West

Press release 23.10.2026

GAYATRI SPIVAK
SYMPOSIUM: RIGHTING WRONGS

26.11.2026-27.11.2026
Location: West Den Haag in the former US embassy, Lange Voorhout 102, The Hague

West Den Haag presents the second in a series of special encounters with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, philosopher, literary theorist, translator, and radical pedagogue, whose work has reshaped what we can say and do about justice, language, and the colonial present. The Hague is globally known for its international institutions which present utopian vision of universal human rights and redemption of the Humanist project. Yet laws and institutions alone cannot produce a just world. As Spivak cites author Susan Bazilli: 'We must always be cognizant of narrowing the gap between law and justice.' How do we meaningfully address the burning contradictions and struggles, moving toward justice and peace?

In her essay 'Righting Wrongs,' Spivak begins with a grammatical observation that opens onto structural violence: 'Rights entail an individual or collective. Wrongs, however, cannot be used as a noun, except insofar as an agent of injustice is involved.' The verb 'to right' cannot be used intransitively; it requires an object: 'to right a wrong.' This means 'Human Rights' is always as well about 'being the dispenser of these rights,' carrying 'the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism, the fittest must shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of the unfit, and the possibility of an alibi.' The aporia Spivak identifies, between the nature that grounds rights and the responsibility that precedes will, between the necessity of human rights discourse and its alibi function, is the central tension under which the symposium takes place.

The essay warns repeatedly against the 'benevolence' of those who would like to right wrongs: 'I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs.' This 'supervisory benevolence' reproduces the very structures it claims to overcome. The 'alibi' of human rights operates on the model of 'the white man's burden', an 'enabling violation' that must be used even as it is renegotiated.

Rather than rejecting the notion of human rights entirely, Spivak's response is to supplement it. 'The redressing work of Human Rights must be supplemented by an education that can continue to make unstable the presupposition that the reasonable righting of wrongs is inevitably the manifest destiny of groups… that remain poised to right them.'

Spivak insists on two 'begged questions' at the origin of any justice project: the question of nature (assumed as ground for rights) and the question of responsibility (being called by the other before will). These questions are not continuous; they stand in a 'discontinuous supplementary relationship, not a solution.' The symposium takes this aporia as the working condition under which our thinking proceeds. This is, Spivak insists, slow work, and it offers no guarantees: the results 'are not directly ascertainable by the teaching subject, and perhaps not the taught subject either.' The symposium is designed accordingly, informed by Spivak's exceptional commitments to pedagogy, towards 'uncoercive rearrangement of desires' whereby subjects understand and explore their shared conditions and their political agency anew.

With a focus on histories and presences of migration in The Netherlands and The Hague, this 2026 symposium is a special opportunity to think with one of the most consistently relevant, challenging and demanding scholars of our age, a deeply committed educator, reader, translator and speaker with over 50 years of classroom experience from the village school to the most hallowed halls of academia. People from

all backgrounds and interests who are interested in challenging their understandings and their thinking are invited to participate. Participants should expect an atmosphere of respectful rigour and attention to detail, and make accommodation for the discomfort which may arise when one's closely held convictions and understandings are challenged.

This symposium is intended as a beginning, a preparation for a full symposium dedicated to Spivak's work to be held at West Den Haag in 2027. Participants will begin working together in 2026 developing approaches, testing methods, sitting with difficulties, looking towards producing a vital experience 2027.

Program:
Thursday 26.11.2026

17:00 — 18:30
Encounter: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with Baruch Gottlieb: 'Righting Wrongs'
Reflecting on the essay 'Righting Wrongs' in which Spivak questions the purported benevolence in the prevailing approaches to supporting development and human rights in the world at large, and affirms her commitment to the humanities and to pedagogy.

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Program:
Friday 27.11.2026

11:00 — 12:30
Discussion: Viken Berberian with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: 'Migrations'
11:00 — 12:30
Viken Berberian will lead a discussion with autobiographical reflections on displacement, diaspora and the changing place of the experience of migration in his storytelling.

12:30 — 13:45
Lunch break

14:00 — 16:00
Conversations: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with Migrant Domestic Workers FNV and allies
Prof. Spivak will meet a group of migrant domestic workers living in the Netherlands and their allies, to hear their stories, and learn how to learn with them.

16:00 — 16:30
Break

16:30 — 19:00
Plenary: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with Oluwaseun Akinfenwa and Patrizio Rotondo: 'Spivak's Gramsci and African subalternity'
The notion of the subaltern, with which Prof. Spivak inaugurated what is sometimes called post-colonial studies, originates in the writings of communist Antonio Gramsci. In this session Prof. Spivak will discuss the research of two young scholars engaging with her work, with Gramsci and subaltern subjects.

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For more information, please contact Emma Wiersma at press@westdenhaag.nl or +31 6 2066 1122.

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