



OUR VOICE ON

Can the Subaltern Speak?

January 2026

This paper is a long-form blog that is deliberately reflective, theoretically grounded, and rooted in People Street's lived practice.

I've written it to *think with* Spivak rather than simply *about* her, and to show how her questions actively shape how People Street designs and approaches holds community research.

I draw directly on Spivak's own questions and provocations from *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and explicitly connect them to design justice, outreach, power, mediation, and the ethics of representation in research.

Where Spivak's thinking is referenced, it is grounded in our practice.

More than three decades after *Can the Subaltern Speak?* was first published, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work continues to unsettle those of us who believe we are doing "good" research.

Her essay is not comfortable. It does not offer tools or checklists. Instead, it asks us to sit with contradiction, power, and complicity, and to question whether our efforts to include excluded voices may, in fact, be reinscribing the very silencing we claim to oppose.

At People Street, Spivak's work matters precisely because it resists simplification.

In a research landscape increasingly populated by the language of inclusion, participation, and co-production, Spivak asks a more difficult question:

"Can the subaltern speak?"

Or, more uncomfortably, *what happens when they do? and who is heard?*

This question runs like a quiet, insistent thread through everything we do.

In this paper, I will ask if speaking is the same as being heard, I'll question the idea of "good" research and I'll explore how design justice attempts actively consider Spivak's provocations.

Can the Subaltern
Speak? and What Are
We Doing When We Say
We Are "Listening"?

Speaking Is Not the Same as Being Heard

One of Spivak's most enduring interventions is her insistence that voice alone is not liberation. The subaltern may speak, but their speech is often translated, filtered, and re-authored through dominant systems of knowledge, academia, policy, research agencies, that determine what counts as intelligible, credible, or valuable.

Spivak warns us that representation is never neutral. She distinguishes between speaking for and re-presenting, reminding us that even well-intentioned advocacy can erase the political agency of those it claims to centre.

So we must ask ourselves, as researchers and designers:

Who frames the research question?

Who decides what is “data”?

Who translates lived experience into insight, evidence, or policy recommendation?

And who benefits from that translation?

These are not abstract concerns. They are everyday ethical decisions embedded in research design, funding structures, timelines, and outputs.

The Violence of “Good” Research

Spivak's essay is often read as a critique of Western intellectual traditions, but its relevance today lies in how it exposes the subtle violence of progressive systems, including participatory research.

She challenges the assumption that inclusion automatically disrupts power. In fact, she shows how inclusion can function as a technology of control when marginalised people are invited to speak *only* within pre-defined categories, methodologies, and institutional logics.

At People Street, this resonates deeply.

We work with communities who are routinely over-researched and under-benefited: people facing poverty, racialised communities, migrants, disabled people, those with low literacy or low trust in institutions.

Many have spoken before in consultations, surveys, focus groups, yet little has changed.

Spivak helps us name why.

When research is extractive, when “engagement” is transactional, when community knowledge is stripped of its context and political meaning, the subaltern is once again rendered silent. Not because they did not speak, but because the system was never designed to hear them.

Design Justice as an Answer and a Question

People Street’s approach is grounded in design justice, not as a trend, but as an ethical stance. Design justice asks us to centre those most impacted by systems in the design of those systems and to redistribute power, not simply participation.

Spivak sharpens this further. She asks:

**Who is speaking?
Who is listening?
And under what conditions?**

In our community research practice, this means we do not start with methods. We start with relationships.

Outreach as Political Work

Our outreach is not recruitment. It is relational, and grounded in trust. We work through community connectors, grassroots leaders, places where people already exist as whole humans, not as “participants”.

This matters because Spivak reminds us that the subaltern is not simply marginalised, they are structurally prevented from being legible within dominant discourse. Outreach, then, becomes an act of resistance: meeting people on their terms, in their languages, at their pace.

Community Researchers, Not Interpreters

Rather than positioning ourselves as neutral intermediaries, we train and work alongside community researchers, people rooted in the communities.

This directly responds to Spivak’s concern about epistemic violence. When knowledge is produced *with* and *by* community members, the risk of erasure is reduced, though never eliminated.

We remain reflexive about our role, power, and institutional positioning

Spivak does not offer innocence. She offers responsibility.

Reflexivity Is Not Optional

Spivak is often misunderstood as pessimistic. In reality, she is deeply ethical.

She insists that intellectuals, including researchers, must continuously interrogate their own authority.

At People Street, this means reflexivity is embedded throughout our work:

- **We are explicit about who funds the research and why**
- **We are transparent about how insights will be used**
- **We share findings back with communities in accessible ways**
- **We create space for disagreement, contradiction, and refusal**

Spivak teaches us that not everything must be spoken, translated, or published.

Sometimes ethical research means holding stories with care rather than extracting them for impact metrics.

Reimagining the Research Landscape

If Spivak were writing today, she might ask:

What does “participation” mean in an age of data extraction?

Who owns community knowledge once it becomes evidence?

How do we avoid turning lived experience into a commodity?

These questions sit at the heart of People Street’s practice.

We do not claim that the subaltern can simply “speak” through better methods. Instead, we ask how research itself must change, structurally, ethically, and politically, to make space for forms of knowing that resist neat translation.

Our work is not about amplifying voices. It is about reshaping the conditions under which knowledge is produced.

Living With the Tension

Spivak leaves us with no easy resolution. That is her gift. The question “Can the subaltern speak?” is not meant to be answered once and for all. It is meant to be returned to, again and again, as a provocation. A check on our certainty, our language, our power.

At People Street, we hold this tension deliberately. We work in the messiness of practice. We navigate institutions while challenging them.

Spivak reminds us that justice is not found in speaking for others, but in dismantling the systems that decide whose speech matters in the first place

And that is the work we continue to do, quietly, collectively, and with care.

Reference

Can-the-subaltern-
speak-by-Gayatri-
Spivak.pdf

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