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## Racial and Colonial Politics of the Modern Object of Knowledge

CAUTIONARY NOTES ON "SCRIPTURE"

JOSEPH PARKER

How might we reconsider the topic of "scriptures" in the midst of what the African historian Steven Feierman has called the "general epistemological crisis affecting all the social sciences and humanities"?<sup>1</sup> We find ourselves at sea in this crisis every time we write, not just when explicitly describing the other, and can only navigate its politics successfully if we recognize the dangers of what Emmanuel Levinas termed an ontological imperialism where otherness vanishes as part of the same of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

For Feierman this crisis has centered on the gradual dissolution of unilinear narratives of world history as the spread of modernity out of Europe; historians have confronted their accountability to the Others of Europe both within Europe and beyond in colonial territories.<sup>3</sup> In the case of modern conceptions of "scriptures," a similar crisis centers on the dissolving of modern notions of sacred text deriving from the biblical tradition, particularly that of Christianity, as it is entangled in direct colonization and the more pervasive process of ontological imperialism. The object of knowledge known as "scripture" may be reconstituted in ways that refuse appropriation into this unfortunate heritage as an ethics and politics of accountability to the Others of modernity. In this essay I explore a few signs that may be useful while at sea on the voyage to accountability for the academy, accountability to the populations whose perspectives are erased every time seemingly neutral knowledge claims to universal truths and categories are made.

For my first sign I turn to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on "marginalia" to think through the epistemological crisis as it applies to "scripture." Spivak asks us to give attention to the way in which any explanation presupposes an explainable universe and an explaining subject, and thereby excludes "the possibility of the radically heterogeneous." If our objects of knowledge, such as "scriptures," are not naturally given to us, we have to call them into coherence, cathect them as we distinguish them from what they are not, and thereby always already stake out a political position. Spivak terms these exclusions the "prohibited margin" and indicates that as a political event and a productive event, each particular explanation specifies a particular politics.<sup>4</sup> Through our attempts to theorize and understand "scriptures," then, we already engage in a highly politicized act of exclusion, an

exclusion of heterogeneity even if our object of knowledge is precisely that of the *heterogeneous excluded margin*. Spivak's project is one of persistently attempting to renegotiate the prohibited margin of the object of knowledge to practice an ethics and a politics of feminism, anti-class exploitation, and decolonization within limits, a project we may pursue with regard to "scriptures" and their Others.

At stake is more than the ethical and political status of our objects of knowledge: if we are not careful our specific politics will also reinforce the marginalization of our work as good liberal humanists in the academy. The specific politics through which humanists are marginalized that Spivak calls our attention to is what she calls "advanced capitalist [and masculinist] technocracy." As academic custodians of culture, Spivak suggests that our traditional role is "to produce and be produced by *official* explanations in terms of the powers that police the entire society."<sup>5</sup> As we are thereby being written into the text of capitalist and masculinist technocracy, we also constitute that very text as collaborators in its inscription who have agency and yet are without full control over the text.

This is a second sign, a warning or omen: unless the work of studying "scriptures" addresses issues of advanced capitalist and masculinist technocracy, we run the risk of supporting through an unacknowledged complicity the powers that police the entire society by excluding these policing powers from the objects of our study. The category of "scriptures" may perhaps seem to be as far as one can get from the powers that police society, and this suggests the need to profoundly reshape the limits of the object known as "religion." Religion is often understood within the truth regime of modernity as something other than science and technology, medicine, legal enforcement systems, psychology, literature, philosophy, economics, or politics. These are the notorious disciplinary boundaries into which we are being constituted even as are also always co-constituting them in our work through our agency, the grid of intelligibility and its disciplinary politics that Michel Foucault critiqued in his early work on the history of the modern human sciences.<sup>6</sup>

It is through the enforcement mechanisms of these meticulous distinctions and exclusions that the prohibited margin is produced, focusing our attention on "religion" or "scripture" as constituted outside of the workings of "advanced capitalist and masculinist technocracy" that police and by which we ourselves police our entire society. We know full well that the enforcement mechanisms of our own day are quite brutal when they come into play. We would see them in action if we were to begin hearing the voices of God, as did Muhammad and Elijah, or if we were to overturn the tables in the marketplace, as did Jesus, or if we were to heal suffering based on the Popul Vuh or Buddhist scriptures rather than Eurocentric medicine, or if we redirected the flows of our own King George's tax revenues. We would then be locked up and put away. The politics of these limits have high stakes, so we would best be cautious as we talk so freely of renegotiating and riffing on them, as if our signifying on its own can reshape or even bring down the dark walls that hold those who have been put away. Yet I would suggest that it is precisely at the moment when these categorical distinctions are problematized,

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## Signifying (on) Scriptures

Vincent L. Wimbush, series editor

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This publication series aims to foster multi-field, multidisciplinary, comparative and sociopolitically engaged thinking, research, and writing about “scriptures”—what they are, why and how they were invented, what we make them do for us, how they are represented, and what effects they have (had) in society and culture. Proposals are invited from scholars of any field, discipline, or area of inquiry. The books published in this series all revolve around issues of interpretation—not of the content-meaning of texts (narrowly defined), but having to do with how *peoples* make “texts” “signify”/“signify on” “scriptures” as vectors for understanding, establishing, communicating, sometimes undermining, sometimes securing their identities, positions, agency, and power in the world.

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# THEORIZING SCRIPTURES

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*New Critical Orientations  
to a Cultural Phenomenon*

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EDITED BY

VINCENT L. WIMBUSH

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Forbes takes a different approach to the systems implementing and enforcing race, slavery, and racism in his study of relations of Native Americans and those of the African diaspora in the Americas.<sup>15</sup> By examining a vast profusion of empirical evidence of confusion in the terminology of racist categorization, Forbes's book ultimately mocks the workings of the institutional structures that attempt to enforce claims to "rational" categorization. Forbes demonstrates how the vocabulary of slavery and racism is constituted through juridical practices as the apparatuses for enforced subjection, providing a historical concreteness and link to political, social, and legal history that is missing from Gates.

Rather than attempting to claim parity through difference of black with white or African American with Western, Forbes stages a displacement of the very grounds and terms on which such comparative claims could be made. Forbes uses modern methods to document the disappearance of the indigenous populations, not through the traditional argument that they succumbed to disease and warfare but through showing how the racial classification system incorporated them into other categories again and again. Rather than adopting the vocabulary and categories of the colonizer and the slave master, Forbes demonstrates the erasures, aporias, and violence of that system. This critique practices an accountability to the radical alterity of the Other commonly erased by academic work that claims to represent difference without critiquing the terms of the modern. Moreover, such a critique does not require postmodern theory for its development, only deep wariness of claims to the politically neutral status of the "factual" by social systems that enforce modern forms of inequality and exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

Through tracking the traces of subaltern group members "cunningly obliterated in the interest of dominant history," Gayatri Spivak has argued that Forbes's work belongs with the work of subalternist historians.<sup>17</sup> Yet Spivak cautions against the move to a generalized use of the term "subaltern," if it is to retain some of its political force and learn from the work of the subaltern studies group of historians and theorists. This term itself has a complex and highly contested history, but for the present purposes we might think briefly of two different conceptions. Antonio Gramsci took the term to mean something like the subproletariat, those below the working class in a Marxist class analysis. With the intervention of Spivak in the work of the subaltern studies group, we were asked to consider, first, how the subaltern was gendered and, second, how problematic was the relationship of the subaltern to language.

The relation of the subaltern to language and intelligibility was summarized in Spivak's provocative article title, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>18</sup> While Spivak has over the years revised her thinking on this last problem,<sup>19</sup> I would suggest that for today we might reductionistically consider her example of the subaltern as an illiterate farming woman from the Third World. Many African Americans and other members of racially marginalized groups in the United States and others in the Third World academy do not seem very compatible with the Gramscian subaltern, a kind of subproletariat below the working class, or the illiterate rural farming woman that Spivak sees as typical. We need only consider the remarkable

uniformity of those of us in the academy in terms of high literacy levels and proficiency in the language(s) of the colonizer(s) and our at the least middle-class socioeconomic status to see how application of the category of subaltern to those of us in the academy would be profoundly misleading.

It is useful in examining the politics of this object of knowledge to ask what range of relations do those of African, Asian, or others in the Third World have to the category of subaltern? Clearly there would be some sectors in the United States, say rural and even urban men and women, certainly of the nineteenth century and even of our own decade, that might closely fit with Gramsci's and even Spivak's conceptions. Other sectors of the Third World diaspora community, however, might have much more distant relations to the status of the subaltern, whether we think of a Henry Louis Gates or a Gayatri Spivak, a Toussaint L'Overture or a Rigoberta Menchú.<sup>20</sup> Many of these individuals carry considerable economic privilege well above anything resembling a subproletariat, are highly literate, are mostly men and mostly urban in affiliation if not in their origins, and in this regard cannot be termed subaltern. Preserving the political force of the category "subaltern" would require working actively with the heterogeneity of these groups across lines of difference of class, gender, literacy level, nomad/sedentary, and urban/rural.

The politics of representation are perhaps always an invitation to appropriation and consolidation into the ontological imperialism of modernity, that network of institutions that set the limits that exclude what Spivak termed the "prohibited margin." The possibility of appropriation can be seen very directly in my own participation in discussions of the Other, as a Northern European heterosexual literate male holding forth on the status of subalterns and African Americans in a settler colony, where my people have colonized and still colonize the indigenous peoples and have enslaved and still subordinate African Americans in myriad ways. As I construct a coherent object of signification and produce my own subjectivity and the legitimacy of my object of knowledge, there are obvious dangers of appropriation. Yet while these dangers are certainly racialized and gendered in my own particular location politics, their limits are also set by the linguistic structures of modernity. These limits pressure us toward ready-made appropriations and consolidations into the structures of modernity: the nation-state, urban centers and depopulated rural areas, the Eurocentric academy, gendered late capitalism, neocolonialism and settler colonies, mass education and literacy/illiteracy boundaries, and so forth. Spivak's work suggests that we must be very wary of the limits to this otherness and of the politics of those limits.

The risks of appropriation have direct implications for a return to the topic of "scripture" marked in the present volume, with its profoundly troubled history of canonization and domination. While these issues are most obvious and straightforward in the case of biblical studies and particularly the role of Christianity in European imperialism, my own field of Buddhist studies also struggles with issues of colonization. Colonization is an ongoing problem for Buddhists, as in the case of the deployment of Buddhist missionaries in Japanese colonization of the continent

when we approach the edge of incoherence, that we may meet with the radical heterogeneity and the prohibited margin that excludes the subaltern and keeps us marginalized as academic humanists, good citizens in preserving the bloody social "order" of our day.

The politics of these seemingly arcane distinctions must be clear by now. The construction of our object of knowledge and its limits is a profoundly politicized moment, a turning point where we may constitute objects known as "scriptures" within the terms of the power-knowledge limits of academic humanism or in terms Other to these limits. The objective of this work is not to produce some more "complete" or "true" or "authentic" object of knowledge as determined by an essentialized Other to humanist, Eurocentric biblical studies. Rather this work may come to produce the always already present prohibited margins whose politics do something other than support the epistemic violence of ontological imperialism and the literal violence of the "brutal ironies" of advanced capitalist and masculinist technocracy.<sup>7</sup>

To reconsider the tradition of interpreting "scriptures" as if they exist somehow outside of racialized and colonial relations, I turn to two complementary examples of what might be termed the Other of modernity through which we might reconsider the epistemological limits and racialized and colonizing politics of "scriptures" as objects of knowledge. The first is an encounter with racialized texts, which I approach through the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. Gates has developed signifyin(g) as an approach to these texts in an effort to undermine their essentialized rendering under Eurocentric racialized representations.<sup>8</sup> By turning to a loosely deconstructionist approach to difference in reading major African American texts, Gates demonstrates a certain limited type of freedom of African American authors in their relation to the social and economic conditions of their day. He rejects essentialist renderings of African American texts as determined by context. This step of rejecting essentialist renderings of the Other in the eyes of the colonizer erodes the grip of fixed social positionings that make domination possible and is an important part of any critical enterprise.

Yet Gates's references to "black tradition" or "blackness" as coherent and unified erases the considerable heterogeneity of the category in terms of gender, class, sexual orientation, generation, immigration status, and other factors. As some African Americans begin to rise to positions of suburban success and considerable institutional authority, including in the academy, this comes at the expense of their solidarity with the common folk of the African diaspora. Gates does not address these questions in his analysis of texts, moving glibly from slave narratives to texts by Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker that are now established as canonical without carefully examining class and gender differences. In subjecting himself and his readers to the modern need for coherence, difference and the Other are erased and obscured.

While Gates's rendering of "text" is still largely limited to the written text, his deployment of the vernacular and the oral tradition introduce the vocally outspoken and bodily unruly African American tradition of riffing, woofing, and

getting loud.<sup>9</sup> That is the notion of signifyin(g) as something colloquial and locatable within a particular racialized social or cultural setting always determined and yet never successfully totalized by the power-knowledge regime of modernity. These behaviors do more than bring the African American colloquial and "street" attitudes into the academy, for they dislocate what Michel Foucault termed the meticulous rituals of power<sup>10</sup> and potentially take "scriptures" outside of what Robert Young has called the "truth protocols of modernity."<sup>11</sup>

This approach to signifyin(g) is potentially profoundly unsettling to biblical studies, to "scriptures," to the academy, and perhaps even to world social relations. These practices invite certain unruly modes of engaging and disagreeing and signifyin(g) and physical behavior and certain failures of bodily docility and certain bodily distributions into arenas where they are not generally welcome: the classroom, dissertation, academic publications, faculty appointments, church pulpits, and social-change movement organizing. If we are to problematize the origins of the object of knowledge, it is precisely such "meticulous rituals of power" and docile protocols of truth that need to be reconfigured. Gates's emphasis on the vernacular opens the door to less-docile bodies and to uses of language that do not follow the protocols of middle-class politeness that maim and kill so many diverse views and that erase attempts to acknowledge the history of violent domination. This emphasis asks us how the docile body of modernity, seen most readily in the rigid arrogance of white masculine bodies, might come to be decolonized.<sup>12</sup> Constructive encounters with this and other oral and vernacular traditions helps us to decolonize not only the bodies of our objects of knowledge but also the academic body, perhaps unlearning some of the docility that was the price of our privilege in the academy, maybe learning a new politics of the body in signifyin(g) with an attitude not just in theory but embodied, not just textually but physically.

Yet Gates grounds his reading of texts in the second half of the book in a binary contrast of "the Western tradition" and "the black vernacular," asserting that African American authors turn to the black vernacular to ground their textual practice "outside the Western tradition."<sup>13</sup> Gates's objective in this argument is to affirm the importance of vernacular texts and the interpretive strategies of signifyin(g) as comparable in importance to the intertextual heritage of Western literature and as making possible a critical tradition of reading and writing. Yet this frame reproduces the binary logic of West/Africa or white/black and reinscribes Gates's project back into the logic of colonial domination and master/slave relations. By working uncritically with the categories of the colonizer, such as the category of blackness, the Other is subjected to the terms provided by the ontological imperialism of Eurocentric modernity, claiming subject status in the terms already established by the imperial ontology. This is one of the problems that must be avoided in reconstituting "scripture" beyond the logic of modernity and the imperial ontology, another warning sign on the voyage to accountability.

One of the ways to avoid such domestication into the imperial logic of modernity is to displace the binarisms and differences by which modernity works.<sup>14</sup> Jack

2. Feierman, "African Histories," 185, citing Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12–16.
3. Feierman, "African Histories," 167–171, 172, 198, and 201n15.
4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, (1979; repr., New York: Routledge, 1996), 33.
5. Spivak, "Explanation and Culture," 35. Spivak uses the phrase "advanced capitalist technocracy," which she then links to what she calls "masculism" (35, 47–48nn8–9).
6. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
7. Spivak, "Explanation and Culture," 38. For Spivak's notion of epistemic violence, which diverges somewhat from Levinas on ontological imperialism, see her "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader*, 219; trenchant application of her concerns with epistemic violence to the field of religious studies may be found in Laura Donaldson, "The Breasts of Columbus," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 48–55.
8. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
9. An application of these notions to religious scripture may be found in Vincent L. Wimbush introductory essay to this volume.
10. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
11. Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 70.
12. An analysis of the racialized and gendered body that explores the failure of modern docility may be found in Elaine Kim, "Bad Women: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Tong Soon Min," in *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, ed. Elaine H. Kim, Lillia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United of California (New York: Beacon Press, 1997), 184–194; for an analysis of the body under slavery that decolonizes the modern gaze, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). I am grateful for Leila Neti and Lindon Barrett for suggesting the latter reference.
13. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxii.
14. The work of deconstruction may be characterized in terms of a reversal of social and textual hierarchies of meaning and power, when the binary terms of the hierarchy are then displaced. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
15. Jack Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, 2nd ed. (1988; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
16. Spivak, "Race Before Racism: The Disappearance of the American," *boundary 2* 25 (1998): 38–39.
17. *Ibid.*, 46.
18. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).
19. See her reconsiderations in "Subaltern Talk," in *The Spivak Reader*, 287–308, and Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 269–273.
20. A thoughtful analysis of the appropriations of Rigoberta Menchú by academics may be found in Caren Kaplan, "The Politics of Location as a Transnational Feminist Critical Practice," in *Transnational Feminist Critique: Theory and Transnational Feminist Practice*, ed. Indral

21. Brian (Daizen) Victoria, *Zen at War* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1997).
22. Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
23. Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991): 1–23.
24. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
25. Feierman, "African Histories," 183–184, 197–198.
26. Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-stories from East Central Africa* (New York: L. Barber Press, 1993).
27. Feierman, "African Histories," 186–197.
28. Critiques of racialization in biblical interpretation are by now well established by a significant scholarship. For important examples see Charles Long, *Significations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), and Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2001); for the implications of racialization in the growth of North American Buddhism, see Joe Parker, "The Subtle Presence of Race in Buddhism: A White Perspective," *Turning Wheel* (Fall 2000): 36.
29. The movement away from notions of scripture and religion deriving directly from Christian missionaries and colonization and indirectly from more subtle processes is a long one. For important work on the more subtle modes of colonization see Brian K. Smith, "Exorcising the Transcendent: Strategies for Defining Hinduism and Religion," *History of Religions* 27 (1987): 32–55; Aijaz Ahmad, "Between Orientalism and Historicism: Anthropological Knowledge of India," *Studies in History* 7 (1991): 135–163; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1993); and Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).
30. The vast scholarship, theology, and feminist social movement literature re-visioning scripture beyond androcentrism is well-known; early foundational work would include Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), and Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 66–71, among many others. For English language critiques of this problem in considering Buddhist scriptures, see the work of Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), and Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), among a growing body of writing.
31. Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
32. Spivak, "More on Power: Knowledge," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, (New York: Routledge) 1993), 51.

during the Pacific War.<sup>21</sup> Yet the more general problem of Eurocentric ontological imperialism is illustrated in the usefulness of the emphasis on text for British imperialist domination India,<sup>22</sup> and the subtle way in which such an emphasis inserts Protestant Christian presuppositions into the academic project.<sup>23</sup>

Finding the value for "scripture" in developing representations of the Other that are accountable to radical alterity is a double-edged project, one that can open new doors but one that is founded on the quicksand of appropriation. By turning to canonical scriptures, revisionist significations and even "woofing" on these texts has considerable power to reach a broad audience, to persuade funding agencies to support research, and even to build a mass movement precisely because the text is already well-known with considerable legitimacy. Yet this same strength is also its primary weakness, because an entrenched, highly constricted arena of meanings is thereby chosen for the site for the struggle of re-signification. This means that the central project of the center, focusing on "scriptures," is primed and poised for appropriation and consolidation into the terms of the truth regime of the society and episteme in which it has been made canonical. This is another auspice on the road to accountability for the research into "scriptures."

I offer two countermeasures to address these problems. The first is to broaden the term "scripture" as has already been done in certain sectors of the poststructuralist project with the term "text," namely reconfigure it to a broader meaning more closely approximating the phrase "social text." Such a project has been admirably accomplished by the journal of that same name and by many other groups and individuals in the academy and beyond. A similar direction has been taken by Foucauldians in rewriting the notion of "discourse" to mean something quite other to the limits of language or of "written text."<sup>24</sup> Broadening the term "scripture" in this way would be important, as it might imply such phrases as "discursive regime" and "truth regime." The term "regime" is much harder to domesticate into something innocuous term like "signifyin(g)" that can be riffed on in some sort of putatively free play.

The second countermeasure is to actively and consciously redefine who it is that makes decisions about which "scriptures" are considered as central to the phenomena. In this way Gates's and Feierman's turn to the vernacular and the oral is important. Also, African historians have adopted multiple methods to resist the entrenched Eurocentrism and unilinear narratives of historical writing to reach the underclasses generally left out of academic histories, including oral histories, historical archaeology, historical linguistics, historical anthropology, and anti-dynastic histories.<sup>25</sup> Feierman draws on these methods through the work of Marcia Wright to develop an analysis of a woman, Narwimba, living in Africa under the shadow of slavery to reject Eurocentric analyses that see European international trade as the driving force of history.<sup>26</sup> Instead Feierman suggests that local practices of kinship, production, sacrifice, and rights and duties profoundly shaped very large scale processes, such as overseas trade and the colonial economy—how the local forms the transnational not through univocal and universalized histories but through

Students of "scripture" would need to adopt similar measures to begin to answer questions about what subaltern illiterate rural women consider to be sacred text and how they interpret it. Such an approach might build comparative analyses of canonical "scriptures" with those of the indigenous colonized and formerly enslaved peoples of North America in insurgent work. These comparative analyses would be important in displacing the hegemonic determinism in the United States of "scriptures" in terms defined by the "white Bible"<sup>28</sup> or the "colonizer's Bible"<sup>29</sup> or the "masculine Bible"<sup>30</sup> and other racialized and colonizing ways that continue to be enforced in academic and community practices.

To this end we may work with the illiterate subaltern who produces the scriptural text, from the First World African American to the Third World rural illiterate subaltern woman to the suited academic body—male and female. If the subaltern is seen reductively as an illiterate rural woman from the Third World, and a "scripture" is seen narrowly as a text the presumes literacy, then how might we ever understand the phrase "subaltern scripture"? How does the domestic U.S. First World context of "African American" be brought to crisis in a fruitful way by the transnational Third World emphasis of "subaltern"? The relation of the "subaltern scripture" to urban African American gendered youthful "woofing" or "getting loud" is no simple one either. While the African American experience has been interpreted as an "internal colony,"<sup>31</sup> its history as part of the First World leads in many but not all cases to considerable privilege compared to rural illiterate third world women. And the relation of "subaltern scripture" to our own writings and teaching as highly literate academics is even more problematic. Spivak suggests that it is only through an ethics enacted consistently through a crisis that opens up the limits of the grid of intelligibility and rewrites the prohibited margins of the object of power-knowledge that we may begin to earn "the right to be heard and trusted by the subaltern."<sup>32</sup>

Knowing that the representations we produce are always already misnamings allows us to construct a critical distance from our own truth claims. It also produces a profound critical awareness that our power-knowledge regime severely constricts key aspects of the objects of knowledge that we construct. If used effectively, this critical distance may provide a wedge to begin to open space up for the radical heterogeneity that we exclude in the prohibited margins of our own coherence as we signify within the limits of the Eurocentric academy, racialized and gendered colonialism and power-knowledge regime of modernity, and of one of the languages of domination, English, the language of this essay.

#### NOTES

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1. Steven Feierman, "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History," in *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contribution of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, ed. Paul T. Popenoe (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 11–22.