Forum: Conference Debates

235 Rashmi Bhatnagar
238 Sangeeta Ray
239 Susan Z. Andrade
241 Ellen Rooney
243 Anuradha Dingwaney Needham
244 Srinivas Aravamudan
247 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Appearing occasionally as a feature of the Forum, "Conference Debates" summarizes the discussions that emerged at recent controversial conference sessions. Panel participants are invited to submit brief accounts of their positions in the light of the ensuing conversation. Panels for "Conference Debates" are selected by the *PMLA* Editorial Board.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Influences: Past, Present, Future

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Seminars on Reading Marx

"My undergraduate Indian student says Professor Spivak's work is wholly influenced by Western philosophy," a colleague tells me. "In my place what would you do?" she asks. In what follows I draw on Spivak's seminars on reading Marx. Principally, I argue that Europeanist-Indianist binaries are a failed yet persistent axis on which certain readers of Spivak anchor their interpretations of her work.

Textuality of the Economic

Spivak's seminars on reading Marx, together with published fragments from those seminars, are generally interpreted in terms of her turn to Continental theory. She made a conceptual breakthrough in forcing a reading of Marx through Derrida to open up the textuality of the economic. Simultaneous with that revolutionary idea, Spivak began work on the value form in canon formation for literary study.[1] Influences activated at this site are not marked off from each other. For instance, childhood memories of agitprop theater produced in response to the Bengal famine nourish Spivak's theoretical interest in the relation between literary and economic realms. In an interview Spivak describes a scene where famine marks the limit case of the economic text: "Earliest memories are of the artificial famine created by the British military. . . . [W]hat they (the Indian People's Theatre Association, IPTA) were performing was the famine and how to organize against it" ("Bonding" 16).

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IPTA performances offer an analytic account of the structure of unequal value in colonial Bengal that results in a *man-made famine*, a term used in famine studies to distinguish famine caused by natural disasters from mass starvation resulting from colonial administrative policy.

IPTA's emphasis on cognition and praxis rather than mimetic enchantments may be sedimented in Spivak's approach toward literature as a site for imagining planetarity. Her name for this is "teleopoiesis." Literature transcodes literary value. The fluidity between base and superstructure that characterizes IPTA performances jump-starts significant processes in Spivak's readings of European philosophy, enabling her to accept Derrida's gift of textuality in place of Plato's ideal forms. IPTA also influences the notion proposed in her work that literature signifies through the value differential as much as through its representational powers.

Use Value as Lever to Open the Literary Text

Replacing binary thinking with acknowledgment of hybridity dodges the difficult work of reading Spivak. We need to pay attention to the *particular forms* taken by literary analysis in her writings. Spivak's take on the relations among literature, feminism, and use value generates provocative questions about the task of the literary critic. She deploys the use-value problematic to link the economic base with literature, urging the critic to seek out the shared ways corporations, world banks, native elites, and nation-states map value relations between elite and disposable populations. Moreover, her deployment of use value to lever open the literary text unfolds questions about literature itself: arguably, literature's subject matter is to a very great extent the part of human life where affective labor, unpaid housework, reproductive labor, nurture, romantic love, and care of the elderly and the sick are placed on a conveyor belt of value.

The specific forms of feminist criticism in Spivak's writings are neither oriented toward binaries nor contained in hybrid fusions. Instead, what takes place in her work is an ongoing interrogation of grounding suppositions deployed "to establish the generalized name of 'woman.'" According to Spivak, this generalization subsumes differences between women of the global South and "women of the internationally divided dominant, two collectivities seen as one." Spivak does not relinquish her emphasis on labor and use value. The consistent theme in this work is that research and activism to bring attention to the myriad ways women perform unpaid labor in the everyday, together with struggles against the international division of labor, presuppose a rational universal model for a woman's rights as a human being and as breadwinner for her family. In Spivak's analysis this rational model constitutes "the emergence of the value form, global commensurability in the field of gender," and while she accepts this value form as a necessity, she also notes "the myriad specificities of women's histories" that are "flattened out" to construct the generalized name of woman (*Death* 44–46).

Use value names the specific orientation toward feminism in the Spivak text: Spivak models a practice wherein the reader pays attention to the part of the novel, poem, play, or essay that either excludes from representation or draws on conventions for containing the hyperexploited human subject (generally women of the global South in her texts). She then discusses value codings of labor and gender. Is labor-centered feminism in her work Europeanist or Indianist? Through use value Spivak both draws on British socialist-feminist debates on women's work and follows through on Theodor W. Adorno's argument that the future development of the aesthetic debate requires that aesthetic effects stop appealing to the consciousness of actual workers.

Spivak describes the use-value problematic as a feminism not after but beyond Marx: "I would like to suggest that if the nature and history of alienation, labor, and the production of property are re-examined in terms of women's work and childbirth, it can lead us to a reading of Marx beyond Marx" ("Feminism" 57). As conceptual lever, use value also draws on struggles by and for subaltern women in India and Ban-

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gladesh as well as on Spivak's translations of Mahasweta Devi's fiction and on English-language Indian literatures that examine exploitation of women's labor. The term "beyond" suggests imaginative remaking of the future by feminists in Western and non-Western contexts.

To sum up, Indianist influences are neither assimilated into hybridity nor neatly segregated into opposites; in essays that read Marx through Derrida, they erupt precisely where overt impulses are conspicuously European. Where Spivak's feminist essays distinguish West from global South, a rhetorical strategy is at work to stage discrepancies between Anglo-American and Indian feminisms. Spivak strategically activates confrontation and challenge to direct attention toward subaltern women of the global South.

Spivak addresses Indian feminisms and yet is not Indianist in an exclusionary sense. Readers operating from an unexamined nationalist perspective may face a problem in scanning her writings. Use value in her work critiques discourses of Indian nationalism: for instance, Spivak's work on Devi's short fiction conveys Devi's rage and irony about those—the tribal, the bonded laborer, the wet nurse, the rural minimum-wage worker—who do not achieve political equality when India and Pakistan declare their independence. Thus, use value signifies Spivak's commitment to subaltern India, not the India articulated by its nationalist bourgeoisie.

Why this debate? Binaries and hybridity are inadequate ways of accounting for a critic's genealogy since influences do not function like identifiable essences or in a manner akin to synthesized objects. I do not envision an end to binary thinking concerning Spivak's writings for the simple reason that in deconstruction critique does not erase the object of critique; instead, it fosters vigilance. Deconstructive readers do a double take when they become aware of the presence of a binary as they articulate it. In the split second of awareness in the double take, distributing the critic's work in terms of Europeanist or Indianist binaries or fusions is revealed as shorthand to manage the reader's location in Spivak's work.

Critiquing binary thinking and hybrid accommodation lets us recognize the problems hidden in such shorthand. First, definitions of Indianness continually change: for one generation Indianness is associated with Nehruvian secularism while for another Indianness may be associated with Hindutva nationalist fundamentalism. Who decides the prevailing criteria, and how are they defined? Second, such modes of evaluation restrict critics' freedom and their right to invoke the human beyond such categorizations. Last, situating Spivak's work in European or Indian philosophical traditions converges with our habits of thought fostered by discourses of globalization. In theory these discourses annul distinctions between West and non-West. In practice, however, slogans of global economy and world order are restricted to the realms of information technologies and neoliberal ideologies. In the realm of academic and cultural production, globalization is aligned with nationalism to discipline intellectuals with arbitrary criteria of Indianness.

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Note

1. Spivak has never veered from her assertion, first made in "Scattered Speculations," that "the issue of value surfaces in literary criticism with reference to canon formation" (109).

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