

interviews with gayatri c. spivak

deconstruction
postcolonialism
subalternity



hayalci hücre: #40 hayalcieng #1 | gayatri chakravorty spivak |
interviews with gayatri c. spivak: deconstruction, postcolonialism,
subalternity | hayalcieng dizi editörü: bilgesu savcı | derleyen: gayatri c.
spivak ve soner torlak ©2024 hayalci hücre | bu kitabın ingilizce ve
türkçe yayın hakları gayatri c. spivak, soner torlak ve hayalci hücre
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tasarım matbaa, yenibosna merkez mh. cemal ulusoy cd. no: 43
bahçelievler/istanbul (sertifika no: 40675) | 1. baskı 2024 / istanbul |
isbn no: 978-625-6597-35-8 | sertifika no: 73832 | hayalci hücre yayın
lerna yayıncılık basım dağıtım kırtasiye ticaret limited şirketi sinanoba
mahallesi aktay caddesi A3-27 blok no: 6a iç kapı no: 6 büyükçekmece /
istanbul | <https://hayalcihucre.com>



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Biography

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is University Professor, and a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. B.A. English (First Class Honors), Presidency College, Calcutta, 1959. Ph.D. Comparative Literature, Cornell University, 1967. D. Litt, University of Toronto, 1999; D. Litt, University of London, 2003; D. Hum, Oberlin College, 2008; D. Honoris Causa, Universitat Roveri I Virgili, 2011; D. Honoris Causa, Rabindra Bharati, 2012; Kyoto Prize in Thought and Ethics, 2012; Padma Bhushan 2013; D. Honoris Causa, Universidad Nacional de San Martin, 2013; D. Litt, University of St. Andrews, 2014; D. Honoris Causa, Paris VIII, 2014; Presidency University, 2014; D. Hum, Yale University, 2015; D. Litt, University of Ghana-Legon, 2015; D. Honoris Causa, Universidad de Chile, 2016; Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award, Modern Language Association of America, 2018; Doctor Honoris Causa, Babes-Bolyai University, 2021. Honorary faculty, Tsing-hua University, Beijing.

Her main academic studies are on the long 19th century (1789-1920) in British, French and German literary production; politics of culture; feminism; Marx, Derrida; globalization.

Her books are *Myself Must I Remake: The Life and Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1974), *Of Grammatology* (translation with critical introduction of Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 1976), *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987; Routledge Classic 2002), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (ed., 1988), *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990), *Thinking Academic Freedom in Gendered Post-Coloniality* (1993; much reprinted), *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993; Routledge classic 2003), *Imaginary Maps* (translation with critical introduction of three stories by Mahasweta Devi, 1994), *The Spivak Reader* (1995), *Breast Stories* (translation with critical introduction of three stories by Mahasweta Devi, 1997), *Old Women* (translation with critical introduction of two stories by Mahasweta Devi, 1999),

Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet / Imperative zur Neuerfindung des Planeten (ed. Willi Goetschel, 1999; 2d ed. forthcoming), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), *Song for Kali: A Cycle* (translation with introduction of Ramproshad Sen, 2000), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (translation with critical introduction of a novel by Mahasweta Devi, 2002), *Death of a Discipline* (2003), *Other Asias* (2005), *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization* (2012), *Readings* (2014), *Walking with Du Bois* (forthcoming from Harvard), *Gramsci and the Schucht Sisters* (first translation of Gramsci's conversation with wife and sister-in-law from prison, with critical Afterword in collaboration with Ursula Apitzsch et al., forthcoming from Fordham.) Various publications of Marxist cultural theory in Bengali.

Her significant articles are "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1985), "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985), "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), "The Politics of Translation" (1992), "Moving Devi" (1999), "Righting Wrongs" (2003), "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching" (2004), "Translating into English" (2005), "Rethinking Comparativism" (2010), "A Borderless World" (2011), "General Strike" (2012), "Crimes of Identity" (2014), "Our World" (2014). (2014), "Can there be a Feminist World?" (2015).

Activist in rural education and feminist and ecological social movements since 1986. Activist in the sphere of Development through subordinated language intervention, with an African focus, since 2000. 2000; Chief advisor, relationship between statistics and narrative in reporting feminized poverty in the rural-urban interface in West and East Africa, with colleagues at Columbia and the Universities of Ghana-Legon and Nairobi; Series Editor and fundraiser, *Bandhan Bank Bengali Library*, Columbia University Press, 2019.



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Preface to Turkish Collection of My Interviews

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak



I am most grateful to Soner Torlak for emphasizing in his selection engaged conversations across various parts of Asia, various parts of Africa, the Euro-US, and Canada. The international academic community admires the courage of our Turkish colleagues, and I very much hope that these exchanges dating from the 80-s into 2016, will give witness to that acknowledgment. As we all know, interviews depend on the interest of the questioner and the ones chosen are evidence of this.

The earliest interview, “Practical Politics of the Open End,” demonstrates my convictions as influenced by deconstruction as a philosophy of praxis (as described by Jürgen Habermas after his collaboration with Derrida following 2000) and already launched on what I now recognize as my more activist trajectory, starting in Bangladesh in 1984. These convictions found elaboration as the work progressed and I learned from my mistakes. Indeed, one of the lessons learned through this experience of activism, while sharing the discourse at the upper reaches of the international academy, the international civil society, and the United Nations – is the importance of realizing that elite discourse, separated from the largest sectors of the electorate in the so-called democracies of the world – absolutely require that we learn to acknowledge our mistakes if we are serious about approaching the subaltern. Indeed, the 1992 interview at the New Nation Writers Conference is a serious example of this and I recommend to readers of this collection both *Remains of the Social*, ed. Premesh Lalu (forthcoming) and

my own essay in Rubby Dhunpath, ed. *A Critical Response to Curriculum Reform in Higher Education: Undoing Cognitive Damage* (forthcoming). In the interim, Joan Vincent, ed. *The Anthropology of Politics: A Reader in Ethnography, Theory, and Critique* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) might be consulted. The interviews with Bulan Lahiri, located at one of the most important English language dailies in India, and Shailja Patel, Kenyan-Indian diasporic now located in New York reveal the difference between nation-state and its diaspora; even as in the present dispensation, the voice of the diasporic is replacing the voice of the neo-patrimonial postcolonial nation-state – each with its own class cross-hatchings. Rahul Gairola and Eduardo Carvalho question as radical diasporics of the elite US academy. The interview with Nazish Brohi is especially interesting to me, because it shows the possibilities of intellectual solidarity between India and Pakistan even as our countries are embroiled in a rather vicious combat over Kashmir, for which an interesting reference text still remains Tariq Ali's *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (New York: Verso, 2011). My interview with Steve Paulson completes the circle and presents my understanding of the usefulness of deconstruction as a philosophy of praxis.

I hope this book will be useful to a wide Turkish readership. And I hope also that we will all see a better world soon.

March 9, 2017

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Critical Intimacy:
An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

* Steve Paulson, "Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 29, 2016.

BY NOW THE HEADY DAYS of deconstruction feel like a curious remnant from another era, as passé as big hair and parachute pants. Yet its core impulse — to unpack the relationship between text and meaning, and critique the hidden biases of the Western intellectual tradition — is so deeply embedded in modern academic life that it's easy to forget how exciting the movement once was. This year, Johns Hopkins University Press reinvigorated a public debate about the merits of deconstruction with a newly revised, and controversial, 40th anniversary edition of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* — one of deconstruction's foundational texts. The book features an updated translation by its original English translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Today, Spivak is an academic superstar — a prolific scholar and co-founder of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. When she first started working on a translation of Derrida's treatise, Spivak was an unknown academic in her mid-20s — “this young Asian girl,” as she says, trying to navigate the strange world of American academe. Spivak was a most unlikely translator. She had no formal training in philosophy and was not a native English or French speaker, so it was an audacious — almost preposterous — project to translate such a complex work of high theory. She not only translated the book; she also wrote her own monograph-length preface that introduced Derrida to a new generation of literary scholars.

In subsequent decades, Spivak carved out what seems like several distinct careers. She became a pioneering feminist Marxist scholar and then helped launch post-colonial studies with her seminal essay “Can the Subal-

tern Speak.” But Spivak’s not just an ivory tower intellectual. She also set up elementary schools for illiterate students in her native India, where she’s taught for decades. Somehow, she’s managed to teach critical theory to grad students at one of the United States’s elite universities while also teaching democratic empowerment to rural children in West Bengal. Rarely has the blending of theory and praxis been so integrated with a single person.

Now in her mid-70s, Spivak maintains the busy schedule of a globe-trotting intellectual. I spoke with her shortly after she traveled to Lagos and before speaking engagements in London and Paris. We ranged over a wide range of subjects, from her friendship with Derrida and the tragic family story that sparked her interest in the subaltern, to the responsibility of intellectuals and the crisis in the humanities.



Paulson: *You have just come out with the 40th anniversary edition of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. Why do we need a revised translation of this book?*

Spivak: When I translated it, I didn’t know who Derrida was or anything about his thinking. So I did my best to introduce and translate it and the introduction really caught on, for which I’m very grateful. But now, after a lifetime of working with and through Derrida, I can say something more to my readers about this extraordinary thinker, so I added an afterword. This is a kind of tribute to a lived life rather than encountering a great new text.

Has your understanding of Derrida’s book changed over the four decades since you first translated it?

So I found. When I began, I didn’t notice how critical the book was of “Eurocentrism” because the word in 1967 was not so common. Derrida was an Algerian Jew,

born before World War II, who was actually encountering Western philosophy from the inside. A brilliant man, he was looking at its Eurocentrism. I don't think I had caught onto that aspect as much as I do now. I also understand the thread that runs through it in terms of not only how we should read but how we should live, which was not as clear to me then. And I also know a bit more about Hegel than I did at that time so I was able to make some connections.

So you see this book as basically a critique of Western philosophy?

That's what de-construction is about, right? It's not just destruction. It's also construction. It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from inside. That's deconstruction. My teacher Paul de Man once said to another very great critic, Fredric Jameson, "Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love." Because you are doing it from the inside, with real intimacy. You're kind of turning it around. It's that kind of critique.

What was Derrida trying to deconstruct? How was he trying to interpret Western philosophy in a new light?

It had a focus on being dominant for centuries without change. Whole groups get excluded because a certain kind of dominant discourse is established. He also said a very powerful thing about African orality: they could remember seven generations back; we've lost that capacity. There, "writing" takes place on the psychic material called "memory." Derrida connects this to Freud. So he was saying, look at reality carefully. It's coded so that other people, even if they're not present, can understand what we are saying. He looked at how this was suppressed in philosophical traditions.

You first started working on the translation of Of Grammatology in the late '60s. You were an unknown scholar at the time and Derrida was still largely unknown in the United States. This was a highly theoretical, very difficult book that's still challenging to read. Why did you want to take on such a daunting project?

Well, I didn't know who Derrida was at all. I was 25 and an assistant professor at the University of Iowa in 1967, and I was trying to keep myself intellectually clued in. So I would order books from the catalog which looked unusual enough that I should read, so that's how I ordered the book.

So you read it in the original French and then thought maybe there should be an English translation?

No, no. I managed to read it and thought it was an extraordinary book. This was before the internet, so nobody was telling me anything about Derrida. My teacher had not met Derrida when I left Cornell, so I truly didn't know who he was. So I thought, "Well, I'm a smart young foreign woman, and here's an unknown author. Nobody's going to give me a contract for a book on him, so why don't I try to translate him?" And I had heard at a cocktail party that the University of Massachusetts Press was doing translations, so I wrote them a very innocent query letter in late 1967 or early 1968. They told me later that they found my query letter so brave and sweet that they thought they should give me a chance. [Laughs.] It's really ridiculous, but there it was.

Quite humble origins for a book that has become a classic.

You know, I was surprised. You must put yourself back into my shoes. Neither English nor French was my

first language and I had left India only in 1961. My introduction was a humble introduction because I had never even had a course in philosophy.

And it's a very long introduction. Your introduction to Derrida's book is almost a book in itself.

That's what I wrote in my contract because I wanted to write a book on him. So I wrote in my contract, I will not do the translation if I cannot write a monograph-length introduction. I was in my mid-20s when I wrote that letter. Now it just fills me with shame and embarrassment.

Did you have much contact with Derrida himself as you were working on the translation?

No. I didn't know him at all. I only met him in 1971. And I did not recognize him until he came up to me and said, in French, "Je m'appelle Jacques Derrida," and I almost died.

But I assume you got to know him quite well after that.

Yes, we became friends. We were allies. You see, one of the things he understood, perhaps more than I did at that point, was the meaning of this Asian girl who really didn't have much French, launching this book into the world in her own way, so far out of the European coterie of high philosophy. He and I would go out to eat — and he was a swarthy man, a Sephardic Jew from Algeria — and people would take him to be Indian, and I'm Indian and my cultural inscription is strong and sometimes I wear a sari, so it was a joke and he would say, "Yes, I'm Indian." He understood the beauty of the situation of this young person who was neither a French PhD nor a native French speaker or native English speaker for that matter, and she was offering his text, not because she was worshipful toward him, because she hadn't even known who he was. She was offering his text to the rest of the world

and they were picking it up. There was something very attractive for him about that situation.

You were born in Calcutta a few years before the Partition of India. Did you grow up in a family of intellectuals?

Yes. My mother was married at 14, and my brother was born when she was 15. My father was born in a village way up in the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now Bangladesh, in a community where they didn't even wear clothes until they were six or seven years old. They just wore a metal ring around their middle. When they went to school they put on dhotis. In the wintertime, they sat by the fire with a wrap around their shoulders. Yet these two people really were both intellectuals and later led lives of intellectuals and brought up their children for the life of the mind. Proto-feminist dad, feminist mother. It was an extraordinary upbringing. I owe almost everything to my parents.

Did the Partition that split the country into India and Pakistan have much impact on your family?

You know, we also thought of it as Independence. Independence was marked by the horror of Partition. So Partition was the price that we were obliged to pay. Well, it marked my relatives more than my immediate family because my father had in fact run away from East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. When he did well in his high school graduating exam, his father said to him, "Ah, then you can be postmaster in the county town," and my father was much more ambitious, so ticketless, he ran off to Calcutta in 1917. I was born in Calcutta. But the way in which the Partition did affect our lives was of course the terrible riots that were brought on by the Calcutta Killings of 1946 and the artificially created famine of 1942 and after. Those things really affected us. And once

the refugees started coming in, my mother, who was by then a considerable social worker, would leave at five in the morning and go to the railway station to help with refugee rehabilitation. These were some of the things that marked my childhood.

You must also have seen how Muslims came to be branded as outsiders.

Of course that's now increasing in India. In 1947 I was too young — I was five years old — to sense the difference between Hindus and Muslims since I was in a very ecumenical household. But it was all around us. It was there in the Hindu-Muslim riots, which were very unusual because until then there had been a sort of conflictual coexistence for centuries. But when that started in our neighborhood, you would hear Allahu akbar and then Hara hara Mahadeo and you knew that someone was being killed. And you would see bloodshed. But I was so young and at home there was so little differentiation between caste or religion or anything. And my father's Muslim students were so supportive, even to come to him dressed as Hindus and tell him not to answer a phone call in the evening. My father himself was a nonviolent man. Opening the small house, he would stand with Muslim men on the terrace and women and children inside the house, saying, "As long as I'm alive, nobody is going to touch you." We didn't think of the difference so much. As children we thought we were the same people.

You got your undergraduate degree in India. How did you end up coming to the United States?

I got my degree at the University of Calcutta, and I was working on my MA. I was only 18 years old and didn't have a father — he died when I was 13 — and I realized I was not going to get a first class because I was

editor of a journal and I'd been very critical of the university. So I borrowed money and came with a one way ticket and \$18 in my pocket. I did not want to go to Britain because I would have had to take a second BA and I was just immediately post-independence. So this is why I came to the United States. I went to Cornell because I only knew the names Harvard, Yale, and Cornell and I thought Harvard and Yale were too good for me.

Today you are best known as one of the founders of postcolonial studies. Is there a connection between this work and your earlier work on deconstruction and translating Derrida?

You know, I was not at all part of the French theory coterie. So as an outsider I had been the tiniest bit of a trendsetter with deconstruction. It had become so internalized that I certainly wasn't making connections. But the postcolonial business had come as a sort of autobiographical moment that comes to most middle-class metropolitan migrants — like Edward Said, thinking "I was Orientalized." In 1981 when I was asked by the Yale French Studies to write on French feminism and by Critical Inquiry to write on deconstruction, I asked myself, how is it that I have become an authority on French material? So I turned around to think differently. Therefore, it was an engagement with that part of deconstruction, which looked at what is excluded when we construct systems. That part of deconstruction which said the best way to proceed is a very robust self-critique. And that part of deconstruction which said that you do not accuse what you are deconstructing. You enter it. Remember that critical intimacy? And you locate a moment where the text teaches you how to turn it around and use it. So this had become part of my way of moving. So clearly, there was a connection. But one thing I've never done is

apply theory. Theorizing is a practice. It becomes internalized. You are changed in your thinking and that shows in your work. So that's what happened.

Your 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has become a foundational text in postcolonial studies. Can you explain what the word "subaltern" means?

It refers to those who don't give orders; they only receive orders. That comes from Antonio Gramsci, who made the word current. He was looking at people who were not in fact working-class folks or victims of capitalism. He was looking at people who were outside of that logic because he was himself from Sardinia, which was outside of the High Italy of the north. But "subaltern" also means those who do not have access to the structures of citizenship. I'm now talking about India today, where the largest sector of the electorate is the rural landless illiterate. They may vote but they have no access to the structures of citizenship. So that's a subaltern.

I discovered that my mother's aunt hanged herself in 1926 when she was 17 because she was part of an anti-imperialist group. She was unable to kill, so therefore she killed herself. But she waited four days until she menstruated so that people would not think that she was killing herself because of an illicit pregnancy. In her action she wanted to say that women do not just belong to men. Can you imagine how hard it must have been to wait? So she spoke with her body.

So she killed herself as a political act?

Yes, as a political act, because that's what you do if you can't carry through an assassination. Then you kill yourself. I mean, I don't understand those things but we've read enough Dostoevsky and we've read enough about the struggle against imperialism in India to know that this kind of thing happened. And she was a teenager,

so she waited because the only reason why teenage women in middle-class families hanged themselves was because they were illicitly pregnant. She left a letter for my grandmother. I heard the story from my mom, but I did not reveal that the woman in the essay was my great aunt. As a subaltern completely outside of these structures, she had spoken with her body, but could not be heard. To say the subaltern cannot speak is like saying there's no justice.

So even if she does speak, no one will hear her.

This is in fact true of subaltern groups. I moved away from my own class and my own agenda when I began to learn what subaltern meant. And I went into subaltern groups in India, which is where my schools are. These are people who have been millennially denied the right to intellectual labor by my own ancestors — caste Hindus. And so daily I see how even if they do speak, they are not allowed to speak in ways that we can immediately understand. Some people are feudally benevolent toward them and very philanthropic, but this doesn't change anything. I've been teaching there for 30 years, but it began when I started asking myself, should I just be an expert in French theory?

One thing that's fascinating about your career is you've worn two hats. You are a celebrated professor at Columbia University, and you also have been going back to India for decades to work with illiterate students in rural schools. What do you do in those schools?

I train the teachers by teaching the kids. And I show them, as far as I can, how to teach the state curriculum. I also try to devise a way of teaching which really makes the intuitions of democracy into mental habits for very small kids because it's no use talking at them. That's not the way children should be taught; it's like writing on

wet cement. So this is a very difficult thing to do. It's a huge challenge because these are minds that have been destroyed by us. These people have nothing. So I try to train the teachers through teaching the children. I go there eight or nine times a year but I talk with them twice a month on the phone. Just yesterday some of the teachers were talking about some difficulties they are having with their supervisors. They're all from the community. And I was saying, "Be patient. Just look at how much trouble I've had over the years trying to speak in such a way that it will really get through to you." So this is a very important challenge.

Teaching literacy usually means teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing, but you're talking about something much deeper. You're talking about democracy and teaching these young kids to question power.

My teachers are themselves also from this community. Largely landless folks. I mean, literacy and numeracy by themselves are not much, especially when the education that's available is a very bad education. Of course I greatly value literacy and numeracy. Nonetheless, I have known two or three illiterate people from this community over the last 30 years with whom I have been able to speak as intellectual equals because they have not been ruined by bad education.

It sounds like you're saying that real education is by definition an ethical practice.

Ethics are to an extent something that cannot be taught because ethics are not just doing the right thing. Remember, democracy is a political system, not necessarily an ethical system as such. A basic democratic approach toward those at the bottom is to remember that we don't just send our child to school for literacy. And

that teaches me a lot about what I do at the top. At Columbia I don't teach South Asia. I am not there to bring authentic news from my birthplace. I'm a Europeanist, so I teach English, French, and German material to these PhD students in New York City. That's about as close to the top as you can get! About as far from "just literacy" as possible. And then I have the landless illiterate in supposedly the world's largest democracy. It's a good experience to see how one can serve democratically at both ends.

Yet when I look at your career, there seems to be a deep paradox. You are teaching PhD students at Columbia, where you're regarded as the high priestess of literary theory, teaching very theoretical books, like Derrida's Of Grammatology. Yet you're also an activist involved in these schools for illiterate students, which would seem to have nothing to do with the world of high theory. Is there really a connection between these two worlds?

There is, yes, if you're talking about that era in France when people were thinking about theory or Gramsci in his jail cell. I'm also very influenced by Rosa Luxemburg, who believed in the state. But I don't apply theory when I'm actually teaching in these schools or teaching at Columbia. It's like I've been thrown into water and I'm learning to swim. Every time I'm still terrified before I go to class. But the thing is that afterward, when I think of the experience, I can see how theory is nuanced by what I have learned from the teaching and what part of the theory survives because theorizing is also a practice. This is something that we have not been able to teach our students at the top.

Do you think theory has actual political impact on real world problems?

Well, I was teaching Mao yesterday in my graduate seminar. I was not teaching *The Little Red Book*. I was teaching his intellectual stuff — the Hunan peasant stuff and then “On Contradiction” and also “On Practice.” It’s very difficult to get a good take on Mao in the United States. As an Indian it’s also sometimes hard because we are competitors. But that’s fine. An intellectual is there to question these kinds of received ideas. But we were looking at what he’s doing with Hegel and of course we were looking at the Chinese text. I’ve been learning Chinese now for six or seven years but my Chinese is certainly not good. But the graduate student who was giving his paper is in fact an Englishman who grew up in Hong Kong and then began to do modern Chinese studies very critical of his own situation in Hong Kong. So together we were looking at this extraordinary essay, “On Contradiction.” Mao had only read Hegel through Lenin and so on. And Gramsci himself talked about a new intellectual as a permanent persuader. So even if one doesn’t know that one is theorizing, one is doing so. If you generalize and you speak to groups, you are theorizing. In fact, it’s impossible to think without theorizing one way or the other. I don’t think one should become so convinced of the excellence of theory by itself that one polices theory, but I think that’s what’s happened. Theory has become a kind of thing that’s completely cut off from everything but it is not in fact cut off. It is in the world.

What do you make of the common criticism that we have all these university intellectuals doing very theoretical work who think they’re radicals but they’re just in their ivory towers, having no impact on real world issues? Does that critique carry any weight for you?

I’m just as critical of them as the picket line type of activist. I really do think they need a reality check. In fact, that’s not just ivory tower. I’m also on the global

agenda committee on values at the World Economic Forum. I go there because it's my fieldwork. I'm not listened to, but I'm extremely careful in always intervening. And certainly my colleagues there are friendly. Below a certain radar, the world is unknown to these well-meaning people. So yes, I'm very critical of people who come forward to help without any idea of what it requires to be able to understand. At the bottom, the first right is the right to refuse. This is something I say to my students in the villages. I say, "I'm your enemy. I'm good and my parents were good but two generations do not undo thousands of years."

Why do you say you are their enemy?

Because I'm a caste Hindu. I'm the top caste. We are the ones who have made these people untouchable. We're the ones who have refused them rights to intellectual labor so they could serve us, so they could be trained for manual labor. This thing is not something where you just say, "Look, good parents, I'm good." I also asked them these kinds of questions because I do some ecological agriculture with them, so I'm sitting under this banyan tree with lots and lots of poor landless farmers. So I say to them, "How many castes are there?" And they know I don't believe in castes, so they don't know what to say. I never tell them answers and I don't give answers in my Columbia classes either. And a small voice pipes up and says, "Two." So I say, "Well, what are they?" So this person says the rich and the poor. And I say, "Good, come forward here. Now look at me." Of course compared to them I'm unbelievably rich, right? So I said, "Just don't forget I'm rich and you're poor. So we are not in the same group at all." So this is the reality check that one must have, rather than this kind of silly philanthropy where one gives a lot of money, but one never teaches how to use money. Money for you and me is very different than for someone who's never seen money. So

the reality check is not just needed for leftists teaching at universities. The reality check is needed much more broadly.

I have one final question. There is a lot of hand-wringing about the state of the humanities these days. We often hear that the humanities are in crisis. Do you think that's true?

Yes. The humanities have been trivialized. They are not a cash cow. As I wrote to the vice chancellor at the University of Toronto, when they were closing the Comparative Literature department, I said, "Look, we are the health care system of cultures. You cannot do moral metrics by knowledge management techniques. You have to cook the soul slow." That's the humanities. We are the personal trainers in the gym of the mind. You know, you can't exercise your body by going somewhere fast — speed of learning, easy learning. In the same way, you can't really make good minds by only doing speed of learning. And so we ourselves have actually allowed ourselves to be trivialized. I spend my life trying to make people understand that we should claim how useful we are and not just give in to the definitions of how to make ourselves useful by complete digitizing and all that stuff. We should not allow the humanities to be trivialized. If you don't train the soul, the global/digital cannot be used right. I can't really say much more in this brief conversation but I hope that one of these days we will have a much longer conversation about this.

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Practical Politics of the Open End: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

* Sarah Harasym, “Practical Politics of the Open End: an Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak”, 1 Kasım 1987; Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory (CJPST) Cilt 12, Sayı 2, 1988.



There are important allegories about the production of knowledge to be read with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her important work on, and in the reception of her work within, the academic theatre of cultural imperialism. As the parasitical “host” of this interview, it is these allegories that I hope to open for reading. This interview was recorded in Pittsburgh, Penn. on October 31 / November 1, 1987.

Sarah Harasym



Harasym: *In a number of your essays (“Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” for example [\[21\]](#)) you discuss the history of the epistemic violence of imperialism as crisis management. I would like to begin with two questions: To what extent does the question of value when it is determined by the “idealist” predication of the subject as consciousness and/or by the “materialist” predication of the subject as labor power manage the crisis of imperialism? Could you outline what some of the theoretico-political or politico-theoretical implications/problems are that arise when the question of value is determined by a “materialist” subject predication such as Marx’s?*

Spivak: What we have to keep in mind when we are thinking of the so called “idealist” and the so called “materialist” predication is that these two adjectives can never be entertained as final. But, anyway, if we decide we are going to make a distinction between them, we have to remember that “value,” the word “value,” the concept or the metaphor “value,” means two different things in the two different contexts. Very loosely speaking, in the context where the human being is defined with consciousness as its specifically defining characteristic

or, to put it on another register, where the subject is predicated as consciousness, if we call it the idealist predication, in that context, the word “value” means, in short-hand, the old fashioned three values: “Truth,” “Beauty,” “Goodness” —Weber’s or Habermas’s three value spheres, cognitive, aesthetic, ethical. So that basically what we see is that the part of the world which implicitly claims that the history of human consciousness has found its best fulfillment in it is, also, the site which is the home of the axiological, the home of the values. And the rest of the world is measured against that. So that, in fact, to qualify for the subjectship of ethics, that can choose between right and wrong imagining that it is the human subject, one must be located in that part of the world where the history of human consciousness has found its fulfillment. So that even access to critique of the position is available, for example, through a position like mine, a position which has gone through that itinerary. The crisis of the other part of the world wanting perhaps to claim, or the possibility of their wanting to claim, that they have indigenous homes for an axiological program, can be managed by this particular presupposition. So that one says, for example, that access to nationalism is part of the cultural effect of imperialism, that access to critique of this kind is, again, through the cultural itinerary of imperialism and so on. That’s crisis management from the so-called “idealist” predication: consciousness as the defining predicate of the human being.

On the other hand, if you take the so called “materialist” predication of the subject as work, work which subsumes consciousness within it as, also, a kind of work, value is that mediating, and to quote Marx, the “slight and contentless” [*Capital*, Vol. I] “Inhaltlos” thing: the mediating and “contentless” differential which can never appear on its own, but it is always necessary

in order to move from labor to commodity, in order to move from labor to the possibility of its products being exchanged. Now if this is ignored, and it has been ignored, dismissed, for example, by economists who have wanted to claim Marxism back into the discipline of economies—I'm speaking now of, let's say, the Sraffians. If one attends to this instead of ignoring it as either "metaphysical" or too "starry-eyed political" or not theoretically astute enough, if one attends to this "slight and contentless thing" that is the mediating possibility between labor and commodity and the possibility of exchange—and I'm not going to spell out the whole argument for you because this is Marx's basic argument—if it is attended to, then there is a possibility of suggesting to the worker that the worker produces capital, that the worker produces capital because the worker, the container of labor power, is the source of value. By the same token it is possible to suggest to the so called "third world" that it produces the wealth and the possibility of the cultural self-representation of the "first world."

This afternoon at a women's graduate student's conference where I was running the workshop on international students, there was present a small group of young white American women who clearly with a lot of benevolence, but completely unexamined benevolence, were suggesting that there was perhaps something wrong in our not acknowledging that we were getting all of these benefits of the U.S. education system, that we were only talking about our problems within the institution. I argued then, following this argument, although I tried to keep it as unpolitically vocabularized as possible, I argued then that if one looked at the documents of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, if one actually looked at the way in which budgets were established etc., one would know that to an extent the position

from where the U.S. educational system, the university system is able to make itself so technically and qualitatively well endowed, a lot of it is produced by the “third world”, and if you want to work it out, you have to work it out from the argument of value: that “slight and contentless” mediating differential between labor power and commodity. Now, the way in which it is produced, on the other hand, is not visible because most people do not read those kinds of economic documents. What they read is ideological stuff in journals and newspapers written by people who are not aware of this fully. On the other hand, the fact that all of these foreign students are at universities is eminently visible, and the fact that they will go back and themselves perhaps work to keep this crisis management intact is an added bonus. But, it is only through the argument that there is this contentless, mediating differential which allows labor power to valorize value that is, the possibility of exchange and surplus, that we can grasp that the manipulation of Third World labor sustaining the continued resources of the U.S. academy which produces the ideological supports for that very manipulation.

If one attends to this and I’m sorry if in order to make this “absolutely” transparently clear I would really have to say just read Marx’s texts carefully. Those thousands and thousands of pages, in fact, explain only this over and over again to the implied reader: who is, of course, the worker within capital logic. Just know that you produce capital, and you can only know this if you forget about your concrete experience simply as what gives you the picture of the world. Think it through and you will see that you are producing capital, and no one is giving you anything like money or wages in exchange for something. In fact, what you are getting is produced by you and it’s being shuffled back to you so more of it can be

produced to keep the capitalist alive. O.K. That's what the so called materialist predication of the subject as labor power can do in terms of our understanding crisis management. It really changes the subject-position, altogether, whereas, the "idealist" predication manages the crisis by saying that the history of consciousness found its fulfillment in this part of the globe. If you don't attend to it, attend to this value question, then, of course, you work back... you fall back into the notion that the "first world" countries are helping the "third world" countries to develop, and, of course, you don't really have to be this theoretical to know that if you simply read the appropriate documents you will see that each aid package comes with certain kinds of requirements for buying certain kinds of goods, percentage of the nationality of workers on the different levels that can be employed this way or that, etc., etc. It's too obvious even to enumerate. But, in fact, when you don't read that, and you believe that you are helping the other side of the world develop itself, the philosophical argument that can make you understand that it is exactly the other way around, it the notion of the concept-metaphor of value and this can be explained in class to students. I would say that that's how the two predications relate to the crisis management of imperialism.

You ask me what might be some of the problems? I think part of the problem might be to turn the theory of value into an analogy for consciousness which is done by many theoretical people, or, on the other side, if you decide to identify value with price rather quickly. That can make a real problem and that can be done if you don't read this carefully enough. The final problem that can arise is to feel that only value-producing work, work that produces commodities that can be exchanged, or, which is even worse, work that produces value that can

valorize itself—which is capitalism—is real work. If you feel that only value producing work is real work that's a problem, or on the other side, if you feel that only use-values, that goods that are produced for consumption by the producer, that only that is good, that's a problem.

Over the past few months, there have appeared in Canadian newspapers a number of articles about the “forgiveness” of debt to “third world” countries. Is this so called “benevolent” gesture of “forgiveness” the management of a crisis?

Well, you see that the way in which the answer to this question has to be considered is by looking at, as I have said—there is an ideological relation between that a set of newspapers, what a set of government documents that are released for publication and what you find in the actual document of the World Bank and the I.M.F. The forgetting, the forgiving of public debt—what one has to look at are what are the conditions that ride on these particular things that are being described as being forgiven. In order to see how crisis is managed, you would have to see—this is absolutely incumbent upon someone who wants to do this kind of theorizing (as in any other case, to be a theorist of something, you have to look at the documentation in detail) that's what has to be looked at, at the individual cases as they are presented in hard terms rather than as what the public policy statements are. I follow this more in the case of India then in the case of other countries, and I'm always struck by analyses of what is said: how it's represented to the general Indian public, how it is represented to the first world countries, and what, in fact, it looks like if you look at the details of each of those gestures.

To many contemporary Marxist (deconstructive and/or feminist) thinkers Marx's mode of production narrative is problematic. Although Marx deals in a very

schematic way with the problem of colonization, it would appear that Marx's mode of production narrative is, perhaps, complicit with the imperialist project. How do you approach this narrative in your work?

If we want the proper development toward international socialism to take place, we must put every country through the regular stages of one mode of production following the other, and where we have an example of such a thing is in Western Europe. This is basically the understanding of Marx's argument upon which is predicated the notion that it is complicit with imperialism. Capitalism as a way to . . . monopoly capitalist imperialism as a way to bring social change into the countries so that they could move toward socialism. Now I would certainly not disagree that there is a certain plausibility of this. If one looks not only at the Lenin-Luxemburg debates or the various kinds of writing on imperialism that have been produced by first and second generations of Marxism involved in politics. Although I would not say that there is such a possibility, I would also say that if one looked at the writings then of people a generation later—Victor Kiernan or Harry Magdoff—one begins to realize that that is only one way of dealing with Marxism and the question of imperialism. Then, if one goes even further and back to Marx, then one can see in order to produce a reading which is politically more useful, rather than a reading that would simply throw away an extremely powerful analysis because it can be given a certain kind of reading, one would see that in the postface to *Capital I*, for example, what Marx says is that Germany could not develop political economy because in Germany capitalism is not developed in the way it developed in England. So then, Marx says, it is not possible for Germany to develop political economy, the professors of political economy in Germany are creating nonsense out of the

paratheoretical petit bourgeois consciousness, but there is a possibility in Germany for a critique of political economy. Because the discipline could not develop in Germany critique cannot be located in the bosom of the theorists, it will come from the disenfranchised. The relationship between Marxism and the developing countries might usefully be drawn on this model. There has also been a certain “historical” tendency toward ignoring the problem of woman within revolutionary protocol that has more to do with what I said in answer to the first question. That there is a tendency to assume that the “materialist” predication of the subject means that only value producing work, or only that work which produces selfvalorizing value is real work. It is repeatedly said by Marx, that to make that identification is estrangement. In fact, whenever Marx tries, certainly in the early Marx, but it is also in the later Marx, whenever Marx tries to find an example of how to understand this estrangement outside of capital logic, he thinks about the relation between men and women. You can say that Marx is a heterosexist, but that you can say about many feminists too who are not necessarily prejudiced against male or female homosexuality but who occupy a heterosexist position. That’s a different issue. To say that Marx in fact said that value-producing work was the only real work, or that work that produces self-valorizing value was the only real work, and, therefore, ignored the relationship between men and women, it is almost like saying, on an analogy, psychoanalysis is no good for literary criticism. When in fact, Freud and Lacan and certain other analysts have looked at literary texts as something that could be an explanatory model for psychoanalysis. I would say that that’s at the bottom of the feminist objection which certainly related to the fact that within revolutionary tra-

ditions also there has been room for this misunderstanding. I think then what one has to cope with then is the sexism of radicals as well as reactionary males, rather than something specifically wrong with Marxism or with the modes of production narrative. And I think if you take the modes of production narrative as a norm, to the extent Jameson does, Jameson whose work I admire greatly in many ways and whose politics I support greatly in many ways; what happens—and I’m not the only one to say this. Apparently (I haven’t as yet looked at it. I was in India when it came out) there was a whole issue of *Social Text* [3] which shows a critical position towards his judgement of Third World Literature as allegories of Nationalism. Now that comes from taking the modes of production narrative as normative because nationalism, itself, which is very much within a certain history of European norm is seen as an unquestioned good that these “third world” countries should now be aspiring to. That’s a problem.

Now another thing that one could find in Marx, for example is a morphology which talks about self-valorizing value as a kind of thing whose form of appearance [Erscheinungs form] you see in the history of the development of the modes of production of value. You see how value valorizes itself. What happens, O.K., that’s morphological semi-narrative. To back this up, you have various 18th century styles where everything fits—you’ve seen this in Rousseau, you’ve seen this in Condillac, you’ve seen this in all the great 18th century Enlightenment proto-anthropological thinkers who make a certain kind of very broad stroke, universal narrative fit with a morphological argument. But, that’s not all there is to Marx. When Marx goes toward discussing actual “historical” events like his discussion of class struggles

in France, like his discussion of 1848, like his journalistic stuff, you see that the moment he talks about those kinds of narratives, the relationship between the normative morphology and the unfolding narrative becomes much more ambivalent. So that one can't just take Marx in terms of the first two things.

So you ask me what I do with the modes of production narratives? Well, I, since my general tendency—this is an idea I have published elsewhere and it would take too long really to hold forth on it at the moment [4]—since I really believe that given our historical position that we have to learn to negotiate with structures of violence, rather than taking the impossible elitist position of turning our backs on everything. In order to be able to talk to you, in order to be able to teach within the bosom of the superpower, in order to be, in whatever way, as a citizen of India, some kind of corrective voice towards nativist cultural history there, I have to learn myself and teach my students to negotiate with colonialism itself. I say to upwardly class mobile feminists, generally the leaders, to learn to negotiate with phallocentricism because they do it anyway. In the same way, I look at this narrative of the modes of production and I negotiate with it, rather than simply take it as normative, or say that If I were to take it as normative my hands would not be clean. As if one could not take it as normative living as one does. One's own social relations prove over and over again that whatever one says, however, one makes visible the normativity of that narrative. Therefore, one must learn to negotiate.

Since the 1960's one of the questions addressed by French poststructuralist thinkers is how to combine the contributions of poststructuralist thought with a Marxist/feminist program. To what extent is this gesture in its

turn the management of a crisis? Where would you situate your work on the critique of imperialism and on the heterogeneous production of the gendered subaltern subject in relation to this gesture?

Well, you see everything is crisis management in a certain sense. One could make it an extremely broad category. The management of crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. I think it includes, as Derrida would say, the “ethical” as well as the “non-ethical.” It seems to me that the most important contribution of post-structuralist thought towards the projects of Marxism as they understood it, has been to point out the presence of metaphysical categories in Marx. It has taught me,—and you know how much I have learned from that essay by Derrida, “The Ear of the Other.” [5] Well before I had read this essay, in my early two essays on Marx after Derrida, I was looking for critical moments in Marx that would open up his texts to something other than simply a program set down by these metaphysical presuppositions. I think that’s one of the strong contributions of post-structuralism, and, later, when you ask me that question about “practice,” I will come back to this. I think, also, the insistence that a subject does not always act in his own interest, most of the post-structuralists have talked about this, that the nature of the subject, thanks to psychoanalysis, is marked by a bar or by an oblique itinerary so that one cannot, in fact, identify the product of epistemological cleansing and the constituency of social justice. But, as de Man says in that wonderful sentence, “You cannot blame anatomy for not curing mortality.” If we paid attention to that we can’t of course get our elegant solutions. In fact, the solutions become nonsensical after awhile, after you have chosen them they fall apart. The contribution of post-structuralism to feminism has been simply the critique of phallogentrism itself. But, then,

the historical state of being woman, is something that post-structuralism has tried to appropriate a little, in order to articulate for itself a space, that is not phallocentric. I think that Derrida's position in the essay called "Geschlecht—difference sexuelle, difference ontologique," [6] is somewhat marked—although I do not want to launch into an analysis of this text, but it is somewhat marked by that gesture. I've talked about this at a greater length in an essay that is about to appear in a collection edited by Teresa Brennan. [7] That essay is on the relationship between deconstruction and feminism. I would say, yet, that the use of the (historical) figure of the woman is one way to manage the crisis of phallocentrism, and even, indirectly of the crisis of the party line communism and socialism in France, if you like. Perry Anderson in *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* [8] has suggested that because in Marx's thinking itself, the relationship between subject and structure was not clearly thought through, in that fissure post-structuralist notions of subject and practice took root. I don't know what to make of this, but it seems to me that that is also an account of that broad concept-metaphor: crisis management. And here the figure of the woman has been manifestly useful.

I've already articulated how it helps me with Marx. In the context of de-colonization the only things you have to work with, are the great narratives of nationalism, inter-nationalism, secularism, and culturalism. These were alibis for decolonization used by that class in the colonies, which was, itself, enabled to change the indigenous power structure in terms of what the colonists imposed. They themselves, as not always unwilling objects of a certain kind of epistemic violence, negotiated with these structures of violence in order to emerge as the so-called colonial subject. If in that context and in

de-colonized space, one looks at the genuinely disenfranchised who never had access to these grand narratives anyway, as a teacher one thinks of a pedagogy on a very generally post-structuralist model: without destroying these narratives, making all of their structures one's own structures, nevertheless, one takes a distance from them and shows what incredible and necessary crimes are attendant upon them: not just aberrations but necessary supplements. One does not, then, produce some kind of legitimizing counter-narrative of nativist continuity. And within this frame, the one most consistently exiled from episteme is the disenfranchised woman, the figure I have called the "gendered subaltern." Her continuing heterogeneity, her continuing subalternization and loneliness, have defined the subaltern subject for me. And I have been helped by the varieties of her representation in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi. [9]

My next question or rather series of questions has to do with institutional responsibility and with the production of knowledge. If, as you write in "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," "the complicity between cultural and economic value systems is acted out in almost every decision we make" (166), and if "economic reductionism is, indeed, a very real danger" (166), what place should and do academics occupy within the political economy? What does our institutional responsibility amount to?

I need an adjective before academics, when you say "what place should and do academics occupy." Academics are not homogeneous either. In India, for example, with a nationalized system of education, and access to education much limited by class, the university as a place of classic mobility is both very important and not important. In the United States, where the university system is run more or less like a private enterprise (arguably

even in the case of the state universities) you have more than 4,000 tertiary institutions that are extremely hierarchized from junior colleges to senior colleges to your Harvard and Yale. In France, you have a highly centralized nationalist educational system where academic radicalism has taken place almost outside the basic university structure organized by an elitist and homogenizing structure. And so on. It seems to me that there is no such thing as the academic and I think that there is a real danger in identifying one's own position with one of these institutional models, and then thinking of the academic. But, given that caution, I would say that in one way or another academics are in the business of ideological production, even academics in the pure science are involved in that process. This possibility leads to the notion of disciplinary as well as institutional situation, and then to the subtler question of precise though often much mediated functions within the institution of a nation state. Thus one can, not canonize one's own discipline and say "I don't have to know, I'm a theoretical physicist" or "I don't have to know I'm a philosopher," etc. Don't canonize the disciplinary divisions of labor. Some of us need to know this. Our institutional responsibility is of course to offer a responsible critique of the structure of production of the knowledge we teach even as we teach it. But, in addition, we must go public as often as we can, especially when we have gained some permanence in the profession.

What political interventional force could or does deconstruction have in the political rewriting of the ethico-political, socio-historical text and its destination?

Deconstruction cannot found a political program of any kind. Deconstruction points out that in constructing any kind of an argument we must move from implied

premises, that must necessarily obliterate or finesse certain possibilities that question the availability of these premises in an absolutely justifiable way. Deconstruction teaches us to look at these limits and questions. It is a corrective and a critical movement. It seems to me, also, that because of this, deconstruction suggests that there is no absolute justification of any position. Now, this is not the final say about the position. Deconstruction, also insistently claims that there cannot be a fully practicing deconstructor. For, the subject is always centered as a subject. You cannot decide to be decentered and inaugurate a politically correct deconstructive politics. What deconstruction looks at is the limits of this centering, and points at the fact that these boundaries of the centering of the subject are indeterminate and that the subject (being always centered) is obliged to describe them as determinate. Politically, all this does is not allow for fundamentalisms and totalitarianisms of various kinds, however seemingly benevolent. But it cannot be foundational. If one wanted to found a political project on deconstruction, it would be something like wishy-washy pluralism on the one hand, or a kind of irresponsible hedonism on the other. That's what would happen if you changed that morphology into a narrative. Yet in its suggestion that masterwords like "the worker", or "the woman" have no literal referents deconstruction is again a political safeguard.

For, when you are succeeding in political mobilizations based on the sanctity of those masterwords, then it begins to seem as if these narratives, these characteristics, really existed. That's when all kinds of guilt tripping, card-naming, arrogance, self-aggrandizement and so on, begin to spell the beginning of an end.

A deconstructive awareness would insistently be aware that the masterwords are catachresis... that there

are no literal referents, there are no “true” examples of the “true worker,” the “true” examples of the “true worker,” the “true woman,” the “true proletarian” who would actually stand for the ideals in terms of which you’ve mobilized. The disenfranchised are quite often extremely irritated with that gesture of the benevolent towards them which involves a transformation through definition. They themselves do not like to fit into a category like the “true worker,” “the true woman,” etc. I often cite a story by Toni Cade Bambara, “My Man Bovanne,” a story in which she actually deals with this phenomenon very beautifully. In national liberation movements, for example, there is a critical moment when a deconstructive vigilance would not allow a movement toward orthodox nationalism.

How is this political intervention force related to what you describe in the final footnote of “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Values” as a practical politics of the open end?

You will remember that I am talking there of Derrida’s essay “Of An Apocalyptic Tone.”[\[10\]](#) I made those remarks with reference to a piece that is very abstruse, very beautiful, but extremely difficult, and I’m going to answer you here in as easy a way as I can find. So when you ask me to refer specifically to the last footnote, there will be this gap. I think that a practical politics of the open-end can be understood through this analogy. For example, when we actually brush our teeth, or clean ourselves every day, or take exercise, or whatever, we don’t think we are fighting a losing battle against mortality, but, in fact, all of these efforts are doomed to failure because we are going to die. On the other hand, we really think of it much more as upkeep and as maintenance rather than as an irreducibly doomed repeated ef-

fort. This kind of activity cannot be replaced by an operation. We can't have a surgical operation which takes care of the daily maintenance of a body doomed to die. That operation would be identical with death. This analogy, like all analogies, is not perfect. It applies to the individual, and, if one applied it directly to historical collectivities, one might be obliged to suggest that there are Spenglerian cycles to civilizations. This analogy, itself catechetical, can help us understand the practical politics of the open-end. It is not like some kind of massive teleological act (the surgical operation) which brings about a drastic change. Now, in all my thinking about practical politics I have always emphasized that there has to be both these two kinds of things, each, to anticipate something we are going to talk about later, each bringing the other to crisis. Because quite often this tooth brushing style of daily maintenance politics seems to require acting out of line. On the other hand, the massive kind of surgery, surgical operation type politics which can go according to morphology, seems to deny the everyday maintenance of practical politics. When each brings the other to productive crisis, then it seems to me you have a practical politics of the open-end: neither is privileged. In fact, the relationship between feminism and Marxism, the fights that arise, even with people such as Sheila Rowbotham, quite often are based in a misunderstanding of this. So that feminism sees itself as one kind of practical politics wanting, also, to be the other kind. That's just divisiveness, and, just as the disenfranchised "know" that the labels that describe them are catachretical; this kind of practical politics of the open-end, too, is something quite familiar. That's one of the beautiful things about deconstruction: that it really, actually, points at the theoretical implications of the familiar. And so, we in fact know this, but it is always considered an

aberration: it is strategically excluded when one is talking theory.

When you were lecturing in Alberta (1986) you gave a very interesting reading of the “living feminine” and the problem of determination in Derrida’s text, The Ear of the Other. What place does the “living feminine” occupy in this text? Is it structurally similar to the position of the feminine in Derrida’s other texts? What is useful in this text to your own work?

In “The Ear of the Other”, the living feminine seems to me to occupy a place with many other articulations in Derrida’s other texts. I think that woman, or the feminine, is a kind of name for something in Derrida. It is, as he has insisted elsewhere, neither a figure nor a kind of empirical reality, and the best I have been able to do with my careful reading of his texts is that it is a kind of name-for something in Derrida. It is, as he has insisted elsewhere, neither a figure nor a kind of empirical reality, and the best I have been able to do with my careful reading of his texts is that it is a kind of name. Just as Foucault in his most interesting texts suggests that power is a name for a certain complex. In the paper that’s going to be in the Brennan anthology, I have tried to discuss some of the problems and some of the positive and the useful elements in Derrida’s use of the name “woman” for a whole ensemble in his morphology: I think the place occupied by the “living feminine” in *The Ear of the Other* is simply the place that stands over against the pact between autobiography and death. The possibility of autobiography is related to death through the fact that autobiography is not life, even biography is not life, and the autobiographer grasps at a name, a name which is bequeathed by the father. What is over against it is the “living feminine, which subtends the nameable, the father’s part”. O.K. But, if one really wanted to pull out the

logic of the concept-metaphor one would see that the “living feminine” once it is named the mother, already has within it a certain kind of repetitive structure. And perhaps, Derrida is looking at that when he looks at the contradictions in Nietzsche’s texts around the “living feminine.” I’m not quite sure of it. I’ll have to look at the text again to tell you what I think. It seems to me, also, that in the earlier, much earlier pieces like “Speech and Phenomena,”[\[11\]](#) One of the most interesting things that he shows us is that any conception of a “living present” for the human subject has to assume the subject’s death, for this “living present” must have existed before the subject and will exist after the subject. And to an extent, I would feel happier if that kind of thing already encroached into the “living feminine.” Otherwise, the “living feminine” becomes a sort of a methodological supposition which is given a name. Now this play between history, the historical place of the name of the mother, as it were, and morphology, the feminine on the other side of difference, etc., this is what I’m trying to attack in that piece for Teresa Brennan.

What is useful to my own work? I like this text a great deal. What is supremely useful is Derrida’s articulation of the new politics of reading: that you do not excuse a text for its historical aberrations, you admit that there is something in the text which can produce these readings. That is extremely useful. But then making the protocols of the text your own, you tease out the critical moments in the text and work at useful readings—readings that are scrupulous re-writings. I have repeated this to students and in talks many times, and I don’t want it to become a formula. That’s the problem, you know, these wonderful things become formulae, and then people just kind of—it’s like a dance step. But, nonetheless, trying to teach

Marx this semester, remembering the history of Marxism, remembering the problems, not trying to excuse Marx or on the other hand, trying to simply turn my back on him has been a very, very useful, a very productive exercise. I remind myself of this essay as I go on.

In “Imperialism and Sexual Difference” [12] you both borrow and show the limits of borrowing uncritically a strategy of reading articulated by Paul de Man. Please correct me if I am wrong. But, whereas Paul de Man’s readings tend to stop at various aporias, your readings—here, I am thinking in particular of your work on cultural self-representation—your readings stress the necessity of thinking beyond the aporia as they focus on the situational specific forces of the opposition in order to find a place of practice. What are your thoughts on this reading?

I think I would partially agree with what you’re saying. However, in de Man, the later suggestion: that in order to act you have to literalize the metaphor is important because it takes one beyond the perception of de Man as attempting to reside in an aporia. People like us learned the predicament of discovering an aporia in a text, and then moved in other directions with the aporetic structure. Whereas, since he was articulating it, it took him a long time simply establishing it in text after text, and, indeed, I think it is not to undermine his excellence to say that in the texts of the period of *Allegories of Reading*, [13] one might feel that that’s all he is doing. But, I think, again, to read him with a new politics of reading, not to excuse the fact that it can lead in people who are blind followers, into a celebration of what Wlad Godzich, [14] I think incorrectly, although normally I think he is a very astute reader, what he’s called “canceling out” in de Man. I think one can get to a position like that, but, on the other hand, it’s also possible to see that

in every text there is a signal that aporias are never fully balanced. So that you know that even in the Allegories of Reading, the text on Proust, "Reading," when he's discussing metaphor and narrative, you can see that, in fact, in the way he's talking the metaphor is privileged, so that one cannot have a full aporia. De Man always marks the moments of asymmetry in Allegories of Reading. But, then, in the later text, "Promises" where he suggests that in order to act you turn the metaphor, you literalize the metaphor, then he's out of simply articulating aporias. This is the work he was on when he died: The work of moving from the description of tropological and performative deconstruction to a definition of the act.

I think you're right, when you describe my stuff, as you do. Given what I think my usefulness is, I tend to emphasize the asymmetry in terms of the opposition. That's just my political style as opposed to theirs. I think without learning from them, this political style would be less, would begin to resemble more and more a kind of old fashioned understanding of dialectics.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" you argue that if the critique of the ideological subject constitution within state formation and systems of the "political economy" and if the "affirmative practice of the transformation of consciousness" are to be taken up, the shifting distinctions between representation as Vertretung (political representation) and as Darstellung must not be effaced. Could you elaborate on this distinction and indicate what place the double session of representation occupies within your work on the gendered subject?

First, about Vertretung, stepping in someone's place, really. Tritt (from treten, the second half of vertretung) has the English cognate tread. So that might make it easier to look at this word as a word. Vertretung, to tread in someone's shoes, represents that way.

Your Congressional person, if you are talking about the United States, actually puts on your shoes when he or she represents you. Treading in your shoes, wearing your shoes, that's *Vertretung*. That's *Vertretung*, representation in that sense: political representation. *Darstellung*, *Dar* there, same cognate. *Stellen* is to place, so placing there. Representing: proxy and portrait as I said, these are two ways of representing. Now, the thing to remember is that in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense, as well. You have to think of your constituency as working class, or the black minority, the rainbow coalition, or yet the military-industrial complex and so on. That is representation in the sense of *Darstellung*. So that you do not ever "simply" *vertreten* anyone, in fact, not just politically in the sense of true parliamentary forms, but even in political practices outside of parliamentary forms; when I speak as a feminist, I'm representing, in the sense of *Darstellung*, myself because we all know the problems attendant even upon defining the subject as a sovereign deliberative consciousness. But then if you take the sovereign deliberate consciousness and give it an adjective like feminist, that is, in fact, a rather narrow sense of self-representation, which you cannot avoid. But, what I'm saying is that this shifting line between treading in the shoes of all the disenfranchised women in my corner, and if I were very hubristic I would say, in the world. That way of representing: I speak for them and representing them. *Darstellend* them, portraying them as constituencies of feminism, myself as a feminist. Unless the complicity between these two things is kept in mind, there can be a great deal of political harm. The debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism is really not the crucial debate. It is not possible to be non-essentialist, as I said; the subject is always

centered. The real debate is between these two ways of representing. Even non-foundationalist philosophies must represent themselves as non-foundationalist philosophies. For example, you represent yourself when you speak as a deconstructor. There's the play between these two kinds of representations. And that's a much more interesting thing to keep in mind than always to say, I will not be an essentialist.

I heard when I went to Alabama to listen to Derrida talking on Kant, that apparently in the morning, and I was unable to be present at the session in the morning, the speaker had referred to an expression of mine in that *Thesis Eleven* [\[15\]](#) interview, "strategic use of essentialism." Hillis Miller actually told me this and he said well you know people talked about you and it was stressed that Stephen Heath had actually said this before you and that you had learned it from Stephen Heath. I said, well I might have but not through reading the text. I don't know how then. I thought that I was thinking about this myself but who knows. Then, he said, that the point was made that you had said that feminists have to be strategic essentialists. I said, well since I wasn't there, I don't know what was actually said. But, I, myself, had thought I was saying, that since it is not possible not to be an essentialist, one can self-consciously use this irreducible moment of essentialism as part of one's strategy. This can be used as part of a "good" strategy as well as a "bad" strategy and this can be used self consciously as well as unself-consciously, and neither self-consciousness nor unself-consciousness can be valorized in my book. As for Stephen Heath, I don't know. The relationship between the two kinds of representation brings in, also, the use of essentialism because no representation can take place, no *Vertretung*, representation, can take

place without essentialism. What it has to take into account is that the “essence” that is being represented is a representation of the other kind, *Darstellung*. So that’s the format, right, and I think I’ve already said enough about the format to show how this would apply to representing the gendered subject also.

One last word. The reason why I am so devoted to the fiction of Mahasweta Devi is because she is very careful about—and now since we are talking about literary technique, our terms take on a slightly different meaning; she is very careful about representing the gendered, subaltern as she represents her. So that single issue bourgeois feminists, who want to represent themselves as the people, I’m now quoting Marx on the typical gesture of the petit-bourgeoisie when they want themselves to be understood as the people, so that the “real” people can take short shrift; they are very irritated about the fact that Mahasweta Devi doesn’t do this herself, and speak as the gendered subaltern herself. But the strength of her texts is that this shifting play between the two kinds of representation is always intact there in various ways. That is what gives them their difficulty and that’s what gives them their power.

When you were lecturing in Alberta you argued that Marxism, feminism and deconstruction must critically interrupt each other. Could you comment on this program?

O.K., my notion of interruption. I kind of locate myself in that idea as a place of the reinscription of the dialectic into deconstruction. It’s already there—interruption. My example is, always, Marx’s discussion of industrial capitalism in *Capital* vol. 2, when he talks about the three moments of industrial capitalism interrupting each other, but, thus, providing a single circuit. He is us-

ing—it so happens that the example he is using is ambiguous. Industrial capitalism is not an unquestioned good in Marx, to say the least. But, on the other hand, if one reads Marx carefully, there is also the relationship between what Marx called *Vergesellschaftet* labor which is translated as “associated labor” in English, but it’s not a very happy translation because *Vergesellschaftet* is a very awkward and clumsy word; whereas, associated labor is a common word which makes us think about various worker’s associations and so on. But anyway, what Marx calls *Vergesellschaftet* labor in his work learns a lot morphologically from what happens in the moment of industrial capitalism. This, unfortunately, has been narrativized into one must pass through advanced capitalism in order to get to socialism. I can’t talk about that in the interview because we are focusing on something else. But, to go back to industrial capitalism, its place is dubious. But, nonetheless, this morphological articulation of a necessary interruption which allows something to function is very interesting, and, just as I said in terms of the politics of the open end and the great-narrative politics, in the same way, it seems to me, that Marxism which focuses and must focus in order to be useful a) on labor that is productive of self-valorizing value and the problems of disguising that situation, and how, to use Marx’s own words, how to read the proper signification of that scenario through the language of commodities, *Warensprache*, on the one hand, and feminism, on the other, is one of interruption. Feminism, must think of the human being predicated as work in senses other than this definition of the work that produces self-valorizing value. Feminism is involved with both anti-sexist work and transformation of consciousness outside of the Marxist project, which is to make the worker his (or her) unwitting production of capitalism. And deconstruction

which is the critical moment, the reminder of catachresis, the reminder of the politics of the open-end, or of the politics of great-narrative, depending on what the moment asks for, the reminder of the fact that any really “loving” political practice must fall a prey to its own critique. This reminder is, also, and necessarily, an interruption of both of these projects. Unless there is this understanding, there will be divisiveness in the radical camp. Crisis management in the global economy will, in fact, act according to these productive interruptions, and we, on the other side, like stupid fools will take the interruptions as divisive positions so we are at each other’s throats.

And, of course, the historian and the teacher of literature is a small example, a small case, if you like, of what happens when disciplinary privileging makes us forget that we can pull together even if we bring each other to crisis. One of the great cases was E.P. Thompson and Althusser, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.[\[16\]](#) Another case now is Habermas’ completely useless task of deriding Derrida. Habermas makes a lot of sense in the history of the West German political context. He makes a mistake by universalizing it. He also makes a mistake by confronting Derrida, whose project is quite discontinuous with his. How does he do it? By trivializing and canonizing a kind of disciplinary sub-division of labor, in his latest essay, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernism*, [\[17\]](#) where he chides Derrida because Derrida is not honoring the disciplinary prerogatives of philosophy and literature as they have developed in the European academy since the Eighteenth century. And Habermas gives to rhetoric a completely trivializing definition as literary style, as it were, and in the interest of this kind of honoring of disciplinary sub-division of labor, which is quite useful up to a point, he throws away anything which

might be useful in deconstruction. Just as I said, it's not a matter of throwing away one and keeping the other but bringing the two to productive crisis. You see these examples where one is privileged so that all you have is division—people can't work together anyway; whereas, on the other side, what wins is precisely people pulling together. That's my last word. Thank you.

Thank you.

Notes

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p.221

[2] Spivak, *In other Worlds*, pp.154-178

[3] *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 3-54.

[4] See, for example, Spivak, "Feminism and Critical Theory," *In Other Worlds*, pp.77-92.

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies: L'enseignement de Nietzsche et lapolitique du nom propre* (Paris: Galilee, 1984); *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

[6] Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht—différence sexuelle, différence ontologique," *Research in Phenomenology* 13 (1983). 68-84.

[7] Teresa Brennan, *New Directions in Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989).

[8] Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[9] Mahasweta Devi, "Breast-Giver", trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In *Other Worlds*, pp.222-240.

[10] Jacques Derrida, "D'un ton apocalyptique: adopté naguère en philosophie," *Les Fins de l'homme à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée 1981) pp.445-486, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," trans, John P. Leavey, Jr. *Se-meia* 25 (1982): 63-96.

[11] Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le Phenomene* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967); *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D.Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 3-88.

[12] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference," *Oxford Literary Review* 8, no. 1-2 (1986); 225-240.

[13] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

[14] Wlad Gozich, "Introduction: Caution! Reader at Work!" in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. xxiv-xxix.

[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution," *Thesis Eleven* 10/11 (1984-85) pp.175-187.

[16] Thompson, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (London: Merlin, 1978).

[17] Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernism*(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

Professor Spivak's numerous writings include *Of Grammatology*, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*.

The interview was originally published in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* (CJPST) Volume 12, Number 2, 1988.

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Herald Exclusive | Nazish Brohi
In Conversation with Gayatri Spivak*

* Nazish Brohi, “Herald Exclusive: In Conversation with Gayatri Spivak”; *Dawn*, 23 Aralık 2014.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an academic giant. A literary theorist and philosopher, she is the first woman of colour to have become a professor at Columbia University. In addition to founding Columbia University's Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, she has taught at Brown University, Stanford University, University of Texas at Austin, University of California, Santa Cruz and Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

She has authored 11 academic books and several literary publications. Spivak has the distinction of having developed and captured complex theories into short phrases that have entered the global academic vernacular and spawned countless dissertations.

But Spivak defies the stereotype of an ivory tower-bound professor. She has established schools for children in West Bengal where she regularly teaches herself. She has translated books, ranging from the works of French philosopher Jacques Derrida – founder of deconstruction theory whom she introduced to the English-speaking world through her book *On Grammatology* – to those of Mahasweta Devi, an activist and Bengali writer.

Spivak's first degree was in music. "I ran away from dance because the instructor used to hit me with the tabla hammer," she reveals, "but I am a trained singer."

Spivak's reception in the academic world is equally varied. She is called the "rock star goddess of postcolonial studies", is regularly introduced as the "celebrity Marxist feminist scholar" and "the world's pre-eminent thinker". Her critics, on the other hand, say she is hard to understand, even "pretentiously opaque" and, in instances, "authoritarian".

Spivak is dismissive of both sets of descriptions. She calls the fawning reverence she receives as a manifestation of the habit of ancestor worship — “Imitatio Christi” or the “Imitation of Christ and all that”. And when people demand simpler language, they often are demanding simpler thoughts, is how she responds when asked about her potent, dense writings.

For someone charged with complicating words, she calls me out on using the word ‘semantic’ in a question. “Why did you say ‘semantic difference’ instead of saying ‘difference of words’? You are like people who say texts instead of books.”

Spivak is hard to peg, and not just in the range of her subjects. She is an atheist who insists on the “slow cooking of the soul”. She is hard-hitting and provocative but then insists on seeing the transcript of this interview before it goes into print in case she regrets what she said. She stomps across campuses in a sari and combat boots with her short, cropped hair. “The villagers [in West Bengal] think it’s a widow’s haircut, so it’s fine,” she says.

But, in spite of this sartorial shrug, when I met her she was irked by what she was wearing. She was in a T-shirt with the image of an orientalised Mona Lisa sporting an Indian maatha patti and a nose ring. “This (shirt) is horrible. Someone gifted it to me on the way here. I don’t have anything else to wear to the gym. It’s all wrong. Its politics is all wrong,” she fretted.

As she munched deep-fried prawns in a hotel lobby and stressed over needing to get to the gym, Spivak spoke candidly and eloquently about a range of issues, the conversation peppered by her fierce brilliance, wry humour, charm, occasional inconsistencies and frequent outrage. Here are the excerpts:

Nazish Brohi. *General interest readers in Pakistan may not know much about your academic work. Should they first encounter your personal side or the political one?*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. There's not much of a difference. My activism is through my teaching and writing. It shapes my life, and my life is shaped from it.

Can you walk us through your formative experiences?

My formation isn't over yet, even though I'm in my seventies. I learn all the time. My earliest memories are of the Great Bengal Famine. It was specifically meaningful for me as a child. Even the rationed food we were given was of terrible quality. I remember skeletal figures crawling up to our backdoor and begging for the starch water of rice that people throw away. There were people dying everywhere.

In California, half a century later, I got a stress fracture while running. The doctor looked at the X-ray and asked when and where I was born. When I told him, he searched his World Health Organization handbook, and said, simply, "bad bones". That's how long the effects linger. The famine was so bad that even middle-class children suffered malnutrition.

Then there was Partition. In 1946, I was in school and the school was closed — our house in Calcutta was on the cusp of where one of the Muslim neighbourhoods started.

I remember the cries of 'Haribol Hari' and 'Allahu-Akbar' echoing through the night. My father, who was against any kind of discrimination, would shelter Muslims in our home. His Muslim students would come to warn him when to go away, when not to attend the phone. He was a pacifist, unlike my mother, who believed in armed struggle in the manner of young women

of her generation, although she was herself altogether non-violent.

I saw the insane division between Hindus and Muslims. This is what makes the idea of including religion in politics and faith-based activism so inconceivable for me.

After my bachelor's, I borrowed money to go to the United States while I was studying for my master's because I had been critical of the teaching of English at the University. I was confident I could do whatever I wanted, and I look back in some amazement at myself. When, as an assistant professor, I undertook to translate Derrida from French to English in 1967, I thought he was as unknown as me. I didn't know much French and I didn't know Derrida.

Was moving abroad culturally jarring? You've spoken about the sexual harassment you faced.

Sexual harassment is an important phrase for us to reflect on. For instance, I don't want a phrase like child abuse used for every disciplinary action taken by a parent. That's a statistical absurdity. What I faced in Calcutta was prurient attention that is common in a middle-class culture that is sexually deprived.

That is not harassment. I never got it from teachers or figures of authority, but I faced it in the US, from some of my professors.

Did identity become a dilemma for you? South Asian diasporic literature now dwells extensively on the angst of the immigrant. Is this something you faced?

I'm completely uninterested in this theme of writing. Not only uninterested but I am also contemptuous that this has such currency. It's boring... The complete[ly]

narcissistic focus on My Immigrant Problem is parochial.

But you also draw heavily from personal experiences and anecdotes.

My writing style is obsessive. Sometimes an anecdote offers an illustration so I use it. Also, while being critical of the US academic feminism, I am also influenced by it. That feminism holds that 'the personal is political'. So part of narrating the experiential comes from that.

I'm intrigued by this mantra because often it short circuits. For instance, in new wave writings, it seems that the personal is the only thing left that is political, everything else has fallen aside. Also, my vantage point is Pakistan and here the religious right wing is the one insisting that the personal is political. On the other hand, the women's movement is saying no, the personal is not political: get out of our bedrooms, get out of our closets; our personal decisions are not open to your political commentary. Is 'personal is political' then predicated on a secular context?

It is grotesque when only the personal is political. Everything is both medicine and poison in itself. I cannot endorse anything as single-dimensionally correct. This is why I took back the concept of strategic essentialism. It was meant to signal that while huge intragroup differences may exist, it is important to strategically bring forward a simplified 'essentialised' group identity.

I took it back because it becomes a formula to follow and justify everything and anything. I agree with you, the context is important. It depends very much on who is using [a concept], for whom and for what. These questions must be asked.

Decades ago, you asked another question in a paper titled 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' that changed the field of postcolonial theory.

[In that paper, Spivak challenged the manner through which 'Other' cultures are investigated. The paper critiques attempts to speak for the marginalised Using poignant analysis of a case of sati/widow suicide, it holds that knowledge is not innocent and expresses interest of its producers. So, all external attempts to address the conditions of the oppressed by speaking for them are fraught with 'epistemic violence'. The oppressed, subaltern, therefore, cannot speak through another and cannot articulate on their own.]

It has been 30 years now – 31 if you want to be accurate – [since the paper was first presented]. I have revisited it many times. It has been published in a revised form in 'A Critique of Postcolonial Reason' (1999). On its 20th anniversary, my colleague, Rosalind Morris organised a conference on it, attended by giants such as Toni Morrison. The conference resulted in an anthology in which I was able to write the concluding response where I spoke about what led to the [original paper]. Resultant thoughts still occupy me.

You say resistance could not be recognised as resistance in the case of the sati because there was no infrastructure for recognising it as such. What would such infrastructure look like?

You don't work to give the subaltern a voice. You work against subalternity itself. The word subaltern, of course, is a military thing, used by Antonio Gramsci [an Italian Marxist theoretician and politician] as he was trying to work beyond his prison censorship. I took up the word because it is truly situational. It is not meant for

just anyone experiencing discrimination. You have to relate it to the context. In my paper, for instance, the context is the desperation when suicide becomes a way of sending out a message.

That brings us to the notion of agency. Can all action by a free agent be celebrated as liberating? Can it exist inside an apolitical, value-free void? Women entering fundamentalist religio-political parties, for instance.

I don't think there is any such thing as a free agent. The idea of freedom of agency itself is existentially impoverished. We must use that idea when we are casting our votes because the vote is an arithmetical reduction of the notion and everybody has one vote.

Therefore, except for voting, we must exceedingly carefully consider this impoverished notion of freedom of choice and freedom of agency. To say you can join any institution and that way you are an agent, I think it's a very knavish or foolish thing to say. Agency is institutionally validated action and, therefore, it is necessary to develop the criticism of institutions that offer validation, and this is the role of the intellectual.

What happened to the class question? Even the question itself seems to have been eclipsed.

It has always been ignored — even when people were talking about class. That's the biggest thing that is always ignored. Sustainable development has actually sustained underdevelopment. That is how the world runs, with low-grade racism and low-grade sexism. The Left suggested the vanguard will bring 'class consciousness to the masses' — that's already a classist remark.

How then does one utilise what you call affirmative sabotage? Can you explain it? Is it specifically imperialist discourse that it can subvert or all hegemonic discourses — which in the case of Pakistan, would be the

religious. Does it depend on the strength of the arsonist or is it a weapon of the weak?

I used the term sabotage because it referred to the deliberate ruining of the master's machine from the inside. The idea is of entering the discourse that you are criticising fully, so that you can turn it around from inside because the only way you can sabotage something is when you are working intimately with it.

It was the factory workers who used to do it first. I have taken the idea from them. It is not destruction of the machines but using the machines to do something else. I saw this among the Algerian women in 1991 when the FLS [Islamic Salvation Front] came in. It is very under-reported that a great deal of resistance was done to this possibility by the chadar-wearing women who worked in the offices to clean the premises.

These cleaner women went and used the mimeograph machines. You can only deconstruct that which you know intimately. It is not a weapon of the weak; it can only be done from a position of strength because the weak do not have the social ability to enter those discourses.

But it is also a little precarious because entering a hegemonic discourse leaves you open to being co-opted by it. It has been one of the longstanding debates in the women's movements here whether to invoke religion or not.

That's no argument. This is the criticism of the resentful. Of course, [anything] can be co-opted. That's no reason not to invoke it. But recall that I said it must be made from a position of strength. If you don't already have that position of strength, then you cannot do it.

Is your work read differently in South Asia, in India in specific, from how it is read in the West?

No, I don't think so. Most of the elite universities [in India] are just like those in the West, except maybe for some unexamined culturalism which is also benevolent; of course diasporic groups share in this unexamined culturalism, with different values for different classes. I don't think there is much of a difference, except there is a localised resentment. That's quite usual. I worked in Algeria, where Derrida was born and they would say Derrida is not really anyone so significant and wondered why he was considered a big deal. When someone makes it big abroad, there is resentment, even more so for a woman.

Do you locate yourself in the women's movement across South Asia? Do you find any traction in the concept of international civil society?

I am not much of a solidarity tourist. I have no interest in international civil society. I think India has a very strong urban, radical women's movement and I am very happy about that, but that's basically not something that I am an intimate part of. Of course, I support them, but it is Hindi-based [and I am a Bengali speaker].

Language is a big thing in terms of being in a movement. I do not have that much experience of the West Bengal-based women's movement either. Part of the reason is that within the old Communist Party of India-Marxist, women who were my friends were also apologists for the party.

In Bangladesh, where I am also involved — basically because it is Bengali-based, Farida Akhter, is a very powerful voice. She is a very close friend of mine. I have given advice to women who worked with her when they first went to the United Nations.

That's a much smaller operation and it's all Bengali. So, it is easier for me to hang around there, but not easy

in the final analysis because I am not a citizen of Bangladesh.

What about grassroots women's organisations then? You say you are also an activist — that's why I am asking.

I'm a teacher. I teach. That's my activism, both in the United States and in West Bengal. That's also my profession, the same in both places. I can give you an example to illustrate the problem. I was visiting NGOs [non-government organisations] in West Bengal and asked for feminist cohorts. In one place I saw a video where women had gone to a village and demonstrated against dowry and sung and danced together [with local women].

They made a song and the lyrics translated into "We will not give dowry and we will not receive dowry".

After seeing the video, my next stop was that village the women had been to. I went there and chatted with them, asking a mother-in-law who clearly had a new daughter-in-law, in a gossipy way over a cup of tea, how much she got [in dowry] and she said 40,000 rupees. They did not translate performance into rational action, because they had been denied the right to intellectual labour for thousands of years.

The elite civil society activists think everyone is just like them and mistake it for egalitarianism. The villagers enjoyed dancing and singing and thought it was wonderful that some middle-class people had come to talk with them and have fun with them. I do the work of nurturing intellectual labour. You have to work to rearrange people's desires. What they want has to change. What they do will follow.

That's what I have been working on for 30 years — to produce in them the habit of democracy, including the

movement from performance to action which middle-class children and parents take for granted.

You run a literacy project in rural Bengal. Is literacy the answer?

I think literacy by itself is nothing but a skill. It allows you to do certain things like reading road signs. Literacy is not frightening to the authorities because they know that literacy is nothing by itself. There is a difference between education and being stuffed with information you cannot process. Education has to develop democratic judgment and train the imagination.

I went to the government education ministry in Calcutta to talk about the fact that we were not getting textbooks in schools and said I knew school teaching posts were being sold and I knew who were buying those jobs.

The minister said to me, "Give me the names and I will arrest them right now." I told him that I was not interested in their arrests. I am not interested in getting the law only enforced; I am interested in getting the change willed by the people and this happens by rearranging desires.

Do you see that rearrangement of desires unfolding?

It may or may not work. People listen to gentlewomen coming in and giving advice, but they are not idiots. I have passed many tests they set up for me because 28 years ago, when I entered the scene, I was perceived as an upper-class, upper-caste, rich person who had come to do good. Slowly, I have changed in their view to someone whose money should be saved. I laugh with them and at myself. They say things to me, such as, 'We were more united before you came and you divided us by giving us money.' They can say that to me.

I'm not some semi-divine person that comes down to help them. There is no distance. Yet, I am not part of them. This they also know. I say to them I am your enemy. I am here to repay my ancestors' debts. I started in 1986 and hardly ever used to talk about it because the process was so fragile but I talk about it a lot more now. That is because, for one, I'm about to die and, secondly, the process is much more stable.

Is the need of an incubation period something that other NGOs can learn from this?

I have no respect for education NGOs, quite frankly. They don't know the nature of the job. If you think about the crimes against oppressed people, they've been through those crimes for centuries. How will you rectify those crimes within your project's life cycle?

You have to have some sense of history. This stuff about impact assessment, quick evaluations, NGO tool kits, knowledge management is crap that these educated people come up with. They think they know how to "produce" large-scale education. And they think about top-down material change, clean water, HIV-AIDS, important, but short-term problem solvings. Then they say ridiculous things like poor people choose cell phones over latrines or, we will give them latrines and newspaper editorials celebrate it.

There have been latrines for many years next to government primary schools, kept under lock and key and no one goes to them. I'll tell you an anecdote. At two o'clock in the morning I had to go to the toilet. So my cohort and I had to walk across the village in the middle of the night and all the dogs were barking their heads off and the whole village was peering out and saying "oh, sister is going to take a shit".

What you produce is a slow connection between actual instances of disease and outdoor defecation. There is an altered desire for preventive healthy life, coming through concrete example — sick relatives — rather than in closed rooms with a potty. Can millennial cognitive crime be overcome? That is my huge and ambitious question, and you cannot ask it in the hope of a quick fix.

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4
Occupy Education:
An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

* Rahul H. Gairola, “Occupy Education: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak”, Publication Date: September 25, 2012, Interview Date and Place: January 8, 2012, Elliot Bat Bookstore, Seattle, Washington; see. <https://politicsandculture.org/2012/09/25/occupy-education-an-interview-with-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak/>.

In January 2012, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak visited Seattle for a number of reasons: to deliver the keynote address of the annual conference of the South Asian Literary Association (SALA), participate on a distinguished panel on the future of postcolonial studies at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), and, among many other things, meet with local scholars, teacher, and students for an informal coffee date at Elliot Bay Bookstore. Spivak's many engagements prefaced the recent publication of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard UP, 2012), a collection of meditations that together explore the many instances of what she has called "the double bind," which can be read as the elliptical shuttling between two subject positions where at least one, but more often both, are sites of the other. A double bind, in other words, involves a binary in which two subject positions can simultaneously oppose yet construct one another. Spivak also describes the double bind as "learning to live with contradictory instructions." [1] We can think of this important concept as a function of many other concepts that Spivak has influenced throughout her substantive career: for example, she has famously argued that one can no longer claim subalternity one comes into representation. This presents a double bind in the sense that we need representation to "know" what it means to be "subaltern," but that representation itself is precisely that – a re-presentation whose meaning is overdetermined and distorted once it is mediated through a semiotic system of meaning production. Another example is Spivak's famous notion of "strategic essentialism," which presents a double bind since it, on the one hand, recognizes that essentialism of identity is at play, but on

the other hand acquiesces that the flattening of identificatory differences is necessary to secure political agency and bind subjects together for resistance tactics.[2]

In this manifesto for teachers, Spivak asserts her staunch support of the humanities and liberal studies by referring to Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) and its insistence on art's potential to benefit the people. Spivak urges us not to overdetermine the impact of globalization such that we foreclose on "the sensory equipment of the experiencing being." [3] This mediation is perhaps most urgent as we continue the worst loss of tenure track lines in history along with soaring higher education costs, diminishing state support, the conversation of academia into a market of exploitative contract work, and the rise of youth suicides. Despite her multiple contributions to myriad, divergent elements of higher education, Spivak has been no stranger to accusations of "obscurism" that trivialize the gravity of her work. In an infamously high profile case of this in June 1999, literary critic Terry Eagleton criticized Spivak for producing work that belongs to "a politically directionless Left." [4] Indeed, if it was simply Spivak's work which he intended to rebuke, his overall assault on the field of postcolonial studies was thinly veiled. Woven throughout his review is the degradation of an entire field of studies that surfaces in statements like this: "Post-colonial theorists are often to be found agonising about the gap between their own intellectual discourse and the natives of whom they speak; but the gap might look rather less awesome if they did not speak a discourse which most intellectuals, too, find unintelligible...Post-colonial theory makes heavy weather of a respect for the Other, but its most immediate Other, the reader, is apparently dispensed from this sensitivity." [5]

Eagleton goes on to say, “For Spivak to impose a coherent narrative on her materials, even if her title spuriously suggests one, would be the sin of teleology, which banishes certain topics just as imperialism sidelines certain peoples.”[6] Eagleton’s remarks, which seem to deploy Spivak as an alibi for his disregard for the serious and vital anti-racist, anti-classist, and anti-sexist work of postcolonial studies, understandably upset a number of those who have worked with Spivak intimately in teaching, scholarly, and service environments around the world.

In a short and direct response to Eagleton, queer theorist Judith Butler asserts that Spivak’s “influence on Third World feminism, Continental feminist theory, Marxist theory, subaltern studies and the philosophy of alterity is unparalleled by any living scholar, and that she has changed the academic terrain of each of these fields by her acute and brilliant contributions...we all know that her critical interrogation of the political status quo in its global dimensions has reached tens of thousands of activists and scholars.”[7] Given the thunderous reception she received at all of the venues in which she spoke, where the dialect of Seattle is based on popular movements and democratic spaces that reflect the same stakes in anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia, it would be fatally short-sighted not to acknowledge Spivak’s grassroots efforts to change the shape of education, at all of its levels, in subaltern communities worldwide. A cursory glance back at some of Spivak’s work testifies to her investment in being a dedicated teacher who is also what Antonio Gramsci describes as an “organic intellectual,” or, in her case, a scribe, agent, and teacher working against the widespread violence of class, race, and gender warfare.[8] Her work has consistently engaged with the hegemony of English, its cultures, and its impact on

indigenous communities. Spivak has been engaged in a critical self-reflexivity on effective pedagogy long before Eagleton's criticism. For example, to return to "Outside in the Teaching Machine," (1993) she has publicly explored strategic essentialism's utility for "the political need to embody a recognized identity, and institutional agency." [9]

In *Death of a Discipline* (2003), which would follow less than a decade later, Spivak deepens her stakes for an aesthetic education in which the field of comparative literature rigorously examines its canonization as a field of literary studies. She clearly states that intellectual creativity and innovation is essential in reclaiming "the role of teaching literature as training the imagination." [10] In a review of *Discipline* that demonstrates an understanding of Spivak's pedagogical stakes, Matt Waggoner writes, "Spivak's purpose, in short, is to suggest the literary practices of reading and translation as counter-measures, instruments for dissimulating and disfiguring the self rather than assimilating the other." [11] As such, it is rather clear and contrary to Eagleton and others' criticisms that Spivak's impact on her students, fields of research, global communities, and the ways we think about transnational pedagogy is unforgettable. Indeed, even as she used feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial critiques to interrogate the past, she nonetheless acknowledges the importance of historical study, especially in the digital age: "I know that the iPod generation lives in the moment, that students inclined toward social benevolence feel that history ended to produce them... We often think our times are special because of the silicon chip." [12]

Spivak's investments in learning and teaching meld into a decades-long continuum that is characterized by a dedication to public learning at all of its sites that is further extended by *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of*

Globalization and the essay, “Why Study the Past?” (2012) Indeed, even as universities turn to online classes and a subaltern class of educators without job security, Spivak works on the grounds supporting the Ivory Tower with teachers and students who live in abject poverty as a means of bridging the work of college teachers/ academics with the “real world” rather than further alienating us from it. Spivak has extended the activism she engages in the classroom as University Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University through her non-profit organization, the Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorty Memorial Education Project. The Project provides quality primary school education to children in some of the poorest regions in the world, including rural West Bengal, India. This dedication of the pedagogy of the poor clearly evinces Spivak’s investment in teaching as a discourse that can transform local communities through grassroots work that reciprocally empowers higher education, as well as the continued oppression of those who are institutionally othered by categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, (dis)ability, etc. Spivak’s willingness to interface pedagogy and praxis for the poor beyond the armchair in her University Professor office at Columbia is perhaps why the Inamori Foundation announced at the end of June 2012 that she had been selected to receive the 2012 Kyoto Prize, often regarded as the “Nobel of the Arts.” In appointing her this year’s Laureate of Arts & Philosophy, the Foundation’s press release announces, “Professor Spivak has shifted a critical theory of “deconstruction” into political and social dimensions, and applied a sharp scalpel to intellectual colonialism which is being reproduced in our heavily globalized modern world. She exemplifies what intellectuals today should be, through

her theoretical work for the humanities based on comparative literature and her devotion to multifaceted educational activities.”[13] Moreover, Spivak’s virtuosic influence in and on South Asia was recently recognized by a unanimous vote of the Executive Board of the South Asian Literary Association to award her the 2012 Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual SALA/ MLA 2013 event in Boston.

Indeed, Spivak’s lifelong preoccupation with training students, on the one hand, and her deft ability to consistently learn lessons from her own past, on the other hand, demonstrate her investments in global education at the most visceral level. In *Nationalism and the Imagination*, she writes, “In 1946, I entered kindergarten. In October, school closed. We lived right on the border of a Muslim quarter, on the edge of Syed Amir Ali Avenue. Those areas were among the cruelest cites of the Hindu-Muslim violence...There was blood on the streets, and I don’t mean that metaphorically. These are my earliest memories: famine and blood on the streets.”[14] This brief selection says much, in plain terms, what the implications between education, livelihood, and violence are: the artificial binaries, the persistence of double binds, led to the demise of public education, the rise of non-secular violence, and is compounded by a lack of food – these are the material conditions that threaten to make aesthetic education impossible while producing double binds in their rawest and most traumatic forms. This account compels us to recognize how deeply education, race, gender, religion, epistemic violence, language, and geography have shaped Spivak since her childhood; if anyone can talk about the need to play the double bind by virtue of attaining higher education – or simply staying alive – it is indeed Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Considering postcolonial studies' ongoing occupation with resisting the continued hegemony of English as a language of elitism and the printed document as the privileged sign of learning, on the macro level, and the recent, unilateral ousting then subsequent reinstatement of Teresa Sullivan as the President of the University of Virginia on the micro level, we wanted to herein stem accusations of academic elitism and the anti-intellectual fantasy that quality education is meaningless. In this global climate of constricting resources and rights, what can we do with the notion of agency? What are the parameters of the subaltern today? The goal of this introduction has been to briefly situate Spivak's past and present work on pedagogy alongside an interview that engages the political implications of her ideas in ways that speak to a general public. It does so by asking deceptively simple questions that required Spivak to give fairly abbreviated response to. This is the context in which these questions and answers should be read rather than products of the assembly line of "obscurism" that Eagleton may imagine Spivak and other postcolonial scholars to be part of. In keeping with her investment in the pedagogical training of young people, Spivak specifically agreed to field questions of critical importance to local youth activists and junior scholars who often feel that they are the subaltern of academia. To those who would continue to accuse Spivak of "obscurism," and thus miss the gravity of her work – this dialogue is our response to you.

Rahul K. Gairola: *Let me first say thanks for this opportunity and welcome you to Seattle. Alright, so are you ready?*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Ahh, yes.

I am just going to record this and transcribe it later. These are some questions that some junior scholars,

many graduate students and adjuncts from the area, wanted me to present to you. They are more like discussion topics, so I don't want to frame them all as questions with clear answers.

Good.

So here are some topics that some junior scholars and graduate students following your work are interested in. The first is that some wanted to hear your ruminations on Marxism and the notion of "subaltern" – the ways your understandings of them might have shifted over the years.

My understanding of Marxism has not shifted, but it changes with each reading of Marx. It is a rich text! So, the reading is in the same place, getting richer. With subalternity, when I began, my study was focused on a single person. I was thinking of resistance that could not be recognized as resistance because there was no infrastructure for recognition. Now, I am more interested in groups and classes rather than single people, and I am more interested in providing or constructing an infrastructure, and also in the development of the subaltern intellectual. There is the change.

Something I noticed during "Questions of Performance," your keynote talk for the SALA 2012 (South Asian Literary Association) conference, and then again in the "Postcolonial Literary History: Concepts and Permutations" roundtable for MLA 2012, was that you gave audiences a number of personal anecdotes. I wonder if you have thoughts on the ways in which the personal is political, how the personal can be informative, even transformative, in thinking about social and political work.

I don't think of them as anecdotes. If you look at them, you will see that they are not actually little stories

with beginnings, middles, and ends. I use myself – my stereotypes of myself – as examples so that I invite the listener or reader to look at it as a text for reading. I don't quite think of the personal as the political, because in my time I have seen a situation where only the personal becomes political, and I think that's a problem. And I also find that it is better for me to be concerned with more abstract structures and also people other than myself. So, I am not exercised on behalf of myself – you will notice that I mostly, whenever I speak about someone who might be myself, it is a stereotype which is an illustration of an idea that must be read or listened to as a text.

Yes, I see.

When I was speaking yesterday, I offered this situation with professor Taraknath Sen, who, after all, treated all first sessions this way – there was nothing particular about me. I gave that as an understanding that our generation was evidence, a part of the evidence of what Professor [Ankhi] Mukherjee was writing about. That was not really an anecdote, it was the example of an idea.

The next two topics up for discussion are the MLA and SALA talks that you gave this past weekend. The MLA keynote explored the current status of postcolonialism and was celebrating the two volume Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature that shall soon be published. Can you briefly summarize, give those who weren't there a sense of what you spoke about?

I first spoke about those memories of the mid-'50s, offering that situation for evidence for what is being considered in one of the Cambridge articles. Then I went on to take up the suggestion by [Ato] Quayson, the editor that postcolonial literary history – what the volumes are about – should continue as a way of thinking rather than just simply be definitively established by the two books

that he has edited. As such, I pointed at the difference between the immigrant and diasporic, and the international, pan-African postcolonial; as it happened, I chose France as my example. And then I went on to talk about how any decision to establish an authoritative account is political, and this I took from [Antonio] Gramsci's argument in his Notebook 29 when Sardinian was being grammaticized. Then I went on to suggest two ways in which postcolonialism as such was changing: one of them was in terms of regionalism, in response to globalization I may add, and the other was in terms of looking at the pre-colonial forces and tendencies as residuals that were coming into dominance in globalization as they had been transformed by the colonial encounter. This is the summary of that talk.

Wonderful. I also wanted to ask about your SALA 2012 talk. It was very interesting to me how you seemed to be performing deconstruction of the questions, at least that is what many junior scholars and graduate scholars who I know were speaking about afterwards. How would you summarize your thoughts on that keynote?

In looking at "performance," I first, very briefly, gave some pointers towards answers in terms of the questions. I said that we could not do subaltern performatives because we are not subaltern. I have suggested that pedagogic performance is not deliberately fictive for me. And I also suggested that the definition of "performativity" you offered seems very close to "purposive without purpose" which is [Immanuel] Kant's famous definition of the aesthetic, but for me did not suggest a deliberate way of performing. That, for Kant, is a description of what happens in the aesthetic, not what we "do." Before I picked up [J.L.] Austin's definition [of the "performative"]], I suggested that, colloquially understood, it could be a useful thing for undermining mere identitarianism,

but then I suggested that when we forgot that it was the idea of “South Asia” either through area studies or through the way in which Vijay Prasad has suggested it was picked up, they are quite solidly based in the United States and so the idea of identitarianism that comes from changing civil society, which is involved in immigration and then as the generations go on – that cannot really combat identitarianism altogether because a sense of being something other is there in being in another civil society. This is an idea that I have been talking about for a very long time in terms of the difference between “ethnos” and “ethnikos.” Then I picked up J.L. Austin’s definition of the performative, which is words that do things rather than describe things. I took this into consideration in the way my thinking has developed, and I talked about shifting the performative into performance taking, as my example, the Warlpiris of Western Australia and then the rhetoric of the epigraphs in “The Souls of Black Folk” by W.E.B. Du Bois, connecting it with his larger project as outlined in the Black Reconstruction and in his life. Finally, I ended with the definition of the classical author as performer in Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* and suggested the concept-metaphor of the conductor of a musical performance, as in European musical performance, as a good description of our task, responsibility towards another’s text – almost constructing ourselves physically, as do conductors – as representing the rhetoric of that other’s text so we can become a conduit for its performance through another group of performers, for another changeable group which makes up the audience. And that is where I ended. I should mention that this was based on a deliberate mistranslation – an intended mistake, part of my methodology. In French, a musical conductor is a *chef d’orchestre*.

You had mentioned the importance of comparative and language studies in that talk. Why would you say this is important for graduate students, and how might this help them in their professional lives and their lives outside of the classroom?

I have actually laid this out carefully in my article “Re-thinking Comparativism” which appeared in *New Literary History* but which is also now a somewhat revised chapter in my new book. The way in which an infant acquires language is before reason. In order for this language to be acquired by the infant, the circuits inside the infant that are used – rather than reason, memorizing as it happens when we learn a foreign language – are the same circuits that construct a system that becomes ethical. So the idea in comparativism, not just language-learning but comparativist language-learning which goes towards literary study – that way of learning-language tries to construct as close as possible a simulacrum to that first language learning remembering that any language can be, in this sense, a first language. In other words, it is a setting to action of the metapsychological so that the ethical system can be established. Literary study can actually help construct this simulacrum. This, after all, is the reason why human beings exist, so I cannot imagine a greater functionality for human beings than this. You enrich your ability to become ethically active, if the occasion arises, through the exercise of language learning. That is how I would say it would help, not just students but anyone. Let me say a word about “humanism” here: I do not say “human” with any sense of teleology. I say “human” because, try as I might to touch that in the animate or, for that matter, inanimate that is not human, I am constrained by my programming as human. Those parts of me that are otherwise defined

can also and only be imagined in the “human” way. Value strapped by method.

*You mentioned *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, your new book, which has caused a huge buzz throughout the SALA and MLA conventions. I was asked to bring flyers here from the SALA conference, but they were all gone because there is so much anticipation and excitement about it. What contribution do you think this book advances in the oeuvre of all your work and thinking?*

That, I must say, is for readers to say. I never imagine anything that my work can do (laughing). I like to be surprised by whatever happens that is so different from anything I might have imagined. That is just not my way of thinking, so I do not know.

A large cohort of current graduate students and adjunct instructors are deeply concerned about the state of the profession and the job market. A number of them have asked me to ask you for any advice you might have for students currently in doctoral programs.

I think it is a good idea to think about other kinds of jobs. I find it hard to think of justifying this kind of work in terms of getting jobs. For me, employability is not necessarily the final definition of human dignity. It so happens that I got a job during the Vietnam War boom; I cannot give advice to students to change this two-war economy. So, I have a feeling that in order for this to be really systemically answered, the connection between banks and states have to be shifted, and that is really not something you can do from within a job in the teaching of literature. So I cannot give a direct answer to improve the condition of this profession in terms of jobs. That is the change that has to take place, and that is so not directly connected to the profession that one really has to

think about doing other kinds of things, you know what I mean?

Yes. So you have been engaged in philanthropic work since 1997, and I wondered what your hopes and/ or goals of The Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorty Memorial Education Project are?

As I said during my talk, it is not philanthropic work unless you want to suggest that my teaching in the United States is also philanthropic. I quite resolutely do not make a distinction between the two kinds of teaching; my goals in the two kinds of teaching are the same – to develop the intuitions of democracy. And that is what I think a humanities teacher does, that is what my goal is. In the United States it also involves situating “Manifest Destiny,” which leads to philanthropy-empowerment talk.

There are a few more topics that I was asked to ask you about – what your thoughts might on this being an election year in the United States, and what your thoughts are on the Occupy movement since the epicenter is where you live, in New York City.

Well, I don’t know what you mean by what are my thoughts about this being an election year. Could you clarify that?

Some of the junior scholars I have spoken to have mixed feelings on the candidates who are running, including Obama as President. They have expressed deep ambivalence in terms of this country’s economic future, and are also wary of Obama’s co-optation with neoliberal agendas. A few of them are curious about what your thoughts might be about him being re-elected, or possibly not-elected, and more specifically what other options there might be, if any.

You mean options other than electing someone?

Or electing him.

I think out of the candidates, in comparison, he is the best. I don't vote in this country, so it is hard for me to really think about it seriously (laughing). I do think that in spite of all the constraints, we would be very much better than all the others who are assembled. So I guess those are my thoughts.

You do vote in India?

I vote in India, yes.

On the Occupy movement – do you have any words of wisdom or an opinion on that?

Well, I do think it is a good thing. I think it is too soon to tell what will be the result of their work. I do not follow every detail of what they are up to, but the questions that they have posed to me have been interesting, first about the general strike and now about how precisely to undo the connection between Washington and Wall Street. I am going to have to write an answer to that second question very soon, which is why I am so anxious about getting all the little bits of work done that are on my plate (laughing). It is an example of citizens who have been subalternized – that is to say access to the structures of the state have been removed: health, education, welfare, housing, all of that stuff. And so they are behaving as citizens through civil disobedience taking the form of a general strike and deciding not to move until the connection between politics, which is Washington, and economy, which is Wall Street, is changed and shifted. This is a very hard task, much bigger than New York City, and as to whether they will be able to do anything, I can only wish them good luck. In my estimation, this is better than demonstrations. Demonstrations are good things – I have always joined demonstrations. I

certainly am in their favor but they don't achieve anything because actual things happen in terms of systemic laws, laws of capital that are not affected by demonstrations. These people are actually trying to see if those laws can be changed – as to whether they can do so, I have no idea.

Do you think the movement is problematic at all because it was mobilized through Facebook and other technological mediums that are owned by corporations?

No.

How do you think that subaltern studies has shaped queer studies since the publication of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Do you see any helpful fusions between these two fields?

“Queer” is a category which is susceptible to classing and racing. Thus “subalternity” — lack of access to social mobility — is nested here. On the other hand, “queer” intersects with “subalternity” in so far as queerness is identified as reason for lack of access.

A local musician who identifies as queer specifically wondered how you would deal with a scenario in which a gay, white man who is clearly troubled articulates his frustrations by making racist remarks to queer men of color on public forums like Facebook.

As I deal with any expression of racism. Reason on the social medium—and reason face-to-face if I felt I had any hope here. I do not intervene for the sake of intervening. Witnessing, yes.

A very large pool of adjunct instructors serve the institutions of higher education in Seattle, and throughout the U.S. in general. Many of those working here wondered if you thought this is the mainstay, and if so, where or not a national or global union of adjunct professors

could be formed to further mediate against their continued subalternization?

National, not global. I don't hold out much hope. We have been working to improve the situation of adjuncts since the 1967 MLA but with the corporatization of the universities, it is worsening, if anything.

Finally, your life is an amazing tapestry of moments and thoughts whose articulations have shaped generations of teachers and scholars. Are there particular teachers and/ or learning moments that were of particular inspiration to you, that were so profoundly formative that you would like to share them with us?

My parents, Taraknath Sen, Swami Pavitrananda, Paul de Man, the rural schools, Q&A sessions—where to stop? I learn as I live.

Well, that is all we have time for, for now. Thank you for your time.

Good. Thank you for your questions.

§

Notes

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

[3] *Ibid.*, 2.

[4] Terry Eagleton, "In the Gaudy Supermarket." *London Review of Books* 21.10 (13 May 1999), p. 3-6.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Judith Butler, "Letter to the Editor." *London Review of Books* 21.13 (1 July 1999).

[8] Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals." *Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p.15.

[9] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Outside in the Teaching Machine." *Discourse* 16.3 (January 1994), p.185.

[10] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p.13.

[11] Matt Waggoner. "A Review of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6.2 (Spring 2005), p.130.

[12] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Why Study the Past?" *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 73.1 (March 2012), p.2.

[13] http://www.inamori-f.or.jp/laureates/k28_c_gayatri/prf_e.html

[14] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Nationalism and the Imagination* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010). p.7-8.



Acknowledgments

I must first thank Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for generosity with her time, thought, and kindness over the many years I have come to know her. I also thank Marshall Brown, S. Charusheela, and Nalini Iyer for editorial counsel, and to Rick Simonson for kindly arranging interview space and the informal coffee date between Professor Spivak and local students, activists, and faculty including Cassandra Hodge, Sonal Khullar, Mario Lemafa, Evan Rodd, Kristina Rose, Anand Yang, and many others who suggested questions. Finally, thanks to my colleagues who helped make the SALA 2012 conference a success, namely Robin Field, Raje Kaur, Moumin Quazi, and Amritjit Singh.



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**Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:
New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa***

* Interviewed by Leon De Kock. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 23:3, July 1992. <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20Interview%20DeKock.pdf>.

IT IS SELDOM that a conference achieves a singular symbolic significance in its own right, but this was true of the New Nation Writers Conference held in Johannesburg, December 1991. In itself it represented so much that its staging alone requires cultural and political decoding. The conference sought to enact, both symbolically and materially, a dialectical alternative to the supposedly vanishing world of apartheid. Indeed, its theme was proclaimed as "Making Literature: Reconstruction in South Africa" (New Nation 5), and the conference organizers saw themselves as encouraging a "re-making of the world" (New Nation 6). The presupposition was that apartheid had been vanquished, and that the market of symbolic goods needed reorganization. But the ironies were there for those who cared to look: formerly exiled writers were back home because the in-place neo-apartheid government had dropped the bans and relaxed restrictions as part of its own strategy to appropriate the rhetoric of liberal democracy. The cultural reconstruction and the "process towards a genuine people's culture" (New Nation 3) was, on the evidence of the conference alone, a fairly middle-class affair, while black South Africans continued to die in large numbers in political violence all around us. 1 And the deep currents of apocalyptic feeling evident at the conference were not matched by anything in the political world except promises and dubious good intentions on all sides. It was like a post-revolution conference before the revolution that would now never really occur.

Nevertheless, it was something of a victory conference for those who had been banned, proscribed, suppressed, and maimed by apartheid, and who were now

back home without ever having repented. The State President had unbanned the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress, and the South African Communist Party, and committed himself to a new government elected by universal suffrage. Senior Nationalist politicians were apologizing for apartheid. But the turnaround also threatened to pull the mat from under oppositional feet. The governing party (and its slavish State television service) had begun freely to appropriate liberal language—"freedom," "justice," "democracy," "human rights," and so on—so that even the discourse of liberal humanism, which for so long was the front line of cultural resistance and the preserve of the arts, looked to be in danger of being swallowed up by the former demons of apartheid. Not for nothing did President F. W. de Klerk congratulate Nadine Gordimer on winning the Nobel prize for literature. Still, the many victims of apartheid were not to be outdone. The conference organizers would insist on their own victory and their own oppositional language. They were an amalgam of progressive organizations representing apartheid's Others: the *New Nation* newspaper, an independent weekly supported by the Catholic Bishops Conference of South Africa; the Congress of South African Writers and the African Writers Association; and other cultural activists. They would not allow the notorious amnesia which afflicts South Africa's frontier consciousness to efface the truth: apartheid had killed, tortured, maimed, divided, and wasted people, and still was doing these things by the implicit power of its surviving hegemonic forms. Moreover, more than three centuries of discursive violence by colonialism, consolidated by four decades of explicit cultural and physical repression, had left deep imprints on the cultural identity of South African people.

So, many of the conference themes were perforce conceived in opposition to the perceived dominant cultural tropes of the old apartheid which everyone knew and could recognize and which, indeed, still survived in the lives and experience of those who came to the gathering to testify to it and to sweep it away. The first day was devoted to discussing alternatives to race-talk. The sessions were entitled: "Race & Ethnicity: Towards Cultural Diversity & Unity"; "Race & Ethnicity: Images & Stereotypes in Literature"; "Race and Ethnicity: The Problems & Challenges of Racism in Writing"; and "Race & Ethnicity: Beyond the Legacy of Victims; South African Writers Speak." The speakers included some of South Africa's most celebrated writer-exiles and former exiles: Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Breyten Breytenbach, Es'kia Mphahlele, Albie Sachs, and Mbulelo Mzamane, as well as nonSouth Africans such as Kole Omotoso, Claribel Alegria, George Lamming, Sterling Plumpp, Chenjerai Hove, and Archie Weiler.² The next day saw a frank discussion of sexism, racism's sibling in the apartheid world, while another trusted pair of interdependent opposites—freedom and responsibility, including "universality and diversity"—was discussed on the third day. The last two days were devoted to "Literature, Language and Democracy" and "Orality and the Dissemination of Literature." The conference organizers also sought to break out of the limitations of highbrow talk by running a week of regional writing workshops for less advantaged South Africans.

The conference served as a healing ground. All of South Africa was symbolically reconstituted under the single nationhood formerly denied them: the exiles and refugees were welcomed home by the internal activists, writers, and scholars; foreign writers shared their expe-

riences and helped to break down the cultural xenophobia of the old order; the marginalized groups (black, female, banned, maimed) were joyously embraced; and the stranglehold of what I described elsewhere as "pompous, Wasp, middle-class control of scholarly discourse" and "whiteism, pinko-liberalism and snuffling, self-congratulatory academic formalism" (De Kock 23) was decisively broken. But for all this, there were some misgivings. Breyten Breytenbach clearly felt disturbed by the dangers of a new "alternative" consensus for culture and remarked that "the fringes must be kept alive." He would oppose the replacement of Afrikaner power structures by "repressive pressure groups using mechanisms of control through censorship, selection, distribution, prescription, manipulation or fashions imposed by literati, structured or unstructured, operating in the name of 'culture'" (Breytenbach 3). Further, Gayatri Spivak identified the problem of recursive debate when she remarked that "the old aesthetics- politics debate is so European... . The form-content debate is so European." To some extent, she was right: the conference was at times occupied with recirculating the clutter of old arguments about literature and politics, universality and diversity, and race and gender stereotypes. There was a fair amount of hostility to "theory," and little evidence of acquaintance with, and advances upon, theories of postcoloniality and discourse analysis, which are, after all, germane to a country as deeply postcolonial and as discursively-stratified as South Africa. It was as if apartheid still had a good many scholars and writers doing a lot of kneejerking, despite the conference's ostensible emphasis on the "new."

Gayatri Spivak was invited to grace the gathering as yet another very bright star in the international firmament, although she was the only international delegate invited as a scholar and not a writer. She herself saw her

visit in humble terms: she came to listen and to learn, and she gave a talk entirely in the subjunctive mood, explaining the paper she would have presented if she had given a paper and not a ten-minute talk. She wrote down the sub-headings of the putative paper on a blackboard and succeeded in perplexing most of the audience. The session in which she participated was called "Women's Exile: Addressing the Marginalisation of Women in Culture." In an attempt to get her to say a little more, this interview was conducted on the day following her talk.



De Kock: *I'd like to ask you, to start with, whether, possibly as an analogue of decolonization, you could provide a brief autobiography?*

Spivak: Well, I was born in British India. When I was going to school, the system of education had not yet started its process of systematic decolonization. My generation at college was among the first generations to really kind of feel that they were in independent India. I entered college in 1955. Looking back now, one of the first things that strike me is that we thought of studying English not as the great literature, but a great literature. I don't know that we knew that's what we were doing. Looking back, that's what really stands out. We had the idea that we were going to do Bengali, which is the first language of the people in the area where I was, as well as we did English. This was by no means a new idea within nationalism, but it seemed new to us. I think that idea of a great literature rather than the great literature was something that coloured all kinds of things later on.

Then, in 1961 I came to the United States. This was perhaps a little more self-conscious. I had no particular desire to go to Britain. I didn't want to remain only in

India. I had no particular plan of doing one thing or another, but I knew I didn't want to go to Britain, so I came to the United States.

How were you enabled to do this?

You really want to hear that story? I don't know if I really want to talk about it. Well, let's put it this way: I borrowed the money. The story of borrowing the money is in fact quite interesting in that I was a very young middle-class girl who had started earning money two years before her departure by coaching English. My father was dead. (My father died when I was thirteen.) So in fact it was really something that I completely kind of did, and I was not in a situation where I really knew anything about American universities. I knew the names of Harvard, Yale, and Cornell, and I thought half of them were too good for me. So I sent a telegram to Cornell saying I was a very good student and I didn't need financial aid because they wouldn't have given it to me because I wasn't a native speaker of English—I mean, those days were different from now—and because multiculturalism was certainly not on the agenda. You had to be as good as a native speaker. And so in fact that story, the story of how I managed to borrow the money, is extremely entertaining and also interesting, but I really don't think it's part of an interview, okay?

Anyway, so that's how I went, with no money because the guy who had lent me the money also had said he would only give me the money monthly, so I went. I had very little money and I knew nobody. . .

And you felt the cringe? You didn't feel you were good enough for places like Harvard and Yale?

I have never. I'm intellectually a very insecure person. I must also say that this had come about because of sexism in my surroundings, which continued right from the

start, the moment I entered college, and even today. And that's the worst thing about sexism, that it makes you believe what is being told. My general reputation is that I'm flashy rather than substantive, rather than generally thoughtful, rather than generally brilliant. This was helped by the fact that I enjoyed being a young woman, and I still very much think I'm a playful person, and this is not supposed to be. If a woman is really serious, she has to deny all her so-called feminine qualities and become like a man. And so in fact that led, especially without any help from feminism on the ground, that helped me, or hindered me really, to form a self-concept which I have not been able to shake off, even today. I know I'm now veering from the autobiographical slightly because it's not a narrative anymore. One of the things, for example, that I encounter paradoxically all the time is public talk from women I respect about women grabbing power. And then when I use what little power I have been able to grab in public to cope with masculine intervention, then among the women I quite often receive a reputation for arrogance. You see, so that to an extent this had led to great intellectual insecurity. Yes, I was quite prepared to believe that I was not good enough for the best institutions. And, to an extent, I still feel that way, that I do not have the right to intervene. In fact, we've come from a session ["Redefining Aesthetics: Universality and Diversity"] where I very much wanted to intervene, but I kept myself quiet because I thought no one wants to hear me, or they'd think I'm arrogant. See what I mean?

So, I went to the United States. Once I went there, I was not particularly vetted for anything. You know, I was only a bright young foreign woman student, and the fact that I knew how to take exams—because that's what

the education system was in India—stood in my way because Cornell then had a system where if a student got an A-plus average, she was allowed to devise her own programme. And it was totally parochial, geared to the American system. I came from a different kind of a system, you know, dying under its own weight, built on the London University system. Therefore, the fact of my doing photo-finish exams had nothing to do with the fact that I really needed some kind of experience of what is best in American education, and sometimes that is abused when students start to judge without any knowledge. But for me it would have been wonderful to have tasted some of the invitation to judge rather than to reproduce. But because I did my exams so well, I was allowed to devise my own programme, so in fact my entire education-formation remains Indian, because in those last three years of Ph.D. work I didn't really learn much. I was just kind of taking courses that I felt would be nice, and so on. I fell into comparative literature because Comp. Lit. was the only thing that offered me money, and therefore I had to learn French and German in classes where instruction was often given in French and German, and we were given Baudelaire and Goethe, because a Ph.D. student in Comp. Lit. was not allowed to take language courses. So that's why my spoken French is fluent but often not grammatical, and therefore this again is held as proof that I couldn't possibly know anything about deconstruction. You know what I mean. So there are all of these problems that I carried on my shoulders without giving myself the right to think that these were problems. A heavy weight of sexism kept me thinking that these were my faults. The blaming the victim syndrome turned inside, especially since I was a good student. Therefore I couldn't say, listen, be kind to me.

I must say at this point that the one strongest influence in my life—that one has to remain resilient, that one should not get exercised on one's own behalf (I'm doing it now because you kindly asked me this question why I thought I was not good enough), to remember that politics is other people, rather than always to exercise oneself on one's own behalf—is my mother. My mother is one of the most unusual women I have ever had the good fortune to have met. My relationship with her is not just confined to the mother-daughter relationship. There is intellectual respect on both sides. We give each other advice, and she understands things about my life and my problems, both intellectual and personal, that I cannot expect other female relatives to understand.

So I would say that with this I came to the United States. I believe I was Paul de Man's first Ph.D. He was chairing Comp. Lit. But as I say I wasn't groomed for anything. I learnt from him. I took good notes and slowly sort of understood.

So, I then married, and at that point I really remained in the United States because I was coming from a cultural production where women stayed where their husbands were. I had no particular plans about staying or not staying, and I didn't look for a job, for example. I got a job because it was the Vietnam years, and it was possible to get jobs without a Ph.D.

So I never really got a chance of knowing what it was like to live as an adult. I stayed. I was a good wife. I was in a bit of a shock, because—although people find this hard to credit because I'm so international in many ways—I didn't really know white people. The only persons that I'd come into contact with were the regional representatives of the British Council, and they were just incredibly kind of stiff. And so it seemed very strange to be among whites. I mean those were the sixties. It was

the beginning of the civil rights struggle. I couldn't understand this, in terms of these people, white people, talking civil rights. And at the same time there were these incredibly artificial constructs of the Allen Ginsberg-/Timothy Leary-style India, which bore no relationship, I mean my strongest influence in Calcutta was second international communism, that's what you were . . . [Interview was interrupted, and interlocutors agreed not to proceed with the autobiographical because of its boundless narrative potential.]

I know you have come here to learn, and you criticize people who talk about and for other people, but how do you read this conference? How do you read the way they are dealing with issues here?

First I must say that I don't. I respect the fact that conferences should not be judged in terms of dealing with issues. Conferences are a sort of staging, where conditions of possibility for dealing with issues are laid down, at what seems to be a great waste of time and talk and energy. But that is the nature of conferences. It's almost like an exercise which has its end almost totally separated from it. And so I see it as that kind of staging. I go to many conferences, and in certain international contexts, I can tell what stops are being pulled out. Within South Africa, since I don't know what stops are being pulled out, for me it is a learning experience. It's because I respect what conferences are supposed to be, and I don't expect them to be a substitute for either activism or policy-making, or, in fact, sheer intellectual instruction. As long as you hang out—hang in with the nature of conferences—it seems to me that you can learn if you are in my position.

Should conferences had to activism or intervention?

No. This is why I said that the relationship between what the end, the goal, the hoped-for results would be, and the conference, are oblique. If they did lead to things, and in some cases in the past they have, you know, especially those conferences which divide parts of the globe after a war or something (but those are extreme cases), it's not always good. It seems to me that a conference has a kind of trickle-down effect, and can affect all kinds of things, but in itself it can only enervate. A conference is not a restful thing, and must involve wastage.

You said earlier that you were tempted to intervene in the aesthetics debate on "Universality and Diversity." Would you care to state what you wanted to say?

Well, I can't say everything I want to say because I haven't thought it through properly, but I think my basic impulse was to look at a completely different sense of aesthetic, rather than relate it to the beautiful, and oppose it to politics. I always believe in looking at things as doings and I was thinking of another old definition, that through the aesthetic you can get pleasure out of things that are representations, things for which you cannot immediately find the actual object, so that it seemed to me that if one looked at it that way, then what we have to deal with is to allow different kinds of pleasure to be known as pleasure, because aesthetics for me is also a transactional thing. We can only feel pleasure at something if the cultural system acknowledges that it is pleasure. So, there was one participant who spoke of his taste, and yet he said that there was nothing universalist in it, and it seems to me that the idea of taste, in fact, is simply what is allowed to be pleasurable. I know that I am not supposed to give long answers but can I give you an example?

Please.

I feel that in the oral-epic impulse, participants who listened to the singer were able—it's a very sophisticated reaction—were able to think of the epic as true even as they knew that it was not factually true. This is a very sophisticated phenomenon, but participants in all countries do this. I'm not a golden-ageist or a reverse-history person, but I do look at these things because separated from that golden age ethos, they really can offer us lessons. Now this is the thing for which Coleridge in the nineteenth century had to devise a description, willing suspension of disbelief, and if people actually bothered, without any golden age impulse, to see that this aesthetic influence—taking pleasure in something for which no actual object can be offered—is alive and well in situations where one does not expect words like "taste" to be used, I think that would be a way in which one would look for enlarging the concept of what pleasure can be, and it would not involve museumizing or endorsing diversity. I've not said everything, and it sounds more crude in my telling of it. The old aesthetics-politics debate is so European, as if there is a separation. The form-content debate is so European. Let's look at it as a social act, aesthetics as the possibility of a social act. That's quite different from universalism talk. There can be no human act without some modicum of universalizing. Humanity would be completely autistic if it were not always, however incompletely, universalizing: thinking of oneself as an example of being human.

Here they seem to be grappling with the issue of that universalizing notion being appropriated by powerful formations, bourgeois culture perhaps.

Yes, but the thing is that if you put diversity against universality you still acknowledge the problem of the one and the many. English, or all the African languages? See what I mean? This is pulling out a stop because this

has been debated endlessly in this country, but I'm just proposing that one look at the aesthetic not as a thing about which answers will be given in alternatives for universality terms. The power will be engaged in expanding the possibility of pleasures.

I also made some notes about certification, validation, book market et cetera, et cetera, because these things now exist and we must make use of them. One of the participants talked about how he does not think these questions are settled at conferences with theories, and then proceeded to give us definitions. It seems to me that therefore we have to acknowledge that however obliquely, mechanisms of certification, validation, and marketing will be there to organize the expansion of the possibility of pleasures, and I think that's where activism should be devoted rather than seeing what the policy-makers decide, so that action will always be resistant to the policies because neither universality, nor diversity, when endorsed by policy, will be uncriticizable. So I remain in the arena of the persistent critic.

You hinted yesterday during your talk that you felt theory was being pushed away a little, and that you would desist from talking theory. Did you feel that, and do you feel that this might be a danger in this kind of discussion?

Well, I don't think theory is actually being pushed away. I think theory is being made in the name of no-theory. There is by now a kind of international institutional culture, and in the international institutional culture both the universalist reactionaries who don't have to let "theory" come in, because they have the most powerful unacknowledged theory, and the activists on the other side, join by being against so-called theory, which in itself is justified because theory is perceived only as a baggage of abstract learning, out of touch with real life

(whatever that might be), talking about real life at a level of abstraction, by people who are incomprehensible, endorsed by institutions, and winning away young minds from the task of either activism, or, unthinkingly applauding the cultural good of the white dominant, white supremacist history. So it is paradoxical for us that we are caught in between these two ends, and I for one cannot completely reject the critique of institutional elitism. You must recognize by now that this is a classic deconstructive position, in the middle, but not on either side, and unable to solve a problem by taking either side, but on the other hand solving it situationally, and not for ever. So what you saw happening yesterday was one of those solutions. Deconstructive imperatives always come out of situations; it's not situationally relative, but they always come out of situations. So what I felt there was, although I didn't succeed, but nonetheless what I was trying to do, was, keep the worst of the theoreticist impulses [inaudible], recognize what brand of theory by naming a vocabulary. I tried to keep the track of that impulse outside of what I was saying. I think the demand that one be comprehensible is a good demand. On the other hand, I also know that plain prose cheats, and I also know that clear thought hides. So, I was trying to do a balancing act. I was using those theoretical discourses which are recognized by many more, like Marx for example. I was using that. But on the other hand, I don't think that I quite succeeded because it seemed to many that it was even yet too theoretical. The trouble with theory is that to theorize is to make visible a great deal.

How do you answer to the charge that your own writing is so difficult, at such an advanced level of abstraction (as you say, you are describing so much) that you

are recolonizing the margin from the centre of continental thought, and that you are somewhat inaccessible to a lot of people?

Well, I tell you many, many of these objections are interesting objections. The centre of European thought. One would like to know what the sources of our thoughts are if we do not name them. I'm not interested in finding nativist alibis for where my thoughts come from. I would say that I have a problem, which is that I cannot write clearly. Let us not give that some kind of a party-politics name. I'm trying to work with it. I believe that my writing now is clearer than it was before. I think that what one saw before was a result of some intellectual insecurity, wanting to write about fields where I didn't know enough. On the other hand I felt what I said needed to be said. I think those things are changing, and I would advise the people who make this objection to think again about where the objection is coming from. I think that it is also that one doesn't speak in the international scholarly situation with the endorsed voice of a female marginal. That is for me to embrace an extremely dubious political position. Unfortunately, that is the only voice that is heard by the readers who complain. I do a lot of other writing and speaking and teaching, where I never see these critics. I invite them, before they make these criticisms, to come and hear me. Well, people like them don't generally bother to come.

Do you find that your register is moderated quite significantly when you teach your students?

I think it's moderated by the timing, by the tempo. In the teaching, in the United States, not when I'm teaching in nonformal situations and my students do not have the same sort of academic preparation, but teaching in the United States in fact I use the same kind of terminology, but I unpack more. I think I am in fact best at classroom

teaching. I'm best as a classroom teacher. In fact what happens to many of my students is that they take one course from me, and then they take all of my courses because I'm even better if my time span is not just 14 weeks, but let's say two years. That's my problem, because I don't know things very profoundly. People who know things profoundly can simplify them without cheating. But I'm learning as I'm teaching, so I can't always speak in that kind of achieved simplicity.

Well, could you unpack for me something in your talk—I did not fully understand what you meant by multiculturalism as crisis management. I wonder in what sense it might be interesting for us here. . .

Now, the last bit I can't say because one of the principles that I dearly hold by is that imperatives are situational, so I don't know if this applies in South Africa at all, and please remember I said it. Whatever you cut off don't cut off this one, but I'm speaking out of the United States context. I'm looking at the United States as in a bit of a crisis right now. All of the apparent signs that have to be used to the hilt to prove that there is no crisis, are "good." The U.S. is the "only superpower." They've got the media. They've got the President. The U.S. has won the Cold War, and so on. The Communists have been defeated—good signs. But in fact what is happening is that unless the situation is managed it is just possible that the European Economic Community, plus Japan (so that it's not a national, or even international concept really) is going to consolidate the United States of Europe, so what has to be managed is the entire area released by the implosion of the Bolshevik experiment. Now that area can be ideologically managed—and here only ideology will work because the crisis situation is political and economic. Ideologically it can be managed by that extremely loose term, ethnicity, and an even looser term,

culture, often identified by the liberal multiculturalists. On top of that there is what I was saying yesterday, the concrete figures that in fact the migrancy is going to be used immensely in order to support a post-Fordist economy, in Europe and in the north in general. In a situation whereas the migrants are taking over with the postcolonial African American, as I was saying, in the United States this is a danger point. The best thing that can be done is to make them compete—the old divide and rule thing. So with this multiculturalism, the coding of capitalism as democracy can be helped by the in-place immigrant, old immigrant communities. With this multiculturalism, with the new immigrants, it becomes nothing but national-origin validation, and they have nothing in common except wanting to be in the United States, so that's divisive. What can be done is that a real wedge can be driven between the African American struggle, between the Latino-Chicano struggle, and what looks like, and I quote a young professor from the University of Minnesota, "Disneyland courses." See what I mean? So this whole thing, it's a huge crisis, but it's being managed in this easy, repressively tolerant way.

And "transnational literacy"—what does that remedy?

It doesn't remedy anything, but what it allows is, it allows us, all of these groups that I've just mentioned, to invent a unity out of what on a level of abstraction we really share, that is to say, our stake in wanting to turn capitalism into a juster model for our communities.

I want to ask you about what you have called your "disciplinary predicament"—what to do with English studies.

This will depend on when I said it because I'm constantly on the move, and my disciplinary predicament

has probably changed from the time when I said it. Well, my disciplinary predicament is to be teaching, tokenized. When I speak within my disciplinary position, what I say can be used because I'm among the few senior women of colour in the United States, and I teach now at a very prestigious university, so one cannot in fact speak against multiculturalism without immediately being used by the reactionary lobby against political correctness. One cannot in fact suggest that these things should not be the hegemony of the English departments without giving support, without providing an alibi for the people who say "only teach the texts of English literature in the English departments." This predicament was not what I was talking about, I'm sure, when you read me saying that. . .

In The Post-Colonial Critic. . .

Oh , my God, what does that say? I mean I don't like that book. But anyway, you don't want me to tell you anything more do you, because there are many things one could say.

What kind of curricular choices or changes would you like to see... given the decolonizing imperative, or whatever you would like to call that?

Within what situation? Remember I never say anything. . . Well certainly. I would have liked you to comment on the situation here, but you can't. . .

Look, I won't. The thing is I could. It's only too easy, only too easy, but I won't.

But in your situation?

My situation? Well, what I'm suggesting is that on the undergraduate level there should be national-origin validation courses. They should not be seen as multicultural because then the person who is the centre is the white

person who is allowing diversity. If you see them as national-origin validation, then it's the young people who are coming as new immigrants who are obliged, you know, as they come through the immigration, naturalization services, they take a very symbolically important Americanization "course." Okay. So in that context, you have on the undergraduate curriculum national-origin validation courses, all kinds of cultures, et cetera, and I see the main pedagogic imperative there to change the established so-called opposition groups in the direction of understanding that the national origin validation course is not against their interests and to change the old immigrants from white identification into immigrant identification, since I see everything as an act.

At the level of postgraduate studies, where I'm most involved, educating the educators, it seems to me that you have to there begin transnational literacy, so the question of a national identity is seen as no more than a kind of affective alibi against the fact that one wants to be within the changed United States, so that the nature of origin is seen within the transnational alphabet, and in general I think we will get more help from the person who's not from that nation in locating this, rather than the person who is from that other nation state. And then, among the teachers of these courses, and I speak as someone who is doing this for herself, there has to be also educating the educators by supplementing the humanities with the social sciences and social sciences with the humanities, so we should realize that interdisciplinary teaching is something we have to learn rather than take for granted.

I'd like to change track a little now. How do you respond to criticism against your position that "the subaltern cannot speak"?

"Can the Subaltern Speak?"[3] comes out of the recounting of an incident. Now the incident is a situation where a subaltern person had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message. I cannot think of a situation where somebody really tries to communicate that is more urgent than this. What happened? In one generation, one of the women in her own family said exactly the opposite and condemned her, so in that situation of extreme poignancy I say "a subaltern cannot speak." But every person has decided not to... . This is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak: nobody relates it to the damned suicide, not a person. In fact, every accusation that G.C. Spivak is not letting the bloody subaltern speak is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak, because that's spoken in rage and disappointment by one woman hearing through the most nonmasculine network—mother to daughter, see that's my grandmother's sister. My mother said to me that my grandmother's sister had done this and left a message and waited until menstruate on and all that stuff, and in my generation the women have forgotten it. It's the least phallogocentric way of networking and it has failed, so not only has she not been able to speak, her grandniece trying to make her speak has also failed because not one critic has related it to the example which proves for me that the subaltern cannot speak. I'm supposed to take that seriously? I cannot take that seriously, to tell you the truth. Now let's move that one out. This you should publish because I've never said this.

Then, the next point: everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. The definition of the word "subaltern" that I use is given in the essay. We are scholars after all. If they are networking in the

most non-phallogocentric way, and it has failed, the subaltern cannot speak. Let us at least use the hegemonic discourse as well, scholarly discourse. I give the definition, I quote the definition, the definition has a scholarly history, and that is forgotten, so that at both ends my critics are just kind of going to town, failing at both ends. Now, the word "subaltern" as one knows is the description of a military thing. One knows that Gramsci used it because Gramsci was obliged to censor himself in prison. One also knows that the word changed in its use when Gramsci presciently began to be able to see what we today call north-south problems, sitting in prison in Italy, because he was talking about the southern question, and he realized that if one was talking on southern Italy, just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything. And so then the word "subaltern" became packed with meaning. How extraordinary "subaltern's" provenance—a word that comes out of censorship and therefore is a classic catachresis, because of this incredible political situation, and we run with it.

The subalternist historians take it from Gramsci and change it. They define it as the people, the foreign elite, the indigenous elite, the upwardly mobile indigenes, in various kinds of situations: everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. It's in capital logic, you know what I mean? So, to that extent, you can only... then I'm talking Gramsci. I mean, do we understand metaphoric use of words that are like minimally metaphoric. When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern's sphere. You bring out these so-called subalterns from the woodwork; the only

way that that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony, which is what should happen, as subaltern. Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologicist museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do *a thing*, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech.

The third thing, which is the worst, that is, you don't give the subaltern voice. You work *for* the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity. The penultimate thing is (I want to say something about the work of the subalternist historians), many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being in a discriminated against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word subaltern, and they don't need Spivak as a whipping girl because she said out of that position that the subaltern cannot speak. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are, and since they can speak, as they tell me—yes they can speak—I quite agree, they're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They shouldn't call themselves subaltern and their main purpose should not be to bloody Spivak.

But the final one is, you see the work of the subalternist historians... their work has in fact, whether they do it themselves or not . . . it's having an impact on decolonized India, because what they have proved with meticulous care is that the nationalist narrative of decolonization is like a vaccine that did not take with the subaltern, precisely because the subaltern had no access to the culture of imperialism. And therefore today in decolonized areas, the fact is that all of those alibis for decolonization

are absolutely useless. The people have no particular vested interest or feeling of identification with those great alibis, used just less than fifty years ago. Now in this interventionist, subalternist work, they are not speaking for the subaltern, but they're working for the subaltern in that way. One doesn't do everything directly. So, those are the things that I would say about the whole spurious "the subaltern can speak" debate.



Notes

1 According to research statistics compiled by the Human Rights Commission and the Community Agency for Social Enquiry, December 1991 (when the conference was held) was a relatively 'quiet' month with approximately 50 political killings (Everatt and Sadek 13). In March 1992, when the white referendum was held, more than 200 people died in political violence (13). The dead in December included three people who were thrown off trains in the greater Johannesburg area, according to the Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression (Independent Board of Inquiry 12-13).

2 A book containing conference contributions is being prepared by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) under the editorship of Andries W. Oliphant.

3 See Spivak (1988).



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In Conversation: Speaking to Spivak*

* Bulan Lahiri, “In Conversation: Speaking to Spivak”, *The Hindu*, February 5, 2011. <http://www.thehindu.com/books/in-conversation-speaking-to-spivak/article1159208.ece>

As I wait for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her brand new office at New York's ivy-league Columbia University where she is University Professor in the Humanities – the first woman of colour to be conferred the University's highest honour in its 246-year history - I admit I am nervous.

At 68, Spivak is – and has long been – a celebrity academic who many consider one of the world's leading “Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist”.

But as she enters - crewcut hair, haversack on shoulder, wearing a sari - her disarming smile puts me at ease and I ask if her hallmark sari is a ‘statement of identity’ and whether, despite having lived in the US for 49 years, she has ever felt awkward about ‘standing out’.

Bulan Lahiri

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Lahiri: You appear the world over in a sari. Is that a statement of identity?

Spivak: Not really. I wear a sari... I always have worn one... You know, I am 68 years old. It's the most convenient thing for me... it never occurred to me that I should change... I am not an identitarian. I sometimes wear western clothes but 57% of the time I wear saris because they are cheaper and second, I feel all the fashion efforts made for saris go against the grain of that free flowing garment. I don't think of it as traditional because this way of wearing the sari came about from conversations with the Tagore family women and women from Bombay in order to make the sari more manageable for riding cycles and so on. Also, people give me saris and so it is economical. I don't know what my identity is or anything...

You were very young when you came to America...

19.

Weren't you uncomfortable about standing out?

I've always stood out! (laughs). I was incredibly tall and a very strange kind of person. That's a silly remark to make, but it's a fact. Whether one stands out for a good reason or not, that's another thing....no, it didn't bother me in the least. Although I was 19, at home I was already a 2nd year MA student and I had come here to do graduate work and in 4 years I was an assistant professor, so I was very precocious and not at all like a starry-eyed teenager. Also at that time, 1961, before Lyndon Johnson raised the quota, not many Indians came to the United States in the English department. I felt really that I knew everything about the US. I was a Calcutta girl... I had read Time magazine and all that stuff. There were no novels talking about immigrants and so on and I didn't know that I was supposed to feel any kind of cultural this that. I just came and started going to class and never thought about the fact that wearing a sari was an odd thing. And that was also the way my Indian citizenship has remained intact. I never thought I was supposed to change.

You've spent most of your life in America....

49 years

How do you see yourself? As an Indian or someone from America?

I don't really know. I don't know how a person actually thinks an identity. I think it's probably something that came about from this process of national liberation. You were thinking that you belonged to this nation and that you should be free but I am truly not much concerned about questioning myself about my identity and so

on. I think one manufactures a stereotype for oneself and I don't think that's a very interesting thing - one's own stereotype about oneself.

What brought you to America?

One of my professors told me that I wouldn't get a 1st class in my MA. I was a fatherless person and I had worked very hard indeed to get a 1st class 1st in my BA. At that time, as far as I knew, for someone who was not going to be able to finance her trip abroad and was in the humanities .. who knows, I never checked this carefully but I was only 18 after all...I thought I would even have difficulty getting a passport if I didn't have a first class and thought 'this is the time for me to leave'. I didn't want to go to Britain...I was an adventurous kind of soul and thought the British universities were an extension of our Indian experience and also that I would have to take a second BA and that was not acceptable. I borrowed money...the person who lent me the money I hadn't known before - I just knew his name. He told me it was a life mortgage because I had no collateral to offer - I didn't even know what collateral was and I don't think there were life mortgages at that time. You must realise how innocent I was. I was a very intelligent person in the matter of taking exams and studying literature and all that but I had no practical sense and I was very protected by my wonderful mother and my father, who had died about 6 years before that. I just felt free to do anything and that's how I came. I signed a document which said that if I didn't return the money by 5 years then I would be obliged to accept any employment -as long as it wasn't illegal or criminal -that this person would suggest. But I did give him the money back in 5 years by saving and stuff and he was kind enough to say that I had already repaid him and did not accept repayment and that was the start of my savings (laughs)

Could you tell The Hindu a bit about your intellectual evolution. You are considered among one of the foremost thinkers in the world today. Did you have any idea early on of how far you would go?

No, frankly, no (laughs). I have never been able to think that I am anything but just a non-bluffing person. I was trained in Calcutta University during those years to think on my feet but because I am not a scholar I often reinvent the wheel and then console myself by saying the wheel is not a bad thing to invent! That's why I can also be so bold. I go into other disciplines and disciplinarians who are really good support me. I think of people like Bimal Krishna Matilal. I have solid high school Sanskrit. I can read historical narrative things like *Rajatarangini* and the *Mahabharata* without a dictionary. I can't read philosophical or linguistic Sanskrit and that needs to be explained to me. With this Sanskrit in hand I had offered readings here and there and people like Bimal or Peter Van der Veer have said "Good, someone outside of the discipline is trying carefully, is trying hard and comes up sometimes with interesting things". And Bimal would also say affectionately, "tell them Bimal Matilal said this is a new reading" and he knew that people wouldn't question his authority. On the other hand, people who are less good and bound by their discipline are quite hostile towards me. In history, in Sanskrit, in political theory...some colleague whose name I will not divulge has actually written in print that I was juridically and theoretically unprepared for reading the *Dharmashastra* in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". What I asked him was: when feminists the world over read *Oedipus*, they are not all classicists. I certainly can read texts that constitute me in culture, which I share with even the poorest woman within Hinduism. I have a right from within and I know some Sanskrit. Who are you to say I am not the

appropriate reader? So that's what I can say to myself. That I try very hard, I don't bluff, I am not a scholarly type but I do as much homework as I can and I look for support from those scholars and friends who are strong enough in their fields to appreciate that I try. I don't really see myself as a great thinker. I am always surprised when people say they have read something by me or know my name. I can even say something else...this is one of my touchstones in a Mathew Arnold way. My mother was once with me at an event where there were many many people in the audience- maybe about a thousand- and I spoke and there was lots of applause, questions etc. I came home with ma and my brother asked her "well, how was she?" My mother loved me with all her heart but she also knew that the kind of unquestioning pride in oneself (vanity) is a very bad idea - it really stops the intelligence from operating - so she, with a smile, quoted that old 19th century advertisement for Bankim Chandra from Star Theatre, celebrating that Gobindalal came onto the stage on horseback - Bengal lights on the horse's head. So my mother looks at my brother and says "hei hei kando, rei rei bapar; ashho pristhe Gobindalal" [Oh what a to-do, what an uproar, Gobindalal on horseback]. She said this with affection but it immediately made me realise how stupid it would be for me to take these kinds of tokenised occasions as any indication of any achievement on my part. I have never forgotten it and it protects me.

There are so many languages that you have worked in....

There is another story...quite an amazing story. I borrowed money, right? I couldn't get a fellowship in the English Department at the U.S university the next year because I was not a native speaker. These things have changed now but to an extent they have changed because

of our work, you know. I had no work permit for the next year, and I was thinking 'what on earth am I going to do next year?' I gave a paper in Paul de Man's seminar. He had just become the new chair of the new Comparative Literature department. My paper was respectable and he had filled all his financial aid slots for students and there was one left and - this has come out in conversation much later when I was myself directing a Comp Lit programme. At that time I thought it was because I was so dazzlingly brilliant! But when Mr de Man asked me if I would like a fellowship in Comp Lit I said 'of course'. Those slots ...if you don't fill them they disappear, so he said 'well, what is your foreign language?' I said, 'English'. I must say that even at that stage it did not occur to me to declare my mother tongue as a foreign language which people do all the time to get into Comp Lit and I think that the politics of that gesture is deeply suspect. In a foreign country, to get money, you call your mother tongue a foreign language? So he said, 'Well, that won't do. What else?' I said, 'nothing'. I had had six months of French at the Alliance Francaise in Calcutta and three months of German with Mrs Bhaduri who was the German widow of a Bengali freedom fighter in Ballygunge where I lived. So I asked 'will the readings be in that language?' He said, 'yes'. 'Will the lectures be in that language?' and he said, 'sometimes'. And I said, 'will I have to write my papers in the language?' He said, 'no, not necessarily'. I said, 'ok, then I am in' because I had no money. He said, 'you can't take language courses. If you are doing a PhD in Comparative Literature at an ivy league school, you are supposed to know the languages'. I said, 'well, I'll give it a try'. That's all the French and German I ever had had and so I sailed forth. I was a very brave person. I can say something very boastful :a couple of years ago, when it was the 40th anniversary of the

Comp Lit programme at Cornell, they invited me as the best student that Comp Lit had produced....and I was thinking to myself, ‘gosh, and I went in knowing no language really at all’! That was amazing. And how I went ahead to translate Derrida - and that too in French, I have no idea, but I did.

How long did it take you to translate a complex thinker like Derrida?

Immediately, because I had no idea who he was...You know, I was very young: I was about 24/25 by then. I thought: here I am... a 1st class 1st from the University of Calcutta, PhD from Cornell, here I am at Iowa – stupid really – I must keep up my intellectual life. I would order books from catalogues and it was by chance that I ordered *Grammatologie*. I didn’t know Derrida’s name at all. I was far, far away. There was no email, no fax, no nothing. How would I know? If I hadn’t ordered that book my life would have been so totally different. Just the thought of that accident fills me with a certain kind of terror...with so little French - it is a very complicated book, at the age of 25. I think that’s the one intelligent thing I have done in my life. I read the book and I knew that this was a good book...I thought to myself: I am a young assistant professor and this is a young unknown author. I want to write something on this book but there is no way that this is going to fly...I heard at a cocktail party someone mention that the University of Massachussets press was doing translations. I really felt at that stage that I could do anything, so that gave me the idea. So I wrote this absurd query letter to the University of Massachussets press: I am a wonderful translator (I had never translated anything before! It took me a week to translate that one page)..it’s a wonderful book but I wouldn’t translate if they didn’t let me write a monograph-size introduction, and sent it off. This query letter

was so innocent, with no one's recommendation or anything... these days when I recommend my students' manuscripts for publication, I think to myself that there was no one recommending this thing. You know, I always fall on my feet- like borrowing that money. They felt they should give me a chance and I surfaced and so that's how it was. Of course my Chairman said I was stupid. Why was I going away from British literature and doing this thing? But, of course, it really kind of made me into a kind of middle line star, didn't it? And I took a whole year off because I had never had a course in philosophy-undergraduate, graduate, anything. So I took a year off and I got a sabbatical from Iowa ..they were very kind..and I put myself to school and I read all by myself this philosophical text and I wrote my introduction. It's really like...when I think back upon it I think, 'My God, how did I manage all that?'

How did -what is perhaps your most famous work -
Can the Subaltern Speak come about?

What happened was that in 1981, I got a request from Yale French Studies to write on French Feminism and from Critical Enquiry to write on Deconstruction. At that point the thought of identity did come in a little because it was in the air. Edward Said was a very dear friend but I didn't read Orientalism until after his death but, nonetheless, those thoughts were in the air....so I thought that I should do something. And so I wrote French Feminism in an international frame and translated Draupadi with an introduction for Critical Inquiry. Something in me was wanting not to be taken over completely by French theory ...you were talking about intellectual evolution...this is my stereotype of the narrative, ok? ? I was looking at this interview between Foucault and Deleuze - these two people who have written such complicated theoretical material. When they are talking between

themselves just to each other they are, in fact, revealing theoretically pre-critical stuff which they would question in their writing. So the presuppositions are all there. Let me put a humble example here. I am not an American citizen, but my mother was because she was with my brother's family...she was my brother's dependent. I, sometimes, just to check out this kind of hidden presupposition which I saw in Foucault and Deleuze would often say to my politically-correct friend, 'my mother was American'. They supposedly think that Americans are of all colours, all everything, but invariably, no exception, they immediately will say, 'oh, that's why you are so tall and broad shouldered!' In other words, in their heart of hearts, they think that American means White. So this is the kind of thing I was looking at: unacknowledged presuppositions which come out in conversation but would not be acknowledged in their theoretical productions. And so that's what I needed to escape from, I felt at that point... so to escape, where would I go? The woman who hanged herself in *Can the Subaltern Speak* was, in fact, my grandmother's sister...so she was like a family person. I never mentioned that because I didn't feel that it was appropriate and I wanted people to react without the kind of benevolence that they give, for example, to a Patricia Williams or Saidia Hartman because they talk about their own family connections to the past. It was extremely hard for me to write that piece and at a certain point I felt that I had used myself up because I did feel that in her gestures she had deeply questioned the idea of a woman belonging to one man and that women in the family had forgotten that she had tried to make this clear in the way in which she died. And so I laid out that ideology of belonging to a unique man in its extreme statement - in sati, although I was very aware that it was an economic phenomenon etc. It was a realistic idea, ok...

that's why I said she *cannot* speak. She could not speak because she *did* speak but was not *heard*. That was the meaning of 'cannot speak'. I got a lot of nonsense as a result of my saying this to the extent that finally Dipesh Chakraborty told me that our friend Meaghan Morris had said a very wonderful thing to him: 'those people who question Gayatri and say that you take away the subaltern's ability to speak etc. think her article is called Can the Subaltern Talk (laughs)! It was not about talking. It was about: when the subaltern speaks there is not enough infrastructure for people to recognise it as resistant speech. So when I felt that I couldn't write any more, I sent it to my editor and said 'please cut it or do something with it. I can't control this anymore'. And they printed it as it was!

But you have returned to that thought over the years.....

Over the years...but you see, that was the beginning and for a person who somewhat deliberately had no family, I have been nourished by both my parents, my sisters and my foremothers. This woman whom I never saw (she was seventeen when she died in 1926) has really taught me the value of going in a certain direction - which was amazing, wasn't it? But I went away from my own class to think of the subaltern in other ways. According to Gramsci's definition, people who have no entry into the structures of the welfare of the state, who cannot have... have not achieved that state. In that sense my idea of the subaltern is somewhat different from subaltern studies. I don't study the subaltern... I learn from the subaltern. There is a little difference there.

Where are your thoughts now?

I have more or less finished a huge book called *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation*. You mustn't get me wrong. I feel that both ends need a re-arrangement of desires, ok? I am not just interested in the subaltern. I am also interested in the super-power. I teach literature and theory in the dominant languages at the doctoral level at a very powerful university in a very powerful city and I have had these schools in the so-called backward districts for 25 years. Some were closed for reasons that are also very interesting political reasons. I see myself as a classroom teacher rather than anything. I write these books because I can't not write. You know, it's that kind of an obsession. I have read an awful lot of very excellent books to think that my books will really make the grade in the long run but they are written with great seriousness and sincerity. But I don't write well either. Many people have said this in print – that I don't write well and I am sorry about that... I try my best. My language has become much simpler but not, therefore, easier to understand.

Your language has often been criticised as being 'dense' or 'opaque'. Has your language been a response to the very complex material that you deal with?

I think so. I don't like the fact that I was so overwhelmed by the complexity of my subject. You see, I am an intellectually insecure person. You will find this hard to believe and so I felt that I wanted to be taken seriously by people and I think that's not a good motive for writing. Over the years my language has become much simpler but the density has not disappeared. My current book begins with two simple sentences: only capital and data globalise, all the rest is damage control. These are two very simple sentences but they are not easy. The first sentence might be easy but the second sentence is incredibly complicated and the trouble is that when you write

it in simple language people think they understand but it's a great trouble because what they understand is so far from what I was thinking. I am a very counter-intuitive personthat's a problem, what to do?

Do you think it is necessary for there to be a dialogue between thinkers and the 'real' world?

Some thinkers do percolate and some don't. John McDowell is one of the greatest philosophers of our time: I don't think he has a great popular following. It seems to me that in our time -the situation may be different in India - but here, in the United States, the so called exchange between policy makers and the international civil society and human rights activists on the one hand and 'thinkers' - let's use that word for me - is not real. If we don't, in fact, more or less speak with the presuppositions of that crowd we don't fly and so I have a feeling that the other side has a bit of an obligation to ask us questions. I myself am not tremendously interested in communicating with the so-called 'real world'. The university is not unreal: in fact, the university is now so corporatised it is very much a part of the real world. What can I say? I'm quite cynical after so many years of being within a university.

Do you think Marxism as a political system is dying?

I think it will probably happen again because I believe it is never exactly appropriate to the theory. It seems to me -one cannot tell the future, the future is undecidable - but nonetheless, it seems to me that the idea that capital should be used for social justice is not an idea that's going to go away. I think that what we had - parties within a parliamentary democracy, which is also Gramscian, you know, democratic communism - *that* I think is probably going to come around again. At this point, with the

break-up of the Soviet Union, it's too soon to say anything but, on the other hand, the idea of socialism -which was based on the notion that if the agents of production knew that capital emerged out of the difference between how much they needed and how much they could make and that if *they* controlled that difference then they could build with that capital a just world – a welfare state, let's say, *that* was not a very practical idea. Anyone who has been in teaching knows that the line from freedom from oppression and freedom to a build a just society simply does not exist. The only thing that can exist is the line between freedom from oppression and claiming rights, which is also a certain kind of self interest. There was a huge education-shaped hole in the idea of socialism, so the kind of education that was encouraged was science and all that kind of stuff and, as everybody knows, it became state capitalism of various sorts -unless it was within the mischief of party politics... and so, competition. But nonetheless, within a parliamentary systems things do happen. Goon politics was always there. Excuse me, I am not an idealist here but having been in those villages and having actually heard the stories of what the party did and how they were before, it's not something you can immediately forget. I am not a party person and it took me years to break into these conversations. I don't think that changing the state formation is the end of it. In fact, it's the beginning of it, so it will have to look very different. It's also true that the factory floor has been pulverised under this globalisation thing etc so we will have to think of a model which is a little different from industrial proletariat as the measure of socialism. And finally, but not less importantly, is the fact that it has to be gendered. There is a beautiful book by a woman – I think "Taji Wai" [I am not sure but I will find her name from my textbook list last year] is her name – who is a film

professor at Peking University and she has written about the fantastic change in women's conditions under Mao. That is something that no one can deny- it completely changed what Chinese women were and men and women became the same but then, she says, just that kind of rational egalitarianism does not undo internalised gendering which has turned, for example, organised labour everywhere into an enemy of women. Permanent casuals: that's what the women are, right? The idea of free love, for example, at the upper end – that's also a ridiculous idea. So, to an extent, it will have to become gendered in complex ways. As to how this can happen, who can tell because it's not really a question of just a change. And the last thing I will say, and where Gandhi was very prescient, the model that Marx really dealt with –perhaps it was never clearly set out– was not necessarily the model of what is called 'revolution' – the violent overthrow of a previous dispensation. That's why when he wrote he said that he could only write in Britain because Britain had come to a certain place in the development of capitalism, and he said Germany can't produce anything right now. What was called the general strike was more implicit as the model for change because at that point it was the industrial proletariat. I have already said that cannot be the centre but that would be –and I am now thinking about Rosa Luxemburg– a place where the intellectuals, the ideologues, would just give tactical advice because the agent would be the workers,... since in a general strike it's not the intellectuals who are employed by the factories. In a general strike if there is violence it is epiphenomenal, it is not part of the definition... This idea in Marxism which, in fact, Gandhi's non-cooperation etc. is related to – one can see that also in his Hind Swaraj and so on – that is not necessarily connected with violence. I am not suggesting that

Marxism was a non-violent theory but its not crucial to this change in the agent of production. As Gramsci saw, and I am quoting, that Marxist project was 'not just moral and psychological but epistemological'. This idea - that it needed a rearrangement of desires, not individualistic but collective if you like, because there are also Marxist fundamentalists who will approach any idea of education and dismiss it with the word individualistic. This is a great shame. They have to be able to think that the singular is always universalisable. It's not this collective against individualism kind of thing. These changes which make a reality check on the assumption that freedom from oppression or exploitation leads directly to the impulse to build a just society or that Marxism is about self interest... you know, which is about the human rights folks, the universal rights folks and the job creation folks... these will have to change and it will have to be gendered and we have to know that the model cannot be just industrial proletariat anymore because of where the mode of production has moved in the current conjuncture. The last thing is that the industrial mode of production has not gone away. In our recent crisis, which we are still within, what really kept happening was that insurance for credit kept failing, right? One after the other after the other because there was a whole system of insuring for credit protection that had been built up totally imaginary, as it were. It fell and fell and fell and right at the end was, in fact, the old model working class. That's the funny thing. All this stuff about service economy and so on and so forth... it hasn't disappeared, the industrial model. I said a great deal because I think about these things but once again, I am not a political theorist and spoke totally as a citizen of the world rather than someone who knows it.

Did the communist states in India get things wrong, such as the government in West Bengal which is said to be on its way out?

I am not good at predictions but, of course, like everybody else I think about these things. So as an interested person I will say that I think that on the kind of level immediately outside the metropolitan circles of good behaviour and so on, this kind of goon politics is not confined to the Communist Party Marxist. I think that the reason for this sort of thing - clan politics in Central Asia, goon politics in our country outside of what Lenin would call the progressive bourgeoisie... there is a book about Central Asia by a woman called Kathleen Collins which is a real eye opener. So to an extent what I think was happening was that there was no ideological connection between the goon politics and the Left... although there were broad policies like the Panchayat Raj, like what the CPM has done in the areas where I have my schools - those are not to be neglected. This goon politics came to the fore when they were unable to think industrialisation in any kind of soft capitalist way. So, to an extent, it was a weakness of their strength. They really were incapable of doing a better soft capitalism and they made a terrifying mistake. The goon politics pre-dates all this and it is shared by other parties. There, I think, to fault Marxism needs a reality check, but then what happened was what I call the feudal layer of international civil society folks. Women, quite often, what they did was set out to destroy the party and that was a mistake. I am not in favour of whatever happened in Singur and Nandigram, and continues to happen, on both sides. But as I say, the goon politics issue is across the board and it's on that that these women - what I call the benevolent feudal layer of protecting the subaltern etc - came in on that and destroyed the party and it seems to me that given that

communism had bitten the dust in Soviet Russia and is kind of transforming itself willy-nilly into a kind of peculiar capitalism in China, it was, perhaps, not very well considered to have done that. On the other hand, I have also heard it said that in a couple of years they will come back again and that they deserved to be taught a lesson etc. I am very distressed with what happened and cannot support the party but to take them down on the issue of that kind of murderous politics in the village areas was a mistake because that is shared by parties and does not depend on ideologies and this I have seen through my experience of actually hanging around rather than just being with the local zamindars and so on in these backward areas. I would also say that the idea of subaltern Maoism – I think it's a kind of rational choice of Marxist vocabulary to describe something which is much more complicated and I think it's highly irresponsible and it's a pity because unfortunately these people have been so used to being cannon fodder and take their readiness to get into armed struggle - the phrase armed struggle itself is too high falutin but physical opposition, let me put it that way - is to take advantage of people. The incredible bad faith among the progressive bourgeoisie about what is actually happening I find tremendously troubling. Some of the writings that describe these people is almost like explorers writing about strange and wonderful tribes.

Do you see yourself as a feminist? What does the term connote to you – as a concept, and by way of a 'lived experience'?

I think that gendering is a bigger institution than anything in the world. I think that it globalised tacitly long before people could think the globe. Sexual difference, which is different from gender, is the only empirical dif-

ference that everyone can sense and any sign system needs a difference around which to construct itself. Gendering is our first, and most persistent, instrument of abstraction. That's the most primitive theoretical tool. Both capitalist and worker are within it, coloniser and colonised are within it. Those kinds of distinctions disappear. Any kind of academic work is incorrect if not gendered. There are people who think that only women and queers ought to be talking about this kind of thing. For me that is wrong. I don't know if that is supposed to be feminist. That's a thinking thing, right? On the other hand, working for good laws that would undo this gender difference is a different kind of work. I think that's quite crucial and should not become a single issue thing. I don't like the idea of the women's vote or something like this. That work, however, cannot be taken as an end in itself because the establishment of laws does not mean that they will be implemented across the board. I am involved with countless public interest litigations. I am involved in a lot of these things but with a clear eye. Now that I am older I can say this: that we should not take this as the end of the struggle. It is in many ways the beginning of the struggle – the passing of a good law because then the definition of the subaltern is someone who does not have access to these structures. I have used examples in my writings. There is a piece called Righting Wrongs which I gave to Amnesty International and is now published and I give examples there about how this happens. There are many feminist thinkers who agree with me there, including people who are not very like me, like Catherine McKinnon. I don't know if that quite boils down to the *label* feminist, just like you have been saying Marxist -but I don't know if it quite boils down to the *label* Marxist, what I am talking about... I will say something more about the Marxist business. People have

objected to my saying that I have always been associated, even sometimes behind the scenes, with the magazine called Frontier. I think they have no right to object. I was very close to Samar Sen, the founder of the magazine. He actually was, in a sense, part of our larger family and then, after his death, I am very close to Timir Basu. That position for me has always been the left of the left critique of parliamentary communism and I think that is a very important position and necessary position. Gramsci in his jail cell was in that position, it seems to me. I would like to say that so people don't dismiss anything that people like me would say as simply ignorant speculation.

I understand globalisation is one of your current interests?

Who can not be interested in globalisation? The university is fully globalised. You folks say corporatized, but actually it is within a system which we call globalisation. This is also true at home. I am going to give a talk to the University of Baroda and the way they have been running it .. it does not seem to be like an Indian University anymore. Our universities – the elite universities – are also within that circle. Yes of course I am interested in globalisation, but I am not an economist and I really do think that what really globalises is capital and data and the other things are very uneven results .. and my feeling is that the humanities cannot and should not be global. We should supplement the fact that there are certain things that will be global in that uniformising sense. Are we just going to write off all the languages of the world? In order to be global you have to have two or three big languages. Yes, of course I am interested in globalisation but i am interested in unmaking the global from the end of the humanities, as it were.

You have straddled so many different fields and areas. Are you looking at synthesising your thoughts, perhaps in a book?

Maybe in this book that I am now working on. It's finished, I am just putting in the references. I have a feeling that most of my writings are kind of a mishmash of a whole lot of different things. I kind of define myself by an American idiom: a mile wide and an inch thick. I am not a specialist in anything. I am kind of a generalist thinking about things. I know a couple of languages, I read carefully. I write what comes to me. I write because I am obsessed. I can't not write. But I am much more a classroom teacher. I've been wanting to write about the possibility of socialist ethics since 1978, but the world is changing, so the answer to that question is changing and I have a feeling I'll die before I write it. The next book is the lectures I gave in 2009 at Harvard – the Du Bois lectures. I think Du Bois was the greatest sociologist historian of the 20th century. People don't pay as much attention to him as they should maybe because he is identified with almost his first book *The Souls of Black Folk* and he's seen as kind of an African Americanist. Then I have a contracted book on Derrida where I get to write on what I understand about that oeuvre. And then after that, who knows? I may be dead.

Where are thoughts now?

I learn from my mistakes. The idea of education, the uncoercive re-arrangement of desires. Both at the top and the bottom. That's my consuming interest. A lot of things come and go because I teach courses after all, but that's my consuming big interest. Du Bois, Derrida, everyone comes in there. I was just talking about Primo Levi.... Primo Levi, you see, was at Auschwitz. He writes in the last chapter of his last book: When young pe-

ople ask him “what were your torturers like in those concentration camps?”, he answers: “Well, apart from the exceptional monsters, they were just average men like us, badly reared”. See that word ‘rearing’? Starting from child rearing through institutional humanities style and qualitative social sciences-style education – that’s rearing. In Italian it’s just *educare*, but in this case it’s a good mis-translation. Rearing is more basic than education following an ‘idea of knowledge as knowledge about knowledge, I’m a great specialist, I’ve found the best theory’ which is kind of Martha Nussbaum and my colleague Hamid Dabashi – that’s nonsense as far as we are now concerned. As I said, that formula ‘uncoercive rearrangement’ – that’s very hard to do. Both at the top where the superpower is ready, to quote, ‘help the world’ which is very arrogant and, at the bottom, where rote education constructs a rote mind... I work way below the NGO radar. NGO folks come and go and either they feel they have results or they are always there, running their schools or kind of taking the children away from their regular upbringing into a more kind of ‘bhadrakalok’ arrangement. This is not what I am talking about. It’s a very complicated thing. If I have any intellectual ambition anywhere, it’s this – can it be done? Can there be a real democracy, as Marx asks, where everyone has rational judgment?

7

**Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,
92nd Street Y, New York***

* Interviewed by Shailja Patel. November 14, 2011.
<http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2011/11/interview-with-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak-92nd-street-y-new-york.html>.

Rockstar goddess of postcolonial studies. Leading feminist Marxist scholar of our time. Gadfly of subaltern studies: her seminal paper, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” seeded a thousand dissertations. Irreverent, iconoclastic, unfailingly taboo-busting, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a study in highwire intellectual risk-taking. As University Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University, one of the world’s most elitist academic institutions, she trains upper-class graduate imaginations for epistemological performance. At the other end of the global spectrum, she has, for three decades, pursued the painstaking, backbreaking project of creating and sustaining schools for rural children in Western Bengal.

I want to understand something about bypassing the necessity of good rich people solving the world’s problems. Good rich people are dependent on bad people for the money they use to do this. And the good rich people’s money mostly goes to bad rich people. Beggars receive material goods to some degree and remain beggars. My desire is to produce problem solvers, rather than solve problems. In order to do this, I must continue to teach teachers, current and future, with devotion and concentration, at the schools that produce the good rich people – Columbia University – and the beggars, seven unnamed elementary schools in rural Birbhum, a district in West Bengal. This work cannot be done with an interpreter, and India is multilingual. I must understand their desires, not their needs, and with understanding and love try to shift them. That is education in the humanities. (Spivak, 2010)

What Spivak does in Bengal is the opposite of philanthropy, or uplift. At the 2008 inaugural World Authors And Literary Translators’ Conference, in Stockholm,

she called for unflinching examination of the conference theme: “Literature And Human Rights”.

I take this idea extremely seriously, so I am obliged to critique it rigorously. We are self-appointed moral entrepreneurs, our mission predicated on the failure of state and revolution. We fetishize literacy, health, employability, without inquiring rigorously into what they have effected, or how we deploy them, in our own lives.

This consistently brilliant calling out of liberal gospels is one reason non-scholars flock to Spivak’s talks, though we may comprehend only every 5th or 10th sentence. But there is more. Spivak has a glamour, a draw, that defies the complex – some say intentionally over-difficult – nature of her work. As with all legends and icons, it is almost impossible to analyze the precise elements of her appeal. Her charisma is best described by its impact.

Consider. On February 2, 2010, Nobel Prize winner, Wole Soyinka, speaks at UC Berkeley. I arrive ten minutes before the panel: “Rights and Relativity: The Interplay of Cultures”, begins. I have my choice of seats in an almost-empty front row. When the panel starts, the auditorium is 75% full, a respectable turnout.

Two weeks later, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks, on “Situating Feminism”. I arrive thirty minutes early, score one of four remaining front row seats, in the same lecture hall where Soyinka spoke. Fifteen minutes before the talk starts, the hall is full. Professors and scholars sit shoulder to shoulder on the floor space below the stage, on the stage itself, pack all available standing room at back of the hall. Ten minutes before the talk starts, an organizer asks those seated on the floor at the front of the hall to clear a path from the door to the podium, so the speakers can enter.

A crowd around the door cannot get in, and overflows down the hallway. I am reminded of Italy's Internazionale Festival, where talks were broadcast on large video screens outside the filled-to-capacity auditorium. I was stunned to see close to two hundred young Italians, a supposedly apolitical and alienated demographic, stand on cobbled streets, in biting cold, to watch Noam Chomsky speak - not even live, but on a webcast from the US.

Spivak's talks generate electricity, that are only partly an outcome of what she says. The charge also comes from the transparency of self-discovery as she speaks. The absence of masks – and the accompanying risk of self-exposure and spectacular tumbles.

There's really no way of locating desire. Please understand this. [] I love my students. I think one should love one's students. Like marriage, it's a contract, isn't it? But it's a very peculiar kind of love, because a student is not really a human being. A student – is a student! (Spivak, 2010)

And from the sheer physicality, the vigor of performance, she brings to the podium. What she describes as her “best skills of hamming”.

I'm better looking than Socrates, OK? I really do think so!

And most powerfully, from the laying open of her living experience, in the moment of answering, without defense or self-justification:

Love in education? I have to sing another song. (sings) Love is just a four letter word! (laughter) Because that's what it is for me! I don't know what it means. It describes an absence of the other affects. Avoiding coercion – that's a real effort. Hanging suspended – that's a real effort. So that you don't actually go in thinking you

know, but you try to see... I'm musclebound with education and qualifications. So I try to see what the hell I should do, the next step. Those are real nameable affects – learning from below....

But something happens – that's that intuition of the transcendental. I cannot really produce an evidentiary thing about it. It's a very irritating kind of thing. Not just this [teaching at rural schools in Birbhum] but also teaching at Columbia. I don't like to teach. This is a thing which people don't believe. But somehow, on the other hand, there is some sense that there must be something beyond evidentiarity, because it's clearly not just earning a living.

And also, to be attached to people whom I often don't like – students in other words! [eruption of laughter from audience]. And yet to be attached, to care – for all of that stuff, which is nothing else, I have this word. Which serves and pleases. []

I mean, love didn't work, whatever the hell that is, in my life. Alone I am. I'm not particularly into self-love either. I'm quite prepared to die. And all the objects of my love are slowly...(trails off).

So the named thing, I can't describe. This is the name of a place where the named efforts and affects seem to find their limit. That's why I was clowning..... (Spivak, 2010)

When I find myself unexpectedly seated next to Spivak, at the New York launch panel for *The Letters Of Rosa Luxemburg* (Verso, 2011), I try to convey to her what I find unique and compelling about her public talks. What distinguishes them from those of other theorists, public intellectuals, even activists. To my delight, the first Rosa Luxemburg letter, in Deborah Eisenberg's reading selected from the book, captures it perfectly:

Do you know what gives me no peace nowadays? I am dissatisfied with the form and manner with which people in the Party, for the most part, write their articles. It's all so conventional, so wooden, , so stereotyped. ...these current songs from our tribe of scribblers... are no songs at all, but just a droning without color or tone, like the sound of a cogwheel spinning in a machine. I believe that the source of this lies in the fact that people, when they're writing, forget for the most part to go deeper inside themselves and experience the full import and truth of what they're writing. I believe that people need to live in the subject matter fully and really experience it every time, every day, with every article they write, and then words will be found that are fresh, that come from the heart and got to the heart, instead of [just repeating] the old familiar phrases. ("To Robert Seidel, Jun 23, 1898", Luxemborg, 2011)

Particularly apt since before the talk, Spivak mentions that the New Left Review will never publish her. She describes a wager made with a colleague, who urged her to publish in NLR, that NLR would reject a submission from her. The prediction was fulfilled, when the editor of the NLR actually called her, acutely embarrassed, to apologize for rejecting her article.

Emboldened by learning that Luxemborg, one of my heroes, is on Spivak's hero list too, I ask Spivak for an interview. She agrees, firm and courteous that she has only 45 minutes to offer. Two days later, we meet at the 92ND Street Y, where she is attending a concert. Spivak wears a thick herringbone coat, and a cap embroidered with sequined elephants. The cap is a gift from a Parisian friend, who saw it and instantly thought of her. Her neck is wrapped in a handwoven geometric patterned scarf, from a Nepali student. On her wrist, a copper bangle from a South African colleague. Another bracelet from

her third husband. And a watch, “from Spivak, bought with my money. And those are all the gifts I am wearing.” This is endearing, her pleasure in her outfit, the sharing of personal history in the items she wears.

We have time for thirteen questions, which suggests a play on Wallace Stevens’ *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. Here then, are “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.”



Patel: *You give an extraordinary number of public talks, and your travel schedule is exhausting to even track. What is it you find worthwhile in the act of public speaking that justifies the prodigious effort it demands of you? What happens when you show up for a live audience, in Delhi, Stockholm, Berkeley, that can’t be transmitted through the written and published word?*

Spivak: This is not, for me, for talking to people. It’s rather, my own work. I work up each talk right before the talk - I can’t recycle old talks. Right before the talk, my energies begin to concentrate toward the occasion. That’s because what I’m doing is fieldwork. It’s my own education, rather than just talking to these people. Although I have to think about the audience, that’s also part of the game – it’s directed speech. What their politics would be. For example, talking to Croatians about Marxism. You can’t say the same thing you do in the US, with the euphoria about Marxism on the so-called U.S. left! (I am never invited in the US by the complete red-baiters.)

So it’s directed talk, but that is the nature of the fieldwork. I was told by my first editor Bill Germano that I worked in cultural politics. That was the subtitle he gave to *In Other Worlds*. I always like to be told by other people what I’m doing. So I decided that that’s what I was

doing. So when I answer this way, remember that the description of my work has been given by someone else.

I don't really know what I do.

But I kind of know that that's why I need to confront very very different kinds of audiences. You've given Delhi, Stockholm, Berkeley, as examples. But in fact, the examples would be much much broader. So I really have to twist myself into many different situations, and many different kinds of interlocutors. Even in interviews. I gave an interview to a young German man, who's completely enthusiastic about saving the world.....that's a very different kind of thing from talking elsewhere.

So that's why I do all this talking, it's my own education.

How do you sustain yourself for this level of travel and performance? How do you maintain your voice, your body, your energy, your enthusiasm?

I don't really sustain myself too well. I always ask when possible, for a full bed kind of ticket. But I don't get it, obviously, and travelling in villages and so on, it's not possible.

But I try to look after myself, where possible, and I've just entered my 70th year. My body is beginning to give notice. I have arthritis. I have bursitis, which developed because the folks in the village were saving me money. And, because I felt that was a total success on my part, I was allowing them to save me money. Because 25 years ago, when I entered the scene, I was perceived as an upper class, upper caste rich person who had come to do good. And slowly I have changed in their view, to someone whose money should be saved. So that's a real passing an exam type thing. So my movement has become almost all on the back of old motor bikes, or in rural

buses, etc. and that is not good for me. Walking even. And so I got bursitis and sciatica, aggravated. So my body's telling me stuff.

And also I have heavy metal poisoning. I got tuberculosis from one village and now have post-tubercular bronchiectasis. I get pneumonia all the time, my bronchial tubes have shriveled, they don't have any lining, the sinuses do their work. So this is not really sustaining, is it?

What I try to do is I try to be what the old definition of a nomad is. Which is wherever I pitch my tent, I try to go through the same routine. I'm exactly not a tourist, wanting to see new sights. No. I am everywhere in the same place. That's how I sustain myself. I have not seen the Taj Mahal - can you imagine that? I go to Delhi many times in a year (laughing) but there it is.

The quality of being you bring to your public life evokes the image of an intellectual tightrope walker, or fire-eater, combined with the honesty and vulnerability of a great actor. You display a willingness to stand in the rivers of what you speak and think about, and be drenched. I believe this is what brings crowds out to hear you wherever you speak, although your subject matter is arcane, dense, often difficult for those of us not trained in academic languages – and even for those who are.

At the podium, you perform, repeatedly, a kind of self-revelation that is the opposite of exhibitionism; it is the most rigorous kind of self-examination. You have said, of aesthetic education, that: The important thing is to welcome the loss of control. (Carruth, 2010), but your loss of control in your public talks appears to be exquisitely disciplined and relentlessly directed towards discovering the truth.

Is this a practice you consciously cultivate? Is it learned, or the natural outcome of the unlearning required to “train the imagination for epistemological performance.”?

That business of presenting myself is really a way of saying that these answers that I’m giving should be judged, contextualized. They are not formulas to be applied under all circumstances. I don’t even know if they’re correct. I just know that at this point in time, they seem to be correct. I will have to think about them more, also to situate them.

That’s why really I talk about myself. I don’t really talk about myself – it’s a stereotype; what do I know about myself? It’s a stereotype that, as far as I can tell, frames information so that I’m not taken to be giving ideas, pure ideas.

But how has this happened? Now people are commenting on it. Before people used to fault me for it, saying I was narcissistic, etc. But I think as the years have passed, people have seen that this has to be distinguished from academic or public narcissism, because we see so much of that, and this does not resemble that.

So how has it happened? It has happened as a kind of reflex. It kicks in because I simply do not want to claim the position of the *sujet supposé savoir* (subject – I – who is supposed to know).

I know that people would rather have quote, ‘the truth’ unquote, from the podium. And it’s not good to make oneself vulnerable to this kind of testing. So I found by kind of a happenstance that I do have this idea that the best player is a player who can deliberately play to lose. As you were asking the question, I’m thinking that perhaps it relates to that – playing to lose.

But playing to lose is a risky thing, when other people don't know that's what you're doing. And of course, playing to lose, you become a victim of your own game, because, if you play to lose successfully, you're not losing. So it's like a labyrinth.

How do you define 'loss' here? What would it mean to lose?

Simply, there is someone else playing with you, and that person wins. That's all that it means. It's not very complicated

I want to revisit your words at WALTIC about the "fetishization of literacy, health, employability". They recall P. Sainath's trenchant comments in Everybody Loves A Good Drought:

Literacy is a vital social tool. It is not an education. [Literacy's] best moments have come when people [] have shaped it to their own reality, their own needs. That usually frightens governments. Make women literate and they picket alcohol shops. It's nice to have the girls read and write. Having them rock the basis of, say, Tamil Nadu politics, is not the idea.

You spoke at Berkeley about the point in your work in rural schools where the "benevolent" project of literacy became dangerous, because it gave people the tools to confront authority. And of the consequences, the state reprisal. I believe this conflict is still widely ignored, because it threatens the premises of so many forms of missionary intervention – from projects such as WALTIC to Ensler's Vagina Monologues, or the current campaigns to address mass rapes in the Congo. So would you be willing to tell that story again?

I very much like what Sainath says. But I will go a bit further.

I think literacy by itself is nothing but a skill. It has nothing particularly good within it. It allows you to do certain kinds of things. You can tell where a bus is going, etc.

But I have found, in the villages of West Bengal, where my experience is concentrated, because that's my native language, you know these people who have been the victim of very bad education, they're not only literate, but they've even graduated high school. But if the government issues a proclamation about the distribution of rice, etc. we have to go to these places and explain to them what the proclamation means. They're not able to read the Bengali for understanding, for in school "reading" was for memorizing.

This both shows the class difference between the government and them and shows the horrible nature of bureaucracy in all languages, that it's not close to common language. But it also shows that literacy and numeracy in themselves are artificial things.

I find, with the people I work with that the smart illiterate person, Nimai Lohar, and another one, Tulu Shabar, illiterate smart folks, they are much more into my ideas than people whose heads have been ruined by bad education.

So if literacy comes tied to rote education, it almost – paradoxically – I can never be against literacy – but paradoxically it harms you. These governments that decide that literacy is the be-all and end-all, statistics of literacy etc. and all that, this is just a convenience for them, because anything else would be too much, right?

I've written about this, in a way that I can't recapture right now, so let this be a kind of an open reference.

It doesn't mean anything to be able recognize letters. That's why to make that an end in itself simply shows

the laziness of governments and the statisticalization of education.

It wasn't literacy that frightened the authorities [in the case of one set of my rural schools]. What frightened them was that one of the young men in my schools had learned – he was much more than literate, he was a very smart young man, literacy doesn't bother the authorities – he had learned to distinguish between good education and bad education. In other words, he had learned to distinguish between just stuffing him with information, so a tribal boy could come first, and being educated.

So if the subaltern begins to get democratic judgment – now distinguish this, because it relates to your question about human rights – from the subaltern being interested by the benevolent feudal-type leaders in self-interest; like “Look, I'm really being oppressed, I must ask for my rights,” that's fine. Self-interest is supposed to be a good thing for the subaltern, although not a good thing for the human rights worker. But if the subaltern gets what the human rights worker has, which is democratic judgment, then – very bad things may happen.

Democratic judgment, which has nothing to do with self-interest, or resisting oppression, or any such thing. That's when the benevolent despot closed the schools. The next day. Closed the schools, evicted the male students, it was unbelievable that it was in response to the young boy wanting to go to another school, from the high school where he had been placed. Because he felt that what they wanted was to make him a ‘first boy.’ And he wanted real education. He wanted to be with other tribals rather than in a school with regular Hindu – Muslim students, where it would be something new, a first for a tribal boy to come first.

That's what it was. Literacy is not frightening to the authorities. Because they know, literacy is a nothing by itself. It's a first step to nothing. So judgment's what scared them.

In the human development index, education is statisticalized. How many years? Whereas for your own child you will make a tour of all universities to see who's giving the best education. Class apartheid. That's what scared the guy.

You mentioned how in your Delhi talks you addressed the caste and gender ramifications of shitting – and how it didn't go down well. I haven't been able to find the text or video of that talk, but it sounds like a perfect example of what Rosa calls for: that people need to live in the subject matter fully and really experience it every time, every day, (Luxemburg, 2011)

Can you summarise what you said on this, and the responses?

This is a few paragraphs from the talk I gave in Delhi, which will be published as a full text, so keep that in mind.

Gender difference. Two narratives, not yet evidence.

A man walks with a feminist leader down a path strewn with human waste and says with ill-concealed pride, "our toilets are free." When his mother is affected with cholera, a male co-worker's son with hepatitis, and since for lack of education, the man and the co-worker cannot use a free national health service, although the feminist leader can, it is possible for her to show, by explaining the difficult prose of the World Health Organization translated into the regional language, that they are paying the high price of their free toilets, and will continue to do so.

When a woman, a capable teacher who regularly teaches the books from the state curriculum outlining oral-fecal disease, is asked why she doesn't use the toilet added to her dwelling, Rs. 2,800 paid for by the feminist leader for her own use, she remarks:

The men here are very courteous. They do not go near the fields that they know are being used by women for defecating.

Now this is a different kind of argument. Gender solidarity through acknowledgment of gendered division of bodily affect. This is not a question of obeying hygiene, of any principles. She knows them, she teaches them, she is one of the best teachers in the schools.

In the feminist leader's case, this has been rearranged through the use of caste shame, by class mobilization, through relatively recent European colonization. Is she simply interested in creating a "middle class" through the use of caste obedience? Then let's not accuse the elitists. This is not pre-modern to modern on the way to the post-modern. This is an acknowledgment of the relief map of modernity, calling for epistemological activism, leading toward slow, but real change, supplementing necessary feudal problem-solving. (In global contemporaneity everything is modern, was the general argument in the Delhi paper.)

I just heard a brilliant paper by a female colleague in Baroda, on the caste distribution of shame, in the context of the women's Chara rebellion, and other related resistances in Kerala. And heard her lengthily lectured by a male Delhi university historian because she had dared to cite Foucault. She is an epistemological activist for the historiographers, and I hope I will learn more from her in the future, in the matter of gendered caste shame, who

is allowed shame – Brahmins and caste-Hindus, not Dalits.

In the caste Hindu marriage, lajjaharan, or removal of shame, is one mark of being married. When the female leader strips in the Euro-US gym locker room, she is married to the rearrangement of caste shame, which is her access to modernity, sequentially and teleologically perceived, so that she can lead today. Yet that is still marked by a sexual difference that doesn't acknowledge the plurality of genders. If there are unisex or gender-diversified locker rooms, the female leader doesn't know it.

And we notice that when the problem gets relocated by caste to race and class drift, we are approaching a reduction to absurdity. It announces the rupture into post-feminism.

Could you say a little about how this passage was received in Delhi?

They were completely nonplussed and flabbergasted. Nobody asked me a question about it. Because I believe – I may be wrong – but I believe they could not bring themselves to talk about shitting in the fields in the Vice-Regal lodge, where this talk was given.

And there were male professors sitting there, including the head of the English Department. I have a feeling that it just didn't break through the barrier of academic shame. There was embarrassment (laughing). That's what it was.

Please describe your experience of submitting work to the New Left Review, and why they won't publish you.

This is about the fact that my work seems completely unacceptable by the NLR. Whenever this kind of thing

happens, I always think that I'm not good enough. Because if I think that, it's helpful for me. I have a pretty strong self-concept, so I'm not going to get blown away. And when I think that I'm not good enough, I don't necessarily think that individual people are better than me – no. I find them, quite often, very funny.

But I would like to be able to write the kind of sober, well-documented prose that NLR publishes, and I'm incapable of writing it, I think partly because I'm not a good enough scholar. On the other hand, I also cannot write like the badly-treated minority, because I'm not that.

So it's better for me to think that I don't get published by NLR because I'm not good enough.

You cited Rosa Luxemburg as one of your heroes. Will you say more about why? Who else comes to mind in your pantheon of heroes as you think about Rosa?

Since I've never been asked to account for why she is one of my heroes, I don't know. I really have no idea. I would have to rationalize that answer. But I am going to teach her, in either the fall or the spring, and it will be on a few texts of the General Strike.

The course will be called: "Some Texts from the General Strike: Reflections on the History of an Idea." I will distinguish this from May 68, from Naxalbari, and Tahrir Square and all that stuff. I have written a little about the fact that the Tunisian example was a singular subaltern speaking - the guy who burned himself- and there was, paradoxically, a political will created by the predatory government.

I will go first into the pre-texts of the anarchists, but even before that, Chartism. Since I don't do 19th century novels, 18th century novels, I will find out if there is a novel of Chartism, because I'm a literature teacher. And

then I will teach Sorel and Benjamin's Critique of Violence which leans on Sorel. Then I will teach Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci, 1905 and Turin,

Luxemburg's book on the mass strike, and this will be my center.

And then I will teach Du Bois, because people said that he made a mistake in calling the exodus of the slaves when the Civil War began a general strike. I don't think so. He was very learned, he wasn't making a mistake. I want to see why.

And then I will do Gandhi. Because I believe the Non-Cooperation movement is mistakenly thought of as only ahimsa, non-violence. Non-Cooperation was much more a recoding of general strike with the generalized Hindu text of ahimsa thing. So I'll do Gandhi and maybe the Gandhi-Tagore letters as they relate to this issue.

And then I'll do Tillie Olsen, because her novel Tell Me A Riddle, is certainly a story of the 1905 revolution, which is what Rosa Luxemburg's 1906 essay is on.

So that's my 7 weeks, and that's how I'll teach her.

But as to why she's my hero – does anyone ever know? No I don't know. But I did put down two things. Lack of fear – yeah, I suppose, but many people are fearless. I also put in her body warmth, but I'm just – I'm really rationalizing. I don't even want to think about why she's my hero. One must protect one's heroes from these kinds of questions (laughter).

I watch and listen to your public talks as one performer watches another. What is your embodied experience when you speak? Are you physically tired afterwards, or high on adrenalin? Do you experience nerves or excitement before?

I used to be terrified before public talks. But somehow it's disappeared.

But these days, I am exceedingly careful about writing the whole talk. And I find that I can really write fast just before the talk.

I finished the Los Angeles talk this week – the woman was coming to get me at 4, and I finished at 12 minutes past 4. Luckily, she was late. And I finished the Tagore – Gandhi talk, maybe one minute before I went down to the lobby. AndI can give you many accounts.

I find it's much better if I write them down. Something remains. I now realize that these talks are full of references, because I've been reading and thinking for many many years, so it's not like I'm writing out of nothing. So that anxiety – I must finish writing – I get up at 4, I get up at 5.

Afterwards, it's adrenalin. OK? I just want a – and I have to go back to the empty hotel room. The thing is, that when I was young and good-looking, men wanted to really, kind of, you know – have sex – because they want to control the woman of power. And of course, I knew that they weren't controlling me, because I was a completely happy participant. I also used to drink, etc. – there was a different scene.

But now, first of all I don't drink. Second of all, who the hell would come towards an old woman like me? So I'm exceedingly full of energy.

But while I'm talking, I'm feeling that I'm not good enough, I'm not good enough, and this is something that never goes away, I don't know why

What is the next level of risk in your work? The next challenge you're setting yourself?

You see I don't really feel that I am taking risks. It's something that you have noticed, and I have welcomed the description, because it's a nice heroic description.

My real intellectual ambition – I have many – as a writer, I want to write a New Left Review type book.

I want to teach a really scholarly course. In other words, I distrust my own demagoguery, which you are praising.

But the real thing is supplementing vanguardism. These rural schools – will they be able to sustain themselves when I'm dead?

You see, I do not want to hang around. I want to teach so there's change in the subaltern. That's what I want, but will it happen? I can see that the board of my foundation, they're not going to take such – to use your words – tremendous risks. The only one that I'm hoping against hope to convert – it's a licensed lunacy – is this Ben Baer – an English person who has learned Bengali, and I hope he will do, but who knows.

That's my thing. Because when I die the foundation will have a little money. Right now of course, it's all my salary. Will it become just like other foundations, other education NGO-s? Then it's no use really, the money should just be given away to someone. That's my real worry. I don't know if it's a risk or anything.

Which of the performing arts speaks most powerfully to you? Will you share a performance you have seen recently that moved you, entered you deeply, and stayed with you?

Music. I was myself trained to do North Indian classical vocal performance. I can't do any more, because that kind of stuff takes a lot of time, 6 hours of practice

every day, but it gives you a certain way of understanding what's happening, which is wonderful. And in European music, I have a great deal of experience in listening, but no training.

But what I generally do with both kinds is the way I read, which is suspend myself. I just let the thing happen. I don't know how to describe why. I'm not obliged to say to anyone why it moved me. I'm very careful – like your question about Rosa Luxemburg - not to constantly think about things that are happening – to me – except when I have to in terms of public speeches or writing something.

However, I mentioned this guy called Joe Diebes. I've been talking about him all over the place. I talked about him at the Whitney Independent Study Program, in LA, I'm going to talk about him in Stockholm.

A Princeton-Columbia coalition of graduate students, they were doing something about translating sound into visible stuff, etc. and there was this guy Joe Diebes. Who had done some stuff that seemed to me to be moved by the same kinds of questions that the early Derrida had in his head.

The early Derrida is a very rare kind of friend of mine. He changed completely, like most people do as they grow older - I have too – and he had become immensely famous, etc. etc. But those questions ... suddenly to see this young man who's not a philosopher at all, he's a composer – so I've gotten very moved by his stuff. But how much of it is Derrida, and how much of it is Joe?

That's a little different from the way in which I hang out within music, remain suspended. Heidegger has this phrase, *Mitwegsein*. That word, to be with someone or something, away (*mit-with, weg – away*), that's the way that I move in music. It's not that I'm unmoved by visual

art, by theatre, by opera, but generally it's music that hits me most deeply, and I hang out in it. I don't know why. I don't want to know.

Is there a question you aren't asked, that you wish you were asked, asked more often, or had been asked, in your long history of interviews?

No. I know there are questions I would like to be asked, but as to what they are, I don't know.

But I'm never satisfied by the questions that are asked. I want to be surprised by a question. As a literary critic, that's the way one is, isn't it? I'm always looking for the unexpected. That business about their saving me money, that I said earlier? That's an unexpected thing. I couldn't have imagined that downward class mobility would be marked by that.

So I've not been surprised by a question that has seemed like a very apposite question. But maybe that question will never arrive, because the lost object has to remain lost, doesn't it? To an extent, it could be that it's just a kind of mode, like Godot. I'm always waiting for Godot, the unexpected question that.... but Godot doesn't arrive except in Monty Python's replaying. So that's that. There we go!



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“Changing Reflexes”:
Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

* Interviewed by Edward J. Carvalho. Works and Days 55/56: Vol. 28, 2010. <http://www.worksanddays.net/2010/File24.Spivak.pdf>.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is widely regarded as one of the world's leading postcolonial and feminist critics. During her career, she has produced several notable texts that include an acclaimed translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1976); *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Methuen, 1987); *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge, 1993); *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard UP, 1999); and most recently, *Other Asias* (Blackwell, 2007). The following interview was conducted on 7 Apr. 2009 at Earl Hall, Columbia University, where Professor Spivak is both University Professor and director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society.

Carvalho: *You may have seen that the Works and Days volume Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-9/11 University (nos. 51-54, 26-27.1/4) was recently the subject of some discussion in three of Stanley Fish's New York Times "Think Again" blogs. Professor Fish focuses first on the relationship between neoliberalism and higher education as explored in the essays by Sophia McClennen and Henry Giroux. Essentially, Fish has clung to the belief in a depoliticized classroom space and that academics should "save the world on their own time." As one might expect, McClennen, Giroux, and Searls Giroux resist this kind of academic forfeiture. In the op-ed column, Fish further attempts to clarify his positions:*

And when I define academic freedom as the freedom to do the academic job, not the freedom to expand it to the point where its goals are infinite, my stance 'fore-

closes the possibility of civic engagement and democratic action.’ (McClennen) That’s not quite right. I don’t foreclose the possibility; I just want to locate it outside the university and the classroom.

What are some of your thoughts on this debate?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: My idea of the teacher of literary reading—and let us not forget that Professor Fish is an exemplary reader—is that willy-nilly s/he, if successful, changes reflexes, and strengthens the imagination. Without a strong imagination, there can be no democratic judgment, which can imagine something other than one’s own well-being. Yet literature is also not “political” in the narrow sense. Insofar as the training into judgment is part of higher education, this applies to even the most “political” of disciplines.

Sure.

The freedom to teach, to expand the imagination as an instrument to think “world,” is thus deeply political. It operates at the root of where the ethical imagination and the political mingle. I believe that to distinguish between “the possibility of civic engagement and democratic action” and teaching in the classroom is to make a useless distinction. I’m not even saying it’s wrong, because I think what you have to realize is that it is with the mind that one takes democratic action! [laughs]

I found it very moving when Mumia Abu Jamal wrote in his book (*Live from Death Row*) as he was waiting on death row, apart from everything what I really need is people with changed minds. Now, when I, Gayatri Spivak, say it, the knee-jerk reaction could be, “Oh, yes, she’s talking about the mind. She doesn’t know that the materialists only think about the body,” which is also nonsense, of course. But, on the other hand, when it’s coming from Mumia, it has a certain kind of authority.

Where does my authority come from? I'm not unlike other people. I, too, like thinkers who show me some choices, but I like the choices to be a little open so that they're not between given positions.

And this is where I think academic freedom stuff begins to become much more complicated. It's not just something opposed to this insane kind of post-9/11 climate—9/11 happened just eight years ago! History is long. When you begin the story from 1915 with John Dewey writing that academics should be distinguished from factory workers and have freedom, or from the end of the eighteenth century and looking at Kant and Mendelssohn writing about what is Enlightenment, it's not quite 9/11, but then you've decided on a race-specific way of looking at academic freedom: that the only history is capitalism, and the only history is Europe and Asia. And within this history, if you start with Kant and Dewey you're claiming a class privilege that has a larger-than-Europe history.

I never really thought about it in those terms. Can you elaborate on this more?

I think about academic freedom in a long context rather than in the aftermath of a terrible president and a very unfortunate event. I consider that *guruvāda*—which is Sanskrit for “guru-ism”—gave the academic absolute freedom. It was a different sort of academy and a different sort of state. But Kant is not exactly teaching at the University of Colorado either.

Here, I go to Gramsci. Gramsci knew Marx backwards —backwards— and understood him, and respected him. But he did not think of Marx as his guru. And so quietly, with a greatdeal of sympathy, he writes a sentence that no one particularly comments on, but it's

a complete heresy. He writes, “This is why Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* [1859] is not just a moral and psychological project, but an epistemological project.” In other words, if you don’t engage exceedingly carefully at changing the reflexes of your student, at whatever level, you are not exercising your responsibility as an academic. So any position that says “that with one part of my mind I do civic responsibility and democratic action and the other part is what is trained in a classroom,” I think it’s talking nonsense.

Robert Post, from Yale, who is supposed to be very strongly proacademic freedom, makes a mistake. I heard him say something like this: “The hard sciences can teach truth, but in the humanities, academic freedom is contained in being commensurate with what the professional organization endorses; because the humanities can’t teach truth, only hard science teaches truth.” I think it’s a deep confusion between the register of exactitude and the register of truth. And it seems to me that we do not teach things; we teach how to know. I mean, we do, of course, teach things, but we really teach how to know. You don’t do politics in the classroom, but you sharpen the ethicopolitical instrument.

The political requires a lifelong preparation that goes along with the short term call to action. Otherwise, the universities would have no reason to exist. And so it seems to me that the facile binary opposition that Stanley Fish makes is, as I say, not even untrue, it’s just irrelevant.

That makes sense. In some ways, it reminds me of your work overseas in that you teach to untrain the effects of rote memorization and, in so doing, try to get your students to exercise their critical thinking and

thereby open the possibility toward a political imagination.

There's no question there, however. I will, in fact, make a comment on your comment. Shall I do that?

Please.

First, I would like you to rethink me a little. Okay? As I said before, I am an Indian citizen. I carry only an Indian passport. I work abroad. I work overseas here; this is my overseas. India's my home. Cornel West made this mistake once, long, long ago.

Well, at least I erred in good company [laughs].

He says, "But Gayatri, you went to school abroad, didn't you?" And I started laughing, and I said, "No, Cornel. I went to undergraduate school at home and then I came abroad to get my doctorate." As to why I came to the United States, it was before Lyndon Johnson lifted the quota, right, '61—he lifted it in '65—so I came four years before. This is not the material for discussion on academic freedom, but this much I will say: It was not a Eurocentric economic migration in order to become American and then take a position against the United States—it wasn't like that. For me, the United States is a place where I work, and I take my work quite seriously. But more and more, that work is shared with work at home as well. So if you begin rethinking me in that way, then I think you begin to get the point of why I'm there.

I think I now understand better your earlier comments on the strictly American view of academic freedom.

I'm not a nationalist—not at all. I think nationalism is an awful thing and that's why I don't like all discussions of academic freedom which seem completely America-centered, and a little bit of something to Europe. "What's happening in America? The origins of academic freedom

are in America.” I think that’s a deeply . . . distasteful way of thinking intellectually, and a dangerous thing politically, as if America is the only place where academic freedom is truly exercised. Period.

Even people who are writing about academic freedom in Gaza or Africa, for example—even George Caffentzis, whose work I greatly admire—always look at academic freedom situations when there are incredible infringements by the state. This is quite unlike the infringements that we fight here. But then, those positions are taken as things that America must solve in terms of American standards of academic freedom.

Now, when you consider my work in India, the first thing being that you don’t think of it as work “overseas,” but “work at home,” then you begin to contextualize the entire sojourn in America, by this work that began in 1986, about twenty-three years ago. The first part of my life in the United States was embroiled in personal problems. Those issues were certainly also political—I’m a feminist—they were deeply involved in politics. But once I came out on a plateau, I started work where it was natural for me to work, as it were: That is to say, among the largest sector of the electorate, with whom I shared a native language. This is not work overseas.

And so, in this sense, it’s always better for me to hit democracy as far below as possible. For example, India happens to be, to quote CNN, “the largest democracy in the world.” I also go to work in China because I’m not a nationalist. I am very serious about the need to look at the largest sector in India of the electorate and in China the people who are “down there.”

What do you hope to accomplish there?

With respect to that work, let me first say this: You cannot understand the rest of the world in terms of the

American story, if you think carefully. America is only two-hundred and fifty years or so old; if you expand to Columbus, it's five-hundred years. When we are looking at Columbus, mercantile capitalism is already beginning to firm its sails: that's a different narrative. And so, it's not that in the ground level at each of these countries [India and China] there is just rote learning to contend with. Rather, I'm trying to approach the fact that in places which are thousands of years old, with established trends in education that millennially predate capitalism, in those kinds of areas I am trying to undo in a sense the effects of what John Dewey said so cockily: that "academic freedom is based on the fact that we are not factory workers." I am trying to undo the differentiation between intellectual labor and manual labor that exists long before capitalism, that which makes academic freedom a deeply responsible situation of double bind. On both of these places, China through the millennial imperial civil service and India through the Brahminical past.

Yes, in the short term, I'm absolutely for fighting, as I have indeed in my short career, fighting every time that an administration or a state stops someone for a politically unacceptable position; though if you look at what we support, you will realize that we are against bureaucratic egalitarianism. We bind academic freedom to a context because we want it free. This is why we cannot confine ourselves to only the "infringements of academic freedom." I can't even see them as infringements of academic "freedom," because in each case it's bound to a position taken by the academic who happens to have contradicted the assumptions of the more conservative side.

The situation reflects for me the irony that all short term political contingencies are based on giving up the

idea of reasonable truth. I cannot therefore theorize academic freedom from these occasions. For me it's not a theory; it's a strategic situation, and I acknowledge that. It's an occupational hazard at the university in the United States, and it relates to this deep distinction between intellectual and manual labor.

Now, if you go back into this area where I do the other teaching, what am I trying to do? I am trying to create the reflex in the poorest people, the largest sector of the electorate that will lead to democratic behavior. But it's not so easy. As I say, I come from a civilization where full academic freedom was the name of oppression and tremendous special privilege. Like the archons, above the law. What I'm undoing now is eight-thousand years of freedom given to the "teachers."

Right. So your work is also a kind of epistemological project . . .

Gramsci, again, was a very smart man. He knew that if you take away the situations of infringement—Gaza being destroyed, Joseph Massad being exploited in that horrible way—that the group known as "intellectuals" is, in general, an upwardly mobile class of folks who don't care about anything and are incredibly slow to change. So his notion was that the intellectual should be instrumentalized. The intellectual should be in a master-disciple relationship, where he is the disciple of the historical-cultural situation in order to be able to understand how to produce a subaltern intellectual who would not suffer from the prejudices of the proletariat, created out of capital logic. This is a very different kind of thing; it comes from a man whose freedom was completely taken away. Probably that statement by the public prosecutor is apocryphal, that "We must incarcerate this man because this mind should not be allowed to think for twenty

years,” but, indeed, what was taken away from Gramsci was his intellectual freedom.

And this is why he is important. What he got out of that situation was not how to plead his own case, but how to think about what the role of the intellectual should be—even when he had been stopped from being an intellectual. He defeated Mussolini by writing those twenty-nine notebooks in jail. We are still reading them. That mind did think. And what did it teach us to think? It taught us to think that our thoughts about the intellectual should not be conditioned by the dangerous, absurd, and criminal behavior of the other side. When the other side behaves in that way, we fight them. But they do not conduct the terms of our theorization of academic or any other kind of freedom. And I think the main problem with all theorizations of academic freedom coming out of the United States is that we have taken as our origin, the behavior of the other side.

Yes, I can see that.

And we do what we can. But when we talk about academic freedom, then comes the moment of the double bind that the intellectual—and Gramsci also says this, to a certain point as I mention earlier—cannot be expected to change too quickly. Intellectual change, epistemic change, is extremely slow. So all of the cases of academic freedom infringement are speedy; “We have to fight them, we can’t let up. And that’s what we must do.” But the other area, what Marx would call the “autocritical,” if we get a moment, then, when we get a moment, that speed is extremely slow. And we are caught within these contradictory instructions. I don’t want to see academic freedom always being discussed at that other speed, the fast speed, obliged and visited upon us by the other side.

To an extent, what I'm trying to do in this particular situation is to prepare these people for that slow reflex. It is so hard, when for thousands of years the only thing that these human beings have been asked to do is to give their bodies' labor, to the rural gentry, the rural middleclass, the rural upper class, and now, due to globalization, by remote control. They don't believe; they don't have heads anymore. This is not five-hundred years of colonialism, this is not people who have come to find a better life and fallen into capitalism in the United States: it ain't like that. And, therefore, the rote learning is not just rote learning. It's that business of even the rote is meaningless because the cognitive instrument has been destroyed. It's the millennial construction of class apartheid. That's a very, very different thing from "just working overseas" or doing NGO work. See what I'm saying?

Definitely.

Spivak: I'm not just trying to break rote learning. I'm trying to do the same kind of thing except here I say "humanities." There it is the decimal system. You know? Because they must be able to enter the science stream in order to move. That's the kind of thing that I'm talking about. It's that word "overseas." My idea of academic freedom doesn't stop at the door of the American university.

Honestly, I think it's important to be able to connect those narrative threads together. That reminds me: During our lunch, you were telling me about your opening remarks for a recent humanities conference that relates to this part of our discussion . . .

Spivak: I had a little conference where I wanted colleagues to talk about the responsibility, especially in the humanities, but also the qualitative social sciences—indeed, hard science is not everything—the responsibility

of producing these reflexes, teaching the practice of freedom, as it were, so that our students wouldn't go out and become such dogs. I mean, that's what we are suffering from, aren't we now?

Without question.

What follows are the opening remarks from the conference that I was talking about earlier during our lunch. You will notice that I bring up a couple of points that I have also brought up in our conversation:

“Living with the Humanities”:

Over the last decades, the situation of academic freedom in this country has become precarious. As in the McCarthy period, so today the fragility of academic freedom is deeply involved with foreign policy. Then as now, discussions of academic freedom in this country are focused on the U.S. alone, and the focus is legalistic. Often we hark back to the beginning of the last century, ignoring altogether the way in which the contemporary world has changed the stakes. I was particularly struck some months ago, and some of you were present on that public occasion, when a reputed law professor, of repute indeed for his deep concern for the humanities, said at this university that whereas the sciences taught, or could teach, the truth, the humanities taught what was acceptable according to their professional organizations. I realized right away that the idea that the humanities taught or could teach the practice of freedom was now lost to us. It is what Peter Bhogossian has called “fear of knowledge” turned 180 degrees.

At this university, which in this respect is no different from others, we hear statistical reports of percentage rises of hiring in the humanities as proof of their health. This is certainly a very good thing. On the other hand, the real question of the humanities is

that, because of its progressive trivialization and marginalization, it has itself forgotten that its role is to teach the practice of freedom to the general culture, so that academic freedom can flourish without having to be noticed only when it disappears, and without having to be confronted only by repetitions of the necessity to enforce the law. Speaking at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association last year— you remember that according to our friend the law professor the humanities teach only what the professional organization will allow—I said, “When did we decide to forget that the work of the humanities is a slow build-up for the practice of freedom, which supplements top-down efforts at problem solving?” And I answered myself, “I think when the absence of democratic structures in the state produces a culture of relentless fundraising, and the potential funders do not generally come out of the humanities.” For them, art and performance are good investments, and think tanks lend prestige, but the teaching of the humanities seems a wasteful anachronism.

The question that we move onto on the humanitarian international stage is: “can one say all this even when poverty is the main issue for a society? Can we still insist under such circumstances on what the humanities bring?” We must also ask the question: “Can one insist on the importance of a training in the humanities in the time of legitimized violence?” In this context, although the stakes have changed, I have learnt more than I can say from the remarks of W.E.B. DuBois, which I here quote: “The immediate need,”—we just read this in class a couple weeks ago—“The immediate need for the negro,” as he wrote, “is no doubt food and shelter. But at the same time, he,”—for him—“At the same time, he must also learn to communicate with the stars.” This conviction, that this must supplement

efforts at disease eradication, poverty eradication, legalism and fighting against violence—because generations are made, generations come up, generations are developed and generations are formed while such efforts continue. You cannot say “this first, and then . . .”

These are some of the inquiries that are not made when the question of academic freedom is only national, only legal. And it is to ask these questions that I urge my colleagues today. We need to think of these questions in a sustained way, even expand them into something like the following list:

- What is academic freedom?
- How is the issue changed if we think internationally?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking of it in national legal terms?
- What are “the humanities?”
- How is the issue changed if we think internationally?
- Can the participants take on board the idea that the humanities can teach the practice of freedom?
- How does this relate to the teaching of the practice of unfreedom in the economic, political, and religious spheres?
- How can the teaching of the humanities be used as a resource in the current state of play, nationally and internationally?
- How is the entire debate enhanced if we look at it from the perspective of the long-term practice of human rights?
- Does academic freedom conflict with what are believed to be “cultural traditions?”
- Do we have to make concessions to the degree of academic freedom that we want in varying political systems? Can it be an absolute freedom?
- What is the relationship between the right to education, the freedom of speech, and academic freedom? Do the humanities play a role in clarifying these distinctions?

Do these questions come to mean different things in different contexts? As a citizen of India, I find this to be pertinent most seriously to the matter

of the right to education. In a specific context, demands for the right to education can be a completely reactionary kind of endeavor. In another context, when violence closes the universities, this has to be fought for.

If we only focus on the United States, and United States precedents, we cannot ask these questions.

Before tackling them myself, I cite some answers sent in by Dr. Probal Dasgupta from India when I was planning a colloquium on this topic, and the concluding paragraph from Professor Aniket Jaware's intervention at the colloquium. I think the fact that in India, freedom of thought is sometimes interfered with by Hinduism, the majority religion, and this does not receive the publicity given to the relationship between education and Islam—has freed these colleagues to consider questions of academic freedom in interesting ways.

Here is Dasgupta:

There will be no time for you to look at this now, but for the record and for future reference at a moment when you do have the time, here are my responses to the questions in your wish list (I am using the word “wish” because you and I wish more people regarded these as questions):

- What is academic freedom? The right to converse freely, even beyond the freedom experienced among friends, given that friendship imposes practical constraints of time and individual attention that only academic structures are able to overcome so that conversations can follow themselves through, towards conclusions which may remain elusive, but become differently elusive when the obvious constraints are overcome.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking of it in national legal terms? Advantages: we find out what we are up against. Disadvantages:

claustrophobia, hopelessness, and also inadvertent complicity in triumphalisms we barely perceive when we are in our homes and do not see how these settlements look to internal and external others.

- What are “the humanities?” The pursuit, and as part of this the study, of the imagination that makes conversation possible, as only my ability to imagine you underpins and creates my speaking to you.

- How is the issue changed if we think internationally? Conversations always work within constraints that reflect one’s settings. When one works across settings, new possibilities open up because we concretely see what certain other contexts make possible. Let us say the conversations become more “ample”. I am quoting from an Ionesco talk I attended at Hunter College, New York in the ‘70s. He was asking why Shakespeare is more significant than, say, Defoe, and he said that Shakespeare had “une interrogation plus ample,” an adjective I have never recovered from.
- Can the participants take on board the idea that the humanities can teach the practice of freedom? With enough social science supplementation (I am thinking of Amitav Ghosh’s outwork in his *In an Antique Land*), yes.

- How does this relate to the teaching of the practice of unfreedom in the economic, political, and religious spheres? The institutions are self-justificatory; those spheres you mention are institutional spheres. The humanities allow us to speak behind and before this institutedness, to ask the why questions in a way that the institutions try, never entirely successfully, to forbid. It is usual to refer such asking to the voice of “the child”, but there are other types of new entrants and beginners involved, and the “child” image does not do enough of the work we expect it to do when we say this. As comic strip Calvin’s mother says, “If anybody says “the child in me” one more time, I’m going to scream.”

- How can the teaching of the humanities be used as a resource in the current state of play, nationally and internationally? I'd try translation studies for leverage, and insist on the interface with the social sciences, a strategy that forces some social scientists (whom the resulting funding patterns will lock into partnerships and joint writing) to face issues they are otherwise able to keep out of professional lives. I'd also use the point at which Sundar Sarukkai, in his 2002 classic *Translating the World: Science and Language*, is able to use translation studies and Derrida's intervention to work his way into a new take on philosophy.

- How is the entire debate enhanced if we look at it from the perspective of the long-term practice of human rights? I'd use religious discourse for additional leverage as the common law base for the human rights discourse, referring to Wole Soyinka who wrote "from the elders of the indigenous peoples in West Africa to the organized world religions, all the religions have consistently said that humans have rights, and this is pretty much all that they've said," or words to that effect, I saw this in a text by him in the '90s.

- Does academic freedom conflict with what are believed to be "cultural traditions?" If we cannot work our way towards an interreligious discourse as a major constituent of religious discourse, this is so and will remain so, but only as a condition that renders certain conversations opaque the way fatigue does. Remedies will need to resemble, and to draw upon, what we do when we are tired.

- Do we have to make concessions to the degree of academic freedom that we want in varying political systems? Can it be an absolute freedom? I am arguing for conversations, and conversations are by definition never absolute; they are languaged and contexted.

- What is the relationship between the right to education, the freedom of speech, and academic freedom? Do the humanities play a role in clarifying these distinctions? I have nothing useful to contribute to this important area of thinking.

I should like to think that the author of this document has no answer to the question of the right to education due to the emptiness of the word “education” by itself. In this country, intellectuals such as Martha Nussbaum and Lynn Hunt have urged the importance of the humanities. They have, however, put the emphasis, at least implicitly, on the contents of the humanities curriculum, inevitably literature, rather than philosophy, rather than its practice. They have not put the emphasis on the nature of the pedagogy of the humanities: how we read, how we philosophize.

The second thing that has interested me in Professor Dasgupta’s document is that as a preliminary to the possibility of something like an international declaration of academic freedom, he suggests “translation studies.” The relationship between deep language learning and access to cultural infrastructures is important. How far afield from questions of academic freedom, especially in places of poverty and legitimized violence, would this take us?

Here, now, is Jaware:

To distinguish academic freedom from freedom in general it might be useful to think of it in terms of moments of comprehension of what could be called the as-yet-uncomprehended. This also allows us not to think of freedom in terms of a substance or attribute that someone, or anyone, might be stated to possess; as well as not to think of it in terms of state of being. Inasmuch as the as-yet-uncomprehended can only be comprehended by a loving and friendly and slow reception, demands for quick

comprehension work towards unfreedom rather than freedom. It is such demands for quick comprehension that dominate outside the academy, and the echo of such demands within the academy could be said to be the beginning of the decline of humanities. However, inasmuch as the academy is the place where new knowledge is acquired and institutionalized, we might also have to look at the processes of institutionalization. These processes will show that academics often work in tandem with administrators, who too are interested in the maintenance of existing structures of authority, funding, patronage, opportunity, etc. It becomes clear again that the struggle is between the processes of institutionalization of new knowledge, and maintenance of old knowledge. At the same time, there is a new form of social vigilantism which seeks to replace rigorous knowledge with opinion, often heavily charged with individual or group emotion and this is the second beginning of the decline of the humanities. I think it is possible to counterpose these processes with what I have called a friendly loving reception of the as-yet-uncomprehended. Since the main areas of knowledge in the humanities are the various processes of being human, it seems to me that the humanities are particularly suited to learn and teach academic freedom in particular and freedom in general.

I take my points of departure from the input given by these two Indian colleagues, because I am myself an Indian Europeanist, deeply troubled by U.S. nationalism in considerations of academic freedom, and further troubled by the inclusion of the European Enlightenment alone—Kant's Enlightenment being the major player—when the horizons are broadened. I believe that the idea of “linguaging and contexting” to be found in Dasgupta's remarks can and should be taken much further historically

into two pre-colonial instances of “academic freedom” that the world has witnessed—the Chinese civil service and Brahminism. It is only then that Gramsci’s incandescent intelligence in making the following remark becomes clear: “A ‘democratic philosopher’ . . . is . . . convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment. When the ‘thinker’ is content with his [sic] own thought, when he [sic] is ‘subjectively,’ that is abstractly, free, that is when he nowadays becomes a joke.”



Thanks so much for the access to this speech. What else did you discuss at this event?

Once the conference got going, apart from two or three colleagues, most of them were the same-old, same-old accounts of infringements of the individual liberties. And I am deeply sympathetic, and I’m every step of the way in the fight. I have nothing to be embarrassed about—everybody knows this. While at that conference, we had the ability and the time not to be fighting and be in the struggle. That was the moment when we could think a little bit, away from the way in which the other side obliged us to act, away from the interminable narratives. A couple of people came forth. They were surprised by the idea. But, in the end, they had enough to say, and we had a good time. But most of the others gave us, again, narratives that unfortunately we already knew about.

Let me advance the discussion then to a question related to science that I was originally going to ask you later in the interview.

Considering your teaching work in India, I wonder if you have any opinions on Nicholas Negroponte’s “One

Laptop per Child” program at MIT? In 1992, when you wrote “Thinking Academic Freedom in Gendered Post-coloniality” you said that:

International support, in other words, however wellmeaning, can also bypass the inequalities within the new nation and stay on the high road of structural enablements. But who are the structures for? Who can or wants to use them? What must you know in order to (want to) use them? And even a further, more mysterious question, can we learn anything from those who seem to not know how to use the political structures we fought for? Or is that road closed? (452)

I asked Professor Chomsky about this program in the final minutes of our Works and Days interview (in relation to John Negroponte and Central American Terror)² and there simply was not enough time to expand upon my premise. Now that I’ve had time to reflect on it, I think the question is actually more apt for you. Do you see this laptop program as something beneficial to the Third World or as a structural device that will enslave governments and peoples (as most of the contracts for these laptops are at the governmental level) and thus place technological road blocks before the subaltern?

One of the key points you emphasize in your talk “Trajectory of the Subaltern” is how indigenous knowledge becomes intellectual property [in the pharmaceutical sector and via patents and so forth]. Can the “One Child per Laptop” program thus be seen as “faking a subaltern collective initiative”? Or, as you also put it, as a means on the part of the International Civil Society “to give philanthropy without democracy?”

That’s a very powerful question. How did Professor Chomsky respond to this?

Well, although my question to him was framed within a slightly different context, his basic sense was that “so far as I know” Nicholas Negroponte “is just trying to do something decent” (536). So, as you can see, it was very brief, and we weren’t able to go into it at any length.

And he’s also speaking of a colleague and I believe it is necessary for all of us to be careful [when speaking] about our colleagues because we live in the same house.

And the actions of one brother can’t be necessarily defined by another brother.

Spivak: Of course not. That’s also true. Okay, I think I would start from an agreement with Professor Chomsky: He, Nicholas Negroponte, is trying to do a decent thing. Now, it would have been interesting to see what Chomsky would have said if there had been enough time. But the real question is not the people who are trying to do really nasty things, but the people who are trying to do decent things out of an unexamined ideology. You see, this is why I went on so long about the word “overseas,” because you had no interest in insulting me or being an American racist or anything [laughs], none at all, none at all. But ideology is larger than personal good will.

True.

Therefore, I undoubtedly am caught in my ideological productions just as much as you are [in yours], except mine are a different set and people can indeed point them out. And people have indeed pointed them out, and I have respected them when they have done it constructively, as I tried to with you and with Cornel. I would say that the idea that is so pervasive now, that speed is of the essence, is a wrong idea. Because the part with which we make judgments still develops at the same old speed.

You have not uploaded the computer fully into the human brain yet, and thank God biopolitics has not yet gone there. And people who make these predictions in popular books and so forth are always questioned by the much more cautious actual neural-network scientists and genomic scientists. I'm not saying something like "forever and a day" to resist the technological shift, but I am saying "no" to it in the near-term as long as our inner mechanisms are still changing. If you want to actually construct minds, you've got to take time. And so the idea of what I have called in print "unmediated cyber-literacy" is a dangerous idea. This has nothing to do even with who gets the money.

And certainly the thinking, and maybe even the perception, about how to use resources is a serious matter.

Take for example in the hamlets, the area where I work. The people shit in the open arena—and not because they can't get cheap latrines. It's because they think it's normal. I was just told by one of them—these are my students and teachers, male and female—as I'm walking through these fields of shit that, "You know, these latrines don't cost any money." And once he said that, I didn't say anything to him, because I'm trying to change minds and not give magical lectures, right? So the next time his mother got cholera, I then said, as they're all weeping and howling and trying to get saline from a hospital far, far away—I said, "Well, look . . ."—and they're not even doing the oral rehydration that the World Health Organization talks about, because who's going to tell them that? I'm not a doctor; they won't listen to me—so I said, when we had a moment to sit down, "All this anxiety, the possibility that you might lose your mother; the difficulty of getting the saline; your mother's health; and so on. You spent a lot of money and passion and anguish. You know what you were paying for? Your

latrine. You said ‘It didn’t cost anything’? This is its price. And then I said, “Because you’re shitting in that area, you’re washing your backside with that water; you’re washing the pots and pans in that. That’s how cholera travels.” So I’ve just shown them a drop of water under a microscope. Because they think, “How can water be bad?”

And, latrines, I must say, the government makes available at quite a cheap cost: quite a cheap cost. But I won’t impose them, because in the schools there are latrines. No one uses them except me when I’m in that direction. Everybody shits outside. Okay? You change minds through knowledge and through desire. I can shit in the woods, but I won’t shit in the woods, because seeing me, maybe they will learn something. One person has in fact followed my example. But, at any rate, they live like this.

Latrines, too, are so much simpler than computers. I’ve seen computers here and there—nobody uses them, first of all—and suppose they are using them? (There’s very wonderful work by a man named T T Sreekumar, which is on this business of giving IT to the Third World and actually what happens. But keep that aside.) Then, as I say, without preparing the mind for how to use such a speedy instrument—what not to do: that is, not to stop yourself from thinking; not to completely ignore intellectual quality; not to watch pornography all the time; not to ruin people’s own work through thinking of viruses; not to steal intellectual property; and so on and so forth. That sort of ethical education is the training of reflexes that I was talking about.

Yes.

That cannot happen at speed. Therefore, the idea—it’s like Stanley Fish’s idea—the notion that if you give

to an untrained child that kind of a speedy instrument as a substitute for the making of the human being, then it's not going to be any good. I'm not exempting this place [Columbia] or how such things can impact the over-trained child, either. At this university, there is a wonderful undergraduate project called The Frontiers of Science. And they came to talk, the faculty, the teachers who teach it, and I was very amused because one of the very detailed parts of the project description—no one else noticed it—was to train the students to see how not to accept some computerized research. Because these people are serious, they are scientists! They are not interested in that so-called “democratic flow of information,” etc., because half of it is junk! And, in fact, the teaching assistant and the professor who had come, they were going through these reams of information about how they teach their students not to misuse the computer. And I was thinking to myself: “Yes, just as nobody would teach a hard science class in the way we are encouraged to teach our humanities classes.” Let the students talk as much as they can. No! They don't know anything yet! [laughs]

Therefore, I have a real problem, number one, with the idea even in an ideal world of giving every child, necessarily, a laptop. Number two, it's easier to give a laptop, basically, than what I'm talking about.

I would say so.

Yet, now they have cellphones. I recently showed an example to one of my supervisors and said, “Take a look. You see this telephone number? Why do you think there is in front of it ‘+91’? Can you tell me why?” He's very smart, but he says, “I don't know, that's not part of the number.” I said, “Because it's a foreign company. 91 is the country code for India. You're just calling from this village in West Bengal to another person in the village

in West Bengal, and yet, the number that is shown there is an international number for India. You understand? You're giving money to foreign folks." He says, "Aren't there any cell carriers in India?"—not that capital is ever national, but I wasn't going to explain that to him—I said, "Yeah, there's Tata Indicom, Reliance, etc." But this Vodafone, it is so much bigger that you see all over the countryside there are those red Vodafone signs. You understand? So all you're doing with your cellphone—and it costs much more than those phone shops that we used to have— all you're doing is giving the money that you don't have. You are giving this money for nothing to this incredibly rich corporation.

Everyone says "How convenient it is!" But they never look at the fact that it's misused and information doesn't have to go quite at that speed for the things that they do. It would be much easier to have a hospital close by than to be able to phone the medical facility that's three hours away. Why is the closest hospital three hours away? That's the question. And these cellphones, as I say, you just look at everybody's cellphone and you'll see the international number that's coming up there. Not yours. The children tinker with their fathers' cellphones all evening rather than think.

That's part of where I was going with the question on the "One Laptop per Child" and the potential for misappropriation in such a program.

But what I tried to say is that it's not just that, even if it were not that, it would be a misuse of capital. But carry on.

I see it as companies potentially looking to open up much larger market share through technological infrastructure—software, operating systems—there could be a real misuse there.

It's not "could be"—there is. There is. In my newest book *Other Asias* I write about this. How IT is going to Armenia as a gender gift. I took very good care to look at all of those reams and reams and reams of projects on the computer, on the Internet, and what is coming from the other side, like these prostitute circles, people wanting jobs, and so on. And from this side, they are talking about how "Your women are really getting empowered . . ."—all those words. You look at the reports coming from that side? Nobody bothers. Who does all that kind of follow-up?

That's very interesting.

Who follows up? That's the question. You see the photo ops of kids with books smiling and looking at their teachers, etc. Do you follow up to see what the photograph is of? People like me, we do follow up. I have never seen any of those schools actually in operation in my neck of the woods, where the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was giving money and there were these photos. The day the photographs were taken, all the kids were happy as a lark, you know? "Sure! You're going to be photographed! Go and put on nice clothes." You see? No one follows up on this. And even if the schools are happening, which is a good thing, how can we think of improving quality. Does the right to teach in "freedom" apply there? Is the Gramscian formula of coercion and persuasion practical?

Earlier we were talking about Joseph Massad. I don't know if you're at liberty to discuss his case?

I'll say what I can say, and I won't say what I can't say. I mean, we have said a lot of things in public, so, those things I can say.

Fair enough. The Israel-Palestine debate was something that Stanley Fish concatenated with his op-ed on

neoliberalism— which is where we started at the beginning of the interview. Columbia has most definitely seen its share of academic freedom cases related to the Israel-Palestine debate, from Nicholas DeGenova to Joseph Massad, and, over at Barnard, of course, Nadia Abu El-Haj. And in terms of highly visible academic freedom cases, the debate continues to yield casualties, one of the latest being, at the time of this interview, Joel Kovel at Bard College. You were awarded a Polly in 2003 for making the following statement, which also appears in the boundary 2 essay we just discussed:

Suicidal resistance is a message inscribed on the body when no other means will get through. It is both execution and mourning, for self and other, where you die with me for the same cause, no matter which side you are on, with the implication that there is no dishonor in such shared death. (96)

Why do discussions on the Israel-Palestine conflict continue to spark academic controversy in your opinion, particularly in the post- 9/11 context? Now, Professor Chomsky says that this debate was much more pronounced in the 1980s, while others indicate that it has increased in its virulence post-9/11.

I think that Chomsky and the others are both right—there are two different kinds. In the case of Columbia, I think there was also the matter of vengeance on Edward Said. You know, he was very much maligned, to the extent that as you know—and here I can say anything I want to because it's completely in the public domain—that a question was asked in Congress about Said's influence on Middle East studies, area studies, and the National Defense Education Act Title VI, and so on. That's part of the Congressional record. Columbia stood behind Edward Said in a principled way. The attitude was always that the university disciplines itself when, in fact,

many, many times grave objections were raised, calls were sent out for the dismissal of Edward Said, and so on. And then after Said's death, junior faculty were attacked, and, of course, this is not something you can prove—I'm just suggesting this—there was just this insane persecution of Joseph Massad. I would say that is a part.

It's really almost smaller than Israel-Palestine in the case of Columbia and Barnard. But then, you must connect it with everything that's happening in the academy, and insofar as that is concerned, it was not Israel-Palestine so much as it was the demonization of Islam. And that, quite often, in the context of the academic who is . . . persecuted, happened to take the form of a critique of Israel, because it clearly would not take the form of a sudden support of Islam. That's also quite telling, isn't it?

Definitely.

I mean, most of these people criticized state policy, you know what I mean? They criticized the United States, they criticized Israel. They were not really talking in a kind of unexamined, culturalist, religious way. So therefore, yes, Israel-Palestine. But it is true, Chomsky's correct, that before the so-called Oslo Accords, there was much more agitation about it. Today, yes, there are certain academics like Judith Butler, Bruce Robbins, etc.—they are focused on the IsraelPalestine problem in a very dedicated way. But, in general, I think today it's more a demonization of Islam, otherwise, this terrible stuff on Lebanon; it was just a news item. And the stuff on the academic freedom infringements in Gaza . . . there will be a meeting here [at Columbia]. Why? Because some of us signed a letter.

Yes, I saw that.

But it isn't something like the outrage that one might expect. So I don't think Israel-Palestine is itself so much the focus. Mind you, with Obama's visit [to the Middle East], already the conservatives are beginning to talk about how Obama is favoring Islam. And, again, that kind of proves my point, doesn't it? That it's more about the demonization of Islam than Israel policy.

I'm not sure to what depth we can discuss it here, but in terms of the petition that you just referenced (e.g., Columbia faculty wrote to President Bollinger about the bombing of the Palestinian University in Gaza): As I understand it, Bollinger was the author of an initiative condemning the boycott of Israeli academics. And yet he has not responded to the Gaza issue in kind.

He did send us a letter in response to this issue, and there is going to be a meeting. Carvalho: Okay. I was unaware of that. Spivak: So, you are right, I would like to hold comments on this until that meeting takes place.

Completely understood.

You know, he's shown this gesture of good will . . .

I didn't realize he had responded. I was only able to find the Columbia faculty "Letter on Academic Freedom in Palestine" itself. Speaking of Obama, and this is somewhat of a timely segue, actually: Did you happen to see that the Obama administration temporarily "discontinued" the use of "war on terror" in exchange for the more oblique "overseas contingency operations"?

It kind of puzzles me. Much as I disliked, like all of us together—we all have analyzed this to death—the phrase “war on terror,” there is something terribly anti-septic about “overseas contingency operations.” Because, you see, a contingency can always be justified, because it relates to that contingency. It's not policy. It scares me, frankly. I must say that I want, like many of

us, to give President Obama a very long leash. I really do. He's coming in after a series of terrible administrations. I mean, we used to complain about the Reagan-Bush years. But then with a little bit of Clinton, which kind of turned into a strange thing, we went into some genuinely, mordantly terrifying years. So I want to give him a long leash.

Now this is pure conjecture, and I could be wrong, but I also feel this about him. Right at the beginning—when he was saying that the labor movement was a solution not a problem, when he wanted to give money in his stimulus package to the National Endowment for the Arts, and stuff like that—he was going in the direction that I alluded to at the start of our talk. In a generally counterintuitive way, he was suggesting that you don't just change the laws; you also try to make some kind of change in people. That's the statesperson's obligation. They don't want to let ambition go beyond the law and bring the country and the world to its knees and then simply solve the actual problems one by one. They get at the root, change people's minds as well as provide material shelter. But it is true that when someone has these kinds of counter-intuitive convictions he or she is not immediately understood by the people around him or her, because these assumptions are counterintuitive.

My most famous example, of course, and I've written about this showing exactly the pages of *Kapital* [Book One] where the instances occur, shows that Engels in fact did not appreciate Marx's counterintuitive assumptions. While Marx would put Engels's commonsense explanations in the footnotes, Engels would push them back in the text. Engels explained them in ways that went against what Marx was asking the reader to think, changing their minds, that is to say, almost against common

sense; he was asking the reader to think. The most famous things, of course, use-value, that value is not just abstracted from exchange. That little paragraph is Engels writing there, that you have to abstract it from exchange. Not Marx! Marx is saying, “Look, normally you would think it was only exchange, but, think hard, you working-class reader of mine, because unless you think it this way, you won’t understand that labor power, quantified labor—he’s for it, not against it as most romantic anti-capitalists think—is the one thing that when it is consumed, used up, that creates value. You will never be able to understand this if you think value only arises in exchange; so you make these goods and they’re exchanged . . . bourgeois economists think this way.” This is what Marx is saying. Engels doesn’t understand this.

So I would say that all through history, you will find leadership-type people, who have counterintuitive imaginings because that’s how change is made. But they’re not understood by the people around them, even people of good will. Obviously Obama is not a despot—anyway, he’s a young man. He has to work with what he has, and so things are changing and he’s not always able to toe the good middle ground; this also happens with very imaginative counterintuitive people. So what’s happening is that it’s beginning to look like he’s giving in to the other side. And perhaps he is doing so, although I still have hope that this proves to not be the case. He will learn. He’s a very smart man.

He is very intelligent.

But this phrase, this “contingency operations” this “overseas” whatever you call it . . .

“Overseas contingency operations.”

Yes, there’s your word “overseas” [laughs]—there is the context in which it can be used! So that to me is one

of those “givings in.” And it scares me. I think it’s an awful phrase, don’t you?

Yeah, I really do. It seems as though there’s a perpetuity, an endlessness to it.

Yes!

You know, there can always be a contingency based upon a contingency. And that’s the frightening part.

Spivak: Yes. It’s very secretive. The war on terror had a different kind of thing in it. I mean, it was just brutally up front and horrible, and we could suspect that there were further horrors and lies concealed. But I don’t know what to choose . . . this one is kind of . . .

There’s a flexibility to it.

Yes—flexible, rational, secretive. I don’t want that phrase.

It has an almost universal applicability . . .

Contingency is so slippery.

I think so. Speaking of contingency in the Obama administration and our hopes for what we’d like to see come out of that, what are your thoughts on his choosing Larry Summers for an economic advisor? Isn’t that indicative of Obama moving toward the other side and pandering to corporate interests? Larry Summers, with his ties to the World Bank, etc.?

Well, that’s what I was trying to say. I think that perhaps Joseph Stiglitz was perceived as too much, perceived as someone who would seem too far on the left. Because it is also true that he [Obama] has to compromise. And in terms of a compromise, who was available? I mean, he couldn’t ask Robert Reich again. Robert Reich would also be perceived as being even further on the left than Joseph Stiglitz. I think when Robert Reich was taken up by Clinton he was a relative unknown. And

so people didn't realize just how far on the left he really was. So I have a feeling this is one of those unfortunate contingencies, you know. Now, you notice—I am making excuses for him [laughs], because, as I say, I want to give him a long leash. I want him to be able to do something. You know, I'm going to have to talk about hope in Britain in a few weeks, and I think I am going to talk a little bit there about doubt being the greatest gift of the European Enlightenment, and if you go further back, Socrates—that's what he was giving to his students.

In this case, I went outside of the Euro-U.S. context because I find the definition of academic freedom becomes easy when you just tie it to the division between intellectual and manual labor or individual rights, and stuff like that. But if you look back into the history of the world and you look at our brother Gramsci—an unbelievably smart man capable of the counter-intuitive—you realize that what the usual debates about academic freedom don't allow us to do is to question an implicit faith in the intellectual as such. So I went beyond. But in the case of this hope thing, I won't go beyond; I'll remain within the European tradition and ask, "What's wrong with doubt?" [laughs]

I think that's a great place to end. Honestly, I don't think we could have planned that any better. Professor Spivak, thank you so much, again, for your time.



Notes

Special thanks to Professor Spivak's former assistant, Ivonne Rojas, for her help in coordinating this interview.

1 Interview transcribed by Edward J. Carvalho.

2 The Chomsky interview appears in *Works and Days* 51-54, 26-27.1/4 (2008-09): 527-37.





