

“Changing Reflexes”

Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak¹

Edward J. Carvalho

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is widely regarded as one of the world’s leading postcolonial and feminist critics. During her career, she has produced several notable texts that include an acclaimed translation of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1976); *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Methuen, 1987); *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge, 1993); *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard UP, 1999); and most recently, *Other Asias* (Blackwell, 2007). The following interview was conducted on 7 Apr. 2009 at Earl Hall, Columbia University, where Professor Spivak is both University Professor and director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society.

Edward Carvalho: You may have seen that the *Works and Days* volume *Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-9/11 University* (nos. 51-54, 26-27.1/4) was recently the subject of some discussion in three of Stanley Fish’s *New York Times* “Think Again” blogs. Professor Fish focuses first on the relationship between neoliberalism and higher education as explored in the essays by Sophia McClennen and Henry Giroux.

Essentially, Fish has clung to the belief in a depoliticized classroom space and that academics should “save the world on their own time.” As one might expect, McClennen, Giroux, and Searls Giroux resist this kind of academic forfeiture. In the op-ed column, Fish further attempts to clarify his positions:

And when I define academic freedom as the freedom to do the academic job, not the freedom to expand it to the point where its goals are infinite, my stance ‘forecloses the possibility of civic engagement and democratic action.’ (McClennen)

That’s not quite right. I don’t foreclose the possibility; I just want to locate it outside the university and the classroom.

What are some of your thoughts on this debate?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: My idea of the teacher of literary reading—and let us not forget that Professor Fish is an exemplary

WORKS AND DAYS 55/56: Vol. 28, 2010

reader—is that willy-nilly s/he, if successful, changes reflexes, and strengthens the imagination. Without a strong imagination, there can be no democratic judgment, which can imagine something other than one's own well-being. Yet literature is also not "political" in the narrow sense. Insofar as the training into judgment is part of higher education, this applies to even the most "political" of disciplines.

Carvalho: Sure.

Spivak: The freedom to teach, to expand the imagination as an instrument to think "world," is thus *deeply* political. It operates at the root of where the ethical imagination and the political mingle. I believe that to distinguish between "the possibility of civic engagement and democratic action" and teaching in the classroom is to make a *useless* distinction. I'm not even saying it's wrong, because I think what you have to realize is that it is with the mind that one takes democratic action! [laughs]

I found it very moving when Mumia Abu Jamal wrote in his book (*Live from Death Row*) as he was waiting on death row, apart from everything what I really need is people with changed minds. Now, when I, Gayatri Spivak, say it, the knee-jerk reaction could be, "Oh, yes, she's talking about the mind. She doesn't know that the materialists only think about the body," which is also nonsense, of course. But, on the other hand, when it's coming from Mumia, it has a certain kind of authority.

Where does my authority come from? I'm not unlike other people. I, too, like thinkers who show me *some* choices, but I like the choices to be a little open so that they're not between given positions.

And this is where I think academic freedom stuff begins to become *much more* complicated. It's not just something opposed to this insane kind of post-9/11 climate—9/11 happened just eight years ago! History is long. When you begin the story from 1915 with John Dewey writing that academics should be distinguished from factory workers and have freedom, or from the end of the eighteenth century and looking at Kant and Mendelssohn writing about what is Enlightenment, it's not quite 9/11, but then you've decided on a *race-specific* way of looking at academic freedom: that the *only* history is capitalism, and the *only* history is Europe and Asia. And within this history, if you start with Kant and Dewey you're claiming a class privilege that has a larger-than-Europe history.

Carvalho: I never really thought about it in those terms. Can you elaborate on this more?

Spivak: I think about academic freedom in a *long* context rather than in the aftermath of a terrible president and a very unfortunate event. I consider that *gurvāda*—which is Sanskrit for "guru-ism"—gave the academic *absolute freedom*. It was a different sort of academy and a different sort of state. But Kant is not exactly teaching at the University of Colorado either.

Here, I go to Gramsci. Gramsci knew Marx backwards—*backwards*—and understood him, and respected him. But he did not think of

Marx as his guru. And so *quietly*, with a *great* deal of sympathy, he writes a sentence that no one particularly comments on, but it's a complete heresy. He writes, "This is why Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* [1859] is not just a moral and psychological project, but an epistemological project." In other words, if you don't engage *exceedingly* carefully at changing the reflexes of your student, at whatever level, you are not exercising your responsibility as an academic. So any position that says "that with one part of my mind I do civic responsibility and democratic action and the other part is what is trained in a classroom," I think it's talking nonsense.

Robert Post, from Yale, who is supposed to be very strongly pro-academic freedom, makes a mistake. I heard him say something like this: "The hard sciences can teach truth, but in the humanities, academic freedom is contained in being commensurate with what the professional organization endorses; because the humanities can't teach truth, only hard science teaches truth." I think it's a deep confusion between the register of exactitude and the register of truth. And it seems to me that we do not teach *things*; we teach *how* to know. I mean, we *do*, of course, teach things, but we *really* teach how to know. You don't *do* politics in the classroom, but you sharpen the ethicopolitical instrument.

The political requires a *lifelong* preparation that goes along with the short term call to action. Otherwise, the universities would have no reason to exist. And so it seems to me that the facile binary opposition that Stanley Fish makes is, as I say, not even untrue, it's just irrelevant.

Carvalho: That makes sense. In some ways, it reminds me of your work overseas in that you teach to untrain the effects of rote memorization and, in so doing, try to get your students to exercise their critical thinking and thereby open the possibility toward a political imagination.

Spivak: There's no question there, however. I will, in fact, make a comment on your comment. Shall I do that?

Carvalho: Please.

Spivak: First, I would like you to rethink me a little. Okay? As I said before, I am an Indian citizen. I carry *only* an Indian passport. I work abroad. I work overseas here; *this* is my overseas. India's my home. Cornel West made this mistake once, long, long ago.

Carvalho: Well, at least I erred in good company [laughs].

Spivak: He says, "But Gayatri, you went to school abroad, didn't you?" And I started laughing, and I said, "No, Cornel. I went to undergraduate school at home and then I came abroad to get my doctorate." As to *why* I came to the United States, it was before Lyndon Johnson lifted the quota, right, '61—he lifted it in '65—so I came four years before. This is not the material for discussion on academic freedom, but this much I will say: It was not a Eurocentric economic migration in order to become American and then take a position

against the United States—it wasn't like that. For me, the United States is a place where I work, and I take my work quite seriously. But more and more, that work is shared with work at home as well. So if you begin rethinking me in that way, then I think you begin to get the point of why I'm there.

Carvalho: I think I now understand better your earlier comments on the strictly American view of academic freedom.

Spivak: I'm not a nationalist—not at all. I think nationalism is an awful thing and that's why I don't like all discussions of academic freedom which seem completely America-centered, and a little bit of something to Europe. "What's happening in America? The origins of academic freedom are in America." I think that's a deeply . . . distasteful way of thinking intellectually, and a dangerous thing politically, as if America is the *only* place where academic freedom is *truly* exercised. Period.

Even people who are writing about academic freedom in Gaza or Africa, for example—even George Caffentzis, whose work I greatly admire—always look at academic freedom situations when there are incredible infringements by the state. This is quite unlike the infringements that we fight here. But then, those positions are taken as things that America must solve in terms of American standards of academic freedom.

Now, when you consider my work in India, the first thing being that you don't think of it as work "overseas," but "work at home," then you begin to contextualize the entire sojourn in America, by this work that began in 1986, about twenty-three years ago. The first part of my life in the United States was embroiled in personal problems. Those issues were certainly also political—I'm a feminist—they were deeply involved in politics. But once I came out on a plateau, I started work where it was natural for me to work, as it were: That is to say, among the largest sector of the electorate, with whom I shared a native language. This is not work overseas.

And so, in this sense, it's always *better* for me to hit democracy as far below as possible. For example, India happens to be, to quote CNN, "the largest democracy in the world." I also go to work in China because I'm not a nationalist. I am very serious about the need to look at the largest sector in India of the electorate and in China the people who are "down there."

Carvalho: What do you hope to accomplish there?

Spivak: With respect to that work, let me first say this: You cannot understand the rest of the world in terms of the American story, if you think carefully. America is only two-hundred and fifty years or so old; if you expand to Columbus, it's five-hundred years. When we are looking at Columbus, mercantile capitalism is already beginning to firm its sails: that's a different narrative. And so, it's not that in the ground level at each of these countries [India and China] there is just rote learning to contend with. Rather, I'm trying to approach the fact that in places which are *thousands of years* old, with established

trends in education that millennially predate capitalism, in those kinds of areas I am trying to undo in a sense the effects of what John Dewey said so *cockily*: that “academic freedom is based on the fact that we are not factory workers.” I am trying to undo the differentiation between intellectual labor and manual labor that exists *long* before capitalism, that which makes academic freedom a deeply responsible situation of double bind. On both of these places, China through the millennial imperial civil service and India through the Brahminical past.

Yes, in the short term, I’m absolutely for fighting, as I have indeed in my short career, fighting *every time* that an administration or a state stops someone for a politically unacceptable position; though if you look at what we support, you will realize that we are against bureaucratic egalitarianism. We *bind* academic *freedom* to a context because we want it *free*. This is why we cannot confine ourselves to only the “infringements of academic freedom.” I can’t even see them as infringements of academic “freedom,” because in each case it’s bound to a position taken by the academic who happens to have contradicted the assumptions of the more conservative side.



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
Earl Hall, Columbia University, 7 Apr. 2009

Photo Credit: Edward J. Carvalho

The situation reflects for me the irony that all short term political contingencies are based on giving up the idea of reasonable truth. I cannot therefore theorize academic freedom from these occasions. For me it's not a theory; it's a strategic situation, and I acknowledge that. It's an occupational hazard at the university in the United States, and it relates to this deep distinction between intellectual and manual labor.

Now, if you go back into this area where I do the other teaching, what am I trying to do? I am trying to create the reflex in the poorest people, the largest sector of the electorate that will lead to democratic behavior. But it's not so easy. As I say, I come from a civilization where full academic freedom was the name of oppression and tremendous special privilege. Like the archons, above the law. What I'm undoing now is eight-thousand years of freedom given to the "teachers."

Carvalho: Right. So your work is also a kind of epistemological project . . .

Spivak: Gramsci, again, was a very smart man. He knew that if you take away the situations of infringement—Gaza being destroyed, Joseph Massad being exploited in that horrible way—that the group known as "intellectuals" is, in general, an upwardly mobile class of folks who don't care about anything and are incredibly slow to change. So his notion was that the intellectual should be instrumentalized. The intellectual should be in a master-disciple relationship, where he is the disciple of the historical-cultural situation in order to be able to understand how to produce a subaltern intellectual who would not suffer from the prejudices of the proletariat, created out of capital logic. This is a *very* different kind of thing; it comes from a man whose freedom was *completely* taken away. Probably that statement by the public prosecutor is apocryphal, that "We must incarcerate this man because this mind should not be allowed to think for twenty years," but, indeed, what was taken away from Gramsci was his intellectual freedom.

And this is why he is important. What he got out of that situation was not how to plead his own case, but how to think about what the role of the intellectual should be—even when he had been stopped from being an intellectual. He defeated Mussolini by writing those twenty-nine notebooks in jail. We are still reading them. That mind did think. And what did it teach us to think? It taught us to think that our thoughts about the intellectual should not be conditioned by the dangerous, absurd, and criminal behavior of the other side. When the other side behaves in that way, we fight them. But *they* do not conduct the terms of our theorization of academic or any other kind of freedom. And I think the *main* problem with *all* theorizations of academic freedom coming out of the United States is that we have taken as our origin, the behavior of the other side.

Carvalho: Yes, I can see that.

Spivak: And we do what we can. But when we talk about academic freedom, then comes the moment of the double bind that the

intellectual—and Gramsci also says this, to a certain point as I mention earlier—cannot be expected to change too quickly. Intellectual change, epistemic change, is *extremely* slow. So all of the cases of academic freedom infringement are speedy; “We have to fight them, we can’t let up. And that’s what we must do.” But the other area, what Marx would call the “autocritical,” *if* we get a moment, then, *when* we get a moment, that speed is extremely slow. And we are caught within these contradictory instructions. I don’t want to see academic freedom *always* being discussed at that other speed, the fast speed, obliged and visited upon us by the other side.

To an extent, what I’m trying to do in this particular situation is to prepare these people for that slow reflex. It is so hard, when for thousands of years the only thing that these human beings have been asked to do is to give their bodies’ labor, to the rural gentry, the rural middle-class, the rural upper class, and now, due to globalization, by remote control. They don’t believe; they don’t have heads anymore. This is not five-hundred years of colonialism, this is not people who have come to find a better life and fallen into capitalism in the United States: it ain’t like that. And, therefore, the rote learning is not just rote learning. It’s that business of even the rote is meaningless because the cognitive instrument has been destroyed. It’s the *millennial* construction of class apartheid. That’s a very, very different thing from “just working overseas” or doing NGO work. See what I’m saying?

Carvalho: Definitely.

Spivak: I’m not just trying to break rote learning. I’m trying to do the *same* kind of thing except here I say “humanities.” There it is the decimal system. You know? Because they must be able to enter the science stream in order to move. That’s the kind of thing that I’m talking about. It’s that word “overseas.” My idea of academic freedom doesn’t stop at the door of the American university.

Carvalho: Honestly, I think it’s important to be able to connect those narrative threads together.

That reminds me: During our lunch, you were telling me about your opening remarks for a recent humanities conference that relates to this part of our discussion . . .

Spivak: I had a little conference where I wanted colleagues to talk about the responsibility, especially in the humanities, but also the qualitative social sciences—indeed, hard science is not everything—the responsibility of producing these reflexes, teaching the practice of freedom, as it were, so that our students wouldn’t go out and *become* such dogs. I mean, that’s what we are suffering from, aren’t we now?

Carvalho: Without question.

Spivak: What follows are the opening remarks from the conference that I was talking about earlier during our lunch. You will notice that I bring up a couple of points that I have also brought up in our conversation:

“Living with the Humanities”:

Over the last decades, the situation of academic freedom in this country has become precarious. As in the McCarthy period, so today the fragility of academic freedom is deeply involved with foreign policy. Then as now, discussions of academic freedom in this country are focused on the U.S. alone, and the focus is legalistic. Often we hark back to the beginning of the last century, ignoring altogether the way in which the contemporary world has changed the stakes. I was particularly struck some months ago, and some of you were present on that public occasion, when a reputed law professor, of repute indeed for his deep concern for the humanities, said at this university that whereas the sciences taught, or could teach, the truth, the humanities taught what was acceptable according to their professional organizations. I realized right away that the idea that the humanities taught or could teach the practice of freedom was now lost to us. It is what Peter Bhogossian has called “fear of knowledge” turned 180 degrees.

At this university, which in this respect is no different from others, we hear statistical reports of percentage rises of hiring in the humanities as proof of their health. This is certainly a very good thing. On the other hand, the real question of the humanities is that, because of its progressive trivialization and marginalization, it has itself forgotten that its role is to teach the practice of freedom to the general culture, so that academic freedom can flourish without having to be noticed only when it disappears, and without having to be confronted only by repetitions of the necessity to enforce the law. Speaking at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association last year—you remember that according to our friend the law professor the humanities teach only what the professional organization will allow—I said, “When did we decide to forget that the work of the humanities is a slow build-up for the practice of freedom, which supplements top-down efforts at problem solving?” And I answered myself, “I think when the absence of democratic structures in the state produces a culture of relentless fund-raising, and the potential funders do not generally come out of the humanities.” For them, art and performance are good investments, and think tanks lend prestige, but the teaching of the humanities seems a wasteful anachronism.

The question that we move onto on the humanitarian international stage is: “can one say all this even when poverty is the main issue for a society? Can we still insist under such circumstances on what the humanities bring?” We must also ask the question: “Can one insist on the importance of a training in the humanities in the time of legitimized violence?” In this context, although the stakes have changed, I have learnt more than I can say from the remarks of W.E.B. DuBois, which I here quote: “The immediate need,”—we just read this in class a couple weeks ago—“The immediate need for the negro,” as he wrote, “is no doubt food and shelter. But at the same time, he,”—for him—“At the same time, he must also learn to communicate with the stars.” This conviction, that this must supplement efforts at disease eradication, poverty eradication, legalism and fighting against violence—because generations are made, generations come up, generations are developed and generations are formed while such efforts continue. You cannot say “this first, and then . . .”

These are some of the inquiries that are not made when the question of academic freedom is only national, only legal. And it is to ask these questions that I urge my colleagues today. We need to think of these questions in a sustained way, even expand them into something like the following list:

- What is academic freedom?
- How is the issue changed if we think internationally?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking of it in national legal terms?
- What are “the humanities?”
- How is the issue changed if we think internationally?
- Can the participants take on board the idea that the humanities can teach the practice of freedom?
- How does this relate to the teaching of the practice of unfreedom in the economic, political, and religious spheres?
- How can the teaching of the humanities be used as a resource in the current state of play, nationally and internationally?
- How is the entire debate enhanced if we look at it from the perspective of the long-term practice of human rights?
- Does academic freedom conflict with what are believed to be “cultural traditions?”
- Do we have to make concessions to the degree of academic freedom that we want in varying political systems? Can it be an absolute freedom?
- What is the relationship between the right to education, the freedom of speech, and academic freedom? Do the humanities play a role in clarifying these distinctions?

Do these questions come to mean different things in different contexts? As a citizen of India, I find this to be pertinent most seriously to the matter of the right to education. In a specific context, demands for the right to education can be a completely reactionary kind of endeavor. In another context, when violence closes the universities, this has to be fought for.

If we only focus on the United States, and United States precedents, we cannot ask these questions.

Before tackling them myself, I cite some answers sent in by Dr. Probal Dasgupta from India when I was planning a colloquium on this topic, and the concluding paragraph from Professor Aniket Jaware’s intervention at the colloquium. I think the fact that in India, freedom of thought is sometimes interfered with by Hinduism, the majority religion, and this does not receive the publicity given to the relationship between education and Islam—has freed these colleagues to consider questions of academic freedom in interesting ways.

Here is Dasgupta:

There will be no time for you to look at this now, but for the record and for future reference at a moment when you do have the time, here are my responses to the questions in your wish list (I am using the word “wish” because you and I wish more people regarded these as questions):

- What is academic freedom?

The right to converse freely, even beyond the freedom experienced among friends, given that friendship imposes practical constraints of time and individual attention that only academic structures are able to overcome so that conversations can follow themselves through, towards conclusions which may remain elusive, but become differently elusive when the obvious constraints are overcome.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking of it in national legal terms?

Advantages: we find out what we are up against. Disadvantages: claustrophobia, hopelessness, and also inadvertent complicity in triumphalisms we barely perceive when we are in our homes and do not see how these settlements look to internal and external others.

- What are “the humanities?”

The pursuit, and as part of this the study, of the imagination that makes conversation possible, as only my ability to imagine you underpins and creates my speaking to you.

- How is the issue changed if we think internationally?

Conversations always work within constraints that reflect one’s settings. When one works across settings, new possibilities open up because we concretely see what certain other contexts make possible. Let us say the conversations become more “ample”. I am quoting from an Ionesco talk I attended at Hunter College, New York in the ’70s. He was asking why Shakespeare is more significant than, say, Defoe, and he said that Shakespeare had “*une interrogation plus ample,*” an adjective I have never recovered from.

- Can the participants take on board the idea that the humanities can teach the practice of freedom?

With enough social science supplementation (I am thinking of Amitav Ghosh’s outwork in his *In an Antique Land*), yes.

- How does this relate to the teaching of the practice of unfreedom in the economic, political, and religious spheres?

The institutions are self-justificatory; those spheres you mention are institutional spheres. The humanities allow us to speak behind and before this institutedness, to ask the why questions in a way that the institutions try, never entirely successfully, to forbid. It is usual to refer such asking to the voice of “the child”, but there are other types of new entrants and beginners involved, and the “child” image does not do enough of the work we expect it to do when we say this. As comic strip Calvin’s mother says, “If anybody says “the child in me” one more time, I’m going to scream.”

- How can the teaching of the humanities be used as a resource in the current state of play, nationally and internationally?

I'd try translation studies for leverage, and insist on the interface with the social sciences, a strategy that forces some social scientists (whom the resulting funding patterns will lock into partnerships and joint writing) to face issues they are otherwise able to keep out of professional lives. I'd also use the point at which Sundar Sarukkai, in his 2002 classic *Translating the World: Science and Language*, is able to use translation studies and Derrida's intervention to work his way into a new take on philosophy.

- How is the entire debate enhanced if we look at it from the perspective of the long-term practice of human rights?

I'd use religious discourse for additional leverage as the common law base for the human rights discourse, referring to Wole Soyinka who wrote "from the elders of the indigenous peoples in West Africa to the organized world religions, all the religions have consistently said that humans have rights, and this is pretty much all that they've said," or words to that effect, I saw this in a text by him in the '90s.

- Does academic freedom conflict with what are believed to be "cultural traditions?"

If we cannot work our way towards an interreligious discourse as a major constituent of religious discourse, this is so and will remain so, but only as a condition that renders certain conversations opaque the way fatigue does. Remedies will need to resemble, and to draw upon, what we do when we are tired.

- Do we have to make concessions to the degree of academic freedom that we want in varying political systems? Can it be an absolute freedom?

I am arguing for conversations, and conversations are by definition never absolute; they are languaged and contexted.

- What is the relationship between the right to education, the freedom of speech, and academic freedom? Do the humanities play a role in clarifying these distinctions?

I have nothing useful to contribute to this important area of thinking.

I should like to think that the author of this document has no answer to the question of the right to education due to the emptiness of the word "education" by itself. In this country, intellectuals such as Martha Nussbaum and Lynn Hunt have urged the importance of the humanities. They have, however, put the emphasis, at least implicitly, on the contents of the humanities curriculum, inevitably literature, rather than philosophy, rather than its practice. They have not put the emphasis on the nature of the pedagogy of the humanities: how we read, how we philosophize.

The second thing that has interested me in Professor Dasgupta's document is that as a preliminary to the possibility of something like an international declaration of academic freedom, he suggests "translation studies." The relationship between deep language learning and access to cultural infrastructures is important. How far afield from questions of academic freedom, especially in places of poverty and legitimized violence, would this take us?

Here, now, is Jaware:

To distinguish academic freedom from freedom in general it might be useful to think of it in terms of moments of comprehension of what could be called the as-yet-uncomprehended. This also allows us not to think of freedom in terms of a substance or attribute that someone, or anyone, might be stated to possess; as well as not to think of it in terms of state of being. Inasmuch as the as-yet-uncomprehended can only be comprehended by a loving and friendly and slow reception, demands for quick comprehension work towards unfreedom rather than freedom. It is such demands for quick comprehension that dominate outside the academy, and the echo of such demands within the academy could be said to be the beginning of the decline of humanities. However, inasmuch as the academy is the place where new knowledge is acquired and institutionalized, we might also have to look at the processes of institutionalization. These processes will show that academics often work in tandem with administrators, who too are interested in the maintenance of existing structures of authority, funding, patronage, opportunity, etc. It becomes clear again that the struggle is between the processes of institutionalization of new knowledge, and maintenance of old knowledge. At the same time, there is a new form of social vigilantism which seeks to replace rigorous knowledge with opinion, often heavily charged with individual or group emotion and this is the second beginning of the decline of the humanities. I think it is possible to counterpose these processes with what I have called a friendly loving reception of the as-yet-uncomprehended. Since the main areas of knowledge in the humanities are the various processes of being human, it seems to me that the humanities are particularly suited to learn and teach academic freedom in particular and freedom in general.

I take my points of departure from the input given by these two Indian colleagues, because I am myself an Indian Europeanist, deeply troubled by U.S. nationalism in considerations of academic freedom, and further troubled by the inclusion of the European Enlightenment alone—Kant's Enlightenment being the major player—when the horizons are broadened. I believe that the idea of "linguaging and contexting" to be found in Dasgupta's remarks can and should be taken much further historically into two pre-colonial instances of "academic freedom" that the world has witnessed—the Chinese civil service and Brahminism. It is only then that Gramsci's incandescent intelligence in making the following remark becomes clear: "A 'democratic philosopher' . . . is . . . convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification

of the cultural environment. When the 'thinker' is content with his [*sic*] own thought, when he [*sic*] is 'subjectively,' that is abstractly, free, that is when he nowadays becomes a joke."

Carvalho: Thanks so much for the access to this speech. What else did you discuss at this event?

Spivak: Once the conference got going, apart from two or three colleagues, most of them were the same-old, same-old accounts of infringements of the individual liberties. And I am deeply sympathetic, and I'm every step of the way in the fight. I have nothing to be embarrassed about—everybody knows this. While at that conference, we had the ability and the time not to be fighting and be in the struggle. That was the moment when we could think a little bit, *away from* the way in which the other side obliged us to act, away from the interminable narratives. A couple of people came forth. They were surprised by the idea. But, in the end, they had enough to say, and we had a good time. But most of the others gave us, again, narratives that unfortunately we already knew about.

Carvalho: Let me advance the discussion then to a question related to science that I was originally going to ask you later in the interview.

Considering your teaching work in India, I wonder if you have any opinions on Nicholas Negroponte's "One Laptop per Child" program at MIT? In 1992, when you wrote "Thinking Academic Freedom in Gendered Post-coloniality" you said that:

International support, in other words, however well-meaning, can also bypass the inequalities within the new nation and stay on the high road of structural enablements. But who are the structures for? Who can or wants to use them? What must you know in order to (want to) use them? And even a further, more mysterious question, can we learn anything from those who seem to not know how to use the political structures we fought for? Or is that road closed? (452)

I asked Professor Chomsky about this program in the final minutes of our *Works and Days* interview (in relation to John Negroponte and Central American Terror)² and there simply was not enough time to expand upon my premise. Now that I've had time to reflect on it, I think the question is actually more apt for you. Do you see this laptop program as something beneficial to the Third World or as a structural device that will enslave governments and peoples (as most of the contracts for these laptops are at the governmental level) and thus place technological road blocks before the subaltern?

One of the key points you emphasize in your talk "Trajectory of the Subaltern" is how indigenous knowledge becomes intellectual property [in the pharmaceutical sector and via patents and so forth]. Can the "One Child per Laptop" program thus be seen as "faking a subaltern collective initiative"? Or, as you also put it, as a means on the part of the International Civil Society "to give philanthropy without democracy?"

Spivak: That's a very powerful question. How did Professor Chomsky respond to this?

Carvalho: Well, although my question to him was framed within a slightly different context, his basic sense was that "so far as I know" Nicholas Negroponte "is just trying to do something decent" (536). So, as you can see, it was very brief, and we weren't able to go into it at any length.

Spivak: And he's also speaking of a colleague and I believe it is necessary for all of us to be careful [when speaking] about our colleagues because we live in the same house.

Carvalho: And the actions of one brother can't be necessarily defined by another brother.

Spivak: Of course not. That's also true.

Okay, I think I would start from an agreement with Professor Chomsky: He, Nicholas Negroponte, is trying to do a decent thing. Now, it would have been interesting to see what Chomsky would have said if there had been enough time. But the real question is not the people who are trying to do really nasty things, but the people who are trying to do decent things out of an unexamined ideology. You see, this is why I went on so long about the word "overseas," because you had no interest in insulting me or being an American racist or anything [laughs], none at all, none at all. But ideology is larger than personal good will.

Carvalho: True.

Spivak: Therefore, I undoubtedly am caught in my ideological productions just as much as you are [in yours], except mine are a different set and people can indeed point them out. And people have indeed pointed them out, and I have respected them when they have done it constructively, as I tried to with you and with Cornel. I would say that the idea that is so pervasive now, that speed is of the essence, is a wrong idea. Because the part with which we make judgments still develops at the same old speed. You have not uploaded the computer fully into the human brain yet, and thank God biopolitics has not yet gone there. And people who make these predictions in popular books and so forth are always questioned by the much more cautious actual neural-network scientists and genomic scientists. I'm not saying something like "forever and a day" to resist the technological shift, but I am saying "no" to it in the near-term as long as our inner mechanisms are still changing. If you want to actually construct minds, you've got to take time. And so the idea of what I have called in print "unmediated cyber-literacy" is a dangerous idea. This has nothing to do even with who gets the money.

Carvalho: And certainly the thinking, and maybe even the perception, about how to use resources is a serious matter.

Spivak: Take for example in the hamlets, the area where I work. The people shit in the open arena—and not because they can't get cheap latrines. It's because they think it's normal. I was just told by one of them—these are my students and teachers, male and female—as I'm walking through these fields of shit that, "You know, these latrines don't cost any money." And once he said that, I didn't say anything to him, because I'm trying to change minds and not give magical lectures, right? So the next time his mother got cholera, I then said, as they're all weeping and howling and trying to get saline from a hospital far, far away—I said, "Well, look . . ."—and they're not even doing the oral rehydration that the World Health Organization talks about, because who's going to tell them that? I'm not a doctor; they won't listen to me—so I said, when we had a moment to sit down, "All this anxiety, the possibility that you might lose your mother; the difficulty of getting the saline; your mother's health; and so on. You spent a lot of money and passion and anguish. You know what you were paying for? *Your latrine*. You said 'It didn't cost anything'? *This* is its price. And then I said, "Because you're shitting in that area, you're washing your backside with that water; you're washing the pots and pans in that. That's how cholera travels." So I've just shown them a drop of water under a microscope. Because they think, "How can water be bad?"

And, latrines, I must say, the government makes available at *quite* a cheap cost: quite a cheap cost. But I won't impose them, because in the schools there are latrines. No one uses them except me when I'm in that direction. Everybody shits outside. Okay? You change *minds* through knowledge and through desire. I *can* shit in the woods, but I won't shit in the woods, because *seeing* me, maybe they will learn something. One person has in fact followed my example. But, at any rate, they live like this.

Latrines, too, are so much simpler than computers. I've seen computers here and there—nobody uses them, first of all—and suppose they *are* using them? (There's very wonderful work by a man named T T Sreekumar, which is on this business of giving IT to the Third World and actually what happens. But keep that aside.) Then, as I say, without preparing the mind for *how to use* such a speedy instrument—what not to do: that is, not to stop yourself from thinking; not to completely ignore intellectual quality; not to watch pornography all the time; not to ruin people's own work through thinking of viruses; not to steal intellectual property; and so on and so forth. That sort of ethical education is the training of reflexes that I was talking about.

Carvalho: Yes.

Spivak: That cannot happen at speed. Therefore, the idea—it's like Stanley Fish's idea—the notion that if you give to an untrained child that kind of a speedy instrument as a substitute for the making of the human being, then it's not going to be any good. I'm not exempting this place [Columbia] or how such things can impact the *overtrained* child, either. At this university, there is a wonderful undergraduate project called The Frontiers of Science. And they came to talk, the faculty, the teachers who teach it, and I was very amused because one of the very *detailed* parts of the project description—no one else

noticed it—was to train the students to see how *not* to accept some computerized research. Because these people are serious, they are scientists! They are not interested in that so-called “democratic flow of information,” etc., because half of it is junk! And, in fact, the teaching assistant and the professor who had come, they were going through these reams of information about how they teach their students not to misuse the computer. And I was thinking to myself: “Yes, just as nobody would teach a hard science class in the way we are encouraged to teach our humanities classes.” Let the students talk as much as they can. No! They don’t know anything yet! [laughs]

Therefore, I have a real problem, number one, with the idea even in an ideal world of giving every child, necessarily, a laptop. Number two, it’s easier to give a laptop, basically, than what I’m talking about.

Carvalho: I would say so.

Spivak: Yet, now they have cellphones. I recently showed an example to one of my supervisors and said, “Take a look. You see this telephone number? Why do you think there is in front of it ‘+91’? Can you tell me why?” He’s very smart, but he says, “I don’t know, that’s not part of the number.” I said, “Because it’s a foreign company. 91 is the country code for India. You’re just calling from this village in West Bengal to another person in the village in West Bengal, and yet, the number that is shown there is an *international* number for India. You understand? You’re giving money to foreign folks.” He says, “Aren’t there any cell carriers in India?”—not that capital is ever national, but I wasn’t going to explain that to him—I said, “Yeah, there’s Tata Indicom, Reliance, etc.” But this Vodafone, it is *so much bigger* that you see all over the countryside there are those red Vodafone signs. You understand? So all you’re doing with your cellphone—and it costs much more than those phone shops that we used to have—all you’re doing is giving the money that you don’t have. You are giving this money for nothing to this incredibly rich corporation.

Everyone says “How convenient it is!” But they never look at the fact that it’s misused and information doesn’t have to go quite at that speed for the things that they do. It would be much easier to have a hospital close by than to be able to phone the medical facility that’s three hours away. Why is the closest hospital three hours away? That’s the question. And these cellphones, as I say, you just look at everybody’s cellphone and you’ll see the international number that’s coming up there. Not yours. The children tinker with their fathers’ cellphones all evening rather than think.

Carvalho: That’s part of where I was going with the question on the “One Laptop per Child” and the potential for misappropriation in such a program.

Spivak: But what I tried to say is that it’s not *just* that, even if it were *not* that, it would be a misuse of capital. But carry on.

Carvalho: I see it as companies potentially looking to open up much larger market share through technological infrastructure—software, operating systems—there could be a real misuse there.

Spivak: It's not "could be"—there *is*. There is. In my newest book *Other Asias* I write about this. How IT is going to Armenia as a gender gift. I took very good care to look at *all* of those reams and reams and reams of projects on the computer, on the Internet, and what is coming from the other side, like these prostitute circles, people wanting jobs, and so on. And from this side, they are talking about how "Your women are really getting empowered . . ."—all those words. You look at the reports coming from that side? Nobody bothers. Who does all that kind of follow-up?

Carvalho: That's very interesting.

Spivak: Who follows up? That's the question. You see the photo ops of kids with books smiling and looking at their teachers, etc. Do you follow up to see what the photograph is of? People like me, we do follow up. I have never seen any of those schools actually in operation in my neck of the woods, where the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was giving money and there were these photos. The day the photographs were taken, all the kids were happy as a lark, you know? "Sure! You're going to be photographed! Go and put on nice clothes." You see? No one follows up on this. And even if the schools are happening, which is a good thing, how can we think of improving quality. Does the right to teach in "freedom" apply there? Is the Gramscian formula of coercion and persuasion practical?

Carvalho: Earlier we were talking about Joseph Massad. I don't know if you're at liberty to discuss his case?

Spivak: I'll say what I can say, and I won't say what I can't say. I mean, we have said a lot of things in public, so, those things I can say.

Carvalho: Fair enough. The Israel-Palestine debate was something that Stanley Fish concatenated with his op-ed on neoliberalism—which is where we started at the beginning of the interview. Columbia has most definitely seen its share of academic freedom cases related to the Israel-Palestine debate, from Nicholas DeGenova to Joseph Massad, and, over at Barnard, of course, Nadia Abu El-Haj. And in terms of highly visible academic freedom cases, the debate continues to yield casualties, one of the latest being, at the time of this interview, Joel Kovel at Bard College. You were awarded a Polly in 2003 for making the following statement, which also appears in the *boundary 2* essay we just discussed:

Suicidal resistance is a message inscribed on the body when no other means will get through. It is both execution and mourning, for self and other, where you die with me for the same cause, no matter which side you are on, with the implication that there is no dishonor in such shared death. (96)

Why do discussions on the Israel-Palestine conflict continue to spark academic controversy in your opinion, particularly in the post-9/11 context? Now, Professor Chomsky says that this debate was much

more pronounced in the 1980s, while others indicate that it has increased in its virulence post-9/11.

Spivak: I think that Chomsky and the others are both right—there are two different kinds. In the case of Columbia, I think there was also the matter of *vengeance* on Edward Said. You know, he was very much maligned, to the extent that as you know—and here I can say anything I want to because it's completely in the public domain—that a question was asked in Congress about Said's influence on Middle East studies, area studies, and the National Defense Education Act Title VI, and so on. That's part of the Congressional record. Columbia stood behind Edward Said in a principled way. The attitude was always that the university disciplines itself when, in fact, many, many times grave objections were raised, calls were sent out for the dismissal of Edward Said, and so on. And then after Said's death, junior faculty were attacked, and, of course, this is not something you can *prove*—I'm just suggesting this—there was just this insane persecution of Joseph Massad. I would say that is a part.

It's really almost smaller than Israel-Palestine in the case of Columbia and Barnard. But then, you must connect it with everything that's happening in the academy, and insofar as that is concerned, it was not Israel-Palestine so much as it was the demonization of Islam. And that, quite often, in the context of the academic who is . . . persecuted, happened to take the form of a critique of Israel, because it clearly would not take the form of a sudden support of Islam. That's also quite telling, isn't it?

Carvalho: Definitely.

Spivak: I mean, most of these people criticized state policy, you know what I mean? They criticized the United States, they criticized Israel. They were not really talking in a kind of unexamined, culturalist, religious way. So therefore, yes, Israel-Palestine. But it is true, Chomsky's correct, that before the so-called Oslo Accords, there was much more agitation about it. Today, yes, there are certain academics like Judith Butler, Bruce Robbins, etc.—they are focused on the Israel-Palestine problem in a very dedicated way. But, in general, I think today it's more a demonization of Islam, otherwise, this terrible stuff on Lebanon; it was just a news item. And the stuff on the academic freedom infringements in Gaza . . . there will be a meeting here [at Columbia]. Why? Because some of us signed a letter.

Carvalho: Yes, I saw that.

Spivak: But it isn't something like the outrage that one might expect. So I don't think Israel-Palestine is *itself* so much the focus. Mind you, with Obama's visit [to the Middle East], already the conservatives are beginning to talk about how Obama is favoring Islam. And, again, that kind of proves my point, doesn't it? That it's more about the demonization of Islam than Israel policy.

Carvalho: I'm not sure to what depth we can discuss it here, but in terms of the petition that you just referenced (e.g., Columbia faculty wrote to President Bollinger about the bombing of the Palestinian

University in Gaza): As I understand it, Bollinger was the author of an initiative condemning the boycott of Israeli academics. And yet he has not responded to the Gaza issue in kind.

Spivak: He did send us a letter in response to this issue, and there is going to be a meeting.

Carvalho: Okay. I was unaware of that.

Spivak: So, you are right, I would like to hold comments on this until that meeting takes place.

Carvalho: Completely understood.

Spivak: You know, he's shown this gesture of good will . . .

Carvalho: I didn't realize he had responded. I was only able to find the Columbia faculty "Letter on Academic Freedom in Palestine" itself.

Speaking of Obama, and this is somewhat of a timely segue, actually: Did you happen to see that the Obama administration temporarily "discontinued" the use of "war on terror" in exchange for the more oblique "overseas contingency operations"?

Spivak: It kind of puzzles me. Much as I disliked, like all of us together—we all have analyzed this to *death*—the phrase "war on terror," there is something terribly antiseptic about "overseas contingency operations." Because, you see, a contingency can always be justified, because it relates to that contingency. It's not policy. It scares me, frankly. I must say that I want, like many of us, to give President Obama a very long leash. I really do. He's coming in after a series of terrible administrations. I mean, we used to complain about the Reagan-Bush years. But then with a little bit of Clinton, which kind of turned into a strange thing, we went into some genuinely, mordantly terrifying years. So I want to give him a long leash.

Now this is *pure* conjecture, and I could be wrong, but I also feel this about him. Right at the beginning—when he was saying that the labor movement was a solution not a problem, when he wanted to give money in his stimulus package to the National Endowment for the Arts, and stuff like that—he was going in the direction that I alluded to at the start of our talk. In a generally counterintuitive way, he was suggesting that you don't just change the laws; you also try to make some kind of change in people. That's the statesperson's obligation. They don't want to let ambition go beyond the law and bring the country and the world to its knees and then simply solve the actual problems one by one. They get at the root, change people's minds as well as provide material shelter. But it is true that when someone has these kinds of counter-intuitive convictions he or she is not immediately understood by the people around him or her, because these assumptions *are* counterintuitive.

My most famous example, of course, and I've written about this showing exactly the pages of *Kapital* [Book One] where the instances occur, shows that Engels in fact did not appreciate Marx's counter-intuitive assumptions. While Marx would put Engels's commonsense

explanations in the footnotes, Engels would push them back in the text. Engels explained them in ways that went against what Marx was asking the reader to think, changing their minds, that is to say, almost *against* common sense; he was asking the reader to think. The most famous things, of course, use-value, that value is not just abstracted from exchange. That little paragraph is Engels writing there, that you have to abstract it from exchange. Not Marx! Marx is saying, “Look, *normally* you would think it was only exchange, but, think hard, you working-class reader of mine, because unless you think it this way, you won’t understand that labor power, quantified labor—he’s for it, not against it as most romantic anticapitalists think—is the one thing that when it is consumed, used up, that creates value. You will never be able to understand this if you think value only arises in exchange; so you make these goods and they’re exchanged . . . bourgeois economists think this way.” This is what Marx is saying. Engels doesn’t understand this.

So I would say that all through history, you will find leadership-type people, who have counterintuitive imaginings because that’s how change is made. But they’re not understood by the people around them, even people of good will. Obviously Obama is not a despot—anyway, he’s a young man. He has to work with what he has, and so things are changing and he’s not always able to toe the good middle ground; this also happens with very imaginative counter-intuitive people. So what’s happening is that it’s beginning to look like he’s giving in to the other side. And perhaps he *is* doing so, although I still have hope that this proves to not be the case. He will learn. He’s a very smart man.

Carvalho: He is very intelligent.

Spivak: But this phrase, this “contingency operations” this “overseas” whatever you call it . . .

Carvalho: “Overseas contingency operations.”

Spivak: Yes, there’s your word “overseas” [laughs]—there is the context in which it can be used! So that to me is one of those “givings in.” And it scares me. I think it’s an *awful* phrase, don’t you?

Carvalho: Yeah, I really do. It seems as though there’s a perpetuity, an endlessness to it.

Spivak: Yes!

Carvalho: You know, there can always be a contingency based upon a contingency. And that’s the frightening part.

Spivak: Yes. It’s very secretive. The war on terror had a different kind of thing in it. I mean, it was just *brutally* up front and horrible, and we could suspect that there were further horrors and lies concealed. But I don’t know what to choose . . . this one is kind of . . .

Carvalho: There’s a flexibility to it.

Spivak: Yes—flexible, rational, secretive. I don't want that phrase.

Carvalho: It has an almost universal applicability . . .

Spivak: Contingency is so slippery.

Carvalho: I think so. Speaking of contingency in the Obama administration and our hopes for what we'd like to see come out of that, what are your thoughts on his choosing Larry Summers for an economic advisor? Isn't that indicative of Obama moving toward the other side and pandering to corporate interests? Larry Summers, with his ties to the World Bank, etc.?

Spivak: Well, that's what I was trying to say. I think that perhaps Joseph Stiglitz was perceived as too much, perceived as someone who would seem too far on the left. Because it is also true that he [Obama] has to compromise. And in terms of a compromise, who was available? I mean, he couldn't ask Robert Reich again. Robert Reich would also be perceived as being even further on the left than Joseph Stiglitz. I think when Robert Reich was taken up by Clinton he was a relative unknown. And so people didn't realize just how far on the left he really was. So I have a feeling this is one of those unfortunate *contingencies*, you know. Now, you notice—I am making excuses for him [laughs], because, as I say, I want to give him a long leash. I want him to be able to do *something*. You know, I'm going to have to talk about hope in Britain in a few weeks, and I think I am going to talk a little bit there about doubt being the greatest gift of the European Enlightenment, and if you go further back, Socrates—that's what he was giving to his students.

In this case, I went outside of the Euro-U.S. context because I find the definition of academic freedom becomes easy when you just tie it to the division between intellectual and manual labor or individual rights, and stuff like that. But if you look back into the history of the world and you look at our brother Gramsci—an unbelievably smart man capable of the counter-intuitive—you realize that what the usual debates about academic freedom don't allow us to do is to question an implicit faith in the intellectual as such. So I went beyond. But in the case of this hope thing, I won't go beyond; I'll remain within the European tradition and ask, "What's wrong with doubt?" [laughs]

Carvalho: I think that's a great place to end. Honestly, I don't think we could have planned that any better. Professor Spivak, thank you so much, again, for your time.

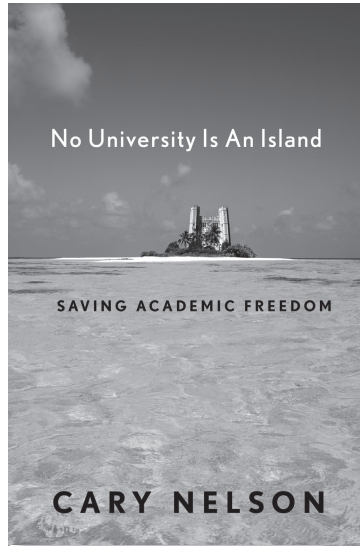
Notes

Special thanks to Professor Spivak's former assistant, Ivonne Rojas, for her help in coordinating this interview.

¹ Interview transcribed by Edward J. Carvalho.

² The Chomsky interview appears in *Works and Days* 51-54, 26-27.1/4 (2008-09): 527-37.

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