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Learning to learn from below: An interview with Rrivu Banerjee

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1) You report in your article *An autoethnographic approach to (not) teaching about the coronation* (Banerjee, 2024) that the correlation between colonialism and celebrating the British coronation was not very clear at the school where you worked at the time. Considering that decolonial approaches to teaching are quite "in vogue" nowadays, in your view, what could account for this difficulty in speaking about these issues among faculty members?

RRIVU BANERJEE

There are different points to address in this question. One reason I mentioned in the article is that the connection between the British Empire, the coronation, and colonialism is not obvious, at least not in Germany. I am not speaking for the UK, where the debate is different, but colonialism is not a topic people like to discuss in Germany. Even in my current work environment, in a German university, while we do draw our references on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, these usually come from Latin America, South Asia, or Africa. At the same time, fundamental conversations on German colonialism itself rarely take place. It's an aspect that has been pushed into the past because, when it comes to the 20th century and what happened after the German colonial rule, the Holocaust becomes a bigger conversation - and rightly so. It needs to be a very important topic. However, because the Holocaust takes up an immense amount of what we call a *remembrance culture*, there is not a lot of attention around German colonialism or even colonialism more broadly, whether British, French, Spanish or Portuguese. In the school where I taught, colonialism was briefly addressed only at the very end of high school, in preparation for final exams. It was treated in a superficial, short unit and never as an ongoing, consequential topic. I see this as a core problem.

I find it interesting that you spoke about decolonial approaches being "in vogue." I have mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, there are groups genuinely invested in critical, postcolonial, decolonial pedagogies. On the other, there are those who treat it as a fashionable label, with "decolonial" and "postcolonial" suddenly plastered on every conference program. That trivialises the work of the first group, reducing decolonial approaches to practises which are not particularly decolonial. For example, allowing students to voice their opinions in class is not inherently decolonial, it is a very European Enlightenment idea. To call it decolonial just because it attracts attention is misleading.
At the same time there's also a difficulty of relating these issues amongst faculty members. The problem is that there is not a lot of honest work being done with students in terms of teacher training programmes at the universities. Where I work, for instance, teacher education follows a very normative model for five or six years. It's only at the end of their courses that students encounter seminars where we suddenly suggest rethinking everything they have learned. It becomes an "add-on," an optional course, not a core part of teaching training, which is why so many future teachers never engage with postcolonial or decolonial perspectives at all. So when you have faculty members in school, whether or not they've had teaching experience for about 30 or 3 years, the problem remains that there is not enough information at hand for them to work differently. That, I think, explains much of the difficulty in addressing colonialism while teaching.

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2) We are talking about being careful with the term *decolonial*, questioning whether it should be used everywhere. In Brazil, it has also become quite fashionable, not always in a positive sense. Many claim to be decolonial or aware of historical issues, but that does not necessarily translate into practice. It often becomes just a label. In a chapter by Māori researcher Moewaka Barnes and her non-Māori colleague McCreanor (2022), they warn us that decolonial and postcolonial theories have become something that white, Western-based researchers take for granted. In this way, decoloniality has turned into a valuable and self-legitimizing stance that allows them to remain within the very power networks that a decolonial stance intends to critique. That is why we need to be cautious, especially with works that opportunistically label themselves as decolonial or anti-racist simply to attract greater attention.

RRIVU BANERJEE

Absolutely. It is astonishing how the West has tried to appropriate both postcolonial and decolonial studies, as if these were something that never existed before. We've had decolonial and postcolonial work since the beginning of colonialism. It is good that there is more discussion now in the last 10, 15 years, but it is certainly troubling when specific voices are silenced and opinions get appropriated by certain individuals in the process. When it comes to getting more attention or getting published because of this decolonial label, that is interesting because I think this dynamic is very present in South America and South Asia, but not so much in Germany. Here, funding has become extremely difficult. You cannot mention words like *decolonial*, *postcolonial*, *hegemonies*. For example, two colleagues and I recently submitted an article on ownership of language and native speakerism among German teachers in India. But nowhere in the title or in the introduction have we spoken about aspects of colonialism or aspects of how native speakerism comes into being. We know that the minute we do that, it's not going to get accepted by the journal. That means we have to be very careful and kind of work our way around it, framing the argument indirectly, as if the connection to colonialism only emerged from the data. Everything depends on the political climate, when it comes to what is going to be allowed or not.

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3) The teaching of topics such as racism, colonial history, queerness and immigration is almost always very sensitive in the classroom. Based on your experience, what can a teacher do and how to better address the subjects in class? What has worked for you?

RRIVU BANERJEE

I'll make this answer complicated again. I can tell you what *I* can do as a teacher, but I don't think I can answer what a teacher in general should do. And most importantly, I don't think I should – because that would imply there is a given solution, a ready-made list of methods to address racism, colonial history, queerness, immigration, or any of these topics. For me, it depends entirely on who you are as a teacher, as an individual and, most importantly, what is your positioning and your context. In my case, when I talk about

colonial history or racism in that article set in a public German school, or when I bring queerness into my PhD research, that has to do with who I am as an individual. I am not a white person in Europe who's from Germany. I am an immigrant. I am someone who is not white. I don't have citizenship in Germany yet. I'm someone who's from a former colonised country, and I am a queer person. This gives me a very particular position to speak from, considering how it all affects me. At the same time, it also makes me very vulnerable, because things can go wrong quickly. The difference, however, is that I held a proper employment contract at the public school on which that article is centered. It would have been very difficult for the school to dismiss me for discussing these topics, because doing so would have violated the basic legal framework of what is permitted in the country. These rights are explicitly written into the German constitution. So I can still speak about issues like colonialism, queerness and racism rather openly in my classes, even if not everyone is comfortable with it. Would I do the same in a context where such discussions are punishable by prison or worse? Absolutely not. Teachers don't need to be martyrs to teach. And if you are in a precarious position, living from paycheck to paycheck, with only temporary contracts, I would not recommend taking such risks either. That is why context matters so much. For me, what worked was bringing my personal experiences into my teaching, both in school and now at university. In my seminars, I am almost always the only POC *(person of color)* in the room, one of the very few openly queer people, and almost always the immigrant. An interesting question, of course, becomes why that has worked for me or why it is that I can speak about these issues, although they put me in a very vulnerable position. I constantly force myself to be vulnerable and I accept that. Why? I'm not sure yet. I believe one of the reasons I am able to do this – and this is still a developing idea I am working on with a colleague – has to do with where I come from. Why is it that, with all these positionings, as a person of color from a former colony, an immigrant, a queer person, I can still choose to address these issues in my seminars, even though they put me at risk? Perhaps it is also because I did not grow up here. In India, apart from my queerness, I grew up in a context in which I was part of the mainstream. I am male, I belong to the majority in India, I have caste privilege. I went to private school, had access to a wonderful education, and come from a family with financial security. All of that probably gave me the tools to understand what it means to speak from a dominant position. So even though I am no longer in a socially

dominant position in Germany, I can still draw on those resources. This is not yet a worked-out theory, just something I am thinking through. My colleague, who is also a person of color but was born and raised in Germany, has very different experiences and therefore works in very different ways. Together, we are trying to understand why our approaches to these social issues in the classroom diverge so much.

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4) We would like to ask something that occurred to us while you were speaking. You mentioned colleagues and co-workers. Do you engage in some kind of network or group of people who help make your stance not exactly easier, but at least feasible? We know it's exhausting to be in a position of constantly going against the mainstream, which is why teamwork makes a great difference.

RRIVU BANERJEE

I do, I entirely do. And that is fundamentally one of the major reasons why I very gladly work with the people I work. My professor and advisor, Yalız Akbaba, has been deeply engaged with these issues for a very long time. My colleague Philipp Hagemann works on racism in school textbooks. Colleagues such as M. Knappik, Denise Büttner, Lisa Höffler, Caroline Nast as well… I could go on with the names. It's not a very big network, we're a total of maybe 15 or 16 people. One of the good things is that many of them work either in educational sciences, pedagogy, or in German as a foreign or second language (DaF/DaZ). So these are shared conversations that affect us all. There's enough space to talk about our experiences and the emotions they bring, and to know that I'm not speaking into an empty room. And it goes both ways: it's not just me sharing, they share too. Sometimes that difference really matters. For example, my colleague Philip, who is white, often says that white students will say things to him that they would never say to me. They know those comments wouldn't fly with me. So yes, this network definitely exists. The challenge, though, is that we're all in precarious situations. Most of us are doing our PhDs right now, and nobody knows what will happen afterwards. It's getting harder and harder to find funding for the kind of work we do.

PALIMPSESTO

5) Autoethnography has been an important methodological path for you. To what extent has it allowed you to access layers of the self that others, other methods might prevent? What benefits can this type of research bring and at what cost? In what ways does autoethnographic research account for non hegemonic epistemologies?

RRIVU BANERJEE

I don't think autoethnographic research *per se* necessarily accounts for non-hegemonic epistemologies, because autoethnography can also be used to present very hegemonic perspectives. The same is true for any research method. For me, autoethnography has been important insofar as it helps me reflect on my own positioning, not just looking at "the data" out there, but also at *myself* as data. With most of most other methodologies in the social sciences, including ethnography, we're now more or less starting to agree on the fact that data is not objective and therefore research is not objective either. But that's usually where the discussion stops: data is not objective because it's collected by individuals, and human beings cannot be objective. Autoethnography, however, lets me go further. It allows me to explore why I do the things I do, and why I react in certain ways to the things that happen around me or to me.

If I look at my PhD thesis and the data that I have collected, it's not data from observing other individuals teach in a classroom. It's teaching that *I* have done. And it helps me look at *why* have I taught that way. Why did I choose certain topics? Why do I react to a student's comment in a particular way? A homophobic or queerphobic comment would probably be received very differently by a teacher who is not queer. A racist comment would also be perceived differently by someone who isn't a POC *(person of color)*, who doesn't experience racism regularly. Or my "favorite" comment: "*our colonialism helped advance your countries".* That is often said. I know there are different ways to respond. You can always look at it in a factual manner, break it down and explain it, but there are also emotions involved because it's a blanket statement. It does affect my validity and who I am as an individual, although it's a statement that covers most of the world as a group. This is what autoethnography helps me uncover, and it's something that would not be possible differently. I cannot write about your experiences. Our worlds may collide in some points, but we still have very different backgrounds. This is where autoethnography,

especially evocative autoethnography, becomes crucial. Analytical autoethnography allows this as well, but with a more ethnographical lens to the data, which is a different conversation.

The cost, however, is that it takes a lot of time and it can be extremely emotionally draining. I wish I could work faster. If I had done a traditional ethnographic study observing others, it might have been easier to work through my data and present results. But being my own research subject, this process becomes a constant retraumatization. We often talk about separating oneself from one's data. It is difficult, almost impossible, but, in order to keep one's own sanity, one must at least try to do it. Yet what happens when separation is actually impossible? That is exactly where I am. Looking at my data is exhausting. I fixate on small details for days, and the constant retraumatization makes progress very slow. Another cost is having to defend the scientific validity of my work. This is less of an issue in contexts like North America or the UK, where autoethnography is a more established method. In Germany, however, there are not many autoethnographic studies, partly because academia here follows a very rigid checklist, even in the social sciences. If you don't fit within that scope, your work struggles to be recognized. This raises questions about research methodology itself and how constricting it can be. Research on discrimination or power structures still often has to fit pre-established methods. We try to fit ourselves into these predominant frameworks and use those methods as tools to prove our points and to explain ourselves – which is a good thing. I think this is where decolonial and postcolonial approaches may diverge. I don't really know where my thesis falls. Is it more decolonial or postcolonial? Methodologically, it's probably more decolonial, but the theoretical foundations I draw on are more postcolonial. In the end, I think it's good to use established methods to show the world what's wrong and what needs to be done differently. But the costs remain: there's the emotional vulnerability of exposing one's life on display. That is why I don't know if I'll ever do another autoethnographic project after this thesis. Maybe I'll change my mind later, but right now, I doubt it.

PALIMPSESTO

6) It seems that, in certain strands of Applied Linguistics, autoethnography has become a relatively common method, but in other fields of Linguistics it could still be rare. A stricter

view of Linguistics insists on objectivity, although the very idea of being "objective" is questionable, since researchers always bring themselves to their work, like you said. You're always part of your research, even in the choice of topic. Still, in some areas it is hard to acknowledge this, and sometimes we cannot even use pronouns like "I" in academic work. That's why your article impressed and reassured us: it shows that science does not need to remain confined to an illusion of objectivity. This is also a non-hegemonic approach, since in many contexts such work is not always considered "serious" science, even if it is just as rigorous.

RRIVU BANERJEE

In Germany, at least in the social sciences, the use of personal pronouns is now more accepted, though still new. The article you mentioned (BANERJEE, 2024) was published in English, in a UK-based journal, where autoethnographic research is more advanced. That gave me more freedom. I'm curious to see what will happen when I publish my German-language papers. German allows you to construct entire arguments without pronouns, and that remains the norm in academia. Even in my upcoming article with my colleagues Achim Oestmann and Anita Mitra, which I hope gets published, there was a conscious decision that we made to not just use the first person, but to also constantly keep saying "we". We debated on whether to write "the research method was…" or "*our* research method was…". We chose the latter, to emphasize positionality. I also notice that many linguists look at languages as something that just emerged out of nowhere. They kind of forget the social aspect of languages and try to merely analyse them, treating languages as if they simply exist, the way that water exists. They ignore the social dimension of language, clinging to an illusion of objectivity. But language is a construct, and as such, it means it's been constructed, which essentially means that it cannot be objective.

PALIMPSESTO

7) In the field of Cognitive Linguistics, for example, we do acknowledge that cognition is a social construct. Still, when publishing, expectations remain conservative. There is some openness, but if one submits an article written quite differently, it might not be accepted. So, while we know language is not isolated, the mechanics of text production

remain rigid, even though positioning oneself is essential in many kinds of research. That is why it was refreshing to read your paper. We should always be aware that methodology and even word choice are political. For instance, the aboriginal authors Lauren Tynan and Michelle Bishop (2023) propose conducting literature reviews from an indigenous perspective, starting with personal networks of indigenous scholars and expanding them relationally, rather than following hegemonic citational practices. Such alternatives are inspiring, and even if we don't know whether they will always be accepted, they open up new possibilities. Which brings us to the next question: At what point did you begin to engage more deeply with the decolonial and postcolonial perspectives? Was there any significant personal or academic milestone in this process?

RRIVU BANERJEE

I have mostly engaged with postcolonial perspectives, due to my initial training. Growing up outside Western Europe meant growing up with a fundamental idea of what it was to live in a postcolonial world, in a postcolonial country. At university in India I studied English literature from that perspective. My university was extremely left-leaning, almost Marxist, so our curriculum centered on postcolonialism, with some decolonial perspectives too. Turning 18 and entering that environment was transformative. Coming from a private school that prided itself in keeping colonial tradition alive, I suddenly encountered constant questioning of privilege and identity at the university. There was this questioning of who we are and what our privileges are, which is why we were there. Why is it that we were there? What were we doing? My five years at university in India combined academic learning with political engagement and resistance outside of the classroom. We protested, sometimes boycotting classes for long periods. That experience shaped my engagement with these perspectives deeply.

PALIMPSESTO

8) In general, debates about critical, inclusive, and decolonial classroom practices seem to be more advanced in EFL (*English as an Foreign Language*) than in DaF (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache, German as an Foreign Language*). In English, the myth of the native speaker has already been deconstructed for some time now, at least when it comes to academic work about it. As a teacher of both English and German, do you agree with this

statement? If so, what do you think accounts for this difference, if there is any?

RRIVU BANERJEE

The easiest answer to that question is that it's still called *EFL*, and similarly *DaF*. The native speaker construct has not been dismantled in any way whatsoever. Academic work exists, but in practice, if we had really deconstructed the native speaker myth, we wouldn't have the IELTS examinations or the many other certificates one needs to do to prove that one speaks English, noting that those examinations are designed for very specific people, from very specific races and very specific countries. Native speakerism has less to do with language itself and more to do with race: it's about who owns the language, who is allowed to own it. German has a specific concept for that, *Linguizismus,* linguistic racism, a kind of racism based on language and accents. If you speak German or English with certain accents, that's perceived as "attractive" and "nice". But other accents and dialects end up stigmatized, especially if the speaker doesn't look the part. You have to look the part, otherwise you don't own the language, the language doesn't belong to you. There is a lot of work being done about that in the field of German as a Second Language (DaZ). It has to do with people who live in Germany, were born, brought up in Germany and then are judged based on their names and family names. They are told "German is not your language". Many times, one of the first questions that I get asked is "where are you from?". This entire conversation is about who language belongs to. The whole idea of native speakerism is also deeply entrenched with pronunciation classes. The fact that we put so much effort on teaching people to pronounce words in a certain way, as if there were ever a correct pronunciation for anything. I do understand that you have to teach pronunciation when there is a difference in meaning, but when it comes down to the kind of pronunciation that doesn't make a difference at all, that's essentially saying: "You might speak it, but that language is mine. I'm letting you use it, I'm letting you borrow it, but it's mine". For example, in a recent study, we interviewed some teachers at the Goethe-Institute in India. They say we need to be very careful about the German that we speak and write, because even when we're reflecting on our teaching practises, if you make a mistake in German, you're going to be judged for your teaching practises as well. I might not be a good enough teacher if I make a mistake in my pronunciation, in the position of the subject, verb or object in a sentence. Which again

proves the fact that the language belongs to somebody or to a specific group of people. Everyone else is allowed to borrow it from time to time. But you have to make sure it's like a rented apartment. You have to make sure that the walls aren't damaged. You can't paint over the wall, because if you do, then it is a variation of the language, and that can't be. This brings us to the term *World Englishes*, which makes absolutely no sense to me, and I would love to hear what you have to say about this distinction between Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, because it's not *Portugal's Portuguese*, it's just *Portuguese*. And then there is the rented out option, the trial option, which is *Brazilian* Portuguese. And it's not like people in Portugal really *lent* you the language. It's like a compulsory Spotify subscription that you simply have to use and you're also expected to pay for it. That's it. So that is my opinion on native speakerism.

PALIMPSESTO

9) While studying English in Brazil, many professors emphasized that non-native speakers are actually the majority, and thus own the language. That discourse gave us an alternative early on. But in German studies, those debates rarely happened, focusing rather on phonetics, always framed in terms of a right or wrong pronunciation.

RRIVU BANERJEE

I find the idea that non-natives are the majority very interesting. By using that term, we are essentially saying to whom the language belongs. It's a pretend world where the language belongs to us, but it's one in which we constantly have to prove that the language actually belongs to us through imposed tests and examinations. Nobody from the UK, US, Canada, or Australia will ever have to do an English language test, yet we must take English exams even to study in German-held courses in Germany. One of the reasons why this debate doesn't happen in the same way in German teaching is historical: German colonialism happened differently, in a limited period of time. That's why the conversation happens mostly around the topic of migration within the country. This connects to the field of German as a second language. At that point, it becomes important to distinguish why people learn German as a *foreign language* versus as a *second* language. There is this wonderful distinction that Alisha M. B. Heinemann (2021) makes in her article: you learn German as a foreign language as an add on to your CV; it's done from a position of

privilege. Learning German as a second language, however, is a necessity for getting access to basic rights and resources. In this context, questions of ownership of language arise. In terms of learning German as a foreign language, phonetics dominate programs in universities mostly outside of Germany, reinforcing a colonial mindset of striving for the "ideal" pronunciation. And that is where Fanon comes in, with this idea of constantly trying to achieve an ideal of the superior culture or nation. You do that by speaking in a certain way, so that you become closer to an actual human being. That's what Fanon says in *Black skin, white masks* (1986): you may move closer to the ideal, but you'll never reach it, since the problem lies not in the language, but in the colour of your skin and where you were born. Still, you constantly keep trying to achieve this ideal. There's this obsession with pronunciation, whether it's English, German, or any other European language. Most of these obsessions thrive outside of these traditional spaces. Personally, I was trained to suppress my Indian accent in school, I was simply not allowed to sound that way. That carried into my German too. I don't know how my German comes across to most people, but people rarely identify where I'm from by listening to me; instead, they react with confusion that my skin colour and my language don't "match."

PALIMPSESTO

10) Based on your experience, how can one develop a critical theory that not only speaks about marginalized subjects, but is produced by them? Stating this in a different way: when we talk about a marginalized subject, we talk *about them*. When is it going to be that *they* are going to produce their theories and knowledge?

RRIVU BANERJEE

Now I am going to do a deep dive into one of my favorite people in terms of the work that they do, and that is Spivak. Spivak speaks about the inability of the subaltern to be heard. Can the subaltern speak? The subaltern do speak, it is just that nobody wants to hear them. That is the point: marginalized subjects are already producing theories and knowledge, and they always have. But why is that knowledge not considered legitimate? Because it is not being produced in a language, in a manner that is hegemonic. We - and I mention this very specifically - are part of the hegemonic discourse. We are all part of the hegemonic discourse, me perhaps even more so, since I am based at a German

university. This knowledge, however, is definitely not being produced in languages that we need, it's always in the West European languages.

So, the knowledge is there, and it's being produced at the same time it is being passed. A good example comes from my colleague Meghmala Bhattacharya, who is completing a doctoral thesis in the UK on oral traditions among the women of Bengal during the Partition. She shows how knowledge is passed on through these oral traditions. It's a wonderful study and demonstrates this point clearly: knowledge does keep getting produced, critical theories keep getting produced through those means. It's just that it's not considered legitimate because it's not written down, not peer reviewed, not written in languages that we will understand, which are three or four languages and no more than that. To address this, there is something that Spivak talks about in *Death of a discipline* (2004) and more recently in her acceptance speech for the Holberg Prize[1]. There's this idea of planetarity, the idea of *learning to learn from below*. From my understanding of Spivak, the only way we can do this is for us to stop talking and listen to the people producing those other forms of knowledge and theories, rather than constantly being obsessed with coming up with solutions. The problem with solutions is that the minute we propose one, we don't look at the problems they create. Something as basic as industrial pollution illustrates this: it emerged as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which was itself a solution to another problem. Today, so-called solutions like electric cars or renewable energy raise new issues, since we're not thinking about how those batteries for electric cars are being produced, how the cobalt is being mined for them to be produced. So, it's this constant cycle. We're obsessed, trying to provide a solution that supposedly works, instead of actually listening to what is being said and to the other forms of knowledge that is already being produced. This is not to say that hegemonic knowledge should simply be overturned or placed beneath other systems such as Indigenous knowledge. No, but we have to look at them as parallels, as different kinds of knowledge that exist, that coexist, and that *can* coexist. In order to do so, we have to learn to learn from below. Not even to learn from below. To *learn to learn* from below, from the voices that we choose to ignore because we don't deem them as knowledge. My

[1] The Holberg Prize is an international award presented by the Norwegian government to scholars who have made outstanding contributions to research in the humanities, social sciences, law, or theology. Spivaks acceptance speech for the 2025 prize can be read here: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Acceptance Speech - Holbergprize

favorite example for this is that I might have a Ph.D., but I cannot drill a hole into the wall. It requires a very specific kind of knowledge, one which I don't have. I can try to do it, I can mess it up. But if I stop talking and listen to someone who explains to me how it works, using that knowledge of how walls are drilled, then I am using another kind of knowledge. These entirely different epistemologies already exist. I think that is the way to do it: to learn to learn from below. It's surely difficult, because we're used to discrediting knowledge that we do not deem as correct or legitimate. That is something that we have to try to stop ourselves from doing.

PALIMPSESTO

11) We're not used to listening to these voices and the way they speak, because they also use different methodologies or whole different epistemologies. For example, in some cultures, oral narratives are very much part of knowledge-making processes. In the West world, we do not value those stories so much, in a sense that we go instead for data, numbers, statistics. But there sure is some knowledge involved in telling a story. We usually don't think so, we say this is just gossip or common sense. There is something being produced there that we have to adjust our ears to, that we have to hear. It’s a very hard exercise.

RRIVU BANERJEE

Gossip has a bad reputation because orally transmitted knowledge that cannot be written down is considered illegitimate. Yet gossip is essential: it is rooted in lived experience, and experience is a form of knowledge. Gossip is not fundamentally negative. When I gossip about something that happened, I am not only reporting an event but also formulating a theory about it. It may not be a big theory, but it is still theorizing. Take, for instance, the case of person X arguing with person Y. I might hypothesize that it happened because X is facing money troubles. That is already a form of analysis: I collect information, pass it on orally, and create a hypothesis. In that sense, gossip mirrors what we do in academic work. However, it is discredited because it does not align with Enlightenment ideals of knowledge production. Those ideals set rigid parameters that only what can be objectified counts as valid knowledge, while experience does not. But gossip is so human and subjective. If we were to gossip about a third person, our opinions

might be completely different about her. And that is, in fact, how social science is supposed to work: two researchers can look at the same data and arrive at probably different interpretations. We have a very enlightened idea of how we're supposed to look at data, hoping that we effectively come to the same conclusions using the exact same methodology, which means that our personal experiences with that third person don't matter. We just look at what we consider objective about that. That's how we pretend to produce objective science. And that is one of the reasons why I think that gossiping is not fundamentally a bad method of going about producing knowledge. I think all of us have a lot to learn, and that is the most difficult thing because we still are socialized and trained in a world where we're constantly told that there is an objective idea. That is the hegemonic epistemology, in singular, which delegitimizes and discredits every other epistemology that exists or can exist. Adjusting our lenses sounds like a very easy thing to do, but it is not. It's also probably almost impossible to do. I mean, we're constantly trying to do it with our work. But again, it's also the idea of what happens when we actually manage to do that, when we succeed in changing that lens. What are we ignoring then? What are we discrediting and delegitimizing then? The kind of work that we do in terms of discrimination and looking at it from decolonial perspectives is not to say that everything that exists as hegemonic knowledge, is wrong. That cannot be the solution, as it would be just another form of discrediting. Our aim cannot be to completely subvert the knowledge systems, but to look at them as parallels, and that is difficult.

PALIMPSESTO

12) It's not that the knowledge that has been produced in a conventional way should be discarded. We have achieved great things by doing things in the way we do, but we could be much more and much more plural if we opened ourselves to other forms of knowing as well. We would be richer as a society, as humanity, if we could take into account what these other systems of knowledge have to say.

RRIVU BANERJEE

Exactly. That's exactly what Spivak talks about when she speaks of planetarity and learning to learn from below. That's when you realize that there's not just *one* knowledge,

but different knowledges that exist parallelly. They do exist. It's just that we choose to not recognize them as legitimate. That is the crux of the problem.

PALIMPSESTO

13) Is there anything else you would like to add? Maybe a question we have not asked, or a remark you would like to make?

RRIVU BANERJEE

At the beginning, you mentioned that I engage with decolonial approaches. As I said at the very beginning, I don't. Most of my approaches are post-colonial. I do like the way that decolonial perspectives look to the future in terms of afrofuturism or afropessimism, though I must admit I know very little about it. My limited understanding of decoloniality or decolonization as opposed to post-colonialism is that everything that exists needs to be taken apart and demolished and we need to start up again. To my mind, that is a wonderful idea and an ideal world. Yet I am a little skeptical. Imagine a plant: if you look at it and say that the plant is poisoned, we can remove it and plant a new one. But the problem is the land. It's the land that's poisoned. Or consider that the fish in a lake are dead. The problem is the lake, and you can't drain that lake out. You can't change the earth that is already poisoned. So, the question is, how do you do it? How do you create something new, knowing that these very hegemonic structures exist. How do you take those structures and do something else with them? This brings us back to methodologies. It is not the smartest to say: yes, these methodologies are extremely colonial and hegemonic, so let us use them only to prove how colonial and hegemonic they are. What Spivak mentions is the idea of *affirmative sabotage*, which shows that it is necessary to work with and against Enlightenment ideas. For example, Kant himself wouldn't agree with any of his own opinions. He talks about this idea of equality, which is the fundamental basis of Western democracy, but Kant very specifically says women, non-white people and a whole section of people are not allowed to participate in those values. Still, those values exist, those virtues have been established. So how about we take those virtues and say, you know what? Let's do it exactly the way you wanted it. If it's for everyone, it should be for *everyone*. Which would require us to look at things differently. If you're saying knowledge is something that, for example, everyone should have access to, then

let's start by writing papers or producing knowledge that is accessible to people, which is something we currently don't do.

PALIMPSESTO

14) The fish metaphor is very precise in showing that the water itself cannot be discarded. The past cannot be discarded. That is probably where Afrofuturist ideas arise. We cannot simply ignore the past, but we have to look toward the future. Isn't there a conflict in that?

RRIVU BANERJEE

I don't think it's a conflict. What we are essentially trying to do is recenter the conversation. The past happened, that is our starting point. We must also ask what we do with it now. We cannot remain trapped in the idea that the past explains who we are. It is true, of course, but at the same time we need to consider what to make out of it. One of the fundamental problems lies in this obsession with the past – not in acknowledging it, but in obsessing about it. It then goest into a very problematic space of authoritarianism. That's where it springs up. This is the exact conversation that happens in the Africas, in almost every country where you have authoritarian rule, in India since the 1990s, more so in the last 11 years with a fascist prime minister in power. Again, the conversation that happened in Brazil, that's happening in the US with *Make America Great Again*. When was America great? Please tell me. Also in the UK with their recent protests, or in Australia, where you look at the past and you kind of sit there. In all these cases, you obsess over it instead of acknowledging it. And therefore I don't think that it's conflicting to conciliate past and future, but rather uncomfortable. Otherwise, we risk falling into binaries of wrong and right, claiming the past and everything that they did was entirely wrong. While much of that critique is valid, framing it solely as right versus wrong leads to a new world order that is equally problematic. It is like proposing to replace patriarchy with matriarchy: the structure remains the same. The problem is the structure.

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