Works Cited


Toward a Productive Crisis: A Response to Gayatri Spivak

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An invitation to give a considered and public response to a discursive performance by Gayatri Spivak is an intellectual challenge that quickly problematizes the usual scholarly conventions for such a genre. A crisp exposition of her main ideas and an evaluation of her supporting evidence is simply not adequate to the intricate discursive strands Spivak weaves for a tapestry she eventually intends to unravel. To critique her interviews or her talks (or her essays) by the usual academic criteria of, say, clarity and coherence, would be an ironic corroboration of her call for a persistent critique of the rigidities of phallocentric discourse that is at the heart of Spivak's intellectual and political agenda. Our received notions of clarity and coherence are, she hopes, put into productive crisis by our attempts to grapple with a prose redolent with deconstructive displacements, Marxist dialectics, feminist resistances, and allusions to Third World and continental thinkers from Derrida and Althusser to Mahasweta Devi and Ife Amadiume. Readers must find their way in this interdisciplinary critical terrain with few signposts. To be lost in a detour from “subject formation” to “normative discourses of constitutions” is, I suspect, an integral part of the journey.

In Spivak's discursive universe, ideas are not vigorously asserted or rigorously defended. Instead, they are held in “productively undecidable” tension to be interrogated from a variety of postmodern perspectives. Perhaps the classic five-paragraph essay (so central to the current-traditional
paradigm) with its confident thesis statement supported by three intercon­

cnected paragraphs of specific reasons, illustrations, and facts is the carica­
tured antithesis of Spivak's enigmatic, circuitous, tentative, and contradic­
tory train of thought. She is, quite obviously, relentlessly rigorous in an

intelligently awesome fashion, but not, most assuredly, to the measured

drummer of conventional humanist discourse. There are certainly rhythms

in her thought and style, but they are more likely to come from the dense

entaglement of Cixous, Irigrary, Derrida, Foucault, and Gramsci. Her

thoughts are not instantly accessible; nor are they meant to be, since her

prose enacts her meaning. Perhaps she also eschews the plain style out of a

fear of being understood too quickly, too clearly, as if real insight could be

conveyed crisply in commonsensical prose. In a comparable context, William

Dowling derides "the limpid style of bourgeois ideology where there is no

need for obscurity because all truths are known in advance" (11). A genuine

Marxist style should, he claims, produce "a dialectical shock" to force readers

out of their usual and lethargic habits of mind. The goal of difficult prose is

to "hear the shifting of the world's gears" (12). Somewhat less theatrically:

when I read Spivak, I hear a demanding heteroglossia—a dialogic weaving

and unweaving.

Her answer to the question about the relation between "gender as drama" and "women's writing and women's teaching" seems representative:

Women's writing and women's teaching, based on gender and drama, bring into play notions like performance, both in the sense of acting out and bringing about through saying, representation, and self-representation, both in the sense of standing in for and seeing oneself as metonymy in the sense of the point of agreement standing in for provisional "collective consciousness," persistently to be dissolved as a presupposition. If this seems a little cryptic, I think the best way to decrypt it is, once again, in the technology of the classroom.

Reading this, I am reminded of Marshall McLuhan's insight that the medium is the message: Spivak is stylistically recapitulating an epistemology that needs to contextualize, to situate, to take back what has just been given, to shun generalization. This is not the linear, logocentric language of tradi­
tional scholarship. Her answer suggests that theory can only be temporarily put forth before it becomes something else under the pressure and the specificity of the classroom. Her response also suggests that ideas bring other ideas "into play," that a radically constructivist/anti-essentialist concept like gender as performance, for example, can and does act simultaneously with other, often contradictory ideas. More concretely, I think Spivak is suggest­
ing that if a woman constructs a certain identity—say, taking a personal and nurturing stance in an intellectual debate—then that "performance" could for strategic reasons momentarily stand in for her identity. However, as Jane Gallop notes, this positing will also need to be called into question. The antipodes to be avoided are a fixed essential woman and an "oceanic passivity
of undifferentiation” (Gallop xii). Here Spivak seems to be giving yet another twist to her provocative call to “take the risk of essence” in her anti-sexist work (qtd. in Smith 148).

In our present anti-foundationalist climate, this ongoing concern about the nature of the female subject is always controversial. The difficulties of definition are clearly foregrounded by Toril Moi’s observation that any theoretical ground the essential woman hopes to stand on has already been occupied and contaminated by patriarchal ideology. There is no escape. Early American feminists, however, felt they could uncover a suppressed and authentic self by throwing off masculinist ideology, as it is manifested, for example, in the canon, in objective critical methods that forbid the personal, or in the privileging of rhetorical strategies that diminish context and narrative. This pragmatic position has been roundly criticized by postmodernists such as Paul Smith for “being caught back up in the humanistic economy, the economy of the same” (137). The anti-essentialist cannot conceive of an identity (even in the case of Luce Irigaray when the female body is evoked as foundational) somehow existing outside the constraints of a particular culture in a specific time and place: “The self is always production rather than ground” (Spivak 212). And since women have always been constructed by a Western tradition dominated by males, it is unlikely Spivak would put much credence in the attempt to locate essence within a phallocentric culture. It is radical specificity that I believe Spivak is wedded to. Her chagrin at some feminists who have misunderstood her position stems from their inability to appreciate the postmodern cast of mind. For example, in a recent essay defending the virtues of the CBS style, Richard Marius invokes what he probably considers a self-evident warrant:

As Aristotle taught long ago and as the rabbis who taught the Torah and the Talmud also believed and as the medieval Scholastics and the humanists of the Renaissance assumed, systematic exposition is defined by the law of noncontradiction. Nothing can be true and not true at the same time. (4)

On the contrary, the performance of a certain identity can be true as a strategic necessity, to support collective resistance against those structures that support fixed identities. Essence is therefore true, as in “situationally appropriate to achieve justice.” But under the gaze of a historicized inquiry, nothing remains unchallenged. So essence can also be false, as in “unsupportable.” The resulting internally heterogeneous subject is consequently released from those logical traps most anathema to the postmodern consciousness: homogeneity, epistemic assurance, fixity, unity, and clarity. For Spivak, Marius’ law of noncontradiction is yet another masculine discursive stratagem to be undone. And if some feminists also believe they have finally established standards of truth, she is eager to register disapproval. With Lyotard, her knowledge is local, contingent, and frustratingly ephemeral.
The importance of focusing on micro-narratives is emphasized in several of her responses. Her nuanced move from strategic essentialism to a "pursuit of collective agency" is not directed primarily at global imperialism but at disciplinary discourse as it is enacted in our departments and universities. She suggests, echoing Foucault's notion of the "specific intellectual," that "decisions should not be separated from the way we run our workplace." Although the "big picture" is always in her mind, her tactics of resistance are directed at where she finds herself, doing the cultural work she does best. Her seemingly evasive response to the theory/practice binary is an example of her refusal to generalize beyond "the place of practice." Focusing on the material local practice seems wise to me. Beyond the obvious notion that current theory should inform practice, how much explicit theory should be foregrounded depends on a dramatistic evaluation of who is involved, the site, the purpose and so on. Writing an essay for *English Journal* requires the kind of practical specificity that would not please the readers of *PreText*, and no one expects a basic writing textbook to be quoting Althusser. And a promotion committee at a community college must give more significance to a candidate's textbook on rhetoric than a doctoral institution would. But even the notion of what constitutes theory is problematic. If we were to use Fish's pure conception, then very little of what gets published in *CCC* or *JAC* would qualify. For some Ken Macrorie is still theory, while for others practice means applied grammatology/paralogy. The banal "it depends" can also be profound. It depends. The crucial idea here is to be the questioning subject, not the subject who already knows. Struggling effectively at work to rewrite the dominant discourse, to refigure the curriculum, and to rework received notions of subjectivity, we help to loosen the grip of the hegemonic.

Perhaps the most local gesture we can make is in the classroom, professing critical literacy. Spivak insists on teaching as intervention, as a disruption of both the conventional canon and conventional pedagogy. Her position, widely endorsed among neo-Marxists, is that as intellectuals working in institutions we cannot be beyond power, somehow freestanding in an apolitical, privileged, and isolated academic grove. We are, she insists, complicitous with the exploitative tendencies of Western humanism. Regardless of her course's ostensible content, then, a critique of the values and assumptions of our received tradition is woven into the class's day-to-day activities. She would bring other voices into the room, alternative visions, fresh perspectives from India, Africa. She would demand a confrontation with the oppositional, the counter-hegemonic, the marginal. Since it is the nature of a dominant discourse to move what it fears, rejects, or represses to the edge to achieve coherence, it is only by bringing marginal voices to the center that systems can be brought to crisis, that we can be forced to doubt our *modus operandi*. The vexed history of composition studies can provide ample evidence of how the unequal distribution of power in the English department allowed the dominant current-traditional paradigm to exile those who would
Spivak knows the value of the voice of the other—how it usefully mocks our fondest dogma—and demands that we admit its critique. This seems a cogent observation for compositionists as we contemplate the postmodern rhetorical canon.

At the risk of accusing Spivak of consistency, let me say that her perspective on rhetoric is compatible with her desire to undo oppressive structures/forms/discourses. Hoping that rhetoric might be more than tropology, more than hermetic pyrotechnics, she embraces de Man’s notion that “rhetoric is the name for the residue of indeterminacy which escapes the system.” However cogent, this is still primarily a reader-oriented view. The work of rhetoricians can certainly be illuminated by reading texts alertly and suspiciously, attentive to the excess of meaning our deconstructive, new historicist, reader-response, feminist or formalist methods can never account for. But the production of discourse—the practice of which should bring theory into crisis—deserves equal notice. The political significance of the critical rhetor has been noticed by such postmodern critics as Frank Lentricchia and Terry Eagleton but is disappointingly absent in Spivak’s interview. Kenneth Burke and not de Man would have provided a more resonant model to evoke in the service of a liberatory rhetoric, one with a transformative bite, one that would be equal to Spivak’s hope for a critical consciousness. From the perspective of responsibility to the “big picture,” Burke’s commitment to probe rhetorical alignments by first investigating our own identities as institutional intellectuals makes more political sense than de Manian indeterminacy and the problems of the individual consciousness. In shuffling her postmodern apparatus to de Man instead of, say, Althusser or Gramsci, Spivak unfortunately misses the opportunity to say something illuminating about discourse productive in university offices and classrooms. And as Lentricchia points out, Burke hopes rhetoric can undo the consequences of the tower of Babel, hopes to establish a community where the persuasive force of rhetoric would be superfluous—a self-destructive ingredient that should have appealed to Spivak.

As we might expect, her response to the question about WAC seems rather superficial. When thinkers like Derrida, Rorty, and Spivak are being interviewed for informed readers, we should probably stop asking them what they think about our specific professional concerns. Since they have not been part of our highly contextualized conversations, they lack our professional frames of references; they lack the historicized and emotional specificity that informs our contentious debates about grammar, process, evaluation, or literature. Here the voice of the other falters. Perhaps this is yet another representative anecdote about the continuing asymmetrical power arrangements within even sophisticated English departments where compositionists are expected to be knowledgeable about the literary canon from Beowulf to Barth, from Plato to Fish, while avant-garde critics seem quite satisfied being...
"a little old fashioned" about writing theory. Spivak would have seemed more postmodern if she had questions instead of "convictions" about composition.

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Works Cited


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