

INTERVIEW

translation speaks to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

translation editor Siri Nergaard and editorial board member Edwin Gentzler met with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for an informal conversation during the 2011 Research Symposium organized by the Nida School of Translation Studies in New York City (September 14). As one of the symposium's two principal lecturers, Spivak gave the speech "Gender and Translation in the Global Utopia," a transcribed version of which was published in issue 1 of translation under the title "Scattered Speculations on Translation Studies."

During the conversation that follows, Spivak explains how she understands translation: she calls herself a "literalist" and explains that her formula is "very careful literalism." She discusses the connections between creolization and translation as a question of class mobility. On a more personal note, Spivak talks about how she lives her life under two different teaching situations, one in the United States and the other in India, suggesting that both the children of the superpower as well as the subaltern who accept wretchedness as normality "need to have their desires rearranged" and understand the importance of the right to intellectual labor, in two different ways. We also hear the stories behind Spivak's own work as translator of Jacques Derrida, Mahasweta Devi, and, more recently, Aimé Césaire's *Season in the Congo*. Finally, and very interestingly, Spivak explains how "translation is the most intimate act of reading": "something that one should not really call an 'I is writing,'" and "taking the responsibility for the writing of the text," a sustained prayer to be haunted.

NERGAARD: We are excited about your presentation today at the Nida Research Symposium. In your opinion, where is translation taking place, and what is translation today?

In addition to this, I would like you to tell why you started to ask yourself questions about translation. I guess your experiences both as a translator of several texts and your living in a continuous process of translation must be parts of the explanation.

SPIVAK: I think when one uses the word *translation*, then one is looking in English—because you know in the major North Indian languages, you have the Sanskrit-origin word, which is *anuvada*, which is “following-speech,” or you have *tarjama*, which is from the Arabic Farsi meaning “translation,” but also suggesting “biography” and “memoir,” a big source of loans for us—so to an extent before I even start talking about translation, I would want to undertake the impossible project of translating the word “translation” in all the languages of the world, going beyond its “latinity.” We all know translation is transference, and we all know the Italian proverb about the translator as a traitor. But these are all “latinate” words, right? Do we know what happens to the concept when it begins to inhabit other words, other lingual memories? Therefore, when I talk about translation, I’m talking about an English word as a teacher of English because I love English. English is a supple language, and I’m talking about what is done at universities or what is done in tertiary systems of education; I think that translation should be done very well. I’m a literalist. I follow Aristotle in a very vulgar way, and Aristotle is teaching his creative writing class, *Poetics*, where he’s talking not theory, but he’s talking to people who are going to write tragedies to win competitions. What does he say? He says, “Be very careful, very good with *mimesis* and if *poiesis* happens it will come by *tychē*,” “by chance.” That is my formula here: very careful literalism. Because I’m a human being, I can’t be perfectly literal, but also on the positive side if I really hit it, *tychē* will bring something beyond literalism.

So that’s where I am with translation. I believe you wanted me—and I’m sorry my answer is so long because I didn’t want to answer the implicit question—you wanted me to talk about creolization. That is not just something happening today because of diasporics; that is something that has happened forever. That is a phenomenon that has nothing to do with translation studies as a discipline, nothing. Forever the servant has learned the master’s tongue, not well, but well enough so that the master can understand and communicate. This oddly occurs in exogamy in which the wife learns the in-laws’ tongue. In Vienna, I gave a talk where I talked about the wife in exogamy as the original diasporic. It’s not theorized. The Victorians brought in love. The artificiality of courtly love has nothing to do with this. It let us conveniently forget

female exogamy as the originary diaspora. Broaden this, and creolization can be seen as the source of all the grammaticalized languages of the world. It's happening all the time, and you should think of that very much more as a model in practice. For example, I live in Washington Heights. I go into a grocery store, and I creolize Spanish because otherwise the grocer can't talk to me. You know I have more power than he, but in that situation I'm a buyer, a customer; he's the server. If I don't realize the only language he speaks, I don't get served. That's something that's been happening all the time; that's not something that's happening just today. I just offered it because people seem completely blind to it as they talk about translation.

NERGAARD: And this reveals maybe the connection between the relation that has always existed between creolization and translation.

SPIVAK: It can be: class mobility. At the beginning of this process, when Dante chooses the curial creole, he chooses the aristocrats speaking in court out of all the creoles. That's like access to translation; it was written in Latin in *De vulgari eloquentia*. But it's confined to class, and to an extent the women become honorary males, as it were. My sister is married to a Hindi speaker; our language is Bengali. My sister has a chemistry doctorate; she's just been nominated by the government of India in the spreading of science as the head of the advisory committee on gender and communication, and she's an extremely successful person. But she had to learn the language of her husband like a native. I love my brother-in-law, but his Bengali is not that good. This is an imperfect example, because Hindi is also the national language. It's a question of class mobility, and what connection is there? The same connection as Dante told us in the thirteenth century: one is between grammaticalized languages, and the other is a survival technique. That's how I connect them.

GENTZLER: In your talk earlier today you mentioned that you were a New Yorker, and we're here in New York today. New York is wonderfully diverse, multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious, very dynamic. We're here on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. It strikes me as if the whole world is watching how New Yorkers move on, commemorate, and regenerate. You're also from Kolkata, which is also a wonderfully diverse multilingual, international city, with great filmmakers, dynamic political parties, and great diversity. How does the multilingual transla-

tion environment of these cities contribute to or underscore or impact your scholarly thinking about translation?

SPIVAK: What happens is that my experience in the village schools teaches me how not to generalize when I'm at a place like this because my cultural difference from the landless illiterate "schedule" castes and tribes in my home state is greater than my cultural difference from you. They are Indians, so I have an affect that that's what informs me. This symposium started not because I wanted to do anything but because I was asked. I always wait for someone else to ask me. In the subaltern teacher-training endeavor also I was asked by a local activist, in 1986. I'm self-subsidized; I'm not corporately funded. In the beginning I told my students in Pittsburgh and Columbia, "I love you, you're my students, but I need a dollar salary in order to carry out this big challenge: supplementing vanguardism, my greatest intellectual challenge. My mind is not on teaching you. And, because I'm the child of plain-living, high-thinking bourgeois parents, precisely because I don't want to work for you any more I feel that I have to work very well for you so that you will get your money's worth and pay good attention to what I'm saying." But then as the years passed I realized that at two ends of the spectrum I was doing pretty much the same thing because the children of the superpower need to have their desires rearranged—understand the right to intellectual labor—just as much as subalterns who accept wretchedness as normality also need to have their desires rearranged—and learn to practice intellectual labor after millennia of prohibition. I'm not doing good to anyone, I mean these people are not in any problematic situation; I'm teaching at both ends. Therefore, I think that's what makes me tick, and I don't really see it as translating. I am with the language here, I don't just mean English, but the language of detriualizing the humanities here, and I'm with the poetry of the decimal system there because there's no science stream in the local high schools so the rural students can't get into the mainstream. So they're two different idioms—bottom and top—that I have tried to internalize in my own way and not really succeeded. I've not succeeded at this end—I've been kicked upstairs, and I've not succeeded at that end because it's very hard to know what a subject is like after a millennium of cognitive damage. It's not a real answer to your question. You had wanted a more ethnocultural answer, but for that you'll have to wait for my friend, Homi Bhabha.

NERGAARD: Even if we say that the grounding problem of how words get their meaning suggests the necessary impossibility of translation, is

it still important to translate as a political act, as you have translated Mahasweta Devi? You introduce, you explain, and you accompany the translations with explanations. Is that a politically important act to do?

SPIVAK: I think it's losing its importance as the translators are talking more and more about how important they are. Herbert Marcuse and Robert Paul Wolff's idea of repressive tolerance, Raymond Williams's idea of the oppositional being turned into alternative (as an adjective)—that's what's happening with the powerful languages translating a lot of stuff. I think translation is inevitable, and I think as far as what I did, no, I would not say these are political gestures. The only thing that was somewhat teacherly, not really political, was that I wanted not just to supply quick ways of learning culture, because culture can't be learned. And since very often writers are obliquely related to their so-called culture of origin, I gave a few notes. But in India this editor or reviewer for *India Today*, the *Indian Time Magazine*, right, says, "The translation is excellent except for Gayatri Spivak's sermonizing." See, so you think it's a political act, but the Indian upper-class thinks, the nonresident Indian "should keep quiet." So therefore, no, it wasn't a political act; it was just that I wanted these texts to be treated as texts for study rather than a quick way of learning culture without reading the history books. You know what I mean? So, no, I don't think they were political in any broad sense. They were narcissistic. When I first read Derrida, I didn't know who Derrida was. I ordered his books in 1967; I was twenty-five years old. I ordered *De la grammatologie* out of a catalog; I read it. I thought, "My God, this is a fantastic book." And I thought: this guy is an unknown guy, I am a very young assistant professor at the University of Iowa, and I'll destroy myself if I write a book on this guy. I'd heard the University of Massachusetts Press was doing translation, so let me translate. I thought I was being so practical. Also, my chair said, "What are you doing? You wrote a nice dissertation on Yeats. Why are you going off in the direction of this peculiar book?" He also didn't know. So I wrote a query letter that was so innocent that the University of Massachusetts Press said yes. So that is hardly a political act, number one. I said I won't translate unless I can write a monograph-sized introduction. When this scandal became known, J. Hillis Miller sold the contract to the Johns Hopkins Press without my knowledge.

GENTZLER: The introduction is brilliant.

SPIVAK: It's now being translated into French as a separate document and twice into Chinese, once straight and once as Cliff's Notes.

GENTZLER: Brilliant, brilliant.

SPIVAK: I think that's so funny.

GENTZLER: I learned more about Freud from your introduction to *Of Grammatology* than in any of my German courses.

SPIVAK: How wonderful—you know what Paul de Man said. He had been my dissertation adviser. So I wrote the introduction, and I sent it to him, and he said to me, "Gayatri, this is three books. Why are you putting it into an introduction?" And I said, "Well, because it is my introduction." But then with Mahasweta Devi, I started translating her because, in 1981 *Yale French Studies* and *Critical Inquiry* had both asked me to contribute pieces: *Yale French Studies* on French feminism and *Critical Inquiry* on deconstruction. And I was an idiot; you know this is completely narcissistic stuff. I was thirty-nine or something, and like a fool, instead of stepping into the European enclosure, I said, "How can this be?" So for the sake of my "identity," I started translating Mahasweta Devi. Do you call this politics? Then the years passed by, and I began to discover her feudality. So with *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, I put an end to it. This is just part of my life story. It's not seriously political; I think politics is more complicated. In the political you influence the policy makers, the decision makers. You think anybody cares?

GENTZLER: May I ask a follow-up? You just finished translating Aimé Césaire's *Season in the Congo*, and there you have no introduction. Have your thoughts about the presentation of a translation as a book changed after the Devi experience, or is this a different publisher, a different editorial policy, or a different audience for your book?

SPIVAK: You didn't hit the one word that I wanted—a different author, a different author: Aimé Césaire. I don't have to go forward to introduce him.

GENTZLER: This is true.

SPIVAK: I mean he himself was so tremendously active within and beyond Négritude, then his own political work in the Antilles, and

then all the wonderful writing on him. I didn't feel that I had to educate anyone in anything. I do have a short paragraph called "Words from the Translator." For me, that part had to be said because it was the dream of United Africa after Pan-Africanism, just after decolonization and Nkrumah's dream and Lumumba's dream—these were taken up by the others from within French-language imperialism because Aimé Césaire, you see this nation-state business—postimperialism rather than postcolonialism—was not focused on his own nation-state. Aimé Césaire tried to imagine the Congo in a way that Patrice Lumumba would see, and he also made it clear that it wasn't just the CIA or the UN withdrawing that killed Lumumba, but those Katangans within the Congo, with their minerals, etc., who wanted to go with general capitalism. Lumumba himself said he was against "tribalism." Capital has no country. I do have a sentence there where I talk about how one should look at that dream within which Nehru placed his India. But the dream failed. When I said this I forgot the double bind. I who always thinks about double binds forgot it because it was my own problem. I was born before Independence, and the disappointment of decolonization didn't leave my generation because we had hoped with the enthusiasm of adolescence. My colleague Bachir Diagne reminded me of the double bind and the perennial mode of "to come." I gave the task of the introducer to Bachir Diagne. So there is an introduction, but it is written by Bachir Diagne, who's from Senegal.

GENTZLER: Lumumba is a great hero of mine, but I am also from that generation. I was shocked to learn—I teach a course on the Vietnam War, and I mention Lumumba as part of one of my talks on the United States' paranoia against liberation movements around the world, and none of my students knew who Lumumba was. I was just shocked. We have to reteach a new generation the international politics of the period. So your new translation is very well timed. It may extend the parameters of my teaching and maybe others as well.

SPIVAK: Please include the "Words from the Translator" because there I really write as a person of that generation.

GENTZLER: It's very political [laughter].

SPIVAK: That is political. I sense you have another question.

GENTZLER: I am thinking about a love in translation question.

SPIVAK: I want to see how you pose it.

GENTZLER: How I pose it?

SPIVAK: Pose was a very big question, a big word when I was at the University of Iowa, and we used to laugh because one of our co-teachers was always posing questions. So I want to see how you pose it.

GENTZLER: I guess, hmmm, how do I phrase it . . . You say that translation is the most intimate act of reading. I think I agree. Sometimes my students say that they learn more about a text in my translation class than they did reading it in any Spanish or French literature class. You suggest that the translator has to surrender to the text, making choices more erotic than ethical. This strikes me as—I see this sort of Schleiermacherian ethics—the domesticating versus foreignizing binary so prevalent in translation circles; I see that as limiting a translator to fairly rational choices. I see your intimate act of translation as more of an individual choice, more of a visual choice, or more of a personal choice. Could you talk a little bit about this third avenue, this third way of translation?

SPIVAK: I see. You are right, and I agree with you, that it would be an irrational decision. What I am doing is I am describing. I am not giving a method. I am saying that translation is the most intimate act of reading, whatever you choose to do. Even as a bad translator, that is about as intimate that you can get. Haven't you met people who cannot really get close to you, which is their misfortune. For me it would also be correct to say that reading is also the most intimate act of translation. It wouldn't be a chiasmus. There would always be a difference. Yet they are a pair of dissimilar similars. And for some people, the intending subject always slips in, their misfortune; they can't give it up to the text. The interesting difference between this whole translation business, how good it is, etc. and the dismissal of reading—oh, get your Kindle, etc. is a global cultural lesson. We read when we were young, since there was no Xerox machine, no nothing, and it was always borrowing and going to lending libraries, national libraries. Karl Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, copied pages and pages and pages. That way of reading is gone. That's okay. I am not saying bring it back. When the desire to translate grabs you, it is an unexpected thing that you welcome. You begin to feel, and the trouble is, this is so without guarantees, so without the ability to test, that people will claim it. It's too bad. People will always claim that they are doing this. You cannot do anything about

it. But you begin to feel that you are writing the text. This happened to me with Melanie Klein. I really began to feel as if—not that it was me—but it was that the *text* was being written in the reading. It is not at all an identity—Melanie Klein/Gayatri Spivak—that kind of thing. I invite my students to think when I am teaching Marx, which I do, a thousand pages of Marx with the translation—it's not Marxism—I invite them at least to imagine, to take it out of history, as it were, and to imagine that there was a day when this stuff was not there. It's actually a contingent piece of writing. I mean, of course, being what I am, the historical must be considered, but there again, I very much, I have this sense, and with Aimé Césaire, in that one scene where Lumumba is dying and there is the blood coming up and in that foam he sees outside of himself into dawning Africa, right, the rosiness. That particular scene, which is of course incorrect because that is not how he died, but it is a play. I must have, but it is not living that scene, because that would be this kind of narcissism that one works against, but I felt again and again that I, that something that one should not really call an "I," is writing. That's the intimacy that I am talking about. Taking the responsibility for the writing of the text. This can't be given as a method, nor as a choice. Even if you teach it, you should not give it as a prescription that I am giving. I just wrote a little piece on loss for Seagull Books, who brought out the Aimé Césaire translation, for their catalogue, and the biggest thing about humanities teaching when it really is humanities teaching is that you are teaching people to play something, to philosophize if philosophy, and to read if literature. You do history of this and history of that and other things, but they are only other models. The main thing that you are teaching is to *play* something: one's self as an instrument. And there are some who surprise you as being the ones who can be taught to play to lose. Because that is how one teaches. Playing to lose. Because *qui gagne perd*. This is like an abyss. Because if who wins loses, then is winning losing, losing winning, losing one's desire to win and all of that stuff, is playing to lose winning? This doesn't end. It is something that you kind of give in to, right? Rather than think about incessantly. So for them, the philosophers of the future, we who are just servants of our students, earning a living teaching, we live in that hope and this intimate act of reading, which is really a prayer to be haunted by the spirit of the writing, not the person. How can I describe it? I am a complete atheist; I am a complete nonbeliever in the soul, but this is about as close to this effect of grace that one can get to. It is the intuition of the transcendental, which, unless you have it, you cannot mourn and you cannot judge,

and that is what is caught by this definition of intimacy. It's not a definition; it is a description.

NERGAARD AND GENTZLER: Thank you very much.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, University Professor at Columbia, has recently been awarded the Kyoto Prize for Thought and Ethics (2012). Her most recent publication is *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2012). She is a translator of the works of Derrida and Mahasweta Devi and is the author of *Death of a Discipline* (2003), *Other Asias* (2008), and *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). She founded The Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorty Memorial Project for Rural Education in 1997, to train teachers among the landless illiterate and to return to modern indigenous agriculture, in a rural district of



West Bengal, India, continuing work that she had started doing in 1986. She is at work on a book on W. E. B Du Bois. Email: gcs piv@gmail.com.