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## REVISITING THE SUBALTERN IN THE NEW EMPIRE

### Abstract

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' was published in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* in 1988. With the female subaltern as its principle concern, the essay moves between the seemingly disparate realms of intellectual production, institutional spaces, colonial archives, Hindu scripture and economic infrastructures (among others) to pose a central problematic in relation to voice, subjectivity, representation and the practice of writing history. In the intervening years since its publication, Spivak's framing of this problematic – which foregrounds the discontinuities between these concepts in scholarship – has been hotly debated in terms of its implications for intellectual work and activism alike. In the move from Bhubaneswari to her great grandniece, Spivak's own revision of this essay in her recent book *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason* draws our attention to the emerging subaltern of the New Empire: once caught and silenced in the relay between colonialism and national liberation struggles, she now disappears in the 'violent shuttling' between multinational capital and culturalism. This paper on Spivak's work responds to what we see as its continued challenge to humanities scholars and activists to fashion an ethics of alterity that is not reducible to identity politics where the gendered subaltern occupies a particularly telling place as part of a comprehensive critique of globalization.

### Keywords

Spivak; subaltern; globalization; ethics; alterity; humanities education

## I

**I**N MARCH 2001, at a conference in Kuwait, Gayatri Spivak, in conversation about this special issue, said 'I'm tired of the subaltern', and she laughed at the response from another conference participant: 'These days, having a bad hair day is subaltern'. In this off handed remark, one can sense Spivak's productive humour and impatience with any 'theory' that is not located, specific, open to constant revision and attentive to the currents of history and culture. While the term 'subaltern' is often employed far too vaguely to denote 'oppression' or 'otherness', which explains Spivak's fatigue with it, Spivak herself brings a persistently critical perspective as she continues to return, in her own work, to the issue of the subaltern and her changing context. If, in 1988, she asked that infamous question about whether she could speak, setting off over a decade of debates, it is only most recently – although she has been working with aboriginal (or scheduled tribe) children and their teachers in India for the past ten years – that she has begun to write about the subaltern in this context. As this special issue tracks her complex engagement with subalternity, this introductory paper specifically addresses the move from the question of speaking to the one of teaching, as it tracks, in Spivak's work, both the 'new subaltern' and the 'New Empire'.

'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (hereafter CSS) – first published in Laurence Grossberg and Cary Nelson's edited collection *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* – is engaged with questions of voice, subjectivity and historiography in its wide ranging examination of theoretical and archival material (1988). This essay, and Spivak's work in general, is frequently accused of being impenetrable, but its impact across the disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, women studies and cultural studies, amongst others, suggests otherwise. It is difficult, but learning from her work requires attentive reading and some familiarity with the scholarly texts and cultural/historical contexts that her work engages with – something Spivak herself calls 'doing your homework'. What is often experienced as frustrating but what is also simultaneously one of the most fruitful aspects of her work are the insights that disrupt any common sense or conditioned response one may have had to the issues explored. When the points are grasped, one must return to the very readings she has performed in all their detail and difficulty – the argument is digressive and takes place in the margins and notes, but nothing is extraneous to it. It does not so much proceed in a linear fashion where the revelation comes at the end: one can not jump to the conclusion of a Spivak essay and expect to understand the piece, a practice that resulted in so many of the misreadings of her 1988 essay; rather understanding comes with simultaneous grasp of divergent threads and multiple texts. This writing style, influenced by her subject matter, already embraces what she makes explicit in her more recent work and in the essay that appears in this collection: the understanding of alterity as spatial as opposed to temporal, but

we will return to this point later. Hence, no brief summing up, which her texts actively resist, can do justice to the circuitous reach of this essay. It moves from an analysis of the western intellectuals paradoxical claim to both dismantle the Subject and to know and speak for the Other (in particular, the working class), which ignores global capital and unwittingly consolidates the international division of labour in its refusal to acknowledge the ideologies informing both the construction of the self and the other; to the intricacies of Hindu Law and its codification by British colonialists as an example the epistemic violence of imperialism that subjugates other knowledges; to the Subaltern Studies group in India and its attempts to resist imperialism and recover and listen to the voice of colonial resistance in the 'already digested' historical archives and records of the elite; to the question of the British abolition of widow sacrifice (1829) and a nativist nostalgia for lost origins.

While many critics, (mis)reading the piece, have attempted to answer the question it posed, Spivak — intentionally echoing and engaging with Kant's 'what can I know?' and his probing of the limits of reason and reason as a limit — is working through the politics and the boundaries of representation and the question of how one can know. In the representation of the subaltern as 'politically canny' or unviolated or as 'speaking', Spivak argues, she continues to be silenced. In the example of widow sacrifice, the British imperialists, misinterpreting the term 'sati' and Hindu law, worked to outlaw widow sacrifice, pursuing the popular colonial strategy of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (1988: 297). The nationalists resisting imperialism but accepting the imperialist misreading of 'sati,' set out to (re)claim brown women, insisting 'the women actually wanted to die' (1988: 297). Caught in the relay between 'benevolent' colonial interventions and national liberation struggles that both construct a will for her, the subaltern, Spivak suggests, cannot speak. In her conclusion to CSS, she gives an updated example of this silencing: the case of Bhuvanewari Bhadhuri's suicide (1926) is represented by her nieces as a case of 'illicit love' *despite* Bhadhuri's attempts to displace this motive by leaving behind a letter about her unwillingness to carry out the political assassination assigned to her as a member of a group struggling for Indian Independence. Spivak stresses that Bhadhuri committed suicide while she was menstruating, thus deflecting the interpretation of her death as shame over an 'illegitimate' pregnancy and the reading of her death as a sacrifice for a man (the 'normalized' understanding of sati) and yet the letter also suggests she was not willing to accommodate the role of a 'fighting woman,' a role that had been celebrated by male leaders of Independence. This intervention and rewriting of 'the social text of sati-suicide' was not heard. Spivak states:

What I'm saying is that even when, whether showing her political impotence or her political power, she tries to speak and make it clear, so that it would be read one way, the women in the family — radical women

decide to forget it. The rhetoric of the ending is a rhetoric of despair. It was at that moment, right after the story, when I said, throwing up my hands, 'The subaltern cannot speak'.

(1999c: 89)

It is this unavoidable muting of the subaltern's intent, as a will is constructed for her, that Spivak's work asks us to be attentive to in 'our' own work.

'Speaking' for Spivak is a necessarily displaced act. Citing Abena Busia's response to CSS – which pointed to the fact that, in the end, Spivak was able to make the subaltern 'speak' – Spivak explains that Bhadhuri, as a middle-class woman with some access to centres of power, was not a 'true' subaltern, but that, in any case, the goal of her work is not to preclude hopeful investigations of subaltern speech but to foreground how these investigations must acknowledge that '[a]ll speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception' (1999: 309). The description of speaking as 'an interception' highlights both the contingency and construction of the act. An interception suggests something that is stopped or caught between two points. The use of the word interception to describe speech in this sentence helps to convey the inevitable displacement that accompanies any attempt to read a definitive meaning or intent in the actions or statements of others, and how speech as interception also productively points to the binary – the two points – in which it is so often trapped.

It is the interception of subaltern speech in the service of globalization or what she has also called the 'New Empire' that has become one of the major concerns of Spivak's work since CSS. In the move from Bhadhuri to her great grandniece, Spivak's own revisiting of this essay in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (hereafter *CPR*) draws our attention to the logic of the New Empire: as a well-placed diasporic South Asian working for a American-based transnational company, this great grand-niece – not having learned the lesson of Bhadhuri's suicide that interrupted the trajectory of both imperialism and national liberation struggles – is working out of a sense of 'moral love' to improve South Asian markets. Citing the East India Company as 'the first great transnational company before the fact' (1999: 220), Spivak argues that the New Empire, in one sense, is also a return to the roots of imperialism's relationship to capitalism where 'free trade' agreements became the norm for conducting business. If as Lenin states '[c]apitalism has been transformed into imperialism', Spivak explains, '[t]oday's program of global financialization carries on that relay' (1999: 311). A brochure for a recent exhibition at the British Library, entitled 'Trading Places: The East India Company and Asia' (summer 2002), unwittingly and uncritically makes this connection as it understands contemporary liberal multiculturalism as continuous with transnational capitalism: 'Imagine an England without tea in china cups, without pepper, or chintz or chutney; imagine an India without cricket or gin and tonic, a world without Hong Kong,

'Travel back 400 years in time and discover how multiculturalism began'. How did this version of postcolonialism become the norm? Despite expectations that the historically 'other', such as Bhadhuri's great grandniece, would counter the dominant, 'the representatives of the so called 'Third World' are often and with the best of intentions found to be 'in the service of globalization' (2001/? : 9). Spivak invites a critique of this version of the postcolonial that is not ironic in its use of the 'post' and presupposes the possibility of a 'decolonization' of the mind (2001/? : 10).

Although kept alive in Marx's work, the eliding of the difference between the two different notions of representation, *darstellen* (re-present or rhetoric as figurative) and *vertreten* (to stand in for/persuade) – which is evident in the exchange between Foucault and Deleuze in CSS, who speak for the worker, and the proponents of global feminism and development that speak for the third-world woman – is what permits the investigator/intellectual to render himself/herself as the transparent communicator of the voice of an 'undivided' oppressed. This conflation and assumption of 'transparency' is, Spivak argues, what continues to secure the centrality of the Western Subject and the 'West as Subject' that depends on the muting of the subaltern as it again constructs a will for her; yet her location continues to shift. Historically, the gendered subaltern was cut off from the centre, 'excluded even from the logic of class structure' (2001: 121) and had 'limited or no access to the cultural imperialism' (de Kock, 1992: 45). Moving from third to first worlds, as the welfare state is eroded, Spivak suggests, this remains the case for the disenfranchised in metropolitan centres that are increasingly cut off from social mobility. However, the penetration of global capitalism – the New Empire – in the guise of the World Trade Organization, NGOs, bio-research companies, UN Development projects and human rights organizations – into the lowest levels of society is responsible for producing what Spivak terms the 'new subaltern' (1999: 276). This new subaltern, caught between global capitalism/development and tradition/culturalism, is now completely co-opted as her body is rendered data and she is sought after as intellectual property. Spivak, thus, not only revisits CSS and the 'The Rani of Sirmur' in *CPR* but puts these essays in this new context as she turns to the 'workling' of the New Empire and exposes the continuity between colonialism as a civilizing mission and globalization, development organizations and third-world aid programmes. Once at the centre of nationalist policies (the structures of which are still operative), the 'Third World Woman' is now mobilized in the name of a global capitalist agenda (1999a: 200). Northern interventions into Southern contexts through the promotion of things such as women's micro-enterprises, gender training and birth control programmes – 'the invasive restructuring of gender relations' – assume an innocent or even humanitarian face in name of 'global sisterhood' (1999a: 223). The practice of extending credit to Southern women through the World Bank and NGOs, without the establishment of any infrastructure that would facilitate reform (that at least was

partially there under high colonialism), what Spivak calls 'credit baiting', is a particularly good example of how transnational capitalism expands its reach and replicates the pattern of colonialist benevolence: again we find 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (1988: 297). Credit baiting also problematically embraces the 'concrete experience' of these women as their testimonies are read as a rationale for globalization, so once again, the transparent reading of the other and the reading of the other as transparent is used to consolidate an imperialist capitalist empire that is quickly becoming the norm in the twenty-first century. As Spivak suggests, the sovereign subject is invoked in the interest of global capitalism where 'evidence is daily produced by computing the national subject of the global South' by referring to 'what really happens' in the same way Deleuze and Foucault refer to the experience of the masses, workers, and prisoners in CSS as outside of ideology (1999a: 255). While if in her earlier work she was willing to accept the necessity of this 'strategic essentialism' in political struggles, the emergence of the new subaltern suggests that this is no longer a viable option and in her more recent work she begins to offer an alternative.

*CPR* again intentionally echoes Kant in its title, but the 'postcolonial' as already contaminated and hybrid, as Mieke Ball points out, disrupts his reading of the possibility of reason as 'pure' (2002: 314–15). Further, Kant's question of 'what ought I to do?' that follows from 'what can I know?' is rethought, by Spivak, as a question of 'how can I teach?' *Imperatives to Reimagine the Planet*, another of Spivak's recent publications, lays some of the groundwork for this discussion by asking: 'How can we provide adequate justification for giving care, for considering the capacity to help others as a basic human right? How can we inscribe responsibility as a right rather than an obligation?' (1999b: 52). Pursuing a response to these questions involves reading Kant's *The Critique of Teleological Reason* against the grain: 'If he wishes to remain devoted [anhänglich] to the call of his inner determination . . . he must . . . assume the being [*Dasein*] of a moral *author* of the world'. Here the imperative is, Spivak argues (examining a longer excerpt), despite assertions to the contrary, not the product of Reason but the supplement to it (1999b: 64). Imperatives thought of only as the product of reason are also where the ethics of alterity gets displaced by the interests of European identity and where the Western subject and the West as subject is cast as the norm. As opposed to, as Kant does, grounding ethics in rational knowledge that then leads to doing, Spivak's notion of teaching keeps alive the ethical imperative as relational and ungrounded, as always begging the question about the relationship between ethics and acting and natural and human rights.

Rather than feeling obligated to act in the interest of the other – duty as White man's burden – the Northern planetary subject needs to understand his/her 'forgotten' implication in the North/South dynamic and the effects it has had in order to develop a truly accountable ethical position. The model of duty assumes the cultural superiority of the West, which must work to 'right the

wrongs' of those less fit. The 'History' chapter in *CPR* provides an example that undoes the amnesia that informs the 'enlightened' view that the First World has a moral imperative or obligation toward the Third World to supply aid and to dispense rights, leaving the Third World indebted/obliged for the receipt of this benevolence. In a letter Spivak cites by Major General David Ochterlony, the nineteenth-century agent to the governor-general in India, he does not disguise his contempt for the people in Bengal but, nevertheless, understands that the return of their territory and revenue 'will be received not so much as an obligation as a right'. Even die-hard colonialists like Ochterlony acknowledged the expectation that the rights of the colonized be restored by the colonialist who had committed a wrong, an understanding that has since been displaced and reversed by the 'benevolent' desire on the part of the colonist to right the wrongs committed by the colonized: 'What was at first perceived as a right came to be accepted as obligation – as being obliged' (1999a: 214). Imperialism is back in 'fashion', a *Time* article announces in its review of Bush's policy on the Middle East and then concludes: 'There's nothing wrong with a little colonialism – sorry, nation building – but it's not easy to get it right. Americans should remember that the old imperial powers got out of the business in part because they never got any thanks for it. Instead their reward was "the blame of those ye better, the hate of those ye guard"' (Elliott, 2002: 46). The naturalization of this narrative – the superior West needs to correct the 'third' world that should, in turn, respond with gratitude – is the one Spivak seeks to denaturalize in her more nuanced reading of history.

In her paper 'Righting Wrongs' – delivered at Oxford University as part of an Amnesty International series of lectures 'Human Rights and Human Wrongs'

Spivak describes two forms of culture – responsibility based (subaltern) and rights based (Northern) – arguing both need supplementation, one by the other, in order to produce social transformation. Without dismissing the usefulness of rights culture that emerged with the Enlightenment, she launches her most explicit attack on its colonial dimensions that have marginalized and excluded subaltern cultures. Without a doubt, the current agenda and assumptions guiding development and human rights initiatives are embedded in an unequal relationship of power between North and South. Spivak argues that it is the descendants of the colonial middle class who have become the human rights and development workers in Southern countries today. Like Macaulay's Minute Men, these workers serve as intermediaries between local constituencies and emergency relief organizations. Generally ignorant of the languages and idioms of the places they travel to, organizations like *Medicine Sans Frontier* (Doctors without Frontiers) turn 'the interpreters themselves into imperfect yet creative imitations of the doctors' (2003). Further, through economic organizations like the World Trade Organization and UN sponsored aid programmes, the already weak postcolonial nation state is pressured from above to acquiesce to the Northern and capitalist culture that accompanies these organizations and their

activities. As Spivak explains, in the postcolonial moment, we have come from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens, where the nation is the source of all sovereignty to a place where human rights 'has turned out to be the breaking of the new nations in the name of their breaking-in into the international community of nations' (2003). Robert Cooper, one of Toni Blair's foreign policy advisors, recently called for a 'new imperialism', where 'among ourselves [the postmodern world] we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle [the pre-modern world], we must keep the law of the jungle' (2002: 2). There is nothing really 'new' about what Cooper calls for, despite his claims to the contrary, as this model continues the old imperialism that operates on the double standards of 'us' and 'them,' which has never been 'post' and that Spivak's analysis demonstrates is well entrenched in even the most liberal of organizations. Cooper's remarks and reference to the 'jungle' are nicely contextualized by Toni Morrison's diagnosis of this devastating practice of 'othering' at the very founding of a 'free' America:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift navigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet blood. . . . The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed couldn't be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (liveable place). It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own.

(Morrison, 1987: 198–9)

Cooper's new jungle is not the third world but lives under the skin of American and British foreign policy that replicates and widens the divide between Northern and subaltern cultures as it justifies brutality in the name of civilization.

A responsibility-based culture is, on the other hand, Spivak argues, a culture where one recognizes that 'the other calls us before will' (2003). As she explains '[s]ubordinate cultures of responsibility *when they work*, base the agency of responsibility in that outside of the self that is also in the self, half-archived and therefore not directly accessible' (2003). Responsibility based cultures keep alive, in their understanding of subjectivity, the 'parts of the mind not accessible to reason' that are therefore 'inaccessible to us as objects and instruments of knowledge' (2003). The ethical imperative, in this case, is not grounded by

rational knowledge alone. In other words, she suggests 'that there is another space – or script – which drives us', like our relationship to language, which is 'outside us, in grammar books and dictionaries' and yet 'in us' in terms of our ability to use it to 'know' the world through it (2003). The cultures of responsibility of the heterogeneous subaltern, cut off from the telos of capitalist empire building and progress, have stagnated; no attempts from above, in the name of a new cultural imperialism, which operates on the old model of the 'burden of the fittest', to correct them will help but will only lead to their further corruption. Democratic reflexes and critical intelligence must be 'activated' and this cannot come about through rote learning, memorization, commandments and slogans, which Spivak argues is a standard part of 'education' in the global south. Pointing out how the promotion of 'basic literacy and numeracy' is also a recipe for the reproduction of hegemony and the reinscription of human rights norms, Spivak articulates an ambitious and radical notion of humanities education that involves the 'uncoercive rearrangement of desires' and 'empowerment at the lowest level' (2003). Neither migrant minorities in the North nor the locally based Southern development workers are seen as adequate to the task of displacing 'international/domestic elite pressure on the state' because their jobs require them to translate human rights and development projects into the ethical and epistemic mindset of the North (2003). Instead, Spivak's pedagogic effort is cathected via the humanities and focuses on a dialogue between children and their teachers within the subaltern community.

Spivak contends that, in general, teachers in the humanities play a key role in normalizing the alliance between capitalism, development and human rights. American-style educational training that encourages benevolence for the other by 'listening to' and 'speaking for' the other has produced, at best, 'cultural relativism as cultural absolutism,' where cultural differences are already subsumed by the Western subject promoted as homogeneous and universal. On the one hand, liberal multiculturalism as it is taught in the North and institutions catering to middle class and elite groups in the South reinforce an 'asymmetrical' human rights discourse and provide an alibi for the New Empire. From kiddie investment handbooks to the marketing of postcolonial literature, Spivak argues: 'We are now teaching our children in the North, and no doubt in the North of the South, that to learn the movement of finance capital is to learn social responsibility' (2003). On the other hand, education at the level of the rural poor is focused on spelling and memorization (2003). Even where there have been examples of pedagogic instruments that attempt to undermine this coercive system of education by encouraging a teaching that involves a dialogic encounter between the student and the text, Spivak illustrates that they have been muted by the dominant logic informing humanities education. As she explains, the teachers with whom she works 'have been so maimed by the very system of education we are trying to combat', this kind of teaching has been made to seem counter-intuitive (2003). The gendered subaltern must be encouraged how to

read, not how to learn lessons: 'As long as real equalization through recovering and training the long-ignored ethical imagination of the rural poor and indeed, all species of sub-proletarians on their own terms – is not part of the agenda to come, s/he has no chance of becoming the subject of Human Rights as part of a collectivity, but must remain, forever, its object of benevolence' (2003).

Teaching, emerging from the understanding of imperatives as relational not knowledge-based, must be attentive to and at least negotiate the effects of the violation by imperialism. Returning to Kant, in this rethinking of imperatives not as obligation or duty, globalization needs to be overwritten by a sense of the planet that would embrace (or return to) the idea of being human as 'to be intended toward the other' that was displaced by the emergence of the Western subject as formed by logic of imperialist capitalism (1999b: 46). Imperatives are re-imagined, in this work, as the responsibility of being human and thus derived not from reason but from an 'alterity' that is unnamed (1999b: 72). A non-coercive education must involve a 'critical intimacy', a revisiting of what she first described in *CSS* 'as a learning to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for)' the heterogeneous subaltern that has been subjected to and muted by epistemic violence from which there is no easy recovery or lasting solution (1988: 241). Spivak proposes a new role for humanities education – an 'education without guarantees' – involving a 'learning to learn from below' and the 'cultural suturing' of 'democratizing reflexes' into stagnant responsibility based cultures or in other words, the 'binding' of a displaced version of the Enlightenment project to subaltern epistemes that would result in 'the activation of dormant structures' in subaltern communities (2003). This would then set the agenda for a 'humanities to come' – a practice of teaching focused on demystifying the role of global financialization and international control in human right initiatives, and a practice that involves learning to read as being attentive to the 'the singular and unverifiable' – singular because of the infinite heterogeneity of culture and unverifiable because of the limits of rational knowledge. This 'suspending oneself into the text of the other' also suspends 'the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end product for which history happened, and that New York [metonymically, the dispendend end] is necessarily the capital of the world' (2003). For Spivak, this kind of 'humanities to come' represents 'the only prior and patient training that can leaven the quick fix training institutes that prepare international civil society workers, including human rights advocates with uncomplicated standards for success' (2003). By learning this practice of reading, Spivak suggests that responsibility based cultures will be revitalized and sutured into right's based thinking in non-hegemonic ways.

In learning 'to learn from below,' the dominant must redefine herself and this gesture requires that geography – first and third worlds – stop being read in evolutionary terms as a teleological narrative of pre-modern to modern, hence the interest in spatial alterity. In Spivak's view, what Marx failed to theorize was

the 'ground condition' of the continued reproduction of class apartheid and thus his solution to the redistribution of wealth was 'to change the victim into an agent' (2003). Education in the humanities 'to come' would have the 'necessary but impossible task' of intervening at this juncture and displacing a *fully* rationale notion of enlightenment thinking and human rights. The echo of Spivak's call for 'persistent critique' in her engagement with other concerns in her oeuvre is obvious here. This process, this 'learning' from pre-capitalist societies – the lost imperative of responsibility – would in turn revive the democratic structures of civil society and encourage capital to break from an imperialism that is now full-scale globalization, interrupting the logic of capitalism so that it serves the social instead of colonizing it and destroying it.

## II

This special issue on Spivak's work responds to what we see as its continued challenge to humanities scholars and activists to fashion an ethics of alterity that is not reducible to identity politics where the gendered subaltern occupies a particularly telling place as part of a comprehensive critique of globalization. To a large extent, the contentious reception of 'CSS' in 1988 was overdetermined by the desire to name the other fermented by a strategic turn to identity politics that dominated discussions about subjectivity within both the institution and the social movements of the 1980s. In her recent reframing of this essay and in her oeuvre as a whole Spivak asks us to consider how the inaccessibility of subaltern consciousness continues to haunt interdisciplinary inquiry despite the move to more contextualized and detailed accounts of the 'everyday'. The silences embedded in these chronological and continuous accounts of history have been glossed over both in the privileging of the archive, an already 'digested' past that poses as the 'raw material for history writing', and in the resistance to understanding the past as the product of the ever shifting terrain of memory. By drawing a parallel between those silences and the gendered subaltern within colonial, national and global contexts, Spivak's work raises questions about whether literature, historiography, anthropological scholarship, development rhetoric, and human rights discourses that claim to excavate 'the other' necessarily also subsume her into hegemonic narratives. In their focus on the literary, the papers we have gathered for this special issue each engage with the ethics of alterity as it relates to various expressions of subalternity in the New Empire. Paul de Man famously wrote, 'When modern critics think they are demystifying literature, they are in fact being demystified by it; but since this necessarily occurs in the form of a crisis, they are blind to what takes place within themselves. At the moment that they claim to do away with literature, literature is everywhere; what they call anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis is nothing but literature reappearing, like Hydra's head, in the very spot where it had

supposedly been suppressed' (de Man, 1983: 18). Literature provokes a productive crisis in the study of culture as it serves as a reminder of the fictiveness of all language, and, it is in this space of language – in its singularity and materiality – that the reader confronts the ethical as it inclines her toward the (im)possible other, what Spivak names as the condition of being human. 'By definition', she writes, 'we cannot – no self can – reach the quite other. Thus the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible. And literature, as a play of figures, can give us imaginative access to the experience' (2000: 336).

Bruce Robbins's 'Soul Making: Spivak on Upward Mobility' returns to *CSS* to remind us that Spivak posed this critical question with specific reference to the international division of labour. Her analysis of Deleuze and Foucault's romanticization of the European 'workers' struggle' – a position that ignores the fact that this struggle is being played out in the context of global capitalism and imperialism – raises the question about whether the fight for an egalitarian politics in the metropolis is not always at the expense of those on the other side of the international divide. Elaborating on Spivak's demand in *CPR* that fellow diasporic intellectuals not explain away their privilege and influence in the academy on 'moral luck', Robbins extends this imperative to any academic/activist commitment to promote an egalitarian politics, understanding deconstructive ethics as acknowledging the 'dirty hands that can never be cleaned'. Following through on this logic then, Robbins suggests that if, as Spivak argues, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* claims her independence at the expense of her colonial sister, so too she rises in class and, in his reading of Kincaid's *Lucy*, points out that this same opportunity for upward mobility is afforded to third world women. In this reading that builds upon Spivak's, Robbins suggests the importance of defending the social welfare state even in its imperfection as upward mobility stories can be about more than self-interested individualism and the betrayal of those left behind. It is what Robbins calls the 'ethic of social interdependence' underlying the social welfare state that saves it from being in fundamental conflict with non-metropolitan spaces even if, against the historical moment of imperialism, this conflict is front and centre.

Turning to the importance of the practice of critical reading in Spivak's work, Brent Edwards, in 'Selvedge Salvage', examines the use of *parataxis* in *CPR*; this rhetorical device is 'a way of using language that withholds connections and conjunctions', thus forcing the reader into an active critical engagement with the text as s/he must both make the links between various sections of the text and recognize the incommensurability of various migrant/racialized/class narratives. Pursuing a discussion of Spivak's analysis of Kincaid's *Lucy* as paratactic and her claim that 'rhetorical sensitive readings' are both political and ethical, Edwards then considers how *CPR* 'peels away from its own progress' to keep alive tensions that are at once irresolvable and productive. As Edwards argues, the asides, footnotes, and parenthetical qualifications that surround the

reprinted/revised essays in *CPR* (the very stylistic elements of her work that some critics find most frustrating) point to the edges of Spivak's claims and mark a self-reflexive 'awareness of class bound complicity' that goes along with her position as an upwardly mobile migrant in the academy. But if, as Spivak has argued, a careful reading of *Lucy* suggests that this story of a Caribbean governess who migrates to the metropolis is about more than the standard notions of diaspora and hybridity that get read onto it, Edwards further argues that Lucy, taking on the responsibility of the exile as she breaks from her mother and birthplace, actively resists making connections between the 'scattered post-colonial migrants' she encounters. In this way, Lucy refuses, as Spivak herself does, a too easy solidarity that would erase differences between variously situated migrants and between 'global postcoloniality and metropolitan migrancy' in the interests of a 'multiculturalism complicit with neocolonialism.' Spivak is proposing a model for an (im)possible pedagogical approach to criticism that is akin to the poetic effect of the contemporary paratactic prose poetry of Harryette Mullen and gestures towards the importance of literary reading practices in an ethics of alterity.

In another reconsideration of *CPR*, Sangeeta Ray, in 'Ethical Encounters: Spivak, Alexander and Kincaid', tracks the recent contributions that Spivak has made to addressing the question of ethics in terms of the possibility of reading the other without dispensing with the structures of civil society (something Spivak herself has recently called 'ab-using the Enlightenment'). Central to this discussion is Ray's explanation of the distinction Spivak's work makes between 'the Call to and the Call of the Ethical'. The Call *to* the Ethical, as Ray explains, assumes a transcendent ethic that is embedded in an Enlightenment position, whereas the Call *of* the Ethical requires 'just the opposite – a recognition that there is an other side and that on this side "is the indefinite"'. This move allows Spivak to disrupt the normalized equivalency that understands responsibility to the other as an obligation – thereby reinscribing the Culture of the Enlightenment as reasonable in opposition to the culture of the multicultural other as non-reason – with a notion of responsibility as a right. Ray's analysis points to how Spivak's rereading of human rights requires us to '[become] comfortable with the inexhaustible diversity of epistemes' and transforms the 'burden of social responsibility' to 'all inhabiting the planet' in the name of a 'more "just modernity"'. Ray mobilizes this theoretical stance in her reading of novels by Meena Alexander and Jamaica Kincaid and a film by Shashwati Talukdar in order to illustrate the difference between a critical versus conservative multicultural reading practice and the conditions of possibility of knowledge that inflect an ethics in this approach.

Returning to some of the insights in *CSS*, Priya Narismulu, in 'Examining the Undisclosed Margins: Postcolonial Intellectuals and Subaltern Voices', offers a critique of the ongoing silencing of subaltern culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Narismulu's paper examines the systematic marginalization of resistance

literature in the curriculum of the South African post-secondary education system where Euro-centric values masquerade as universal and help to shore up White liberal privilege. The poetry of women resistance writers is contrasted with the patriarchal and liberal representation of 'protest writing' to reveal contradictions and complications in the position of the gendered subaltern in relation to South African nationalist discourse and the state's social and economic policy. Narismulu's interdisciplinary approach to reading the situation of the gendered subaltern in the post-apartheid and globalized context highlights the difficulty the subaltern has articulating her response to the social, cultural and economic pressures she experiences on a day to day basis. She provides examples of the continued silencing of the gendered subaltern in the curriculum of South African universities, in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in the activism of the shack dwellers of the Impolweni settlement where she has conducted fieldwork. Narismulu's paper points to the instrumental role that grassroots organizations that develop 'networks of globalization from below' can play in demystifying the democratizing rhetoric that has informed post-apartheid government policy but that has failed to deliver any significant improvement in the lives of the subaltern community.

Alterity, ethics, subalternity and their special relationship to literature – the themes that run through this special issue – are all revisited in the final paper in the collection. The question of how individual memory fits, or more accurately, does not fit with history is at the heart of Gayatri Spivak's 'The Staging of Time in *Heremakhonon*', a Maryse Conde novel about Veronica Mercier, a character who was born in Guadeloupe, moves to Paris and travels to West Africa in search of an ancestry that was interrupted by slavery. Suggesting that the focus on Mercier as a character is limited in its approach, Spivak reads the novel as a staging of heterogeneous time that foregrounds the inevitable suppression of the subaltern that occurs when the novel is read only in terms of the central character's personal quest for her African roots, for 'niggers with ancestors', for Africa as a 'singular lost object' that necessarily involves ignoring the subaltern

is nuanced by the novel's deployment of heterogeneous time. The staged absences and gaps in the novel, between thought and speech, between memory and history, between Guadeloupe and Africa, between the gift of time and confession, between women's personal sexual pleasure and the impersonal reproductive body point to the way the novel exceeds its characterological outline. This epic quality of the novel that acknowledges the impersonal heterogeneity of history as hybrid time points to 'pre-capitalist ways of imagining' and thus resists the progressive model of literature, which situates the novel at the height of democratic expression. It is this staging of the 'ruse' of individual memory that posits at its origin a 'there was' in its attempts to connect with an impersonal history that ultimately allows the novel to gesture toward the heterogeneous history that gets forcefully unified under the name 'Africa' in the main character's quest for ancestors. While the main protagonist, and readings that

focus on her, wants to jump the gap between discontinuous histories in the attempt to affirm an 'originary History', it is the epic gestures in this novel that foreground the gaps, thwarting this very attempt.

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