

Review: Spivak Lessons

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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## SPIVAK LESSONS

### *GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK: IN OTHER WORDS*

BY SANGEETA RAY

Wiley-Blackwell, 2009

*Ben Conisbee Baer*

The questions that animate Sangeeta Ray's engaging new book on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak bear upon teaching and learning. The push and pull of being both student of Spivak's work and teacher of that work in the classroom and in the medium of the book are palpable from the first pages. We begin with a heading of "Partial Beginnings," and soon the "impossible" task of a book on Spivak is invoked (1). "[H]ow would I write her without diminishing her presence?" (1) asks Ray, facing, in fact, the double bind confronting every teacher: how to respond responsibly to the subject they have to teach.

As Ray points out, Spivak calls attention to the play in Derrida's French between *répondre à* and *répondre de* that formalizes several options here. Thus, "give an answer to," "answering to," "being answerable for" (Spivak, "Responsibility," 61; Ray, 72).<sup>1</sup> None is predictably the right thing. Caught in this double bind, the teacher is left without a reliable device with which to calculate what her answerability to the material to be taught should be. So we receive "a version of the many possible books that were discarded and rewritten" (Ray, 1). Maybe it all sounds a bit dramatic, but in fact it's an experience of everyday life: like everyone, the teacher must decide how to go on, but every "instant of decision is a madness . . . a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of nonknowledge and nonrule" (Derrida, "Force of Law," 255). In her continuously reflexive engagement with the texts of Spivak, Ray does not cease reminding her readers that

the urgent, productively anxiety-inducing scene of pedagogy is acted out in those texts.

The options open to the teacher will depend to some extent upon where she or he stands in the tremendously class-divided situation of education at all levels in the world today. As Ray observes, it is to questioning the instituted apartheid of education that Spivak has dedicated a great part of her energies over the last twenty years or so. In a class-divided system, standardized, rote-learned answers are called for from the poor, while the middle and upper classes demand that their children are taught to “think for themselves,” to become “problem solvers” and “leaders.” With unyielding perseverance, Spivak has worked to train teachers in the rural South to teach a state curriculum in such a way that the children of the subaltern might also become “problem solvers,” minimally equivalent in capacity to their Ivy League peers at the other end of the spectrum on which she teaches. In the second chapter, on the theme of “soul-making,” Ray shows how Spivak’s experience of education in the rural global South radically informs her apparently more abstract or “high”-level theoretical writing. To be able to discern the figure of the “gendered subaltern” and the “new subaltern” (nonreciprocally accessed by a one-way street of telecommunications and finance capital) at large in the world; to be able to read in the writings of Tagore and J. M. Coetzee, for instance, the specific disjunctures between ethics and politics, warning of the risks and failures of postcolonial politics, as well as their totally unexpected resources of hope; to be able to do any of these things (and myriad others, too, that readers will find original in Spivak’s work), Ray observes, it is perhaps necessary to have ventured out of narrowly academic enclosures into teaching work alongside grassroots subaltern activists (51–62). This is no easy task: thinking you have successfully done so is itself a warning, a moment for vigilance (59).

Meanwhile, overseen by this multileveled labor of Spivak’s, there have appeared in the last few years several short monographic studies of her work. Stephen Morton’s *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (2003) is part of Routledge’s *Critical Thinkers* series of “introductory guides to key figures in contemporary thought.” Mark Sanders’s *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (2006) is part of Continuum’s *Live Theory* series published under similar rubric. Although the number of book chapters and articles in many languages that engage and discuss the work of Spivak

is probably uncountable, there are still relatively few monographic studies. Given the significance of Spivak's intellectual contributions, and the force and frequency of her interventions in many academic and activist contexts, it is somewhat surprising that there are not more monographs and collections dedicated to her oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> Ray's book is not part of a "beginner's guide"-type series, and its more explicit engagement with the peculiarly summary-resistant sinews and interconnections of Spivak's writing and activism makes of it an essential complement to the other two monographs. One hopes that these short studies of the past few years are straws in the wind, signs of a deeper, more comprehensive engagement to come.

Ray's book does not, however, appear as part of a series introducing students to important critics or concepts; nor does it present itself as a beginner's guide. "This is not a book about Spivak," she writes at the end of chapter 1 (22). Ray rather hopes that her book "offers a thinking through with Spivak the important questions about reading, pedagogy, ethics, and feminism" (23). *In Other Words* comes across as a reckoning with Spivak, as a record of a reading and teaching itinerary over many years, and as a staging of a scene of instruction (the above-quoted mention of pedagogy clues us in here: this is a book full of "lessons" and "learning"). Indeed, Ray dramatizes her own scenes of being-instructed-by Spivak as, simultaneously, she instructs her readers in lessons to be learned from Spivak. Thus the book turns out to be a guide after all, but one that attempts to enter Spivak's work as a kind of guerrilla classroom or workshop, a precept session for the ethico-politically engaged feminist scholar. Not simply a guide to Spivak, but a dramatization of how Spivak can be a guide. The fact that, as Ray points out, Spivak's writing does not easily yield models or paradigms may itself explain the relative lack of secondary studies of her work in its mode of a "reading practice" (22). A practice that somehow resists summary even as it enables other headings, in bodies of work that do not, or cannot, resemble it.

Ray centers each of her four chapters on a well-chosen collage of Spivak's writings, bringing out how these writings are part of a larger, cumulative argument about, and performance of, pedagogy. Thus, in chapter 2, on literature, Ray deftly relates the "Literature" chapter of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999)—and especially the part that began as the pathbreaking essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique

of Imperialism" (1985)—to Spivak's practice of teacher training in rural Bengal. She achieves this connection through the motif of "soul making," the production of the colonial subject as a *subject*, an ethical being. Spivak tracks a taxonomy of the limits of this colonial endeavor, the making of a classed soul, through literary examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in *Jane Eyre*, *Frankenstein*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and then in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*. Ray then relates these readings to another site of soul making, in the practice of the rural classroom, where the "discontinuity" between subaltern and intellectual may perhaps be repaired (61). In the rural classroom, the soul-shape of the subaltern child can perhaps be engaged with as something that will educate the educators. For Ray, Spivak's "uncoercive rearrangement of desires" (61) is cast in terms of a variant of soul making informed by a robust literary imagination that has learned how to work, doubtfully, slowly, without piety—in unguaranteed, possibly hopeless, conditions. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

It is the question of ethics that remains at the center of Ray's engagement with the pedagogical Spivak, and chapter 3 tackles this question head on. The central texts at issue here are "Responsibility" (1994) and *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet* (1999). Ray teases out some implications of the intricate deconstruction of "benevolence" undertaken in Spivak's astonishing juxtaposition of a reading of Derrida on Heidegger (*Of Spirit*) with her own account of the World Bank Flood Action Plan for Bangladesh and the European Green opposition to it. Spivak's staging of the double bind of responsibility here—itsself doubly bound in the relation between a historical narrative and a philosophical morphology—calls attention to the way the subaltern still falls between the cracks. The World Bank stands for the exigencies of Economy; the Green Party stands for the demands of Nature. These two self-assigned "responsibilities" lose the subaltern on the one hand by sheer imposition of development from above, and on the other by a (necessarily misfiring) deployment of the native informant as "authentic local voice" (78). Ray lingers on this, one of Spivak's most important and daunting critiques of benevolence, and makes it segue into a more general consideration of Spivak's "ethical turn."

We thus return to responsibility with the question of "planetarity," a term Spivak coined in *Imperatives* to supplement globality. Ray tracks the ongoing elaboration of the ethical in Spivak's work to show

the different ways in which she sets rights- and responsibility-based ethical systems into critical relation with one another. What Spivak has termed the “terror” of planetarity<sup>3</sup> may be experienced in terms of the alterity of a “planet” that is literally indifferent to the presence of its human “custodians” (84). Reading perhaps too romantically, Ray understands planetarity to signify “pre-capitalist structures of engagement with the earth” (85) in a humanistic, ecological mode. Yet humanism itself, as Spivak has argued recently, may be thought of as a “grounding error,” a defense mechanism against the otherness of a planetarity that *does not care about us* (“The Stakes of the Question”). Ray de-emphasizes the absolute alterity of the planet (as one must, as it is unthinkable), but perhaps thereby misses that it is the “pre-modern,” now-residual *response* to this “terror” that opens the possibility of situating agency in alterity rather than in a self as subject of rights. Such a challenge to ecological and other kinds of collective thought remains to be elaborated if the promise of activating what is “defective for capitalism” can be turned into a learnable—let alone a practicable—lesson.

Throughout the book, in her own readings of literary texts as well as in her account of Spivak, Ray does an excellent job of emphasizing how feminism is a key to Spivak’s life and work. The feminist lesson, for Ray, is the most important lesson of all. While each chapter attempts to do justice to the play of Spivak’s feminist positions, the final chapter concerns itself specifically with an account of Spivak’s critical relation to academic and theoretical feminisms of our times (“Anglo-American” and “French”), while tracking her singular journey beyond their limits. This is broached through a discussion of the vicissitudes of the concept-metaphor “strategic essentialism,” perhaps the most famous and now overused of all the Spivakian slogans Ray discusses in her book (see especially 107–23). Spivak has certainly distanced herself from this formula by now. However, Ray vividly illuminates how and why, at a certain point, the formula was necessary and effective in cracking open the self-image of French feminism as it privileged a heterogeneous universe of (European) women’s pleasures against a homogenous universe of (non-European) women’s suffering (114–20). Ray’s reminder of this fact is timely.

As Ray points out, Spivak often proceeds from a feminist position that cannot ignore the obligation to *begin* with a feminism that is

“grounded in the differences between women” (121), as well as in the thought that she can best “articulate female solidarity” internationally from that differential base (124). Another lesson, another setting-to-work that must be activated.

Perhaps “inevitably” (127) ending with a discussion of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Ray concludes with a meditation on Spivak’s concluding representation of the young suicide Bhubaneswari Bhaduri. It is this particular move that has received the most elaboration in Spivak’s subsequent discussion and reworking of the first versions of the piece.<sup>4</sup> It was always a daring move to frame this lone, unheard attempt to “speak” against the validation of *sati* in the context of the revolutionary militancy of the Bengali middle class. I read it as a particularly difficult example from which to generalize subalternity, strangely echoing Antonio Gramsci’s letter to Julia Schucht wherein he seems for the first time, and addressing a woman, to singularize subalternity rather than, as in the *Notebooks*, tending to figure it only as a collective formation (subaltern classes, subaltern groups).<sup>5</sup> It is a mark of Ray’s acute readerly instincts that she is able to frame Spivak’s inclusion of this account of the death of a family member in terms of Spivak’s “own desire” and as a “critically gratifying” act (129; 132). Finding the gesture problematic and “dangerous,” Ray is “concerned about the manner in which this desire could be seen as similar in form to the very desire [Spivak] critiques in Foucault and Deleuze” (129). We return to the scene of pedagogy, undone, in Ray’s argument, by the desire to be autobiographical: “Why lessen the lesson,” asks Ray, “by making the autobiographical explicit?” (131).

Yet here I feel that Ray does not pursue her own insights far enough. For, as I understand it, desire is the very thing Spivak lets the reader in on in her staging of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” At stake are precisely the desire and self-gratification of the theorist. With the formula “white men are saving brown women from brown men,” improvised upon Freud’s “a child is being beaten,” does Spivak not write the theorist’s desire into the picture? “A Child Is Being Beaten” is Freud’s most elaborated exploration of the question of identification, and his setting out of the permutations of the subject’s position within the scene is well known. Child, beater, beatee, spectator, and more: all these positions can change for and as the subject of the phantasmatic identification in this scenario. Beating might indeed figure self-gratification.<sup>6</sup>

The whole theater is a desiring-machine. Why does Spivak invoke *sati*, Draupadi, the *Dharmashastras*, and the *Mahabharata*? Not just because she wants to show the colonial overwriting of “tradition,” but because she wishes to inscribe the question of subalternity within a far deeper history than merely that of British colonialism. That is, she also wishes to produce a critique of “Hinduism” and its part in the story of the making of the subaltern. Freud, the white man, will here save Spivak, the brown woman. Thus there is nothing fortuitous in the fact that Spivak borrows a syntactic formula from Freud. Consequently I would say that at this point Ray must read the scene of writing more closely than she does. We are confronted with a site of complicity, a theater of (theoretical) auto-affection, at the very moment Spivak was instigating her own path of exit from the closures of the Parisian theory scene. Spivak here allies with a different group of Indians, B. R. Ambedkar and Mulk Raj Anand, for example, who do not fixate on modern imperialism as the only system for producing subalternity. That is another story, waiting for the next writer of a Spivak guide. For now let us borrow some words from Derrida, words that Spivak has often cited for similar reasons, to suggest an allegory of reading for those closing moments of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

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. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24)

The importance of Ray’s book lies in its active transgression of the kind of knowledge-project that can and must be performed by a beginner’s guide. In this respect, her book works as an excellent pathway into the complex textures of Spivak’s own writings. We have a deeply engaged record of Ray’s encounter before us, and once we have worked through it she encourages us to cross the limits of her book’s virtual classroom for other scenes of teaching and learning where “the ethical interruption can postpone the attempt merely to know the other.”<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. Spivak’s “Responsibility” was first published in *Boundary 2* in 1994. For Derrida’s discussions, see “Passions,” 3–34, and *Politics of Friendship*, 250–53.

2. But see the excellent recent collection edited by Rosalind Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

3. "The Stakes of the Question: Why Study the Past?" Paper presented in the session "Pastism," Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Los Angeles, January 7, 2011.

4. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has been through several variants since its first delivery at the Institute on "Marxist Interpretations of Culture: Limits, Frontiers, Boundaries" conference in Illinois in 1983. An early version was published in *Wedge* (1985). To my knowledge, Spivak discusses Bhubaneswari as a member of her family, her grandmother's sister, a person of her own class, for the first time in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, and then on several occasions after that.

5. "You put yourself . . . in a subaltern rather than a dominant position," he writes to Julia Schucht. See Antonio Gramsci, letter of August 8, 1933, *Letters from Prison*, vol. 2, 318. Gramsci is able to singularize subalternity in an address to a (loved) woman. This could be related to Spivak's interest in the singular encounter (sometimes "embrace") with the woman subaltern, touched on by Ray with two examples from Assia Djebar on 126–27. I have benefited here from hearing Ursula Apitzsch's account of Gramsci's letters in the paper "Revolution, Defeat, and Subalternity: Antonio Gramsci in Dialogue with Giulia and Tatiana Schucht," presented at the conference "Negotiating the Enlightenment: Kant, Gramsci, Education, and Women," Columbia University, March 25, 2011. Apitzsch is an editor of the complete *Gefängnisbriefe* in German.

6. See Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten." Judith Butler offered a reading of some of these permutations in her response to the publication of *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* at CUNY Graduate Center, March 2, 2011.

7. Spivak cited in Ray, 133.

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