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A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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## Towards a Theory of Native Informant

**A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of The Vanishing Present** by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak;  
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SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

The text is yet another challenging intervention by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the world's leading critic, theorist and feminist intellectual. This text is a dense weaving of interdisciplinary and intertextual threads (in spite of the modest apology of the author in the preface) addressing itself to philosophers, feminists, scholars of postcolonial and cultural studies and the so-called 'native informants' of the academia and of the ethnographers field. The avowed objective of this text is 'to track the figure of the native informant through various practices' through "a range of philosophical presuppositions, historical excavations, and literary representations of the dominant" (p xi). The dominant is counterposed as part of the critical project of Spivak, in terms of native informant defined and displaced within the dominant. The native informant is "a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of man – a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation" (p 6). Spivak's attempt has been to clear out the 'native informant' of the 'cluster' of western ethnographical research/inscriptions and 'postcolonial masquerading'. This 'clearing out' of the 'native informant' eventually has raised certain fundamental and crucial questions and opened up possibilities of alternative discourses which are perhaps marks of Spivak's own commitment "not only to narrative and counter-narrative but also to the rendering (im)possible of (an)other narrative" (p 6).

In the opening chapter entitled 'Philosophy', Spivak examines the emergence and foreclosure of the 'native informant' in the three 'great texts of the western Philo-

sophical tradition – Kant, Hegel and Marx'. The flux of the 'history of the vanishing present' is perhaps the adjustment or negotiation of what Spivak calls 'the European discursive production' and the 'axiomatic of imperialism', which continues to influence and instruct our knowledge, culture, economy, literature, and pedagogical practices. Spivak hopes that some readers may "discover a constructive rather than disabling complicity between our own position and theirs" (Kant, Hegel and Marx) (p 4). The constructive aspect as suggested by Spivak emerges from an appropriation of these "great narratives of western philosophical tradition, which are still dictating the logic of the capital and the financialisation of the globe. It is worthwhile to (re)quote Spivak's quotation of Carl Pletch's conclusion to 'The Three Worlds'.

Our challenge is not merely to cast aside this conceptual ordering of social scientific labour (into three worlds), but to criticise it. And we must understand the task of criticism in the Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist sense here. We must, in other words, overcome the limitations that the three worlds notion has imposed upon the social sciences as a matter of course (p 3).

The last line here assumes greater significance with Spivak's clarification that 'we' in the humanities have already started seeing the 'third world', "as a displacement of the old colonies as colonialism proper displaces itself into neo-colonialism" (p 3). This displacement of the old colonies has eventually resulted in the collapsing of the geopolitical boundaries of the 'three worlds' and has made the conceptualisation of the 'fourth world' pre-emergent (Spivak has stated elsewhere that the fourth world is the first world pushed back). One thus juxtaposes the foreclosed figure of the 'native informant' of Kant and the image of free-floating migrant (a concept coined from Rushdie) to construe the fourth world 'subject' as the cross-pollinated, displaced native informant in this 'history of the vanishing present'.

Another important aspect of this text as the author herself claims is that it is a feminist 'book' where feminist issues are 'pre-emergent'. The second chapter is a discussion of several literary texts of which a few pages probably has been Spivak's own classroom lectures. Her discussion of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an extension of her critique of 19th century feminism in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism'. Rhys's novel becomes particularly significant in her teaching of the 'native informant' because it projects that the 'other' cannot be 'selfed' or given an 'identity' owing to fractures produced by Imperialism. For Spivak, contemporary feminism continues to be only an extension of 19th century feminism with respect to the treatment of the 'racial' other. Our attempts to render voice to the (subaltern) other is also not free from the influence of western proto-feminism. One is reminded of Spivak's comments on such attempts of scholars and researchers (to trace the subaltern voice) at the VIth Subaltern conference in 1998. Her word of caution to younger scholars was that one should not put one's words into the mouth of the Subaltern and claim that the Subaltern has spoken. Rather one could objectively experience the 'textuality of doing' (without valorising doing over knowing) and learn the limits of one's ignorance which informs that the other has no language (*EPW*, May 9, 1999). This is a strategic positivist essentialism that resists reverse ethnocentrism while it reinscribes the native as an expropriated non-presence beyond the claims of articulate subjectivity. The expropriation of the native is a strategy of transforming and radicalising the impossible moral luck of itself in silences incipient between the signatures of the proper identities, a crossing out of both the native and the dominant rationality.

In her reading of how colonialism and postcolonialism are figured in literature, Spivak also discusses Baudelaire, Kipling, Mahasweta and Coetze. Rhys, Mahasweta and Coetze along with Mary Shelley,

according to Spivak resist what she calls "the ethics of alterity as a politics of identity". Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne' and Kipling's 'William the Conqueror' have been read together with a discussion paper laid before a secret meeting of the East India Company. Spivak's attempt has been to project the affinity between the "mirror of our performance of certain imperialist ideological structures even as we deconstruct the tropological error of masculinism celebrating the female" (p 148) and the most crude presuppositions of racism. Spivak's reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahay' has focused on the measuring of difference in the master-slave enclosure projected in *Frankenstein* and the impossibility of retaining the colonial female subject of history in such an enclosure. The emergence of the 'native informant' takes place at the disjuncture between the master-slave enclosure and the "postcolonial performance of the construction of the constitutional subject of the new nation, in subalternity rather than, as most often by renaming the colonial subject, as citizen" (p 141). The narrative scope of Mahasweta's text opens wide with Spivak's observation that Mahasweta's text cannot be used as an example of Jamesonian 'third world literature'. Mahasweta's use of the myth of 'Pterodactyl' and her naming of the locale (beyond the recognised familiar geopolitical significance) of the myth is significantly suggestive of the presence of another world below and beyond the politico-cultural enclosure of the 'three-worlds'.

In trying to read the histories of the management of widow burning and the history of a 19th century hill queen, which is again an extension of her article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and 'The Rani of Sirmur', one of the important issue raised here is the transition of 'Europe and its other' to 'Europe as an other' (p 199) and how it has instructed the politics of gender and development. Through the resuscitation of the 'Rani of Sirmur' from the archives and documents and her retelling of the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, Spivak's argument partly is that "woman's interception of the claim to Subalternity can be staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogeneous circumstances" (p 308). The chapter attempts to discuss these two women as 'informant' of history. The Rani of Sirmur is resurrected from archives, letters and despatches in the interest of

British imperialists, just as 'Women and Development' is restructured into 'Gender and Development' in the interest of the financialisation of the globe. Spivak comments aptly that "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not onto a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation, culturalism and development" (p 304). The tale of the widow Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide is as Spivak writes a "subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide" of third world woman. Spivak's reading of Subaltern speech is extended through the question of stakes to 'political speaking' into a collective arena. In the gap between national liberation and globalisation, the casting of vote (for the Subaltern woman) becomes a constative 'speech' in contrast to the silent self-inscription of violence on Bhubaneswari, on her own menstruating body at the age of 17.<sup>1</sup>

The last chapter is the history of the present time, focusing on women in textile and postmodern fashion. She begins with a discussion on Fredric Jameson's postmodernism and states that the conflation of postmodernism and poststructuralism is a 'cultural production' in the metacritical production of cultural history, architecture, fashion, clothing, etc. These are 'privileged areas of inscription' of (postmodern) culture. Spivak discusses a host of cultural images and their nuances including the internet which are caught in the 'white-collar cultural enclave of the present times'. Spivak writes, "This enclave can, depending upon its class connections contain the impulse toward cultural museumisation as part of its sensitivity training" (p 393). The immigrant humanities teacher is one who can relate to the institutionalisation of this impulse because the new immigrant is a figure like the native informant and the 'postcolonial', who is 'woven into the folds' of the text of globalisation. The first three chapters track the native informant through Europe and the fourth circles around the US where the author herself is traced. Socially, the postcolonial/new management women in multiculturalism is what Spivak has in mind in this concluding chapter. Spivak makes a critique of the bid of multiculturalist feminism to acquire transnational literacy in the new world order. Can the disenfranchised new or old

diasporic woman (of the east) inhabit this aporia of the welfare and justice of the capitalist state? This woman is however the elite of global public culture privatised, the proper subject of real migrant activism (p 400). One here needs to remember Spivak's caution of learning to read the objective textuality of the silence of such women before tracing her voice. The interventionist academia can only assist such women rather than participate in their gradual indoctrination into an 'unexamined culturalism' (p 402). Groups of the gendered outsiders are the attraction of transnational agencies of globalisation. Spivak's suggestion to them is that they should think of themselves as a collective and not as victims and engage themselves in resisting globalisation and redrawing the vicissitudes of migrancy. This group should address the challenge of the political imagination to rethink their countries not as nostalgic memories but as a part of globality of the present, outside the US melting pot. Their participation in the new social movements of the west can have their own countries of origin as their entry point. This re-meeting of America and globality can re-invent the (his)story of the vanishing present which would in turn retell the story of a Caliban or a Friday. It is this group which constitutes the 'implied readership' of Spivak's Critique of Postcolonial Reason, a group with which Spivak can perhaps identify herself.

### Critical Historiographical Strategies

Spivak's reading into the nature of German nationalism that claimed an unified national and cultural identity, brings out its metonymic forgetfulness of the self in the other as an unified identity. This is a typical posing of nationalist teleology that the dialectic between German civilisation (the self) and Asian world emerge into a larger epistemic and ideological entity at the global level. What Spivak brings out is a prehistory of today's linkages between nations to merge into a transnational and global entity and simultaneously a teleology of liberal nationalism as well as progressive imperialism. The movement of German thought in what Spivak calls 'Kant's comopolithia, Hegel's itinerary of the idea and Marx's socialist homeopathy' forms the double register for determination of our subject position from the third world. On the one hand, it determines third world as a margin and on

the other the very same determining discourse forms the terms of our critique of the west. In between these registers, Spivak argues that we, the third world critic construe our kingdom by a 'denial of history, which paradoxically turns out as our own disavowal of agency' (p 9). Shelving such circular hermeneutic moves within the maze of western discourses, Spivak vows for an impossible perspective, the perspective of a 'native informant'.

Such a vow crops up from an understanding of the internal logic of capitalism-imperialism-socialism circle of western reason. Firstly, it has always construed on other, either by bringing her within the fold of their discourse on cultural other or by sheer non-recognition and exclusion of the other. Such a construal of the other, for Spivak, has remained as the crucial strategy for iteration of the 'self in terms of dominant western discourse in both western and non-western contexts available as spaces for expansion of the rule of capital, dialectic of spirit (Hegel) and freedom of will (Kant). Instead of saying that such an entwined position of ours (as third world subjects) had graduated and qualified us to attain a kind of self-reflexivity to judge ourselves vis-a-vis the west (as believed to be the postcolonial experience), Spivak says that it had led us to a self vs other opposition monotonically rehearsed in our endless tell-tale of colonial exploitation, national liberation and third world underdevelopment. Spivak deconstructs such an entrapped subjectivity through a different strategy of inversion. When the terms of denial that we refer to (as listed above) are often construed as the excluded margins of the west, the third world subjects are already deconstructed in an otherised mode and hence one needs to deconstruct this otherised non-western marginalised subject from a position outside both the western and eastern discourses of civilisation and culture. Such a deconstruction is carried out not merely in the self-conscious awareness of 'forclusion' of subject positions but in the 'abyss' produced by western/eastern discourses and its 'subject-effects'. Such an 'abyss' could be located only creatively, first by breaking the mirror which gave an image of the other, a denial of alterity and then by re-articulating a self in a substitution of the subject of humanism by subject in emergence. Spivak takes up the issue of 'emergence' in terms of ideology of the aesthetic.

In Kantian aesthetics the move to naturalise the sublime by way of subsuming the raw and the terrific under 'beautiful' and accord this to the mediating role of reason, culture and education in the realm of human senses is for Spivak an impossibility to unalter if one is naturally alien to this. Such an alienation is exemplified in terming woman as 'naturally uneducable', especially a woman of the south, not only as the racial other to be alleviated by universal adoption through the perpetuation of racial superiority as benevolent equalisation between women of other races as white or black man as brave as the white, a catachresis (an abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor) describing something similar to subsumption of the raw under the sublime while expurgating it from the sphere of the beautiful. A global process like Americanisation of babies from Africa and the east by wholesale adoption or creating native women as 'informants' in the UN style new world order, for Spivak, is an aestheticisation of the brute forces of racial discrimination, patriarchal violence and economy of sexism. But the move to expurgate the raw in an irreducible manner as in Kant's critique of judgment, assume what Spivak calls an "impropriety of denomination" by way of an ultimate substitution of the 'analogy of danger by real danger' to evoke the sensation of the violent, the dangerous, the raw and the beastly. This is what completes the circle of reason by desensitising the subject when it forces the object through the sublime and culture. Therefore, Spivak cautions against such philosophical desensitisation by suggesting a therapeutic use of 'politics' and 'deconstruction'. Politics in the typical Althusserian sense in which Althusser suggested, "Everything which touches on politics may be fatal to philosophy, for philosophy lives in politics" (p 17). Deconstruction in an unusual sense of 'setting-to-work mode' in which the text deconstructed from a certain position imbricates itself within the trace structure of the text. Therefore a politics of negotiating an exterior position inside the text while deconstructing the text assumes a politics of impossibility of any relation of self-sameness or alterity that keeps deconstruction going. The question then is, where lies the agency of deconstruction? Spivak theorises the agency of deconstruction no more in terms of autonomous subjects or subject effects, but in terms of an interminable chain of re-

production of value in the process of exchange in the global market and one 'between' critical vigilance and radical practice. Interestingly, the native informant construed as a subject is produced discursively by a body of global powerful political, economic and financial institutions, who caught between exchanges, while the deconstruction of such a subject produces spaces between such exchanges. Spivak cites the example of a migrant, who as a native informant simultaneously scales through market-driven forces of immigration as well as remains complicit with her different identity. A figure like a third world woman placed outside the collaboration of global, institutionalisation also remains a 'native informant' by being caught in an exchange between representations of her's and the role in which she is cast within native patriarchal order. On the one hand, Spivak critiques the instrumentality of the third world women as sites of representation and on the other any representation, for her is a process of exchange within a chain of production of signifiers. Such a political economy of signification is what generally overdetermines the position of the 'native'. At the first level Spivak's 'strategy of deconstruction frees 'native' from such a chain by eschewing the constitutive mechanism of the global political economy, but at the second level such a decentred native re-enters into the global chain of signification as an 'informant', as a migrant, transnational and hybrid subject of knowledge. Such a knowledge is what Spivak terms as, "the risk of deconstruction without reserve" (p 430).

What Spivak claims is that both these levels of deconstruction are inhabited by a process of effacement of the 'native'. At the first level, the 'native' caught within the global chain of signification is not the 'subject' of reality, it is a movement within the chain of signification that has solely technical and representative function. It is a representation of the loss of identity within representation of the 'native' through the structure of representation which is mediated within the global political economy; his loss of cultural/national identity which is again mediated by a non-identity of being a migrant. Such a non-identity is a rupture within the continuum between the native and the global and hence bringing it into presence through the supposed role of an 'informant', is a second level deconstructive move that account for the impossibility of the pos-

sibility of the subject in the native informant. Such an impossibility determines as totality of the limits of global appropriation of the third world by retaining the original trace of the native in its transformed movements. Therefore, neither political economy nor any other preferred episteme of globalising discourse cannot avoid linking the other and the self-reflexive appropriation of the other into an irreducible non-presence of the other in the exteriority of the fundamental topic of contemporary western discourses: representation, value and identity. Since western discourses conceived these issues as generating themselves in a movement of unmediated auto-affectation, what such auto-affected movements conceal are their dependence on both the structural and the supplementary laws of production. Deconstruction in its usual sense reveals such dependence by way of exposing its architectural components. The auto-affected production of value, for example is a function of termination of the chain of 'reproduction' exposing its dependence on the supplementarity of capital. Capital as a supplement remains attached to the very structure of production, but it conceals such an attachment in its very operation. The length of time taken in the processes of generation of value stops its circulation at the point where its chain of reproduction is constantly substituted by the 'electronic' exchange of stocks and shares. Spivak, therefore, relocates time as the non-present constitutive element of value that terminates the auto-affectation of value by calling its exterior laws of (re)production. Such an extêrity is the remainder of what goes into making of 'processes' and 'products' of economy of signs.

Within the fundamental topoi of generation of signs the cultural history of natives of the erstwhile colonised countries still act as the source of value and representation for the first world. The instrumentality of western knowledge transforms this source into an alienated essence. The history of this alienation involves an upstaging of the western episteme in its ideology of sublime. The sublime is constituted by an image of celebrating the otherness of the native. Such an otherness produces the self-same western image of mankind with all its oppressive machinations. Outside this manufactured history of mankind, Spivak opens the particularities of the textualised native souls by underlining the strategies of appropriation of the

figure of the native. Spivak suggests a move from exteriority already inscribed in the native to the interior norms of the relationship between the western cogito and the native self to recover the native from its instrumental presence in the metadiscourse of civilisation to its disappearance in the conceived otherness of the native. This is the native who speaks without a voice and its silences need to be recuperated in order to retrieve its self-consciousness. Spivak assumes that the textual historiography can only stand testimony to this silence without any redemptive possibility as it can only assume the voice of the dominant. Therefore both history and time are frozen within historiography in giving the native only a spectral identity that goes into repetitively making a structure of traces with the lost identity of the native. Such a structure is what determines the narrative representation of history and hence Spivak names it metaphorically as the 'History of Vanishing Present'. The muted subverted and frozen presence of the natives within historiography makes it repressive to the extent that it only reinscribes and enacts the cruelty of writing the native in effacement, living only at the exterior, a simultaneous exteriorisation and extermination of the native.

### The Paradox of Native Informant

Now the question is whether the extenuation of process of signification necessarily leaves open an exterior? This leads to a further question that, "if the 'native informants' of the third world defy any relationship of alterity", how can their location at the exterior of dominant western discourses help reinscribe themselves within the field of discourse? Isn't then the 'native informants' remaining simultaneously inside and outside of the dominant discourse? While remaining inside as 'traces' they become an auto-artifact without a self-conscious reflection on themselves. Obviously the west cannot locate them neither as 'natives' nor as 'supplements'. It is only when they are redescribed, they become 'other' as an identifiable entity. They are identifiable yet without a 'voice'. While becoming an exterior to the western discourses, their voices are heard but they speak the language of the dominant. Their own voices are forever effaced in this absolute otherhood as an identity and as a non-identity in the foreclosure within the political economy of reproduction of western discourses.

Taking the deconstructed figure of the native as an irreducible exterior of the western discourse, one further question is, how do we write its genealogy? We are again back with a Kantian question about the condition of possibility of the native informant. This is a replacement of the status of history by the possibilities of a minimal, much diminished structural principle of making history move. Isn't it a further move towards aestheticisation of history without a closure? Such a history without a closure is despotic to the extent that the historical sublime is broken into traces of subjects of history, while such subjects live at the exterior of history only to re-inscribe themselves without being subjects of history. Such a project of vanishing history vanquishes natives as subjects.

The crucial question is, are we then left with history without subjects to look for subjects who could palpably stand outside history? The answer seems to be deferred in Spivak's act of reading 'History of Vanishing Present'. Especially the figure of the native as an informant acts as a 'concept metaphor' that suspends a literal meaning as well as its appropriation within a discourse, especially discourse like history, disciplined and institutionalised. Being displaced from their own roots in terms of their discursive identification as well as from their 'past', a simultaneous re-identification and reconstruction of their past and present is what marks this building of knowledge of their displacement. Such is their visibility that they are foreign to themselves and it is their being 'foreign' that makes them visible. This visibility would as such remain the other of the 'visible'. How would then the native recuperate its 'self'?

The answer to this question lies in explorations of 'irreducibility' to others as well as to themselves, a position that produces a 'differential inappearance' of its markers of identity. Such an opening is what Spivak once described as the giving of the subject to the proprietor, as somebody not determined within the ethics of alterity, but to be traced within an ethics of responsibility. Such an act of giving turns paradoxical as it has to take a decision to give unto the point of total loss of self to bring an end to indecision. Further in a response of indebtedness to the given, what is given is split into the giver and given by bringing an end to the gift. So, the time of the gift can never be thought as a 'now', rather as what remains of it

in the 'now'. What remains of it makes the gift visible only as an in-between and hence as the subject of history it could only remain visible as an informant in a present which is sublime and which does not have a history of its own, expurgated from the domain of the real. Such an invisible native is further split into the cobwebs of visibility by denying its present and thereby reducing it to a pale shadow of the past, a vanishing trace to be only discovered as an undecidable within the fleeting traces of spectral modern history. So the question remains open as to how does one can take stock of the present without losing oneself in the act of giving or accepting a residual existence in the realm of sublime?

### Making Sense of the Undecidable

Seemingly the agency of the native informant lies somewhere suspended as an agent of history against the episteme of dominance. The drift of Spivak's argument encourages a radical move to rewrite the history of the native as an agency in independence to the role of being an informant. Such an independence of the native is achieved by way of assuming an agency through responsibility to take a step beyond the relationship of alterity that makes a 'double gesture': a criss-cross between the image of the native caught within the western dominant discourse as both non-present and an exterior entity and the image of the native present as the wholly other to the west; a native constituted and dislocated by making a rupture through the criss-cross in all possible figuration of the self and the other. This is what Derrida called 'conjunction', drawing a line between 'what there is' and 'what is not there'.<sup>2</sup> The line here could be drawn by cessation of the otherness of the native which would interdict in the history or the present that makes it another instead of just an 'other' by the production of a differential inapparence.

Spivak puts the situation in the words of Derrida, "What could be the responsibility...(toward) a consistent Discourse which claimed to show that no responsibility could ever be taken without equivocation and without contradiction?" The question could be contextualised here in terms of the nature of the responsibility, of the native as an agent and subject of history by asking how could the native remain responsible to the discourse of

making her self identity? The answer to the question begs responsibility itself. So even the native is caught once again in situations of answering to the call of doing, acting and becoming an identity which directly and indirectly comes back to the metaphysics of subjectivity.

In effect perhaps one should posit the identity of an in-between as a subaltern who would offer a persistent critique of capitalism-imperialism by way of acts that are relatively autonomous and that which discounts the dominant lie as an intermediary between the global and the local and who stands as a deconstructor of fulfilled reason by their silences, by their refusal to take the role commanded upon them. The pace for such autonomy still exists historically as Spivak herself shows how the attempts of stumping the resistant voice from the so-called third world is foiled and already deconstructed in the texts of resistance.

Such deconstruction of the dominant does not signify that the native is able to make herself heard. Her voice as an identity is excluded in the space of history and discourse which is marked by a strict division of the world in a manner that what is excluded from it produces an inside in terms of the legitimate. Therefore deconstruction of the discourse only invents the permissible and the possible. This is what makes the other, and the native, impossible, only to be invented as an informant. This invention of the native is what opens up time and what is spaced as history with the performance of

otherhood. So what history offers is a rupture between the conscious self and its portrait in which self resembles the non-self identity. Such a non-self identity could only be inscribed as the coming present within history. Such a present is already there in the excluded spaces of history which requires a decision to "expose ourselves to the non-presence of our present". In the inimitable words of Jean Luc Nancy,

Finite history is this infinite decision toward history – if we can still use the word 'history'(...).

In time today is already yesterday. But every today is also the offer of the "spacetime" and to

Decide how it no longer just be time, but our time [Jean Luc Nancy 1997:166].

### Notes

- 1 She becomes a body without property as the constative seeks to reassure the performance of speech. Such a reassuring performance is the reproduction of a subjecthood that jibes with the dominant.
- 2 The term 'conjunction' is a neologism created by Derrida in his reading of Marx to signify a homology between capitalism's production of value as a inapparent trace and forms of signification that remains under perpetual erasure both as a structural phenomenology of repetition.

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