

**Interview with Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

## **Exclusionary Education(s): An Ongoing Dialogue with Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

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### **An Endless Abyss of Exclusions: October 2016**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Padma Bhushan in Literature and Education (2013), is University Professor and founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature & Society at Columbia University (in the City of New York, USA), as well as a world-renowned pioneer in feminisms, postcolonial studies, and Marxism, among many other inter-disciplines. In January 2016, Spivak published a much-anticipated, new edition of her Herculean translation of Jacques Derrida's seminal *Of Grammatology* (*De la grammatologie*, 1976). The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary re-translation, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, is updated with a new Afterword by the translator, and an Introduction by famed gender theorist Judith Butler (Hannah Arendt Chair and Professor of Philosophy, The European Graduate School, and Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley).

In her salutary prelude, Butler praises Spivak's re-turn to Derrida's text, writing, "It is rare to find such a combination of nuance and erudition in any translation of this magnitude. This translation has undergone a reiterative process. She [Spivak] translated it forty years ago and now again, and so we are confronted with several

intervals or spacings. There is the distance of the original to the translation, and now that of the second translation to the first.”<sup>1</sup> A pressing question here may be: why (again) Derrida, and why (again) now? Derrida’s reformulations of Ferdinand de Saussure’s famed linguistic structuralist formula *signifier/ signified* = *sign* are little less than earth-shattering. His insistence on the hermeneutic independence and value of the signifier (writing) rather than its derivative dependence on the signified (meaning) unhooked the metaphysical relationship between voice and meaning.

The historical shockwaves from this academic revelation have been far-reaching and profoundly generative, especially in the context of exclusion studies and pedagogy. They forged a philosophical rationale for challenging thought, in general, and Western knowledge systems in particular, by unearthing assumptions and naturalizations of meaning. Derrida raised some foundational questions in the opening of his “Signature Event Context,” whose issues had been germinating since the August 1971 Montreal international conference on French and philosophy. He asked in what are now-revolutionary terms, “Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable?”<sup>2</sup> This query immediately interrogated the exclusionary, rather than all-inclusive, democratic functions in and between languages. It recognized the instability of meaning or any overdetermining form of hegemony, where the “hegemonic class” ruled over the “subaltern classes” by “winning them over” as described by Antonio Gramsci.<sup>3</sup>

This made improbable the guarantees that meaning is always transmitted without problem or fail. Rather, many of the assumptions and naturalizations of meaning are effects of historical power relations mired in slavery, casteism, colonialism, apartheid, etc. The transformative ramifications of Derrida’s thought spilled into socio-political movements of the late 1980s and beyond, and are commonly credited with the formation and development of new trends in literary criticism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. These tectonic shifts in world thought recognize those who are excluded from popular democratic discourses even as they submerge themselves into teaching at all levels to counter reproductions of those who are marked as excludable “Others.”

Indeed, Spivak is perhaps best known for “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, an essay whose very title threw gender, class, and national identity into question along with the authority that we are accustomed to encountering in a traditional academic

<sup>1</sup>Judith Butler. “Introduction.” *Of Grammatology*. Jacques Derrida; Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. xxi.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context.” *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated with addition notes by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 307-330; p. 307.

<sup>3</sup>Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Books, 1971.

essay. The immortal question continues to compel us to recognize and interrogate social exclusions in their most muted and incognizant disguises: “Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?”<sup>4</sup> These fateful questions have shaped profuse fields of study at many epistemic sites around the world. I myself first encountered this essay as a college sophomore in the context of Black British Studies, and its probing questions and challenges to Eurocentric knowledge formations and indigenous religious nationalisms stick with me even today. Time, in addition to healing many wounds, also seems to afford us reflection and revision that empowers an “upgrade of the self” with respect to earth-shattering heuristics.

Spivak substantially developed and extended her decades-long commitment to deconstructionist labor in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012). That text is committed to exploring the strategies that teachers engage as they juggle democratic education with social exclusion, urging us not to foreclose on “the sensory equipment of the experiencing being”<sup>5</sup> by resignedly overdetermining the impact of multinational globalization. Rather, Spivak has explored “the political need to embody a recognized identity, and institutional agency”<sup>6</sup> that is the ultimate hope of marginalized groups’ engagement with the ethics of alterity. This need also marks an era in which we often believe education can be magically accomplished with the wave of a digital wand. She writes, “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.”<sup>7</sup>

Spivak’s meditative distance of 40 years of philosophical retrospection espouses a striking clarity when she re-translating *Of Grammatology*, in which she re-translates herself. She was the same during an interview conducted some years ago in which I fielded and asked Spivak questions that were posed by marginalized demographics in Indian and American academia. In honoring her pedagogical training of young people, Spivak agreed to field questions that interrogate various aspects of education and exclusion. What follows is an edited and abridged version of an interview that appeared online in *Politics & Culture* (2012)<sup>8</sup>, republished here with kind permission of Co-Editors Amitava Kumar and Michael Ryan. For

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<sup>4</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 2.

<sup>6</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Outside in the Teaching Machine.” *Discourse* 16.3 (January 1994), 185.

<sup>7</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Why Study the Past?” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 73.1 (March 2012), 2.

<sup>8</sup>Rahul K. Gairola, “Occupy Education: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.” *Politics & Culture* (25 September, 2012). <https://politicsandculture.org/> Accessed 1 November, 2016.

this version, Spivak has kindly added new material and re-worked her previous words, in effect thus re-translating herself.

**Back (words): January 2012**

**RKG:** So here are some topics that some junior scholars and postgraduate students following your work are interested in. Many have asked to hear your ruminations on Marxism and the notion of “subaltern” – the ways your understandings of them might have shifted over the years.

**GCS:** 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.

**RKG:** I wonder if you have thoughts on the ways in which the personal is political, how they [personal anecdotes] can be informative, even transformative, in thinking about social and political work.

**GCS:** 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.

**RKG:** Why would you say this [comparative and language studies] is important for graduate students, and how might this help them in their continuing education, their professional lives in and beyond the classroom? How may we today substantially meditate on the link between language and learning?

**GCS:** 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.

**RKG:** Is there any advice you might have for students currently in doctoral programs?

**GCS:** 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?

**RKG:** I do, although this does not much allay the concerns of students on the job market. 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?

**GCS:** As I [earlier] said, 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.

**RKG:** My next question involves the Occupy movement, which has been later followed by the global Black Lives Matter movement. What are your thoughts on this?

**GCS:** 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.

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

**GCS:** No.

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

**GCS:** “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.

**RKG:** 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?

**GCS:** My parents, Taraknath Sen, Swami Pavitranda, Paul de Man, the rural schools, Q&A sessions-where to stop? I learn as I live.

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

**GCS:** Good. Thank you for your questions.

#### **After (words): October 2016**

The above interview demonstrates the many categories through which exclusionary tactics can operate – gender, class, race, sexuality, access to education, civil disobedience, and even the proliferation of smart phones and their corresponding apps with technologies of surveillance. In the Afterword of the new edition of *Of Grammatology*, Spivak also acknowledges the agency-shaping rise and role of digital technology on writing, identity, and difference. She writes, “The general argument is most pertinent to our time: that although the cybernetic and informatics revolution, using linguistics as a scientific model, is putting emphasis on writing – all that which used to assemble itself under the name of language now assembles itself under the name of writing – in fact, the ‘revolutionaries’ are using not a new discourse to fix these new inventions, but versions of the millennial ethnocentric and Eurocentric ideology of the thinking of Europe.”<sup>9</sup>

Spivak’s attentiveness to the ongoing urgency of Derrida’s text in our digital milieu prefaces decades invested in a career that has always theorized, labored, and lived side by side with some of the most socially abject subalterns of our time. Today, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is regarded as a poststructuralist anthem of the transmillennial shift from the neoliberal 1980s and ‘90s into a new era whose threshold was riddled by the apocalyptic Y2K meltdown of technology, then the global dominance of iCulture the world over and the rise of a “Digital India.” At the time she gravely questioned aloud, she also foreshadowed the fraught specter of gender in the ways that exclusion continues today with regard to girls’ birth rates, education, and weddings in contemporary South Asia, adding, “The question of ‘woman’ seems most problematic in this context.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Afterword.” *Of Grammatology*. Jacques Derrida; Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. p.345.

<sup>10</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. p.90.

This question of woman was perhaps most forcefully manifested in the positive on 21 February, 2017, when about three million women and allies across the U.S. were joined with allied groups in solidarity around the globe to protest the inauguration of Donald J. Trump. Beyond women's rights, ongoing global disputes and refugee crises center on borders that range from those that delineate nations to those that divide humans according to various identificatory taxonomies. These make urgent the issues that Spivak has exposed and challenged in and around Western discourses which today have a visceral agency with new policies of exclusion. These emerge as institutional xenophobia, violence, surveillance, and policing around the building of walls, enforcement of borders, mass deportations, and assaults on women's bodies and reproductive rights. Brexit and Trumpism have yielded populist nationalism whose misguided tall tales obscure historical record in the interest of deploying "home" and "homeland" as a domain of exclusion rather than inclusion.<sup>11</sup>

Many of these exclusionary discourses were challenged by Spivak in one way or another in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Throughout that seminal essay, Spivak focuses on the hanged body of a female Indian independence fighter who had waited four days to menstruate to ensure that no one would think she was killing herself due to an illicit pregnancy. Through suicide, the woman (whom Spivak later reveals was her 17-year-old, maternal great-aunt) was re-appropriating *sati*, or widow-burning, through self-induced violence that produced her corpse as a palimpsest of colonialist patriarchy. This act compels us to acknowledge that silenced subjects, even who speak through the violent eradication of their own lives, are yet unheard in the wake of suicide. This tragic history braids together threads of difference, ethnicity, and identity, which are all gendered, and have a deep impact on colonized subjects who have transformed into postcolonial agents following the decades of decolonization that emerged from the demise of the Axis Powers.

Yet such a poignant account of anti-colonial gender resistance further testifies that discourses of exclusion have not come to an end. People who are marginalized according to race, gender, sexuality, class, color, caste, creed, etc. are compelled to engage in identity politics enforced by dominant forces, but may also acknowledge that flattening difference is sometimes necessary to secure political agency by building coalitions.<sup>12</sup> This creates what Spivak elsewhere calls a "double bind," which she describes as an elliptical shuttling between two subject positions where at least one, but more often both, are sites of the other that imbibe "learning to live with contradictory instructions."<sup>13</sup> The double bind, or that which

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<sup>11</sup>Rahul K. Gairola. *Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belonging*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016. p.21.

<sup>12</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.3.

<sup>13</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p.3.

simultaneously connects and disconnects difference, is underscored by the exclusion/ inclusion binary which inscribes “common sense” hierarchies into social relations and the ways in which they are today represented in history and meaning production.

In the Digital India of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the excitement of the technological future is tempered by a fraught past. Will the widespread promise of technological innovation and the dream of Digital India mediate against further exclusions in social, political, and domestic spheres in contemporary India? Certainly the effects can cut both ways. As I have elsewhere noted, these digital gadgets often lead to a false sense of movement without movement, what I have called ‘migrations in absentia’ in the context of contemporary digital advertising attempts to bank on the ongoing heartache of Partition.<sup>14</sup> The technologies of Digital India are being streamlined for the benefit of the least vulnerable, even as “the subaltern” remains ungeneralizable. In expounding on her intentionality in using the term, Spivak writes, “Many people around the world have borrowed that title but not really understood what I was trying to say. Mostly, they are claiming that, ‘Yes, the subaltern *can* speak!’ without any actual involvement with subalterns anywhere in the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Subalternity is defined by the inability of its speech act to be completed by the elite. The persistent task is to combat capitalism’s irreducible need to subalternize, and actively make it possible for subaltern struggles for citizenship to be recognized, and where necessary, assisted on their terms rather than through left wing rationalism, diagnosing a “Maoism” that refuses to acknowledge the subaltern groups caught between middle class leaders and the government. In 2017, subalternity is both produced and undermined by the manipulations of borders and portals, thresholds of belonging and spaces of exclusion that are designated as zones for authorized suffering, misery and bloodshed. Inclusion and exclusion underscore today’s definition of “world power” according to who is and is not invited into the nuclear club of elite nations around the globe.

Exclusion these days has also become a key feature in spaces of privilege that are marked by gendered, national, and racialized difference. Spivak writes to me, “Although you don’t mention it in your interview with the Ambassador [Richard Verma], I remain the only ‘South Asian’ woman of color who actually is teaching European material in the Euro-U.S. at the Ivy League University Professor

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<sup>14</sup>Rahul K. Gairola. “Migrations in Absentia: Multinational Digital Advertising and Manipulation of Partition Trauma.” *Revisiting India’s Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics*, edited by Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer, and Rahul K. Gairola. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016. 53-70, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Re: Response to SALA Invitation.” Received by Rahul K. Gairola, 3 February 2016.

level. On the other hand, I am still sometimes drawn into secondary inspection at the airport when I enter the country, because I have not changed my citizenship. So, praise of immigrant experience has another side.”<sup>16</sup> Just as meritocratic praise can be attended by the exclusionary practices at homeland borders, exclusion from elitism and education seems to be a major path forward for social justice education.

This is especially important for the countries of South Asia, continental Africa, and Latin America as major political shifts in the U.S. and E.U. will influence the Anglo-American Empire and its impact in these part of the globe.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, as we move forward with the pioneering work of Derrida, Spivak, and those who follow, we may best succeed in embracing exclusionary techniques as a means for slowly yet methodically undoing them. But will either finance capital or the policy makers listen? As in a dialogue from William Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*:

Glendower:       And I can call spirits from the vasty deep.  
Hotspur:         Why, so can I; or so can any man.  
                      But will they come, when you do call for them?<sup>18</sup>

#### **Forwards: Days Before the U.S. Election (4 November, 2016)**

“It [the original interview] was done when it was done and no doubt I will have learnt more in the interim” – GCS.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Rahul K. Gairola and Ashna Ali, “Ambivalence and Security in the Anglo-American Empire: A Critical Dialogue with Professor Homi K. Bhabha.” *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 47.1 (Winter 2017), 144-163; p.145.

<sup>18</sup>William Shakespeare, *Henry the Fourth*. Part I, Act 3, Scene 1, p.52-58.