"Can't Complain"
A Response to Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" from a Post-colonial *Pinoy*/Filipin*x* (of the) American Diaspora Perspective

Carmelo Sorita
Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

This paper argues for the possibility to reclaim freedom and effect positive change in an ethical manner even in situations where one "can't complain." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" demonstrates the necessity of not just complaining but also of resistance. It is neither enough nor even right to give a voice to the subaltern or the oppressed for they have their own voice. It's not that they can't speak. It's rather they refrain from speaking for their voice makes no matter. Their existence does not matter in the current state of things. A social reformer must work for the oppressed until their voice is heard, i.e., the conditions that subject them to alienation and dehumanization, i.e., subalterity, are no more.

I. 'Can't Complain': a methodological framework

The short narrative below prefaces and frames the paper. Purposely written in English, it is a meditation on the significant interactions that this Filipino author has accumulated so far while living in America for almost a decade. It also serves to identify his social location and his intended audience. It also guides the arguments of his thesis and the questions that motivate them. Even as it attempts to re-present or make present, no statement made herein represents or speaks on behalf of anyone else or for the collective in a way that it claims to represent or be representative of the reality of all Filipin*x* (=*Pinoy*) subjectivities. Its task is to describe the particularity of his perspective, his interests, and his observations about society as they contribute to the formation of his subjectivity towards the development of an "ethics of self." While it is the author's hope that this text could awaken positive change on others' consciousness, it is the sole responsibility of the reader to consent to such influence and to make that ethical change possible.

"Can't Complain"

> One of the things that fascinated me most about U.S. culture is the phrase, "Can't complain" as an answer to the common greeting, "Hi, how are you doing?"
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> I remember the first time I encountered this phrase was when I was working as an interfaith chaplain at a nursing home in Florida. I was on the elevator with my Puerto Rican nurse assistant co-worker friend when the Head of Maintenance came in on the lift with us. He's a kindly white Southerner who looks and sounds very much like that "Git 'er dun" fellow on TV (The character is "Larry the Cable Guy," I was told). "How're ya doin'?" I said to him. "Can't

complain" was his curt reply. "Uh-huh," my friend sighed in agreement with him. I blurted out, "What does 'Can't complain' mean? Does that mean we're prohibited to air our grievances? I have heard that phrase many times before but never had the courage to ask." "You don't know what it means?," my friend looked at me with wide-eyed surprise. "I say it all the time," she said in her usual confident and pleasant sing-song voice. "How long have you been here in the U.S.?," she asked.

I treated the last sentence as a rhetorical question so I didn't answer it (OK, it was about five years since I arrived in the U.S. as an international student. This is my first full-time job after acquiring three years in seminary and another year and a half for the chaplaincy residency and fellowship). I said, "*Sí señora*, it's in English. So, maybe I know. But I must admit it when I am not actually sure. There's this one time an African American co-chaplain friend of mine asked me, 'Have you heard of Jim Crow?' And I said, 'I have heard of *him*.'" They both laughed. "Yeah, that was embarrassing," I said, smiling. "At least, you learned. Well, how about you try it then. Tell us if complaining works for you. If it doesn't, then, at least, you learned," they encouraged me with a wink and a smile.

If you don't like it here, you can always leave." I recall this was what my Filipino American (*Fil-Am*) chaplain co-resident said to me when I spoke once about income inequality and racism in America. He's a 2nd generation immigrant and a proud citizen of the U.S.A. He deemed that I was complaining and being ungrateful, so he flat out told me, "Why don't you go back to the Philippines?

Aray (Ouch)! That's a dagger thrust through the heart right there. But he's right, we can't complain because *we're blessed*. Coming from a "shit-hole" country, this little brown brother's working-class *Pinoy* parents were able to come to America. That is already a huge accomplishment! "It's like the Browns going to the Super Bowl!" my friend exclaimed. He re-used the joke that he used to say when he needs to go to the toilet.

"No, it's more like *Pinoys* in the Promised Land!," I beamed. "Enslaved for centuries, they escaped and went through a desert experience until they finally made it to the U.S. of A!" My friend looked at me incredulously. "Seriously, bro, look! Their only son is 'All American'! I can't imagine how so very proud of you they are."

My *Fil-Am* friend became teary-eyed. He shared that when his family came to the U.S., they lived a life of poverty. His father died of cancer when he and his sister were very young. His mom had to work two to three part-time jobs, hardly sleeping at night, so that she can pay for their education. That is why he is grateful and proud: "I got my college degree from the 'Harvard of the South!'," which he claims is in Valdosta, Georgia.

'Gotta love that sense of humor! I have to say: that's the *Pinoy* in him. Indeed, we, *Pinoys*, laugh even when our hearts are crying. Despite our petty contests, we sure got mad respect for each other. I always pray for him as he does for me. I'd tell him, "Bless your little heart, bro!" And he'd respond in earnest, "Bless your little heart, *kapatid* (brother). No, seriously, brother. Be blessed and be always grateful."

Got it. The next time someone asks, "How are things going?" I should just say, "Can't complain."

It should have been easy as 1-2-3. Well, it turns out I did not learn my lesson. Two years later, I was fired from my first job as a full-time chaplain. The browns hit the fan, as it were, when the nursing home was sold to a national healthcare corporation. "Corporate" installed a "New Management," and imposed a new medical charting system that costs 3 million dollars. They then enforced drastic budget cuts to the administration of the nursing home, which then translated to less nurses, nurse assistants, and therapists working per shift. Everybody had to work harder and in more dangerous conditions for no additional pay. Naturally, employee turnover went high. So, "New Management" just hired new workers, who were willing to take on the heavy load for the same pay because they had less job experience and needed the job. Bottom line, the living conditions for the elderly residents and dementia patients went down from bad to worse. It was heartbreaking.

There was not a day when I do my rounds that I would not discover one of these residents with dementia sitting for no less than an hour on their own pee and poop. Bedsores became much more common and much worse. Hospitalization and deaths among the patients and residents also became more frequent. They would be brought to the hospital because of a urinary tract infection or an unattended fall and then never come back.

I don't mind holding memorial services for the deceased; it is always nice and they are a necessary ritual for grieving loved ones. But that is not enough to count for compassionate care in the light of faith that does justice. I had to use my prophetic voice to advocate for my adopted elderly family so that they can reclaim their dignity and personhood in a place that they are supposed to call 'home' but they say is more like a prison or a "pre-departure area" instead. I spoke with Management and even with Corporate in private and in the Town Hall meetings that they held. So, they knew as a matter of principle/conscience I did not cover up for them when the government inspectors came in to investigate the complaints.

As a result, my employers terminated me for gross insubordination. The Human Resource Manager, who happens to be African American, offered me these parting words: "You can't change the system, Carmelo. You're just a chaplain."

II. "Can the Subaltern Speak -- and Live?"

Nobody likes a complainer – that's a fact; and another reason behind "Can't complain." Other variations are: "It is what it is." Meaning: It's *the* reality. "Here's a straw." Meaning: "Suck it up." There's no use complaining. Likewise, it is not helpful to blame people for believing it is hopeless to speak up even if there are legitimate and ethical reasons to. However, it is important to ask: Is there a way to get out alive from a sticky situation that one finds unethical and unhealthy but 'can't complain' about? To put it in another way: Can the subaltern speak and live?

Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provides some invaluable insights in this regard. In contrast to a care-less "How are you," Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," does pose a serious question.[1] It is not a rhetorical question in the contemporary sense, or a question that is not really a question. It is rather a critical inquiry in as much as it is a critique. Thus, it demands an answer. Not just an answer for the sake of answering, but rather an engaged, well thought out response is required. The addressee needs to listen very well first before entertaining any urge at all to being the responder. But for the impatient who "got no time for this," a short summary by way of "question and answer" is here given together with all the respect that is due them: Q: "Can the subaltern speak?" A: "Yes, she can. But if she will just be complaining, then the answer is No. Not interested. Zip. It. Dot. Com. End of conversation. Case dismissed. Now, go away. Who is this 'subaltern', anyway?"

In Spivak's essay, the "subaltern" manifests as a woman who dwells in the periphery, an outsider cast out of the social, economic, and political institutions of a society that is/was colonized or under rule by a foreign empire, such as India, Spivak's native country, under the British *Raj*. As such, Spivak's subaltern significantly deviates from the traditional English meaning of subaltern, that is, "a junior officer in the army." While she is not the originator of the idea, Spivak creatively borrowed it from both Antonio Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Collective, an activist group of scholars who aims at rewriting South Asian history from the perspective of the colonized. Gramsci originally used the term "*subalterno*" as a euphemism for the proletariat. The Subaltern Studies Collective adopted Gramsci's usage and extended its meaning "to include all oppressed groups, such as the peasants, millworkers, women, 'tribal people'."[2] In the essay, Spivak describes the subaltern as people who inhabit "the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit [that are] marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, Aboriginals, and the lowest

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313. A slightly revised version of this essay appears as the closing section of a chapter entitled "History" in Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 244–311; and subsequently preserved as the essay's final form with the same title, "Can The Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21–78; the original version is also reprinted as an appendix in pp. 237-291. For the sake of simplicity, this present paper utilizes and follows the pagination of the revised/final version.

[2] Prem Poddar, "Subaltern Studies," in *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. John C. Hawley (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001), 425–30, esp. p.425. See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Spivak refers to Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Collective in Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 37-41; also, in Leon de Kock, "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa," *A Review of International English Literature* 23, no. 3 (July 1992): 29–47.

strata of the urban subproletariat."[3] In a subsequent interview, Spivak offers a further qualification of the term's signification:

> The subaltern is [not] just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. […] In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. It's in capital logic, you know what I mean?"[4]

Spivak emphasizes above that due to the "epistemic violence" that is perpetuated by "capital logic," the subaltern is "everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism." This description of the subaltern is much clearly foregrounded in the revised/final version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" roughly twenty-years after the publication of the original essay, as it begins with this lament:

> *Women outside of the mode of production narrative* mark the points of fadeout in the writing of disciplinary history even as they mime "writing as such," footprints of the trace (of someone? something—we are obliged mistakenly to ask) that efface as they disclose. If the mode of production narrative is the final reference, these women are insufficiently represented or representable in that narration. We can docket them, but we cannot grasp them at all. The possibility of possession, of being haunted, is cut by the imposition of the tough reasonableness of capital's mode of exploitation.[5]

At first glance, the question "Can the subaltern speak?" may imply that the subaltern does not have a voice. But that might be entirely true. On the contrary, for Spivak, the subaltern is *not* incapable of speaking; for she does speak, she "mimes writing as such," to say the least.[6] In so far as she exists, she has a story to tell. However, the problem lies in this -- nobody cares to listen.

In this prevailing state of neocolonial hierarchical affairs, dominated by the efficient economic system of global capitalism, the subaltern is silenced or shut off. It makes no matter how important her message is, or how loud she cries out, or how hard she tries in life – even to the point of taking her own life – she does not matter in the end to those who have the power to define what *really* matters.[7] After the logic of capital have so efficiently erased her or cast her out of history 'as we know it', only a "footprint of the trace" remains of the subaltern, so that, according to Spivak, "We mistakenly ask: Is [the subaltern] someone(?) or something(?)."[8] "Insufficiently represented or representable" in the prevailing "mode of production narrative," the subaltern is a figure whose existence is as real as a ghost -- for "only in death do they enter a

[3] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 37.
[4] De Kock, "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," 46.
[5] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 21; emphasis added.
[6] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 21.
[7] De Kock, "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," 44: Spivak says, "'Can the Subaltern Speak?' comes out of the recounting of an incident. Now the incident is a situation where a subaltern person had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message." That subaltern person turns out to be Spivak's grandmother's sister.
[8] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 21-22; slightly rephrased.

narrative for us; [only in their erasure do] they become figurable."[9] So if a question could be asked at all, then it should not be the literal "Can the subaltern speak?" but rather "Can the hegemonic ear hear anything?"[10]

Nonetheless, "Can the hegemonic ear hear anything?" may still give the wrong impression that again the subaltern is to blame, only this time the problem is her language, or that she does not have the ability to communicate effectively. In other words, the subaltern is "victim blamed" for being dumb and mute, when the truth may well be this: power has constituted the imperial Subject to become deaf. Or more properly, blind, in so far as the only subject it sees is one's own; everything else "other" is objectified, understood, and valued only in so far as they contribute to the production of his/her own subjectivity. Therefore, in order to emphasize that the critical issue is actually about agency or subject-constitution, the question could be reframed in this way: "Will those who (still) have hearing ears listen?"

III. Intellectuals and Power, Or How did we lose our Hearing

Gayatri Spivak does not cast a stone against a giant system that is "global capitalism" without also throwing a sharp rebuke in the direction of those who stand complicit to the subaltern's erasure, and thereby, the perpetuation of her oppression. According to Pheng Cheah, the "signal contribution to contemporary critical theory" of Spivak's essay is "its immanent critique of theory's embeddedness in global capitalism."[11] Jean Franco echoes the same sentiment having observed how in the two iterations of her essay Spivak was consistent in her biting criticism of (1) the "transparency" of her fellow intellectuals who "report on the non-represented subject" and (2) "the foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production."[12]

From among these intellectuals in the field of critical theory, Spivak singles out Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. For the "theoretical brilliance" in their critique of the sovereign subject Spivak acknowledges them as "activist philosophers" and yet she calls them "hegemonic radicals" at the same time for the two afore-mentioned crimes.[13] The gist of which is captured in this quote:

> According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) and *mutatis mutandis* the metropolitan "third world feminist" only interested in resistance within capital logic, the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here) *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of

[9] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 21-22.
[10] Michèle Barrett, "Can the Subaltern Speak? New York, February 2004," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 58 (2004): 359.
[11] Pheng Cheah, "Biopower and the New International Division of Reproductive Labor," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 179–212; the quote is from p.79. [Hereafter, Cheah, "Biopower and the NIDRL."]
[12] Jean Franco, "Moving on from Subalternity: Indigenous Women of Guatemala and Mexico," in Morris and Spivak, eds. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 213, 223: Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* pp. 248–266, or "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 22–35 in the present volume, i.e., the revised/final version.
[13] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 23.

> the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak*?[14]

The declaration that "the oppressed can speak and know their conditions" is particularly triggering for Spivak. The operative word is "*if* they are given the chance. The problem of representation cannot be bypassed here."[15] So alongside intellectuals like Foucault and Deleuze, and the "the metropolitan 'third world feminist' [who is] only interested in resistance within capital logic," Spivak names the following as examples of these so-called proxies:

> the national subject of the global South, the rural woman who is the consensual recipient of microcredit, woman as subject of development in UN Plans of Action, the postcolonial/third world subject as native informant who comes from the ranks of the formerly colonial subject/the indigenous elite, and, last but not least, the "postmodern postcolonialist" who engages in "hybridist postnational talk, celebrating globalization as Americanization."[16]

To this list of proxies, Cheah adds the contemporary "data gatherer or activist who zealously desires access to a subject of development or oppression [but] pays no attention to the complex social relations—patriarchy, polytheism, divisions of class, caste, and tribe—that constitute subaltern space and block access to it."[17]

For Spivak, those who dare speak for the subaltern, or represent the subaltern, or claim to have "retrieved the true voice consciousness" of the subaltern, or even "claim to *be* the subaltern," are no different than those who directly oppress her and subject her into subalterity.[18] From someone who remains trapped in the pit down below, they are all the same. "Can't complain," in this context, means "Does it even make a difference if you do? Damned if you do, damned if you don't. So why care at all? If "less talk" equals "less mistake," then "no talk" equals "no mistake." One would think that the bottom of the pit couldn't sink much deeper. But it does make sense. Indeed, who gives the chance "to speak and know" in the first place? And who are those that can take advantage of it?

The very fact that these proxies could stand up and even claim that they stand in for the subaltern is incontrovertible proof that they are part of the system. For their exercise of representational power comes not from the subaltern but from her absence, or more precisely, from the same source that causes her perceived truancy. She did not disappear "for no reason." Her erasure, her darkness, her imperceptibility, all that constitutes her subalterity is the direct effect of a superefficient rationality, which is also known as, "the continuing development of capital through the International Division of Labor."[19] So instead of helping the subaltern, these

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[14] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 37. See Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Sherry Simon and Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 20), 205–17.
[15] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 37, emphasis added.
[16] Cheah, "Biopower and the NIDRL," 181, and note 3: Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 255, 259, 361/"Can the Subaltern Speak?," 27, 30.
[17] Cheah, "Biopower and the NIDRL," 181.
[18] Cheah, "Biopower and the NIDRL," 181.
[19] Cheah, "Biopower and the NIDRL," 181.

proxies that occupied "the space of difference" in behalf of the subaltern are agents and partakers in "the epistemic violence of colonialism" that created the monstrosity that is the subaltern.[20] Thanks to these proxies, instead of advancing her life, the subaltern's speech becomes lost in translation. The knowledge of her condition ends up as nothing but fossilized information mined to fuel the machine.

Poignantly, Spivak declares, "It is in the shadow of this unfortunate marionette that the history of the unheeded subaltern must unfold."[21] For it is not that these representational acts of ventriloquism are poor substitutes of the subaltern; but rather, her subalterity is the product-effect of the same forces of super-efficient capitalist logic that allow these so-called ideological alliances and representative practices in the first place. Since the oppressed know about their situation and can speak about it and they did so by way of representation, the gap is filled and the balance is regained. All is good: the show can go on. With all its crew on board and everyone accounted for, the colonial capitalist machine goes on its churning and grinding. The behemoth confidently barges ahead, trudging along the road to economic progress with ever-increasing speed and efficiency while dreadfully deaf to the screams of agony of those crushed underneath its iron wheels. In other words, "'Can't complain – All's good!"

However, denying the existence of evil does not in effect negate its power and influence. Silence also does not mean yes. In the same way, when someone says, "Can't complain," it does not necessarily mean "all is good," or "no harm done." The fact that she did not complain does not mean she approves of such an oppressive regime exercising an unquestionably sovereign power over her body. In this sense, "Can't complain" is a warning with a silencing effect, like a hush-money that comes with a threat: "Don't speak of what you know. Don't ever tell anyone I told you this. You did not see or hear anything. Or else, you will see."

Of course, there is a categorical difference between the criminal and the accomplice, especially if the latter is being coopted to accomplish evil without him knowing. In terms of culpability, the guilt lies more with the instigator. But like the workings of a deadly virus, the victim also becomes the victimizer when he spreads it to others even if it was unintentional. Whether in the name of solidarity or activism, these proxies are no less driven by self-interest and must be held accountable when they unwittingly contribute to the erasure of the subaltern and perpetuates the system that creates subalterity. They don't work for the subaltern but rather for the system.

IV. Conclusion

Spivak is using her prophetic voice when she speaks in this regard: "No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. […] You don't give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity."[22]

It is proper to reclaim, therefore, the original *telos* of rhetoric, i.e., to stimulate one's mind and heart to spring into action. For the sake of those who resist losing their sense of hearing and their humanity altogether, it is crucial to go through this progressive set of questions. And it starts from "Who writes history 'as we know it'?" "Who are 'we'?" to "Can we rewrite it?" "How do we 'know' and how do we 'write'?" and "How do we end the

[20] Cheah, "Biopower and the NIDRL," 181.
[21] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 23.
[22] De Kock, "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," 46.

historical/economic/epistemic/hegemonic conditions that dehumanize a person to the point of subalterity?"

When one deconstructs the mechanisms behind a "Can't complain" belief system, a plethora of ideological blinders, proxies, and agents that operate behind it comes to the surface and becomes apparent. It becomes self-evident that the courage to speak against injustice and to dismantle systems of inequality can only come from a grateful heart that persists in hope, for authentic blessedness can never be contented with being "at least."

It becomes imperative then to break the shroud of silence that hinders the self from actualization, for only then shall light escape from within and shine through the cracks. Only then shall the subaltern speak and be heard at last: Freedom is at hand!