

## Conversations in Japan

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

I have been for a long time troubled by the question of "Asia," indeed with the heterogeneity and diversity hidden by the names of most continents. In Japan in the summer of 2007, it was possible for me to ask that question in the most productive way, and to receive instruction as to how to look for answers. Conversations ranged from an earlier phase of Pan-Asianism to contemporary sub-nationalisms, and a deep concern for neglected indigenities. Indeed, it was the self-criticism that is the material of a critical nationalism that engaged me during those weeks.

The Asia-Pacific, Oceania, and Central Asia as the playground of NATO and the ex-Soviets (today's Great Game, as it were) fit in here. Japan's status in the region as a former empire and perpetrator of dubious gender politics in the theaters of war, was repeatedly brought up in open discussion and this intellectual freedom was, for me, an impressive part of the good memories that I cherish.

My interest in the issue of continentalism is framed in the possibility of an activism located in, yet radiating beyond the University, rather than in polar opposition to it. For University folks to be activists is to be "outside in the teaching machine," has been my conviction. The need for the humanities is crucial here, because, without the desire to touch cultural infrastructures that is a part of the humanities, activism too frequently becomes a matter of a quantified convenience, where a reputation for generosity is sometimes acquired by a combination of fundraising and an ignoring of long term consequences. At Hitotsubashi University, it was possible to suggest this with active participation by my brilliant translator Ted Motohashi, the very different but equally moving and painstaking responses by Lee Chong-Hwa & Minoru Iwasaki, questions from the many participating students, and, of course, the tremendous welcome from the faculty, reminding me of the close ties between Bengal and Japan, from poetry to national liberation, challenging for many decades the distinction between the intellectual and the activist.

My other encompassing interests are, comparativism in literature and life, deeply connected with feminism in both. They informed all our conversations; but most particularly my planned intervention at Okinawa, and the spirited dialogues at Ochanomizu, the women's university, with Kazuko Takemura, Fumie Ohashi, and others. Reproductive heteronormativity has been for me the oldest and broadest institution, which provides validity within the most ancient social formations as well as today, across the class-network, in the most remote areas as well as the most sophisticated bulwarks of globali-zation. And yet, we are in a double bind with it. As I am fond of saying, if we love our parents, we are in such a double bind—and I certainly hope that we do. Some of this fascination was caught in Ochanomizu.

I remember with particular delight the constructive criticism that came from Fumie, my only graduate student interlocutor in the planned public debates. I was able to emphasize something that I have said to students for the last 45 years,

that initially one builds the foundation, by concentrating, so that later, at a certain point, it becomes possible to expand, cautiously at first, and then more and more. At the time of foundation building, I have insisted with my best students, one must give a lot of time to deep language learning. Fumie's interest in work in India is important in this respect. There is no possibility of slowly spreading one's intellectual and political wings later productively, if the languages are postponed. Access to the intuition of the transcendental comes through lingual memory.

In the matter of comparativism, therefore, I am able to suggest that we must think of all languages as equivalent, in that each can serve as a first language, activating the meta-psychological circuits of the infant that go on to constitute the possibility of an unconditional ethics. In all cases, I have found the literary to be a textual arrangement that can, through the teaching of reading in the most robust sense, lead us into affecting these insights.

In conclusion, I acknowledge the connections made with my love of theory by my new friend Professor Hiroko Sakamoto and my old friend Professor Satoshi Ukai. These colleagues know, of course, that the practice of theorizing is a passion that permeates the entire spectrum from politics to personal pleasure.

I hope this is the first of a series of interactions. I miss Tokyo. □□□