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4

Refusing the Subject

This is the story of a woman who would not talk to me—who refused, in short, to be my subject. It is also the story of how I make her subject refusal itself a subject; of asking what new forms of subject constitution are forced upon her by now inscribing her silence in speech.

"Lies, secrets, and silence" are frequently strategies of resistance. Yet the ethnographer's task is often to break such resistance. Normative ethnographic description itself is rife with the language of conquest: we extort tales and confessions from reluctant informants (or shall I say informers?); we overcome the resistance or recalcitrant subjects when we "master" their language or "subdue" their insistent questioning. The ethnographer finally arrives when she renders a people or person "subject." Even if this text is marked by an absence of trials or triumphant language, does not my puncturing of a carefully maintained silence replicate the same moves of a colonial anthropology? Or does the very shape of this analysis perhaps signal a small victory for the refusing subject? For the story I give you is not exactly about this woman (who even categorically refuses the term);[1] it is rather more about how I negotiate and understand the construction of a silence, how I seek to be accountable to it.

Subjecthood requires a category or name. Yet Denise Riley in asking "Am I That Name?"[2] warns us of the "dangerous intimacy between subjectification and subjection."[3] The naming process itself suggests a juridical or inquisitorial model of history, one that interrogates the subject beginning with the first question, "What is your name?"[4] What, then, if this subject refuses a name, refuses also to be named—as freedom fighter, famous woman, noteworthy newspaper item? What is the relationship between naming and identity, be-

tween not naming and subjectification, between speaking "as" and not speaking at all? How should I name this woman who wishes to be anonymous? And what identity do I construct for her?

It is at this juncture that I would argue we pay more attention to our own naming practices in anthropology. Naming, even in the choice of a pseudonym, produces authenticity. The pseudonym is a false name that stands for a "real" person. As such it marks a key site between the real and fictitious in anthropological writing. Yet some fictions are expected, indeed required, to figure both ethnography and authority. Is it not, then, the moment to probe further the relationship between authoring and authorizing fiction?

What if I were to call this resisting subject Françoise or Ghislaine? Surely my audience, anticipating the story of an Indian woman, would object, knowing that the anthropological pseudonym connotes place-name if not ethnic identity. What if I were to give her a typically English or American name—Mary or Susan—and then pronounced those names differently to show the cadence of an English appropriated by another land? Or, what if I were simply to call her Revathi? Surely the easiest choice, since it is unmistakably an Indian name.

That, however, would make my readers entirely too comfortable. I have toyed with the idea of calling my subject Jennifer. Yet that name I doubt you would have accepted. A name cunjuiing up Western images of fresh youth would hardly have done for an old South Asian woman in her eighties.

So instead I have adopted a tactic from the clandestine correspondence of forbidden love affairs (another dangerous intimacy) and the cheap detective novel. I have decided to call her by an initial, "M." As we all know, the use of a first initial signifies an enigma, a mystery to be solved, an identity to be exposed or unmasked; it is the s.ign of a linear movement from unknown to known via the proce&'-s of detection, the end result being discovery and denouement. Of course, my use of the first initial departs radically from the trajectory of the typical detective novel, for here M stands for a person who shall not be exposed, an identity that will not be elaborated on. A noninnocent subject is not, after all, guilty. (Here, perhaps, I commit an[1] epistemic trespass? What are the consequences of theorizing what is hidden and unknown into a feminist way of knowing?)

My objecViveSs to move away from a declarative or official historiography founded on transparent "realist" narrative. For, as Catherine Belsey r eminds us, the classical realist text is itself constructed around an enij?ma:

> Information is initially withheld on condition of a "promise" to the reader that it will finally be revealed. The disclosure of diis "truth" brings the story to an end. The movement of narrative is thus both towards disclosure—the end of the story—and towards concealment—prolonging itself by delaying the end of the story through a series of reticences ... snares for the reader, partial answers to the questions raised, equivocations.[5]

Belsey suggests that disclosure is a form of closure.[6] To suspend disclosure, then, is also to forestall closure. This analysis thus will shroud itself in a series of delaying tactics, reticences, equivocations: questions posed, left unanswered, hinging on the practices of deferral. In so doing, I hope to construct what Belsey describes as an "interrogative" text, one that emphasizes the subject split into both subject and object, as continually in the process of construction: a "subject in process."[7] This interrogative text discourages identification of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation. "The position of the author inscribed in the text if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory."[8] My authority rests not on positing facts; rather, it risks forfeiture by posing more and more questions. In so doing, my role as an unreliable narrator is activated.

Is it possible to produce an interrogative text without interrogating a subject? In selecting an initial for the woman about whom / will speak, i identify the suspect sparser, me, me *subject)* without naming, without having recourse to the pseudonym. The pseudonym, we remember, stands for a "real" person. Yet this subject neither authored nor authorized her own representation. She did not wish to be "real" for people outside her own history and daily life. Therefore I have written her as a fiction, knowing all the while that you will never accept her as such. For you understand that, this story was based on "fieldwork," something recognized as "real" experience. Here I will issue no disclaimers: any resemblance of the following to fictional narrative is intended and purely noncoincidental.[9]

Well, on with the story—

One day I had been visiting my friend's aunt when I mentioned to her that I'd like to meet a close relative of hers, M, a woman who was one of the well-known leaders of the nationalist movement in Madras. My friend's aunt immediately offered to call M. "She is very busy, you know, even at her age she rises by four in the morning! Can you believe it? She's more than eighty! But if I call her I think she'll agree to see you."

My friend Mala had warned me that her great-aunt M had an acute disdain for journalists and had stubbornly refused to grant even one interview over the last thiry or forty years. So I listened with hesitant hopes as Mala's aunt made the call and arranged for me to see M the following afternoon.

The next day I arrived at M's house promptly at 4 P.M. One of her helpers, a woman of perhaps fifty or sixty, whom I took for another relative, opened the gate and gave me a puzzled glance. "I'm here to see M," I said, hoping to clarify matters.

"Yes, well, she's just gone down for her nap," the old woman told me.

"Oh dear," I exclaimed. "Perhaps there's been some mistake. I thought she'd asked me to come at four o'clock."

"Do come in," said the woman, giving me a warm smile, and quite gratefully I followed her inside.

As I recall, I was given some very good South Indian coffee and the usual biscuits. It was a few minutes before M emerged from another wing of the house. She ignored me at first, moving quickly from one corner of the large room to another, shuffling through neat piles of papers and sending out quick orders to a servant. I think I found her presence slightly intimidating. Finally, her helper, standing anxiously nearby, endeavored to introduce me. "Ma, this is Kamala, Mala's friend from the States."

"Oh yes, how is Mala? In the States, is she? A while since I've seen her," said M. We talked briefly about Mala's brilliant academic career, and then M asked me what I was doing in Madras and where I was staying. I told her that I'd come in part to stay with my grandmother, but also that I planned to do research for my Ph.D. "What kind of research?" asked M. I told her ! hoped to interview women from Tamil Nadu who had participated in the Freedom Movement.

It seems to me that M, who was anyway not a woman to sit still for long, shot up from her chair to search again through more papers on a desk nearby. Or perhaps she excused herself and went out of the room for a brief moment, I can't say for sure. In any case, I used that momenr, discreetly I thought, to pull out my tape recorder and lay it on the chair next to me.

"I'm sorry," said M, turning back to me. "I haven't any more time to talk to you today. I'm very busy."

"I suppose I've come at a bad time," I stammered. "I thought you had time to talk to me today."

"You said you wanted to *meet* me," said M sharply. "Now you've

met me." Stunned by the exactitude with which she interpreted the word *meet,* I suggested that we could talk at another time about her experiences in the nationalist movement.

"Yes, yes," she said testily, "but I'm very busy for the next two weeks." M then thrust a paper in my hand as I was shown to the door. It was an invitation to a fund-raiser for the orphanage she ran, to be held in two weeks or so. "If you want, you can come to this," she said.

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Well, I myself left for Delhi by train the next day, and was not to return for another month. Once back in Madras I was immediately engrossed in a series of interviews with people who seemingly couldn't wait to talk to me. Over time I managed to forget the sting of M's forthright rejection.

I did, however, try to contact M again some months later. After leaving a couple of messages that were unreturned, I once managed to get around M's helpers and actually got M herself on the phone. After I identified myself, she shouted "Who?!" deafly into the phone, and then, "I'm very busy," and hung up.

It was after this second rejection that I became determined to talk to this cranky and energetic old lady. I resolved again to enlist the aid of Mala's aunt.

When I next met Mala's aunt, I explained io her that I thought M had simply forgotten who I was after so many months. Could she possibly call M again? I was leaving for the States soon and I felt it was imperative to talk with her. In fact, everyone I met in Madras repeatedly told me to talk to M. Her name was beginning to follow me around. The more old newspapers I pored over, the more I ran across her name; the more jail files I looked at, the more M's name appeared.

Mala's aunt was, I think, a bit surprised at my request, but generously made the call. Of course, she understood fully what had transpired. "This time," she said, "you must talk to her about the orphanage; it's the one thing she really cares about these days. In fact," she continued, "this time you'll have to meet her at the orphanage—she says that's when she's free during the day."

Two days later I took the bus into T-Nagar, and after quite a walk in the shimmering heat, I reached the orphanage. It was now August, and the year had changed numbers since I'd first met M December last of the winter monsoon.

I was ushered into M's office at the orphanage with great ceremony and told that "Arnma" was expecting me. This time M greeted

me with a sunny smile. "Yes, I remember you, you're Mala's friend. So you've come to see the orphanage, how nice. We need more young people like you. Here, this is Dipti, Mala's cousin. She'll take you around."

For the next hour and a half, I had the full tour of the orphanage. I visited the work station where teenage girls were printing gift cards, the woodshop where the older boys were making furniture and small knickknacks. Then I saw the nursery, the dormitories, the classrooms, and a puja room.

At the end of the tour I was both impressed and fatigued by the display of well-intentioned hegemony in yet one more social welfare institution. Dipti told me that the older children often did not want to leave once they had reached age eighteen, or that they complained about being schooled only for crafts or trades, and not for an education that would prepare them for a white-collar job. I was also quite frankly distressed to learn that one of M's policies was not to adopt children from her orphanage out to Muslim or Christian families. Only Hindu families were eligible. It seemed to me an oddly communal practice for a confirmed Gandhian like M.

But when I returned to the office, there was M, bright as ever. "How did you like my orphanage?" she queried. I managed, I think, a fairly sincere smile. "I'm very impressed with how well ordered and organized things are," I said. "I see that your care really makes the orphanage work." I think I might have also told her that both of my parents were social workers, which pleased her greatly, though it was more an attempt to avoid speaking of my own conflicting feelings about social work.

M beamed at me, and in a most genial manner delivered the Gandhian lecture to which I was now quite accustomed: how it was the task of my generation to return to India to run institutions like these, to carry out the task of social uplift left uncompleted at Independence, to fight against the graft and corruption that characterized modern India. Almost imperceptibly, she began to tell of her life and times during the nationalist movement, to narrate something of the vision of India for which she had fought. Her words were nostalgic and seductive. 1 must have perked up noticeably, because her eyes then took on a mischievous glint as she rattled off stories and anecdotes about all the marches she and her girlfriends led, their numerous arrests; about the printing press she set up in her friend's attic to print illegal leaflets during the Quit India movement of 1942.

I sat in front of M's desk, willing myself to accept her narrative

on the terms she had set. I tried not to think of my absent tape recorder, or even the lack of pencil and paper to jot down notes. Wasn't M herself all too aware that the tape recorder wasn't there to catch her words? Wasn't that, indeed, part of her play?

I vaguely remember the end of our conversation, but I do recall M reaffirming her Gandhianness by commenting on her avoidance of the journalists. "You see," she said, "this work is not about any one individual or personality. So many people come and want to give this award or that award, but Gandhiji said that the work itself is its own reward."

I pondered her words as I rode the bus back to Mylapore. In a sense, M had been saying that what had not been achieved was not worth the telling. I'd met a subject who refused to historicize herself, who repudiated not only the telling of her own history, but that of the nation's as well. I felt again, as I had so often after an interview, the deep anguish of that generation, the form of a question that itself remained unresolved: Had they somehow failed the nation, or had the nation failed them?

Ironically, in almost a year of not talking to M 1 had suddenly, it seemed, learned something of what the young owe the old. I realized that my grandmother's generation looked at our parents' flight from India with something more than alarm. And it was true, the "Quit India Movement," a term used with cynical humor by Delhi intellectuals to refer to colleagues departing west in search of lucrative jobs, did not mean the same thing it had in 1942. Nevertheless, those of us reared in the West, bearers of foreign accents and strange habits, born to a generation exercising and fleeing its own Independence, signaled the hope of a return.

I undei stood that to M I represented the promise of a new generation that was somehow not implicated in the history of a "failed" nation, a generation that would remold the country from the ashes of a forsaken vision. In visiting the orphanage, I had somehow, if belatedly, paid my respects to that originary dream. It seemed no accident that M would finish out her days dedicated to instilling this vision in caring for the young.

Gandhi had seen social reform as political program, yet when the two were cleaved into distinct, competitive elements by the nationalist movement, many Congress workers followed Gandhi into the villages to continue the "constructive program." Thus M had renounced her considerable stature as a political leader and devoted herself to social work. In so doing, even M the woman disappears into a subject position as readily occupied by men as women, for the true social worker had no gender. In fact, not marking one's gender could be seen as a further sign of great humility. This, too, was quite common among Gandhians.

It seems to me that M, in refusing the subject, enacts a particular critique of the nation. For like many "freedom fighters," she is keenly aware of the uses to which her subjectivity may be put.

First, there is the material gain of a pension awarded by the Indian government to its most dedicated freedom fighters, those who had served time in jail. Of course, M, as an upper-class Brahmin woman, with considerable family resources and prestige, can afford to snub a state-sponsored pension; her refusal, read as a rejection of the nation, underscores her own class privilege. Janaki, the subject of the preceding essay, could not. I first came to know of Janaki, also Brahmin, but lower class, through a local historian who, when compiling the *Who's Who of Freedom Fighters* for the state of Tamil Nadu, had helped to document her claim for a pension by tracking down and certifying her jail records. Thus there are very real material processes at work that allow one subject to avoid the historian, and force another subject to search her out.

Second, there is the fame and glory of continual press coverage when old freedom fighters are honored by being asked to inaugurate or preside over various state functions, perhaps legitimating, in M's eyes, a vision struggled for and not won. For to participate in the nation's newly won status was to confirm that the nation had already arrived and was not still in the process of arrival. It was the means of nationhood, not the end of nation, that was important. If "Hind Swaraj" meant there could be no self-rule without self-respect, then until true self-respect had been won, one could not speak of a real Independence.

I had come to greatly respect and admire this woman who had made, indeed changed, the history of India but who would not, by her own design, make the pages of its history books. M's refusal to participate in the recording of her past problematizes our own assumptions about the relationships between memory, experience, historical record, and written testimony. I want to argue that it is in rethinking such relationships that refusing the subject becomes indeed the ground of a feminist ethnography.

How might a feminist ethnography pose the question of memory and identityi^The form this question takes is deliberate, for I do not >jitend this essay to be an exercise in Benedictine "memory ethnog-

raphy,"[10] or even the remembered ethnography of M. N. Srinivas. I raise the issues of memory and historical identity because they have consequences for imagining another form of ethnography. How are the identities of self related to the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past? Or, more specifically, what are the identity-defining functions of memory?

Memory, as we know, is not to be relied upon; memory always indexes a loss.[11] It is not uncommon for the experienced oral historian to caution, "All memories are subject not only to simple, gradual erosion over time, but also to conscious or unconscious repression, distortion, mistakes, and even to a limited extent, outright lies."[12] There are also the assumptions of the historians of popular movements who tell us that "loss of memory is equivalent to the loss of historiography, of a usable past, indeed of historical agency."[13] No memory, no history. No history, no agency. The historian, then, must adjudicate between loss of memory and memory itself as a site of loss; between the failure of memory and failed memory.

Yet memory is what establishes the relationship of the individual to history. "The commonplace elements in self-representations are taken to reveal cultural attitudes, visions of the world and interpretations of history, including the role of the individual in historical process."[14]

That historical process, we know, is inescapably bound up in the teleology of the nation. If we consider that one of the functions of nationalism is to constitute subjects (citizenship again), then refusing the subject is implicitly to refuse the nation. As Homi Bhabha puts it, "People are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy," contributing to the authority of nationalist discourse; they can only be the subjects of a process of nationalist signification.[15] Bhabha reminds us, too, that the telling of an individual story necessitates the whole laborious telling of the collective itself.[16] The work of the subject is inevitably the work of the collectivity. Notwithstanding an ideal of citizenship that founders along lines of gender, there is the sense of certain women being elected to stand for the nation, and a sense of proprietorship: one can speak, for example, of Jeanne d'Arc being the creation of Michelet, even as the Rani of Jhansi symbolizes, for many historians, the Indian "mutiny" of 1857.[n]

Gayatri Spivak has asked the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and answered with an unequivocal no. Speech has, of course, been seen as the privileged catalyst of agency; lack of speech as the absence of agency. How then might we destabilize the equation of

speech with agency by staging one woman's subject refusal as a refusal to speak?

M's subject refusal, deployed in full irony, must be located at the juncture of (at least) two competing processes of identity formation—the feminist one, which would retrieve her voice to fulfill certain subject functions in the West, and the nationalist one. Judith Butler urges us to examine institutional histories of subjection and subjectification, to comprehend the "grammar of the subject."[18] She asks, "Is it not always true that power operates in advance, in the very procedures that establish who will be a subject who speaks in the name of feminism, and to whom? And is it not always clear that a process of subjection is presupposed in the subjugating process that produces before you one speaking subject of feminist debate?"[19]

M's refusing the subject of the feminist historian may look like an all-too-common gendering—an inability to see the value of her own contribution within larger social or historical narratives that would work to deny it. For M's narrative does not take the "I am my own heroine" form much feminist oral historiography uncovers.[20] Rather, M is poised at the edge of history, neither its victim nor its heroine, forcing the feminist historian to hesitate between subject bestowal and subject suspension. Of course, the feminist historian herself is no longer hero of her own story, for she, too, has come to doubt the university rescue missions in search of the voiceless. .

If Susan Sontag has written suggestively of "the anthropologist as hero," Pierre Nora has written more resignedly about the losses of the historian. In lamenting that "the historian's is a strange fate; his role and place in society were once simple and clearly defined: to be the spokesman of the past and the herald of the future,"[21] Nora suggests the passing of the time of historian as hero.

When the historian can depict neither past nor future, chronologies are destabilized, and temporality itself is subject to suspension. That is to say that the subject of such a history is itself one in suspension, signaling a suspended temporality, a repudiated nation. The subject speaks betwixt and between time and places.[22] "The subject is graspable only in the passage between telling/told, between 'here' and somewhere else,"[23] delinking memory from place, what Nora has called "les Heux de memoire."

If history is ultimately the telling of a nation, what, then, are the mnemonics ofhistory? Pierre Nora's recent analysis delineates a fundamental antagonism between memory and history:

> Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in a fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually active phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.[24]

Nora goes on to say that "memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone, and no one, hence its claim to universal authority."[25] This process is elaborated most clearly in the concept of the nation. "Relationships between history, memory, and the nation were characterized as more than natural currency: they were shown to involve a reciprocal circularity, à symbiosis at every level": *

> No longer a cause, the nation has become a given; history is now a social science, memory a purely private phenomenon. The memory-nation was thus the last incarnation of the unification of memory and history.[27]

This splitting apail of memory and history, then, *is* perhaps the place of articulation for critical subjects of the nation. The question is *bow,* if M presents herself as a subject not of history but of memory, *my* memory.

With the breakdown of universal History, there is a lapse into a kind of individual pluralism rather than a necessary restitution of the collective. As Nora puts it, there is a multiplication of private memories demanding individual histories. "The transformation of memory implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual___In the last analysis it is upon the individual alone that the constraint of memory weighs insistently as well as imperceptibly."[28] Nora warns that the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to become "memory individuals."[29] Nora's notion of "duty memory" suggests more than the obligation to remember; rather it is a discursive will operating to force the individual to remember. Yet the process of remembering implies that one must *speak* of memories. If one does not speak is memory lost?

While Nora speaks of the will to remember, Bhabha speaks of a necessary forgetting of the nation's past: "the violence involved in establishing the nation's writ."[30] It is this forgetting that constitutes the beginnings of the nation's narrative. Bhabha argues that it is in this "syntax of forgetting"—being obliged to forget—that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible.[33] The confession is a kind of speaking in order to forget.[32] The mechanics of nationalist thought, then, must rest on confessional history. Is this the juncture at which to locate M's refusal to speak? How do we locate Butler's proposed grammar of the subject in the nationalist syntax of forgetting and the individual duty to remember?

The processes of breakdown and reconstitution that have marked the disciplinary formation of anthropology in the past two decades have also affected history. That is to say that history, too (via Collingwood), sought to differentiate itself from science and art. "What distinguished history from science ... was die operation of an 'a priori imagination' that governed the activity of historical construction; what distinguished historical imagination from the artistic imagination was its respect for evidence."[33] There was, too, an equal conflation of genres. In French historiography, for example, contes, nouvelles, and mémoires judiciaires, all quasi-fictional modes, while recognized as means of telling stories, counted as marks of reality, and therefore evidence,[34] even if Jules Michelet's *Sorcières* was read as a novel, and not as history when it first appeared.[35]

Finally, if official history formerly dealt with states, its turn to the individual, that is, the biographical, was not without questions of proof. This led to the identification of "world-historical individuals" who could be seen as the exemplars of' a universal history.[36] Any other kind of biography (that dealing with lower classes, for example) was relegated to the status of "imaginary biography"—heightening the gap between history and fiction.[37] Carl Ginzburg makes the case for a "conjectural historiography," one that relies on the conditional mood "perhaps," or "might have been," raising the possibility of changing the past in the future simply by making it the past of a different present."[38]

Such a historiography works in ways contrary to the judicial form of official history that regards history as a trial to establish veracity. Here, Victor Turner's analysis of Max Gluckman's work on legal discourse may yield some useful insights. Turner tells us that "the judicial process seeks to establish the facts by means of cross-examinati<8$ of witnesses and the assessment of conflicting evidence in

terms of 'as-if' models" and that "narratives are placed in such 'as if' frames in order to move from the subjunctive mood of 'it may have happened like this or that' to the quasi-indicative mood of 'these would appear to be the facts.'"[39]

The shift from judicial (or indicative) history to subjunctive or conjectural history then parallels the shift we have argued for from declarative (or realist) to interrogative texts. Here we must speak of an imagined history, rather than one that proceeds from the compilation of facts.[40] This should not surprise us given that history remains a tale of the nation, and that we are now accustomed to speaking of the nation as an "imagined" community.

Ginzburg argues that the subjunctive analyses of historians like Natalie Davis[41] speaks to the difficulties of historical reconstruction. To my mind, however, conjectural historiography speaks equally to the realm of deconstruction. In fact, it mediates between the two: the one indicating the realm of possibility, the other, the realm of impossibility. M's subject refusal has been located in a conjectural, as well as conjuncture], history. It is a conjectural history because I have indeed speculated on her reasons for refusing to speak. It is a conjunctural history because I have located the impossibility of her speaking in the conjuncture between memory and history, between nationalist and Western feminist processes of subject retrieval.

Like an unreliable narrator, the fidelity of the conjectural historian, confronted with the choices if——, then? and if not——, then? cannot be assumed. Subjunctive historians are then faced with their own apologies. Perhaps this is why, like Natalie Davis, in her analysis of the sixteenth-century French pardon tale,[42] 1, tooj will also ask my subject(s) to pardon me ...