Dear Alumni/ae and Friends of the Department of English and Comparative Literature,

As we round the corner into the homestretch of the academic year, I pause to reflect on the pace of life in the modern research university. It is not slow. In the Department of English and Comparative Literature we have just completed “wooing week,” the days when we invite to campus all those who have been accepted into our Ph.D. program for the next academic year. We try to give them an idea of what life in the department is like. They visit classes, stay in the apartments of current grad students, and talk with the professors with whom they want to study. It’s hectic; it’s fun; and it’s serious. From this process we hope to attract about fifteen new graduate students who will be in the department—teaching, taking classes, and writing their dissertations—for the next six to seven years. We will get their final acceptance letters in mid April.

At the same time, the department is preparing to graduate this year’s crop of undergraduates. Some of us are directing senior theses, the long essays that are the capstone of many students’ experience in the departmental major; meanwhile the Director of Undergraduate Studies is overseeing the process by which many of those same seniors will be awarded prizes and honors at the May graduation: initiation into Phi Beta Kappa, Latin honors, awards for outstanding essays and creative writing. Many of us will be saying goodbye in May to students whom we have seen mature from anxious freshmen to seniors about to launch into their independent lives as editorial assistants, Teach for America recruits, law students, and interns in NGOs and on Wall Street.

But faculty are doing much more than shepherding students along their complicated paths. We are also teaching our own courses and taking part in an astonishing array of other activities: finishing books, serving on university committees, building digital spaces for collaborative scholarly work, and advising theater companies on the Shakespeare plays they are about to perform. The faculty in the Department of English and Comparative Literature is astonishing for its versatility, its commitment to teaching, and for its excellence. This spring three of our faculty members—Patricia Dailey, Stathis Gourgouris, and Molly Murray—won the University’s coveted Lenfest Distinguished Faculty Awards, a feat no other department has managed. One faculty member, Julie Crawford, is head of Columbia’s signature Core course, Literature Humanities. Another, Austin Quigley, just won the Mark Van Doren Award for Teaching. Other faculty have received distinguished fellowships that will give them a year off to finish their research projects in 2015-16; still other faculty have published books this spring on topics ranging from the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop to the literature of disability.

We hope that the following pages will let you glimpse the extraordinary range of activities in which department members are involved as we hurtle into April. The modern research university is a complex and challenging place—full of joy and pleasure but not for the faint of heart.

Best,
Jean E. Howard

Comments should be addressed to Jean E. Howard, Chair of English & Comparative Literature, at jfh5@columbia.edu or to Aaron Robertson, Coordinator, at ar3488@columbia.edu
Mark Strand, poet and member of the faculty since 2006, died on November 29th at the age of 80. He is remembered as the fourth Poet Laureate of the United States and winner of a Pulitzer Prize (1999, Blizzard of One). Having taught at Columbia from 1969 to 1972 and again in 1980, Strand offered many courses at the College as well as the School of the Arts, including “The Autobiographical Poem,” “The Short Fiction of Franz Kafka,” and courses on Wallace Stevens—one of strand’s heroes.

Born in Prince Edward Island in northeastern Canada, Strand moved from place to place throughout his early life. From his birth in 1934 to his adolescence, he lived in Halifax, Montreal, Cleveland, Philadelphia and later South and Central America. After earning his BA at Antioch College, he studied painting as well as poetry at Yale. Winning a Fulbright scholarship in 1960 gave Strand the chance to study poetry in Italy, which strengthened his interest in the art. Strand earned his MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1962.

His first collection of poetry, Sleeping with One Eye Open, was published in 1964 by Stone Wall Press. That book, inspired by the mood of the Cold War, would inaugurare a career of eighteen books of poetry, including the 2014 Collected Poems published by Knopf. His other works include six translations and three children’s books. Toward the end of his life, Strand focused on prose and later fine art—mostly working with collage. These collages were exhibited most recently at the Lori Bookstein gallery in Chelsea. His success in other domains notwithstanding, it is Strand’s poetry that has made him internationally recognizable.

Former colleague and Chair of the Writing Program at Columbia School of the Arts, Timothy Donnelly contends that Strand excelled at “giving dread a shape,” a feat he pursued with great attention to form. The two taught courses together: one on Wallace Stevens and another on Emily Dickinson. Whereas Donnelly would sometimes focus on broader themes and critical concerns, Strand always preferred an “isolated encounter with individual poems.” “He loved a very leisurely and celebratory type of close reading,” Donnelly adds, “he wanted to spend maybe thirty minutes basking in an individual poem.” Professor Patricia Dailey finds Strand’s poetry “disarmingly simple,” and “an unusual blend of Kafka, Stevens, and maybe even a touch of a manly Emily Dickinson, in the taunting presence of death.” The two also co-taught courses that blended modern poetry and prose with medieval literature, and Dailey especially “marveled in his ability to hear uncanny resonances in medieval texts.”

Poet Octavio Paz wrote, “Mark Strand has chosen the negative path, with loss as the first step toward fullness: it is also the opening to a transparent verbal perfection.” In the wake of his death many news venues highlighted the bleakness of Strand’s verse. The New York Times wrote that his “deceptively simple investigations of rootlessness, alienation and the ineffable strangeness of life made him one of America’s most hauntingly meditative poets.” But Strand’s oeuvre includes numerous works that defy his reputation as a poet of loss, including the humorous collection of short fiction, Mr. and Mrs. Baby and Other Stories (1985), and the parodic prose-poem The Monument (1978).

“Making light of the dark,” Donnelly names the balance of humor and death in Strand’s poetry. Despite the bleak subject matter, he sees “another principle that counters the negativity, and it has to do with beauty.” Dailey agrees, claiming that his austere philosophical sense was counteracted by the playful and formal properties of his art: “he knew how to bring the figure of an exterior limit to the inside of poetic space and play with it. He enjoyed the constraints of form, perhaps for this reason.” Writer and faculty member, Colm Toibin, found Strand’s attention to form a crucial part of his emotional sense: “when I finish this poem, there’s a chill or shiver from the poem that I can’t quite pinpoint. But eventually you can, of course. You see that in the turn of a line, he managed to do something quite skillful.”

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Strand revealed his thoughts about the potential of poetry in an interview with the Paris Review: We usually hang on to the predictability of our experiences … and there’s no where else where one can escape that as thoroughly as one can in certain poets’ work. When I read poetry, I want to feel myself suddenly larger . . . in touch with a—or at least close to—what I deem magical, astonishing… And when you report back to your own daily world after experiencing the strangeness of a world sort of recombined and reordered in the depths of a poet’s soul, the world looks fresher somehow.

**Celebrating 25 Years of Gauri Viswanathan’s**

**Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India**

This past year marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Gauri Viswanathan’s *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. To commemorate this work, the Department of English and Comparative Literature, the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, the Department of Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies—along with the Society of Fellows in the Humanities, the University Seminar in Literary Theory, and NYU’s English Department—sponsored a one-day conference at the Heyman Center featuring an international group of scholars. In concert with the talks, the Columbia University Press has released a new edition of *Masks of Conquest* that features an updated preface written by Professor Viswanathan.

In *Masks of Conquest*, Viswanathan reveals how the promotion of English literature in colonial India presented an effective means to political control. She describes a history in which British administrators saw literary instruction as an intrinsic part of the assimilation of native populations. In the new preface, Viswanathan reminds us that literary curriculum “engaged official discussions at a level of intensity matching the deliberations about military matters.” Remarkably, English literature as a category of schooling in itself took place in India prior to its establishment in England’s school system. Since its publication, *Masks of Conquest* has become a hallmark of postcolonial studies and provides a decisive critique of the apparent neutrality of “English literature.”

In planning for the event, the organizing committee – Elaine Freedgood (Ph.D. 1996), Dohra Ahmad (Ph.D. 2004), and Anjuli Raza Kolb (Ph.D. 2013) – considered a variety of proposals before deciding on a conference showcasing three “generations” of Viswanathan’s former mentees. Among the presenters were eighteen scholars from the United States and abroad, all of whom were Professor Viswanathan’s former students. The conference received considerable financial and organizational support from the Society of Fellows; Viswanathan wrote *Masks of Conquest* as a Fellow from 1986 to 1988.

Dohra Ahmad, Associate Professor of English at St. John’s University, remarked that the conference felt like a reunion for many in attendance: “the atmosphere was really positive, appreciative, and celebratory.” Sessions ranged from “Colonial Exchange and Change,” which focused on the exploitative commercial practices of imperial England, to “Method and Mentorship,” which served as a retrospective on Viswanathan’s scholarly approach and teaching style.

Anjuli Raza Kolb, Assistant Professor of English at Williams College, spoke of her former mentor’s opposition to tailoring one’s education to the whims of the job market: “the thing that I’ve heard over and over again—even on the panels that weren’t on mentorship—was that the essential questions always come first.” Ahmad remarks that Viswanathan’s mentorship was not only intellectual but social and emotional: “while I was in graduate school, she always took time to bring us together and celebrate our milestones, which is part of why the event was so joyous and happy for us.”

In the classroom, Viswanathan steers away from slogans or polemics. “She had the curiosity of a learner. Everyone would come away with a completely different sense of the text,” Kolb recollected, adding that Viswanathan had “an incredibly subtle way of opening up a text in all its multiplicity rather than steering toward some kind of an agreement.” Elaine Freedgood, Professor of English at NYU, remembered the rigor that Viswanathan demanded. Briefly put, “very scary,” was Freedgood’s first impression of her mentor, who eventually revealed a kindness. “Once you get to know her, she’s incredibly kind. She could be really tough and rigorous but you know that’s part of her pedagogical love,” Freedgood recalls.

Gauri Viswanathan, Class of 1933 Professor of the Humanities, has been part of the faculty at Columbia since...
Gauri Viswanathan and attendees at the Heyman Center. Photo credit: Sarah Monks

1986 and has taught a range of courses such as “Theory, Religion, and Culture” and “Indian Writing in English”. Her other publications include Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief, which explores religious conversion as a form of resistance from the colonial era to the present day. That book went on to win the Harry Levin Prize from the American Comparative Literature Association, the James Russell Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association, and the Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy Book Prize from the South Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies. More recently, she has contributed to Edward Said’s Translocations: Essays in Secular Criticism, focusing on religion and dissent.

A quarter century after Masks of Conquest was published, it was apparent to many in attendance how much their field had changed. On one hand, important self-reflexive ways of thinking like postcolonial studies have become integrated into the curriculum of English departments. On the other hand, much of Viswanathan’s critique of the exaltation of national literatures has yet to be addressed in a systemic way.

In the 2014 preface, Viswanathan calls for the continued recognition of the colonial origins of English literature curriculum. Despite the fact that “the curricular study of English can no longer be studied innocently or inattentively to the deeper contexts of imperialism, transnationalism, and globalization,” she does not see English studies today cleansed of its nationalistic past. “Readers are asked to master literary skills,” Viswanathan warns, “as if they are world experiences, and in this substitution one begins to see the power of institutional study, which turns the text into a metonymy of the world, and the reader’s relation to it as the ground of sensibility.” Thus, Viswanathan concludes, “to regain the world through other imaginings that recapture texts from a point outside the institution offers a challenge to English studies that its postcolonial offshoot has considerably reinvigorated.”

Reflecting on her decision to work outside the trajectory of a typical Ph.D. graduate, Vesna Kuiken (Ph.D. 2014) claims, “there are ways to find academia—a better one even—in other realms.” Like many entering the academic job market, Kuiken struggled to find desirable opportunities in her field of American literature. After three years of searching, she was offered an adjunct professorship near her home in upstate New York. Already writing the syllabus for the course, she was contacted by El Museo Del Barrio in Manhattan about a researcher role—a position she would ultimately accept.

El Museo del Barrio is a community museum dedicated to Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Latin American art. In a stretch of upper Manhattan known as “Museum Mile,” El Museo blends into the neighborhood in a way that its fellow institutions do not. Founded in 1969 by artist and educator Raphael Montañez Ortiz, it is the first museum of its kind in New York City. The collection features thousands of pre-Columbian and traditional artifacts as well as 20th century arts and crafts, graphics and popular media. Holding the title of Senior Research and Publications Associate, Kuiken is involved in new projects at El Museo including publications and the museum’s fundraising efforts.
At the moment, Kuiken is working closely with the executive director, Jorge Daniel Veneciano, to launch the museum’s journal—the first in its 45-year history—along with a book series. Importantly, Kuiken feels that her expertise is being used. “Because we want the journal to be a serious, academic-style engagement with the questions that have preoccupied El Museo since its establishment in 1969—questions of identity, creativity, community, social justice, race, and so on—my own intellectual interests and academic experience are essential,” she contends.

A report published by the Modern Languages Association last year has people like Kuiken in mind. It encourages academic departments “to provide students with ways to acquire skills necessary to scholarship and future employment, such as collaboration, project management, and grant writing.” What the MLA refers to as “transformational experiences” can be fostered by embracing internships and professional associations. Accordingly, Columbia has made resources available for those in the humanities and social sciences who seek alternative careers. To Kuiken, however, many of these skills are already cultivated in a graduate education—if an employer has the eye to recognize them. Kuiken remembers her initial meeting with Veneciano, who told her that he needs “neither a finance person, nor a museum expert, nor even an art historian—but someone who knows first and foremost how to read.” Reflecting on that first conversation, Kuiken sees what Veneciano meant: “in order to write a solid proposal, one ought to be able to determine the donor’s exact expectations, which are sometimes embedded between the lines.” The primary grant writer for the museum, Kuiken has a sense of fundraising unique to her literary education that she calls “fundraising with a close-reading component.” That rhetorical sensibility, she adds, is familiar to any student of the humanities: “reading between the lines, unveiling ideas, deconstructing what passes as self-evident, and of course—making some large, often outlandish claims.”

Kuiken’s academic history and previous professional credentials are formidable and tell a compelling story about her passion for social justice. Prior to coming to Columbia, Kuiken worked in the non-governmental sector in Serbia for a decade, mainly in human rights organizations. Because of El Museo’s political and activist approach to art, Kuiken feels that her job does not eschew her past as a scholar. “I felt, and still feel, that El Museo is a continuation, an extension of, rather than a break with, my academic life,” Kuiken emphasizes.

For those studying in the humanities that seek to follow a path similar to Kuiken’s, she finds that deliberately seeking alternative careers while in graduate school can be challenging. The routine of a typical Ph.D. candidate seems to prohibit imagining a world outside the ivory tower: “you live on a semester schedule, you work all the time, all your friends are academics,” worse perhaps, “your family can’t understand what you do or what the MLA is, you are appalled that your cousin has never heard of Adorno, etc.” Therefore, more than any special training, her current position came about by networking with her peers. Her boss, Jorge Daniel Veneciano, was himself a student at Columbia’s English and Comparative Literature Department and was introduced to Kuiken by her dissertation advisor, Branka Arsic. What Kuiken’s story reveals is that one may not need to tailor his or her curriculum vitae to pursue work beyond the university. She suggests that the obstacles to alternative careers came more from her own expectations than from employers: “getting rewired is hard, but the difficulty is mental and psychological rather than practical. I understood that I could find the lovable aspects of academia in other worlds, which then also casts academia and my own affinities in a different light.”

**Sickness and Health in Colonial America: Cristobal Silva**

For Cristobal Silva, the domain of American colonial history extends much farther than New England. “I want my students to build a geographical awareness of the 18th century,” Silva says of his teaching. “What we think of as the U.S. colonies, what eventually became the United States, was just one node in a broad Atlantic network.” Silva points out that important leaders from colonial history, like Benjamin Franklin, were occupied as much with southern locales as they were the fledgling colonies in the northeast of the United States: “in fact, the political center, the economic center, and the scientific center in the 18th century were not the U.S. colonies but the Caribbean.” This hemispheric sensibility lends itself to Silva’s expertise in colonial epidemiology, which he argues had a tremendous impact on the racial and national politics of the 18th century and beyond.

His first book, *Miraculous Plagues: An Epidemiology of Early New England Narrative*, reads the medical writing of the 18th century as a form of literature with its own rules and conventions. How one articulated ideas about sickness and health, Silva contends, was greatly affected by racial and social hierarchies. Black, white, and indigenous bodies were spoken of in relation to their
supposed susceptibility to disease. Yet the spread of disease was a constant disruption to those hierarchies; immunity crossed racial barriers in ways that the elite class could not predict or comprehend, and thus a sophisticated discourse arose around this evolving field of inquiry.

Having always envisioned *Miraculous Plagues* as the first of a two-part project, Silva will be heading to the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island in 2015-2016 to complete research on its sequel, *Republic of Medicine: Epidemiology and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. He plans to uncover the exchange networks between physicians and writers in the Caribbean and North America, focusing on the bodies and the pathogens that moved with the slave trade and the narratives that were told along with them.

In a pivotal anecdote between his first and second books, Silva reveals that the practice of inoculation in Western medicine has African and Muslim origins. According to records in the early 18th century, Puritan minister Cotton Mather questioned one of his slaves, Onesimus, about whether he had ever been infected with smallpox. Onesimus’ answer was both yes and no: he was intentionally infected with smallpox in Western Africa, recovered, and subsequently became immune to the disease. Mather would advocate using this same method on a large scale when smallpox erupted in New England in 1721 after Boston physician Zabdiel Boylston first tested inoculation on his son and two of his slaves. An instance of what Silva considers “medical narratives overwriting one another,” the history of inoculation is just one of the examples of the appropriation of African knowledge in early American and 18th century medical discourse.

When asked about the origins of his interests in medicine, Silva’s answer is personal rather than academic. “I was an adolescent in the early ’80s, which is right at the heart of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in North America,” Silva explains, “and what I realized in part at the time—and I’ve increasingly realized since then—is how important those events were to my relationship to the world and my understanding of the world.” The impact of the HIV pandemic would gain a new significance later on: “fairly deep into graduate school, I began to understand that I could think about those experiences in literary terms or as narratives.” In the preface of *Miraculous Plagues*, Silva states, “What HIV/AIDS (or more appropriately, HIV/AIDS epidemiology), reveals are the ways in which epidemics and their treatments cannot easily be separated from the representational practices that describe them.” Indeed, while the medical interventions of diseases from smallpox to HIV continue to grow more sophisticated, the language used to describe them to the culture at large remains entrenched in a history of xenophobia.

Despite the distance of centuries, Silva is eager to show the political impact of his work in contemporary terms. In 2014 he participated at a university-wide panel at the Heyman Center entitled, *Ebola: Field Histories*, to discuss the social and political currency of the Ebola virus and its ability to stoke fear: “in terms of the politics of Ebola, that was especially clear to us in the United States at the moment Ebola arrived on U.S. shores.” Silva is troubled by the reaction in the US. Experts in public health proposed banning travel into the United States from Africa while officials in New Jersey proposed quarantining nurses who had been to Africa—despite being asymptomatic; “I would describe each of those events as moments of public xenophobia, and I think those do draw back to the really long history of reaction to contagion.”
Colm Tóibín spends each spring teaching two courses at Columbia, part of an international itinerary that he considers a positive influence on his own writing and teaching. Since 2012, he has offered the same undergraduate lecture, “Irish Prose,” but although the title remains the same, Tóibín denies carrying a “yellowed notepad” containing his lessons plans from semester to semester. In fact, with each iteration of the course he relishes in the opportunity to approach the texts in new ways. The seminar, Tóibín explains, exists to fill in the gaps of a traditional education on Irish literature. Alongside the usual titans of the curriculum—Yeats, Joyce, Beckett—Tóibín’s syllabus is populated by authors like Sheridan LeFanu, Maria Edgeworth, William Carleton, and others not usually familiar to a Columbia undergraduate. For graduate students, his course offerings are more numerous and range from authors like Jane Austen to conceptual topics like masculinity. All his upper-level classes have one element in common, however: maintaining a comfortable atmosphere in which to talk about a text. “A safe space,” Tóibín says, “lets students grow.”

Despite having written books on Henry James, George Orwell, and most recently, Elizabeth Bishop, Tóibín is ambivalent about considering the biography of the author to teach literature. “You have to be careful that you’re not involved in some higher form of gossip in discussing a writer’s life” he warns. More dangerous is the allure of equating biography with bibliography; “trying to talk about a way in which a writer’s life feeds into the work is futile most of the time.” His actual reading methods are like those of many Columbia professors: close reading perhaps supplemented by a consideration of craft; “the book is artifice and it’s construct. So let’s look at its artificiality or how it’s constructed… but the author’s life is always a mystery.”

Tóibín’s latest book, *On Elizabeth Bishop*, offers a mix of a biography, literary introduction, travelogue, and memoir. Written from the locales that were significant to Bishop’s life—Nova Scotia, Key West, and Brazil—he recounts his own indebtedness to her in chapters like “One of Me” and “Order and Disorder in Key West.” The inspiration for the project stemmed from his long-held admiration for the poet, which formed, Tóibín recalls, when he was just eighteen or nineteen years old. To Tóibín, Bishop represents a “northern sensibility … people on the coast of say, Sweden, Ireland, Canada, and even the east coast of the United States. There is a sort of a calm you can find in that work—very little easy emotion.” Tóibín points out that Bishop wrote at a time when confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton were at the height of their popularity, but his interest in Bishop’s work lies in what is withheld rather than what is confessed. “You don’t name the emotion,” Tóibín identifies as her tendency. “For example, in her case, melancholy, grief—you don’t use those words. Somehow they’re in the gap between the words. Somehow they’re in the tone. The reader can feel it without being told about it.” Tóibín elaborates on a strategy in Bishop’s poetry that he himself considers when writing prose; “you have to feel the feeling and then mask it but still have it so that somehow it’s buried in the rhythms of the sentences.” On her way of masking emotion, Tóibín suggests that “sometimes in a poem that seems like it’s nothing much other than she saw something, there’s an actual sensibility that is fully expressed in itself without even saying that it’s there.”

Aside from her distance from the confessional poets, there were other facets of Bishop’s poetry that made her exceptional, particularly the length of time she devoted to individual poems. Whereas some poets of the 1960s were experimenting with so-called instant poetry, Tóibín found that Bishop would wait years before finishing a piece. In his research, Tóibín traces one poem, “The Moose”, to a letter Bishop wrote describing the experience. It was written twenty years before the poem was published.

Bishop eschewed public discussions of her sexuality, and the progressive movements of the 1960s seem a world away from her: “with the business of the closet and homosexuality—she said she wanted closets, closets, and more closets, so that you could never have enough closets.” Tóibín goes
on, “there was no fashionable movement, from gay liberation to the women’s movement to confessional poetry that she joined.” For readers familiar with his latest novel, *Nora Webster*, it may seem that Tóibín is interested in the margins of what is popular or contemporary. Part fiction and part autobiography (the proportion of which he will not tell), *Nora Webster* centers on a widow in County Wexford, Ireland during the late 1960s. Only in the periphery of Nora’s life does the reader get a sense of the politics so central to the era, providing a refreshingly individual perspective. This, Tóibín claims, “is much more useful than trying to write a deeply fashionable book.”

Fashionability aside, Tóibín’s work has been immensely popular. Besides being praised by the Obamas at a public event last year, *Nora Webster* has been reviewed enthusiastically by most major literary venues and was shortlisted for the Folio Prize. This year Tóibín will be inducted into the New York State Writers Hall of Fame along with Francine Prose, David Remnick, in addition to four deceased writers: Isaac Asimov, Allen Ginsberg, Ezra Jack Keats, and Dawn Powell. When asked if he felt pressured to reproduce his success in his new work, Tóibín claims that “each book requires its own music and you just go with that.” While preparing to write *The Master*, Tóibín recalls skepticism from the literary industry: “when I told the publishers that I was writing a book on Henry James, they sort of laughed about it. This Irish guy who writes Irish books wants to write a novel on Henry James.” *The Master* would go on to win several prestigious literary awards, including the *Los Angeles Times* Novel of the Year Award and, in France, *Le prix du meilleur livre étranger*. Now having also written a prize-winning play, *The Testament of Mary*, changing directions has been a source of momentum for Tóibín: “so you just go on with it, taking the risk every time.”

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**GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK’S READINGS**

*Readings*, a new book by Columbia University Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, defies the simplicity suggested by its title. Those imagining an anthology of politically charged philosophical writings may be surprised to find instead an assessment of reading itself, a treatise on its potential to create habits of ethical response. The text offers specific critical interventions into the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel as read by Frantz Fanon, as well as interpretations of literary works by Elizabeth Gaskell and J.M. Coetzee; *Readings*’ general insistence, however, is that deep, critical reading can change the way one responds to the world.

Asked about the title of the book, Spivak recalled a conversation at the South African Sociological Association. “A smart faculty member described my own method beautifully. I was of course delighted. But I did tell him, ‘I just call...”

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*Readings* (Chicago UP, 2014)
it reading.” That way of parsing her own work—as simply reading—is connected to the larger idea in the book about how one should use theoretical knowledge. Merely applying a theory—feminist, Marxist, or otherwise—to a piece of literature or thought often results in an uncritical reproduction of the theory at the expense of the text it seeks to analyze.

“When people apply theories,” Spivak claims, “they often destroy the thing by making it not much more than an example and vindication of someone else’s thinking.”

One is not doomed, however, to repeat this reductive tendency. Spivak claims that if you read theory as “a creative endeavor undertaken by the person who is theorizing, then you follow the theoretical text so well for its own play that it can become a part of the way you think.” In a section of Readings titled ‘Theory as Practice,’ Spivak writes, “research theory is like athletics. First-class athletes do not think about the moves they make. They do not ‘apply’ what they have been taught… That is how one ‘uses’ other people’s theory—with respect, preparing oneself to be able to read it, following through.” Warning her students not to rely on familiar polemics, Spivak suggests that one finds “a place where you think the text will allow you to turn it around and use it—use its best energies for the project at hand.”

Part of Spivak’s reading practice involves “affirmative sabotage,” which she defines as a method, “a way you do things rather than only the way you think.” Whereas ‘sabotage’ describes the strategic destruction of a master’s tools by the workers, Spivak wants to reconsider sabotage affirmatively, to “turn [the master’s tools] around to be used for other purposes.” In the case of literary studies in English, affirmative sabotage uses “material that we received from people who are not necessarily our friends,” referring to the great gains of the European Enlightenment, often co-existing with and justifying the spread of imperialism. A text, in other words, should not be abandoned by those it was designed to exclude. “What [these early intellectuals] had was very well developed because they were rich, they had leisure, we helped them, and so on. To throw away those methods that ignore race, class, and gender,” Spivak says, “is impractical. Let us turn them around, for they still run our world.”

Predicting an objection to the idea of using the expository texts of Europe for unconventional ends, Spivak references the paper Audre Lorde delivered after a conference at NYU in 1984: “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Lorde famously argued there that, “those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women… know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” But for Spivak, the words of her late friend are not intended to be taken generally. They are to be understood as rejecting the master’s tools as such. “Making differences strengths” is what Spivak calls affirmative sabotage. Lorde’s warning, Spivak recalls, “came out of a specific situation of open academic discrimination by those who were simply following the ways of the master.” Thus, in Readings, Spivak attempts to show how an activist intellectual such as Frantz Fanon—marginalized by the French because of his race—can read Hegel against the grain for the purposes of anti-colonial struggle. In her exposition of Fanon in Readings, Spivak chose to write about the penultimate chapter of Black Skin White Masks, “The Black Man and Hegel,” because, as she contends, “there is something wrong in always putting Fanon into a kind of identity niche,” represented by the heavily anthologized chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man.” Recalling the coverage of Fanon’s death in the influential anti-colonial quarterly Présence Africaine, Spivak notes that “when the big African activists, the imaginative activists, are mourning Fanon’s death, they’re not talking about someone who’s just constantly talking about his own experience of being black in a white world.”

Based on a series of English literature seminars taught at the Savitribai Phule Pune University in 2012, Readings was first proposed by its editor, Lara Choksey, who was intrigued, she says, by the idea of “somehow holding in book form this interaction and the movements it produced.” Spivak was immediately impressed by Choksey, who allegedly offered to transcribe the seminars for free. The two met in the various cities in which Spivak lectured, drafting pages of the book in between. Choksey had “a strong sense that this would be a book for students, of any age and not only within academia.” Moreover, she wanted a book for those who “might sense that ‘being correct’ and ‘doing the right thing’ are only moments of a long and difficult endeavor that might, in the broadest sense, be called ‘reading’.”

Known for her critique of monolingual literary study, Spivak makes a surprising defense of the study of literature in the English language for those in British postcolonial universities such as Pune—advice, she says, that can also be given for French Literature Studies in former and current French possessions. In Readings Spivak writes: “the radical emphasis…must be on attempts to change habits of mind, for which the best weapon remains a literary education, best developed worldwide in the study of English literature.”

Spivak’s further point, however, is that English should be used as a way forward, not an alternative, to study of literary traditions in the regional first languages of India: to “use it affirmatively to build a matrix for the study of regional languages as deeply as comparative literature requires.” For Spivak’s thoughts on Comparative Literature in the United States, see Death of A Discipline.
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Writer and Activist, Heather Robertson (1942-2014)

Heather Robertson (M.A. 1964) is best remembered as the leader and plaintiff of the class-action lawsuit Robertson v. Thompson Corp., a case brought to the Supreme Court of Canada on behalf of freelance writers. Her fifty-year career, however, includes eighteen books and three novels, countless pieces in the Canadian press, and her establishment of the Professional Writers Association of Canada and the Writers’ Union of Canada. One of the first female journalists to escape the confines of “women’s papers” in the Canadian journalism, Robertson was known for her social criticism.

Friend and classmate, Francis Sypher (Ph.D. 1968), remembers Robertson as an exceptionally brilliant student. She entered the Columbia graduate program in English in the fall of 1963 with a Woodrow Wilson fellowship, specializing in the Victorian period, and in 1964 was awarded the degree of Master of Arts. Sypher recalls that Robertson first thought of becoming a college/university teacher, but found the academic world too confining, becoming a journalist and writer instead.

Robertson wrote many pieces of fiction and nonfiction. At 24 years old, she published her first book, Reservations are for Indians, a preemptive journalistic depiction of the Canadian reservation system and its crippling effect on First Nations people. In 1995 Robertson sued the Globe and Mail for republishing two of her pieces in an online database without compensation or her consent. The case was eventually granted class action status and was decided in favor of Robertson in 2006. Many freelance writers would get “Heather Robertson checks” from the Globe and Mail, which paid millions of dollars in damages. Robertson devoted her last years writing about end-of-life issues in Meeting Death: In Hospital, Hospice, and at Home, augmenting her own experience with research abroad.