An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
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Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson

Danius: You speak of the necessity of unlearning one's learning and unlearning one's privileges, and you have also said that one must “learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard it as bullshit.” Speaking from your own experience as teacher, professor, and intellectual, how do you suggest we approach this project?

Spivak: I think now of the necessity of unlearning one’s learning in a slightly different way from when I first said it. I understand all my work as being in a sort of stream of learning how to unlearn and what to unlearn, because my positions are growing and changing so much; since I don’t really work from within an expertise, I have to really be on my feet learning new things all the time, and as I learn these new things, my positions change. It’s a bit embarrassing, but they do. Initially, if I remember right, when I started talk-


ing about “unlearning one’s learning,” I was really thinking more about how to behave as a subject of knowledge within the institution of neocolonial learning. I also thought about how to behave as a woman subject of knowledge—I am not even saying feminist—obliquely placed within access to the subjectship of learning in the institution of the subjectship of knowledge, of neocolonial learning.

On the other hand, now, I feel that, in order to be a para-disciplinary, ethical philosopher, it is necessary for me to ask the question, How is it possible to imagine as the subject of ethics—that is to say, the human being who thinks of doing the right thing (and therefore is capable of doing the wrong thing) for the other person? How is it possible to think such a subject outside of the monotheist Judeo-Christian tradition and its critique. And in order to do that, in order even to ask how to think I, I’m having to . . . — because all the ethical philosophy that one reads, even the non-Western ethical philosophies, unthinkingly precomprehends that kind of subject, because the ones who write are formed within various kinds of imperialist or anti-imperialist traditions—I’m having to actually give a lot of time to just sort of hanging out with women who are as out of touch with what one normally thinks of as the possibility of ethics as can be. And, you see, I can’t imagine myself there as someone who is going to write anything, because if I do that, then my relationship to the entire situation changes. Just as one doesn’t romanticize, one also doesn’t investigate, because one is trying to learn outside of the traditional instruments of learning, and also with the persistently asked question, “What is it to learn, what does it mean to learn?” In that situation, the suspension of learning, without legitimizing it by reversal, is so much more complicated than what I said fifteen years ago when it seemed more clear-cut, as a kind of political decision rather than as confronting the undecidability of ethics. You know, this answer is, indeed, to another question, not to the one you have asked, because that question no longer exists in quite the same way.

On the other hand, the concrete terms are so very concrete but so outside of the university circuit—and also so much not the sort of committed social work, which must serve as alibi for this other kind of project of surreptitious suspension of learning. The concrete terms would be to check out your theoretical presuppositions by testing them in areas as unlike the institution of learning/certification/validation/information retrieval as possible. Urban radicalism of various sorts, and then step-by-step alternative development work, becomes nothing more than an alibi for the opportunity to see the object of politics as the judges of ethical positions.
This is very mysterious, but I hope you can make something out of it. Honestly, let me say something extremely concrete here. I was just very recently in the cyclone and tidal wave area of Bangladesh. Apart from everything else, I had been asked to do a little bit of investigation into various kinds of foreign interventions in that area. I was in the center of the area where the worst devastation had occurred, and I spent time there, as usual, joining in the work as alibi for the opportunity to see the object of politics as the judges of ethical position. So when I came back to the capital city of Bangladesh, one of the activists asked me—very quickly, because he was running around; obviously, at the time of disaster you don’t sit down and have a chat. He sort of quickly came into the room (and there were other people there), and he asked me, “What did you see?” Now, this man is an extremely intellectually sophisticated man, a poet and all that, but his work is basically what we call activism. And I knew that what he was asking when he asked “What did you see?” was not a report on the conditions of devastation or a glamorized report on “what I had done,” because he does very much more—he is the one who was running the survey teams, so I couldn’t tell him anything. What he was asking—one could translate it into fast Greek, as it were—was really about the visibility that comes when you theorize. You know, theorein, to make visible. So he was asking me the question that he felt I could specifically answer, because I was, for him, a special theorist person. So then, in order to answer him, I broke my rule of not constructing this as an object of knowledge. I really tried to go as far as possible in theorizing this. It sort of came in a flash how much I was having to struggle because of the material that I was trying to unearth—this guy knows his Marx and Hegel, so I wasn’t talking down to him at all—but in order to be able to say something which he thinks I can see and he can’t see, I had to really paradoxically make this unlearning work for me, because even a person like him is hampered by mere learning. In a certain way, it was amusing, because it was really like I had all of my stops pulled out right there, and, on the other hand, he is not an academic intellectual, and there we were in this cramped space with other people, and they are just kind of talking to him, quick, before he left. And then I used what I had said to him the next week in Singapore at a conference, and this awful academic said it had nothing to do with practice! In this new project of unlearning as task, this is so far my only concrete case of theorizing about the relationship of the human being in the socius, with land, and also about the situation of the woman within that, a very pared down situation, and how the question of aid, for example, causes us to rethink a lot of things if these people them-
selves are to be taken as agents of knowledge. (And then I even turned it into a sort of trancy prose for an article which Ranajit Guha just told me he disliked very much!) It came out like that, but I really knew that as I was talking I had to do this unlearning stuff, at high speed, in order to deliver something which would be satisfactory, which would be responsible as a response.

Jonsson: When reading “The Postcolonial Critic,” I was struck by the fact that the subject of ethics comes up very seldom. And now, responding to our first question, you say how you have started to rethink the idea of unlearning one’s privileges and learning in terms of ethics. Is it correct to say that you have started to become more interested in maybe criticizing Western ethics, in maybe thinking, as you said, what would ethics be like if it were not contaminated by Western, European ethics?

Spivak: Yes . . . I think that is right. The word contaminated I also use much less these days. It was a favorite word. But I would also like to say that, more than critiquing Western ethics, I am more interested now in imagining the other ethical subject. I think it would be correct to say that inevitably, or perhaps not so inevitably, some of my colleagues are spinning their wheels because they don’t want to take the risk of genuinely unlearning—that is to say, moving from the critical phase into a more affirmative phase, into areas from where agencies of critique can come. So yes, the answer is yes.

Then, just anecdotally, just in terms of life as narrative, I have taught over and over again a course which I think I teach best, really, of all the courses I teach, a course involving just Marx. This is sometimes very unfashionable, depending on where your students are coming from, sometimes deeply fashionable, and sometimes dismissed as unreal, since as a teacher I exist not only in the United States. Nonetheless, I’ve taught this, and it’s got a very classic form, about a thousand pages of Marx, nothing else, and we read the German and the English translation side by side, and French if it is where French is more accessible, because generally, in the Third World areas where I have taught, the English text is authoritative. Over the last ten years or so, I have become very interested in the question, “Can there be a socialist ethics?” This course has changed its shape since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This is the subterranean historical thing in my work, the exact opposite of the other project of “hanging out”—Mitdasein as Mitwegsein—hanging out so that you can catch the ontic where it is not, the ontico-ontological difference as différence, to see if it is possible to imagine—because, after all, if one thinks that the ethi-
cal possibility is merely another way of saying how one is human, or even perhaps how one is not only a higher animal, as it were, then it should not be—I may be wrong—necessary to posit a degree of acculturation in order to be merely ethical. You see what I mean? So, first of all, there is the subterranean historical project, then the surreptitious unlearning. And then, I started working with a man who was one of the world’s greatest Sanskritists and scholars of Indian philosophy, who has, indeed, just died—Professor Matilal at Oxford. He actually wanted me to do this work with him. I will still publish the book that we were coauthoring, because I think we had written enough. But the thing was that he himself—an enlightened male feminist and a very learned man, who had been teaching at Oxford for many years and had been, therefore, very close to the regular Oxford philosophers—was no longer satisfied with the outlines of his discipline. He needed, as a person to dialogue with, someone who was placed enough in the culture that she knew Sanskrit—and I don’t know it well, but I certainly read enough simple Sanskrit to produce new interpretations in my brash way that so outrages specialists muscle-bound by knowledge—and who was a feminist, and who was working on contemporary philosophy of the European strand, and with whom he could talk. And what I began to see through this contact was the importance—in the face of Hindu fundamentalism in our country, and, on the other side, the questioning of the possibility of moral philosophy in Anglo-Saxon philosophy (with Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, Jon Elster, et cetera), as well as in the more interesting continental strand of Foucault and Derrida—of rereading the historical dismissal of the Indian tradition as containing the possibility of moral philosophy. In other words, I was learning about using the performative ethical strand in Indic philosophies, both popular ethical performances and its rational critique within the tradition, the scriptural tradition of authority in religion. We met with a great deal of resistance, because it is all right to use these things as cultural artifacts, even for the sake of resisting, but to use them as real instruments of philosophizing is not on the agenda. Even my very liberated colleagues on the cultural studies front don’t understand what I’m talking about when I speak of this. To them, it seems to be an abandonment of secularism. They just do not understand that it is possible to think of these scripts as things to work with, not simply in a restorative impulse. This, too, has to do with the possibility of ethics.

The moment you start thinking of doing something, you see it crawling out of the woodwork, right? Or perhaps it is just that those words begin to resonate in other people’s work; perhaps that is all it is. But it was around
that time that Derrida, with his work on Benjamin, Celan, and the like, started talking more directly about ethics and justice. On the other hand, we have Foucault, in the final phase, declaring that he had to jettison the chronological project of history, however far away from chronology he had come, in order to see the possibility of ethics in terms of The Care of the Self and The Use of Pleasure. So, to an extent, I don’t know how it happened. It happened. One always thinks one thought of it and then one sees that others were interested: One’s readers think the other way. But you are quite right—I’m much more concerned about the affirmative ethical possibility than with the critical rejection of established and possible ethics.

Danius: This ties in with another question. Speaking about the events in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, we can see how, in a very short space of time, the East-West conflict has changed to a conflict between the North and the South. You went to the United States in the beginning of the sixties, during the Cold War, and, in intellectual terms, you were partially “brought up” there in that kind of climate . . .

Spivak: Formed, yes. Because it was my last three years of graduate studies, and because I became an assistant professor in 1965, then I was bringing up other people, as it were.

Danius: But you went there in 1961 and took your Ph.D. there and so forth . . .

Spivak: Yes, yes, after a full four years of undergraduate and two years of graduate work at the University of Calcutta . . .

Danius: Anyway, I was thinking whether the change in these lines of conflict has in any way changed the frame, or context, of your way of thinking. Has this change brought you closer to ethics?

Spivak: There is an oblique relationship developing now, after the fact, as it were. As I tried to explain, these interests predate Gorbachev. But the possibility of another ethical subject has to concern itself with the gendered internationality of Islam, right? Think about the incredible diversity of state formation, from Morocco to Indonesia, and about the gendered internationality of Islam as a possible space of imagining an ethical subject, although that is not all, because Islam is an unorthodox kind of internationality, not the usual way of thinking internationality. I am myself brought up as a Hindu “polytheist.” (I have discussed the problems with that term elsewhere.) So this is not really to do with rewriting the East-West conflict as a North-South
conflict. But, since it has happened this way now, thinking of the reshuffling of imperialist space by the United States, let’s say, confronting the new Europe, you have to think about the question of the internationality of Islam, the staging or demonization of Islam, et cetera. All of this feeds into my broader interest; it isn’t a result of that thing at all. But the concern with the ethical is also perhaps related to the coding of capitalism as democracy in all of the choices that have been made recently. [Revising in 1992, I cannot not mention the growing interest in resisting “sustainable development,” and this brings me back to the lessons I learn from Mahasweta Devi . . . ]

Jonsson: I’d like to go on with the question of how to conceive of the ethical subject . . .

Spivak: Imagine! “The possibility of imagining an ethical subject outside of the monotheist Judeo-Christian arena.”

Jonsson: So, how would you make a start on formulating that possibility? Are there elements in the Judeo-Christian tradition that you would preserve?

Spivak: I haven’t begun to formulate it. Once you start doing this kind of thing, the project becomes extremely naïve. The rules of the game are like genuinely, empirically checking out Einsteinian physics by measuring the time to get from Piccadilly Circus to Liverpool Street. You know what I mean. It’s like you must be prepared to make the heaviest possible category mistakes, in order to create a situation where you can even be in a position. So, as for formulating a critique, it’s funny that you should ask this question, because I haven’t even bothered about asking what I would preserve. I don’t care. If I have to deal with it, I’ll think it through. But I haven’t thought about it even. Because you see, critiquing the Judeo-Christian is, for me, a bit of a parlor game because of where I teach. I’m not undermining anything. And people sometimes don’t realize that I speak from the extreme other side. But just as I will fight tooth and nail—and I have both tooth and nail—against white racists’ demands to keep what is conceived of as the European dominant in power, I do not want to lose my right to say that what is counterposed is, in fact, also itself completely to be unlearned by me in order to open the space of imagining. So, that’s the quick answer to your question.

Jonsson: I’ve been wondering about the relationship between your strategy of deconstruction and Marxist analysis. You’ve suggested a strategy of
reading that faces a given text, posited as the center of attention, and that attempts to observe how the centralization, or canonization, of this particular text presupposes the marginalization of other texts, and how these margins, once disclosed, then become centers in their own right, the constitution of which is preconditioned by yet another marginalization. This kind of reading seems to move in ever-widening circles in a play between centralization and marginalization. How does this compare with a Marxist reading that investigates the process of mediation and that attempts to find the historical situation and subtexts that produced the preconditions of a particular work or historical narrative?

**Spivak:** It’s related to the Marxist reading. But, you see, I’m not really a Marxist cultural critic. I’m very eclectic, and the Marxist part of it, since my earliest conscientization, is a domesticated variety of Second International communism. My sense of the Marxist moment in what I do is much more tied to a structural understanding of what Deleuze and Guattari called “the release of the abstract as such” and how that is recoded. The notion of a historical subtext is not the most interesting part of Marxism as an explanatory model to me. So, I am not made nervous by understanding the Marxist part as, in fact, the abstract that one recodes. That needs to be said first. Therefore, the idea of subalternity, as it has been reinscribed by Third World historians taking the ingredients from Gramsci (there is a real difference, but also connections, between the Gramscian position and the subalternist’s position in the Third World context today), has interested me precisely because . . . that is much more Marxist in the sense that you understand it—the historical alternative text is not even seen really as a “subtext” in the sense of it being located on another layer on the collective consciousness, but simply suppressed by official historiography. Again, it is on another level of abstraction.

In the arena of institutional practice, with which you began your question, I would say that—again, keeping within a Hegelian and Marxist trajectory—your interpretation of it is more historical and not philosophical enough. I’m thinking now of the *Science of Logic*, part one, where Hegel talks about the relationship between a historical narrative and a philosophical morphology. I’m thinking also about the place in the *Grundrisse* where Marx talks about the philosophy of the origin of capital and the impossibility of producing a historical narrative that will account for it.

If one looks at this centralization-marginalization as simply something that follows in sequence, according to a pre-given notion of the his-
torical, then it becomes—although there is that, too, I’m not disclaiming it—a constant taking of another step back. But if one sees the structure that is called economy rather than dialectic, philosophically inscribing every gesture of the securing of knowledge, then, in fact, it isn’t a historical two-step. The critical moment is implicit in the moment of teaching the critique. Each pushes the other away, is one another’s différence. So yes, that’s why I consider humanist teaching much more my thing than scholarly writing. I said before in answer to Sara’s first question that it’s a constant re-asking of the question, What is it to learn? What is it to learn? Is it to learn to talk about certain things coherently? Or is it to learn to actually do something else, within which the “talking about” is a moment, the theoretical is a moment? Talking and doing as the same differed-deferred? I don’t know yet. In terms of your other question about the ethical, you see, the stage of jettisoning, of unlearning, is always there now; that’s the first thing to happen, I find. So, the idea that I started with when I began that surreptitious project of imaging the other ethical subject—which came from Marx, early Marx’s idea of “species being,” the fact that each human being must, by virtue of being human, imagine, in Marx, “himself” as the example of being human. Otherwise, there is no possibility of being ethical. Now, I have found that I have quietly laid aside this as my presupposition as I go into those places. I don’t know if this is necessarily true anymore. [1992: Maybe it is . . . ]

**Danius:** Reading the essays in *In Other Worlds*, I thought that the first ones—the ones in the section called “Literature,” where you analyze literary works and more or less stick to the language and ideas of deconstruction—were at once easier and more difficult to understand than the later ones: easier because they are readily identified as deconstructive readings; more difficult because of the level of abstraction. But in the later essays—those that you have collected under the headings “Into the World” and “Entering the Third World”—you operate with three master narratives, or three paradigms: Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction. I really like your insistence on using these three paradigms, in spite of their alleged incommensurability, and how you use them; and I’m intrigued by your insistence that they bring—and should bring—“each other into crisis.” These moments of crisis are also moments of great insight, at least for me. So, in a way, the essays in the later two-thirds of the book are thematically more difficult, whereas your more properly deconstructive readings in the first part were not, while at the same time easier to understand and, in fact, completely unpredictable.

**Spivak:** That was a wonderful comment, Sara. I’ll tell you why. It’s because
I’m amused by this myself. Most often, what readers say to me is not exactly what I’ve been thinking, and that’s okay. I mean, one learns . . . But this particular thing . . . it’s so old-fashioned that I’m always hesitant to say it, but you said it before: My words are becoming simpler. They are becoming simpler because I can’t do anything with the more complicated machinery. It’s getting in the way, you know. It’s getting in the way. On the other hand, I’m absolutely antimystical. I’m absolutely, like 200 percent, antimystical. So, I don’t know what to do with this particular development. Therefore, when I’m pushed these days with the old criticism—“Oh! Spivak is too hard to understand!”—I laugh, and I say okay. I will give you, just for your sake, a monosyllabic sentence, and you’ll see that you can’t rest with it. My monosyllabic sentence is: We know plain prose cheats. [laughter] So then what do you do? Shut up? Don’t you want to hear some more? And then it becomes much harder.

Jonsson: Does this mean that your work has changed? I sense that you are starting to work with completely new things and new areas . . .

Spivak: That ethical stuff is indeed new. I’m not satisfied with the answers that I have been constructing for myself and for my students, so that’s the change, and with it has come the necessity to be simpler, because I talk a lot to people in these places where I go in search of that possibility of imagining. I said that social work is undertaken as an alibi, so that you can actually clear the space for that waiting, listening, and stuff like that. So, in the social work area, given the fact that I am basically a teacher, rather than something else, I talk a lot to grass-roots activists who are very sophisticated about the workings of multinationals but who are not well versed in academic discourse and yet, when I talk to them, I’m not about to compromise my theoretical positions. As a result, I have found that the need to be comprehensible is coming not from the know-nothingist-white-racists and their legitimizers-by-reversal but from the people to whom I care to make myself understood. So, one can say that simplicity comes from there, too.

As to what kind of work I’m doing now, I’m trying to write, and this is a hell of a task. I’ve finished a manuscript called “An Unfashionable Grammatology,” which I perceive as an end to the earlier stream of work. Then there is this work using Indic texts and Indic popular ethical performance as an instrument of philosophizing, which is also nearly finished but has to be revised for publication. Then there is a collection of about fourteen essays, which I am tentatively calling “Outside in the Teaching Machine,” which is more related to the question you asked about the play of centralization-
marginalization, which I don’t see as only historical. [1992: This, with extensive revision, is now in press.] And then I’ve done about 350 pages of translation, and I’m doing some more, of Mahasweta’s work. [1992: I’ve just embarked on the introduction.] I’m somewhat dismayed by the currency she has received as a result of my translations and the quick fixes that are being organized now on her. So, to this collection of translations, which is being published by Routledge in the United States and by Thema in Calcutta at the same time, I’m going to write two different introductions, one for the American edition and world distribution, and the other for the Indian edition. And I think there—so you’ll see how tightly organized it is, it is not mystical at all—I will confront the problem of hard simplicity, uncompromising, yet hard, simplicity, in response to demands that come from outside the U.S. context. So that is there, and then there is a text of which I’ve written about seven chapters, and that is simply a book on Derrida. [1992: This is really becoming a new book with the later Derrida.] That, I think, is going to combine the two. . . . My collection of teachers are related to this Indic stuff, the deconstruction stuff, and the undecidable ethical subjects-people. Those three groups are my collection of teachers and judges at the moment. So, the deconstruction text is going to involve thinking through some of what the material of this interview is. But the final text that I’m really trying to write and that I’m finding very hard to write is a text called “Feminism in Decolonization,” which is very different, indeed, from multicultural feminism, and which is almost set against the idea of postcolonial feminism. I’ve told you all of what it is not. But this is the text that is occupying me now, and I’m finding it extremely . . . I really almost feel it is a bit more than I can chew. I’m doing it for Verso. And if anyone from Verso reads this statement, they’ll be appalled . . . but I’m finding this very hard to do. [1992: I’m hopelessly late in this—I need time . . . ]

Danius: If we try to tie these things together, we could go back to your use of the three master narratives and how they confront one another. And then I guess we end up on the idea of “strategic essentialism,” one of the notions you are famous for. You always insist on the situation-specific, that is, the history that has produced a given problem, or a subject position. The danger involved in such an idea is that one may end up in endless heterogeneity, with thousands of different and ever-changing subject positions. You don’t agree with the idea of an ideal speech community of neutral communication and free dialogue. But in order to be understood, one has to presuppose a community of listeners. Given the heterogeneity, how, in terms of class,
race, and gender, do you think about the constituency of this community? Is that always a strategic choice?

Spivak: The strategic use of essentialism. You know, I gave a long interview in the opening issue of Differences where I said that I no longer want to use it. In the context in which I said it, it was picked up, it was picked up in the United States, in Australia, and in Britain. You’re quite right—it really became known. Why did it become so well known? Of the two things that are best known of mine, one is the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and the other is this little thing: the strategic use of essentialism. When, in the United States, the statement “the personal is political” came into being, given the socio-intellectual formation, it really became quite quickly “only the personal is political.” In the same way, my notion just simply became the union ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that.

So, as a phrase, I have given up on it. As to whether I have given up on it as a project, that is really a different idea. I am much more interested now in considering the differences between the sexed subject—female agency, feminist theory—and a variety of individualisms, and their inter-relationships. I’m becoming more interested in that. It seems to me that Marxism is a critique of essentialism, so that when one says old-fashioned Marxism is essentialist, one is talking about “the site of a betrayal.”

Danius: In what sense?

Spivak: Remember, I am most interested in Marxist economic theory and crisis theory rather than its reinscription in the mid-twenties as intellectual and cultural theory. Even in the work of Raymond Williams, I find an anglicization of Marx. The entire theory and notion of value reaches me as an effort to undermine subjective essence and objective essence. That’s the part I find exciting, not the ways in which it gave in to essentialism—just like, in a much smaller context, “the personal is political” gave in to the essentialist field. I have suggested—in a speech for ReThinking Marxism, and also in another piece that is published in an Indian political journal called Frontier—that in the kind of current geopolitical context, I see a Marxist feminism as a feminism that simply eats up and incorporates in the most naïve psychoanalytic sense the economic analysis in Marx but that does not just produce analogies like in Catharine MacKinnon or in the work of someone like Anne McClintock: not just analogize loosely and softly but really incorporate, chew, and digest the economic analysis and crisis theory and
make of it, to use an old Marxian word, a Stoffwechsel—a stuff-exchange (always translated “metabolism”). I neither see Marxism, necessarily the old-fashioned variety, as being essentialist nor the necessity to compose Marx by psychoanalyzing or cultural theorizing. I like my Marxism neat, but I don’t use it as a whole explanatory model. It’s something that I have eaten, or swallowed, not to mix metaphors. So I don’t go with the strategic use of essentialism anymore. I’m much more interested in seeing the differences among these so-called essences in various cultural inscriptions. They are not all the same everywhere. The question of female agency is dependent upon constitutions. Constitutions are extremely historical things that are produced quite often by the dismantling of a colony or an empire, and, therefore, in the constitution, the mark of the former masters is still present. A constitution is a cusp document, a transitional document. And yet, the possibility of female agency is written in that discourse.

As for having to choose to work on something, I’ve come to understand that that happens anyway. I must perform a découpage (circum-cise) so that I can carry on with what I am saying or doing: I don’t have to say I’m going to do it, for that is what will get done anyway—one carves out a provisional field and a provisional traffic of essences.

Jonsson: One of the great strengths of your work is your elaboration of Marx’s theory of value, and how you show that we, as First World white intellectuals, fail to acknowledge the relationships between our work and the production done by the labor force in the Third World. Could you reiterate how you connect the global division of labor, the theory of value, and a rethought Marxist analysis?

Spivak: Okay. This is going to look less practical than what one thinks of as Marxist work. Let’s put it this way: In trying to understand what it is that the worker sells, Marx, as we all know, came up with the idea that it is not “work” but “work power.” What, then, is work power? Work power is one name of something that we, because we are human, secrete [1992: I feel this is slightly off-base, but will let it pass . . . ], but this thing that human beings secrete is immediately given names. I’m almost paraphrasing Marx, and not even the early Marx. Marx called this thing “simple and contentless”—inhaltlos und einfach (which is always translated as “slight in content”). He doesn’t want to be a pure formalist: This guy is not a formalist—we all know that. On the other hand, he has to have some understanding of how societies make sense of their own activities, and in order for him to understand this, to go back to square one rather than just listen to radicals, he
comes up with this idea of the contentless rather than the formal, and he calls that—miscalls it, because there are no good words when you try to talk about something as ground level as this—he *miscalls* it “value.” He miscalls it, because the word *value* is in the history of the language, and so it can either be given the meanings of truth, beauty, goodness, and all that baggage, or it can be given the meaning of price—how much is a thing worth? (Price, by the way, is the relative value-form measured in money.) So, the word has, like most words that are used for new ways of thinking through, done its harm. But, as I said before, words like that are both medicine and poison. That’s why, as a teacher, one chips away at words, even as one sees them slipping away from one. So this thing that is “simple and contentless” is immediately given content. There is no place where pure value is hanging out. There may be nothing called “pure value.” It is that you have to think it, in order not to make the mistake of thinking that all of the various ways in which we say society operates or the psyche operates or sexuality operates are actually things. Because they are not, they are these immediate names beyond which you really just have to imagine something like “pure value.”

*Danius*: So the abstraction makes it *inhaltlos*?

*Spivak*: Well, pure value is actually before concretization, before appropriation. So to call it abstract is also to give it an *inhalt*. It really will have to remain slippery. That’s the hard part, and one doesn’t think about it too much. In fact, if you remain involved with it, you become a mystic. You become, you know, like a philosopher of the absolutely other. What’s the point? You have to make the grounding mistake of not worrying about that, but you have to keep it as a presupposition, or even a supposition. It’s not a big deal. It’s only useful in order not to make the universalizing mistake, the other kind of mistake, which thinks the ground is a ground.

The economic coding of value, which Marx was dealing with, is easy to follow through, because it does lead to the most general, the most universal, the most abstract: the money form, and then its transformation into capital form. So that’s good.

On the other hand, if, as feminists, as ethical philosophers, as political philosophers, we think about other kinds of coding that are also done—affective coding, cognitive and political coding, et cetera—then we have to come to grips with areas where final descriptions are no longer possible, because they are not fully abstract. So, this is where Foucault, deconstruction, et cetera, come in. Marx himself gives an idea of this by talking about areas
where capital's mode of exploitation has been exported without capital's mode of production. There, you cannot have an unmodified Marxist economic analysis as your guide. In that context, we in the neocolonial areas of the world, as well as those of us who are in the collaborative spaces of the Third World, as well as those of us—I'm thinking now of a place like Brazil—who are being newly colonized in neocolonial models, as well as those of us—I'm thinking now of a place like Poland—who are seeking to be redefined as European rather than anything else, as well as—(so you see it is not just a question of the West and the rest)—areas on, let's say, the Asia Pacific Rim, like Singapore, which is so fully inscribed now in the world economic system that what goes wrong there one cannot lay at the door of the West simply; in those kinds of areas, we have to see that the recodings in the affective, cognitive, political areas are recodings of a developed capitalist economic coding. The cultural recoding manages the crises of a fully abstract capitalist coding, so that one looks at one's complicity, which you were talking about, with what I suppose still can be called the international division of labor, although that has become more difficult in the post-Fordist era. This is why I am interested in structures of complicity, globally, in a different form from Third World/First World divisions . . . The moment you make that into an allegory within the First World, the problem becomes simpler: It's white racism against . . . you know. So, that's how my notion of Marx's philosophical intuition of value and my notion of our complicity with the production of knowledge, I think, come together. Is this an answer to your question? Perhaps it wasn't simple enough, though?

Jonsson: Yes, it is, and I think I understand. So, it all really starts with a profound reconsideration and demystification of the concept of value. First you have to see it as something contentless . . .

Spivak: Fully contentless, except that the word is content, but simple . . .

Jonsson: . . . a concept of value, which then first, in economic forms through modes of exploitation, reaches noncapitalist sections of the world. In order to manage that exploitation, you have to inscribe other, noneconomic secrets of human activity with concepts already developed in capitalist institutions of knowledge production . . .

Spivak: Yes, that's one part. Absolutely. You have a more sequential imagination than I do, but that's fine. This is a story that can be developed out of what I've said . . .
Jonsson: So what would you like to add to that, then?

Spivak: Well, I would just like to muddle it somewhat by saying that this is not just something that takes place step by step but all at the same time because of the multiple coding of value. I don’t know if the idea of value is correct. The idea of value is useful. It will serve. That’s all I’m saying. If you disprove it, you’ll have to give me something else I can use. The multiple codings are operative simultaneously, yet discontinuously. Ah, the anecdotes that come to mind!

Jonsson: If I still see it sequentially, can the kinds of codings that occur in the noncapitalist parts of the world in order to manage exploitation and so forth be seen as what you call the production of cultural explanations? Is that a form of managing?

Spivak: Yes, cultural explanations are always managing, most often inaugurated by sexual differences. It’s, in a sense, the way in which one produces signification and reference out of anything. Of course they can. But I have a question: What do you see as the noncapitalist parts of the world?

Jonsson: I guess I’m still thinking in terms of a historical narrative saying that once upon a time there were parts of the world that didn’t have a capitalist mode of production, which then spreads out. I don’t know if that’s a good way of conceiving it. . . .

Spivak: I don’t know; it may be. But as far as I’m concerned—since I think of all of the historical narrative as the history of the present, and not of the past as a collection of past presents and the future as a collection of future presents, not like that (it’s my way of getting around sequentialism)—I’m at the moment more interested in, let’s say, uneven and unequal development than in noncapitalist and capitalist. That’s why I talked about the many Asias.

But I don’t want to oppose these bad management-style cultural explanations to good ones, the real cultural explanations. For me, cultural explanations are always crises-managers, and you will not be able to find a space where you get a definition of crisis over and against something that is not crisis. The definition of crisis becomes—like most other things—originary. I won’t make a distinction between these; it’s not useful for me.

Jonsson: Perhaps we should move on to the American scene and the various debates and discussions going on there about the canon, the core
curriculum, literacy, and political correctness. Have you thought about these issues?

Spivak: Well, one is obliged to think about it if one teaches in the United States. I have a new job at Columbia University, and I was shown by my colleague Cornel West an editorial written by Hilton Kramer, whom I don’t have the pleasure of knowing. It was a long editorial in the New Criterion, which suggests that my appointment, in what he describes as a once-distinguished department, is a violation of every principle of the university, the assumption being that I was appointed because I was merely politically correct rather than an expert in the field of literary criticism. Therefore, even if one wants to be concerned about the other things that I’ve been talking about, one cannot not be concerned with this if one is living in the United States.

I myself think that the idea of multiculturalism in the United States is very, very different from multiculturalism in, let’s say, Australia or in Britain, or in Holland, of which I’m learning a bit more (multiculturalism is a very complicated scenario, because it’s one word). I hope this will give your readers a sense that nobody who teaches in a certain way in the United States can keep clear of it; it’s like that. So I don’t have a real position, but I have to have a position. So, as far as I perceive it, liberal multiculturalism is a way of talking about recoding—dealing with the fact that it is not possible, in the present global context, to have an overt emphasis on the white dominant. In spite of the puppet speakers for the white dominant that are being thrown up by the system—the Dinesh D’Souzas, the Bill Bennetts, and the Allan Blooms—people know that that is not what the times require. The real politicians speak about political correctness now because they have already bought it in a certain way. Before all the talk about political correctness came in, we had seen it all already, in the use of women, for example: the place of day care and all of that stuff as alibis in the Bush administration; the place of both gendering the military and of using women in the Islamic world, in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait especially, as ideological justifications of, not unimportant ideological justifications for, the Gulf War. I’ve made an argument elsewhere that when one wants to say that one is establishing not just a civil, but a good, society, protection of women is one of the most important topoi. We have seen that in our time. And in that context, that was a kind of prefiguration of this ferocious talk about political correctness now, so that Camille Paglia, or a Bennett or Bloom or D’Souza, is, in fact—and one feels like asking someone to write a new Eighteenth Brumaire—already
speaking a dying discourse. They are necessary, but they are not important. The important thing is liberal multiculturalism, the museumization of ethnic goods, as it benevolently mingles with the work of someone like Renato Rosaldo or Guillermo Gómez Peña, the people who are involved in Chicano and Puerto Rican kinds of insertion into the polity, which is really very different from, let’s say, the Los Angeles Festival. As an educator, I am interested in keeping the distinctions separate: When you say feminism, when you say socialism, please remember to say British socialism, British feminism; those national markers are important political markers, not because these things have nationalities but because otherwise the universalizing comes easy. In the same way, I want my colleagues and students to remember that this is U.S. multiculturalism. The moment one remembers that, the U.S. component becomes more responsibly understood, rather than the United States as an adversary and the multicultural as real Third World, et cetera. Some of my colleagues make this mistake of thinking that the presence of the rainbow coalition in the United States means the presence of the real Third World. But it is no such thing.

As for the accusations of political correctness, it is a very well-known strategy: Once one has bought into something, one accuses the other side of doing it. Those of us who are being called “politically correct” should now begin to talk about the uses of “political correctness” on the other side rather than to define them as politically incorrect, not to legitimize their accusations by reversal.

The canon—I’m less certain about the canon debate. The canon debate in the social sciences and in the humanities is, as far as I understand it, the idea of introducing work that is not necessarily just the great works of Western culture. I am at one with that impulse. I always give support to it. I try to bring in whatever else can be brought in. I’m just not satisfied with the possibility of fully decanonizing or decolonizing the canon within the U.S. university structure. Mind you, this is said with absolute approval of the efforts against the assertion of the white dominant. I have no problem with that one, and I will continue to support it institutionally as far as possible. It is like my position vis-à-vis secularism. I have no doubt that I will support in every possible way secularist laws. I’m totally against theocracies. But I can see that in the larger context, secularism is a class-based position in the former colonies, and it is not a moral position. As opposition to the impulses for religious violence, or what is called fundamentalism, secularism is not a fully robust instrument. In the same way, in the case of expanding or decolonizing the canon at U.S. institutions, I’m much more settled about
the opposition than I am about what my program should be. It really works
day by day with me at this point.

Is that an answer?

Jonsson: It is, certainly. But let me ask: Is liberal multiculturalism an in-
stance of what you called “tokenization,” of managing, or of what a friend
of mine in Los Angeles called the creation of a minority elite that can man-
age their masses in the same way that Macaulay suggested that the British
should create a bourgeoisie in India, which would be English in everything
but skin color?

Spivak: Yes. But you see that the program here is exactly the opposite: the
British example—of course, one always quotes Macaulay saying “we will
produce a people which will be English in everything but blood,” whereas in
the United States, what is happening is “we will produce a class that would
think it has been multiculturally educated.” So, you don’t solve the problem
by drawing the analogy, and I know you didn’t draw it. It’s not possible to
dismiss liberal multiculturalism, because in some cases, it’s the best one
has. It’s the alliance that one performs when one is trying to decolonize the
canon at the university. One uses it in the way one uses most liberal insti-
tutions. What is on the other side? What would be the solution? My solution
is the formula that I’ve used a lot: “persistent critique of what one cannot
not want” from within the institution. It’s hard to keep one’s hands clean.

Yes, there is an analogy, but the analogy is almost more interest-
ing in the breach—how territorial imperialism, settlement colonies, had to
develop in one way and how neocolonialism secures itself in another way.

Jonsson: You asked what the other side of liberal multiculturalism would be.
I guess it would be some sort of essentialism, affirming one’s own identity
very strongly as black, Mexican . . .

Spivak: Where? How?

Jonsson: In the institution. I suppose . . .

Spivak: How?

Jonsson: By a very militant opposition to the Western canon, for instance . . .

Spivak: As you still want validation within the institution?! Do you want your
degree or not?!

Jonsson: I’m not saying that I agree with this essentialism . . .
Spivak: No, no. I’m talking about X, as this guy, or this woman, still wanting validation!

Jonsson: It’s a very paradoxical position, of course . . .

Spivak: It’s an impossible position! If you want certification by the university system, that is totally the product—but totally, there is nothing else there—of the history of what we loosely are calling European liberalism. There is no way that you have stepped out of liberal multiculturalism. There is no way that you have stepped out of liberal multiculturalism.

Jonsson: But couldn’t one use one’s belief in affirming one’s own identity—which may amount to an essentialism—in a way that looks like maneuvering; in a way that would be much like strategic essentialism; in the sense that you strongly hold on to your identity and your tradition; as a way of reforming the institution from within? Is that a respectable position?

Spivak: I like the people who do it until I begin to see them not doing it. But I think it’s not a productive position. There again, the question of subject and agency comes in. I feel that in the U.S. context, the ideas of the rainbow coalition, the idea of civil rights, all of this is what actually restores identity, because in the field of agency, identity is viable. You know, if the economic is the fully abstract, agency is something that is understandably inscribed in the rational, normative, privative discourse of things like the constitution, the law, and so on, and in that coding, identity is viable. The fact that my seventy-nine-year-old mother has an American passport and I have an Indian passport makes a difference in our agency. It makes a difference in our identity, in our identity cards, if you know what I mean. But then, consider the question of our production—I am much more capable of affirming my identity because I am in the class position of having infiltrated a university. My mother, in a certain sense, inhabits an identity where the ontico-ontological difference has been allegorized, as is typical of the U.S. case. So, it seems to me that the affirming of one’s identity is precisely not a strategic use. It is to be utilized by the institution, only at another allegorical remove. Within the U.S. context, if you really want to affirm your identity, you would have to undo the system totally; that’s not possible anymore. We have bought into, we have contractually bought into, the institution, and there is safety in recognizing that. If you want to undo the curriculum, be aware of the limits of your power rather than dramatize yourself: Gesture politics comes without the critical moment built into it. Within gesture poli-
tics, there is a wonderful critical moment that one can use without learning all of this jargon that we are talking, which is humor, humor. That political use of humor, which we know in the general African American struggle in the United States, I have looked at with incredible admiration. That I quite often don’t see in university identity wallahs, that kind of robust autocritical humor within the movement. I don’t believe that is a strategic use of essentialism at all.

Jonsson: I believe that some of the people who hold on to this program still believe it is.

Spivak: You are one of these people?

Jonsson: No, no—I’m not . . .

Spivak: I mean, what identity would you affirm?

Jonsson: I don’t feel I have any particular identity to affirm. As a white, middle-class male intellectual, I’m afraid I represent a “mainstream.” What identity would I, or we, affirm? Some kind of “Swedishness”? But that would be ridiculous!

Spivak: On the other hand, I feel you have a very important identity to affirm. The identity of the full-fledged agent of undoing the system that has inscribed you. That’s the task that one takes away by this kind of capering and posing. I’m not prepared to write off the people of good faith who have a critical conscience. I’m not prepared to write them off. I’m prepared to use them. You know what I mean? . . .

Jonsson: I have two questions on this. You said that D’Souza, Bloom, et cetera, represent a dying discourse. Do you really think they do? Another way of seeing it is that they actually have a lot of support from the very conservative white upper middle class that is becoming more and more entrenched, so to speak, in defending their dominance and property.

Spivak: Oh, yes. I’m not saying they’re not dangerous. I’m just saying—to use a very old-fashioned term, necessarily for intelligibility and, therefore, necessarily limited—they’re not world historical. That’s why I said one would want someone to write a new *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Because at that point, when the *Eighteenth Brumaire* was written, Marx was saying a few good things against contemporary radicals, and he was also saying that the contemporary conservative voice was not as dangerous as the stream of history. So, I’m by no means saying that they’re not dangerous. I’m by no
means saying that they do not have the backing of a powerful conservative lobby, but the negation of that one is being produced from within the powerful conservative lobby with transnational exploitative interests and Euro-centric migration, beyond personal goodwill and personal/group intentions. Even the people who are talking about political correctness are themselves involved in a much more dangerous way, so that when we choose, when we—the supposedly politically correct—choose, we choose what we think is the lesser of two evils, which is the cultural-institutional consolidation of the United States.

Jonsson: On the level of contemporary American intellectual history as opposed to the level of world history, how serious do you think this rightist backlash actually could become?

Spivak: I think it could become very serious. If one is thinking just of localized campuses, I think it could become very serious indeed. I think it can interfere in tenuring, and that means the rising generation of radical teachers will be effectively silenced. I think it can interfere in the policing of curricula in subtle ways. I think it can interfere in precisely the sort of local attempts at having a slightly more diversified syllabus. Tenuring and promotion seem to me to be most important, because they are means of disempowering the educators. As the prospect of disempowerment operates in the ideological stream, it will influence choice, as it already does, among students. Especially given the control of the media, it seems to me that there is no way that we can ignore this.

So, clearly, no, I'm not underestimating the immediate power of the Right. I was shown by Renato Rosaldo an issue of Time magazine [8 July 1991] that is just amazing in its blatant racism, amazing in the way in which it describes ironically the claims made by what is discussed as the “politically correct” lobby, in saying that when Columbus came, the Americas were already inhabited by people with civilizations; the Time article thinks that this is a stupid thing to say, so it gives it in a transparently ironic account and wraps it in a racist cover. If irony is available to the readership of such a magazine on such a level that you do not have to spell it out, that means that this system of meaning operates in the national lexicon. This means, in turn, that on the ground level, on the ordinary language level—where pouvoir-savoir means simply the ability to know, not power/knowledge—this conservatism operates; so it's dangerous, indeed. On the cover, if I remember right, there is a picture of the big white guy, and in the back folkloric pictures of Hispanics, and then on the two sides a very amiable looking
small-sized Asian American woman and a small-scale Native American in a kind of John Wayne costume.

So, no, I'm not underestimating its dangers. I'm just saying that we who are thoroughly against the neocolonial inscription of knowledge need not legitimize it by reversing it and theatricalizing ourselves, only theatricalizing ourselves—gesture politics has its uses—as affirming the identity within an institution and reforming it from within. We ought to refuse the consolidation of the same by just reversing. We ought to work at working in the critical moment, not as something that happens later but as something that must go on, often counterintuitively, at the same time.

Another thing that I didn't say anything about was the heterogeneous situation of the African American force (you can't say African American "presence" in the United States), and the Chicano, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, Latino voice, and the older melting pot element of the Jews, the Irish, the Italian, the Scandinavian, the Central and Eastern European, and the completely different situation of the new immigrant. [1992: I have by now worked at understanding this dynamic map of marginality in all its shape-changing complexity.] It seems to me that in the new immigrant situation (my relationship to my mother kind of reverses the new immigrant situation), where the mother tongue is being transplanted, both as the heart is transplanted and the disease is cured and also in the sense in which diasporas produce hybrids, as a plant is grafted—in that context, the women's situation is again on the cusp. In the situation of the new immigrant mother and her daughter, the translation is quite different from the situation of the African Americans and the Native Americans to the extent that they are constitutive of the United States. I am now writing a review of a book by Jack Forbes called Black Africans and Native Americans, which gives you a sense of how much the actual production of what Forbes calls Eastern Neo-American and Western Neo-American in the Americas and the greater Caribbean—of how all this has been completely covered over, so that in today's debates, we can simplify the whole situation by saying Black/White, Self/Other. Within the multiculturalist lobby, you will find one section of this spectrum that I've described on the one side and another on another. My thinking is spectral in that sense, history as the specter of the present as event. I was talking about the many different Asias. West Asia is the Middle East. North Asia is, you know, part of the former Soviet Union as it is redone. Inner Asia is

quite another part of the ethnic constituency of the Soviet Union which relates differently to Eastern and Central Europe, where the Muslim-Christian debates make it part of the gendered internationality of Islam. South Asia is us, that is to say, the strictly speaking postcolonial sectors, as Algeria is, let’s say, where the cultural sector is strategically very important. That is quite unlike the Asia-Pacific Rim, which is yet another Asia. Southeast Asia, on the other hand, which Benedict Anderson, in his wonderful, but in some ways unfortunate, book, Imagined Communities, takes as the model of the undoing of Marxism in the discourse of imagined communities, is another Asia. In the same way, within the United States, there is the “multicultural” spectrum of internal colonization. In the absence of spectral thought, there is opposition from within the multicultural sector—one part of the spectrum opposing the others, saying that it is politically incorrect now. You see?

Jonsson: In the last part of Les Mots et les choses, Foucault talks about the reorganization of the human sciences. In order to describe the production of knowledge after the end of the Classical Age in the West, he uses three conceptual pairs: norm/function, rule/conflict, and system/signification. Previously, Foucault says, analyses of human behavior, social forms, and language were made in terms of functions, conflicts, and significations. But these analyses always presupposed a norm, a rule, and a system—in relation to which objects or humans could be seen as normal/abnormal, et cetera—none of which was ever made explicit but which nevertheless acted as a tacit presupposition; and this was, of course, the norm, rule, and system established by the Western, male subject of knowledge. He then suggests a possible organization of knowledge, where each group, or culture, is functional and significant according to its own norm and systemic coherence. According to Foucault, the recognition of this will bring an end to the dominance of Western reason. Now, is this a view that you agree with? Is it a way of describing what is happening in the debate about the canon, for instance, and in modern critical theory and in theorizations of ethnicity, or of moral and aesthetic values?

Spivak: I want to situate this whole story once again; with Freud and the post-Kantian tradition coming to a head with Freud, and then with tendencies of critique that we will name “Foucault,” something happens, no doubt. But I think that’s a little story, a record of a symptom, as much as anything

else. I don’t see it as “really” happening. I see it as the study of the social sciences and the organized study of the humanities having to legitimize themselves in yet another particular way. I think this claim to a greater metavision of Western Europe’s own history is part of that. As a Europeanized postcolonial, I try to learn from it. Yet, the much more important moments are the moments where these people—the persons that you have looked at—indicate their cautions about what they are doing, which sometimes their disciples forget. Foucault of Les Mots et les choses is quite different from the last Foucault. Seeing Foucault’s itinerary, I ask, Was Foucault just recapitulating? I don’t believe so. You may disagree. But this is just my sense. Foucault also went back to some of his very early stuff, like the dream-book that he had written as an existential psychoanalyst, the introduction to Binswanger. He went back to that stuff right at the end. So what was it? He said that peculiar thing about being influenced by Heidegger at the end: There are some people by whom one is so influenced that one never writes about them. Now, what was this indicating? It seems to me that that notion of the inaccessibility of the prochain, of the absolutely intimate—what Heidegger calls the ontic and Foucault the sub-individual—has been operating all along the way and comes back to Foucault when he decides to embark on looking at other ways of constituting the ethical self, ways other than Western European. I was talking to you earlier about how very difficult it is to choose just one scribal system, the Indic system, as an instrument of philosophizing—the critique of how the West did its job leads to a moment of incredible difficulty of actually finding, within our historical situation of institutionality, instruments of philosophizing that will not just be responses to a demand for inclusion but really an offer of substitution. That’s hard work! And it seems to me that the other things are too self-congratulatory for me to really feel that it’s serious. It’s extremely nice; I mean, as I said, I like it, I do it, it’s safe, it’s there. But it’s not the intellectual history of the world, and I will say this: The reason why I go to these places where I’m hanging out, about which I want to say nothing at this point, is that a subtle change will come, for example, in exactly the opposite way from the way in which an institutionally trained doctor relates to a naked body. This subtle change in relationship is what happens when a trained academic relates to something, wanting to write, yet pushing the control of writing away in order to break through romanticization into the two-way road of learning from the compromised.

This is not recognized by us, when we take quick fixes by going hither and yon and writing about stuff that is really not the West. I was cut to the
quick when a woman writing in Feminist Review dismissed me as “a world-traveler.” When you move out of identity politics and inspirational prose, you lose your allies. If we relate to something as knowers, learned people—le sujet supposé savoir, the subject of the production of knowledge—it is impossible to have another relationship to learning. No anthropologist has ever, in the history of anthropology, been able to suggest that there is a ratio in the culture studied which is the equivalent of European reason. They have knocked European reason, but nobody has ever been able to substitute for it. On the other hand, it is not true that there is no ratio anywhere. It is not possible to discover it while you remain le sujet supposé savoir. Reason is not ceded. This is not an invitation to mysticism.

Now, therefore, and, in fact, in most of these people that you have named, there are moments of acknowledgment of this that, to me, are much more productive. When I go to “hang out,” I acknowledge the fact that the critique of the Western norm of the production of knowledge—of this norm, rule, system—also exists in those other places, they’re developed critiques that are not institutionally developed as systems of knowledge. These people that I’m describing, who are ground-level, disenfranchised, they, in fact, never took the behavior of the Europeans based upon these systems as correct. They submitted to it when it came their way, as absurd but linked to power. They relate differently to us because we are not European. They think we are fools when we—I say “we” as a “hanger-on,” not as a trained worker or an analytical observer—come to disturb their normality with demands of urine in test tubes, or the offer of a different kind of piece of string dipped in red for tying the umbilicus, or an offer of shit-ting in holes surrounded by walls rather than taking your ease under the sun. They see us as fools, especially since we are unattractive, breastless, hairless, without men, childless. They see us as fools. But they saw Europeans as absurd, never questioned them, but submitted to them because they were allied to power. That is a critique. It is only an insane vanguard-ism of theory, coming out of ideologically constructed, hellenized Greece, the Christianizing of Aristotle, that thinks that the story of the development of that critique is Kant to Freud to Foucault. To use that as an instrument of philosophizing, you have to respect the ontico-ontological difference and go to the big texts, and even then it is almost impossible. Apparently, one of the reasons Matilal did not get into the British Academy was because—and I’ve heard these words used—he was working within a “minority area.” So this challenge to the story of the impossibility of moral philosophy, which is also presented as the narrative by folks like Richard Rorty, cannot be
institutionally empowered. In fact, neither of us was capering as affirming our Indian identities. We were critical of Hindu fundamentalism. We “know” too much about India. We are Indians, despised ex-patriates, not-quite-not-the-real-thing, yet obstinate about celebrating, contrary tokens suspicious of the invitation to peddle personal pain, always squinting around the corner for the future that is already with us, at our ease, elsewhere.