theories and methodologies

What Use Is the Imagination?

JENNY SHARPE

JENNY SHARPE, professor of English, comparative literature, and gender studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, is author of *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (U of Minnesota P, 1993) and *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (U of Minnesota P, 2003). Her work has also appeared in *Signs*, *Atlantic Studies*, *Small Axe*, and *Interventions*, among other journals. Her current book project, "Archive of Affect: A Poetics of Caribbean Cultural Memory," brings affect theory into critical conversation with Caribbean studies in order to establish the value of a literary engagement with historical records, while theorizing a Caribbean poetics of modernity, sacred time, and memory.

IN *DEATH OF A DISCIPLINE*, GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK ATTRIBUTES THE EMERGENCE OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES TO AN INCREASE IN Asian immigration to the United States following Lyndon Johnson's 1965 reform of the Immigration Act (3). I would like to resituate her genealogy of the field in order to consider the "ab-use," or "use from below," of the European Enlightenment she asks us to cultivate in her most recent book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. To perform this move, I will suggest that postcolonial studies began more than one hundred years before the legislation Spivak names in what has become a founding document for the field. I am referring to Thomas Babington Macaulay's well-known 1835 minute on Indian education, which proposed the creation of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (729). The class of Western-educated natives who would serve as liaisons between European colonizers and the millions of people they ruled came to be known in postcolonial studies as *colonial* subjects.[1]

The creation of a new class of natives was an astonishing achievement that could perhaps have been accomplished only through the power of Enlightenment thought. Yet the transmission of knowledge was not as seamless an operation as Macaulay envisioned. Utilitarians feared that an overemphasis on literary studies would feed the propensity in Indians for the imagination to take possession of truth and reason. As Gauri Viswanathan remarks about a curriculum that included both Enlightenment philosophy and Romantic literature, "[T]he fact that educated Indians were reading Goethe in translation caused infinitely greater concern in British administrative circles than their reading the works of political liberals like Locke or Hume, whose appeal to reason and constitutionalism rather than the imagination presumably posed fewer dangers of shaping a unified nationalist sentiment" (157). Who would have thought the imagination could have been considered more dangerous than political philosophy? The Romantic poets did in fact inspire Indian writers to create a new

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nationalist imaginary out of ancient Hindu texts, while Enlightenment philosophy made evident the contradiction between the "democratic promise" and "moral pretentions" of British colonialism (164). Is it possible to argue that Western-educated natives "used from below" their colonial education? The answer is yes, but only if we accept the national bourgeoisie as the subject of Indian history.

My suggestion that postcolonial studies began with Macaulay's minute is not intended to create a myth of origins that predates the field itself. It is, rather, to stage the argument of *An Aesthetic Education*—namely, the necessity for breaking with the colonial episteme of modernity that continues to be repeated and reproduced long after European colonialism has ended. Or, as Spivak more poetically phrases it, "in postcoloniality the past as the unburied dead calls us," except that the colonial past to which she refers does not center on the class mentioned in Macaulay's minute (*Aesthetic Education* 108). She describes British colonialism as having instituted a "fractured modernity" by leaving untouched oppressive feudal practices like bond slavery and the Hindu caste system (110).[2] Her idea of an aesthetic education invokes the European Enlightenment and Romanticism in a manner that sabotages "the repeated construction of the colonial subject" (116).[3]

Spivak belongs to a group of Asian and African intellectuals who came to the United States not as immigrants following the 1965 immigration reform but rather as foreign students in a postwar effort to expand the subject-making project initiated in British India. A United States congressional bill to fund the "promotion of international good will through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and science" was signed into law in 1946 and was expanded considerably, particularly in developing countries, during the 1950s and 1960s. The bill's sponsor, Senator J. William Fulbright, explained that the program, which carried his name, was to have an "impact . . . on the thinking class, on the people who are going to make governments, who are going to lead" (qtd. in Elfin and Montague 59). His words allude to the creation of the *neocolonial* subject: an educated class of natives who would assist in the modernization of their emerging nations. It is of no small significance to my argument that the Fulbright program was started around the same time as the establishment of the Bretton Woods organizations, which Spivak identifies as signaling the end of European colonialism, the beginning of neocolonialism, and the emergence of the United States as a world power (*Aesthetic Education* 98). Fulbright considered a firsthand experience of American culture to be central to what the authors of a 1963 *Newsweek* story on "diplomas and diplomacy" characterize as "our best buy in foreign policy" (Elfin and Montague 59).

The tension between a utilitarian and a cultural approach to education that existed in nineteenth-century British India is evident in the recommendation by the United States assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs that foreign students concentrate on economic and development courses over "poetry and philosophy" (qtd. in Elfin and Montague 59). Gayatri Chakravorty, a beginning graduate student at Cornell University, was among the international students featured in the 1963 *Newsweek* story; however, she pursued a path different from the one charted by the international program. Instead of returning to India to train an elite cosmopolitan class of leaders, she embarked on educating teachers for Indian village schools. Instead of avoiding poetry and philosophy classes, she introduced their lessons into economic and development arguments.

Since literature and philosophy involve fictional, poetic, and theoretical abstractions, the arts and humanities are presumed to be detached from the real world. Spivak draws attention to how global finance, as "a uniform system of exchange," is "the abstract as such,

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the abstract as virtual, pure structure," while culture, being woven into people's lives, has a material and tangible existence (*Aesthetic Education* 105). The electronic transfer of money and conversion of indigenous knowledge into data for patenting explain why she says that the globe exists on our computers or in the logo of the World Bank and is an imaginary place where no one lives (338). Her comparison of the grid of electronic capital to latitude and longitude lines circling the globe suggests a simulated model much like the map that cartographers draw to cover the entire territory of Empire in the Borges story Jean Baudrillard offers as "the finest allegory of simulation." He explains, "[I]t is with the same Imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their simulation models" (1–2). Imperialism can serve as a perfect allegory for the precession of simulacra because the greatest experiments in a violent reshaping of worlds took place in the colonies. The name for this reshaping is modernization, the discursive production of which Spivak asks us to examine rather than accept. And part of the examination involves placing women's lives at the center of modernization and development narratives.

Spivak explains that the point of her well-known 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was to show that the British and upper-caste Hindu reformers who sought to abolish *sati*, the sacrifice of Hindu widows on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands, made no effort to ameliorate the miserable existence of women who survived their husbands because the actual condition of the widows in life was inconsequential to the reform being enacted on their behalf (*Aesthetic Education* 196). She observes that her sentence describing a modernization introduced in the name of native women—"white men are saving brown women from brown men"—"runs like a red thread through today's 'gender and development' programs" ("Can" 48). And she asks us to refuse the lure of its ethical impulse, despite the enthusiastic response to its missionary appeal by generations of European, American, and upper-class native women. *An Aesthetic Education* builds on this earlier argument by showing that the difference between the colonial and neocolonial moments of modernization is that in the latter middle-class diasporic women, who "are indistinguishable" from metropolitan women in the global South, join hands in making subaltern women agents of their own destiny (103).[4]

The renaming of the World Bank's "Women in Development" programs as "Gender and Development" signals to Spivak how upper-class diasporic and native women of the global South serve as models for the gender training of poor rural women. She is particularly critical of the Self-Employed Women's Association for its promotion of microloans as women's liberation. These loans, Spivak argues, bring subaltern women into the circuits of finance capital by recoding feudal fidelity as loyalty to banks while introducing corporate forms of disciplining to ensure repayment. Elite classes of native women unwittingly participate in the formation of a new, globalized subject through a "gender alliance" with subaltern women so that finance capital can move deeper into rural areas, which is the current frontier of globalization (106–07). When diasporic women living in the global North form an alliance with disenfranchised women of the global South based on the idea of a shared native identity, they deploy an epistemology of sameness resembling the universal womanhood that was thoroughly critiqued by United States women of color in the 1980s.

Audre Lorde's declaration that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" was a powerful indictment of liberal feminism's ignoring of differences in class, race, age, sexual orientation, and history. As a corrective to the idea of a universal womanhood, Lorde proposed that knowledge should flow in the reverse direction, from poor women of color on the streets into the univer-

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sity. "Poor women and women of Color," she writes, "*know* there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street" (112; emphasis added). Lorde is pointing to how a feminist metaphor—the figuring of marriage as slavery—enables the idea of a shared gender oppression cutting across the racial divide. If one considers the historical usage of the marital-slavery metaphor, liberal feminism's overlooking of differences in race and class becomes even more evident. The marital-slavery metaphor gained traction with the increased momentum of the antislavery movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when debates on women's rights became linked to those on the human rights of slaves.[5] The idea of a shared oppression enabled middle-class Euro-American women to act as if there were little difference between their own oppression and that of female slaves.

There is another figure in Lorde's statement. Her use of "our" in "our daughters who line 42nd Street" is also a metaphoric use of language, strategically deployed as an expression of solidarity with disenfranchised women of color and the working poor, who existed outside the frame of academic feminist discourse at the time. Although the point of Lorde's statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" was to promote "difference as a crucial strength" rather than something to be overcome or ignored (112), subsequent generations have interpreted her declaration to warrant the abandonment of European theory. Spivak, by contrast, dismantles the master's house from the inside, using what she calls the "beautiful tools" of the European Enlightenment ("Gayatri Spivak"). She argues that the master's tools can be otherwise deployed through ab-use, which she glosses not as abuse but—according to the Latin prefix *ab*, meaning "below," as well as "motion away"—as "agency, point of origin," "supporting," and "the duties of slaves" (*Aesthetic Education* 3–4). Her sabotage "from below" of a knowledge system imposed in the colonies from the top down indicates that Spivak's and Lorde's feminist interventions are not incompatible even if they cannot be reconciled—nor should they be.

The women-of-color "we" in Lorde's essay, when extended to the global South, licenses a reading of decolonized space through a lens of exclusions in the metropolitan center. In the chapter entitled "Who Claims Alterity?" Spivak is critical of the American-born children of South Asian immigrants who appeal to the history of racial exclusion in the United States to claim marginal identities for themselves. She considers this form of self-representation an "appropriation of 'alternative history' or 'histories'" that further marginalizes the women on whose behalf Indian Americans speak (*Aesthetic Education* 57).[6] Spivak alerts us to social, cultural, and historical differences between disenfranchised women in the global North and South, differences that tend to be ignored when we map feminist writings about sexism, racism, and homophobia in the United States onto the rest of the world. "The stories (or histories) of the postcolonial world," she writes, "are not necessarily the same as the stories coming from 'internal colonization,' the way the metropolitan countries discriminate against disenfranchised groups in their midst" (61). In order to attend to the stories and histories of subaltern women in decolonized space, Spivak contends, we have to grapple with the differences in their cultures and everyday lives, and her name for this engagement is "aesthetic education."

Spivak's formulation of an aesthetic education addresses the problem of bringing subaltern people into representation without turning them into objects of knowledge or native-informant-style subjects of oral histories (60). She demands of us an ethical responsibility toward "the other" by resisting a humanist episteme that presupposes the other

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to be identical with the self. At the same time, she cautions against letting our intellectual enterprise be guided by a will to knowledge that equates the ethical with a desire to know. Proposing that the other must be imagined as both self and other, a logical impossibility, she characterizes the aporia or logical impasse in this form of imagining as a double bind that has to be negotiated rather than resolved. Its figure is the "quite-other," which, as a catachresis or imperfect metaphor, draws attention to the absence of a match between who we imagine the other to be and the wholly other that cannot be approximated.

While the term *catachresis* signals an imperfect fit between a figure and what it represents, the role of the imagination is not to close the gap but to draw attention to the inadequacy of representation *in the very need for an appeal to the imagination*. "By definition," writes Spivak, "we cannot—no self can—reach the quite-other. Thus the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible" (97–98). She transforms intellectual practices from a will to knowledge into a willingness to learn, from gathering more data about the other into a suspension of the knowing self. Only then, she argues, will we be able to consider rural women of the global South as capable of "creation and innovation" and "strategy toward us" (31, 60).

On the other end of her teaching, which involves educating teachers for West Bengali village schools, Spivak explains that her desire is "to produce problem solvers rather than solve problems" (135). In other words, she is careful to avoid making herself the agent of social change. Spivak is deeply conscious of her status as an outsider to people for whom she can occupy but two subject positions, one native and the other diasporic: the Bengali Brahmin as activist or the metropolitan Indian as anthropologist. She chooses to position herself as an anthropologist who is "earning trust" and whose fieldwork involves "that patient effort to learn without the goal of transmitting that learning to others" (Sharpe and Spivak 619–20). She allows the two sites of her teaching to interrupt each other but also keeps them apart. Her pedagogical approach to working within the double bind involves maintaining a supplementary relation of two disparate and incompatible spaces of teaching. What has Spivak learned from the ethical experience of engaging this double bind? She says that she used to tell her Columbia University students to unlearn their privilege but has come to realize that her advice was centered on the metropolitan self. Now she tells them "to use their privilege" but not without "learning to learn from below" ("Situating"). Her proposal for training the imagination demands a persistent critique of epistemological presuppositions (what she calls "habit") through a conscious effort to avoid replacing old habits with new ones.

Spivak's deployment of the term *aesthetic education* is intended to demonstrate that poetry and philosophy are about not only truth and beauty but also politics and ethics. Her invoking of the ethical imperative in the aesthetic is a strategic response to what she calls "the trivialization of the humanities and the privatization of the imagination" in the neoliberal university (*Aesthetic Education* xv). Although the Enlightenment is also driven toward science, reason, and information, an aesthetic education does not reconcile the double bind of a marginalization of the humanities by uncritically embracing this drive (11). Nor does it reverse the hierarchy by favoring the humanities over science and technology. Despite her advocacy of literary studies as reading practices that can resist the totalizing logic of globalization, Spivak is not promoting literature as a privileged site of truth and knowledge. To believe that she is would be to lose sight of the imagination as a conduit for an ethical experience of what we cannot know.

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Notes

1. Historically, the term *colonial subjects* referred to European settlers in overseas colonies.

2. Viswanathan indicates how, despite its professed intention of abolishing Hindu caste sentiment, an English-style education had the effect of deepening social stratification in India (151).

3. The title of Spivak's book is a play on Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, just as her earlier book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* alludes to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

4. Spivak describes subalternity as a condition of being "cut-off from lines of social mobility" rather than an identity (*Aesthetic Education* 439).

5. In "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery," Moira Ferguson makes a persuasive case for how Wollstonecraft transformed the preexisting association of marital slavery with harem life by connecting it to the human rights arguments of antislavery debates.

6. As the American-born child of Caribbean immigrants, Lorde shares with Indian Americans an origin in a former colony. At the same time, her identification with disenfranchised women of color in the United States can be traced to a racial history in which West Indian immigrants of her generation were segregated alongside black Americans as well as to the marginalization of black lesbian feminists in mainstream feminism.

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