# The Spivak reader selected works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean.

## The Spivak Reader

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Edited by
Donna Landry
and
Gerald MacLean

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### Reading Spivak

INTRODUCTION-

If you have been reading Spivak, you will know that writing an introduction to her work is no easy task. In 1976 Spivak published Of Grammatology, an English translation of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's De la grammatologie (1967). Besides introducing this influential thinker to English-speaking audiences, Spivak's "Translator's Preface" set a new standard for self-reflexivity in prefaces and introductions. It addressed from every conceivable angle the "question of the preface" and what it meant to translate and explicate the work of Derrida, who developed the form of philosophical critique known as deconstruction. In her "Preface," Spivak briefly introduced Derrida, the man or biographical subject, and Derrida, the collection of published writings, before turning to the question of the preface as a form of writing and an occasion or event in writing, with particular protocols to be observed. This attention to the particular protocols of specific occasions is one of the characteristic gestures of deconstruction.

Like Spivak introducing Derrida, we shall have to assume that some introduction to Spivak is in order.

#### SPIVAK

Gayatri Chakravorty was born in Calcutta on 24 February 1942, the year of the great artificial famine and five years before independence from British colonial rule. She graduated from Presidency College of the University of Calcutta in 1959 with a first-class honors degree in English, including gold medals for English and Bengali literature. At this time, degree requirements in English Literature at Calcutta compared to those at Oxbridge; a degree from Calcutta amounted to a comprehensive first-hand reading knowledge of all literature in "English" from just before Chaucer up to the mid-twentieth century, with a special focus on Shakespeare. After a Master's degree in English from Cornell and a year's fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge,

Spivak took up an instructor's position at the University of Iowa while completing her doctoral dissertation on Yeats, which was being directed by Paul de Man at Cornell. Along the way she married and divorced an American, Talbot Spivak, but has kept his surname, under which her work first appeared in print. She currently holds the Avalon Foundation Professorship of the Humanities at Columbia University.

Today, Spivak is among the foremost feminist critics who have achieved international eminence, and one of the few who can claim to have influenced intellectual production on a truly global scale. In addition to the groundbreaking translation of Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology, Spivak has published four books, a volume of interviews, and numerous theoretical and critical articles. The checklist of her publications included at the end of this volume indicates the extent and range of Spivak's writing. A revised version of her dissertation, popularized on what she herself describes as a "sixties impulse," appeared in 1974, entitled Myself Must I Remake: The Life and Poetry of W. B. Yeats. In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics, a collection published in 1987, brought together scattered essays on topics as varied as Dante, Marx, Wordsworth, and the Indian writer Mahasweta Devi. The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues (1990), put together by Sarah Harasym, was an attempt to make Spivak's thinking more accessible to those who found the essays in In Other Worlds-now in its fifth reprinting-difficult. Outside in the Teaching Machine (1993) is a more integrated volume of essays, some new, some revised from previous publication, in which Spivak offers analyses of, and strategies for improving, higher education in a global context. The "Translator's Preface" and "Afterword" to Imaginary Maps (1994), a collection of stories by Devi translated into English by Spivak, are included in this reader. An Unfashionable Grammatology: Colonial Discourse Revisited, her long-awaited archival and theoretical study of gender and colonial discourse, is in preparation as The Spivak Reader goes to press.<sup>1</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is also this collection of texts.

Particularly in the United States, where Spivak has made her academic career, there has been within the various women's movements a strong populist impulse that has encouraged feminist critics and intellectuals to keep their work accessible to general audiences. In spite of this pressure, and the anti-intellectual tendencies of U.S. culture generally, Spivak has relentlessly challenged the high ground of established philosophical discourse. She has done so in difficult theoretical language, and on grounds recognizable to philosophers, especially those trained in the traditions of continental philosophy. Although her own primary training was in literary criticism, Spivak has a command of philosophy and ethics, as well as political economy and

social theory. Thus she has been able to challenge the practitioners of the academic disciplines of philosophy and history in the United States, Britain, India, and elsewhere in terms that, if not exactly their own, are nevertheless recognizable; terms that specifically explore the margins at which disciplinary discourses break down and enter the world of political agency. The range of this challenge has made her work seem remote and difficult to some readers, and she has been controversially received by academic philosophers, historians, literary scholars, and elite Indianists, especially those antagonistic to deconstruction, poststructuralism, subaltern studies, and post-1968 French thinking, with which her work often engages.

Yet it would be a serious mistake to assume that Spivak's work is so esoteric that she has no audience outside the academy. During the past fifteen years, her career has followed a complex intellectual trajectory through a deeply feminist perspective on deconstruction, the Marxist critique of capital and the international division of labor, the critique of imperialism and colonial discourse, and the critique of race in relation to nationality, ethnicity, the status of the migrant, and what it might mean to identify a nation or a cultural form as postcolonial in a neocolonial world. This intellectual trajectory has gained for Spivak a relatively heterogeneous international audience.

It helps, of course, that Spivak is a very powerful and charismatic speaker. When she came to Detroit, for instance, in March 1991, she addressed a large, metropolitan, racially and ethnically mixed audience at the Detroit Institute of Arts as part of its Lines speaker series on new writing in America. Her lecture, "War and Cultures," addressed questions of multiculturalism with reference to the linguistically hybrid work of Guillermo Gómez Peña, the Chicarrican artist from Tijuana-San Diego, and an installation by the Lebanese-Canadian artist Jamelie Hassan, in the highly charged political context of U.S. anti-Arab racism at the time of the Gulf War. Not only did Spivak receive a standing ovation, a fairly unusual response for a museum lecture from a cool urban crowd, but she was also accompanied afterward to the reception following her talk by an enthusiastic group of African American women not from the local university, but from the Detroit community. One woman carried a much-read copy of Spivak's translation of Derrida's Of Grammatology. Her daughter, also part of the group, was reading In Other Worlds for a course at her inner-city high school. For these women, Spivak's feminist critique of the links between racism and capitalism had been crucial for their intellectual development. They embraced her as a profoundly political sister, not as an inaccessible academic.<sup>2</sup>

Though these are times of right-wing backlash on a global scale, cultural resistance continues. It would be misleading to cast Spivak as a lone crusader or an academic outsider. Despite the difficulties that some U.S. readers have experienced with her ideas and writings, Spivak's contributions to the critical investigation of literary and cultural theory have at last been widely recognized within the U.S. academy. Since the late 1970s her reputation has become increasingly international as well. Spivak has held visiting university appointments in France, India, and Saudi Arabia, and has lectured extensively throughout the U.K., U.S., Australia, Canada, the Indian subcontinent, Belgium, Eire, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, the former Yugoslavia, and before the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Her sustained critical engagement with the intellectual tradition represented by the writings of Freud, Lacan, Marx, Derrida, and Foucault has been instrumental in transforming and politicizing the reception of the feminist and poststructuralist critiques of psychoanalytic and Marxist thought. Moreover, her wide-ranging critical and theoretical challenges continue to influence the development of multicultural studies, postcolonial studies, and feminist theory not only in the U.S., but also internationally.

Considerable as it already is, then, Spivak's intellectual achievement is so far from being "over" or completed that any summary runs the risk of foreclosing on what is, both in fact and effect, a continuing politico-intellectual global activism. Nevertheless, if we were to formulate the essential Spivak for the contemporary moment, the following slogans could serve as a beginning:

#### UNLEARNING ONE'S PRIVILEGE AS ONE'S LOSS

This is one of the most powerful tasks set readers by Spivak's writing and teaching. The injunction to "unlearn," recently advocated by the young African American filmmaker John Singleton in publicizing the anti-racist message of his most recent film, Higher Learning, means working critically back through one's history, prejudices, and learned, but now seemingly instinctual, responses. If we can learn racism, we can unlearn it, and unlearn it precisely because our assumptions about race represent a closing down of creative possibility, a loss of other options, other knowledge. Whoever we are, if we are reading Spivak, we are likely to be comparatively privileged, at least in terms of educational opportunity, citizenship, and location within the international division of labor. Unlearning one's privilege by considering it as one's loss constitutes a double recognition. Our privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge: not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions. To unlearn our privileges means, on the one hand, to do our homework, to work hard at gaining some knowledge of the others who occupy those spaces most closed to our privileged view. On the other hand, it means attempting to speak to those others in such a way that they might take us seriously and, most important of all, be able to answer back.

Unlearning our privilege as our loss is a task for everyone, from Spivak herself to her white male students, who may feel silenced by the recent upsurge of feminism and marginality studies: "I am only a bourgeois white male, I can't speak." In an interview in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, Spivak advises them, "'Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?' Then you begin to investigate what it is that silences you, rather than take this very deterministic position—since my skin colour is this, since my sex is this, I cannot speak" (p. 62). Doing one's homework in the interests of unlearning one's privilege marks the beginning of an ethical relation to the Other.

## ETHICS ARE NOT A PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE BUT A CALL OF RELATIONSHIP, (WITHOUT RELATIONSHIP, AS LIMIT CASE)

In "Echo" (see p. 175), Spivak outlines a formulation of ethics through a decipherable instance of the ethical relation in the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Spivak wonders how it is that Freud and others have attributed narcissism primarily to women, when Narcissus was a boy. Where is Echo, the woman in the story? Reading Echo in all her complexity requires a critique of narcissism, that touchstone of Western imperial and masculine identities. Figuring identities and relations differently—not as narcissistic fixtures expecting mirror-reflections across the globe, but as a call to honor and embrace across impossible differences and distances—is indispensable for any movement toward decolonization. As Spivak observes in both "How To Teach a 'Culturally Different' Book" and her "Translator's Preface and Afterword" to Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (see p. 237, p. 267), we must perpetually keep in mind the question "Who decolonizes? And how?"

Thinking of the ethical relation as an embrace, an act of love, in which each learns from the other, is not at all the same thing as wanting to speak for an oppressed constituency. Throughout her work Spivak has been concerned with addressing questions of the international division of labor (of the super-exploitation of Third World female labor in particular) and she is well-known for her formulations on the subaltern, that constituency which remains most excluded from the circuits and possible benefits of socialized capital. As she explains in the interview "Subaltern Talk" (see p. 287), when she claims that the subaltern "cannot speak," she means that the subaltern as such cannot be heard by the privileged of either the First or Third Worlds. If the subaltern were able to make herself heard—as has happened when particular subalterns have emerged, in Antonio Gramsci's terms, as

organic intellectuals and spokespeople for their communities—her status as a subaltern would be changed utterly; she would cease to be subaltern. And that is the goal of the ethical relation Spivak is seeking and calling for—that the subaltern, the most oppressed and invisible constituencies, as such might cease to exist.

Such a revolutionary change will not be brought about by traditional revolutionary means, nor by intellectuals attempting to represent oppressed minorities, nor worse yet, pretending merely to let them speak for themselves. Here Spivak's deconstructive vigilance leads her to keep in mind at all times the dangers of fundamentalism in any form and to insist on the two meanings of "representation."

DECONSTRUCTION CANNOT FOUND A POLITICAL PROGRAM OF ANY KIND. YET IN ITS SUGGESTION THAT MASTERWORDS LIKE "THE WORKER" OR "THE WOMAN" HAVE NO LITERAL REFERENTS, DECONSTRUCTION IS A POLITICAL SAFEGUARD.

This passage, paraphrased from an interview in The Post-Colonial Critic (p. 104), exemplifies in its simplicity the practical and political Spivak, whose theorizing is always ultimately directed at intervention, at attempting to change the world. Yet how can one help to bring about change without repeating the mistakes of previous political movements that have sought liberation yet ended in repression and fundamentalism? We can make a start, Spivak suggests, by keeping in mind the two meanings of "representation," which would have been clear to Marx, writing in German, but which English usage elides: "Treading in your shoes, wearing your shoes, 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'.... 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" (The Post-Colonial Critic, p. 108). As we have observed elsewhere, the danger lies in collapsing the two meanings, mistaking the aesthetic or theatrical sense of representation—as re-staging or portraiture—for an actual beingin-the-other's-shoes.<sup>3</sup> This collapsing leads to the fundamentalist mistake: assuming that always imagined and negotiated constituencies based on unstable identifications have literal referents: "the workers," "the women," "the word." But there is no Vertretung without Darstellung, without dissimulation; the two terms are locked into complicity with one another. Deconstruction perpetually reminds us of this complicity, which fundamentalism would pretend to do without.

PERSISTENTLY TO CRITIQUE A STRUCTURE THAT ONE CANNOT NOT (WISH TO) INHABIT IS THE DECONSTRUCTIVE STANCE.

These are nearly the last words of Outside in the Teaching Machine (p. 284), Spivak's most recent collection of essays, but they echo her most persistent take on deconstruction, repeated from the "Translator's Preface" to Of Grammatology until the present day. If one sets out to do a critique of metaphysics, there is no escape from the metaphysical enclosure. You cannot simply assert, "I will be anti-essentialist" and make that stick, for you cannot not be an essentialist to some degree. The critique of essentialism is predicated upon essentialism. This is why it is especially important to choose as an object of critique something which we love, or which we cannot not desire, cannot not wish to inhabit, however much we wish also to change it. Spivak translates Derrida in Of Grammatology as follows: "Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say, without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work,"4

This deconstructive liability, this self-confessed fallibility of deconstruction, is in some sense its greatest gift, according to Spivak. Her own intellectual production is as subject to its exigency as any other.

We hope that these few Spivakian rules-of-thumb provide some sense of why her work might be interesting, important, and worthy of the careful and patient unpacking it requires.

#### THE SPIVAK READER

In selecting from among the range of possible options presented by Spivak's list of publications, talks, and interviews, we have attempted to assemble not so much a "bluffer's guide to Spivakism" as an exemplary series of places to start reading Spivak.

We have attempted to trace what she calls the "itinerary" of her thinking over the last fifteen years. The power of this specific metaphor arises from its illustration of how Spivak's thinking proceeds: it is not fixed and finite in the form of thought as a "product," but active—thinking—a journey that involves moving back and forth over both familiar and less familiar intellectual terrains while constantly interrogating its own premises. Here the strong connection between Spivak's research and writing and her teaching should be noted, since most of her published writings have arisen from attempting to work through the critical problems that crop up in pedagogical situations.

In a certain way, Spivak's reception has been a curiously silent or oblique

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one. Have her achievements seemed too formidable or complicated to be commented upon according to the usual forms? Indeed, while citations to her work can be found thickly scattered across various fields of scholarly publication, the true range and importance of her intellectual influence cannot be measured in the number of scholarly articles, chapters, or books dedicated to "explaining" Spivak. For that, we would somehow have to assess not only the conversations and ideas that her lectures and writings continue to stimulate directly, but also the immeasurable differences that her work has made to the thinking of feminists, cultural critics, and political activists in places as far flung as Delhi, New York, Riyadh, Hyderabad, Lünd, and Sydney.

The essays collected in the present volume range across Spivak's contributions to many different aspects of intellectual and political life subsequent to her introduction of Derrida to English-speaking audiences. The essays are not simply arranged in chronological sequence; we imagine that readers coming to Spivak's work for the first time will find the thematic and developmental arrangement we have adopted to be more helpful than a strict chronology would be. The nine essays are bracketed by two very recent interviews, "Bonding in Difference," with Alfred Arteaga, and "Subaltern Talk." "Can the Subaltern Speak?," published in 1988 but based on a 1983 lecture, would make the collection more complete, but we gave way to Spivak's resistance to this idea, because she is revising the essay in such a way that the first version, although unchanged in its conclusions, will, in its details, become obsolete.

The first five essays in *The Reader* represent key moments in Spivak's deconstructive critique, especially the ways it has both challenged and transformed the development of feminism, Marxist analysis, and cultural theory. The next four essays sharpen, extend, and broaden that project by examining the politics of translation and multiculturalism in a variety of textual, historical, and political arenas. This order, we trust, will usefully indicate how the itinerary of Spivak's critical thinking is not a settled achievement but a continuing process, a constant challenge to reread Freud, Marx, Derrida, and Foucault, bringing their provisional certainties to crisis as we attempt to negotiate with the daily events that constitute our political lives in both the local and the global sense. Spivak pays considerable attention to the management of the subaltern in the southern hemisphere, the developing world of the New World Order, so that by a "setting to work" of theory in these locations she can gauge the limits of the theory that influences her.

It is curious but revealing that as Spivak has increasingly expanded her interests beyond the European literary and philosophical traditions to the history of imperialism and non-elite or subaltern insurgency, she has gained

new audiences interested in race, gender, colonial discourse, and multicultural education, but also lost ground within the deconstructive establishment. To be given a hearing by Third World scholars and ethnic studies or minority discourse specialists would seem to be accompanied by being marginalized on the high deconstructivist agenda. Although Spivak initially became known as the translator of Derrida and an advocate of deconstruction, and although she remains one of the few intellectuals actually carrying out the suggestions made by the post-Enlightenment ethical movement associated with Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, scholars who have engaged in high ethical debates in the recent past seem to have ignored her contributions. Comparison of two recent issues of Diacritics, a journal published by the Department of Romance Languages at Cornell University, and one that has served as one of the chief organs of deconstructivist debate, illustrates this asymmetrical reception. In the Spring 1993 issue, Rey Chow features Spivak in her essay "Ethics after Idealism." Chow, a feminist who works on questions of identity, ethnicity, and postcoloniality, reads Spivak and Slavoj Žižek as two of the "most energetic" post-Marxists writing today. Three issues later, however, in the Winter 1993 issue, two other pieces on ethical questions, including the question of the Other, neglect to mention Spivak. It is as if Spivak's work had become contaminated by too long an association with Marxism, Third Worldism, and international feminism to possess a theoretical position pure enough to be entertained any longer as high ethical discourse.<sup>5</sup> This foreclosure in ethics of considerations of power or politics is, of course, precisely Spivak's point in the recent interventions included in The Reader.

Living in an age much given to interest in the personal, we have placed "Bonding in Difference" first, since in this interview Spivak reflects autobiographically. By turning her personal recollections against their historical contexts, however, in a characteristic gesture she resists playing into the cult of personality or trading on her intellectual-celebrity status, thereby demonstrating how deconstruction interrogates claims made on behalf of the merely personal:

Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced. That's why deconstruction doesn't say logocentrism is a pathology, or metaphysical enclosures are something you can escape. Deconstruction, if one wants a formula, is, among other things, a persistent critique of what one cannot not want. And in that sense, yes, it's right there at the beginning.

Right there at the beginning, deconstruction opens up the personalist belief in identity-as-origin not by denying experience, but by insisting upon the need to examine the processes whereby we naturalize personal experience and desire into general truth. Deconstruction is not the end of ethics, politics, or history, as Spivak makes clear in her "Translator's Preface" to Devi's Imaginary Maps, when she echoes Derrida on the question of deconstruction and ethics in a statement too often misread as signifying the ahistoricity of deconstruction: "Please note that I am not saying that ethics are impossible, but rather than ethics is the experience of the impossible."

Constantly stressing the interconnectedness of the seemingly disparate aspects of her intellectual production, Spivak says of herself in "Bonding": "I have two faces. I am not in exile. I am not a migrant. I am a green cardcarrying critic of neocolonialism in the United States. It's a difficult position to negotiate, because I will not marginalize myself in the United States in order to get sympathy from people who are genuinely marginalized." Spivak first opened up this discussion of the foundational premises of what constitutes "truth" within the academic community at large in the first essay reprinted here, "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia" (1979). She did this by introducing the problematics of her own position as an internationalist, a feminist, and a literary critic who works within the protocols of reading named "deconstruction." With the third essay, "Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model: Derrida's 'Limited Inc.,'" The Reader moves from the second essay, 1985's "Feminism and Critical Theory," back to 1980, in order to pick up on questions concerning deconstruction that were greatly troubling to the English-speaking academy at that time. For many readers, this essay may prove as difficult as any that follow, but it develops directly from the previous essays by pursuing the aim announced toward the end of "Feminism and Critical Theory": to learn "how to read [our] own texts."

In "Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model," Spivak addresses in detail two texts by Derrida that she cited in "Explanations" as the source of her understanding of Derridean deconstruction and proceeds to read them deconstructively. In the first part of the essay, Spivak reads the debate between speech-act theorist John Searle and Derrida; in the second part she reads Derrida's texts alongside Heidegger. For those unfamiliar with Derrida, Searle, and Heidegger, the going will be tough and the rewards not immediately apparent. Like Marx, Spivak is often most powerfully suggestive when engaged in polemic. Here she makes no attempt at impartiality since one of her principal aims in the piece is to demonstrate how Derrida's response to Searle exemplifies many of the necessarily practical implications of Derrida's general critique of metaphysics. In a scrupulously exacting and highly nuanced style of philosophical critique, Spivak describes

what it means to take Derrida's project seriously, to read according to the strategy of what she elsewhere terms "the reversal-displacement morphology of deconstruction" ("Feminism and Critical Theory"), and, finally, to engage in undoing philosophical discourse of this very kind.

As she observes in the final paragraph of "Revolutions," students trained to read within liberal-humanist discourses of identity and meaning tenaciously claim "their opinions' center as their own self-possession." If Spivak's prose is challenging, it challenges us on our own grounds as readers, as centered producers of meaning. For those readers—and who among us is not necessarily included in this indictment?—trained to start reading by "finding oneself in the text," it might prove useful to approach this essay by glancing at the end, with the final paragraph addressed to "graduates and undergraduates."

For some, this paragraph might supply an entire evening's worth of reading and rereading precisely because its challenge can only be expressed in a language that seems "difficult," but that is, rather, the achieved vocabulary of a powerful critical discourse seeking to change the way we read our world. Here is the penultimate sentence:

The "deconstructive" lesson, as articulated in *Limited Inc.*, can teach student and teacher alike a method of analysis that would fix its glance upon the itinerary of the ethico-political in authoritarian fictions; call into question the complacent apathy of self-centralization; undermine the bigoted elitism (theoretical or practical) conversely possible in collective practice; while disclosing in such gestures the condition of possibility of the positive.

We should notice that the operative term here is "'deconstructive' lesson" and not "deconstructionist." "Deconstructionist" is a term often used to describe the processes of deconstruction by those outside it, those who don't themselves follow the protocols of deconstruction, "in a certain way always a prey to its own critique" (OG, 24, translation modified). The deconstructive lesson provides a new way of looking at things and tasks. We've already encountered "itinerary" in this introduction, so we have no trouble fixing our glance on it and noticing how it here performs a new metaphorical turn, thereby announcing the allegorical figure of "the ethicopolitical" journeying through "authoritarian fictions." This development deserves at least a semicolon pause, whatever sort of reader we are; because yes, that is just what-by definition-authoritarian fictions do, they narrate ethico-political conflict metaphysically ("good" versus "evil") even when they might claim to be about something else. Fictions always come to an end, and in the authoritarian kind, plots are invariably "solved" by the superimposition of a third term, "power."

So, to pick up the syntax, what's to be learned from reading deconstructively is that it is particularly ethically and politically useful to look at authoritarian fictions by noticing how they figure conflicts and power, and, within the same activity of reading, to continue addressing ourselves as readers caught up in the complicities of what the quoted paragraph previously termed the "de-historicized academy." For we are surely invited to recognize ourselves-whatever positions we may occupy with respect to academic institutions—in the suggestion that student and teacher like can learn to "call into question the complacent apathy of self-centralization" that academic approaches to reading continue to encourage, especially in liberal arts programs. What's at stake here is that whenever we rest contented with saying "this is my reading, it's different from yours; but that's okay, we don't need to go any further" or whenever we feel, argue, or insist that what we do within the academy is merely academic and of such insufficient political consequence that we need do nothing because it won't count anyway, we are simply reproducing a general liberal dilemma and not doing what we think we are doing, whenever we imagine we are "thinking for ourselves."

So whenever we set about reading "our" texts and find them leading us obsessively back to ourselves, it is a good idea not to stop there, with ourselves as centers of meaning, but rather to go on and to think through the possibility that the personal might necessarily lead us outside "ourselves" to the political. The third and final part of Spivak's account of the deconstructive lesson certainly sounds political—the suggestion that we "undermine the bigoted elitism (theoretical or practical) conversely possible in collective practice; while disclosing in such gestures the condition of possibility of the positive." If her turns of language and thought here seem puzzling at first glance, this polemical rhetoric at the essay's end at least serves to warn us that there are dangers in beginning at the end of things. Spivak is, in large part, reflecting upon the conditions that made possible the very reading of Derrida, by way of Searle and Heidegger, that she has just performed.

Thus we propose that Spivak's "'deconstructive' lesson," while it can be glimpsed by sneaking a look at this final paragraph, will be more gratifyingly intelligible to those who have made the journey through the essay from the first paragraph instead.

Because of the difficulty of this essay, we have spent some time unpacking it here and in the headnote that accompanies it. The essays and interview that follow "Revolutions" may now seem like plain sailing, by contrast, though each is also prefaced by an explanatory headnote.

NOTES

In presenting these writings, we have silently corrected errors in the original versions and standardized spelling, orthography, and reference formats as far as it has been possible to do so without significantly altering the style of the original. For example, in order to preserve the historical specificity of the original publication of "Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model" in 1980, we have left quotations and references to the 1977 publication, in Glyph, of Samuel Weber's and Jeffrey Mehlman's translation of Derrida's "Signature Event Context" and Weber's translation of "Limited Inc." In subsequent citations of these texts by Derrida, we have followed Spivak's more recent practice and cited "Signature Event Context" from Alan Bass's translation in Margins of Philosophy (1982). References to Derrida's "White Mythology" throughout The Spivak Reader are to Bass's translation.

- Unsolicited entries on or from "Spivak" have recently appeared in The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism, Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York: Routledge, forthcoming); and the entry on "deconstruction" in The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.
- 2. It is a bleak historical irony, but Spivak's was one of the last such guest performances at the Detroit Institute of Arts. As Kofi Natambu reports in his essay, "Nostalgia for the Present: Cultural Resistance in Detroit, 1977–1987," by March 1991 funding for the Lines program had already been cut, and by the end of that year the museum was to have its budget slashed by the recently elected Republican governor of Michigan, John Engler, as part of an economic gutting of the city. These policies included eliminating over 100,000 general assistance payments, many to disabled people, and most state monies for Medicare, Medicaid, and allotments for the homeless, in addition to funding for various arts projects and institutions; see Natambu in Black Popular Culture, a project by Michelle Wallace, Gina Dent, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 173–86.
- 3. See Landry and MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 197–98.
- 4. Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 24. Hereafter cited in the text as OG, followed by page references.
- 5. See Rey Chow, "Ethics after Idealism," *Diacritics* 23:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 3–22; Judith Butler, "Poststructuralism and Postmarxism," *Diacritics* 23:4 (Winter 1993), pp. 3–11; Robert Baker, "Crossings of Levinas, Derrida, and Adorno: Horizons of Nonviolence," *Diacritics* 23:4 (Winter 1993), pp. 12–41.

## Bonding in Difference Interview with Alfred Arteaga

(1993-94)

ONE

This interview introduces Gayatri Spivak talking about such matters as the intersection of personal and national history, colonial discourse and bilingualism, and the different projects of working on behalf of identity and constructing new historical narratives from migrant-minority discourses in the United States, India, Bangladesh, and Britain. Alfred Arteaga, a young poet and scholar of Chicano literature and culture at the University of California, Berkeley, conducted this interview with Spivak in 1993.

In their conversation we can observe Arteaga's interest in seeing how Spivak will situate herself and her own postcolonial projects in relation to what he calls the internal colonization experienced by Chicanos and Chicanas. The historical differences between the New World and the Old; the legacy of the "failure" of Spanish imperialism in the Americas, especially when compared with British industrial-capitalist imperialism in India and Africa; and the academic competition over whose model gets to dominate the analysis of colonial discourse: each of these issues echoes throughout the conversation.

One reason why Spivak and Arteaga had this conversation is that both wish to challenge the kind of identity politics in which rival ethnicities compete for institutional precedence or academic turf. Neither of them would argue that only one who is a member of a social group can speak about or for or "represent" that group. For each of them, representation is always, problematical, always double, and never adequate or complete. It entails both a standing-in-the-other's-shoes and an imaginative and aesthetic representation, a staging in the theatrical sense. For some years Spivak has criticized a too-literal understanding of representation within identity politics, describing this position as "nativist," and exposing the repressive and fundamentalist politics of claiming that "only a native can know the scene."

in engaging with, retelling, and ethically and imaginatively inhabiting other people's narratives. As Ellen Rooney observes in an unpublished essay, "What's the Story? Narrative(s) in Feminist Theory," the strongest tendency in feminist storytelling to date has been to tell "my story as the story of my feminism." As with feminism and gender politics, so also with ethnic and other forms of identity politics. Rooney singles out Spivak's exceptional ability to tell "your story as the story of my feminism," to tell another person's story without appropriating it. She investigates and respects differences but acknowledges the anger or the political passion that the story generates as her own.

Young assistant professor and internationally known distinguished chaired professor, Arteaga and Spivak opt for solidarity rather than rivalry, for bonding in difference across historical and cultural divides.

ALFRED ARTEAGA: Tell me a little about yourself, about the influences upon you.

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK: Well, born in Calcutta in the middle of the war, 1942. Earliest memories are of the artificial famine created by the British military to feed the soldiers in the Pacific theater of the Second World War. It was obviously illegal to protest against this. As an extraordinary political move in response to this situation, was formed what became a major phenomenon, the Indian People's Theatre Association, IPTA. They took performance as the medium of protest. Obviously the British were not coming to check out street-level theater: the actors were not professional actors. What they were performing was the famine and how to organize against it.

I was growing up as a middle-class child in the shadow of the famine. The extraordinary vitality of the Indian People's Theatre Association was in the air. A relationship between aesthetics and politics was being deployed by people who were taking advantage of the fact that aesthetics had been officially defined as autonomous by colonial ideology. They were, in other words, using the enemy's definition of aesthetics as having an autonomous sphere and sabotaging that in order to bring back the relationship between aesthetics and politics in a very direct way. The fine thing was that the plays were good; the songs were good. One still sings those songs, even on marches. That's something that colored my childhood more than I knew then.

One of the big memories is of negotiated political independence, very early on. My generation was on the cusp of decolonization. On our childhood and adolescent sensibilities was played out the meaning of a negotiated political independence. We were not adults; yet we were not born after independence. In a way, it's more interesting to have been in my generation than to have been a midnight's child, to have been born at independence, to be born free by chronological accident.

I come from the bottom layer of the upper middle class or the top layer of the lower middle class, depending on which side of the family you are choosing. I went to a missionary school, which is different from a convent. A convent is upper class and fashionable stuff. Mine was a cheap school, very good academic quality. By the time I was going, most of the teachers were tribal Christians, that is to say, Indian subalterns, lower than rural underclass by origin, neither Hindus nor Muslims, not even Hindu untouchables, but tribals—so called aboriginals—who had been converted by missionaries.

So that again, if the IPTA is one early experience, another early experience which then I didn't know was going to influence me so strongly was learning—as a child from a good caste Hindu family—from women who were absolutely underprivileged but who had dehegemonized Christianity in order to occupy a space where they could teach social superiors. The schooling was in Bengali, my mother tongue, until the last four years when, of course, it was hard to get us into English, since teachers and students were both Indian. But "English medium" still has glamour for the Indian middle class, presumably because it is still a better weapon for upward class mobility.

And then B.A. from Presidency College. I think that the strongest influence on students of my class going to that kind of college was the intellectual Left. It was, once again, a college known for academic excellence but not class-fixed, so that there was a sprinkling of students from working class and rural small bourgeois origins, as well as students from the upper middle, etc. It was a politically active institution. The atmosphere at the Ecole Normale on rue d'Ulm in Paris sometimes reminds me of my college. This was Calcutta, University of Calcutta. I left as a third-year graduate student for Cornell.

AA: How much English was there in your household?

GCS: Well, no, there wasn't much English in the household. That's a characteristic. Even now, for example, I will not write letters to my family in English. It's unthinkable, although they're all super educated. It is sometimes assumed that if one knows English well, then one would use English. That's not the case. One can know English as well as treasure one's own mother tongue. This is perhaps a Bengali phenomenon, rather than an Indian phenomenon, and there are historical reasons for this—or

at least one can construct a historical narrative as a reason.

To an extent there was in conversation, in writing, in reading even, in the family situation, one could say, no English. But in school, of course, English was one of the languages; English was a language that we learned in class. And we knew very well that in order to get ahead in colonial, and immediately postcolonial India, what you needed was English.

AA: I am interested in the ways diasporic intellectual workers describe themselves in light of their language use. For example, Jacques Derrida explained to me, in English, that he was raised in Algeria, a descendant of a Spanish Jewish family, but that he is not bilingual. Tzvetan Todorov, on the other hand, affirms the bilingualism and biculturalism of the Eastern European in the West. But it is an unequal bilingualism, weighted by time, distance, borders. How would you describe yourself?

GCS: From the point of view of language? I see myself as a bilingual person. As a bilingual person, I do translations from my native language. I think I would like a greater role in West Bengal as a public intellectual. Remaining in the United States was not at any point an examined choice, a real decision made. We won't go into the background now. I left India without any experience of what it was like to live and work in India. So I have kept my citizenship, and I'm inserting myself more and more into that. I have two faces. I am not in exile. I am not a migrant. I am a green-card-carrying critic of neocolonialism in the United States. It's a difficult position to negotiate, because I will not marginalize myself in the United States in order to get sympathy from people who are genuinely marginalized.

I want to have more of a role in the space where Bengali is a language for reading, writing. I write Bengali competently, with the same sort of problem making myself clear as I have in English. Mahasweta asks me to write more in Bengali. So reading, writing, public speaking, television: I want to get more involved. The cultural field in West Bengal is so rich that I'm a bit envious, you might say. It's working out slowly, and I can now see myself as a person with two fields of activity, always being a critical voice so that one doesn't get subsumed into the other.

AA: Do you think that had you remained in Calcutta, you would do as much work in English as you do now, working in the United States?

GCS: Probably so. I was an English honors student. English is my field. Remember, we are talking about a colonial country. I have colleagues there who have remained more wedded to "English," without the critical edge. There is sometimes a kind of resentment that I, living in the West,

should be cutting the ground from under them, since, for them, that's their specialty rather than a contested political field.

Recently I gave an interview for the BBC World Service regarding colonial discourse. The first question that the British questioner asked me was, "Do you think your activities in this critical theory have anything to do with the fact that you were born in India?" And I told her, "Look, in fact, if you were born and brought up in India you can have exactly the opposite view." So, yes, I probably would have been more like a traditional, solid, British-style (instead of maybe using the American style, who knows?) English scholar, probably a Yeats scholar.

AA: Is the choice of language, English or Bengali, for example, particularly significant for the writer writing in India?

GCS: Quite significant because India is a multilingual country. I have talked a lot about the concept of enabling violation. The child of rape. Rape is something about which nothing good can be said. It's an act of violence. On the other hand, if there is a child, that child cannot be ostracized because it's the child of rape. To an extent, the postcolonial is that. We see there a certain kind of innate historical enablement which one mustn't celebrate, but toward which one has a deconstructive position, as it were. In order for there to be an all-India voice, we have had to dehegemonize English as one of the Indian languages. Yet it must be said that, as a literary medium, it is in the hands of people who are enough at home in standard English as to be able to use Indian English only as the medium of protest, as mockery or teratology; and sometimes as no more than local color, necessarily from above. So, yes, there is an importance of writing in English, high-quality writing.

AA: What are your thoughts on hybrid writing and speech, on a Bengalized English?

GCS: It's very interesting that you ask me that, because that is the English that is an *Indian* language. It's not just *Bengalized*. You know there are over seventeen to nineteen languages, hundreds of dialects in India. The English I'm speaking of may be used, for example, on a bus by two people talking to each other, underclass people, who clearly share an Indian language, not English. They may at a certain point break into a kind of English sentence that you wouldn't understand. The situation changes as you climb up in class. And it is this imbrication of the dynamics of class mobility with proximity to standard English that would, as I have already indicated, make the project of hybrid writing in English somewhat artificial. And the writer

who would be a serious user of hybrid English would probably write in the local language. That is the difference in India, that there are very well developed literary traditions in some of the local languages. Many English words are, and continue to be, lexicalized in these languages in senses and connotations ex-centric to Standard English. You might say the choice to write pure or hybrid exists more realistically in those vernaculars. And the choice takes its place among other kinds of hybridizations: dialects, class variations, underclass vernacular mixings through internal migrant labor, multilingual irony. As in the case of South Africa, it would be difficult to find a clean analogy for resistant language-practice in the Indian case. Here, as in many other instances of resistant cultural practice, I think the solidarity comes from exchange of information and a bonding through acknowledgment of difference.

If we were a white country, might our hybrid English have been another English, as different from British as is American? What about the fact that we have flourishing, developing vernaculars? At any rate, the creative level of Indian English was always defined as a deviation. And the major vernacular literatures were somehow defined as under-developed because they had not followed the Hegel-Lukácsian line of form and content. This is by now so well established, even internalized, that it seems hopeless to speculate about a counter-factual history. The idea of the European novel as the best form and its harbingers as Cervantes and Defoe is here to stay. To get back to Indian English, it is too late in the day to undertake the project of actually introducing it into public discourse. It already is there because, in fact, public Indian English is significantly different. It can seem comical to the users of "pure" Standard English—is there such a thing? because it is unself-conscious. And our upper crust often joins in that laughter. The celebration of that intellectualized patois in international Indian literature, or subcontinental literature written in English, would be impractical for reasons that I have already given.

AA: Let me shift the focus from India to Ireland. Could you speak to the project of writing as that of Joyce, Yeats, Beckett?

GCS: I hold on to the idea of dehegemonizing. I think I am more sympathetic with Joyce's stated deep irony. You remember Mother Grogan in *Ulysses?* Haines, the Englishman, who has learned Irish, speaks to her in Irish, and she asks, "Is it German?" Yeats, in the event, transformed English. But in his stated politics, language politics, I find him less sympathetic than Joyce. It has to be self-conscious or nothing.

I will now draw an example not from India, but from Bangladesh, because I've just had this discussion with a poet in Dhaka. When the

British became territorial, rather than simply commercial, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, they came in through Bengal. There was already an Islamic imperial presence in India located nearly a thousand miles away in Delhi, although the Nawab of Bengal was Muslim and there was a sizable, powerful Muslim minority, both urban and rural. In order to counteract Islamic domination—and I'm obviously simplifying—they played up the Hindu Sanskrit quality of Bengali. Bengali was the language they emphasized, because they had come through Bengal and established themselves in Bengal. There was therefore a colonial hype of Bengali as an Indic-Hindu language. In fact, of course, Bengali had a strong Arabic-Pharsi element as well. Under the British, nearly all of it was erased, and subsequent Bengali nationalism also emphasized the Hindu element. (Curiously enough, the Hindu majority government of India has been playing the same game with Hindi, the national language, for some time.)

The liberation of Muslim-majority Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 was officially on linguistic-cultural rather than religious grounds. My friend the poet has this question: How do we restore the Islamic elements in Bengali without identifying with a program of religious fundamentalism? Bengali is my mother tongue too. So there we were: he born a Muslim, I born a Hindu, he Bangladeshi, I Indian, neither of us very religious, totally against fundamentalism, and neither of us at all interested in the crazy project of a separatist Bengal, a pipedream that is occasionally brought out for sentimental or political rhetoric. I said to him that I thought that since language cannot be interfered with self-consciously, the only way to do it is absolutely self-consciously; that is to say, write manifestos, and so on. I have a great deal of sympathy with self-conscious tampering, because one knows that language works behind and beyond and beside self-consciousness.

#### AA: What about Beckett's writing in French?

GCS: I see it as a sort of self-distancing. When you began you were talking about identity. I have trouble with questions of identity or voice. I'm much more interested in questions of space, because identity and voice are such powerful concept-metaphors, that after a while you begin to believe that you are what you're fighting for. In the long run, especially if your fight is succeeding and there is a leading power-group, it can become oppressive, especially for women, whose identity is always up for grabs. Whereas, if you are clearing space, from where to create a perspective, it is a self-separating project, which has the same politics, is against territorial occupation, but need not bring in questions of identity, voice, what am I, all of which can become very individualistic also. It seems to me that Beckett's

talist, which is a real contradiction within all fundamentalisms. And that, for reasons of prejudice, was taken to be the real nature of Islam in the United States. In other words, the Ayatollah succeeded in his self-representation. But that is self-representation, not acting out the nature of Islam, whatever that might mean. What is the nature of a religion—always the broaching of the universal in the historical? We see the difference between the U.S. reaction and the British reaction. Rather than keeping it coded as terrorism versus freedom of expression, in Britain the incident recorded itself as fundamentalism against racism, so that you can't take either side. The only side to take is the British Black women's, who are against both. It is more complicated for them. You have to create a space for doubters and transgressors; you have to create a space for the way politics uses things. It is productively confused in Britain. It shows up the living dilemmas of politics.

AA: Does this explain the delay in the British response? It wasn't until after Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, and American PEN issued statements of support in New York, that there was noticeable support from writers in London.

GCS: If you consider the Bradford Muslims British, the response was not delayed. But I know what you mean, of course. Liberals were uneasy. Here was a "black" religion. In Britain, Pakistanis and Indians are black. How can the writer take sides, the white writer? I mean, what are the issues? Colonial subject against the authentic natives?

AA: Was it a wait for a U.S. valorization?

GCS: I don't think so. If you look at the detail of how it is still going, nobody is following the lead of the U.S. coding. Even in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Peter Porter is obliged to say that this is the cross versus the crescent, and so on.

No, in Britain, it has been significantly different. And the unease was on grounds of possible racism, which didn't give anybody any pause in the United States. They saw it right from the beginning as those bloody Arabs. Of course the Ayatollah isn't an Arab; what's the difference? Bloody Arabs against freedom of expression.

AA: Let me move the focus of discussion once again, this time to the United States. Chicano writers have at times characterized our relationship with Anglo America as internal colonialism. As we work our strategies for our identity, it seems that it could be very helpful to hear reflections on our

situation from someone such as yourself, that is, an intellectual from a Third World, postcolonial country. What does colonial discourse from the external Third World offer to the U.S. internal Third World?

GCS: Where did you get the internal colonization model?

AA: From Chicano social science texts. Rodolfo Acuña's Occupied America and Mario Barrera's Race and Class in the Southwest are two examples.<sup>4</sup>

GCS: I needed to know that, because when I talk about internal colonization, my model is Samir Amin's *Unequal Development*, which is Afrocentric, global, and, of course, generally from Gramsci.<sup>5</sup> I apply it, of course, to the United States situation, but the model, especially in terms of the First Nations, has to be twisted somewhat.

My feeling is that it is necessary to see the Chicano movements as united with the colonial discourse analysts speaking from the decolonized nations outside of the United States for reasons of political solidarity. As both your authors point out, the making of the Chicano has something like a relationship with those voices. But when one is thinking of the production of knowledge, that is to say, when you are writing or teaching, it is also necessary to look at the differences. The idea of internal colonization can become significant in computing the differences.

The received idea is that the Hispanic imperial text failed partly because, again oversimplifying, the conjuncture between conquest and mode of production was not yet right. Britain with its industrial revolution was the one that could launch full-fledged capitalist imperialism. The Spanish example, as you know better than I, had a different fate and created the peculiar phenomenon of Latin America. The Chicano emerges into internal colonization from the "other" text, with differences. Shall I quote Barrera's excellent little definition here? "Internal colonialism is a form of colonialism in which the dominant and subordinate populations are intermingled, so that there is no geographically distinct 'metropolis' separate from the 'colony.'"<sup>6</sup>

But in the internal colonization scene, let me again offer you an analogy, because there is little I can tell you about the Chicano predicament that you don't already know. I am thinking about Central and Eastern Europe today and all the nationalisms and subnationalisms that are coming up under glasnost and their peculiar relationship with anticommunism, the peculiar relationship with the longing for welfare state-ism, etc. If one thinks there of the former script of the Ottoman Empire, the centuries of a kind of practical multinationalism without the emergence of the discourses of nationalism as in Atlantic Europe, if one takes that into account, then