

Review Essay

A Voice Sweeter than Salt: Tóyìn Fálolá and the Construction of Subaltern Narrative Space

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Abstract

Gayatri Spivak is arguably most recognized for her 1988 intervention in the dialogue of Subaltern Studies. It is within the intellectual rift of Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that I explore the narrative of Toyin Falola's memoir, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. While Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak because of the subaltern's placement within existing knowledge production, Falola's "Mouth" articulates a formation that says otherwise. Indeed, in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Falola's status in the subalternity of a decolonizing Nigeria depicts a powerful subaltern voice with deep implications for knowledge, representation, authorial location, multifaceted identity paradox, and most of all, the tendrils of modernity.

Fundamentally, this piece argues against Spivak by constructing a case for the relative authenticity of Falola's voice, despite its incorporation into Western intellectualism. Spivak claims that the subaltern cannot speak so long as the Western academy can only relate to the other within its own investigative paradigm of the non-Western object. Here, I frame *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, not as a Western co-opting of an indigenous voice, but rather, as an invitation to explore Falola's memoir from the position of the non-Western subject. The work also allows us to move beyond the categories of the Western and non-Western subject to seriously engage the paradox of postcolonial existence.

In granting credence to the idea of identity paradox, a close analysis of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* reveals the complexities of African subaltern voice and its dialectic with the forces of modernity. While Spivak might argue that this formulation is tainted by the motives of the West, such an interpretation of Falola's memoir also builds ground to discuss alternatives to the Western archive

in the development of African intellectualism. Falola's memoir stands as a testament to the legitimization of oral history, micro-historical storytelling, and the disintegration of Western disciplinary divisions between history, literature, sociology, philosophy, and a host of other imported intellectual categories. By outlining the critical duality of Falola's act of subaltern speech, I hope to build a realm in which the African intellectual voice is not artificially segmented from the historical influence of modernity, but can also open discursive space to stand on its own ground.

Introduction

Gayatri Spivak is arguably most recognized for her 1988 intervention in the dialogue of Subaltern Studies. When she published "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak noted a schism between the discourse of the subaltern voice and the oppressive representational constructions of Western epistemological institutions. That is, she claims that Western institutions generating knowledge about subaltern peoples do not truly represent subaltern voices. It is within this intellectual rift that I explore the narrative of Tóyin Fálólá's memoir, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. While Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak because of the subaltern's placement within existing knowledge productions, Fálólá's "Mouth" articulates a formation that says otherwise. Indeed, in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Fálólá's status in the subalternity of a decolonizing Nigeria depicts a powerful subaltern voice with deep implications for knowledge, representation, authorial location, multifaceted identity paradox, and most of all, the tendrils of modernity.

I begin by examining Spivak's justifications for why the subaltern cannot speak. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak argues that representations of the developing world are harvested and produced in a way that allows the West to speak to itself. In this stipulation, Spivak might reason that a *Mouth Sweeter than Salt* is also representation originating from Western cultivation because of a number of reasons, from the work's composition in a colonizing language to its publication by Western press. I entertain these Spivakian critiques in their full capacity, not because I ultimately concur with them, but because they are serious intellectual hurdles that must be overcome in order to understand the true value of Fálólá's memoir as an act of subaltern speech.

Fundamentally, this piece argues against Spivak by constructing a case for the relative authenticity of Fálólá's voice, despite its incorporation into Western intellectualism. Spivak claims that the subaltern cannot speak so long as the Western academy can only relate to the other within its own investigative paradigm of the non-Western object. This is the point of departure for my argument. Here, I frame *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, not as a Western co-opting

of an indigenous voice, but rather, as an invitation to explore Fálọlá's memoir from the position of the non-Western subject.

One need not look far to understand Fálọlá's deconstruction of Western concepts throughout the work. From his intervention in temporality with questions of his birth on the first page of the memoir, to his exploration of Yorùbáland and the overlay of Western modernity, Fálọlá invites readers to break the barriers of the Western epistemological paradigm. Engagement with *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* presents an opportunity to respond to Spivak and illustrate that the subaltern can speak.

Nonetheless, Spivak also offers an opportunity to complicate the question of subaltern discourse. Rather than leaving my examination of Fálọlá's memoir as an active subaltern voice in African intellectualism, I also examine the general concern Spivak postulates more closely. *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* is admittedly as much representative of Fálọlá's inevitable connection with the West as it is an attempt to divorce Western autobiographical methodologies from his narrative. Here, I employ Edward Said's devices of strategic location and strategic formation to develop a critically nuanced understanding of Fálọlá's subaltern speech, its context, its intellectual influences, and the ways in which the West has become intrinsically entangled with that voice. In this evaluation, the discussion of Spivak's argument becomes, not "Can the subaltern speak?," but rather, "How does the subaltern speak, and in what ways does that speech become syncretic with the West?"

Next, I launch into a broader discussion of modernity as an expression of identity paradox. From Fálọlá's encounters with the Western train and the postman in the memoir's third chapter to his relationship with Western education throughout the work, his position as an outside subject experiencing modernity concurrently reifies his formation as a product of modernity, existing both on the inside and outside of his narrative lens.

Though Spivak and Said have both engaged the idea of identity paradox, Dipesh Chakrabarty offers an interpretation of modernity helpful in considering the critical location of Fálọlá in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. Indeed, the illustration of Fálọlá's experience as both being integrated into modernity and simultaneously resisting it through his narrative voice seems irresolvable. In effect, it is, but Chakrabarty warns us against monolithic experiential constructions. Instead, he argues that we ought to allow parallel narratives of paradox to coexist as part of the project of provincializing Europe. I argue that upon the application of Said's analysis of location to Fálọlá's subaltern voice, a duality arises that can only be understood by embracing Chakrabarty's notion of irresolvability.

In granting credence to the paradox a close analysis of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* reveals, a deeper understanding of the complexities of African

subaltern voice and its dialectic with the forces of modernity can be formulated. While Spivak might argue that this formulation is tainted by the motives of the West, such an interpretation of Fálólá's memoir also builds ground to discuss alternatives to the Western archive in the development of African intellectualism. Fálólá's memoir stands as a testament to the legitimization of oral history, micro-historical storytelling, and the disintegration of Western disciplinary divisions between history, literature, sociology, philosophy, and a host of other imported intellectual categories. By outlining the critical duality of Fálólá's act of subaltern speech, I hope to build a realm in which the African intellectual voice is not artificially segmented from the historical influence of modernity, but can also open discursive space to stand on its own ground.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?"

In 1988, Gayatri Spivak published "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* as an analysis of the ways in which Western cultures investigate non-Western cultures. The main focus of the first part of her piece examines the metaphysical implications of basing evaluations of foreign cultures on the perception of universal concepts and frameworks, a frequent assumption in much of the Western academy. Though she criticizes Michel Foucault harshly in much of her writing, I argue that Spivak shares a similar understanding that the function of knowledge is never innocent. Instead, it represents the motives and agendas of those that produce knowledge. Taking some of her cues from Karl Marx, she perceives Western knowledge as an import to the developing world, wrapping it into ideas that promote Western political and economic gain.¹

Though the academy has diversified significantly from its Western roots in colonizing the world — and even since Spivak published her essay — the study of another culture inherently carries colonial themes. As Spivak argues, research defines a foreign place, concept, people, etc. in relation to the researcher as a foreign subject. In a way, this foreign subject becomes an object of the researcher's will to knowledge. The object of research is an "other" to be analyzed and classified. As this process occurs, knowledge is extracted from the foreign entity and returned to the West or reinserted (within the context of a new Western perspective) into the foreign culture. In both cases, such knowledge becomes an object for consumption.²

1. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

2. *Ibid.*

Ultimately, consumption becomes inevitable because of the institutional framework of the Western academy. Critical analysis of other cultures, or the other, in Western spheres stipulates the other in relation to the West. It speaks about the other in Western vocabulary and publishes that speech through Western companies which are very much subject to the interests of a capitalist market. This makes the selection of what knowledge gets reproduced subject to fiscal flows.³ Though we live in a much different era than those that featured the scramble for colonies, the search for knowledge of foreign lands and peoples exists in histories which provided many justifications for colonization. Western knowledge and understanding of the world was brought to the colonies in a form presented as objective and universal, but it was, as Spivak identifies, tainted with the Western imperial drive for conquest.⁴ Centuries have passed, but the same system operates in new forms such as in neoliberal development models, and more recently, the rise of massive international humanitarian bureaucracies. Indeed, the colonial origins discussed by Spivak are still alive and well.

While all of the above description is key to understanding Spivak's position, her real contention is that the Western academy's recent attention to the subaltern narratives of postcolonial spheres is merely a new attempt to produce and give prominence to Western knowledge systems. She introduces her chapter with, "Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject. The theory of pluralized 'subject-effects' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject knowledge."⁵ Given the system of Western interests described earlier, Spivak's introduction questions the capacity for a Western system to authentically represent the people it previously — and still does — oppress. As the Western academy publishes non-Western works that reflect the subjectivity of Western knowledge, its survival is ensured as the main framework for intellectual discourse and publication. In this way, Spivak claims that colonial knowledge discourses are sustained.

She is critical of her colleagues in the subaltern studies collective because postcolonial studies, prior to her essay, reified the intellectual oppression and cultural hegemony of the West as a result of being complicit with the Western academy. Borrowing from Bill Ashcroft, Spivak notes the necessity that "post-colonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss."⁶ The more postco-

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 66.

6. Bill Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge, 2002, p 28.

lonial academics participate in Western discourses through the contemporary academy, the more they become co-opted by it. Indeed, postcolonial discourse has been molded in the past two decades into universalized camps of subaltern speakers who are dependent upon the Western publishing monolith to project their voices. Further, it has become apparent that the largest writers of subaltern voices and narratives are Western authors.⁷ Finally, Spivak contends that when postcolonial scholars aim to reclaim their cultural identity in the Western academy, they generalize caricatured facsimiles that universalize subaltern voices into unauthentic replicas of their original form.

Ultimately, the integration of subaltern voices into the Western academy reorients focus back to the West as the investigator of a non-Western phenomenon. Because of the capital behind publishing and the university as the locus for the development of ideas and critical thinking, Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak — at least in any pure form — because the Western academy is unable and unwilling to relate with the subaltern outside of its own paradigm for intellectual inquiry.

A Spivakian Critique of Tóyin Fálólá's Subaltern Discourse

By examining Fálólá's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* through the framework Spivak's essay utilizes, the memoir features many ideas and sub-narratives that might be subject to accusations of complicity with the West, and even the promotion of Western themes. If anything, Fálólá's work is a discussion of his youth in the midst of a modernizing Nigeria. While he often takes a tone that is critical of the West, sections where he simulates his childhood fascination with aspects of modernity cannot help but establish some form of perceived legitimacy for them. For example, when Fálólá reminisces about his first experience with a train in his third chapter, he revels in the courage he had to sneak into the station and ride it to a far off city. For a nine-year-old Fálólá, the train is a vehicle to his exploration of distant places. It facilitates his first steps into a world made smaller by the instruments of globalization. "The train began to travel, with me as one of its passengers. I was happy, more than happy, to be in it. Everything I saw excited me, the people inside the train, those outside the train. Things were new, or so they appeared so."⁸

As I discuss later, these issues are much more complicated than they seem. However, the stronger argument in Spivak's favor relates to the memoir itself

7. Spivak, pp. 271–313.

8. Tóyin Fálólá, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005, p. 63.

as a physical example of specific discursive trends. For one, the memoir is published by the American University of Michigan Press within the American academic system. This exposes the book to potential complicity with both the Western capitalist publishing complex and the Western academy, especially in the context in which Western students participate in the market to purchase Fálólá's memoir for course study. Grazia Saracino, however, draws attention to the even more pressing issue of language. The physical reality of the discourse on Nigerians and Yorúbá culture in Fálólá's memoir is communicated in English, the colonizing language. In effect, the English-language monopoly of the majority of the worldwide publishing industry generates "inequalities in knowledge construction and dissemination ... [and] leads to the marginalization and appropriation of periphery research and scholarship."⁹ This is because, as Vai Ramanathan and Dwight Atkinson have indicated, the centuries old tradition of academic writing in the West implements English in a way that invokes Western social institutions. Given the overwhelming dominance of English as the language of the global academy, this invocation functions to linguistically recolonize the world and its epistemologies.¹⁰

Indeed, many recent inquiries from the non-native English-speaking intellectual sphere have noted that Western (read Anglo-American) academic communication highly values culturally driven assumptions around the formation of critical thought, "voice, argument, logic, insight, cogency, explicitness, originality, linearity, textual ownership, etc."¹¹ For Ramanathan and Atkinson, these culturally rooted values represent specific norms of communication and idea development in which non-native speakers do not have socialized training. Such processes reflect the very hegemony of language, which Spivak would criticize because they prioritize English publication within the Western academic market. Furthermore, much of the linguistic framework for English assumes the naturalness and universality of its rhetoric. English words are assumed to stand in for objective relation to objects and ideas that, in turn, ignore the role language plays in constructing our perceptions of those objects and ideas.

For example, the English word "religion" did not have a comparable Chinese-language equivalent until the late 19th century when translation of English texts into Chinese languages necessitated the coinage of *zongjiao*. Prior to this discursive assimilation, Chinese "religious thought" did not

9. Grazia Saracino, ed., *Writing for Scholarly Publication in English: Issues for Non-native Speakers*. Manni, 2004 p. 36.

10. Vai Ramanathan and Dwight Atkinson, "Individualism, Academic Writing, and ESL Writers." In Grazia Saracino, ed., *Writing for Scholarly Publication in English: Issues for Nonnative Speakers*. Manni, 2004, p. 32.

11. *Ibid.*

distinguish between the sacred and the ordinary or the natural and supernatural. Instead, these ideas were all related to their specific contexts.¹² In effect, the contemporary understanding of religion in China has become divorced from its authentic meaning by the dominance of English. For a work such as Fálólá's memoir, Spivak might argue that the translation of complicated Yorùbá ideas may be subject to a similar loss of authenticity due to the perpetuation of the assumed universality of English words.

Fundamentally, the issue of English language is important because it can function to override indigenous cultural meaning with one that is inherently Western in nature. As Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong-Scollon argue, much of the valorization of Western themes and the centrality of Western culture connoted by the monopoly English possesses in the academic sphere comes from seventeenth and eighteenth century European humanist and rationalist movements.¹³ Most of all, English conceptualizes "language as the vehicle of the rational or scientific mind. In other words, the key principles and practices of Western academic writing assume a model of communication centrally based in the Western ideology of the rational, autonomous individual."¹⁴ Thus, a Spivakian critique of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* could find ground to levy the above arguments against not only Fálólá's use of Yorùbá poems followed by English translations, but also the English-language publication of a work about a man's experience of Yorùbá culture and a time of extreme historical importance in a non-Western nation.

Rebutting Spivak: Theoretically Reconciling Tóyìn Fálólá's Paradoxical Strategic Location

As stipulated in my introduction, I do not ultimately align my argument or conclusions with the Spivakian critique of Fálólá's memoir. Nonetheless, Spivak's criticisms are important — and well placed in many contexts. Certainly, they represent a legitimate challenge to *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, but my arguments for why the memoir surmounts these challenges makes its contribution to the space of subaltern speech all the more meaningful. I posit the above Spivakian critique in such a direct and thorough manner because setting Fálólá's work against a straw man argument would do both

12. Ch'ing-k'un Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.

13. Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong-Scollon, "Topic confusion in English-Asian Discourse." *World Englishes*. Vol. 10, No. 2. 1991, pp. 113–25.

14. Vai Ramanathan and Dwight Atkinson, p. 33.

the memoir's discursive meaning, as well as the significant concerns Spivak raises, a disservice.

Similarly, I could systematically attempt to list multiple examples of resistant subaltern speech that is critical of the West in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, but that approach would also be reductive. Such an argument would merely ignore some of Spivak's concerns and reify her claims that postcolonial scholarship, though defiant of the Western academy, is complicit with the foundations of the Western intellectual sphere by publishing in English and manifesting as a product of the free market. Instead, I intend to account for the two objections by implementing both Edward Said's concepts of *strategic location* and *strategic formation* and Dipesh Chakrabaty's discussion of *paradox* before launching into my discussion of the memoir. Through these paradigms, I can facilitate a rebuttal of Spivak's concerns in the context of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, and draw out additional elements of Fálólá's work that speak to the book's capacity to deconstruct the forces of Western globalized intellectualism.

Edward Said developed his understanding of strategic location and strategic formation in the groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, which marked a drastic shift in the way global peripheries produced scholarship critical of the West. Strategic location "is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the ... material he writes about."¹⁵ Strategic formation "is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large."¹⁶ These concepts are critical to understanding the ways in which a writer frames his or her work within and against the existing body of literature and knowledge that has already been produced about an area. Such an endeavor primarily utilizes strategic formation as a point of academic relationality, but strategic location is also important for understanding the effect the background of an author may have on his or her own work and, thus, his or her strategic formations. Particularly in the case of Fálólá, both factors are critical as he occupies a complicated space of connectivity with both the Western academic sphere and his own subaltern voice, as well as the subaltern voices of his culture.

Strategic location and formation especially draw attention to the ways in which a work may be complicated by historiographical relationships with the West. Indeed, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* references events in Yorùbá history written about by Western scholars for the better part of a century. From employment in radio repair, to the Western mail system and the Western

15. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 20.

16. *Ibid.*

primary education system Fálqlá describes, the memoir is rife with references associated with the West. I contend, that in an increasingly globalizing world, these relationships are inevitable. This said, it would seem that the influences Spivak critiques are also all but inevitable as well. In fact, Spivak herself, a highly regarded member of the Columbia University faculty and renowned scholar in the Western academic arena, is subject to her own critiques. It seems that one is either directly complicit with the Western academy, indirectly complicit with it by critiquing it within its own framework, as Spivak argues, or critical of the Western academy outside of it—in which case, the critique is unlikely to be widely read or have significant impact.

Such a dynamic features a rather nihilistic range of options. However, Dipesh Chakrabarty offers a helpful interpretation for resisting the oppressive forces of the Western academic structure while simultaneously participating in it. His understanding of this paradox does not provide a mechanism for resolving the tension, but instead, for coming to terms with it. Given the difficulty of critiquing the Western academic system without participating in it, I argue that Chakrabarty's formulations present the best perspective for interpreting *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* as a justification for why the subaltern can, in fact, speak. In this way, Fálqlá helps construct a space for subaltern voice within the Western academic complex.

Chakrabarty defines his concept of paradox, which will be used for the purposes of this paper, in a way that understands the Eurocentric implications of Western knowledge systems, but also grants their inherent usefulness for articulating non-Western formulations.

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers who shape the nature of social science have produced theories that embrace the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind—that is, those living in non-Western cultures ... The everyday paradox of third-world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “us,” eminently useful in understanding our societies.¹⁷

For him, the project of coming to terms with such tension is his book's namesake *Provincializing Europe*. Thus, not only are the themes in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* similar to Chakrabarty's provincialization, the paradoxical publication of an anti-imperial, Afrocentric memoir by a Eurocentric (or at least

17. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 52–3.

Anglo-centric) press is undeniably a physical act of provincialization within the Western scholarly community. Chakrabarty explains:

To provincialize Europe in historical thought is to struggle to hold in a state of permanent tension a dialogue between two contradictory points of view. On one side is the indispensable and universal narrative of capital—History 1, as I have called it. This narrative both gives us a critique of capitalist imperialism and affords elusive but necessarily energizing glimpses of the Enlightenment promise of an abstract, universal but never-to-be-realized humanity. Without such elusive glimpses, as I have said before, there is no political modernity. On the other side is thought about diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to “world the earth” in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging. These are the struggles that become—when in contact with capital—the History 2s that in practice always modify and interrupt the totalizing thrusts of History.¹⁸

A Mouth Sweeter than Salt: Embracing Paradox, Building Subaltern Intellectual Space

Many themes throughout Fálólá's memoir speak to the paradoxical place of his work and his personal narrative within the tension between the worldview of his Yorùbá culture and that of the Western modernity making its way into Nigerian society during his youth. In line with Chakrabarty, I use “modernity” not as a cultural judgment about development, but rather as a signifier for Western worldviews, no better than worldviews of those outside of the West.¹⁹ From his understanding of time, language and meaning, and family, among others, Fálólá effortlessly weaves a detailed tapestry of his paradoxical location in his memoir that foregrounds a legitimate space for subaltern voice in Western scholarship. Spivak might view this as complicity, but ultimately, I argue that endeavors such as Fálólá's represent a powerful force for subaltern agency.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

19. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity.” *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 116, No. 3. 2011, pp. 663–75.

Time:

In Western culture, time appears as one of the most basic units of measurement: twenty-four hours in a day; seven days in a week; fifty-two weeks in a year; etc. For many, the supremacy of this system is taken for granted. Dates are associated with events, and with enough detail, any occurrence can be mapped upon the span of time. From page one, Fálólá shatters this assumption by reflecting on the perception of time into which he was born. "Time can be an idea, a concept. Time can be measured by comparing people, relating one event to another. Like logs of wood placed on top of one another, time can be determined by the placement of one log in relation to the other."²⁰ Though basic in principle, many who have filled out their date of birth on passport applications, bank forms, tax filings etc. will take pause. Why is "I was born on the fourth crescent moon after the start of the war" not sufficient? Such a statement can be just as accurate, just as legitimate as the Western system of tracking time. Indeed, "Time can be measured and presented as an event. People had been born in the year of famine, drought, hurricane, locust invasion, and other calamities. People had given as the day of their birth moments of joy an happiness, as on the day of the visit of Queen Victoria to Nigeria."²¹ Fálólá masterfully articulates his strategic formations in relation to his readers, a large group of who are American university students. Though he does not prompt the question directly, Fálólá's suggestion of alternate perspectives on temporality facilitates Western audiences undermining their own Western assumptions. Indeed, the subaltern voice in this example could arguably erode, if not supersede, customary notions of "time."

Language and Meaning:

In another prominent example, Fálólá uses his understanding of *Mesiogo* to invite readers into a non-Western understanding of language, communication, and truth. Again these are features, as discussed in the section on English-language, that many Westerners are socialized to take as universal, static, and objective. As Fálólá's discussion of *Mesiogo* demonstrates, such themes are entirely relative when subjected to non-Western worldviews.

Mesiogo is a personality of sorts claimed by Fálólá's home city of Ibadan, though the word can stand in for a person, an identity, and types of language use. Its meaning shifts very much in line with the themes it is used to represent. "If wars and bravery are clear, *Mesiogo* is about the ambiguity of words, their capacity to multitask and create many exit points for an individual. *Mesiogo* sees a human personality as an embodiment of words and actions that

20. Falola, p. 3.

21. Ibid., p. 7.

shift like time and season.”²² For Fálọ́lá and the larger Yorùbá culture, *Mesiogo* represents a stark paradox in the realm of framing reality. For example, yes and no are not clear-cut signifiers as they are in many Western cultures. Fálọ́lá prompts his readers, “If your world is built on saying a sharp reality of no and yes, take a deep breath and accept other realities.”²³ For Fálọ́lá, yes may not mean yes in the Anglo sense, and the truths behind interpretation of a yes or a no response in conversation can be just as fluid. In some ways a yes can even mean its Anglo-opposite, no. Even more paradoxically, Fálọ́lá draws readers’ attention to *Kò burú*, which combines yes and no as one, leaving the listener to decipher the actual truth of the meaning.²⁴ In effect, Fálọ́lá attends to the necessity of implementing Said’s strategic location and formation in interpreting communication of this type. The reality of a conversation depends entirely upon the strategic context of its participants.

As Fálọ́lá contends, these types of language structures, counter to the arrogance of English-language dominance, have a capacity to be more descriptive, vividly drawing meaning from how and where they are produced. Fundamentally, “One’s mouth is one’s lawyer.”²⁵ *Mesiògò* can represent a strategy for picking appropriate times to stand your ground. It is a code of etiquette for those who know how to distinguish speech for those with authority as well as those with a reputation of deception. “*Mesiògò* also use silence for effect. Words such as *kò burú* and *béjé ni* are used to create effects similar to that of silence, that is, talking without revealing anything.”²⁶ Ultimately, “*Mesiògò* factors the agency of destiny and the future that only the greater forces can see and manipulate into interpersonal relations and the dialogue to sustain them.”²⁷ Again, such drastic difference in communication is illustrated within the context of a Western publication; another paradox to be admired rather than criticized.

As a former member of Fálọ́lá’s Western classroom audiences, I remember reading the above analysis in his memoir and thinking that whomever claimed English was one of the most difficult languages to learn was speaking about learning words themselves and not the meanings behind them. My experience was of Fálọ́lá’s brilliant yet subtle insurgency at work, and while it opened up a new realm of understanding for his culture of communication, it also undermined the sophomoric assumptions of an eighteen-year-old Westerner. After becoming cognizant of his argument, I understood that my

22. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

language could flow with variant meanings too if not for the universality of English-language I had been socialized to believe existed. This was, in effect, a successful form of intellectual provincialization, despite its occurrence under premises that Spivak's critique could target. Though, as Spivak criticizes, a Western institutional sphere was distributing knowledge about the developing world to Western audiences, Fálólá also opened a realm for subaltern African knowledge to be voiced on its own terms.

Family:

One of the most socialized assumptions within the dominance of Western globalized culture is the nuclear family unit. Of course, many are told that there is an extended family unit that is possible within a household, or that polygamy allows many to be married to one, but Fálólá stretches understanding to form an academic discursive space for his kinship culture. Indeed, it is rare that a Westerner would think of having multiple mothers, but Fálólá explains that he, for the better part of his youth, did not know which mother was biologically his. There was Màmá One, Màmá Yéqsà, Màmá Èlèmu, Màmá Ayò, Màmá Adé, Màmá Báýò, Màmá Pupa, Màmá Yẹmí, Màmá Bìòdún, etc. All of these individuals were wrapped in a set of complex relationships through which Fálólá navigated not by the rules of an unknown biological connection, but rather, by the filial laws of his culture.²⁸ There was no single one mother assigned to raise him as in most of Western culture.

Whenever anyone asked about my màmá, I answered in the plural "they are home." I never acted or behaved as a child with one mother. When a crack appears in a wall, the lizard finds the opportunity to enter. The crack that I was looking for was the màmá with generosity at a particular time, one who would give me more food. When the màmás did not coordinate their activities, I could have two dinners by judging when the food would be ready in two places.²⁹

Here especially, the concept of family structure seems foreign to Western readers, but it is explained in a way that discursively represents the strategic location of Fálólá in a place where divergent, from a Western perspective, family practices become normalized. They just formulate an alternate structure as opposed to one that is odd or irregular. Again, Fálólá engenders engagement with his culture on its own terms, within its own discursive subaltern space. Hammering the point home to his readers, Fálólá explains that father, brother, sister, and uncle are not representative of family members in Africa

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-9.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

in the same way that they are in Western cultures. Rather, they represent signs of respect and social etiquette.³⁰ Particularly here, Fálólá directly illuminates legitimate cultural difference within an academic realm tied strongly to Western themes by making comparisons with American practices.

Fálólá's Paradox: A Critique of Modernity

Beyond the micro themes addressed above as examples of Fálólá's challenge to assumptions of Western knowledge, his memoir features a much larger critique of modernity. In line with Chakrabarty, his intention does not reflect a rejection of modernity, but rather an investigation of its implications in order to challenge the ways in which modernity delegitimizes other worldviews. For Chakrabarty, "If someone is 'modern,' then he or she is so with regard to somebody who is not. That 'somebody' may come to be seen as 'backward' or 'premodern' or non-modern or waiting to be made 'modern.'"³¹ Additionally, Jadunath Sarkar reminds us that the application of modernity to any context is both an act of ideology and imagination, otherwise read as the production of potentially oppressive knowledge systems.³² *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, functions as a way to embrace the elements of modernity that can help subaltern voices gain leverage while nulling the judgments attached to the word by replacing "non-modern" with "parallel." Fálólá, thus, creates intellectual space for a different worldview within the modern scheme by criticizing the ways in which modernity has overlooked equally legitimate alternate systems.

For example, in his culture, temporality is not just a question of the time of day, it functions as a framework for identity and all of the relevance identity politics has for contemporary Western scholarship.

A day may be so fragmented that there can be no confusion as to time or season. A wristwatch or clock is not essential to the understanding of this fragmentation; it only serves to ornament the habits already in place. Work merges with time, time and work merge with people, all combining in elaborate greeting forms that denote boundaries of time, season, gender, occupation, and space.³³

In the context of language, Fálólá defends his subaltern culture by noting that the changes of Western modernity do not necessarily mean progress or betterment. Instead, his writing demonstrates to his readers, subaltern and

30. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

31. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Muddle of Modernity," pp. 663–75

32. Jadunath Sarkar, "Forward." In Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Andhra Pradesh: Orient Longman India, 1932, p. 1.

33. Falola, p. 18.

Western alike, that universalizing Western cultural themes can be deleterious to foreign cultures. Speaking to issues of language, Christian translation affected Yorùbá tradition greatly. The god Èṣù who occupied a space as a gatekeeper, the purveyor of crossroads, and a rebel in traditional Yorùbá culture was likened to Satan in many missionary translations, and as Christianity spread, the original religious place of Èṣù, who differed greatly from the Satan, was permanently vilified.³⁴

Fálọlá writes that the shifts in language, etiquette, and vocabulary imported from the West began to override his own linguistic culture. For readers, they will understand that this is not Western progress, but a deep loss caused by the assumption of Western cultural superiority. As he explains:

I begin to interact with those who do not know how to greet, whose vocabulary is handicapped. Slowly, painfully, I learn not to say Pèlẹ and Ẹkú, not to greet the cashier at the department store, not to exchange smiles with the technician, not to laugh loudly in seminars. My vocabulary, too, begins to shrink, my face begins to look sterner, my neck is less flexible, as it no longer needs to turn the head to look at the palm wine tapper about to fall. When people greet me, I thank them, and they wonder why they deserve the gratitude. A Pèlẹ can no longer be returned for another Pele.³⁵

These examples illustrate clearly for a reader — a facet of strategic formation — that the degradation of other worldviews in the pursuit of Western ones has consequences with deep personal meaning and profound cultural loss for individuals all over the world. Part of the memoir's project is to provincialize Western perspectives by showing that they are not better than other ones, simply different, and equally valid along parallel schemes.

Conclusions

To this day, Spivak's claims of the limit to subaltern speech weigh heavy in postcolonial scholarship. Nonetheless, in addressing the intimate level of penetration Western culture and intellectual attitudes have made into all corners of the globe, she has all but outlined the problem as insurmountably inevitable. Given her analysis, the alternative of authentically pure subaltern speech simply does not exist. The West has left no culture untouched. However, instead of pursuing this seemingly hopeless paradigm, I advocate for a reconceptualization of what subaltern authenticity means. In the intellectual arena,

34. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Western influences may be strong, but that does not mean that we should not dismiss the efforts that have been made to promote non-Western worldviews. Even more, we should not discount the passionate critiques of the West made by non-Western authors in paradoxical identity locations. In both cases, real subaltern agency flourishes. Subalternity has a voice, and while it may not be perfect, it appears to be a better option than the alternatives, or lack thereof, in Spivak's essay.

For both Said and Chakrabarty, the concept of autocritique presents a compelling answer to the problem of paradox addressed in this chapter. Chakrabarty tells us that we must learn to accept the inevitable paradox of our place in the current intellectual and physical world, but what makes that paradox, specifically the Western exigencies, permissible is a constant, vigilant questioning of the Western tendrils in our respective paradoxes. In *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Fálólá makes a commendable effort. Many of the critiques in Fálólá's work discussed here feature strong examples of autocritique. More subtle choices also implement autocritique of his Western influences such as sidestepping the Western obsession with utilizing the national unit of analysis in preference for cultural and community groupings as Homi Bhabha recommends.³⁶ In helping build a subaltern discourse community, Fálólá understands that, as Joseph Harris argues, at any given time, we belong to several dialogues and are concurrently committed to a plethora of conflicting and paradoxical discourses.³⁷

What follows appears as one of his most striking points of defiance towards the institution of the Western academy: When publishing his native city's cultural poem in a manuscript, he was asked to add a citation. He simply replied, "from whom?," suggesting that a centuries old historical tradition did not belong to someone a Western publisher could credit and stamp onto a footnote. When he was asked again, he reacted with political brilliance to reiterate his point by telling them he would cite it, but needed them to find the address of the author and publisher of the poem.³⁸ Of course, there was none because the poem belonged to the collective historical memory of the city of Ibadan. Such a thing cannot be cited, and the Western publishers soon learned this. In effect, Fálólá taught the publishers that, as Thomas Kent put it, "Our knowledge of others and of the world always will be relative to the particular conceptual schemes or communities in which we exist."³⁹ While it is critical to note this

36. Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*. Oxford: Routledge, 1990.

37. Joseph Harris, "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing." *College Compositional and Communication*. Vol. 40. Pgs. 11–22. Feb, 1989, p. 19.

38. Fálólá, p. 29.

39. Thomas Kent, "Talking Differently: A Response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Journal of Advanced Composition*. Vol. 11, No. 1. Pgs. 185–191. Winter 1991. Pg. 186.

in our publications, it is also important to understand that this lesson can be applied to the publication process itself.

Ultimately, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* represents far more than any of the issues I have individually addressed. It is a complex amalgamation of them all. It is both subtle and direct. It celebrates elements of modernity while making a profound argument for the right to subaltern cultural legitimacy within a Westernized world and a Westernized intellectual community. Fundamentally, Fálólá's memoir is an act of subaltern speech that does not fall victim to Spivakian criticisms because it practices Chakrabarty's notion of paradoxical provincialization with precision and expertise. Fálólá utilizes his strategic location of having grown up during the height of the struggle between tradition and Western modernity in Nigeria to demonstrate that Yorùbá, African, and to some degree, all subaltern voices deserve the same epistemological legitimacy as Western knowledge systems. Simultaneously, Fálólá uses his memoir's strategic formation to relate his argument to English-speaking audiences, both for those who have been exposed to modernity in subaltern circles and those who are born directly into Western modernity.

Our world is not one of universal interpretation or singular answers, and Spivak's critique rightly notes this reality. Nonetheless, in her understanding of the overwhelming monolith that involves a fundamentally Western intellectual control of the academy, she fails to acknowledge the powerful ways in which subalternity has fought back. Audre Lorde became renowned for her famous quote, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."⁴⁰ Spivak more or less offers an advanced analysis of why using the master's tools will ultimately result in complacency. At least in the intellectual sphere, one only needs to look at the exponential growth in critical postcolonial scholarship in the heart of Western academic presses such as Oxford and Routledge over the past three decades to conclude that Lorde got it wrong. In particular, Tóyín Fálólá moves beyond the hierarchy of the master's tools and the subordinate beings who implement those tools. Instead, Fálólá constructs a space within which those tools can be owned by the subaltern. In other words, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* operates in a space that is Western in origin, but represents a paradoxical fusion of equally legitimate worldviews that cease to be Western. In this way, when Spivak claims that "The subaltern cannot speak,"⁴¹ she does not account for the subaltern's ability to forge a space in which their voice is on equal terms with

40. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, p. 112.

41. Spivak, p. 104.

Western intellectual authority. She need only examine Tóyin Fálólá's memoir to see a compelling, and ultimately successful attempt at doing so.

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