

*Interview With Gayatri  
Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation  
Writers Conference in South Africa*

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IT IS SELDOM that a conference achieves a singular symbolic significance in its own right, but this was true of the New Nation Writers Conference held in Johannesburg, December 1991. In itself it represented so much that its staging alone requires cultural and political decoding. The conference sought to enact, both symbolically and materially, a dialectical alternative to the supposedly vanishing world of apartheid. Indeed, its theme was proclaimed as "Making Literature: Reconstruction in South Africa" (*New Nation* 5), and the conference organizers saw themselves as encouraging a "re-making of the world" (*New Nation* 6). The presupposition was that apartheid had been vanquished, and that the market of symbolic goods needed reorganization. But the ironies were there for those who cared to look: formerly exiled writers were back home because the in-place neo-apartheid government had dropped the bans and relaxed restrictions as part of its own strategy to appropriate the rhetoric of liberal democracy. The cultural reconstruction and the "process towards a genuine people's culture" (*New Nation* 3) was, on the evidence of the conference alone, a fairly middle-class affair, while black South Africans continued to die in large numbers in political violence all around us.<sup>1</sup> And the deep currents of apocalyptic feeling evident at the conference were not matched by anything in the political world except promises and dubious good intentions on all sides. It was like a post-revolution conference before the revolution that would now never really occur.

Nevertheless, it was something of a victory conference for those who had been banned, proscribed, suppressed, and maimed by apartheid, and who were now back home without

ever having repented. The State President had unbanned the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress, and the South African Communist Party, and committed himself to a new government elected by universal suffrage. Senior Nationalist politicians were apologizing for apartheid. But the turnaround also threatened to pull the mat from under oppositional feet. The governing party (and its slavish State television service) had begun freely to appropriate liberal language—"freedom," "justice," "democracy," "human rights," and so on—so that even the discourse of liberal humanism, which for so long was the front line of cultural resistance and the preserve of the arts, looked to be in danger of being swallowed up by the former demons of apartheid. Not for nothing did President F. W. de Klerk congratulate Nadine Gordimer on winning the Nobel prize for literature.

Still, the many victims of apartheid were not to be outdone. The conference organizers would insist on their own victory and their own oppositional language. They were an amalgam of progressive organizations representing apartheid's Others: the *New Nation* newspaper, an independent weekly supported by the Catholic Bishops Conference of South Africa; the Congress of South African Writers and the African Writers Association; and other cultural activists. They would not allow the notorious amnesia which afflicts South Africa's frontier consciousness to efface the truth: apartheid had killed, tortured, maimed, divided, and wasted people, and still was doing these things by the implicit power of its surviving hegemonic forms. Moreover, more than three centuries of discursive violence by colonialism, consolidated by four decades of explicit cultural and physical repression, had left deep imprints on the cultural identity of South African people.

So, many of the conference themes were perforce conceived in opposition to the perceived dominant cultural tropes of the old apartheid which everyone knew and could recognize and which, indeed, still survived in the lives and experience of those who came to the gathering to testify to it and to sweep it away. The first day was devoted to discussing alternatives to race-talk. The sessions were entitled: "Race & Ethnicity: Towards Cultural Diversity & Unity"; "Race & Ethnicity: Images & Stereotypes in Literature";

"Race and Ethnicity: The Problems & Challenges of Racism in Writing"; and "Race & Ethnicity: Beyond the Legacy of Victims; South African Writers Speak." The speakers included some of South Africa's most celebrated writer-exiles and former exiles: Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Breyten Breytenbach, Es'kia Mphahlele, Albie Sachs, and Mbulelo Mzamane, as well as non-South Africans such as Kole Omotoso, Claribel Algeria, George Lamming, Sterling Plump, Chenjerai Hove, and Archie Weller.<sup>2</sup> The next day saw a frank discussion of sexism, racism's sibling in the apartheid world, while another trusted pair of interdependent opposites—freedom and responsibility, including "universality and diversity"—was discussed on the third day. The last two days were devoted to "Literature, Language and Democracy" and "Orality and the Dissemination of Literature." The conference organizers also sought to break out of the limitations of high-brow talk by running a week of regional writing workshops for less advantaged South Africans.

The conference served as a healing ground. All of South Africa was symbolically reconstituted under the single nationhood formerly denied them: the exiles and refugees were welcomed home by the internal activists, writers, and scholars; foreign writers shared their experiences and helped to break down the cultural xenophobia of the old order; the marginalized groups (black, female, banned, maimed) were joyously embraced; and the stranglehold of what I described elsewhere as "pompous, Wasp, middle-class control of scholarly discourse" and "whiteism; pinko-liberalism and snuffling, self-congratulatory academic formalism" (De Kock 23) was decisively broken. But for all this, there were some misgivings. Breyten Breytenbach clearly felt disturbed by the dangers of a new "alternative" consensus for culture and remarked that "the fringes must be kept alive." He would oppose the replacement of Afrikaner power structures by "repressive pressure groups using mechanisms of control through censorship, selection, distribution, prescription, manipulation or fashions imposed by literati, structured or unstructured, operating in the name of 'culture'" (Breytenbach 3). Further, Gayatri Spivak identified the problem of recursive debate when she remarked that "the old aesthetics-

politics debate is *so* European. . . . The form-content debate is *so* European." To some extent, she was right: the conference was at times occupied with recirculating the clutter of old arguments about literature and politics, universality and diversity, and race and gender stereotypes. There was a fair amount of hostility to "theory," and little evidence of acquaintance with, and advances upon, theories of postcoloniality and discourse analysis, which are, after all, germane to a country as deeply postcolonial and as discursively-stratified as South Africa. It was as if apartheid still had a good many scholars and writers doing a lot of knee-jerking, despite the conference's ostensible emphasis on the "new."

Gayatri Spivak was invited to grace the gathering as yet another very bright star in the international firmament, although she was the only international delegate invited as a scholar and not a writer. She herself saw her visit in humble terms: she came to listen and to learn, and she gave a talk entirely in the subjunctive mood, explaining the paper she would have presented if she had given a paper and not a ten-minute talk. She wrote down the sub-headings of the putative paper on a blackboard and succeeded in perplexing most of the audience. The session in which she participated was called "Women's Exile: Addressing the Marginalisation of Women in Culture." In an attempt to get her to say a little more, this interview was conducted on the day following her talk.

*I'd like to ask you, to start with, whether, possibly as an analogue of decolonization, you could provide a brief autobiography?*

Well, I was born in British India. When I was going to school, the system of education had not yet started its process of systematic decolonization. My generation at college was among the first generations to really kind of feel that they were in independent India. I entered college in 1955. Looking back now, one of the first things that strike me is that we thought of studying English not as *the* great literature, but a great literature. I don't know that we knew that's what we were doing. Looking back, that's what really stands out. We had the idea that we were going to do Bengali, which is the first language of the people in the area where I was, as well as we did English. This was by no means a new



idea within nationalism, but it seemed new to us. I think that idea of a great literature rather than *the* great literature was something that coloured all kinds of things later on.

Then, in 1961 I came to the United States. This was perhaps a little more self-conscious. I had no particular desire to go to Britain. I didn't want to remain only in India. I had no particular plan of doing one thing or another, but I knew I didn't want to go to Britain, so I came to the United States.

*How were you enabled to do this?*

You really want to hear that story? I don't know if I really want to talk about it. Well, let's put it this way: I borrowed the money. The story of borrowing the money is in fact quite interesting in that I was a very young middle-class girl who had started earning money two years before her departure by coaching English. My father was dead. (My father died when I was thirteen.) So in fact it was really something that I completely kind of did, and I was not in a situation where I really knew anything about American universities. I knew the names of Harvard, Yale, and Cornell, and I thought half of them were too good for me. So I sent a telegram to Cornell saying I was a very good student and I didn't need financial aid because they wouldn't have given it to me because I wasn't a native speaker of English—I mean, those days were different from now—and because multiculturalism was certainly not on the agenda. You had to be as good as a native speaker. And so in fact that story, the story of how I managed to borrow the money, is extremely entertaining and also interesting, but I really don't think it's part of an interview, okay?

Anyway, so that's how I went, with no money because the guy who had lent me the money also had said he would only give me the money monthly, so I went. I had very little money and I knew nobody. . .

*And you felt the cringe? You didn't feel you were good enough for places like Harvard and Yale?*

I have never. I'm intellectually a very insecure person. I must also say that this had come about because of sexism in my surroundings, which continued right from the start, the moment I entered

college, and even today. And that's the worst thing about sexism, that it makes you believe what is being told. My general reputation is that I'm flashy rather than substantive, rather than generally thoughtful, rather than generally brilliant. This was helped by the fact that I enjoyed being a young woman, and I still very much think I'm a playful person, and this is not supposed to be. If a woman is really serious, she has to deny all her so-called feminine qualities and become like a man. And so in fact that led, especially without any help from feminism on the ground, that helped me, or hindered me really, to form a self-concept which I have not been able to shake off, even today. I know I'm now veering from the autobiographical slightly because it's not a narrative anymore. One of the things, for example, that I encounter paradoxically all the time is public talk from women I respect about women grabbing power. And then when I use what little power I have been able to grab in public to cope with masculine intervention, then among the women I quite often receive a reputation for arrogance. You see, so that to an extent this had led to great intellectual insecurity. Yes, I was quite prepared to believe that I was not good enough for the best institutions. And, to an extent, I still feel that way, that I do not have the right to intervene. In fact, we've come from a session ["Redefining Aesthetics: Universality and Diversity"] where I very much wanted to intervene, but I kept myself quiet because I thought no one wants to hear me, or they'd think I'm arrogant. See what I mean?

So, I went to the United States. Once I went there, I was not particularly vetted for anything. You know, I was only a bright young foreign woman student, and the fact that I knew how to take exams—because that's what the education system was in India—stood in my way because Cornell then had a system where if a student got an A-plus average, she was allowed to devise her own programme. And it was totally parochial, geared to the American system. I came from a different kind of a system, you know, dying under its own weight, built on the London University system. Therefore, the fact of my doing photo-finish exams had nothing to do with the fact that I really needed some kind of experience of what is best in American education, and some-

times *that* is abused when students start to judge without any knowledge. But for me it would have been wonderful to have tasted some of the invitation to judge rather than to reproduce. But because I did my exams so well, I was allowed to devise my own programme, so in fact my entire education-formation remains Indian, because in those last three years of Ph.D. work I didn't really learn much. I was just kind of taking courses that I felt would be nice, and so on. I fell into comparative literature because Comp. Lit. was the only thing that offered me money, and therefore I had to learn French and German in classes where instruction was often given in French and German, and we were given Baudelaire and Goethe, because a Ph.D. student in Comp. Lit. was not allowed to take language courses. So that's why my spoken French is fluent but often not grammatical, and therefore this again is held as proof that I couldn't possibly know anything about deconstruction. You know what I mean. So there are all of these problems that I carried on my shoulders without giving myself the right to think that these were problems. A heavy weight of sexism kept me thinking that these were my faults. The blaming the victim syndrome turned inside, especially since I was a good student. Therefore I couldn't say, listen, be kind to me.

I must say at this point that the one strongest influence in my life—that one has to remain resilient, that one should not get exercised on one's own behalf (I'm doing it now because you kindly asked me this question why I thought I was not good enough), to remember that politics is other people, rather than always to exercise oneself on one's own behalf—is my mother. My mother is one of the most unusual women I have ever had the good fortune to have met. My relationship with her is not just confined to the mother-daughter relationship. There is intellectual respect on both sides. We give each other advice, and she understands things about my life and my problems, both intellectual and personal, that I cannot expect other female relatives to understand.

So I would say that with this I came to the United States. I believe I was Paul de Man's first Ph.D. He was chairing Comp. Lit. But as I say I wasn't groomed for anything. I learnt from him. I took good notes and slowly sort of understood.

So, I then married, and at that point I really remained in the United States because I was coming from a cultural production where women stayed where their husbands were. I had no particular plans about staying or not staying, and I didn't look for a job, for example. I got a job because it was the Vietnam years, and it was possible to get jobs without a Ph.D.

So I never really got a chance of knowing what it was like to live as an adult. I stayed. I was a good wife. I was in a bit of a shock, because—although people find this hard to credit because I'm so international in many ways—I didn't really know white people. The only persons that I'd come into contact with were the regional representatives of the British Council, and they were just incredibly kind of stiff. And so it seemed very strange to be among whites. I mean those were the sixties. It was the beginning of the civil rights struggle. I couldn't understand this, in terms of these people, white people, talking civil rights. And at the same time there were these incredibly artificial constructs of the Allen Ginsberg-/Timothy Leary-style India, which bore no relationship, I mean my strongest influence in Calcutta was second international communism, that's what you were . . . [Interview was interrupted, and interlocutors agreed not to proceed with the autobiographical because of its boundless narrative potential.]

*I know you have come here to learn, and you criticize people who talk about and for other people, but how do you read this conference? How do you read the way they are dealing with issues here?*

First I must say that I don't. I respect the fact that conferences should not be judged in terms of dealing with issues. Conferences are a sort of staging, where conditions of possibility for dealing with issues are laid down, at what seems to be a great waste of time and talk and energy. But that is the nature of conferences. It's almost like an exercise which has its end almost totally separated from it. And so I see it as that kind of staging. I go to many conferences, and in certain international contexts, I can tell what stops are being pulled out. Within South Africa, since I don't know what stops are being pulled out, for me it is a learning experience. It's because I respect what conferences are

supposed to be, and I don't expect them to be a substitute for either activism or policy-making, or, in fact, sheer intellectual instruction. As long as you hang out—hang in with the nature of conferences—it seems to me that you can learn if you are in my position.

*Should conferences lead to activism or intervention?*

No. This is why I said that the relationship between what the end, the goal, the hoped-for results would be, and the conference, are oblique. If they did lead to things, and in some cases in the past they have, you know, especially those conferences which divide parts of the globe after a war or something (but those are extreme cases), it's not always good. It seems to me that a conference has a kind of trickle-down effect, and can affect all kinds of things, but in itself it can only enervate. A conference is not a restful thing, and must involve wastage.

*You said earlier that you were tempted to intervene in the aesthetics debate on "Universality and Diversity." Would you care to state what you wanted to say?*

Well, I can't say everything I want to say because I haven't thought it through properly, but I think my basic impulse was to look at a completely different sense of aesthetic, rather than relate it to the beautiful, and oppose it to politics. I always believe in looking at things as *doings* and I was thinking of another old definition, that through the aesthetic you can get pleasure out of things that are representations, things for which you cannot immediately find the actual object, so that it seemed to me that if one looked at it that way, then what we have to deal with is to allow different kinds of pleasure to be known as pleasure, because aesthetics for me is also a transactional thing. We can only feel pleasure at something if the cultural system acknowledges that it is pleasure. So, there was one participant who spoke of his taste, and yet he said that there was nothing universalist in it, and it seems to me that the idea of taste, in fact, is simply what is *allowed* to be pleasurable. I know that I am not supposed to give long answers but can I give you an example?

*Please.*

I feel that in the oral-epic impulse, participants who listened to the singer were able—it's a very sophisticated reaction—were able to think of the epic as true even as they knew that it was not factually true. This is a very sophisticated phenomenon, but participants in all countries do this. I'm not a golden-ageist or a reverse-history person, but I do look at these things because separated from that golden age ethos, they really can offer us lessons. Now this is the thing for which Coleridge in the nineteenth century had to devise a description, willing suspension of disbelief, and if people actually bothered, without any golden age impulse, to see that this aesthetic influence—taking pleasure in something for which no actual object can be offered—is alive and well in situations where one does not expect words like "taste" to be used, I think that would be a way in which one would look for enlarging the concept of what pleasure can be, and it would not involve museumizing or endorsing diversity. I've not said everything, and it sounds more crude in my telling of it. The old aesthetics-politics debate is *so* European, as if there is a separation. The form-content debate is *so* European. Let's look at it as a social act, aesthetics as the possibility of a social act. That's quite different from universalism talk. There can be no human act without some modicum of universalizing. Humanity would be completely autistic if it were not always, however incompletely, universalizing: thinking of oneself as an example of being human.

*Here they seem to be grappling with the issue of that universalizing notion being appropriated by powerful formations, bourgeois culture perhaps.*

Yes, but the thing is that if you put diversity against universality you still acknowledge the problem of the one and the many. English, or all the African languages? See what I mean? This is pulling out a stop because this has been debated endlessly in this country, but I'm just proposing that one look at the aesthetic not as a thing about which answers will be given in alternatives for universality terms. The power will be engaged in expanding the possibility of pleasures.

I also made some notes about certification, validation, book market *et cetera, et cetera*, because these things now exist and we

must make use of them. One of the participants talked about how he does not think these questions are settled at conferences with theories, and then proceeded to give us definitions. It seems to me that therefore we have to acknowledge that however obliquely, mechanisms of certification, validation, and marketing will be there to organize the expansion of the possibility of pleasures, and I think that's where activism should be devoted rather than seeing what the policy-makers decide, so that action will always be resistant to the policies because neither universality, nor diversity, when endorsed by policy, will be uncriticizable. So I remain in the arena of the persistent critic.

*You hinted yesterday during your talk that you felt theory was being pushed away a little, and that you would desist from talking theory. Did you feel that, and do you feel that this might be a danger in this kind of discussion?*

Well, I don't think theory is actually being pushed away. I think theory is being made in the name of no-theory. There is by now a kind of international institutional culture, and in the international institutional culture both the universalist reactionaries who don't have to let "theory" come in, because they have the most powerful unacknowledged theory, and the activists on the other side, join by being against so-called theory, which in itself is justified because theory is perceived only as a baggage of abstract learning, out of touch with real life (whatever that might be), talking about real life at a level of abstraction, by people who are incomprehensible, endorsed by institutions, and winning away young minds from the task of either activism, or, unthinkingly applauding the cultural good of the white dominant, white supremacist history. So it is paradoxical for us that we are caught in between these two ends, and I for one cannot completely reject the critique of institutional elitism. You must recognize by now that this is a classic deconstructive position, in the middle, but not on either side, and unable to solve a problem by taking either side, but on the other hand solving it situationally, and not for ever. So what you saw happening yesterday was one of those solutions. Deconstructive imperatives always come out of situations; it's not situationally relative, but they always come out of

situations. So what I felt there was, although I didn't succeed, but nonetheless what I was trying to do, was, keep the worst of the theoreticist impulses [inaudible], recognize what brand of theory by naming a vocabulary. I tried to keep the track of *that* impulse outside of what I was saying. I think the demand that one be comprehensible is a good demand. On the other hand, I also know that plain prose cheats, and I also know that clear thought hides. So, I was trying to do a balancing act. I was using those theoretical discourses which are recognized by many more, like Marx for example. I was using that. But on the other hand, I don't think that I quite succeeded because it seemed to many that it was even yet too theoretical. The trouble with theory is that to theorize is to make visible a great deal.

*How do you answer to the charge that your own writing is so difficult, at such an advanced level of abstraction (as you say, you are describing so much) that you are recolonizing the margin from the centre of continental thought, and that you are somewhat inaccessible to a lot of people?*

Well, I tell you many, many of these objections are interesting objections. The centre of European thought. One would like to know what the sources of our thoughts are if we do not name them. I'm not interested in finding nativist alibis for where my thoughts come from. I would say that I have a problem, which is that I cannot write clearly. Let us not give that some kind of a party-politics name. I'm trying to work with it. I believe that my writing now is clearer than it was before. I think that what one saw before was a result of some intellectual insecurity, wanting to write about fields where I didn't know enough. On the other hand I felt what I said needed to be said. I think those things are changing, and I would advise the people who make this objection to think again about where the objection is coming from. I think that it is also that one doesn't speak in the international scholarly situation with the endorsed voice of a female marginal. That is for me to embrace an extremely dubious political position. Unfortunately, that is the only voice that is heard by the readers who complain. I do a lot of other writing and speaking and teaching, where I never see these critics. I invite them, before



they make these criticisms, to come and hear me. Well, people like them don't generally bother to come.

*Do you find that your register is moderated quite significantly when you teach your students?*

I think it's moderated by the timing, by the tempo. In the teaching, in the United States, not when I'm teaching in non-formal situations and my students do not have the same sort of academic preparation, but teaching in the United States in fact I use the same kind of terminology, but I unpack more. I think I am in fact best at classroom teaching. I'm best as a classroom teacher. In fact what happens to many of my students is that they take one course from me, and then they take all of my courses because I'm even better if my time span is not just 14 weeks, but let's say two years. That's my problem, because I don't know things very profoundly. People who know things profoundly can simplify them without cheating. But I'm learning as I'm teaching, so I can't always speak in that kind of achieved simplicity.

*Well, could you unpack for me something in your talk—I did not fully understand what you meant by multiculturalism as crisis management. I wonder in what sense it might be interesting for us here. . .*

Now, the last bit I can't say because one of the principles that I dearly hold by is that imperatives are situational, so I don't know if this applies in South Africa at all, and please remember I said it. Whatever you cut off don't cut off this one, but I'm speaking out of the United States context. I'm looking at the United States as in a bit of a crisis right now. All of the apparent signs that have to be used to the hilt to prove that there is no crisis, are "good." The U.S. is the "only superpower." They've got the media. They've got the President. The U.S. has won the Cold War, and so on. The Communists have been defeated—good signs. But in fact what is happening is that unless the situation is managed it is just possible that the European Economic Community, plus Japan (so that it's not a national, or even international concept really) is going to consolidate the United States of Europe, so what has to be managed is the entire area released by the implosion of the Bolshevik experiment. Now that area can be ideologically

managed—and here only ideology will work because the crisis-situation is political and economic. Ideologically it can be managed by that extremely loose term, ethnicity, and an even looser term, culture, often identified by the liberal multiculturalists. On top of that there is what I was saying yesterday, the concrete figures that in fact the migrancy is going to be used immensely in order to support a post-Fordist economy, in Europe and in the north in general. In a situation whereas the migrants are taking over with the postcolonial African American, as I was saying, in the United States this is a danger point. The best thing that can be done is to make them compete—the old divide and rule thing. So with this multiculturalism, the coding of capitalism as democracy can be helped by the in-place immigrant, old immigrant communities. With this multiculturalism, with the new immigrants, it becomes nothing but national-origin validation, and they have nothing in common except wanting to be in the United States, so that's divisive. What can be done is that a real wedge can be driven between the African American struggle, between the Latino-Chicano struggle, and what looks like, and I quote a young professor from the University of Minnesota, "Disneyland courses." See what I mean? So this whole thing, it's a huge crisis, but it's being managed in this easy, repressively tolerant way.

*And "transnational literacy"—what does that remedy?*

It doesn't remedy anything, but what it allows is, it allows us, all of these groups that I've just mentioned, to invent a unity out of what on a level of abstraction we really share, that is to say, our stake in wanting to turn capitalism into a juster model for our communities.

*I want to ask you about what you have called your "disciplinary predicament"—what to do with English studies.*

This will depend on when I said it because I'm constantly on the move, and my disciplinary predicament has probably changed from the time when I said it. Well, my disciplinary predicament is to be teaching, tokenized. When I speak within my disciplinary position, what I say can be used because I'm among the few

senior women of colour in the United States, and I teach now at a very prestigious university, so one cannot in fact speak against multiculturalism without immediately being used by the reactionary lobby against political correctness. One cannot in fact suggest that these things should not be the hegemony of the English departments without giving support, without providing an alibi for the people who say "only teach the texts of English literature in the English departments." This predicament was not what I was talking about, I'm sure, when you read me saying that. . .

*In The Post-Colonial Critic. . .*

Oh, my God, what does that say? I mean I don't like that book. But anyway, you don't want me to tell you anything more do you, because there are many things one could say.

*What kind of curricular choices or changes would you like to see . . . given the decolonizing imperative, or whatever you would like to call that?*

Within what situation? Remember I never say anything. . .

*Well certainly. I would have liked you to comment on the situation here, but you can't. . .*

Look, I won't. The thing is I could. It's only too easy, only too easy, but I won't.

*But in your situation?*

My situation? Well, what I'm suggesting is that on the undergraduate level there should be national-origin validation courses. They should not be seen as multicultural because then the person who is the centre is the white person who is allowing diversity. If you see them as national-origin validation, then it's the young people who are coming as new immigrants who are obliged, you know, as they come through the immigration, naturalization services, they take a very symbolically important Americanization "course." Okay. So in that context, you have on the undergraduate curriculum national-origin validation courses, all kinds of cultures, *et cetera*, and I see the the main pedagogic imperative there to change the established so-called opposition

groups in the direction of understanding that the national-origin validation course is not against their interests and to change the old immigrants from white identification into immigrant identification, since I see everything as an act.

At the level of postgraduate studies, where I'm most involved, educating the educators, it seems to me that you have to there begin transnational literacy, so the question of a national identity is seen as no more than a kind of affective alibi against the fact that one wants to be within the changed United States, so that the nature of origin is seen within the transnational alphabet, and in general I think we will get more help from the person who's not from that nation in locating this, rather than the person who is from that other nation state. And then, among the teachers of these courses, and I speak as someone who is doing this for herself, there has to be also educating the educators by supplementing the humanities with the social sciences and social sciences with the humanities, so we should realize that interdisciplinary teaching is something we have to learn rather than take for granted.

*I'd like to change track a little now. How do you respond to criticism against your position that "the subaltern cannot speak"?*

"Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>3</sup> comes out of the recounting of an incident. Now the incident is a situation where a subaltern person had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message. I cannot think of a situation where somebody really tries to communicate that is more urgent than this. What happened? In one generation, one of the women in her own family said exactly the opposite and condemned her, so in that situation of extreme poignancy I say "a subaltern cannot speak." But every person has decided not to. . . . This is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak: nobody relates it to the damned suicide, not a person. In fact, every accusation that G. C. Spivak is not letting the bloody subaltern speak is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak, because that's spoken in rage and disappointment by one woman hearing through the *most* non-masculine network—mother to daughter, see that's my grandmother's sister. My mother said to me that my grandmother's

sister had done this and left a message and waited until menstruation and all that stuff, and in my generation the women have forgotten it. It's the *least* phallogocentric way of networking and it has failed, so not only has she not been able to speak, her grandniece trying to make her speak has also failed because not one critic has related it to the example which proves for me that the subaltern cannot speak. I'm supposed to take that seriously? I cannot take that seriously, to tell you the truth. Now let's move that one out. This you should publish because I've never said this.

Then, the next point: everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. The definition of the word "subaltern" that I use is given in the essay. We are scholars after all. If they are networking in the most non-phallogocentric way, and it has failed, the subaltern cannot speak. Let us at least use the hegemonic discourse as well, scholarly discourse. I give the definition, I quote the definition, the definition has a scholarly history, and that is forgotten, so that at both ends my critics are just kind of going to town, failing at both ends. Now, the word "subaltern" as one knows is the description of a military thing. One knows that Gramsci used it because Gramsci was obliged to censor himself in prison. One also knows that the word changed in its use when Gramsci presciently began to be able to see what we today call north-south problems, sitting in prison in Italy, because he was talking about the southern question, and he realized that if one was talking on southern Italy, just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything. And so then the word "subaltern" became packed with meaning. How extraordinary "subaltern's" provenance—a word that comes out of censorship and therefore is a classic catachresis, because of this incredible political situation, and we run with it.

The subalternist historians take it from Gramsci and change it. They define it as the people, the foreign elite, the indigenous elite, the upwardly mobile indigenes, in various kinds of situations: everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's

not subaltern. It's in capital logic, you know what I mean? So, to that extent, you can only . . . then I'm talking Gramsci. I mean, do we understand metaphoric use of words that are like minimally metaphoric. When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern's sphere. You bring out these so-called subalterns from the woodwork; the only way that that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony, which is what should happen, as subaltern. Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologicistic museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do *a thing*, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech.

The third thing, which is the worst, that is, you don't give the subaltern voice. You work *for* the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity. The penultimate thing is (I want to say something about the work of the subalternist historians), many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being in a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word subaltern, and they don't need Spivak as a whipping girl because she said out of that position that the subaltern cannot speak. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are, and since they can speak, as they tell me—yes they can speak—I quite agree, they're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They shouldn't call themselves subaltern and their main purpose should not be to bloody Spivak.

But the final one is, you see the work of the subalternist historians . . . their work has in fact, whether they do it themselves or not . . . it's having an impact on decolonized India, because what they have proved with meticulous care is that the nationalist narrative of decolonization is like a vaccine that did not take with the subaltern, precisely because the subaltern had no access to the culture of imperialism. And therefore today in decolonized areas, the fact is that all of those alibis for decolonization are

absolutely useless. The people have no particular vested interest or feeling of identification with those great alibis, used just less than fifty years ago. Now in this interventionist, subalternist work, they are not speaking for the subaltern, but they're working for the subaltern in that way. One doesn't do everything directly. So, those are the things that I would say about the whole spurious "the subaltern can speak" debate.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> According to research statistics compiled by the Human Rights Commission and the Community Agency for Social Enquiry, December 1991 (when the conference was held) was a relatively 'quiet' month with approximately 50 political killings (Everatt and Sadek 13). In March 1992, when the white referendum was held, more than 200 people died in political violence (13). The dead in December included three people who were thrown off trains in the greater Johannesburg area, according to the Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression (Independent Board of Inquiry 12-13).
- <sup>2</sup> A book containing conference contributions is being prepared by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) under the editorship of Andries W. Oliphant.
- <sup>3</sup> See Spivak (1988).

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