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Joseph D. Parker  
*Pitzer College*

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## Chapter 11

# An Ethico-Politics of Subaltern Representations in Post-9/11 Documentary Film

**Joe Parker and Rebekah Sinclair<sup>i</sup>**

The World War Without End (WWWoE), formerly known as the War on Terror,<sup>ii</sup> is one of those rare occasions when a gendered subaltern population comes to the attention of the nation-state. If the subaltern is understood as something akin to illiterate rural women from the global South, then she now has the full attention of the White House and Downing Street, the US State Department, CNN and *Time* magazine.<sup>iii</sup> In official state positions and in media coverage, interest in the subaltern is often expressed in humanitarian attention to the rights or freedoms of these subaltern women in order to justify military invasion and ongoing intervention.

Post-9/11 documentaries that appear to oppose the World War Without End rely on similar liberal beliefs in rights and freedom in order to formulate explicit

and implicit political criticisms of the war. In this way the documentaries are agreeing with the arguments of those they claim to oppose: such nation-states as the United States and Britain, who have justified their interventions by use of these same humanitarian terms. This agreement is seen when documentaries show the violation of constitutional or international law and human rights in Afghanistan, as in *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2010), or in the US, as in Sree Nallamothu's *Patriot Acts* (2004).

We might liken our own present historical moment to the nineteenth-century British attention to certain women of India whom they felt they must protect from what they saw as the uncivilised tradition of *sati*, or the burning of upper class and caste widows. In both cases, a dominant world power legitimises its intervention into the affairs of a South Asian country by arguing that outsiders must protect the women of the region from the barbarian practices of their countrymen. So here we examine the figure of the gendered subaltern women in post-9/11 antiwar documentaries to reconsider the grounds for critique of the WWWoE. Our central interest is to reject colonising modes of modern meaning and justice based in humanitarian legal and rights thinking, as well as the appropriations of the subaltern to those ends found in film.

Since the WWWoE is being fought not just in Afghanistan and Iraq, but simultaneously in the US, Britain, Spain, Indonesia, Yemen, and other locations, we cannot follow the classic conception of war as something fought in discrete theatres limited to points of invasion and mass conflict. For this reason we have considered documentaries made about a broad range of theatres of conflict not limited to Afghanistan and Iraq.

We bring postcolonial and queer feminist political theory and an ethics of singularity and the Other into conversation with documentary film to centre our analysis on subaltern populations. This allows us to demonstrate how certain forms of violence can often remain unnameable and invisible because they are made possible and justified by fundamental liberal assumptions. We propose below to begin to identify the appropriations and subjugations performed in the

name of liberal humanitarian justice in order to recognise and challenge the claims of universal democracy and justice made by the US and other collaboration forces in the WWWoE as a problem. This problem is seen in the way that universalist claims naturalise the violences of globalisation through agricultural regulatory schemas proliferated under the guise of national reconstruction or freedom as defined by the economic. For as we will see in our discussion of the films *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Rendition* (2007), when the valences of democracy, economy, and occupation or war converge in this way, the subaltern's inability or refusal to conform to sanctioned modes of capitalist exchange also make possible her erasure from the political.

As documentary filmmakers work within homogenising universalist beliefs in human rights, freedom, and democratic constitutional governance, they erase the agency and resistance of the subaltern. Subaltern agency is rendered visible only with careful attention to local configurations of difference within historically specific arenas of struggle. If we wish to ever come to recognise rural, unlettered women of the global south as something other than victim, we must find a way to refuse the monolithic homogeneity of categories like 'Muslim women' (obscuring differences of sexual orientation, class, race, and rural/urban divides), 'Afghan women' (erasing class, literacy and educational, and ethnic or regional differences), or even the universalised category of 'women', that is itself the subject of considerable debate among feminists (Butler 1992: 9, 13, 16-17; Mohanty 2003; Spivak 2008: 142-3, 148-9).

Gayatri Spivak and a number of other activist critics have turned to the notion of singularity to counter liberal presumptions to the universal (Spivak 1995: xxiv-xxv; Spivak 2005: 475-8; Morton 2007: 61-3, 95-134; Derrida 1982: 21; Derrida 1991: 100-2; Deleuze 1990: 52-63). They propose instead to recognise the constitution of the Other through these general categories as a key ethico-political moment in a political ontology of resistance.<sup>iv</sup> Singularity is the notion of the unrepeatable, irreducible, historically specific, contingent Other whose existence is marked outside of knowledge and language – a 'social' being that nevertheless is constituted in ways that make her 'unintelligible' to us. In our

present approach to justice and responsibility, our goal is to explore practical ways to establish other forms of ethical accountability in documentaries that focus on relations with the Others of ongoing imperialism, globalisation, and the WWWoE. We suggest that ethico-political responsibility is possible through refusing to appropriate the Other into modern schemas of intelligibility, even as this refusal displaces the terms of our own collectivities and subjectivities. In the documentaries we explore, we mark how the figure of the subaltern always already contests these universalist terms and logics that would render the Other decipherable, even as the politically disenfranchised populations to which the subaltern refers are strategically excluded from dominant histories and representations.

### **The Elusive Subaltern in Post-9/11 Documentaries**

The gendered subaltern is characterised by the difficulties of understanding her within the political limits of bourgeois modern knowability. The subaltern has been theorised in different ways by activists in Marxist movements first, and now increasingly across a range of disciplines, movements, schools and regions. This obscurity is produced in obvious ways for documentarians, such as limiting the subject matter almost exclusively to the agency of the educated or men, as in *Taxi to the Dark Side*. More frequently, however, the failure to recognise the resistance of the subaltern takes place in more subtle ways.

To explore examples of when the figure of the elusive subaltern appears in post-9/11 documentaries which seem to critique the WWWoE, we begin with Alex Gibney's Academy Award winning documentary, *Taxi to the Dark Side*. The film documents abuses which are widely known but which have never officially been acknowledged as a tactic.<sup>v</sup> Gibney's film explicitly contrasts the views of military interrogators with legal experts who argue in humanitarian terms that the practices documented are violations of national and international law. Their arguments rely on the foundational presumption of equality and the coherent, free individual that undergird modern national and international legal systems. The movie documents the lack of freedom on the part of the taxi driver (and

other detainees at other facilities) at the centre of the film to show that the law was not applied equally to free individuals.

While the film is relentlessly masculinised, there is a fleeting moment when one military intelligence interrogator makes a passing remark about a woman corporal interrogator who suggested that the taxi driver's wife visited him in prison. This is the only mention in the film of a woman from the small, peanut-farming village of Yakubi in Khost Province that the taxi driver was from, and may be the only representation of a rural, possibly unlettered farming woman in the film, even though the woman herself is not shown on screen. Yet the US interrogator being interviewed quickly dismisses the possibility that the wife was able to visit, given the conditions at the prison, and the viewing audience is left with a contradictory and uncertain account.

This ghostly, contradictory appearance of a rural Afghan woman in a film that argues for humane treatment and constitutional rights brings into clarity the gendered tilt not only of the prison population at Bagram air base in 2002-3 and in the documentary, but also of the WWWoE and global capitalism and development. For example, the male taxi driver was able to insert himself into the circuits of capitalism as he transitioned from stone-carrier and farmer to taxi driver. Unlike the male driver, the women in this same village are likely cases of those outside the circuits of capitalism who rarely benefit in any concrete way from national wars of liberation or so-called modern development, globalisation, or democracy. Their nearly complete absence from this documentary is one index of how such rural Afghan and Iraqi women are effaced from the stories that documentarians tell us about the WWWoE, and the ways this effacement is tied to their identity constituted as economic remainders in the theatres of globalisation.

We can see the ways these peanut farmers might be remaindered by globalisation – and thus also left out of the narrative of Gibney's documentary – by pointing to the economic shift from pre-war agricultural self-sufficiency, to globalised, neoliberal policies in Afghan seed policy. Shortly after the Afghan

theatre opened with the US-led invasions, an initial 2002 agreement was reached between international and national organisations and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to protect local seeds. The agreement stated:

[Seed practices] should not distort the local seed systems and it should be aimed at building the foundation for a sustainable seed supply system in the future. As much as possible, says the Code, seed should be produced locally to ensure its adaptation to the local environment....

(Food and Agriculture Organization 2002)

But by 2005, the FAO, in complicity with the European Union and the US, had moved to support a commercial seed market – opening the door to foreign seed companies and agribusiness, and endorsing monopoly rights for seed companies. This effectively shut out small farmers, for whom it is difficult or next to impossible to meet the new minimum standards of germination, purity, and labelling for seed sales established in the seed law passed in June 2009 (Grain 2008). From a perspective considering the rural peanut farmers left out of the human rights discourse in Gibney's film, this agricultural shift marks the specific structures of economic-political disenfranchisement that likely made possible and financially viable the transition of the taxi driver from peanut farmer to urban participant, even as the same mechanisms may be destroying the grounds for his wife's farming practices.

Likewise, in Wasit Province of the Iraqi theatre, under new policies adopted by the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture in 2008, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is funding a loan guarantee programme through Iraqi banks in order to move local farmers into the circuits of financial credit systems (Noel 2008; Husar 2010). This work of globalisation on the ground, in a theatre of conflict of the WWWoE, moves the Afghan and Iraqi national agricultural systems towards replacing the small farmer seed production that has served subsistence farming for millennia. These subsistence food production practices are displaced with commercial seed sales and monopoly rights that instead serve transnational agribusiness interests such as Nestlé, Stine Seed Company of Iowa and the

German seed company KWS, in cooperation with the Afghan Ministry of Foods and Light Industry (Grain 2009).<sup>vi</sup> In this sense civilian USAID workers, the armed forces of the PRT and local elites do more than erase subalterns from the universalist categories of the ‘economic’ or ‘progress’: they promote policies, laws, and regulatory systems that work to destroy means of subaltern subsistence.

Documentarians who give attention to the always already present subaltern agency and its resistance to the forces of globalisation would find rich material in what Spivak calls the ‘persistent short-term initiatives of local self-management...against the financialisation of the globe’ (2008: 156) that the women of the peanut farming villages of Khost Province have been forced to develop while under siege from the WWWoE. Spivak has linked subsistence and small or medium-size farming to Afghan democracy for these reasons (2008: 157), as the terms of democracy shift from those of liberal humanist practice centring on national class elites of the global south, to those which recognise local decision-making practices among subaltern groups. However, even as we suggest documentary film give attention to these matrices of globalisation amid the WWWoE, as well as the movements that resist them, we must also mark the ways documentary film itself imposes limits to the recognisability of these initiatives. This is one way to critically approach the means by which documentarity structures meaning through its claims to facticity and the power at play in its filmic gaze.

### **Recognisability and the Ethico-Politics of the Documentary Frame**

The documentary image is constituted fundamentally by what is left out – maintained, like the taxi driver’s wife, outside the frame. Judith Butler’s work on frames of recognisability suggests that democracy and legality are deployed to render certain Others legible during times of war, even as, in the same gesture, they exclude Others like the subaltern from the literal document frame, and thus invite a critique of the politics of framing. The frame is active, interpretive, ‘both jettisoning and presenting, and doing both at once’, delimiting the domain of representability and its Others (Butler 2009: 73-4). As Butler suggests, ‘If there is



a role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely to thematise the forcible frame,' referring as in her other work to Michel Foucault's conception of power (2009: 100).

This suggests that the ethico-political documentary film might come to document the delimiting operations of the frame itself in order to contest the terms of recognition used to construct the film's ethics and politics (Butler 2009: 71, 73). One example of this can be found in Cassian Harrison and Saira Shah's documentary, *Beneath the Veil* (2001), which claims to be documenting the effects of Taliban rule on Afghan citizens generally, and on women specifically. Because of the danger of encountering Taliban officials, and because video and other cameras were outlawed by the Taliban regime, much of the film is shot from under a burqa or inside a sweater. The film shows Shah and her crew being detained, searched, and questioned – vacillating in and out of the frames presented to the viewer. By this movement, the universalised claims of the sovereignty of the Western humanitarian, and her assumptions of unmediated access to the 'real' of covered and violated women in the frame, are disrupted as both Shah and her crew find the camera turned back upon them. This vacillation makes visible the operations of power that are inscribed by the camera and may be deployed as a documentary method to problematise the ethico-political limits of what is representable.

Conversely, in Nick Broomfield's 2007 docudrama *Battle for Haditha*,<sup>vii</sup> we find a failure to interrogate the Western schemas of recognisability. The film portrays the perspectives of US Marines, an Iraqi family, and several Iraqi insurgents on a violent conflict that follows the explosion of a roadside bomb. Though the film appears to be critical of the war, Broomfield perpetuates the political and military justifications for the ongoing occupation of Iraq by appropriating identities of disenfranchised women into the schemas of humanitarian intelligibility that substantiate the claims of collaboration forces as a quest for global democracy. A Butlerian analysis would ask us to mark that lives of the Iraqi women and children who are killed late in the film are rendered visible and valuable only by first being presented throughout the film as 'normal families',

through heterosexual sex scenes, and family and religious gatherings, and the like. Indeed, we can recognise the violence and wrongs done to the possibly subaltern women only because they are depicted through an ontology of a generalised, global human subject constituted through an assumed shared narrative of suffering and coercion with the US soldiers and Iraqi insurgents. By doing this, Broomfield does not make it possible to recognise any way in which the subaltern women might reject the ethico-politics of US military personnel. For Ewa Ziarek, working with Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the differend, this inability of the women to signify the violence done to them in terms other than those offered by Broomfield's generalised liberal ontology, is precisely what maintains the putative unity of the Western, humanitarian identity (Ziarek 2001: 17, 84).

Both documentaries and fictional films circumscribe difference within a particular domain of representability, one to which all forms of subjectivity must sooner or later be referred for their validation and legibility. For this reason Spivak has emphasised the ethico-political importance of the imagination in construing the 'reality' of those populations (such as the subaltern) that generally appear only outside the hegemonic narrative frames of capitalism, 'development', globalisation, justice, or the 'real' (2003: 12, 43, 53-4). While Spivak's work gives primary attention to fiction and history, we may borrow her insights to develop an analysis of such film genres as 'docudrama' or films marketed as 'based on real events', such as *A Mighty Heart* (2007), *Kandahar* (2001), *Redacted* (2007), *Rendition*, *Battle for Haditha*, or *Extraordinary Rendition* (2007). It is through the mobilisation of the imagination in films on the margins of the documentary genre that the documentarian may carry out what Spivak (1995: 79) calls the 'opening up of...counterfactual possible worlds'. Such counterfactuals can accommodate the agencies of subalterns or the resistances of unlettered women that are often erased in orthodox economic or national history, or the elite, androcentric narratives of progress, or the colonial/postcolonial, or the family through which subalterns are erased. Documentaries of this sort reconstitute the ethico-politics of the past in order to make room for the 'real' of the subaltern present, and allow for the subaltern to

come into her own in a ‘counterfactual post future’ (Spivak 1995: 82), a term useful for constituting a new subgenre at the margins of documentary film that renders legible the histories and experiences and future contributions of the subaltern.

### **A Calculus of Affirmative Undecidability**

As we have suggested, post-9/11 documentaries operate within the limits of what we might call the ‘calculations of answerability’ or intelligibility (Spivak 2008: 58), calculations ceaselessly marked by their necessary insertion into complicity with troubled binaries. Such binaries might include, for example, the nation-state which kills under the colour of democracy as opposed to the armed terrorist who appears as anti-democratic, or justice via state legal systems as opposed to the injustice of the ‘illegal’ (such as non-state armed forces). How might documentarians work within the politically compromised space of this acknowledgement of complicity? In Jacques Derrida’s (1989) analysis of Martin Heidegger’s relation to Nazi fascism, and in Spivak’s (2008: 61-78, 88-89) analysis of the academic’s relation to capitalist exploitation and violence – in the act of drinking tea or paying taxes or speaking against war – they urge a caution that takes the form of ‘knowing which is the least grave of forms of complicity’ (Derrida 1989: 39-40, quoted in Spivak 2008: 63, 65). This approach to critique, one haunted by Nazi electoral successes that compromised Heidegger, deconstruction, and democracy in general, centres on a careful mapping of sites where complicity is acknowledged rather than denied. This acknowledgement may work affirmatively to strategically site ways that the unrecognisable, the subaltern, or the differend might pressure intelligibility into new forms of sense making.

This approach could be summarised as what we might term a calculus of ‘affirmative undecidability, responsibility’ (Spivak 2003: 101-2). Rather than presumptively claiming that we know the universal values of a common humanity, we may strategically work with the undecidable to allow the figure of the collective (audience, we, nation, Marxist, feminist) to remain irreducible, so that it ‘remembers its limits’ (Spivak 2003: 52) rather than presumes universality.

Such a calculus of undecidability refuses the claim to make the radical other appear and speak, as in ethnography or much documentary film, instead operating with the recognition that the best we may do is to work to make visible the specific circumstances and limits to knowledge that render the speech acts of the subaltern indecipherable or unhearable (Morris 2010: 3, 6). By focusing on the moment of effacement in disclosure (Spivak 1999: 310), as we saw in *Taxi to the Dark Side*, we may ‘make visible the foreclosure of the subject whose lack of access to the position of narrator is the condition of possibility’ (Spivak 1999: 9) of our own colonising modes of meaning and justice. Affirmative undecidability holds its ethico-political value through a focus on the relation of Subject/Other at the moment when the rules of disciplinary training and the determinisms of academic knowledge break down and there emerges the ‘dark night of non-rules and non-knowledge’ (Spivak 2008: 60, 63) that allows for an ethical decision. This experience of that which is impossible in hegemonic and disciplinary terms is the moment when we may answer the call of the wholly Other in a responsible manner (Spivak 1999: 428).

Such undecidability is found in *Rendition*, where the gendered, possibly subaltern figure of Fatima is only recognisable in her relations to two, highly politicised, class-stratified, male figures in the film: her father, Abasi Fawal, an interrogation officer who is complicit with the US military, and Khalid El-Emim, a member of the Islamic resistance forces. The film’s central plot follows the extraordinary rendition of an Egyptian born US citizen to an undisclosed North African country. But it is Fatima’s character that makes legible the political, economic and legal conflicts in this North African state. Her figure is undecidable because she serves as what Ziarek might term a differend, who can never call the US to account; throughout the film she not only remains outside the terms of capitalism, education, democracy, and legality, but her erasure in these ways and the absence of her narrative voice is precisely what allows these central conflicts and the other characters to make sense to us.<sup>viii</sup>

Spivak suggests that the subaltern allows us to identify the moment of appropriation and ethical accountability. So we may ask what to make of Fatima,

whose undecidable figure haunts the frames of recognisability and prevents her appropriation for either democratic aims or other forms of legibility. For example, the viewer remains uncertain about her position with respect to democracy, since we cannot decipher whether she shares her father's affiliation with US imposed 'democracy', or Khalid's affiliation with resistance; nor with freedom, since she is pictured both wearing and not wearing her head-covering, and having rejected an arranged marriage, while also being uncomfortable with her apparently intimate relations with Khalid. Thus her identity might be rendered as a question to the viewer. The indeterminacy of this figure asks that we consider what the possibilities of postcolonial democracy, modernisation, and economic 'freedom' might mean to her. In this indeterminacy there emerges an opening for imagining ourselves differently, not determined by liberal binaries, and open both to new possible configurations of Self/Other and to a reconstitution of ethico-politics that displaces the limits of the benevolent modern humanitarian.

Fatima is a non-rural figure of the possibly subaltern that might also help us think through urban subalterns in documentaries on Arab or Muslim immigrants in Britain or the US. Sree Nallamothu's 2004 documentary of South Asian immigrant neighborhoods in the northern Chicago area, *Patriot Acts*, depicts two of the men who chose to register with the US government rather than fleeing the country or going underground. Like *Rendition*, the film follows the US government's relentless androcentrism in centring on men who are presumed by the state authorities demanding registration to be prepared for anti-capitalist and anti-state violence, rendering immigrant women secondary. Resistance to state violations of its own guarantees of civil liberties are implicitly defined in this film in terms of systems of immigration law and human rights that rely on liberal universalist foundations. For example, even as the documentarians for this film render immigrant women secondary through their focus on men they advance an implicit argument that all immigrants should be treated equally under the law, an argument that is critical of the post-9/11 registration process as it is applied only to men and only to immigrants from certain countries. Through their use of naturalised identity categories (citizen/non-citizen immigrant, male/female), the

filmmakers reproduce the very terms under which the US government carried out not only the post-9/11 registrations but also its justifications for the invasion of Iraq and other uses of military force in the WWWoE.

Pia Sawhney and Sanjna N. Singh's short 2004 documentary on US-based Muslims in the years shortly after 9/11, *Out of Status*, opens up some of the resistance strategies that besieged immigrant families draw on as the nation-state begins to detain, interrogate, deport and abuse them. As the families depicted encounter forcible removals, false charges, and secret detentions that violate the very dictates of the legal system itself, they begin to pursue their own versions of justice through fleeing the country and in other ways. In this way Sawhney and Singh's documentary of urban settings shows resistance that relies not only on the terms of the travesty of liberal democratic legality carried out repeatedly by the nation-state, but something Spivak characterises as the 'persistent short-term initiatives of local self-management' (2008: 156) that are everyday practices among subaltern communities.

The key ethico-political point of such a calculus is that it renders fully human and partially if still insufficiently recognisable those who do not benefit from development, globalisation, and the travesties of democracy that have taken centre stage under the WWWoE. Carefully considering which questions to retain as undecidable in our writing and documentary production also allows us to render as legible our own personal complicities with social practices that are far from democratic and just.

### **Subalterns Always Already Contest the Terms of Terror**

Subalterns on the ground in theatres of conflict both in the US or Britain and abroad contest fundamental liberal presumptions in various ways. For example, the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) is a growing collective, locally run by Afghan women, who travel to the mostly rural, and culturally and economically secluded villages in Afghanistan to offer health and other education to women and children. In a revealing incident after a 2009 speaking engagement in the US, AIL's founder, Sakena Yacoobi, was asked by a member of the US college

audience, ‘So what can *we* do?’ This question performs the moment of humanitarian benevolence: what can the middle class, educated, humanitarian, from the global North contribute to the struggle for freedom and democracy of poor, uneducated, Others victimised by the backwards patriarchal men of the global South? Yacoobi replied that if we felt we needed to do something, we could release veiled women from the position of victim in which we are complicit with their own government in holding them (Yacoobi 2009). This constitutes a moment when local grassroots movements on the ground resist the totalising narrative of liberal humanitarianism complicit with the nation-state perpetrating and legitimating the WWWoE, and also problematises the distribution of so-called development aid under globalisation as a central transnational mode of modern ethical responsibility (Spivak 2008: 85).

Learning is a key theatre of conflict in the WWWoE, where the struggle is not defined by the Taliban and collaboration forces so much as by local grassroots organisations confronting the massive influx of NGO, US government, and US military efforts to build, staff, fund, and populate schools (USAID 2010b; Winthrop and Graft 2010; Burde and Linden 2009; Catholic Relief Services n.d.). These public sphere interventions by the machinery of the nation-states pursuing the WWWoE and their compliant NGO organisations and citizenry are a major problem in Iraq (Zangana 2007: 81-93) and for the AIL, as they attempt to reframe the representations of local Afghan women and the agency of the subaltern that they carry out. The deeply rooted modern belief that the NGO enactment of humanitarian efforts will promote development and equality persists in the face of many decades of evidence to the contrary, shored up by the universalist teleology but disrupted by subaltern resistance when it becomes intelligible.

The women of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) mark another moment of subaltern agency and resistance, as they insist that the Taliban, the Afghan governmental forces, and the US, British, and other international troops not only share a coevolutionary history as oppressors,<sup>ix</sup> but share equally in the displacement of the educational, sexual, and political rights

of the women of Afghanistan. Their literature and website consistently reject the terms of stories run in newspapers around the world that attempt to misperceive Afghan women as ‘needing international aid or occupying forces’, or as ‘destitute and without hope’ (Hairan 2010).

One example of RAWA’s subversion of feminist and other Western vocabularies of freedom is their suggestion that the burqa – seemingly a global symbol not only of the oppression of women, but of anti-democratic and ‘terrorist’ violence generally – can be taken back and redeployed as a tool of resistance.<sup>x</sup> *Beneath the Veil* opens with a view of a woman in a burqa, Zarima, who is subsequently dragged into the centre of a public stadium and shot in the head. The image was captured on film by Salima, who upon reflecting on the images and her experience in the stadium, suggested that RAWA might have to reconsider their stance on burqas, since they could not have carried out this and other tasks (including documentary film-making) without the covert protection of these mandatory garments (Brodsky 2003: 20). Here, the burqa that seems, under modern Orientalism, to appear as a silencing mechanism of anti-freedom that makes it impossible for Muslim women to join with their Western sisters in baring uncovered skin required for modern objectification of women under globalisation, is complicated by its new role as an undercover documentary film-making device.<sup>xi</sup>

Indeed, in Meyda Yeğenoğlu’s (1998: 43-4, 62-3) analysis, the veiled woman becomes a site for the inversion of the omnipotent, invasive gaze of modern panopticism, since she can see without being seen, displacing the seemingly stable, unidirectional ‘truths’ of modern objectivist documentary realism and destabilising the putative unified viewing subject position of the documentary camera’s gaze. By refusing the urge to ‘lift the veil’ to see the ethnographic realist ‘truth’ of the Oriental woman, as in Sharmeen Obaid’s 2007 documentary *Lifting the Veil* about wartime Afghan women, Yeğenoğlu suggests a frame that can accommodate the ambivalent economies of desire and unavoidable trace of difference that opens up to the possibility of a subject status of woman as undomesticated Other. RAWA and the AIL are players in transnational



networks of resistance to those modes of globalisation supported by the WWwOE, the IMF and the World Bank, and transnational corporations that remain vigilant to contest their appropriation as global subjects in order to retain agency in the terms of their own rendering.

Akin to the moments of subaltern resistance we see in RAWA's subversive use of the burqa, other forms of resistance include those acts of mimicry that Homi Bhabha (1994) has highlighted in his rewriting of history, and the playfulness that Yeğenoğlu (1998) finds useful in Luce Irigaray's work to avoid the liberal mode of resistance through reversal. For those who are forced to subject themselves over and over to the categories and mechanisms of the hegemonic, this playful repetition allows a woman to refuse to be reduced to the place of exploitation by discourse and/or by force. The possibility of exploiting a social role deliberately, in order to thwart a form of subordination by rendering it visible with playful repetition and variation – even when it is supposed to remain invisible – allows the woman to 'also remain elsewhere' (Irigaray 1985: 76, quoted in Yeğenoğlu 1998: 64).

Still another form of resistance can be seen later in Shah's documentary, when a moment of undecidability occurs as three young women, ages 15, 12, and 8, who were targets of Taliban violence, refuse to speak about the events following their mother's death, when they were left alone with local Taliban officials. This refusal momentarily disrupts the unity and authority of Shah's narrative voice, and exposes her to the differend – the failure of signification to capture what is irreducible or untransferable to Western audiences (Ziarek 2001: 95; Lyotard 1988: 13). We must ask ourselves, in view of their agential silence, if there has been no testimony to a legal offense, how can we respond with law? If there has been no clearly documented violation of rights, what can democracy bring? Here it is our identity that might be rendered as a question as we take this moment of undecidability, the moment of the differend's appearance, as an opening for 'institut[ing] idioms which do not yet exist' (Ziarek 2001: 103). Spivak terms this a 'silent interruption' (2008: 19, 56), meaning an interruption in the idiom of the

peasant rather than in the language of the film critic, philosopher, or the highly educated filmmaker.

A similar moment occurred in the collective production of the self-portrait photographs documenting post-9/11 Muslim women in Britain from the exhibit *After Cameron*, when several group members decided not to allow their pictures into the public domain (Jennings 2005).<sup>xii</sup> In this case the collective process allowed particular immigrant women, many of them more educated than the subaltern in its traditional conception, to exercise their own agency in exposing the nature of authorship and the risky politics of documentary production for public view in a racist time. In participating fully in a project that ultimately questions the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, a photographer from a colonial family in India, the women who refused to enter public space perform the digital media equivalent of what Spivak (2008: 148, 160) characterises as the ‘secret writing’ of the subaltern. This form of resistance is writing by girls trained to write for their own democratic agency rather than trained to reproduce the docility of the modern democratic citizen under the gaze of the panopticon. This lack of knowledge, this undecidability, puts us in the humble place of learning from below, of asking the subaltern how she might see us, and how she might suggest we respond.

### **Conclusion: Concrete Practices for Documentary Film**

Our ultimate political goal is to confront the limits of liberal notions of democracy and justice in a search for ethically and politically effective strategies for documentary production on the WWWoE (Spivak 2003: 25-71; Mouffe 1992; Derrida 1994; Rancière 2009). The ethico-political moment is precisely when we refuse deterministic, indentitarian appropriations of Others to allow ourselves to be imagined by the subaltern Others of the WWWoE through what we have called an ethico-politics of an affirmative calculus of the undecidable. Practicing an ethico-politics of the subaltern allows us as documentary viewers to find the moment where Eurocentric, colonising universalisms betray their exclusion of those never meant in the modern to have full constitutional rights,

to have success in capitalist exchange economies, or to have full participation in representative governance systems.

Showing this ‘real’ in a documentary is important not because it completes the factographic record, introducing a small but hidden group into the panopticon of modern objectivity. Rather, it brings into visibility those everyday successes at resisting the travesties of democracy and the violence of capitalist progress that characterise the agency in quotidian experiences of the subaltern, while also disrupting the Enlightenment political ontology that depends for its foundations on abstract universalisms that cannot accommodate the historically specific singularity of the subaltern.

Through the encounters with the subaltern, the differend, the ungrievable and the unrecognisable, we hope that documentary films yet-to-come might be able to see the framing as one of their most important political statements. For framing is one moment of a gendered, class-selective, rendering of justice as a central moment of exclusion and erasure, and the subsequent intelligibility is a profound ethico-political problem rather than a neutral lens through which we look to find what we know as the ‘real’. By marking and troubling the limits of documentary recognisability, by exposing ourselves in our own colonising patterns of recognition rather than seeking to expose the Other, we might rethink what constitutes a political intervention. Such foundational reconceptualisations can create openings for recognising otherwise effaced agency for subalterns, and for filmmakers and audience members, agency which may serve as possibilities for justice that have yet to be imagined in film.

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<sup>i</sup> The authors thank Becca Spence for research assistance for this chapter.

<sup>ii</sup> The Obama administration, which no longer uses the Bush era ‘war on terror’ terminology, now uses terms like ‘Global Counterintelligence’ (G-COIN) and ‘Overseas Contingency Operations’, among others.

<sup>iii</sup> See *Time's* 29 July 2010 cover photos. For the US State Department, see its 2001 'Report on the Taliban's War Against Women', and more recently Hillary Rodham Clinton's January 2010 statement on the women of Afghanistan and Pakistan (US State Department 2010). USAID estimates that the illiteracy rates of women in rural areas is about 90%, and about two fifths of the overall population is illiterate (USAID 2010a).

<sup>iv</sup> An introduction to the new political ontology in postmodernist theory may be found in White (1991; 2000), Dillon (2006), and Marchart (2007), among many other sources.

<sup>v</sup> A useful analysis of the ways these open secrets shape the public sphere and rewrite the jurisdiction of international law may be found in Bhattacharyya (2008: 54-72, 117-33, 134-44).

<sup>vi</sup> For a brief overview of the history of agribusiness expansion under globalisation of the seed industry, see Grain (2010).

<sup>vii</sup> *Battle for Haditha* begins by instructing the audience that the story to come is based on real events. It opens with the words: 'On November 19, 2005, an IED planted on the roadside in Haditha Iraq, killed one marine and injured two others. In the following hours, marines killed 24 Iraqi men, women, and children.'

<sup>viii</sup> Cynthia Weber builds a similar argument in her book *Imagining America at War* about the feminine providing a site for staging conflicts over the morality and legitimacy of war in films about World War II (2006: 13, 169 n6), Vietnam (2006: 42-6), and the post-9/11 wars (2006: 83-90).

<sup>ix</sup> In the historical view of RAWA these forces include the US supported insurgents fighting the Soviets in the 1970s, the 'elected' governmental officials from the Northern Alliance financially and militarily backed by US troops, and the US and international presences, whose occupation continues to signify the oppression of the people.

<sup>x</sup> For a similar argument about the veil during the Islamic revolution in Iran, see Mohanty (2003: 33-4).

<sup>xi</sup> This is suggested again in a 4 April 2010 interview with a RAWA activist in Kabul, who suggests that the burqa can be used as a subversive tool, against the violent regimes, to mask identity in a dangerous location where resistance activity gets women killed (Boone 2010).

<sup>xii</sup> *After Cameron*, National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television, 2004, [www.nmpft.org.uk/aftercameron](http://www.nmpft.org.uk/aftercameron).