theories and methodologies

Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

CATHY CARUTH

Aesthetic Education and Globalization

Cathy Caruth: Let me begin by asking you about your forthcoming book, *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*. What does it mean to use "aesthetic education" as a response to problems of globalization? In the preface, you refer to globalization as a movement of data and capital through networks not confined to the nation-state, and you suggest that globalization has "ruined knowledge and reading." This statement, at the beginning of your essay, has to do first of all with knowing and reading and not, for example, with peoples' experiences of the world or of suffering. You thus address first an epistemological and a reading problem and only later democracy and ethics. What does it mean to say that globalization has ruined knowledge and reading, and what does it mean that this is your first concern above all else?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: I teach at a university, and I also teach at elementary schools. The only way I can make the slightest difference—perhaps, perhaps not, for perhaps the remotest future, and perhaps not—is through teaching. Therefore, the only thing that I have a right to be concerned about is knowing and reading. Everybody talks about politics, but sometimes I feel like asking Shakespeare's question: When you call spirits from the vasty deep, will they come? I think that's the problem with literary folks who want to be political. Nobody pays the slightest attention to them. My first concern is in areas where I can have the slightest effect. Mind you, "alleviating suffering" without epistemological preparation does not have the much advertised effect either, but let's not get political.

CC: Is there a difference for you between knowledge and reading?

GCS: Knowledge is upstream from reading because it's the construction of an object to know. In order to know, you have to be trained in how to construct an object of knowledge. With electronic information control, it is as if there were unmediated knowledge. I refer in the preface to colleagues with so-called research projects. Such projects are really only tabulating many different kinds of responses to simple questions. You can have the effect of research very

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.1020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

quickly without the effort of research. And nothing is accidental anymore because the connections are all already made for you. For an aesthetic education, it is better to do as we often used to do, to wander in library stacks, because you would see things that you hadn't thought about before. Or if there are no libraries, no dictionaries even, teach the mind to work out rather than develop consuming habits for the exigent cellphone, but let's not talk about the subaltern.

CC: So aesthetic education at a time of globalization would allow for the accidental in thinking or in reading, both in the sense you've talked about, as wandering through libraries, and also, I assume, through the effort that it takes to read—to read a text or to get involved in another language and try to read with it?

GCS: Who knows? The important thing is to learn to welcome the loss of control. In literary criticism we learn how to learn from the singular and the unverifiable. In addition, there's no guarantee for the readings. And the future is just that: singular, unverifiable, unguaranteed. It is in the aesthetic that one can judge, because there's no guarantee anywhere. The unexpected, the something that will have happened as a result of what we're doing, this thing that can't be caught by even the most insistent and imaginative of programming, that which is unprogrammable, that's what we have lost, haven't we? The future as the contingency of history.

CC: So that is what we can learn through what you call "deep language learning." I am thinking, in this context, of how you talk about the need to change not only what we know but also the way we know. Is it correct to assume, then, that learning the reading process—as an opening to unverifiability, singularity, and surprise—is what you're talking about when you suggest we must change the way we know?

GCS: Partly and formulaically. It is nothing new, but it's also not just conservative and old. It has also become necessary because globalization has introduced a kind of contemporaneity, which is both real and fake. So we must learn to think a simultaneous history rather than modernity and tradition, colonial and postcolonial—reimagining history.

CC: What do you mean by "contemporaneity"?

GCS: It results from the networks established by capitalist globalization. The network of capital, the abstract as such, which is outside nation-states and histories of development and histories of imperialism and civilizing missions, moves always with the same kind of value, grinding everything into commensurability. It's the same capital everywhere, right? To the extent that the electronic is creating contemporaneity, and more so when no human being is involved, data and capital are moving. At the same time, the human has not gone away, and I don't mean to be a humanist by this. I'm just talking about the fact that, generally speaking, human beings use electronics rather than only being staged by the electronic. The pace that would allow us to operate with that depth of knowing has become an inconvenience for this contemporaneity, and that's the double bind. The people who can think about this are the humanities folks, although they don't, scared of not getting money.

CC: The space for thinking about it is itself threatened?

GCS: Not just threatened but also demolished, by our lack of unified resistance. We ourselves feel that to be really modern we ought to say, Hey, look, we are moving at the same speed.

Fractured Reason

CC: But surely your use of the phrase "aesthetic education" does not suggest that we return to a time before globalization or, specifically, to Schiller, from whom you take the phrase. In fact, you speak of sabotaging Schiller, in part through a reading of Kant. What do you mean by this?

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GCS: Kant and Marx are counterintuitive thinkers. People turn them all the time into garden-variety thinkers. You can never simply "go back" to Kant. You have to know how to read him. And you learn how to read him by reading him, and you're never sure that you have learned. What was different about Kant was that he was almost at the mercy of the counterintuitive power of his thinking. For example, he describes philosophizing on the analogies of understanding as it deals with the manifold of the senses, that being how we access pure reason—fantastic stuff. But then he's unable to acknowledge that fully because he cannot acknowledge that, by this reckoning, reason is fractured. It's a site of struggle in Kant's writing because he's more powerful in his counterintuitiveness than others, than himself.

CC: So how does your reading of Kant contribute to your thinking of aesthetic education? What do you mean by "aesthetic"?

GCS: I don't really deal with Kant's idea of the aesthetic. For me neither the *Critique of Practical Reason* nor the third *Critique*, which is a superb piece of writing, is where I find the scary mystery of Kant. That's in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. My interest is in the analogies of understanding, which is where I find the austerity of Kant's thinking and his ways of dealing with it.

What I find in the analogies of understanding with indirect access to pure reason is a blow-by-blow description of why there has to be philosophy, because otherwise experience would be impossible. No guarantees, because you can't produce any evidence of its grounds. You have to have a transcendental deduction.

There is a chapter on phenomenon and noumenon in *Pure Reason* right at the end of the huge middle section. Kant introduces an unusually metaphoric description, and you ask yourself, why did the language change like this? He describes what he's been doing all this time, saying we have been touring this area with these mountains and, in the middle of it all, this little lake to which we give the nice name "Truth." That's a description of everything that's been happening, the analogies of understanding and everything else in the *Critique of Pure Reason*? And he's then going to talk about the impossibility of the noumenon and the impossibility of the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon. You go to Kant manuals, you'll see that people accept the distinction minus the figuration.

Thus, we miss the staging of the text: that the philosophical subject of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is caught in its own machine and has to go toward Kant's other books in the transcendental system to show what it means to be *as if* not caught in the machine. To produce judgment without any objective correlative of the concept. To produce arguments from freedom by misrepresenting, in a programmatic way, what pure reason would simply call indefinite. To *have* to posit a final cause. And so on. This is amazing. This is why *Pure Reason* is more interesting.

Communicating with the Stars

CC: What happens when we shift to Schiller, who is a reader of Kant?

GCS: Paul de Man was correct when he said that Schiller turned Kant into a chiasmus.

CC: And the asymmetries are all made into symmetries.

GCS: The destructive potential of the asymmetrical, the force resident in a structure that is askew, is taken away and made into a balance. I have been recently involved in a group interested in preservation, in preserving cultural heritage in places like Kosovo, for example. Now these folks in fact make almost exactly this move, where the great and jagged promontories and relief maps of whatever can be called culture are turned into a balance. And so these folks say to me, Well, you know, you read texts as if they were material, and we read material as if it were texts. And I say, No. Don't iron out the asymmetry for the sake of

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superficial symmetry. We must all use verbal semiotic conventions agentially, not visual ones. The relationship between the verbal and the visual is not a chiasmus. One must learn languages. I'm interested in Schiller because, monolingual in the great European languages, Schiller made a seductive, unintended mistake on behalf of the convenience of the chiasmus.

CC: So why turn to Schiller? The aesthetic, as you said, does not come out of Kant's third *Critique*; the phrase "aesthetic education" is, rather, taken from Schiller, and, as you just explained, when Schiller reads Kant he symmetricalizes, makes things into chiasmuses, into binaries that work together and become resolved into totalities. Maybe you could explain why you nonetheless turn to Schiller to speak of the aesthetic and what interests you there. In other words, why pass through the aesthetic at all, in view of what we're given by Kant, and what do you mean by "aesthetic"?

GCS: Because we usually make the same kind of mistake as Schiller, only we are monolingual in different sectors. I'm not interested in the aesthetic as it is given by Kant. It is wonderful, don't get me wrong, but I am interested in the fact that Schiller, in his vulgar strength, is exactly the kind of thing that, for educated, good-hearted folks of a certain sort—and not just "Eurocentric" folks, that's a stupid word, but, you know, people who do theory at elite universities all over the world—represents that strong, wonderful voice of something that is very loosely called the Enlightenment. So to use the Enlightenment in a certain way is more appropriate to the current conjuncture than harnessing Kant.

CC: As de Man said, "We are all Schillerians." It seems that the interest of Schiller for you is also, in particular, that he is interested in education.

GCS: Upstream from content. My formula is "training the imagination for epistemological performance."

CC: So aesthetic education involves the imagination, but you also talk about deep language learning and literary learning, and you focus on language specifically. And so is that training of the imagination something that needs to pass through language? Because one of the critiques that de Man made of the use of the word "aesthetic" in the context of reading texts after Schiller was the way it became associated with perception or phenomenality, whereas language challenged that model for texts.

GCS: Yes. That's the legacy of the eighteenth century, Martha Nussbaum et al. The European eighteenth century did not finally work in the interest of a just world. I'm not interested in taking direction from the Schillerian text. I'm interested in saying, Look where he went wrong and we must too. I follow de Man carefully because I think he was right, and insofar as I have to say that, I bring in a little bit of Kant, but one cannot act out the Kantian counterintuitive. If you think that aesthetic education is for the imagination to be trained for epistemological performance, in order to judge between issues and people in a democracy you need to be able to do this epistemological construction rather than be taken in by the hyperreal as if it were unmediated. W. E. B. DuBois already teaches about this.

Yesterday at the UN, at the Committee on the Status of Women, and with the young democratic socialists, I heard people going on about how what we really need to focus on is food, shelter, clothing, and education as a vocational need. DuBois writes that "the Negro" needs food, shelter, and clothing, but at the same time he needs to learn how to communicate with the stars. Now, that extremely metaphoric phrase—a completed education as "communicating with the stars"—has something like a relationship with what I'm calling aesthetic education. It is such an epistemological transformation that can begin to imagine that democratic judgment is not identical with justified self-interest in being oppressed, which is the focus of human rights. To foster such democratic judgment—rather than the epistemological parlor game

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of "global literacy"—is also the focus of folks in the humanities.

CC: This reminds me of something you said years ago at a conference in response to a paper in which the presenter argued that a literary tradition of dying gay men seemed to support the unfortunate view of gay men, during the AIDS era, as determined for death, as having a kind of death drive. You suggested that in literature—as in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the death drive is introduced—we cannot know for sure what the referent of "death" is. And that while a useful "short-term" politics may arise out of a referential reading, such a reading might not serve a "long-term" politics. Is this perhaps also what a "sabotaged" aesthetic education might teach us?

GCS: Remember that I do not think that aesthetic education necessarily leads to either political engagement or good politics. It is simply that without aesthetic education, in my sense, without training the imagination for epistemological performance, there is only stupid politics. Not everybody has to have their imaginations trained by way of an institutional humanities education, but I agree with Longinus's argument that some folks can indeed access the sublime and others have to be trained in it.

You can see people who know that in order to decide, one must make a mistake, as it were. This is not Kant, but it's of the same genre. Short-term politics is when you must pass the better law knowing that a law in itself is nothing. On the other hand, you can think of the law as not simply an instrument of enforcement as it is today but as something the possibility of which can be internalized in some way. That's part of the aesthetic education, isn't it? For that you can't just do the short-term politics of passing good laws or fighting for national liberation because it's after the passing of the good law that the problems begin, because there is no practice of freedom under colonial law. I lay much greater stress now on epistemological preparation than on learning to wait for the ethical.

First-Language Learning and Comparative Literature

CC: How is your notion of training for epistemological performance linked to the concrete activity of teaching that you do in the schools in Bengal?

GCS: It's the same kind of thing that I do at Columbia, except at Columbia I do it at the top, and in my schools I do it at the bottom. I want to understand the mechanics of why the problems of the poor must be solved by good rich people. The good rich people are obliged to take money from bad rich people, and much of the money goes back to the bad rich people. The beggars receive some material help but remain beggars. I am interested in producing problem solvers rather than solving problems. That's the epistemological-performance training. I must teach with care at places that "produce the good rich people," like Columbia University, and the places that produce the beggars, these seven unnamed schools in the bottom-feeding sector of Birbhum. I'm interested in supplementing vanguardism, because the vanguard is necessary. Social justice is for everyone, not just theoretically clean water and any quality education; this is Gramsci and DuBois. And I realize talking to you that this is what Derrida was saying back in GREPH [Groupe de Recherche en Épistémologie Politique et Historique], that philosophical education should not be denied the high school student. It shouldn't become a specialty. The work at Columbia and the work in the schools—both teacher training—really interinanimate each other.

CC: For that one must, presumably, train in "deep language learning." Is this an important task for everyone who would participate in this new aesthetic education?

GCS: I think not everybody has to do this. It's the extreme. It takes a huge amount of time

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