

Interview with Gayatri Spivak  
By Kerry Chance and Yates McKee  
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Gayatri Spivak, best known as a postcolonial critic and translator of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, presented a lecture entitled "Human Rights and Human Wrongs" in the Olin Auditorium on Thursday. The talk addressed the role of human rights in education, and the imperative for people of the "South" to locate their positions as 'subject.'

From "Can the Sub-Altern Speak?" to *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason*, Spivak's work has investigated imperialism and the struggle for decolonization, while interrogating the premises of Marxism, feminism, and Derridean deconstruction that underwrite her work. Self described as a "para-disciplinary, ethical philosopher," Spivak has published literary criticism in *Myself Must I remake*, to deconstructionist theory in the Introduction to *Of Grammatology*, as well as cultural analysis in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. She is currently an Avalon Foundation Professor at Columbia University.

Spivak spoke to the Free Press after her lecture, discussing the Quebec protests, teaching, radical art, and postcolonial studies.

Yates McKee: Could you offer your assessment of the anti-corporate globalization "movement" which has emerged into international visibility since the demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, and specifically the role that universities and students have played in it? This is a particularly urgent topic right now at Bard, as around 40 students will travel to Quebec next week to demonstrate against the FTAA.

Gayatri Spivak: Well I'm for these demonstrations. I think it is extremely important that this kind of opposition be made visible by young people in the metropolis. But you will agree that they cannot stand alone. What developed in the aftermath of Seattle is a kind of labor union. I was in Seattle right after the event and I went to some of these meetings. Then I was also in certain meetings in New York where South African workers and people from AFCIO, where people were consolidating after Seattle. I'm not directly involved the post-Seattle, post-Naples situations but I felt, since I'm a bit of an activist in these fields, that perhaps the aftermaths of these demonstrations should be a learning of the counter-globalizing movements already in place in the countries of the South and not imposing agendas from debt relief - South African workers were asking for signatures on debt relief. In what way debt relief by itself is an issue? When I asked this question by those doing this after the demonstrations, the kinds of answers that I got were not very satisfactory.

Therefore, I would say, we need more of what we called 'teach-ins' in the sixties, and awareness of what the issues are for the global movements that have been around for a long time that try to make globalization into strategy-driven rather than crisis driven. I

feel that not enough comes after the actual demonstrations. The demonstrations remain somewhat as self-fulfilling events, after which the efforts that are picked-up are either in terms of organized labor or in terms of visible redress, which don't necessarily have real connections with the demonstrations. So what happens is you give fuel to the other side like some of my colleagues. Then in Naples for example a great deal was made of freedom of speech that the demonstrators should be able to express their opinion against the World Trade Organization. I think that is not a very good way of going about it. I think there you forget that these freedoms must be bound to content. The World Trade Organization should not be opposed in order for Europe to exercise its freedom of speech. It must be bound to content. So I absolutely support these demonstrations. But so that an editor from Foreign Affairs cannot describe the protesters as latte drinking dancers in front of the World Bank. Or that the opposition cannot label them as ignorant. I think we must consolidate ourselves in a post-protest learning experience. We shouldn't try to lead so much after the demonstrations. We should really try to follow instead.

Kerry Chance: In your talk, you emphasized that indigenous peoples, such as those with whom you work in India, need to look forward rather than mourn over history. Homi Bhabha, a few weeks ago in an interview with the Free Press, discussed the right and the need to narrate, to provide testimony. How does looking forward relate to the imperative to speak, and provide testimony to that history?

GS: What people were Homi Bhabha talking about?

KC: One of the examples he used was South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

GS: Well, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a masterful idea. It's almost like throwing the gauntlet Christianity. The confession taken as a logical solution in the place of legal solutions. So there it's a kind of substitute for legal mode where people are narrating, and it's extremely organized. Already in '97, all the victims had finished speaking, and it's now such that the business of the state cannot go on. The people in the new nation now sometimes, especially in private, express some consternation. But I'm talking about something different. I'm talking about the normality of people not people of crisis. I'm talking about in the daily work of people, intervening in the normality of people so that for the future their mindsets become the subjects of addressing their own wrongs. I'm interested in long-term solutions.

KC: As part of the everyday normalcy of people, you said in your talk that part of teaching in India for you is defined by an "uncoersive rearrangement of desires." What do you mean by that and how would it be possible?

GS: Well each place is different. I'm speaking about children, and the education of children not in adult education. I don't generalize at all, and at the end of each day all the teachers at all the schools come and meet, and I said to them once, you get most of your clothes from this old clothes place, a central place where people donate their

clothes, some of you sometimes can buy your clothes from the village markets. But the rich have tailors. They actually take the measurements from the person and make the clothes. I'm your tailor I say to them. So what I say to one teacher may not travel to another. I truly draw teaching lessons from what happens.

YM: While you have admonished "radical art" for being "insufficiently canny not only about globality but about [its] own place and role in globalization" your participation in things like Documenta X, the Johannesburg Biennial, the Whitney independent Studio program suggests that you take it seriously in some respect. What are the prospects of articulating artistic production to movements discussed above in a way that might move us beyond the didactic and instrumentalist concepts of "communication" and "consciousness raising" which frequently dominate activist understandings of "art"? Where might an understanding of the literary or poetic as distinct from political calculation fit here?

GS: Conceptual art asks us to be decoded. The fun is in seeing how much can be collapsed into a piece of work and how many different things it can do. So I'm not really thinking about conceptual art but I would be, in the arena of visual art, like to be surprised. I would like the unexpected. I'm not very savvy on this subject. We were talking about Homi [Bhabha]. Homi is infinitely more savvy on visual art than I am. My dealings with visual art are either didactic, following the lead of conceptual art, or waiting to be surprised.

And it happens. As for verbal art, rather than visual art, there of course what I was speaking about in my lecture, that is the exercising of the imagination because meaning is always a curveball, it never goes strait. That's where the imagination claims.

KC: What do you see as the limitations and possibilities of 'postcolonial' discourse?

GS: I don't know. When I wrote the piece on Jane Eyre, when I gave "Can the Sub-Altern Speak" as a lecture, when I started translating, I had no idea I was doing postcolonial anything. So to an extent, I have never been very happy with post-colonial work. I have always thought that that's how just literary studies should be done.

I've always thought of myself as a Europeanist who was doing good Europeanist work by looking at the whole big picture. The idea of being deliberately post-colonial troubles me. I sometimes do use that word in terms of my own work but that's more like Derrida using the word deconstruction. Since in the history of the language deconstruction has become a word meaning analytically dismantling, etc. So the idea that deconstruction could not be done, Derrida cannot stay on with that idea anymore, he has to claim deconstruction because it's taking on this other meaning.

So I too say postcolonial in terms of what I'm doing but I'm always a little uncomfortable. I'm not sure where it's going but I always feel like its going to hell but I don't want to say because that may be just me. You know, I never teach postcolonial, I

just teach Marx, Freud, Literature in English, French, and German. I think the way I teach teaches thinking in a way that others call postcolonial but I'd rather leave it to others.