

BOOK REVIEWS

An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization, Gayatri C. Spivak

February 2012 Hardback

\$35.00 • £25.95 • €31.50 ISBN 9780674051836

Harvard University Press

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, The University of British Columbia, Canada

An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization (AEEG) has 25 essays spanning a period of 23 years and represents Spivak's cumulative retrospection on the meaning, difficulties, joys and paradoxes of teaching in the humanities focusing on the conflictual intersections of ethics, aesthetics and politics. The book has been described as an enthusiastic reminder of “pedagogy’s power to reach beyond the logic of capital” (Bari, 2012, p.1). The book offers a patterned mosaic of her pedagogical propositions, something that can be extremely useful for thinking education “otherwise.”

However, in order to give justice to Spivak’s propositions it is necessary to trace them back to the context of critique within which they emerged. Therefore, what I decided to do in this review article is to offer a very brief synthesis of Spivak’s critiques and propositions that I think are of most value to an “Other” education and, in order to do this, I will focus on her work as whole; not only her latest book.

But before I go any further, I should qualify my own reading of Spivak. Although I do have a first degree in English and literary studies, I was only introduced to Spivak’s scholarship while carrying out research on the World Social Forum at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, which is hosted by the Department of Political Theory at the University of Nottingham, in England. Since then, my reading of Spivak has focused on political and existential (rather than literary) aspects of her work and has been deeply influenced by discussions with colleagues in political theory and cultural and development studies.

Since I was introduced to Spivak’s work, her insights have not only given me the language to articulate sticky educational, political and existential concerns, but have also pushed me to expand my imagination and educational practice in profound ways. On the other hand, I must say that her style of writing made me want to give her up at least a thousand times. An example of her difficult and dense prose can be found right in the introduction of AEEG. Here we go:

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti
The University of British Columbia
vanessa.andreotti@ubc.ca

I would like to propose that the training of the imagination that can teach the subject to play—an aesthetic education—can also teach it to discover (theoretically or practically) the premises of the habit that obliges us to transcendentalize religion and nation (as Bateson and Freud both point out). If, however, this is only a “rearrangement of desire” or the substitution of one habit for another through pedagogical sleight-of-hand, there will be no ability to recover that discovery for a continuity of epistemological effort. We must learn to do violence to the epistemo-epistemological difference and remember that this is what education “is,” and thus keep up with the work of displacing belief onto the terrain of the imagination, attempt to access the epistemic. (Spivak, 2012, p. 10)

Countless times I have asked myself: “What on Earth is she on about?” or “Does she do this on purpose?” and if so “Does she really want to alienate so many readers?” I kept asking these questions until the day I realized that I should not try to read her linearly, but this is a conversation for another day. Today I intend to do precisely the opposite of nonlinear thinking: I will present her in a square box for a good purpose. So my “Spivak-in-a-nutshell” should be read for what it is: a situated interpretation that grossly over-simplifies something much richer, sophisticated and, to be honest, way more convoluted than what I will present here.

Spivak’s critique

The quickest way to illustrate her analysis of global relations and the unequal divisions of wealth and labor is through a metaphor. I often use a modified version of Jens Galshiot’s sculpture of Justitia—*The Western Goddess of Justice*, to offer a glimpse of her critique. In Galshiot’s sculpture, a very heavy white woman is being carried by a skinny black man. She has her eyes closed and is carrying a scale (representing justice) in one hand and a staff in another. She is saying: “I’m sitting on the back of a man. He is sinking under the burden. I would do anything to help him. Except stepping down from his back.”

I generally invert the gender relations in the sculpture: I have re-drawn it as a picture of a gagged black woman carrying a blindfolded heavy white man holding the scales and saying something similar to what the woman in the sculpture says: “I will do anything to help you except what would really change the historical conditions of our relationship.” When I present this to my students, I ask if they can count and name the injustices in the scene—both immediate injustices and injustices by implication. For example, the division of labor could be traced down to colonial/imperial processes and exploitative accumulation of capital grounded on racialized and gendered notions of cultural supremacy and exceptionalism; carrying the scales could represent the “epistemic violence” of the hegemonic “worldling of the world as West” (i.e., the definition of what is meant by justice and the control of institutions of law and education); the discursive paradox can represent Spivak’s notion of the “double bind” where one orientation cancels the other. I use the gagging of the subaltern woman later to talk about Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (or can those over-socialized in cultural supremacy really listen beyond what they can understand, especially when they are the ones enabling her

voice?). Therefore, in a small nutshell, we have the patriarchal and racialized structural and discursive making of unequal divisions of labour and wealth grounded in coloniality.

What is not obvious in this picture, and a very important aspect of Spivak's critique, is her problematization of representation and agentic protagonism of benevolent intellectuals (and activists) who: a) harvest data from the so called "Third World"; b) represent or speak on behalf of the "masses" (including Foucault and Deleuze) (see Stein and Andreotti in press); or c) attempt to "give voice" to subalterns. She also launches a sharp critique of "native informants": socially mobile elites from the global South claiming subaltern status who benefit from tokenistic economies of inclusion. Spivak illustrates the problems with these engagements with reference to her own position as a 'Third World' woman teaching in the 'First' - she constantly draws attention to the irony of critiques reproducing precisely the problems they are trying to address and the need for a hyper-self-reflexive stance that pushes us to work without guarantees (for more on this see Kapoor 2004; McEwan 2008; Andreotti 2007; 2011; 2012; 2014; Stein and Andreotti in press).

This is where her post-structuralist disciplinary background (remember she was Derrida's translator) sets her apart from traditional Marxists and separates her pedagogical project from critical pedagogy teleologies. Unlike those who believe that emancipation from false consciousness leads to "true" consciousness, empowerment, and progressive protagonistic agency, with her sharp radar for aporias, Spivak cannot see any space outside of a system *where one can launch a critique without being implicated in it*. She does not believe deconstruction can be the foundation of any political project, but she sees it as a safeguard for progressive projects that protect these projects against the seductive blindness to their own internal contradictions. Hence, for me, the greatest gift of her work is the possibility of analyses of systemic complicities, of what these complicities can teach us about where we are coming from and where we can (or should not) go, and of how we can find ways of using complicities, paradoxes and contradictions to imagine differently and to open up spaces of subversion, where, educationally, we might be able to support the emergence of what she calls an "ethical imperative towards the Other, before will" (Spivak, 2004, p. 535).

Spivak's propositions for education

I now turn to Spivak's propositions for education. I chose four main ideas to focus on: learning one's privilege as one's loss; education as an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires; the project of de-transcendentalizing religion and nation; and learning the double bind (her latest maxim).

Learning one's privilege as one's loss: Spivak does not use this phrase anymore. She uses other phrases to talk about the same thing, but I still find it extremely useful. My interpretation of her statement is that our inherited privilege (e.g., class mobility, social and cultural capital, whiteness, education, etc.) has restricted our imagination and possibilities of existence, and prevented us from having access to other ways of knowing and being. This interrupts the common belief that the privileged 'I' is complete while the Other is lacking. This deficit or deprivation of the privileged 'I' can be observed in at least two ways. First, it can be observed in our foreclosures or sanctioned ignorances (what we have to deny in order to continue to

believe what we want to believe in) that tend to direct our desires inwards towards fixed teleologies and towards having our certainties and identities affirmed. Second, it can be observed in our *inability* to even identify, let alone make sense of, possibilities beyond what we have been (over) socialized into. This creates specific desires: We want our truth confirmed, or, if this truth is destabilized, we want a concrete alternative, and this alternative must come in our own language and in our own terms. Realizing that the paradox and arrogance of this position is a *loss* is part of what Spivak is talking about.

Education as an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires: If our desires have been trapped in imagined outcomes and our senses and language can only perceive that which is familiar, causing us to reproduce our ethical-political mistakes over and over, Spivak sees the humanities, or an aesthetic education, as a way to expand the imagination without replacing it with something already known. She expresses this possibility in many different ways in her work. For her, an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires is related to “a recruiting of [...] teachers reaching hearts and minds, against the interests of a maximal capitalism, and unmediated cyber literacy as the greatest good” (Spivak, 2012, p. 11). She emphasizes the need for a de-transcendentalization of the state and of religion (Spivak, 2012, p. 296), which are taken for granted signifiers that mobilize the allocation of desires and are placed beyond critique. This de-transcendentalization is done in an effort “to rid the mind of the narrowness of believing in one thing and not in other things” (p. 297).

In my own work, the suggestion of an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires has helped me interrogate my own practice deeper (Andreotti 2012) and, more recently, to articulate a tentative ethico-political pedagogical project framed around desire re-arrangements (Andreotti 2011; 2014). Drawing also on other theorists who offer critiques of modernity’s enchantments (e.g. Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 1999; Maldonado-Torres, 2007), Spivak’s work has inspired me to explore the role of education in reproducing and/or contesting desires allocated towards three different ‘dreams’ of modernity: 1) The dream of modern teleologies (engineered seamless progress in linear time through science and technology); 2) The dream of innocent heroic protagonism (anthropocentric agency grounded on Cartesian subjectivities, where being/existence is designed by thought); and 3) The dream of totalizing forms of knowledge production (i.e., knowing/naming the world to control it, which takes us back to 1) (Andreotti, 2014).

Learning (to play) the double bind (rather than to solve it): Or “learning to live with contradictory instructions” (Spivak, 2012, p. 3), or paradoxical imperatives, or conflicting demands... I could only start to grasp this when I realized that dialectical negations (e.g., White has been bad, when it was supposed to be good) generated antagonistic projections (e.g., therefore Black is now good) that became a mirror reactive reflection of what the dialectical negation was trying to overcome in the first place. The possibility of holding Black and White in tension with their potential negative and positive aspects in view (and being aware of the partiality of this view) is how I interpret the double bind. For example: Very often, counter-hegemonic movements become new hegemonies, counter-ethnocentric strategies challenging universalism become absolutely relativistic (which is another form of

universalism), and attempts to correct ahistoricism (that abound in education) end up in history being high-jacked for a single political cause (see Andreotti & Souza 2012; Andreotti 2012). Every solution creates another problem... nothing is uncontaminated, in particular the illusion of a pure, innocent, authentic and only benign transcendental signifier (be it the State, religion, a progressive movement, a heroic philosopher, or an “original” culture that can save us) or the very desire to inhabit this signifier, to see our ideologies as harmless and ourselves as systemically and personally innocent.

Learning the double bind means taking a step back to observe the swing of the pendulum socially, historically, and in relation to our own desires, and trying to work around it, to ab-use and subvert the direction of the signifying motion (see for a distinction between dialectic and analectic negation that resonates with the critique of the pendulum in Gaztambide-Fernández 2014). The humanities (and their master, the Enlightenment) offer good examples of a double bind: We like to think about the humanities as “emancipatory,” but the humanities can also be perceived as “enslaving” of the imagination, if we trace them back to their provincial roots. And this does not mean that the humanities are bad—or good—they are sites of signification that can be re-signified “from below” or be “productively undone.” For Spivak productive undoing is done “at the faultlines of the doing, without accusation, without excuse, with a view to use” (Spivak, 2012, p. 1). However, Spivak warns us that playing the double bind is also a double bind, both a virtue and a vice as it is done “without guarantees”: “to deny the pervasiveness of the double bind leads to failed revolutions, [p]aradoxically, to acknowledge its pervasiveness does not lead to unqualified success” (Spivak, 2012, p. 476). We can't know when we are playing the game or being played by it, but that is not a good reason not to try, in fact, an ethical imperative compels us to do so (another double bind!).

To conclude, Spivak is one of the few theorists who will not offer us comfort in answers that will give us a key to occupy that innocent and benevolent place beyond critique that we have learned to aspire to: a space where we are not complicit with that which we criticize. Instead, she gives us a language to name that which is difficult to speak of; that is both outside and inside ourselves. She role-models the craft of generating vocabularies of possibilities of knowing, being and relating otherwise, but always “without guarantees.” In the same breath, she commands us to walk our talks, she tells us that this is an impossible task, and that, still, we need to see success and find joy in our failure. For those who appreciate being continuously undone (and who are used to her writing style) *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* will be a welcome gift.

References

- Andreotti, V. (2014). Conflicting epistemic demands in poststructuralist and postcolonial engagements with questions of complicity in systemic harm. *the Journal of Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 50(4), pp. 378-397.
- Andreotti, V. (2012). Education, knowledge and the righting of wrongs. *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 1(1), pp. 19-31.

- Andreotti, V. (2011). *Actionable postcolonial theory in education*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Andreotti, V. (2007). An ethical engagement with the Other: Gayatri Spivak on education. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices*, 1(1), pp. 69-79.
- Andreotti, V. & Souza, L. (Eds.). (2012). *Postcolonial perspectives on global citizenship education*. New York: Routledge.
- Bari, S. (2012). Review of an Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization. *Times Higher Education*. Available online at: www.timeshighereducation.co.uk Last accessed: 1 August 2014.
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2014). Decolonial options and artistic/aesthetic entanglements: An interview with Walter Dignolo. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(1):196-212. Available online at: <http://decolonization.org>
- Kapoor, I. (2004). Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World "Other." *Third World Quarterly*, 25(4), pp. 627-647.
- McEwan, C. (2008). *Postcolonialism and development*. New York: Routledge.
- Mignolo, W. (2011). *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Quijano, A. (1999). Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en *América Latina*. *Dispositivo*, 24(51), pp. 137-148.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of Being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), pp. 240-270.
- Spivak, G. (2004). Righting wrongs. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2/3), pp. 523-81.
- Spivak, G. (2012). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stein, S., Andreotti, V. (in press). Complicity, ethics and education: Political and existential readings of Spivak's work. Accepted in *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices*.

Reviewer details:

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti is Canada Research Chair in Race, Inequalities and Global Change at the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her latest edited book is *The Political Economy of Global Citizenship Education*, published by Routledge.

