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The Essential Difference
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GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK
WITH ELLEN ROONEY

a Word. *Interview*

To undertake to place contemporary debates on essentialism in "context" is perhaps already to take sides in the controversy those debates have engendered. In some lexicons, at least, context is an anti-essentialist slogan; to contextualize is to expose the history of what might otherwise seem outside history, natural and thus universal, that is, the essence.

As an idiom, "in a word" signals a moment of compressed and magically adequate expression. To summarize a matter "in a word" is to locate or hit upon its proper form, to capture its essential quality and thus to say all that need be said. The problem of essentialism can be thought, in this way, as a problem of form, which is to say, a problem of reading. Context would thus emerge as a synonym for reading, in that to read is to demarcate a context. Essentialism appears as a certain resistance to reading, an emphasis on the constraints of form, the limits at which a particular form so compels us as to "stipulate" an analysis.

In "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," Frances Ferguson glosses stipulation as "trying to put a limit to ambiguity by defining the understanding of a term or a situation" (109); to put it in a word, perhaps. She argues that the "intense formality of the law of rape seems designed to substitute the reliability of invariable formulae for the manipulable terms of psychological states" (95); these "invariable formulae" ("rape," in a word) serve to foreclose the question of consent and to define rape in terms compatible with phallocentrism. For the law and for some feminists as well, the victim's "body is thus converted into evidence, having become [a] text" (91). But while the body is formally legible, individual psychological states, specifically concerning consent and its absence, go unread. In a phallocentric context, this "intense formality" functions to exclude the victims entirely from the definition of rape; for example, "for ancient Hebrew law, the act of sex carries with it the inevitability of consent. For Brownmiller and Dworkin, it carries with it the impossibility of consent" (94). The significance of form is thus stipulated in advance, an effect of the morphology of the body. Context is swal-

lowed whole, and women, as subjects, disappear with it, absorbed entirely into their bodies.[1]

The body is of course essentialism's great text: to read in its form the essence of Woman is certainly one of phallocentrism's strategies; to insist that the body too is materially woven into social (con)texts is anti-essentialism's reply. But feminism's persistent return to the body is only in part a rejoinder to the resilience of anti-feminism's essentialism. Caught between those who simply "read off" the body and those who take its ineluctable power to be a fragmentary social relation is the feminist who speaks "as a woman."

Feminisms return to the problem of essentialism–despite their shared distaste for the mystifications of Woman–because it remains difficult to engage in feminist analysis and politics if not "as a woman." Within every feminist reading practice, for example, essentialism appears as a problem both of the text and of the critic who reads "as a woman." Elizabeth Spelman calls this phrase the "Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism," inevitably dissembling the differences among women (x). The body can figure here as a trump card, seeming literally to embody the woman-ness of woman, obscuring the fact that "only at times will the body impose itself or be arranged as that of a woman or a man" (Riley 103). We seem to desire that what unites us (as feminists) pre-exist our desire to be joined: something that stands outside our own alliances may authorize them and empower us to speak not simply as feminists but as women, not least against women whose political work is elsewhere. In the U.S., this is an old dream of "non-partisanship" at the heart of politics, as well as what Donna Haraway calls "the feminist dream of a common language . . . a perfectly faithful naming of experience" (92). In a word.

Yet simply to label this political dream of women essentialism is to layer another political refusal over the rifts among us. The word essentialism can also work to conceal political divisions among women, insofar as it represents them as purely theoretical, a question of enlightenment. Political failures, if it be a failure not to unite all women under a single banner, are read as wholly intellectual failures–easily corrected. The original evasion is repeated; political difference is reduced to a matter of bad form, in a word, to essentialism.

In reading the body, to find "woman"; in "women," to secure feminism; to capture in a word the essence of a thing: essentialism is a dream of the end of politics among women, of a formal resolution to the discontinuity between women and feminisms. Anti-essentialism may mimic this formalism, even as it

seeks to diagnose it. Gayatri Spivak suggests–by turning repeatedly to the question of the word: which word to choose? to what end?–another reading. E.F.R.

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ER: As you know, some current discussions of the topic of essentialism have resulted in calls for a new willingness to take the "risk of essentialism," and these calls include citations from some of your most recent remarks. I'm thinking here of Alice Jardine's comment in *Men in Feminism* that "one of the most thought-provoking statements of recent date by a feminist theorist [is] Gayatri Spivak's suggestion (echoing Heath) that women today may *have* to take 'the risk of essence' in order to think really differently" (58), or of Bruce Robbins's interview with Edward Said, where Robbins asks: "One idea that has been much repeated in conversations about intellectuals and their relation to collectivity, especially among feminists, is the necessity to accept 'the risk of essence,' a phrase associated with Gayatri Spivak and Stephen Heath. Does it seem at all generalizable or useful in the case of the Palestinians?" (51).

You've examined the question of essentialism throughout your work, and you've said a number of different things about it, at times warning against defining women in terms of woman's putative essence and stressing the possibility that essentialism may be a trap, and, at other times, most recently in working on the text of the Subaltern Studies Group, talking about the "*strategic* use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest." I'd like to talk about the necessary risks of taking what may seem to be essentialist positions; about how we can signal the difference between a strategic and a substantive or a real essentialism; about the possibility of mobilizing people to do political work without invoking some irreducible essentialism; ultimately, how we can determine when our essentializing strategies have become traps, as opposed to having strategic and necessary positive effects?[2]

GS: To begin with, I think the way in which the awareness of strategy works here is through a persistent critique. The critical moment does not come only at a certain stage when one sees one's effort, in terms of an essence that has been used for political mobilization, succeeding, when one sees that one

has successfully brought a political movement to a conclusion, as in the case of revolutions or national liberation movements. It is not only in that moment of euphoria that we begin to decide that it was strategic all along, because generally it doesn't work that way, although that is important, too. It seems to me that the awareness of strategy–the strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like *woman* or *worker* or the name of any nation that you would like–it seems to me that this critique has to be persistent all along the way, even when it seems that to remind oneself of it is counterproductive. Unfortunately, that crisis must be with us, otherwise the strategy freezes into something like what you call an essentialist position.

Having said this, let me also emphasize the importance of who it is that uses the strategy. When I speak of the Subaltern Studies Group, for example, I'm not speaking of, let us say, a group situated within a very privileged institution of learning in one of the most powerful neo-colonial countries. The Subaltern Studies Group is working as a counter-movement within Indian history as written even by politically correct Indians trying to fabricate a national identity in decolonization; to an extent, it is in a different structural position from someone working from within, not only the University of Pittsburgh but certainly Brown University. You and I are in a different position in terms of the production of neo-colonialist knowledge, so you can't simply take the example of one group and their historians. And if you use the word positivism, you have to take into account the importance of positivism in the discipline of history in the nineteenth century; some of the best history is written under acknowledged or unacknowledged positivist impulses. So, to an extent, we have to look at where the group–the person, the persons, or the movement–is situated when we make claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory.

Finally, since you have, I think, quite correctly, spoken of my moving from one position to another, I think I will say that I have also reconsidered this argument about the strategic use of essentialism which I know has caught on, quite to my surprise, since it was really only mentioned in an interview which came out in an Australian journal which I don't see cited in many other contexts in the U.S. (Spivak with Grosz). I don't know the Heath passage, so I can't contextualize that one, but this one I have had played back to me many times, and perhaps even that fact has made me want to reconsider it. Because it seems to me that just as we saw within mainstream feminism the extremely good insistence that "the personal is political" transform itself within class alliances in a very personalist culture (and I like the word personalist a lot better than the word essentialist) into something like "*only* the personal is political," so, I would say that one of the reasons why the strategic use of essentialism has caught on within a personalist culture is that it gives a certain alibi to essentialism. The emphasis falls on being able to speak from one's own ground, rather than on what the word strategy implies, so I've reconsidered it. I think it's too risky a slogan in a personalist, academic culture, within which it has been picked up and celebrated. Now I think my emphasis would be more on noting how we ourselves and others are what you call essentialist, without claiming a counter-essence disguised under the alibi of strategy. And I'll repeat that: noting how ourselves and others are what you call essentialist, without claiming a counter-essence disguised under the alibi of a strategy. I would even say that these days, seeing with a good deal of surprised humility how these things do catch on, my interest as a teacher and in some ways as an activist is to build for difference, in other words to think of what we might be doing or saying strategically, sometimes tactically within a very powerful institutional structure. Given the way these things work–the collaboration between techniques of knowledge and strategies of power–given where we are, my project is to take account of the fact that, in spite of my personal benevolence, these things are used as if they were theories. And therefore one has to be careful to see that they do not misfire for people who resemble us so little that we cannot even imagine them in the strong sense. It seems to me that that vigilance, what I call building for difference, rather than keeping ourselves clean by being whatever it is to be an anti-essentialist, that has taken on much greater emphasis for me at this point. I think I probably have said enough in answer to this question. There's a great deal more to be said, but . . .

ER: Could I ask one further thing? When you spoke just then about noting our own essentialism, that sounded to me as if it were a reassertion of the need for the critique of essentialism. I think your description of the way in which your remark has been taken up in discourses that are produced from sites of influence and power is absolutely true. And the marking of the critical moment–what you call the strategic moment–is erased. What's reasserted then is actually the need for a kind of naiveté in the assertion of personal identity.

GS: You know, when I started teaching in '65, no, even before, when I was a teaching assistant at Cornell, someone, I forget who it was, gave us

teaching assistants the task of telling our students to write without using the word "however" and see what they would use in its place. I feel that very strongly about the word essence, or anti-essentialism or essentialism. What I am very suspicious of is how anti-essentialism, really more than essentialism, is allowing women to call names and to congratulate themselves. If one begins to see what words one could use in the place of essentialism or essence many, many words would come in. You yourself chose the word identity a minute ago; identity is a very different word from essence. Why do I mind this? I mind this because after all, if I understand deconstruction, deconstruction is not an exposure of error, certainly not other people's error. The critique in deconstruction, the most serious critique in deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything. That should be the approach to how we are essentialists.

You know, some young man, an analytical philosopher who was in my class, was very dissatisfied with the way I was teaching Derrida because it seemed to him, since he knew Nietzsche better than he knew anything else, that I was claiming that Derrida was a poor man's Nietzsche, to use his phrase. And, to an extent, what I told him was that the way I taught Derrida might make him seem like a poor man's everything, you know, so that if you knew Heidegger best, he would seem to be a poor man's Heidegger; if you knew Plato best, he would seem to be a poor man's Plato. So if I took that angle, I would say that perhaps what I'm saying here is that Derrida is a poor man's Althusser. In Althusser's most naive essay, "Marxism and Humanism," he talks about the fact that if you know an ideology, it doesn't dissipate the ideology. I think one of Derrida's most scandalous and greatest contributions is to begin with what is very familiar in many radical positions and to take it with the utmost seriousness, with literal seriousness, so that it transforms itself. This Althusserian position on ideology is one which one could very easily criticize–Althusser himself in his auto-critique suggested this–as mired in a theoreticism, mired in an absence of auto-critique, etcetera. But if you forget all of that and see that Derrida teaches us to re-read it, you can rescue this, too. I would remind the feminists who want so badly to be anti-essentialists that the critique of essence *à la* deconstruction proceeds in terms of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is very dangerous.

So I have certainly reconsidered my cry for a strategic use of essentialism because it is too deliberate. The idea of a *strategy* in a personalist culture,

among people within the humanities who are generally wordsmiths, has been forgotten. The strategic really is taken as a kind of self-differentiation from the poor essentialists. So long as the critique of essentialism is understood not as an exposure of error, our own or others', but as an acknowledgement of the dangerousness of what one must use, I think my revised statement–that we should consider how ourselves and others are essentialist in different ways–I think I would stand by it. The critique of essentialism should not be seen as being critical in the colloquial, Anglo-American sense of being adversely inclined, but as a critique in the very strong European philosophical sense, that is to say, as an acknowledgement of its usefulness.

ER: Could we pick up on the references that you have made to deconstruction and talk about what you have called "the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility" (*Other* 201). I think that one of the things that's most striking about your arguments about essentialism and about your work generally is the way you both assert the importance of positionality and refuse to essentialize it. How much would you say that your general thinking about essentialism is shaped by your conceptualization and your own practice of self-positioning or self-identification? What kind of relationship is there between the broad project to deconstruct–in the very precise sense that you were just invoking–identity, not to refuse identity but to deconstruct identity (a project you've participated in) and your own frequent concern to identify yourself, to position yourself, to refuse what you have pointed to most recently in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as a tendency on the part of supposed critics of essentialism to make their own positions transparent and unproblematic?

GS: If I can go back to something we were talking about before we started the interview, I'm interested in a sort of deconstructive homeopathy, a deconstructing of identity by identities. What we were talking about was the fact that it's quite often claimed that "Spivak talks too much about herself." I'm saying that if I really gave the story of my life, it would sound rather different. Assuming that there is such a thing as the story of a life (about which more later), it would sound rather different from all the other talkings about myself that I engage in. I believe that the way to counter the authority of either objective, disinterested positioning or the attitude of there being no author (and these two opposed positions legitimize each other) is by thinking of oneself as

an example of certain kinds of historical, psycho-sexual narratives that one must in fact use, however micrologically, in order to do deontological work in the humanities. When one represents oneself in such a way, it becomes, curiously enough, a deidentification of oneself, a claiming of an identity from a text that comes from somewhere else. In order to explain myself, I want to use a passage from *Grammatology* (47) about which I've written elsewhere ("Poststructuralism"). I'm not going to give an exact account of that passage. I'm going to turn it into a slightly crude analogy and I'm going to turn it into the analogy of a mother tongue. A mother tongue is something that has a history before we are born. We are inserted into it; it has the possibility of being activated by what can be colloquially called motives. Therefore, although it's unmotivated, it's not capricious. We are inserted into it, and, without intent, we "make it our own." We intend within it; we critique intentions within it; we play with it through signification as well as reference; and then we leave it as much without intent for the use of others after our deaths. To an extent, the way in which one conceives of oneself as representative or as an example of something is this awareness that what is one's own, supposedly, what is proper to one, has a history. That history is unmotivated but not capricious and is larger in outline than we are, and I think this is quite different from the idea of talking about oneself. I'd like to acknowledge a debt to *Anti-Oedipus* here, too, a book that I have often spoken against. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari talk about the way in which a socius is produced and then becomes a "miraculating" agency operating like a quasi-cause (10). The example that they use is capital, but, in fact, culture, ethnos, sexuality, all of these things become miraculating agencies like this, so that one feels that as if by a miracle one speaks as an agent of a culture or an agent of a sex or an agent of. . . . A body without organs has inscribed on its recording surface this miraculating agency, which seems like a quasi-cause. Now, what you take as representing, what your self represents, is that kind of a miraculating agency, a history, a culture, a position, an institutional position. But, via that persistent critique that I was talking about, you are aware that this is miraculating you as you speak, rather than that this is what is speaking. Another concept that one can bring in here which is very, very interesting is the concept of biography. You know that you graph your bio in order to make sense of it. These are uses of essence which you cannot go around, and you are written into these uses of essence. This is the strategy by which history plays you, your language plays you, or whatever-

the-hell the miraculating agency might be. It's not a question of choosing the strategy. You are, to an extent, distanced from it with humility and respect when you "build for difference," as I was saying. In that sense, I would say that being obliged to graph one's bio is very different from the attitude of claiming anti-essentialism, and I think even if the difference is not great, it's a crucial difference in terms of how you do your work. Is that an answer to your second question?

ER: Yes, and given what you have said in response both to that question and another, I'd like actually to skip to some things I thought we would talk about later, namely, why has anti-essentialism been so powerful in the way you were just referring to, as a kind of term of abuse, and how important are the questions of the disciplines, the institutional constraints of the U.S. academy, and the interventions of cross- or counter-disciplinary discourses like women's studies or area studies? What is the purchase the essentialism debate has on the academy? How does its inflection differ from discipline to discipline? Is anti-essentialism an effect of anti-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary work? Within feminism and within some other discourses, essentialism seems to be a kind of blind spot that won't go away. It hasn't, by and large, been historicized or related to the history of high philosophical essentialisms, but has been invoked to distance and disallow certain kinds of discourses. Why hasn't the response to that been a kind of philosophical essentialism that fights back, that resists this abuse, and the ahistorical and in some ways not very informed use of the word essentialism?

GS: And why there hasn't been a philosophical essentialism?

ER: In response, yes.

GS: Because essentialism is a loose tongue. In the house of philosophy, it's not taken seriously. You know, it's used by non-philosophers simply to mean all kinds of things when they don't know what other word to use. This is why I–not being a philosopher, but being auto-didactic enough so that I taught myself to read, I can't philosophize but I've certainly taught myself to read certain kinds of philosophy–this is why it shames me a little, the use of the word essentialism. It seems to me that within analytical philosophy, people like Hilary Putnam seem to be much more astutely coping with the problem of the irreducibility of essences without any of the fanfare; but they don't look, they don't sound like poststructuralist feminists or anything like that. In fact, when the question of essences is philosophically considered it doesn't seem very

sexy, hmmm? For example, non-foundationalist ethics, which from the analytical ground cannot proceed very far, so that, let's say, the work of a Thomas Nagel, or the slightly more interesting work of a Bernard Williams, is actually trying to cope in a philosophical way with the problem of essence and deontological practice in the humanities. In other words, moral philosophy doesn't look a bit like all the noise about anti-essentialism outside of philosphy. The question of anti-essentialism and essentialism is not a philosophical question; that's why there isn't any rebuttal from the house of philosophy. It takes place elsewhere. And, as to why it's taken on so much importance, I don't know, frankly, that one should assign reasons in that way. But I'm happy to fabulate. You ask if this is an effect of anti-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary work, and, as a kind of very old-fashioned teacher, who has been teaching full-time now for nearly twenty-five years, I would say that sometimes this is the case in the worst way. Whereas I find that the construction of an object in an investigation need not be the acceptance of essences; you know, in these cases, small "a," small "e," anti-essentialism is a way of really not doing one's homework. And it seems to me now, looking at what all this has wrought, that it would be much more interesting to try to infiltrate the old disciplines that deal with these things, like psychology, history, anthropology, the area studies, than to give way to a kind of globalism which wants to do all of these things, calls its impatience with academic homework anti-essentialism and really repeats one of the greatest dangers of the cross-culturalism that came hand-in-hand with imperialism. One cannot forget that the knowledge venture of imperialism, which was absolutely spectacular–the establishment of anthropology, comparative literature, comparative philology, comparative religion, world history, etcetera–the knowledge venture was, in its inception, Eurocentric cross-culturalism, and that's what we are, in fact, looking at, watered down and diluted in the house of a so-called interdisciplinary anti-essentialism in the humanities and the social sciences. As a person very deeply involved with the institution of tertiary education in the United States, I would say, as I have said before, that if one establishes an interdisciplinary space which does not engage with the most important arena (a silent, unemphatic arena) of warring power in the disciplines themselves, where the people who don't publish much, who don't teach very well, engage day after day, as with distribution requirements, let us say, if one doesn't budge them, but proliferates interdisciplinary, anti-essentialist

programs, in fact one provides an alibi, once again, for the ruthless operation of neo-colonialist knowledge. So if I seem to be speaking in a slightly old-fashioned voice . . . advisedly so.

ER: Your invocations of the knowledge venture and the philosophical discussion of the irreducibility of essences reminds me of a passage from "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern," which speaks, I think, to the relationship between essentialism and the production of knowledge. It's one of your takes on the argument that "only a native can know the scene" and you say: "The position that only the subaltern can know the subaltern, only women can know women, and so on, cannot be held as a theoretical presupposition either, for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity. Whatever the political necessity for holding the position, and whatever the advisability of attempting to identify with the other as subject in order to know her, knowledge is made possible and sustained by irreducible difference, not identity. What is known is always in excess of knowledge. Knowledge is never adequate to its object. The theoretical model of the ideal knower in the embattled position we are discussing is that of the person identical with her predicament. This is actually the figure of the impossibility and non-necessity of knowledge. Here the relationship between the practical–need for claiming subaltern identity–and the theoretical–no program of knowledge production can presuppose identity as origin–is, once again, an interruption that persistently brings each term to crisis" (*Other* 254). This passage touches upon a number of issues I'd like to talk about: the first is deconstruction and what it's taught us about identity and difference, the proper and reading, and their relationship to the production of knowledge. How would you say your interests in deconstruction have fed your thinking about essentialism? What's the importance of deconstruction in dismantling essentialism? How are essentialism and anti-essentialism related in Derrida's text?

GS: In terms of the first bit that you read, there is a further problem in there, which today I call "clinging to marginality." These things happen very fast under micro-electronic capitalism, and the institution of tertiary education in the United States is an extraordinary thing, with nearly 4,000 degree-granting institutions, incredible telematic contact; it's something. Unless you have worked within other systems with equally intelligent colleagues and students, you don't realize how much all the dogma on anti-essentialism is supported by

this political and economic structure. Now, within that context, within the last decade, we have seen that this "clinging to marginality" is being fabricated so that the upwardly mobile, benevolent student (the college is an institution of upward mobility; it would be ridiculous to deny that, and it would be ridiculous to say that upward mobility is necessarily bad), in an upwardly mobile situation, the young student, the so-called marginal student, claiming validation, is being taught (because we don't have the sense of strategy that I was speaking of, so that what was good in strategy has now become a slogan, and we don't look at the years passing) is being taught this idea of speaking for oneself, which is then, in fact, working precisely to contain the ones whom this person is supposed to represent. In other words, the miraculation is working as if it truly is a miracle. Thus the constituency that this person is supposed to represent when she says that "only I can speak about the Chicana," that is forgotten.

Going back to the question of deconstruction, I would say that what deconstruction has taught me right from the beginning is the necessity of essentialism and how careful we must be about it. As I have often said, deconstruction considers that the subject is always centered and looks at the mechanisms of centering; it doesn't say there is something called the decentered subject. When I say this, what people say is "Well, you just centered the subject in Derrida." This shows, it seems to me, a real desire to take one kind of political position over against another, not to see that a way of thinking is about the danger of what is powerful and useful, and instead simply to think that that way of thinking is talking about how that dangerous thing doesn't exist. The former is the lesson of deconstruction for me. I'm not saying that Derrida is necessarily claiming exactly this, but this is what I learn from it. Every reading is transactional. You run with what you have, and you become something else. So deconstruction also teaches me about the impossibility of anti-essentialism. It teaches me something about the conditions of the production of doing, knowing, being, but does not give a clue to the real. The real in deconstruction is neither essentialist nor anti-essentialist; the real . . . difficulty with deconstruction is that if you like it, you have to think through the extraordinarily counter-intuitive position that it might be essences and it might not be essences. Again, if you like, a "poor man's" agnosticism, all right? That "poor man's"—words given to me by this rather officious student, who comes and goes in my class—that "poor man's" there means, taking literally, trivially, what is implicit in the radical moment in other kinds of lessons. Deconstruction is

not an essence. It's not a school of thought; it is a way of re-reading. Deconstruction itself can be an essentialism. I was just reading a book called *Enlightened Absence* (Salvaggio). It is an example, I think, of essentialist, humanist, deconstructivist feminism. I think it can certainly become a viewpoint in deconstruction, a description of what it is to be feminine, how the anti-essential feminine is the essence of the feminine. It can be an essentialism, I think; it doesn't come packaged with either one thing or the other.

ER: Moving in the other direction, off the same passage, and this is related to what you were saying earlier about how one talks about oneself: can you talk about your own history, or the trajectory of your own work, your earliest intellectual and political history, and its impact on your thinking about essentialism? Is your recent work and its partial focus on the problem of essentialism a reinscription of earlier concerns, concerns that perhaps predate your work on Derrida?

GS: I don't really know. I mean, I'm sorry. Many of these answers to questions are: "I don't know." On the other hand, what I welcome is the chance of graphing myself through your questions. So if it is understood that that's what I'm doing, accounting for something about which I really have not stopped to think and that this is simply an accounting, in that spirit of a *parvenue*, I think one of the lessons learnt early for a child in a colonial context, who comes from a background which has the full share of the ambivalence toward the culture of imperialism, is related to the fact that the native language operated very strongly in my particular class; we still read, write, speak in our native language when we are by ourselves. We certainly were brought up within that context. There was a certain kind of nationalism on the rebound. In that situation, also, to learn through the percolation of the epistemic violence of imperialism . . . in school, strangely enough, mostly my teachers were tribal Christians. Now, I'm a caste Hindu. A caste Hindu child, in her native language, hegemonic Calcutta Bengali, which is quite different from the tribal languages which are not known by Bengalis, being taught by tribal Christians, who are, if one knows anything about the history of India, in certain senses outside of the religions of India, dehegemonized millenarian Christians. They were not Christianized, they became Christians, in a certain sense. They were, of course, Christianized, but I'm using it in that sense. To be in that situation, to have them as one's teachers . . . I still cannot think about my school days without an immense sense of gratitude to my parents for

having thought to send me to such a school rather than to a more fashionable Western-style school or a less fashionable native-type school. In a situation like that, one begins to realize without realizing the extraordinary plurality of the source of enlightenment; in the very long haul, the sources of enlightenment were our race enemies in every sense. On the other hand, my direct teachers, who were not co-religionists, who were caste-wise lower, in some senses, outcasts, and yet my teachers, respected teachers, Christians. The sense of what a division there is in one's own making came early.

Now it's that sense of division, and then the involvement with left thinking . . . In a situation where, after independence, the idea of internationalism is under fire from the national party, the lines between socialist internationalism and the fabrication of national identity were finessed by the left. That again is an idea that gets into one's way of. . . . You know, forty years later, thirty years later, graphing one's bio, one is asked why there is some sympathy for that word that I don't like–anti-essentialism–in one's make-up, those are the things that one still thinks of. It seems to me that that's the experience of the planned emergence into post-coloniality on a middle-class child in that part of India. The word experience would have to be understood in the way in which I was talking about, the mother-tongue, insertion, representation, example, anti-miraculation. . . . The experience of that, I think, is perhaps the strongest bond and also the strongest impatience with anti-essentialism as a battle cry.

ER: Your reference to the left suggests another way of asking a question similar to the one I asked about deconstruction, a question about marxism. That is, how has your interest in and your work on Marx influenced your thinking about essentialism? How does the marxist tradition of anti-essentialism fit into your own practice and thinking? Could you talk about a dynamic of essentialism and anti-essentialism within marxism?

GS: Well, I tell you, my relationship to marxism is like anything else; because I'm such a re-reader, it moves a great deal, and in Marx it is the slow discovery of the importance of the question of value that has opened up a lot of things for me. And it does seem to me that in Marx there is a very strong sense that all onto-political commitments (just as in our neck of the woods, all onto-cultural commitments) that is to say, ontological commitments to political beings, historical agents, are seen as negotiable, in terms of the coding of value.

I would draw your attention most strongly to, let's say, those chapters in *Capital*, Volume III, where Marx is talking about the trinity formula and

mocking the idea that there is anything–in your terms–essentialist about class. And then the final chapter on class, which, of course, we know is unfinished. That's not just one moment in Marx, if one attends carefully to the way in which he develops the idea of value. Unfortunately, the "Englishing" of Marx in this case has been the translations which have almost uniformly obliterated the trace of the counter-intuitive nature of Marx's exhortation to his implied reader–that is to say, the worker–and how counter-intuitive he wants the worker to be in order to realize that the worker is agent rather than victim, so that the entire idea of agency is structurally negotiable. The relationship between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity in Marx, right from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, displaces itself in a million ways after the discovery of value, and finally comes to lodge in that famous section in *Capital III* which is often quoted by people without their quite noticing what's going on there.

Those senses, the senses of the negotiability of commitment and the extraordinary elusiveness of value, are lost. You know, Marx calls value, let me see if I can get this straight, "contentless and simple" (*inhaltlos und einfach*). The English translations *always* call this "slight in content" (*Economic*). There is a great difference between "contentless and simple" and "slight in content." Value is not a form. Pure form is not something that Marx is talking about. Marx is talking about what in today's language we would call an "almost nothing," a *presque rien*, which cannot appear but which. . . . It's not mediation, it's the possibility of the possibility of mediation, as it were, which establishes exchange and then its appropriation and extraction, etcetera, as surplus and so on. Now this is of course a very, very complicated thing in Marx, but I would say that this way of understanding Marx's project would certainly not underestimate the importance of class, but would not see it as a trafficking in essences. That's something which goes much further than just what I've been able to say. I've written something rather recently where I take the various forms of value that Marx talks about, and it is in that piece, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Post-coloniality, and Value" that I've tried to relate this to analyses other than economic, but I think at this point this is probably enough.

ER: Could we move, then, to the relationship between the current and growing interest in materials from the so-called third world and essentialism? Is there a perception of a strategic essentialist moment that's located "out there" in the "third world," perhaps in the form of liberation struggles, which

is related to the renewed interest, specifically among U.S. critics and scholars, in essentialism and in that–that benevolent, as you have called it, but problematic–desire for translations of "third world" texts and the production of new forms of knowledge about a "third world" which is also often rendered monolithically, both within feminism and outside of feminism? How much of the difficulty that academics in the U.S. have avoiding certain essentialist traps has to do with the displacement of questions of race and ethnicity into this monolothic and safely distanced "third world" and the consequent effacement of imperialism as such?

GS: Well, you know, it works both ways. You displace it into the third world, but, on the other hand, you again reconstruct the third world as people of color and marginalized people in the United States, like all of the other syndromes, you know, like "little Italy" and "little Ireland" and now, increasingly, "little India," which becomes more real than the original cultures to the great irritation of the original cultures. Again, the word "original" is shorthand. In fact, I have an argument, which I have learned to make after reading Robin Blackburn's book rather carefully, that even New England, to an extent, with all of the rabid anglomania in the United States and its difference from the breakup of Britain and so on, that it is this relationship of a constructed space, a simulacrum in the United States, which then comes to take the place of Britain. No one speaks about the repeated emergence of this difference between the simulacrum in the United States, "realm of the hyper-real," to quote from a critic whom I don't usually endorse, and the so-called original places which have their histories (Baudrillard). So, to an extent, it's not just displacing it into the third world, but displacing it, as you have very properly suggested, within the "third world." If one looks at the so-called 'third world' as such (I'm now really quoting from something that I have written), between two texts like Frobel Folker's *The New International Division of Labor* and Nigel Harris's *The End of the Third World* there is a decade. And between these two books, one begins to realize that that very definite new economic program, after the Second World War and the accompanying change in global outlines after that, has really undergone a change. To use that as a sort of culturalist description is rather shabby academically, frankly. If the "third world" is used as a sort of mobilizing slogan for . . . call it non-aligned nations or whatever, I think it's fine, but that is rather different from essentialism. If you look at the conferences, etcetera, where this language is seriously used, you will see that each

one of the countries has come asserting its difference. They really do know that it's strategic because they're not sitting in humanities departments trying to be different from others. That is a strategy that changes moment to moment, and they in fact come asserting their differences as they use the mobilized unity to do some specific thing. And that's where you see strategy at work. That has nothing to do–when the third world claims unity as a block–nothing to do with essences. And I think we should keep that as a reminder.

On the ground of cultural politics, the third world is a postcolonial world. Consider, for example, the idea that magical realism is the paradigmatic style of the third world. What is (and this is a point I've made elsewhere) the hidden ethical, political agenda behind claiming that that part of the third world which relates most intimately to the United States, namely Latin America (just as India used to relate to Britain in the nineteenth century), that a style practiced most spectacularly by some writers there, is paradigmatic of a space which is trying to cope with the problem of narrativizing decolonization, whereas, in Latin American space, one of the things that cannot be narrativized is decolonization, as the Ariel-Caliban debate that I have written about clearly articulated for us?[5] What's the agenda behind this kind of thing?

So it seems to me if one looks at the larger third world as basically postcolonial, basically making catachrestic claims. . . . Political claims are not to ethnicity, that's ministries of culture, or, you know, people getting degrees, the political claims over which battles are being fought are to nationhood, sovereignty, citizenship, secularism, all that kind of stuff. Those claims are catachrestic claims in the sense that everybody knows that the so-called adequate narratives of the emergence of those things were not written in the spaces that have decolonized themselves, but rather in the spaces of the colonizers. That is a catachrestic situation. There the question of essences becomes the question of regulative political concepts. I mean, I don't really think about essentialism or anti-essentialism when I look at what's going on in the third world. I see either block unity, highly strategic in the strictest political sense, or these catachrestic claims where people are having to negotiate questions like national language, nationhood, citizenship, etcetera. The question of essence really doesn't come in there because it is catachrestic. And, in fact, if one wanted to give an example here, one could find a wonderful one from the sixty-three million tribal people in India, as to how the idea of nationship, unity, et cetera, are being negotiated within that arena, but that would take a very long time.

Let me end this long and impassioned answer briefly by saying that one could look at it another way, too. Again, I want to acknowledge some debt to a re-reading of *Anti-Oedipus*. Maybe if I read *A Thousand Plateaus* again I will like it. In the old days I didn't like *Anti-Oedipus*, but I've been rereading it. One can put it this way: capital is anti-essentializing because it is in the abstract as such. There's no doubt about it. I'm not talking about capital*ism*, I'm talking about capital, and, against it, the essence of nations, cultures, etcetera, deployed for the political management of capital. And today, to an extent, the "politics of overdetermination" is the newest twist in that management, even including the idea of an anti-essentialist multiplicity of agents. I'm speaking obviously of the wake of Laclau and Mouffe's book. That's the newest twist in this management of the basically anti-essentializing movement of capital as the abstract as such. Let's stop here. This is a good answer.

ER: I take the force of your point, that when you think about the third world, especially politically, the problem of essentialism doesn't arise. But in what you have written, for example, about the Subaltern Studies Group, their practice, and their pursuit of an essential category or definition . . .

GS: . . . subaltern consciousness . . .

ER: . . . you describe a certain kind of project: they produce, in the process that you unpack, an anti-essentialist encounter with radical textuality; I think that is the way you put it.[4]

GS: Yes.

ER: That was part of what my question was directed at, the way in which your work on *their* work has gotten, at least in some ways, articulated in terms of the debate around essentialism and anti-essentialism.

GS: I should say something about this perhaps. I haven't ever really said anything. You know, I'm still part of the collective (Subaltern Studies Group) and I hope to attend the next workshop, but my intervention has made them somewhat uncomfortable. I think I turned out to be more . . . well, I will use your word, anti-essentialist . . .

ER: . . . in quotation marks . . .

GS: . . . than they had figured. So that, to an extent, I work with them. I'm not monumentalizing them. They are not a group of third world historians who are just wonderful and correctly strategically essentialist, etcetera. I think they, at least some of them, had more invested in the subaltern consciousness

than I had thought when I was welcomed in the group. So it seems to me that rather than think of it as my work *on* them, it should be seen as my work *with* them as a kind of gadfly, a persistent critic among them. So that is the peculiar position that I seem to occupy in spite of the, to me, rather unfortunate opening sentence of Colin McCabe's introduction to my book. The position I occupy is such that most deconstructivists think that I'm too vulgar; most marxists think that I'm too elitist and too much in love with Parisian fads; many feminists, mainstream feminists, are beginning to feel, in fact, they have said so, that I am, in some way, anti-feminist. And, in the same way, in the Subaltern Studies Group, I'm a closet elitist perhaps. So, I like that, I don't know how, why this happens, but it keeps me home-free (laughter from ER) to an extent, it keeps me vigilant. You know Benita Parry recently has accused Homi Bhabha and Abdul Jan Mohammed and me of being so enamored of deconstruction that we're not able to let the native speak. She has forgotten that we are natives, too, eh? The postcolonial is the old colonial subject. In the same way, I *am* one of the subalternists; I don't work *on* them. And as a subalternist, not a subalternist historian, but a subalternist critic, I'm against their grain as I am against the grain of the anti-essentialist. You know, in fact, a group of extremely committed anti-essentialists in Australia once described me in a journal, I'm sorry I've forgotten the name of the journal, and the name of the person who actually was the representative of this group who described me as such, but I wear it like a crown–as representing the decline of the real. So, you know, I'm not going to stand by that claim to the essentialism, as you put it, of the subaltern consciousness forever, saying "watch this wonderful strategic use of essentialism." There, too, the scene changes as things move.

ER: You have made several references to the problem of theory, whether it's marxists accusing you of being too attached . . .

GS: Not accusing–thinking of me . . .

ER: Thinking of you . . .

GS: I'm not so important that people are accusing me. . . . One of the subalternists did indeed accuse me of various things but I've written about that in my book.[5]

ER: (laughing) Okay . . .

GS: . . . but that's an exception–no, when they think of me they think . . .

ER: (laughter)

GS: . . . if my name comes up, let's put it that way . . .

ER: (laughing) Okay . . . in any case, there is one reading of essentialism in the U.S. context that suggests that it tends to be empirical, that it's a kind of practical rather than a theorized essentialism, or that it's an essentialism by default. I wonder what you think of that reading, and that would return me to an earlier question about the absence of a kind of a philosophical rejoinder to anti-essentialism. We've already talked about that, but I wonder if you think it's possible at present to construct a kind of self-consciously theorized essentialism, or if there would be any point in even trying to do that. There are, of course, discourses perhaps in the biological or the genetic sciences that seem to be seeking to isolate universal or essential human traits. Is the reductiveness that tends to characterize those kinds of moves a primary strategy of essentialism? Do those kinds of reductions go against the grain or against the disciplinary prejudices and investments of literary and philosophical discourse and thus disable a substantive theoretical essentialism in the debate?

GS: Now, sociobiology, cognitive studies, artificial intelligence, which take something as the ground, they are exaggerated cases of most such discourses, hmmm?

ER: Right.

GS: These things become politically offensive, a way, precisely, of differentiating oppressive behavior. I have no problem there; I'm against that. And I don't particularly want to wait to theorize essentialism in order to say that; I really do believe in undermining the vanguardism of theory. I really do think that that persistent effort is very important for people to talk about in anti-essentialism. So, to an extent, I don't want a theory of essences. We have enough of those. We have nothing but the practice of essences, either. So, when I said strategy, I meant strategy. I don't even think I'm capable of thinking theory in that sense. With essences, at least I feel that they're so useful that they can become dangerous. With theory, I feel that, for the moment, for me, at least, it's best to keep it at a distance. So, I would say, coming from my own sort of odd position, I don't see why we would want a substantive essentialism. It seems to me that there is no reason. What a person like me wants to look at is why essentialism is confused with the empirical. Why do people make this terminological confusion? Earlier, in my school-teacherly voice, I said that this confusion is a way of not wanting to infiltrate the disciplines, the vested interests, the real problems. Instead, one says that the careful construction of an

object of investigation in a field is essentialism. This is the same as confusing essentialism with the empirical. All we really want to claim is that there is no feminine essence; there's no essential class subject; the general subject of essence is not a good basis for investigation. This is rather different from being empirical.

If we base our ontological commitments on various forms of coding, you know, and there are people like, let's say, Gayle Rubin, whose essay I, again, have re-read recently. It is, to me, spectacular that someone coming from a Freudian/Lévi-Straussian structuralist humanism should in fact get into the idea of value in so important a way, and it's hardly picked up–that part of it–people talk about sex-gender systems, etcetera. It seems to me that if, whether we declare ourselves as essentialists or anti-essentialists, we work hard enough to see that our own ontological commitments (and they must be there, even if it's only to anti-essentialism) are dependent on various forms of coding, if we base our ontological commitments on various forms of coding, and now I'm basing myself on stuff that I've said before, we can presuppose a variety of general catachrestic names, you know, as a grounding. I've taken examples from postcoloniality, but one can, in fact, find these kinds of examples all over the place. In fact, Richard Rorty speaking about the nominalism in poststructuralism is right on target there. What he does with it is something else. But to see that, to base one's ontological commitment on an examination of value coding and then to take, to presuppose, a catachrestic name in order to ground our project, our investigation, allows us to be thoroughly empirical without necessarily being blind essentialists, essentialist as such. Ultimately, if you will forgive me for saying so, but then you need some kind of a voice, you know, in your journal, that will speak from the other side, I have to say that a lot of self-consciously anti-essentialist writing seems to me a bit useless and boring. You know what I'm saying? It's often very derivative, resembling other and better models that are not as scared of essences. It seems to me that to be empirical in this way would be a much greater challenge, require much harder work, would undermine . . . would make people read different things, you know. I mean, if you're reading development economics or old-fashioned ethnography that's still coming out . . . in order to be able to re-fashion it this way, it takes up all your time; you don't read Cixous's latest thing. In fact, I'm very out-of-date on much of the, you know, "with-it" writing because it takes time to read the other stuff and then *do* this thing that I'm talking about, and I

don't even do it well. So that's what I would say. I think to confuse empirical work with the pursuit of essences is, in itself, something that should be examined, and I don't see any need for a substantive theory of essentialism.

ER: We've been talking about feminism all along, but to address it very directly, how would you say feminism, as such, which is already problematic . . . (laughs) . . . *feminisms*! . . . how have feminisms influenced your thinking about essentialism? Did feminism or women's studies put essentialism on the agenda in the U.S. academy? And what would you say–you just now mentioned Cixous–about the way essentialism and anti-essentialism are intertwined in the practice of feminist theory and women's studies, in the U.S. or in France, in the work of the anti-feminist feminists like Cixous or Kristeva?

GS: I think in general women's studies philosophy is humanist. There is a piece by Jean Grimshaw in the current *Radical Philosophy* on Mary Daly's humanism. Of course, Mary Daly is not representative of U.S. feminism, but I think some lessons can be learned there about essentialist or anti-essentialist debate.

When I began to write as a feminist, the idea of differences being unjustly made and differences unjustly not being recognized needed the presupposition that what was self-same or identical was an essence. It was okay as a strategic presupposition; it certainly allowed me to learn and teach. But it does seem that like most strategies, for me at least, it has served its purpose, and at this point I can't go on beating that horse anymore. And as I say, my feminism now takes a distance from that debate.

As you know, anti-feminist means something else in France. I really don't have much to do with it because that's very situation specific. I like reading Irigaray, but I read her within the tradition of the French, foregrounding rhetoric. I see many of my students, who accuse her of being essentialist as she's talking about women, not reading *in that way*. They're saying, "well, she's saying this about women, this about. . . ." If you read her, in the way that, from the surrealists on down, we've been taught to read the best in French writing, without taking for granted her own sometimes irritatingly declared ruptures . . . but you know that Hegel has to be read that way, you know, Marx has to be read, Derrida has to be read that way. Why do we become essentialist readers when we read someone like Irigaray? I take a great deal of pleasure reading her because she writes within that tradition and . . . it's good.

I'm repelled by Kristeva's politics: what seems to me to be her reliance on the sort of banal historical narrative to produce "women's time": what

seems to me Christianizing psychoanalysis; what seems to me to be her sort of ferocious Western Europeanism; and what seems to me to be her longstanding implicit sort of positivism: naturalizing of the chora, naturalizing of the presemiotic, etcetera. I'm so put off by this that I can't read her seriously anymore, so it's more my problem. I mean, I'm not generous and catholic enough to learn from her anymore. Cixous, I should pick up on again, and perhaps I will do so since I'm going to teach. . . . I've put some stuff by Cixous on the reading list so that I'm obliged to really take a look at her.

I think the kind of anti-essentialism that I like these days–again, every time I use that word, I'm using it because it is your word–is (I've already talked about Rubin), is, let's say the work of someone whom I've used a lot, a woman called Kalpana Bardhan. But, if you read her, you probably wouldn't see what I was talking about. Again, as I was saying, one has to do that work of learning how to honor empirical work. In her work, she talks about how stratified, let's say, the whole idea of women is in a place like India. In Bardhan's work (she's a development economist), you begin to see how impossible it is to focus on, even within endogamous or exogamous marriage lines, how impossible it is to focus on something called a space out of which you will define and articulate something called a woman. She even diversifies in this way the radicals who can join in their struggle. Then, in another space, she diversifies the people who study them–good people, herself, Barbara Miller. . . . I find, in that kind of a work which is not against essentialism but which completely pluralizes the grid, it is my task as a reader, as it is with deconstruction, to read it and run with it and go somewhere else. It is my task as a reader to see where in that grid there are the spaces where, in fact, woman oozes away, you know? That's the kind of stuff that really excites me these days, you know? So that's what I read. Essences, it seems to me, are just a kind of content. All content is not essence. Why be so nervous about it? Why not demote the word "essence," because without a minimalizable essence, and I'm now thinking of Derrida's notion of a minimal idealization, without a minimalizable essence, an essence as *ce qui reste*, an essence as what remains, there is no exchange. Difference articulates these negotiable essences. So, I have no time for essence/anti-essence. It seems to me that there's so much work to be done that demoting the notion of essence, minimalizing, looking at these minimalizable essences, seeing that that's how it works, one can go ahead and do something else. You know what I'm saying?

ER: Yes, but it seems to me that the reason that that can't be done across the board is teaching. I always have to "do" essentialism/anti-essentialism

with my students because in the first flush of feminist thought they become the most energetic essentialists, or personalists, perhaps. And that's, of course, a quite different thing from a research program or the kinds of books that one wants to write, but in my experience that's part of the reason that the question won't go away. It's a kind of initial question, politically and intellectually, when students discover the possibility of a feminist discourse.

GS: Well, of course that's a problem. What I'm trying to suggest, because this is not a problem I don't have, what I'm trying to suggest is that rather than make it a central issue, work it into the method of your teaching so that the class becomes an example of the minimalizing of essences, the impossibility of essences; rather than talk about it constantly, make the class a proof of this new position. If we're talking strategy, you know as well as I do that teaching is a question of strategy. That is perhaps the only place where we actually get any experience in strategy, although we talk a lot about it. And it seems to me that it's a change that strategy has called for. I think talking about essentialism and anti-essentialism and making students take sides–they're not yet ready, they don't, they know nothing about the real meaning–essence is a grand word, you know? They know nothing about how much has been achieved in the name of essences. In that context, it seems to me that one can make a strategy of taking away from them the authority of their marginality, the centrality of their marginality, through the strategy of careful teaching, so that they come to prove that that authority will not take them very far because the world is a large place. Others are many. The self is enclosed; the concrete is fabricated. One can do it in true teaching rather than talk about it *ad infinitum* because they're not even ready to take sides. We have to assume that we, as dogs in office (*King Lear*, you know, "a dog's obeyed in office"), are teaching them, hmmm? That's what I would say.

ER: How would you make a distinction–obviously you would make a distinction–between specificity and essence, so that it's possible to articulate specificities without moving in the direction of totalization and therefore without lapsing into essentialism? Perhaps one of the things that has happened in the debate in the U.S. is that critics have been attacked as essentialists when in fact they've been talking about specificity.

GS: Well you know, I'm not saying that there isn't a problem of freezing one's little arena of expertise into a global model. That problem cuts across so-called essentialists and so-called anti-essentialists. Remember I was saying

"what would you do if you had to use another word?" I think that problem should be attacked. I don't know whether it should be diagnosed as essentialism because at this point that word has become really . . . it's been overworked. I don't even know if it was originally ready to be worked, but now, it seems to me, it's doing nothing there except signalling what color cockade you're wearing in your hat.

ER: There has been, at least in literary studies, a kind of consensus that feminist critics have done exactly what you describe, taken a very small sample and then generalized about a "feminine aesthetic" or a "woman's tradition"–produced ahistorical misrepresentations of things as feminine, feminine, you know, the Feminine, with a capital "F." Insofar as this criticism has been generally accepted, there's a kind of consensus in favor of pursuing specificity, multiplying differences. Is there a way in which multiplication can become pluralism? What are the consequences of that?

GS: The real problem, one of the reasons why it becomes pluralism, is that we live in a country which has pluralism–the pluralism of repressive tolerance–as the best of its political credo. That's why it becomes pluralism, you know? I mean, none of us is particularly interested in changing our social relations, so the real answer is that. What to do about it? Certainly not chat about essentialism. I think we should shelve that question there and then talk about it a bit more within those limits. It seems to me that the proliferation of multiplicity, which is always limited by what choices are allowed, is a very bad idea. It seems to me that one should focus where one can focus, make it possible for one's students to focus a bit more.

Once we have established the story of the straight, white, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual man of property as the ethical universal, we must not replicate the same trajectory. I think we certainly have to watch it, but it is not possible. . . . We are . . . we have limits, we cannot even learn many languages. This idea of a global fun-fair is a lousy idea as a teaching idea. One of the first things to do is to think through the limits of one's power. One must ruthlessly undermine that story that I was talking of, the story of the ethical universal, the hero. But the alternative is not constantly to evoke multiplicity; the alternative is to know and to teach the student the awareness that this is a limited sample because of one's own inclinations and capacities to learn enough to take a larger sample. And this kind of work should be a collective enterprise. Other people will do some other work. This is how I think one should proceed, rather

than make each student into a ground of multiplicity. That leads to a pluralism. And I see so often in the U.S. student–we were talking about this miraculating agent–I ask the U.S. student: "What do you think is the inscription that allows you to think the world without any preparation? What sort of coding has produced this subject?" I think it's hard for students to know this, but we have a responsibility to make this lesson palliative rather than fully destructive. This is not a paralysing thing to teach. In fact, when a student is told that responsibility means proceeding from an awareness of the limits of one's power, the student understands it quite differently from being told "Look, you can't do all of this." You know what I'm saying? I can't do all of this. But I will share with you what I have learned about knowing, that these are the limitations of what I undertake, looking to others to teach me. I think that's what one should do rather than invoke multiplicity.

ER: How is this problem of the subject related to the relationship between essentialism and the efforts to theorize the body, or bodies, as someone pointed out to me when I showed him this question? What kind of problem is this? Can we theorize our bodies without essentializing them as the body? Is our confusion about how to theorize bodies the root of the problem of essentialism? Insofar as there is another factor that keeps the question of essentialism kind of bubbling, I think it has to do with the fact that, at least in the U.S., the effort to biologize gender is not over in the general culture, political culture, for example, the front page of the *New York Times* a few weeks ago explaining why at certain times of the month we can't find our cars because of our . . .

GS: Really?

ER: . . . hormones raging. Yes.

GS: I didn't see that. It gives me an answer to my question!

ER: (laughs) How is your own effort to address bodies in some of your work part of your thinking about essentialism? And how do race and class actually enter in here, as well as the more obvious gender?

GS: Well, you know, all of those generalizations, again, I am against universalizing in that way. I mean I would look at why they're essentializing, rather that to say that "this is bad" necessarily, because I think there is something, some biological remnant in the notion of gender, even in the good notion of gender. Biology doesn't just disappear, except it should not be offered as a ground of all explanations. So basically on that, you know, I'm a nonfoundationalist in that sense, especially when grounds are found to justify bad politics.

So it's almost as if I'm going at it the other way, a sort of deductive anti-essentialist, how is the essence being used? But apart from that I would say that biology, a biology, is one way of thinking the systematicity of the body. The body, like all other things, cannot be thought, as such. Like all other things, I have never tried to approach the body as such. I do take the extreme ecological view that the body as such has no possible outline. You know, again, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, where Marx, talking about species life, says nature is the great body without organs. You know, if one really thinks of the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such. I think that's about what I would say. There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it.

ER: This also is a question that's not in here, per se, because when I looked again at that not very well formulated question about the unconscious and death, I realized that there is no question about psychoanalysis anywhere in here.

GS: That's okay.

ER: (Laughs) Okay?

GS: Yah!

ER: (laughing) These are my last questions that didn't fit elsewhere. Is it possible to speak of a non-essential essence? Would that be a kind of gloss on strategic essentialism?

GS: I don't think so.

ER: No?

GS: I mean, one might just as well speak about an essential non-essence. It's possible to speak of everything. But an essence, if it's minimalizable, is also cross-hatched. But in the longer question as you had it before you had asked about the relationship to death. . . . I would like to say that death for me–body, woman, worker, lover, so this perhaps applies to all words–but death as such can only be thought via essence or rupture of essence, that mother-tongue analogy that I gave you. . . . I cannot approach death as such, you see what I'm saying? To an extent it takes us back to the question of catachresis. Catachresis is a nice thing . . . better than an anti-essence.

ER: I've already asked about deconstruction as a kind of questioning of essences or of the relation between the essential and the anti-essential, and as I look back I want to ask you about de Man, as opposed . . . I was about to say

as opposed to Derrida, but not necessarily as opposed to Derrida, but in his specificity as someone who can be of help.

GS: Well, you know, Derrida, from his very early work was animated by this peculiar intuition of deconstruction. Of course when I knew de Man he was a phenomenologist, interested in people like Lévi-Strauss, Poulet, etcetera, and deconstruction was a thing that appealed to him greatly and he ran with it in another direction. I see his work as lapidary and strong in its very limits. That is to say, I don't believe he ever gave away his control in the writing. He talked about giving up his control, but he never really gave away his control in the way that Derrida constantly can. De Man even writes about it in the normal way. But writing, accounting for something, can sometimes be understood in one way. It seems to me that the strength within its limits was a sort of extraordinary training in reading, which is then open for use in many ways. Just as I was saying to you that what one learns from deconstruction is the importance of essences, how useful they are. From de Man, the lesson that I learn is the extreme importance of an absolutely literal-minded reading. I think that's his strength. And that cuts across as many different manifestations.

ER: You spoke earlier, several times, about other words that might be used rather than anti-essentialist, and although I didn't know you were going to say that, as I was thinking about talking with you, I did fix on certain terms in your work, like "interruption," or "transactional," or "discontinuous." I don't mean that you were thinking of this when you made the earlier remarks, but are these perhaps other words that can serve the strategic, have strategic effects?

GS: At the expense of being repetitive, but I think it bears repetition, I'm feeling more centered or positioned by that word essence than I like, because after all essence is the word in anti-essentialism too, if you take a position vis-à-vis anti-essentialism. So I feel more positioned or centered by that word, whereas I have never developed a position of thinking its relation to the question of essences. I thought through that bit about essences as *ce qui reste* because I wanted to come forward, to answer questions that clearly positioned me as having a position on the strength of, you know, those couple of sentences I said to Liz Grosz and have somewhat regretted since then. Now, having taken that apology, as it were, if you put that together, that idea of essences as what remains, the minimalizable, something with which we negotiate (we were talking about the strategy of teaching, etcetera, and this works with students), without

talking about the debate, making it a topic of discussion–if you put this together with interruption as bringing to crisis, then you can see how it can relate. It really can relate to anti-many things, bringing to crisis.

Now, in this wave, sort of in this endless wave of my thinking–and I'm talking about where I am here, now–I'm sort of soldiering on in my own way to bring anti-essentialist metaphysics to crisis. Not that that will remain the only agenda if you talk to me again. Strategic means strategic. I'm attempting to bring anti-essentialist metaphysics to crisis because I care. You see this whole business of what I began with–that you deconstructively critique something which is so useful to you that you cannot speak another way. . . . You know, I just told my graduate students what I would look for in their papers, and one of the things I said was "Earn the right to use words, your language. Never say text when book will do. Never say discourse when language will do. Never say critique when criticize will do," because this is too important for us, and I don't want my students to push it around and think that this is taught in a critique of humanism. So, to that extent, I would say, because I care, because after all this is the only way that I can speak. . . . I talked a little bit about how the postcolonial on the cusp of decolonization is almost made a paradigm of this kind of a thing. I feel it necessary to bring anti-essentialist metaphysics to crisis. What one cares about one doesn't want to see spoiled so easily. This brings us, of course, to the next question about which I've spoken before, the politics of overdetermination–looking for some way out of being marxist and still not losing credit. This idea of alliance politics, etcetera. Laclau and Mouffe's work, to an extent, is supporting the kind of very reactionary pluralism that most humanities students are into anyway. When I asked Laclau this question in London, he very painstakingly explained to me the difference between plurality and pluralism in the public arena, just as . . . he had, in fact, explained with the same kind of painstaking care the difference between contingency and randomness to a young philosopher about ten minutes before that. The philosopher had said something rather like what I had said, and so I didn't feel completely crushed because (both laugh loudly) I just thought that this was uncalled for. But it seems to me that this, the anti-essentialist metaphysics, is in fact giving support to the politics of overdetermination: "we are all overdetermined," sort of multiplicity of agents, which is really rather a reactionary position.

"Transaction": now a transaction can be a transaction between essences, so it is not necessarily anti-essentialist. And radical discontinuity

cannot appear, like pure difference; remember, essences cannot appear either. I mean, theoretically, essences are not allowed to appear, so there's not much theoretical difference between pure essence and pure difference. Radical discontinuity cannot appear. So discontinuity, to relate this to what I thought through in terms of essences for your set of questions–the minimalizable, what remains–discontinuity must traffic in minimal continua. So we go back to *ce qui reste*, fragments of essences to reckon with, and that's where writing like Bardhan's is so interesting. Fragments of essences to reckon with rather than preserving myself from them. If you see this as an anti-essentialist project, I start running the other way again. (ER laughs.) Because you see, this is the whole business about strategy, asking what regulates your diagnosis, why do you want me with you, what claims me, what is claiming me? I've written about this too. I'll tell you what I am against: unacknowledged corporatism. I am anti-corporatist, and that cuts across essentialism and anti-essentialism.

ER: Can we talk, just because of the very last things that you've said, about the question of audience? When I thought about these questions, I also thought about my own work. I've been writing about pluralism. What I have been calling pluralism is partially what you were just referring to as corporatism. It's an essentialism that doesn't have to do so much with the object of study as with one's audience. The pluralist assumes not just her own transparency–in fact she may articulate her positionality–but the transparency and therefore the unity of one's audience. That's where essence resides, or is expressed, that is what pluralism doesn't acknowledge. Perhaps this isn't what you meant by anti-corporatism. . . . I guess what I'm asking is for you to say a little bit more about it. What I see as the pluralist moment is the moment when one doesn't acknowledge–and I've learned this from you, at least I think I have learned it from you–the exclusions that fragment one's audience.

GS: Yes. Now one thing that I will say is that when one takes the representative position–the homeopathic deconstruction of identity by identity–one is aware that outside of that representation of oneself in terms of a stream, there are areas that are completely inaccessible to one. That's, of course, that's a given. In the same way, it seems to me, that when I said "building for difference," the sense of audience is already assuming that the future is simply a future present. So, to an extent, the most radical challenge of deconstruction is that notion of thought being a blank part of the text given over to a future that is not just a future present, you know. So in that sense, the audience is not ar essence, the audience is a blank. When I was speaking of building for differ ence, I was thinking of the fact that an audience can be constituted by people cannot even imagine, affected by this little unimportant trivial piece of work which is not just direct teaching and writing. That business displaces the ques tion of audience as essence or fragmented or exclusivist or anything. Derrida calls this a responsibility to the trace of the other, I think, and that I find is a very. . . . It's something that one must remind oneself of all the time. That is why what I cannot imagine stands guard over everything that I must/can do think, live, etcetera.

But when an audience, having said that, when an audience is responsi ble, responding, invited, in other words, to co-investigate, then positionality is shared with it. Audience and investigator: it's not just a binary opposition wher an audience really is an audience. That's why, I mean I hadn't thought thi through, but many of the changes I've made in my position are because th audience has become a co-investigator and I've realized what it is to have a audience. You know what I'm saying? An audience is part of one. An audienc shows us something. Well, that is the transaction, you know, it's a responsibilit to the other, giving it faces. It's not. . . . I don't see this de-essentializing particu larly, but really deconstructing the binary opposition between investigator an audience. Radically, in that it is not a future present, it is the blankness of th future but also . . . the less radical method, the logical one, where one begins t imagine the audience responding, responsible, and invited to be co-invest gator, one starts owning the right to have one's invitation accepted, given tha the invitation is, like all letters, open letters intercepted and that people turn u in other places for other occasions with that invitation, so that we begin t deconstruct that binary opposition bit by bit. I don't see that particularly as d essentializing. It's something else. But yes, I think the question you've asked very very important.

ER: As you were answering it . . . you used the word "future"; after had finished these questions, at the very end, I realized there was no questic about history, either as a potentially essentializing discourse or as a potential anti-essentializing discourse. Actually, now these questions, with the wor essentializing and anti-essentializing . . .

GS: See what happens?

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Notes on Contributors

TERESA DE LAURETIS is Professor of the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She guest-edited the *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* issue of *differences* (1991). Her most recent book, *The Practice of Love,* is a deviant psychoanalytic reconsideration of lesbian sexuality as perverse desire.

DIANA FUSS is Assistant Professor of English at Princeton University. She is author of *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* and editor of *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories.*

ELIZABETH GROSZ is Director of the Institute of Critical Theory and Cultural Studies at Monash University, Australia. Her most recent books are *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* and *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism.*

LUCE IRIGARAY, psychoanalyst and theorist, is a director of research at the Centre national des recherches scientifiques in Paris. Her recent works include *Le temps de la différence: pour une révolution pacifique* and *Je, tu, nous: pour une culture de la différence* (English trans. by Alison Martin). ROBERT LAWRENCE MAZZOLA is Assistant Professor of French and Italian at Wagner College, Staten Island. His essay "Coming to Terms: Mask and Masquerade in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant*" appeared in *Journal of Durassian Studies* (1992), and he is currently working on fratricide in Duras's novels.

LESLIE WAHL RABINE is Professor of French and Director of Women's Studies at the University of California, Irvine. Her recent books include *Reading the Romantic Heroine: Text, History, Ideology* and *Feminism, Socialism, and French Romanticism,* co-authored with Claire Goldberg Moses.

ROBERT SCHOLES is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities at Brown University. His last book was *In Search of James Joyce.* He has just finished a book, written with Nancy R. Comley, called *Hemingway's Genders.*

NAOMI SCHOR is William Hanes Wannamaker Professor of Romance Studies at Duke University. Her most recent book is *George Sand and Idealism.* Along with Elizabeth Weed she is the founding co-editor of *differences.*

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Her newest book is *Outside in the Teaching Machines.* ELLEN ROONEY is Associate Professor of English and Modern Culture and Media at Brown University and Director of the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women. She is the author of *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism and the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* and is working on a book on "Criticism and the Subject of Sexual Violence."

ER: . . . larded in so thickly, are no longer the right questions, but, having said that, what would you say about history?

GS: Well, I'll give you a very short answer. It depends on your view of history as negotiable determinant or fact.

ER: Thank you.

GS: Thank you.

Notes

1 Space doesn't permit me to do justice to Ferguson's extraordinarily interesting and intricate essay. Her analysis reveals that the legal system's preference for addressing "stipulated states" enabled it to evade the systemic problem of the contempt for women's testimony on rape. Ferguson points out that it also makes it extremely difficult for women who are attacked by men they know to convince district attorneys even to press charges. (See Estrich's discussion of "simple rape.") At the same time, in her analysis of *Clarissa*, Ferguson stresses that stipulation *can* be used, in particular cases, to combat phallocentric constructions of sexuality and sexual violence.

2 See Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*:

We must of course remind ourselves, our positivist feminist colleagues in charge of creating the discipline of women's studies, and our anxious students, that essentialism is a trap. It seems more important to learn to understand that the world's women do not all relate to the privileging of essence, especially through "fiction," or "literature," in the same way (89); Reading the work of Subaltern Studies from within but against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and "situate" the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a strategic *use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest. This would put them in line with the Marx who locates fetishization, the ideological determination of the "concrete," and spins the narrative of the development of the money-form; with the Nietzsche who offers us genealogy in place of historiography, the Foucault who plots the construction of "counter-memory," the Barthes of semiotropy and the Derrida of "affirmative deconstruction." This would allow them to use the critical force of anti-humanism, in other words, even as they share its constitutive paradox: that the essentializing moment, the object of their criticism, is irreducible (205).*

3 See "Three Women's"; Rodó; Retamar.

4 See *Other* 202–7; see also Guha.

5 Things have changed somewhat since this interview was conducted in December 1988.

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