

An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 2012. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. xvi, 608 pp., photographs, index. Hardcover, US\$35.00.

“GLOBALIZATION TAKES PLACE only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control” (1). So begins *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, an anthology of the essays of exilic Bengali literary scholar, South Asian radical feminist, and Western-based deconstructivist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Comprised of twenty-five essays spanning twenty-three years, and written in her forbidding, often controversial prose, *An Aesthetic Education* is Spivak’s attempt to redress the imbalances caused by globalization, which bulldozes cultural differences and nondeveloped societies through the illusion of a universal individualized choice achieved via ever more efficient forms of capital instrumentalization. Lost in the contemporary miasma of social networks, consumer “freedoms” and the tyranny of science and technology is the disempowerment and decay of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences; a condition that Spivak stringently reproaches by reiterating the revolutionary potentials inherent in the humanistic language of modernity. Spivak grounds this critical premise in the Enlightenment promise not only of a phantasmatically progressive present, but also of a reflective and skeptical human subject.

This critique takes form through Spivak’s reification of Gregory Bateson’s concept of “the double bind,” in which a participant of a game or project encounters contradictory instructions in the act of implementation, and is forced to live through this condition in a state of perpetually deferred or “frustrated” goals. Using Marx—as transformed by Gramsci—Spivak tweaks the role of the skeptical intellectual grounded in the conditions of communal life (Gramsci’s “organic intellectual”) as a critical position that gives cognizance of the need for the humanities to “educate” publics submerged under the dominant specter of capitalism, while at the same time question the certainty of this knowledge as grounded

either in the imperialist imagination of Western humanities (in particular, English literature), or in the nativist invented tradition of essentialized primevalism.

This impetus to “defer” the fulfillment of an epistemic *logos* explains why Spivak rereads the giants of Bengali literary canons, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahasweta Devi and R. K. Narayan; and revisits and deconstructs Western theoretical figures from Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller to Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. This rereading and revisiting seems to achieve two simultaneous goals: to differ in their assumptions of certainty and closure, and to defer the claim of a triumphal counternarrative rooted in the suspicion of grand narratives. Such a doubled movement also belies Spivak’s own epistemic debt to deconstruction, a discipline she learned under Paul de Man, the legacy of which she ultimately acknowledges to Jacques Derrida (Spivak’s first major publication in 1977 was the English translation of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*). Spivak’s introspection of this discipline also suffuses her writing, which is not merely thematic, but also autobiographical, a critical tactic borne of her feminist (and Marxist) leanings, and more importantly, of her nation(ed) and race(d) cipher as the Other teaching amongst the (West’s) Self.

But as the essays of her contemporary postcolonial writers like the Algerian feminist Assia Djebar or the South African J. M. Coetzee; events like the War on Terror; and aesthetic insights into “artists of color” like Tsong Pu, Chittrovanu Mazumdar, Abderrahame Sissako, and Anish Kapoor all show, Spivak is equally at home interpellating in the nebulous site of globally produced, and diffusely gendered art and politics in locations like New York and London. These productions cannot be so easily pigeonholed into locations, tropes, sexes and ethnic identities. Rather, as a consequence of the globalization that abetted and informed them, the works of these writers and artists underwrite the task that Spivak sets out: to use the humanities as the radical term that unhinges the centrality of knowledge in the Other (that is, the peoples of the underdeveloped world) through its “performative locution” as text/image dwellers located both in the West and Non-West, simultaneously.

Throughout her essays, Spivak reminds readers of the radical possibilities of rethinking the “subaltern” (a term that she immortalized in “Can The Subaltern Speak?,” an essay that, unfortunately, is not included in this collection) as both possibility and textuality. Reminding us of her first rereading of South Asian radical femininity through the life and death of Spivak’s first “martyr,” Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, essays detailing Spivak’s own efforts at educating poor Bengali women in Bangladesh—and the ultimate failure of that effort due to male elite interference—are amongst the most poignant and empathic in the collection. Admittedly, this experience would, to the uninformed reader, explain the tone of “bitterness” that is often ascribed to her recent work. But as *An Aesthetic Education* indicates, Spivak’s adherence to her reified insight of the double bind forestalls an easy resolution of (Western-based) progressing the (Asian/African-based) underdeveloped. This realization is rooted in the deconstructive commitment to constant deferral, eloquently summarized by Spivak in two pregnant and eventually revealing words: “false hope.”

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