Close Reading

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

Many of us say with a smug surprise: "the Law is founded on its own transgressions." This may be a convenient aphorism that carries within it the memory—in most cases a textual memory not necessarily elaborated by the user—of Lacan's explanations of the Law of the Father, or of Derrida's meditations on perjury, or, rather, *par-jure* because ultimately Derrida carefully stopped short at the irreducibility of idioms, the limits of the translatability of philosophies.

The textual memory of a coterie is not enough. What specific law are we speaking of here? And which transgression in what mode of which law is it that conditions the Law? We continue to speak of *the* Law and *the* State while what is increasingly called the prison-industrial complex thrives on consequences of assumptions that transgressions are exceptions to the social normality both represented and protected by the law. That the law is founded on the possibility of its transgression is only trivially true. The law's singularity, by which I mean its repeatable difference, escapes each time, in both more hierarchical (Europe and its former colonies) and more adversarial (Britain and its former colonies) legal traditions.

Irreducible idiom, singularity on the move. Let us hold these thoughts in mind as we approach the question of the translation of human rights. Let us also remember that rights are not laws. Even a seeming description and tabulation of natural law as a declaration of human rights must inevitably and can only be an instrument productive of public-interest litigations of various sorts and levels—embracing the local and the global in the name of the universal. It would be more difficult to say that rights are conditioned by the possibility of their transgressions. It is because Law in general has metaphysical foundations that we can think transgression in general on its behalf. This line comes down from the idea of transcendental deductions in Kant (1724–1804) and its different "others," including not only Spinoza (1632–77) and Locke (1632–1704) but also Derrida. The concept of rights, aligned as it is to both the human and nature, is not directly metaphysical in the same way. Its transgression can be named as an antonym—responsibility.

My topic today is translation, so I will not linger here.

At the end of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which is, unlike the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, formally and legally binding, the following words appear: "The present Covenant, of which the Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish texts are equally authentic, shall be deposited in the archives of the United Nations." These are legal words, establishing neutrality. Étienne Balibar writes of a question

> which concerns the "neutrality" of the public space and the presence at its heart of marks

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> of identity, and thus marks of social, cultural, and more fundamentally anthropological difference. . . . [A]llegedly self-evident and natural thresholds turn out upon examination to be wholly conventional, shot through with strategies and norms, with evolving relations of forces among groups, subjectivities, and powers. . . . (356–57)

If we follow the implications of Balibar's observations, we will see that as citizens we must make visible the question of power necessarily covered over by the requirements of the law without thereby annulling the legal statement. In the case of the covenant, this will bring us to the question of translation as question of power. Even if translations self-produce on the neuromachine, there is never no original. "Original" is the name of a relation to a language when another language is also in view. We begin to ask, how do these languages stack up in the power play? and we realize that, unless we enter the text of the innumerable wars of maneuver that form the World Wide Web, in this case with a woof of thirty to forty years—the covenant was adopted in 1966 and "entered into force" in 1976—we cannot begin to ask the question of origin here. The World Wide Web gives a simulacrum of knowledge, an impoverished translation that flattens the relief map of power into a level playing field. The impartial Internet offers the alphabetically arranged information that Afghanistan ratified the covenant on 24 Jan 1983 and Zimbabwe on 13 May 1991.

Each one of these dates is a narrative of power that those members of the MLA who can think that the law is conditioned by its own transgression can piece together. The character of the separation of intellectual labor from knowledge management in general is so established in the network society that these stunning exercises make no impact outside the charmed circle of their readers. They make for serious and good reading. But that genre of writing contains, somewhere in its constative glamour, the idea that it makes a performative difference. We used to say that much of the capital invested by transnational agencies returned to them. That is still true. But today that sort of inner-circle circulation, displaced into another sphere, is unfortunately ensured of varieties of intellectual labor as well.

The only hope seems to lie in what Derrida wrote the year after the international covenant: "thought is here for us a perfectly neutral name, a textual blank [*un blanc textuel*], a necessarily indeterminate index of a future epoch of differance."[1] Derrida is intertextual with Mallarmé here; he is working on "The Double Session" at this time.

Anyone who has read Mallarmé with care knows the magical power signaled by the word *blanc* in his text. It is not just whiteness, not just blankness. It may be a hypertextual imagining. It is something like a representation of something like what we would today call a "link," opening, however, onto a possibility not yet programmed.

Such, thought Derrida, is the responsibility of thinking, and never revised that position. Thinking is a link to something that may turn up for a reader the writer cannot necessarily imagine. This relation, described as a textual *blanc*, is inconceivable when translatability is at once fully asserted and fully denied by that declaration: "The present Covenant, of which the Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish texts are equally authentic, shall be deposited in the archives of the United Nations." Archive sickness. The uniformity and stasis of death. Not the force field of power that is life but life-death.[2]

But I have been speaking so far of what is, nominally at least, *legally* binding: the covenant. "Cultural rights" are included here, and we must consider them in any extended meditation. For now let me say that in terms of the covenant, the law's dependence on transgression might apply. But what good would that do? The covenant cannot be cited if there is not a prior violation—the now-tired argument about performative contradiction, which by itself does nothing.

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The real question for us today is, surely, what is it to violate a right? You have taken away something to which I have a right—or you are not allowing me to exercise a right. It is your responsibility to protect my rights. When the you was the state—an abstraction—this language could be thought. The bourgeois state—the ideal you of the citizen—was a shifter. In principle, at least, the state's responsibility was a structural guarantee. In the case of the absolutist state, the sovereign—a concrete abstraction and an ipseity—does not harbor the language of rights. At best the situation there could be put thus: I protect you, to a certain degree, because you belong to me, and that is my responsibility—the other side of the fact that I alone have rights. The human rights actors, from large to small, have a greater similarity to the latter situation than to the former. Yet, because the human rights movement emerged within the former, we understand its activities within the discourse of a utopian, social-democratic structure dispensing welfare in the generic sense. This seems hardly to matter when the task at hand is disaster management. And mostly the examples offered are testaments to the ever-wakeful benevolence of the sovereign as structure. Let us leave the many things that need to be said here for lack of time. This session is devoted to language rights and cultural rights—their culture, their language. And it is in the area of those rights that the discursive representation of the democratic structure of the displaced sovereign begins to falter.

Language and culture: we might as well say gender and education, gender and religion. What is it to have rights here? I will repeat an argument I have made often: to have rights here is to attempt to proclaim that a language or a culture, whatever that might be, is not in the place of the original. "Original" is the name of a relation to a language when another language is also in view.

But, and again a point I have made before, you cannot know you are not the "original" unless translation and translatability have been broached. Although language is in culture and culture in language, we must keep language and culture separate here. I want to quote two very dissimilar passages and discuss the situation of language rights. Next I will discuss cultural rights briefly.

The first passage is from *Towards a New Beginning: A Foundational Report for a Strategy to Revitalize First Nation, Inuit and Métis Languages and Cultures—Report to the Minister of Canadian Heritage by the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, June 2005*:

> First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages and philosophies are unique in Canada. And because of this, we do not always see things in the same way as do other Canadians. Nor should we be expected to. The reasons for our different approaches to the issues that have arisen in our relationship with other Canadians and with Canadian governments are rooted in the different philosophies reflected by our distinctive languages and cultures. To recall the words of the Assembly of First Nations, our ancestral languages are the key to our identities and cultures, for each of our languages tell[s] us who we are and where we came from.
>
> First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples rarely see the past in the same way as do other Canadians. The differences in outlook between the First Peoples of Canada and other Canadians have been noted again and again in report after report. (24)

The next quotation is from Samuel Huntington's "Deconstructing America," a chapter in his book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*:

> In one 1997 poll in Orange County, 83 percent of Hispanic parents "said they wanted their children to be taught in English as soon as they started school." In a different October 1997 *Los Angeles Times* poll, 84 percent of California Hispanics said they favored limiting bilingual education. Alarmed by these figures, Hispanic politicians and leaders of

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> Hispanic organizations duplicated their efforts against the Civil Rights Initiative and launched a massive campaign to convince Hispanics to oppose the bilingual education initiative. . . . The[se] deconstructionist challenges to the Creed,[3] the primacy of English, and the core culture were overwhelmingly opposed by the American public. (170, 176)

The Canadian Aborigines prove Huntington's point. They are "deconstructionists," by which Huntington means those who promote "programs to enhance the status and influence of subnational racial, ethnic, and cultural groups" (142). Indeed, the Canadians are unhappy even with the unitary name *Aboriginal* (7). On the level playing field of the law, both the Canadians and the Hispanics in the United States are speaking of minority language rights. That uniformity in law should be protected. As readers, however, we look at the two situations and also see a difference. Huntington's complaint in the book, grasped in the passage quoted, is that the civil rights laws, too idealistically true to the "American Creed," opened the door for Hispanic politicians and other politicians of color to turn the demand for civil and political equality into its opposite: special demands through voting blocs for cultural difference. His implicit suggestion is that it was better when people of color were kept in their place: "'Becoming white' and 'Anglo-conformity' were the ways in which immigrants, blacks, and others made themselves Americans" (145). Louis Althusser taught us in 1965 that a text can answer a question that it cannot itself formulate. That insight applies not only to great texts. The question Huntington's text answers is, what would make the underclass Hispanics ("the American public," for Huntington, because greater in number than the "elitists" who support affirmative action) want a bilingual education? Assuming that his statistics are correct, the answer would be—laws and a dominant episteme that allow class mobility—in other words, equal opportunity. Huntington cannot think class. "[I]nterest groups and nonelected governmental elites have promoted racial preferences, affirmative action, and minority language and cultural maintenance programs, which violate the American Creed and serve the interests of blacks and nonwhite immigrant groups" (313). This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of the issue. I will simply repeat what I have said before: class mobility into the public sphere allows us to museumize and curricularize language and culture—change the enforced bilingual performative into a class-enriched performance that can be accessed at will.

This argument does not apply to the Canadian First People, because of the world-historical place of their language. Our task is to preserve the linguistic diversity of the world. How can that be advanced through the language of rights? An interested question.

I wrote some years ago of "the passage, in migration, from *ethnos* to *ethnikos*—from being home to being a resident alien" ("Moving Devi" 121). The allochthonous citizen is in this pass as well, as are, paradoxically, the First Nations, recoded in their own minds, as minorities, as the different. Today I would propose that, even as the humanities must take this passage from *ethnos* to *ethnikos* into account, it must take the question of endangered languages outside the question of identity, precisely because the ethnos can afford to be generous with its dominant language.

Towards a New Beginning shows us again and again that the idea of language rights is dependent on the history of the state and on the United Nations to set that history right. Huntington's example concerns United States domestic law, the national episteme. It seems appropriate that the United Nations think of language rights as a shoring up of cultural identity through nurturing of language. The institution of tertiary education here helps the United Nations by taking a measured distance from it, for the real problem with endangered languages is the history of the world. I warn you that I am learning the steps of thinking

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about these distinctions as I profit from my association with Elsa Stamatopoulou, chief of the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations.

As a comparativist, I feel that one does not learn languages to bolster identity. The opposite, if anything—one ventures out to touch the other. Curiously enough, the Canadian First Nations, Inuit, and Métis say that their elders offer this lesson—the first lesson of responsibility. Paradoxically, even as the United Nations committee labors mightily to preserve the people's ability to say so, the institution must make it possible for *other* people to learn their languages, and not only for ethnographic purposes. The purposes, if you like, of close reading. What is it to read closely the riches of orature?

I will repeat here the commonsense description of learning the first language that I often use: it will repeat what we know. Language is there because we want to touch another. The infant invents a language. The parents learn it. By way of this transaction, the infant enters a linguistic system that has a history before its birth and will continue to have a history after its death. Yet the adult this infant becomes will think of this language as his or her most intimate possession, and will mark it in a way, however small, that will be incorporated into his or her impersonal history. Only the first language is learned this way. It activates a mechanism once in a lifetime.[4]

If we describe this invention in psychoanalytic terms, as did Melanie Klein, we say that this coming into being is also a making up of an ethical semiosis that will be lifelong. When we learn a language in literary depth, we reproduce a simulacrum of this inventive psychologic. Marx catches it in his concept-metaphor for revolution as language learning. The revolutionary "makes the spirit of the new language his own and produces in it freely only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when in it he forgets the language rooted in him."[5]

Working with Stamatopoulou's materials is starting to show me how the question of language rights must be wrenched out of its identity frame—a detritus of colonial history—to fight a different fight in the schools.

I have said the following a number of times recently—once at Trondheim, at a globalization conference, once at our own Translation Conference at Columbia, and once at an international civil society meeting: "Globalization is a means, not an end. Even good globalization requires uniformity and must therefore destroy linguistic and cultural specificity. This damages human life and makes globalization unsustainable in terms of people."

In Trondheim, the musicians took it to heart. In New York, a former student, an academic intellectual, merely mistook it for a reiteration of the descriptive counter-globalization I have called "permanent parabasis," taking the term from Attic comedy via Friedrich Schlegel and Paul de Man. On the last occasion, Stamatopoulou asked me if she could quote it, than which there is no higher praise. We are thinking now about a sustained institutional practice of diversified language learning in imaginative depth. This is not anthropology, which is still social science.

A knowledge-management model will never allow us to rethink the teaching and learning of languages in this way. Amit Bhaduri makes the cogent remark that in the liberalized state, if the model is the market and the ordering principle is management, there will never be a "demand" for drinking water for the poor. The business of providing for the poor is then in the hands of the benevolent sovereign as structure, the economic textuality of which has been abundantly dismantled by heads better than mine.

Let us consider the analogy with knowledge management. I recently heard an eloquent and powerful diasporic female knowledge-management maven declaim, "You don't *need* specificity if you empower the grass roots." The disciplinary history

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that brings us into an analogy with corporate practice is parallel to the political history that brings statecraft into an analogy with corporate practice. That is the shared provenance of knowledge (as) management.

We must remember that economic history is also the history of capital. I have cited Marx many times in this connection. "The nature of capital presupposes that it travels through the different phases of circulation not as it does in the idea-representation, where one concept turns into the other at the speed of thought, in no time, but rather as situations which are separated in terms of time."[6]

With the silicon chip, the barrier is removed. Capital can now move at the speed of thought. World trade still needed the interruptions. And finance capital itself carries a resident contradiction. It can neither create a single currency nor not move toward a single *system* of exchange. Hence a globalization that is still tied to a differentiated world, yet committed to a movement toward uniformity. This is contemporary capitalist globalization. This does bring with it an immense degree of convenience in undertaking global projects, good and bad. But, because of its requirements for uniformity—even though it needs nation-state currency differentiation—it must destroy linguistic and cultural variety. Bad globalization is what it is. If, however, we want to conserve the results of what we might call good projects within bad globalization, we must obstinately insist on depth-teaching of languages, outside mere preservation. If language learning is an instrument, it is one that reminds us that globalization, outside the frenzy of the capitalist, is an instrument, not an end. Thus, the digitalization of all disciplines is also an instrument. The end is the responsibility to the *blanc textuel*.

Our conference title is "Human Rights and the Humanities." In the humanities disciplines, it is as if the world's languages, most especially the endangered ones, claim a right to be taught, in depth. I repeat, this is different from saying that you get ethical practice if you learn to read the text of the other, though I hold on to that as well.

Cultural rights are a mixed bag. It extends from dropping peyote on the job to, of course, the infamous *hijab* and beyond. Here access to class mobility allows members of a "culture" to museumize, to curricularize. For the paradox of the dominant culture is that it translates itself even as it appropriates the emergent, redoes the archaic. This is what Barthes would call the writerly march of cultural change, which no reader can capture without cutting off a piece.

Recently I heard a taciturn female frequenter of the World Economic Forum suggest that the best way to end violence against women was to bring the world's nation-states into competition. Arrange them in tiers in terms of women's-rights-against-violence compliance and make them compete for aid and trade status. Here the benevolent sovereign is in loco parentis. There is already such a tier system, instituted around the trafficking of women, by the United States Department of Justice. I will not discuss the politics of such rankings. I will simply say that such curious undertakings assume that the culture of competition, today the global dominant, is simply human nature. As of this writing, I am rereading Edmund Husserl's 1935 Vienna lecture "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity," where "European humanity" is assumed to be the only culture with a telos. Many have thought that it is the peculiar built-in teleology of the self-determination of capital that creates the simulacrum of such a teleology. Transferred into a psychology, it is the culture of competition—it is not the essence of human nature. When my friend Lawrence Venuti suggests that the right to translate is the right to interpret, by which he seems to mean the right to interfere, I say no. Knowing that one will have interpreted/interfered, one must answer the responsibility to the original. This is surely not to write off interpretation!

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In the same spirit, because one will have competed, the idea is to build checks and balances against the unbridled spirit of competition. This is not to write off competition but (a) not to imagine it is human nature and (b) not to endorse a society where the morning newspaper reports that the chief executives make four hundred times the pay of workers.

Because the question of cultural rights is untheorizable as one thing, I will take the liberty of taking shelter in a self-citation:

> Agency presumes collectivity, which is where a group acts by synecdoche: the part that seems to agree is taken to stand for the whole. I put aside the surplus of my subjectivity and metonymize myself, count myself as the part by which I am connected to the particular predicament so that I can claim collectivity, and engage in action validated by that very collective. . . . [W]hen [persons are] not publicly empowered to put aside difference and self-synecdochize to form collectivity, the group will take difference itself as its synecdochic element. Difference slides into "culture," often indistinguishable from "religion." And then the institution that provides agency is reproductive heteronormativity (RHN). It is the broadest and oldest global institution.
>
> ("Scattered Speculations")

This is most frequently the terrain of cultural rights.

Within these assumptions, I will place two examples as my last movement.

My first example is Kabita Chakma, a case study in *Internal Displacement in South Asia* (Guhathakurta and Begum 184–85). In this activist book, she comes through as grassroots. She is an activist person of great charm, a young woman with the perfume of university demonstrations still on her, modestly at ease in upper-middle-class Bangladesh, reciting her elegant lyrics, which she composes in her mother tongue and explains in Bengali. The Chakmas are hill people, with an enlightened aristocracy, paradoxically still ostracized and oppressed—a complex situation, where the question of cultural rights must be understood with the same textual savvy that I spoke of in the context of the international covenant. For our purposes here, I ask you to hold on to the Chakmas as oppressed by the Bengali dominant.

I cross the border now to northeastern India. There, as a result of sustained cultural imperialism by the Bengalis, the autochthonous tribals drove out the long-resident Bengalis after independence. How are we going to work out the status of language and culture here? Everything is easier in black and white.

I had thought I would compose this talk around the Bengali translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the way, I realized that I couldn't do an identity trip on Bengali. My tribal students in West Bengal got in the way. I don't know when they "lost their language." One group, the Sabars, have no concept of rights at all—they are merely election fodder. The other, the Dhekaros, are litigious in a desultory way, but not unacquainted with generally progressivist party rhetoric. My connection with them is through Bengali, which is their language and is not. The newish neighboring state of Jharkhand belongs to the large and progressive tribal group called the Santals. The state language there is Olchiki, in which new publication is proliferating. This is surely a victory, though the state pays no attention to the destruction of paleolithic cave paintings by mining interests. But, once again, the Bengali dominant in the area is unaffected by these developments, and the question of cultural rights, too easily won, has become irrelevant. The textuality of the situation becomes more complicated by the fact that the Hindi dominant starts a few hundred miles to the west. And Hindi is the national language.

So I won't make the obvious point after all. All the translations of the UDHR into non-European languages are symbolic gestures of equality that a comparativist teaching the humanities finds useless for explanation. No one who doesn't know a hegemonic Euro-

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pean language will have any idea what is going on in these so-called translations. At a certain point in our careers, we knew that if we went to the India Office Library in London, we would surely turn up some bit of manuscript that could turn into a fine colonial-discourse argument. Translation politics have become something like that. The fact that English is the language of power, that the ones who administer human rights may appreciate the unreal Bengali and that the beneficiaries never will, that there are often embarrassing malapropisms in the UDHR translation can be too easily proved. "Race, color, sex" in article 2 creates a problem. "Privacy" in article 12 is hopeless. "Everyone who works" in article 23(3) cannot take the easy translation because the translator is nervous about departing from the English syntax (there is an "original" after all). "Community" proves untranslatable in 27 and 29, especially "cultural life of the community." These are superficial remarks. There are, of course, much deeper problems here. Yet the document serves its purpose as a point of reference to use against oppression. I am not impractical. Yet something remains. Many in this room have heard me say many times that the UDHR should be used not only to solve the problems of the poor but also to mark its own distance from an impossible "everyone or anyone" being able to declare the rights of others, what the declaration itself does. The marking of that distance is the MLA's work.

It is not necessary to rehearse this yet once again. But it is appropriate, in context, to cite again the banal equalizing gesture that occludes the question of power and declares an equivalence by way of the statistics of languages into a commonality in *Verständigung* (Habermas 18–34 and passim). By implication, this promises a transparent intertranslatability of all the world's languages:

> Native Name
> English
>
> Total Speakers
> 322,000,000 (1995)
>
> Usage by Country
> Europe—
> Official Language: Gibraltar, Ireland, Malta, United Kingdom
>
> Asia—
> Official Language: India, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore
>
> Africa—
> Official Language: Botswana, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia
>
> Central and South America—
> Official Language: Anguilla, Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Br. Virgin Isl.s, Dominica, Falklands, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, Puerto Rico, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Trinidad & Tobago, Turks & Caicos Islands, US Virgin Islands
>
> North America—
> Official Language: Canada, USA
>
> Oceania—
> Official Language: American Samoa, Australia, Belau, Cook Islands, Fiji, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Norfolk Islands, Northern Mariannas, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Western Samoa.
>
> Background
> It belongs to the Indo-European family, Germanic group, West Germanic subgroup and is the official language of over 1.7 billion people. Home speakers are over 330 million. As regards the evolution of the English language, three main phases can be distinguished. From the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., the Celtics are believed to have lived in the place where we now call Britain. Britain first appeared in the historical records as Julius Caesar campaigned there in 55–54 B.C. Britain was conquered in 43 A.D. and remained under the

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Roman occupation until 410 A.D. Then came from the European Continent the Germanic tribes, who spoke the languages belonging to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. First the Jutes from Jutland (present-day Denmark) in the 3rd century A.D., then in the 5th century, the Saxons from Friesland, Frisian Islands and north-west Germany, finally the Angles, from present-day Schleswig-Holstein (a German Land) who settled north of the Thames. The words "England" and "English," come from the word, "Angles." During the Old English period of 450–1,100 A.D. (first phase), Britain experienced the spread of Christianity, and, from the 8th century, the invasion and occupation by the Vikings, called the "Danes." The most important event of the second phase, the Middle English period (1100–1500 A.D.) was the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Normans were the North Men, meaning the Vikings from Scandinavia, settled in the Normandy region of France from the 9th century, who had assimilated themselves to the French language and culture. English was much influenced by French during this time. During the third phase, the Modern English period (1500 onwards), English spread to the world as the British Empire colonised many lands. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) lived in this period, and in 1755 Samuel Johnson completed "A Dictionary of the English Language" with about 40,000 entries, which contributed to the standardisation of the English language. The English language which spread to the world created many of its variants, the most prominent of which is American English. The American English writing system is said to owe much to Noah Webster's "An American Dictionary of the English Language" which was completed in 1828. Other important varieties include Indian English, Australian English, and many English-based Creoles and Pidgins.

[Native Name
Bengali]

Total Speakers
196,000,000 (1995)

Usage by Country
Official Language: Bangladesh, West Bengal/India

Background
It belongs to the Indo-European family, Indic group, and is spoken by over 120 million people in Bangladesh and over 68 million in India, in the province known as West Bengal. The number of speakers exceeds 190 million including second language users. Only five other languages in the world can claim as many as 190 million speakers. Modern Bengali has two literary styles. One is called "Sadhubhasa" (elegant language) and the other "Chaltibhasa" (current language). The former is the traditional literary style based on Middle Bengali of the 16th century, the latter is a creation of this century, based on the cultivated form of the dialect spoken in Calcutta by educated people. The difference between the two is not very sharp, however. The Bengali script, in its present printed form, took shape in 1778. The script originated from a variety of the Sanskrit Devanagari alphabet, assuming its own characteristics in the 11th century.
(Universal Declaration)

Do you see why we can neither begin nor end here? To begin here is to start the game of us and them, where those who possess Bengali privilege it simply because it is not English and complain about the lack of specificity in the history of Bengali, about the mistake in calling West Bengal a "province" rather than a "state" of India, about the historical laziness in the description of the two "kinds" of Bengali. We exclude all endangered languages. Yet to end by bringing each and every endangered language onto this level playing field of complete intertranslatability is to destroy the relief map of history, politics, economics, and, yes, culture. Can we move within the double bind, needing to credit that singularity supplements universality, that difference neither belongs to nor divides the specifically universal declaration? I wrote long ago that every freedom is bound

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to specificity in its exercise ("Thinking" 458). The Danish cartoonists did not think this through. The concept of the case was enough for that argument. But no longer. The place to move in the double bind is in the classroom.[7] The MLA has a hand there. Help us change the long-standing views of language teaching, culture teaching. Unleash them from their place on the totem pole and from identity, from religion; change their institutional structural position. The job is in your hands, and your hands are, of course, ours—if we ignore the question of power.

Notes

1. *Of Grammatology* 93; trans. modified.
2. See Derrida, *Archive Fever.*
3. The "American Creed" is explained on 66–75.
4. This last paragraph is from Spivak, "Remembering."
5. "Eighteenth Brumaire" 147; trans. modified.
6. *Grundrisse* 548; trans. modified.
7. This is discussed in detail in Spivak, "'On the Cusp.'"

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