

**Subaltern Geographies**  
**Geographical Knowledge and Postcolonial Strategy**

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### ***Abstract***

In recent years a small but rich geographical literature has engaged with Subaltern Studies to explore the geographical and geopolitical imaginations of subaltern subjects and groups. Such writings have deployed subalternity to designate a substantive subject, or group, marginalized in the face of power. Departing from this, the paper instead treats subalternity more figuratively, as a word able to evoke spatialities occluded by the EuroAmerican power that haunts disciplinary geography. The paper argues that using subalternity like this holds the potential to pluralize geographical interventions, particularly in the light of the discipline's materialist turns since the late 1990s. To make this argument, the paper engages Gayatri Spivak's seminal critique of the Subaltern Studies collective, suggesting how this might speak productively to a postcolonial geographical methodology. It demonstrates the potential of this methodology by weaving it through a broader attempt to critically engage the politics of nature and environment in Sri Lanka.

### ***Keywords***

Subaltern Studies    postcolonial    Gayatri Spivak    Sri Lanka    uncertainty  
translation

**Subaltern Geographies:  
geographical knowledge and postcolonial strategy**

This paper stages a dialogue between geographical knowledge production and Subaltern Studies. Specifically, it explores the benefits to an avowedly postcolonial geography of engaging Gayatri Spivak's (2010 [1988]) seminal and much re-published (1999, pps.198-311; 2010, pps.20-78) critique of the Subaltern Studies collective in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In plain terms, I argue that geographically there is much to gain from treating subalternity not just as a reference to subordinate subjects and/or groups, but also as a more figurative reference to geographies occluded by the hegemonic conceptualizations of space that pervade our discipline. Mobilizing subalternity in this figurative geographical way, I suggest, positions Spivak's critique as a strategy for, firstly, bringing toward the imagination "quite other" (Spivak 2010 [1988], p.265) spatialities, and secondly, making visible the ways that disciplinary geography's familiar theoretical resources and concept-metaphors work to actively dissimulate those "quite other" spatial formations.

The essay builds on long-standing concerns to highlight and work through the pernicious effects of disciplinary geography's pervasive Eurocentrism, its "masked universalisms" (Slater 1992, p.307; also Robinson 2003). In very practical terms, my own research on and in Sri Lanka has struggled both with and against some of those masked universalisms that, as I show later in this paper, fail to adequately reveal various spatial formations in the Sri Lankan context that fall between the crevices of enlightenment rationality's most tightly woven binaries, in particular nature/culture and sacred/secular. These taken-as-given concept-metaphors in geography (and more broadly in the social sciences) have proved curiously inappropriate signifiers to

describe the kinds of spatial formations that my research wants to describe. It is from this particular methodological problematic that this essay emerges; a problem that, I suggest, is first and foremost one of ideology. By this I mean to implicate the languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation that our disciplinary community routinely deploy in order to make sense of society, and which, like any ideological deployment, unwittingly stabilize particular forms of power (Hall 1996, p.26-27). In other words, the paper critically engages the ways that established conceptual orthodoxies within the discipline work in fact to *ideologically constitute* the geographical imagination in particular kinds of ways. This, I argue, necessitates approaches that interrogate the mechanics of representation at work in the production of geographical knowledge, and by so doing demonstrate the discipline's failure to grasp certain types of geographical alterity.

First, however, it is worth stressing the stakes of this argument right now in human geography. In the Introduction to the 2003 *SJTG* dossier on *Geography and Postcolonialism* (the precursor to this themed issue), the editors wrote this of their intentions:

It was hoped that the explicit conjunction offered by threading geography through postcolonialism (and vice versa) would extend debates beyond discourse and representations and produce postcolonial insights which engage with 'material practices, actual spaces and real politics'... (Sidaway, Bunnell and Yeoh 2003, p.269)

This call for postcolonial geography to push beyond representation should be read in the context of geography's broader materialist turn from the mid to late 90s onwards, when at least three intersecting literatures contributed to an identifiable attempt to

rematerialize social and cultural geography: Marxist critiques of the reification of culture (see Mitchell 1995), the turn toward consumption geographies (see Jackson 2000), and the emergence of ‘non-representational’ theory (see Thrift 1996). To different degrees, all critically responded to the primacy that the new cultural geography afforded to the relationship between representation and meaning. Perhaps most polemically, however, certainly in British cultural geography, non-representational theorists have continued to react against the sovereignty of discourse, what they have dubbed “extrinsic sources of causality and domination, an out-of-field ‘power’”, in order to embrace the “practical ‘composition’ of subjectivities” (Anderson and Harrison 2010, p.8).

This turn away from representation has had far-reaching effects within human geography, and, as Sidaway, Bunnell and Yeoh’s (2003) essay anticipated, within postcolonial geography too (also see Jazeel and Brun 2009, pp.4-5; McEwan 2003). Though this paper should not be read as a retreat from the importance of materiality in the production and politics of everyday life, it is driven by a concern that geography’s materialist turn has been embraced at the expense of a thoroughgoing engagement with representation itself, which as a consequence has blunted geography’s ability to contextually comprehend radical alterity. It is, therefore, precisely in order to dwell in the domain of representation and to trouble over the mechanics of representation at work in geographical knowledge production that I revisit Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?*; a text well known to postcolonial geographers. As I show in what follows, I do so not at the expense of “real politics” (Sidaway, Bunnell and Yeoh 2003, p.269), but instead in the pursuit of comprehending the grounded geographical contextuality of “real politics”. The paper works toward teasing out geographies that are subaltern in the context of the discipline’s hegemonic theorizations and concept-metaphors.

It is for this reason that my title references the “postcolonial strategy” of a thorough dialogue between geography and Subaltern Studies. In a themed dossier whose aim is to explore ‘Where is postcolonial geography now?’, my aim is categorically not to reify postcolonial geography as a ‘theory’ object. By mobilizing the term ‘strategy’ instead, I mean to emphasize the “interventionist value” (Spivak 1985, p.345) that the particular approach I set out below offers, in particular in my efforts to evoke the workings of Sinhala Buddhist power through environmental spatialities in Sri Lanka. Thus, I do not propose the postcolonial strategy I set forth below to be in any sense “correct theoretical practice” (ibid., p.346), but rather a contingent methodology that has enabled my own work to make visible the contours of power in certain Sri Lankan spatialities that might otherwise remain hidden. The project to which I refer in the last section of this paper, has been a sustained attempt to make visible spaces of nature and environment in Sri Lanka through which ethnicizing Sinhala Buddhist power continues to operate and continues to minoritize Sri Lanka’s non-Sinhala citizens (Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, for example). In my broader work I have sought to demonstrate the close relationship between nature and environment in Sri Lanka on the one hand, and Sinhala Buddhist nationhood on the other, particularly through the ethnicizing structures of feeling that inhere in certain natural and environmental sites within the non-secular nation-state (see Jazeel 2013a; 2013b). However, there is a double bind that haunts this project and necessitates the kind of postcolonial geographical strategy I outline in this paper: how to make visible the political filaments of Sri Lankan spaces of ‘religious’ ‘nature’, when those very words – ‘religion’ and ‘nature’ – obscure that which comprises the spatial and political formations under investigation? The strategy I develop in this paper is essentially a way through this double bind.

The next part of this paper briefly sketches the Subaltern Studies collective's rich theoretical innovations, before identifying its influence on geography. I then draw out some key aspects of Spivak's critique of the collective's work, before working the epistemological conundrums she poses about ideological subject constitution in historical research through explicitly spatial registers. This is where I consider the ideological production of the disciplinary geographical imagination in the specific context of my own research problematics in Sri Lanka. The paper then focuses on uncertainty, translation and the value of negative dialectics to speculate on how geographers might more effectively comprehend radical alterity, or "quite other" spatialities.

### ***Subaltern Studies and Geography***

The Subaltern Studies collective was forged by a small group of young historians based in Britain who, in the late 1970s, met regularly to discuss their increasing frustration with South Asian historiography. The group, who were collectively dissatisfied with historical interpretations of the Indian Freedom movement, included Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Gyanendra Pandey, and they found intellectual leadership in the figure of Ranajit Guha. The problem with Indian historiographical scholarship as they saw it was that extant historical narratives of the making of the Indian nation celebrated elite political contributions whilst denying those contributions made by ordinary people. In 1982, the group formally established itself as the Subaltern Studies collective with the release of the first of what became an eponymous series of edited volumes. *Subaltern Studies I* was published by Oxford University Press, edited by Ranajit Guha, and contained contributions from all of the collective's founding members.<sup>1</sup>

The collective's adoption of the term 'subaltern' of course referenced the early twentieth century Marxist, and founding member of the Italian communist party, Antonio Gramsci's writings on class and state in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci's use of the term was a way of avoiding censorship whilst imprisoned by Mussolini (see Gidwani 2009, p.66), and it literally referred to lower ranking military personnel. Gramsci (2005 [1971], p.55) used the term, however, to refer to social groups in fascist Italy who were "always subject to the activity of ruling groups". Subalternity named a proletariat whose voices were excluded from a ruling class, the Catholic Church, whose own interests forged hegemony in civil society and thus constituted domination in and of the state. But for Gramsci, subaltern organization fostered by the work of organic intellectuals should aim toward the reconstitution of hegemony by incorporating subaltern voices into a dynamic 'national-popular consciousness' (Hoare and Nowell Smith 2005 [1971], pp.3-4). In other words, and in terms that become relevant for the closing sections of this paper, subalternity and hegemony existed in dialectical relation to one another.

The Subaltern Studies collective seized upon Gramsci's political agenda to work through their own critiques of the dominant narrative of Indian nationalism, which at the time was written as an achievement of colonial India's political classes. This elitist historiography was to be expected given that the colonial archive was simply not able to retain the utterances and actions of illiterate peasant movements, of which there were few textual records. Nonetheless, these were the subaltern forms of agency that the collective wanted to recover in order to interpret, as Guha put it, "the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and development of this nationalism" (2000, p.2, emphasis in original). From the outset then, the Subaltern Studies project was driven by a desire to write histories



from below. They reconsidered India's subaltern classes, not as 'pre-political', voiceless subjects, but as "[political] subjects in the making of their own history" (Chaturvedi 2000, p.viii).

Guha's seminal 1983 monograph, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1999 [1983]), was a magisterial lesson on how practically to go about this kind of history writing from below in the absence of any archives of peasant voice. As he showed, insofar as a physical archive of subaltern expression cannot exist, the only available historical resources to glimpse peasant agency and insurgency were in fact those colonial archives that recorded the counter-insurgency measures of the ruling classes, their armies and the colonial police (Chakrabarty 2002, p.16). Guha argued, therefore, that writing history from below entails reading these archives *against their own grain*, being attentive to the ways that peasant agency is inferred, effaced, and can be delineated from the voices of power that structure the textual properties of the colonial archive (ibid.). In other words, authentic peasant agency and subjectivity would be recovered only if the historian reads for lack, absence and effacement in the colonial archive.

In human geography, the influence of the collective's early work has principally been to stimulate excavations of the geographies, sometimes historical, of subaltern groups and subjects. For example, David Featherstone has produced a series of important writings that unearth the thoroughly transnational spaces and imaginations of political activism forged by disparate subaltern and working class political groups. Working creatively across far-flung archives, tracing court proceedings, ephemera and newspaper articles, his work has revealed the London Corresponding Society's connections to international networks in the 1790s (Featherstone 2007), and more recently forms of black solidarity forged through

1930s internationalist geographies not beholden to the nation-state (Featherstone 2013). Similarly, though less historically, Vinay Gidwani (2006) has written about the worldly geographical and political imagination of a one-time maid in the employ of his family, Connie, positioning her voice as a mode of subaltern cosmopolitanism. Sharad Chari (2004) has referred to the forms of social capital generated by Gounder caste men in Tirippur, South India, as subaltern forms of agency and organization. And recently, Joanne Sharp and her colleagues have advanced the notion of “subaltern geopolitics” (2011) to name geopolitical knowledge production that falls outside traditional geopolitical binaries of political domination and resistance (also see Woon 2011; Harker 2011). In addition, geographers and anthropologists have critically engaged the dominant spatial imaginaries at work in Subaltern Studies scholarship. For example, as Donald Moore (1998, p.352) has shown, for the Collective, subalternity was always that which emerges *in* an autonomous domain, cut off and outside the lines of mobility and power in a colonized country. As writers like Moore (ibid.) and Dave Featherstone (2009) have shown, however, subaltern resistance is frequently forged through relational and networked spatialities.

All of this work has focused largely, and productively, on subaltern social groups or subjects, *not* on the discipline’s lesser order spatialities. Perhaps closer to this is geographical scholarship that has taken its cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influence on the trajectory of Subaltern Studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. His books *Provincializing Europe* (2000) and *Habitations of Modernity* (2002) advanced a concerted effort to interrogate the relationships between (European) power and knowledge. Chakrabarty’s insight was simply to broaden the Subaltern Studies collective’s critique of the structural properties of the historical archive, to a critique of the structural properties of humanistic cultures of knowledge itself. He highlighted

the Eurocentrism of the knowledge structures we all inhabit, arguing that “political modernity... is impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000, p.4).

In geography, Jennifer Robinson (2003; 2006; 2011) has productively used Chakrabarty’s work to prize open urban theory’s structural Eurocentrism in ways that have stimulated the vibrant field of comparative urbanism. This literature has variously explored the colonial and EuroAmerican inheritance of urban research, revealing the implicit forms of comparison that are instantiated when taken-for-granted urban theoretical concept domains are blithely used to study non-EuroAmerican cities. Likewise, this work has shown the liberatory epistemological potential of exploring cities in the global south on their own terms (for examples, see McFarlane 2010; Bunnell et al. 2012).

My own movement towards recuperating subaltern geographies departs – in both senses of the term – from these critical urban geographical maneuvers. Whilst the thoughts below are influenced by comparative urbanism’s focus on the valences of comparison, they also emerge from a more general dissatisfaction that ‘comparativism’ in contemporary human geography seems now to be synonymous with an overwhelmingly *urban* postcolonial optic. This glosses the word’s lineage in literary studies, cf. ‘comparative literature’, therefore eliding its resonance for engaging the politics of representation more generally, and crucially thus its broader potential for geography. Thus, as a way of recovering the critical potential that insights from comparativism provide for unearthing subaltern geographies, I want now to suggest we might usefully pause over the mechanics of representation at work in geographical knowledge production. Note here that my use of the term ‘subaltern’

refers not specifically to marginal groups or subjects, but to space itself, and the ways it is theorized in disciplinary geography. Similarly, my intention is not to engage historical archives per se, but following Chakrabarty (2000; 2002) to adopt a particular kind of disposition to spatial knowledge and theory conceived *as* “archive”.

### ***Subalternity and representation***

In the context of geography’s materialist turns, Gayatri Spivak’s (2010 [1988]) seminal critique of the Subaltern Studies collective and its historiographical work offers the discipline much politico-intellectual potential. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* calls into question the textual properties of the subaltern agency that the Subaltern Studies collective’s early work sought to recover. It does so by posing the question of woman as subaltern in the face of a subaltern agency that the collective silently assumed to be male. For Spivak, the collective’s attempts to recuperate a “native” and “authentic” subaltern agency were problematic because by doing so, she observes that they could not help but essentialize subaltern agency. At stake here was the categorization of the subaltern *as* subaltern, which for Spivak is merely the reproduction of a colonial logic of Othering by the benevolent Subaltern Studies intellectual who *himself* remains unable to see the structural impossibility of not ventriloquizing the subaltern as he claims unproblematically to give voice to that subaltern’s agency. As she put it:

The object of the group’s [the collective’s] investigation, in the case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite-subaltern, is a *deviation* from an *idea* – the people or subaltern – which is itself defined as a difference from the elite. It is toward this structure that the research is oriented, a predicament rather different from the self-diagnosed

transparency of the first-world radical intellectual. What taxonomy can fix such a space? Whether or not they themselves perceive it – in fact Guha sees his definition of “the people” within the master-slave dialectic – their text articulates the difficult task of rewriting the conditions of its [subaltern agency’s] own impossibility as the conditions of its [the collective’s] possibility. (Spivak 2010 [1988], p.254, emphasis in original)

In other words, if the project of Subaltern Studies focused in its early period on the recovery of the subjugated subject’s historical agency, then structurally the collective could not help but theorize subaltern space as a pre-scripted identity-in-difference (Birla 2010, pp.88-92). This was no move toward radical alterity, or toward the Derridean notion of the “quite other”. Rather, it was a narrative of identity as identitarianism.

Righting this epistemically violent misrepresentation is not as easy as simply representing better, being more transparent, less essentialist as it were. For Spivak it involves grasping that the promise of utterly transparent representations of radical alterity is in fact an impossible promise, even, and especially, when the theorist makes claims to be speaking for subalternity. Note that in the quote above she refers to the Subaltern Studies theoretical work as “text”. At issue here are the workings of representation itself, particularly her injunction to construe the theory of subalternity as itself a form of representation. To make this point, Spivak critically engages a friendly conversation between Deleuze and Foucault (see Foucault 1977), in which both declare that the oppressed subject of history can speak unproblematically through the intellectual, as a self (a subject with agency that is), without mediation and messiness (Birla 2010, p.90). They are able to declare this much because of their

investment in a belief that theory *is* practice; that is to say, they share a conceit that theory is transparent, has nothing to do with representation. Indeed, Spivak quotes Deleuze saying as much: “Thus Deleuze makes this remarkable pronouncement: ‘A theory is like a box of tools. Nothing to do with the signifier’...” (Spivak 2010 [1988], p.242). By this reckoning, theory – and by implication, the theorist – represents the oppressed group only in the manner of giving voice, by proxy, effacing their own presence in the process. As Spivak writes, for Deleuze and Foucault, the concrete experience of the subaltern “is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme” (ibid.).

This promulgation of intellectual work’s ideal invisibility – a willful equation of theory with practice, which I would stress is worryingly familiar in some strands of non-representational thinking in human geography – is a negation of theory’s own textuality. And for Spivak this is problematic in ways that should be very resonant for geography and spatial theory. The force of her deconstructive critique is founded upon a very Derridean faith in the irreducible textuality of the world, and indeed of theories about the world. Indeed, as Derrida writes in the opening lines of ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’:

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. (Derrida 1981, p.63)

Accordingly, as Ritu Birla puts it in her excellent reading of Spivak’s essay, “it is exactly because Foucault and Deleuze make the radical claim that theory is practice that they elide the problems of representation that *should* burden intellectual work” (2010, p.90, my emphasis). This “should” is important because it marks a

responsibility incumbent upon the intellectual to attend to the ways that one's theoretical work construed *as* text works to ideologically constitute the subaltern subject, even if the intellectual cannot easily step outside that text.

To mobilize the ways that theory – in this case 'subalternity' – ideologically constitutes the historical subject, *Can the subaltern speak?* takes the reader through the mechanics of representation. Looking to the dual meaning of the word in German, the essay stresses that representation works in two ways simultaneously. The first sense of 'represent' – *darstellen* – denotes the constitutive work that representation does, as in philosophy or art's capacity to make something present again, but interpretively so. We might deploy the word in this sense to speak of an artist's portrayal or depiction of a scene, an object, a person. The second – *vertreten* – denotes instead the substitutive use of the word in the political sense, as in representative democracy, where we might designate a proxy to speak on our behalf (see Spivak 2010 [1988], pps.242-249; also see Jazeel and McFarlane 2010, p.5). In English, we roll both these overlapping and intersecting processes into the one word, 'represent', but Spivak's point is that both are always at work in representational processes.

To conceive of theory *as* representation then, in contradistinction to Deleuze and Foucault's fantasies otherwise, is to assert that theory participates fully in both *darstellen* and *vertreten*; it constitutes as it speaks for. Whatever else theory is, it is a key optic through which the world is made present *and* imaginatively constituted at one and the same time. Theory is in fact not at all transparent. Representationally, it ideologically constitutes that which it depicts (Ismail 2005). In terms of the critique of Subaltern Studies then, Spivak's intervention is to stress how in speaking for the subaltern, the subaltern is ideologically constituted *as* subaltern in a particular kind of

way. The subaltern's actual difference, her real agency, is epistemologically irretrievable for the postcolonial intellectual. Here is where Spivak advocates for a heuristic move from the collective's facile retrieval of subaltern agency which can only turn out to be the mobilization of a merely "self-consolidating other", toward the (im)possible effort of moving toward the imagination the "quite other", or radical forms of alterity whose contours cannot yet be fully known (Spivak 2010 [1988], p.265).

Spivak's answer to her own question, *Can the subaltern speak?*, is notoriously ambivalent. As Gidwani (2009, p.69) and Chari (2012, p.4) both remark, in 1988 Spivak's answer was a resounding "no". Her example was the case of a young woman, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, who on the fourth day of her menstrual cycle hung herself in her father's apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. Initially a mystery, a decade later it was discovered that she was a member of an independence group and she had been entrusted with a political assassination. For Spivak at least, suicide was Bhuvaneswari's abstention, and suicide during her menstrual cycle was Bhuvaneswari's articulation that her suicide was *not* due to an illicit pregnancy. Nonetheless, when Spivak asked Bhuvaneswari's nieces about the suicide, both professed it was because of illicit love, and when she asked another Bengali intellectual, she was asked in return why she was so interested in Bhuvaneswari when Bhuvaneswari's two sisters had led such wonderful lives. Thus, in 1988 it seemed clear to Spivak that "The subaltern cannot speak" (2010 [1988], p.283). In the 1999 rewrite of the essay, however, she writes:

I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark. (Spivak 1999, p.308)



Though Spivak never quite goes so far as admitting the subaltern can indeed speak, there is an important tension here that might be summed as follows: yes, the subaltern – Bhuvaneshwari – *spoke*, but the true cadence of her voice continues to be effaced and then (re)constituted in different kinds of ways. In Spivak's example, at least three (re)constitutions of Bhuvaneshwari's agency are at work: Bhuvaneshwari's nieces', the Bengali intellectual's, and Spivak's own. Bhuvaneshwari's agency continues to be dissimulated by the myriad interpretations of her act of suicide. So, although the task of transparently representing subaltern agency remains technically impossible, there is some urgency attached to the task of trying always harder to interpret, to listen, to translate her agency. Even if doomed to fail, doing so exposes the dissimulation of subaltern agency whenever we try to speak for it (Birla 2010, p.89).

### ***Subaltern geography as problem space***

Transposing the main thrust of Spivak's, by now familiar, critique of Subaltern Studies from the register of historiography to spatiality provides a valuable reminder of the imperative for geographers to worry over the ideological effects of geographical theory construed *as* representation, as text. In the last half of this paper, I argue that the work of tracing subaltern geographies should attend to the myriad ways that disciplinary concept-metaphors that are second nature to us, can work to actively dissimulate the contours of radically different spatialities and geographical imaginations. Just as for historians the epistemological problem of recovering subaltern agency transparently and faithfully remains an insurmountable but necessary challenge, for geographers there is a just as urgent imperative to embark on

the (im)possible task of grasping radically heterogeneous spatialities; geographies whose difference continually flings us away due to the inadequacies of geography's rather too certain intellectual tools and concept-metaphors.

To reiterate, my use of the term "subaltern geographies" does not signal a spatial translation of a straightforward Gramscian deployment of subalternity. In other words, I do not use the term to refer to the geographical imaginations of lower ranking, lower caste or class, social groups, despite the importance of such a task. Instead, I use the term to refer to ways of thinking spatially that may be considered lower ranking in the context of disciplinary geography's Eurocentric hegemony. The subaltern spatialities in Sri Lanka that I engage are in fact complicit with power, with the state's ethnicizing Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony that is to say, but what interests me here is their subalternity in the context of disciplinary geography's inability to grasp those spatialities through the lens of extant concept-metaphors. "Subaltern geographies" is therefore a figurative term strategically deployed to intervene in the stabilizing power of disciplinary geographical knowledge production. It marks the existence of dissimulated geographical knowledge (see Jazeel 2013), which I regard as spatialities concealed, or hidden, by the hegemony of geography's familiar concept-metaphors that masquerade as universal categories; nature and religion are the ones I engage here. Put differently, how can we as geographers avoid the traps of a social science imagination that persists in framing 'data' from the periphery by concepts, debates and research strategies from the metropole (Connell 2007, p.64)? How can we get closer to the impossible task of grasping the metaphysics of quite other spatialities on the terms through which they are written and contextually experienced? And moreover, what difference does doing so make to politico-intellectual geographical work?

The project to which I refer in the rest of this paper has been an ongoing effort to trace the ways that Theravada Buddhism has territorialized ethnicizing Sinhala power in Sri Lanka. The research has sought to do so by analysing experiences of Sri Lanka's natural and sacred environments (see Jazeel 2012; 2013a; 2013b), exploring how experiences of nature and religion (re)produce ethnicized identity, difference and Sinhala-Buddhist sovereignty in Sri Lanka. Methodologically, however, my argument has been that the very categories 'nature' and 'religion' need to be put under erasure such that the politics of these kinds of geographies *can* be made visible. Not pushing beyond the conceptual domains of 'nature' and 'religion' in fact dissimulates geographies through which significant forms of ethnicizing state power work, hence the "interventionist value" (Spivak 1985, p.345) of the approach outlined here.

Both the nature/culture and the sacred/secular binaries are foundational cornerstones of western thought that have helped to render the vast tapestry of the world comparable through the abstractions characteristic of enlightenment rationality. Both, however, have also undergone significant critical scrutiny in the social sciences in recent years. For example, Marxist, poststructuralist and ANT inspired geographical scholarship has variously developed the key insight that 'nature' does not so unproblematically name a realm external to society as we might at first think (see Smith 1984; Castree and Braun 2001; Clark 2011). Though diverse in approach, such scholarship is united by a desire to grapple either with the various social and cultural processes through which the natural world is humanly constructed, or with how nature acts upon human worlds. In terms of religion, critical geographical engagements with the term have in recent years focused on the neglected role that religion plays in the production of social and spatial meaning, and its role in everyday

urban life (see Yorgasson and Della Dora 2009; Kong 1990; Cloke and Beaumont 2013).

There is far more to say about both these bodies of literature than space here allows, but the simple point to stress is that both concepts – ‘nature’ and ‘religion’ – remain key to the contemporary research imagination. Though the terms have differently been subject to critical engagement, both have also never gone away as theory texts. In other words, both ‘nature’ and ‘religion’ form a part of a corpus of theory culture that emerged with enlightenment rationality and remains silently universal, prescriptive, and thus ideological in the ways that it serves disciplinary geography’s self-consolidating interest. The rest of the world is constructed by this research imagination “in the idiom of cases, examples, and test sites” (Appadurai 2000, p.4). What is at stake here is the ideological constitution of space that trails in the wake of this kind of research imagination.

To elaborate, critical nature scholarship itself re-essentializes the concept of ‘nature’ at the very moment of its undoing. Whilst this work may in various ways refute nature’s ontological status as a domain separate to humankind, it ultimately leaves intact nature as a presupposed public knowledge and taxonomy. In other words, to argue that ‘nature’ *is* a social construction, is also to assume that a nature/culture distinction is a given, despite the fact that for many in the world such a binary does not exist to be unmasked in the first place (Curry 2008, p.52; West 2005, p.639). In the Sri Lankan context, what follows then is a necessarily restrictive kind of research investigation formulated along the following lines: ‘how is *nature* experienced or constructed in Sri Lanka?’ Implicitly, this is to reaffirm a Cartesian ontology that distinguishes a knowing human subject from a non-human object world. This is earth writing – *geo-grafia* – in a particular kind of way that remains tightly

tethered to enlightenment rationality, thus writing Sri Lankan space in that image. As I show below, human relationships with the environment in Sri Lanka are *also* textualized through quite other, non-dualistic metaphysics routed through Buddhism thought as philosophy, not as religion per se. In fact, in this context the very phrase “human relationships *with* the environment” is misleading insofar as it implies an inescapably dualistic relationship between subject (human) and object (environment).

To ask ‘what role *religion* plays in the politics of Sri Lankan nationhood?’ is also misleading however, as it reessentializes Buddhism as a formal religion in the Sri Lankan context. Buddhism’s emergence as a formal religion in early nineteenth century colonial Ceylon was bound to the comparative science of religion, which itself was driven by orientalist scholarship intent on identifying, classifying and interpreting the existence of other – that is to say, non-Christian – religions existent in the world (Scott 1998, p.58). Christianity, with its emphasis on doctrines-scriptures-beliefs, provided the template for these Other religions. Buddhism was always destined to be written like this by orientalist scholars intent on cataloguing and comparing the world’s major religions (see Cohn 1996). Importantly, for a religion to exist, to dwell in a place, its constitutive outside – the secular – must also be discernible. As a consequence, to ask what role religion plays in the Sri Lankan context, or to construe Buddhism *as* ‘religion’ like this, is to imply the existence of secular spaces outside Buddhist space in Sri Lanka. It is to imagine a socio-spatial dialectic from which Buddhism *can be* excluded.

To be clear, I do not suggest that ‘nature’ and ‘religion’ do not exist in Sri Lanka. There is a sizeable Sri Lankan ‘nature’ and wildlife industry, and Buddhism is consolidated as a doctrinaire and institutionalized ‘religion’ by, amongst other means, its protection in the country’s written constitution and the significant privileges

afforded to the country's *sangha* (Buddhist monkhood), which in turn makes Buddhism itself anything but subaltern in strict Gramscian terms. Nonetheless, my argument is that any avowed attempt to locate 'religiously Buddhist nature' in Sri Lanka, also actively dissimulates a "quite other" kind of spatiality through which ethnicizing politics works; that is a much more slippery non-dualistic Buddhist realism that has no easily discernible inside and outside, and as such colonizes the social in the Sri Lankan context. These productions of space are what I position here as subaltern geographies; subaltern in the context of their dissimulation by disciplinary geography's hegemonic theory culture, and hence its (in)ability to conceptually grasp such spatial formations.

***Uncertainty and translation: subaltern geography as negative dialectics***

In the context of this research in Sri Lanka, moving towards these "quite other" spatialities necessitates working through two key registers that I suggest more generally are key to the task of advancing postcolonial geography: uncertainty and translation. To restate the double bind that confronts the problematic at hand: how to make visible the political filaments of Sri Lankan spaces of 'religious' 'nature', when those very words erase the spatial and political formations under investigation?

One key strategy is to proceed by working in the domain of uncertainty. What I advocate here is a cautious yet creative kind of intellectual work that aims to learn difference precisely by *unlearning* the kind of conceptual knowledge that we already know as social scientists (see McFarlane 2006). Uncertainty's epistemically liberating promise is the simple recognition that alterity remains underived from us. It demands a politico-intellectual effort that must necessarily identify how dominant concept metaphors (nature and religion are my examples), when thought through radically

different regional contexts, always work to pull us into forms of implicit and silent comparison (see Jazeel and McFarlane 2010, p.118; Robinson 2011, p.129). As Aamir Mufti writes, working with uncertainty aims to actively “displace and realign the axis of ‘comparison’ for our discipline from *Europe* or the West to *the planet*” (2005, p.487). Mufti’s mobilization of *the planet* sets to work Spivak’s more recent and suitably awkward formulation “planetarity” (2003, pp.71-102), which she calls upon to overwrite the globe and globalization. Globalization, she argues, is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere (ibid., p.72), and theory’s globalization promulgates the same grids and graticules of analysis everywhere. So, for example, theorizing a Sri Lankan or Buddhist ‘nature’ becomes mere adjectival modification to the universal prescriptions of nature’s inescapably dualistic metaphysics.

Working in the domain of uncertainty on the other hand pushes us to critically engage the globalization of theory with as much urgency and reflexivity as geographers have engaged the globalization of capital or neo-liberalism. In words that speak fortuitously to my own problematic, Spivak writes that “To talk planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided “natural” space rather than a differentiated political space, can work in the interest of this globalization in the mode of the abstract as such” (ibid.). What is much harder is the defamiliarization of what would be familiar space; the making uncanny of familiar EuroAmerican concept-metaphors, like ‘nature’ and ‘religion’. This is the uncertain and hard work required to suspend oneself into the text of the quite other (Spivak 2008, p.23).

In the Sri Lankan context, proceeding in the domain of uncertainty leads us to recognize how Buddhism does not always announce itself as formal, organized

religion, that is to say in the sense of an identifiable system of doctrines-scriptures-beliefs. Writing about Tibetan Buddhism and the western imagination, Peter Bishop (1993, p.17) has stressed how before the Orientalist obsession with the myth of the Shangri-La, Tibetans did not think of themselves as “Buddhists”. Rather, these were people who practiced the teachings of the Lord Buddha, and whose beliefs and rituals even today merge indefinably into local environments, folk customs and everyday practice. In other words, ‘religion’ has little to do with the aesthetic specificities of the Tibetan present.

In similar ways, for many in Sri Lanka, in incomparably un-‘religious’ ways, Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics textualize society and space as much as enlightenment and Cartesian rationality do (see Jazeel 2013b). Buddhism thought in this capillary way is best conceived as a structure of feeling (Williams 1977) rather than a ‘religion’. As such, and importantly, it has no irreligious or secular outside, and as a structure of feeling it is not in any way opposed to modernity. It is both secular and religious at one and the same time. This figuration of Buddhism’s capillary operation in Sri Lanka takes us further in terms of the political geographies it makes visible. As I have stated, it is not that Buddhism does not exist in Sri Lanka as an organized ‘religion’, rather in addition to its institutional presence in the country, Buddhism *also* exists in this more pervasive, aesthetic and residual way. This dual existence of Buddhism is, in fact, precisely what enables the state to legitimately claim it can parse ‘religion’ (as an organized institution) from public and institutionally political spaces, when in actual fact Buddhism in its more capillary and aesthetic form continues to produce space from the inside out, in the process hegemonizing and territorializing the social.



Where aporias of understanding occur in the research imagination, the work of teasing out subaltern geographies must desist from the knee-jerk reaction to fill those gaps with the radiant light of sovereign and familiar EuroAmerican concept-metaphors. That is precisely where dissimulation of the subaltern geographies to which I refer occurs. In this sense, to learn by unlearning that which we know about the concept-metaphor ‘religion’ is not just to work in the domain of uncertainty, it is also to push for a certain kind of translational work. As Sidaway et al. (2004, p.1037) suggest in the context of political geography, translation makes visible the specificities of “nomenclature, terminology and language used to designate the political and its geographies”. If in this paper I have re-stated the importance of regarding spatial formations as always in some sense textual, particularly in the light of disciplinary geography’s materialist turns, then to push for translational work is simply to stress that space may not always be written in scripts with which disciplinary geography is familiar. This is to suggest that materialities must be contextualized, and reading space in translation can help with that task of contextualization.

For example, pausing over vernacular approximations of the word ‘nature’ in the Sinhala language proves instructive insofar as it offers insights into the non-dualistic formations of a Buddhist environmental realism. In Sinhala, the word *swabhawadharmaya* is used to refer to the biophysical world, and its use conjoins two semantic meanings. *Swabhwaya* alone is used to refer to the essential quality of something, where *swa* denotes own-becoming, or the essential quality of something; an object’s hardness, coldness, smoothness, for example. But *swabhwaya* is commonly used in conjunction with *-dharmaya*, thus connecting the etymology back to the notion of Buddhist dharma, or in other words Buddhist philosophy. Dharma is a

foundational principle in Buddhist metaphysics. It is the energy that comprises the universe, and, unlike in western metaphysics, it is an energy that encompasses and leaves no room for an objective world. To glimpse dharma then, is to transcend selfhood and become one with that dharma, with the universe. Dharma is thus a fundamentally non-dualistic formulation that the word ‘nature’ violently disfigures. *Swabhawadharmaya*, therefore, is by no means an equivalent to ‘nature’ (Jazeel 2013a, p.72). Idiomatically, its literal use mobilizes an encompassment of metaphysical principles about the Buddhist world itself; principles that the word ‘nature’ cannot begin to capture.

This is the geographical difference that translation makes visible. We can move towards radical alterity precisely via the *inability* to translate, which itself is what retains the promise of the “quite other” that alterity marks. Whether or not we have well-developed language-learning skills, working through the register of cultural translation is at its core an effort to expand the range of literacies that we can bring to the formulation of our research (Mufti 2005, p.477). What this means in geographical terms is simply that a Buddhist place, or a place through which one can trace the inscription of Buddhist aesthetics or structures of feeling, is also a sovereign space written from the inside out in a particular kind of way. The work of translation reveals a Buddhist realist universalism that is neither ‘religious’, nor ‘natural’ in all the ways that those concepts at first suggest. In Sri Lanka, where Buddhism is inalienably connected to the Sinhala ethnos, the work of reading these subaltern geographies makes visible the contours of particular kinds of political territorialization. This ongoing Sinhala-Buddhist territorialization that takes place through all manner of environmental spatial productions (see Jazeel 2013b), works to (re)produce Sri Lanka’s minority Tamil Hindu, Muslim and Burgher groups *as* other, whilst also

hospitably making space for those others in the postcolonial nation-state. And precisely by doing so, this territorialization instantiates substantive forms of Sinhala-Buddhist sovereignty and power.

This paper has suggested the strategic and interventionary potential in spatial theory's own fractured and fracturing narrative; a fracturing that can be unleashed by the work of uncertainty and translation. In terms of postcolonial geography, subalternity's radical disciplinary potential is in its dialectical relationship to hegemonic geographical knowledge. For example, Vinay Gidwani (2008, p.2580) draws upon Theodor Adorno's engagement with Hegel's dialectic to refer to theory's strategic and explanatory potential as its "subaltern moment". As he puts it, "[Adorno] gave the name 'negative dialectics' – a 'dialectics of non-identity' – to the unstoppable trembling produced in the selfsame Hegelian subject by unruly otherness" (ibid.). The uncertain and translational engagement of concept-metaphors like 'nature', like 'religion', is precisely that unruly otherness that produces the "unstoppable trembling" of those selfsame concepts in the Sri Lankan context. From that trembling comes the postcolonial geographical ability to dislodge and negate the explanatory potential of extant concept metaphors and theory texts, and only then we can hope to shake loose the discernable contours of quite other geographies that once were obscured by those same theory texts: these are the subaltern geographies toward which this paper has gestured.

In closing, it is worth stressing that it would be antithetical to generalize from my example. In fact, my example must instead stand as a demonstration, simply because this paper has insisted on the importance of engaging singularities. I have argued against blithely generalizing from essentializing Eurocentric theoretical resources, and I have argued that by taking singularities seriously we can reveal the

ways that radical geographical alterity is so often spoken for by the EuroAmerican text of theory. Gayatri Spivak's question – *Can the Subaltern Speak?* – remains of profound importance across the social sciences and humanities, but for geographers the question's potential is heightened when its historical plane is transposed to show the ways that hegemonic spatial theory speaks for the world's vast tapestry of different geographies. Subalternity as I have tried to mobilize it in this essay operates as a heuristic and bifurcated figure of both constraint and release in disciplinary knowledge production (Clayton 2011, p.246); a method for, first, revealing the ideological constitution and dissimulation of quite other spatialities, and second, for embarking on the (im)possible task of eliciting those quite other geographies on terms true to the singularity of their differences.

At its core, however, this paper is also an appeal for postcolonial geography to continue to dwell in the domain of representation; to not turn its disciplinary back on the text of the world before we have got to grips with the world's truly heterogeneous and discontinuous textual fabric. This, I think, is a salient reminder now that geography has relentlessly pursued its materialist, non-representational and vitalist turns. In fact, right now it seems apposite to ask whether such preoccupations are actively dissimulating ever more geographies? Going forward, we need to pause over many more of our disciplinary theoretical texts in order for a postcolonial geographical research imagination to more effectively, and far less imperially, engage radical alterity.

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<sup>1</sup> For more comprehensive genealogies of, and reflections on, the Subaltern Studies collective, including the geographies and political contexts in which it was formed, see Chaturvedi (2000), Gidwani (2009), and Chatterjee (2012).