

The Problem of Speaking for Others

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# The Problem of Speaking for Others

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*Linda Alcoff*

Consider the following true stories:

1. Anne Cameron, a very gifted white Canadian author, writes several semi-fictional accounts of the lives of Native Canadian women. She writes them in first person and assumes a Native identity. At the 1988 International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal a group of Native Canadian writers decided to ask Cameron to, in their words, “move over” on the grounds that her writings are disempowering for Native authors. She agrees.<sup>1</sup>

2. After the 1989 elections in Panama are overturned by Manuel Noriega, President Bush of the United States declares in a public address that Noriega’s actions constitute an “outrageous fraud” and that “the voice of the Panamanian people has spoken.” “The Panamanian people,” he tells us, “want democracy and not tyranny, and want Noriega out.” He proceeds to plan the invasion of Panama.

3. At a recent symposium at my university, a prestigious theorist was invited to give a lecture on the political problems of postmodernism. Those of us in the audience, including many white women and people of oppressed nationalities and races,

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waited in eager anticipation for what he has to contribute to this important discussion. To our disappointment, he introduced his lecture by explaining that he could not cover the assigned topic, because as a white male he did not feel that he could speak for the feminist and postcolonial perspectives that have launched the critical interrogation of postmodernism's politics. He went on to give us a lecture on architecture.

These examples demonstrate some of the current practices and discussions around speaking for others in our society. As a type of discursive practice, speaking for others has come under increasing criticism, and in some communities it is being rejected. There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate. In feminist magazines such as *Sojourner* it is common to find articles and letters in which the author states that she can only speak for herself. In her important paper, "Dyke Methods," Joyce Trebilcot offers a philosophical articulation of this view. She renounces for herself the practice of speaking for others within a lesbian feminist community and argues further that she "will not try to get other wimmin to accept my beliefs in place of their own" on the grounds that to do so would be to practice a kind of discursive coercion and even a violence (1).<sup>2</sup> In anthropology there is also much discussion going on about whether it is possible to adequately or justifiably speak for others. Trinh T. Minh-ha explains the grounds for skepticism when she says that anthropology is "mainly a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them,' of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature man . . . in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless . . . 'them' is only admitted among 'us,' the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an 'us' . . ." (65, 67).<sup>3</sup> Given this analysis, even ethnographies written by progressive anthropologists are a priori regressive because of the structural features of anthropological discursive practice.

The recognition that there is a problem in speaking for others has arisen from two sources. First, there is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to

transcend one's location. In other words, a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech. The creation of women's studies and African-American studies departments was founded on this very belief: that both the study of and the advocacy for the oppressed must come to be done principally by the oppressed themselves, and that we must finally acknowledge that systematic divergences in social location between speakers and those spoken for will have a significant effect on the content of what is said. The unspoken premise here is simply that a speaker's location is epistemically salient. I shall explore this issue further in the next section.

The second source involves a recognition that, not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for. This was part of the argument made against Anne Cameron's speaking for Native Canadian women: Cameron's intentions were never in question, but the effects of her writing were argued to be counterproductive in regard to the needs of Native women. Thus, the work of privileged authors who speak on behalf of the oppressed is coming more and more under criticism from members of those oppressed groups themselves.<sup>5</sup>

As philosophers and social theorists we are authorized by virtue of our academic positions to develop theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs, and goals of others. However, we must begin to ask ourselves whether this is a legitimate authority. Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for validity? In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?

We might try to delimit this problem as only arising when a more privileged person speaks for a less privileged one. In this case, we might say that I should only speak for groups of which I am a member. But this does not tell us how groups themselves should be delimited. For example, can a white woman speak

for all women simply by virtue of being a woman? If not, how narrowly should we draw the categories? I am a Panamanian-American, and a person of mixed ethnicity and race: half white/Angla and half Panamanian mestiza. The criterion of group identity leaves many unanswered questions for a person such as myself, since I have membership in many conflicting groups but my membership in all of them is problematic. On what basis can we justify a decision to demarcate groups and define membership in one way rather than another? No easy solution to this problem can be found by simply restricting the practice of speaking for others to speaking for groups of which one is a member.

Moreover, adopting the position that one should only speak for oneself raises similarly problematic questions. For example, we might ask, if I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege? If I should not speak for others, should I restrict myself to following their lead uncritically? Is my greatest contribution to *move over and get out of the way*? And if so, what is the best way to do this—to keep silent or to deconstruct my discourse?

The answers to these questions will certainly differ significantly depending on who is asking them. While some of us may want to continue to undermine, for example, the U.S. government's practice of speaking for the "free world"—an ideological construction that represents a great number of Third World nations—we may *not* want to undermine someone such as Rigoberta Menchu's ability to speak for Guatemalan Indians.<sup>6</sup> So the question arises as to whether all instances of speaking for others should be condemned and, if not, where the line of demarcation should be drawn.

In order to answer these questions we need to become clearer on the epistemological and metaphysical issues that are involved in the articulation of the problem of speaking for others, issues that most often remain implicit. I will attempt to make these issues clear, and then I will turn to discuss some of the possible responses to the problem before advancing a provisional, procedural one of my own. But first I need to explain further my framing of the problem.

In the examples used above, there may appear to be a confla-

tion between the issue of speaking for others and the issue of speaking about others. This conflation was intentional on my part. There is an ambiguity in the two phrases: when one is speaking for others one may be describing their situation and thus also speaking about them. In fact, it may be impossible to speak for others without simultaneously conferring information about them. Similarly, when one is speaking about others, or simply trying to describe their situation or some aspect of it, one may also be speaking in place of them, that is, speaking for them. One may be speaking about others as an advocate or a messenger if the persons cannot speak for themselves. Thus I would maintain that if the practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others, since it is difficult to distinguish speaking about from speaking for in all cases.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, if we accept the premise stated above that a speaker's location has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims, then both the practice of speaking for and of speaking about raise similar issues. I will try to focus my remarks in this paper on the practice of speaking for others, but it will be impossible to keep this practice neatly disentangled from the practice of speaking about.

If "speaking about" is also involved here, however, the entire edifice of the "crisis of representation" must be connected as well. In both the practice of speaking for as well as the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*. I am representing them *as* such and such, or in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject-positions. This act of representation cannot be understood as founded on an act of discovery wherein I discover their true selves and then simply relate my discovery. I will take it as a given that such representations are in every case mediated and the product of interpretation (which is connected to the claim that a speaker's location has epistemic salience). And it is precisely because of the mediated character of all representations that some persons have rejected on political as well as epistemic grounds the legitimacy of speaking for others.

And once we pose it as a problem of representation, we see that not only are speaking for and speaking about analytically

close, so too are the practices of speaking for others and speaking for myself. For, in speaking for myself, I am also representing myself in a certain way, as occupying a specific subject-position, having certain characteristics and not others, and so on. In speaking for myself, I (momentarily) create my self—just as much as when I speak for others I create their selves—in the sense that I create a public, discursive self, which will in most cases have an effect on the self experienced as interiority. Even if someone never hears the discursive self I present of them they may be affected by the decisions others make after hearing it. The point is that a kind of representation occurs in all cases of speaking for, whether I am speaking for myself or for others, that this representation is never a simple act of discovery, and that it will most likely have an impact on the individual so represented.

Although clearly, then, the issue of speaking for others is connected to the issue of representation generally, the former I see as a very specific subset of the latter. I am skeptical that general accounts of representation are adequate to the complexity and specificity of the problem of speaking for others.

There is another sense of representation that may seem also vitally connected here: political representation, as in, for example, electoral politics. Elected representatives have a special kind of authorization to speak for their constituents, and one might wonder whether such authorization dissolves the problems associated with speaking for others and therefore should perhaps serve as a model solution for the problem. I would answer both yes and no. Elected representatives do have a kind of authorization to speak for others, and we may even expand this to include less formal instances in which someone is authorized by the person(s) spoken for to speak on their behalf. There are many examples of this sort of authorizing, such as when I asked my partner to speak on my behalf in the hospital delivery room, or when my student authorized me to speak on her behalf in a meeting with the chancellor. However, the procurement of such authorization does not render null and void all attendant problems with speaking for others. One is still interpreting the other's situation and wishes (unless perhaps one simply reads a written text they have supplied), and so one is still creating for them a self in the presence of others. Moreover, the power to confer such authorization, and to have

power over the designated representative, is rarely present in the instances where one is being spoken for. Intellectual work has certainly not been guided by the mandate to get permission from those whom one is speaking for and about, and it is safe to say that most political representatives have not been strictly guided by the need to get such authorization either. The point here is that the model of political representation cannot be used in all instances of speaking for others, though it may prove instructive when we attempt to formulate responses to the problem.

Finally, the way I have articulated this problem may imply that individuals face it and have to (and can) make an individual choice concerning their own discursive practices. This is not what I wish to imply. The problem is a social one, the options available to us are socially constructed, and the practices we engage in cannot be understood as simply the results of autonomous individual choice. Yet to simply replace the “I” with a “we” does not solve this problem because the “we” is also a product of mediating forces and, in a certain sense, is also a fictional construct. Yet, to replace both “I” and “we” with a passive voice that erases agency results in an erasure of responsibility and accountability for one’s speech, an erasure I would strenuously argue against (there is too little responsibility-taking already in Western practice!). Further, I would argue that when we sit down to write, or get up to speak, we experience ourselves as making choices. We may experience hesitation from fear of being criticized or from fear of exacerbating a problem we would like to remedy, or we may experience a resolve to speak despite existing obstacles. But in many cases we experience having the possibility to speak or not to speak. On the one hand, a theory that explains this experience as involving autonomous choices would be false and ideological, but on the other hand, if we do not acknowledge the activity of choice and the experience of individual doubt, we are denying a reality of our experiential lives.<sup>8</sup> So, despite its inadequacies, I have decided in this article to use the “I” (and in some cases the “we”) in articulating this set of problems.

The possibility of speaking for others bears crucially on the possibility of political effectivity. Both collective action and coalitions would seem to require the possibility of speaking for. Yet Gilles Deleuze has characterized as “absolutely fundamental: the



indignity of speaking for others” (Deleuze and Foucault 2009), Trebilcot has renounced for herself the act of speaking for others, and the danger of speaking for others has caused many people to question its validity. I want to explore what is at stake in rejecting or validating this as a discursive practice. But first, we must become clearer on the epistemological and metaphysical claims that are implicit in the articulation of the problem.

## I

A plethora of sources have argued in this century that the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer, can never again, be sustained, even for a moment. Critical theory, discourses of empowerment, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, feminist, and anticolonialist theories have all concurred on this point. Who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening. Following Foucault, I will call these “rituals of speaking” to identify discursive practices of speaking or writing that involve not only the text or utterance but their position within a social space including the persons involved in, acting upon, and/or affected by the words. Two elements within these rituals will deserve our attention: the positionality or location of the speaker and the discursive context. We can take the latter to refer to the connections and relations of involvement between the utterance/text and other utterances and texts as well as the material practices in the relevant environment, which should not be confused with an environment spatially adjacent to the particular discursive event.

Rituals of speaking are constitutive of meaning, the meaning of the words spoken as well as the meaning of the event. This claim requires us to shift the ontology of meaning from its location in a text or utterance to a larger space, a space that includes the text or utterance but that also includes the discursive context. And an important implication of this claim is that meaning must be understood as plural and shifting, since a single text can engender diverse meanings given diverse contexts. Not only what is emphasized, noticed, and how it is understood will be affected by

the location of both speaker and hearer, but the truth-value or epistemic status will also be affected.

For example, in many situations when a woman speaks the presumption is against her; when a man speaks he is usually taken seriously (unless he talks “the dumb way,” as Andy Warhol accused Bruce Springsteen of doing, or, in other words, if he is from an oppressed group). When writers from oppressed races and nationalities have insisted that all writing is political the claim has been dismissed as foolish, or grounded in *ressentiment*, or it is simply ignored; when prestigious European philosophers say that all writing is political it is taken up as a new and original “truth” (Judith Wilson calls this “the intellectual equivalent of the ‘cover record.’”)<sup>9</sup> The rituals of speaking that involve the location of speaker and listeners affect whether a claim is taken as a true, well-reasoned, compelling argument, or a significant idea. Thus, how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will in turn affect its perceived significance (for specific hearers). The discursive style in which some European post-structuralists have made the claim that all writing is political marks it as important and likely to be true for a certain (powerful) milieu; whereas the style in which African-American writers made the same claim marked their speech as dismissable in the eyes of the same milieu.

This point might be conceded by those who admit to the political mutability of *interpretation*, but they might continue to maintain that *truth* is a different matter altogether. And they would be right that the establishment of location’s effect on meaning and even on whether something is *taken* as true within a particular discursive context does not entail that the “actual” truth of the claim is contingent upon its context. However, this objection presupposes a particular conception of truth, one in which the truth of a statement can be distinguished from its interpretation and its acceptance. This concept of truth would make truth by definition independent of the speakers’ or listeners’ embodied and perspectival location (except in the trivial case of a speaker’s indexical statements, e.g., “I am now sitting down”).

Thus, the question of whether location bears simply on what is taken to be true or what is really true, and whether such a distinction can be upheld, involves the very difficult problem of

the meaning of truth. In the history of Western philosophy, there have existed multiple, competing definitions and ontologies of truth: correspondent, idealist, pragmatist, coherentist, and consensual notions. The dominant view has been that truth represents a relationship of correspondence between a proposition and an extra-discursive reality. In this view, truth is about a realm completely independent of human action and expresses things “as they are in themselves,” that is, free of human interpretation.

Arguably since Kant, more obviously since Hegel, it has been widely accepted that an understanding of truth which requires it to be free of human interpretation leads inexorably to skepticism, since it makes truth inaccessible by definition. This creates an impetus to reconfigure the ontology of truth, or its locus, from a place outside human interpretation to one within it. Hegel, for example, understood truth as an “identity in difference” between subjective and objective elements. Thus, within the variety of views working in the Hegelian aftermath, so-called subjective elements, or the historically specific conditions in which human knowledge occurs, are no longer rendered irrelevant or even obstacles to truth.

For example, in a coherentist account of truth, which is held by such philosophers as Rorty, Donald Davidson, Quine, Gadamer, and Foucault, truth is defined as an emergent property of what is essentially a discursive situation, when there is a specific form of integration between various elements. Such a view has no necessary relationship to idealism. In terms of the topic of this paper, the social location of the speaker can be said to bear on truth to the extent that it bears on the full meaning of any speech act. This claim will be fleshed out further as we go along.

Let me return now to the formulation of the problem of speaking for others. There are two premises implied by the articulation of the problem, and unpacking these should advance our understanding of the issues involved.

Premise 1: The “ritual of speaking” (as defined above) in which an utterance is located, always bears on meaning and truth such that there is no possibility of rendering positionality, location, or context irrelevant to content.

The phrase “bears on” here should indicate some variable amount of influence short of determination or fixing.

One important implication of this first premise is that we can no longer determine the validity of a given instance of speaking for others simply by asking whether or not the speaker has done sufficient research to justify his or her claims. Adequate research will be a necessary but insufficient criterion of evaluation.

Now let us look at the second premise.

Premise 2: Certain contexts and locations are allied with structures of oppression, and certain others are allied with resistance to oppression. Therefore all are not politically equal, and, given that politics is connected to truth, all are not epistemically equal.

The claim here that “politics is connected to truth” follows necessarily from premise 1. Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena. To the extent that this context bears on meaning, and meaning is in some sense the object of truth, we cannot make an epistemic evaluation of the claim without simultaneously assessing the politics of the situation.

According to the first premise, though we cannot maintain a neutral voice we may at least all claim the right and legitimacy to speak. But the second premise dis-authorizes some voices on grounds which are simultaneously political and epistemic.

The conjunction of premises 1 and 2 suggest that the speaker loses some portion of his or her control over the meaning and truth of his or her utterance. Given that the context of hearers is partially determinant, the speaker is not the master or mistress of the situation. Speakers may seek to regain control here by taking into account the context of their speech, but they can never know everything about this context and with written and electronic communication it is becoming increasingly difficult to know anything at all about the context of reception.

This loss of control may be taken by some speakers to mean

that no speaker can be held accountable for their discursive actions. However, a *partial* loss of control does not entail a *complete* loss of accountability. Clearly, the problematic of speaking for has at its center a concern with accountability and responsibility. Acknowledging the problem of speaking for others cannot result in eliminating a speaker's accountability.

In the next section I shall consider some possible responses to the problem of speaking for.

## II

The first response I will consider is to argue that the formulation of the problem with speaking for others involves a retrograde, metaphysically insupportable essentialism that assumes one can read the truth and meaning of *what* one says straight from the discursive context. This response I will call the "charge of reductionism" response, because it argues that a sort of reductionist theory of justification (or evaluation) is entailed by premises 1 and 2. Such a reductionist theory might, for example, reduce evaluation to a political assessment of the speaker's location, where that location is seen as an insurmountable essence that fixes one, as if one's feet are superglued to a spot on the sidewalk.

After I vehemently defended Barbara Christian's article "The Race for Theory," a male friend who had a different evaluation of the piece couldn't help raising the possibility of whether a sort of apologetics structured my response, motivated by a desire to valorize African American writing against all odds. His question raised the issue of the reductionist/essentialist theory of justification I just described.

I, too, would reject reductionist theories of justification and essentialist accounts of what it means to have a location. To say that location *bears* on meaning and truth is not the same as saying that location *determines* meaning and truth. And location is not a fixed essence absolutely authorizing one's speech in the way that God's favor absolutely authorized the speech of Moses. Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static, but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility.<sup>10</sup> What it means, then, to speak from or within a group and/or a

location is immensely complex. To the extent that location is not a fixed essence, and to the extent that there is an uneasy, under-determined, and contested relationship between location on the one hand and meaning and truth on the other, we cannot reduce evaluation of meaning and truth to a simple identification of the speaker's location.

Neither premise 1 nor premise 2 entail reductionism or essentialism. They argue for the relevance of location, not its singular power of determination. Since they do not specify how we are to understand the concept of location, it can certainly be given a nonessentialist meaning.

While the charge of reductionism response has been popular among academic theorists, a second response which I will call the "retreat" response has been popular among some sections of the U.S. feminist movement. This response is simply to retreat from all practices of speaking for and assert that one can only know one's own narrow individual experience and one's "own truth" and can never make claims beyond this. This response is motivated in part by the desire to recognize difference, for example, different priorities, without organizing these differences into hierarchies.

Now, sometimes I think this is the proper response to the problem of speaking for others, depending on who is making it. We certainly want to encourage a more receptive listening on the part of the discursively privileged and discourage presumptuous and oppressive practices of speaking for. But a retreat from speaking for will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases; it may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility for her society whatsoever. She may even feel justified in exploiting her privileged capacity for personal happiness at the expense of others on the grounds that she has no alternative.

However, opting for the retreat response is not always a thinly veiled excuse to avoid political work and indulge one's own desires. Sometimes it is the result of a desire to engage in political work without engaging in what might be called discursive imperialism.

The major problem with such a retreat is that it significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity. There are numer-

ous examples of the practice of speaking for that have been politically efficacious in advancing the needs of those spoken for, but I think the example of Menchu is particularly instructive. Menchu is a Quiche Indian born and raised in Guatemala. (I use the term “Indian” to follow R. M.’s choice of words.) Her family suffered the same fate of intense exploitation by the landowners and the government faced by nearly all Guatemalan Indians—a life in which, as of this writing, death by malnutrition and insecticide poisoning is a common occurrence. (And these are a direct result of their forced labor on large farms, not because of their traditional agrarian lifestyle.) Her father and mother became activists in the resistance movement against the landowners and, like thousands of others, were brutally tortured and murdered by the army, as was her brother. Menchu made a decision to learn Spanish, travel to other countries to tell people about the massacres, and, in so doing, try to stop the genocide.

In her autobiographical book Menchu opens with the claim that her story is “not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of . . . all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1). Thus, throughout the book she asserts that she is speaking not only for her family and her community of Quiche Indians, but for all of the 33 other Indian communities of Guatemala, who speak different languages and have different customs and beliefs than the Quiche. She explains their situation with force and eloquence, and decisively refutes any “hierarchy of civilizations” view that would render her agrarian culture as inferior and therefore responsible for its own destruction. As a representative of the Fourth World, she offers a vivid critique of the genocidal practices from which these groups of people are still suffering.<sup>11</sup>

Menchu’s words have helped publicize the situation in Guatemala, raise money for the revolution, and bring pressure against the Guatemalan and U.S. governments who have committed the massacres in collusion. The point of this example is not to argue that for Menchu there is no problem of speaking for others. She herself is very aware of the dangers and instructively recounts how this problem was addressed in the revolutionary movement of the Indians. Attempts were made to train each resistance activist to perform all the necessary tasks, from building traps for the

soldiers, to learning how to use a rifle, to going to the city for help. Structures of general training as opposed to specialization were emphasized in order to reduce the vulnerability of the movement to the death or betrayal of specific individuals. This was also the reason Menchu went to the city to become a house servant in order to learn Spanish: so the Quiche would no longer have to rely on others to represent their situation. (In many cases translators were paid by the government or landowners purposefully to mistranslate the Quiche words.) Also, she speaks with wry humor about a group of progressive Europeans who came to Guatemala and tried to help her village with new farming products. The village was not interested: the Europeans' assessment of what they needed was off the mark. Menchu and her family maintained friendly relations with the Europeans but patiently resisted their interpretations of the village's needs.

Thus, Menchu cannot be constructed as a "naive" speaker unaware of the dangers and difficulties of speaking for others; she and her *compañeros* are well aware of the dangers since they have so often been the unhappy recipients of malicious or well-intentioned but wrongheaded attempts by others to speak for them. Yet instead of retreating from speaking for others, Menchu and her *compañeros* devised methods to decrease the dangers. And despite the significant and complex differences between the many Indian communities in Guatemala, she has not flinched from the opportunity to speak on behalf of all of them.

Trebilcot's version of the retreat response needs to be looked at separately because she agrees that an absolute prohibition of speaking for would undermine political effectiveness. She applies her prohibition against the practice only within a lesbian feminist community. So it might be argued that the retreat from speaking for others can be maintained without sacrificing political effectiveness if it is restricted to particular discursive spaces. Why might one advocate such a retreat? Trebilcot holds that speaking for and attempting to persuade others inflicts a kind of discursive violence on the other and her beliefs. Given that interpretations and meanings are discursive constructions made by embodied speakers, Trebilcot worries that attempting to persuade or speak for another will cut off that person's ability or willingness to engage in the constructive act of developing meaning. Since no embodied



speaker can produce more than a partial account, everyone's account needs to be encouraged (that is, within a specified community, which for Trebilcot is the lesbian community).

There is much in Trebilcot's discussion with which I agree. I certainly agree that in some instances speaking for others constitutes a violence and should be stopped. But there remains a problem with the view that, even within a restricted, supportive community, the practice of speaking for others can be abandoned.

This problem is that Trebilcot's position, as well as a more general retreat position, presumes an ontological configuration of the discursive context that simply does not obtain. In particular, it assumes that one *can* retreat into one's discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly based on that location that do not range over others, that one can disentangle oneself from the implicating networks between one's discursive practices and others' locations, situations, and practices. (In other words, the claim that I can speak only for myself assumes the autonomous conception of the self in Classical Liberal theory—that I am unconnected to others in my authentic self or that I can achieve an autonomy from others given certain conditions.) But there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to decisively demarcate a boundary between one's location and all others. Even a complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance.

As my practices are made possible by events spatially far from my body so too my own practices make possible or impossible practices of others. The declaration that I "speak only for myself" has the sole effect of allowing me to avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others; it cannot literally erase those effects.

Let me offer an illustration of this. The feminist movement in the United States has spawned many kinds of support groups for women with various needs: rape victims, incest survivors, battered wives, and so forth, and some of these groups have been structured around the view that each survivor must come to her own "truth," which ranges only over oneself and has no bearing on others. Thus, one woman's experience of sexual assault, its

effect on her and her interpretation of it, should not be taken as a universal generalization to which others must subsume or conform their experience. This view works only up to a point. To the extent it recognizes irreducible differences in the way people respond to various traumas, and is sensitive to the genuinely variable way in which women can heal themselves, it represents real progress beyond the homogeneous, universalizing approach that sets out one road for all to follow. However, it is an illusion to think that, even in the safe space of a support group, a member of the group can, for example, trivialize brother-sister incest as “sex play” without profoundly harming someone else in the group who is trying to maintain her realistic assessment of her brother’s sexual activities with her as a harmful assault against his adult rationalization that “well, for me it was just harmless fun.” Even if the speaker offers a dozen caveats about her views as restricted to her location, she will still affect the other woman’s ability to conceptualize and interpret her experience and her response to it. And this is simply because we cannot neatly separate off our mediating praxis that interprets and constructs our experiences from the praxis of others. We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also. When I speak for myself, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and am offering that to others, whether I intend to or not, as one possible way to be.

Thus, the attempt to avoid the problematic of speaking for by retreating into an individualist realm is based on an illusion, well-supported in the individualist ideology of the West, that a self is not constituted by multiple intersecting discourses but consists in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others. It is an illusion that I can separate from others to such an extent that I can avoid affecting them. This may be the intention of my speech, and even its meaning if we take that to be the formal entailments of the sentences, but it will not be the effect of the speech, and therefore cannot capture the speech in its reality as a discursive practice. When I “speak for myself” I am participating in the creation and reproduction of discourses through which my own and other selves are constituted.

A further problem with the retreat response is that it may be motivated by a desire to find a method or practice immune from criticism. If I speak only for myself it may appear that I am immune from criticism because I am not making any claims that describe others or prescribe actions for them. If I am only speaking for myself I have no responsibility for being true to your experience or needs.

But surely it is both morally and politically objectionable to structure one's actions around the desire to avoid criticism, especially if this outweighs other questions of effectivity. In some cases perhaps the motivation is not so much to avoid criticism as to avoid errors, and the person believes that the only way to avoid errors is to avoid all speaking for others. However, errors are unavoidable in theoretical inquiry as well as political struggle, and moreover they often make contributions. The desire to find an absolute means to avoid making errors comes perhaps not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation. From such a position one's own location and positionality would not require constant interrogation and critical reflection; one would not have to constantly engage in this emotionally troublesome endeavor and would be immune from the interrogation of others. Such a desire for mastery and immunity must be resisted.

A final response to the problem that I will consider occurs in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's rich essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Spivak's essay, the central issue is an essentialist, authentic conception of the self and of experience. She criticizes the "self-abnegating intellectual" pose that Foucault and Deleuze adopt when they reject speaking for others on the grounds that it assumes the oppressed can transparently represent their own true interests. According to Spivak, Foucault and Deleuze's position serves only to conceal the actual authorizing power of the retreating intellectuals, who in their very retreat help to consolidate a particular conception of experience (as transparent and self-knowing). Thus, to promote "listening to" as opposed to speaking for essentializes the oppressed as nonideologically constructed subjects. But Spivak is also critical of speaking for others

that engages in dangerous representations. In the end Spivak prefers a “speaking to,” in which the intellectual neither abnegates his or her discursive role nor presumes an authenticity of the oppressed but still allows for the possibility that the oppressed will produce a “countersentence” that can then suggest a new historical narrative.

This response is the one with which I have the most agreement. We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one’s own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers.

Often the possibility of dialogue is left unexplored or inadequately pursued by more privileged persons. Spaces in which it may seem as if it is impossible to engage in dialogic encounters need to be transformed in order to do so—spaces such as classrooms, hospitals, workplaces, welfare agencies, universities, institutions for international development and aid, and governments. It has long been noted that existing communication technologies have the potential to produce these kinds of interaction even though research and development teams have not found it advantageous under capitalism to do so.

Spivak’s arguments, however, suggest that the simple solution is not for the oppressed or less privileged to be able to speak for themselves, since their speech will not necessarily be either liberatory or reflective of their “true interests,” if such exist. I would agree with her here, yet it can still be argued, as I think she herself concludes, that ignoring the subaltern’s or oppressed person’s speech is “to continue the imperialist project” (298). But if a privileging of the oppressed’s speech cannot be made on the grounds that its content will necessarily be liberatory, it can be made on the grounds of the very act of speaking itself. Speaking constitutes a subject that challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, an opposition that is key in the reproduction of imperialist modes of discourse. The problem with speaking for others exists in the very structure of discursive practice, no matter its content, and therefore it is this structure itself that needs alteration.

However, while there is much theoretical and practical work to be done to develop such alternatives, the practice of speaking for others remains the best possibility in some existing situations. An absolute retreat weakens political effectivity, is based on a metaphysical illusion, and often effects only an obscuring of the intellectual's power. Therefore, in the remainder of this paper I will ask, how can we lessen the dangers of speaking for?

### III

In rejecting a general retreat from speaking for, I am not advocating a return to an un-self-conscious appropriation of the other, but rather that anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved. I want to develop this point through elucidating four sets of interrogatory practices that are meant to help evaluate possible and actual instances of speaking for. In list form they may appear to resemble an algorithm, as if we could plug in an instance of speaking for and factor out an analysis and evaluation. However, they are meant only to suggest a list of the questions that should be asked concerning any such discursive practice. These are by no means original: they have been learned and practiced by many activists and theorists.

1. The impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics!), fought against. This may seem an odd way to begin discussing how to speak for, but the point is that the impetus to *always* be the speaker and to speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination. If one's immediate impulse is to teach rather than listen to a less-privileged speaker, one should resist that impulse long enough to interrogate it carefully. Some of us have been taught that by right of having the dominant gender, class, race, letters after our name, or some other criterion we are more likely to have the truth. Others have been taught the opposite, and will speak haltingly, with apologies, if they speak at all.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that the very decision to "move over" or retreat can occur only from a position of privilege. Those who are not in a position of speaking at all cannot retreat from an action they do not employ. Moreover, making the

decision for oneself whether to retreat is an extension or application of privilege, not an abdication of it. Still, it is sometimes called for.

2. We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in. Constructing hypotheses about the possible connections between our location and our words is one way to begin. This procedure would be most successful if engaged in collectively with others, by which aspects of our location less highlighted in our own minds might be revealed to us.<sup>13</sup>

One deformed way in which this is too often carried out is when speakers offer up in the spirit of “honesty” autobiographical information about themselves usually at the beginning of their discourse as a kind of disclaimer. This is meant to acknowledge their own understanding that they are speaking from a specified, embodied location without pretense to a transcendental truth. But as Maria Lugones and others have forcefully argued, such an act serves no good end when it is used as a disclaimer against one’s ignorance or errors and is made without critical interrogation of the bearing of such an autobiography on what is about to be said. It leaves for the listeners all the real work that needs to be done. For example, if a middle-class white man were to begin a speech by sharing with us this autobiographical information and then using it as a kind of apologetics for any limitations of his speech, this would leave those of us in the audience who do not share his social location to do the work by ourselves of translating his terms into our own, appraising the applicability of his analysis to our diverse situation, and determining the substantive relevance of his location on his claims. This is simply what less-privileged persons have always had to do when reading the history of philosophy, literature, etc., making the task of appropriating these discourses more difficult and time-consuming (and more likely to result in alienation). Simple unanalyzed disclaimers do not improve on this familiar situation and may even make it worse to the extent that by offering such information the speaker may feel even more authorized to speak and be accorded more authority by his peers.

3. Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says. To whom one is accountable is a political/epistemological choice contestable, contingent, and, as

Donna Haraway says, constructed through the process of discursive action. What this entails in practice is a serious and sincere commitment to remain open to criticism and to attempt actively, attentively, and sensitively to “hear” (understand) the criticism. A quick impulse to reject criticism must make one wary.

4. Here is my central point. In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there.

Looking merely at the content of a set of claims without looking at effects of the claims cannot produce an adequate or even meaningful evaluation of them, partly because the notion of a content separate from effects does not hold up. The content of the claim, or its meaning, emerges in interaction between words and hearers within a very specific historical situation. Given this, we have to pay careful attention to the discursive arrangement in order to understand the full meaning of any given discursive event. For example, in a situation where a well-meaning First World person is speaking for a person or group in the Third World, the very discursive arrangement may reinscribe the “hierarchy of civilizations” view where the United States lands squarely at the top. This effect occurs because the speaker is positioned as authoritative and empowered, as the knowledgeable subject, while the group in the Third World is reduced, merely because of the structure of the speaking practice, to an object and victim that must be championed from afar, thus disempowered. Though the speaker may be trying to materially improve the situation of some lesser-privileged group, the effects of her discourse is to reinforce racist, imperialist conceptions and perhaps also to further silence the lesser-privileged group’s own ability to speak and be heard.<sup>14</sup> This shows us why it is so important to reconceptualize discourse, as Foucault recommends, as an *event*, which includes speaker, words, hearers, location, language, and so on.

All such evaluations produced in this way will be of necessity *indexed*. That is, they will obtain for a very specific location and cannot be taken as universal. This simply follows from the fact that the evaluations will be based on the specific elements of his-

torical discursive context, location of speakers and hearers, and so forth. When any of these elements is changed, a new evaluation is called for.

Let me illustrate this by applying it to the examples I gave at the beginning. In the case of Cameron, if the effects of her books are truly disempowering for Native Canadian women, they are counterproductive to Cameron's own stated intentions, and she should indeed "move over." In the case of the white male theorist who discussed architecture instead of the politics of postmodernism, the effect of his refusal was that he offered no contribution to an important issue and all of us there lost an opportunity to discuss and explore it.

Now let me turn to President Bush. When Bush claims that Noriega is a corrupt dictator who stands in the way of democracy in Panama, he repeats a claim that has been made almost word for word by the Opposition movement in Panama. Yet the effects of the two statements are vastly different because the full meaning of the claim changes radically depending on who states it. When the president of the United States stands before the world passing judgement on a Third World government, and criticizing it on the basis of corruption and a lack of democracy, the full meaning of *this* statement, as opposed to the Opposition's, is to reinforce the prominent Anglo view that Latin American corruption is the primary cause of the region's poverty and lack of democracy, that the United States is on the side of democracy in the region, and that the United States condemns corruption and tyranny. Thus, the effect of the president's speaking for Latin America is to re-consolidate U.S. imperialism by obscuring its true role in the region in torturing and murdering hundreds and thousands of people who have tried to bring democratic and progressive governments into existence. And this will continue to be its effect unless and until he radically alters U.S. foreign policy and admits its history of international mass murder.

### ***Conclusion***

This issue is complicated by the variable way in which the importance of the source, or location of the author, can be understood. In one view, the author of a text is its "owner" and "origina-



tor” credited with creating its ideas and with being their authoritative interpreter. In another view, the original speaker or writer is no more privileged than any other person who articulates those views; and in fact the “author” cannot be identified in a strict sense because the concept of author is an ideological construction many abstractions removed from the way in which ideas emerge and become material forces.<sup>15</sup> Now, does this latter position mean that the source or locatedness of the author is irrelevant?

It need not entail this conclusion, though it might in some formulations. We can de-privilege the “original” author and reconceptualize ideas as traversing (almost) freely in a discursive space, available from many locations, and without a clearly identifiable originary track, and yet retain our sense that source remains relevant to effect. Our meta-theory of authorship does not preclude the material reality that in discursive spaces there is a speaker or writer credited as the author of their utterances, or that for example the feminist appropriation of the concept “patriarchy” gets tied to Kate Millett, a white Anglo feminist, or that the term feminism itself has been and is associated with a Western origin. These associations have an effect, an effect of producing distrust on the part of some Third World nationalists, an effect of reinscribing semiconscious imperialist attitudes on the part of some First World feminists. These are not the only possible effects, and some of the effects may not be pernicious, but all the effects must be taken into account when evaluating the discourse of “patriarchy.” I don’t wish to imply here that I believe the term “patriarchy” should be rejected, or that the responses of hearers must be accepted without argument, but if we ignore the real effects and concentrate only on “content” (as if these could be separated), our evaluation will be seriously inadequate.

The emphasis on effects should not imply, therefore, that an examination of the speaker’s location is any less crucial. This latter examination might be (and has been) called doing a genealogy. In this sense a genealogy involves asking how a position or view is mediated and constituted through and within the conjunction and conflict of historical, cultural, economic, psychological, and sexual practices. But it seems to me that the importance of the source of a view, and the importance of doing a genealogy, should be subsumed within an overall analysis of effects, making the central question what the effects are of the view on material and discursive

sive practices through which it traverses and the particular configuration of power relations emergent from these. Source is relevant only to the extent that it has an impact on effect. As Spivak likes to say, the invention of the telephone by a European upper class male in no way preempts its being put to the use of an anti-imperialist revolution.

In conclusion, I would stress that the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies. I hope that this analysis will contribute to rather than diminish the important discussion going on today about how to develop strategies for a more equitable, just distribution of the ability to speak and be heard. But this development should not be taken as an absolute dis-authorization of all practices of speaking for. It is not *always* the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off, or that when we speak for others they end up worse off. Sometimes, as Loyce Stewart has argued, we do need a "messenger" to advocate for our needs.

The source of a claim or discursive practice in suspect motives or maneuvers or in privileged social locations, I have argued, though it is always relevant, cannot be sufficient to repudiate it. We must ask further questions about its effects, questions that amount to the following: will it enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?

### Notes

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1. See Maracle, 9–10.

2. Trebilcot is explaining here her own reasoning for rejecting these practices, but she is not advocating that other women join her in this. Thus, her argument does not fall into a self-referential incoherence.

3. For examples of anthropologist's concern with this issue see Clifford and

Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*; Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority"; Marcus and Fischer, eds., *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*; and Rabinow, "Discourse and Power."

4. To be privileged here will mean to be in a more favorable, mobile, and dominant position vis-à-vis the structures of power/knowledge in a society. Thus privilege carries with it presumption in one's favor when one speaks. Certain races, nationalities, genders, sexualities, and classes confer privilege, but a single individual (perhaps most individuals) may enjoy privilege with respect to some parts of their identity and a lack of privilege with respect to others. Therefore, privilege must always be indexed to specific relationships as well as to specific locations.

The term privilege is not meant to include positions of discursive power achieved through merit, but in any case these are rarely pure. In other words, some persons are accorded discursive authority because they are respected leaders or because they are teachers in a classroom and know more about the material at hand. So often, of course, the authority of such persons based on their merit combines with the authority they may enjoy by virtue of their having the dominant gender, race, class, or sexuality. It is the latter sources of authority that I am referring to by the term "privilege."

5. See also Lugones and Spelman. In their paper Lugones and Spelman explore the way in which the "demand for the women's voice" disempowered women of color by not attending to the differences in privilege within the category of women, resulting in a privileging of white women's voices only. They explore the effects this has had on the making of theory within feminism, and attempt to find "ways of talking or being talked about that are helpful, illuminating, empowering, respectful" (25). This essay takes inspiration from theirs and is meant to continue their discussion.

6. See her *I . . . Rigoberta Menchu*. (The use of the term "Indian" here follows Menchu's use.)

7. For example, if it is the case that no "descriptive" discourse is normative- or value-free, then no discourse is free of some kind of advocacy, and all speaking about will involve speaking for someone, ones, or something.

8. Another distinction that might be made is between different material practices of speaking for: giving a speech, writing an essay or book, making a movie or TV program, as well as hearing, reading, watching and so on. I will not address the possible differences that arise from these different practices, and will address myself to the (fictional) "generic" practice of speaking for.

9. See her "Down to the Crossroads" for a discussion of this phenomenon in the artworld, especially 36. See also Christian, and Gates, especially 34.

10. See my "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism." For more discussions on the multidimensionality of social identity, see Lugones and Anzaldúa.

11. My use of these numerical terms is meant to refer to Mao's theory of the three worlds, which was an attempt to reveal the exploitative division of labor between nations, and provide a more specific account than the term "oppressor/oppressed nations" can convey. Still, these terms are problematic since they may appear to reinscribe the very hierarchy between nations that they attempt to subvert. And in certain contexts they can resonate in such a way as to bolster unjustified feelings of superiority among First World people.

12. See Said, 219, on this point, where he shows how the "dialogue" between Western anthropology and colonized people have been nonreciprocal, and supports the need for the Westerners to begin to *stop talking*.

13. See again Said, 212, where he encourages in particular the self-interrogation of privileged speakers. This seems to be a running theme in what are sometimes called “minority discourses” these days: asserting the need for whites to study whiteness. The need for an interrogation of one’s location exists with every discursive event by any speaker, but given the lopsidedness of current “dialogues” it seems especially important to push for this among the privileged, who sometimes seem to want to study everybody’s social and cultural construction but their own.

14. To argue for the relevance of effects for evaluation does not entail that there is only one way to do such an accounting or what kind of effects will be deemed desirable. How one evaluates a particular effect is left open; number 4 in my list argues simply that effects must always be taken into account.

15. I like the way Susan Bordo makes this point. In speaking about theories or ideas that gain prominence, she says: “. . . all cultural formations . . . [are] complexly constructed out of diverse elements—intellectual, psychological, institutional, and sociological. Arising not from monolithic design but from an interplay of factors and forces, it is best understood not as a discrete, definable position which can be adopted or rejected, but as an emerging coherence which is being fed by a variety of currents, sometimes overlapping, sometimes quite distinct” (135). If ideas arise in such a configuration of forces, does it make sense to ask for an author?

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