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## Questioning Appropriation: Agency and Complicity in a Transnational Feminist Location Politics

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Questioning Appropriation: Agency and Complicity in a Transnational Feminist Location Politics

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**Abstract:** In feminist circles agency is often opposed to complicity and associated with resistance to sexism and patriarchy, yet such binary oppositions make the political stakes of their presumed boundaries difficult to interrogate. By bringing location politics into dialogue with agency theory, boundaries of same/Other and location categories may move from a naturalized ground for political work to the contested center of a politics of resistance. I follow a Foucauldian interpretation of agency to reconsider the ethico-politics of established divisions of self and Other both individually and in terms of social movements. By following Gayatri Spivak, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, and Chandra Mohanty's transnational feminist politics, I argue for the refusal of totalizing binaries and for careful attention to unavoidable complicities. This makes possible practices of agency that can critique the political and ethical limits and effects of its epistemology and take as its central project the intervention into appropriations of the Others into modern notions of the "real." The resulting reconstitution of self-Other relations in their work opens up important new avenues for building social movements that acknowledge difference within the subject or the movement rather than deny and expel their Others.

**Keywords:** agency, complicity, location politics, Mohanty (Chandra Talpade), Spivak (Gayatri Chakravorty), the Other

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## Introduction

Location politics places the writing subject in history, rather than allowing her to present arguments for androcentric universalized truth claims as if those claims are not contingent on historical and social locations. Yet the historical itself is a contested category, real for some and constructed or even fictional for others, definitive for a few and contested as hegemonic for a few more, knowable in some approaches and subject to aporias and silences in others.

While location politics inserts a certain difference into the epistemological, the commonplace use in practice of established social categories overlooks historically specific heterogeneities of race, class, and gender; the complexities of intersectionalities and hybridities; and poststructural and postcolonial feminist interrogations of modern liberal notions of knowledge, freedom, experience, and resistance. Modern locations, including practices of resistance, are often or perhaps inevitably complicit with patriarchy, capitalism, neocolonial white supremacy, and other problematic practices under advanced modernity, since complete freedom from such norms may well be impossible. Carefully theorized notions of agency present a way to approach these debates over the contested meanings of established categories of difference in location politics, since the politics of difference and relations to the Others of the modern are precisely what is at stake in feminist social-change work.

In some feminist circles agency is opposed to complicity and associated with resistance to sexism and patriarchy, yet such binary oppositions make the political stakes of their presumed boundaries difficult to

interrogate. For the present purposes, I use agency not as a synonym for resistance but as the taking up of a specific social location, whether the location is established through normalization or through resistance against the grain of the modern discursive regime. Social locations are made available most commonly to agents through subjection to general economies of domination operating through political technologies of the body (Foucault 1979, 25–26, 272). However, agency may become a form of resistance when the subject constitutes power relations in ways that diverge from the location politics and power/knowledge relations of fixed modes of normalization, what Judith Butler terms “desubjugation” in her reading of Foucault (2002). Critically examining a historically specific subject’s politicized relation to general economies of domination, by demarcating where she is complicit and where resistant, allows the agent to establish a critical distance from social norms even as she inevitably relies on them to constitute the intelligibility of the object of knowledge and her own subject position. Such critical examination requires attention not only to the complicities of individual actions but also to the complicities of social institutions and movements, even those that claim to resist domination while subjecting themselves to the beliefs, practices, and epistemes of modern masculinized Eurocentric liberalism.

Conversely, there has been little work on how location politics might be useful for thinking through how agency is conceived. With a few important exceptions, theorizations of agency neglect to critically examine the theorizer’s location politics. This risks perpetuating Eurocentric cultural and knowledge-based imperialisms, as some activists and theorists in the global North may be representing agency in third world women’s social-change efforts in the global South. By bringing a transnational location politics into the frame of examinations of agency, I argue that problems of appropriation and domestication of difference are central to the ethico-politics of feminist projects.

A facile emphasis on agency overlooks the limits to social change always already impinging on subjects from multiple sources. I explore theorizations of complicity to render visible and gain critical traction on the all-too-frequent subordination to these restrictive pressures by even the most successful agents for social change and resistance to structures of domination. An emphasis on complicity also helps bring the specific politics of the subject and of general economies of subjection into visibility in order to guard against the erasure of privilege that facilitates appropriations and domestications of the Other that have been a problem in the practice of location politics.

I argue below for explicitly acknowledging complicities when performing the practices of agency that lead to resistance. Such practices would allow for interrogation and destabilization of seemingly clear boundary lines between the marginal and the center or the oppositional and the complicit, so that the political stakes in such binary constructions may come more clearly into focus for critical interrogation. My central proposal is for a critical examination of an inevitable oscillation between the (unavoidably limited) freedom of agency and the (always incomplete) historically determining pressures toward complicity.

This allows for agency that can name more precisely the political and ethical effects of its epistemology and work more critically with its limits in engaging with and transforming history. Rather than uncritically granting the modern objectivist status of the “real” to the Others of modernity, an agency located in the violent histories of difference that make the modern possible may instead take as its central project the intervention into the categories of difference that such violence naturalizes. Those few transnational feminist theorists of complicity discussed below center their notions of agency on bringing to visibility the points of both naturalization and erasure of such violence through refusals of domestications and appropriations of the Others into modern notions of the “real.” The resulting reconstitution of self-Other relations in their work opens up important new avenues for building social movements that acknowledge difference within

the subject or the movement rather than deny and expel their Others (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 9). My hope here is that a dual emphasis on agency and complicity in a transnational location politics will be useful for feminists in positions of multiple privilege, as I am, as well as for those in other social locations.

While difference is at times domesticated to refer only to difference within the boundaries of a single nation-state, I emphasize below feminists working in a transnational frame to interrogate the unavoidable presence of the neocolonial, masculinized, Eurocentric discursive regime both in the countries of the global North and elsewhere. A pervasive and intractable problem remains the unavoidable presence of the logics and political limits of masculinized epistemologies of the “real,” with genealogies deriving from modern Europe. The virtually global reach of these epistemologies extends well beyond the boundaries of Europe and the modern via traditions of human rights and travestied claims to democracy, racialized and gendered logics of capitalist markets, mass education and other knowledge systems, and many other channels. It appears that this problem will remain with us for some time, and addressing it requires sharpened skills for working with complicities in order to engage with it in effective resistance for social change.

### **Agency in a Transnational Feminist Politics of Location**

Some feminist activists and theorists have found a politics of location useful in recognizing the historical force of discursive formations that impinge on particular subjects. Without reviewing the history of location politics theory (Kaplan 1994, 140–41), it may suffice to say that location politics practice has shown how examining the resistance of third world women is insufficient to resist the appropriation of difference into reinscriptions of a modern universalized white androcentric norm (Kaplan 1994; Wallace 1989; Moya 1997; duCille 1994). These appropriations may occur despite recognitions of the contradictory and partial nature of feminist criticism and an explicit refusal of appropriation, as when “activist” texts such as Rigoberta Menchú’s autobiography are granted status as “theory” in order to assert a contiguity between the politics of Quiché Indians and first world feminists (Kaplan 1994, 147). Critiques of location politics such as that by Caren Kaplan warn of an apolitical relativism that marks appropriation, Western feminist cultural imperialism, and remystifications and exoticization of difference and objectified “Others.”

Recentring location politics on agency can bring to the foreground the highly politicized process by which difference is produced and appropriated. By centering location politics on the agency of the subject’s constitution of the “real” or the object of knowledge, the politics of boundaries and categories may be confronted as sites of historicized struggles and refused a problematic naturalization (Kaplan 1994, 144–50). Agency also demands the highly specific historical analyses of linkages of particular subjectivities to power (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xvii; Mohanty 1997b; Frankenberg and Mani 1993, 305; Kaplan 1994, 148), focusing on particular contested categories rather than appropriating difference to erase privilege, claim universal validity for knowledge, or reinscribe homogenized differences. Conversely, approaching agency through the practice of location politics brings the politics of the knowing and writing subject to the foreground. The political importance of this rendering visible of the act of knowing is not to reinstall the problematic location politics of the first world academic and/or activist but to interrogate them; not to erase the privileges and complicities of the knowing and language-using subject but to mark them, track them, and question them in order to transform their political effects. For these reasons, my emphasis here is on an agency that occurs through the constitution of difference that simultaneously shapes the limits and politics of her Others and of the subject herself. This subject is not the privileged subject of the global North existing somehow apart from the subordinated subjects of the global South (found both in the North and in the South), but the subject who cannot know her Others outside of the discursive terms and logics of the

masculinized Eurocentric modern truth regime and so must consistently interrogate the politics of those terms and logics.

Approaching agency through a politics of location makes the particular politics of the writing and activist subject visible, thereby rendering colonizing, essentializing, and other appropriations more difficult. Among important feminist theorizations of agency, Patricia Jeffery and Deniz Kandiyoti neglect to render intelligible their own relations to history in their respective constructions of South Asian feminists and women in patriarchal societies. Both endeavor explicitly to avoid homogenizing difference, but their own relations to difference remain uninterrogated. Jeffery attempts to interrupt homogenized constructions by focusing on South Asia, while briefly mentioning differences of educated, urban feminists from unlettered village and urban slum women (Jeffery 1997, 231–32). Kandiyoti refuses monolithic characterizations of patriarchy by contrasting its Sub-Saharan African forms with patriarchy in areas of what she terms “classic patriarchy,” including North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and India and China (Kandiyoti 1988). Yet their erasure of the particular politics of their own locations as the site for the constitution of the global South obscures the potentially troubled politics of those locations. Some of these troubling politics may be seen in that both share affiliations with academic institutions of the global North, suggesting middle-class privilege, as well as alignments with a Eurocentric objectivist heritage of scholarship whose problematic lineage has been interrogated by many feminists.

The resulting compilation by Jeffery and Kandiyoti of what Rey Chow has called a “factography” of the Other (Chow 1993, 5, 116) not only consolidates certain Others (South Asian feminist, sub-Saharan woman) as “real” but also consolidates the authority of the writing subject. Chow has suggested on different grounds that “we can, as we must, attack social injustice without losing sight of the fact that even as ‘women’ speaking for other ‘women’ within the same gender, for instance, we speak from a privileged position” (Chow 1995, 113). Acknowledging such privilege interrupts the production of knowledge that hides “the agendas of the inquirers and naturalizes the ‘objects’ as givens,” Chow suggests. Naming privilege clears room for the reflexive project of the “act of making explicit the historical predicament of investigating ‘China’ and ‘Chinese women,’ especially as it pertains to those who are ethnically Chinese and/or sexually women” (Chow 1995, 115–16). While Kandiyoti and Jeffery are in a similar predicament as they investigate women from various regions in the global South, their unwillingness to name their own privilege leaves unchallenged their claim to a naturalized consolidation and objectification through modern knowledge production of women of the global South. To refuse subjection to that modernist, colonizing logic in practicing and theorizing agency, a politics of location asks that writing, speaking, and knowing subjects locate themselves in the politics of those histories as they constitute their “realities” and their “Others.”

Some rethinking of agency has responded to theorizations of everyday power relations by Michel Foucault, whose poststructuralist theory of power included a critique of the modern “free” individual. Rather than privileging a single institution (capitalist markets or the state) or variable (such as gender or race), a Foucauldian analysis of modern power examines how apparatuses in multiple institutions work through self-surveillance in everyday behaviors to enforce a general economy of subjection to the modern disciplinary regime. In this approach, the subject’s quotidian constitution of power relations often involves subjecting the self to general economies of subjection (what I term complicity below) and at other times involves practicing resistance through the constitution of subject positions that diverge from the sociopolitical norms of the discursive regime. In other words, agency is generally a quotidian subjection to general economies of domination but may become resistance when the subject constitutes herself in opposition to fixed normative subject positions. Foucault’s notion of the complex relation between agency

and apparatuses of subjection that I use below understands “freedom [as] found not in our transcendental nature but in our capacities to contest and change those anonymous practices that constitute our nature” (Rajchman 1985, 105; see also Cook 1993, 5). While some feminists have found agency problematic in Foucault, where the discursive regime profoundly limits the subject (De Lauretis 1987; Hartsock 1990; Christian 1987; Butler 1993), Judith Butler and other feminist theorists and activists have suggested that Foucault’s conceptualization locates agency in the daily practices on which power relations depend (Butler 1988, 525; Butler 1993, 15; Cook 1993; Martin 1988; Sawicki 1996; Spivak 1993).

Chandra Mohanty used such a Foucauldian conception of power in “looking at the way women are constituted as women *through* these very [kinship, legal, and other] structures,” rather than “assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group” (Mohanty 1994, 213, 218). For Mohanty, an assumption that third world women are a coherent group appropriates their pluralities, opens the possibility of a colonizing universality, and obscures their agency by “homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of different groups of women, eras[ing] all marginal and resistant modes of experiences” (Mohanty 1994, 213–14). Mohanty made her well-known argument for “context-specific differentiated analysis” as a basis for “careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities” as a counter-strategy to this problem (Mohanty 1994, 211–12). Carefully historicizing particular third world subjects makes possible, according to Mohanty, not only agency for third world women but also the transformation of their relations to first world women as they are constituted through decolonized acts of knowing.

Mohanty’s critique suggests problems in theorizing agency even in the careful attempts by Jeffery and Kandiyoti to avoid and even disrupt the binarisms that underlie the implicit legitimation of western Man’s centrality in modern humanism or the subtle installation of the first world feminist as agent. These attempts fail to recognize the politics of the constitution of the object of knowledge due to fealty to a preexisting realism of gendered binarisms (in Jeffery’s case) and of the “reality” of everyday experience (for Kandiyoti), while the troubled politics of the first world subject constructing the object of knowledge (South Asian appropriations, multiple forms of patriarchy) is erased. Yet it is precisely to the contested politics of the particular event of construction in and by historically located (but not determined) particular writing and knowing subjects that Mohanty asks us to give careful attention, a politics occluded in the analyses by Kandiyoti and Jeffery. This site of occlusion erases the location politics and its particular practices as constituted through specific negotiations of the shoals of racist and neocolonialist appropriations of third and fourth world gender politics, a risky step indeed for those engaged in decolonizing feminist practices.

Similar problems are found in Esha Niyogi De’s theorization of agency that takes decolonization as her explicit goal. De emphasizes an anti-imperialist universalist humanism as the ground for critical evaluation of social relations, where agency is a transcultural evaluative process resting on an anti-imperialist vision of the human whole (De 2002, 43, 52–53, 57). Her holism develops as a response to Foucault’s critique of subjectivity. De turns away from what she sees as Foucault’s skepticism towards referential thinking that leads to relativism, and instead turns towards an “absolutist endorsement of cultures alternative to the modern Western and its individualist rationality” (De 2002, 43–44). De turns towards the “real” in order to establish grounds for activist mobilization for social transformation of coercive relations (De 2002, 44, 51, 57), yet this reference to the “real” inevitably obscures the contingency of the “real” on the politics of the social construction even of the realist object of knowledge. While De’s linking of the political with the epistemic to shape agency rejecting “coercive knowledge structures” (De 2002, 51, 57) is in a similar spirit to Mohanty’s, she overlooks the epistemic problems with terms like “culture” and “the human whole” that install ungendered monolithic notions such as “colonial India” (centered on Rabindranath Tagore)

that would be subject to Mohanty's critique. While following Satya Mohanty's refusal of an absolutist metaphysics of the whole (De 2002, 52), De's approach neglects the context-specific differentiated analysis incorporating gender and other differences, advocated by Chandra Mohanty, while simultaneously erasing her own complex location politics as an academic positioned in the global North.

In contrast, the theorization of agency by Bronwyn Davies centers on antiessentialist notions of the subject as constituted through specific, highly localized discursive practices that refuse modernist presumptions of freedom and the unified individual (Davies 1991, 42–43, 49–51). Yet even as Davies emphasizes the politicized particularities of the constitution of the subject, she neglects to work with difference, intersectionality, or location politics as it applies to her own location. This has the troubled political effect of implicitly limiting her theorization to European settler colonies of the United States (explicitly linked to Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*) even as she glibly borrows from Trinh Minh-ha, María Lugones, and the Algerian-raised Jewish feminist Hélène Cixous (Davies 1991, 42, 44, 47). As a result, her argument's suggestiveness for transnational feminist work is compromised by its unwillingness to interrogate the limits and politics of the settler colony as the normative setting for her location as well as for her theorization of agency.

Paul Smith, a feminist theorist working without close reference to Foucault, has been critical of modern and postmodern theorizations that privilege the subjection of the subject to social structures without giving sufficient consideration to how the possibility of resistance is theorized (Smith 1988, xxxi). Smith agrees with US third world women theorists of intersectionality in finding the notion of multiple determinations useful in opening space for critique and agency. Smith also argues that the subject is constituted through a constant oscillation from contradiction and dispersal in multiplicity to temporary fixity and coherence, a totalizing process he summarizes with the term "subject" (Smith 1988, 151). Smith and other feminists responding to postmodern and postcolonial theorizations of power (Spivak 1996, 219; Donaldson 2002, 51; Yeğenoğlu 1998, 1–38) have suggested that attempts to make the self seem to cohere despite these contradictions is itself a way of subjecting the self to and enforcing the modern mechanisms of domination. Consequently, Smith has argued that agency may best be characterized as the point at which historically established structures of domination succeed or fail to wholly determine the subject (Smith 1988, 37–39). This emphasis on structural failures links the individual or personal to issues of the (re)production and (re)inscription of subject positions available widely in a society, as many others have done (Nixon 1996, 315–23).

Characterizing this key political moment as a failure of totalization is congruent with Frankenberg and Mani's presentation of a postmodern politics of location as the "effective but not determining relationship between subjects and their histories" (1993, 305–6). Similar constructions of subjectivity and agency are characterized by Rey Chow as operating "both from and against privilege" through "both identification and opposition" (Chow 1993, 113) and by white feminists like Diana Fuss (1989) and Judith Butler as "neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary" (Butler 1990, 147) or, in Teresa de Lauretis's words, as "at once inside and outside" hegemonic institutions and discourses (in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*; quoted in Phelan 1994, xvii).

These approaches recognize that subjects are not "free" in the humanist sense, yet they retain a sense of agency within the structural limits of their historical moment. This complex process may be named as the ambivalent or conflictual economy of the subject and of discourse, a destabilized process that opens up room for the transformation of subordination into resistance through the refusal of reduction to the place of exploitation (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 24–27, 58–63, 153–54n77; Bhabha 1994). While some have argued that political movements must reject ambivalence if they are to succeed, here I agree with the shared insight of



intersectionality theorists and the poststructural and postcolonial feminist theorists just mentioned that it is precisely through contradiction and ambivalence that moments of resistant agency emerge.

Centering political work on the ambivalent character of the subject may also contribute to a feminist decolonization through the disruption of the truth regime at work in modernity. Interrogating these conflicts foregrounds questions of epistemic violence, which Laura Donaldson, following Gayatri Spivak, has summarized as “the violat[ion] of the most fundamental way that a person or people know themselves” (Donaldson 2002, 51). The modern power/knowledge regime reconstitutes a Eurocentric privileged subject that “constituted/effaced a [colonized] subject that was obliged to cathect (occupy in response to a desire) the space of the imperialists’ self-consolidating other” (Spivak 1996, 219). To reject this mode of cathecting or consolidating the subject is to refuse appropriation of the radical Other into an ethico-politics that consolidates the subject of imperialism, what Meyda Yeğenoğlu has termed the masculinized sovereign subject status of the West (1998, 1).

For the present purposes, I would emphasize that displacing this type of obligation constituted through subject/Other relations is possible through refusing such a constitution of the colonized or neocolonial woman as object of knowledge, i.e., as the “imperialists’ self-consolidating other,” thereby opening space for what Foucault termed subjugated knowledges (1980, 81). Subjugated knowledges for Foucault, largely though not always caught as he was in the nationalist frame, included the unreason of the French delinquent or the psychiatric patient, to which a transnational feminist might add the wisdom of indigenous elders or subaltern women of the global South. Such local, unqualified or disqualified, illegitimate popular knowledges were central to Foucault for considering non- or antiuniversalist epistemes that could interrupt “the tyranny of globalizing discourses” (1980, 83) such as evidentiary procedures and juridico-scientific knowledge regimes, making “an autonomous, non-centralized kind of theoretical production” (1980, 81) possible. Their importance for the present purposes is that “it is through the re-appearance of ... these disqualified knowledges that criticism performs its work” (1980, 82), so that otherwise unquestionable assumptions and limits of the modern episteme and their violent social effects might come under interrogation.

Gayatri Spivak’s conception of agency refuses the appropriation of difference into solidarity, and instead begins with a rejection of the presumption that the Other is knowable from the social location of those trained in the liberal European secular imaginary (1993, 170, 175, 183). The language-centered poststructuralist conception of agency that Spivak draws on by way of Derrida’s “White Mythology” (Spivak 2002, 18n3) centers on a refusal of the appropriations through logic or reason (the effects of knowing) of disruptions by the figurative or rhetorical (the conditions for knowing), working the dependence of logic on metaphor against the grain (2002, 22). She suggests that much modern practice of agency carries out a minimalization of these disruptions in knowing, and instead emphasizes the need for an unlearning of liberal practices of agency that presume knowability, solidarity, and similitude with the Other (1993, 170, 183). Spivak argues for the “communication and reading of and in love” that refuses to minimize figurative disruptions in text and society through acts of intimacy and surrender, so that the silences of the founding violence of language and agency itself may be rendered visible (1993, 180–83). Spivak’s notion of agency thus ultimately centers on a politics of decolonization and negotiation with structures of violence (1993, 171). Space within the “real” for such agency is made possible as the agent makes visible and engages with the silences and aporias produced and enforced by modern language, meaning, logic, and “reason” in behavior.

Spivak explores this type of agency in a discussion of the character Lucy from J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, a possibly lesbian daughter, pregnant after being raped and beaten, who agrees to a concubinage-style marriage to a relative of one of the rapists. In doing so, Lucy does not accept the rape and resulting

pregnancy in the terms presented to her by modern individualism or by the modern family, but rather “cast[s] aside the affective value-system attached to reproductive heteronormativity as it is accepted as the currency to measure human dignity” (Spivak 2002, 21). This is a refusal of rape by individual men and also a refusal of rape by the instrumentalizing forms of reproduction so central to capitalism, imperialism, and androcentric social practices, refusals that clear ground for the normalization in civil society of the multisexed subject (Spivak 2002, 24). So Spivak’s notion of agency involves internal refusals of value systems that effect subjection to the terms of major modern institutions, such as the family, rather than modern individualist divergences from norms, as well as practices drawn from divergent value systems and lifestyles that may even seem illegible from within the limits of the terms of modernity.

Spivak’s example of how figurative disruptions may render founding violences visible comes from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, when Sethe reclaims before her daughter the brand left under her breast by her owner (Spivak 1993, 195). This form of the family is marked not by the heteronormative conjugal love offered by liberal reason but by externally and internally imposed violence. Sethe’s memorization of the branding as an act of violence that makes possible her family carries out agency through a communication in love that refuses to be articulated into the “normal” of history and its language, that declines the name of family as liberal humanism would have it. Rather than a practice of agency presuming solidarity and similitude even among family members, this reshaping of motherhood also marks a moment of failure of slavery and colonization in the (fictional) past and of the masculinist neocolonial in the (authorial) present. Morrison’s appropriation of the liberal silencing of the violent origins of the modern family as found among US slave women, like Spivak’s own appropriation, refuses to minimize the disruptions to render this violence simultaneously visible and unreasonable.

The resulting language invites into figuration the (im)possible appropriation of the blankness of that which is outside the historical limits language imposes on reason (Spivak 1993, 170). By keeping a certain focus on liberal silencing of what is unsaid or unsayable within the limits of modern reason, Morrison and Spivak refuse complicity with the modern; they do not claim to speak for the Other but instead point towards the limits of speaking from the Other. They do so to gesture in language towards the “subordinated ways of rusing with rhetoric” (Spivak 1993, 187) that may be disclosed in resistance. By centering on the silences deriving from the limits of reasoned modern language and gesture, Spivak urges agencies that retool the limits of modern epistemology. Through this linking of the political and epistemological we may encounter agency as moments of decolonization in embodied locations (pregnancy, mother-daughter intimacies) where we might otherwise not recognize the political effects of heteronormative masculinized colonization.

While the specific sense of erotic/agency is developed by Spivak with reference to translation, she also explores the ways in which such an agency may be practiced in other venues, such as reading (1993, 197–200; 2002, 18, 22–24), writing (1993, 180), teaching (2002, 27–29; 2003, 29–30), the epistemological (2002, 17), and work in the public sphere (2002, 18–29), including a Marxian emphasis on everyday struggles in the sphere of necessity (2002, 30). For those who might render Spivak’s emphasis on translation or reading and writing as a privatized practice, she argues against ethical impulses that do not lead to the political (2002, 24). Rather, she urges “the activated subject, the capital I” that must be secured through entry into the political calculus of the public sphere (2002, 29) to respond to the equalizing disgrace of failures of democracy in India, the US, and beyond (2002, 25ff.). Spivak’s emphasis on language, meaning, and social relation generally resists easy normative statements about a particular venue where agency should be exercised, such as the traditional venues of feminist movements, labor centers, classrooms, or research emphasized by other theorists. Yet her notion also makes possible a diffusion of the locus of agency to any

and all sites where language and claims to meaning and reasonableness in social relations are key, such as writing and teaching, quotidian exchanges and organizing, intimate relations, and public advocacy.

In this case, the location politics of agency are defined less by the traditional parameters of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as understood in liberal Eurocentric terms than by contestation of the modern. For Spivak, these contestations center, first, on the knowledge practices of neocolonial heritage of the European Enlightenment (2002, 21; 1993, 171) and, second, on liberal humanism as it defines the “imperialism-specific” political and ethical limits of individual subjects in such practices as knowing (the Other), the nation-state, and heteronormative marriage (2002, 17–18, 21–29; 1993, 194–95). Yet she consistently problematizes the politics of her own location historically, if not also playfully and ironically, as, among others, the “assimilated-colonial-ethnic-minority (ACEM)” operating unavoidably in colonized space (Spivak 1993, 176), not an easy place to practice ethics and agency in any simple way.

One way I carry out such a problematizing of my own social location is as the “straight-white-able-bodied-masculine-privileged (SWAMP)” operating in the simultaneously colonizing and neocolonial space of the United States academy. While naming my own exploitative middle-class status with the P of SWAMP, my privileges certainly extend beyond the economic to include those based on sexist practices, white supremacy, and heteronormativity overlaid onto the colonization of the lands I grew up calling “home.” I have worked to reconstitute the ethics and politics of these privileges through transnational and US rights-derived feminist (Beijing platform) and anti-racist (AWARE-LA) work in the 1990s and into the first years of the present century. Yet I still meet with multiple privileges in the workplace and elsewhere that draw on unequal social norms and continue to render me complicit with multiple inequalities. Most recently, my complicity in the performance of US citizenship, with its chamber-of-horrors list of well-known global and local atrocities, has directed my attention to the subaltern and sharpened my focus on critiques of gendered nationalism and antidemocratic practices in my academic publications, classroom teaching, a blog on democratic organizing, and urban Zapatista community work.

Feminist critiques of the political effects of poststructuralist social theory have sometimes taken the form of cautions against relativism. These debates are often configured by contrasting the “reality” of historical oppression with the seemingly more relativistic “constructed” character of reality, with the realists not wanting either the “reality” of difference or the possibilities of agency to be reduced in significance (Moya 1997, 126; Christian 1987). Some have returned to identity politics and the category of experience as a response to the perceived threat of a relativism seen as facilitating appropriation and the domestication of difference (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xvii; Mohanty 2003, 6; Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000; De 2002), demanding that still existing “relations of domination and subordination that are named and articulated through the processes of racism and racialization” be addressed (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xvii).

Establishing how racialized hegemonic relations are addressed is a profoundly important question not only for location politics, which is fundamentally defined by categories of difference, but also for postmodern politics and ethics generally. Yet the very categories of difference through which domination is carried out and by which much resistance is organized themselves have specific histories linked to modern Euro-American, androcentric, heteronormative, capitalist, and nation-state-centered domination. In exploring ways to practice resistance to this historical legacy, it is crucial to develop modes of resistance that do not reinscribe and thereby reinforce these entrenched categories on which inequalities are founded, even while attacking their effects.

A politics of location is forced to engage with this problem simply by the need to name a location, and it is in the act of naming location that agency may fall into subjection to modern structures of domination or

refuse such subjection. One great risk of a politics of location is that by constantly reinscribing the subject into locations conveniently generated by modern social formations (the “real”), both the subject and her object of knowledge and action (solidarity, silencing) may be effectively subjected to modern forms of domination. By bringing location politics into dialogue with agency theory, this important moment may move from a naturalized ground for political work to the contested center of a politics of resistance.

Some theorizations and activism usefully confront both horns of this dilemma through confronting the “realities” of domination without falling back into either relativism or a “realist” metaphysics and epistemology that fail to question the problematic history of categories of difference. Gayatri Spivak emphasizes the violence of difference in history in her persistent deployment of Marxism through particular examples of transnational exploitation (1986, 68–70; 1995b, x–xvii, xxxvi–xxviii) while also consistently marking how difference is highly contingent on the analytic frame and highly politicized in its construction (Spivak 1996, 30–35, 46; 1993, 40–41, 49–51). Another feminist closely associated with this type of work is Judith Butler, who has argued for a double movement between an insistence on identity and a simultaneous calling into question the exclusionary procedures by which identity terms are produced (1995, 129). While Chandra Mohanty has not hesitated to deploy a more realist epistemology in engaging with specific histories of domination grounded in differences (Mohanty 1997a, 7–22, 357n10), she is also well known for problematizing the politics of homogenized categories of difference, as described above.

My own work attempts to address both horns of this dilemma through an oscillation between antiessentialist critiques of homogenized difference lodged in an emphasis on agency, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, a confrontation with the politicized histories of domination grounded in differences through acknowledging complicity. In such an approach, agency takes the form of a vigilance about the limits and contradictory politics of the relations between the subject and her Others that produce difference, where the differences produced may affirm historical relations of subordination and privilege or reconfigure them into relations of resistance to such histories. It is to the role of complicity in this complex and contradictory historicized economy of discourse and the subject that I now turn.

### **Complicity in a Transnational Feminist Location Politics**

Foucauldian conceptions of power find that modern agency is often not enacted in resistance but generally in everyday alignments of subjects with the general economy of subjection, as in capitalist obligations of home loans, heteronormative practices of marriage, and the productive docilities enforced in modern academic classrooms. I find this notion of “complicity” useful to critique certain problematic aspects of agency, particularly as the critical edge of the term urges us towards agency that resists multiple inequalities. The notion of complicity follows the structuralist recognition that deeply formative discursive formations greatly determine our relations of domination and privilege, while avoiding structuralist pretensions to universal, certain, scientific study of these structures. The term complicity also underlines the intransigence even of what some see as socially constructed rather than “real,” the recalcitrance even of what others interpret as historical and changeable rather than essentially “true,” the entrenchment even of what some view as unstable rather than fixed in meaning, and the persistence even of what some understand as multiple rather than homogenous.

Taking complicity as central to a location politics has the political effect of interrupting the erasure of privilege for members of hegemonic groups, a key problem in location politics (Wallace 1989, quoted in Kaplan 1994, 142). Perhaps more centrally, it also disrupts any claims to political and ethical purity in relations to Others. In calling for an emphasis on complicity, I am endorsing the recognition by feminists of

the need to problematize the positionality of those whose race, gender, class, sexuality, or national locations align them structurally with dominant groups. Yet in this section I broaden the notion of complicity beyond the biographical, to include practices where activist movements and theorists find themselves subtly subjecting themselves to and thereby supporting precisely that which they may wish to oppose politically (Derrida 1991, 99).

Some of the broader implications of complicity are seen in internalized oppression. As Audre Lorde found, “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situation which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressor’s tactics, the oppressor’s relationships” (1984, 123). Indeed, Virginia Harris, Trinity Ordone, bell hooks, and others have argued that complicity in the form of internalized sexism, racism, and heterosexism is a major obstacle to developing solidarity among women of color, not to mention coalitions of women of color across other differences (Harris and Ordone 1990; hooks 2000, 3, 10, 14). Gayatri Spivak also agrees in arguing that “internalized gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over” (1995b, xxviii). For Spivak, a critique of the modernist notion of the freedom of the subject for feminists, and of internalized gendered social relations, must supplement the traditional feminist critique of male exploitation.

Another broader aspect of complicity may be seen in critiques of affiliation with the modern academy, an aspect closely linked to socioeconomic class division. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty draw on R. Radhakrishnan (1989) to point out that “[w]e cannot overestimate the need for conscious self-reflexivity about the complicity of intellectual frameworks in politics, in the fact that something is at stake, in the very process of reauthorizing and mediating inequalities or regressive politics of different kinds” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xviii; see also Mohanty 1991, 32). The anthropologist and playwright Dorinne Kondo has likewise argued for careful practice of what she terms “complicitous critique,” describing both disciplinary academic practice and cultural production as interventions that “are never beyond complicity,” often serving liberal humanist attempts to domesticate race and power relations (Kondo 2001, 30, 34). These comments by Mohanty, Alexander, and Kondo, who have all been active as feminists in the academy, do not construct a pure space of opposition defined over and against the corrupt space of complicity, but open up a negotiated space of ethics and agency as resistance in an institutionalized site compromised by complicity.

A US-based example of complicity that links internalized sexism with the race and class issues implicit in the academy is found in bell hooks’s narrative of her experiences in college as a teen. Her response to the constant questioning of her abilities at Stanford meant that she “began to doubt” herself, after having been “socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to ... judge each other without compassion and to punish one another harshly” (2000, 14). This “female self-hatred” is complicit with patriarchy, and only through the campus feminist movement was hooks able to come to imagine the unimaginable under patriarchy: “Female bonding was not possible within patriarchy; it was an act of treason” (2000, 14). By practicing that which was not “real” under patriarchy, hooks was able to bond with other feminists to transform not only the academy but also home and work, living out agency that was confronting its complicity to build new epistemes and the new social relations they made visible.

A transnational example of how working with complicity rather than attempting to avoid it at all costs may strengthen agency as resistance is found in Katie King’s comments on the work of Rey Chow. Chow remarks that some Sinologists have questioned her directly and indirectly about her use of Western theory and feminism, and she notes that such disapproval of her “complicity” with the West is an attempt to

“demolish the only premises on which I can speak” (1991, 90–91). With a British colonial and US educational background, Chow is very much entangled with the West, making a pure nativist or nationalist Chinese perspective, or some pure position of China-as-East, impossible for her to take up. While King describes Chow as “literally embody[ing] issues of a world historical order,” she suggests that these historical issues appear abstract “to those in hegemonic status” (1994, 38). Yet in a Foucauldian critique of the political technologies of the body, white bodies or male bodies or straight bodies or middle-class bodies or the bodies of citizens also “literally embody” historical issues through histories of unearned modern privileges gained through economies of subjection. By noting specific points of the historicized complicities of these bodies with the modern power/knowledge regime, they can lose their unmarked status and its affiliation with the universal to become visible, subject to historical critique as a step towards an agency of resistance.

A third, broader aspect of complicity is seen in Spivak’s critique of oppositional writing or activism, where the subject takes up a position distinguishing herself from men or racists or capitalists, attempting to make the self transparent so that the problem can be seen without any interference. Spivak questions the seeming sovereignty of the subject by showing how the international division of labor makes possible the lifestyle to which those in the academy are accustomed (Spivak 1990, 121–22), subjecting it to multiple complicities:

[O]ur lives ... are being constructed by that international division of labor, and its latest manifestations were ... the responsibility of class-differentiated non-white people in the Third World, using the indigenous structures of patriarchy and the established structures of capitalism. To simply foreclose or ignore the international division of labor because that’s complicit with our own production ... is a foreclosure of neo-colonialism operated by chromatist race-analysis. (1990, 126)

This is one aspect of the more general problem Spivak develops in a reading of Foucault: the production of intelligible knowledge is profoundly compromised by having been coded within the legacy of imperialism, a coding which introduces regulative political concepts that are not adequate to articulate claims from postcolonial spaces. This legacy is inscribed in nationhood and democracy, capitalist development and secularism, even as these limits make possible both the practices of ethics and of freedom that change state policies, earn the right to be heard and trusted by the subaltern, and work on behalf of positive social change (Spivak 1993, 48, 51).

Spivak finds that a refusal of totalization helps to make this structure of complicity apparent and she carries out this refusal in her own well-known persistent disallowing of attempts by colleagues to position her as the “marginal.” These interventions interrupt both personally and institutionally the claim that the hegemonic has a cleanly defined “Other” to speak to, the attempt to clearly mark “why we should be *there*, why they should be *here*” (Spivak 1990, 122; original emphasis). Her discussion of Gandhi’s complicity (perhaps due to “[Indian] business pressure”) with the British in the Gandhi-Irwin pact of 1930 (2003, 53) performs a comparable critique at the level of the nation of any putatively simple binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, center and margin. Attention to complicity may begin to interrupt such hegemonic foreclosures of marginal and central positionings, opening possibilities to interventions in neocolonial relations of political economy and in biologically deterministic race- or gender-based relations.

Refusals of such totalizations are critical to interrupting the ways in which, as Foucault argued, subjugation of groups is produced through “turning them into objects of knowledge” in modern panoptic society (1978, 28). Being brought into visibility or to “voice” is generally an ominous event in a Foucauldian panoptic of power (Foucault 1979, 28; Kang 2002, 12–21, 215–70), but in cases where the specific location politics of modern hegemonic groups are marked as problematic there may be positive political effects. In

such cases, what is being brought into visibility are not subordinated groups but universalized normative groups that in a Foucauldian analysis are also subject to internalized surveillance and so are comparable to subordinated group members, yet in other ways claim normative status by being rendered invisible. Or, as Spivak argued elsewhere, questioning the transparent ethical subject into specificity and visibility allows us to measure its ethics through research into the ways the subject subjects itself through the ability to know and various modes of objectification (Spivak 1993, 39).

A similar point is made by Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano who argues, in the context of textual interpretation, for a “constant interrogation of the conditions and locations of reading” (1994, 8) and not just the locations of the text, in order to bring historical specificity and critical attention that resists appropriation to “the discursive production of consciousness itself, a consciousness linked with political activity” (24). Such interrogation brings objects of analysis into visibility, but not with the aim to produce knowable objects of power/knowledge to be subjected to the modern disciplinary regime. Rather, such visibility provides opportunities to recognize what is often effected without notice, so that the subject may break with the citizenship of the neocolonial liberal state and make apparent the dissymetries and impossibilities that are, in Spivak’s view, the object of all commitment (Spivak 1993, 39–40).

Chandra Mohanty has identified a related problem in her influential critique of neocolonial feminism, “Under Western Eyes.” There, she argued that the binary opposition of Western feminists as progressive over and against the monolithic representations of third world women as veiled and tradition-bound installs Western feminists as the only true subjects of resistance, foreclosing third world women as possible resisting agents in historical relations (Mohanty 1994, 199, 213–15). As in Spivak’s analysis, Mohanty suggests that the totalizing categories constructed by the critical subject of academic work or activism obscure the ways in which the critical subject’s own oppositional politics are, in Spivak’s terms, “complicit with what you are so carefully and cleanly opposing” (1990, 122). Interrogating and destabilizing seemingly clear boundary lines between the marginal and the central or the oppositional and the complicit allows the political stakes in such binary constructions to come more clearly into focus.

For Spivak, this attention to complicity is not the politically “irresponsible” practice of the “negative metaphysics which would like to be completely anti-essentialist” (1990, 122). Rather, such attention makes possible the politics of refusing totalization in order to interrupt subjection to power/knowledge apparatuses and open up possibilities of resistance. The political effects of Spivak’s reading of complicity as a refusal of totalization are central to my present overall point, for they suggest that “the holders of the hegemonic discourses” (Spivak 1990, 121) should de-hegemonize their position and open up the possibility of broad-based social change, rather than limiting issues of gender oppression to females or issues of race to people of color. In a similar vein, Mohanty has called for a focus on “the consolidation of the self rather than the marginalization of the Other” as particularly productive in resisting “the crafting of white, masculinist, heterosexist, and capitalist citizenship” in the academy (Mohanty 1997b, xiii). My own multiply problematic social location as a white, straight performer of bourgeois masculine citizenship certainly demands this work of de-hegemonizing my positionality.

Such an intervention in totalizing binaries makes it possible to operate within still unknown or even counterfactual possibilities of resistance (Spivak 1995a, 79–82; Povinelli 2011, 6–11, 109–31) that might lead to broad-based sociopolitical change resistant to the already established logics of the modern. Such political practice refuses the blackmail of attempted reversals of the practices of imperialism (by the anticolonial) or capitalist logic (by the proletariat) or sexism (by the modern feminist). Instead, such practice displaces these reversals to enter an ethico-politics that recognizes the anticolonial or the proletarian or the modern

feminist as dystopic representations useful as convenient terms because no other word can as yet be found that may name resistances of the habitat of the modern's radical Others, such as the subproletarian or gendered subaltern (Spivak 1993, 48–49).

By carefully historicizing and critically examining the interrelationship between the consolidation of the self and the politics of the production of the Other, complicity becomes useful in creating a resistance politics of self/Other relations. Tom Keenan's reading of Spivak's recent work suggests that such a displacement of the centralizing subject again and again is a refusal of a certain type of historicized blackmail. Keenan points out how Spivak suggests in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that we must "emphasize our complicity, which we must acknowledge in order to act" (Spivak 1999, 370n79). For Keenan, this "acknowledging of complicity, however indeterminate, is as close as we can get to a foundation (and it is precisely not a foundation, not a stable ground, even if it is a sort of inescapable conclusion) for action and politics" (2002, 193–94).

There are very good reasons to suspect a theorization that recognizes and even accepts complicity with the modern discursive economies of subjection and privilege. One danger of such a politics is that it may become a blunt instrument in the hands of those who might wish to reinforce regimes of subjection and domination rather than proliferate openings to resistance. Activists or theorists claiming that they work in pure spaces of resistance along one axis of domination, such as gender or anti-imperialism, for example, might dismiss those who acknowledge complicity as compromised in their politics, without recognizing the stakes of their alignment with structures of domination along multiple axes. Staking the politics of an analysis on the recognition of always already present complicity also runs the risk of falling into domestications of difference and bourgeois compromise with the business-as-usual appropriations of the Other that obscure visions of radical social change. However, linking the acknowledgement of complicity to calls for agency as resistance should address this concern.

A dual emphasis on agency and complicity is useful in naming the ambivalence of the position of work by US women of color "from 'within and against' *both* women's liberation and anti-racist movements" (Frankenburg and Mani 1993, 304) since the 1960s—what was identified in the previous section as being "at once inside and outside" of hegemonic institutions and discourses. For members of other groups, consistently taking the naming of complicity as a mechanism for working towards greater accountability to resistance would be an important way to avoid falling into a depoliticized acceptance of complicity that might come from growing more accustomed to working with the impure political state of compromise that complicity names. Conversely, others may find that increased skill at acknowledging and working with complicity may release them from the avoidance of complicity at all costs at all times in the defensiveness of the ever-elusive pursuit of ethical and political purity.

## **Conclusion**

An agency of feminist resistance emerges in this sketch of a transnational feminist location politics through focus on the non-totalizable, incommensurable, and contradictory elements that refuse the founding violences of modern Eurocentric economies of subjection and difference. Through historicized concrete confrontations with persistent complicities in the constitution of the subject, enforced through the politics of the object(s) of knowledge, this approach foregrounds the ways in which the apparatuses of masculinized neocolonial modernity attempt time and again to position their subjects as having mastered or unified the heterogeneity of their multiple Others. An emphasis on ambivalences and contradictions that make resistant agency possible may allow us to recognize the failures of totalization and coherence under the modern



power/knowledge regime as sites where founding violence and ongoing epistemic violence and exploitation may come into intelligibility. Through such disruptions of consolidated subject positions and refusals by Others to comply with the terms, presumptions, and ontological politics of liberal modernity, those practicing agency may begin to destabilize aspects of the “real” so that they may come to be named, known, and subjected to categories of difference outside those permissible under the modern. These disruptions of the modern truth regime’s claims to omniscience are also partial failures of all-too-conveniently supplied modern social locations to claim the subject or social movement as their own, so that agencies of resistance reconfigure the “real,” refiguring the limits of subject and Other, of center and margin, of knowable and aporia.

Working with partially destabilized objects of knowledge that persistently refuse to be completely consolidated under a coherent nation, name, sexuality, or social stratum may be unnerving for those of us more comfortable with claims to a totalizing, coherent fixity of universal knowledge. Perhaps it is through just this destabilizing process of subject/Other constitution known as agency that the founding violences of our social orders and systems of signification may be rendered legible, and the modern limits to politics and ethics may be reconfigured to make more effective resistance possible.

Proliferation of such disruptions, refusals, and failures has as their effects more than just new knowledges of difference or of Others, for they constitute new relations of power and realities of social justice. Moments of construction of our various Others may increasingly interrogate complicities and destabilize deeply entrenched premises of hegemonic relations to the Others that are constituted and enforced by modern social norms and silenced by our power/knowledge regime. Through persistent practice of these resistant constructions, personal political practices shift, as do those of the general tactics of subjection that we in part constitute and uphold (or refuse to uphold) in our daily practices.

Agency, then, is carried out not as an owning or possession of a thing called power or difference outside the subject, in a “true” construction of some distant Otherness. Rather, agency takes shape as a disruption of the subject locations and power relations of the modern discursive regime in two ways. The first way consists of the contradictions that refuse the complete totalization of difference within the subject location and within power/knowledge discourse. The second is the opening up of the subject and her “realities” to heterogeneity and the contradictory economy of the subject that refuses appropriation and clears space for incommensurable difference with Others that is inconceivable within the epistemic terms of the modern. The emphasis on agency through contradiction and failures of totalization resists the domestication of difference both for the writing/activist subject and for the objects of “reality.” This brings the specific politics of the subject into visibility to confront the silences of founding violence and the dangers of exoticization and appropriation of difference that so concern Kaplan, Spivak, and others.

This form of location politics does not center on descriptions of pre-given “realities” of social hegemonies that the writing subject somehow transcends or keeps at a distance. Instead, it takes as a central objective the accountability to the politics of how feminists might practice what are perhaps inevitable appropriations of the Other in a way that makes explicit and problematizes such appropriations. Complicity in this approach is not some license to appropriate and domesticate the Other into a totalizing consolidation of the Other. Rather, complicity becomes one part of an ambivalent and contradictory construction of subjectivities and their Others that opens totalizations up to difference, rendering visible the violences of aporias in language and clearing space for agency as resistance for subjects less effectively linked to the general economy of subjection.

This is no naive assertion of some mysterious capability of postmodern textual play or multicultural enthusiasms to somehow right economic injustices. Rather, it is a recognition that unequal practices

across multiple social sectors (including but not limited to the economic) depend, to a profound if rarely acknowledged degree, on the often subtle but always already present complicity with those practices by those whom they harm as well as by those whom they benefit. Giving political attention to these complicities makes it possible to destabilize and intervene in them in ways that invite resistance and make possible an agency that is active, in Meyda Yeğenoğlu's terms, "not in the sense of domination and controlling ... others" but "in the sense of a receptivity and openness to others and otherness" (1998, 9). The ultimate measure of success of such a method may be found in part in economic changes, but also in the reduction of the grip on agents of internalized oppressions, of complicit academic knowledges, and ultimately of the neocolonial Eurocentric power/knowledge regime that links the "reality" of Others to domination.

The increased accountability that comes from explicitly acknowledging and working with complicities has clear benefits for both members of subordinated groups and for those whose politics and ethics are compromised by unearned privileges. Confronting complicities in modernity and in reinforcing certain privileges and dominations is not easy, perhaps a discouraging yet also a leavening and bracing practice from which some may recoil in defensiveness or in despair at how pervasive such complicities are. While the topic of complicity has obvious relevance for a politics carried out from my own profoundly compromised social location, I hope that an approach linking it to location politics, agency, and appropriation will also be useful for those in other social locations ready to pursue social change without the ever-elusive yet violent dreams of universal truths, political and ethical purities, and transcendent freedoms.

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