

Derrida's "Différance"

P. Prayer Elmo Raj

Assistant Professor

PG & Research Department of English

Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai

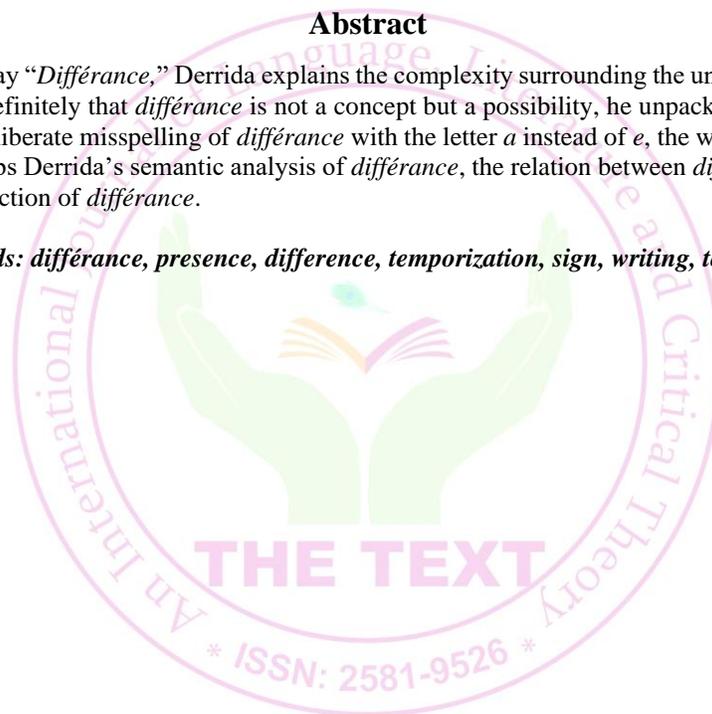
Tamilnadu, India

Orcid ID: **0000-0002-4771-2107**

Abstract

In his essay "*Différance*," Derrida explains the complexity surrounding the understanding of *différance*. Stating definitely that *différance* is not a concept but a possibility, he unpacks his reflections centering on the deliberate misspelling of *différance* with the letter *a* instead of *e*, the writing within writing. This essay maps Derrida's semantic analysis of *différance*, the relation between *différance* and presence and the production of *différance*.

Key Words: *différance, presence, difference, temporization, sign, writing, text*



 This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) International License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Interpolating the letter *a* in *différance* to carry out the writing on writing and/or writing within writing interface/s varied trajectories. To consider this procedure as a mistake or breach of regulations of writing determines different intersections. The interpolation can be executed in silence or misplacement of literal rearrangement.¹ Although one might view Derrida's use of *différance* as a word or concept or a neographism, he maintains that "*différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept" (Derrida 3).² He puts to use the word *sheaf* to explain the "*general system of [...] economy*" (Derrida 3) of *différance*. The word *sheaf* denotes "that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning—or of force—to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others" (Derrida 3).³ Derrida's analogy expose the complexity involving *différance*. The structure of weaving together allows definite and different lines of meaning. In this assemblage, difference configures meaning recognizing new trajectories and deferral establishes the presence and absence of meaning. Globus recognizes the heterogeneous elements of *différance* constituting the sheaf. "There is not even a place to begin to trace the sheaf of *différance* (Globus, *Postmodern* 51). It results in an unfinished and elusive combination. This can be identified as dynamic interlinking yet nonconnected, "refuse to be bound and closed" structures "which are the condition for the possibility of differences, deferrals, spacings and the very constitution of presence, time, conceptual differentiation along hierarchies and alterity" (Globus, "Derrida" 193).

The difference between two vowels (*a* or *e*) only remains graphic: "it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard" (Derrida 3). Referring to Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* where the body of the sign is likened to Egyptian Pyramid, Derrida compares *a* of *différance* to be a silent, secret, discrete

¹ "*Différance* is distinguished from difference by the resonant silence of a certain inscriptive intervention: the writing of the *a* erases the *e*. The differences between the two notations or the idioms involved here is inaudible" (Ormiston 42).

² "What ensures that *différance* isn't a concept isn't the fact that it has several meanings; many concepts do, and this possibility is a central aspect of, for instance, Hegel's account of dialectics. Rather, what prevents *différance* from being a concept is that it is what allows us to have meaningful concepts. As such it acts as a transcendental condition for the possibility of conceptual thought" (Somers-Hall 172).

³ Neel thinks that Derrida brings in analogy "because he does not wish to describe the stages of a history by showing *différance* imposes a graphic disorder on each text and each contest; rather, he wishes to study the general system of the economy of *différance*" (157).

“tomb: *oikēsis*,” in which the economy of death is produced (Derrida 4). The “pyramidal silence”⁴ between *e* and *a* functions within “the system of phonetic writing, and within the language and grammar which is as historically linked to phonetic writing as it is to the entire culture inseparable from phonetic writing” (Derrida 4). The pyramidal silence is a sign where the silence terminates to be. It cannot be pushed over but entwined in the sign with an incredible potential. The silence that functions within phonetic writing nullifies itself as it function by accepting nonphonetic signs like punctuation and spacing. The importance of nonphonetic signs emphasizes on the endurance of the concept of sign. As Saussure observes, the play of difference “is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play” (Derrida 5). Silence is the difference between the two phonemes that allows to function and enables it to be. The graphic difference also disappears into oblivion to extend an invisible relationship:

The economy and play of differences render *différance*. As a figure of speech *différance* is always and already caught up in and bound by the play of figuration—tradition. The play of the formal exigencies, indeed the formalism and elaborate conventionalism, that functions as the preschematization of language conceals the force of the word, its redoubling thrust. (Ormiston 48).

The silence or absence in “differ(once)” does not belong to sensibility, intelligibility or the opposition between sensibility and intelligibility. The resistance embedded within this opposition can be recognized in a movement of *différance* that does not belong to voice or writing. The integrating space binds together speech and writing beyond tranquil familiarity interconnecting each other asserting its difference.

The *a* of *différance* cannot be exposed: “One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present” (Derrida 5-6). The presentation of being-present is never presented. Aligning its resemblance with negative theology Derrida argues that *différance* does not exist, not a present-being, it is *not* everything, it neither has existence nor essence (Derrida 6). The irreducible nature of *différance* generates a system and

⁴ Taylor reflects on how phrase interconnects with space: “The dilemma the postmodern architect faces is how to inscribe the space of this time—the nonpresent space of a time that never was, is, or will be present. This is also the dilemma of the writer. In some sense, every text implies the arche-text-ure of pyramids and every architect is a writer” (28).

a history.⁵ The originary point or point of prominent responsibility of the trace or graphics of *différance* is non-traceable. Derrida's explication of *différance* is strategic because any transcendent truth that exists outside the domain of writing cannot administer theologically the entirety of the field. Further, this strategy does not aim at finality but can be considered as an empirical wandering that traverses philosophical discourses and oppositions.

Derrida attempts a semantic analysis on *différance*. The verb *différer* has two meanings: first is "to temporize, to take recourse consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of "desire" or "will," and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect" (Derrida 8). This temporization is associated with spacing, "the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time," (Derrida 8), the beginning constitution of time and space. The second meaning is the more common, to be not similar, to be other. Both the un-identical otherness and polemical otherness involve the spacing between different elements. With *e*, the word refers to temporization and with *a*, it recompenses the loss of meaning referring to the subsequent configuration of its meanings. The polysemic nature of the word, placed in interpretive context, defers itself by bringing itself close to the verb *différer*. The conventional limits designate a constitutive process of difference configuring differences. *Différance* is neither active nor passive, a function that is non-function conceived through the action of a subject upon an object.

The question Derrida pursues is how *différance* as temporization and *différance* as spacing can be combined. "The temporization of *différance* is, on the one hand, the orientation towards an ultimate presence, and, on the other hand, the inevitable failure to reach this presence, because the reference of this presence will remain a deferral" (Evink 4). The sign takes the place of the thing placing itself for meaning or referent. The place of the present is taken by the sign in its absence. When the present cannot be presented, we take a detour to give signs, we signal, we signify. Accordingly, the sign, here can be understood as a "deferred presence" (Derrida 9). Representation of sign defers the moment of response or encounter of the thing itself. The nature of the sign in

⁵ *Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological—ontotheological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return" (Derrida 6).

this encounter represents “signification as the *différance* of temporization” (Derrida 9). The sign that defers presence is imaginable on the basis of deferred presence and moves toward the presence that it aims to reconstitute. The substitution of the sign for the thing is secondary as the sign derives from an original and lost presence and, provisional because the missing presence transports toward a movement of mediation. The provisional secondariness of the substitute can be viewed as an originary *différance* without originary or the final as in *ousia*. To oppose the originary *différance* have two outcomes: a) *différance* cannot be enveloped in the notion of the sign which destines the representation of a presence and a system that governs the movement of presence b) it challenges the authority of presence or absence or lack. It challenges the limits which restricts us. The restrictions come in the form of language and a system of thought or the process of signification, how we formulate the meaning of Being as presence or absence under the rubric of being or beingness.

Difference as temporization-temporalization cannot be limited within the horizon of the present. It causes independent relations but to disorder the structure. “The disordering is caused by a spacing of differences that cannot be taken together in one unity of presence, as well as by a temporization that endlessly defers pure presence, replacing it by a future that remains to come” (Evink 4). Heidegger considers temporalization as the transcendental horizon dealing with the question of being anticipating to liberate the present from the traditional metaphysical perspectives. Dolgopolski maintains that “Derrida’s analysis of temporization both grounds and exceeds Heidegger’s ontic-ontological difference—the difference of being from beings or entities, without sight of which the former gets lost behind the thinking of the latter” (28).

According to Saussure, the arbitrary and differential functions of signs are “correlative” features. Difference as the condition of signification influences the totality of sign.⁶ The signified is comprised of relations and differences in relation to language and materiality. The fundamental nature of language rests on these differences and how differentially and positively it is constituted. It is not ideas or sounds that makes language but the conceptual and phonic differences surrounded make the linguistic system. Accordingly, “the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in

⁶ “The signified is the concept, the ideal meaning; and the signifier is what Saussure calls the “image,” the “psychical imprint” of a material, physical—for example, acoustical—phenomenon” (Derrida 10).

a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself” (Derrida 11). Every concept interconnected in a sequence refers to the other by means of “systematic play of differences” (Derrida 11). This play, *différance*, is not mere concept but possibility “of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general” (Derrida 11). For this reason, *Différance* is not a fixed or unitary self-referential accord of concept and phonic elements.

The differences at play in the system of language is historical rather than transpiring out of nowhere. *Différance* is a functional movement that produces the effects of differences. It is “the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus the name “origin” no longer suits it” (Derrida 11). The effects of differences can be located in the evasive play of *différance*. For Saussure, language and speech are complementary, language is essential for speech to be intelligible and to fashion its outcomes but in order for the language to be historically established speech becomes indispensable and originary. *Différance* the movement is produced and constituted historically beyond the metaphysical language. *Différance* is “no more static than it is genetic, no more structural than historical” (Derrida 12).

Différance motivates the movement of signification in the possible present. It determines the relation of the elements of the present to something other than itself by entwining with past and vitiating to the future. The past and future are connected to the present with its relation to what it is not. The interval, that which is not, distinguishes the present from its essence, that which is: “An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject” (Derrida 13). The dynamic self-configuration locates the interval as spacing, “the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*)” (Derrida 13). The configuration of the present as an originary and irreducible convoluted concord of traces of retentions and protentions is archi-writing, archi-trace, or *différance*, “Which is (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization” (Derrida 13).

Differences “are “produced”—deferred—by *différance*” (Derrida 14). What differs? Who differs? Without the above explication, *différance* would have been thought as the basis of present

being, a state that connects itself to a subject. Saussure does not consider language as the function of the speaking subject. The subject and its identity or the consciousness of its identity is engraved in language as a function. It becomes a speaking subject by conforming to speech, a creation or transgression of the system of the rules of language/differences.

That neither difference nor *différance* can be thought except in relation to identity and presence. The displacement of the foundational status of the latter by the former cannot be sustained. The hypertrophic development of either pair would be one-sided and even—if that were not such a contested term—undialectical. The everyday mutual interdependence of these pairs is the unacknowledged point of departure for any thinking. (Wood 63)

Language makes spoken word intelligible as it produces its effects. Putting speech in an oppositional position makes *différance* the play of differences within language. The practice of language or the play of forms without invariables and play of traces forms an archi-writing without present origin. When the regular erasure of the archi- transforms into writing, it executes a critical function involving the idea of the sign metaphysically preconceived with *différance*.

The subject becomes a speaking subject encompassing the economy of linguistic differences or it becomes a signifying subject by designing within itself the system of differences. The signifying subject does not present itself without *différance*. Derrida, however, asks if one can conceive presence of the subject before signs or presence itself in and through a silent and spontaneous consciousness. He presupposes a possibility of consciousness before locating its signs in space. Consciousness presents itself to thought as self-presence, as “the perception of self in presence” (Derrida 16). Subject as consciousness does not disclose itself except as self-presence. Along with consciousness, the present assumes its privilege granting the ability to harmonize traces through reconfiguring them. The value of presence, determined as ontotheological by Heidegger, petitions the value of presence. Consequently, we can postulate presence, specially consciousness, not as central form of Being but as “determination” and “effect”:

A determination or an effect within a system which no longer that of presence but of *différance*, a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination, etc., such that in designating consciousness as an effect or a determination, one continues—for strategic reasons that can be more or less lucidly deliberated and systematically calculated to operate according to the lexicon of that which one is de-limiting. (Derrida 16-7).

When *différance* is available by name in texts, everything is at stake. For Nietzsche, the fundamental activity of unconscious and consciousness is the outcome of forces which are not aligned with it. He observes that “consciousness is a common, but nevertheless special, sort of awareness—a kind of self-awareness that often, but not inevitably or even optimally, accompanies the basic awareness that is required for the process of thinking, feeling or willing to occur” (Soll 24). Force is present with the play of differences between forces and quantity. The logic is that philosophy thrives *in* and *on* *différance*. *Différance* is the displaced trajectory of different thing to the other as opposition. We can reassess how binary opposites are configured not to dismantle the oppositions but to locate what designates the *différance* of the other, the other as different and deferred. When not dominated by truth, the figures assume a circumscribed function. Consequently, *différance* is an active movement discord of different forces against the metaphysical system.

In Freud, the two varied values of *différance* are interconnected with each other, “to differ as discernibility, distinction, separation, diastema, *spacing*; and to defer as detour, relay, reserve, *temporization*” (Derrida 18). The idea of trace and of breaching is inevitable to the idea of difference. The origin of memory and psyche can be explicated only by the presence of difference. Breach is not possible without difference and difference without trace. The differences in the production of unconscious can be understood as moment of *différance*. Freudian ideas are moments of detour in the economy of *différance*: “One is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other. One is the other in *différance*, one is the *différance* of the other” (Derrida 18). Within Freudian context, Derrida questions how one can understand *différance* as the economic detour and *différance* as the connection to an impossible presence.⁷ It is hard to bring together the economical and the noneconomical. The economic nature of *différance* does not suggest that the deferred presence can be found with provisional investments. Unlike Hegelian dialectical, play must be understood as “the displaced presentation” remaining conclusively:

⁷ “How are we to think *simultaneously*, on the one hand, *différance* as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and, on the other hand, *différance* as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy?” (18).

To be sure, the notion of a general or unrestricted economy, of a Hegelianism without reserve, of dialectic without the depletion allowance of the Absolute, of some sort of exchange with and traffic in the radical alterity represented by the unconscious and by death, seems reducible to the futile attempt to escape the entanglements of signs, to foil the ineluctable deferral (not dialectic) of desire. (Krell 8)

Différance maintains the interconnections that are miscomprehended and exceeding the alternate of presence and absence. There is a certain exempt from the process of presentation through which the potential self-presence is presented. “It differs from and defers, itself; which doubtless means that it is woven of differences, and also that it sends out delegates, representatives, proxies; but without any chance that the giver of proxies might “exist,” might be present, be “itself” somewhere, and with even less chance that it might become conscious” (Derrida 20-1). Unconscious is not but is a veiled consciousness. Connecting with this radical alterity is the irreducible presence.

The configuration of suspension prohibits temporalization, a dialectical impediment present as originary and synthesis focussed on itself meeting of retentional traces. The alterity of the unconscious is related with its past but not of the present and the future will not produce a form of presence. Hence, the idea of trace is discordant with the idea of retention. Within the ontology of beings and beingness, difference is approached not as a present being. It is “unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom” (Derrida 22). *Différance* is historical and temporal recounting of Being or of the ontological difference.

The very formulation of the ontological difference as the difference between beings and Being encourages this thoughtlessness. We forget to think out first the character of this between, of the *zwischen*, that comes before Being and beings. This between of the ontological difference is forgotten—genesis is forgotten. This forgetting originates metaphysics. But the origin itself remains unthought. It cannot be even be thought from within metaphysics, whose concepts of origin always come after and presuppose this originary origin. The originary origin, the original difference, cannot be read in the metaphysical text itself. The text emerges on the basis of its obliteration. (Brogan 34) The letter *a* of *différance* embarks upon a movement of this unfolding. The unfolding of *différance* does not rest on the epochality of Being. The inner meaning of Being dissimulates itself with ontological difference. The play of trace does not appropriate itself within the borders of Being

but transfers to the meaning of Being.⁸ The ontological difference interpellates the epochality of Being. According to Brogan,

Metaphysics failed to think the ontological difference. Nevertheless, this thinking can arise, according to Heidegger, only in the concept of a proper understanding of metaphysics. To accomplish this rethinking, Heidegger suggests that we pay heed to the genitive *of* in the thought of Being as the Being *of* beings. The expression “the Being of Beings” indicates that there is a belonging together of Being and beings. Beings emerge from Being and into Being and thus are. Being gives itself to beings. This movement which the *of* expresses is called by Heidegger a *genesis*, a coming forth (*Herkunft*) of the present from presencing. (Brogan 34)

The trace can never manifest itself but connects the foundational ontology.⁹ It obliterates itself in its functional presence like the *a* inscribing its tomb in *différance*. Heidegger places the difference between Being and beings alongside the difference between presence and the present. The trace of difference between the two is consumed. “If we maintain the *différance* (is) (itself) other than absence and presence, if it *traces*, then when it is a matter of the forgetting of the difference (between Being and beings), we would have to speak of a disappearance of the trace of the trace” (Derrida 23-4). The history of Being begins with oblivion and is unveiled in the present. Since the trace is not a presence but only a simulacrum, it displaces the erasure of the structure. The erasure constitutes it by altering the site and veils its appearance. The similarity of erasure of trace of difference is maintained through alterity. The ambivalence of structure is reversed through metaphysical concepts: “the present becomes the sign of the sign, the trace of the trace” (Derrida 24).

⁸ “The forgetting of the difference is the primary “effect” of difference. Thus metaphysics stands always in a position of recovery, of repetition, and of recollection with respect to difference. But it can never from within itself achieve this unmasking of what is hidden from it because it is always only an outcome of the difference that perpetually withdraws from it” (Brogan 34).

⁹ “Ontic and ontological, ontico-ontological are, Derrida says, derivative with regard to difference in Heidegger and *différance* in his own writing—derivative, it seems of the language of metaphysics which a more originary style would put under erasure. But Derrida says, it is only in and on the horizon of the Heideggerian path that this *sous rature* of another style can be achieved. The ontological difference operates from within the texts and language of metaphysics and yet performs a series of displacements that attempts to think beyond the closure in which these texts operate. Thus there is a certain ambivalence that Heidegger’s discourse embodies. According to Derrida, this ambivalence arises because there are two texts in Heidegger, the one that turns away from the domination of present beings toward the more primordial thought of Being as presencing; and the one that questions the truth of this primordial presencing as such, a truth that encloses and exceeds metaphysical thought and therefore exceeds the whole context of presence in which metaphysics operates” (Brogan 33).

The metaphysical text is understood by traversing its limit as its interior is marked by plural furrow of margins. The reflection of the trace is at once living and dead, “living in its simulation of life’s preserved inscription. A pyramid. Not a stone fence to be jumped over but itself stonelike, on a wall, to be deciphered otherwise, a text without voice” (Derrida 24). The trace of difference is lost in oblivion and its lost is at once protected and delayed. “In a text. In the form of presence. In the form of the proper. Which itself is only an effect of writing” (Derrida 24).

How do we conceive what is outside a text i.e. outside the margin of the text? The trace which evades the destiny of Being outflows the determination of the metaphysical text. The trace is absent in itself because it cannot appear *as such*. “There is no essence of *différance*; it (is) that which not only could never be appropriated in the *as such* of its name or its appearing, but also that which threatens the authority of the *as such* in general, of the presence of the thing itself in its essence” (Derrida 25-6). Neither Being nor truth engages with *différance*. *Différance* is a metaphysical name as it presents the determination of *différance* as the difference between presence and the present. *Différance* stays unnameable because one has to seek another language outside the finite system: “It is rather because there is no *name* for it all, not even the name of essence or of Being, not even that of “*différance*,” which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions” (Derrida 26). The unnameable has to be read in its *platitude*. It is the play that generates nominal effects, that which administers nominal atomic structures and the sequences of substitution of names entwined within the function of the system. The word is neither a master-name nor a primary prescription or prophetic annunciation of a nominal activity. “There is nothing kerygmatic about this “word,” provided that one perceives its decapta(liza)tion” (Derrida 27). The affirmation of *différance* is present in the text, it “speaks/ always and everywhere/ throughout/ language” (Derrida 27).

Works Cited

- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, The Harvester Press, 1982.
- Dolgopolski, Sergey. *What is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement*. Fordham University Press, 2009.
- Evink, Eddo. "Différance as Temporization and its Problems." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, May 2020, pp.1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2020.1766885>
- Globus, Gordon G. "Derrida and Connectionism: *différance* in neural nets." *Philosophical Psychology*, vol.5, no.2, 1992, pp.183-197. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515089208573055>
- . *The Postmodern Brain*. John Benjamins B.V., 1995.
- Neel, Jasper. *Plato, Derrida and Writing*. Southern Illinois UP, 2016.
- Soll, Ivan. "Nietzsche on the Illusions of Everyday Experience." *Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, edited by Richard Schacht, CUP, 2001, pp. 7-33.
- Somers-Hall, Henry. *Judgment and Sense in Modern French Philosophy*. CUP, 2022.
- Taylor, Mark C. *Tears*. State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Wood, David and Robert Bernasconi, editors. *Derrida and Différance*. Northwestern UP, 1988.

