
For over a quarter of a century, Gayatri Spivak’s scholarship has remained at the forefront of postcolonial studies, pushing the discipline forward, asking the uncomfortable questions, and engaging in spirited debates. Spivak’s 1988 essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ launched her into academic prominence, and while the essay still is regarded as enormously influential, unfortunately, it often overshadows many of her other important works, which is why her recent book, *An Aesthetic of Education in the Era of Globalization*, published by Harvard University Press, is such a welcome reminder of her varied and important contributions. The 25 essays, spanning nearly an equal number of years, not only reveal Spivak’s unwavering commitment to an ethical, aesthetic engagement with literature (and the world) as a way of fulfilling the humanities’ promise to contest the logic of capital, but also they reveal her enormous capacity as a teacher.

In the preface and introduction, Spivak informs readers that she writes now with a ‘desperate honesty’ and that doubt will be her guiding refrain (x). From the outset, it is clear that she is concerned deeply by ‘this era of the mantra of hope’ and deploys doubt, which she sees as a great inheritance of the Enlightenment, as a way to recuperate the aesthetic (1). This meditation on the aesthetic gives the collection a thematic thread for readers to grasp as they move through the essays. Additionally, running throughout the collection is the frame of the double bind. Spivak instructs readers to keep this structure in mind while engaging with the essays as it reveals the tensions that undergird many of her arguments. Ultimately Spivak’s work attempts to displace globalisation’s hold on information, data, and capital through a ‘productive undoing’ of the legacy of the aesthetic coupled with the structure of the double bind (1). At times this lofty project is undermined by a determined insistence to use the double bind framework even when the fit isn’t comfortable, leading to several unnecessarily opaque moments. The introduction also is mired in a selected history of the double bind that contain large tracts of quoted text, with little exposition, that divert readers from Spivak’s more urgent claims. To be fair, Spivak asks for ‘an interactive reader’ that is willing to take this journey with her in which the ‘reconsiderations and realizations’ of the introduction are not always expounded in the essays themselves (3).

The book is not divided into sections, but there are narratives that reflect a progression of ideas. Spivak’s essays transition fluidly from issues of difference to translation to disciplinary concerns. Throughout these movements, readers will observe Spivak’s willingness to draw from intimate, often private moments to forward a thesis. It is this vulnerability that reveals the stakes of Spivak’s work. The most striking moment of intimacy occurs in the final chapter, ‘Tracing the Skin of Day,’ Spivak takes readers on her journey to view Chittrovanu Mazumdar’s *Nightskin*. We walk with Spivak through the museum, and it is here that Spivak brings her discussion of the aesthetic to a close, remarking how ‘in the visual, the lesson of reading is the toughest’ (507). Spivak offers a poststructural meditation on Mazumdar’s artwork, suggesting that his work ‘protects the trace away from the promise of the sign’ leaving viewers ‘with no guarantees’ (502). This concluding image of the trace in Mazumdar’s artwork seems a fitting way to end the collection as it provides a space for the undoing of the certainty of the logic of global capitalism.

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Many of the essays contain the presence of two voices from Spivak: the one used to write an essay or lecture at a particular moment and the one introducing or commenting on the piece from the present. She uses slightly different dynamics to navigate the two voices in each essay, but too often Spivak’s present day voice directs readers on how a particular selection fits her double bind theme. As such, the relationships between the works take on less of an organic connection and more of a managed feel. One essay, ‘The Double Bind Starts to Kick In,’ stands out as a prominent example of this on-going negotiation. In this essay, Spivak inserts her present-day position ‘as a running parenthetical commentary’ (97). While at times it can be insightful to observe this conversation between Spivak today and an earlier Spivak because it illustrates a development in her thinking, the original iteration of the thought becomes obscured or even dismissed by this extra layer of commentary. Another example of this guiding voice occurs at the beginning of ‘Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching,’ in which Spivak suggests readers ‘read it [the essay] with bemusement […] and a suspicion of golden-ageist culturalisms’ (316). This rhetorical move puts readers in an awkward position as they attempt to engage with her ideas, but then again, Spivak has been putting readers in awkward intellectual situations for years.

The book spans over 500 pages, but it is not the volume of words that leaves a lasting impression, it is often the turn of a phrase or an observation that gives readers pause for thought. For instance, in ‘Reading with Stuart Hall in “Pure” Literary Terms’, Spivak makes the case for literature as the locus of ethics and in two powerful sentences. She suggests that ‘the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible. And literature, as a play of figures, can give us access to the experience’ (352). Embedded in these lines are the roots of the type of aesthetic education that she argues for in the introduction. In other words, this is not a book to tackle all at once; instead, in smaller increments it can serve as a space for contemplation as well as consternation but always with the reminder of the transformative possibilities of an aesthetic education.

Spivak often gets positioned as a cynic, and many times rightfully so, but to view her in this one-dimensional light is unfair and uninformed. A hallmark of her scholarship is her understanding of the implications these theoretical approaches have on the material realities of individuals and groups. That ethical imperative resurfaces time and time again in An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization. By putting these essays side by side, readers can see the importance of Spivak’s work as on-going commitment to ‘an aesthetic education for everyone’ (122). This democratising approach to education is the quiet hope that that this book instills in readers. An Aesthetic of Education in the Era of Globalization takes up the ceaseless struggle to exhibit the necessity of the humanities in an era of globalisation.

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