INTERRUPTED SUBJECTS: THE NATIVE INFORMANT AND SUBALTERN AS TROPES OF RESISTANCE

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To my beloved family
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This project begins with a basic question: How can we imagine a form of resistance to the hegemonic system of (European) modernity that cannot be co-opted by the logic of the dominant discourse? In other words, how can we imagine a radical alterity?

The discourse of globalization and the recalibration of national to global sovereignty are explored in relation to the critical theories of radical resistance to the discursive hegemony of the dominant Western discourse. Hardt and Negri’s “multitude” and Nancy’s “singular plural” are attempts to defer the ever-present threat of co-optation by this hegemonic logic. Spivak calls this the “double bind” faced by the critically vigilant intellectual: the “ethical imperative” to articulate a resistant figure like the subaltern while not speaking on behalf of that figure or assimilating its resistance in the narrative constitution of its subjectivity. Following Derrida, I explore the aporia of tracing the subaltern in literary critical readings without rearticulating a subaltern-subject that would reinsert the in-visible universal “subject” in the reproduction of the recognizable “other.”

The work of the Indian Subaltern Studies group, especially that of Spivak, opens the distinction between the recognizable difference of the native informant that can be
co-opted by the dialectical process of subject-constitution and the irreducible difference of the subaltern that has to be put under erasure. I use the textual subject’s narrative turn away from the subaltern as the basis for an interruptive reading praxis that traces the absent-presence of subaltern difference to deconstruct the subject-constitution of the hegemonic.

“Diaspora” is used in postcolonial criticism as a form of hybrid resistance in both national and global terms. I trace the Jewish context of the term to the history of the “Marrano” to name the “secret” of subaltern difference marked in a constitutive erasure in the original act of translation that produced the diaspora. Finally, I bring the Marrano to an impossible face-to-face with the Indian English fiction of diasporic writers like Amitav Ghosh and K. S. Maniam to trace the subaltern absent-presence of the Indian “coolie” in Malaysia.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

My work begins with a basic question: How can we imagine a form of resistance to the hegemonic system of (European) modernity that cannot be co-opted by the logic of the dominant discourse? Of course, this basic question necessitates many corollary clarifications to be able to clearly conceptualize the problem. How do I understand the hegemonic dominant? What do I mean by resistance that cannot be co-opted? How is that resistance to be both recognized and reconstituted?

As a part of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms the “New Immigrant Intellectual” in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, I felt the need to bridge the general academic concerns of English literary and cultural studies in India and the United States, to understand what it means to circulate “[i]n the interest of transnational literacy” (377). In a sense, my work is an exploration of what it means to “forage in the crease between global postcoloniality and postcolonial migrancy” (373). The current focus on globalization therefore is a good starting point: globalization allows me to address, on the one hand, the inter-connectedness produced by developing technologies and comparatively greater mobility, at least for some classes of people, between nations, and, on the other, the growing global inequalities. I look at the genesis of globalization not necessarily as a radical break from the political economy of modern nation-states, but as the logical global recalibration of capitalism’s exploitation of the unequal distribution of resources and labor between nations. And if globalization therefore reveals the teleology of capitalism, then this teleology can be mapped as the evolution of a global sovereign reconstituting its hegemonic logic through the “agglomerating” (Nancy) movement of its “networks of power” (Hardt and Negri).
This hegemonic logic of the sovereign is constituted in the language of Enlightenment rationalism with “Rational Man” at its narrative center, and this (post-)colonial modernity was always already contaminated at the “contact zone,” produced through Europe’s contact with its colonies. Then, if the dominance of what Spivak terms “Europe as Subject” is maintained through its ability to assimilate dissent, i.e., “other” contending narratives, how do we imagine a new form of global dissent that will defer this co-optation by a recalibrated global sovereign? How do critics like Hardt and Negri, Jean-Luc Nancy, Homi Bhabha, Walter Mignolo, Spivak and Jacques Derrida enable the conceptualization of a space of “radical alterity,” i.e., a radically different otherness that cannot be assimilated by the hegemonic? And if such an alterity is assumed to be radically “other” to the hegemonic rationalism that is the foundation of modernity, including the academic discourse that this work is a part of, then how is that otherness to be recognized without re-narrativizing and assimilating its radical difference?

Of course, the above issues also raise the question whether we need to imagine a radical otherness? Is all rational discourse, in that it traces its genealogy to the colonial history of Western hegemony, necessarily complicit in the perpetuation of a politics of inequality that feeds Empire’s “networks of power?” If discourse is necessarily hybrid as Bhabha points out in *The Location of Culture*, then isn’t colonial modernity always already “other” than/to itself? As Bhabha argues, the sovereign seeks to dialectically resolve its inherent hybridity in the performative repetition of its pedagogic sign of immanence, but always repeats itself as/in difference. However, acknowledging that the subject is always already hybrid, the dominant reiterates its hegemony by internalizing difference as the same, by assimilating the recognizable difference of the
native informant and putting under erasure the irreducible difference of the subaltern. So Hardt and Negri’s critical work to posit a comprehensive resistance to Empire in “multitude” and Nancy’s conceptualization of the “singular plural” are attempts to defer the ever-present threat of co-optation by this hegemonic logic. And Spivak calls this the “double bind” faced by the critically vigilant intellectual: the “ethical imperative” to articulate a resistant figure while not speaking on behalf of that figure or assimilating the subaltern’s resistance in the narrative constitution of its subjectivity. My project then is to explore, following Derrida, the “aporias” of tracing the subaltern in literary critical readings without rearticulating a subaltern-subject that would reinsert the in-visible universal “subject” in the reproduction of the recognizable “other.”

**Resistance of the Radically Other**

In order to lay out possible postcolonial critical attempts to articulate sites of resistance and deconstruct sovereignty, I begin by exploring “globalization” and the attempts to posit a radical alternative to the movement of global capitalism, such as the assumption of a radical alterity in global terms that can defer co-optation by the dialectical logic of the global sovereign. Exploring the dialectical sublation of the “other” in the performative dissemination of the pedagogical sign of the national-global sovereign in the constitution of the hybrid subject, I address through careful readings of Spivak the difference between the native informant, both complicit and resistant to the hegemony of Enlightenment discourse, and the subaltern figure that cannot be assimilated by the dominant.

According to Bhabha, the subject is always rendered unstable by its inherent hybridity. The subject thus tries to resolve its difference by repeating its sign—reconstituting its difference as same. However, this repetition of difference as the same
is always incomplete as the fundamental ambivalence of the subject’s sign persists. This ambivalence is a result of the trace of an irreducible difference that the subject cannot fully co-opt. Some critics try to retrieve this irreducible difference as the subaltern-subject by deconstructing the dominant paradigm founded upon the logocentrism of the sovereign universal subject. So, following Bhabha, within the discourse on hybridity, we need to clearly differentiate between the inherent hybridity of the national-global subject and the radical difference of the “subaltern” that cannot be recognized as part of the constitutive hybridity of the subject. I aim to interrupt the narrative production of the subject—sovereign, national, global, marginal, subaltern, etc.—as in both the knower and the object to be known, particularly engaging with this epistemological split that produces what Walter Mignolo has termed “colonial difference” and enables “coloniality of power.” Bringing together (1) postcolonial critiques concerning nation and narrative and (2) globalization studies addressing sovereignty and the subject enable an exploration of the im-possibilities of imagining sites of radical alterity. Following Derrida’s articulation of the aporia of subject-constitution, I explore the liminality of the sign of alterity and of the im-possibility of the “beyond” as a space for locating radical resistance. In the process, I re-evaluate the terms of critical engagement of both globalization and postcolonial studies at the point of their convergence.

I argue that any difference identified in the repetition of the sign of the subject cannot be immediately termed radical since the repetition of the sovereign sign is the process of sublating that difference. Where then can that irreducible difference be located? Following Spivak’s work, I argue that in the constitution of the subject, even the marginal and the resistant, there are “apostrophic” moments when the sign has to
assimilate certain differences and turn away from “others” that it cannot subsume. Even marginal identities in the process of subject-constitution must reconstitute difference as subsumable “other” that Spivak identifies as the native informant. The difference of the subaltern that the subject cannot subsume, that cannot be textually recognized but can only be traced in its absence is then the trace of irreducible difference. And the tracing of this irreducible difference also marks the distance between complicity and resistance in the native informant and thereby deconstructs the logic of the subject displacing the repetition of its hegemony into the ambivalence of resistance. In this way, the repetition of the sovereign sign can be made to resist its own reconstitution deferring its hegemony.

**Ethical Imperative of an Interruptive Reading**

This difference between the native informant and subaltern in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work provides a perspective from which to elucidate the impossibility of radical resistance to the hegemony of Enlightenment discourse. I propose the importance of an interruptive reading of critical and fictional literature to map the genealogy of even postcolonial interventions into colonial discourse to create institutional spaces for the subaltern to insert itself into the narrative of subject-constitution. However, this interruptive reading is not an instantaneous insertion of the subaltern-subject as the center of a postcolonial critique of hegemony, to avoid inadvertently or surreptitiously assuming the voice of the subaltern from the standpoint of a postcolonial critic. So Spivak in “Deconstructing Historiography” suggests that the “against-the-grain” readings of the Subaltern Studies group must themselves be read against-the-grain as an “interventionist strategy” aware of its strategic reduction to the essentialism of subject-constitution as the limitation of its “un/witting” “poststructuralist
understanding of ‘consciousness’” (344). Here we need to take a moment to clearly understand the value-addition of Spivak’s critical gesture.

“Native” resistance, as argued by the Indian Subaltern Studies group headed by the likes of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha, did not begin with nationalist movements spearheaded by the “native” bourgeoisie culminating in the liberation of postcolonial nation-states. Resistance in the postcolonial context began with contact with the colonial other, and the project of the Indian Subaltern Studies group has been to recuperate traces of resistance even in colonial narratives of comprehensive native submission or complicity. In its recuperative gesture, much postcolonial critical work seeks to “restore” to the native/subaltern figure its own subjectivity. This act of restoration that suggests an uncontaminated sovereign native-subject that had been repressed and marginalized by colonialism, and whose holistic identity must be retrieved by postcolonialism, has been critiqued for its failure to address the fact that in the process of recuperating native identity it restores the rational subject of Western discourse. Even Spivak’s deconstructive project to address the limitations of restorative identity-constitution and to problematize the constitution of the Western subject by recuperating only the traces of the native-as-other as integral to the epistemological teleology of the Western sign is critiqued for, on the one hand, limiting “native” identity to fractured traces to be defined in the gaps of the hegemonic discourse of Western subjectivity, and on the other, as still employing the tools of Western epistemology. Thus, even the Subaltern Studies project must at times take recourse to rationalization of the non-rational signs of the native/subaltern-as-other to reconstitute traces of native resistance. As Veena Das argues in her article “Subaltern as Perspective” in Subaltern
Studies: Vol 6, “the speech of the subaltern, when it becomes available for study, has already been appropriated by these superior forms of authority” (315). The appropriation of “the speech of the subaltern” is marked not only at the site of colonial constitution, but also at the point of postcolonial recuperation.

So does the value of Spivak’s intervention lie in the interventionist value of the Subaltern Studies project or the critical understanding of that project in its poststructural limitations? Or in other words, is a strategy, once identified, to be valued in its specific application or the strategic recognition of its application and its specificity as both its efficacy and failure? The significance of the deconstructive gesture lies not in a general statement of failure of the/any “interventionist strategy,” but in marking a specific moment of failure as the recognition of an-other point of intervention, important in a certain recognition of a historical context. The project of interruption is then to identify an “apostrophic” moment in the narrative when the dialectical process of subject-constitution, while assimilating the native informant, is unable or unwilling to subsume the radical difference of the subaltern and “turns away” from it thereby rendering it irrelevant and in-visible. Marking this subal“turn” moment as critical to the constitutive gesture of the citizen-subject’s sovereign sign, I seek to follow the genealogy or trace of the subaltern not beyond the limits of the text, but in the constitutive erasure of its sign.

However, in my reading of interruptive moments, I articulate a site that does not necessarily produce a synchronous contesting narrative. In fact, interruption at an apostrophic moment precisely recognizes an absence of a synchronous narrative that displaces the interventionist strategy of subaltern subject-constitution for the strategic purpose of interrogating the specific apostrophes necessary for that subject-constitution.
Thereby the reading strategy aligns with Spivak’s articulation of “persistent criticism” without articulating a theory of “absolute difference.” This specter of “absolute difference” can only be displaced by specific readings of interruption and not by a theoretical directive against the articulation of “absolute difference.” Therefore, while “interruption” as a reading strategy is theorized in this work, the theory cannot substitute for the strategy of reading moments of interruption in a text. The absolute difference of endless interruptions must be deferred through non-repeatable interruptive readings of specific textual contextualizations. And while critical interruption will unavoidably reproduce narrative recuperations of the subaltern subject-effect, the essentializing function of that subject-effect has to be displaced through the strategic realization of the “absence” marked by the apostrophic gesture of the narrative, i.e., the subaltern narrative produced is a synchronous specter substituted for the inability/refusal of the text to narrativize the subaltern figure. That is why I interject a reading of the historical figure of the Marrano through Derrida to problematize the constitution of subjects of resistance in the hybrid space of the “diaspora” in South Asian postcolonial theory and to recognize a metaphor for the “other” as the naming of a category that is itself without recognition.

I then read the fiction of Amitav Ghosh and K. S. Maniam to illustrate this interruptive strategy to defer the slippage of the postcolonial subject into the specter of absolute difference by retrieving apostrophic moments in the text. Some critics, reading Ghosh and Maniam as postcolonial writers whose work allows the subaltern to speak, fail to address the genealogy of the figuration of the subaltern. The positing of postcolonial literature as the site in which the subaltern can finally speak is problematic
because of the politics of constituting the subaltern-subject as a non-Western figure mediated through Western epistemology. In Ghosh’s and Maniam’s fictions, I intercept the narrative constitution of such subaltern-subjects and displace the problematic idea of making the subaltern speak to a re-evaluation of the site of the non-speaking periphery. Such a re-evaluation enables resistant readings of the periphery in its dialectical and non-dialectical relations to the narrative center without refiguring its marginality in terms of a subaltern-subject. And in that process of interrupting the narrative, I hope to elucidate a reading practice that is vigilant of its own critical gesture through the ethical imperative of “unlearning” its own discursive privilege for the impossibility of an “other” discourse that it cannot recognize.

In Chapter 2, I address the issue of the sovereign subject at the heart of the postcolonial project of discursive resistance to the hegemony of Western logocentrism. Most postcolonial critical endeavors attempt to recuperate “subaltern agency” in the will of the resistant subject who can only be realized within the ambit of the sovereign rights of the citizen-subject. Current postcolonial criticism, in keeping pace with the discursive focus on globalization, explores the possibility of global resistance to what Hardt and Negri call Empire’s networks of power as a radical alternative to the constitution of a global sovereign. However, the work of scholars like Ankie Hoogevelt shows globalization as the evolution of capitalist exploitation based on global inequities and not marking a radical change in the socio-political economy of the world. Keeping that in mind, we need to be careful about easy articulations of radical alterity because a globally resistant postcolonial subject faces the threat of co-optation from what Homi Bhabha identifies as the performative dissemination of the pedagogical sign of the
global sovereign. Through the work of scholars like Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, Aijaz Ahmed, Benita Parry, Timothy Brennan and others, I interrogate the nation as both the articulation of the hegemonic and the last defense of the local against the exploitative movement of global capitalism. My project then is the “im-possibility” of resistance “beyond the nation” but not pre-figured through the dialectical constitution of a global subjectivity that can be easily co-opted by the accumulative logic of global capitalism.

I begin Chapter 3 with the question of the subaltern as the (textual) site of a radical resistance. I establish that simple hybridity cannot be the condition of the radically resistant subject; instead radical difference must be traced to the specific moment/s in the text when the narrative, in an apostrophic gesture, turns away from an ineradicable difference that it is not able or is unwilling to dialectically resolve in the constitution of the textual subject. As I clarify in the chapter, I do not wish to retrieve subalternity in a textual figure, at the center or at the periphery, as subject or other/object. Instead I locate this subaltern “turn” to trace the absent presence of that irreducible difference that the narrative cannot dialectically sublate and that forecloses the inherent hybridity of the text beyond the assimilation of the native informant. Tracing the subaltern is tracing the genealogy of narrative subject-constitution in its attempts to externalize its internal splitting in the erasure of the unassimilable as the irrelevant.

Because positing even a resistant “other” reincorporates the dominant as subject at the center of the text, I conceptualize the subaltern in its difference from the native informant. I posit the question: is the difference between the native informant and the subaltern to be identified as the différance of the consolidated “other” to the radically “other?” In order to explore the possibility of the radically “other” as a site of global and
local resistance, I look at Nancy’s notion of the “singular plural,” Hardt and Negri’s “multitude” and Bhabha’s “cultural difference,” as well as Mignolo’s exploration of “border thinking” as a way to conceptualize subaltern forms and modes of knowledge. While these concepts offer interesting possibilities of articulating resistance to the logic of globalization, I argue that resisting co-optation by the homogenizing imperative of the networks of power of the global sovereign must be c/sited in the im-possibility of the Derridean event in Aporias—“the impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or a future advent” (8).

In Chapter 4, I take up the central problem of how subaltern resistance can be identified by tracing the narrative process of subaltern subject-constitution without reconstituting essentialist identities and reappropriating marginal voices in the name of postcolonial resistance. I look at major critiques of the work of the Indian Subaltern Studies group by Rosalind O’Hanlon, Spivak, and Sumit Sarkar, to clearly understand the “double bind” of the critically vigilant intellectual. I read Spivak’s famous article “Can the Subaltern Speak” in the context of this argument to engage with her “theory of interest” by which the critically vigilant intellectual must not only attempt to retrieve a subaltern agent who can speak for himself or herself, but also deconstruct the critical project of that retrieval in order to interrupt the circulation of systemic theories that prefigure the transparent “Subject of desire and power.” Following another well-known article from one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies group, “Chandra’s Death” by Ranajit Guha, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s critical reading of both Spivak’s and Guha’s work, I argue that locating subalternity in the textual absence that marks the
sovereign’s attempt to sublate its inherent hybridity defers the inevitable displacement of
the inaccessible historical figure of the subaltern beyond the margins of the text and
instead focuses our critical attention on the textual constitution of subjectivity.

In Chapter 5, I trace the genealogy of postcolonial theorizations of diaspora to
the term’s Biblical roots, retracing a legacy of “erasure” to the Marrano experience in
15th-century Spain. Following the work of Elaine Marks, I approach the Marrano as
metaphor to explore Marrano difference as defining the constitutive gesture of Spanish
national identity that in order to externalize and expunge the threat of internal impurity
instituted the systematic persecution of converted Jews in the form of the Spanish
Inquisition. I then follow the legacy of the Marrano to the critical deconstructive practice
of Jacques Derrida in whose work I situate the origins of the “interruptive” approach I
develop in my work. Tracing this Marrano difference then enables the vigilant reader to
suspend the dialectical production of the textual subject by identifying those specific
moments of narrative sublation when the recognizable difference of the “other” is
assimilated in the form of the native informant and the unassimilable difference of the
subaltern is put under erasure. And the specific legacy of the Marrano, in the context of
postcolonial critical engagements with the concept of diaspora enables the vigilant
reader to interrupt his or her own critical project in order to understand that the
“difference” of the subaltern and the native informant is not produced as a result of an
essential otherness of these two figures, but is re-produced by that dialectical process
of narrative sublation through which the subject constitutes itself. This realization is
crucial for the critic to defer a similar gesture of critical appropriation in constituting the
native informant and especially the subaltern as objects/subjects of this postcolonial
critique. Thus the diasporic difference of the Marrano lies at the very heart of Spivak’s “double bind.”

In Chapter 6, I look at the work of two Indian English writers of differing backgrounds to interrupt their fictional narratives as well as the critical approaches to their work to trace the legacy of Marrano difference even in the subject-constitution of postcolonial diasporic narratives. Amitav Ghosh is generally regarded as one of the stalwarts of Indian English fiction and many critics regard his work as examples of cosmopolitan postcolonial fiction. K. S. Maniam, on the other hand, is a Malaysian writer of Indian diasporic origins who explores the indentured roots and diasporic identity of the Indian community in Malaysia. Through careful readings, not only of the works of fiction, but critical responses to their texts, I explore how the cosmopolitan identity of the global postcoloniality of Ghosh’s work is premised on the inadvertent erasure of the diasporic context of plantation laborers in Malaysia. I trace the legacy of the indentured Indian plantation laborer in Malaysia, displacing that legacy on to the narrative of Maniam’s work. However, even in Maniam's fiction, I critically engage with the narrative process of subaltern subject-constitution to explore how even in the process of giving voice to the “legacy” of these indentured workers in the figure of the main protagonist, Maniam has to peripheralize other voices and put other subalterns under erasure. So keeping in mind Spivak’s “ethical imperative,” the critically vigilant intellectual must continue to intervene in the dialectical logic of sublation to strategically interrupt these apostrophic moments of erasing subaltern absent-presences to displace the circulation of the hegemonic sign of even the postcolonial subject in order to create critical spaces
for the recognition of subalternity and to imagine the aporia of the subaltern inserting himself or herself into that discursive space.
CHAPTER 2
RESISTING GLOBALIZATION: INTERROGATING THE SOVEREIGN

At the juncture of the discourses of globalization and postcolonial efforts to produce narratives resistant to the hegemony of “Western” discourse lies the notion of “sovereignty.” At the heart of the “postcolonial project”—this generalized notion is an expedient category to address a central concern that continues to haunt diverse critical resistances located across the globe that constitute the “postcolonial” field—lies the aporia of the “sovereign subject.” I use the term postcolonial following the critical trajectory of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in their important work *The Empire Writes Back*. Thus postcolonial, in my work (unless otherwise indicated), does not define a political moment of resistance and liberation at the point of the demise of the colonial, but signifies a discursive field imagined post-contact between the colonial West and the “native” East.

**The Discourse of Globalization**

Does globalization reconstitute the concept of sovereignty and hence the sovereign subject in ways that mark the end of the latter’s colonial-national identity? Does globalization offer avenues of resistant identity-formation by liberating the subject from the colonial cartography of nation-states? Can the global sovereign subject be the site/s for the articulation of borderless resistant identities, multiple and fluid in their prerogatives, and radically beyond the politics of national priorities?

I define “globalization” as a discourse—and not as a “real-political” phenomenon—though not homogeneous in its strategic deployments. Thus as a discursive field it incorporates arguments for a liberative expansion of the socio-politico-economic identity of “human society” (with the Western subject again as its implicit
center) progressively incorporating previously marginalized sections of the world, and thereby providing people from all nations access to the resources and democratic values that have so far been the prerogatives of the “West/North;” of course, this definition of globalization does not limit its accumulative movement in one direction—the marginalized communities are not simply consumed by the hegemonic logic of the West; they enrich global society with their labor and their diverse cultures, and their “artifacts” are added to the commodity fetishes in circulation through the global channels of free-market capitalism. Globalization as discursive field also includes arguments against the post-imperial colonial expansion of Western hegemony through the technological improvements of world capitalism, emphasizing the progressive colonization of global labor aided by the *comprador* bourgeoisie of postcolonial nation-states. Globalization in critical discourse also constitutes the site of the transnational diaspora whose multiple, hyphenated identities counter the logic of nation-states with their rigidly defined territorial sovereignty producing and limiting the identity of the national sovereign subject. Finally, some critics, while arguing against the politico-economic expansionism of global-imperialism, also point out the global fault-lines opened up by this uneven process; these fault-lines marked at the sites of detention centers, refugee camps and illegal immigrants—marking identities that the discourse of globalization is unable or unwilling to “legally” incorporate—are sites of global oppression and also resistance.

I define globalization as a discursive field to highlight its discursive production and emphasis in recent literary-critical practice. While any notion of “reality” is also discursively produced, the constitution of a performative and internally-coherent
discourse also produces identities and affects the identities it produces. Thus I do not mean to dismiss the significance of the discourse of globalization by arguing against its “reality” as an ontological phenomenon outside of its discursive boundaries. Instead, I emphasize the discursive nature of globalization as in-constitution or in-performance, and hence, open to contesting constitutive gestures that can significantly affect the “reality” of globalization in the future. The contestations over the discursive definition of globalization also define the constitution of the global sovereign subject and by corollary its influence on subject-constitution in narratives of resistance.

Globalization as a discursively constituted ontological referent is further problematized by the different approaches to its definition. Globalization is seen by some as a recent politico-economic phenomenon, originating post World War II as technological innovations, particularly in the spheres of communication and travel, progressively produced a global time and space compression, to use David Harvey’s apt phrasing. This allowed the evolution of multi-national corporations (MNCs). These MNCs aided by the World Bank and the United Nations weakened the regulative and protectionist capabilities of nation-states while exploiting the unequal conditions of exchange established through the postcolonial process that produced the modern cartographic division of the globe into First, Second and Third Worlds. In fact, most developing countries actively seek to attract MNCs by offering to lower tariff barriers, providing free access to resources, and lowering taxes, for the increased trade they bring with them. While governments claim job production thus lowering unemployment, critics argue against the destruction of local economies and ways of living as well as
against the inter-national exploitation of “labor.” From an economic perspective, globalization is thus marked by an increased growth in world trade.

Ankie Hoogvelt, in her excellent work entitled *Globalization and the Postcolonial World* published in 1997, has systematically argued against this kind of simplistic definition of globalization as a recent phenomenon that posits a radical break with the pre-globalization politico-economic setup. If globalization is to be defined by its expanding networks of power spearheaded by technological innovations, then the difference between the early stages of European colonialism and the current stage of globalization is the rate of innovations and not the substance. European colonial expansion, crucial to the development of European nation-states, went hand in hand with technological innovations, and one process fed, and fed upon, the other. Globalization, then, is substantively a political evolution of the process that gave rise to the postcolonial cartography of the modern nation-states. If, economically, globalization is to be defined by the increase in world trade, Hoogvelt, after looking at available quantitative measurements of world production and trade from 1800 to 1993, comes to the conclusion that “the record of world trade can neither be summoned to testify to ‘the increasing interconnectedness which characterises our world economy’, nor to evidence of ‘the deepening and widening penetration by the core of the periphery’” (75). Hoogvelt does not dismiss globalization, but defines it as a “phase of *deepening, but not widening capitalist integration*” (115). The progressive entrenchment of existing global capitalist relations with minor recalibrations does not concurrently necessitate greater access to capitalist resources for the “periphery.” Better and faster communication technologies and increased mobility have allowed greater control of inter-national labor by the
developed nations and some of the larger developing nations while the shared lifestyle of a globalized world is necessarily restricted to the urban educated elite (preferably educated in English or similar “international/global” languages of power). At the same time, the logic of globalization (or global capitalist networks of accumulation) functions by the selective exclusion of large sections of the world population. As noted by Hoogvelt:

> Within the framework of the new informational economy, a significant part of the world population is shifting from a structural position of exploitation to a structural position of irrelevance. (89)

The growth of world trade cannot be measured without addressing the mode of participation of the world’s population in that trade. What is evident is that globalization as discourse, depending on its strategic deployment for politico-economic reasons, has a significant impact on identity politics: from the systemic exploitation of inter-national “labor” to the relegation of large (and usually the poorest) sections of the world population to “a structural position of irrelevance,” globalization demands a continuous and critical politics of resistance. These resistant identities (global or national/local) are then defined in opposition to the global sovereign subject implicit as the in-visible center of the discourse, in whose a priori sign is guaranteed the global imaginary.

**From the Sovereign Subject to the Global Sovereign**

The accumulative movement of globalization is realized in the name of a global sovereignty—a “detached” autonomous authority that is the pre-condition of its own institution. This “detachment” of global sovereignty, its “precedence” of its own origin, legitimizes the de-centered and multi-centered proliferation of globalization’s networks of power. The autonomous, hegemonic authority of the sovereign is realized in the political institution/s of nation-states whose narrative production dialectically resolves a
radical constitutive split between the pedagogical, historical immanence of its master image and the repetitious, performative dissemination of its variable sign. In the process, the nationalist narrative sublates its inherent cultural difference, transforming its multitudes into the collective body politic of the “people” and the autonomous sign of the subject. The people/subject as political entity is stripped of the creative force of the multitude and subjected to biopolitical control, having surrendered its radical agency to the hegemonic law of sovereign authority.

I use the word “sublate” above in the Hegelian sense, and since I use it often in my work to indicate the dialectical assimilation of the “other” in the subject-constitution of the sovereign, I provide here a clarification of its meaning. The word “sublation” is the English translation of Hegel’s term “aufheben” that he uses in the double meaning of “‘clear away’ or ‘cancel’, and in that sense … that a law or regulation is cancelled (aufgehoben) … [and] also … ‘to preserve’ … in this sense that something is well taken care of (wohl aufgehoben)” (Hegel 154). Hegel particularly draws the reader’s attention to the “speculative spirit of … [the German] language, which transcends the ‘either-or’ of mere understanding” thereby allowing “the same word … a negative and a positive meaning.” W. A. Suchting, one of the translators of The Encyclopaedia Logic, in his “Translating Hegel’s Logic: Some Minority Comments on Terminology,” in expressing his disagreement with the other two translators over some specific words, elaborates on Hegel’s use of aufheben and the general translation of the term as “sublation” in English. Suchting points out that Hegel uses the term “in both nontechnical and technical senses” (xxxv). In the first sense, Hegel denotes “do[ing] away with,” and in the second, he denotes both meanings of the word “to mark his conception of the way in
which one logical category successively does away with and also includes an immediately preceding one.” Jean-Luc Nancy in *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* points out that the term “presents … in the most dynamic form, the remarkable property of conjoining two opposite senses, and of thus being by itself, in itself, and ultimately upon itself, the operation of the mediation of sense in general” (51). Nancy clarifies that “Aufhebung” represents “the conjoined suppression of its two possible significations, the sublation or up-heaval of the one by the other” and does not allow for “the simultaneous presentation of its two significations.”

Suchting goes on to point out that J. H. Stirling originally translated *aufheben* as “sublation” in his 1865 publication of *The Secret of Hegel*. This word “sublation” that “by the nineteenth century lived on only in manuals of logic” meant by its dictionary definition only to “remove,” and by its use in logic, to “deny” or “contradict” (xxxv). Stirling by “impos[ing] on it the extra semantic dimension of ‘include’, ‘preserve’” thereby essentially re-coined the term specifically to denote the “speculative spirit” of the original German word. Suchting argues that while “sublation” in this specific coinage fulfills its purpose, its original obscurity contradicts Hegel’s stated goal of using ordinary native words to conceptualize his philosophical tenets. The translator believes that the ordinary English word “suspend” in this sense is a better translation of *aufheben* as it also carries a dual meaning “of something’s being put out of action whilst continuing to exist” (xxxvi). He also shows that “suspend” is etymologically closer to *aufheben*—particularly because *aufheben* can also mean to “lift” or “raise up,” and “suspend” in its sense of “hanging” comes close to this third denotation. In my work, however, I use “sublation” following the general practice in English translations of Hegel to conceptualize the
dialectical process by which difference is both assimilated and removed to produce a higher (as in dialectically evolved) “being” in the sovereign rational subject. However, this consolidated subject is dependent on the “other”, i.e., the difference it has sublated. This sublated difference is therefore both co-opted and preserved in the subject that Bhabha identifies as the latter’s constitutive “hybridity.”

In my work, when discussing the process of sublation, I use Spivak’s engagement with the native informant and the subaltern to distinguish between the “assimilation” of recognizable difference and the “erasure” of unassimilable difference though the traces of both are “preserved” in the constitution of the subject. The trace of the native informant can be retrieved in what Bhabha terms the “conceptual heterogeneity” of the subject while the trace of the subaltern can be located at the site of the “absence” that marks the putting under erasure of the irreducible otherness that the subject cannot (or will not) assimilate. Nancy also states in Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative that “sublation” “conserves the thing in raising it to the idea” that is significant in the context of the representation of subalternity in postcolonial criticism. The representation of the “other,” i.e., the marginalized, is also the sublation of its “otherness” in the process of its subject-constitution, which is the “bind” of postcolonial recuperations of the subaltern that I take up in greater detail in Chapter 4. The “operation of mediation” that is necessary for the “manifestation” of subalternity must suppress the unassimilable difference behind the subalternization of that difference in the first place. In Nancy’s words:

The concept of sublation is the concept of that which is its own upheaval and which, because it itself suppresses itself, itself succeeds itself, takes up where it itself leaves off. It is the concept of dialectical mediation, which is
nothing other than manifestation considered according to the form of its operation. Insofar as it is relation to self, manifestation is mediation. (51)

So the imperative here is to conceptualize subalternity without sublating its irreducible difference in the constitution of a subaltern-subject as the representation (the idea) of a marginal “figure” (the thing) recuperated from within the dialectical “preserves” of the (post-)colonial text—such attempts inevitably re-produce the native informant (recognizable and sublatable) in the name of the subaltern.

The “sovereignty machine” according to Hardt and Negri produces and controls biopower by transforming the multitude “in every moment … into an ordered totality” (87), and hence, is integral to definitions of “identity.” This “sovereign” power was constituted through the colonial process, and therefore, is a postcolonial phenomenon. Any postcolonial forms of resistance, whether seated at the center or the margins, or globally, must then interact with and oppose the constituting hegemony of the notion of the sovereign. An understanding of sovereignty is crucial to its deconstruction, so that the notion of the sovereign may be put under erasure, fracturing its hold on biopower. This biopower must also simultaneously be put under erasure to recuperate the ever-present trace of the “essential originary” conflict/tension of (post-)modernity between the sovereign and the people.

Though the concept of the sovereign nation-state is identified by Hardt and Negri to be Eurocentric (69), the interaction of “third-world” discourses with Eurocentrism parallels the interaction between the colonies and colonial Europe that was crucial to the formation of the modern sovereign identity. As they state in *Empire*:

*modern sovereignty … was born and developed in large part through Europe’s relationship with the outside, and particularly through its colonial project and the resistance of the colonized. Modern sovereignty emerged,*
then, as the concept of European reaction and European domination both within and outside its borders. (70)

Therefore, critical readings of the presence/absence of alternative forms of nationalities, states, sovereignties are necessarily in a dynamic state of “self” definition in *différance* to the very Eurocentrism they challenge and resist. The very impossibility of escaping the sovereign-subject bind needs to be explored and exploded, to be erased and emancipated, for alterities of the modern subject to be proposed.

The assumption of sovereignty, especially in Nancy, is the *absolutum* of its conception that bears testimony to the assumption of the universal reach of Enlightenment discourse. Nancy defines the sovereign as “the summit itself … the subject whose being consists in height” (96), a concept that “is no longer comparable or relative … [i]t is no longer in relation” (97). Sovereignty “supposes that nothing either precedes it or supercedes it, that no authority or instituting force has been exercised before it” (99), yet its “exercise … takes place entirely under the condition of the ‘state of exception’ where laws are suspended, betraying the fundamental illegitimacy of sovereignty as the condition of legitimacy having to legitimize itself” (18). That the “transversal” (97) power of the sovereign, its detached height, may be inconceivable to certain sections of the masses whose relation to sovereign law is only determined by force, and not by the force of authority, is not addressed by Nancy. It is possible to read, in terms of Bhabha’s notion of “hybridity,” the traces of the subaltern, and not just the native informant, always already present in the sovereign center even and especially when its “presence/absence” is not acknowledged. Just as the concept of modern (European) sovereignty spread from the Americas and Europe to the “third world,” the tensions of sovereignty—the detachment of the sovereign that actually rested on the
detaching of significant sections of the population from the politics of the State as well as the integral conflict that biopolitics engendered—that spread back to the Euro-center had to contaminate and destabilize the authority of the sovereign. The crisis of the sovereign is/was not an inherent possibility that has manifested in the crisis of post-modernity, but has been present from the very conception of this authority; it is only now that the transformation of global capital has aligned the dominant discourse in line with the fault-lines of this originary conflict and thus allowed the recognition of this crisis.

It is now convenient for capital to precipitate a critique of the present form of sovereignty (of modern nation-states) in the necessity of a dismantling and restructuring of a new, global politics of accumulation—a re-positing of a global sovereignty. This global sovereignty, however, retains structural similarities to the modern notion of the (national) sovereign as the discursive center of an epistemological paradigm that is strategically deployed to recalibrate and maintain an inter-national division of labor under the hegemonic sign of the Western subject. In Empire, Hardt and Negri acknowledge the imperialist tendencies of the post-modern condition of U.S. sovereignty as “best calibrated for extensive Empire”—the “open and continuous process” (169) of expanding networks of power that resolve the modernist dialectical tension by progressively subsuming the globe within its “international police power.” In fact, they admit that what they “have presented as exceptions to the development of imperial sovereignty should [perhaps] instead be linked together as a real tendency, an alternative within the history of the U.S. Constitution … [and that] perhaps the root of these imperialist practices should be traced back to the very origins of the country” (177). The teleology of the global sovereign in its discursive constitution can thus be
traced to the sovereign subject of Western discourse under whose sign the modern cadastral politics of nation-states was rationalized usually in West-East, North-South, developed-developing, capitalist-communist, democratic-despotic binary terms. This sovereign subject is not the site of universal empowerment for those who read themselves within this discursive paradigm. While the sign of the sovereign subject is harnessed by those in power as the guarantor of the rules of engagement, which legitimize the existing hierarchies of exploitation, as a detached signifier of absolute authority it detaches authority from the masses it constitutes as subject to its sovereign logic. This then demands an examination of sovereignty as the site of an essential contestation, but a contestation that is a part of the logic of its conception—sovereignty as the site of subjection, where the subject is conceived as the multitude made into “people” (Hardt and Negri 103), and the people are necessarily subjected (to violence, to regimentation, to biopolitics, to control).

David Harvey, in *Spaces of Hope* published in 2000, identifies one of the elements of capitalism as “the construction of territorial organization, primarily (though not solely) state powers to regulate money, law, and politics and to monopolize the means of coercion and violence according to a sovereign territorial (and sometimes extra-territorial) will” (60). The sovereign state here is directly or indirectly implicated in the exploitation of the very people whose collective “will” it (dis-)embodies. The people and the sovereign seem bound in dialectical tension as the creation of the one presupposes the other, yet neither can be identified as foundational in this symbiotic relationship. The sovereign derives its authority from the people, yet it precedes its own foundation if it is to have the legitimacy of the sovereign. In Nancy’s words:
it is the power that founds and forms the bond. The bond is not one of loyalty but authority, in the precise sense that the sovereign is the author of the law, whereas loyalty supposes a law that precedes it. (98)

So even though Nancy goes on to argue that the “sovereign people possess nothing less and nothing more than the absolute monarch: namely, the very exercise of sovereignty” (99), yet the institution as that preceding all other institutions under its purvey, including the institution of the people, stands (or is suspended above as “summit”) “in excess of” the latter. In the context of my project, the important question then becomes—are critical productions of resistant subjects—imagined globally, either as borderless or hyphenated identities, or nationally/locally as native or subaltern—also necessarily and irrevocably constituted under the sign of the sovereign subject? As such are these resistant subjectivities only recalibrations of the narrative of sovereign subject-constitution?

Sovereignty as the site of the “subjection” of the people has to be put under erasure to recuperate the will of the “multitude”—which alone precedes the “sovereign will”—as the source presupposing the body politic. The relation between the sovereign and the people—the people’s sovereign and the sovereign people—marks the site of contestation where the fault-lines of resistance can be imagined. For sovereignty, according to Nancy, though “an infinite institution … nevertheless includes within it the imperious necessity of the finite moment of its institution” (100). The crack in its overarching authority is this symbiotic relationship, for the finitude of the body politic limits the infinity of self-constitution. The possibility of resistance lies in the realization that the “sovereign people are a people who constitute themselves as subjects” (100), i.e., the people themselves are deeply implicated in the socio-politico-economic process of capitalist exploitation, and their own subjection to the global networks of
accumulation. There is then a necessity to reconstitute the self, reimagine another “world” of identities, *mondialisation*—“an expanding process … keeping the horizon of a ‘world’ as a space of possible meaning for the whole of human relations … preserving something untranslatable” (Nancy 28)—as opposed to globalization—“the notion of a totality … an enclosure in the undifferentiated sphere of a unitality … [that] has already translated everything in a global idiom” (27-28).

Thus, the very discursivity of narratives of globalization suggests the possibility of constituting resistant subjects not necessarily sublatable by the hegemonic dialectic of “Western discourse.” However, though Nancy gestures towards such a radical politics of resistance, its radicality is premised upon its eventuality and not its actuality in the present. The imaginary of such resistance seems to be the impetus for current practices of discursive resistance and not their substance. While Nancy envisages a discursive event beyond the dialectical bind that re-produces difference as difference-within the hegemonic discourse of Western rationality, he does not adequately address how such an event will defer the performative sublation of emergent critical resistances. I explore the limitations and possibilities of Nancy’s articulation of radical resistance in Chapter 3.

**Writing the Postcolonial Nation**

Does the passage of modern national sovereignty into the crystallizing dynamics of a sovereign Empire effectively resolve the dialectical tension of modernity and thereby subsume and internalize within its accumulative logic any radical gesture of self-reconstitution by the people? There is, at present, a noticeable tendency towards the identification of a global “people” in the trans-national/inter-national migrancies of displaced populations. Though the hybridities generated through spatio-temporal dislocations significantly reveal the fissures of sovereign borders that define unitary
identities of modern nation-states, care has to be taken so that these are not effectively co-opted in defining a global sovereignty legitimizing global regimes of capital accumulation, or in Nancy’s words “agglomeration.” It is important to point out that all migrant populations do not share either the same legitimacy or the same global mobility, and hence, all hybridities are not transnational in the same way.

An important aspect of global sovereignty is that its logic seeks to include the excluded, “the irrelevant,” within, and not outside, its networks of power. Empire selectively disenfranchises large groups of people, but seeks to simultaneously subsume them within its notion of global totality, thereby internalizing possibilities of resistance. Any assumption of an imperial sovereignty should thus immediately necessitate concomitant interruptions, mindful of the fact that this Empire is post-national only in the sense that the logic of capital exploitation now seeks to diminish the authority of the nation-state as “one of the prime defenses against raw market power” (Harvey 65) vis-à-vis its function as facilitating (by virtue of providing stable labor forces and markets) transnational, postcolonial regimes of “subjection.” As Aijaz Ahmad states in On Communalism and Globalization: Offensives of the Far Right, “Capital wants no barriers but labour regimes are always national” (103). The status of the nation within the hegemonic logic of sovereignty becomes a necessary entry-point in both understanding the biopolitical reach of Empire’s networks of power and envisioning modes/sites of resistance to the current politico-economic structure of globalization. On the one hand, the modern teleology of the nation is the locus of the “subjection” of the “people”—the transformation of the multitudes into a body politic subject to biopolitical control. This transformation is effected through social, historical and literary narratives.
that produce and embody “the complex strategies of cultural identification and
discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and make
them the immanent subjects and objects” (Bhabha 292) of a sovereign state. On the
other hand, as both Aijaz Ahmad and Benita Parry argue, the insurgent postcolonial
nation is or can be both the last bastion against the progressive agglomerating
movement of global capitalist exploitation and the site for emergent articulations of
identities resistant to the repressive hegemonic narratives of current nation-states.

In re-tracing the emergence of the modern nation-state, Homi K. Bhabha, in
“DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” published in
1990, draws particular attention to the disjunction between the nation as historical reality
and the nation as narrative production. In the former case, there is an implicit faith in the
“reality” of the national fabric, constituted of the nation as historical continuity, the
nation-state as a political entity, and the national “will” as the “real-ization” of the
national subject into the nation’s “people;” in the latter case, there is an explicit
recognition of the nation as Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” in the process
of being constructed through repetitious rituals of subjection of a heterogeneous
multitude into a body politic (national fabrication). In Bhabha’s words:

In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the
continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious,
recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting
that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of
writing the nation. (297)

The argument that the nation is constituted of the dialectical tension of its pedagogical
and performative impetus suggests a progressive narrative resolution that incorporates
both aspects of this discursive tension. I agree with the inherent hybridity of the national
identity, but the narrative of the nation in its resolved image is marked by the
dissemination of the pedagogical and the erasure or at least the suppression of the performative aspect of its constitutive traces. The recognition of this constitutive hybridity is essential for the emancipation of the national question from fundamentalist reiterations of purity/indigeny; however, so is the recognition of the essential erasure, the collective “willed” amnesia that is at the constitutive heart of the nation’s sign. I agree with Bhabha’s argument that “[t]he national totality is confronted with, and crossed by … [t]he heterogeneous structure of Derridean supplementarity in writing,” so that the fundamentalism is itself a reaction to the persistent threat of the nation’s alterity inscribed in its own text. This split, however, is a part of the constitutive dialectical tension of the national fabrication that is resolved in “[t]he iterative temporality that marks the movement of meaning between the masterful image of the people and the movement of its sign [that] interrupts the succession of plurals that produce the sociological solidity of the national narrative” (305). I explore the possibility of recuperating this alterity in the constitutive hybridity of the nation in Chapter 3.

In other words, the fabric of the nation is not in itself a recognition of its fabrication. My question is—does the theoretical acknowledgment of its “writing” rearticulate the national site into a liberative possibility? Or does such an acknowledgment necessitate the conceptualization of an im-possible site of resistance, if not outside, but displaced beyond the borders of the national narrative? The problem is that resistant narratives that articulate their resistance in the form of emergent national “wills”—reconstituted from the fissures of other national narratives and incorporating “succession of plurals” of their own—are also subject to the same
progressive dialectical movement that ultimately “puts under erasure” the performative alterity that in-visibly produces the pedagogical narrative of the nation for dissemination.

Of course, the nation need not be articulated only in a dialectical discursive movement between the pedagogy and performance of its sign—the nation can be imagined as a site not of the dialectical resolution of the “succession of plurals” into a “sociological solidity,” but of competing narratives with a particular dominant, usually bourgeois, identity articulating the national will in its own hegemonic image. This then opens the national space to the contestation of multiple imperatives where

[the] 'reason of state’ in the modern nation must be derived from the heterogeneous and differentiated limits of its territory. The nation cannot be conceived in a state of equilibrium between several elements co-ordinated, and maintained by a ‘good’ law. (Bhabha 301)

The problem here is that this does not alter the fact that this heterogeneity is still conceived within the boundaries of a finite space and what Anderson calls “homogeneous empty time.” Also, whether the hegemony of a particular class, caste, group, community or even narrative is replaced, or the nation fractured into multiple emergent national identities, the narrative gesture that inscribes the body of the nation—the act of writing that mediates between the performative heterogeneity and the pedagogic immanence—produces a body politic always already susceptible to subjection, to the projection of a homogeneous “will,” to the constitution of a national subject in the name of expediency.

One has to be careful in imagining “beyond the nation,” however, so as not to feed the logic of globalization in its attempt to “smash the nation-state, the last obstacle to the new phase of the world-wide expansion of transnational capital, and transform it into a simple management state in an ‘interdependent’ world” (Brennan 46). It is
possible to argue that by all indications the progressive globalization of world capitalism has not necessarily resulted in the deconstruction of nation-states, but has, in fact, from certain perspectives rigidified national boundaries and fundamentalized notions of nationalist indigency as a reaction to the homogenizing gestures of global networks of power. We must, however, still concur with Radhakrishnan in *Between Identity and Location: the Cultural Politics of Theory* that there is indeed no contradiction between the logic of globalization and the self-interest of dominant nationalisms and nation-states. Just as, analogously, notions of transnationalism and internationalism are posited, not on the basis of any critical negation of and/or divestment from the ideology of nationalism but, rather, on the basis of a supra-nationalism that holds on to and consolidates the privileges and prerogatives of dominant nationalism; so too, globalization extends the regime of uneven development as it exists between developed and developing nations. (89)

Fanon too earlier in 1961, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, had argued that at the very moment of what was often a violent transition of the colonial state to a newly independent postcolonial nation “the colonizer replie[d] with the strategy of containment—respecting the sovereignty of nations” (31). This concept of sovereignty, as has been noted earlier, had partly developed out of the Enlightenment rationality of Western Europe that coincided with the rise of the bourgeois classes and the realization of the modern nation-state. Elaborating on this point, Aijaz Ahmad states later in 1992 in his book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* that “decolonization had given power in most (and in the most populous, the largest, the relatively more developed) countries not to revolutionary vanguards but to the national bourgeoisie poised for reintegration into subordinate positions within the imperialist structure” (28). Consequently, the formerly militant sites of resistance were neatly incorporated into a new narrative of the global dominance of sovereign authority perfectly calibrated to feed the networks of
Empire by maintaining unequal development of, and unequal exchange between, nations and by extension the unequal global division of labor. In fact, the inability of the national narratives to acknowledge their constitutive heterogeneity is precisely what allows the expanding networks of globalization to weaken the protectionist barriers of the nation-states.

Is it possible to reconceptualize national belonging or nationness or even to move beyond the nation-state without being reconstituted as a part of the global subject subject to the accumulative logic of the global networks of power? Can the nation be held in abeyance and not “smashed” in the process of articulating resistance, thereby interrupting those networks of Empire? In a sense then, I am advocating that site of resistance “beyond the nation” as a strategic deferment of the national will that would necessitate displacing the moment of subjection though articulating a common cause in both its performative and pedagogic aspects. Such a cause, because of its historic location and performative articulation, has to be necessarily situated in a specific context, but the deferment of the national narrative that would essentially incorporate it into the logic of global capitalism allows it to strategically seek commonality with other articulations of resistance from around the world. Such a project necessitates an interrogation of the epistemological constitution of the subject to explore the possibilities of resistant articulations of context-specific subjectivities not immediately sublatable by the hegemonic narrative/s of the national-global subject.

Constituting the Subject

If the constitutive subject-object split sublated in the epistemological production of the textual subject (with the subject of the text as its integral/dialectical other) is rearticulated in the narrative constitution of the national subject; if the subject represents
the individuation of the “people” within the national narrative; if a single individual can be a part of the people, but cannot be the people, and if the plurality of the latter term suggests a collectivity or community that does not directly correlate with the individuality and self-determination of the (post-)modern subject, how might Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*, published in 1979, re-frame this problem as a “rhetorical question”—a question of its constitutive rhetoric?

In *Allegories of Reading*, de Man addresses the inside-outside and part-whole distinction (of the text, i.e., of the sign vis-à-vis its referent) through an interesting reading of the difference between grammar and rhetoric. De Man argues that these distinctions are textually produced and read as rhetorical tropes and that in each instance it can be shown that the two polar sites are actually bound (in textual reading) in a dialectical relationship—metaphorical in the first case and synecdochic (or metonymic) in the second. He reads this “dyadic” relationship in terms of the textual interaction of grammar and rhetoric—the distinction/s being textually produced as rhetorical tropes through the rhetorization of grammar, i.e., the production of a rhetorical figure in the syntactic relationship (paradigmatic and syntagmatic) of grammatical units. The significant thing to note is his observation that the rhetorical figure depends, unlike the literality of grammatical syntax, on “deflection” (borrowing Kenneth Burke’s term), that is, the rhetorical trope uses the essential ambiguity of reading to produce this dyadic relationship between two terms or two (or more) possible interpretations of the text. In fact, de Man argues that the power of the trope lies not in the possibility or existence of various interpretations (i.e. meanings) but because it engenders a
constitutive uncertainty in the reading where one interpretation/meaning cannot be immediately and assertively given precedence over others. In his words:

The grammatical model … becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. (10)

In this sense, the dyadic relationship of the “people” and the subject functions through the rhetorical ambiguity of the individuation (interpretation) of the “body politic” in the “body” of the citizen. The site of the subject, on the one hand, allows for the subjectivity of the individual and, on the other, recognizes the sovereignty of the (inter-)national citizen in its realization of the “detached/autonomous” authority of the “body politic,” which thereby legitimizes individual agency in the name of the collective. Neither the subject nor the people precede the other, but are dialectically produced in the transformation of the multitude into a political constituent under the hegemony of sovereign law: if the concept of the people subsumes the cultural difference of the multitudes, then the subject contains this difference as individuation of a collective identity without disrupting the sovereignty of the collective. As Bhabha aptly puts it: “Out of many one … founding dictum of the political society of the modern nation – its spatial expression of a unitary people …” (294). Thus the citizen-subject serves as the name of the “body politic” but can only function in the name of the latter. There can be no subject without “people” and no “people” without subject. This problem resurfaces in my engagement with the multitude in Chapter 3, particularly in reference to the work of Paolo Virno while I embrace the ambiguity of the “trope” to both critically read the constitution of the subject and to deconstruct it under the sign of its difference. The
constitution of the national subject correlates to the narrative dialectic of the nation-state in that the heterogeneity of cultural/colonial difference is sublated in the “subjection” of the citizen; the subjective space reconciles the possibility of individual agency with the legitimacy of sovereign/national autonomy. In fact, it is in the realization of this sovereign autonomy that the national subject coincides with its global form. The global subject need not be articulated in supra-national terms. In so far as global sovereignty (coincident with Hardt and Negri’s Empire) is realized through expanding networks of power that produce, maintain and exploit the unequal division of labor, the post-national subject is coincident with its national avatar as integral to the inter-national cartography of Empire.

In this process of nationalist subjection, the radical difference that the subject “contains” loses its radical potential to articulate sites of resistance; its constitutive split, instead of marking an inherent, irreconcilable heterogeneity, becomes necessary for the performative articulation of national individuality from within the pedagogic immanence of the nation’s sovereign space. Thus the relationship between subject and “people” within the (post-)national space is precisely this dialectic between pedagogic immanence and performative continuity: the transformation of the multitude by the dialectical process of the national/sovereign narrative produces the “people” as “historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy, gives the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event,” and at the same time repetitiously reconstitutes the body politic as “the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national
life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process” (Bhabha 297). Though Homi Bhabha identifies this split movement of the people’s constitution as necessitating the imperative to think in “double-time,” it is important to understand that this essential doubling of the temporal (and spatial) identity of the nation’s body politic is dialectically subsumed into the reconstitution of a homogeneous site of national sovereignty.

The problem, it would seem, with my understanding of the subject in the dialectical movement of narrative production is the possibility of the complete subsumption of subjective agency in the dialectical resolution of the pedagogic and performative temporalities of the national body politic. As I explore later in an important debate within the project of the Indian Subaltern Studies group in Chapter 4, it is precisely this understanding of the complete subsumption of subjective agency and the possibility of resistance that can inadvertently reify the hegemonic sovereign in postcolonial theory in the very attempt to recognize and resist its dialectical reach. The postcolonial subject in the reconstitution of the postcolonial nation was also subjected to this same logic of dialectical sublation by the national narrative as the “colonialist bourgeoisie hammered into the colonized mind the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity” (Fanon 11). Fanon, however, in The Wretched of the Earth, does not divest the postcolonial subject of anti-colonial agency though it is not clear how he emancipates the site of subjection from its dialectical bind. In fact, he agrees that the “disintegration, dissolution, or splitting of the personality” of the “colonized subject” (later transformed into the postcolonial subject) “plays a key regulating role in ensuring the stability of the colonized world” (20). The “colonized
subject” “discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation” (21). Fanon’s acknowledgment of the embourgeoisement of the colonized mind, however, shows a recalibration of the modern/colonial world system in response to the colonized’s violence that neutralizes the latter’s radical potential and contains it within the dialectic of postcolonial international sovereignty.

As Benita Parry argues in Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique published in 2004, “[t]he contradiction lies in the fact that the more the ‘subject’ produces knowledge about itself, the less it is able to assume political agency on behalf of that very knowledge” (2). Aijaz Ahmad, on the other hand, in his articulation of the “danger of embourgeoisement” in In Theory, while enumerating the “triple signs under which radical movements … are at length assimilated into the main currents of bourgeois culture,” includes “the currently fashionable theories of the fragmentation and/or death of the Subject … the very end of the social, the impossibility of stable subject positions, hence the death of politics as such” along with “Third-Worldist nationalism” and “essentialism” (64-65). Ahmad, while arguing against the comprador bourgeois subject of the postcolonial nation, also objects to the surrender of the site of the subject to the hegemonic logic of dialectical sublation under the sign of the sovereign. It seems to me that at issue here is “a distinction between ‘subject formation’ and ‘agency formation’” (Radhakrishnan 142).

Radhakrishnan, in Between Identity and Location, goes on to argue that “the creation of a new subjectivity is not entirely emancipatory; it is equally a matter of subjection and ideological interpellation” (142). Later on, however, he does state:
It is of vital importance that nationalist thought coordinate a new and different space that it can call its own, a space that is not complicit with the universal Subject of Eurocentric enlightenment, a space where nationalist politics could fashion its own epistemological, cognitive, and representational modalities. The break from colonialism has then to be both political and epistemological. (194)

The problem is that even while conceptualizing an epistemological break, there is a need to be aware of the pre-given epistemological terms reincorporated into the conception of radical alterity. Radhakrishnan does realize that in the articulation of a postcolonial subject, no matter how radical its premise, there is a concurrent and necessary constitution of a “people” as part of the dialectical production of a new national identity. In his words:

The contradiction lies in the fact that the unification of the people is going to be undertaken not in their own name, but in the name of the emerging nation and the nation-state that is to follow. The subaltern valence of the people has to be reformed as a prerequisite for their nationalization. The people thus become a necessary means to the superior ends of nationalism. (198)

The Native Informant and the Subaltern

The pedagogical constitution of the sovereign subject and its performative repetition in the national-global imaginary are coincident in the postcolonial context with the discourse of Western hegemony. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason published in 1999, traces the constitution of this sovereign subject to the Enlightenment discourse on Rational Man. Her argument is that the discursive production of the Rational Man in the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx foreclosed the figure of the native informant “… as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man—a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation” (6). Spivak reads the native informant as the presence of the exclusion of the “other”—the figure of “Man” needed the native informant as the “other” to its constitution as a rational and free
subject. Thus unlike the subaltern, the native informant is visibly present as the repository of the negative affects expelled from the discursive constitution of the “European ethico-political subject.” This establishes in Western Man simultaneous desire and repulsion in relation to the native informant. The desire is for “freedom” from the “other” of itself that it wishes to reject—a desire implicit in the implicit foundation of the sovereign subject as the center of Western rationalist discourse. In her excellent tracing of this constitutive impulse in Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment*, Spivak states that “the function of this freedom is described as a compulsion: ‘… in order to account for … the existence of things commensurate with [gemäs] a final purpose, we must assume, not only first an intelligent Being (for the possibility of things of nature for which we are compelled to judge of as purposes), but also a moral Being, as author of the world’ (CJ 306)” (21-22). The teleology of the Enlightenment subject that legitimizes the discourse of rational purpose, the discourse of my project as well, links it to the sign of the sovereign that also rationalizes the inter-national and now global exploitation of those sections of the world population that it discursively constitutes as its “other” in the tropology of the native informant. The pedagogical institution of the rational and free subject by repressing the difference-within in the repetitious performance of foreclosing the other-as-Native-Informant mirrors the discursive re-production of the nation in Bhabha. Thus Spivak posits that “[r]hetorically crucial at the most important moment in the argument … [the native informant] is not part of the argument in any way” (13). Spivak reads this discursive ruse as “the encrypting of the name of the ‘native informant’ as the name of Man—a name that carries the inaugurating affect of being human” (5).
This discursive foreclosure of the native informant as the sign of difference sublated in the dialectic of the Western subject is at the heart of the crisis of resistance.

At the same time Spivak argues that this act of foreclosure also marks the native informant as the site of resistance. I quote her at length before exploring this assertion:

The possibility of the production of the native informant by way of the colonial/postcolonial route and thus, ultimately, in books such as this one, is lodged in the fact of that, for the real needs of imperialism, the in-choate in-fans ab-original para-subject cannot be theorized as functionally completely frozen in a world where teleology is schematized into geo-graphy (writing the world). This limited access to being-human is the itinerary of the native informant into the post-colonial ... (30)

The discursive production of the teleology of Western hegemony as it re-produces the “world” is also caught in the necessity of its pedagogical sign’s repetitious performance—as it repetitiously reconstitutes the native informant as the fetishized “other,” performatively consumable as its constitutive difference. The constitution of the native-informant-as-other cannot then be “completely frozen” and its recognition as the always-present, repetitiously-performed “difference” of Man marks its critical entry into narratives of postcolonial resistance. This entry cannot be read, however, as the reconstitution of the native informant as an “authentic” native-subject. Spivak reads the native informant as a deconstructive deferment of the performative “geo-graphy” of the Western subject. In fact, she argues that attempts to read “who” comes “after the subject … in the name of who came before” (27) re-produces the “Aboriginal,” i.e., the fetishized native informant of Western discourse. Thus “neither the colonial, nor the postcolonial subject inhabits the (im)possible perspective of the native informant or the implied contemporary receiver” (62). The perspective of the native informant is “(im)possible” precisely because the possibility of its resistant reading lies in the impossibility of the retrieval of an authentic essentialist native subject. Reconstructions
of native-identity are always constituted in a voice “other” than the implied voice of the
native informant as the subject-writer re-produces the native-subject in a discursive
performance as repetition-in-difference of the hegemonic discourse it seeks to
destabilize. Instead of essentializing this discursive reproduction of an image of native-
authenticity, I argue that it is more fruitful to read the repetition-in-difference as
repetition-as-difference, i.e., the critical appropriation of the discourse of identity-
formation to deconstruct hegemonic identities and in the process posit counter-
hegemonic identities as strategic contestations of power. Reading the native informant
as native-subject discursively re-produced as the narrative center of resistant
articulations of postcoloniality has been critiqued for “the complicity between native
hegemony and the axiomatics of imperialism” (37). Spivak identifies the task of
deconstruction as “a persistent attempt to displace the reversal” (37) and reveal the
workings of this complicity.

I now turn to the other important figure of Spivak’s enquiry—the subaltern. While
the native informant is marked by the always-present difference of its sign, the figure of
the subaltern is marked by its always-absent presence. The native informant is
constituted as an “other” presence—its presence speaks (is spoken for) precisely of its
otherness and the need for its rejection. The subaltern, as read by Spivak, “cannot
speak”—its presence (and it has a presence that produces its discourse, or to be more
precise, its discourse produces its presence) is constituted by its silence/absence. The
speaking subaltern or the subaltern-subject, in the act of speaking has already
overlapped into the role of the native informant. Both figures are spoken for in
postcolonial discourse, but while the native informant is constituted in its “placement” as
the “other,” the subaltern can be read in its “displacement” as the “other.” I read the subaltern as a strategy for layering the postcolonial text—its textual constitution of spatio-temporal borders and the outside as well as the point of mediation between the discursive hegemonic center and the native periphery. While the native informant is the mark of mediation where the colonial subject rhetorically constitutes its sovereign identity, the subaltern is the site of liminality where the excess of the native, after its fetishization into the consumable “other” (that excess which cannot be uttered), is displaced.

**The Subaltern as O/other**

Rey Chow’s critique of postcolonial narratives of resistance in her article “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” originally published in 1994 articulates her objections to the limitations of postcolonial critical gestures. Following Chow, I address “the question of how cultural difference [or “subaltern difference” in the context of my work] can be imagined without being collapsed into the neutrality of a globalist technocracy … and without being frozen into the lifeless ‘image’ of the other” (137).

In her seminal essay, Chow argues against the essentialisms of postcolonial narratives of native authenticity, but at the same time finds the project of recovering native identity in the gaps of the dominant discourse problematic. She addresses the possibility of recovering the native’s “voice” from what Bhabha has articulated as the “hybridity” of a “discursive system … inevitably split in enunciation” (127). Thus the “conceptual ambivalence” of the “heterogeneous structure” of even colonial discourse always already includes the “native voice” that can be read and recovered against the grain. In Chapter 3, I take up Walter Mignolo’s similar attempt to recover subaltern forms of knowledge or “border thinking” by challenging the assumptions of “colonial
difference." Chow cautions against a simplistic recuperation of subaltern “subjectivity,” addressing the problem of “subject-constitution” of the “native” or the “subaltern” in postcolonial criticism “firmly inscribed in Anglo-American liberal humanism … in which we try to make the native more like us by giving her a ‘voice’” (128). She clarifies Spivak’s position in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as “a protest against the two sides of image-identification, the two types of freedom the subaltern has been allowed – object formation and subject constitution – which would result either in the subaltern’s protection (as object) from her own kind or her achievement as a voice assimilable to the project of imperialism.” Agreeing with Spivak’s assertion of subaltern silence, Chow urges her readers, instead of attempting to restore to the “native” her “‘authentic’ context,” to focus on that “silence” as “at once the evidence of imperialist oppression (the naked body, the defiled image) and what, in the absence of the original witness to that oppression, must act in its place by performing or feigning as the pre-imperialist gaze” (130).

Referring to Malek Alloula’s The Colonial Harem, Chow critiques his project of recovering the identities of Algerian women in picture post-cards that French soldiers “sent home … during the early decades of the twentieth century” (130). Chow rightly observes that in Alloula’s critical work, the pornographic gaze of the French soldiers is replaced by the gaze of the postcolonial critic. She argues that “[e]ven though the male critic sympathizes with the natives, his status as invisible writing subject is essentially different from, not identical with, the status of the pictures …” (131). Arguing against a stable ontology for the pictures or the pornographic gaze, Chow suggests that in the process of his critique Alloula re-produces the colonial text, i.e., “understands the
images in terms of content rather than as a signifying process which bears alternative clues of reading” (132). For her, one alternative to avoid the critical reinscription of a (post-)colonial gaze would be to withhold the images and describe them “verbally.” This strategy presumably would draw attention to the discursive production of the colonial text instead of re-producing the colonial gaze. Eventually, Chow goes on to elaborate her thesis as

combating the construction of the native as the straightforward or direct ‘other’ of the colonizer … [by] add[ing] to this ‘image’ of the native the ability to look, so that the native is ‘gaze’ as well. But this is not the gaze of the native-as-subject, nor the gaze of the anti-imperialist critic like Alloula; rather it is a simulation of the gaze that witnessed the native’s oppression prior to her becoming image. (139)

This gaze “neither a threat nor a retaliation” makes the colonizer “conscious” of himself and forces him to project his own gaze/self on the “native-object.” Chow defines this simulated gaze as “the big Other the big Difference” (139) and concludes that the “native” that postcolonial critics are trying to recuperate is located “between the defiled image and the indifferent gaze” (141). While I agree with her focus on native silence, I also take up in my project what I believe is an enabling distinction between the figures of the native informant and the subaltern. While both would still be projections of the critical gaze, the former would be read as the “native pose” and the latter as the “dis-posed” native.

Chow’s “big Difference” is premised on the Lacanian “Other (big Other) that exists before ‘separation,’ before the emergence of the objet petit a, the name for those subjectivized, privatized, and missing parts of the whole” (138). She clarifies that the “function” of this “total sign” is to “contest the limits of the conventional (arbitrary) sign itself” and “not an attempt to recuperate an originary, primordial space before the sign"
to posit an idealized “totality” radically “different (and indifferent) to our own” (139). While Chow acknowledges the absence of the “original witness” of the defiling of the “native,” however, the simulation of the indifferent gaze as the “big Other” enables “a mode of understanding the native in which the native’s existence – that is, an existence before becoming ‘native’ – precedes the arrival of the colonizer” (139). So in Chow’s reading, the “big Other” does discursively refer to a point of pre-contact, an uncontaminated native “history” before “native history.” Even though in her theoretical formulation the “native” is an “indifferent, defiled image” (141) and does not directly correspond to a native “reality” outside the image-text, her postulation of the meta-signifier of the “big Difference” re-produces a binary discourse of pre- and post-contamination/colonization as a meta-text premised upon the historical coordinates of an “originary” event.

A look at Chow’s article entitled “The Interruption of Referentiality,” published in 2002, sheds light on the structural problematics of this theoretical framework. In this article, she argues against the implicit recourse to the hegemonic discourse of Western (colonial) rationality by postcolonial, poststructural narratives of resistance. Early on, in her article, there is a disconcerting confusion between readings of structuralism and poststructuralism. In her own words:

The one indisputable accomplishment of poststructuralist theory in the past several decades has been its systematic unsettling of the stability of meaning, its interruption of referentiality. If such meaning had never been entirely stable even in pretheory days, what poststructuralist theory provides is a metalanguage in which it (meaning) can now be defined anew as a repetitive effect produced in the chain of signification in the form of an exact but illusory correspondence between signifier and signified. (172)

While the distinction between structuralism and poststructuralist theory is not absolute, and the first bleeds into the second, the two categories can be strategically deployed to
highlight significant discursive differences. The poststructural systemic constitution of meaning that Chow identifies is generally ascribed to the structural theories of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss; poststructuralism refutes the internal coherence of the linguistic structure as a stable system of meaning and point of reference for the signifier, thus interrupting the repetitive performance of the systemic constitution of meaning. It seems to me that this general confusion has some bearing on her eventual recourse in the previous article to the structuralist trope of the Lacanian "big Other" as the point of reference for native silence. Therefore, at the end of "The Interruption of Referentiality," she advocates accepting "[r]eferentiality, reformulated … precisely as the limit, the imperfect, irreducible difference that is not pure difference but difference thoroughly immersed in and corrupted by the errors and delusions of history" (184-185).

Chow produces a generalized and inclusive notion of poststructuralism and its deployment by postcolonial critics that is supposed to circumvent the notion of "exclusion" by its mechanical methodology of naturalized differential that is all-inclusive. She argues that postcolonial critics in their "distrust of Western theory" resort to poststructuralist "differencing" but by "implementing the bracketing of anchored, referential meanings that constitutes one of contemporary Western theory’s most profound influences" (180). However, that same process of their criticism of Western theory, the interruption of referentiality, in the end "dissipates" even their critical categories/tools thereby posing the problem that “[t]o truly argue for resistance, they would in fact need to go against or abandon altogether the very theoretical premises (of poststructuralist differencing) on which they make their criticisms in the first place.” She
equates deconstructive practice with what she identifies as the repetitive gesture of poststructural meaning-constitution, stating:

Inevitably, difference as such will continue to fragment and dismantle whatever specificity that may have been established through it, once again rendering the goal of stable objectification impossible.

Permanent differentiation and permanent impermanence: these are the key features of poststructuralist theoretical practice as we find it today. (179)

While critical deconstructive practices have countered epistemological claims of a positivistic ontology, Chow ignores the importance of “strategic positions” that both Derrida and Spivak have emphasized countering a theory of “permanent differentiation and permanent impermanence.” I posit that the argument needs to be displaced to a different register of enquiry—namely, the strategic significance of “other” readings as well as their limitations as they seek out subaltern identities (premised on race, gender, class, caste and other identity markers) as sites of resistance from traces of hybridity coincident with the repetitious performance of the dominant subject. My purpose in deconstructing literary and critical constitutions of subalternity is not to universally reject such resistant readings as “permanent repetitions” in difference of (or in indifference to) the hegemony of Western discourse, but, in those specific instances, to fore-stall and defer the constitution of the subaltern-subject as an “absolute” sign of resistance.

Chow goes on to ask that if theoretical references to Western discursive practices are testimony to the hegemony of Western discourse itself, then what legitimates critical claims of resistance? In a sense, she is asking if “true” resistance has to be located at some radical site outside the referentiality of Western discourse. Arguing against assumptions of radical non-Westernity from within Western discourse,
in Chapter 3, I explore theoretical articulations of radical resistance as sites of counter-hegemonic postcolonial identities.
CHAPTER 3
LOCATING RADICAL ALTERITY: ARTICULATING GLOBAL-NATIONAL RESISTANCES TO THE HEGEMONIC

How is the subaltern to be defined and to be identified? Who is/are the subaltern? Here the choice between the singularity and plurality of the subaltern is an important one because the choice is between the individualization of the radically “other” and the plurality of a radical collective. Again, in the case of the latter, is the collective a singular (hence, potentially political) body that is unconscious of its own political potential? Or are the collective a multitude of differences strategically identified as subaltern in the radical solidarity (a potential solidarity; a very strategic politics of solidarity) of their unvoicing? Or is subalternity a theoretical term strategically employed to mark the a priori slippage of an-other—the “other” that has not been (cannot be) constituted into the “other” of the postcolonial “self”—into irrelevance? Each of these questions marks the problematic of the subaltern, its essential undefinability, not because it remains beyond definition, but because it has no presence in definition. It indefinitely defers its definition because it can only be defined (identified) at a strategic theoretico-political instance and importantly in différence to its “other” definitions.

The Textual Apostrophe of the Subaltern

Bhabha’s notion of hybridity marks the inherent différence within the definition-in-performance of the statement of identity: national, global, colonial, postcolonial, etc. This hybridity cannot be the universal particular, the answer to the question of radical difference. The identification of hybridity is the fulcrum of the deconstructive strategy of intercepting the reading of a text that cannot end with the identification of the representative hybrid as the radical subject. The problem lies in the project of identification, the subject-constitution of the chosen identity as a troping of the rational
subject. In her reading of Roberto Fernandez Retamar’s “Caliban,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak clearly cautions:

If, however, we are driven by a nostalgia for lost origins, we too run the risk of effacing the 'native' and stepping forth as 'the real Caliban,' of forgetting that he is a name in a play, an inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text…. [C]laiming to be Caliban legitimizes the very individualism that we must persistently attempt to undermine from within. (118)

This is precisely why I read the subaltern at the site of the textual apostrophe.

I derive this notion of the “textual apostrophe” from Spivak’s reading of Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne” in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. The word apostrophe according to its Greek roots means “to turn from/away” (OED) and I define the apostrophic moment in the text as the precise point at which the narrative turns away from the textual “other/s” towards the subject. The apostrophic moment is thus constitutive of the narrative’s subject-other dialectic, but is also the deconstructive moment of the essential unraveling and revealing of textual hybridity. As Spivak has shown, it is imperative for the critical reader to intercept this apostrophic moment to enable a truly interruptive reading strategy, to interrogate the narrative mechanisms by which the text constitutes its subject and its “other/s,” and refuses—turns away from—constituting the subaltern.

The subaltern essentially lies outside subjection, not because it is ontologically indefinable, but because it is epistemologically the text’s blind-spot. The subaltern, and here I am reading a very literary subaltern, the subaltern as text, has no ontological presence beyond the text to be retrieved. I am interested in the trace of the subaltern that marks the constitution of the hybridity of the textual play of the subject and the native informant. The textual subject turns away from the native informant only to mirror
it, to constitute it as its “other.” But the text-in-performance of the statement of its identity has to constitute the borders of its narrative and consequentially define the limits of its performance. In the process, it not only performs its hybridity through the subjects of its narrative, both subject and “other,” but also performs the absence of what lies beyond its definitive boundaries.

The subaltern is not the radical outside of the text and its textual boundaries, but necessarily a trope to conceptualize that outside. The subaltern is a turning away without a mirror, without a turning back, because it is “irrelevant” to the performance of the text. It importantly helps the reader as interceptor, the interruptive reader, to realize textual performance as a “self”-constitutive statement. The subaltern is therefore the closest we can get to writing about speaking of the “radically other,” which is not an “other” because the text and the textual subject refuse to or are unable to textually consolidate it. The sign of the subaltern is not the constitution of the textually radical. It is traced and lost at the site of the slippage of the irrelevant “other” into absence—the subal“turn” of textual apostrophe. Here the irrelevance is relevant simply because of a strategic reading that often follows the trace of the text’s own apostrophic gesture. The narrative-in-performance has to turn away in order to perform its statement of identity, and the interruption of subalternity, its sign in strategic interruptive reading, is made to bear the statement of this apostrophic performance. The subaltern sign is neither a testament nor testimonial to radical alterity, which is also a trope of truth-telling.

My engagement with the figure of the subaltern is precisely to defer this critical trope of radical alterity that often becomes the backdoor for consolidating more native
informants to the truth-telling of the Western subject, and effectively re-turn the
conversation to the strategic deconstruction of literary texts for specific subaltern traces.

The subaltern in my reading need not, should not, be termed the “radically other.” In fact, the site of the text’s radical liminality is marked by the subaltern, while the subaltern is marked at that precise moment of the textual apostrophe, the “turning away” of the narrative from what it cannot, what it wishes not to, contain. This apostrophic instance is also the instance of interruption at both instances of writing and reading the text. The text in its writing interrupts its narrative in “turning away” from the subaltern, and my proposed critical reading interrupts the narrative turn at this moment of “turning away” to recognize the eruption of the im-possibility of re-figuring the subaltern. This interruption is marked at the interception of the text in its movement from the implied reader to the implied receiver. How can the subaltern be “radically other?”

The conceptualization of the “radically other,” or even of radical difference, pre-conceives a narrative epistemological center in the sovereign subject to posit the “radical” as its im-possible alterity. My reading seeks to displace this problematic of the alter-subject to tracing the im-possible narratives from which dominant historiography turns away as its philosophical, ethical, and political imperatives. The weight of the significance of this crucial distinction between the subaltern trace and radical alterity is placed on the hyphen. The “im-possible” is the possibility of the “event” that has not arrived, cannot arrive and is being conceived of. It signifies the eventuality of an im-possible realization of the finitude of sovereignty and by corollary sovereign, democratic, rational discourse, not by tracing some impossible “other” as the other-subject, but by
re-tracing the subaltern that the sovereign refuses to, and therefore is unable to, by its own narrative compulsion, recognize.

Is the difference between the native informant and the subaltern to be identified as the différance of the consolidated “other” to the radically other? Is the subaltern, as opposed to the sovereign subject’s internalization of the native informant in self-constitution, the site of radical resistance to the dominant narrative of Western epistemology? Christopher Watkin points out that this question of radical alterity has haunted Western and particularly French philosophy since the publication of Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*. While Watkin embraces the “different alterity” of Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of the “singular plural,” in this chapter I engage with the problematic of radical resistance as alterity as a means to situate the native informant and the subaltern through the ideas of Nancy, Hardt and Negri, Derrida, Homi K. Bhabha, Radhakrishnan, and finally, Walter Mignolo.

**Multitude and “Singular Plural” as Resistance**

The expanding networks of Empire progressively subsuming the globe by the logic of capitalist accumulation has in the last few decades brought about an urgent sense of the necessity of a global resistance. The question is how to envision this resistance: whether as a global movement capable in its scope of resisting the expansive reach of globalization, or as multiple local resistances, distinct in their contextual specificity, yet global in their multitude, thereby defeating the very logic of translating the world into a single consumable global idiom? Would a global resistance necessitate a global identity, a transnational “people” liberated from nationalist prerogatives, or in other words, provincial loyalties, capable of presenting a unified front against the advance of Empire? I have previously argued the problems associated with
the assumption of a global subject as the “other” of an imperial sovereignty, which would legitimize a global structure of exploitation and internalize/institutionalize resistance as subject to its own logic. The need for resistance from within, for a deconstructive movement questioning the self-constitutive institution of imperial sovereignty, is of the utmost importance at present; any such deconstructive gesture, however, has to be particularly aware of its own assumptions and whether such assumptions are aligned with the logic of the very exploitative regime it seeks to resist.

At the same time, we need not assume the institution of Empire inevitable. The formulation of resistance in global terms need not a priori assume the institution of a “global people” on which such a resistance would have to be seated. The “imagination” of a “multitude” can be premised upon “strategies of commonality” as argued by Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, by preserving the differences that localized individuals and communities share in material, political, social and ideological terms, without translating it into a global body politic “calibrated for extensive Empire” (182). In fact, the deconstructive gesture of resistance produced by the “creative movement of the multitude” (162) must resist its own urge to homogenize and, thereby, “subject” itself to the detached authority of its own sovereignty.

Hardt and Negri introduced the idea of the “multitude” in their seminal work *Empire* in 2000 and then dedicated their subsequent publication *Multitude* in 2004 to exploring this notion of a global resistance. In defining “multitude,” the authors tried to resist the subsumption of resistance under the sign of the sovereign subject in the figure of the “people,” the problematics of which I have already explored in Chapter 2. The susceptibility of the “people” to biopolitical control lies in the unity of its singular sign.
Hardt and Negri negotiate this constitutive weakness of the “body politic” in *Multitude* by imagining a singular body of resistance composed of a set of *singularities*—and by singularity… a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different…. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people. (99)

This conception of “plural singularities” automatically draws comparisons to Jean-Luc Nancy’s articulation of the “singular plural.”

Interestingly, Hardt and Negri don’t refer to Nancy’s “singular plural” in *Multitude*, even though the latter introduced the idea in his book *The Inoperative Community* in 1991 and then in 1996 devoted *Être Singulier Pluriel* (translated into English in 2000, the same year as the publication of *Empire*) to further explore this notion of a Being-in-common or Being-with that avoids the subject-other dichotomy of the Heideggerian *Dasein*. Nancy’s assertion of a singular “Being” as Being-with that is not the “other of Being” cannot be a recourse to an ontological essence of Being as such. In fact, Nancy clearly states in *Being Singular Plural* that the origin of Being is the affirmation of repetition and is not a “fact” (6). And the repetition of Being-with is traced in the multiplicity of origins of the originary idea of Being(-in-common). This originary multiplicity does not indicate multiple origins, but posits repetitions of an originary commonality that is at the heart of Nancy’s critique of the (another originary—an alter-originarity) being-other dichotomy. According to Nancy:

the being-other of the origin is not the alterity of an “other-than-the-world.” It is not a question of an Other (the inevitably “capitalized Other”) than the world; it is a question of the alterity or alteration of the world. In other words, it is not a question of an *aliud* or an *alias*, or an *alienus*, or an other in general as the essential stranger who is opposed to what is proper, but of an *alter*, that is, “one of the two.” This “other,” this “lowercase other,” is “one” among many insofar as they are many; it is *each one*, and it is *each time* one, one *among* them, one among all and one *among* us all. In the
same way, and reciprocally, “we” is always inevitably “us all,” where no one of us can be “all” and each one of us is, in turn (where all our turns are simultaneous as well as successive, in every sense), the other origin of the same world. (11)

Thus the commonality of Nancy’s Being-in-common is not founded on a simple plurality of singular beings. Such a commonality would suggest that the singularity of identity precedes the plurality of a finite community while Being-with is in “compearance,” i.e., defined in the sharing of an originary Being-together. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy states:

Being in common means that singular beings are, present themselves, and appear only to the extent that they compear (*comparaissent*), to the extent that they are exposed, presented, or offered to one another. This compearance (*comparution*) is not something added on to their being; rather, their being comes into being in it. (58 [emphasis mine])

So singularity of “beings” is identifiable inasmuch as they are “presented” to each other—from the Latin root “pārē-re” meaning “to come in sight, come forth” and “to be present” (OED)—in the plurality of Being-with. The presentation of singularities that is the ground for the “in-common” of “Being in common” hinges on the notion of “exposure.” Being is Being-with and can only present itself in the plurality of its singularities exposed to each other for without compearance “there would be nothing but being appearing to itself, not even in common with itself, just immanent Being immersed in a dense pearance (*parence*)” (58). Interestingly, in his use of the word “compearance,” Nancy does not address its root in the French “compar-oir” meaning “to appear formally before a tribunal” (OED). It would seem that in order to compear, the notion of Being-with must defer “judgment” in-definition, in différance to certain possible meanings that it does not wish to share. I retrieve the trace of this judgment, of the law
of the tribunal (the law of language, of the text), in the “invisible” sovereign subject of Nancy’s address.

This argument for the “Being in common” of Being-with is very important, for here Nancy is clearly opposing the idea of radical alterity as an alter-identity that is radically different to the world, an essential Other to the essential Self. This distinction needs to be clearly thought through. Following Bhabha’s articulation of the constitutive “hybridity” of the subject in *Location of Culture* in 1994, the Other as the essential alterity to the Self is necessarily constitutive of that Self and is part of its identity. In a sense, radical alterity is not an alterity at all, in the sense of an alter-identity, as it is the non-other, that which is not conceived in the constitution of the world. Nancy here seems to have taken this a step farther to argue that there is no possibility of such a radical alterity, since identity as Being is fundamentally reduced to Being-other which is Being-with where all pronouns are reconciled in the “we” which is always inevitably “us all.”

This is then the fundamental difference between Nancy’s “singular plural” and Hardt and Negri’s “multitude.” While the latter propose the coming-into-being of the multitude, Nancy traces out the originary (and hence singular “each time”) plurality of Being-in-common in its “non-essentialized mutuality” (Watkin 57). However, we have to interrogate the limits of this idea of sharing of meaning that Nancy elaborates in *Being Singular Plural*—“sharing” from the Old English word *scearu* meaning “a cutting, shearing, division” (OED)—that is so central to the articulation of the commonality of Being-with. To propose an idea of sharing that is all-inclusive is a recourse to a rhetorical trope that denies the Being-otherwise of every(one)thing that cannot partake
of the sharing, is not deemed a “cut” of the whole. This apostrophic turn is not inevitable, but I argue that Nancy falls into this trap as he attempts to articulate an all-inclusive notion of originary commonality. While this may not be Nancy’s intention, this rhetorical trope can still follow the dangerous trajectory of identity politics unless critically intercepted.

While I argue that the radically Other cannot be defined without assimilating its radical difference, I locate the trace of the radically unknowable, the im-possible, in the trace of the subaltern. Derrida would argue that one has to face the possibility of radical difference in the im-possibility of the “event.” To foreclose on that im-possibility is to erase the trace of the subaltern and deny the apostrophic moment wherein the subject defines its own limits. Here I’m not questioning the singularity of the plurality of the world, but I am arguing that the Nancean “singular plural” in its singular plurality cannot sublate the singularly im-possible whose trace marks the limits of both singularity and plurality. While the trace of the subaltern is—has to be—a part of the “singular plural,” the actualization of the “figure” of the subaltern marked by that trace—both in its present-absence and its absent-presence—must remain radically im-possible.

In Derridean terms, I argue that Nancy merely defers in-definitely the subject-other dichotomy in defining a notion of “singular plurality” premised on the sharing of meaning among the multitudes. The presence of this Being-with, this Being-in-common, is not singular but singularly plural and realizes the “self” as such. However, Nancy defines this presence as different from the pure presence that is undivided and hence is both absent and present. In the context of my work, I argue that the “self” of this “singular plurality” has to define itself rhetorically by turning away from undivided
“presence” (which is also an “absence”) that is both absent and present, that is a “presence to nothing, of nothing, for nothing … the simple implosion of a being that could never have been—an implosion without any trace” (2). In closing out the pure presence of an ontological essence of Being, Nancy has also foreclosed on the subaltern, and consequently produced a pure absence that is also both absent and present and whose trace I retrieve at this apostrophic turn of the text (of Being Singular Plural). I disagree with Nancy that this absent presence (or present absence) does not leave a trace. Its trace lies in the apostrophic turn of Nancy’s rhetorical conceptualization of this Being-in-common that evades the subject-other dichotomy of Dasein, the alterity for the need for radical alterity. The absent “figure” of this trace that I have marked as the subaltern is also undivided because it has no presence because it is a present absence; it has no singularity, but is contextual in producing contextually the singularity of the textual subject even when that subject seeks to avoid/defer its own subjectivity as in the case of Nancy’s Being-with. I explain my assertion of the “undivided” absence of the subaltern in Chapter 4 when I engage with the problematics of subaltern representations.

At present, I argue that Nancy’s conceptualization of the singular plurality of Being-with is actually grounded in an evasion of the recognition of plurality in difference and of indifference—i.e., the repetitive reconstitution of difference and indifference to any mutuality of difference. Here, I have consciously used the term “evasion” instead of “deferment” since the latter would suggest a strategic postponement on his part with the possibility of re-engaging with this problem of plurality later on. To be clear, Nancy does not propose some essential commonality/ies to gloss over the differences that mark the
plurality of individuals. Nancy recognizes the repetitive gesture of the articulation of
Being-with without laying claim to some ontological originary essence; his challenge is
to test and contest the discursive and disseminative primacy of the plurality-in-difference
that marks current identity politics across the globe today. Nancy asserts that what each
“self” of Being-with, or each repetition of Being-with, shares is the very plurality of
differences, the plural repetition of its differences. In *The Inoperative Community*, he
states that “what is shared therefore is not the annulment of sharing, but sharing itself,
and consequently everyone’s non-identity, each one’s non-identity to himself and to
others” (66). He proposes a recognition and reconstitution of mutuality on the basis of
an acknowledgment of this sharing of differences (but not a particular difference), the
sharing of an originary “incommensurability” of the plural repetition of difference. Thus
Nancy calls for a re-definition of Being as Being-with, for each repetition of “self” to
reconstitute the mutuality that it shares instead of merely repeating its difference; he
clearly provides this call in *Being Singular Plural* in the words:

> From now on, *we, we others* are charged with this truth—it is more *ours*
than ever—the truth of this paradoxical “first-person plural” which makes
sense of the world as the spacing and intertwining of so many worlds
(earths, skies, histories) that there is a taking place of meaning, or the
crossing-through [*passages*] of presence. (5)

> Thus the previous distinction between “multitude” and the “singular plural” is
deconstructed in the recognition of the illocutionary act of this call. Nancy, through this
ilocutionary act is proposing the coming-into-being of a Being-with of the shared
mutuality of difference/s. I argue that this Being-with that-is-to-come through a collective
definition of mutuality becomes the origin of its own call and coincides with the
“detached” authority of the sovereign subject as the pre-condition of its own origin. In
*Being Singular Plural*, Nancy, in the circulatory mediums of the repetition of Being-with,
includes “all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods” and differentiates them for “humans” (3). But how are we to ascertain the circulation of mutuality amongst those deemed not-human, deemed irrelevant to this question of mutuality; unless this notion of Being-with transcends the narrative bounds of language, in which case, we need to interrogate this rhetorical slippage into the trope of pure essence that is not bound by recognition through repetition in language. In fact, Nancy goes on to elaborate:

Language speaks for all and of all: for all, in their place, in their name, including those who may not have a name. Language says what there is of the world … and it also speaks for them as well as in view of them, in order to lead the one who speaks, the one through whom language comes to be and happens (‘man’), to all of being, which does not speak but which is nevertheless…. (3 [emphasis mine])

My point here is that Jean-Luc Nancy’s attempt to include the “non-human” within the “circulatory” limits—actually limitlessness—of language does not address the problem of recognizing “non-human” repetition of Being-with; how do “we” (and the “we,” and not “one” or “I,” here is very important) recognize (and constitute) in language the repetitive gesture of a “thing”—not “something” or “anything” but a non-thing, “nothing” marked only by its absence—that is “irrelevant” to the repetition of “self”-constitution? The “non-human” for Nancy is included, assimilated, in language without addressing the “subject”ive limits of the repetition of and in language “each time.” The assimilative inclusiveness of language is not the solution to the limits of Being; isn’t the problem the assimilative inclusive limits of language to the proposed limitlessness of Being-with? I address the invisible subject of language in Nancy’s articulation of “singular plurality” a little later on in this chapter.
The “Primordial Mutuality” of the Singular Plural

Christopher Watkin, in his article “A Different Alterity: Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘Singular Plural,’” defends Nancy’s notion of Being-with that shares a fundamental “incommensurability” as the basis of a “primordial mutuality” (59). The problem of realizing that primordial mutuality in the repetitive circulation of the “self” each time is how to avoid (and not defer) the Derridean “irreducible reciprocity” of the “other” as “wholly other” (56-59). Watkin suggests “touch” and “exposure” as means of sharing this incommensurable mutuality of Being-in-common. He explains that
touch for Nancy is always an indication of both proximity and distance, contact and impenetrability. Touching in distance characterizes the relation of singularities in the ‘we’. Touching one another with their mutual weights, bodies do not become undone, nor do they dissolve into other bodies, nor again do they fuse with a spirit. This is what makes them, properly speaking, bodies. (59)

However, the mutuality produced through the touching of bodies is not constitutive of an “oikological” globality (to avoid a sense of community based on commensurability) but an “ecotechnical” one—“a term evoking, as opposed to the oikological, the absence of any fixed frontiers of its identity” (58). This is how Nancy seeks to transcend the subject-other dichotomy of the Heideggerian Dasein, by sublating the “other” (and assimilating it) through erasing the limits/boundaries of the subject—and in the process, as I pointed out earlier, erasing the im-possibility of the subaltern. Of course, this marks the apostrophic moment of the subal“turn” in Watkin’s engagement with Nancy’s “text” (the text of “singular plurality”) thereby marking the moment of erasing, and simultaneously siting the subaltern trace of the absence of, the irrelevant “other.” Nancy (and Watkin) does not address a subject in his call to mutuality. He proposes “touching” without a subject, and defers the politics of “touching” while talking about the “politics” of bodies.
He argues for the “configuration, of shapes” in his article “Corpus” (24) published in Thinking Bodies but does not address the subject of that configuration. Who configures? Who configures the body politic? And in whose name is the body politic (to be) configured?

It is the problem of the invisible subject that haunts Nancy’s elaboration of “exposure” as the basis of mutuality as well. Watkin understands exposure at the “limit” as similar to the “thaumazein” of the pre-Socratics—the astonishment that is “nothing other than what comes at the limit”—and proposes that “[a]t the limit, truth is the surface glimmer of 'simple presentation', presence before signification” (59). So Being-with is defined at the “contact zone” as the mutuality of “presence” without signification. I read this assertion of presence without signification as an attempt to break out of textuality to avoid the inevitable limits of a text-in-definition—the finite limits of “defining” a textual subject, from the Latin root finiire meaning “to end” (OED). Watkin does not address how exposure in the colonial context was defined between “bodies” politically constituted in the eyes of the sovereign imperial subject in the language (text) of modernity (rationality). His reading of Nancy evokes the “contact zone” by turning away from the “repetition” of bodies-in-definition—as subjects and objects, as subjects and others—that was constitutive of the sovereign subject of Enlightenment rationality. I do not think that the imperial sovereignty of “Being” at the center of the Western epistemological paradigm can be rethought and re-defined as the Being-with of global mutuality by ignoring the colonial history of the constitutive ground of the “contact zone.” The insidious power of Western imperialism was the “global” reach of the Enlightenment project—in the manner in which it assimilated “other” discourses and sublated them as
the “other/s” of “Rational Man” (or the Western subject) in the figure/s of the native informant while erasing many, rendering them irrelevant (those whose absence postcolonial discourse has attempted to re-trace under the sign of the subaltern).

The “absence” of a subject that initiates the mutuality of the touch, or the subjects of “exposure” at the “limit” through the evocation of “bodies” preceding signification, only masks the re-entry of the (reconceptualized, but still) sovereign subject of Western rationality as the “one” or the “I” who acknowledges Nancy’s “call” to the “we” and the “us all.” What stands out particularly in Nancy’s call for a re-configuration of the Western rational subject is the fact that his own discourse is completely limited to Western epistemological bounds. In effect, the “singular plural” is an epistemological call to global commonality that epistemologically limits its own paradigm, i.e., its conception of the globe, to the West. This is why Nancy’s engagement with the notion of “people” as a premise for the being-in-common of his conceptualization of Being-with needs to be interrogated as well. In its singularity—as Nancy states, “‘I’ take refuge in an exception or distinction when I say ‘people,’ but I also confer this distinction on each and every person, although in just as obscure a way” (8)—the “people” is also coincident with the biopolitical singularity of the sovereign “people” that I took up in Chapter 2. As with his notion of Being-with, unless intercepted, his engagement with the “people” can be the repetition of the ever-present danger of bio-power in its manipulation of the body of the “masses” into the “body politic” of the sovereign State. This is thus ultimately a political issue. How does Nancy’s political call propose to change current global identity politics? Does the recognition of the mutuality of differences necessarily allow a politics of solidarity?
I argue that Nancy’s “singular plural” actually enables a critique of the assimilative narrative of Enlightenment rationalism suggesting the incorporation of “others” as native informants in the sharing of difference/s. Thus each repetition of subject-constitution in-difference is a repetition of Being-with since “we” are linguistically (textually) unable to recognize the radical alterity to Being-with as Being-without—the “radically other” is limited/defined by and in the text in the trace of its absence that is the subaltern. This assimilative mutuality of Being-with—a “primordial mutuality” defined in différance—is synonymous with the agglomerating movement of Empire. At best, we are at the limits of our own textuality, the “contact zone,” looking for exposure without assimilation—without assimilating the “radically other” into our own language, which explains the recourse to “presence before signification.” Contextualized within Western epistemology, however, the Nancean trope of “singular plurality” suggests a different politics of otherness, a call to recognition of mutuality instead of difference as “we” proceed to assimilate “others.” It is an attempt to reshape the language of otherness by avoiding “Othering Altogether” that is often the premise of global sectarianism. Instead of arguing for “presence before signification” at the “limits,” the “singular plural” can be an important and strategic call to a politics of “presencing” after—always already after—signification at the “contact zone” by acknowledging the constitutive hybridity of Being-with. I explore this constitutive hybridity through the work of Homi K. Bhabha later on in this chapter.

Thus instead of merely opposing Derrida’s articulation of “every other is wholly other” as Watkin asserts in his article (56), I read Nancy as proposing a recalibration of identity politics beyond the otherness of the “other” and the same to a shared otherness
between “selves.” Watkin does acknowledge, in defending Nancy against Simon Critchley’s critique of the “reciprocity of the ‘with’” in the “singular plural,” that “[f]or Nancy togetherness is otherness” rejecting the “shoulder to shoulder” essentializing community of “common cause” or “common identity” (60-61). However, Nancy’s call is to a politics of inclusivity—to the “invisible subject,” the Center, of Western epistemology—that is always susceptible to indifference to its own agglomerating movement. He does not address a politics of resistance against that indifference—the indifference of the mutuality of differences—and the urgent need for solidarity in-difference from the “visible” multitudes “subjected” to the logic of Empire.

The “Strategies of Commonality” of the Multitude

Hardt and Negri deal with this precise problem of the indifference of all-inclusivity by acknowledging the primacy of plurality-in-difference in current global identity politics. They argue for “strategies of commonality”—the decision to make common cause, not in spite of, but acknowledging differences—in resistance to the networks of power of Empire by harnessing the shared commonality of those very networks. Amartya Sen, in *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*, identifies this gesture as prioritizing between the “multiple commitments and affiliations” (99) that we all share. This is not to deny that group identification can produce, or may be the result of, what George Akerlof calls “loyalty filters” that can severely limit agency in prioritizing. The site of “strategies of commonality” is always fraught with tension and violence, but the negotiations between individual priorities, in resistance to the manipulations of identity politics, can produce “richly divergent forms” (Sen 22) conducive to the expanding notion of a multitude.
The multitude thus draws strength from its global plurality but retains the autonomy of its multiple local singularities. The inherent and constitutive difference within the multitude is also its protection against the “indifference” of Baudrillard’s “mass” (100). So while Baudrillard clearly asserts “the end of the social” in the logic of the “masses,” Hardt and Negri seem to argue for a neo-social revolution against the agglomerating logic of Empire. In fact, they argue that the multitude is an inevitable result of the globality produced by and through Empire’s expanding networks of power. Here it is worthwhile to quote them at length as they preface their argument for the multitude as the site for global resistance. In their book *Multitude*, they state:

> there are two faces to globalization. On one face, Empire spreads globally its networks of hierarchies and divisions that maintain order through new mechanisms of control and constant conflict. Globalization, however, is also the creation of new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters. This second face of globalization is not a matter of everyone in the world becoming the same; rather it provides the possibility that, while remaining different, we discover the commonality that enables us to communicate and act together. The multitude too might thus be conceived as a network: an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common. (xiii-xiv)

Hardt and Negri define the plural body and loci of this resistance as singular in its difference from previous forms of resistance. But as they have pointed out, the expansive mode of Empire is different from the territorial mode of the nation-state; so how are we to ensure that the multitude is not the constitutive “other” of Empire in its modal difference? This does not deny the multitude’s resistance to the unity of a singular subject-constitution. If in order to understand the movement of Empire, we need to recalibrate our understanding of the biopower of the sovereign nation-state, then perhaps, we need to also recalibrate our understanding of the “people” as the
constitutive “other” of this fundamentally new evolution of global subjection. As critical readers, we need to stay vigilant against any hasty celebration of new modes of resistance, especially when this “multitude” as conceived in theory shares a symbiotic relationship with the agglomerating movement of Empire. There is no denying that seated in diverse localities across the globe, in communication with other movements and populations, deriving sustenance and inspiration from the same networks that feed into Empire, this multitude of resistance forces the latter to continually recalibrate its strategies of accumulation; but my point is precisely that Hardt and Negri’s logic enables/forces Empire to adjust to and learn from the resistances of multitude; in which case, while the networks of multitude provide the means for a global resistance to Empire, are the authors able to really articulate a radical alternative to Empire, one that provides the multitudes of the exploited the im-possibility of a “different global community?”

My concerns are echoed by Sylvère Lotringer in her “Foreword” to Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude* translated and published in English in 2004. Lotringer argues that in spite of having his political roots in the *Operaismo* and later *Autonomia* movements of the 60s and 70s in Italy, Negri (along with his co-author Hardt) does not trace the evolution of the notion of the “multitude” to these “workerist” struggles. Virno’s approach to the “multitude” is to trace it as a constitutive part of the Hobbesian argument for the hegemony of the sovereign (subject and State), the “other” to the constitution of the “people” as the realization of the premise for that sovereign authority. Virno argues that the evolution of post-Fordist capitalism (synonymous in Hardt and Negri with Empire) was a reaction to, a recalibration as a result of, the pressures of the
“multitude” that had always existed as the basis and cause of the precarious authority of the sovereign logic of State capitalism. Tracing the concept back to Spinoza and Hobbes, Virno reads the multitude as the “general intellect” of the social—“social knowledge turned into the principal productive force … the complex of cognitive paradigms, artificial languages, and conceptual clusters which animate social communication and forms of life” (87). Returning to the context of the constitution of the “people” and the sovereign citizen-subject that I explored in Chapter 2, the multitude according to A Grammar of the Multitude “is inherent in that which precedes the ‘body politic,’” and that which had to be repressed and sublated in Hobbes for the constitution of that “body politic.” This is because, for Hobbes, the multitude “shuns political unity, resists authority, does not enter into lasting agreements, [and] never attains the status of juridical person because it never transfers its own natural rights to the sovereign”—and so “if there are people, there is no multitude; if there is a multitude, there are no people” (22-23). However, according to Virno, the multitude survived into modernity through the hyphenated space of the dialectical relations of the public-private and the collective-individual, always circulating in the “uneasy” space of the “private” and the “individual.”

Here it is important to point out the difference between Virno’s conception of the individuation of the multitude in the illegitimate generality of the “one” and the realization of the political will of the “people” or the “body-politic” in the representative articulation of the sovereign citizen-subject. The multitude finally mobilized itself in resistance to the regularization and rigidization of its labor power by Fordist capitalism in the mobility of “emigration” forcing capital to adapt to a deterritorialized and “global” workforce. Thus in
Virno’s reading, Empire is the result of the multitude forcing Fordist capitalism to transform to its individuated and diverse contours. Thus he reads four attributes of the multitude—opportunism, cynicism, idle talk and curiosity—as the new requirements of labor in the post-Fordist workplace. And the fact that in the new techno-economic relations of production, labor encompasses not just the hours in the workplace but “the entirety of human faculties in as much as they are involved in productive praxis” (84) is the realization of post-Fordist capital’s “desire” to harness, commodify and “put to work” the inherent and potential totality of the “general intellect” that is characteristic of the multitude. This is the purpose of bio-politics—to enable the realization of the “potential” labor-power of this “general intellect” or the “life of the mind” (81) that is both premised on and is the premise of the multitude. Virno argues that the multitude too desires this realization of its potential and hence the characteristics of the new techno-economic relations of production mirror its attributes in:

**Opportunism**—“the ability to maneuver among abstract and interchangeable opportunities;”

**Cynicism**—familiarity with “the naked rules which artificially structure the boundaries of action;”

**Idle talk**—the “significant variances, unusual modulations, [and] sudden articulations” of an innovative discourse that “no longer requires an external legitimization… [and which] constitutes in itself an event consisting of itself, which is justified solely by the fact that it happens;” and

**Curiosity**—“greed of sight” fed by the mass media to “succeed in appropriating an abstract reality… concepts materialized in technology” to enable the “senses to consider the known as if it were unknown, to distinguish 'an enormous and sudden margin of freedom' even in the most trite and repetitive aspects of daily life… [and] to consider the unknown as if it were known, to become familiar with the unexpected and the surprising, to become accustomed to the lack of established habits” (84-93).
A close reading of *Empire* reveals that Hardt and Negri do repeatedly articulate this dialectal relation between the “multitude” and capitalism, clearly stating that “[t]he deterritorializing desire of the multitude is the motor that drives the entire process of capitalist development, and capital must constantly attempt to contain it” (124). Then what is the crucial difference in their two positions? Virno focuses on the dialectical relationship between the multitude and post-Fordist capitalism, particularly on the constitutive role that the multitude has played in shaping the networks of power characteristic of capital’s new global relations of production. For him the evolution of this dialectical relation is marked by “ambivalence,” for the four attributes identified previously mirrored in both the new relations of production and the multitude can be realized in negative and positive ways as articulated in the varied negotiations of individuals (not necessarily as citizen-subjects as the sovereignty of nation-states is weakened as a barrier against the exploitative networks of Empire) with the new capitalist regime across the globe. As Lotringer notes:

> The multitude is an “amphibious” category that can veer toward “opposing developments,” or come to nothing, so a combat is constantly raging—not with Empire, within itself. (17)

However, Virno does not imagine a break from this dialectic or propose a vision of a different social relation beyond the “ambivalence” of the interaction between multitude and post-Fordist capitalism’s global networks of power. In Lotringer’s words “[i]t is at this point that *Empire* comes in” (13).

For Hardt and Negri the multitude is not just the constitutive force behind the evolution of Empire, but it is also the “possibility” of a different future, the call for a concerted resistance to the expansive movement of global capitalism. In *Multitude*, they clearly state:
the concept of multitude is meant to repropose Marx’s political project of a class struggle. The multitude from this perspective is based not so much on the current empirical existence of the class but rather on its conditions of possibility. The question to ask, in other words, is not “What is the multitude?” but rather “What can the multitude become?” (105)

However, this multitude as the “body” of resistance cannot become a unity, a “body politic” subject to co-optation by the sovereign logic of Empire. As they had originally laid out the problem in Empire:

totalitarianism consists not simply in totalizing the effects of social life and subordinating them to a global disciplinary norm, but also in the negation of social life itself, the erosion of its foundation, and the theoretical and practical stripping away of the very possibility of the existence of the multitude. (113)

They defer the threat of this co-optation by imagining the multitude as a “set of singularities … whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different.” Interestingly, they need to locate the “body” of the multitude in an “active social subject” that can act as the agent of resistance, a subject of “plural singularities” that only “acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common.” To sum up in their words:

The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common. (100)

The important thing here is the rhetorical negotiation to define a subject of resistance while deferring the constitution of a sovereign subject that will become the constitutive unit of a global sovereignty legitimizing the logic of Empire.

In contrast, Virno in A Grammar of the Multitude individuates the multitude through the trope of the “one” because, he argues, “[e]ven the many need a form of unity, of being a One.” He defers co-optation by arguing that the unity of this general individuated representation of the multitude is not based on (and is not consequently the
basis of) the sovereignty of the State but is grounded on “language, intellect, [and] the communal faculties of the human race,” i.e., the “general intellect” I addressed earlier, as its “necessary precondition” (25). The problem for Virno is his attempt to define multitude as “precondition”—of itself and capitalism, i.e., the dialectic that defines human society in his work—in the language of modernity. To clarify, I argue that Virno is caught in the bind of rhetorically defining the “precondition” of his own rhetoric and that this rhetorical turn coincides with the same autonomous logic of sovereignty that Nancy’s “singular plural” fell victim to. Let me illustrate my point with an important example.

Virno’s engagement with Hobbes in his book is particularly significant as according to him “[t]he best way to understand the significance of a concept—multitude, in this case—is to examine it with the eyes of one who has fought it tenaciously” (22). As I have quoted him previously, Virno, drawing on Hobbes, points out that the multitude as the “one”—any-“one” or some-“one”—resists the “status of juridical person,” i.e., cannot be co-opted by the logic of the sovereign, because it refuses to “transfer its own natural rights to the sovereign” (23). However, he does not address the conundrum of defining “natural rights” outside the epistemological paradigm guaranteed by the authority of the sovereign. While “natural rights” can be defined as pre-existing the legal authority of the sovereign, such rights cannot be recognized without the guarantee of the sovereign that establishes the language of rights. Thus Virno, by delineating the multitude through the “eyes” of Hobbes, avoids and/or is caught in the rhetorical trap of formulating the multitude as the “precondition” of the very system that enables it to come-into-being (be recognized). In fact, he has to return to this
“precondition” in his redefinition of individuality as bearing the “echo of the archaic multitude” (24). While acknowledging the “harsh problems: above all the logical problem (which needs to be reformulated, not removed) of the relationship of One/Many” one has to confront in defining the multitude, he argues for its conceptualization as a “premise” instead of a “promise.” He differentiates the “unity” of the multitude—in the individuation of the One—from the unity of the people—“towards which things converge”—by arguing that the former is to be “taken for granted, as a background or a necessary precondition” (emphasis mine). While clearly calling for the conceptualization of this “multitude”—a multitude that “must be thought of”—he emphasizes that “we must conceive of a One which, far from being something conclusive, might be thought of as the base which authorizes differentiation or which allows for the political-social existence of the many seen as being many” (25). Paolo Virno’s “multitude,” like Nancy’s “singular plural,” is thus a concept that must precede, and serve “as the base which authorizes,” its own conception—“many seen as being many”—mimicking the “detached autonomy” of the sovereign.

The problem for Hardt and Negri, on the other hand, is that in their articulation of the multitude-to-come that can in its constitutive solidarity resist Empire, they define a democracy of differences where differences do not matter—for Virno the multitude represents a “non-representational democracy.” While they define this articulation of the multitude as a political project and reiterate the need to “ground” it in “empirical analysis” their purpose is clearly to demonstrate[] the common conditions of those who can become the multitude. Common conditions, of course, does not mean sameness or unity, but it does require that no differences of nature or kind divide the multitude. It means, in other words, that the innumerable, specific types of
labor, forms of life, and geographical location, which will always necessarily remain, do not prohibit communication and collaboration in a common political project. (105-106 [emphasis mine])

Lotringer critiques this gesture towards an-other politics, a politics of alterity radical enough as Hardt and Negri claim in *Empire* to “push through … to come out the other side” (218 [emphasis mine]). The precise need to articulate multitude as radically different is to break its dialectical relation to global capitalism. Lotringer argues, however, that in the process they constitute Empire as an “oversize enemy” that needs the multitude as a “global counter-power” (14). Essentially, her argument is that the “telos … precedes the multitude” (15), i.e., the expansive networks of Empire built on the vitality of the multitude necessitate a multitude-to-come that will somehow not only overcome its multitudinous differences but “build up” a solidarity based on “communication and collaboration” to not just resist global capitalism but move towards a radically different future. I agree that this telos of the multitude in Hardt and Negri puts it in an inevitable dialectical relation with Empire as the two concepts feed off each other. The “telos” here functions as the rhetorical “precondition” of the multitude’s definition, a teleology of resistance that originates from the global networks of power of Empire; at the same time, Hardt and Negri do not address the fundamental inability to narrativize “the other side” of Empire, that the eventuality of a radically different future is necessarily un-recognizable from within the epistemological paradigm of Western modernity. As Lotringer points out, how are we to assume that this alterity is the better alternative? Do we advocate “an-other” future as “any-other” future?

On another note, the difficulty in imagining a global resistance constituted of multiple local resistances lies in the fact that local concerns are often at odds with each other, even when they are aligned against the exploitative processes of globalization.
These shifting dynamics of strategic alignments premised upon the changing priorities of individuals and communities with “multiple commitments and affiliations” (Sen 99), however, are the very basis of that “creative movement” that defines the multitude and makes it so “desirable” to Empire. Empire’s networks of power, riding transnational flows of information technology while seeking to subsume the globe within their accumulative logic, produce neither a socio-political nor a material homogeneity in the people. So even though one may regard globalization as “a new social architecture of cross-border human interactions” (Hoogvelt 67), global networks of power do not produce what has often been touted as a “global village” of shared concerns. Instead, globalization progressively alienates large sections of the world population, creating what Manuel Castells calls the “Fourth World,” i.e., “those areas in the Third, Second and First World that are no longer relevant to the workings of the global informational economy” (Hoogvelt 89). It is important to note, however, that the excluded at the core, though also subject to globalization’s processes of exclusion, are distinct in their politico-economic possibilities of resistance from the disenfranchised populations at the geographical peripheries of the current world order. In fact, globalization’s modes of exclusion are inflected in their difference as exercised in locally specific contexts across the world. On the one hand, it diminishes the power of the nation-state to act as “one of the prime defenses against raw market power” (Hoogvelt 65), and on the other, it exploits the politico-economic inequalities demarcated by national borders, to sustain its regime of agglomeration.

**The Im-possibility of Interrupting Globalization**

So localized resistances, constrained within the networks of imperial power, often exhaust their deconstructive potential, either trying to bridge context-specific differences...
to unify disparate struggles across nations, or fighting the wrong enemy in attempts to localize the source of exploitation. At the same time, in reaction to neo-liberal globalization, such resistances often generate extremisms and fundamentalisms of the worst kind, or what Castells calls “defensive identities” of “the known against the unpredictability of the unknown and uncontrollable” (61), that exacerbate the very striations that feed into capitalism’s global reach. Castells, in *The Power of Identity,* defines the problem of defensive identities as,

> forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression, usually on the basis of identities that were, apparently, clearly defined by history, geography, or biology, making it easier to essentialize the boundaries of resistance ... [or, in other words] *the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded* ... [that is, the building of defensive identity in the terms of dominant institutions/ideologies, reversing the value judgment while reinforcing the boundary. (9)

He goes on to argue how identity as a “post-traditional reflexive project,” by virtue of “an increasing inter-connection between the two extremes of extensionality and intentionality: globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other” (11), is only possible for “the elite inhabiting the timeless space of flows of global networks and their ancillary locales” (11) while “deprived masses and disaffected intellectuals ... [attempt to] reconstruct meaning in a global alternative to the exclusionary global order” (20). Castells takes up in detail the resistance of the Mexican Zapatistas to show how a locally specific social movement was internationalized by using the very information technology that fuels the expansion of globalization’s networks of power. We do not need, however, to identify with the Zapatistas so much as recognize the “difference” of their local resistance, and acknowledge it as a strategy against the global processes of exploitation and find common cause with their struggle. Assumption of shared identity through some misguided notion of sympathy/empathy
can make us unmindful of our daily investment in those aspects of the global political economy that form an integral part of those very networks of global capitalism that have contributed to the exploitation of indigenous Mexicans for centuries. I do not mean to devalue the significance of urban resistance against co-optation by the logic of agglomeration, but there is an obvious need to differentiate between diverse social movements originating from diverse locally and globally specific imperatives that may often be at odds with each other. The acknowledgment of such difference is essential to the conceptualization of a multitude if there is to be any hope of articulating “strategies of commonality” against Empire.

The alignment of this multitude of resistance in a coherent challenge to imperial logic thus seems impossible without being co-opted by the homogenizing imperative of a sovereign subject. It is this im-possibility of resistance that then needs to be recuperated since it proposes a differential challenge, i.e., the integral difference of the multitude in-definition must resist and defer the homogeneity of Empire. This Derridean im-possibility is defined in *Aporias* by “the path … of the *aporos* or of the *aporia*: the difficult or the impracticable, here the *impossible passage*, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the *event of a coming or a future advent*” (8 [emphasis mine]). The im-possibility of the multitude’s resistance imagines a site, though within the boundaries of global imperialism, but outside the bounds of the possible determined by the current institutional structure of transnational political economy. This im-possibility is not utopic; it is realized in the acknowledgment of the differences of social movements situated across borders mapping the world, and the “strategies of commonality” that they adopt
with (and at times against) each other to effectively combat the networks of exploitation, both at the local and global levels.

This diversity of interests and concerns of the multitude, rife with misdirection, misalignment, shifting loyalties, strategic advances and withdrawals, and the ever-present threat of co-optation, enables it to effectively resist the imperative of homogenization and define the site/s of im-possible resistance. These movements, however, have to be continually vigilant against on the one hand, the constant threat of internalization by the logic of globalization, and on the other, their internal tendency to self-exhaust their potential to resist by forming “defensive identities” entrenched in essentialisms that aid Empire. The deconstructive gesture of resistance must assume the responsibility of questioning, “interrupting,” its own response as well as the network of exploitation to which it is responding. Jacques Derrida sums up the important function of “interruption” in *Aporias* as:

> It is necessary, therefore, that the decision and responsibility … be taken, interrupting the relation to any *presentable* determination but still maintaining a presentable relation to the interruption and to what it interrupts. (17)

The urge to determination, to essentialism, has to be deterred, so that the im-possibility of resistance cannot be terminated, limited, given an end. Each interruption is a necessary responsibility of resistant awareness, a necessary response to the contours of global capitalism as it negotiates the subsumption of the movement; in the process, these interruptions mark the eruption of new im-possibilities of strategic alignment in response to the changing dynamics of the situation at hand.

Therefore to address the problem of the teleology of the multitude that I outlined earlier, I argue that the radicality of “the other side” must also be interrupted and re-
defined in différance to its own radical end (finitude). The gesture towards “an-other” future defers the narrative of “any-other” future or the figuration of a particular “Other” susceptible to subsumption by the logic of the global sovereign. This gesture does not produce a definite teleology with a definable end, but articulates strategies of seeking common ground. These strategies are always already limited within the epistemology of modern ethics, but they problematize, in their global and local differences, the universalization of the sovereign narrative of that ethico-politics. What cannot be (must not be) discounted is the “event-uality” of an im-possible future without which these “strategies of commonality” cannot be articulated. Does the gesture towards that im-possible future then not serve as the “precondition” for the multitude? I argue that it is a strategic “precondition” that allows for the critique of the rhetoric of sovereignty from within its rhetorical bounds. It defers the realization of the epistemologically possible—the dialectic as the inevitable, the assimilable—through the trope of the im-possible “event,” a future radically inarticulable from within the Western paradigm. Thus the shifting dynamics of the “strategies of commonality” must be left unshackled, in the multitude’s resistance to the homogeneity of a sovereign people subject to the logic of agglomeration of Empire’s networks of power.

In “Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular,” published in *Postcolonial Studies* in 2005, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the “‘Multitude’ is as dangerous a hypostatization of singularity, as ‘people’ is of Subalternity” (485). She posits a coincidence of the multitude with the notion of the “people” as a “pluralised general category that has no necessary class-description” (479). Of course, the readings of traces of the multitude in diverse acts of resistance across the globe are
necessarily contextualized in terms of class and gender. However, by their own
definition, Hardt and Negri argue for the realization of the “multitude” as an “active agent
subject” without class-affiliations to avoid differences that can divide the agent of
resistance against itself. As I have noted earlier, it is the recognition of an undivided
multitude of resistance as its own “precondition” that produces a teleology susceptible to
coop-tation by the sovereign logic of Empire. Interrupting this teleology, if we defer the
definition of the “undivided multitude,” we are faced with the problem of defining
“strategies of commonality” amongst diverse groups who are read—i.e., we read them
as identifying themselves—both through and in resistance to the active categories of
race, class and gender (and others) within the dominant epistemological paradigm of
(Western) modernity. And in the context of my project, as we engage with this problem
of defining the subject of multitude in différance to the possibility of its own subjection to
the dialectic of sovereignty, we need to intercept the apostrophic turn away from the
subaltern irrelevant to any definition of commonality.

Thus to re-formulate the problem in the terms of my project: the trace of the
subaltern interrupts the conceptualization of the “multitude” as the universal class-less,
un-gendered and de-racialized “precondition” of its own teleology that inevitably defines
it as the “Other” of the global sovereign. And my proposed interruptive reading strategy
necessitates the interception of each of the diverse narratives of resistance in the
context of class, gender and race to critically read the subject-constitution of the agency
of resistance. The “active agent subject” (necessarily contextualized) as the gesture of
commonality towards the im-possible “event”uality of the multitude must be interrogated
in his or her subject-constitution—on the one hand, to recognize and reconstitute
resistance in différance to the dialectic of the sovereign subject; and on the other, to intercept this “other” subject (an alter-subject) under the sign of the native informant—the sign of slippage into silence, a slippery sign. We need to be critically vigilant of the politics of that resistance, to interrupt any rhetorical strategy (always possible) of speaking for the “silence” of the “other” and to enable the eruption of that silence through the exploration of the figure of the native informant. To sum up, in the context of the multitude, the trace of the subaltern marks the im-possibility of the advent of the multitude-as-alterity in différance to the multitude-as-telos, the constitutive “other” of global sovereignty, while the figure of the native informant enables the strategic politics and the critical reading of resistance in diverse contexts as a continuing gesture towards that im-possible “event.” The interception of the inevitable slippage of the subaltern (in the process of its retrieval) into the figure of the native informant whose “silence” is spoken for and constituted into the resistant subject is the deconstructive strategy of deferring the totalization of the multitude in the teleological definition of radical alterity. I have therefore argued for the resistance of the multitude in the hybridity of subject-constitution. I now explore the constitutive hybridity of the subject through the work of Homi Bhabha and the possibility of recuperations of an-other narrative, an alter-narrative of radical alterity, through the work of Walter Mignolo.

**Hybridity as Resistance**

Using my engagement with the nation’s inherent hybridity in Chapter 2 as a point of departure, I now seek to interrogate the site of the hybrid as the location of alterity, of the “other” in its migrant, minority, or any other form. The importance of this interrogation lies in conjunction with my previous critique of the nation’s alterity as constitutive of the dialectical progression of the national narrative that resolves itself
repetitiously in the fundamental articulation of its pedagogic definition and the “putting under erasure” of its performative and radical difference. I argue for a strategic deferment of the dialectical sublation of the constitutive “cultural difference” of national identity; hence, I caution against the supplementary production of the space of hybrid alterity, which is produced, and is hence subsumable, by the hegemonic narrative of Western/modern epistemology.

Bhabha, of course, has identified the sign of alterity in “dissemiNation” as the possibility of the recuperation of the “radical other,” the doppelganger, the subaltern voice, the repressed minority sublated in the nation’s hegemonic image. I argue that the radical im-possibility of alterity that Hardt and Negri explore under the sign of the multitude is coincident with the constitutive hybridity (otherness) of the sovereign sign of the nation-state realized in the “body” of the citizen-subject (and in the “body politic” of the people) that Bhabha was mapping out on the national terrain in 1990.

Two particular arguments from Homi Bhabha’s “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” regarding the constitutive hybridity of the nation are of significant importance—supplementarity and cultural difference. Drawing upon Derrida’s notion of supplementarity in Of Grammatology, Bhabha points out that although the concept can be read in its cumulative and accumulative logic, the supplement also suggests an “anterior default of a presence” that is “filled up of itself … only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy” (Derrida 145). This anterior presence of a national “self” (the sovereign citizen-subject) that is being supplemented is importantly marked by an otherness—a radical deferral of the self-completion that it seeks—which it is never able to completely exorcise. The act of supplementation, in its
“filling up” for that otherness (within the self) that can only be articulated to the detriment of the nation’s “sociological solidity,” as “an adjunct, a subaltern instance ... [a]s substitute ... is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief” (Derrida 145). So essentially, through his engagement with supplementarity, Bhabha marks in the “subaltern instance” the trace of the apostrophic moment: both the narrative turn in the self-constitution of the sovereign subject away from the constitutive “other” repetitiously supplemented in the figure of the native informant; and the subal“turn”—the trace of the radically different in the sublation of the irrelevant “other.”

Thus, the performative, repetitious reiteration of the “zero point or starting point” (Brennan 51) of the nation—a fixed “point of origin,” “the mythic birth of the Polis”—supplements its “historical immanence” by culturally reimagining and re-producing the necessary “sociological solidity” essential for the national imagination.¹ Yet that very same ritualistic need for such performative supplementation bears testimony to that alienating alterity that continually haunts the identity of the nation. And therein lies the possibility of recuperating the nation’s otherness from its own neurotic repetitive acts of supplementation, usually in the body of the indigenous national’s “other”—the minority, the migrant, the diasporic hybrid. In Bhabha’s words:

It is in this supplementary space of doubling – not plurality – where the image is presence and proxy, where the sign supplements and empties nature, that the exorbitant, disjunctive times of ... [the nation] can be turned into the discourses of emergent cultural identities, within a non-pluralistic politics of difference. (305)

¹ Timothy Brennan quotes Regis Debray from “Marxism and the National Question” regarding the “zero point” of the nation in his interrogation of the latter’s “delimitation in time.”
This cultural supplementation of the narrative of national homogeny/indigeny reveals the underlying cultural differences that “re-articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying singularity of the ‘other’ that resists totalization” (312).

In light of my previous problematization of the conceptualization of the multitude, I caution that any realization of the nation's otherness in the “body” of an “other” would mark the slippage of the trace of the subaltern into the figure of the native informant. I previously argued that while the subaltern trace defers the totalization of the sign of global (and national) sovereignty, our “strategies of commonality” in resistance to this hegemonic sign must rely on the diverse and necessarily contextualized movements of resistance across the world. Each reading of the subaltern instance retrieved in the figure of the native informant-as-subject-of-resistance in the process of subject-constitution is put under the threat of sublimation by the narrative of sovereignty. Each critical interruption intercepts that sign from being performed as another repetition of the sovereign sign of the national/global subject by reading its own constitutive otherness, both in the “silence” of the native informant and the “absence” of the subaltern. In the process, each reading must neither be an accumulative gesture towards a totalizable sovereign nor its dialectical Other. The “event” of the radically different cannot be, must not be, mapped out in the teleology of narrative accumulation, but in the eruption of the im-possible. Therefore, I see Bhabha as reading the constitutive hybridity of the subject, the always-otherness in each repetition of the national/global “self,” to posit how we can articulate the im-possibility of the subaltern without mapping out a positivistic teleology of an-Other.
Cultural difference, as argued by Bhabha, defers hybridity in the latter’s etymological meaning of “cross-breed” or “mongrel” homogeneity as defined by OED. Hybridity as a concept suggests that dialectical sublation in the production of a de-finite location of otherness that runs congruent with the narrative resolution of the national question. This is why he argues that the idea of “cultural difference” is particularly significant because it does not lead to a “dialectical sublation” that would feed the logic of the national narrative. Instead, in conjunction with the repetitious ritual of the performative circulation of the national sign, the nation’s *socius* is repeated in its difference, producing specific displacements in “the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding-to does not add-up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification” (312). In other words, the epistemology of the sovereign is unable to identically repeat itself—of course, it repeats itself precisely because it is continually trying to sublate its constitutive always-otherness—and each repetition critically interrupted displaces the teleology of the sovereign in eruptions of acts of resistance strategically defined. In each performance of reinscribing its own hegemony, the sovereign is displaced and repeated as other-to-itself. Its power is thus constituted by the circulation of the sign of its hegemony and not by the institution of a self-identical sign of sovereignty; our critical and political project is therefore to interrupt this circulation and instead of replacing it with a competing narrative of a counter-sovereign, to displace the sign of the subject in strategic eruptions of resistant identities. While these diverse identities-in-resistance must also be interrogated in the process of their subject-constitution, the “strategy” of interruptive
reading must be articulated in différance to the narrative teleology of the sovereign epistemology; that is its critical gesture towards the im-possible.

Another way of approaching the problem of a teleology of radical alterity is by acknowledging that Hardt and Negri’s Empire is not marked by a single center of power; hence, individual instances of resistance (individual and collective, but always in a particular context) cannot be necessarily read in a gesture in-common(ality) towards an-Other alterity. In fact, as Radhakrishnan argues in *Theory in an Uneven World*:

> [t]he ability of each gaze or perspective to realize the alterity (symbolic authority) of the Object is perennially interrupted by the perspectivism of every other gaze, each engaged in realizing its own symbolic authority. The very alterity of the world-as-real is pluriform and contested, and the eventual “worlding” of the world depends on the extent to which the different gazes negotiate with each other on the basis of the strength of their symbolic currency. (103)

The “strength of their symbolic currency” is, of course, dependent on their location in the unequal division of labor, both in the national and global context, and accordingly their ability to negotiate the transnational flows of Empire in traversing the weakened but necessary national boundaries of the First, Second and Third worlds. And when hybridity as site of resistance is marked coterminous with the figures of the subaltern, the minority, and the diasporic immigrant in their respective valences of alterity, its possibilities of co-optation by the identity politics implicated in producing the national/global, postcolonial subject also inflects the constitution of the marginal as the dialectical Other of the sovereign self, stripping it of its “radical difference.”

The subaltern as produced in the dialectical progression of the narrative emerging in the language and/or location of metropolitan hegemony—unless deconstructively/self-critically aware of its location—is the performative sign that circulates the pedagogical master image of the recognizable Other; its un-recognizable
“body” (its “radical difference”), on the other hand, is marked by “absence,” the supplement, the “cultural difference” that is only identifiable in its “othering” of the sovereign Self. This is not to argue that postcolonial hybridity produced as, or producing, texts from migrant or minority perspectives do not, or cannot, resist the hegemonic narratives of national or global dominance. It is important to recognize, however, that such texts are always fraught with the tension of slippage between situational resistance and fetishization into what Graham Huggan identifies as “commodified perceptions of cultural marginality” (xii). Huggan, in The Post-colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins published in 2001, does not argue against the disruptive potential of the margins. In fact, he contends that “mainstream culture is always altered by its contact with the margins, even if it finds ingenious ways of looking, or of pretending to look, the same” (22). The transformation of this disruptive potential of the marginal into the consumable “spectacle” of the exotic through the process of fetishization “acts as the safety-net that supports these potentially dangerous transactions, as the regulating-mechanism that attempts to manoeuvre difference back again to the same” (22). It is worth noting the coincidence between this process of containment through exoticization of alterity by the mainstream that is at the same time forced to recognize “without fully controlling, the changes taking place within its midst” (22-23) and the dialectical sublation of the “other/s” through supplementation by the national-global narrative of sovereign hegemony, which is nonetheless haunted by its constitutive “cultural difference.”

Radhakrishnan, in Between Identity and Location, also articulates this critical need to interrupt positions of resistant identities (often represented under the sign of
subaltern resistance) through an important engagement with the notion of hybridity, taking into account both its ontological and epistemological assumptions. The issue here is between the concept of hybridity as a situational reality even if it is articulated through a locational disruption (the willed or involuntary deferral of spatio-temporally finite definitions of identity in communal, national or even global terms) and hybridity as a theoretical site of resistance to unipolar identity regimes. Even when hybridity is recognized in its multi-locational “reality,” Radhakrishnan argues that one still has to differentiate between its metropolitan and postcolonial versions where “the former are characterized by an intransitive and immanent sense of jouissance, [and] the latter are expressions of extreme pain and agonizing dislocations” (159). I would also argue that though there is an attempt to identify a metropolitan global bourgeoisie whose transnational hybridity runs corollary to the logic of globalization, we cannot completely disregard the specifics of location in the emergence of different sections even within that metropolitan group. The relatively mobile, urban, educated classes from the “developing” postcolonial countries (as opposed to both the “developed” and “underdeveloped” nations), though riding the “same” transnational flows of globalization’s networks of power, are not the same as their counterparts emerging from the First World metropolis. However, although such distinctions between the specific recognitions and reconstitutions of hybridity are important and often crucial to strategic articulations of subaltern resistance, it is important to keep in mind that such “subalternity is not an inherent state of being or a historically objective condition, but very much a matter of narrative production” (Radhakrishnan 168). Hence, it is just as crucial to recognize the narrative imperatives in the construction of hybrid spaces in
their situational realities in order to remain aware of the possibilities of the dialectical
sublation of “cultural difference” in such articulations of a recognizable alterity in the
name of strategic expediency.

The issue with the theorization of hybridity, on the other hand, is the risk of
rendering it “subjectless.” In Radhakrishnan’s words:

although avant-garde theories of hybridity would have us believe that
hybridity is ‘subjectless’, that is, that it represents the decapitation of the
subject and the permanent retirement of identitarian forms of thinking and
belonging, in reality, hidden within the figurality of hybridity is the subject of
the dominant West…. Although, theoretically speaking, it would seem that
hybridity functions as the ultimate decentering of all identity regimes, in fact
and in history, hybridity is valorized on the basis of a stable identity…. (159-
160)

Theories of hybridity, then, need to interrogate their own critical assumptions in their
dialectical narrative production of the very idea of a hybrid Other; while such theories
should especially resist the urge to “return” to ontological articulations of a hybrid space,
they also need to be careful of universal generalizations that mask the privileging of
Western modes/sites of rationality. There is an obvious coincidence between his
problematization of hybridity and Spivak’s critique of the multitude (and my critique of
Nancy’s “singular plural”) as taken up earlier in the chapter. As Radhakrishnan aptly
puts it, “[t]he problem has to do not with hybridity per se, but rather with specific
attitudes to hybridity” (160). And these attitudes are subject to the same conditions of
uneven development that are necessary to, and subsumed within, the logic of
globalization whose networks of power proliferate throughout the globe, but privilege the
capitalist relations maintaining the hegemony of First World nations. The “subject” of
theoretical discourses can be subjected to an “absent presence” just as well as the
subaltern figure at the periphery of the text; the former’s absence, however, can be
marked by the assumption of a paradigmatic hegemony that renders specific
identifications unnecessary and undesirable, allowing the “universal” to serve as proxy.

In the context of my argument for strategic interruptions, it is important to note
that the imperative of interruption is conceptualized and located within a “rational”
epistemology that is in obvious dialectical relation with “Western modernity,” i.e.,
constituted in the “contact zone” of the colonial encounter with Enlightenment
rationalism. Drawing upon Radhakrishnan’s argument, I acknowledge that my
formulation of the “strategy” of interruptive reading is “subjectless,” that is, subject to the
“universal” sign of the critical reader within the Western academic paradigm. This
“universal” is coincident with the figure of the transnationally literate academic in
Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. However, I make this “universal” sign of
“transnational literacy” visible and posit my strategy of interruption necessarily within the
hegemony of the “rational” paradigm; arguing against the uncritical postulation of
counter-paradigms in the guise of an-Other worldview, I articulate the strategy in
différance to the hegemony of its own paradigmatic constitution. In its deconstructive
strategy of interrupting the repetitious performance of the sovereign sign of its own
epistemology—here repeated in the trope of the in-visible subjectless “universal”—the
strategy both defers and differs from its own “universal” application. It must do this by
not proposing a strategic teleology of radical paradigmatic alterity, but in differential
readings of diverse constitutions of identities-in-resistance each interrogated in its
contextual specificities. Spivak clearly points out that “if we only concentrate on the
dominant, we forget that the difference between varieties of emergent and residual may
be the difference between radical and conservative resistance to the dominant” (314).
Of course, the possibility of the “radical” is “by no means certain,” and in fact, must remain un-certain and im-possible, but “we must keep focusing on the traces of the heterogeneous.” However, I also argue for the simultaneous gesture towards the im-possibility of radical alterity—through the imperative of “strategies of commonality”—beyond the specific contextualities of each identity-in-resistance because to reject it in the name of the “universal” would be in itself a repetition of the hegemonic paradigm. Such a rejection is based on the agglomerating logic of the sovereign (national and global), and “we cannot afford to ignore the irreducible heterogeneity of the cultural [“cultural difference” as articulated by Bhabha] in the name of the “cultural dominant” simply because it is dominant” (315).

“Border Thinking” as Resistance

Finally, Bhabha’s argument regarding “cultural difference” finds an important resonance in Walter Mignolo’s articulation of “colonial difference” in his book Local Histories/Global Designs. Mignolo’s concept refers to the “geohistorical density of the modern/colonial world system and the diachronic contradictions of its internal (conflicts between empires within the same world view) and external borders (world views in collision)” (8) maintained by the “coloniality of power” that recalibrates itself to the inceptions of new (global) commercial circuits in the (post-)modern imagination. This coloniality of power that produces and maintains the uneven structure of the modern/colonial world system “presupposes … colonial difference as its condition of possibility and as the legitimacy for the subalternization of knowledges and the subjugation of people” (16). Therefore, according to Mignolo, modern epistemology defined itself as the systematic mode/organization of knowledge based on rationality and logic and premised upon an “abstract universalism”; it functioned, however, in line
with the “coloniality of power” to mark and sublate “colonial difference” in the production of the modern/colonial world system. So in 2000, when his book was published, Mignolo conceptualized a global framework of power along the same lines as Empire, but with a particular focus on the colonial striations of the world.

Mignolo identifies the development of Western “epistemology” and the “will to truth,” historically concurrent with colonial expansion and the rise of the modern nation-state, as always already inflected by this presumption of “colonial difference” that was both necessary for the conception of colonial hegemony and its production as politically and economically viable colonial relations of power. Importantly, Mignolo draws attention to the epistemological constitution of the modern “knowing subject” as distinct from the “object of knowledge.” Thus modern epistemology not only legitimizes, but becomes the site of a constitutive radical split in the postcolonial subject—“the epistemological principle splitting the knowing subject from the known object” (60). The dialectical interaction between the “knowing subject” and the subject/object of knowledge produces “colonial difference” as the presumptive condition of the modern/colonial world system, and is also the process by which this colonial difference is sublated in the constitution of that world system. The problem is the conceptualization of a “knowing subject” from within the epistemological premises of modernity that does not always presume this constitutive “colonial difference” as articulated by the “coloniality of power.” In fact, drawing upon Anibal Quijano’s “Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad,” Mignolo suggests that the problem is the impossibility of entertaining “the idea that a knowing subject [i]s possible beyond the subject of
knowledge postulated by the very concept of rationality put in place by modern epistemology” (60).

In resistance to the colonial epistemological imperative, he posits the notion of “border gnoseology” as “critical reflection on knowledge production from both the interior borders of the modern/colonial world system (imperial conflicts, hegemonic languages, directionality of translations, etc.) and its exterior borders (imperial conflicts with cultures being colonized, as well as the subsequent stages of independence or decolonization)” (11). Border gnoseology, in challenging the assumptions of “colonial difference,” liberates subaltern forms and modes of knowledge, thereby producing “border gnosis” or “border thinking,” i.e., “knowledge from a subaltern perspective” (11) that “is no longer conceivable in Hegel’s dialectics, but located at the border of the coloniality of power in the modern world system” (67). Though the emergence of such “‘an other thinking’ … is based on the spatial confrontations between different conceptions of history” (67), its site of articulation is not to be determined in terms of territoriality. Mignolo argues that while “[b]order thinking from a territorial perspective becomes a machine of appropriation of the colonial differe/a/nces” (45), the exteriority that he identifies as the liminal site of im-possible resistance has to be “decentered from its dominant determinations in such a way that would make it possible to think beyond the ontologization of an area to be studied and move to a reflection of the historicity of differences” (69).

I understand Mignolo’s “border gnoseology” as made possible by the constitutive hybridity of “colonial difference” in the coloniality of power. As he has made clear, this coloniality of power is able to re-produce (in repetitious performance of its hegemonic
sign as Bhabha would point out) the modern/colonial world system only through
“colonial difference”—a difference that marks a constitutive hybridity in its self-
conception and enables the recuperation of the “colonial other” in the figure of Spivak’s
native informant. This “colonial difference” is then re-conceptualizing Bhabha’s “cultural
difference” in the context of the colonial production of the culture of modernity—the
epistemological imperative of the national and global sovereign. As such, colonial
difference as constitutive hybridity, while enabling the re-production of the
modern/colonial world and the national-global subject as its sovereign sign, also repeats
that sign in différance to its own implied hegemony. I also argue that though Mignolo
maps out the “internal” and the “external” loci (as borders) of the modern/colonial world
system, in effect its sign is re-produced at the “contact zone” of colonial difference. That
is why Mignolo argues for a deterritorialization of difference or a “border thinking”
focused on “the historicity of differences” that has marked similarities with the notion of
the “multitude.”

The issue here is: how do we conceptualize this “border thinking” without
appropriating it? To produce an-other thinking is to recognize it as such, that is, to re-
produce it as a discursive subject and thereby susceptible to assimilation by the
modern/colonial paradigm. We can imagine different conceptions of history, but
recognizing their difference is to also appropriate them in the language of modern
epistemology. However, “border gnoseology” conceived and practiced from within the
dominant paradigm can be read as an interruptive strategy at the apostrophic sites of
the hegemonic narrative of the coloniality of power to intercept the constitutive moments
when that narrative dialectically constitutes and sublates the “other”—as native
informant—and turns away from the irrelevant—as subaltern. This process would force the language of coloniality—or postcoloniality, as the evolution of the dominant paradigm of Enlightenment rationality through the colonial development of the modern world system—to recalibrate itself necessarily as other-than-itself while strategically questioning its hegemony. Thus through strategic interruptions, border gnoseology would put colonial/modern hegemony under erasure, forcing the coloniality of power to reconstitute its colonial difference. However, if “border gnosis” is conceptualized as an-Other knowledge as opposed to “border gnoseology” as an-other thinking—or re-thinking, re-membering the “other” (and other ways of thinking) constituted as native informant or ignored as subaltern in the production of the modern/colonial world system—then the eruption of the former is the im-possibility of a truly subaltern perspective, the radically Other un-recognizable in its radical difference. Thus Walter Mignolo’s concept of “colonial difference” is particularly useful in interrupting the networks of Empire particularly keeping in mind the colonial teleology of the global sovereign. Mignolo’s work also emphasizes the “contact zone” of coloniality as one of the operative contexts of any interruptive reading strategy by focusing on the colonial context of the constitutive hybridity of the national-global sovereign and the necessarily postcolonial negotiations of the multitude in its im-possible gesture towards an-Other future.

In conclusion, the supplementation of the pedagogical immanence of the national-global narrative of sovereign hegemony (Empire as conceived by Hardt and Negri) through a ritualistic, repetitious, performative dissemination of its sign in the “body” of the citizen-subject and the “body politic” of the people when interrupted by a
critical awareness of the constitutive hybridity of cultural/colonial difference can enable a multitude of resistance. This constitutive difference is recuperated under the name of the native informant as the foreclosed other/s of the sovereign self and realized in the c/siting of identities-in-resistance. The identities-in-resistance, however, must be “differential” rather than hybrid, deconstructively displacing the dialectical production of cross-breed homogeneity that can be re-incorporated into the hegemonic narrative of the sovereign Self as the consumable “spectacle” of the recognized (and hence contained) “other.” Defined in difference, and in spite of their contextual differences, their resistance can be articulated in strategies of commonality as a gesture towards the im-possible eruption of an-Other thinking (or border gnosis as conceived by Mignolo) whose im-possibility is textually traced under the sign of the absent-presence (and present-absence) of the subaltern and in the strategic gesture of the multitude-to-come. In Chapter 4, I take up critical representations of the subaltern intercepting its sign-in-slippage into the figure of the native informant while exploring the critical and strategic im-possibility of the eruption of subaltern representations in radical difference.
I locate my argument of subaltern difference in the context of the Indian Subaltern Studies group and critical responses to their work. I do not propose to chronologically review the group's work; instead, I focus on the problematic of the retrieval of subaltern identity as difference in opposition to the hegemonic and trace this argument through some major interventions into the Subaltern Studies project. I explore whether subalternity can be located at the site of difference outside the discursive reach of the hegemonic or if difference must always already be difference-to and defined in relation to the hegemonic that thereby forecloses the radical possibility of an "outside." Coincident with this debate is how to critically re-produce subaltern difference without co-opting its resistance in the process of subaltern subject-constitution. By critically engaging with this complex argument in the Subaltern Studies project, I argue that the figure of the native informant that I have traced in my previous chapters can be usefully deployed to locate the narrative production of "subaltern difference" as resistance while at the same time dis-locating the subaltern in that difference to the textual "apostrophe" marking the irretrievability of the radically heterogeneous.

**Subaltern as Failure**

In an article titled "The Dis/appearance of Subalterns: A Reading of a Decade of Subaltern Studies" published in David Ludden's 2001 edited book *Reading Subaltern Studies*, author Jim Masselos makes an argument for a clear distinction between "the subaltern" as subject (of critical historiography) and "subalterns" (or subaltern-subjects) as agents of their own historiography. Masselos argues that the former serves both as "historical subject" and "literary [narrative] object" and "privileges the role of continued
dissent and establishes a traditional, legitimated, genealogy of opposition … provid[ing] a consciousness of a past as colonial subjects … which eliminates the subordination inherent in other readings of the past, and by prioritising the autonomy of resistance goes far to eliminate the dominator as actor or influential agent” (210). He expresses concern, however, that though the concept of subalternity (or the “figure of the subaltern”) is useful (as trope?) to critical historiography, “subalterns” outside of the autonomous domain of resistance/opposition to the dominant are depersonalized and disappear in the work of the Subaltern Studies group thereby “failing” Ranajit Guha’s original articulation of the project in *Subaltern Studies I* as retrieving the “subaltern” as independent actor and the “maker of his [or her—in a Spivakian intervention] own history” (208).

Masselos’ article is mainly an appraisal of the first six volumes of *Subaltern Studies* focusing on the development of the project both in terms of subject matter and methodology. Here, I differentiate between “development” and “evolution” where the latter term would suggest a linear progression of ideas towards a more “correct” theory in a body of work more or less unified in its “direction”—as both orientation and authorial intent. Masselos clearly points out that the project, under the able stewardship of Ranajit Guha, brought together scholars with often significant methodological differences, and varying research skills and analytical ability though they generally shared a common interest in recuperating narratives of resistance to the dominant (elite—both colonial and postcolonial) historiography of the nation-state. And as the volumes progressed through the first decade (beginning with volume I in 1982), the various contributors followed individual lines of critical evolution; so if one seeks to chart (a) line/s of “progress”
through the various articles published in the volumes, one has to account for divergent
development of critical thinking in the various authors “[c]ollectively nevertheless …
retain[ing] a general convergence and focus [on the subaltern]” (189).

Masselos, therefore, examines the various articles published in the *Subaltern Studies*
volumes for differences in subject matter, methodologies, focus and even technical strategy though that is not his main goal. Having given due consideration to the depth and breadth of the work of the Subaltern Studies group, their influences and their influence on subsequent historiography and postcolonial critical work both in the Indian sub-continent and outside, he points out that “what is striking is that throughout the volumes the subaltern subject continually disappears within the historian’s subaltern project” (201). He argues that it is precisely the Subaltern Studies group’s focus on “the subaltern” as opposition to the hegemony of the dominant—the thread of their convergence—that reifies a theoretical figure of the subaltern as resistance and depersonalizes “subalterns” who fall/slip outside that narrative of opposition. He points out that “[t]he subaltern is a creation, a reification of historians … [and that] no one in India called themselves subaltern, nor do any of the writers quote Indian terms which were equivalent” (205).

So essentially, the problem according to Masselos of the disappearance of the “subalterns” is a cumulative historiographical project (though divergent in subject matter, methodology, etc.) that recuperates narratives of collective resistance towards the hegemonic. He does address the fact that all the contributors in the group do not share the same understanding of hegemony and that most of them do not subscribe to a Foucauldian notion of a pervasive power structure or a Gramscian reading of “the
hegemony of the upper classes and its downward thrust” (203). The Subaltern Studies group generally held on to the notion of subaltern “autonomy” outside the sphere of colonial and postcolonial hegemony, but Masselos argues that the subaltern figure as autonomous resistance is realized through (the dual tropes of) “polarisation” and “collective acts [mentality] of resistance” and that the “categorisation constructs those who joined in assorted and diverse acts of geographically widely dispersed violent action … brings them together as subalterns and, increasingly frequently in the later volumes, calls them subaltern classes” (205-206 [emphasis mine]). He goes on to elaborate:

> Despite all the narrative of the particularities of change in various variables, what is offered is not processual change but an underlying, consistently similar structure of continued resistance. In these narratives the individual has little place and is presented usually only as the exemplar of resistance. Otherwise there is no space available for the individual. (206)

To sum up Masselos’ point, while the Subaltern Studies group effectively produces the subaltern as subject of history, the members “fail” to retrieve the subalterns as subjects of their own history. And Masselos, drawing on Spivak’s seminal article “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” published in Subaltern Studies IV, is concerned not just with the failure of the historiographic project, but also with the fact that “the Subaltern series accounts are accounts of failure” (208). He asserts that the project does not explore the “consequences of [the] failure[s]” it reads (and produces as history) and instead focuses on “the primacy of struggle as a necessary condition of subalternity—a constant of that condition” (208). Masselos here points out what he sees as an essential contradiction that lies at the heart of the Subaltern Studies group’s focus on the condition of subalternity instead of the reasons and effects of subaltern failure. On the one hand, a subaltern revolution would presume a clear understanding of power
and hegemony (as precondition of subaltern autonomy) and necessitate a reconceptualization of hegemonic power structures—the production of the radically different as subaltern knowledge that I have dealt with in Chapter 3—thereby producing subjects and not subalterns of an-other history; on the other hand, “failure” would mean that the subaltern is doomed to repeat his or her resistance to a hegemonic system that subsumes him or her in a pervasive narrative beyond the subaltern’s control thereby giving the lie to any claims of autonomy.

While Masselos shows comprehensive knowledge of the writings of the group and clear understanding of the many aspects of their work, he does not clearly read the problematic of this failure that he has identified as the double bind of writing “history” that Spivak explored in “Deconstructing Historiography.” To Masselos, the subaltern as “exemplar of resistance” is reified into a hero of a historical narrative while the actual subalterns “disappear.” In fact, he observes that the historical subaltern coincides with the literary tragic protagonist in many of the group’s writings, where “[t]he will and agency of the subaltern … [are] dissipated in the need for epic narrative” (210). Therefore, in critiquing the Subaltern Studies group’s narrative re-production of the subject of subaltern historiography—what Spivak had identified as “subaltern subject-effect” in “Deconstructing Historiography (341)—Masselos posits a plurality of “individual” difference prior to recognition or retrieval in discourse. However, in his point about the “disappearance” of “subalterns,” the difference of plurality in the plural marker “s”—in difference to the singular definitive “the subaltern” as the metonymic representative of collective resistance—also stands for the invisible “s”ubject of an-other historical narrative. And even though he observes that the production of that narrative
(of subalterns) would also lead to a disappearance of “subalternity” for the subalterns(subjects), he re-produces an-other narrative erasure by “failing” to address that history has no access to actual subalterns. He even notes, drawing upon Spivak, that “the subaltern exists through the historian, but additionally so does the historian through the subaltern” (196). And so while his critique, also drawing upon Spivak’s article, of a certain insistence on the part of the Subaltern Studies group of retrieving an autonomous subaltern consciousness is valid, his argument that “subalterns” disappear from subaltern historiography is not. As Masselos allows in the invisible “subject,” defined (unless deferred and displaced) through the circulation of its narrative under the sign of sovereign hegemony—repetition of the same in the name of difference, an other-history where the subaltern is subject—through the proverbial back-door, he repeats the conditions of hegemony in the name of the subaltern. Strategically, I argue, following Spivak, that the praxis of the narrative retrieval of the context/condition of subalternity in the failure of retrieving subalterns to be read against the grain of its own historiography is preferable.

I argue that Masselos’ use of the word “dis/appear” gestures towards this reading of subalternity in the trace of failed resistance in the writings of the Subaltern Studies group, but a reading that he does not follow through on. This word seems to suggest a contiguity of both disappearance and appearance—Masselos, I presume, reads the contiguous appearance of the subaltern as subject of history and disappearance of subalterns as historical subjects. But the word can also be read to suggest that appearance and disappearance are semiotically contiguous as subalternity is the marker of a presence in absence, an absent presence that the narrative turns away
from and supplements with, in my reading, the figure of the native informant. The tracing of this difference between and differential relationship of the native informant and the subaltern allows for a more effective reading of the problem Masselos has addressed.

The Subaltern Studies group, in the “failure” to retrieve the autonomous subaltern-subject, supplements the historical absences by constructing the figure of the subaltern—the metonymic supplement for the collective resistance of those ignored by dominant historiography—through meticulous readings against the grain of historical documents narrating failed acts of opposition. The occasional writing of individual actors as exemplars of resistance (subalternity) can then be read as attempts to repeat the trope of the subaltern as synechdoche when it primarily functions as metonymy—i.e., the “actor” is figured as representative (as part) of a subaltern group when, in fact, he or she serves as a “stand-in” for subalternity. And this trope, primarily as metonymic supplementation occasionally buttressed through synechdochic figures as “exemplars of resistance” retrieves the resistance of the native informant, the recognizable “other” of dominant historiography, resistant to the dominant but subsumed within the inevitable circulation of (an already contaminated hybrid Western) historical paradigm. Therefore, subalternity in Subaltern Studies does not fail, but is constructed out of narratives of failure. And Spivak had clearly advocated in “Deconstructing Historiography” that subaltern historiography must also be read against the grain, by reading critical strategy in this textual supplementation in the project wherein the context of subaltern absence is painstakingly reconstituted without claiming the retrieval of the subaltern. In her words:

Reading the work of Subaltern Studies from within but against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and ‘situate’ the effect of the subject as
subaltern … a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest. (341-342)

Rosalind O’Hanlon, in an earlier article, had discussed similar issues with the representation of subalterns by the Subaltern Studies group and had advocated recovering minor forms of resistance in contrast to what she saw as the contributors’ emphasis on resistance as political action. As Sumit Sarkar points out in “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,” O’Hanlon’s critique of the Subaltern Studies project was the first review of *Subaltern Studies* published in *Modern Asian Studies* and helped bring the group’s work to the attention of “Western academic establishments.”

O’Hanlon, in her 1988 article titled “Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” brings up the issue of the reconstitution of the subaltern-subject in the Subaltern Studies project under the sign of “liberal humanism.” While she suggests that the Subaltern Studies group should strategically use the elite-subaltern dichotomy to make a categorical point about dominance through power instead of using the terms as essential categories to represent societal groups, she also suggests that the contributors’ general project is to identify with the “masses” or “the people” and “fill up” the “absences” in elite historiography. She suggests that in the work of the Subaltern Studies group, even with the assertion of significant critical, theoretical and methodological divergence of the various contributions, the idea of the subaltern loses some of its theoretical potency, particularly because it is recuperated/refigured in different ways. She argues for the subaltern as a category of difference (marking the site of subordination) while I argue for the subaltern as a category of absence (or a radical difference—marking the limits of the narrative circulation of the sign of the subject). I also add the native informant as
another theoretical category that enables a more nuanced reading of the function of the “filling up” of the “absences” in the dominant narratives. I want to clarify that one cannot point to a particular historical figure and call him or her a native informant. Here, I deploy the native informant as a trope in the transition of (the understanding of) subaltern absence into the (failed) recuperation of an-other subjectivity that serves to hybridize but circulates within the paradigm of the hegemonic (here identified as the sign of the sovereign Western subject of liberal humanism). The native informant is not the recuperated subject of the “other” narrative, but marks the simultaneous co-optation of that subjectivity (in the process of narrative constitution) and the resistance through difference (i.e., in difference) to the hegemony of the subject. This is the point the O’Hanlon makes in her article, but without using a term that would allow the subaltern to mark the limit of sublatable difference that the native informant produces.

So essentially what O’Hanlon argues is that in their attempts to retrieve “subaltern consciousness,” some members of the Subaltern Studies group end up reconstructing the subaltern as a “substantive social category,” a unitary consciousness that is the origin of its being, i.e., its act(ion) of resistance. Instead, she recommends reading the subaltern as a “subordinate” category in relations of dominance and not “negotiation, consensus or common contribution” (199). Unfortunately, such a project is also reductive since relations of domination are never uncomplicated exercises of power, and the Subaltern Studies group’s project of retrieving the “autonomy” of the subaltern-subject was precisely to show that the subaltern’s resistance could just as often be recuperated in complicity with social networks of power, only where the social relations were interpreted in ways other than hegemonic readings in dominant
historiography. O'Hanlon does usefully point out that without critical vigilance the subaltern could easily (and did) slip into historiographic essentialisms, reconstituted in the inevitable circulation of the invisible sign of the (liberal humanist) subject.

O'Hanlon also discusses Homi Bhabha’s reading in his new “Foreword” to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* of the “splitting of the self always associated with the dominated in the colonial context as elsewhere, to stand in two places, and ‘keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger’, to witness himself triumphant” (205). Of course, here Bhabha's reading of Fanon's work has to be understood in conjunction with his reading of the essential hybridity of the “self” constituted in sublation (and not just negation) of the “other.” Understanding this process of sublation that I have elaborated on in Chapter 2 adds greater urgency to a clear elucidation of any critical effort to displace this circulation of the hegemonic sign of the subject/self. If O'Hanlon is proposing even a theoretical displacement of the self-other dichotomy of the narrative subject in the “presence without essence” (204) of the subaltern, then how such a presence can be articulated deferring an “essential” slippage into subjectivity needs to be clearly understood.

Acknowledging that we read the figure of resistance into being always already foreclosed in the repetitive circulation of the epistemological imperatives of liberal humanism in-contamination at the margins, I have re-traced the sign of the native informant as a useful trope of reading a figure of resistance that not only “negotiates, concedes and contributes” but in that very complicity also contaminates and resists, thereby hybridizing the subject from within. And such a move defers the unfortunate sublation of the radical difference marked at the site of the subaltern in an undefined
“presence without essence.” The act of deferring is not defining the subaltern, but tracing the moment(s) of difference at the apostrophic sites of the “turn” away from the radical to the sublatable—the subal“turn.” O’Hanlon, in her theoretical attempt to displace this dichotomy suggests reading the subaltern in the relations of power, hence resorting to a structuralism without acknowledging her theoretical approach as such. So while the structure of power can be read without essential categories of social groups—elite and subaltern—in terms of variable networks of dominance (as in Hardt and Negri’s “networks of power” discussed in Chapter 2), the structure itself again has to pre-figure its legitimacy through the repetition of sovereign logic. The structure is then coincident with the structural foundations of Western epistemology that authorizes its readability where the figure of authority is the (here invisible) sovereign subject of liberal humanism.

In her critique of the fixed categories of the disciplinary fields that the Subaltern Studies contributors work with, O’Hanlon goes on to argue that many of the contributors have a very definitive idea of resistance as political action—“of organized labour, of a vigorous effort at political mobilization, of a direct blow against the collusion of landlord and state” (214). In the process, they ignore the minor “forms of resistance which are modest in the extreme: inscribed in small everyday acts, made in fields apparently quite disconnected from the political as it is conventionally understood” (215). I argue that here her intervention in the Subaltern Studies project is interruptive since she is careful to acknowledge the very real progress made by the Subaltern Studies critics in challenging the narrative of dominant historiography. Her intention is to interrupt the reading of subaltern resistance through only overt and definitive acts of rebellion.
politically recognized as significant failures in the archives of dominant historiography by reading minor daily acts of dissension that lack definitive focus and thus cannot be reconstituted as a comprehensive consciousness of either a subaltern-subject or a subaltern collective. These acts of general resistance can only be read between the lines of even subaltern histories of failed resistance. She thus states that these acts (or as she points out in Jean Comaroff’s terms “the vast proportion of human social action”) are in their “own way a series of negations, a refusal of approved forms of behaviour, even if these are made within a coercive framework which is not itself directly challenged” (215).

O’Hanlon attempts to displace the inevitable repetition of the subaltern-subject under the sign of the sovereign subject by retrieving instances of resistance as fragments of power relationships. But in order to do that she explicitly recommends a conception of power as a meta-narrative. This pervasive notion of power is read from within the epistemological discourse of Western philosophy in her explicit reference to Foucault even though Foucault’s reading of power is itself a reading of the functioning of (function as sublation) the Western humanist paradigm. And if power is read as domination as she recommends, then the critical displacement invisibly repeats the hegemonic subject as the dominant dis-placed and re-veiled under the sign of power as sovereign. The similarity of the functioning of power as self-legitimizing and autonomous to the function of the sovereign can be traced by returning to my discussion of the sovereign in Chapter 2. And I have demonstrated how the subject of liberal humanism (the sign that O’Hanlon set out to displace) is recuperated and repeated in the circulation of the sovereign (here power). Am I able to work out this inevitable dis-
placement in my reading of subaltern as absence? In fact, I read this dis-placement of the subject, its inevitable return instead of its definitive displacement, and defer its repetition as the same by reading the moments of textual sublation of subaltern silence as interruptions of the narrative progression of the sovereign sign. So my reading of subaltern absence is not a recourse to anti-humanism as a displacement of liberal humanism. Because in that process, O’Hanlon erases the trace of the subaltern in its singularity by retrieving that trace as only the multifarious form/s of the general functioning of power—the subaltern is retrieved and erased in her theoretical text of the meta-narrative of power as sovereign structure. And identifying this erasure is my interruption of O’Hanlon’s very important intervention into the Subaltern Studies project.

**Subaltern as Narrative**

In “Can the Subaltern Speak,” also published in 1988, and also considered a seminal intervention into the project of Subaltern Studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak begins by addressing the “critique of the sovereign subject” (66) in “French poststructuralist theory,” particularly in “the conversation between Foucault and Deleuze … framed by two monolithic and anonymous subjects-in-revolution: ‘A Maoist’ (FD, p. 205) and ‘the workers’ struggle’ (FD, p. 217).” She argues that in their conversation, Foucault and Deleuze do not acknowledge their own locations within the epistemological ideology of Western discourse—“that a developed theory of ideology [must] recognize[ ] its own material production in institutionality, as well as in the ‘effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge’” (68)—and this renders the “unnamed Subject”—“much like the generalized ideological subject of the

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1 In Spivak’s quote *FD* stands for Michel Foucault’s *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected essays and interviews*
theorist” (68)—transparent and reinscribes it at the same time at the invisible (because now read as de-centralized) center of the discourse. Spivak’s point is that in this conversation the “last instance” of “Society’s Other”—the heterogeneous oppressed resistant—is being sought “between economics and power” where “agency” is an “undifferentiated desire” where “power slips in to create the effects of [that] desire” (69).

Therefore, in her article, Spivak critiques the systemic reading of power or economics as constitutive of the space for heterogeneity as resistance or the “unquestioned valorization of the oppressed as subject” where this resistant subject can speak for itself (69). Such systemic readings recover the othered subject as theory overcoming the problem of representation (and re-presentation) by positing a multiplicity of agencies defined in systemic relationship of opposition in terms of power or class. Here Spivak differentiates between two senses of representation—on the one hand, representation of the “other” where the other “speaks for” (i.e., is made to speak for itself), and on the other, re-presentation as the act of speaking for “as in art or philosophy” (70). She does not suggest subaltern-subjects representing themselves from any ontological space in the margins. The issue, according to her, is that ignoring the “immense problem” that these two senses of representation are “irreducibly discontinuous” through advocacy for a systemic theory in which “as Deleuze declares ‘There is no more representation; there’s nothing but action’ – ‘action of theory and action of practice which relate to each other as relays and form networks’” also effaces the “critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formation and systems of political economy … [as well as] the active theoretical practice of the ‘transformation of
consciousness’” (70). This is precisely why, at the very beginning of her article, Spivak states:

The theory of pluralized ‘subject-effects’ gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing cover for this subject of knowledge. Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by law, political economy and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has ‘no geo-political determinations’. (66)

Spivak suggests a “theory of interest” against this positing of the “desiring subject as Other” where, as mentioned before, desire as agency is systemically produced as the effect of power and economic relations. Such “totalizing concepts of power and desire” re-introduce “the Subject of desire and power” contiguous with “the self-proximate, if not self-identical, subject of the oppressed … [and] the intellectuals … become transparent in the relay race, for they merely report on the nonrepresented subject and analyze (without analyzing) the workings of (the unnamed Subject irreducibly presupposed by) power and desire” (74). She thus argues for the critical project of deconstructing the ideological underpinnings of the “interest” revealed in the “vehement denegation,” i.e., the refusal of the “intellectuals” either to acknowledge or interrogate their “transparency.” For her, “radical practice” would be to “attend to this double session of representations,” i.e., interpellate both representation of “others” as resistant to the sovereign subject and representation as theoretical project even when the theorist claims no representative agency except to merely reveal the self-representation of the “other” (74).

Spivak elaborates on the need for this critical project by reading the 19th Century colonial dialog between the “early colonial British” and the “Indian nativist argument” (93) about the practice of sati (suttee) in India—the ritual burning of widows on their husband’s funeral pyre—which eventually culminated in a British ban on the practice in
1829. She argues that “women’s voice-consciousness” had been left out of the dialog and that the subaltern woman in this context, the “Hindu widow [who] ascends the pyre of her dead husband and immolates [or made to] herself upon it,” has no space in the ideological production of the sati debate to represent herself even though she (the sati as subject) is firmly s/cited in the debate. Spivak rhetorically reconstitutes the terms of this debate as “White men saving brown women from brown men” (93). She makes it clear that she does not oppose the abolition of sati (97), but that her critical project here is to look at the ideological constitution of the debate. On the one hand, the sati’s agency was re-produced by the “Indian colonial elite” as her “choice,” a “nationalistic romanticization of the purity, strength and love of these self-sacrificing women” (97). Spivak’s reading of the “authoritative” Hindu texts like the Dharmasāstra and the Rg-Veda shows that “the self-immolation of widows seems an exception to the rule” (95), which allows the reconstitution of the sati’s “choice” to “exceed[ ] the general rule for a widow’s conduct” as “an exceptional signifier of her own desire” (96). On the other hand, she shows that the British colonial argument against a “heathen ritual” drew on the sati’s decision “to be dissuaded … [by the local British police officer supervising the immolation as] a mark of real free choice, a choice of freedom” (96). Thus Spivak clearly shows that in a relation of power, there is no space for the subaltern, particularly the “sexed subaltern subject” (103), to “speak” outside the ideological construction of its subjectivity by the dominant (here circulating in the contestation over the sati’s “choice” between the British colonial ruler and the Indian colonial elite). That is why she states that “in the case of the woman as subaltern, no ingredients for the constitution of the
itinerary of the trace of the woman as subject can be gathered to locate the possibility of dissemination” (91).

So the question becomes for the critically vigilant intellectual: how to trace the absence of the subaltern woman’s voice without either arguing for a theoretical space where the subaltern can represent herself without ideological interpellation or essentializing that absence as theory where in both cases the theory (even in the absence or “transparency” of the theorist) serves as the sovereign site of identity constitution? Spivak makes it clear that the postcolonial intellectual in “seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman … [needs to] systematically ‘unlearn [...]’ female privilege … [which] involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized” (91). So Spivak’s critical project does not recover radical difference, but addresses the radically different (the unrecoverable) through the deconstruction of the text to recover the trace of the constitution of that “absence.” The tropes of the native informant and subaltern in deconstruction are extremely important literary-critical tools in articulating an interruptive reading praxis.

She elaborates on this deconstructive project through a careful reading of Derrida’s central question of “how to keep the ethnocentric Subject from establishing itself by selectively defining an Other” (87) in Of Grammatology. She notes that “Derrida … aligns ‘grammatological knowledge with the same problems as empirical investigation” in that it “cannot ask first questions” about its own foundations (88). So the project of grammatology—the deconstruction of (object and model) writing
is obliged to develop _within_ the discourse of presence. It is not just a critique of presence but an awareness of the itinerary of the discourse of presence in one’s own critique, a vigilance precisely against too great a claim for transparency. The word ‘writing’ as the name of the object and model of grammatology is a practice ‘only within the _historical_ closure, that is to say within the limits of science and philosophy’ (OG. P. 93). (89)

Spivak notes that as a postcolonial critic what is important to her is Derrida’s acknowledgment of the “Europea Subject’s tendency to constitute the Other as marginal to ethnocentrism,” which is a “European problem” (even though it is “the problem of all logocentric and therefore also all grammatological endeavors”) in the specific context (the text of the context of Eurocentrism) he deconstructs. In that Eurocentric context, as I have noted earlier in Chapter 3, the postcolonial critic of imperialism (and neo-imperial globalization as I argue) must attempt to read difference in the “text-inscribed blankness” (89)—reading both the functioning of sovereign logic as “thought or the thinking subject [rendered] transparent or invisible [that seeks] to hide the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation” (89) and the “absence” of the subaltern. Thus postcolonial criticism and subaltern studies must always begin at recognition of these two blanknesses, for the theory of difference is the recognition of its sublation, while the theory of the subaltern (radical difference) is its lack of recognition, by the S/subject (even when transparent) of theory.

Spivak ends her article by recounting the suicide of a “young woman of sixteen or seventeen” by the name of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri who had waited till the “onset of menstruation” to take her life (103). As it turned out a decade later, by means of a letter the young woman had left for her elder sister, she was a revolutionary for Indian independence, but unable to carry out the political assassination entrusted to her, had killed herself. In light of this revelation, her wait for menstruation was an attempt to
“displace (not merely deny) in the physiological inscription of her body” the general
ascription of “illicit love” as the motive for such suicides. Spivak reads this act as “an
unemphatic, ad hoc subaltern rewriting of the social-text of sati-suicide”—the subaltern
woman attempting to em-body her voice in the very act of silencing herself. And while
her menstruating body “is at first a reversal of the interdict against a menstruating
widow’s right to immolate herself” thereby foreclosing the reading of her suicide in terms
of “imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male,” Spivak notes that “[i]n the
immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity” (104).
So the means that Bhuvaneswari had adopted to subvert the general assumptions
regarding a young woman’s suicide, was generally interpreted (even by her “own
emancipated granddaughters: a new mainstream” [309] as Spivak adds in the revised
version of the article published as the “History” chapter in A Critique of Postcolonial
Reason) as madness, refusing her the voice that she had attempted to code in her
body. This is why Spivak emphatically states “[t]he subaltern as female cannot be heard
or read” (104).

In a 2010 article titled “Death and the Subaltern” published in Can the Subaltern
Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, by revisiting
Spivak’s article, explores the relationship between the “subaltern” and “death.” She
makes a very interesting point about the constitution of female subalternity through the
narrative trope of “death” in Spivak’s article. She points out that even Spivak
acknowledges in the “History” chapter of A Critique of Postcolonial Reason that the
figure of Bhaduri was not “a ‘true’ subaltern, but a metropolitan middle-class girl” (273).
However, her act in suicide of speaking both through a suicide note and through her
menstruating body is rendered subaltern by the inability even of female members of her family to read/acknowledge her speech. Rajan thus points out that Spivak’s work in “Can the Subaltern Speak” was the narrative production (in tracing) of Bhubaneswari (here Rajan follows Spivak’s revised spelling of the young woman’s name in “History”) Bhaduri’s subalternization. She compares the figure of Bhaduri to the figure of Chandra in Ranajit Guha’s article “Chandra’s Death” published in Subaltern Studies V in 1987, arguing that in Guha’s reading Chandra was subaltern as “a member of the Bagdi caste, among the poorest and lowest of castes” (132) and her death is the victimization of her subaltern condition and not constitutive of it. I provide a reading of Guha’s article by way of contextualization before returning to Rajan’s point.

In “Chandra’s Death,” Guha retrieves the narrative of Chandra’s death resulting from a botched abortion forced upon her by her brother-in-law, Magaram Chashi, with whom she was having an illicit affair. Guha reads the archives of the legal proceedings in 19th Century British India, in “the work of a village scribe drafted in the service of the local law-enforcing agents” (37). He points out that the “material reproduced has already served with two authorities” (34)—firstly, the authority of colonial law as recorded by the scribe which bears “witness to the force of the disciplinary thrust made by the colonial regime into Indian rural society by the middle of the nineteenth century” (37), and secondly, the authority of Panchanan Mandal who collected the legal transcript in his book Chithipatre Samajchitra, vol. 2, published in 1953, for its “sociological interest” (34). Right at the beginning of his article, Guha makes it clear that he is reading the archives against the grain—“a transgression” (34)—piecing together the narrative from the testimonies of various family members of Chandra, particularly her mother,
Bhagaboti Chashin, and sister, Brinda, who had tried to save her from ostracization and their family from dishonor by attempting the abortion. While he does assume an actual “event” of the death and dates it in 1849, he focuses on the legal constitution of the narrative through three legal depositions, and argues that in the process “a matrix of real historical experience was transformed into a matrix of abstract legality, so that the will of the state could be made to penetrate, reorganize part by part, and eventually control the will of a subject population” (39). In fact, he argues that the “interposition of other wills and purposes” read in the tension of the event’s constitution in two different “authorial” texts, “justifies yet another intervention—a return to the terminal points of the shift, the only visible sites of legal and editorial intentionality, in order to desecrate them by naming the material once again and textualizing it for a new purpose” (34).

Guha carefully contextualizes the case in the social milieu of Chandra’s kinship—“[t]he Bagdis belonged to the nether end of the colonial society where extreme poverty and abject pollution converged to make them among the lowest in class and caste” (40). He notes the difficulty of working with the “untamed fragment”—“[a]n anecdote with no known context … the residuum of a dismembered past” (37)—for the historian. The archive that he is working with here consists of three depositions with the beginning of the first sentence of the first deposition by Brinda, and the end of the last sentence by the last deposition given by Kalicharan Bagdi, who provided the medicine for the abortion, missing. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan provides a perceptive reading of Guha’s project in her above mentioned article, and notes that the actual verdict in the legal case of Chandra’s death is missing because “either the record or Guha withholds it from us”(134). However, Guha’s article clearly shows that the archive does not provide the
verdict, but as he crucially points out, the archive itself is “a set of narrowly defined legalities” (38) as a part of “official investigation into what is presumed to be a murder” (37). Guha’s point is that the “ekrars (a legal term for confessions or acknowledgments of guilt)” (38) even though they were written down in the first-person voice of the defendants in the case, as legal statements were mediated by the requirements of the colonial judicial system and served to detach the testimonies from the socio-economic context of the “event.” In fact, Guha’s project is to recover Chandra’s narrative as contextualization of the subaltern whose history must be recovered against the grain of the archives of dominant historiography, by relocating it from the legal context of its authorial production into the socio-economic context of the “villages [that] formed a kinship region for six Bagdi families, all of whom felt seriously threatened by Chandra’s pregnancy” (45).

So while the archival “fragment” in Guha’s case is de-contextualized, it has been de-contextualized by the colonial legal “process of detaching an experience from its living context and setting it up as an empty positivity outside history” (38) that allowed the colonial authorities to bring the complex socio-economic negotiations of rural India under its judicial purview and “knead[ing] the plurality of these utterances [i.e., the depositions] … into a set of judicial evidence … thereby … subsume the humble peasant voices that speak here in sobs and whispers” (39). Guha’s critical intervention is to work with this “fragment” to disrupt its constitution as “an event without a subject,” a “case” of “crime” where the death of Chandra becomes a “thing’s occurring” and the statements of the “criminals” are recorded as facts of the event and not statements of their “particular will,” and restore “[s]ome of those perspectives … by a reading that
acknowledge[s] them as the record of a Bagdi family’s effort to cope collectively, if unsuccessfully, with a crisis” (39-40).

In the article, Guha makes a clear distinction between Chandra and Magaram Chashi who are both responsible for the crisis that precipitates the turn of events that lead to the former’s demise. Magaram Chashi, unlike Brinda, Bhagaboti or Kalicharan, is not held culpable in Chandra’s death from the botched abortion and therefore is not a “defendant” in the case and is “beyond the reach of the disciplinary arm of the colonial state” (50). Yet, he was definitely a participant in the act of their illicit relationship that violated the sexual norms of their society. While he is backed by the authority of patriarchy, that does not legitimize his relationship with Chandra. His role in the incident is therefore tolerated in secrecy. In fact, if Chandra’s illicit pregnancy had become known, the entire family would have faced the rigors of “prayaschitta, or penitential measures made up of fines, fasting, and feasting” (47) that could be a severe economic burden for the poorest castes. In fact, according to Guha, the option was always open for a community member “to incriminate oneself deliberately and court punishment” as a “preemptive tactic … to ward off the ultimate sanction of outcasting” (47). Guha points out that “prayaschitta” for the offenders was determined “at the village level ... [by] Brahman priests acting individually or collectively, or by the leadership of a caste or subcaste” as an “amalgam of local custom, caste convention, and a rough-and-ready reading … of the shastras” (46). He argues that “the mechanics of discipline and punishment”—in this case “the government of sexuality”—“lay within the jurisdiction of samaj (community, a term in which the institutional aspects of society and their moral and political attributes are happily collapsed),” which shows a “failure of the Raj to
incorporate some of the most vital issues of indigenous conflict within its hegemonic juridicature” (46).

So Guha’s work shows a constitutive tension between the colonial hegemonic and the indigenous dominant, and while Magaram participates in the patriarchal authority of his *samaj*, he too would have suffered the rigors of *prayaschitta* had the affair been exposed. Guha notes that it was this fear of either expensive atonement or “*jatmara*, literally the destruction of caste” (47) that defined kinship solidarity since the depositions show that every family member who participated in the attempt to help Chandra abort her baby would have been affected by the social disgrace of the illicit affair. So we see power relations working at different levels and Guha is careful to note that at the *samaj* level “patriarchal concern [was] to exercise greater control over female … sexuality” (47). This was because the “prestige of a caste” was determined by the “degree of its purity … [valorized in] a maiden’s virginity, a widow’s chastity, and a wife’s sexual fidelity” (47). We can see here the social [*samajic*] sanction for a widow exceeding her code of conduct (according to the “authoritative” texts) by committing *sati* since that act (as self-sacrifice) in its violation of the rule, would still, by emphasizing her “purity, strength and love,” increase the prestige of her caste. Guha’s work is clearly talking to [and can be used to further contextualize] Spivak’s reading of *sati*. And just as the latter had argued that the female subaltern cannot speak or be heard, Guha notes that other than the three depositors, of the two main protagonists of the affair “Chandra is … absent and … [her] absence corresponds to her silence” but Magaram “is given a voice in the text” (49). While Magaram, not being a defendant in the case, did not give a deposition, a statement—“Or else, I shall put her into *bhek*” ascribed to him by
Chandra’s mother “is allowed to set the scene, define its context, and determine all the action in it” (50). Thus in Guha’s words:

Magaram’s voice thus dominates the text. It does so not merely by providing a cue for its drama but by elucidating its politics. (50)

Magaram’s politics here is the assumption of patriarchal authority in threatening his lover with “conversion to the Boishnob faith” thereby forcing her to lose caste. Guha’s article does not address whether Chandra’s being put into bhek would have saved the caste from dishonor, but instead focuses on the fact that threatened with the exposure of the illicit affair in which he had been a participant, Magaram took resort to patriarchal authority to bully the female members of his caste kinship into removing the traces of his deviance. It is this space in male-dominated society which allows him to “transcend[ ] his particularity and emerge[ ] as the universal male” (52) that gives Magaram his “voice.”

Guha goes on in his article to argue that the “solidarity born out of fear contained within it another solidarity activated by a different, indeed contradictory, principle—namely empathy” (55). He argues that the decision of the “Bagdi women of Majgram” to help Chandra abort her baby rather than let her be put in bhek was “an act of resistance against a patriarchal tradition that was about to claim yet another woman as its victim” (56). He reads this resistance within women’s control of the “domain of the female body” (57). While, according to the depositions, Bhagaboti required the assistance of her son’s father-in-law to convince Kalicharan to give her the medicine, and three male family members buried Chandra’s body, the decision for abortion was taken by the women, the monetary transaction for the drug was negotiated by Bhagaboti, and the drug was administered by Brinda. While Guha notes that “the elaborate structure of patriarchy’s
self-defense” does attempt to control this “domain of the female body” by prohibition and prescription, he argues that the Bagdi women “defined their independence negatively by excluding men from all those decisions and initiatives that were vital to the termination of Chandra’s pregnancy” (58). However, here I argue that such a solidarity of the Bagdi women is premised on the politics of difference and not the agency of empathy as Guha charts since it is set in motion by Magaram’s assumption of patriarchal authority that allows him to “speak[ ] for all men in a semifeudal society and for male dominance itself” (51) and constitutes the women of his kin as “other” by difference. So Guha is resorting to identifying the female subaltern as difference; only he is proposing that the difference in this particular instance is constituted by the agency of the Bagdi women in response to the difference of male dominance. I propose that once again, the figure of the native informant, as both complicit in and resistant to its co-optation in the constitution of the dominant (male) identity, provides a better reading of the agency of the Bagdi women as read by Guha. Such a reading would allow a clear distinction of their (historiographically reconstituted) agency from the absence of voice that marks the textual presence (marking her absence in death) of Chandra.

Speaking of illicit love in the sexual politics of nineteenth century rural Bengal, Guha writes:

a transgression of that order [an illicit relationship], born in secrecy, survived by stratagems of secrecy. Silence and evasion, fear and shame—*all conspired to tolerate, or at least look away from*, whatever exceeded the prescribed limits of sexual politics within a kinship group, so long as it was not forced out into the light of day by violence or by a rupture in the mute complicity of horizontal loyalties.” (51 [emphasis mine])

And even when the incident becomes a judicial matter through the intervention of the colonial state in the patriarchal socio-political domain of indigenous society, Chandra is
still defined in the legal language of the case as the “thing” that has been committed.

The actual act of the illicit relationship in Chandra’s case is contained by “looking away from” her, an apostrophic reduction of her individuality to a subaltern site of a crime. The crime takes center-stage while the actual act of the violation of the sexual norms of the society, an act participated in by Chandra as an individual, is suppressed by both the society’s and the state’s consent. That is why, even in Guha’s attempt “to reclaim the document [of the legal proceedings of the case under colonial jurisdiction] for history” (34), the male-dominant figure of Magaram is centralized as the “particular will”—“the murderer’s hand”—behind the “thing’s occurring” in response to which the Bagdi women mobilize themselves in solidarity of empathy. Thus Guha writes:

This attempt to shirk parenthood by the destruction of an embryo or by consigning its carrier to living death in an akhra earns for Magaram a place in a historical relationship of power, a relationship of male dominance mediated by religion. It is a relationship that is overlaid and obscured, in our text, by the law’s concern to assign criminality to one or more of the “defendants” in this “case.” But the project to reclaim this material for history calls for a movement in the opposite direction, so that the pall of abstract legalism is penetrated in order to identify the murderer’s hand as that of patriarchy in its dual role of the cynical lover and the authoritarian samaj. (55)

In the process, Guha replaces the dominance of colonial law with that of patriarchal indigenous law. The important thing to note here is that even this recuperation is precisely possible because of the apostrophic turn from the figure of Chandra, the subaltern moment when she is reduced to a corpse, a “thing” that has been committed. The existence of the colonial legal archives pertaining to this case is grounded upon the subalternization of Chandra, the reduction of her individuality to a “thing.” The purpose of the case was to impute liability for the act of Chandra’s death, an event enabling the intervention of the colonial state into the socio-political domain of indigenous patriarchy.
Guha’s intervention reanimates this discourse of legal abstraction to recover the voices of the legal “defendants” of the case and ends up centralizing indigenous patriarchy in the form of Magaram Chashi as the original perpetrator of the murder. But even his reading is grounded on the fact/act of the murder, the “thing” that has been committed. Guha clearly acknowledges his inability to recuperate the voice/motivations of Chandra in the act of the original illicit relationship. I read Chandra’s death, the figure of Chandra as the figure of the dead body, the figure of the “thing” that has been committed, as the subaltern figure, and the incorporation of the various “subjects” of the “case” as native informants. In the original legal discourse, these native informants are the “other” of the legal discourse of the English penal code while in Guha’s reading they are the “other” of the male subject, literary instances of subalternity who have to be recovered as the voiced subjects of an indigenous historiography. Following Spivaks’ argument in “Deconstructing Historiography,” I focus on Guha’s reading of the silence of Chandra as the un-recuperable moment of history, the apostrophe that is crucial to the writing of even subaltern historiography.

My reading above is then in line with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s point that “death” for the subaltern forecloses any possibility of retrieving any recognizable “voice” and “functions as disclosure rather than as attribute in and for subalternity, and it still remains the necessary condition for such disclosure of subaltern identity” (131). Thus quoting Spivak, Rajan states, “Indeed, it is only in their death that they [gendered subalterns] enter a narrative for us, they become figurable” (131). In fact, she goes on to point out that the lack of a verdict for the accused, particularly Brinda and Bhagaboti, in the case of Chandra’s death is a death of another sort because
the vanishing of their death is, of course, also their death. The subaltern cannot speak. (134)

So Rajan’s argument is that it is not possible to retrieve through critical historiography the perfect example of subalterinity (let alone a subaltern-subject). A perfect example that is coincident with its historical fact is impossible and hence subalterinity has to be retrieved through narrativization (critically contextualized) of the subaltern condition. Rajan argues that Spivak in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason deliberately chooses the “imperfect” or “figural” example of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri as the “subaltern who cannot—but, in fact, does—speak” instead of the “perfect” or “literal” example of “Friday” in Coetzee’s Foe as “the subaltern who cannot—but also will not—speak (his tongue, after all, has been cut out)” (121). Bhubaneswari’s subalternity more significantly marks the failure (of recognition) of speech at what Rajan identifies as “the site of a strenuous attempt to communicate” (121). Thus, Rajan argues that Spivak’s “resistance to literalism” marks the “(im)possibility of subaltern speech” not just because the subaltern’s voice-consciousness is impossible to retrieve (such as when the subaltern has lost its “tongue”) but also because hegemonic discourse finds it impossible to recognize that voice-consciousness.

However, in order to make her point Rajan does take recourse to an outside in the figure of the historical subject who will resist recuperation in the exemplary form of the subaltern (127). This resistance is foreclosed in the fact of death though she is careful to point out that “death [in itself] is not the sign of subalterinity” (130). I have already argued that the “historical subject,” coincident with the sovereign subject, is premised upon the sublation of the native informant as the visible “other” and the refusal to recognize (in turning away from) the subaltern as in-visible “absence.” Re-coding the
subaltern even rhetorically as historical subject will re-produce the sovereign subject sublating the disjunctive “absence” of the subaltern in the “subject” of subaltern subjectivity. Instead, by arguing for the reading of “absence” as the marker of subalternity, I resist the reading of a historical subaltern-subject as outside historiographic recuperation. This historical (subaltern) subject is just as much a narrative trope as its death that has to be literalized (literarily realized) to read subalternity.

Here, I find it interesting to note that in defining the empathy that motivated the Bagdi women to help Chandra abort the baby rather than face bhek, Guha identifies an “utterance” from Brinda’s deposition—“I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate the pregnancy and did not realize that it would kill her” (35)—that he argues “defies the ruse of the law and confers on this text the dignity of a tragic discourse” (57). I read this as a statement of critical strategy on Guha’s part to shift the discourse from the register of legal proceedings producing an “empty positivity” to a narrative of the Bagdi woman’s agency as empathy. I use this critical strategy to address Masselos’ critique of the narrative strategies of the Subaltern Studies group to produce “literary tragic protagonists” that dissipate the “will and agency of the subaltern.” Acknowledging Rajan’s argument that the subaltern can only be figured in the narrative of its death/absence, I read Guha’s use of the narrative mode (through the reconstitution of a “tragic discourse”) to re-produce the “will and agency of the subaltern” not to restore subaltern agency as historical fact, but to critically disrupt the colonial legal archive from “subsum[ing] the humble peasant voices” under its own juridical agenda. And Rajan, in her reading of the narrative troping of “death” of and for
the subaltern, addresses Masselos’ concern about the “failure” that marks subaltern historiography arguing that in Spivak’s reading subalternity is precisely the failure of recognition (of speech) and not just a class-condition. That is why even a middle-class woman like Bhubaneswar Bhaduri can be subalternized. In fact, Rajan argues that such a failure is “the fullest measure of … [Bhubaneswari’s] gendered condition”—that a young woman’s suicide must be read (even by her female relatives) in terms of “reproductive heteronormativity,” i.e., the result of “illegitimate passion,” in spite of her attempt to “voice” herself by writing both a letter (normative) and her menstruating body (non-normative)— and is “the veritable ‘proof’ of the subaltern’s inability to speak” (126). Rajan also points out that Bhubaneswari’s coding of her body even though she had left a note explaining the motives of her suicide was an acknowledgment of the power of reproductive heteronormativity in co-opting women’s voices and “is the sign of her gendered subalternity” (125). However, Rajan argues, “the transgressive potential of the sexuate body’s excess” in Bhubaneswari’s act of coding her body was in itself a “submission to the violence of a social system’s insistent demand to be satisfied about a female subject’s chastity” (125) thereby reiterating Spivak’s point in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak” (103).

While I agree with Rajan about the narrativization of subaltern absence in death, I read subalternity in the “turn” away from recognition and not the recognition (narrativization) of subaltern death even though she does suggest all forms of absence as “death.” I read the subaltern as the absence of retrieval in the narrative schematics of subject-constitution. The subaltern figure is a substitute, a supplement to fill that
absence through a process of conscientious (and in Rajan's argument empathetic/affective) critical strategy. While in discourse we must speak of the subaltern as the subject/subject of her discourse, we need to also critically distance the supplement from the absence of the subaltern—the “aporia of exemplarity” that Rajan invokes from Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. This methodology helps me address the literary-literary bind of the recuperative project of subaltern subject-constitution by displacing the trace of the subaltern figure to the narrative production of the subaltern's subjectivity. We re-produce the effect of subaltern presence in discourse and supplement this effect as the cause of their presence. Institutional discourse does determine the conditions of the entry of the formerly subaltern into subject-constitution (in-resistance—as both resistant and resisting subject-constitution). I read later in this chapter Spivak’s argument that as academics, we can alter the conditions of this entry without acting as gatekeepers, professing control over the subject-constitution of the non-subject.

**Subaltern as Difference**

In the article titled “After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World” published in 1992, O'Hanlon, in collaboration with David Washbrook, argues the importance of materialist criticism suggesting that the “post-structural” and “postmodernist” turns in literary and historical criticism is a product of “the well-known hostility of American political culture to any kind of materialist or class analysis” (166). The authors base their argument on a critical reading of Gyan Prakash’s “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography” published in 1990. What O'Hanlon and Washbrook primarily oppose is what they see as a critical decontextualization of ethnographic “extreme cultural relativism” married to
“methodological individualism” that ultimately harkens back to liberal humanist principles of self-representation—in this case, of authoritative marginals who voice their own concerns from the peripheries. While they conscientiously point out that Prakash is critical of the pitfalls of his own methodology, they argue that his program shares these “core assumptions” that “help make possible a radical-sounding assault, issued along with a declamatory public commitment to the emancipation of marginalised cultures” while in reality “[s]uch efforts to sever off spheres of activity for free individuals or cultures are a very old device of liberal ideology …

a new form of that key and enduring feature of Western capitalist and imperialist culture: the bad conscience of liberalism, still struggling with the continuing paradox between an ideology of liberty at home and the reality of profoundly exploitative political relations abroad, and now striving to salve and reequip itself in a postcolonial world with new arguments and better camouflaged forms of moral authority. (164-166)

According to O’Hanlon and Washbrook, Prakash in “an attempt … to ride two horses at once” (167) combines Marxist historiography with deconstructive critical practices in the post-structuralist and postmodern mode. Prakash thus focuses on fragmented narratives, they argue, in an attempt to break away from reconstituting foundational hegemonic explanatory structures like capitalism, but ends up ineffectively repeating the same opposition to the dominant ad nauseam without actually producing a space for resistance. While at first this seems to go against O’Hanlon’s project of focusing on “minor acts of dissension” in “Recovering the Subject,” what this emphasizes, again, is that in that earlier article those minor narratives were read only as parts of a comprehensive structure of power read as relationships of dominance (thereby legitimizing my earlier critique of her position). Only, in this article, along with
Washbrook, she sublates her Foucauldian notion of power into a Marxist meta-narrative of global capitalist relations.

This critique of the Subaltern Studies project, therefore, marks an interesting contrast to the argument that Masselos makes. Masselos argues that the reification of the subaltern as “subject” of resistance in critical historiography is precisely a result of reading resistance only as opposition to the dominance of the hegemonic. While his argument is that this results in a repetition of resistance doomed to failure, O’Hanlon and Washbrook read the attempt to break away from the foundational by positing a space of radical difference as ineffective repetition of de-contextualized resistance.

Prakash, in his response in the article “Can the ‘Subaltern’ Ride: A Reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook” published in the same volume (34) of *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, makes it clear that suggesting the hegemony of a certain system (here capitalism) does not mean that that paradigm exercises complete dominance over everything that it subsumes within its “self” or consolidates as its “other.” Nor, he argues, does pointing out the paradigm’s fissures and limits reject the paradigm as a “disposable fiction,” which O’Hanlon and Washbrook accuse him and “the other postmodernist theorists” of doing. While the latter suggest that Prakash was disposing of capitalist modernity in favor of “marginal histories, of multiple and heterogeneous identities” (O’Hanlon and Washbrook 147), he argues in his response that his was a refusal to read marginal “histories” as parts of the larger narrative of capitalism’s dominance as that would result in “homogenizing the histories that remain heterogeneous with it” (176). It is clear that Prakash, drawing on Bhabha, is arguing for recovering subaltern narratives as the irreducible difference of “colonial discourse” while
grappling with how to resist sublation of these histories of resistance in the repetitious self-re-constitution of the dominant. How do you retrieve resistance from the “ambivalence” of the dominant (discourse) while resisting the dominant at the same time? And from this dilemma arises his need to “ride two horses at once” because even when one uses “Marxist categories to analyze patterns of inequalities and exploitation … [one] also [has to] us[e] deconstructive approaches to contend that Marxism is part of the history that institutionalized capitalist dominance—approaches which argue that although Marxism can rightfully claim that it historicizes the emergence of capitalism as a world force, it cannot disavow its history as a nineteenth-century European discourse that universalized the mode-of-production narrative” (168).

Prakash goes on in his article to critique O’Hanlon and Washbrook’s misreading of Derrida as offering “an intellectual cul-de-sac” where deconstruction can “do little more than reveal, over and over again, the subjective and arbitrary nature of our categories and the uncertainty of the knowledge derived from them” (O’Hanlon and Washbrook 144-145). In fact, the latter provide absolutely no reading of any of Derrida’s work and instead base their condemnation on a review essay by John Searle published in 1983. Prakash’s point is that “deconstruction opens up productive ways of reading and reinscribing the structure of ambivalence closed by foundations in serving certain types of authority and power”—a critical strategy, whose “purposive adequacy” consists in revealing that the politics displacing other claims to the margins can be undone by rearticulating the structure of differences that existing foundations seek to suppress and that strategies for challenging the authority and power derived from various foundational myths (History as the March of Man, Reason, Civilization, Progress, Modes-of-Production) lie inside, not outside, the ambivalence that these myths seek to suppress. (172-173)
O’Hanlon and Washbrook’s position on this debate is that they are addressing the limits of the liberative potential of the historiographic politics of identifying “fragments” in place of totalitarian if resistant identities. While their main point is that Prakash’s approach delegitimizes historical materialist critiques in the name of refusing the dominant, they also bring up the problem of ethnic/marginal “authority” suggesting that these “new dialogic approaches” (where the dialog is between Marxist historiography and the ethnographic cultural relativism of postmodernist strategies) “seek to return control over knowledge to its indigenous sources, to represent adequately the authority of informants, and to open real textual spaces for a multitude of indigenous voices whose perspectives and agendas are not imposed on them from outside” (160). They point out that such a move establishes “authoritarian” voices in the margins—“authoritative indigenous individuals” (161)—and bears a striking resemblance to the colonial strategies by which an authoritative Hinduism was constituted by “East Indian Company officials” that “gradually eroded what had previously been a much more heterogeneous collection of local social and religious practices” (161-162). Once again, I frame this problem as the ever-present threat of narrative co-optation of subaltern difference in the figure of the native informant recoded as the subaltern-subject (the “generalized ideological subject of the theorist”) speaking for itself. In this aspect, their argument echoes Spivak’s “theory of interest” I have addressed earlier. Prakash’s strategy, however, is to recuperate subaltern difference in the resistance of the native informant that defers its complete complicity. And he reads that resistance as the (im?)possibility of agency, an-other space where the “other,” even within a paradigm infected and hegemonized by the exploitative practices of global
capitalism, cannot be read as merely a repetition (a mirror) of the dominant. In his words:

all totalizations reveal their impossibility in their use of supplements. This means that history becomes possible in the structure of marginalized others; Western discourses may have constituted and transformed colonial and postcolonial subjects, but they cannot determine the agency that these subjects find in the contradictions and equivocality set in motion in discursive fields. (184)

While historiographic readings in themselves cannot “liberate” resistant identities, theories of resistance can propose agendas of resistance and reconceptualizations of academic politics in engagement with the dominant paradigm to create spaces within the institutional discourse of identity-contestation for marginal “subjects” to define “other” subjectivities. We have to emancipate (not minorities) but our critical politics of the need to define a liberative difference for “others.” This cannot be interpreted as indifference but as a politics of creating space for resistance repeated-strategical-ly without creating boundaries for the form of that resistance. This also does not mean that we stop critiquing the limits of resistance articulated in spaces of resistance (whether enabled in discourse or produced in resistance) because there needs to be a clear gesture towards the im-possible eventuality of resistance that is truly “other” in its refusal (to engage) of the dominant that it is resistant to. And as I argued in Chapter 3, this im-possible resistance cannot be supplemented by an expedient resort to a romanticized alterity uncontaminated by the colonialism of contact with the dominant.

So I do agree with O’Hanlon and Washbrook that one cannot deconstruct the dominant paradigm by positing a recoverable radically different subaltern-subject to be recuperated from the margins. This is why the historiographic move of the Subaltern Studies group was termed “strategic use of positivist essentialism” by Spivak. The
problem is that in the process of making their argument, O’Hanlon and Washbrook suggest that history in its fragmentary state is just “noise.” Here their argument is that this “noise” “possess[es] no inherent themes and express[es] no unequivocal voices” and that “‘Other’ histories” must be reconstituted by the historian. Therefore subaltern-subjects cannot speak of their own agency unless the historian does what “only the historian can do … turn the noise into coherent voices through which the past may speak to the present” (149). So history needs to be constituted into textuality premised on the trace by first recognizing the trace as such. Prakash, however, in his response, significantly points out that this understanding of the historical archive as just “noise” ignores the fact that the archive (whether fragmentary or from which the “fragment” is retrieved) is itself only available as “text” conditionally produced in an encounter (which must be critically read in terms of its own historical production) between the source and the author (who must be traced within their relationship of difference). He points out that the reading of “empirical sources” as “noise” evokes “a primeval scene, an original encounter before history.” So while the dominant paradigm cannot be deconstructed by positing a subaltern-subject, the latter cannot be dismissed by reifying the hegemony of that paradigm here implied in the sovereign authority of the historian as “all powerful interpreter” who constitutes from “lifeless evidence [history that] is blind to the history of its own enactment” (173).

In fact, the argument for uncontaminated “noise” as historical archive would suggest the possibility of radically “other” subjectivities as “empirical sources” that are contaminated only because of the (“in part”) subjective nature of the historian’s work. In arguing against Prakash’s critical strategy that gestures towards a subaltern history
recoverable outside the hegemony of the dominant—what they identify as “postfoundational”—O’Hanlon and Washbrook inadvertently posit “empirical sources” outside history as a pre-foundational space. The deconstructive position would, however, point out that in the act of reconstituting history from the fragments of the archives, the recognition of the “trace(s)” of history sublates the traces of its epistemic coming into being as trace, sublating (subsuming and repressing) the traces of difference that enable its reconstitution as history. And at apostrophic moments, when faced with the residue of alterity as the trace(s) of what it cannot subsume—and here residue does not mean the remainder as finite, but remainder as what remains outside the tracing of history or the text and cannot be measured in terms of finite and infinite—the historical subject (even the marginal recovered in the name of the subaltern) must turn away from that alterity. I recognize the trace of this lack as the subaltern while the Subaltern Studies group read the trace of the marginal, the subsumed and repressed, recovering it as the strategically reconstituted sign of the subaltern-subject.

O’Hanlon and Washbrook bring up a legitimate conceptual bind—the need to posit a hegemonic dominant at one end of the spectrum to define radical difference at the other. Drawing on Frederic Jameson, they state that “it is only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic system that resistance, emancipation, or difference can be meaningfully identified or measured at all” (149). Now if we posit a pattern of infinite differences, and recognize the inherent hybridity of the hegemonic, then the hegemonic is itself rife with a multiplicity of differences and there is no fixed boundary to separate it from the resistant margins. And if one does not textually posit the hegemonic, then what is the resistant resistant to? After breaking
down the center-margin dichotomy, one merely reads infinite relationships of difference marked by divergent relationships of power where resistance is merely the difference of complicity. The problem here is how to work out this bind to articulate a comprehensible theory of resistance constrained by the limitations of the academic discourse that such theory sees itself as a part of.

In fact, one of the points that Masselos raises in his article is the circularity of establishing that there is no original act of contamination, that all texts, i.e., systems of knowledge, are already always infected/hybrid. He argues that once this point has been "made and accepted ... then perhaps there is little more to be said" (199-200). He points out that the effects of the power, or in my reading the repetition of the sign, of the sovereign may not help to explain the "specificity of the variant forms of power and knowledge [repeated as the sign of the sovereign subject]" (200) but would merely reveal a repetition/circulation of the sovereign sign. In my work, if the point of interruption is merely to identify the subal"turn" and the presence of subaltern absence, then the repetition of such reading would only function as the "other" of reading (and repeating) the hegemonic sign of the subject and would tend towards "reflex cliché and dogma" (Masselos 200). Instead, the strategic and critical point of interruption is precisely the displacement of this repetitious mode, whereby the reading (and in consequence, the narrative) is re-turned towards the trace of "blankness" (subaltern absence) that marks the liminality of the text. Such a reading does not merely establish the method of the functioning of the sovereign sign or even the fact that resistant subjectivities repeat the constitution of that sign. The reading attempts to defer the singular instance of the present reading-as-repetition by reading subaltern absence in
place of the subject. The reading reconstitutes the narrative against the grain not by supplementing a different resistant subject, but by identifying the contextual constitution of resistance-as-subject. I am proposing a particular reading of a particular context-bound (gendered, classed, racialized) subject to unmake its constitution in the process of repeating its sign. If the sovereign sign repeats itself as the same in-difference—repeating difference in indifference to its own hybridity—then the unmaking (here strategically) must also be vigilantly repeated in-difference—repeating the unmaking of the sovereign’s indifference to its constitutive difference. And the impetus must always be towards the im-possibility of the Derridean event in the trace of subaltern absence marking the liminal points of the subject’s narrative constitution—the eventuality of a radical difference outside the binary subject-object, subject-other, subject-subaltern, other-subaltern opposition. And this im-possibility has to be critically deferred and not declared in realization. The im-possible radical functions precisely to unmake the constitutive complicity of the possible radical so that we do not read into existence easy and unexamined subjects of resistance as the “last instance” of “Society’s Other.”

**Subaltern as Double Bind**

Sumit Sarkar, a significant member of the Indian Subaltern Studies group, in his article “The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*” published in 1997, argues against the group’s turn towards the “fragment” as a critique of “grand narratives.” He points out that the generalization of the Enlightenment (particularly Enlightenment rationality) as a “grand narrative” is problematic and ignores much critical work (such as E. P. Thompson’s posthumously published *Witness Against the Beast*). Sarkar thus emphasizes “the need for socially nuanced and differentiated conceptions of Enlightenment and ‘counter-Enlightenment’ that go far beyond homogenized praise or
rejection” (316). He argues that instead, in their critique of the Enlightenment, Subaltern Studies scholars end up generally condemning the modern nation-state and secularism without realizing that this theoretical position is also appropriable by “softer versions” (318) of the same fundamentalist forces that they are trying to oppose. For example, Sarkar argues that when opposing “the motivated and majoritarian BJP campaign for imposing a uniform civil code through unilateral abrogation of Muslim personal law” (313), if we oppose secularism itself, as Partha Chatterjee does in a 1994 article titled “Secularism and Toleration” published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, giving precedence to the right of distinct religious communities to have legislative autonomy, we ignore the fact that this also empowers the Hindutva campaign to claim to “speak on behalf of all ‘Hindus’, or fundamentalists in Bangladesh [to] persecute[e] a dissenter like Taslima Nasreen” (313).

So while O’Hanlon and Washbrook were arguing against the rejection of the hegemonic (as global capitalism in historical materialist readings of the archives) to caution against what they saw as repetitive reconstitutions of de-contextualized resistance, Sarkar argues against the positing of Enlightenment rationalism as the absolute hegemonic to caution against what he sees as the threat of re-contextualizing “fragmentary” resistances to serve fundamentalist narratives. Both the former and the latter make the point that a so called “grand narrative” is not as internally coherent a dominant as subaltern resistances are constituted in opposition to, and being rife with contradictions, allow for differences and thereby resistances within. However, while O’Hanlon and Washbrook argue for a reading of resistance as differences within and in opposition to the hegemonic to contextualize those differences in terms of class
exploitation, Sarkar argues against unproblematic (unproblematized) readings of the hegemonic precisely because of those internal differences that mark teleologies of other spaces (defined in terms of secularism, human rights) that are the foundations of institutional resistances against various registers of exploitation. He is therefore opposing the Subaltern Studies group’s argument for the “fragment” in opposition to the hegemonic by fragmenting the hegemonic and retrieving the resistance of differences (contradictions) within.

Sarkar’s point that the foreclosing of textuality in the name of the sovereign rational subject forecloses the possibility of the radically different subject only outside the paradigm brings up the important issue of the constitution of the “grand narrative” of sovereignty that presumes textuality as read from within the postcolonial paradigm defined in contamination of but circulating the hegemonic sign of Western rationalism. My use of the “grand narrative” of the Western sovereign is a strategic shorthand—in Chapter 2, I called it an “expedient category to address a central concern that continues to haunt diverse critical resistances located across the globe that constitute the ‘postcolonial’ field”—for the limits of radical difference as defined from within the hybrid (colonial-post) constitution of the discursive space I belong to, and not the refusal of a radical alterity. My point is that I cannot recognize (in reading) resistance as radically different without textually sublating that radical difference, thereby normalizing it (“subjecting” alterity to narrative constitution) as an-other difference always already defined in relation to the subject of its resistance. The resistance that I read in the text is not beyond the limit of subaltern absence, but located in the transition from this absence of recognition to the resistance of the native informant (always already under the threat
of sublation) as the latter’s difference is othered just as its “voice” is reconstituted as repetition of the sign of the (hybrid) subject. This transitional resistance is particularly significant because it can only be read in the trace of its loss, just as I read the im-
possibility of radical resistance in the trace of its lack. One can attempt to defer the sublation of this resistance by reading the tension between the repeated “difference” of the subject as hybrid and the repeated sameness of the hybrid as subject. However, Sarkar’s argument is that this reading of difference, in its singular repetition as “fragments,” rejects larger socio-economic concepts like class and civil/human rights (or contextualization as he sees it). So in the Subaltern Studies project, the “separation of the domains of power and autonomy culminates here in an oscillation between the ‘rhetorical absolutism’ of structure and the ‘fragmented fetishism’ of the subject” (307-308).

So the problem for Sarkar is how to move past this fetishization of the “fragment” to contextualize the subaltern in resistance and through that contextualization enable it to form socio-economic (and not only class) alliances. From Spivak’s perspective, the “double bind” lies in how to defer the repetition of the subaltern as reconstituted subject of resistance reappropriated as the “other” of the citizen-subject while enabling him or her (now no longer subaltern having transitioned to an engagement with the tools of civil subject-formation) to form the strategic alliances necessary for a recognizable socio-
political existence.

In “Scattered speculations on the subaltern and popular” published in 2005, Spivak explains her conception of subalternity as “position without identity … where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognisable
basis of action" (476). In her Keynote address at UCSB on “The Trajectory of the Subaltern” a year earlier, she had made it clear that this position had evolved from her original understanding of the subaltern as “difference.” This re-conception of subalternity allows her to move beyond the “fragment” as “difference” towards a pedagogical strategy of enabling the self-intuitive metonymization of the subaltern as citizen. The subaltern’s self-intuition has to be through the synecdochic gesture of claiming agency as part of the democratic state. Spivak proposes a difference (or more properly a différance) between agency and subject formation by elucidating that “[a]gency was the name … [she] gave to institutionally validated action, assuming collectivity, distinguished from the formation of the subject, which exceeds the outlines of individual intention …” (“Scattered speculations” 476). I understand her position as a proposed reading of “agency” for the subaltern-subject that does not necessarily incorporate that agency into the sanctioned (in difference from validated or recognized) agency of the “people.” In her article, she addresses how “‘People’ becomes a slogan too quickly” (477) and in a footnote (18) explains “‘Multitude’ is as dangerous a hypostatization of singularity, as ‘people’ is of subalternity” (485). Spivak goes on to define her notion of “agency” as:

If the repetition of singularity that gives multiplicity is the repetition of difference, agency calls for the putting aside of difference. Agency presumes collectivity, which is where a group acts by synecdoche: the part that seems to agree is taken to stand for the whole. (480)

Here there is a clear need for critical vigilance since as soon as agency is repeated as the synecdochic gesture of claiming the rights of citizenry, the subaltern-subject is consigned (or consigns itself) to the biopolitical reach of the state. I read this tension between reading the subaltern (as subject) in theoretical praxis in the interstices
of historical archives and recognizing the subaltern-as-subject in its agency not only in Spivak’s writing but also in my understanding of my theoretical project. Spivak addresses this tension in the distinction between the constative and the performative. In “Scattered speculations,” reading Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, she suggests that the withholding of self-representation—Marx wrote “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”—is constative and that attempts by the Subaltern Studies group to recover the subaltern in history in “some recounting of the details of the practice of disenfranchised groups … is useful work, but only constative … [because] there is no effort here to touch the subaltern or, with the energy with which historiographic practice is questioned, to question the political strategy that appropriates the disenfranchised” (477). In contrast, she argues as she had originally argued in “Deconstructing Historiography,” that the group’s performative potential had been in their “attempt to expand the horizons of historiography” often read against the grain, which provided a “call” “for another kind of ‘setting-to-work’,” a call

for another performativity, a contamination of the outlines of historiography by its own place in history, so that the subaltern is not merely protected by ‘negative consciousness’, as the new historiography continues endlessly to read the archives against the grain. Such reading of the archives is, of course, useful, but only, at best, for correcting the constative. (478)

This “attempt to expand the horizons of historiography” then is what her recent work has tried to performatively supplement, in a move beyond just reading the subaltern as textual subject. In a clear echo of Sarkar’s call to contextualize, Spivak argues:

To historicise the subaltern, then, is not to write the history of the singular. It is the active, scrupulous, and vigilant contamination of historiography from the constative through the disciplinary performative into the field of the historical possibility of what we can only call the present. (484)
What Spivak is trying to address is that the definition of the subaltern as the indefinite, the move towards a refusal/rejection of defining the subaltern, also limits the intellectual gesture to the constative. But any performative gesture on the part of the “organic intellectual” would also necessitate a working definition/location of the subaltern. Is it possible to address the problematic of the subaltern in a simultaneous gesture of the constative and the performative and would that necessitate a distinction between the constative deferment and the performative definition? If such a distinction is to be made, then should we still use the same term subaltern, or does this distinction call for another metonymy? This is why I propose the trace of the native informant for exploring this tension between the articulation of the un-recoverable alterity of radical difference and the tracing of difference as resistance to (and from within) the hegemonic. The native informant is always already implicated in the sign of the sovereign and the co-optation of the sign of its otherness is constitutive of the sovereign subject in whose name is guaranteed the civil institutions that Sarkar identifies as central to the resistance of difference. I read the trace of the native informant in Spivak as the genealogy of the “double bind” of an “aesthetic education” that she proposes in the “Introduction” to her new book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, published in 2012.

According to Spivak, this aesthetic education is a “productive[ ] undoing of another legacy of the European Enlightenment” by recognizing “the double bind of the universalizability of the singular, the double bind at the heart of democracy, for which an aesthetic education can be an epistemological preparation, as we, the teachers of the aesthetic, use material that is historically marked by the region, cohabiting with, resisting, and accommodating what comes from the Enlightenment” (3-4). Here Spivak
is drawing attention to the same discursive hegemony that I have placed my work in, and arguing for the deconstruction of that hegemony from within by working its “double bind” (not “playing” it) for a “reflexive re-arrangement of desires” (11). Her argument here is that while we should not romanticize the radical difference of the unrecognizable, we should always be aware that the subaltern-subject—the subaltern who has entered into discourse with the institutional and is no longer a subaltern—is also necessarily “animated” by the “desires” of “agency” to be realized in the status of the citizen-subject as constituted by the hegemony of the sovereign. She clearly states in “Scattered speculations” that her “foray into teacher-training for the subaltern is because they also are citizens, the name for hegemony” (7). So the goal of her “aesthetic education”—an education about the “double bind” at the heart of the aesthetic—is for the “instrumentalized intellectual” of Gramsci “to build infrastructure so that the[ subaltern] can, when necessary, when the public sphere calls for it, synecdochise themselves without identitarian exploitation (sometimes well-meaning but equally destructive), from above” (“Scattered speculations” 482). Thus she argues in An Aesthetic Education, the practice of an “aesthetic education” is to “teach the humanities in such a way that all subjects are ‘contaminated’” (9). Spivak argues that the “intellectual” can achieve this by learning “to learn from below, from the subaltern, rather than only study him(her) … in order to be able to devise a philosophy of education that will develop, for want of a better expression … the ‘habits of democratic behavior’, or ‘rituals of democratic behavior’, or ‘intuition of the public sphere’” (“Scattered speculations” 482).
Spivak’s advocation of learning from below to make available the tools of citizenship to the subaltern implies a performative act of translation. In *An Aesthetic Education*, she states:

In our dwindling isolation cells, we must plumb the forgotten and mandatorily ignored bi-polarity of the social productivity and the social destructiveness of capital and capitalism by affecting the world’s subalterns, in places where s/he speaks, unheard, by way of deep language learning, qualitative social sciences, philosophizing into unconditional ethics. (27)

I have already argued for the usefulness of the trace of the native informant in distinguishing between the “speaking subaltern” and the subaltern absence that always marks the “double bind” in the circulation of the sovereign’s hegemony. Otherwise, the act of translation here that is pre-figured as a necessity can be co-opted by the liberative gesture of translating subaltern performativity into agential performance. What needs to be translated here, however, to the “organic intellectual,” is the ever-present and very real danger of the sublation of the subaltern into the performative of the organic intellectual. This moment of translation needs to be iteratively re-visited at every moment of training/learning. I find it very interesting then that Spivak clearly identifies the “aesthetic education” of the “double bind” as “the interruption of the ethical” (30 [emphasis mine]). Therefore, Spivak’s identification of the subaltern to learn from is not a recourse to an essentialized identity of radical difference but a carefully considered “ethical imperative,” or a “responsible buttressing of the possibility of the political in view of the tremendous uncertainties of the ethical” (16). In “Scattered speculations” she states:

I have fallen into a reading task: to learn from these collectivities enough to suture rights thinking into the torn cultural fabric of responsibility; or, to vary the concept-metaphor, activate a dormant ethical imperative. The text is text-ile. To suture here is to weave, as in invisible mending. (483)
This ethical imperative cannot be misread in liberal humanist terms, but must be read as an interruption of liberal humanist ethics in order to “engage in ab-using the enabling violation of our colonial past to converse with each other … to turn globalization around, but also to supplement the necessary uniformization of globalization with linguistic diversity” (An Aesthetic Education 28). I cannot undertake the project of this work—a reading of the subaltern (figure and absence) in literary texts—without the acknowledgment of such an ethical imperative.

An interruptive critical approach has to make its argument at every specific point, at every specific turn of the narrative reconstitution of the hegemonic whether read as Western rationalism or indigenous fundamentalism. Sumit Sarkar makes the point that critical work cannot limit itself to the fragment—in my reading the differential and endless identification of radical alterity—but must at the same time make strategic alliances with rational institutions guaranteeing civil rights like secularism reading them towards a more equitable politics. Spivak clarifies this argument in an interruptive project of an “aesthetic education” to use the “double bind” to “learn to learn from below” and enable the institutionally un-recognized to constitute themselves though within but with a clear understanding of the discourse of the hegemonic, thereby enabling the impossibility of unmaking the self-consolidating logic of global sovereignty. In Chapter 5, informed by the constitutive tension between the subaltern and the native informant, I trace subaltern difference at the site of the “diasporic,” central to articulations of hybridity as resistance in postcolonial criticism.
I have clarified the notion of subaltern difference following the major arguments of the Indian Subaltern Studies group, and established that hybridity as the site of resistance must critically engage with its re-figuration of the resistant subject through the dialectical process of assimilating the recognizable difference of the native informant and putting the irreducible difference of the subaltern under erasure. In this chapter, I interrupt that dialectical process of sublation to trace subaltern difference at the site of the hybrid to explore the im-possibility of imagining a space for the irreducible without assimilating its difference in rationalizing it.

Postcolonial criticism, especially in the South Asian context, has placed the “diaspora” at the center of its critique of the hegemonic narrative of (post-)colonial modernity, particularly the nation-state essential to modernity’s cartographic imaginary. The diaspora as hybrid serves to both decenter the consolidated sign of the citizen-subject and cut across the rigid cultural, political, and linguistic boundaries of nation-states. The diasporic subject can claim the privilege of both an outsider’s and an insider’s perspective allowing for both distance from and familiarity with the postcolonial nation.

**Diaspora in Postcolonial Theory**

Françoise Král, in her book *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* published in 2009, makes a forceful case for diaspora theory as well as diasporic literature. Král does not agree “that the figure of the migrant has been presented as emblematic of the postmodern, post-industrial condition, a sort of epiphenomenon and heightened version of the consequences of postmodernity” that
Arjun Appadurai calls “diaspora of hope” (2). She believes that diasporic literature in its “prismatic value” offers “a unique vantage point, a privileged outlook on emerging issues which loom large at the turn of the twenty-first century” (3). She argues that “[t]here is indeed an intrinsic value to literary representations of these changing and hybrid identities, which lies in the emphasis they put not so much on analysis and critical appraisal as on self-representation” because this literature “leaves more room for the grammar of identity to express itself in all its complexities, in the jarring polarities of its fragmented nature, and for the divide between objective markers of integration and one’s sense of belonging to widen to unexpected proportions.”

Král goes on to argue that the diasporic condition privileges the diasporic subject as both a “blessing and a curse—a curse in the sense that the diasporic writer is doomed to a life of in-betweenness, but a blessing in the sense that s/he enjoys a double outlook” (15). However, she does not clarify how the “double perspective” of the diasporic subject “not only … allows the immigrant to embrace a metaperspective, but … also frees the subject position of its natural correlative, namely subjectivity.” While the in-between position can be argued to offer an interesting “metaperspective” on identity constitution in rigid national terms, we need to be careful of reconstituting a “subject position” free of subjectivity. Král sees diasporic experience as an existential category without critically addressing the issue that the “existential” is premised on an epistemological aporia. This epistemological aporia—I discuss this aporia later in this chapter—pre-figures the subject-consciousness of “Rational Man,” also pre-figures the subject-consciousness of the diasporic subject. Král does go on to caution against an apolitical liminality referring to the work of R. Radhakrishnan in Diasporic Mediations as
one of the most incisive critiques of the “third space and its depoliticised projection of liminal subject position” (16).

Král also questions the rejection of the center-periphery polarity by some postcolonial theorists for a series of international exchanges because the latter often ignore the politics of global inequalities. In arguing for reintroducing a confrontational aspect into diasporic relations, she essentially calls for the recovery of agency of the diasporic subject. She argues that the reason why diasporas are unable to realize their “promising agenda” is, on the one hand, the “gradual complexification of the larger map of diasporic exchanges, which has not only become more elaborate but is plagued by constant shifts and redefinitions which undoubtedly make it more difficult to read the whole picture” (18), and on the other, “the multi-directionality of migratory fluxes and the criss-crossing of several types of networks, on both a vertical and lateral plane” (19). Drawing upon “Tambiah’s analysis of transnational movements” in his article “Transnational Movements, Diaspora, and Multiple Modernities,” she argues that in the questioning of situating (or re-territorializing) diasporic identity, many critics refuse agency to the diasporic subject and in the process fail to recognize the “balance of power between the different poles of the global map” (19) against which the diaspora must articulate its resistance to realize its radical hybridity/liminality.

Král identifies two broad trends in diaspora theory, “those which use the term diaspora in a strict sense and distinguish between migrants, exiles, expatriates … [—the bipolar model featuring home country and host country] and those who use the term diaspora as a metaphor … [—a tripolar model, which no longer foregrounds the point of origin or return but a middle ground, as in Bhabha’s theorization of the third space]”
Most diaspora theorists refer to the inauguration of the journal *Diaspora* in 1991 and William Safran’s article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” published in that first volume as significant for the term’s re-conceptualization from its specific Jewish context into a central concept in postcolonial articulations of hybridity and resistance. Safran began his article by making the point that “most scholarly discussions of ethnic communities, immigrants, and aliens, and … most treatments of relationships between minorities and majorities” did not consider diasporas. In response, he proposed broadening Walker Connor’s definition of diaspora as “that segment of people living outside the homeland” to include all expatriate minority communities that shared the following characteristics:

1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

Various critics have since tried to build on this definition either broadening it to include specific migrant communities or narrowing it down to avoid dilution of the term’s theoretical efficacy through over-generalization. There is also a significant amount of discussion about the appropriate focus of diaspora studies—for example, Gabriel Sheffer, in her article “A Nation and its Diaspora: A Re-examination of Israeli-Jewish Diaspora Relations” published in 2002, similarly broadens the definition of diaspora.
beyond its Jewish context, but with a specific focus on the diasporic community’s ethno- national “identity and identification … based on a combination of what analysts of nationalism have called primordial, ethno-symbolic, and instrumental factors” (333). Sheffer thus focuses on the “distinct strategies” adopted by the diasporic community to negotiate its identity and representation in the host nation “to ensure integration, rather than assimilation” (334).

In the Introduction, “Thinking ‘Indian Diaspora’ for Our Times,” to their book *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations* published in 2008, Parvati Raghuram and Ajaya Kumar Sahoo look at the focus of different diaspora theorists. While critics like Safran and Sheffer mentioned above attempt categorical definitions of diaspora, others like Paul Gilroy define diasporic communities based on their difference from the dominant ethnic group/s in the nation, focusing on “the contradictory emotions, the ambivalences in the diasporic’s notions of belonging, their identification with and against territorial social and cultural formation, especially as they are shaped through the process of exclusion” (2). Again while some theorists emphasize the importance of the “homeland,” both mythical and real, to the diasporic consciousness, others prefer to focus on the diaspora’s relations both with the host country and with other diasporic offshoots of the same group transnationally. Steven Vertovec, in his article “Three Meanings of ‘Diaspora,’ Exemplified among South Asian Religions,” in place of defining diasporas only in terms of home and host nations, proposes exploring diasporic communities as social form, type of consciousness, and cultural production. At the same time, critics like Floya Anthias problematize diaspora
theory questioning its lack of specificity, especially with regard to issues of gender and race.

Anthias, in her article “Evaluating ‘Diaspora’: Beyond Ethnicity?” published in 1998, points out that diaspora as theoretical concept gained currency, particularly through the work of Gilroy and Stuart Hall, because it “involves a conception of identity that avoids the essentialism of much of the discussion on ethnic and cultural identities” (558). However, she argues that because “the concept of diaspora, whilst focusing on transnational processes and commonalities, does so by deploying a notion of ethnicity which privileges the point of ‘origin’ in constructing identity and solidarity … it also fails to examine trans-ethnic commonalities and relations and does not adequately pay attention to differences of gender and class.” So her main argument is that in the process of defining diasporic groups with a shared identity and interests, particularly in the categorical terms of Safran and others, diaspora theory often posits both the dominant and diasporic communities as homogeneous in themselves ignoring the diversities and differences within the groups.

Here, Raghuram and Sahoo point out that Martin Sökefeld, in response to Anthias, argues in his article titled “Mobilizing in Transnational Space: a Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora” that while diasporic consciousness is indeed often defined in primordialist terms, the diaspora theorist must interrogate the constitution of essentialist diasporic identities “to ask how these people are mobilized for such an identity, how they are made to accept and assume it” (267). Sökefeld thus argues that the focus on the homeland in diaspora theory is not to define an “ethnic identity [that] derives almost naturally from experiences of belonging in primordial
communities” but to explore the “triggers” that produce such a strong attachment to a real/mythical homeland at the heart of the diasporic’s self-representation and its othering by the nation-state. I quote him directly to clarify his elaboration of diaspora as a specific type of “transnational social formation”:

The assumption of a shared identity that unites people living dispersed in transnational space thereby becomes the central defining feature of diasporas. Rejecting ideas of migrants’ natural rootedness and belonging to places of origin, I argue[] that diaspora identity and the imagination of a diaspora community is also an outcome of mobilization processes. The development of diaspora identity is not simply a natural and inevitable result of migration but a historical contingency that frequently develops out of mobilization in response to specific critical events. Diaspora is thus firmly historicized. It is not an issue of naturally felt roots but of specific political circumstances that suggest the mobilization of a transnational imagined community. The focus on mobilization in the formation of diasporas effectively counters essentializing concepts of diaspora. (280)

Mala Pandurang, on the other hand, in her article “Moving Beyond, Moving Ahead: Possible Paradigms for Accessing Indian Emigrant Subjectivities,” refocuses on the homeland arguing that ignoring the diaspora’s relationship with its country of origin defines the concept exclusively in terms of its relationship to its host nation. Such a “host-centered” position suggests that diasporic identity is solely consolidated after the fact of migration and that the characterisitcs of the diasporic group’s identity are determined exclusively in reaction to its adopted nation. While such an argument may have been partly true for diasporic groups formed prior to the technological advancements from the mid-twentieth century who had limited access to the homeland post-emigration, the new diaspora “partakes in a hyper mobile phenomenon” thereby continuing “to interact, almost on a daily basis, with the cultural matrix of ‘homeland’ over the Internet, chat facilities, email and telephone” (272). She therefore argues:

[b]y recognizing the significance of departure in the itinerary of migration, we acknowledge that negotiation skills do not necessarily evolve only upon
arrival. This is [sic] turn compels the theorist to re-conceptualise the psycho-social dynamics of the moment of arrival, normally associated with concepts of ‘shock’ and ‘ambivalence’. (272)

Pandurang, in her article, limits her study of diasporic subjectivities to “an increasing number of young women from urban middle-class families” who “anticipate the possibility of emigration” exploring “the correlation between ‘the will to emigrate’ … and ‘resistance to assimilation’ upon arrival in the host country” (275-276). Therefore, while her work obviously does not address the transnational movements of the many thousands of “illegal immigrants” who cross borders forced by “the inequalities created by capitalism, such as the demand for labour, the rise of poverty or famine and the basic demand for better social and economic conditions” (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 11), it does add to our understanding of the diversity of diasporic experiences. In the process, Pandurang makes a very important point about the gender roles of Indian women in the new diaspora. She argues that a “host-centered” diaspora theory posits that the rigid gender roles “as instrumental in preserving the ‘dignity’ and ‘pride’” of the homeland that South Asian women are often subjected to are a result of “a self-defence mechanism [that] comes into operation upon arrival and upon threat of contact.” However, such a theory “does not take cognisance of possible mechanisms prior to departure that have already inculcated a gendred acceptance on the part of the emigrant woman that the ‘Indian woman is expected to be responsible for maintaining this Indian home in diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood’” (280). So in a very interesting way, exploring the diasporic consciousness of a specific class and gender, Pandurang argues for a theory that is equally cognizant of the “triggers” of both the home and host nations shaping diasporic identity.
In an excellent book titled *Diaspora and Hybridity* published in 2005, Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk bring up another interesting criticism of diaspora theory. They compare the usefulness of the concept of diaspora not only to ethnicity, but also to the term “immigrant.” Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk argue that “[c]ombined with a hyphenated, hybrid identification … diaspora allows us to move beyond the static, fixed notion of immigrant” (14). So their argument is that the term immigrant tends to suggest “a one-off, one-way process” whereas diaspora posits a more open relationship of the community to both the host nation and the homeland. At the same time, referring to Anthias’ argument about the lack of adequate intra-ethnic differentiation, they point out that the term immigrant “carries with it sets of larger institutional connotations, such as laws, regulations and reciprocity between nation-states” (15). These connotations thereby ground the term “immigrant” in specific local relationships between a nation and its constitutive ethnic groups while the term diaspora, in the work of some critics, displaces political, class and gender concerns to a more general cultural register. They also interestingly observe that the term “transnationalism” has recently gained currency as a way to locate the “impact of diasporic formations upon legislation and state institutions” (15).

So in a sense, the main argument here is for the grounding of diaspora theory in specific national and transnational contexts to avoid Radhakrishnan’s “subjectless” theory on the one hand, and reiterations of essentialist identities on the other. While differing in methodology, all the above theorists argue for a nuanced understanding of diaspora that pays attention to the complexity of its differences within and to other marginal and dominant groups in the adopted nation as well as the homeland. And
there is general agreement that while the emphasis on the importance of the homeland, actual or mythical, may differ, the notion of the homeland in diasporic consciousness needs to be adequately problematized to avoid essentialist reconstructions of primordial ethnic identities. And while all postcolonial theorists recognize the significance of the Jewish context to the concept of diaspora, the call to expand the definition of the term beyond its “reductive” roots is partly because the Jewish diaspora is strongly associated with a millenarian (hence primordialist) ethos. While I find critical elaborations of diaspora theory to encompass diverse transnational migrants other than just the exilic useful, I argue for a better understanding of the Jewish context of this critical term. Agreeing with the rejection of essentialist identities, I argue that the concept of diaspora is precisely a theoretical mobilization to examine, critique and resist the circulation of the hegemonic sign of a “homogeneous” nation-state. In fact, Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk propose that diaspora as a theoretical concept is a useful tool for deconstructing the national narrative because

the historical longevity of the diasporic construct is one that predates the modern formation of the nation. In this sense, diaspora could be utilized to indicate transnational forms, formations and processes that take into account larger geo-political shifts and historical patterns of struggle (civilizational clashes, changes of mode of production, etc.). (12-13)

And precisely recognizing diaspora as a significant postcolonial critical concept, I posit that we need to clearly understand the critical genealogy of the term in the process of mobilizing it to articulate sites of resistance.

**The Diasporic Imaginary in Postcolonial Criticism**

Before the term gained currency in postcolonial criticism, it was used in Anglo-American (and European) theory to generally refer to the Jewish, Armenian and Greek diasporas (i.e., the classical diasporas) as well as Africans displaced by slavery. In this
chapter, I explore the genealogy of the concept in its original Jewish context, not to argue for some essential meaning, but to historically situate the critical mobilization of the word diaspora and to explore whether the specificity (in political, historical, and cultural terms) of its “original context” can inform its postcolonial deployments in interesting ways.

Vijay Mishra, one of the major South Asian diaspora theorists, in his book Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imagination published in 2007, briefly discusses the Jewish context of “diaspora.” Mishra rightly notes that the Jewish diasporic communities “created homelands” wherever they settled with their “diasporic episteme … located squarely in the realm of the hybrid, that is, in the domain of cross-cultural and contaminated social and cultural regimes” (5). The diaspora is defined through its response to the racial and ethnic “pressures” of its adopted nation-state and the reconstitution of a mythical “homeland”—even the more accessible homelands of a globalized inter-net-connected world—“become the sublime signs of the ungraspable in the complex psychology of diaspora” (6).

Mishra reads the diaspora in psychoanalytic terms defining a “diasporic imaginary … to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement” (14). He uses the term “imaginary” in both “its original Lacanian sense (linked to the mirror stage of the ego, and therefore characterized by a residual narcissism, resemblance and homeomorphism …)” and in “its more flexible current usage” following the work of Slavoj Žižek. Mishra argues that the “nation” “as the ‘Thing’ in Heideggerian parlance that ‘presences’ itself,” or as Žižek calls it the “Nation
qua Thing,” is the site of identity contestation between the dominant community for whom “the 'nation' simply is (beyond any kind of symbolization)” and the Other which “has ways of enjoying the Nation that do not necessarily mirror the forms of the nation’s enjoyment of itself.” He reads Žižek to posit that the dominant community feels that its ability to “enjoy” the nation as “exclusive property” is appropriated by the diasporic “others” “constructing the nation ‘otherwise’” which leads to racist phobia.

However, Mishra at this point slips into an unintended affirmation of certain anti-semitic arguments. After stating that the “Jewish diaspora is the fundamental ethnic model for diaspora theory, and all serious study of diasporas will have to begin with it” he argues that the model needs to be divested of “its essentialist, regressive and defiantly millenarian semantics” to be reread “through alternative models much more attuned to spatio-temporal issues and to a diaspora’s own silenced discourses of disruption and discontinuity” (6). He seems to suggest that the “virulent racism and endemic nativism” that is often a schizophrenic nation’s response to the realization—externalized as “threat”—of its inherent heterogeneity is “a consequence of … [the Jewish diaspora’s] millenarian ethos of return to a homeland.” That is why he states that the diasporic imaginary is marked by a “recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one’s mother (father) land” (16). So while on the one hand, Mishra seems to argue that the “schizophrenic social and psychological formations of diasporas” (5) result from the repeated questioning of “belonging,” on the other, he suggests that this questioning of “belonging” is encouraged by the diaspora’s melancholic attachment to a mythical homeland. In fact, Mishra posits that the dominant community sees in the diaspora “reflections of its own past, its own earlier migration
patterns, its own traumatic moments, and its memories of settlement” (15). And the fact that the dominant is unable to share the same attachment to its homeland, which it feels is impeded by the presence of the diasporic “others” “gives rise to the exclusion of diasporas from the national imaginary.” Thus the “absence” of the enjoyment of the “Nation Thing” presupposes the “presence” of the “thing” that has been lost/contaminated, and that is why “the diaspora as Other has an important function to play in the construction of the fantasies of the nation-state as a Thing to be ‘enjoyed.’”

However, this confusion in Mishra’s work of the origins of what Bhabha identifies as the constitutive “splitting” of the nation—whether the schizophrenic performative dissemination of the nation’s pedagogic homogeneous sign produces schizophrenic diasporic formations or the other way around—sets up an aporia that is, in fact, often the justification for ethnic cleansing directed at the very diasporic groups to which Mishra belongs. This aporia also informs Mishra’s theorization of diasporic trauma that bears further analysis.

Mishra addresses the “impossible mourning” in Derrida’s *Mémoires: For Paul De Man* arguing in his reading of Derrida’s work that “[t]rue mourning becomes impossible because we do not accept the truth, the textuality, of mourning” (8). In his engagement with the idea of “impossible mourning,” he focuses on the diaspora’s attachment to the memory of its “homeland” and then goes on to discuss Freud’s distinction between “mourning” and “melancholia,” where in the latter case the subject suffers from a “pathological disposition” implying “‘an uncompleted process that awaits belated completion before it can be incorporated into the self’” (8). Mishra goes on to suggest that when the diaspora “perceives” its adopted nation as “racist or imperialist” and feels
that it is denied the “therapy of self-representation … a melancholy sets in precisely because the past cannot be constructively interpreted, the primal loss (of the homeland, a ‘lack as an a priori, ontological condition of psychic life’) cannot be replaced by the ‘new object of love’” (9). Here we need to carefully look at Mishra’s reading of Derrida’s argument about “impossible mourning.” I first reproduce the quotation from Derrida’s Mémoires: For Paul De Man from Mishra’s book:

What is an impossible mourning? What does it tell us, this impossible mourning, about an essence of memory [of anamnesia, of remembrance]? And as it concerns the other in us … where is the most unjust betrayal? Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, the idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives on in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism? (7)

Mishra understand Derrida’s argument here as “the truth of mourning in literature, as figurative language, effectively implies that true mourning can never be defined, except as an absence” (8). He therefore argues, again drawing upon Derrida, that the “normal working of mourning” is “an idealization of absence because it is prior to the possibility of mourning” (8). Quoting Derrida, Mishra states, “we can only live this experience in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and of prosopopeia ['the mode of personification that implies an absent speaker'], where the possible remains impossible”’ (8). Working with Mishra’s engagement with Derrida’s notion of “impossible mourning,” I merely point out that we have to also simultaneously engage with the subalternization of certain diasporic “others” by the nation-state. If the diaspora idealizes the “absence” of the “homeland,” then the nation-state repetitively idealizes the “absence” of the “othering” of its irrefutable heterogeneity. While I understand the importance of Mishra’s focus on diasporic imaginary, I feel that his reading of diasporic
trauma here does not take into account the racial and ethnic pressures of the nation-state that he brings up earlier in the book. What Derrida draws attention to as “the most unjust betrayal” is the fact that even in the process of identifying the “other” without immediately internalizing its difference through its assimilation as native informant, in its reconstitution under the hegemonic sign of the citizen-subject, even in acknowledging the non-homogeneous “leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove,” the nation-state still externalizes the “other” as non-native, immigrant, alien, as other-than-itself. Derrida identifies “impossible mourning” as the “loss” of the “self” that was/is always already “other” and can therefore never be interiorized. The “aporia of mourning” here is the performance of a mourning without “absence,” a mourning that does not seek to internalize the object of its loss—the “most deadly infidelity.” So in this context, the lack of an interrogation of the nation’s “impossible mourning” that must go along with the exploration of the schizophrenic psychological formations of the diaspora can result in an-other infidelity, another betrayal. I am wary that the above elision when coupled with the suggestion that the nation’s identitarian phobias might result from the diaspora’s own millenarianism inadvertently centralizes the diasporic as the “subject” of the nation’s schizophrenia. Drawing upon Spivak, I understand the “double bind” here as how to address diasporic othering as constitutive of national identity without reconstituting the diaspora as the “problem” of the inherent hybridity of the nation-state.

Mishra does usefully point out the complexity of the diasporic imaginary that he argues is often simplified in the “idealist scenario endorsed by some diaspora theorists” (17). Importantly, he points out that while the diaspora as Other serves to fuel the racist phobias of the nation-state, the diaspora’s own reconstitutions of its mythical homeland
“often become racist fictions of purity as a kind of jouissance, a joy, a pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homelands are constructed against the multicultural, miscegenation-prone reality of the nation-states in which diasporas are located” (16). Thus Mishra exhorts that it is important to “constantly revisit” diasporic trauma “as part of our ethical relationship to the ghosts of diaspora” by engaging with specific diasporic narratives. I would only add that along with the psychoanalytic exploration of the internal “trauma” of the diasporic, we need to interrogate the subject-constitution of the diasporic as Other and to acknowledge “other” possibilities of diasporic identity as well as those im-possible differences—i.e., subaltern differences—put under erasure precisely to define the resistant postcolonial hybrid subject.

Of course, once again, we have to pay heed to Radhakrishnan’s caution against a “subjectless” theory of the diaspora in the attempt to defer retrieving subaltern difference as an-other figure of postcolonial resistance. Rashakrishnan’s concern is that this subjectless theory functions in the name of the in-visible universal “subject of the dominant West” (159). In the chapter “Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity” in his book Between Identity and Location, Radhakrishnan discusses the “contradictory and multi-accentual” (173) politics of the metropolitan diaspora. This diaspora’s “metropolitan de-racination” equates “loss of ‘where one came from’=loss of historical perspectivism=the removal of ‘interestedness’ from the realm of the ‘political’ and, finally, the realization of politics as a kind of unsituated anarchism” (175). Radhakrishnan argues that such a conceptualization of a hybrid space as “the radical nonname of a nonplace” is full of “exciting possibilities” for academics who “seek transcendence through exile and an epiphanic escape from the pressures of history”
(173). He recommends instead the situated hyphenation of the “ethnic self” (i.e., the immigrant identity) of the diaspora “re-territorializing itself and thereby acquire[ing] a name” (175). I quote his position at length:

Whereas the term ‘diaspora’ indicates a desire to historicize the moment of departure as a moment of pure rupture both from ‘the natural home’ and ‘the place of residence,’ the ethnic mandate is to live ‘within the hyphen’ and yet be able to speak. Whereas the pure diasporic objective is to ‘blow the hyphen out of the continuum of history,’ the ethnic program is to bear historical witness to the agonizing tension between two histories (Benjamin). (175-176)

I show, however, that the deployment of diaspora as a concept of un-historicized hybridity can be problematized by tracing the genealogy of the term. A careful examination of the etymology of the word produces a very interesting “revelation.”

**Tracing the Diaspora**

The word diaspora comes from Deuteronomy 28:25 of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced in Alexandria around 3rd Century BCE. As with most historical Biblical research, there is a fair amount of speculation about the actual reasons behind the translation and the nature of the translation itself. According to the “Letter of Aristeas” dated around the 2nd Century BCE, the Septuagint was produced in Alexandria at the behest of Ptolemy II who invited six members from each of the 12 Jewish tribes to comprehensively translate the Hebrew Bible into the language of his empire. The Encyclopedia Judaica notes that the “Letter of Aristeas” uses a legend about the production of the Septuagint that was already established by the 3rd Century BCE. The encyclopedia also notes that the Greek translation “contains sufficient historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies to render it impossible to consider the work a product of the reign of Ptolemy II” (595). However, the letter also provides some interesting insights on the reason behind this “groundbreaking endeavor.”
The Letter of Aristeas makes a plea for better relations between Jews and Greeks. The encyclopedia entry thus notes a clear sense of “dualism” in the letter, suggesting that on the one hand Jews were “different” from the native Greeks, and on the other, the diaspora was finding common cultural and even religious ground in its new land. Based on these observations, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* asks:

Does it not, it might be asked, make more sense to seek LXX origins within the Alexandrian Jewish community itself, which saw the need for an authoritative Greek version of Sacred Writ, as fluency in, or even familiarity with, Hebrew became rarer and rarer? (595)

Instead of a clear either-or distinction between the precise reasons for the Greek translation, the encyclopedia assumes that there were both “internal and external causes” and that these were contingent on the “history of the times.” Therefore the Torah was translated both to preserve the religious identity of a community in danger of losing its “roots” and with the awareness that its rendition in Greek would make it available to the dominant Greek community in Alexandria. Such a historical understanding also then sheds light on the nature of the translation as sometimes the translator or translators adopted a “reasonable and somewhat flexible literalism, on occasion bending the Greek rather far in the direction of the Hebrew original, [and] at other times show[ing] a deep concern for a Greek-speaking audience” (595). The importance of this understanding brings us to the specific context of the diaspora, the verse of its occurrence in “Deuteronomy.” I provide below, first, a transliteration of the original Hebrew verse with its English translation:

Yitenkha YHWH niggaf lifnei 'oyeveikha
YAHWEH will cause you to be defeated before your enemies
be-derekh 'ekhad tetze' 'elav
you will go out one way against them
tanús lefanav
and in seven ways you will flee before them
le-zá'ava le-khol mamlekhot ha-`aretz
and you will become a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth

Interestingly, this verse was heavily modified in the Septuagint. I now provide below the Greek translation of the original in the Septuagint and its translation into English:

δῶῃ σε Κύριος ἔπισκοπήν ἐναντίον τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου· ἐν ὀδῷ μιᾷ ἔξελεύσῃ πρὸς αὐτούς, καὶ ἐν ἑπτὰ ὀδοῖς φεύξῃ ἀπὸ προσώπου αὐτῶν καὶ ἔσῃ ἐν διασπορᾷ ἐν πάσαις βασιλείαις τῆς γῆς

The Lord give thee up for slaughter before thine enemies: thou shalt go out against them one way, and flee from their face seven ways; and thou shalt be a dispersion in all the kingdoms of the earth ("The Greek Old Testament [Septuagint]")

The translators of the Torah therefore made a very interesting change to the original text of the “Book of Law” here, clearly changing the meaning of the original verse. In my research on the use of diaspora in its modern critical deployment as a condition of hybridity, I came across only one source that refers to this modification—Caryn Aviv and David Shneer in New Jews points out the change from “terror” to “dispersion” and states:

Zá'ava, the word in question, means anything from atrocity and outrage to horror and terror, but it does not mean dispersion. That which came to symbolize the Jews’ scattering among nations had a much more ominous and threatening tone in the original. (3)

So the word diaspora marks the “erasure” of a specific translation that needs to be historically situated. The translation of the Hebrew “terror” into the Greek “dispersion” has been read as an attempt to neutralize the negative connotations of the original verse as the Old Testament was being opened up to a larger audience. The word
diaspora then marks a moment of anxiety at the historic moment when the Jewish community in diaspora proceeded to translate the Torah so that the community adapting to its exile could still keep the “word.” I argue that while the discursive deployment of the concept in postcolonial criticism does not have to be limited by its Jewish context, critics need to be aware of their differential deployment of the concept through a meticulous engagement with this genealogy by properly historicizing the term. I provide below a better understanding of this change and its historic context to explore the specific discursive force that the word “diaspora” carried over first in its deployment in the 1950s as a “name” for the immigrant as hybrid, and then in its appropriation in postcolonial critical engagements with “dispersion” and “hybridity,” leading up to its current association with the condition as well as the critique of globalization.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “Deuteronomy” is “the only part of the Pentateuch called ‘the book of the law’ (*Sefer ha-Torah*)” (615). The word “Deuteronomy” comes from the Greek translation of “*misneh ha-Torah*” (Deut. 17:8) and means “the second law” or a “copy of the law.” This status of the Deuteronomy as the “first book [of the Pentateuch] to have been sanctified publicly” coupled with the assumption of “Mosaic authorship … [as] an article of faith for classical Judaism and Christianity” brings up the specific caution in the “Letter of Aristeas” against tampering with the text pronouncing an “anathema/curse … on anyone who would change even a word of it” (595). This pronouncement is then interesting in the context of some of the textual changes wrought by the translators, and particularly regarding the introduction of the word diaspora. Keeping in mind that such pronouncements in the Biblical context are different from the actual conditions of the production of the Bible, I address this point
to argue that the translators of the Septuagint made their decisions fully aware of the authority of a religious-legal text, and particularly the authority of the Deuteronomy, the only text clearly ascribed to Moses within the Bible. The change wrought in meaning thus becomes even more “groundbreaking” and perhaps sheds light on the significance of the “internal and external” pressures on the translator/s. The Jewish diaspora thus came into being in a deliberate act of mis-translation when a period of significant anxiety over the identity of the community produced an “event.” Jewish scholarship clearly indicates that the Greek word “diaspora” in the context of the verse did not just refer to the act of dispersion of the community. Aviv and Shneer note:

[The first theoretician of diaspora, the prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. and the subsequent Babylonian Exile, suggested one particular survival strategy. Jews needed to craft a concept of diaspora that would allow them to be at home wherever they were, while still maintaining a memory of place that connected them to Zion. (4)]

The act of dispersion was then read as a state of dispersion—from “to be dispersed” to “to be in dispersion/diaspora”—that came to define Jewish existence specifically after the destruction of the First Temple up to the end of the Second World War and the creation of Israel and for some Jewish people even beyond the creation of the Jewish nation-state. Aviv and Shneer also note that following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, “[m]any Jews who actually lived in the land we now know as Israel during the two-thousand-year ‘exile’ still conceived of Zion as a mythic place from which they were exiled” (4).

This reading of the meaning of diaspora problematizes the inclination of some scholars (both Jewish and non-Jewish) to distinguish between the term and exile. The original context of diaspora in “Deuteronomy” represents a very important crisis for the
entire community, including even those who remained in Erez Israel because the mass exile of important members of the community led to a period of great devastation. And the fact that the Septuagint was produced in the 3rd Century BCE, at the very least a couple of centuries after the beginning of Jewish exile, clarifies that the translators used the term diaspora in full knowledge of the “terrors” of exile even if they did seek to erase the negative connotations of the diasporic condition. The term thus always already marks the trace of that erasure in an attempt, on the one hand, to survive a crisis both of faith and identity by re-naming a sense of exile or expulsion (for not having kept the “laws” of God) as a “scattering” of the community, and on the other, an awareness that the diasporic condition led to (at least, a perceived) dilution of that faith and identity. The term in its attempt to erase the negative connotations of the “terror” of exile can be read as marking the trace of difference—the “otherness” of a scattered community in contrast to the dominant groups whose “home” it shared. And progressively, it also marked, as perceived by Christians, the “difference” of a morally diminished community whose “scattering” was the result of both failing God and killing God. As I will show later on in this chapter, this trace of difference marking the otherness of the community’s identity in a specific historical context shifted from a religious to a racial politics always threatening and enabling the survival of the Jewish diaspora as the socio-cultural and political “other.”

The Encyclopaedia Judaica makes an interesting distinction between “diaspora” and “galut” though it also notes that the latter is the Hebrew word for the former. The encyclopedia uses the term “diaspora” to refer to “voluntary dispersion” as opposed to the “forced dispersion” of “galut.” This word galut’s late Biblical Hebrew root “galah”
means “uncover” or “remove.” The word “golah” (also from the root “galah”) meaning exile is found mostly in the later books of the Hebrew Bible—the Prophets, Chronicles and II Kings. Aviv and Shneer argue:

*galut* is an inherently negative term, suggesting spiritual diminishment and exile, rather than just dispersion from a homeland. In Modern Hebrew, the adjective *galuti*, which should simply be translated as ‘diasporic,’ in fact is generally translated pejoratively as ‘ghetto-like, of ghetto nature, exilic, diasporic,’… (3)

The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* argues that diasporic communities do not constitute *galut* “as long as the homeland remains in that nation’s possession” (352). Aviv and Shneer also note that the historian Howard Wettstein makes a similar distinction between the terms “diaspora” and “exile” as well. However, in elaborating on the historical consciousness of *galut*, the encyclopedia suggests that “the loss of a political-ethnic center and the feeling of uprootedness” turn the dispersed community into exile. So there seems to be some confusion between the historicity and the historical consciousness of exile since the distinction between forced and voluntary dispersion is being premised on both an actual and perceived condition of “uprootedness.” A look at Jewish history suggests that such a clear distinction is unhelpful whereas the complexity of a community’s dispersion both forced and voluntary is better encapsulated in the mis-translation of diaspora in the Septuagint. The condition of *galut* “uncovers” this act of translation that seemingly attempts to re-code the “horror” of uprooting by re-situating the communities as merely “dispersed” or globalized.

However, Jewish history shows that even during the period of Babylonian exile, the sense of galut was not limited to the Jews re-located to other parts of the Babylonian kingdom. Many Jews living in both the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah considered themselves in exile and the loss of their
political-ethnic center was linked more to the destruction of the Temple and the methodical destruction of the community than to the collapse of a larger concept of a nation-state that is in its present form a product of Zionist nationalism particularly reinforced after the establishment of Israel. What such a definition of exile also fails to take into account is that progressively many of the communities of the Jewish diaspora came to see themselves as parts of other nations though retaining an ethnic identity. Even after the establishment of Israel, this issue has become a matter of contention between the Zionist movement and the various diasporic communities, particularly the American Jewish diaspora that initially sustained Israel with their financial contributions.

Daniel Smith-Christopher, in *A Biblical Theology of Exile* published in 2002, draws on Laurence Silberstein’s work to address the nationalist politics of Zionism that posits the diasporic “Jew, a product of exile … as inauthentic, obsolete, and unproductive” while the “‘New Hebrew’ on the other hand, a product and producer of the renewed national life in the homeland, is represented as authentic, modern, and productive” (9-10). At the same time, Aviv and Shneer address the work of Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin who “by theorizing an anti-Zionist politics without negating the importance of Jews’ connection to a place called Zion … ‘… propose Diaspora as a theoretical and historical model to replace national self-determination.’… a future of permanent and celebrated diaspora, not just for Jews but for all people” (17-18). Aviv and Shneer themselves propose a “dismantling of diaspora” arguing that the term, on the one hand, has become a “catch-all phrase to describe complex spatial and identity formation in a fragmented world,” and on the other, still “presumes that there is a single center of a given community” (21). In the Jewish context, they are opposed to the
generalization of all Jewish communities spread across different nations outside Israel under the rubric diaspora, preferring instead to engage with how these communities “are remaking their sense of home and establishing new kinds of roots, not just to particular pieces of land bit also to concepts, ideas, stories, and spaces.”

Interestingly, Aviv and Shneer refer to Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s critique of diaspora in her article “Spaces of Dispersal,” and bring up the need to “theorize how space is being reterritorialized in the contemporary world.” The authors are particularly interested in Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s proposal to uncouple “displacement, dispersion and diaspora” because as “[n]ew spaces of dispersal are produced—traversed and compressed by technologies of connection and telepresence” there are communities that disperse themselves without necessarily experiencing “displacement” (20-21). Therefore, Aviv and Shneer in the Jewish context reiterate Radhakrishnan’s emphasis on re-territorialization, but while the latter emphasizes the importance of “ethnic identity,” the former articulate a preference for “global” new Jews to “break down the inherent dichotomy … of the Israel/diaspora metaphor” (20). While I understand their concern about the tendency to universalize diasporic identity, I argue that Aviv and Shneer end up replacing what they see as a “catch-all phrase” for “the celebration of displacement, rootlessness, exile, and hybridity” with a general celebration of global belonging. In their words:

we explore ways Jews are making home in a global, not diasporic, world. We examine how Jews use travel, money, memory, organizations, and power to constitute new identities and to create new relationships to real and mythic homelands, and we show that often the real and the mythic are the same place. We also show how the ability to be rooted, to live in a postdiasporic moment, is a sign of affluence, power, and privilege as Jews have “made it” in many of the societies in which they live. … we examine the national, symbolic, and intimate processes of homemaking by showing
Jews exerting power over space and place, and over one another, across different geopolitical boundaries, and through various media and cultural practices. To call a place home is a statement of power (Zionists know this best). By arguing that a place is home, Jews express a sense of entitlement, control, and familiarity. Home is a place where people practice identity and intimacy. We examine both the ways that Jewish discourses reinscribe diaspora into the language of global Jews and at the same time how global Jews encounter these discourses, sometimes actively resisting, others [sic] times passively ignoring the idea of diaspora. (22-23)

So this conception of the global new Jews is premised on the power of home-making that derives from “affluence” and “privilege.” This politics of celebrating global belonging, however, does not seem to make space or place for the “other” who cannot belong, whose mobility is circumscribed—im-mobilized, i.e., as mobility that is both suspended and controlled—by boundaries outside his or her control, or who is rendered invisible/absent by the identity politics of a globalized world. In contrast, I argue for a problematization of the concept of diaspora by interrupting its deployment in uncritical celebration of global hybridity through not only an exploration of the specific (national) manifestations of its forms, i.e., Radhakrishnan’s “ethnic identity”—there seems to be a clear threat of slippage from “ethnic identity” to “global belonging”—but also “writing” the trace of the difference of the “other” and the absence of the subaltern. In exploring the etymology of the term, I have already established that diaspora always already marks the trace of this difference, the anxiety of an erasure under the pressures of identity-constitution.

Daniel Smith-Christopher also points out an interesting example of subaltern absence that coincides with the work of the Subaltern Studies group in India that I looked at in Chapter 4. Smith-Christopher argues that while the state of exile was not seen as a “nonviable existence,” it was problematic like the status of modern refugees. As a result, “biblical theology has too often looked for occasions where either the
Hebrews struggled to restore their own state or … presumed that they fully accepted their existence within Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic imperial states” (22). Smith-Christopher prefers the option of a diasporic community to the two alternatives of “statist resistance” or the “willful collaboration” of diasporic priests like Ezra and Nehemiah as “official minions” of the Persian empire. He draws upon James Scott’s work in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* to argue for forms of resistance other than armed conflict where “alternative forms of Hebrew existence were being constructed out of the demise of Jerusalem and the Hebrew state.” Smith-Christopher notes that after “working with Asian peasants,” Scott proposed a theory of “‘hidden transcript’ as opposed to the ‘public transcript’” that marked the “difference between the outward declarations and language of subordinate peoples and the private discussions” (22-23). I now follow, in the next section of this chapter, this constitutive trace of diasporic difference in its original Jewish context in the historic production of otherness in the figure of the Marrano.

**Naming the Marrano as Diasporic Difference**

In *Aporias*, Jacques Derrida names the “possibility of the pure and simple impossibility” of “death” that defines *Dasein* in Heidegger (23) as the “Marrano.” Derrida clarifies that in Heidegger the “maturation or ripeness” of *Dasein* which is an “end” or a “limit” that it can always “surpass” is not its “death” because “*Dasein* is the very transgression of this borderline” (26). “Death” therefore can always precede or follow the limits that define *Dasein* which allows Heidegger “to situate his existential analysis of death before any ‘metaphysics of death’ and before all biology” (27). This crucial distinction, according to Derrida, thus allows Heidegger to posit (“put into operation”) a “logic of presupposition” of “death” (an-other *a priori* border or limit) as an “incontestable
(metaphysical) truth” that then is the basis for the analysis of all other borders (forms of knowledge) that “determine”—bring to termination, and hence, make “possible”—Dasein. Derrida clarifies:

If one wants to translate this situation in terms of disciplinary or regional borders, of domains of knowledge, then one will say that the delimitation of the fields of anthropological, historical, biological, demographic, and even theological knowledge, presupposes a nonregional ontophenomenology that not only does not let itself be enclosed within the borders of these domains, but furthermore does not let itself be enclosed within cultural, linguistic, national, or religious borders either, and not even within sexual borders, which crisscrosses all the others. (27)

So “the end of man” is to be properly distinguished from the “death of Dasein,” its “properly dying”—a death that is proper to man as the “animal rationale.” But even before he takes up the “death proper” of Dasein in Heidegger, Derrida shows that “one” cannot experience “his/its” own death though one can speak of it. And in Heidegger, the ability to speak of “death” is to experience “death as such” which distinguishes “man … as the only example of Dasein” from the animal (35). Death assumes a certain passage—a “step” across or a crossing, from the French sentence “Il y va d’un certain pas … [It involves a certain step/not; he goes along at a certain pace.]” (6)—of a border, a limit that marks the termination of the “living” that cannot be experienced beyond its own limit, which is why it “determines” (“terms” the limits of) all other knowledge. Therefore, “death” assumes a passage that is a “nonpassage”—an “impossibility” of an “event” that must be assumed, expected, in order to de-termine (for “de-finition”) the “living” or the experience of “mortality” as distinguished from the non-living.

This “presupposition” of a border is essential in language but the “presupposition” is premised on the “aporia” of a border, the impossibility of determining the border that determines both sides of the border. However, this border (this limit) that is essential to
the “logos” of “knowledge” can”not”—in French “pas” means step, gait/pace as well as “not”—be resolved or posited by dialectically op-positing (i.e., opposing to predetermined positions) and resolving the two sides of its non-existent limit. In Derrida’s words:

the aporia is said to be impossibility, impracticability, or nonpassage: here dying would be the aporia, the impossibility of being dead, the impossibility of living or rather “existing” one’s death, as well as the impossibility of existing once one is dead…. (73)

Therefore, to sum up, Derrida shows that Heidegger can perform the “existential analysis” of *Dasein* to determine its “difference” (from the animal or the non-mortal) by presupposing the terms—and therefore the “limits”—of an existential analysis (of “death”) that is prior to all other forms of logos (enquiry). And he shows that even though Heidegger “does not … [begin by] allow[ing] himself any philosophical knowledge concerning what man is as *animal rationale*” (29), this presupposition derives from the pre-posed existence of *Dasein*, i.e., its “proper being-able” that only “man” can “testify [to] by attesting to …” his “death as such” (36). Derrida thus proposes—or pro-positions (i.e., puts us on the path [pas] to)—“aporia” as the “interruption” of the assumption of the dialectical resolution of this border that is presupposed to exist to determine knowledge.

The consequences of this aporia, and the significance of “interruption” that I have pursued in this work, are marked at every resolution, every positing of a border to determine “living” where such a “line” with very real consequences for the “living” is presupposed only on the *a priori* knowledge of the border. The consequence of this aporia in the postcolonial context is the naming of “difference”—the “shibboleth effect” (10)—where difference is presumed beforehand (*a priori*). And in my work, I have
interrupted this “difference” by “tracing” subaltern absence—the absence of “that” which presupposes the border that determines difference, the “limit of the limit”. And Derrida states “[t]o that which lives without having a name, we will give an added name: Marrano, for example” (77). This act of naming by interrupting the naming of the border of “difference”—the difference not only between what is named, but also between what is named and the unnameable (that which is refused a name because “it” determines the named)—is therefore “witness” to the “the ambiguity by which … we characterize[] the clause of belonging without belonging that is the condition of any testimony, and of its language first of all” (79).

So, according to Derrida, if “Death, as the possibility of the impossible as such, is a figure of the aporia in which ‘death’ and death can replace—and this is a metonymy that carries the name beyond the name and beyond the name of name—all that is only possible as impossible, if there is such a thing” (78-79)—i.e., if I understand “properly dying” as the limit of the “proper being-able” of Dasein that is the aporia of knowledge (of difference)—then “death” as the (pre-)condition of “properly dying” gestures towards (or steps, passes beyond to) the name of nonbelonging, i.e., the Marrano. What needs to be clearly understood here is that Derrida is “not” naming—that interruption is not a step towards naming—duality, i.e., the positing of an-other difference that can then be dialectically sublated to produce the “subject” of knowledge. The naming of Death is to move beyond the name to anticipate the future “event” of the im-possible, and this naming—and not the future im-possible—is figured as the “Marrano.” And the “Marrano” is named precisely to bear this “secret” that instead of defining a subject of knowledge, it is the name of the aporia of knowledge which is the very condition of knowing (of
difference), the “[c]ondition of the self, such a difference from and with itself … the 
pragm of its pragmatics” (10). Thus at the “end” of Aporias—and the irony of locating the 
limit of his book does not escape me—Derrida states:

Let us figuratively call Marrano anyone who remains faithful to a secret that he has not chosen, in the very place where he lives, in the home of the inhabitant or of the occupant, in the home of the first or of the second arrivant, in the very place where he stays without saying no but without identifying himself as belonging to. In the unchallenged night where the radical absence of any historical witness keeps him or her, in the dominant culture that by definition has calendars, this secret keeps the Marrano even before the Marrano keeps it. Is it not possible to think that such a secret eludes history, age, and aging? (81)

Derrida does not propose an ahistorical understanding of belonging as the deconstructive project. In Aporias, he shows how the limits of knowledge-production are historically presupposed by Heidegger and how this aporia is present in the production of “logos” in Western epistemology. The naming of this aporia is not a rejection of the history of knowledge because Derrida names this aporia from within this history. The project of interruption also acknowledges the a priori conditions of knowledge production and steps towards (in a gesture of stepping beyond by passing through these limits) the im-possibility of a nonbelonging that is not defined either by a simple denial of difference or a dialectical resolution (sublation) of difference by “turning away” from the absence of the subaltern. I now look at the historical context of the Marrano, not to replace this historical figure by appropriating its name but to show that its history bears testimony to the failure of the dialectical resolution of difference as it is always already marked by an un-sublatable nonbelonging.

**Tracing the Marrano in Jewish History**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word Marrano as “In medieval and early modern Spain: a Christianized Jew or Moor, esp. one who professed conversion in
order to avoid persecution.” Yirmiyahu Yovel, in *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* published in 2009, notes that “Spanish Marranism burst into existence in two waves of mass conversions (1391-1414 and 1492)” (xi). Marc Shell, in his article “Marranos (Pigs), or from Coexistence to Toleration” published in 1991, notes how the forced conversion of Jews in Spain starting from the end of the 14th Century, with the final edict of expulsion of all Jews in 1492, marked the culmination of a significant shift in Spanish society from a culture of “convivencia, or coexistence” during Muslim rule to a complete rejection of the “other” after the Christian Reconquest. Shell elaborates that “convivencia” or “Spanish Islam’s limited tolerance towards religious heterogeneity and towards national differences” was premised on a “twofold distinction” in Islamic doctrine between Muslims and non-Muslims and then between non-Muslim “Peoples of the Book” and “pagans” (306-307). He also clarifies that there is some confusion in Islamic doctrine about who can be considered pagan—and can thereby be “put to the sword for refusing to convert to Islam” (306) unlike the “Peoples of the book”—since “Sabianism” was included with Christianity and Judaism as “religions of the book” and “at different times such varied groups as Zoroastrians in Persia and Hindus in India were said to be Sabians” (308).

However, Spanish Christendom’s intolerance of the “other” was not directed merely at Jews—all Muslims were similarly expelled in 1502—but also manifested in the wholesale persecution of Marranos by the Spanish Inquisition for being unfaithful to their adopted religion. Shell’s speculation in 1991 about “the gradual historical evolution of the exclusivist definition of the modern Spanish nation” (309) is answered by Yovel in his book. Yovel shows that while the religious (and racial) intolerance of Spain
culminated in the expulsion of Jews and Muslims and the constitution of the Inquisition under Ferdinand and Isabella’s rule, this intolerance of the “other” can be traced back through Spanish history to even before Muslim Spain. In fact, the first paper document mentioning Jews in Spain was an anti-Jewish decree passed by a council of bishops in AD 308. And though Jews enjoyed a period of stability in the 5th Century AD after Spain fell to Visigoths who were Arian Christians, their persecution resumed towards the end of the 6th Century with King Reccared, and official royal documents referred to them as “plague and leprosy” (6)—a stunning accusation to be echoed in the 14th Century as Jews were scapegoated for the bubonic plague or “black death” in Europe. Yovel also points out that “Jewish Conversos (forced converts) made their first collective entry onto the Spanish stage” (7) in AD 613 though King Sisebut did not have the resources of a centralized government, as did Ferdinand and Isabella in the 15th Century, to enforce his order for all Jews to convert or leave his kingdom. And while Shell points to the convivencia that benefitted Jews as well as Christians in Muslim Spain, because the former had embraced Muslim conquest in the 8th Century which brought relief from persecution, they were always regarded as having sided with the enemy of Spanish Christendom.

In fact, as Yovel shows, the success that Jews did enjoy in Spain during periods of stability actually stemmed from their being marked the always already “other” on whom Spanish monarchs could rely for administrative and other official duties without fear of a usurpation of power. In his words:

It was the Jew’s status as both indigenous and Other—as the native Other—that helped them attain such high rank in Christian Spain. Their position was due to their stigmatized image no less than to material considerations. The Jews were more dependable than Spanish peers in
doing the Crown’s work because, as members of an irremediably stained group, they did not have sufficient political legitimacy to contend for real power. Paradoxically, therefore, it was their basic illegitimacy that allowed the Jews to attain high office and thus survive and flourish in Spain….

In a word, the Jews’ alienness played in their favor, much as it also played against them; and this tension defined the Jews’ situation in Christian Spain. They were tolerated and resented, granted opportunities and envied for using them, and always seen as utter strangers. Their support came mainly from the crown and from a thin Christian elite, yet even their patrons felt the Jews to be disquieting aliens and Christianity’s *irreconcilable* Other. (33 [emphasis mine])

This marking of otherness was also political, as the Jews were made the “king’s slaves” towards the end of the 7th Century by King Egica, which gave them a special status (and protection) in Spain reserving their loyalty for (and putting their fate solely in the hands of) the monarch (9). This ruling as “the first major occasion proclaiming the principle of *servitus iudaorum*” distinguished the Jews as “enjoy[ing] a dual autonomy—as an urban corporation vis-à-vis the nobility, and as a semi-independent community within the city, directly subject to the king … [which] was a permanent cause of grievance and conflict between the cities and their Jewish citizens” (31). And it was the mass introduction of Marranos as a significant component of Spanish society through forced conversions in the 15th Century that finally provided the Spanish monarchs with an alternative source of the loyal administrative service that had been the Jews’ prerogative so far, thereby enabling the latter’s complete expulsion.

However, in the process, “[t]he Jewish Other, who formerly had confronted Christian society from without, had now become an inner component of that society without losing his otherness either in the eyes of the host society or, often, in his own self-perception” (58). And both Shell and Yovel emphasize that the Marranos were doubly othered as they “were caught between a world of Christians who called them
derogatorily *Marranos*, or ‘pigs,’ and a world of Jews, who called them *anusim*, or ‘compelled’ and even ‘raped’” (Shell 320). So “Marrano” was not just the name given to the *conversos* in 15th Century Spain, but to the difference that passed beyond their conversion. Yovel clarifies in his book that the expulsion of all Jews from Spain did not end the persecution of the Marranos even though the former were exiled specifically as the source of temptation that fed the latter’s Judaizing ways. This history shows that the knowledge of Spanish identity and of Spanish nationalism could only be premised on the difference within of the “other within” and not just the difference of the recognizable “other,” i.e. the Jews. The “turning away” of the Jews through exile—and I choose the term exile fully acknowledging a recognition of belonging that was denied—did not resolve the “turning away from” the unsublatable difference, what Yovel terms an “ineradicable otherness” (58), of the Marrano.

Thus the excesses of the Spanish Inquisition stemmed from an anxiety of a difference within Christianity that could not be recognized in spite of the repeated attempts to name it through torture. In fact, though they were eventually exiled, surprisingly few Spanish Jews were persecuted by the Inquisition because they could not be accused of unfaithfulness to a faith that they were not a part of. The continuing persecution of Marranos in Spain by the Inquisition even after the expulsion of the Jews led to their exodus to other parts of Europe such as Portugal, France and Amsterdam. Marc Shell argues that the “Iberian Marranos,” caught not just between two religions or two nationalities but also between belonging and non-belonging, produced a “unique philosophical stance … which was skeptical and liberal … [and] helped to mark and make for a new sort of toleration” (321-322). This “new sort of toleration” that according
to Shell significantly influenced the “ideology of national toleration” developing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the work of influential Marrano philosophers like Spinoza traced its roots through the “skeptical and liberal” philosophical stance of the Marranos to “tolerant coexistence” of the “particularism of Judaism” in contrast to the universalism of Christianity. Shell argues that while this “particularism” of the Old Testament has been scapegoated as the source of racism and anti-Semitism in Christianity, it actually encourages coexistence with “others” who are not recognized as “kin.” Instead, Shell argues that “racial intoleration among Christian universalists” stems from

the doctrinal absence, essential to the universalist dogma of Christianity, of the Old Testament category of “human beings who are other than siblings.” Christianity, indeed, gains its fundamental New Testament intermediation between humankind and God (in the person of the man-God Jesus) only as a trade-off for the Old Testament intermediation between sibling human being and nonhuman others. (329)

And the Jewish roots of the Marranos, that which came to define their “ineradicable otherness,” according to Yovel produced a “new way of being other … expressed either as dissent from Christianity or as dissent within Christianity” (79). Earlier, Shell had defined this “new way of being other” as a search for a secular identity, a way of belonging beyond religion and race, i.e., a way of belonging as “other” or “non-kin,” clarifying that “the larger sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourse on toleration did guide the separation of church and state that nowadays we suppose to inform modern democracies’ attempts to thwart religious inquisitions and witch-hunts and to respect what we call ‘the rights of others’” (335).

While Shell makes an interesting point about the “particularism of Judaism” encouraging coexistence like the convivencia of Islamic Spain, I point out that the Old
Testament also records destruction of various tribes under Moses’ direction as the Jewish people carved out Israel for themselves. So the particularism of the Old Testament does not automatically result in coexistence, but *convivencia*, as shown by the history of Jews in Spain, is often born of strategic necessity. The other important point that Shell addresses, but is dealt with in greater detail by Yovel, is that the shift in the identification of “otherness” from religion to “blood purity” in Spain was itself a secularization of “the opponent’s radical otherness, or negative-demonic essence” (Yovel 74). This secularization of “otherness” was necessitated by the inadvertent internalization of religious otherness through conversion when the Jew as recognizable “other” became the “Other Within” as the Marrano. The “discourse of toleration” thus shares a history with Spain’s “secularization” (as a means of consolidation) of Spanish identity that continued the religious persecution of the Marranos in the name of “blood purity.” And this secularization did not mark a separation of church and state, but a shift in power, as the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella consolidated their authority in Christian Spain by using the Inquisition to exert their control over both the semi-autonomous city councils and the Marranos who had taken over the traditional administrative roles of the Jews. The Inquisition, headed by Tomás de Torquemada, who was the confessor of Isabella, was in effect a very tangible representation of the centralization of Spanish authority in the monarchy marking the completion of the Spanish Reconquest.

Interestingly then, the Inquisition also represented the shift of Spanish identity from a religious to a national (racial) one—hence the need to re-define otherness through “purity of blood”—and this new racial identity was informed by the “difference”
of the Marrano that was therefore both religious and racial. Thus the Sentencia
Estatuto, “the first document of blood purity in Spain (and in Europe)” signed on June 5, 1449 by “the city elders of Old Christian extraction [in Toledo] gathered under Pero Sarmiento” define “blood purity” through the religious infidelity of conversos. I reproduce below the original wording of the “Blood Statute” from Yovel:

We the above mentioned, Pero Sarmiento … and the citizens and people of Toledo, declare that since the Conversos of Jewish origin are suspect of disbelief in Our Lord Jesus… and often return to their rot and Judaize, they will not be permitted to hold any posts of benefices, public and private, from which they could cause harm to Christians of pure origin…. [And this is done in accordance with] a privilege that this city had been granted by King Don Alfonso of glorious memory. (75)

So if the secularization of “human rights” in modern nation-states is traced to the “discourse of toleration” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly influenced by the ambivalence of Marrano identity and the persecution of religious and racial intolerance that they had suffered in the name of an “ineradicable difference,” then it is worth noting as well that the secularization of the modern nation is also premised on the religious and racial difference of the Marrano that enabled the shift (and not separation) of the definition of national identity from the church (i.e. through religion) to the state (i.e., through blood or race). In fact, Elaine Marks uses the “Marrano as metaphor” to trace the “question of Jewish identity” marking this constitutive paradox in the secular identity of the modern European nation.

Marrano as Metaphor of Irreducible Otherness

In her book Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing published in 1996, Elaine Marks looks at the “Jewish question and presence” in French literature. Through insightful readings of various French texts, primarily focusing on twentieth century French writing (and critical responses to those texts) before and after
the Second World War, Marks argues that a French literary identity is marked by the “presence and absence” of French/European Jews as the racial “other.” She therefore deploys the name Marrano as “metaphor” to define this constitutive “difference” in the development of a European identity through national literatures. More specifically, Marks writes:

My metaphorical Marranos—and I’m aware of the risk involved in using specific terms metaphorically and outside their historical context—are Jews who have to some degree been taken in by or assimilated to the other religious cultures in which they live (these may be Christian or Muslim) and who continue in spite of this inevitable acculturation to profess a belonging to Jewishness. (xvii-xviii)

Therefore, she points out that even though France professes a secular nationalism, its “secular” institutions, including the education of its citizens, is heavily influenced by the dominant Christian culture, and the secularization of “others” in their attempt to integrate themselves as French citizens actually means a gradual acculturation into this dominant Christian identity. Marks clarifies that the dominance of Christianity in French “secular” culture does not mean an erasure of Jewish (other) identity, but the reproduction of the latter to define otherness “related to the construction of stereotypes, both negative and positive, by Jews and non-Jews, including those that construct Jews as Christ killers, restless wanderers, dangerous revolutionaries, materialistic, lascivious, superior thinkers, intellectual leaders, and so forth” (128). Being Jewish in France, especially during World War II when Jews were deported under the Vichy government and identified as “déportés raciaux” or “racial deportees” to distinguish them from the members of the French Resistance who were also deported (6), therefore required a negotiation of a dual identity of belonging and non-belonging—French Jews defined a secular identity as French born citizens that was at the same time premised on the
“ineradicable difference” of Jewish otherness as constituted in French national literature. Marks’ metaphor of the Marrano thus identifies a form of forced “conversion” to a national secular identity where toleration (of religious and racial otherness) is simultaneously premised on intolerance (through the demarcation of the religious difference and racial otherness of the Jew).

So, in 15th Century Spain, when the question of belonging passed from the question of faith to the question of blood, the Jewish question had to be resolved by subalternizing Jews through an act of state-sponsored expulsion. However, this act of expulsion of a “race” determined not to be a part of Spanish identity simultaneously acknowledged their belonging to the question of Spanish identity that needed this recognizable difference to name itself. The subalternization of Spanish Jews still left the residue of “blood impurity” in the figure of the *converso* who had assimilated to the Christian faith but could not assimilate into Spanish blood (i.e., race). I therefore distinguish between the names *converso* and Marrano, suggesting that the persecution of the *conversos* reveal the trace of the subaltern difference of the Marrano that Derrida names “living without a name.” Or, drawing upon Marks’ work, I distinguish between the Marrano and “Marrano difference” (the Marrano as metaphor) just as the subaltern-subject can be produced but only by re-producing difference within the dialectical terms of subject-constitution and by reinscribing subaltern difference in an-other absence of subalternity. The ambivalence of Marrano identity stems from bearing the “secret” of subaltern difference, the mark of “impurity” that the *conversos* could not forsake because their very identity—as borne by their naming as Marrano—was the premise for the difference that determined Spanishness. Thus Derrida in *Aporias* argues that this
difference “stem[s] from the opaque existence of an uncrossable border: a door that does not open or that only opens according to an unlocatable condition, according to the inaccessible secret of some shibboleth” (20). But the “impermeability” of this “uncrossable border” is the mark of the “fact that there is no limit.” The Marrano cannot overcome the “impurity” that he is named to bear because the impurity is itself the name of a difference presupposed before the act of naming. The “unlocatable” difference of the Marrano is the shibboleth—the password to a “secret” that cannot be revealed but must always already be borne. The identifiable difference of the Marrano and of the Marrano condition revealed as “duality” can and needs to be interrupted by tracing the secret of its production—the unidentifiable and ineradicable difference that must always already mark the Marrano who cannot convert to sameness.

Following Bhabha, I argue that the recognition of hybridity—the hybridity of the Marrano and the hybridity of Spanish national identity—cannot be celebrated as attempted in the globality of Aviv and Shneer’s diaspora or the hyphenation of Radhakrishnan’s “ethnic identity” without interrupting the recognition and reconstitution of that hybridity as bearing the secret of an irreducible difference that is the premise of the history of borders whose testimony is a history of persecution. The difference of the Marrano as converso (and not Marrano difference) is the externalization of the difference within (Marrano difference) by Spain, and so the name does not just simply bear another difference but an “other’s” difference—it is a marker of the anxiety of the “process of splitting … [through which] the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation” (Bhabha 297) that I elaborated in Chapter 2.
The Marrano is the re-naming of diaspora as an attempted erasure of difference through translation that always already bears the irreducible mark of that difference that is the residue of any act of translation, which is, returning to Derrida, any act of speaking. The naming of the Marrano was then an acknowledgment of Spain’s difference to itself in an attempt to translate for itself a national identity that the “other” had to conform to. Derrida clarifies in *Aporias*:

* Babelization does not therefore wait for the multiplicity of languages [or identities?]. The identity of a language can only affirm itself as identity to itself by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself. (10)

But this “hospitality” is also an acknowledgment by the “host” that “the one who invites and receives truly begins by receiving hospitality from the guest to whom he thinks he is giving hospitality.” The Marrano is then the naming of the “absolute *arrivant*” which is an acknowledgment of the prior posit-ing (arrival, belonging) of the *arrivant* even before the *arrivant* or the host can be named. Again, in Derrida’s words:

* He surprises the host—who is not yet a host or an inviting power—enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies. (34)

No wonder such a naming of difference as an act of hospitality elicits such anxiety that manifested in the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition. As Derrida clarifies:

* where the figure of the step is refused to intuition, where the identity or indivisibility of a line (*finis* or *peras*) is compromised, the identity to oneself and therefore the possible identification of an intangible edge—the crossing of the line—becomes a *problem*. There is a problem as soon as the edge-line is threatened. And it is threatened from its first tracing. (11)
The Impossible Haunting of the Marrano

In an unpublished paper entitled “A Marrano’s Smile,” John Leavey addresses Antonio Negri’s attempt in “Specter’s Smile,” and later in Empire with Michael Hardt, to move beyond deconstruction’s “incarceration” within the bounds of ontology—an attempt to move beyond Heidegger’s “presupposition” not by anticipating but by pre-posting (proposing) the future “event” of a “post-deconstructive ontology” (5). Leavey notes that Derrida wonders why the functioning of deconstruction from within Western epistemology signifies “imprisonment within ontology” for Negri and proposes a linguistic compromise. Derrida makes clear in Ghostly Demarcations that “if one is prepared to question, in all its forms, this reference, in the word ‘ontology,’ to the present-being, properly present and as such (real, concrete, actual, etc.), while arbitrarily, or for strategic reasons, deciding to make the word express something entirely different in the hope that this terminological decision will produce some sort of emancipatory effect, then so be it; I have nothing against the word itself” (15). However, Leavey notes that here Derrida, “so as to conclude with a smile,” offers Negri an “armistice based on compromise … [to] agree to regard the word ‘ontology’ as a password, a word arbitrarily established by convention, a shibboleth, which only pretends to mean what the word ‘ontology’ has always meant” (16-17). Thereby Derrida agrees to use a “coded language, like Marranos” to signify an understanding of Negri’s “pre-position” as a name for the im-possibility of the “event” which is always already an anticipation but not a realization. Leavey proceeds to “trace out the lineage of the Marrano in Derrida’s corpus” (25), which I have followed (earlier) to enable my reading of Aporias in this chapter.
I find it fitting that this acknowledgment (citation) of the “foundations” of my reading of the “Marrano” in Derrida follows Leavey’s reading as the prior trace. This is because Leavey’s significant question “Are two Marranos always able to recognize one another …” (17), crucial to my reading of the “Jewish question” in the postcolonial literary critical deployment of the term “diaspora,” cannot be named without a prior reading of that lineage of the Marrano in Aporias. A question of “genealogies” of traces cannot ignore/circumvent the “lineage” of each “strategic” tracing. Following Leavey following Derrida, “if one wants to translate this situation in terms of disciplinary or regional borders,” as the latter following himself in The Other Heading clarifies in Aporias, the “negative form (aporia)” is the “affirmation” of a “duty” that is “the necessity of experience itself, the experience of the aporia (and these two words that tell of the passage and nonpassage are thereby coupled in an aporetic fashion) as endurance or as passion, as interminable resistance or remainder” (19). My use of interruption, not least to interrupt Hardt and Negri’s pro-position of the multitude as a “radical” alternative to globalization in Chapter 3, is the putting to practice of Derrida’s deconstructive project that Negri “sees … as stepping back from ‘practice,’” as Derrida’s “incarceration” in “his ontological prison, his mourning for the old terms of ontology in order to work with (‘effect’) the new” (15). Derrida clarifies in Aporias citing himself from The Other Heading that “[a]s soon as it [the negative affirmation of aporia] is converted into positive certainty (‘on this condition, there will surely have been event, decision, responsibility, ethics, or politics’), one can be sure that one is beginning to be deceived, indeed beginning to deceive the other.” So to respond to (and not answer) Leavey’s
question—“Are two Marranos always able to recognize one another …”—I quote Derrida from *Aporias*:

> A plural logic of the aporia thus takes shape. It appears to be paradoxical enough so that the partitioning [*partage*] among multiple figures of aporia does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other. (20)

In Chapter 6, I read the “haunting” of the Jewish diaspora in the South Asian, as the Marrano’s “secret” comes to an “impossible face-to-face” with the subaltern absence of the Indian plantation worker in Malaysia.

In “A Marrano’s Smile,” Leavey also brings up Avita Ronell’s engagement with “*basanos* as torture” in *The Test Drive*. Leavey notes that “*Basanos* is the touchstone to test the truth of gold, but also the test or torture for the truth revolving around servility and the excluded, whether torturing interrogation gets to a reliable testimony” (4-5). I have shown earlier in this chapter how “blood purity” became the “test” and “torture” for the exclusion of the Marrano from Spanish national identity. But while the “test” was to purify Spain of racial impurity, it brought about the opposite effect. As Yovel explains:

> By burning thousands of New Christians on the stake or ruining their families’ standing and property for several generations, the Inquisition succeeded in shrinking the size of the problem in one hand and intensifying it in the other. The climate of fear and persecution in which the Conversos lived, their being always held in suspicion and liable to sudden arrest, and the restrictions against citizens of ‘impure blood’ that Spain later adopted, heightened many Coversos’ awareness of their separate and alien identity. And since quite often they were victims of false accusations, even assimilated Coversos were driven against their will back into the group from which they had sought to escape. (59)

In fact, the “test or torture” of the Marrano became the “touchstone” of the Marrano in another sense—as “a source of Jewish instruction (part of which was not really Jewish but distinctly Marrano: that is, dualist), and providing the converts a sort of catechism—a guidebook of what Judaizing was all about” (Yovel 168). I have earlier noted that the
“ineradicable difference” of the Marrano marks the “inaccessible secret of some shibboleth” that then became the “password” of the “Judaizing Marranos … [as] doubly alienated … called Jews by the Inquisition and shunned as non-Jews by the people to whom they claimed to belong” (Yovel 61). But what we have to be vigilant against is the shibboleth (of the Marrano as metaphor, and also of the diaspora) becoming another “basanos,” another “test or torture” to identify the radically progressive “new practice” of a “post-deconstructive ontology” that Hardt and Negri situate in the “multitude” in *Empire*. The name of the Marrano is the naming of the “secret” of the “aporia” and not the name of an-other (in Hardt and Negri, a radical) difference. The shibboleth always already bears the threat of “basanos”—as the Marrano difference as “test” of the secular modern nation also marks the secularization of the “torture” of the Marrano as the “Other Within.”

Interestingly, the etymological root of the word “shibboleth” reveals this persistent threat of slippage into “test or torture.” OED notes that “shibboleth” is “[t]he Hebrew word used by Jephthah as a test-word by which to distinguish the fleeing Ephraimites (who could not pronounce the sh) from his own men the Gileadites” in “Judges” (12:4-6). I provide the exact use of the word in Judges 12:6 below:

> then said they unto him: 'Say now Shibboleth'; and he said 'Sibboleth'; for he could not frame to pronounce it right; then they laid hold on him, and slew him at the fords of the Jordan; and there fell at that time of Ephraim forty and two thousand.

The word was then the “test” that led to the “slaughter” of the Ephraimites which explains OED’s definition of “shibboleth” as a “word or sound which a person is unable to pronounce correctly; *a word used as a test for detecting foreigners*, or persons from another district, by their pronunciation” (emphasis mine). Leavey recommends the
recognition of the “shibboleth effect” of the “Marrano” as the “encrypted word” that in
Derrida’s compromise with Negri carries the “secret” of the “aporia” of even a “new
ontology.” And according to Leavey, this “aporia” of Negri’s post-deconstructive “new
ontology” is that “[n]ew practice is not without its legacy … [n]othing is without legacy …” (33). To understand “what and how,” in the armistice offered by Derrida with a smile,
“ontology is to be a shibboleth for a new practice” he notes:

The shibboleth divides and cuts in the word that can and cannot be said. Sometimes the dividing line seems to be no greater than the comma of a speculative remark, that break within speech that substitutes the pause for the verb forms of “to be.” (17-18)

And Derrida clarifies in “Composing ‘Circumfession’” that this cutting in, the splitting of
the word or the name that must bear both the anticipation (i.e., test) of the future “event”
and the “legacy” (i.e., testimony) of the “torture” of a “genealogy” is itself the
“interruption” of the “other” as the difference within. In his words:

It’s the other who decides in me. It is always the other who makes the
decision, who cuts—a decision means cutting. That is the etymology; to
decide means to cut. It is to interrupt the continuity of time and the course of
history, to cut. For such a cut to occur, someone must interrupt in me my
own continuity. If I decide what I can decide, I don’t decide. For me to
decide, I must have in myself someone else who cuts, who interrupts the
possibility. If I do only what I can do, what is possible for me, I do nothing.
The decision is the other’s decision in me. (25 [emphasis mine])

This “interruption” of the “other,” which is also a tracing of the “genealogy” of the
“aporia” is the “shibboleth effect” in Leavey which is

not to be at home, not to be able to remain at home even at home. And so,
the ghosts multiply, perhaps in secret. There is no statement that is not also
a ventriloquism of the other. And no new practice that does not result from
this shibboleth effect, even if it makes possible a new language and a new
practice. (31)

The diaspora too cannot be a shibboleth for identifying the voluntary immigrant
from the forced exile and the globally dispersed from the exiled rootless as the
touchstone for progressive hybridity. It must always be a mis-translation marking the trace of a historical difference—of a re-naming, and the pressures of “otherness” that precipitate such a linguistic shift. Following Derrida, I argue that this compromise of a mis-translation would only be in name, a name—a re-naming. I do not argue against the re-naming itself, but point out that the name must bear the trace of the compromise, a compromise that must be “interrupted” to re-trace the difference of the subaltern. The “touchstone” of the globally progressive diaspora must bear the traces of those that failed the “test,” not only those calcified in essentialist identities of modern nation-states, but also those whose identities cannot be empowered through hybridity because even hybrid subjectivities are constituted in their absent presence. And this subaltern absence is interrupted at the textual lacuna or “apostrophe” where the narrative of subject-constitution turns away from its absent presence to re-produce the recognizable “other” as native informant to be dialectically sublated in the repetition of the sign of the subject. And this strategic act of “interruption” is not to re-name an-other difference, a “new difference,” to introduce another native informant in the anxious circulation of subject-constitution, but to “divide and cut” into the “test” of subjectivity (of citizenship as the guarantee of “human” rights) in recognition not of a retrievable subject-figure but a re-traceable “shibboleth effect.”

Does interruption then propose an indifference to actual identities of oppression, focusing on the Marrano difference instead of the diasporic subject? How do I reconcile the theoretical “beyond” of the anticipation of a future im-possibility with the ethical imperative of a “new practice?” As Spivak makes clear in “Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular,” the critically vigilant intellectual’s purpose is not to introduce
as gatekeepers subaltern-subjects, but to “build infrastructure so that the [subaltern] can, when necessary, when the public sphere calls for it, synecdochise themselves without identitarian exploitation” (482). And this building of infrastructure is a deconstructive process in which the intellectual must “systematically unlearn” and “productively undo” the “legacy of the Enlightenment,” an unlearning that can be done only by re-tracing the “aporia” of that legacy by recognizing the “shibboleth effect” of its hegemony. And in the process, I recognize the subject-constitution of “diasporic,” “marginal,” “hybrid,” “minority” and other postcolonial identities fragmenting and de-centering the hegemony of the dominant, but I also strategically trace the dis-placement of subaltern absence to an-other apostrophic “turn” in the text. Following Derrida, I am therefore advocating an “ambivalent” reading ethic balanced between indifference and non-indifference to stay vigilant, as Spivak has cautioned, against both speaking in the name of the “other” and ignoring the “responsible buttressing of the possibility of the political in view of the tremendous uncertainties of the ethical” (An Aesthetic Education 16). This is why in “Confessions and ‘Circumfession,” Derrida clarifies:

Indifference and non-indifference—I have no measure, no rule, no general criteria, to define this relationship. The only thing I know is that I could not survive, no one could survive, either a total indifference or a total non-indifference. As soon as I speak, for instance, even before I speak, I have to be indifferent, that is, to use general words for concepts in which some indifference is implied. I cannot speak to you, address you, without some indifference, some generality, some distance, some trace, which is a way of erasing the presence, the proximity, and the continuity. Some indifference is necessary even for the most authentic relationship to the other. I would prefer, in that case, to speak of interruption. The interruption is needed for any relationship with the other, as such. That is, my relation to the other, my rapport with the other, implies a break. Without a break, there would be no respect for the other, no relation to the other as such. This interruption is at the same time an interest in the other and a space, a distance, an
indifference. This mixture of indifference and non-indifference is the structure of our experience. (45)

In Chapter 6, I conduct an interruptive reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* and K. S. Maniam’s *The Return*, re-tracing the “shibboleth effect” of diasporic identity by asking Leavey’s important question at the “break” of my strategic interruption—“Are two Marranos always able to recognize one another….”

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1 “Confessions and ‘Circumfession’” is the transcript of a roundtable discussion with Jacques Derrida moderated by Richard Kearney, published in *Augustine and Postmodernism* edited by John Caputo and Michael Scanlon.
CHAPTER 6
AN IMPOSSIBLE FACE-TO-FACE: READING THE MARRANO IN THE FICTION OF AMITAV GHOSH AND K. S. MANIAM

Can we read the narrative constitution of the postcolonial subject in Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Glass Palace* and K. S. Maniam’s *The Return* to interrupt the “diasporic imagination” of each writer? Is it possible to recover the trace of “Marrano difference” within their diasporic subjects and the subaltern absence that enables the textual re-production of these diasporic subjects at the postcolonial center of their narratives? In Chapter 5, I discussed how in postcolonial criticism “diaspora” often becomes a “name” for what Bhabha has identified as the essential “ambivalence” of national identity. As a marker of hybridity, “diaspora” thus serves to problematize the rigid boundaries of the colonial-modern inter-national cartography. However, the unconditional celebration of the diasporic condition can slip into a valorization of global identity politics that also re-produce the dialectical movement of narrative subject-constitution. Such a globally-mobile hybrid subject can be co-opted as the individual realization of the global sovereign. To defer the dialectical sublation of the “difference within” of the national-global citizen-subject, I interrupt the “genealogy” of the term diaspora to trace the “history” of “Marrano difference” as that residue of “ineradicable difference” that the sovereign subject can never subsume and must always attempt to externalize and erase at the site of subaltern absence. Therefore, returning to Spivak’s exhortation, our “ethical imperative” is to interrupt the transformation of diaspora from the “shibboleth” or “password” for the condition of migrancy and hybridity into the “basanos,” i.e., “test or torture,” for a postcolonial “global” resistant subject.

Ghosh and Maniam represent the two points of the spectrum of diasporic theory that I identified in Chapter 5—Aviv and Shneer’s “globality” and Radhakrishnan’s “ethnic
hyphenation.” Born in the diasporic Indian community of Bedong in Kedah, north Malaysia, and brought up in a hospital compound where his father worked as the “‘dhobi’ or laundryman” (Wicks 2000 73-74), Maniam focuses primarily on the diasporic experience of his community in Malaysia in his fiction. He explores the hyphenated lives of his Malaysian Indian protagonists as they struggle to come to terms with a migrant history and acculturate in a nation where they are always “other” than “Bumiputeras” or “sons of the soil.”

On the other hand, as Brinda Bose notes in the “Introduction” of her book *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*, Ghosh’s “diasporic imagination” is known for a certain “internationalism.” A more prolific writer than Maniam, Ghosh has covered a range of subjects and experimented with different genres in his novels. However, it is possible to identify some common themes in his fiction: his main protagonists are usually of Indian origins; the protagonists are mapped on to a global narrative as they get caught up in transnational currents; these transnationally mobile protagonists problematize the limitations of colonial-national subject-constitution and the rigid boundaries of modern nation-states; finally, multiple narratives are woven together in the novels, and many of the protagonists are fictional recuperations of subaltern-subjects in colonial texts. So Ghosh also works with diasporic subjects, but instead of focusing on the hyphenated ethnicity of a specific location, his novels deconstruct the performative circulation of the national hegemonic at the conjuncture of history and fiction. Therefore, Ghosh tries to fictionally realize historical subjects as part of an-other “global” diaspora without participating in the hegemonic logic of “globalization.”
I do not focus on the “globality” of Ghosh’s diasporic imagination in *The Glass Palace*. Instead, I disrupt the “cosmopolitanism” of that “globality” by re-turning to the subaltern absences at the margins of his postcolonial narrative. And in the process I trace the “genealogy” of the subaltern—as opposed to the subaltern-subject recovered and re-configured as the globally-migrant hybrid postcolonial subject—in the novel and dis-place that trace on to Maniam’s work. This attempt to dis-place “globality” into “ethnic-hyphenation” is not to “re-territorialize” the diasporic as Radhakrishnan has suggested, but to reveal the “shibboleth-effect”—the tracing of the genealogy of the “aporia” that is constitutive of the dialectical production of even a postcolonially resistant subject.

**The Postcolonial Subject in *The Glass Palace***

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*, written in 2001, has a young Indian boy named Rajkumar as arguably the central protagonist though the narrative follows different coincident and divergent storylines in the footsteps of various characters involved in a series of “historical” events taking place in the four different countries of Burma, India, Malaysia and America. The various histories of all the different characters can be said to intertwine through the historical narrative of British imperialism even as many of the individual narratives develop without obvious bearings on the central storyline. Ghosh’s novel is definitely “postcolonial” in its narrative decentering as various characters and their stories jostle for narrative space on a global stage and identities become fluid/hybrid through travel, exile, immigration, marriages, etc.

Rajkumar himself is a stateless person—though born of Indian parents, his home at the beginning of the novel is a coastal boat or “sampan” that he trades for accommodation and work with Ma Cho, a half-Indian, half-Burmese owner of a “small
food-stall” in the royal city of Mandalay in Burma. Rajkumar is witness to the British colonization of Burma and the subsequent exile of the royal family. In fact, he falls in love at first sight with one of the royal maids and sets out to make his fortune in order to follow her to India where the Burmese royals and their coterie have been exiled. In his efforts to enter into the Burmese teak business, Rajkumar returns to India and for a while trades in people—he recruits Indian villagers as indentured laborers for plantation contractors from Burma and Malaysia. He eventually returns to Burma, sets up a flourishing timber business, goes to a remote Indian town to locate the Burmese royal family and his love, Dolly, and finally brings her back to Burma as his wife. He also sets up a rubber plantation in Malaysia with an old Malaysian friend named Saya John and fathers an illegitimate child there with one of the plantation workers. But Ghosh’s novel is also the story of Dolly, the Burmese royal handmaid Rajkumar falls in love with; Uma, the wife of the district collector posted in the town of Ratnagiri where the Burmese royal family is exiled; Uma’s nephew Arjun and his twin sister Manju; Dolly’s sons Neel and Dinu; and Saya John’s granddaughter, Alison.

The very difficulty of summarizing the complicated narrative of *The Glass Place*, of being able to clearly identify the main protagonist and the central narrative speaks for the postcolonial style of Ghosh’s fiction. The shifting perspectives between multiple narrators, the interactions between national and global identities as they impinge on each other, the engagement with colonial history from multiple postcolonial “native” points of view, the realization of hybrid/migrant as opposed to reductive/essentialist national identities, articulations of feminist historiography—all serve to promote a postcolonial reading of the text in resistance to colonial historiography with its simplified
stratification of the world into empires and colonies articulating colonial difference and in which the narrative imperative belongs to the colonial dominant (usually male) at the center/s of imperial power. My point, however, is that in spite of Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Saya John and the rest of the novel’s characters representing marginal-migrant figures, the logic of Ghosh’s narrative constitution re-figures them as the “subjects” of his text, circumscribing their postcolonial resistance with the discourse of rationality, the very rhetoric that was complicit in and developed through Western imperialism. The actions of the various characters are to be understood in concatenation with the historical events that provide the backdrop of the novel, and Ghosh repeatedly draws attention to their complicity in the “colonial” history of the various countries involved. This does not invalidate the postcoloniality of Ghosh’s novel, but draws attention to the dialectical bind of the hyphen tethering the post- to its colonial past.

In her article “The Indian Diaspora in Burma and the Politics of Globalization in Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace and Mira Kamdar’s Motiba’s Tattoos,” Jaspal Kaur Singh argues for the interpolation of “voices from the margins” into the works of “cosmopolitan writers” to fill in the gaps between the representation of “only the very rich or the very poor” (50). While Singh acknowledges her current “complicity with global modernity” as a teacher in an American university, she offers her “‘autoethnographic’… accounts of Indians in Burma … [to] deconstruct dominant historical narratives of nation-states and national belonging, gender and race …” (48). Drawing upon Mary Louise Pratt’s “autoethnographic representation” in “The Art of the Contact Zone” as “the text which the ‘subjugated others … construct in response to … metropolitan representation,’ or ‘representations that the so-defined others construct in response to
or in dialogue with those texts’’ (48), Singh elaborates upon her family’s “simple unassuming lives in colonial and postcolonial Burma” (52) through various hardships both during the British colonial era and afterwards under the brutal U Nu regime of General Ne Win to essentially posit a middle-class contrast to the fictional representations of the Burmese in Ghosh’s and Kamdar’s work.

Singh raises a very interesting point about the inadvertent repetition of colonial stereotypes even in the multi-vocal narrative of Ghosh’s novel. She points out that in *The Glass Palace*, Dolly as the “ethnic Burmese woman” “provide[s] the Burmese sentiments regarding Indians in Burma: ‘Indian moneylenders have taken over all the farmlands; Indians run most of the shops; people say that the rich Indians live like colonialists, lording it over the Burmese’” (52). Singh’s point is that as one of the main narratives of Ghosh’s novel focuses on the lives of Rajkumar and Dolly who belong to the category of “rich Indians,” the “unassuming lives” of “everyday Burmese Indians” like “the night soil removers, the menial laborers, the tailors, the petty-traders, the mechanics, the farm-hands” are completely left out, which seems to reiterate the very colonial stereotype that later became the rallying point of the “wunthanu” movement of the “ethnic Burmese towards ‘racial purity’” (52-53). Singh notes:

> Aung San Suu Kyi states that the movement “signifies the preservation of one’s lineage and as used during the 1920s it denotes patriotism in the form of preference for traditional values and the eschewal of things foreign” (143). However, it was [not] towards the colonizers, but towards the Indians that the Burmese took out their frustrations as can be seen by the 1930s riots and massacre of innocent Indians. (52-53)

Interestingly, in the novel, Dolly actually makes the above observation as fact and not as a re-statement of “ethnic Burmese” sentiments. This is all the more striking since her marriage to Rajkumar makes her a “traitor” to her own people and her children are
taunted as “Zerbadi—which is a swear word, for people who’re half-Indian, half-Burmese” (240). Essentially, Singh at the end of her article argues for the “hybridity” of “a collective identity” “[t]hrough literature and artistic expressions, through the merging of the private and the public narratives” (63). She finds the promise of such “intermingling and merging” in the representation of the stories of the Burmese woman Ma Thin Thin Aye whom Dolly’s son Dinu marries at the end of The Glass Palace. As Singh notes from the novel:

Her work was innovative and experimental; she was using the Burmese language in new ways, marrying classicism with folk usage … [with a] wealth of allusion … her use of dialect … [and] the intensity of her focus on her characters. (532)

While Singh doesn’t clearly elaborate on how such a merging of the “literature of the public … with the stories and narratives of the home or private space” may produce “a new way of being, a new way of capturing national essence and culture” (64), Ghosh explores this possibility through Dinu’s conversations with Ma Thin Thin Aye about her work. When Dinu points out that in spite of her depictions of diversity in her stories, all the characters speak in Burmese, the latter responds:

“Where I live … every house on the street speaks a different language. I have no choice but to trust my reader to imagine the sound of each house. Or else I would not be able to write at all about my street—and to trust your reader is not a bad thing.” (533)

So here Ma Thin Thin Aye’s “innovative and experimental” work in Ghosh’s novel, and by extension Singh’s argument, promotes an idea of “national diversity” as a form of progressive hybridity, and Singh proposes to actualize this diversity by interpolating “everyday minority stories.”

I agree that, in the context of Ghosh’s novel, this diversity does not merely seek to broaden the rigidity of Burmese nationalism by incorporating a very cosmopolitan
idea of inclusivity. After all, Dinu represents a more complex “genealogy” of Burmese identity in the conversation, and Ghosh, in an interesting statement by Ma Thin Thin Aye, captures the difficulties of the “intermingling” of dominant ethnic groups and diasporic minorities in the modern nation. Ma Thin Thin Aye explains to Dinu that while her work aims to disrupt the “difference between classical [in which “everything happens outside—on streets, in public squares and battlefields, in palaces and gardens—in places that everyone can imagine”] and modern writing” through the “moment when … [she has] to step off the street and go into a house”

“… nothing is more difficult for me than this—going into a house, intruding, violating. Even though it’s only in my head, I feel afraid—I feel a kind of terror—and that’s when I know I must keep going, step in, past the threshold, into the house.” (534 [emphasis mine])

And Singh shows in her “autoethnographic” narrative of her family’s survival in Burma that “unassuming” Indians found a way to “step in” and define a Burmese Indian identity for themselves through a “merging” that seems to have produced the sort of “ethnic hyphenation” that Radhakrishnan focuses on in his work.

While I find this creative interpolation of Burmese Indian identity in its struggle to “step” past the “terror” of colonial rule and military despotism in Burma significant, I also draw attention to “other” necessary erasures in the representation of the diasporic globality or cosmopolitanism of Ghosh’s novel. I recognize Singh’s intervention as an important interruption of Ghosh’s constitution of global narratives, but I also problematize the subject-constitution of both Ghosh’s globally and Singh’s nationally “hybrid” diasporas.
Marrano Difference and Subaltern Absence in Ghosh’s Fiction

I draw attention to the margins of Ghosh’s text where we can read the subaltern figures of the Indian rubber planters—the indentured laborers in the Malaysian plantations who were literally reduced to the status of colonial currency in Rajkumar’s quest for success. In the novel, the laborers in Rajkumar’s plantation in Malaysia rarely talk and always occupy the fringes of the narrative mise-en-scène. When Elsa visits her husband Matthew, Saya John’s son, developing the “dense, towering, tangled, impassable jungle” into the “ordered geometry of the plantation,” she notes the “workers’ shacks—tiny hovels, with roofs made of branches and leaves” (199-200). While the narrative shows the toll that the building of the plantation takes on Matthew’s health and Elsa acknowledges the “unimaginable” squalor of the workers’ living quarters and the “mud-walled hut where they went to be treated when they fell ill … [with] the floors covered with filth” (200), the actual laborers are never depicted. Later again, when Dolly and her friend Uma visit the plantation now named “Morningside,” the narrative at first avoids “embodifying” the laborers. I quote from the novel when Matthew’s daughter Alison takes Uma and Dolly’s younger son Dinu for a ride in her car through the plantation:

Suddenly the trees ended and a small shantytown appeared, with rows of shacks lining the road—hutches of brick and mortar, sheltered under steepled sheets of tin. The shacks were exactly similar in design and yet each was defiantly distinctive in appearance: some were neat, with little curtains fluttering at their front windows, while other [sic] were hovels, with pyramids of filth piled at their doors.

“The coolie lines,” said Alison, slowing briefly. In a moment they were past and then the car picked up speed again. (228)

Finally, when the “coolies” do make an appearance, they become the point of an argument between Uma and Matthew about the ethics of using Indian laborers in the
plantation. Matthew takes Uma to the morning “Muster”—“part military parade and part
school assembly … presided over by the estate’s manager … a portly Eurasian … with
two rows of Indian overseers lining up behind him … [as] ‘conductors’” (230-231). By
this point in the novel, Uma, after her husband’s death, has traveled to Europe and
America, and joining the “Indian Independence League” has become a public advocate
for national independence for India. Uma with her modern thinking developed through
her association with “interesting and idealistic, men and women whose views and
sentiments were so akin to her own” (191) as they spent their time in New York
“watching, observing, picking apart the details of what they saw around them, trying to
derive lessons for themselves and their country” (221) is “disturbed by this spectacle …
the feeling of watching something archaic, a manner of life that she had believed to be
fortunately extinct” (231). Her reaction to the “Muster” is therefore an admission in the
narrative that even those struggling for freedom from colonial rule “turn away” from
realities of certain segments of the colonially oppressed. And what is even more
significant is that their argument does not break the narrative flow of the central lives to
make a stand for the plantation workers.

In fact, their argument ends with Matthew’s philosophy about the running of the
plantation in which he dis-members the “collectivity” of the workers and absorbs them
into the “machinery” of the plantation. And he achieves this de-humanization through a
very interesting use of metaphor. Matthew shows Uma the rubber trees and explains
the “enormous amount of human ingenuity [that] has been invested in making these
trees exactly similar,” but draws her attention to a tree that does not bear sap. He tells
her that while “[b]otanists will tell you one thing and geologists will tell you another and
soil specialists will tell you something else,” he knows that the tree is “fighting back” (232-233). Matthew clarifies:

“I planted this tree, Uma. I’ve heard what all the experts say. But the tappers know better. They have a saying, you know—“every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian life’. They know that there are trees that won’t do what the others do, and that’s what they say—this one is fighting back.” (233)

But at the very moment that Matthew recognizes the cost of human life in the production and maintenance of the plantation, and individualizes the plantation worker through the individual instance of the rubber tree “fighting back,” he also literally de-humanizes and objectifies the worker as the inevitable process of nature breaking the “law” and “order” of human domestication that “has nothing to do with … [him] or with rights and wrongs” (233). The subsumption of the workers into both natural law and the domesticated landscape of the plantation is achieved as he declares:

“… it’s a vast machine, made of wood and flesh. And at every turn, every little piece of this machine is resisting you, fighting you, waiting for you to give in.” (232 [emphasis mine])

However, this erasure of human agency in the clever ruse of acknowledging its resistance also evokes the anxiety of “hospitality”—the acknowledgment that there is no plantation before the workers—an anxiety of an-other legacy that produces an anxious smile

“But, Matthew,” Uma laughed again, “what on earth are you going to do if your tappers take a lesson from your trees?”

Now it was Matthew’s turn to laugh. “Let’s hope it never comes to that.” (233-234)

This laughter ends their argument and marks the “turn away” from the intrusion of the issue of plantation workers on the central narratives of the novel. I make this laughter
the moment of a strategic interruption for tracing this "legacy" of the plantation economy at the center of *The Glass Palace*.

This silent body of plantation workers reveals the fact that the subject-constitution of the primary characters of the novel had to be premised on the erasure of this subalternized margin whose identity could not be given a proper voice, had to repressed for the sake of narrative cohesion. This interruption can then be strategically deployed as a recognition of the dialectic limits of the novel’s postcolonial resistance, making us aware that beyond those limits there are events concerning those faceless subaltern figures whose revolutionary possibilities are not circumscribed by the recognizable bounds of Ghosh’s narrative.

There are two instances of individual “figuration” of the plantation workers in *The Glass Palace*. In the first instance, we are introduced to the “illegitimate” son of Rajkumar born of his affair with one of the plantation workers. This illegitimate son, Ilongo, depicted as a “thin, lanky and dark” boy “dressed in a shirt and checked sarong” (234) is found by Uma as he follows her around the Morningside plantation. When Uma asks, Alison describes Ilongo as “Morningside’s village idiot” though Uma notes that “[h]is eyes were large and very expressive: looking into them, she could not believe that he was a simpleton” (235). So here we see the process of individualizing Ilongo as the narrative makes a specific note of his intelligence, but at the same time we also note the fact that the rest of the central figures in Morningside dismiss his “intrusion” into their lives as inconsequent. Uma investigates into Ilongo’s background and before long realizes the truth of his parentage. Her conversation with Ilongo’s mother is an interesting example of the function of the native informant in the narrative progress of
Rajkumar’s bildungsroman. While this unnamed woman readily discloses her relationship with Rajkumar, she makes Uma promise not to reveal her secret. And this “relationship” is a clear form of sexual oppression as she recounts:

“They sent me to him. On the ship, when I was coming over. They called me out of the hold and took me up to his cabin. There was nothing I could do.” (236)

And even though Rajkumar used her “[f]or years afterwards,” she seems to rationalize her victimization saying “[h]e wasn’t so bad, better than some others.” And she rationalizes her silencing of Uma, which is in fact her self-silencing, as necessitated by her circumstances, explaining to Uma that even though the latter means to help she is “an outsider” who does not know “how things are here” (237). She clarifies:

“… it will not help me to see him punished: it will only make things worse for everyone. The money will stop; there’ll be trouble ….”

I wish to make it clear that Ghosh’s writing draws attention to the inequality of this woman’s gendered position and that Uma, in the narrative, understands that her educated notions of gender equality are rendered ineffectual in the colonial framework of plantation sexual politics. In fact, the narrative device of “revelation” by which Ilongo’s mother shares her “secret” with Uma writes her “silencing” into the text. Through this “narrative device,” this unnamed woman states her “secret” and then asks that it not be revealed and the readers collude in keeping her “silence” while being aware of the “secret” of Ilongo’s “blood.” The narrative, in enacting the self-silencing of the native informant, reconstitutes her as “complicit” in the very colonial sexual politics of which she is a victim. While Ghosh recuperates the “marginal voices” of a pre-globalization global postcoloniality, he makes a narrative choice not to recuperate the identities of the
plantation workers in similar detail, except as native informants instrumental to the full elaboration of Rajkumar’s character and the development of Uma’s social awareness.

Later on in the novel, we find out that Saya John “acting on a whim” adopts Ilongo and sends him to school “in the nearby town of Sungei Pattani” (323). At twenty, Ilongo, “a dark curly-haired youth, slow-moving and soft-spoken, but of imposing height and build,” finishes his “electrician’s course” and returns to Morningside to gradually take over most “of the daily functions of caring for the old man” Saya John. I find it interesting that the narrative emphasizes the “unobtrusive yet quietly reliable presence” of Ilongo, that “there was something about him that was so transparently trustworthy” (359 [emphasis mine]). Once again, in the process of individualizing one of the plantation workers, someone who shares a “genealogy” with many of the central characters, the narrative effectively renders Ilongo “transparent” or in-visible. His illegitimate “intrusion” into the narrative is rendered “unobtrusive,” and even when Dinu, as he later visits Morningside, realizes that Ilongo is his half-brother, he does not actually change the essential nature of their relationship even though the narrative notes that “a visit that had begun as a meeting between strangers, had somehow changed, in tone and texture, to a family reunion” (360). As it turns out, Saya John’s “whim” in adopting Ilongo had actually been Dolly’s request to him to look after the child. So essentially various members of the family were fully aware of Ilongo’s true parentage, but in spite of their kindness, maintain the “ambivalence” of his identity. Ilongo himself is aware of his “legacy” as he conveys his filial relationship to Dinu in “conversations, nurtured by a pattern of questions and occasional oblique asides—by Ilongo’s curiosity about the Raha house in Rangoon, by his interest in family
photographs, by the manner in which his references to ‘your father’ slowly
metamorphosed so that the pronoun disappeared” (359). Yet Ilongo never overtly
claims the “legacy” that is rightfully his, instead seemingly preferring to occupy the
ambivalent identity (in the “duality”) of both “other” and “brother.”

In *The Glass Palace*, I therefore read Ilongo through the metaphor of the
Marrano whose Marrano difference—the “genealogy” that even when ignored is
revealed in his “striking … resemblance to Rajkumar” (498)—cannot be effaced even in
the anxious reconstitutions of his identity as “unobtrusive” and “transparent” in the
narrative, and yet cannot be embraced because it is instrumental to the character
development of many of the central protagonists. Ilongo’s secret reveals the
helplessness of Uma’s social and political activism in the colonial framework of
plantation life in Malaysia and problematizes Rajkumar’s “rags-to-riches” story, drawing
attention to the legacy of “transporting people” from India as indentured laborers to
Malaysia on which the latter built his success. And in Dinu’s case, this secret ends his
relationship with his father and helps him decide to settle down in Sungei Pattani, a
choice that defines his narrative through the rest of the novel. Ghosh in writing of Dinu’s
inability to change his relationship with his “Marrano” brother depicts the “ineradicable
difference” of sameness, the anxiety of confronting the “Other Within” that had defined
the “Marrano” experience in Spain. The narrative notes:

Dinu found it hard to give shape to the thought that Ilongo might be his-half-
brother. A brother was what Neel was—a boundary to mark yourself off
against. This was not what Ilongo was. If anything, Ilongo was an
incarnation of his father—as he’d been in his youth, a far better man that
the one whom he, Dinu, had known. (360)

Ilongo’s “Marrano difference” does not only set him apart from his family, but also
marks him as distinct from the “other” kinship he shares with the plantation workers. In
fact, while Rajkumar and Dolly and later Dinu never overtly accept him as kin, they help
to accentuate his inherited difference, setting him apart from the other plantation
workers through his schooling. Once again, the narrative notes that while Ilongo knew
every estate worker

[They in turn accorded him an authority unlike that of anyone else on the
plantation. He had come of age on the estate, but he'd also stepped outside
its boundaries, learnt to speak Malay and English, acquired an education.
He had no need to raise his voice or utter threats in order to gain respect:
they trusted him as one of their own. (323)

This constitution of Ilongo as the native informant in charge of the administrative
functions of the plantation, sharing kinship with both the owners and the workers has
striking resemblance to the Marrano experience in Spain that I addressed in Chapter 5.
I do not suggest that Ilongo's depiction in The Glass Palace is to be read in terms of the
Marrano, but instead I argue for the usefulness of recognizing the "haunting" of the
"legacy" of the one in the "inherited" difference of the "other." And if Ghosh's novel with
its global characters is to be read as a postcolonial articulation of cosmopolitan
diaspora, then the "genealogy" of that diaspora must be traced through both the
"Marrano difference" of the native informants and the subaltern absences at the margins
of the narrative essential to the constitution of its postcolonial cosmopolitanism. And this
tracing of the diaspora's "genealogy" reveals that the reconstitution of the postcolonial
center of the novel, i.e., the central characters of the multiple narratives who would
otherwise have occupied the margins of a colonial framework, involves the expedient
choices of reconstituting "other" margins of other "ineradicable differences" and
subaltern silences. That also is the "legacy" of postcolonial writing even in its laudable
resistance to Eurocentric and colonial subject-constitution.
The second instance of “individualization” of Indian plantation workers occurs towards the end of the novel. At this point, Uma’s nephew Arjun, who had been one of the earliest Indian recruits of officer rank in the British army, has defected to the nascent Indian National Army after the fall of Singapore and the Malay States to Japanese occupation. The narrative notes that Arjun’s “unit had initially numbered about fifty men … [and] was evenly split between professional soldiers and volunteers” (520). The volunteers were mostly Indian plantation workers and though at first the officers had been skeptical of their loyalty, they were the ones who stayed with the independence army while the professional soldiers deserted. Arjun’s “batman” Kishan Singh explains to him that the reason why the professional soldiers (i.e., Arjun’s fellow-officers trained by the British Indian army) are able to desert is because they “knew the men on the other side; the men they were fighting against were their relatives and neighbours; they knew that if they went over, they wouldn’t be badly treated” (521). So it is the diasporic difference of the indentured laborers, the gradual erosion of their links to their home country, that keep the Malaysian Indians fighting for India’s independence. Arjun also realizes that the “volunteers” recognize this difference and realize “that in the end, theirs wasn’t the same struggle as that of the professionals; in a way, they weren’t even fighting the same war” (521). In the novel, one of these new recruits is individualized as “a lean, wiry man, all muscle and bone, with red-flecked eyes and thick moustache” named Rajan.

The narrative recognizes Rajan because he is one of the few volunteers that Arjun is able to “converse fluently” with since not all the Malaysian Indians speak Hindustani. Rajan had been born in Malaysia, and “his knowledge of India came solely
from stories told by his parents” (521). At this point, Ghosh through Arjun speculates about the motivations of the “plantation recruits” like Rajan asking why they would fight for a country “they had never seen; a country that had extruded their parents and cut them off” (521-522). Rajan represents the “other” side of Ilongo’s “unassuming” difference, articulating his motivation as his struggle against “slavery” on the plantation, against “being made into a machine: having your mind taken away and replaced by a clockwork mechanism” (522). What escapes Arjun, because his newfound awareness of his “duty” to the cause of Indian independence cannot encompass the oppression of the plantation workers who will not directly benefit from India’s freedom, is that Rajan’s struggle is both against the British colonial machine and the “othering” of poverty and caste that had forced his ancestors into indentured labor by those Indians who could claim the postcolonial privilege of an independent Indian identity.

However, unfortunately, Ghosh at this important moment in the novel does not recuperate the complex conditions of Malaysian Indian life in the rubber plantations or the complexities of diasporic Indian identity, but instead resorts to a very generalized depiction of diasporic celebration of the mythical homeland. So while Arjun wonders if Rajan and the other “plantation recruits” realize that they are fighting for a country where they would still be victims of poverty and caste discrimination, the narrative notes:

[n]one of that was real to them; they had never experienced it and could not imagine it. India was the shining mountain beyond the horizon, a sacrament of redemption—a metaphor for freedom in the same way that slavery was a metaphor for the plantation. (522)

While this mythologization of the “homeland” in the diasporic imaginary has been noted in postcolonial criticism and in the fiction of diasporic writers like V. S. Naipaul, I find it
interesting that Ghosh uses this general observation to stand in for the subject-consciousness of the Indian “volunteers.” In fact, this observation in the narrative is made on their behalf and not expressed by Rajan. What is even more interesting is that shortly afterwards, Rajan and the other “plantation recruits” force Arjun against his wishes to court-martial and execute Kishan Singh for trying to desert the army. Rajan and the other “recruits” finally realize their “ineradicable difference” from the professional Indian soldiers, going so far as to refuse Arjun’s order to execute Kishan Singh themselves. When Arjun tells Rajan to ask for volunteers to carry out his sentencing, the latter states:

“… No … [n]one of us will volunteer. He’s one of yours—one of your men. You will have to deal with him yourself.” (524)

But even here, this act of self-realization of the plantation workers is merely instrumental in completing Arjun’s self-awareness. In the act of executing his loyal “batman” who had merely tried to desert the army out of exhaustion and desperation, he remembers the “guilelessness and trust and innocence … the goodness and strength” of Kishan Singh, “qualities that he himself had lost and betrayed—qualities that had never been his to start with, he who had sprung from the potter’s wheel, fully made, deformed” (525). Arjun executes Kishan Singh to prevent him from “betray[ing] himself … [from] becom[ing] something other than he was” (525).

While the “plantation recruits” are essential to Arjun’s mental struggle and eventual awareness, and they literally frame the execution, the narrative does not show any interest in their self-realization and they slip off the narrative frame immediately afterwards. When Dinu finally receives word of Arjun, he is told that the latter died
alone. The last note the narrative makes of the “plantation recruits” so crucial to the
continuing struggle of the Indian National Army is that
they were all gone—they’d taken off their uniforms, put on longyis and
disappeared into the forest… it was impossible [to track them]. They knew
the jungle, those men—they’d vanished. (527 [emphasis mine])

Once again, in the narrative progress of Ghosh’s novel The Glass Palace, the
Malaysian Indian plantation laborers are subsumed into the background, erased from
even the postcolonial “gaze,” merging into “wood and flesh” indistinguishable as
individuals whose legacy is central to the unfolding of the global narratives that Ghosh
threads.

**Tracing the Subaltern**

The “slavery” that Rajan and the other “plantation recruits” are struggling against
is that of the “indentured labor” system of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century colonial
plantations in pre-independence Malaysia. K. S. Sandhu comprehensively covers this
plantation economy in his seminal work *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their
Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)* (henceforth *IM*) published in 1969. Since then
quite a few scholars have explored the colonial indentured system in Malaysia
comparing it to similar systems of Indian immigration to Burma, Fiji, Mauritius, Ceylon
(Sri Lanka), and the Caribbean islands. Chris Thomas, drawing on Sandhu’s work,
notes in his book *Diaspora Indians: Church Growth among Indians in West Malaysia,*
that British colonialists brought Indians to the Malay States from as early as 1786—
when Britain acquired Penang Island—to work as “domestic servants and on the sugar
plantations” (48). Sandhu goes on to note in his article “The Coming of Indians to
Malaysia” (henceforth “CIM”) published in 1993 that as Britain continued to expand its
colonial authority, finally gaining “actual control of the whole of Malaya” by 1909, the
empire brought “political stability” to the region, and because of the Industrial Revolution and “active official encouragement” there was “a large flow of capital, especially European, into Malayan development projects, particularly large-scale commercial agriculture.” He shows in his work that European “plantation agriculture” proceeded from the cultivation of “spices and pepper in the 1820s, sugar in the 1830s, and coffee in the 1870s … [and] reached its crescendo with the ‘rubber rush’ of the early years of the present century” (151).

This boom in “plantation agriculture” necessitated a steady supply of efficient labor, and given the small population of ethnic Malays, the European planters had to look elsewhere for their labor needs. Sandhu notes that while Chinese immigrants were “already present in substantial numbers in the Straits Settlements,” the Report of the commissioners appointed to enquire into the state of labour in the Straits Settlements and Protected Native States, 1890 (henceforth RLC 1890) argued that they “were ‘inclined to be disorderly, cost more in police and supervision and (gave) more trouble’” (IM 54). So Indian laborers were found to be a more suitable alternative with “the South Indian peasant, particularly the untouchable or lower caste Madrasi … considered the most satisfactory type of labourer, especially for light, simple, and repetitive tasks” (“CIM” 152). Later in this chapter, I discuss how Shanthini Pillai contests this colonial image of the “malleable … and … easily manageable” Indian plantation worker.

So at first, European (mainly British) planters sent agents like Rajkumar in The Glass Palace “to the Madras Presidency to hire men as workers for Malaya and these labourers were required to sign a contract for three years, although this term of employment was later reduced to 600 days” (Thomas 23). Sandhu notes in IM that
colonial economic policies had by this time severely aggravated the “disintegration and impoverishment” of what had originally been a self-sustaining village economy in India, and created a large population “totally illiterate and possessing few marketable skills … mostly fit only for manual work” who had “no other hope of escaping” their poverty and caste-oppression “except possibly through immigration” (32-43). During the early days of the indentured immigration system, the planters in colonial Malaya took full advantage of the desperation of the Indian immigrants. The first indentured laborers were not allowed to change plantations, and the estate workers in the Malay States were paid less than their counterparts in Burma and Ceylon (Thomas 24). Eventually, in order to create a more efficient system and a more efficient workforce, the “Kangany system” was introduced in 1890.

Thomas writes:

Kangany was a middle man who served as a hiring agent between planters and labourers. The Kangany system was extremely popular from 1910 until 1938. (24)

The “Kangany” was usually a former laborer sent back by the planter to recruit men and women from India. The “Kangany” would normally go back to his village to recruit laborers from the “lower castes.” As Thomas notes, according to the 1931 census, more than one third of the Indian immigrants were “untouchables” (53). The “Kangany system” benefitted the planters because they got an efficient workforce filially tied together that made individual desertions rare. At the same time, this new system somewhat reversed the male-dominated sex ratio of the earlier immigration pattern because entire families immigrated under this system. However, Thomas also notes that the “Kangany” deliberately created “too rosy a picture of life in Malaya” (50) to entice Indians to immigrate, and as we shall note later in this chapter, the diasporic
estate communities inevitably re-created a rigid social order with the Kangany as the supervisor, which mimicked the caste hierarchy of India. So while the "Kangany system" offered a recognizable social enclave for the new immigrants in a foreign country, it was primarily designed as a more efficient means of controlling and regulating the indentured laborers. And this more efficient system was necessitated with the introduction of rubber to the plantation economy in 1896.

Another important point to note is that the Indian diasporic community in Malaya always had a “transitory” identity. Sandhu notes the “ephemeral character” of this diaspora stating that “approximately 4.2 million enter[ed] and 3 million … [left] the country between 1786 and 1957” ("CIM" 154). Thomas adds that because many Indians returned to India every year as their “contract” expired and many others died “of sickness, snake bite, exhaustion and malnutrition” (54-55), the Indian diasporic population never exceeded 1 million in Malaysia (48). So Sandhu points out that of the 820, 270 Indians counted in the 1957 census “62.1 per cent were local-born” ("CIM" 154), which explains characters like Rajan in Ghosh’s novel who were part of the Indian diasporic community but had never been to India. And though a majority of the community was constituted of “unskilled” labor, as the rubber plantation economy boomed, the planters brought over an increasing number of “English educated administrative and clerical staff … to work as clerks, land surveyors, road builders, railway workers, hospital assistants, teachers, and other technical workers” (Thomas 52).

Thomas goes on to note that the "Kangany system" was eventually replaced with the "Independent Assisted Labour system" through the passage of the "Indian
Emigration Act” in 1922, which sought to rectify the skewed sex ratio of the immigrants, “establish[ed] minimum and maximum wage scales,” and appointed “welfare agents … to look into the needs of the labourers” (50-51). This independent assisted labor migration was itself banned by the British Indian government on 15 June 1938 even though unassisted migrations continued to occur (Sandhu IM 114). According to the 2010 census, of independent Malaysia’s current 28.3 million population, Indians constitute 7.3% while “ethnic Malays” or Bumiputeras (literally “sons of the soil”) constitute 67.4% and the Chinese constitute 24.6% (Department of Statistics, Malaysia). Thomas also notes in his book that with two-thirds of the Indian population living in “Rural” and “Urban Small” areas—i.e., in areas not exceeding 9,999 people—

[m]ore than two thirds, or about 68 per cent, of Indians [in Malaysia] are classified as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, and about 30 per cent as skilled workers. The remaining 2 per cent are professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, bankers, or businessmen. On the whole, the Indian community is the poorest in multi-racial Malaysia. (64)

Therefore, the “legacy” of the economic struggles of Rajan and the other “plantation recruits” in Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace have to be traced both back to the “indentured” roots and forward to the current poverty of the Indian diasporic community in Malaysia.

Re-territorializing the Subaltern

In her book Colonial Visions, Postcolonial Revisions, Shanthini Pillai argues for the shared “genealogy” of modern Indo-Malaysians and the Indian indentured laborers who were brought to the country by the rubber plantation owners in collusion with Indian facilitators. Pillai argues that while the familial ties between the two generations are obvious, modern Malaysians of Indian origins often attempt to erase the legacy of their indentured ancestors because of the negative associations of a “coolie” heritage and
the belief that the indentured past represents a meek submission to colonial exploitation without agency. Pillai points out that there are practically no first-person records of the early “coolies” as the “power of representation was almost always in the hands of the dominant” (xiii) and the dominant colonial records attempted to “box” the “coolies” as subservient laborers in the colonial “frame.” In her words:

> From the confining quarters of the immigrant depots built to hold the labourers as they awaited transportation to the Malay States to the barrack-like living quarters they were allocated and all the minutiae of the colonial plantation experience, one finds that the presiding issue is always the anxiety to preserve the boundaries of control so that the frame is kept intact at all times. The intention of most colonial textualisations was to keep all configurations of the labour enterprise well within the grasp of imperial power. (xi-xii)

Yet a reading of the colonial records against the grain produces plentiful evidence of “coolie” agency and the fact that the early Indian immigrants often broke out of the “frame” of imperial control to preserve a sense of “cultural identity, one that resided within and was an affirmation in many senses of the possession of something that could not be manipulated by colonial control” (13).

Pillai provides some excellent readings of colonial texts to deconstruct the myth of the docile “coolie.” For instance, she notes that even in our attempts to represent the victimization of the indentured workers, we erase the actual agency that many coolies asserted even after they landed in the Malay States. She notes that “[o]ne of the most significant ways in which the coolie dodged the frame of docility that was placed around him or her was through acts of ‘desertion’” (13), which often forced the European plantation owners to raise wages to hold on to their laborers. Drawing upon the “Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States (RCL) of the year 1890,” Pillai shows that “[e]very Immigration
report documents a fair number of coolies absconding from ports of disembarkation in
the Straits as well as the plantations … [and that] a number of newly arrived coolies at
the government depot at Negapatnam who find themselves ‘engaged on less favourable
terms become aware that better can be had, and ultimately refuse to sign contracts
unless on better terms, so that those offering lower terms cannot get as many as they
want’ (RCL 1890: Evid. 73)” (11). 1

However, reading the colonial accounts against the grain is only part of Pillai’s
project of tracing the “legacy” of the modern identity of the Malaysian Indian community
back to its indentured past. Later in her book, she reads the work of K. S. Maniam as a
“postcolonial writer[’s] … reinsertion of the subaltern into written history” (68). At the
same time, Pillai clearly points out that this reinsertion entails reconstitution of the
subaltern as the central protagonist of the postcolonial narrative, “the post-colonial
repositioning of the subaltern as key figure in the text” (69). And according to her,
Maniam is perfectly placed for this “postcolonial revisioning” as intimately familiar with
the lives of the estate workers in Malaysia, which allows his “postcolonial imagination
[to] articulate[[] those disregarded details and fill[] in the gaps left on the inherited murals
of imperial discursivity” (70). Thus in Maniam’s fictional work, Pillai reads “the continuity
between subaltern history and diasporic sensibility” summing up his creative and her
critical “reinsertion of the subaltern into written history” as:

[t]he gaze of the colonised moves into the visual space that has previously
been dominated by the lenses of the colonial Seeing Eye. It transforms that
landscape with the inclusion of an emotive layer left out of the latter’s
dismissive sweep. As the lost space of the coolie is reclaimed, the
caricatured imperial markings begin to fall off and we see them becoming

1 Shanthini Pillai writes the title of the Report (RCL) differently from K. S. Sandhu though they both refer
to the same text.
creators of their own narrative. With these changes, it becomes increasingly possible to retrieve the beginnings of the story of the formation of the diasporic Indian identity that is the legacy of every Malaysian Indian today.

(73)

And this transforming of the landscape is, according to Pillai, the process of “re-territorialization” as articulated by Radhakrishnan. Arguing against the critical approaches of Bernard Wilson and Peter Wicks to Maniam’s work—according to her, both read a “failure” of the “Malaysian Indian diasporic imaginary” in Maniam’s fiction—she emphasizes the “inventiveness of the diasporic imaginary that has reterritorialised Indian culture-scapes into Malaysian contexts” (82). And according to Pillai, Maniam realizes this cultural re-territorialization through three motifs—“the figure of Lord Nataraja the Cosmic Dancer,” “the Indian caballa-like artform of the kolam,” and “the South Indian architectural form of the thinnai or verandah” (82). In the last section of her book, Pillai reads these motifs in Maniam’s three novels. I read only Maniam’s first novel *The Return* to “dis-locate” the “Marrano difference” of Ilongo in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* into the diasporic “(non-)belonging” of Maniam’s protagonist Ravi.

*The Return*, written in 1981, is generally regarded to have autobiographical resonances though Maniam notes the similarities of the textual characters and occurrences in the work with his own life as “coincidences” rather than “events” (Pirbhai 165). The novel reconstructs a particular vision of Malaysian society from a diasporic worldview. The focus of the narrative, in spite of the first-person narrator seemingly tracing a personal bildungsroman, is not completely limited to the voice of Ravi, the main protagonist or the authorial self-image, but shifts subtly from character to character, depicting a complex pattern of lives and deaths, dreams and frustrations, triumphs and failures.
Here I point out that Wicks and Wilson don’t quite read Maniam’s work as a complete “failure” of the “Malaysian Indian diasporic imaginary.” Pillai cites Peter Wicks’ article “Diaspora and Identity in the Fiction of K. S. Maniam” published in *The Atlantic Literary Review* in 2002, noting that he believes that beyond the personal landscapes of the individual, the prospects of south Indian diaspora are indeed bleak. Maniam’s fiction conveys a profound sense of cultural loss, and of never having arrived at a secular alternative. For too many Indian Malaysians, diaspora is both inescapable and acutely problematic. (82)

In another article, entitled “Parameters of Malaysian Identity in the Novels of Lloyd Fernando and K.S. Maniam,” published in *Asian Profile* in February 2002, Wicks makes a similar point stating that the novels of both Fernando and Maniam “confirm that the parameters of Malaysian identity were, and remain, communally defined and exclusionist” (28). However, the point the critic makes about the communal mosaic of Malaysia is an important one, particularly when we take into account that later waves of Indian migration to the rubber plantations in Malaysia took place under the “Kangany system” that “[on the] one hand … helped provide personal identity and cultural vitality in a new land, at least for a while until memory fades, and nostalgia and a mournful sense of cultural loss takes over … [and o]n the other hand, an aspect of Tamil communalism such as caste restrained the upward mobility, occupational choice, and material success that the new circumstances of Malaya/Malaysia warranted and encouraged” (31). Wicks actually argues for “the imperatives of cross-cultural communication in the polyglot, hybrid society” of contemporary Malaysia and believes that English is the language that “can reflect Malaysia’s context and its distinctive, heterogeneous, multi-ethnic tradition” (28). In fact, because Maniam (and Fernando) has persisted with English writing in Malaysia, especially after the passage of the
National Language Act in 1967 that gave privileged status to “Bahasa Malaysia, the language of the politically dominant Malay community” to foster “an ethnic Malay nationalism that defined Malaysia in exclusive Malay cultural terms” (27), his work, according to Wicks, bears “testimony to the persistence of substantial minority cultures” (35). So essentially, while Wicks notes that “much in Maniam’s work [is] about dislocation, abandonment, disorientation,” he also points out that the author “yearn[s] for a recognition of cultural pluralism that is more than political lip-service, and for a larger view of Malaysia that is integrative rather than assimilationist” (35).

Again, Bernard Wilson, in his article “Memory, Myth, Exile: the Desire for Malaysian Belonging in K.S. Maniam’s The Return, ‘Haunting the Tiger’ and In a Far Country” published in Textual Practice in 2003, actually makes an argument similar to Pillai’s. He argues that in Maniam’s literary oeuvre his vision of nation invariably begins and ends with conscious and subconscious quests for self-truth as a reaction to the marginalization of one’s language(s), race(s) and culture(s), and as a response to a collective identity superficially imposed through political or geographical conditions. What is clear is that perceptions of individual ethnic identity and a collective plural national identity should not be diametrically opposed or mutually incompatible—indeed it is only when the individual acknowledges his or her ethnic heritage and identity that the potentiality of true nation can begin to exist. (392)

Wilson, like Wicks, focuses on the importance of language in the constitution of both personal and national identity, pointing out that in Malaysia “language shapes national consciousness and individual identity to an overwhelming extent” (392). He also importantly notes that Maniam’s novel The Return “deals almost exclusively with first- and second-generation Tamil Indians and examines their obliteration/regeneration in confronting colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial influences and their (largely unsuccessful) attempts to negotiate a path towards a hybrid identity that acknowledges
their cultural and religious heritage” (393). Maniam, in an interview with Bernard Wilson, acknowledges that in “Malaysia writers are often accused of being communal” but explains the limited perspective of his early work as “you write well about those things you know best” (22).

So the novel reflects the unique socio-politico-economic structure of the country where though these three major races, Malay, Chinese and Indian live side by side, they exist in relative isolation, and their cultures and languages mostly develop in pockets. Maniam asserts that cut off from the “homeland” and unable to draw upon each other for enrichment, the diasporic cultures revert to “symbolic ethnicity.” In The Return, the narrator Ravi states that “[l]anguage was inadequate” in expressing the true feelings and thoughts of the people, and in the community “formed only the surface … staccato, coarse, unending and seemingly unnecessary,” coming from an “imagination that had withered because that clutter … to [be] identified as culture wasn’t there” (71). For Wilson, this focus on the Indian community and its specific struggle for “belonging” makes the novel “less specifically Malaysian than universally diasporic” (393). He addresses the issue of language in greater detail than Wicks, addressing Anne Brewster’s analysis of The Return using Bakhtin’s theory of the multi-vocality of the novelistic form that I will take up later in the chapter. Importantly, Wilson notes that language in Maniam’s work can both be “a tool of subversion and control” and “a constantly evolving process that is non-directional and open-ended, employing (both subconsciously and consciously) myriad cultural, social and historical influences” (394). So he argues that on the one hand, Tamil education provides “a concrete ancestral and cultural past but a limited future in Malaysia,” but on the other, the main protagonist
“Ravi’s superior use of the English of the colonial teaching system” alienates him from his community and from his father (395).

Mariam Pirbhai, in her book *Mythologies of Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture* published in 2009, takes up a similar argument about the status of English in *The Return*. Her observation, following Wong Ming Yook’s 2000 survey of Malaysian English fiction entitled “Traversing Boundaries: Journeys into Malaysian Fiction in English,” that English, which used to be a “common administrative language” in colonial Malaya, is now the “language used by an urban minority” (162) significantly adds to Wilson’s analysis of Maniam’s exploration of the “legacy” of linguistic politics in Malaysia. In fact, as we shall see later in this chapter, Ravi’s English education does not merely alienate him from his community for linguistic reasons, but sets him apart from his “kin” because it enables him to escape the poverty of the diasporic Indian community into a more cosmopolitan urban life. His ability to traverse linguistic boundaries translates into an ability to traverse economic and cultural boundaries, but only through self-differentiation from (and rejection of) his immediate family and extended community. Pirbhai also importantly suggests, cautiously drawing upon T. Wignesan’s “Religion as Refuge, or Conflict and Non-Change: The Case of the Malaysian Writer in English,” that since in Malaysia, the privileging of Bahasa Malaysia is a program for the privileging of ethnic “Islamic” Malay culture, for many minority writers “the English language offers a refuge: it is the religion of he who chooses to write in it” (160). This partly explains for her why “among South Asian diasporic writers in Malaysia, it is writers of Hindu background who produce the majority of English language literary texts” (160). Unlike Wicks and Wilson, Pirbhai, following Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s rejection of the colonial politics of English, clearly
argues that Ravi’s English education as well as the “construction” of his narrative in the language “rigidly define[s] him as another kind of cultural outsider, colonial subject” (166). This “orientation to the colonial language and culture” (when added to Ravi’s “diasporic identity as an ethnic and linguistic minority”) makes him “doubly compromised” and explains “his peculiar predicament as the excluding subject who gradually dissociates from family and friends (his recognizable world), as well as the excluded subject among a European elite, a majority indigenous Malay population and an increasingly incomprehensible Tamil community.” However, she notes that this is deliberate strategy on Maniam’s part to write a “quintessentially post-colonial [novel] in its critical assessment of assimilationist colonial practices” (166-168).

So to sum up, Pillai, in arguing against Bernard Wilson’s position, points out the latter’s observation that Maniam’s work shows an “overwhelmingly discouraging outlook for cultural and linguistic belonging in colonial and postcolonial Malaya” (395). However, I note that he also goes on to argue that even though members of the Indian diasporic community in Malaysia, like Ravi’s grandmother Periathai and his father Kannan in The Return, “seek a sense of belonging that must fail because it alternates between the polarities of cultural rigidity and cultural vacuum,” Ravi, who escapes the confines of the community through an English education, partly learns that what is “crucial for survival … is the creation of new hybrid-polyglot, transcultural myths without the rejection of an ancestral base: a weaving of the fabric of cultures and discourses to make sense of this permanent state of transition and to combat the political discourses of colonialism and neocolonialism” (397-98). And while Wicks argues for English in Malaysia as the ideal linguistic vehicle for “cross-cultural” communication, Wilson posits that both Tamil and
English problematize a clear “sense of belonging” for the diasporic community, but also suggests that the latter language partly provides an opportunity to produce “a precariously balanced existence which marries one’s cultural past with a new multicultural and multilingual present that accepts past, present and future as inseparable” (396). However, for Pirbhai, Maniam’s novel serves as a critique of the colonial imposition and continuing neo-colonial politics of English both as language and cultural marker of urban elitism, and it is only the “insertion of his ancestor’s narrative of migration and survival” along with “the signs of nostalgia and loss” that enable the protagonist Ravi to “counter[] the hegemonic effects” of a “master-narrative” that privileges “‘permanence as the desirable condition of being” (170). And in contrast to (instead of being counter to) these three positions, Pillai argues for the “legacy” of Indian cultural motifs as enabling the survival of the indentured diasporic Indian community into the Malaysian Indian community of current times. I now quickly elaborate on Pillai’s use of her three cultural motifs to trace the cultural re-territorialization of Malaysia by the Indian diaspora in Maniam’s work.

In *The Return*, the protagonist Ravi’s grandmother Periathai brings the “figure of Lord Nataraja” over from India to Malaysia, and it is one of the few material possessions that tie the family to their Indian roots. While Ravi is unattached to such material “belongings,” the “statue” plays an important part in his father Kannan’s struggle for “affiliation to the land,” a struggle that he inherits from Periathai to stake a claim to the piece of land on which his house stands. As Pillai notes, in his attempt to re-territorialize himself, Kannan discards most of the material “belongings” of Periathai linking him to the “ancestral land,” but “retains the statue of Nataraja” (89). When the town council
orders him to vacate the land, Kannan proceeds to “cremate” himself in the house. Pillai argues that while most critics read this “event” towards the end of the novel as Maniam’s acknowledgment of the “failure of the disenfranchised diasporic to gain any form of admission into the Malaysian national landscape” (89), she sees in Kannan’s “extreme” act the symbolism of Nataraja’s “ananda tandava … performed in ‘the crematorium, the burning ground’ which symbolises the place ‘where the ego is destroyed … resulting in a state where illusion and deeds are burnt away’” (89). Thus the motif of the “deity” represents for Pillai “the links that are created and destroyed as new generations of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia emerge … shap[ing] a pattern of their own, which is in many senses the blueprint of the design of the diasporic identity that Malaysian Indians hold today” (90).

As far as her second motif is concerned, Pillai defines the “kolam” as a “traditional South Indian art form that normally graces the entrance of Indian houses … [whose] caballa-like design … begins with a sequence of dots drawn on the ground and these consequently develop to form a series of uninterrupted lines” (91). Pillai suggests that the “kolam” that is drawn to “invite harmony within the home that lies past its bordered edges” represents “the diasporic rites of passage into the new home-land” (91). She does point out that unlike the traditional “kolams,” the diasporic design that she sketches in Maniam’s work, in this case primarily in his second novel In a Far Country, is not continuous and is disrupted and interrupted by the various stages of the diasporic experience. But the new “kolam” instead of “taper[ing] inwards into that ethnic community alone,” “transgresses the boundaries of that identity and ventures into a territory that brings it into contact with the multi-cultural elements that reside in its midst”
thereby “reterritorializing … the Indian self as borders are broken down and new imprints are allowed to pattern the fabric of this new identity” (91).

Finally, Pillai explains her third motif of the “thinnai” or verandah which is “one of the distinguishing features of traditional Tamil houses” as the “exterior space of the house that lies between the thalvaram or street corridor consisting of a raised sheltered platform and the interior of the house” (97). This “thinnai” is for her a “transgressive space between the inner and the outer world … where inhabitants from the former interact with the latter and if they are more familiar, they transgress into the space of the home that lies within” (97). So this “transgressive space” is where the process of re-territorialization takes place in the diaspora. And Pillai elaborates on her motif by showing how Bill Ashcroft developed a similar theory of transculturation emphasizing the “significance of the veranda to postcolonial identity.” In Postcolonial Transformation published in 2001, Ashcroft states that “[m]etaphorically speaking verandas become that space in which discourse itself is disrupted and the very identities of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ become negotiable” (198). Pillai posits that in Maniam’s work, especially his third novel Between Lives, “[i]t is the thinnai, the transit space, that can facilitate the transfiguration of communal consciousness from its liminal relationship with the coolie past” (106).

I find Shanthini Pillai’s tracing of the legacy of modern Malaysians both interesting and instructive, and agree that the ending of The Return is far from an unproblematic acknowledgment of the “failure” of the “diasporic imaginary.” However, I also argue that the tracing of the “genealogy” of modern Malaysian Indian identity cannot just be premised upon the “ananda tandava” of the diasporic community as a
process of “transculturation” or re-territorialization at the “transgressive space” where the diaspora meets the dominant in the new homeland, but must also acknowledge the erasures and the absences that are a part of the anxiety of this community in its diasporic condition. The reconstitution of hope from the ashes of Kannan’s self-immolation should not ignore the dis-figurement of the subaltern beyond the margins of colonial and postcolonial narratives whose dis-embodied absence cannot be recuperated even through “extreme” acts of agency like self-cremation. I locate the trace of that subaltern absence even in such “postcolonial revisionings” as Maniam’s work not at the center of his fiction, but at the liminal moment of textual apostrophe when the subaltern slips off even the dis-placed margins that serve to define the “postcolonial center” of the text.

The Diasporic Condition of the Hyphenated Ethnic

In the novel *The Return*, Ravi recounts the experiences of his childhood and youth as he struggles to educate himself hoping to escape the futility of a life in the poverty and humiliation of a rubber estate hospital compound near Bedong, Malaysia. A second-generation immigrant, he chooses the dominant alternative of an English education over his traditional Tamil heritage. In the process, he gradually grows distant from the rest of his family who continue to struggle against the squalor of an exploitative system that is built upon their labors but ignores them as legitimate participants in its socio-economic fabric. The novel moves along two parallel lines—Ravi’s quest to define a modern urban existence for himself liberated from the caste and class hierarchies of the diasporic Indian community he was born into through the emancipatory possibilities of a postcolonial English discourse; and his family’s, especially his father Kannan’s, quest for economic advancement and, at a deeper level, a “sense of belonging” to the
adopted land. The narrative ends with Kannan’s death, after Ravi has grown up and acquired a teaching job, which brings about a need for the latter to critically re-evaluate his life, his ties to his family, his relationship with his past and his sense of dislocated identity.

The novel opens with a quick but significant depiction of Periathai’s life, the “Big Mother,” who had originally migrated as a widow from India to Malaysia with her three infant children. Periathai had tried to put down roots in her adopted land, tried to build a “real house” with “a large, cool hall, a small room and an old-fashioned, Indian cooking place” replete with a “colourful entrance … [a] double-pillared affair … [that] had strange stories carved on its timber faces” (4), and tried to cling to the piece of land she inhabited with “no papers, only a vague belief and a dubious loyalty” (8).

Ravi, however, promises himself that he will not give in to such “quirkish desires and irrational dreams” (141). He believes that every individual has the chance to shape his or her own destiny and his encounter with a certain Miss Nancy in his first year at “The English School” provides him with the alternative to what he sees as futile pursuit of “belonging.” Instead, he aims to acquire a skill that will “allow … [him] a comfortable, unthreatened existence” (140). He masters the English language, which serves as the gateway to the upper echelons of both colonial and post-independence Malaysia. This colonial language is also the basis of hierarchy in the hospital “lines” where Ravi grows up in the first part of the novel. Access to English determines whether one is left toiling away like Kannan at his laundry, at the mercy of Menon or “Ayah,” or residing in the “yellow territory” with the educated hospital officials. The novel does not make it clear whether Menon is of a higher caste than the other workers of the hospital “lines,” but it
is evident that his power as superintendent derives from his knowledge of English, which makes him the intermediary between the workers and the doctors at the hospital. It is not merely his knowledge of English, however, that renders Ayah so invaluable, but his fluency in the language of the workers as well “issuing orders in Tamil or coming down to … [their] level by cursing in dialect” (74).

Anne Brewster in her article, “Linguistic Boundaries: K.S. Maniam’s The Return,” reads Bakhtinian polyglossia into the novel—“the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages operating within a single cultural system” (176). In what Makarand Paranjape calls, in his article “Displaced Relations: Diasporas, Empires, Homelands,” the “process of replication, if not reproduction” (9) in the Indian diasporic community of its re-memorialized caste and class hierarchies, frozen in time but reinscribed in a new geographical space, reconstituted in Ayah’s linguistic privilege, I see none of the polyglossic positive mutual animation of languages and cultures that Brewster invokes in citing Bakhtin. Maniam posits no simple privileging of multi-linguality as the site of postcolonial empowerment. In the entire novel, only Ayah reserves the right to multi-linguality, to restrict the laborers from transgressing his privilege. This is clearly expressed by Ravi in the following lines:

The minute we broke into “pure” English we were scolded.

“You’ll have the Ayah’s anger on our heads!” (75-76)

The Indian laborers understand the power of English and send their children to the English school in Sungai Petani, hoping to cross through the linguistic barrier into a better life. This translation of language into class and caste identity is a significant feature of the novel. Ravi’s entire escape from the confines of the social status he is born into is through the means of English, which is the point that Pirbhai makes about
colonial and postcolonial linguistic politics, where education is the only capital a
disenfranchised people can rely on, and the only education that has market value is
often available through the dominant discourse of the language of colonization.

Ravi chooses to adopt English, preferring it over his own language and culture,
so much so that he also begins to identify with the English landscape that Miss Nancy
introduces to him through the English book of alphabets, and through English fairy-
tales. Miss Nancy, especially since this part of the narrative is set in pre-independence
Malaysia, embodies the colonial values, in her almost pathological aversion to dirtiness,
in her imposition of an imagination that borrows from a cultural context, spatially and
temporally dislocated from the reality of her students’ lives, and in the transference into
her students of the implicit faith in the inherent superiority of everything associated with
English. Miss Nancy, in this respect, represents a postcolonial metaphor—the text does
not make it clear whether she is European or Eurasian—embodying in her a dichotomy
between the “English” primness and cleanliness symbolized by “Snow White,” and the
unrestrained passion of the “savages” by “Little Red.” “Snow White” and “Little Red” are
two of the various dolls that she uses to recount fairy-tales to her young students and
Little Red in contrast to Snow White’s immaculate white features has a “darker
complexion and a mischievous look in her eyes … bulg[ing] at the hips and breasts”
(28).

Wooed by the “fairish Indian teacher” (55), Mr. Veerasingham, Miss Nancy
undergoes a mental struggle between these two personas, resulting for a moment in a
fusion of the two, symbolized in her metamorphosis of the Snow White doll into “Snow-
Red.” The tale that she creates around this new character is one that speaks of sexual
horror, a very colonial anxiety at any notion of racial inter-mingling and hence pollution. Overall, in this encounter between the two selves, Miss Nancy represents, in her own obvious sexual repression, the colonized condition of the Malaysian (ethnic and diasporic) torn between “natural” instincts and imposed “artificial mores,” thereby creating a socially and culturally, as well as economically and politically, repressed individual. In the end, Miss Nancy marries an “English army officer” (63), the same marriage reciprocated by Ravi in his assimilation of English as the foundations of his “unthreatened existence,” and when the young narrator steps up to present the class wedding gift to her with the hope that she would finally get to enjoy “snowy England,” there is “no grip in the slight handshake she offer[s]” (63)—perhaps a premonition of Ravi’s own future discontent with his adopted discourse. This discontent is expressed in Ravi’s acknowledgement that his English world “was … disappointing … [that] it wasn’t real enough” (61), and his later observation during his two-year visit to England that “[t]he snow wasn’t as white as I had imagined it to be: it muddied the moment the flakes touched the ground” (147).

So Ravi substitutes one language and culture for another, moving from the discourse of the dominated to that of the dominant. Here, we see a clear parallel between Ravi in *The Return* and Ilongo in Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*. But while Ghosh’s Ilongo grows up into an “unobtrusive” and “trustworthy” helper at the plantation through his English education, Ravi ends up questioning both the cultural myopia of his diasporic community and the disaffection of the urban life that his English education privileges him to. Bringing these two characters in an “impossible face-to-face,” I posit
Leavey’s critical question—“Are two Marranos always able to recognize one another...?”

The only other instance of multi-lingualism, and in this case a literal fusion of languages, occurs at the very end of *The Return*, when Ravi’s father, Naina (“the filial honorific in Telugu” [103]), starts chanting in a “garbled language ... a rhythm mounted on Tamil, Malay and even Chinese words” (170). By this time Naina/Kannan, after the death of Periathai, has abandoned his own pursuit of economic betterment and, like his mother, illegally occupied a piece of government land, building a house and growing vegetables, in an attempt to forge a connection with “the water and soil of the earth” (172). Slowly he sinks into irrationality, holding his own rituals, disassociating himself from the socio-economic concerns of everyday life, till eventually, threatened with eviction by the Town Council, he self-immolates, burning down the house along with all his “belongings.” Brewster interprets his “secret language” (170) as “glossolalia,” or “deranged speech associated with schizophrenic disorders” (181). She posits this condition in Naina to be in reaction to Ravi’s acquisition of English, a discourse from which the former is excluded and which at the socio-economic level disempowers him. Naina thus also ritually burns his son’s “English” acquisitions—the books, comics and other materials Ravi had collected during his school years, as well as some of his degrees and certificates.

Brewster suggests that Naina portrays “th[e] 'untenable middle ground' that lends the novel its poignancy and complexity” (182). I suggest here that Naina in his linguistic hybridity attempts to articulate Bernard Wilson’s “new hybrid-polyglot, transcultural myths.” Thus the hybrid language may be for Naina a ritual representation of the only
means of creating a national consciousness that is inclusive of even diasporic identity, i.e., an inter-mingling and inter-mixing of the races, mainly Malay, Chinese and Indian, who due to the historic process of colonial socio-politico-economic circumstances were brought together in this country, and left to live side by side, yet largely isolated in their respective languages and cultures. But his “weaving of the fabric of cultures and discourses” is not to “make sense of [his] permanent state of transition” but to seek “permanence as a desirable condition of being.” Pirbhai, however, argues that Maniam counters this quest for “permanence” in both his critique of the “master-narrative” of colonial and even postcolonial English and his incorporation of the “narrative of migration and survival” and “signs of nostalgia and loss” of the diasporic community.

So to clarify, the “failure” of Kannan’s attempt to seek a permanent sense of belonging in Malaysia is essential to Maniam’s critique of the rigid definition of modern “national” belonging whose “legacy” can be traced to colonialism’s “master-narrative.” And Kannan’s destruction of his son’s English “possessions” seems to be an attempt to remove what he sees as the markers of Ravi’s “Marrano difference” that makes the latter “kin” to both his diasporic Indian past and the small urban middle-class of Malaysia’s cosmopolitan present, and at the same time “other” to both his minority Indian roots and the dominant “ethnic Malay” culture. For Kannan, English is problematic because it is the postcolonial legacy of a colonial imposition that is inherently structured in the model of a foreign system, alienated from the socio-cultural environment of the country. English excludes him, rejects him and hence from the prism of its hegemony identifies his language as “garble.” But while Kannan burns the “material” signs of Ravi’s “Marrano difference,” the English education that his son has
internalized marks an “ineradicable difference” that can neither be externalized nor completely erased. And Maniam does not make it clear if in this “failure,” he posits his preference for the “urban hybridity” of Ravi sanctioned through a language of power over Kannan’s “garbled hybridity.” However, in order to centralize, even if to critique, Ravi’s “urban hybridity” premised on his acquisition of English, Maniam’s narrative has to “turn away from” other marginal figures in the diasporic Indian community. Therefore, in the process of Ravi’s acculturation into Malaysia’s urban milieu, the novel gradually renders “in-visible” the “hospital lines” that trace the legacy of Ravi’s cosmopolitanism back to the “coolie” roots of his Indian past.

**Interrupting the Trace of the Subaltern**

At times in the novel, the reader becomes painfully aware of Ravi’s insensitivity and selfish individualism, his apathy towards his family after his return from England, his disgust at his father’s “backward dreams” (156), and his impatience with his mother’s loving gestures. Ravi in quite clear terms declares, “Watching my infant brothers and sisters, I only felt disgust” (84). However, he later admits to himself, that he “hardly knew them” (107) and his mother too had begun to “mystify” him. This escapism had been the goal of his life, and he manages to achieve such a level detachment that when Kannan, out of his “secret grief” at Periathai’s death, propels the family once again into heavy debts by staging an elaborate funeral, and then the entire family throws itself into backbreaking labor to make ends meet, Ravi candidly expresses amusement at their struggle to recover lost dignity. To him what matter are only his “studies” and the fact that he can “go to England” if he “w[ins] a teaching bursary” (140-141), thus finally “leaving all this filth behind” (121). He fails to understand that along with the filth he would be leaving his family behind, to toil away in the same conditions of degradation.
that he wishes to escape from. In fact, he considers his family members to be part of the “mysterious, dark world” (89) he is trying to escape. But Maniam's narrative also compels us to take into account the characters of his two brothers, Kumar and Samy, not to mention his other siblings whom Ravi considers failures corrupted by his step-mother Karupi for “[t]hey had all dropped out of school in favour of the mindless work and the beguiling chatter around the laundry shed and the kitchen fire” (107). Both his brothers Kumar and Samy, however, can be appreciated for the support they provide to the family almost uncomplainingly, never grudging Ravi his dreams, but instead respecting him for the success and status he is able to achieve. Even later, when Kannan gives up his laundry business and shifts to farming, and these two boys take up their own professions, they hand over all their earnings to their parents, toiling practically to their grave. Kumar, in fact, dies crushed under one of the lorries he is employed to service.

It is the relative silence of Kumar and Samy that forces readers to notice their presence, and ask—are they really mindless brutes yoked to a system of exploitation with no desire for relief, or are we to appreciate the loyalty they bear to the family and the sense of responsibility and sacrifice that they display in the course of the novel that in a way enables their more ambitious sibling to pursue his personal dreams? The “work force” that Ravi designates his family as, as opposed to a “unit of affection” (93), is built upon the shoulders of these individuals and would collapse if they too like him put personal ambitions before family needs. The laundry business, especially after Kannan leaves the hospital compound, would have become non-functional had it not been for all the other family members working themselves to the bone, which Ravi finds amusing as
he closets himself in his own room most of the time, to block out the “planning and the quarrels” that “filtered through, an interfering vibration to … [his] scholarly tasks” (142).

Similarly in the conflicts with his father’s neighbors in the hospital lines, like Govindan, and their sons, like his childhood friend Ganesh, Ravi depicts a picture of pettiness, malice, ignorance and hatred. Ganesh, like his brothers Kumar and Samy, is unable to do well in his studies, and jealous of Ravi’s success taunts him with insults like “white monkey” and “Like girl staying in the house all time” (43). Ganesh’s jealousy seems to result from a central grievance—“Reading, writing more than us!” (43). The same sentiment is echoed in Govindan’s words as he argues with Kannan over their children’s squabble:

“And how do you think I raise my family? On the white man’s ideas? Soon your son will be wiping his backside with paper!” (44)

Later, Ravi notes the moral and economic victory that he and his father score over Menon (the “superintendent of the hospital compound”), when he earns a scholarship, thereby providing his own funds for his education and going beyond the reach of Ayah’s censure and control. This victory has a “strange effect” on the people of Bedong who thereafter begin to address Kannan with the honorific, “Ayah.” But even then, later one evening, crouching in the shadow of guava trees at a bend in the road near the “long-house,” they ambush Ravi with a “brutal keening” and more insults like

“White backside! Town filth!”

“Man with nothing between the legs!”

“Perfumed prostitute!” (122)

Is this merely the blind malice of an ignorant people who have no desire for betterment, but cannot bear the thought of somebody among them rising above their lot in life?
Though theirs is again a story never revealed to the reader from their own perspective, I argue that the answer lies in the important accusation that Govindan throws at Ravi that “Even Ayah, who knows white man’s knowledge had time to listen to us” (121). Thus Ravi, in his quest to escape the degraded life of his fellow sufferers, turns away from them, growing so distant that he fails to see the humanity of their struggles. One of the most poignant moments of the narrative is when Kumar comes to meet Ravi after the latter’s return from England, and is unable to convey the thoughts and feelings bottled up within him because of the immense gulf that his brother has constructed between them. The narrative notes”

Kumar entered the room and stood beside the bed, silent and unsure. Then he began to cry…. (152)

So once again, we find in the re-configuration of a postcolonial subject—one recuperated not only from the margins of colonial discourse, but also the margins of Ghosh’s postcolonial fiction—the dis-placement of “other” marginal figures caught in the tension between the co-optation of native informants and the “erasure” of subaltern absences. This reconstitution of the narrative margins of The Return needs to be strategically interrupted to defer the dialectical subsumption of characters like Kumar, to interrupt their co-optation as native informants representing the “failure” and “myopia” of a segregated diasporic Indian community mired in poverty and caste-discrimination. Instead, we need to trace the simultaneous subalternization of their “silent voices” to understand the “shibboleth effect” of positing the “urban hybridity” of a cosmopolitan Malaysian Indian identity that is raised from but gradually erased of the “legacy” of its “coolie” past. Only through these strategic interruptions can we defer the unproblematic
valorization of Ravi’s urban diasporic identity as universal representative of a global or ethnic, postcolonial, hybrid, resistant subject.

Maniam, through these resounding silences in *The Return*, and hence the shift of “vocal focus,” alienates himself from his narrator Ravi. These silent voices in their multitudinous presences and simultaneous absences—“voices in absentia”—seemingly subsumed by the narratorial voice, add to the multi-vocality of the text and its multiple narratives. To follow through on Brewster’s argument, these “other” voices in the narrative do have, borrowing a Bakhtinian concept, a “heteroglossic” effect. This “heteroglossia” of the novel does not depend only on the voices overtly portrayed, but also on the marked silences that impinge upon the narrator’s voice. The readers similarly do not have direct access to Kannan’s secret or garbled language. I argue that it is through Ravi’s narratorial reference to Kannan’s irrational or non-rational speech at the end of *The Return* that Maniam directly engages the text’s heteroglot linguistic foundations that Bakhtin defines in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* as the “fundamental socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-languagedness,” i.e., “social heteroglossia” of the novelistic form (219). So Maniam’s use of “double voiced discourse” or “another’s speech in another’s language”—I argue not just speech, but another’s silence in another’s language as well—in his novel addresses both the diasporic condition of the Malaysian Indian community and the postcolonial writer’s difficulty in narrativizing the “legacy” of that diaspora. The other interpretation of Naina’s “garble” is then that it represents in its “hybrid construction” the impossibility of linguistic classification. In Bakhtin’s words, the “internal dialogism of authentic prose discourse … is not ultimately divisible into verbal exchanges possessing precisely marked
boundaries” (220). Maniam’s problem is that in his use of the narrative mode he cannot escape the “abstract notion of language as unitary” (Bakhtin 203), and hence, any representation of Kannan’s hybrid chanting would suffer “refraction of authorial intentions” (Bakhtin 217) in the authorial language, which is English. In its absent presence, however, the “secret language” marks the fault lines of the abstract unitariness of the text, directing our attention to the “living heteroglossia” of novelistic discourse. Kannan’s garbled speech is then not inclusive—for such inclusivity would reinscribe the essential classifications of diverse races, languages and cultures—but is “differential,” defying categorization in its constant slippage from one linguistic-racial-cultural identity to another.

Therefore, of the various interpretations of the novel’s title, I am interested in Maniam’s linguistic “return” in the context of this chapter. In his article, “Writing from the Fringe of a Multi-Cultural Society,” Maniam addresses his need to make the English language his own, having “moved away from the imperialistically-tainted language … [he] was taught in school in the 1950s” (285). This novel marks a return to the linguistic dilemma of a postcolonial writer who has adopted a language that both privileges and marginalizes in the national context of Malaysia, but most importantly brings up issues of authenticity and identity crisis. Whether the novel is autobiographical or not is beside the point, but it could be read as a “double voiced” engagement with Maniam’s literary identity, his linguistic center and his need to re-assess his adoption of a colonially imbricated while postcolonially liberative language.

The novel is left open-ended, concluding with a poem representing a critique of “words” (173). Perhaps Maniam suggests that the final answer to an integrated but
hybrid identity is not to be found in his work, which itself harnesses the medium of words that “will not serve,” no matter to which language or culture they belong, imprisoning “your flesh, your thoughts” (173). In his article “In Search of a Centre,” he states that “a writer who rests within a centre is in danger of repeating himself, or worse still, of becoming too lucid.” I therefore conclude this chapter by arguing that instead of attempting to recover in Maniam’s novel even a “hybrid-polyglot” identity that can offer in its “unthreatened existence” a sense of “permanence as the desirable condition of being,” we need to interrupt the dialectical sublation of the margins to recover the “Marrano difference” that even the postcolonial subject at the narrative center either attempts to co-opt as reconstituted native informant or erase as subaltern absence. By interrupting the silences that pervade the textual structure of the novel’s language, we need to both re-trace the “legacy” of the diasporic condition that is the foundation of this cosmopolitan, either global or ethnic, hybridity and imagine spaces where “other” marginal voices can strategically con-textualize themselves in our ongoing postcolonial discourse.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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