Interview with Gayatri Spivak

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38. *Ibid.*, pp. 303-304.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 303-305.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 930-931.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

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WA: Since you are interested in the strategy of reading rather than in recovering the writer's "original vision", why couldn't your approach be called a "reader response approach"? What are your reservations regarding readers response theories?

GS: The kind of reader response theory that is in vogue here in the United States seems to suggest that one could assume a community of readers without troubling to look at the socio-political production of these communities or questioning the notion of hegemonic comunities. The question that I have to pose when people ask me to distinguish my position of "interest" from reader response is: who is the reader? My position vis a vis reader response is reactive: the political element comes out in the transaction between the reader and the texts. What I am most insistent upon is that the politics of the critic or the reader should be put on the table as scrupulously as possible. Textual criticism cannot just be a judgement on the basis of disinterested readings by a presumed community.

WA: It sounds to me as if your criticism of contemporary reader response theory is a criticism about its failure to live up to its own promise. Couldn't your own political reading incorporate reader response criticism as well as more traditional strategies of looking at the politics in the text?

GS: Yes. In fact in Eastern Germany there is a variety of reader response theory which is trying to take this into account. But when that phrase — "Reader Response Theory" — is invoked here in the U.S., we generally retreat from the question of interested political readings.

WA: Why don't we move to the question of whether or not there is an essentialism involved when we posit binary oppositions like book-author or individual-history.

GS: It seems to me that the first opposition, that between book and author, has been used to exculpate the author, saying that it is the book we are dealing with and not the author. Or the opposition can operate so as to prove the author's transcendence of history. That's the first opposition. The second opposition on the other hand, between individual and history, has been used either to assert the unquestioned shaping role of the individual as undivided consciousness or to separate that consciousness out as a text, where everything else becomes context. When I talk about those two oppositions and say that I am using them strategically, I do so knowing that in general these are essentialist problems that arise when these binary oppositions are used. But it is not possible, within discourse, to escape essentializing somewhere. The moment of essentialism or essentialization is irreducible. In deconstructive critical practice, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway. So then strategically you can look at essentialisms, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything. This gesture on the part of the critic relates to the two oppositions in two different ways.

When we operate with the opposition book-author, we want to avoid the kind of simple reversal whereby the critic's hands remain clean and the critic becomes diagnostic in a simple symptomatic reading. We keep ourselves within the book's field and see how far we can go when we respect that. In the second case, the individual and history, we want to see the individual consciousness as a crucial part of the effect of being a subject, which is itself a part of a much larger structure, one which is socio-political, politico-economic, psycho-sexual. Now all of these elements are discontinuous with each other so that you can't easily translate from the one to the other. But, nonetheless, all of these things are organised as narratives which reflect a sort of weave of presence and absence. As a result of this, you lose the confidence of *having* something which is *causing* something or *controlling* something. And from this point of view the question what is that whole thing, the whole network, no longer remains pertinent except in the context of the universalizing subject of knowledge.

In fact, Perry Anderson's recent critique of post-structuralism, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, is a good example of this. He looks at the network of textuality as a continuous weave, himself tacitly assuming the position of that universalizing subject. He then proves that post-structuralism was an inevitable development from structuralism and that the two movements posited relationships between subject and structure, individual and history that entailed each other. We see this in the light of a graspable whole network and this as a kind of necessary trajectory. The pertinent chapter ends with the assertion that the question answers itself. That would in itself be symptomatic of the kind of danger that we are trying to avoid, the essentialist danger, where you translate all of the elements within that

larger structure into a kind of continuous configuration which the knowing subject can control.

WA: The next obvious question, to allow you to say more about your own view of the critical process, is to ask you how to advance the process towards a feministly interested reading. Obviously there must be as many answers to that question as there are feminists. What's your's?

GS: I don't know what a feminist looks for. To an extent, my gesture towards the text is a very old-fashioned one. I think that the critic's first task is to attend to the text. So that I try, knowing that of course it's impossible to suspend myself, as it were. Having said this, I would add that my interests now, to an extent, are to be seen as; in what way, in what contexts, under what kinds of race and class situations, gender is used as what sort of signifier to cover over what kinds of things. It really is a discovery which arises through actually attending to texts. So I'm a little wary of trying to locate a program with which one actually confronts a text. I think the preparation of the critic takes place, to an extent, before the confrontation with the text just as much as with it.

WA: It seems that your view of the critical process, at least as you've articulated it so far, is as much an education of the critic as it is the critic's education of the reader. Do you also think that literary criticism can be a kind of, let's say, feminist literary guerrilla warfare towards the readers?

GS: I suppose it can be. But then again, would one have to assume a sort of 'kneecapping' position, as if women are history transcendent? Of course there is a sort of euphoria in that. But, nonetheless, I think as a long-term proposition, it won't last in the wash. Guerrilla warfare takes place where guerrilla warfare takes place, and that's not academic literary criticism.

WA: Let me move on to your concept of the fractured semiotic field. In what sense is the world a semiotic field? And what do you mean by fracturing?

GS: I don't think that the world is a semiotic field. By semiotic field I had meant something as simple as this: that there are collections of axioms in the socius, depending on your position within the socius, and these axioms are by no means unified all over the globe. What I was suggesting what that when a writer writes, she doesn't just write in English or French, she also writes in these so-called sign systems, and it's in this sense that one can see the socius as a very heterogeneous collection of what I called, I think now somewhat wrongly, semiotic fields. With respect to the notion of fracture, what I am talking about is obviously the problem of cultural self-representation. The way in which semiotic fields are tapped for cultural self-representation, in fact, always covers over the dislocation between the kinds of axiomatics that are being used, and whatever it is in the 'culture' that constitutes the hidden agenda of the suppression of idealogical production. Let me say that very broadly-speaking, the fracture goes either in the direction of Utopianism, or in the direction of a golden-age complex. One sees the best example at festivals. And one of my favourite examples is how, at Fourth of July picnics, the United States which is, after all, a micro-electronic capitalism, represents itself as engaging in independent commodity production. That's what I would call a fractured semiotic field. But if you say something is a semiotic field, you're suggesting that it is nothing but a text, nothing but language, nothing but words and meanings. I wasn't trying to reduce hard reality to nothing but signs. I was talking about the fact that, within the practice of representation, which is

defined within the enclosure named the aesthetic, this is one strategy of tracking the socio-economic; by noticing in what way and through the covering over of what fractures, semiotic fields are being tapped.

WA: You say that you don't want to identify hard reality with the production of meaning within semiotic fields. What do you fear is missed in doing so?

GS: I'm very interested in a persistently critical practice and I think that, once one has unrecognized totalizing impulses, one can end up privileging one's own disciplinary practice. I'm not suggesting that there is a necessarily hard reality out there. In fact I would argue the opposite, that it is always dredged up as a slogan. But I would also not want to identify such reality with the production of signs. Something else *might* be going on. The concept of the sign itself, after all, is something which has emerged within certain kinds of disciplinary practices.

WA: It seems that the signifier 'man' does more than float. It disguises itself under an unproblematic cover, the signifier human. Can you say something about anthropomorphism and the concept of man as historically independent?

GS: When Derrida criticized Sartre's anthropomorphic re-reading of Heidegger, that critique of anthropomorphism was picked up in two ways, and over the last, almost twenty years, we've seen it going in two directions within the deconstructive establishment. One has been for the critic to say, do not look in it for a *human* story, but rather for the texts' constitution of its own textuality or narrativity. Another which has been Derrida's track, has been to say: look here, it is almost as if the sign, anthropos, has no history. Perhaps that was what led him to say that one might look at the sign, woman, rather than simply say, get the human out of the way and look at the text's constitution of its own narrative. It was from that point onwards that he started worrying about the sign, woman.

WA: Could you comment on the relationship between ideology and literary criticism, or ideology and the social world, both as a battle for domination, and in relation to critical readings by literary critics?

GS: I think there's a real problem when the critic of ideology takes a diagnostic position and forgets that she is herself caught within structural production. This obviously brings us to the ghost of Althusser, because the other side of the critics taking a diagnostic position is a symptomatic reading. I think when Althusser speaks of ideology having no history, he was really writing as a philosopher and was suggesting that we think ideology before we can think history. I also think that Althusser was ill-served there by turning to Lacan in order to develop his notion of the primacy of interpellation and so on. In Lacan, what he found, after all, was still a discussion that was caught within the notions of the subject and the patronymic, the name of the father. If one looks at the current Derrida, who talks about the auto-position of the subject saying yes to itself before the possibility of discourse, I think one can use that as a lever to lift Althusser's text. One thinks ideology before one can think history as something out there, before one can, in fact, conceive of the fact that history is the narrativizations of various kinds that are in a field of contention. When, within specific readings, people universalize one or another ideology, that, I think, has very little to do with what Althusser was trying to say. Althusser was using a kind of argumentative grid which was not sufficient to the power of his insight. He did keep on saying that one must continually re-think the distinctions between ideology and history, ideology and science, ideology and philosophy, and he finally came out recommending a *pratique sauvage*, a wild practice, a wild philosophy. It seems to me that we have the task

of re-inscribing the Althusserian insight there, rather than throwing him away as a closet idealist.

WA: You say that we have the task of re-inscribing Althusser. Does part of that project involve determining the production of the text in the last instance, in Engels' phrase?

GS: I'm very glad you mention Engels. The problem is that determination, as a critique of causality, has been transformed into determinism as the fixing of causes disguised as the final instance. In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel was trying to speak about determination as the possibility of the inauguration of discourse, as we would say today perhaps the inauguration of philosophy. It is certainly a critique of causality that Hegel is advancing. To transform that into determinism has done a great deal of harm. The way I would read Althusser is to look at the notion of relative autonomy and see how, if one really thinks it through, it is looking at discursive practices — let's call it political, economic and ideological — which cannot be translated one into the other in a continuous way. If one looks at it like that, then one can even go beyond the notion of many determinations, political, economic, ideological — you name it, Marxist, feminist, anti-imperialist — one can even take it into the notion of over determination as speaking of discontinuous determinations. We are in the process of throwing away that complex notion of relative autonomy, rather than using it practically, because we are being operated upon by a cultural politics of the transformation of a critique of causality into something that is the most iron-clad philosophy of causality. It seems to me that, in Marx, the relationship between consciousness and materiality, or the final determining role of the economic, remain powerful moments of bafflement that one can work at. But in the context of a fundamentalist notion of reading, we're in the process of misunderstanding that, misappropriating it by virtue of the particular fracture between determination as critique of causality and determinism as a re-inscription of causality.

WA: What I find confusing is the way you adeptly fuse what I have always regarded as two very different discourses, semiotics and Marxism. In the latter, of course, we're concerned with the relationship of being and consciousness, and in the former we're concerned with the relationship of language and society and those two don't necessarily fuse very easily. You were speaking of fractured semiotic fields. Is it worthy of our interest to attempt to determine the causes of the fracturing of the semiotic field or is it enough simply to locate the manner in which the semiotic field is fractured?

GS: I'm a very eclectic person. I use what comes to hand. I'm not a fundamentalist. And I'm not an Althusserian in the strict sense. I'm more interested in opening up texts than in establishing, like some medieval scholar, the authenticity of a text. Within literary criticism, quite often an interdisciplinary practice means nothing more than neutralizing the vocabulary from another discipline and taking it to describe yet once again what happens between reader and text. Psychoanalysis certainly has suffered in this way. Similarly, quite often you'll see that value production, for example, is taken as an analogy for linguistic production. One ought to remember Marx's caution in the *Grundrisse*, that it would be a mistake to make an analogy between the production of value and the production of language. From my point of view, it would be much more interesting to see what happens as literature, the literary text, is completely inserted into the circuit of the production of commodities. That's how we get our best seller lists, and

what gets remaindered, what gets written, what the construction of readership is, and so on. It would be much more interesting from my point of view to see how, when that is happening, the literary artist begins to say over and over again that literature produces use value. There is a fractured semiosis if you like. The whole notion of the creative imagination comes in as literature gets into the circuit of commodity production in the most brutal sense. That, to me, is a more interesting way of using Marxism within literary criticism than constantly making analogies between literary production and the production of value.

WA: Of course,a major preoccupation for Marxists is the advancement of the proletariat. I would agree with you that we have to give up the concept of a unified subject, as Marx has it in the proletariat and other people have in patriarchy or whatever. How is it possible to speak coherently for and about marginalized groups once we give up this concept?

GS: When I criticized Foucault in my talk in Melbourne, I was not suggesting that Foucault himself had not brilliantly tried to represent the oppressed. What I was looking at in the late Foucault was the theorization of that project as letting the oppressed speak for himself. It seemed to me that theorizing in the late Foucault actually buys into the privileging of 'concrete experience', which is something that is also used by the other side, by capitalism. There is an impulse among literary critics and other kinds of intellectuals to save the masses, speak for the masses, describe the masses. On the other hand, how about attempting to learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard as bullshit. When I think of the masses, I think of a woman belonging to that 84% of women's work in India, which is unorganized peasant labour. Now if I could speak in such a way that such a person would actually listen to me and not dismiss me as yet another of those many colonial missionaries, that would embody the project of unlearning about which I've spoken recently. What can the intellectual do toward the texts of the oppressed? Represent them and analyze them, disclosing one's own positionality for other communities in power. Foucault has done this. In fact, I can't think of another person, another intellectual, who has done this in our time in the Western context. What I was objecting to was that theorization of letting Pierre Riviere speak for himself, and what the theoretical articulation does for the people who are influenced by Foucault, enthusiastic academic intellectuals, who at the same time swallow Foucault's critique of the watershed intellectual and make Foucault into a watershed intellectual!

WA: Does speaking to marginalized groups and yet not 'deskilling' oneself mean anything about the kinds of texts that one ought to speak about?

GS: When I said that one shouldn't invite people to de-skill themselves I was talking about a kind of anti-intellectualism that exists among academics and counter-academics. One ought not to patronize the oppressed. And that's where this line leaves us. Unlearning one's privileged discourse so that, in fact, one can be heard by people who are not within the academy is very different from clamoring for anti-intellectualism, a sort of complete monosyllabification of one's vocabulary within academic enclosures. And it seems to me that one's practice is very dependent upon one's positionality, one's situation. I come from a state where the illiterate, not the functionally illiterate, but the real illiterate, who can't tell the difference between one letter and another, are still possessed of a great deal of political sophistication, and are certainly not against learning a few things.

I'm constantly struck by the anti-intellectualism within the most opulent university systems in the world. So that's where I was speaking about de-skilling.

WA: But the heart of my question nonetheless remains and that is, ought one to choose one's texts in the light of the interests, desires, prejudgements of marginalized groups? Or ought one to choose one's texts in light of what we suppose they ought to be interested in? Or should there be no conscious choosing of texts of this type at all?

GS: Again, I don't know. I can only speak of my working life which has been spent as a teacher of literature in the United States, in Europe and in England. It seems to me that I cannot speak of what marginalized people ought to be interested in. In Melbourne I ended my talk with an account of the suicide of a teenage woman in Calcutta in 1926. What I was doing with the young woman who had killed herself was really trying to analyze and represent her text. She wasn't particularly trying to speak to me, I was representing her. I was re-inscribing her. To an extent, I was writing her to be read, and I certainly was not claiming to give her a voice. So if I'm read as giving her a voice, there again this is a sort of transaction of the positionality between the Western feminist listener who listens to me, and myself, signified as a Third World informant. What we do toward the texts of the oppressed is very much dependent upon where we are.

WA: Let me ask you one final question. In one of your talks in Melbourne, you said that the prime task of feminism should not be to retrace the figure of woman. What did you mean by that?

GS: Well, I was trying to say that although Derrida was, in some ways, retracing the figure of woman, that's not identical with the project of feminism. And I was really talking about 'global feminism' since that seems always to be one the agenda these days when one speaks in the West. It seems to me that if one's talking about the prime task, since there is no discursive continuity among women, the prime task is situational anti-sexism, and the recognition of the heterogenity of the field, instead of positing some kind of woman's subject, women's figure, that kind of stuff. It seems to me, if you really want to trace the figure, then you should start looking elsewhere in the globe. Psychoanalysis and counter-psychoanalysis can easily become the gift of capitalist imperialism to the cause of feminism.

WA: So you're saying that tracing the figure of woman would be another one of those essentialisms which you think it is better to avoid.

GS: In the name of anti-essentialism, and in the hands of hegemonic feminists, it sometimes becomes that. If one can situate it geopolitically, if one can situate it within the work place, I think some excellent work can be done, is being done, and tracing what we are calling the figure of woman. But when we speak of the 'prime task', my heart is elsewhere.

Questions on behalf of *Thesis Eleven* were formulated by Philipa Rothfield and Sneja Gunew, and posed by Walter Adamson, who also teaches at Emory University in the Institute for Liberal Arts. This piece has been edited and revised by Philipa Rothfield.