Paulo Freire, Gayatri Spivak, and the (Im)possibility of Education
– The Methodological Leap in Pedagogy of the Oppressed and “Righting Wrongs”

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The main objective of this essay is to find out and show as to whether the respective pedagogies of Paolo Freire and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are free from the authoritarian and oppressive tendencies they both expressively seek to oppose. More specifically, the investigation presented in this text is focused on the relation between theory and method in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Spivak’s “Righting Wrongs – 2002: Accessing Democracy among the Aboriginals.” The analysis of this relation, and these two texts, moreover, is informed by three interconnected research questions, asking (1) how Freire and Spivak prompt us to *learn from the learner*, (2) if Freire and Spivak manage to circumvent the danger of transference, of imposing the teacher’s agenda on the student, and (3) how the *methodological leap* (from theory to practice) of Freire and Spivak fit into their respective theorizing in a broader sense. As the inquiries above suggest, this essay pays close attention to the fact that Freire and Spivak both—albeit to different degrees—try to render their theories practicable, while still avoiding undemocratic methods that fail to take into account the voice and the reality of the student. By way of a close reading of some of Freire’s and Spivak’s central pedagogical concepts, a thorough scrutiny of the concrete methodological examples provided by the same scholars, and an analysis of Freire’s dialectical reasoning and Spivak’s Marxist/deconstructionist theorizing, this thesis aims to demonstrate that neither of these two theorists are completely successful in realizing their educational projects. In the case of Freire, this is primarily due to a methodological saving clause that ultimately functions so as to mute students whose voices are not resonant with that of the pedagogue, and in Spivak’s case, the failure finds its explanation mainly in the author’s deconstructionist tendency to resist the practice of offering concrete, overall solutions to complicated problems.

Keywords: Paolo Freire, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, education, pedagogy, ideology.
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“I mean your analysis…no, better call it ours—aren’t we showing contempt for him, for that poor man—in analysing his soul like this, as it were, from above, eh?” (Dostoevsky, The Karamazov Brothers, 236).

1. Introduction.

For more than two millennia, well-balanced dialogue has been a highly respected means of stimulating awareness and critical thinking in students. The listening pedagogue, who learns from his or her learners, is often elevated as an obvious good, antithetical to the self-absorbed lecturer. As admirable as this idea is, however, it raises some important questions: for starters, the question of how. How, more specifically, is it possible for any teacher to avoid the risk of imposing ideas and ideals on the pupils? In other words, what didactic methods make for this true dialogue, propelled by the contributions of both student and teacher? Unfortunately, as the praiseworthy practice of the dialogical educator is seldom thoroughly discussed, questions of this kind often remain unanswered.

In this essay, I focus on two pedagogically oriented theorists who struggle with the very problematic described above: the postcolonial critics Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-). These two thinkers have both made attempts at offering pedagogical formulas that take into account the “reality” of the student in order to oust oppressive tendencies from the classroom, and at a first glance, many of their ideas seem close to identical: Freire speaks dismissively of “banking” education (75)—Spivak indicts rote learning (“Righting” 551); Freire argues that a reconciliation of the teacher-student contradiction is a prerequisite for proper education (all participants need to be “teachers and students” simultaneously [53])—Spivak exhorts the educator to “learn to learn from below” (548). In other words, Freire and Spivak both advocate a pedagogy whose “very legitimacy lies in…dialogue” (Freire 109)—and, as I will argue, most importantly, they both undertake what this text labels a methodological leap, from theory to practice, from thought to action.

The main objectives of this essay, then, will be to find out how Freire and Spivak render their pedagogical theories practicable, and as to whether they—in doing this—manage to circumvent the danger of transference, of imposing the educator’s agenda on the learner. Arguably, these inquiries implicitly ask the question as to whether it is possible for any pedagogue to initiate a didactic model based on dialogue without establishing a “fixed” itinerary for the student to follow; in other words, the problems described above belong not
only to Freire and Spivak, but to all reflective practitioners who are concerned with the communication between themselves and their students. From this it follows that, as the challenges of Freire and Spivak might be considered our challenges, their solutions, too, might possibly be our solutions. Therefore, a scrutiny of the methods advocated by the former has an indisputable value for the general field of pedagogy.

Here it must be noted, however, that whereas the questions posed by Freire and Spivak have general significance, the contexts in which their respective pedagogies were founded are both rather noteworthy. Freire, to begin with, was born in the Brazilian city of Recife, where he experienced severe destitution at an early age; when the effects of the Stock Market Crash of 1929 hit Brazil, affecting the export industry and thus a majority of the people dramatically, he was eight years old. Soon after this, in 1932, during the aftermath of the crisis, Freire’s family moved to neighboring Jaboatão dos Guararapes, where living expenses were somewhat more affordable. It was here, at the modest age of ten, Freire “began to think that there were a lot of things in the world that were not going well,” and it was here he had to learn how to endure school underfed: “I didn’t understand anything because of my hunger,” Freire has explained—“I wasn’t dumb. It wasn’t lack of interest. My social condition didn’t allow me to have an education. Experience showed me… the relationship between social class and knowledge” (qtd in Schugurensky 14). In 1934, when Freire’s father passed away, the situation worsened again—first economically, and then academically; grades plummeted, and a few of Freire’s teachers diagnosed him as developmentally disabled (14). Eventually, however, material conditions changed for the better, and so did Freire’s academic performance; still in high school, he became a teacher of syntax and grammar, and after a few detours early on in his career, this would also turn out to be his foremost vocation (14). In 1947, he became director of “the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service of Industry (SESI) in the state of Pernambuco”—a position he would hold for ten years (17). The welfare work that occupied Freire during this period would ultimately inform his writings on pedagogy; as early as 1958, in a paper written for the Second National Conference on Adult Education, he argued that education for adults “should begin with the day-to-day situations experienced by learners,” and that “for any educational project oriented toward democracy to be successful, educators should work with learners in co-creating knowledge” (18, italics mine). As we shall se, these ideas would prove no temporary features in Freire’s pedagogical theory.

Another vastly important event in Freire’s life and career took place in 1963, when he became director of “the University of Recife’s Cultural Extension Service” and, as such,
administered literacy programs intended for peasants in the northeast corner of the country—
“one of the poorest and most unequal regions of the planet,” where “life expectancy was 28
years for men and 32 years for women, and the illiteracy rate was about 75 percent [which
meant that only about 25 percent of the inhabitants were allowed to vote]” (21). This reform
work of Freire’s, however, ended abruptly in 1964, when president Goulart was overthrown
by the Brazilian military (supported by the CIA), and Freire was incarcerated and declared an
“‘international subversive’ and a traitor of Christ and the Brazilian people” responsible for
writing decried as parallel to “‘that of Stalin, Hitler, Peron, and Mussolini’” (McLaren 155) 1.
After 70 days of imprisonment, he was exiled—a state in which he would remain for 16 years.
It is during this period of homelessness Freire writes his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)—
one of the texts of main interest in this essay.

It will come as no surprise for the reader that the eventful career delineated above has
had a great impact on the tone and subject matter of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Nonetheless,
however, it should be mentioned—at least parenthetically—first that Freire often uses the
pronouns “oppressed” and “student” interchangeably, and second, that the specificity of the
locus of gestation of Freire’s works should never be forgotten. Needless to say, teaching
famished farmers in rural Brazil in 1963 is quite different from schooling deep-pocketed
“millennials” in an affluent suburb north of Stockholm. Of central concern in this essay,
however, are Freire’s and Spivak’s methods per se, and how these are designed so as to take
into account the culture, the interests, and the voice of the student, whomever this may be.
Furthermore, explicitly connected to this concern is my main objective, to determine whether
Freire and Spivak succeed in presenting pedagogies that are completely non-oppressive; and
although we are free to draw parallels to all kinds of pedagogies and situations, we must first
compare the specific theories of Freire and Spivak and the specific methodologies of Freire
and Spivak to the specific examples they themselves provide us with. Only via an analysis of
this kind will it be possible to ascertain whether the educational ideas of these two
pedagogues are untarnished by the very domineering tendencies they seek to indict.

Though Spivak’s childhood—unlike Freire’s—did not coincide with the Great
Depression, her birth was synchronous with another historical event: the great artificial
famine of 1942—a disaster planned so as to provision British soldiers in what was commonly
referred to during WWII as the Pacific Theater of Operations, or, simply, the Asian Theater.

1 Of course, several factors contributed to this development. For instance, Goulart officially sympathized
with either side in the Cold War, expropriated oil refineries that formerly belonged to foreign companies,
and caused unease in the Brazilian oligarchy with his efficacious literacy programs (Schugurensky 22-23).
Spivak was born in Calcutta, and in 1959, twelve years after India was declared independent, this was also where she graduated from the university (with extraordinary credentials in English and Bengali literature). Eventually, Spivak moved from one continent to another, acquired a Master’s in English at Cornell University in upstate New York, relocated again, and went on a one-year fellowship at Cambridge’s Girton College. A few years later, while finishing her doctoral thesis, she was hired as an instructor at the University of Iowa—a job that was later succeeded by several prestigious positions at renowned universities all across the United States.

However, while Spivak’s teaching career took off in America, her pedagogic efforts would eventually cross the borders of the Western world; in 1997, she launched the Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorty Memorial Literacy Project—a not-for-profit organization which provides children in rural West Bengal with “quality education.” Spivak’s present work within this field also includes the training of local teachers.

It is this context, then—rural regions in West Bengal, and literacy training for young subalterns—we need to bear in mind when we approach Spivak’s ideas on education. The pronoun “subaltern,” is here key, and for Spivak, it denotes a subject existing outside power, “subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity” (Norton 2111). This is a person, in other words, who is not merely marginal to the social and economic norm, but whose life, as it were, is led exterior to the system altogether, disconnected from state and society. As William Paul Simmons observes, moreover, Spivak disapproves of organizations or movements that attempt to represent or plead the cause of the subaltern and consequently turn these subjects into “the universal or a ‘people’ instead of a series of singularities creating themselves into a multiplicity…” (143). This risk is imminent, Spivak states, as the subaltern is a person who does not possess “’the power to self-synecdochize,’” whose voice is muted, and who accordingly cannot even represent him- or herself (qtd in Simmons 143). Let it be clear, then, that this is whom Spivak refers to when she speaks of the “student,” or the “learner,” and that this is the person her didactic examples primarily concern. However, in Spivak’s own words, “in the hope that [her] words will be read by some who are interested in comparable work elsewhere, [she is] always pushing for generalization” (“Righting” 551).

Reading this as an invitation, the author of this essay will take the opportunity to juxtapose Spivak’s generalizations with those of Paulo Freire, in the hope that this will yield interesting results for teachers wishing to learn both with and from their students.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, a signal characteristic of Freirean and Spivakian pedagogical theory both is that they eventually—to different degrees—crystallize in relatively concrete methodological examples. In my essay, the espousal of this practical dimension, this endeavor to render theory practicable, is referred to as a methodological leap. The primary aim of my text, then, is to find out what happens in this leap, in this maneuver from theory to practice, from abstract philosophy to concrete exemplification. Do Freire’s and Spivak’s dialogical ideals remain intact, and, if so, how is this achieved? Three markedly interconnected inquiries will shape the execution of my analysis. They read as follows:

• How do Freire and Spivak prompt us to learn from the learner?
• How do Freire and Spivak circumvent the danger of transference, of imposing the educator’s agenda on the student?
• How does the methodological leap of Freire and Spivak fit into their respective theorizing in a broader sense?

It goes without saying that to engage successfully in the questions listed above, we need to be familiar with the theoretical tools employed by both thinkers; therefore, before anything else is done, I will offer a reading of some main points in the theorizing of both Freire and Spivak. As the reader will soon discover, the theorists presented in this essay both belong to a strand of inquiry focused on ideology critique—a practice which in both cases is supposed to pave the way for a pedagogy with the potential to enfranchise students whose voices are normally silenced by ideologically conditioned oppression.

3. Material and Method.

The main primary sources chosen for my analysis are Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Spivak’s “Righting wrongs: Accessing Democracy among the Aboriginals”—one book and one article in which the play between theory and method is apparent. In the case of Spivak, however, I have been obliged to muster material from more than one text, the reason for this being Spivak’s tendency to focus on more than one issue at the time, and to elaborate on the one and same idea in more than one article. Thus, focusing on Spivak’s pedagogy, I have found strong complementary sources in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Outside in the Teaching Machine, and in an interview by Nermeen Shaikh.

Unfortunately, little has been written on the correspondences and differences between
Freire’s and Spivak’s work on education, and what is there to find, moreover, is indeed tangential to my research questions. On the other hand, however, a lot has been published on the individual efforts of each pedagogue, and from these corpora, I have derived a number of valuable ideas both to refute and agree with. In the chapters where I explicate and critique Freire’s theories, both general and pedagogic, the insights of Henry A. Giroux, Peter McLaren, and W. Ross Winterowd will prove helpful; in the equivalent chapters on Spivak, the ideas of Ilan Kapoor, Terry Eagleton, and William Paul Simmons will assist my analysis. The reader must note, however, that this essay will adopt no complete theories or methods offered by the scholars enumerated above; rather, the ideas I refer to along the way will merely aid me in my theoretically oriented scrutiny of Freire’s and Spivak’s theories and methods. This, in other words, means that the works of Freire and Spivak constitute both theory and material in this text: theory (Freire’s and Spivak’s ponderings on the world of pedagogy and the world as such) and object of analysis (again, Freire’s and Spivak’s ponderings on the world of pedagogy and the world as such) are merged together. This fact, of course, is not the result of an inadvertent error on behalf of the author; on the contrary, it is the corollary of a deliberate move, of an attempt to answer the question as to whether the pedagogies studied here are the same in theory as in the examples of practice offered by the pedagogues themselves. Below is our starting point: a chapter that places Freire and Spivak in their respective theoretical contexts.

4. Theory—Ideology and Education.


Although the theoretical differences between Freire and Spivak abound, there are also important similarities between the lines of reasoning that constitute the foundations of their respective pedagogical programs. As previously mentioned, one of these correspondences concerns ideology as a phenomenon that needs to be charted and understood in order for a liberating pedagogy to be developed. Beginning with Freire, I will now show how this notion manifests itself in his and Spivak’s work.

Drawing on Karl Marx—and adherents as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, György Lukács and Louis Althusser—Freire discusses the ideologically constituted myths that check the liberation of the oppressed; for instance: “the myth that the oppressor order is a ‘free society,’” “the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur,” and “the myth of the universal right of education, when of all the Brazilian children who enter primary
schools only a tiny fraction ever reach the university” (120). Due to the false consciousness of the oppressed, Freire argues, these myths pass unnoticed (111). Furthermore, for Freire, this concept of false consciousness is hinged on the idea of fatalism—a state of mind rendering the subject oblivious of the fact that he or she can change the world (66)—and suggests that there “is no history without humankind, and no history for human beings… [,] only history of humanity, made by people and (as Marx pointed out) in turn making them” (111). A false perception of the world, Freire has it, fails to see this; instead, it reifies the very same history, and accordingly views material reality as an unalterable constant.

A destructive symptom of the “ideology of oppression,” Freire claims, is the tendency of the dominant elites to project “an absolute ignorance onto others” by way of a dismissal of “education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (53). In the forms of education often advocated and practiced in oppressive societies, he adds, the distinction between the educator and the educated is indissoluble: “The teacher presents himself [sic] to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence” (53). For the students, Freire argues, this results in a state of alienation; believing that they know nothing and that they are completely deprived of agency, pupils in oppressive classrooms accept to be “filled” with “the contents of [the teacher’s narration]—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (52-53). In this classroom—the scene of “banking” education, as Freire calls it—words “are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (52).

In the quotations above, Freire implicitly points out how ideology severs the connection between language and reality, and how it blocks from view the fact that, in a historical sense, people are agents and not marionettes. In other words, ideology is here understood as a smokescreen that prevents people from comprehending the world. The task of education then, according to Freire, should be to de-ideologize, and, in doing so, “unveil” reality (150, 154). Faced with this challenge, Freire contends, banking education is clearly not up to the mark; on the contrary, as hinted above, this pedagogical doctrine rather contributes to the maintenance of oppressive ideology. For this reason, Freire offers “problem-posing education” as a liberating alternative, encouraging students to become “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (62). Whereas banking education “attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness,” he explains, problem-posing education “strives

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2 Henceforth, I will not emphasize Freire’s use of gender-specific pronouns.
for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” (62). This is education as “the practice of freedom”—from ideologically conditioned myths, and potentially, from oppression (62).

Most likely, no reader fails to note that Freire is a devout dialectician—something that manifests itself not least when he attempts to disclose the “true” world hidden behind the veils of ideology. In Freire’s rendering, this world tends to be structured according to a binarist logic; for instance, the oppressed is antithetical to the oppressor, “problem-solving education” finds it opposite in problem-posing education, and science is diametric to magic (Giroux). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, binarisms of the kind referred to above often make for black and white pictures, in which the nuances between the oppositions are blocked out. Critiquing this limiting logic, Henry A. Giroux goes even further, suggesting that Freire, in his struggle against colonialism “often reverses rather than ruptures its basic problematic” (Giroux). This is an interesting allegation, to some well founded, but—as I will show—nonetheless worthy of scrutiny.

In “Paulo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism,” Giroux lays it down that, in his later work, Freire eventually “invokes and constructs elements of a criticism that shows an affinity with emancipatory strands of postmodern discourse” (Giroux). By way of a “refusal of a transcendent ethics, epistemological foundationalism, and political teleology,” Giroux argues, Freire “further develops a provisional ethical and political discourse subject to the play of history, culture, and power” (Giroux). This, in other words, is a repudiation of what is fixed and stable, and thus oppressive. Consequently, it must be seen as a contrast to the repression of heterogeneity in the “monolithic figures and stereotypes of colonialist representations” that arguably haunt *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Parry qtd in Giroux).

To be sure, this dichotomy between Freire’s early and late work is compelling (especially since the progression would be in step with postmodern times); unfortunately, however, it is also almost as reductionist as the binary thinking it seeks to indict. Though it is true, for instance, that Freire contends that “[r]evolutionary praxis must stand opposed to the praxis of the dominant elites” because “the latter constitute” the antithesis of people, he also warns his readers by suggesting that if the oppressed rise to power as dual beings—the oppressor and the oppressor logic still housed within themselves—they will only have imagined to have ceased power (107-108, 112). Their “existential duality,” Freire writes,

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3 This formulation was primarily aimed at the works of Frantz Fanon, who Benita Parry accuses of the failure to realize that the “founding concepts of the problematic [of imperialism] must be refused” (qtd in Giroux). Giroux, then, draws the parallel between the similar theoretical shortcomings of Fanon and Freire.
“may even facilitate the rise of a sectarian climate leading to the installation of bureaucracies which undermine the revolution” (108). This, in its turn, then, will be very like to result in a mere changing of poles, a reversal of the “terms of the contradiction” (38). And this is not enough. In order for the people to become “fully human,” Freire argues, a “[r]esolution of [this] oppressor-oppressed contradiction” and a “new social consciousness” are absolute necessities (38, 124).

Freire’s advocacy of dialectic resolutions (thesis-antithesis=synthesis) would—along with the idea of a new kind of consciousness—surely be labeled by Giroux as an adherence to “certain problematic elements of modernism,” focused on the production of new languages and “new spaces of resistance” (Giroux). Some form of a programmatic modernist utopianism, in other words. What is interesting, however, is that “Freire’s own belief in the diverse ways in which the oppressed struggle,” which Giroux, too, pays some attention, also makes itself heard in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In a footnote, for instance, when discussing the necessity of interaction between different parts (such as communities) of the societal whole, Freire points out that “[t]his requirement implies the consciousness of *unity in diversification*” (123, my italics)—a term strikingly reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s notion of *unity via affinity*, which was presented at least in part as a critique of dialectics as a “dream language” (Haraway 2213). That *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* shows an awareness of the risks associated with this language, but still speaks it, makes for an interesting problematic: the author wants to map, to systemize, to educate, and to transform, but soon seems to realize that the only means he has at his disposal are flawed. As I will eventually show, Freire’s decision to *try anyway* is an important feature of his own pedagogics; furthermore, it will also prove to provide an interesting link to the theorizing of Gayatri Spivak, which, of course, will be thoroughly outlined in this essay as well.

In “Paulo Freire and the Academy—A Challenge from the US Left,” Peter McLaren implicitly touches upon the theoretical indeterminacy discussed above. While Freire’s “corpus of writing does not fall easily under the rubric of poststructuralism,” McLaren admits, “his emphasis on the relationship among language, experience, power, and identity give significant

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4 Drawing on Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980’s,” we could argue that any line of theory that imposes a “common language” on other subjects is as imperialist as one nation occupying another (2213). Haraway has it that dialectics is not only a "common language, but a "dream language," as it yearns for the resolution of contradictions. If we adhere to this stance, we can draw the conclusion that all theoretical perspectives that recognize some contradictions but fail to see others unquestionably are imperialist and divorced from “reality.” Haraway's solution—"affinity"—suggests that resistance must have its starting point in a "self-consciously constructed space," erected not on grounds of natural identification, but on sympathy and political kinship (2197).
weight to certain poststructural assumptions” (158). What is here considered poststructuralist is the idea of language as constitutive. In McLaren's words: “Freire’s work stresses that language practices among individuals and groups do more than reflect reality, they effectively organize our social universe and reinforce what is considered to be the limits of the possible…” (158). Indeed, for Freire, “to speak a true word is to change the world”—“[o]bjective reality, of course, remains unchanged,” but people’s perceptions of it change, and this is what is important (Freire 68, 88). To clarify: language cannot transform the material world as such, but it affects how people view this world, and their own relations to it. This, in its turn, then, determines people's sense of agency, what they believe is possible to change in the situations they themselves are lodged in. Moreover: importantly, a “true word” with transformative potential cannot be articulated in a vacuum of solitude; on the contrary, it prospers in dialogue only—and no one can “say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words” (69).

When discussing the material world, McLaren states that, in the relationship between The First and The Third World, “cultural dependency often follows in” the wake of “economic dependency” (154). In these cases, McLaren asserts, “the elites” of the subjugated countries “basically serve in a supervisory capacity when it comes to the cultural consumption of the indigenous peasantry” (155). However, McLaren continues, the remaining “ties of the peasantry to their own ethnic cultures does help them become less dependent on Western information” (155, italics mine). This rooting, we must assume, constitutes a potential opening for a liberating pedagogy, and for people to “change world.” It is here education must begin, in the “particular view of the world held by the people”—because in this “thematic universe,” as Freire labels it, the teacher and the taught are likely to find “generative themes,” suitable for a dialogical pedagogy (76-77). The methods prescribed for this procedure will be analyzed later in this essay.

As the passages above make clear, the connection between world, experience, and thought is an essential part of Freire’s theorizing. In other words, the production of a new pedagogy is dependent upon the conjugation of hope and theory “with some aspect of the carnal, tangible world of historical and material relations,” as McLaren puts it (180). If this link is missing, Freire himself explains, theorists and pedagogues risk loosing themselves in

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5 Ira Shor describes Freire's constructionist traits as follows: “Freire's social pedagogy defines education as one place where the individual and society are constructed, as a social action which can either empower or domesticate students” (qtd in Smart 282).

6 To adopt a formulation from Winterowd: “[r]eality is objective enough, Freire tells us, but it is meaningless without interpretation and is thus multiple, not single…” (31).
“a game of words,” or a “ballet of concepts”—a haughty verbosity, simply put, that has little or nothing to do with real problems in the real world (Freire qtd I Giroux)\(^7\). This significant insight, I will argue, is a guiding principle not only for Freire, but for his fellow interlocutor in this essay—Gayatri Spivak—as well\(^8\). Hence, I will now use this fact as a bridge over to the next subject matter of this text: Spivak’s views on ideology, and their bearing on her pedagogical ideas.

4.2. Spivak, Silence, and Blankness.

Theory of ideology is for Spivak as important as it is for Freire; however, much has happened in this line of reasoning when the former enters the academy. This means that she is obliged to embrace as well as refute ideas that were still in its infancy when Freire wrote his pedagogic magnum opus. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” for instance, Spivak indicts Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault for ignoring “both the epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor” in their respective works (84). Introducing argument, Spivak writes of Foucault that his “commitment to ‘genealogical’ speculation…has created an unfortunate resistance to ‘mere’ ideological critique” (68). For Foucault, Spivak notes, this results in a number of theoretical failures. One of these, she contends, is the tendency to regard the masses as “undeceived” (69). Explicating this idea, in one of Spivak’s quotations, Foucault proposes that “‘the masses know perfectly well, ‘clearly’…they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well’”; thus, these people need no intellectual spokesperson (69). This notion, Spivak diagnoses as the symptom of the idea of a “mechanical relation between desire and interest”: the masses know their interests because they know their desires, and “‘interest always follows and finds itself where desire has placed it’” (68). “An undifferentiated desire is [here] the agent,” Spivak explains, “and power slips in to create the effects of desire: ‘power…produces positive effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of knowledge’” (69). This “parasubjective matrix,” then, “cross-hatched with heterogeneity, ushers in the unnamed Subject” (69).

What worries Spivak here, it seems, is the restoration of a sovereign subject that can speak for itself (she also notes the irony of the fact that this restoration is executed by those

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\(^7\) Several pertinent examples of this kind of writing can be found among the winners of Philosophy & Literature’s Bad Writing Contest, which is now permanently closed (Dutton).

\(^8\) As Terry Eagleton aptly puts it, for Spivak, the “relations between North and South are not primarily about discourse, language or identity but about armaments, commodities, exploitation, migrant labour, debt and drugs” (161).
who purport to be its severest critics—the advocates of poststructuralist theory [72-74]). One of the reasons why this bothers Spivak is that she believes that the imperialist “constitution of that other of Europe...was in the interest of a dynamic economic requiring that interest, motives (desires) and power (of knowledge) be ruthlessly dislocated”; differently put, that desires and other driving forces were rearranged so as to contribute to the fulfillment of certain goals conjured up within the ideology of colonialism (75). If we adhere to this view, we have to concede that the success of the colonial project proves that the masses cannot always speak “for themselves,” as ideology might rearrange their desires and complicate the picture (73). Furthermore, if we subscribe to these views, we have to agree with Spivak that a theory of ideology is an absolute indispensability for intellectuals interested in the relationship between the First and the Third World—or, as I will show, in the relationship between teacher and student.

Responsibility and complicity are two keywords in Spivak’s critique of Deleuze and Foucault. The intellectual, she declares, has an “institutional responsibility,” and this responsibility s/he evades if s/he masquerades “as [an] absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (75, 87). Our task, of course, is not to speak for the Other, but to find out and illustrate why the Other cannot speak. In other words, we should not attempt to represent the Other, but to represent how the Other is represented, and how these ideologically conditioned representations silence the very object of representation. Ignoring this task—by “abstain[ing] from representation” altogether—makes us more than necessarily complicit in the incessant obliterating of the voice of the oppressed, of the culturally and materially damaged “[o]n the other the side of the international division of labor” (80). Therefore, Spivak argues, we should instead engage in the major problem “that the [Other’s] itinerary has not [yet] been traced as to offer an object of seduction for the representing intellectual” (80). Below, I give an account of how a “tracing” of this kind is supposed to work.

One of the most essential works for those wishing to understand “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as well as Spivak’s ideas on education, is Pierre Macherey’s A Theory of Literary Production, written four years after Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Influenced by Althusser’s concept of “internal distination,” Macherey argues that, by bestowing a form on ideology, literature illuminates “ideology’s contradictory relation to real history” (Eagleton “Macherey and Marxist” 151). Ideology is here seen as unitary, and thus, an illusion, sustained only by silences that if spoken would reveal the ideology as a “structure of absences” (150). To unmask ideology, the critic needs to interrogate the “unconsciousness” of
the texts investigated, to look for significance in the margins (150). Adopting and modifying
this method of interpretation, Spivak sets herself the task of reading “the social text of
imperialism” in order to find out “what it refuses say,” what is repressed (82)\(^9\). This
“‘measuring [of] silences,’” then, for Spivak, becomes synonymous with an investigation and
description of “the…deviation’ from an ideal that is irreducibly differential” (82).

As Spivak illustrates in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” the “deviation” discussed above
might take the form of a story or a piece of information that usually goes untold. Discussing
Sati, the Hindu practice of widow burning which was banned by the British colonialists in
1829, Spivak first gives an account of two contrasting representations of how and why this
abolition was carried out, and then offers a story in between—an explanation that does not fit
easily into our general preconceptions regarding the relations between Great Britain and its
“crown jewel.” The first two stories, Spivak argues, are “dialectically interlocking”; the first
one, popularized by the British, tells us that the cancellation of the Sati was “a case of ‘White
men saving brown women from brown men,’” and finds it counterpart in the second
narrative—the “Indian nativist argument,” which suggests that “‘The women actually wanted
to die’” (93). As Spivak argues, confronted by this binary opposition—epitomized by two
disharmonious sentences—the first question the intellectual needs to ask is: where is “the
testimony if the women’s voice consciousness”? (93). Guided by this very inquiry, then,
Spivak finds a third story, told neither by the colonialist, nor by the nativist, but by Ashis
Nandy, a contemporary Indian political psychologist and sociologist:

‘Groups rendered psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western
impact…had come under pressure to demonstrate, to others as well as to
themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To
many of them Sati became an important proof of their conformity to older
norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within’ (93)

In the quotation above, two ways of reading the history of colonialism are challenged
simultaneously. The British/Western argument that “white men saved brown women,” firstly,
is contradicted by the thesis suggesting that “Western impact” reactivated rather than thwarted
an old misogynist ritual, and, secondly, the nativist argument, that the women “wanted to
die,” is refuted by the notion that the women self-immolated not as an act of free will, but as a

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\(^9\) For the sake of correctness, it must here be stressed that Spivak's adoption of some of Macherey's
methods in no way implies that she subscribes to his theory as a whole. Whereas Macherey is interested in
what a literary text “cannot say,” Spivak—rather irreverently—wants to find out what a certain social text
"refuses to say" (81-82, my italics). Although this latter notion "might be careless for a literary work,"
Spivak argues, "something like a collective ideological refusal can be diagnosed for the codifying legal
practice of imperialism" (82).
gesture of allegiance. To be sure, this Machereyian investigation of Spivak’s does not bring back alive the many women burned on the pyre, but at least it brings to our attention a different way of knowing why their voices are irrevocably lost.

From a pedagogical point of view, the ideas discussed in the passages above are extremely important, as a tracing of ideological absences potentially brings to our attention why certain voices speak while others are silent. Consequently, as I eventually will go on to show, Spivak’s pedagogical program—and its dialogical character—is a logical continuation of the insights described in this chapter.

Another hugely important scholar for Spivak is Jacques Derrida—and in fact, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” some of the ideas adopted from Derrida serves as to reinforce the methodology Spivak has built on Macherey. For instance, when the former quotes Derrida’s Of Grammatology and writes that “’thought…is the blank part of the text,’” this is certainly in keeping with the “theory of silences” discussed above (89). Echoing Derrida, Spivak suggests that what “is thought is, if blank, still in the text and must be consigned to the Other of history”; and from this, then, it follows that this “inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an impenetrable text is what a postcolonial critic of imperialism would like to see developed within the European enclosure as the place of the production of theory” (89). Put simply: that which is not visible in the text is still there, and this absence of presence must be acknowledged and theorized. Of crucial importance here is for the intellectual to keep from establishing him-/herself “by selectively defining an Other,” to acknowledge the latter’s specificity, and to raise arms against the “recognition’ of the Third World through ‘assimilation’” (88). Derrida’s formula for this reads as “‘rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us’” (89). To clarify this concept: as this interior voice or rendition is a false presupposition or prejudice, it must not be listened to; rather, its deliriousness needs to serve as a reminder of our own assimilative “ethnocentric impulse” (88).

Known primarily as the founding father of deconstruction, Derrida has often been subject to criticisms suggesting that he “plays the game for the fun of it,” and that he lacks that “fatal touch of humanity” that can endow a theory with practical value (Winterowd 35). In fact, as his highly multifaceted school of thought often focuses on rather textual matters, such as the observation that the construction of meaning always is based on ambiguous signifiers (a notion that renders knowledge and truth subjective and unstable), even Derrida himself seems unsure as to whether “‘deconstruction can lead to an adequate practice, whether critical or political” (“a program for the benevolent Western intellectual” [87]). As I
will show below, a pedagogical program of this kind is precisely what Spivak tries to launch when she brings onboard deconstructionist ideas, combines them with Marxism, and applies them onto the world of education. Like Freire, Spivak shows an awareness of the many pitfalls that threaten an undertaking of this kind; nonetheless, however, she too suggests that we must take the risk of severe failure—that we must “acknowledge complicity and yet the walk the walk” (xi *Outside*)

5. Pedagogical Programs.

5.1. Where All Grow—Frerie’s Pedagogical Program.

As the primary objective of this essay consists in scrutinizing Freire’s and Spivak’s attempts at applying concepts from the safe havens of theory to “the real world,” their respective pedagogical theories must first be analyzed in some further detail; then, the methods advocated by each thinker need to be studied. Finally, in chapter six, the relation between theory and method will be reviewed so as to offer an indication of what happens when Freire’s and Spivak’s ideas on education are concretized in didactic formulas. Is the idea of “learning from the learner” kept intact through the methodological leap, and if so, how is this possible? The answer to this question will be the terminus of this text.

Via varying formulations, Freire often states that *the only way to learn is together*, and that “critical perception” is an ability that “cannot be imposed” (92). Much in this manner, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* teaches us that “dialogue [as “essential communication”] does not impose, does not manipulate, does not ‘sloganize,’” and that this is precisely what makes for a learning situation in which “all grow” (149, 60). Furthermore, following Marx, and substantiating his argument, Freire reminds us that “the educator himself needs educating”—and, accordingly, the teacher elevated as an ideal here, the problem-posing educator,

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10 Spivak’s use of the word “complicity” needs to be explained. In the second edition of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, the editors make an attempt when they touch on Spivak’s argument that “even the most benevolent effort” at establishing contact with an other risks repeating “the very silencing it aims to combat” (2110). “The outsider,” they continue, “creates the framework from within which the ‘native’ speaks,” and this is the problem” (2110). “After all,” the editors remark, even colonialists “thought of themselves as well-intentioned” (2110).

11 Freire declares that, to be sure, “the task of the humanists is surely not that of pitting their slogans against the slogans of the oppressors, with the oppressed as the testing ground, ‘housing’ the slogans of first one group and then the other. On the contrary, the task of the humanists is to see that the oppressed become aware of the fact that as dual beings, ‘housing’ the oppressors within themselves, they cannot be truly human” (76). Arguably, Freire here tries to rise above the banality of mere counter-political efforts. Spivak makes a similar note when she argues that “[r]peating slogans, even good slogans, is not the way to go, alas. It breeds fascists just as easily” (“Righting” 52).
unconstrainedly “reforms his reflections in the reflections of his students” (35, 61). This teacher does not single-handedly present solutions to the problems posed in the classroom; rather, s/he “re-present[s]” the students’ “thematic universe” to the students themselves, and works with the students from that point on (90). This work, moreover, is preceded by a “thematic investigation” which is supposed to uncover problematic phenomena in the relationship between the pupils and their world. Needless to say, this process also involves both teacher and student—the teacher as investigator may not “elaborate itineraries for researching the thematic universe, starting from points which he has predetermined” (89, italics mine).

Another potential problem Freire discerns in the encounter between oppressor and oppressed, and between teacher and student, is the risk that the authoritative but compassionate subject brings with it “the marks of [its] origins”—prejudices and deformations “which include a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know” (42). As Spivak might have put it, a teacher of this kind, an educator “from above,” is responsible of constituting the students as ignoramuses that lack intelligence, agency, and knowledge (no matter how benevolent the teacher’s effort). The problem-posing educator, on the other hand, has “faith in people,” and consequently avoids “paternalistic manipulation” (72).

The gist of the arguments above is that students ought to be listened to regardless of what they have to say, and that the topics we want them to discuss must emanate from their own experiences. To illustrate this with an example from my own teaching career: An English teacher set on problematizing the relation between art and capital may not simply show the TV advert where Nike (the shoe manufacturer) ruthlessly expropriates Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” ask the students what they think of this assault, and then wait for all the “right” answers (scolding the curse of commercialized art). For this pedagogue to become a Freirean, s/he would first have to let the students partake in the gathering of the material to be discussed, and then pay attention also to the “wrong” answers (which are at odds with his or her own ideas on the matter). In due time, we will here try to determine as to whether Freire himself—and Spivak—manage to develop methodologies that take heed of all voices, including those that are not resonant with the sentiments of the pedagogue.

However, as respect for the learner is an obvious cornerstone in Freire’s pedagogy, it should be acknowledged that this respect does not go so far as to suggest that either the student or the teacher is a “complete” human being; on the contrary, Freire states first that hope is a prerequisite for dialogical education, and then that hope, in its turn, “is rooted in
men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others” (72). Furthermore, as previously implied, this notion of “unfinishedness” regards not only people, but their world as well: reality is constantly transformed into something that cannot be foreseen, and it is this process in itself, the “process of becoming,” which is important (65). Supposedly, this mindset—rendering the present dynamic, and the future uncertain—is meant to function as a blocking agent against the oppression of what is fixed and predetermined, and against this background, then, it becomes necessary for Freire to stress that education must be an “ongoing activity” which is “constantly remade in the praxis” (65). This is an argument that brings us to a point where Freire crosses paths with Spivak, who, similarly, puts forth the idea of a “Humanities to come” (more on this in due course [“Righting” 526])—as well as to the very problematic that gives rise to the research inquiries of this essay; to wit: the question as to how is it possible for educators to develop methods for something that is supposed to be spontaneous, uncoercive, and dialogical, and how a method that has been written down (and is thus fixed) can remain versatile and in step with a dynamic present. In order to get a little closer to the answers to these questions, we will now take a look at how Freire moves from theory to method, from the abstract to the relatively concrete.

As already mentioned, one of the main objectives of Freire’s pedagogy is to reveal ideologically conditioned myths as false representations of reality. This is achieved by focusing on concrete situations and joining the people in an analysis that goes so deep as to force the latter to either “divest themselves of their myths, or reaffirm them” (138). The former option is, of course, a painful undertaking, as it involves the tumbling of a world that for its “inhabitants” seemed real just a moment ago. Freire exemplifies this with details from an educational program called “Full Circle,” which took place in New York City in 1968:

A group in a New York ghetto was presented a coded situation showing a big pile of garbage on a street corner—the very same street where the group was meeting. One of the participants said at once, “I see a street in Africa or Latin America.” “And why not in New York?” asked the teacher. “Because we are the United States and that can’t happen here.” Beyond a doubt this man and some of his comrades who agreed with him were retreating from a reality so offensive to them that even to acknowledge that reality was threatening. For an alienated person, conditioned by a culture of achievement and personal success, to recognize his situation as objectively unfavorable seems to hinder his own possibilities of success (138)

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12 Commenting on these traits in Freire’s pedagogy, Winterowd states that “problem-posing education sucks us into the vortex of indeterminacy” (32).
What is illustrated in this quotation, Freire argues, is how the participants do not “talk and act for themselves as active Subjects of the historical process (139). (Rather, we must assume, they are subject to the historical process). To change this, to render people “considerers” of the world, carefully prepared methods must be put to use (120). These methods, then, need to operate so that they relate directly to the “felt needs” of the students, and to the situations that limit them, that weigh them down. For Vieira Pinto, an influential scholar in relation to these matters, Freire explains, these “‘limit-situations’ are not ‘the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where possibilities begin’” (97, 80). Beyond the limit-situations—which are made up of contradictions\(^{13}\) that people are involved in—lie “untested feasibility” and “potential consciousness” (94). Untested feasibility is the antithesis to “perceived practicable solutions” and “presently practiced solutions”; in other words, it represents a new way of living life, free from the oppression which is always manifest in limit-situations (94). Attaining this new life, however, is no easy task: even problem-posing educators might fail to guide their students to a perception of the “untested feasibility lying beyond the limit-situations which engender[...] their needs” (97, italics mine). (Here, a parallel must be drawn to Spivak’s argument that the colonialists managed to “dislocate” the interests and needs of the Other, so that an imperialist project propelled by economic incentives could be implemented [Spivak 75]. To clarify this comparison: For Freire and Spivak both, ideology, oppression, and limit-situations might perfectly well generate and rearrange peoples’ needs; put another way, for these two thinkers, what people covet is not always the result of some desiring-machine, naturally inherent in humankind—and from this, it follows that desires and needs do not necessarily tell us what political action [or lack thereof] that would improve the lives of the rank and file).

Freire’s way out of the sphere of the corrupted needs discussed above spells “thematic investigation” and “codification” (98-99). The student’s relationship to reality must first be investigated by an interdisciplinary team working with the students, and then, thematic findings that are believed to have generative potential are codified (in the form of photographs, sketches, or oral presentations [98, 95]). The next step of this methodology, then, is the decoding process. Below is an excerpt from a passage where Freire shows by way of example how this procedure works:

In one of the thematic investigations carried out in Santiago, a group of tenement residents discussed a scene showing a drunken man walking on the street and three young men conversing on the corner. The group participants

\(^{13}\) In Freire's text, "contradictions" most often refers to social stratification and inequality.
commented that “the only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can’t take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and a souse like us.

The investigator had intended to study aspects of alcoholism. He probably would not have elicited the above responses if he had presented the participants with a questionnaire he had elaborated himself. If asked directly, they might even have denied ever taking a drink themselves. But in their comments on the codification of an existential situation they could recognize, and in which they could recognize themselves, they said what they really felt.

There are two important aspects to these declarations. On the one hand, they verbalize the connection between earning low wages, feeling exploited, and getting drunk—getting drunk as a flight from reality, as an attempt to overcome the frustration of inaction, as an ultimately self-destructive solution. On the other hand, they manifest the need to rate the drunkard highly. He is the “only one useful to his country, because he works, while the others only gab.” After praising the drunkards, the participants then identify themselves with him, as workers who also drink—‘decent workers’ (99)

“In contrast,” writes Freire, “imagine the failure of a moralistic educator, sermonizing against alcoholism and presenting as an example of virtue something which for these men is not a manifestation of virtue” (99-100). Of utmost importance here is that the teaching situation and the teaching material are not cut off from the students’ perception of reality, and that the students themselves partake in “delivering” the lesson. Furthermore, and finally, it is also crucial that the form of the situation is permissive (everyone gets to speak), as this apparently endows the seminar with an openness that paves the way for a nascent type of critical thinking.

The opposite of this kind of open-ended teaching could be further substantiated. Let us therefore linger on the theme from the quotation above, but envision a more detailed case that clearly illustrates how a teacher should not approach his or her students. Picture, for instance, a junior high school class, attending a school where the use of alcohol and marijuana has recently increased, and a special day devoted to the study of addiction in general, and “gateway drugs” in particular. On a day like this, the Freirean pedagogue would most likely try to find out why more and more students are attracted to drugs; by way of a carefully planned codification of this problem (that is, theme), this teacher would invite the class to discover the reason some of them or some of their friends choose to defy the law by drinking underage or imbibing an illegal substance. Whereas this would be the main imperative for the dialoguing pedagogue, Freire’s counter-type, the moralist educator, on the other side, would pay no attention to the discoveries of the pupils; instead, s/he would lecture on the hazards of alcohol and THC, perhaps show deterring pictures from a reality other than that of the
students, and, in doing so, make it perfectly clear that the experiences of the students are not important. This form of anti-dialogical practice, considered anathema in Freirean pedagogy, is entirely closed, and works with learners from a distance.

Implicitly drawing on the opposition above, and the unfinished or indeterminate character of Freire’s pedagogy, McLaren touches upon the difference between strategies and tactics. Strategies, McLaren notes, quoting Michael Shapiro, “belong to those who have legitimate positions within the social order and consequently are part of ‘a centralized surveillance network for controlling the population,’” whereas tactics “belong to those who do not occupy a legitimate space and depend instead on time, on whatever opportunities present themselves” (161). The tactical educator, accordingly, is a teacher who “seizes the space of the classroom to engage in a dialogue about issues not on the formal curriculum” (161). The pedagogy of this teacher, McLaren declares, inevitably takes place in the terrain of the Other, and the tactics that inform it are “‘dispersed,’” “‘nomadic,’” and “‘difficult to administer because they cannot be pinned down’” (Conquergood qtd in McLaren 162). To say the least, this definition of tactics certainly has some bearing on Freire’s methodology, as it stands clear that the latter is designed so as to rise above the stagnant tendencies McLaren and Shapiro associate with strategies. The Freirean seminar is supposed to be devoid of agendas and determinate itineraries, but charged with an openness towards the unexpected. Consequently, even as Freire works with reasonably concrete pedagogical formulas, “faith” in the students and their voices remain one of the most important ingredients. “‘How do we prevent what begin as tactics—that which is “without any base where it could stockpile its winnings” (de Certeau: 37)—from turning into a solidly fenced-off field,’” Rey Chow asks, echoing Michel de Certeau (qtd in McLaren 162). This is the exact question Freire struggles with when he formulates his methodology—and his tactical efforts in this struggle is what render his methods both “difficult to administer” and difficult to pin down. Without these difficulties, however, Freire’s pedagogy risks ending up no less oppressive than the oppression it seeks to overthrow—it is the openness that cannot be pinned down that here constitutes the hope of a liberating pedagogy.14 Whether or not this hope actually results in a pedagogy of this kind will be the object of study in chapter six.

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14 Arguably, it is also this openness that has encouraged Western educators to adopt Freire's methods and practice them outside the specific scenes of oppression Freire observed and worked in.
5.2. Learning to Learn—Spivak’s Pedagogical Program.

Whereas Spivak’s pedagogy in itself may not be easily grasped, in all likelihood, few first-time readers fail to note that a relatively small number of keywords frequently recur in her texts. For instance, nouns such as “humility” and “imagination”—accompanied by verb phrases like “‘open ourselves to an other’s ethic’” and “learn from below”—inform Spivak’s writing and sketch a pedagogy that cannot be definitely planned, and that will not work unless the teacher halts his or her will to dominate (Simmons 141). This pedagogy, moreover, is explicitly focused on the importance of working with the culture of the students, and with desires as a productive force.

As I have already made clear, desires are for Spivak no unproblematic indicators of what people really need; rather, they are moldable and can be manipulated so as to serve the weal of others than the desirers themselves. In keeping with this argument, Spivak suggests that it “is wrong to think that [the people “below”] would have a clear intuition of the public sphere and know exactly what they need and want” (Shaikh 183). Put even more bluntly: “[y]ou don’t oppress people for centuries and then expect that their intelligence somehow remains unscathed” (183). Against the backdrop of these statements, Spivak introduces the idea of education as “an uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (Simmons 141). If global capitalism “deceives” us into desiring certain products and a particular way of life, education, too, must operate in a similar fashion; the “‘developed post-capitalist structure’ of today’s world must ‘be filled with the more robust imperative to responsibility which capitalist social productivity was obliged to destroy’” (Kitcher qtd in Spivak “Righting” 24, italics mine)15. As the word “uncoercive” suggests, however, an educational rearrangement of desires “is not imposed by the teacher but takes place in a manner analogous to the reading of texts; not as ‘analyzing’ and ‘diagnozing’ but as a ‘no holds barred self-suspending leap into the other’s sea—basically without preparation’” (Simmons 141).

As a theoretical concept, Spivak’s leap without preparation is somewhat reminiscent of the “unfinished” tactics McLaren finds in Freire’s pedagogy. This becomes even clearer when she adopts the term “telepoiesis” from Derrida. In Spivak’s rendering, this term signals

15 Spivak elaborates this idea further when she writes that, “[i]n its simplest forms, being defined by the call of the other [that is, open oneself up]... is not conducive to the extraction and appropriation of surplus [and, thus, in other words, not congruent with late capitalist logic]. Making room for otium and living in the eco-biome does not lead to exploration and conquest of nature. And so on. The method of a specifically literary training, a slow mind-changing process, can be used to open the imagination to such mindsets” (“Righting” 533). Put differently, by working with desires, educators work with the same means as capitalism, but towards different ends.
an activity focused on “creating toward a distant future with a ‘distant other’” (142). Like Freire’s pedagogical theory, Spivak’s rearrangement of desires “‘is never accurate and must be forever renewed’” (142), and as a practice, Spivak argues, it leads to an awareness of the distance “between the ego and the other [a gap that ‘will never be bridged’]”. This awareness, then, in its turn, vouches for “humility and suspension of certainty” (142).

As this humility of course has intrinsic value, it must also, more specifically, guide us so that we become able to see the “‘impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations…for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination’” (qtd in Kapoor 56). Commenting on Spivak’s bent towards this line of thought, William Paul Simmons notes that the former tries to “imagine a learning that requires turning off [one’s] own voice” (142). He also observes that this kind of learning, this “‘leap into the other’s sea,’” this rearrangement of desires, will only be possible in a “Humanities to come”—a teaching and a learning that can never be given a determinate itinerary, lest it loses its entire potential (141). Two highly related prerequisites are here of great importance: the imaginative ability in both student and teacher, and the latter’s learning to learn from below.

“Learning from below,” writes Ilan Kapoor, “is a tried and tired formula”—and for Spivak, he continues, “it results mostly in more of the same. Serious and meaningful learning from the subaltern requires an anterior step: learning to learn. I have to clear the way for both me and the subaltern before I can learn from her/him” (56). The “on-the-ground application” of this learning, then, as construed by Kapoor, is “suspended my belief that I am indispensable, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from always thinking that the Third World is ‘in trouble’ and that I have the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting myself or my world onto the Other” (56). This process of suspension and resistance has by Spivak herself previously been described as the unlearning of one’s privileges; recently, however, this has changed: “you cannot fully unlearn your privileges,” is the new deal (Shaikh 182-183). The closest we can get, according to Spivak, is seeing our privilege as “instrumental more than anything else”; in other words, as something that can be used—as a means of change (183). To sum up, whether we call it “learning” or “unlearning,” the point here is that we should strive to “open ourselves” and imagine the Other “through the Other’s

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16 This can be compared with Freire’s notion that the “antidialogical individual, in his relations with others, aims at conquering them” (119).

17 Here it should be noted that this idea is arguably incongruous with Spivak’s argument that Westerners should not leave it to the Third World peoples to oppose the detriments of global capitalism. As the editors of The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism put it: “When most of the power resides in the West, why should the least powerful of those caught up in globalization be responsible for halting its advance?” (2111).
eyes as much as possible” (Simmons 141-142).

Indeed, Spivak’s acts of suspension and learning from below bear apparent resemblance to Freire’s rejection of the paternalistic manipulator who leaves little or no room in the curriculum for ideals other that his or her own. In other words, rather explicit in Freire and Spivak both is a critique of the teacher who plans everything (that is to be learned) in advance because s/he *knows better* than the students what should be classified as proper knowledge. A hypothetical illustration of the undertakings of this teacher might, for instance, be the following: A middle aged pedagogue—who teaches political science in a multicultural class at a Swedish senior high school—wants to instill democratic values in the students. Rich from the experiences of half a century and a solid education, s/he is not interested in ideas that risk altering the intended direction of the series of lectures s/he has planned. Consequently, instead of engaging the students in preparations for a potentially fruitful discussion on the subject of democracy—during which, as a starting point, the participants could ventilate their experiences and ideas—s/he adopts key passages from the Treaty of Lisbon and sets a deadline when the class should know these axioms by heart. In this arrangement, the subject matter is not problematized, and the teacher certainly does not learn anything; s/he is not open to an other’s ethic, and sees nothing through the eyes of the learner.

As the close to literary metaphors above make rather clear, Spivak’s ideas on education are not easily put to practice. The theorist herself even goes so far as to call teaching in groups “[n]ecessary but impossible tasks—like taking care of health even though it is impossible to be immortal; or continuing to listen, read, write, talk and teach although it is impossible that everything be communicated” (“Righting” 575). Similarly, Spivak often writes of the “(im)possibility of cultural studies” (*Outside x*)—an utterly ambiguous notion suggesting both that the Humanities is an impossible project that never fully succeeds in reaching its noble goals, and that this project—with its obvious focus on the imagination—is the best possibility we have to understand ourselves and each other. Furthermore, as stated before, the Western intellectual, maneuvering in the sphere of cultural studies, is always complicit in constituting the Other; yet, however, s/he must “walk the walk”—for what other options are there (xi)?

In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh, Spivak touches upon the question as to whether the above-mentioned complicity can become transformed into something relatively benevolent and productive. The answer is yes: “If you can think of com-plicity as being folded together, you begin to work at the other’s textile much more carefully,” Spivak argues (184). The role of the teacher is here the role of the suturer or the “invisible mender”—
someone who learns “the weave of the torn cultural fabric” of the other “in unexpected ways [remember Spivak’s espousal of a ‘Humanities to come’]” (“Righting” 546, 548). In other words, if we step outside the textile metaphor for a moment, the task Spivak assigns to the pedagogue is to gently look for collective habits that have been lost and superseded by new ones, and then render these habits instrumental—for instance, this can be trying to “access and activate the tribals’ indigenous ‘democratic’ structures to parliamentary democracy by patient and sustained efforts to learn to learn from below” (548). To clarify: the object in this procedure would be to activate ways of life which belong to a “cultural fabric” that has been pushed aside after “centuries of oppression and neglect,” and to put these “ways” to influential and liberative use in contemporary society (548). This is a design that looks as if it affirms the current administration of Western style parliamentary democracy (intertwined with late capitalism), when it actually tries to alter it from within, by way of suturing it to pre-existent societal structures that were not imposed from above. This is liberation from below, via indigenous democracy.

If we ponder carefully upon the ideas presented in the passage above, the influences from Macherey and Derrida become evident. The “indigenous ‘democratic’ structures” in Spivak’s comment is what has been repressed in the cultural text of imperialism; it is what is now silent—it is an absence. Below, I focus more concretely on Spivak’s methodological leap, and also, on how a certain primer she uses epitomizes a set of lost habits that need to be resurrected in order for a “learning from below” to take place.

As mentioned earlier, and as her rather airy language gives away, Spivak is a theorist who usually refrains from offering methodological directives or concrete political plans of action. In the article “Righting Wrongs: Accessing Democracy among the Aboriginals,” however, she makes one of few exceptions; here, the idea of “a new pedagogy” is substantiated by way of the description of an Indian schoolbook, published in the mid 1800’s. The author, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Spivak tells us, “fashioned pedagogic instruments for Sanskrit and Bengali that could, if used right (the question of teaching again), suture the ‘native’ old with the “new”—which at this time was represented by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” (44)18. As described by Spivak, Vidyasagar’s primer is an extremely helpful tool for undermining rote learning and triggering the child “to locate meaning without a teacher” (45). The key to this efficaciousness, reportedly, lies in the fact that the book exhorts the pedagogue to “jumble the structure” of the teaching, and thus, to

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18 Macaulay (1800-1859), was, among other things, an English politician, historian, essayist, and abolitionist (Encyclopædia Britannica).
encourage the student to think on his or her own (44). “The first part of the book,” Spivak writes,
is for the active use of the teacher. The child does not read the book yet—just listens to the teacher, and learns to read and write by reading the teacher’s writing and writing as the teacher guides. Reading and writing are not soldered to the fetishized schoolbook. In very poor rural areas, this is still a fine way to teach. (If you have been stumped a hundred times in a lot of places by both teacher and student producing some memorized bit from the textbook when asked to ‘write whatever comes to mind,’ you are convinced of this.) Halfway through the book, the child begins to read a book, and the title of that page is *prothom path*, ‘first reading,’ not ‘first lesson.’ What a thrill it must have been for the child, undoubtedly a boy, to get to that moment. Today this is impossible, because the teachers, and the teachers’ teachers, indefinitely, are clueless about this book as a do-it-yourself instrument. Well-meaning education experts in the capital city, whose children are used to a different world, inspired by self-ethnographing bourgeois nationalists of a period after Vidyasagar, have transformed the teacher’s pages into children’s pages… (45)

In other words, as formerly used in rural Bengal, Vidyasagar’s primer vouched for independent reading and thinking, decoupled from the inhibitory influence of schoolbooks that are construed as objective even though this, of course, never is the case (fetishization, however, obscures the labour and the values of the people who produced the book, and endows the latter with a life of its own19). Unfortunately, as Spivak remarks, this state of things has changed into “the scandal that, in the global South, in the schools for middle-class children and above, the felicitous primary use of a page of language is to understand it; but in the schools for the poor, it is to spell and memorize” (44). What Spivak tries to do by retrieving the old and “correct” way of working with Vidyasagar’s primer, then, is (1) to bring to our attention a piece of “social weave” that has been forgotten, (2) to *understand it* and work with it gently, and (3) to suture it onto the current pedagogical practices in rural West Bengal. The “generalizable significance” of the misguided use of the primer, Spivak states, “is that, at the onset of colonialism/capitalism, when the indigenous system of teaching began to be emptied of social relevance [as it collided with a ‘new world’], there had been an attempt to undo this. The discontinuity between the colonial subject and the rural poor [located completely outside of the ‘system’],” however, “is such that the instruments of such undoing were thoughtlessly deactivated” (45). To now *activate* one of these instruments again, means entering dialogue with a deviation from an ideological ideal. Needless to say, this “dialogue” differs to some extent in kind from the interchange Freire advocates: whereas

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19 This veiling of the conditions that created it, moreover, renders the object “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” as Marx puts it in *Das Kapital* (24).
Spivak’s discourse with the muted voices from a “torn cultural fabric” takes place at a metaphorical and structural level, Freire’s dialogue is dialogue as most of us know it, and emerges primarily in an intimate encounter between teacher and student. This is not to say that an intimacy of this sort is unimportant in Spivak’s teachings—on the contrary, opening oneself up to an “other’s ethic” must definitely be regarded intimate—but as far as specific methods go, Spivak does not prescribe dialogue in the classroom as explicitly as Freire (she does not even use these words). Similarly, although structural dialogue between politicians, revolutionaries, and the general public is evidently central in Freire’s theorizing, this is not what is elaborated in the methodological parts of Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

The example of the primer is about as specific as Spivak gets, with one important addendum: the importance of a shared language—a prerequisite that is heavily emphasized in “Righting Wrongs” (this is, of course, yet another proof of the theory’s dialogical ambitions). “Anyone” can do what Spivak is proposing, she herself claims—“[o]nly, whoever it is must have the patience and perseverance to learn well one of the languages of the rural South” (550). Without this, there can be no “access to the subaltern episteme,” and, consequently, no “suturing pedagogy.” Most expectedly, Freire agrees; via a similar statement, he remarks that, often, “educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address” (77). Even though it is clear that Freire here speaks of register rather than national languages or dialects, the bottom line is still the same, scilicet: that the dialoging pedagogue must “learn well” the language of his or her students.

As we have now acquired some ground to stand on, as regards both theory and methodology, it is time to move to an analysis of how these two interrelate in Freire’s and Spivak’s texts.

6. The Methodological Leap.

As the previous chapters have shown, both Freire and Spivak stoutly reject pedagogies that somehow project one world onto another, or that silence rather than activate voices other than the teacher’s. We have also seen that, in spite of the risk of becoming something akin to what they critique, they both make attempts at launching methods for a liberating pedagogy. This impulse is evidently the strongest in Freire, who concretizes his “plans for praxis” to a higher degree than Spivak. Let us therefore begin here, in a scrutiny of Freire’s methodological bent, and its potentially problematic implications.
One problem that often complicates various notions of “freedom” is the risk that the liberty of the few results in the oppression of the many. Unsurprisingly, this is a hazard Freire cautiously takes into consideration when developing his pedagogy; in his efforts to circumvent the “pitfalls of liberation,” as it were, he arms his text with a couple of saving clauses which are designed so as to immunize his methodology against any oppressive tendencies. This, however, is more problematic than it sounds—something that becomes amply clear when Freire gives the reader an account of his views on confidence (a concept that is thoroughly discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

“A real humanist,” Freire tells us, “can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust” (42). This idea of confidence permeates *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* via a number of different phrasings; for instance, we learn that “trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change,” that “faith in the people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue,” and that whoever lacks this “will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions” (42, 71, 48). It stands beyond any doubt that the ability for a teacher to have confidence in the students is the warp and woof of Freire’s pedagogy. Interestingly, however, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this basic rule of trust eventually collides with another of Freire’s axioms: the idea that the oppressed often internalizes the oppressor. In the quotation below, where Freire elaborates his notion of trust, this is clearly illustrated:

> This confidence should not, however, be naïve. The leaders must believe in the potentialities of the people, whom they cannot treat as mere objects of their own action; they must believe that the people are capable of participating in the pursuit of liberation. But they must always mistrust the *ambiguity* of oppressed people, mistrust the oppressor ‘housed’ in the latter (150)

Here, one of the saving clauses that make Freire’s methodology work emerges and come into effect. As the teacher in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* not only *initiates dialogue*, but also supervises it, s/he can make sure that it does not transmute into something undesired. In other words, when the educator arbitrarily distinguishes between the *true voice of the student* and the inhibitory voice of the oppressor, s/he has the opportunity to block out any subjugating tendencies. The dangers of this enterprise are apparent: as the teacher decides what voice s/he should listen to in the pedagogic dialogue, quite decidedly, s/he risks dominating this seemingly balanced process. As a result, interchange is sacrificed at the altar of the teacher’s agenda. Put differently: Freire is a pedagogue with a cause—he knows perfectly well what myths he wants to unmask and what societal disequilibria he wishes to level out—and this is
what necessitates the reservation above.20

McLaren, too, touches upon the first half of this problematic: Freire’s “particular strength,” McLaren begins, is “that he has developed a critical language and vernacular which can help to translate both the other’s experience and his own experience of the other in such a way that ideological representations may be challenged” (171). McLaren’s understanding of this “language” is that it supplies the oppressed with a set of tools, enabling them to “analyze their own experiences” (171). However, McLaren reports, Freire is aware that this analysis, this process of translation, never can be entirely “immune from inscription in ideological relations of power and privilege” (171). Unfortunately, though, McLaren fails to realize that this is a problem that works both ways, that ideology might corrupt teacher as well as student, that the former might muffle the latter’s voice and influence; in McLaren’s rather compliant reading of Freire, this is not sufficiently acknowledged (although the text parenthetically admits that the “pedagogy of the oppressed” is “imposed in such a bourgeois manner so as to ‘save’ those who live in situations of domestication only when they are reinitiated into the conditions of their own oppression [156]).

Giroux gets closer to the core of this problem when he inquires as to how one can “explore the contradiction between validating certain forms of ‘correct’ thinking and the pedagogical task of helping students assume rather than simply follow the dictates of authority, regardless of how radical the project informed by such authority.” This question, Pedagogy of the Oppressed does not answer; rather, it renders the need for a response even more urgent.

The problematic discussed above suggests that Freire’s pedagogy should never be entirely fixed, not even in accordance with his own methodology. On the contrary, in order to remain benevolent and effective, it needs to remain organic and let the methodological outlines serve as mere examples. If, conversely, it were to be secured rigidly into one form or the other, without any respect to the situation in which it is currently used, the whole operation would be deemed to failure. Here it should be noted that it is beyond neither Giroux nor McLaren to acknowledge the necessity of approaching Freire’s work with this attitude; for instance, Giroux argues that “Freire’s ongoing political project raises enormous difficulties for educators who situate Freire’s work in the reified language of methodologies and in empty calls that enshrine the practical at the expense of the theoretical and political,” and McLaren

20 Furthermore, Freire also declares that some “restraints...must be imposed on the former oppressors so they cannot restore the oppressive order” (39). This statement is arguably informed by the same logic that assigns Freire’s pedagogue the task of deciding what voices that should be listened to. Freedom for all is the goal, but before it is achieved, the suppression of some detrimental attitudes is inevitable.
simply states that Freire’s pedagogical oeuvre is not grounded in “doctrinal absolutism” (181). Furthermore, adopting a term from Abdul R. JanMohamed, Giroux suggests that, as an intellectual and a pedagogue, Freire has created a state of “homelessness”—a “situation wherein utopian potentiality can endure” (JanMohamed qtd in Giroux). In this construal, “homelessness” becomes a means of keep going, of obliterating the risk of being sucked into a comfortable subject position (or into a doctrinal pedagogy).

The concept of *utopia* is indeed interesting also in relation to our discussion on Spivak’s pedagogical formulas. In *The Postcolonial Politics of Development*, Ilan Kapoor leads us to this issue by way of noting that, as explained by Spivak, “the ethical encounter with the subaltern” (referred to above) needs to happen at a “face-to-face” level in order not to be exploitative (58). Although Kapoor agrees, he is discomforted by Spivak’s reticence to find out whether or not this idea is practicable on a larger scale; “not attending to issues of do-ability,” Kapoor asserts, “gives [Spivak’s] work a romantic, utopic dimension,” and “endows her discussion of the ethical encounter with the subaltern with a quasi-mystical, ecstatic character…” (58). Needless to say, “utopia” is not as positively charged in this sentence as it is when Giroux uses the term; what Kapoor here recognizes and critiques in Spivak’s writing can be traced to a general unwillingness to indulge in the practical and concrete, a tendency not uncommon in deconstructionist writers 21.

When Fredric Jameson remembers that “[s]omeone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” he implicitly makes an interesting comment on this widespread inclination to resort to the abstract at the expense of the sort of theorizing that might actually change something in the material world (Jameson “Future City”). The problem here is that, if prevalent, certain theoretical abstractions, symptomatic of the permanent present of postmodernism, and thus completely decoupled from “the Real” and devoid of historicity, may reinforce ideological containment by serving as “blocking agent[s] which set[...] limits around what is thinkable in [our] particular historical moment,” as David Holloway puts it (190). When reviewing one of Spivak’s major works, Terry Eagleton sides with Holloway in his own way, arguing that Spivak’s notion of “complicity”—discussed earlier in this text—weighs down the critical potential of her arguments; “Spivak,” Eagleton has it, “is logically mistaken to suppose that imagining some

21 In connection to this issue, however, as if unsure of his own critique, Kapoor states that “Spivak’s hyper-self-reflexivity” hardly can “be accused of being a navel-gazing exercise that reinforces Western ethnocentrism when it is expressively carried out in order to clear the way for an ethical relationship with the Other” (57). This strange and misguided remark suggests that intentions are all that count, and that as long as we have a progressive agenda, our efforts can never be counterproductive.
overall alternative to the current system means claiming to be unblemished by it” (*Figures* 166). Eagleton himself advocates a form of resistance more firmly rooted in the belief that late capitalism is nothing but a brief moment played out in an endless series of fluctuations, and accordingly, he reminds us of the example that “[q]uite a few people in the Soviet bloc in the mid-1980’s were convinced that their system could be resisted but not changed…but [that] this opinion turned out in the end to be a little too rigid, even if what that system changed into was hardly a just society” (167).

This critique of Spivak’s aloofness to the concept of factual change, moreover, Eagleton combines with a questioning of her “pretentiously opaque” language (159). Although post-colonial theory “makes heavy weather of a respect for the Other,” he notes, “the reader, its most immediate Other, is apparently dispensed from this sensitivity” (159). Important to note here is that what Eagleton would want from Spivak is not theoretical simplification; on the contrary, he would probably argue that she is guilty of the commonplace “mistake of supposing that the concrete is simple and the abstract is complex” (*How to Read* 142). Refuting this “misconception,” Eagleton contends that it is not until the notion of a phenomenon is inserted into its “complex social context…that we can construct a ‘concrete’ concept of it”—and this, one might argue, is a far greater challenge than attending to vague discussions that, really, are nothing but rough sketches, nothing but “preliminary outline[s] of the actual reality” (142). To be sure, this verdict of “simple” abstruseness that Eagleton passes on Spivak adds to Kapoor’s delineation of the former as a romantic utopian in total want of political potency.

Of course, Spivak herself would plead not guilty to these allegations, due to a considerable number of reasons. For starters, the concept of utopia is treated quite differently in Spivak’s own writing; for her, to be utopian is not to neglect to think or discuss that which is difficult to imagine; rather, it is to be concrete when one should not—it is to lose oneself in a mode of thinking that “allows us to figure the impossible” (“Righting” 575). Simply put: in Spivakian theory, it is considered a mistake to endow complex matters with concrete and simple formulations (because “‘plain prose cheats’” [Spivak qtd in Morton 6]). In keeping with this, Spivak somewhat self-righteously explains that she remains a “consensus breaker among metropolitan activists, who feel they can know everything in a nonvague way if only they have enough information, and that not to think so is ‘mystical’” (548). Implicitly contesting this latter claim, Spivak suggests that, when it comes to teaching, we can only speak about the “‘form’” (Shaikh 175). “The substance of teaching,” she continues, “informs or is informed by this form. I am not talking about ‘what’ because that is the problem: people
think that just giving a lot of ‘what’ actually does work as teaching. The trouble to learn is no longer undertaken” (175). What Spivak is saying here is that overly specific pedagogic formulas might prevent the teacher from learning from the students as well as from the situation s/he currently shares with them. The formulas, as it were, might take over, ignore the specificity of student and context both, and consequently place the latter in shadow (a parallel may here be drawn to Giroux’s critique of “the reified language of methodologies” and their devastating effect on “the theoretical and political”). To sum up: Education as understood by Spivak is never as nonvague as a distinct methodology—and this notion, she insinuates, we must take up, lest we lose ourselves in rash, premature, and thus utopian conceptions about “good pedagogy.”

What is interesting here is that, as we have seen, in spite of Spivak’s aversion to deceivingly simple formulas, she cannot completely refrain from producing them herself. In this essay, two examples, “learning to learn from below” and “unlearning one’s privileges” have been mentioned. “Strategic use of essentialism,” to offer one further example, is yet another formula that has gained enormous popularity among scholars across the globe. As the quotation below shows, this is a fact that fills Spivak with great discomfort:

Once I started really getting into doing something about this, about unlearning my privilege, I took it away. It is ‘learning to learn from below,’ if you want a formula. I have also become extremely suspicious of the fact that people seem to like my little formulas: to take another example: ‘strategic use of essentialism,’ I have put that to rest many times, but people have not given it up (qtd Shaikh 183)

In this highly informative quotation, Spivak subtly suggests that as soon as a thoroughly developed formula is put to use, it must be put to rest—because as a mere formula, it can never match the complexity of the reality it meets (and therefore, the latter eventually invalidates the former). In this “taking back of formulas,” this reversed methodological leap, so to speak, we find something important; namely, Spivak’s solution to the problem that, if received uncritically and practiced without any respect to individual and situational specificity, all methodological instruction is oppressive. By annulling her own ideas as they—one by one—prove insufficient or faulty, Spivak implicitly tells her reader that didactic methods invariably are provisional and context-bound, and that, for her, the ongoing quest for pedagogical knowledge in itself is the main virtue. In other words, the search for a way to

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22 “The idea of strategic essentialism,” Stephen Morton reports, “accepts that essentialist categories of human identity should be criticized, but emphasises that one cannot avoid using such categories at times in order to make sense of the social and political world” (75). In other words, although the concept marks this categorizing as flawed, it tries to hijack it and use it productively.
teach and learn is indispensable, but its findings can never be universal or everlasting. This “fact,” Spivak herself would probably label a “success-in-failure,” typical of deconstruction, which—in Vanessa de Oliveria Andreotti’s words—“always falls prey to…itself,” but, that nevertheless can pose questions and cause doubts, and thereby “lead to better practice” (74). In other words, as the deconstructionist constantly problematizes established notions regarding what is true and what is not, and what is good and what is bad, s/he, too, eventually ends up deprived of the possibility to offer any “truths.” In spite of this, Spivak might argue, by scrutinizing the production of truths, deconstruction can act as a corrective device that helps us to hold off our impulse to believe that we (as individuals and collectives) always “know better” than “them.” Put to work in Spivak’s work on education, then, this theoretical enterprise becomes a means of circumventing the danger of methodological oppression, of avoiding the instilling of one’s own ideas on how education is “done properly” in students and other teachers.

Drawing on Marx, and substantiating the idea that education cannot possibly be nonvague or universally the same, Spivak explains that “working hands-on with teachers and students over long periods of time on their terms without thinking about producing information for [her] academic peers is like learning a language ‘to be able to produce in it freely’” and hence “‘to move in it without remembering back to the language rooted and planted in’” her—“‘[…]indeed forgetting it’” (“Righting” 548). What Spivak proposes here is that non-oppressive teaching only is a possibility if the pedagogue rids him- or herself of the idea of theorizing, and instead focuses all attention on the particular situation s/he is currently immersed in. If this operation is completely successful, it seems, it is not necessarily translatable into academic language; if the teacher has managed to “‘leap into the other’s sea,’” it is because s/he has suppressed the impulse to scrutinize, analyze, and lecture (in other words, the inclination to produce new scholarly knowledge [Spivak qtd in Simmons 141]). What is suggested here is that when education—for once—works, it is beyond the scope of scholarly language, and that, therefore, we cannot ever know it. For Spivak, this is arguably a very convenient conclusion, as it allows her to exit her thesis at an early stage, with many difficult questions unanswered. However, whereas this evasive move is what immunizes Spivak from demands that she needs to concretize her theory, it is also extremely problematic, and indeed what justifies Kapoor’s accusations of mysticism and romanticism. In other words, here, two distinct positions take shape—one that suggests that certain activities cannot be textualized and (thus) understood by anyone, and one that states that this explanation is nothing but a dubious subterfuge from someone who lacks the will or energy to present
7. Conclusion.

As I have demonstrated in no unclear terms, Freire and Spivak both agree that ideology exerts an influence on felt needs, that people consequently do not always know what measures that would improve their lives, and that this calls for the intervention of a pedagogue who is aware of these problems. Obviously inherent in Freire’s line of reasoning is the idea of the teacher as a person in the know, and the student as a subject whose consciousness needs to be raised—and even though Spivak is somewhat more careful in relation to these matters, by subscribing to the idea that the masses are deceived, her reasoning, too, implicates that the successful teacher is a savior who cures the ignorance of the many. This, moreover, is an excellent illustration of Spivak’s notion of complicity: by posing as epistemic rescuers, Spivak and her pedagogue risk constituting the Other as destitute of all kinds of knowledge “that matter.”

The danger of this critique, of course, is that, if conscientiously adhered to, it leaves us in a deadlock where no pedagogic action at all is possible. In all likelihood, this risk of complete paralysis is what makes both Freire and Spivak try anyway, as I have called it—what makes them both leap from theory to practice. Spivak, for one, is evidently utterly aware of her own complicity (Norton 2110), and, moreover—in spite of her concept “uncoercive rearrangement of desires”—she contends that “education [, after all,] inevitably is coercive” to some extent (Lee and Mascarenhas). In other words, Spivak admits that without any guidance or leadership, the idea of education (a liberating pedagogy no less) would go down like a house of cards—and, needless to say, this kind of debacle neither Freire nor Spivak advocates. Leadership, then, we must assume, is important, but the point is that this leadership should not re-enact societal mechanisms that promote certain groups and marginalize others. As I have shown, both Freire and Spivak have developed certain strategies for combatting this kind of preservation, and for resisting a mere reversal of an unjust socioeconomic order. We have also seen, however, that these efforts are definitely not free from problematic side effects.

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23 Yet another common perspective on this matter might here be delivered by Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, who amenably accepts that Spivak’s work primarily is “related to finding contradictions (aporias) to open up debates,” and not “to propose a coherent set of universally applicable solutions” (69).

24 Actually, as Andreotti notes, Spivak accepts reversal as “a necessary stage,” as long as it is “followed by the displacement of the terms of opposition (through self-reflexivity/deconstruction)” (75). Arguably, this is comparable to the initial restraints Freire wants to put on the oppressor so that oppression does not re-emerge (39).
To answer the main inquiry of this essay then, which asks the question as to whether Freire and Spivak manage to put forth pedagogical methods that are immune from “the danger of transference,” the reply must be no, in Freire’s case, and yes, but only provisionally with regard to Spivak’s work. To elaborate on this statement: When Freire puts his teacher in charge of deciding what voices that should be heard and what voices that should be gagged, he leaves the door open for renewed oppression and a mere turning of the tables—clearly against the grain of his own line of argument. Spivak, on the other hand, leaves no loopholes for oppressive tendencies in her methodology; however, as she usually shuns “the production of models [of practice] as such,” withdraws her own formulas, and uses deconstruction as a “safeguard against the repression or exclusion of ‘alterities,’”25 her settling for a certain praxis can only be temporary and provisional (“Can the Subaltern” 103, Norton 2110). As stated before, this is both Spivak’s problem (as no lasting “overall alternative” is ever offered) and her solution (as methodological oppression is avoided).

To further clarify these differences between Freire and Spivak: We have seen that Freire’s dialectics clearly inform his pedagogical methods, that this results in rather rigid dichotomies, but also, that the synthesis of Freire’s dialectical reasoning allows for “alterities,” diversification, indeterminacy, and openness to enter his pedagogical scene—at least in theory, until his methods ban the “internalized voice,” as if to ensure that the teacher’s agenda is implemented. Were it not for this last move, Freire and Spivak could painlessly have joined forces in the same curriculum. As should be abundantly clear by now, however, Spivak does not validate the kinds of saving clauses Freire eventually resorts to; although she, like most scholars, has an agenda, and a fairly concrete idea of what the world needs politically, this does not corrupt her pedagogical formulas (her avoidance of firm positions, her investigations of “stories in between,” and her constant moving from one subject position to another, make for this fact).

Drawing on the deductions above, the point has been made here that education is an “impossible task,” and yet also the best possibility we have for mutual understanding (and love, as Freire would have put it). In other words, the combination of teaching and learning is a most necessary (im)possibility for which the perfect and completely satisfactory form can never be found. While Spivak is the one who explicitly gives voice to this idea, as I have shown, Freire, too, is evidently aware that the theoretical language from which he constructs his pedagogy is far from faultless.

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25 “…that is, people, events, or ideas that are radically ‘other’ to the dominant world-view” (Norton 2110).
In conclusion, although this essay has laid bare a few flaws in the respective methodologies of Freire and Spivak, it has also offered several starting points from which the creative and open-minded educator can take off towards a way of teaching that respects and takes into account the world-view of the student. For this teacher, the most valuable lesson to be learned from Freire and Spivak may not be a certain method, but a certain attitude, acknowledging the student as an intelligent being, and downplaying the pedagogue’s self-assumed superiority.
8. Works Cited.

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