

## Gayatri Spivak, Planetaryity, and the Labor of Imagining Internationalism<sup>1</sup>

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As Hegel defines it: "Thinking is, indeed, essentially the negation of that which is immediately before us."<sup>2</sup>

I've... looked for the unknown in the midst of the known.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I want to discuss three concepts deployed by the cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak, namely "planetarity," "imagination," and the "figure of the impossible."<sup>4</sup> I argue that these concepts owe their origin, philosophically, to Left-Hegelian thought and specifically to the Hegelian-Marxist theorization of the human as laboring subject. While Spivak remains one of the few non-European female intellectuals whose work has achieved institutional status, her engagement with the tradition of Left-Hegelian dialectical materialism and twentieth-century socialism is often neglected.

That this has been so is not surprising. Spivak has not written extensively on socialism. Further, her work has been produced, circulated, and interpreted in an US milieu that is historically indifferent, if not hostile, to organized Marxism. This means that her politico-intellectual affiliations have often been glossed over or interpreted in antithetical ways. Spivak's best-known essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" for example, mounts a Marxist critique of the French post-Marxist philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze on account of the latter's "disavowal" and "neglect" of the "international division of labor, a gesture that often marks poststructuralist political theory."<sup>5</sup> Despite its outlining of such a fundamental point of critique, Spivak's essay continues to be read largely in a poststructuralist register, one that divorces the notion of aesthetic representation from the international division of labor. On the other hand, Spivak complains in a 2009 interview, that she "ha[s] never been taken seriously within the tradition of Western Marxism," even as she describes her thought as emerging from the communist traditions of the global south and the non-European peripheries — from India, China, and Cuba.<sup>6</sup> In both instances, Spivak

enables, to use her words, a “wrenching [of] Marx from his European provenance,” thereby pointing to a more nuanced engagement than contemporary trends will allow.<sup>7</sup>

In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak compares “planetarity” to “socialism at its best”; elsewhere, she notes its derivation from “original Marxist” notions of “value.”<sup>8</sup> More recently, Spivak turns to questions of the imagination, humanist education, and ethical consciousness, explicitly borrowing from Friedrich Schiller’s eighteenth-century conceptual framework.<sup>9</sup> What material, political-economic or ideological contexts do such shifts indicate, away from postmodernist and poststructuralist anti-humanism, textual indeterminacy, and the like? I argue that such ideas have their basis in real world antagonisms. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly at stake in these conversations is the humanist tradition of Hegelian-Marxism. What Spivak’s intervention signals is the desire, arising from the contemporary conjuncture of global capitalist crisis, to reclaim creative human agency. Rather than traditional liberal humanism, I argue that this move places Spivak in alignment with the Hegelian-Marxist theorization of the human as laboring subject, and labor itself as purposive, creative activity. Such an affinity, moreover, is in opposition to significant current trends in theory, namely post-Marxism. As the post-Cold War liberal-capitalist triumphalism about the “end of history” fades further into the horizon, and a new series of imperialist misadventures and economic recession cycles bring focus to the persistent question of human emancipation, contemporary theory has demonstrated a strange turn away from the human. Whether in cyborg theory, new ecology, post-humanism, network theory, object-oriented ontology, or systems theory, a series of intellectual currents have sought to erase the key problematic of labor from the realm of ideas. I will suggest in this essay that such strands repeat century-old discourses of positivism and phenomenology. In doing so, the present age of globalization resembles, ideationally, an earlier twentieth-century epoch of imperialism.

My discussion of Spivak seeks to decenter her work from the familiar confines of a postmodernism-inflected postcolonial theory, onto a longer, and more politically charged, trajectory of modern intellectual history. The crucial place of Left-Hegelianism in twentieth-century anti-colonialist discourse has been recently demonstrated in Timothy Brennan’s path-breaking study, *Borrowed Light*. During the interwar era, as Brennan argues, Left-Hegelian thought specifically sought to contest the downgrading of human agency. Ranged against the anti-humanism of scientific positivism and idealist phenomenology, dialectics – and especially the Hegelian concept of negation – emerged as important tools for conceptualizing emancipatory politics.<sup>10</sup> This is especially true for such European thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse; and for anti-colonial intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore and Aimé Césaire, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In these conversations a key point of focus is human experience; while experience provides a mediated, negative sense of the world, it is through the negation of the negation, an act of human labor in the

fullest sense, that the impossible could be imagined. I suggest that such analysis is rooted in the political understanding of anti-imperialism as described by Lenin. As I illustrate through my discussion of Spivak, these continue to be key questions for a twenty-first-century socialist and proletarian internationalism.

In her Welles Library lectures, subsequently published as *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak sees the term “global” as produced by the convergence of multinational finance, media, and information technology. These are symptomatic of capital’s tendency to homogenize and assimilate. “Globalization,” Spivak says, “is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike much of contemporary cultural theory, Spivak does not valorize globalization as a positive outcome whereby the sweeping tides of cultural exchange transform peripheral subjects into cosmopolitan global citizens. Globalization, or so the celebratory version of it goes, is supposedly an epistemic break from the past, freeing its subjects from their narrow prejudices and provincial affiliations toward new, decentered and even nonhuman horizons.<sup>12</sup> Spivak’s assessment is far more sober: “in the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball [the globe] covered in latitudes and longitudes... now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems,” is how she links the capitalist production of the globe.<sup>13</sup>

Spivak’s understanding of globalization as not simply cultural cosmopolitanism or post-humanism, but as the alienation of labor, internationally, is rooted in older Marxist analysis. It is to be found in Vladimir Lenin’s 1916 text, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The comparison of globalization to imperialism, and between Spivak and Lenin, might strike a contemporary reader as odd. That is precisely because globalization carries a value-neutral if not altogether positive valence in theoretical discourse as opposed to the entirely negative connotations of the term imperialism. Further, as I noted above, globalization is often viewed as a fundamentally “new” form of capitalism where older categories of analysis do not hold. Still, as a concept, imperialism as the globalization of capital has an older, if less discussed, history. Lenin did not coin the term imperialism. Other thinkers such as the liberal J.A. Hobson and Marxists of various persuasions such as Rudolph Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg, and Nikolai Bukharin were deploying the concept in the early decades of the twentieth-century. However, it is Lenin who systematically analyzed imperialism’s departure from the “classical” paradigm of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, and its reconfiguration into more globalized forms. In this regard, the title of his widely known pamphlet is misleading. As Hobsbawm has reminded us, imperialism is defined in Lenin’s original title as the “latest” stage — rather than highest, with all its stage-ist implications — of capitalism, only to be changed after his death.<sup>14</sup>

Emerging since the 1870s imperialism or globalized capital demonstrates distinct characteristics. These include the financialization of capital, the export of capital rather than commodities, the creation of transnational monopolies, and finally, the imperial struggle for territories and human and natural resources abroad. Imperialism

divided the world into opposing camps of “oppressor” and “oppressed” nations, thereby providing a new and displaced form to the struggle between capital and labor. In our own era, these aspects of “fictitious” capital, whether speculative, virtual, or electronic have been accelerated — but not, I would argue, qualitatively transformed. For Lenin, it necessitated the strategic aligning of proletarian struggles in the imperial core with the national liberation movements in the colonial peripheries. Such was the particular configuration of Leninist internationalism.

While such a view of imperialism is still common in the more critical studies of globalization today, what is largely bracketed is the legacy of Lenin, or what Neil Larsen correctly terms “the genealogical centrality of [Lenin’s] thought in relation to postcolonial studies.”<sup>15</sup> To describe present-day globalization as the continuation of imperialism by other means, as I am suggesting, appears to many in the metropolitan left as anachronistic or even suspect. This is owing to two main reasons. One, imperialism and colonization are often relegated to be outdated matters, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century sequence of modernity that has been left behind; it is affirmed that the new age of capital is fundamentally different, more complex and diffuse than traditional imperialism. For nation-states in the global south, however, such conflation between economic and political sovereignty is inaccurate, if somewhat pervasive, in dominant discourse, as they (as well as subaltern groups within the core imperialist countries) continue to be haunted by imperial and sub-imperial domination and exploitation. Second, and this is a more narrow cause flowing from the previous, the work of radical intellectual-activists of the periphery such as C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and others has been “domesticated” within academic boundaries. Today one speaks, politely, of cultural difference and Eurocentrism, not imperialism and the resistance to it. Institutionalized academic theory has steadily appropriated, effaced and declared obsolete Lenin’s legacy of emancipatory thought.

Yet it is undeniable that the Leninist framework of imperialism provides a critical materialist theorization of several key aspects of the postcolonial condition. To phrase this in contemporary vocabulary, it is Leninism that provides the earliest comprehensive critique of European civilizational and teleological claims of progress, liberal-capitalist democracy, “First World” and white worker privilege, nationalist essentialism and chauvinism, the intersectionality of racialized, gendered forms of oppression/domination with economic class exploitation, and finally, the importance of third-world struggles in world-historical and non-identitarian terms. World-historical that is, in their own right, rather than belated versions of European history. These were key points in Lenin’s theoretical break with the Second International and the evolutionary logic of Social Democratic Marxists such as Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein.<sup>16</sup> In historical terms, the Leninist Bolshevik experiment, which ended the absolutist Tsarist Empire, was the actualization of a materialist-postcolonial vision in a multi-ethnic, semi-developed periphery of Europe. It is perhaps needless to add that the shortcomings of actually existing socialism in, for example, the Soviet Union,

as well as China, Vietnam, Korea, Cuba, do not render irrelevant the genuine insights of materialist thought. Yet, that is often the thrust of Anglo-American post-Marxist and postmodern criticism. If anything, the current “latest stage” of imperialism calls for an even greater engagement with materialist and dialectical critique.

In Marxist terms, the globalization of capital deepens (displaces) existing inequalities between social classes, and between nations, even as it homogenizes across these categories. Homogenization and differentiation are the social effects of globalizing capital, involving the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of various social formations and their discrete relations into an overarching global mode of production. Social differences of race, gender, ethnicity, and location, as well as culturally distinct ways of living in the world are progressively obliterated, so as to produce an equivalent relation between different forms of laboring subjectivities. Such equivalence is achieved through the commodity, and by extension, through money, which represent human labor in its absolutely alienated form. In cultural terms, one could describe this process as the proliferation of *similitude*. Not only do increasing numbers of people the world over buy the same consumer products, they also experience structurally similar kinds of feeling, the same aspirations and ambitions on one hand and alienation and crisis on the other.

At the same time, it is through this mediated similitude that capital produces a spatio-temporal disequilibrium in the realm of experience. This is the schism, to rephrase in older philosophical terms, between “appearance” and “essence.” Things appear to us as discrete experiences and concrete sensations whose underlying causes and structures are invisible, and rendered progressively inscrutable. Such a gap between phenomenal appearance and its noumenal essence within human consciousness, concretely embodied in the form of the commodity, corresponds to the alienated perception of the world. Fredric Jameson, borrowing from Adorno, has succinctly summarized the spatio-temporal displacement thus: “The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life.”<sup>17</sup> The spatio-temporal gap between metropole and periphery produced by capital thereby mediates subjective forms of knowing. It is the task of a properly materialist and dialectical criticism to bridge the gap, so as to illuminate, as Adorno puts it, the “totality” behind “every” discrete event and object.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the persistence of imperialism and the metropole-periphery distinction means that subjective experience is calibrated by a fundamentally unequal and uneven world-system. The world-system here is the engine of *difference*.

Jameson, mentioned above, is of course an exception among contemporary theorists in his fidelity to dialectical categories of analysis. Among other things, it is thanks to Jameson’s interventions that the most influential Hegelian Marxist theorists of the interwar era, such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and György Lukács (and “Western Marxism” in general), have enjoyed a degree of popularity in

the Anglo-American theory canon. However, such institutionalization comes at a price. Much of post-Althusserian theory, including Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, as well as postwar recuperations of Nietzsche and Heidegger, has consistently sought to discount Hegelian conceptions of totality, negation, and dialectics, that is, Critical Theory itself.<sup>19</sup> Postmodernism sits uneasily with Hegel, even when postmodern philosophers such as Derrida have turned to such Hegelian thinkers as Benjamin. Postmodernism has sought, to quote Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, to “wage a war on totality... [to] be witnesses to the unrepresentable.”<sup>20</sup>

This includes the refutation of two basic Hegelian premises: first, that sensory perception is mediation between the self and the world, and second, that subjective sensation is a means to grasp what is empirically unverifiable.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, the postmodern notions of unrepresentability, undecidability, ambivalence, and in-betweenness point to the impossibility of knowledge. Instead we have a discursive construction of reality better known as “truth-effects” or “linguistic games.” In practical terms, postmodern thought labels any effort at knowing, and transforming, reality to be illusory if not impossible: the postmodern critique of historicism ends up discarding the category of history from theoretical analysis. To translate such philosophical abstractions into political positions, postmodern theory is deeply status-quoist as it systematically delegitimizes any and every attempt at transformative thought. Postmodernism is moreover, intellectually eclectic; it chooses at will, retaining or rejecting philosophical concepts that are most convenient for its purpose.

A consideration of Spivak’s late concept of planetarity then is vital, I would argue, in differentiating and reclaiming Left-Hegelian thought from such eclectic appropriations. Such a gesture, I think, is in keeping with Spivak’s persistent critique of the Eurocentrism of contemporary theory. Planetarity as Spivak seeks to deploy it is squared against the “global”; in other words, in Marxist terms it is the *negation* of the alienation produced by capital. Let us examine a relevant passage from her text. Planetarity, Spivak writes, invokes a relationship between the human and the natural worlds that is “in excess” of capitalist globalization:

The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say ‘the planet, on the other hand.’ When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition.... Planet-thought opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of such names, including but not identical with the whole range of human universals.... If we imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, Spivak chooses deconstruction over dialectics in her reading. Borrowing from Derrida, she says the figure of the impossible is a “spectral” one. It involves imagining from a distance, and aimed for a future that is yet to come, “calling on *teleopoiesis* rather than *istoria*.”<sup>23</sup> I would suggest that the genealogical antecedent of this formulation is somewhat more complex than Spivak allows here. The idea of the negative in particular, a key component of Hegel’s dialectic in the *Phenomenology*, anticipates Derridean deconstruction.<sup>24</sup> In thinking of planetaryity negatively, as an “experience of the impossible” working through the “imagination” that “contains us as much as it flings us away,” Spivak is — in fact — drawing on dialectical philosophy.

In a later passage, she defines her position further: “the planetaryity of which I have been speaking... is perhaps best imagined from the pre-capitalist cultures of the planet.”<sup>25</sup> Such planetaryity is to be located in the future and is as yet “mysterious and discontinuous, an experience of the impossible.”<sup>26</sup> The immediate resonance of Spivak’s formulation is not only with the “weak messianism” of Walter Benjamin (“On the Concept of History,” 1940) — but also with Ernst Bloch (*The Principle of Hope*, written in the 1940s but published in 1954), Georg Lukács (*The Young Hegel*, 1938), and Herbert Marcuse (*Reason and Revolution*, 1941).<sup>27</sup> I mention a host of these names, and their work all written between the 1930s and 1940s, for a specific reason. The tendency in current theory has been to single out Benjamin, as a theorist who advocated a history without teleology and without class struggle; in short, he is supposedly the postmodernist before postmodernism, a “dissident” against “totalitarian” Marxism. Such an interpellation not only ignores Benjamin’s historical materialism in favor of messianic theology — which is debatable — it also ignores the decidedly Leftist constellation and the particular history of anti-fascist struggle within which Benjamin’s work is properly situated.<sup>28</sup>

Imagination in the Benjaminian sense, that is, imaginative “empathy” (*Einfühlung*) and “distance” (*Abstand*), is derived from German Romanticism, specifically the progressive tradition of Hegel, Goethe, and Schiller, and is channeled through the philosophical work of interwar-era Marxism. Nor is this simply a “Western” notion; a good number of anti-colonial intellectuals in this period, such as Rabindranath Tagore who I quote in the epigraph to this essay, were at work on a similar terrain. Tagore’s negative notion of seeking for the unknown in the midst of the known (*janar majhe ajanare*), demonstrates a similar dialectical understanding of the human imagination as creative labor.<sup>29</sup>

To chart such a genealogy for the concept of the human imagination, in the mode of progressive materialist-dialectical thought, is to immediately risk several charges. First of these is the imputation of intellectual naiveté and epistemic adherence to “reflectionism,” where the social world is reflected in the human mind. A reflection theory of knowledge, however, presupposes that the human mind is capable of having unmediated, transparent access to the real, precisely what the dialectical tradition disputes. Yet thanks to the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion, dialectical Left-

Hegelian thought is said to be implicated in several things at once, including an Enlightenment project of the “tyranny of reason,” the prioritizing of the mind over body, colonialist constructions of the self-coherent humanist subject, and so on.

None of these objections in fact holds true. One does not have to be a colonial European male to affirm the importance of the imagination. (By that logic, Spivak would be one.) Instead, what I am outlining is this — the imagination takes its place within a non-hierarchical constellation of sensory perceptions. To invoke the negativity of the dialectic: it is through the imagination that the human subject objectively and historically experiences sensations of the “unknowable,” as well as the “not present.” “The forming of the five senses is a *labor* of the entire history of the world down to the present,” as Marx notes.<sup>30</sup> Such negative knowledge clearly meditates against the positivist emphasis on “facts,” as well as any transparent access to the outside world. Equally, and this is where dialectics departs from, and is indeed superior to, deconstruction, it opposes the phenomenological view of the world where sensations are all that can be known in a world that does not reveal itself in essence.

This brings us to a second related point on the importance of locating the notion of planetarity within the Left-Hegelian tradition. Human imaginative reason, I am suggesting, is not quite the same thing as scientific-positivist reason. Quite the opposite: negative knowledge of the impossible is incommensurable with the scientific-positivist knowledge of the world. Indeed one of the signal achievements of Left-Hegelian thought was to posit the dialectical method against positivist science and phenomenological ontology. To invoke the 1930s debate here: as Adorno pointed out in “The Idea of Natural History,” dialectics challenged the phenomenological and ahistorical view of human consciousness, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, for example. Adorno writes, “Even though history is acknowledged to be a fundamental phenomenon... it is transfigured directly into ontology. This is the case for Heidegger for whom history, understood as an all embracing structure of being, is equivalent to his own ontology.”<sup>31</sup> What unites positivism and phenomenology, despite their seemingly disparate positions, is the shared belief in the impossibility of transformation: the first on the scientific basis of facts beyond human control, and the second by reducing history to the question of ontological being (*Dasein*).

As Adorno, as well as Lukács and Marcuse, noted, the combination of positivism and phenomenology represented in abstraction the ideas of capitalist ruling classes in Europe, in the interwar era as well as the postwar period. The reactionary character of this combination, with their rejection of the human potential for transformation, becomes clearer once we concretely situate these philosophical disputes within the material conditions from which they arose. Positivism and phenomenology served as twin philosophical vehicles for reaction: the first for liberal-capitalist democracy and the second for fascism in the interwar era. Dialectics, on the contrary, provided a revolutionary framework of proletarian internationalism. Between the two world wars, it is dialectics that articulated the expressive struggle of the workers and the

peasantry against an internally divided, crisis-ridden regime of global capital and its liberal-imperial and fascist political camps.

Here, once again, it is useful to invoke Lenin as a philosopher of materialist dialectics. Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), polemicizing against the subjective idealism of the Austrian Ernst Mach and his Russian disciple Alexander Bogdanov, had already made the above point in the early twentieth century. Phenomenology is quietist if not outright reactionary because, as Lenin writes:

The sophism of idealist philosophy consists in the fact that it regards sensation as being not the connection between consciousness and the external world, but a fence, a wall, separating consciousness from the external world — not an image [a mistranslation of the Russian original, *obraz*, which is closer to “figure”] of the external phenomenon corresponding to the sensation, but as the “sole entity.”<sup>32</sup>

Idealism's ontological emphasis, which Lenin decries, is familiar to us. What is less noticed are the conceptual connections that connect these to dominant trends in present day theory. In the postwar era, Mach's ideas about the ahistorical nature of sensation came to inform the schools of phenomenological constructivism, while Bogdanov's *tektology* was the precursor for systems theory. Much of French poststructural theory of the 1960s, with its emphasis on discursive and linguistic constructions of the human, drew directly from these sources. More recently, anti-humanist philosophers such as Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze, and concepts such as “actor-network theory” and “desiring machines,” continue the work of these early idealist figures.<sup>33</sup>

Positivism too continues to thrive; in our own age and time, “scientific research” shapes our lives in inscrutable ways, from macroeconomics to climate change, from high-tech wars to information technology. It is not my contention here to discount scientific knowledge per se, but only to point out that today, more than ever, it is impossible to separate science from capital and the regime of knowledge from the regime of accumulation.

Under such conditions, the very notion of the human is, once again, under duress. To provide a concrete example, one needs to look no further than the situation of the humanities. Humanities research today is under increasing pressure to resemble the sciences in order to justify its precarious existence within the neoliberal university. In the past decade alone, the tendency to work with big data or emulating the natural sciences, as for example, digital and medical humanities, demonstrates the transformative impact that such pressures have had on the humanities. The downgrading of the human is a corollary to this new scientism. It is as if faced with a catastrophic world order that has no room left for human agency, the only response has to be nihilism and pessimism. To be clear, this is an ideological move, refracting

the global maneuvers of capital and discounting the ongoing struggles for human dignity and autonomy. In philosophical terms, such a move has been accomplished under the inverted guise of “radical” theory.<sup>34</sup>

One thinks here not only of postmodern theory in general, whose time has passed, but very specifically of the post-human turn in the humanities. Any number of subversions of this can be found in specialist humanities journals — cybernetics, new materialism, affect, network theory, thing-theory, object-oriented ontology, animals studies, postmodern ecocriticism, and the anthropocene. Here, the anti-humanist phenomenology of Nietzsche and Heidegger, whitewashed of their associations with European imperialism and fascism, makes its reappearance in the theoretical humanities. The point is worth noting in regard to the “nature” debate, particularly in the recent line about humanist arrogance (not capitalism or imperialism) that is held responsible for the destruction of the natural planet. Faced with the untranscendable horizon of capitalism the breathtaking suggestion has been made that we “decenter” the human to the status of the non-human. In the posthuman conception, the human is reduced like everything else in the phenomenal world to just another combination of entities. It is neither in priority to nor distinct from the nonhuman. What happens then to the question of historical change? Who are the actors and under what conditions of possibility do they operate? Such crucial and politically pressing questions are left unanswered in posthuman thought. To compound irony, the quietist ideology of the post-human carries itself under the banner of new materialism; that is, it appropriates and distorts the dialectical and historical materialism of the old.<sup>35</sup>

Simply put, post-humanism carries on the legacy in a different guise and under a different name of earlier traditions of anti-emancipatory, conservative thought. The matter of retracing such an intellectual-philosophical history is not a mere academic exercise in antiquarianism. As I have been arguing in this essay, the philosophical positions represented in the early- to mid-twentieth century by dialectics on one hand and positivism and phenomenology on the other, have political repercussions on how we debate globalization today. In this vein, I want to return to Spivak’s notion of planetarity to note, in conclusion, a few additional points of relevance.

Planetarity is deeply relevant in thinking through the dialectic of the human imagination of the impossible as well as the interplay between the human and the natural. Understood in this materialist sense, planetarity conceptualizes the inseparability of human and natural history and offers an alternative to the anti-historicism, and misanthropy that has come to characterize posthuman thinking on the “nature” question. Rather than disempowering the figure of the human, a properly dialectical investigation into the human-nature relation would chart its way through the uneven, historical geographies of capitalism. This entails recognizing that it is the colonial and semi-colonial peripheries that provided (and continues to provide) “free” natural resources, and “unfree” gendered and racialized human labor for imperialist plunders.<sup>36</sup>

Spivak, it seems to me, is keenly invested in this issue. In connecting and identifying planetary with earlier intellectual traditions, her essay gestures to but does not follow through older, nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-imperial formations. Spivak invokes two figures, Jose Marti and W.E.B. Du Bois. Spivak calls attention to Marti's "rural left-humanism," and the "figure of the land that undergirds it." Just as much, she seeks in Du Bois the desire to "displace the 'primitivism' of the colonizer into the subaltern of the postcolonial."<sup>37</sup> Spivak claims to "reinscribe" these historical figures as "necessarily proleptic choice[s] for a *postcolonial* internationality."<sup>38</sup>

Postcolonial internationality and the resistance provided by pre-capitalist cultures, are as central to the thought of Marti and Du Bois, as they are to the intellectual Spivak does not name — Lenin. Marti's progressive legacy in Latin America is undeniably Leninist and communist; for example informing the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, the Argentinian Ernesto Che Guevara and the Chilean Pablo Neruda, among others. Similarly, Du Bois's neglected essay "The African Roots of War" (1915), published a year before Lenin's *Imperialism*, anticipates in close detail the latter's argument about colonial conquest being the driving force of European imperialism. Politically, it was Du Bois's solidarity with Communist China during the height of the Cold War that was crucial for the Marxist internationalism of the US Black Panther Party. It is a matter of record that post-Marxist theory has largely ignored these crucial episodes of "postcolonial internationalism."<sup>39</sup>

Similarly the categories of the rural, the primitive, and the subaltern offer an antidote to the presentism of post-human theory. Attention to the past is not an exercise in cultural nostalgia, as conservative thought would have it but an attempt to recognize the genuine achievements of humanist reason, and the limits thereof. Given the dialectics of capitalist combined and uneven development, the past not only determines the present. The former also co-exists with the latter. Neither is the past readily available for comprehension, in conceptual terms. Vico understood this problem best when he said that history is only comprehensible to those who make it. In *The New Science*, Vico observes that in order for the intellectual to study the past as well as to trace the development of human thought, it is necessary for her to focus on the imagination: "With the philosophers we must fetch it [the past] from the frogs of Epicurus, from the cicadas of Hobbes, from the simpletons of Grotius ... we ha[ve] to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures."<sup>40</sup> Here are the specific, concrete historical conjunctures where one witnesses human creative activity (labor) at work among the "frogs" and the "cicadas." Significantly, Vico does not present thought as disembodied but as something that is located within the sphere of everyday material life. Thought is conceptualized by "wild and savage natures" in the midst of their sensuous activity. Labor imagines, and thereby defines the material world of which it forms a part. Ranged against the contemporary dehumanizing impact of the "global," a materialist planetary would attend to these human forms of imagining — and changing — the world.

### Notes

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2. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).
3. Rabindranath Tagore, "The sky full of the sun and stars," *The Essential Tagore*, eds. Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, trans. Amit Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011) 348.
4. Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
5. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 272.
6. Gayatri Spivak, "Interview with Oscar Guardiola-Rivera," *Naked Punch*, 28 August 2009. <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/21> Accessed January 30 2017.
7. Postcolonial scholars such as Robert J.C. Young continue to insist that Spivak represents, for them, a welcome departure from Marxist analysis since the latter has outlived its purpose. Young goes so far as to claim that, "In a sense, it was Spivak, not [Antonio] Gramsci, who invented the 'subaltern'.... Since Spivak's intervention, the subaltern has been transformed into a new and powerful paradigm for our class-wary times." See Young, "Il Gramsci Meridionale," *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, eds. Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya (London: Routledge, 2011) 31-32. On the other hand, materialist critics, such as Benita Parry, have strongly criticized Spivak for presenting subalternity in existential-ontological, or Heideggerian, terms rather than as a relation shaped by history. Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). My contention here is that Spivak's earlier deconstructive-poststructuralist writings on the gendered, singular subaltern need to be supplemented by her more recent work on the humanist aesthetic imagination, influenced by Coleridge and Schiller. Doing so, particularly, illuminates Spivak's indebtedness to the dialectical tradition. I am closer to Neil Larsen's suggestion when he remarks about the poststructuralist Spivak that, "despite the mystification, some partial truth is run up against," in this mode of concept formation. Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London and New York: Verso, 2001) 79. Whether Spivak is a materialist intellectual, partial or otherwise, is outside our current scope — I leave it to the reader to decide.
8. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 100; see also Spivak, "Love: A Conversation," *Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, eds. Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) 61.
9. See Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2004).
10. Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). The book continues Brennan's earlier work on the contradictory roots of contemporary intellectual history, as well as theories of postcolonialism and globalization. See Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
11. *Death of a Discipline* 72.
12. Some influential examples of this post-Marxist approach can be found in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling The Social: An*

*Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

13. *Death of a Discipline* 72.
14. Vladimir Lenin, "Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism," *Selected Works, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971) 667-768. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Vintage, 1987) 12, and Giovanni Arrighi, *The Geometry of Imperialism: The Limits of Hobson's Paradigm*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1983).
15. Larsen, *Determinations* 10.
16. See in addition to *Imperialism*, Lenin's short essay, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism," *Collected Works*, vol. 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964) 105-120, and the pamphlet, "On the Slogan for a United States of Europe," *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963) 629-632.
17. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 349.
18. Theodor Adorno, "Society," trans. Fredric Jameson, *Salmagundi* 10/11 (Fall 1969-Winter 1970) 144-153.
19. Critical Theory refers specifically to the work of the Frankfurt school, though the term is loosely, and inaccurately, used to refer to postmodern theory that became popular in the US academy in the 1970s and 1980s. As Horkheimer notes in his 1937 essay, the term is used to distinguish it from "traditional" theory, which claims pure objectivity of knowledge independent of context. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972). For a comprehensive account of the Hegelian legacy of Horkheimer and others, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theory and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
20. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 46.
21. G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
22. *Death of a Discipline* 72-73.
23. *Death of a Discipline* 97.
24. For a useful distinction between dialectics and deconstruction as hermeneutic strategies, see William Desmond, "Hegel, Dialectic and Deconstruction," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 18.4 (1985) 244-63. In addition to Spivak's work, another attempt to incorporate Derridean deconstruction within the dialectical tradition is made by Jameson in *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2010), especially the chapter "Hegel's Contemporary Critics."
25. *Death of a Discipline* 101.
26. *Death of a Discipline* 102.
27. See citation above for Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*; Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 389-411; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 volumes, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Georg Lukács,
28. Two important works that provided a counterpoint to the postmodern Anglo-American reading of Benjamin in the 1980s are Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), and Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London and New York: Verso,

- 1981). Also see the account of “On the Concept of History,” in Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s On the Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
29. Himani Bannerji superbly illustrates Tagore and Marx’s comparative conceptions of the dialectics of human freedom. See Bannerji, “Beyond the Binaries: Notes on Karl Marx’s and Rabindranath Tagore’s Human Capacities and Alienation,” *Marxism With and Beyond Marx*, eds. Amiya K. Bagchi and Amita Chatterjee (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) 25-56.
  30. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Mineola: Dover, 2007) 108, my emphasis.
  31. Theodor Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” trans. Bob Hullot-Kenter, *Telos* 60 (1984) 115.
  32. Vladimir Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, trans. Abraham Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972) 46.
  33. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). On Bogdanov, see McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2015).
  34. On the crisis narrative in the US humanities see Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Sander Gilman, *The Fortunes of the Humanities: Thoughts For After the Year 2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and others.
  35. Given the limited scope of this essay I can only point to some of the texts that have come define the posthuman and nonhuman turn. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
  36. There involves an engagement with the substantial Marxist scholarship that exists in both cultural geography and ecological studies. For some prominent examples, see David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (New York: Wiley, 1997); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); as well as John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).
  37. *Death of a Discipline* 92-93, 96-98.
  38. *Death of a Discipline* 96, original emphasis.
  39. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The African Roots of War,” *Atlantic Monthly* 115.5 (1915) 707-714. For a recent study of his interactions with Maoist China, see Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
  40. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) 100.