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Article abstract

This article revisits two influential essays by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation” (1992) and “Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet” (1999), and aims to connect and foreground their shared preoccupation with the ethical as “experience of the impossible.” I argue that, crucially for our contemporary moment, these two essays also think borders—linguistic, disciplinary, political, geographic—but eschew the familiar “bordered/borderless binary”; instead, Spivak seeks to displace the border question altogether onto the scale of planetarity, beyond categories of local/global or national/international where the planet is understood to be in a “species of alterity,” an otherness that is not and cannot be derived from us, “the globe.”

Border Ethics: Translation and Planetarity in Spivak

Avishek Ganguly

If the iteration of certain ideas within an author's oeuvre and their agenda-setting appearance elsewhere can be seen as a mark of lasting impact, then it is possible to argue that the publication of two noteworthy essays—"The Politics of Translation" (1992/1993) and "Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet" (1999)—more or less bookend a period of extraordinary output by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak during the long 1990s of "high theory."[1] The earlier piece eschews any easy concept of translation as a literal or metaphorical border crossing, arguing instead that the act of translating is the "most intimate act of reading."[2] The latter essay, prompted by an invitation for a public lecture on "refugee policy and the politics of migration," offered the prescient notion of "the planet," probably for the first time in the contemporary humanities and humanistic social science thinking, as an

[1] "The Politics of Translation" was first published in two different volumes close to each other: Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (eds.), *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1992, p. 177–200; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 179–200. I will refer to the 1993 version of the essay in the rest of this article. For "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet" I will refer to the English-German parallel text edition in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet/Imperative zur Neuerfindung des Planeten*, Vienna, Passagen Verlag, 1999. Along with producing field-defining essays on translation, cultural studies, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and deconstruction over the course of the long 1990s Spivak also published the two volumes *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London, Routledge, 1993 and *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999, and delivered the Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine in May 2000, which were subsequently published as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.

[2] Spivak, 1993, p. 179–200.

attempt "to overwrite the globe."[3] These two essays influential on their own, however, have rarely been read together—something I attempt to do in the rest of this article in order to connect and foreground what is perhaps central to both of them and what constitutes the enduring theoretical legacy of the moments of their composition: the preoccupation of these two texts with the ethical as "experience of the impossible."[4] More importantly for the present occasion, I would argue that both of these essays also think borders—linguistic, disciplinary, political, geographic. Hence, my goal in rereading Spivak in this age of redoubled xenophobia, hyper-nationalism, and ecological crises is to show how her concern over the years has never been with a simple reversal of a "bordered/borderless" binary when it comes to movement and migration or with the valorization of border crossing as a metaphor for translation.[5] Instead, she seeks to displace the border question altogether onto the scale of the planetary, beyond categories of the local/global or national/international, where the planet is understood to be in a "species of alterity," an otherness that is not and cannot be derived from us, "the globe."[6] Spivak's larger aim across these two essays, I suggest, is to complicate the position of the host (in the North) as the sole giver of hospitality, rights, and refuge and to direct our attention to the often overlooked gifts of generosity and responsibility that are brought forth during seasons of migration (from the South); her goal is to instigate an "epistemic shift" that repositions the dominant as well as the subservient "as both receivers and givers" and makes us aware of being at the scale of the planet.[7]

¶2 Spivak has recently expressed her doubts about how "[l]ike the subaltern not speaking, [her notion of] planetarity has been altogether misunderstood," but the planet as an analytical category continues to gain prominence across disciplines.[8] I

[3] Spivak, 1999, p. 44.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[5] For a contrasting view from a migration studies perspective, see the influential recent volume Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (eds.), *Border As Method Or, The Multiplication of Labor*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2013, which positions itself as an attempt to consolidate the conversation "around borders and practices of translation crisscrossing them" with the aim of contributing to the debate on "the politics of the common" (p. viii).

[6] Spivak, 1999, p. 44.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[8] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in The Era of Globalization*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 335. For a brief selection of the more prominent texts across disciplines, see Wai-chee Dimock, "Planetary Time and Global

think this makes it all the more imperative to highlight in the present how her early notion of planetarity, offered nearly twenty years ago, was anything but a simplistic idea like "community, thinking of the world's resources, or yet, at the extreme, sustainability," and continues to be generative as an imagining of the ethical.[9] What follows is an attempt at a reflective piece whose primary motivation is to read Spivak's famously "scattered speculations" on translation, borders, and migrancy as they are focalized through the concept of planetarity. Along the way, I will briefly allude to some instances that might offer us imperfect glimpses of this "planetary mode of intending":[10] a scene in a recent science-fiction film, a temporary installation by a contemporary artist, an observation in a text about immigration and translation. All of these are occasions for contemplating unanticipated arrivals and alienating encounters, however, in keeping with the spirit of the essay I urge the reader to approach these instances as being more exemplary than definitive. After all, the planetary, as I hope to show, is fleeting and ungraspable. That is also why this essay sets itself the task of exploring *why* rather than *how* Spivak's notion of planetarity speaks to contemporary issues in migration studies. In recent times, occasioned at least in part by the crisis of the stateless Rohingyas in South Asia, Spivak has been engaging with questions of refugees, genocide, and migration more visibly than in the past.[11] So, a fuller engagement with how her work might inform ongoing concerns in the field will necessarily need to be a separate, supplementary piece. Here, I am simply trying to outline the case for why it might be worthwhile for scholars

Translation: "Context" in Literary Studies," *Common Knowledge*, vol. 9, no. 3, Fall 2003, p. 488–507, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/45550 (accessed 21 May 2020); Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, Winter 2009, p. 197–222, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/596640 (accessed 21 May 2020); William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2017, as well as the important recent volume Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (eds.), *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2015.

[9] Spivak, 2012, p. 335.

[10] Spivak, 1999, p. 52.

[11] For instance, Spivak has recently given public lectures on the Rohingya refugee crisis at Cornell University, "The Rohingya Issue in a Global Context," 30 October 2017, https://www.cornell.edu/video/gayatri-spivak-rohingya-issue-global-context (accessed May 21 2020), Dhaka Art Summit, "Critical Writing Ensemble: Keynote Lecture," 9 February 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEDqz-T8BHk&feature=emb_logo (accessed 21 May 2020), and Berlin Conference on Myanmar Genocide, Keynote lecture, 26 February 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSQKojA_XRk (accessed 21 May 2020).

working on questions related to the experiences of migrants and refugees to engage with Spivak's perceptive, double-bind resisting, untranslatable idea of planetarity.

¶3 The two essays under discussion undoubtedly build upon thoughts on the ethics and politics of representation in preceding texts by Spivak.[12] However, I think their significance lies in repositioning complex ideas about translation and politics, on the one hand, and the ethics and collective responsibility of doing and being in the world, on the other, in a manner that opens them up to other disciplines, further extrapolations. In fact, I would argue that an emphasis on the notion of "responsibility"—in translation and activism, in teaching and international aid work—as a supplement to the concept of "rights" is perhaps what implicitly connects the ethical impulse traced in the two texts.[13] More on that later. "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet" re-appears in a slightly edited and updated version as Chapter 16 in the volume *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* where it also loses the plural "s" in its original title: "Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet."[14] Perhaps, in this shift from noun to adjective, with a clearer hint of the grammatical mood, we can discern the increased urgency of the task at hand thirteen years after the lecture was first published?[15] The only other instance where Spivak has published a short and slightly modified extract from this text is the entry on "Planetarity" in Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*.[16] That iteration is also significant because there Spivak expressly highlights the "untranslatability of

[12] Spivak's notion of "ethical singularity" also figures prominently in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard, 1999, but for the purposes of this essay I am focusing on the earliest moments of systematic articulation of these ideas.

[13] The other essay that comes to mind where Spivak explores the rights/responsibility dynamic at length is "Righting Wrongs," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2–3, Spring/Summer 2004, p. 523–581.

[14] Spivak, 2012, p. 335–350.

[15] This is one of the reasons why I want to focus on the English/German version first published in 1999. After all, the context in which "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet" would be read by someone who first encounters it in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* in 2012 would be very different from that of the 1999 version, where the then recently delivered lecture was explicitly framed and published as a text on questions of migration and refugee policies.

[16] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Planetarity," in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. by Steven Rendall et al.; translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2014. The version I cite here was reprinted as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Planetarity (Box 4, WELT)," *Paragraph*, vol. 38, no. 2, June 2015, p. 290–292.

planetarity" and brings into sharper relief the connection between planetarity and translation that I am trying to underline here.[17] But the most prominent and oft-cited occasion where she has explicitly brought some of the major ideas from "The Politics of Translation" into conversation with the notion of the planetary first articulated in "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet" is probably in the chapter titled "Planetarity" in *Death of a Discipline*.[18] My attempt here follows that precedent and aims to track the deeply entangled idea of the ethical across seemingly disparate directions in her work—deconstruction and literary reading, translation, feminism, critique of identity politics, postcolonialism, critique of development, and human rights discourse.

¶4 Only a few paragraphs into "The Politics of Translation" Spivak asks a crucial question: "How does the translator attend to the specificity of the language she translates?"[19] And by way of addressing this question she immediately points out that "[t]here is a way in which the rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systemacity"; this is essential for the translator to keep in mind since it is in the act of translation that she comes "perilously close" to directing and controlling such a "dissemination" that results in the "risky fraying" that somehow enables communication.[20] Although this situation appears to be true for "every language," Spivak's immediate concern is with translations from languages of the Global South as they increasingly cross borders and show up on comparative literature syllabi in North American classrooms. Her first example, unsurprisingly, is "from a non-European woman's text" since she has Mahasweta Devi's Bengali fiction in mind. It is precisely in such instances like Devi's, she claims, that this lesson gets ignored as an unfortunate consequence of the translator's inability or, worse, insincerity in attending to the "rhetoricity of the original."[21]

¶5 So far so good. But what happens when, hypothetically speaking, the possibility of the rhetorical or the figurative disrupting the logical is allowed to run its course, is taken to its limit, in the act of translating? Does it threaten to make translation (as mere transfer of meaning) impossible? Do we risk drifting into the

[17] Spivak, 2015, p. 290.

[18] Discussions of planetarity in Spivak's work usually refer to this chapter. A notable exception is the recent volume Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera (eds.), *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2011, which includes a number of essays that, similar to my effort here, trace the idea to the earlier moment in "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet," 1999.

[19] Spivak, 1993, p. 180.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

domain of incomprehension? Spivak seems to entertain this disconcerting thought in passing, but it becomes a crucial move for launching most of my speculations on translation and planetarity in the rest of this article. Here is the full paragraph:

> The simple possibility that something might not be meaningful is contained by the rhetorical system as the always possible menace of a space outside language. This is most eerily staged (and challenged) in the effort to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space. (Absolute alterity or otherness is thus differed-deferred into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate.) But a more homely staging of it occurs across two earthly languages. The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny.[22]

The prospect, while attempting a translation, of encountering something that does not meet "our" standard of "being meaningful" is only a special case that highlights the contingent quality of all communication. But, it is a prospect—"the always possible menace of a space outside language"—that is reined in by letting the rhetorical take momentary precedence over the logical, idiom over syntax, as long as we are dealing with "a more homely staging of it [...] across two earthly languages." When articulated in terms of the task of the translator in such a situation, it would imply her "surrender" to the rhetoricity of the text she is translating.[23] The experience of encountering incomprehension, of failure to fathom meaning, however, especially for a subject position that is accustomed to mastery, habituated to having a command over understanding—that exudes a "confidence in accessibility in the master's house" as Spivak calls it elsewhere in the text—can be unsettling. Spivak carefully chooses the Freudian word "uncanny"—in its German sense of "unhomely" (*das Unheimlich*)—in the second part of the quotation to describe this "experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu." It is not surprising that this experience of being "un-homed," of the defamiliarization of that which was familiar (place, language, or fellow beings), often arises in the encounter with the foreign, at the borders of our "imagined

[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 189.

communities."[24] It is also a common enough trope in alien science fiction, a subgenre that traffics in "effort[s] to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space." This brings us to the first signpost of this discussion, the recent science-fiction film *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016), which attempts to stage this encounter with an interesting twist.

¶6 *Arrival* is an adaptation of the short story "Story of Your Life" by award-winning literary science-fiction writer Ted Chiang and is structured around a so-called "first contact" scenario between humans and extraterrestrials.[25] The film's well-meaning fantasy of crossing borders between dissimilar languages and worldviews leading to understanding, empathy, and peaceful cohabitation is grounded in a well-known but contested theory of linguistics known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis."[26] First popularized in the early decades of the last century, the so-called hypothesis asserted that the language we speak determines the way we think, a claim about linguistic relativity and determinism that has been essentially disputed in contemporary linguistics.[27] However, what is most germane to our current discussion on the ethical underpinnings of border thinking are the scenes of what I would like to call "interspecies translation": moments where a linguistics professor enlisted by the US military is shown trying to communicate with two "heptapod" extraterrestrial beings (see Fig. 1). Dr. Louise Banks, played by actor Amy Adams, is a celebrated authority on many languages, but seems to be at a loss when it comes to the modes of communication employed by these unearthly visitors.

[24] Emily Apter has also recently written about this dynamic; see "Translation at the Checkpoint," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2013, p. 56–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2013.850235 (accessed 21 May 2020).

[25] Ted Chiang, Stories of Your Life and Other Stories, New York, Vintage, 1998, p. 91–145.

[26] See Edward Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," *Language*, vol. 5, no. 4, December 1929, p. 207–214, https://www.jstor.org/stable/409588 (accessed 21 May 2020) and Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," *Technology Review*, vol. 42, April 1940, p. 229–231, p. 247–248.

[27] Susannah Greenblatt, "Three Translators Respond to Arrival," *Words without Borders*, 27 March 2017, https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/three-translators-respond-to-arrival-susannah-greenblatt (accessed 21 May 2020).

Fig. 1. Still image from the film *Arrival*, Denis Villeneuve, 2016. © Paramount Pictures

¶7 All she has to go by are muffled, low-growling sounds and eventually some quick-dissolving logograms that, we are told, are unlike any known writing system: circular shapes that are periodically spray-painted by the extraterrestrials with a dark, ink-like medium on a luminous screen. The linguist and her collaborator, a mathematician, work from the assumption that the extraterrestrials were using two different languages, provisionally named as "Heptapod A" and "Heptapod B," and roughly corresponding to one written and one spoken, sonic language. The inevitable breakthrough in understanding comes only after the linguist, in line with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suddenly undergoes a profound transformation in her entire way of thinking (in this case, most prominently, about the notion of time), which then begins to offer her insights into the workings of the extraterrestrials' language (see Fig. 2). This close encounter of the uncanny kind is further amplified by the film's moody, sparingly lit cinematography and an evocative, eclectic soundtrack.[28] The presence of a trained linguist as protagonist and problems of

[28] The musical score, in fact, adds another layer to the film's critique of artificial, antagonistic borders, the stuff that modern nation-states and their obsessions of territorial sovereignty are made of; for instance, the opening and closing track, "On the Nature of Daylight," is taken from acclaimed contemporary composer Max Richter's *The Blue Notebooks* (2004), an album, which the artist has called a "meditation on violence" in all forms

translation as the central mystery in a mainstream Hollywood film has received mixed reactions from the community of experts. Some have been thrilled by this rare depiction of their fields of expertise on screen while others have taken issue with the film's uncritical celebration of linguistic relativity.[29] My interest in *Arrival* is specifically related to how the film's attempt to stage an effort "to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space" comes close to but ultimately falls short of figuring an intimation of planetarity as it is imagined by Spivak.

Fig. 2. Still image from the film *Arrival*, Denis Villeneuve, 2016. © Paramount Pictures

¶8 A few more pages into "The Politics of Translation," Spivak suggests that "tracking commonality through responsible translation can lead us into areas of difference and different differentiations."[30] From the task of the translator it seems we have arrived at the responsibility of the translator. It is possible to read this as border talk routed through domains of language and ethics, but how can we be responsible in translation? Following up on the idea of the translator surrendering herself to the rhetoricity of the language she is translating from, we note that she also needs to develop a profound "intimacy with the medium." But the paradox Spivak identifies here is this: "[I]t is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness

and which he had created specifically as a work of protest in the days leading up to the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.

[29] Greenblatt, 2017.

[30] Spivak, 1993, p. 193.

or alterity maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical."[31] This is the paradox that appears to get staged and subverted in the film. On one level, *Arrival,* by visualizing its aliens as "heptapods"—giant, faceless, squid-like creatures—figures among a handful of examples of its genre that resist the temptation to anthropomorphize the extraterrestrial other. On the other hand, in a climactic moment when the creature finally reaches out and touches the "screen," it appears to do so only by imitating the action of the linguist who, having previously taken off her hazmat helmet to reveal her face in a daring breach of security protocol, had extended her hand out and done something similar at her end. This moment is provocative in more than one way: on a minor note, we witness a scene where a response from the other comes only when an embodied gesture of touch supplements written signs being previously used by the linguist. Perhaps there is in this exchange a slim opening for thinking about translation inter-media, beyond mere writing? More directly relevant to our present discussion, however, is the film's failure to imagine the possibility that the host and the visitor could both be "intended or interpellated by planetary alterity."[32] If the exchange between the human linguist and the extraterrestrial beings had faltered, if it had stayed with the impossibility of translating the eerily unfamiliar if not the completely foreign, refused the possibility of interspecies translation, may be then the film would have offered us an intimation of what I have been calling the planetary in Spivak? But, in the end *Arrival* merely flirts with transgression. The film stays close to the dominant conventions of the alien sci-fi genre and chooses to contain rather than confront this disconcerting possibility of incomprehension or failed communication. The ethical impulse kicks in only when the other—here extraterrestrial visitors, elsewhere migrants and refugees—gets cast into something like the self, further consolidating a liberal politics of recognition. The film accomplishes this by making the aliens just the right amount of anthropomorphic, a human-like, sentient other with whom we could then hope to initiate communication if not concord.

¶9 "Alien," not just extraterrestrial but also "non-resident," "resident," "inadmissible," "deportable," etc., is a resonant term in US immigration discourse. Valeria Luiselli briefly remarks on the slippage between these uses of the term in *Tell Me How It Ends*, her poignant account of her experience as a volunteer

[31] *Ibid*., 183.
[32] Spivak, 1999, p. 78.

interpreter/translator for unaccompanied child migrants in a federal immigration court in New York City.[33] In the opening section of the book titled "Border," Luiselli notes how the children's stories she is supposed to translate into "written words, succinct sentences, barren terms" are always "shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order."[34] Yet another breakdown of translation prompted by a dehumanizing regime of borders buttressed by a systemic failure of imagination and its inability to think of the migrant as a minor, akin to the refusal "to learn from the underclass immigrants in the interest of a more just modernity [...]."[35]

Fig. 3. Huma Bhabha, *We Come in Peace*, sculpture, 3.65 meters, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New-York, 2018. Courtesy of the artist, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Salon 94, New York, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photography by Hyla Skopitz.

[33] Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Coffee House Press, 2017.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[35] Spivak, 1999, p. 78.

¶10 The artist Huma Bhabha offered another provocative take on the matter of aliens with her recent sculpture commission for the Roof Garden of the Metropolitan Museum in New York titled "We Come in Peace."[36] In keeping with the artist's practice, the eponymous figure was a monumental, scarred, collaged object, one of a pair that made up this site-specific installation (see Fig. 3). It appears uncanny in its apparent act of bearing witness to the trauma of war, displacement, and colonialism. Announcing that they come "in peace," this not-quite not-human figure that actively references classic sci-fi films along with a myriad of other cultural texts and practices, denies the viewer the consolation of encountering a neat, anthropomorphized other even as it demands that we confront and "read" its own dis-figured being. Perhaps, in resisting (easy) translation, "We Come in Peace" puts us in mind of "planetary imaginings [which] locate the imperative in a galactic and para-galactic alterity?"[37]

¶11 "The Politics of Translation," published in 1992, is still an essay ostensibly on the topic of translation and Spivak does not use a specific term to describe the "peculiar mindset" for sensing the borders of our earthly existence as yet, but I would argue that we can already see in these early moves the lineaments of "the planetary."[38] Two quick examples from her own work in the 1990s will substantiate my point. First, Spivak's reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) in "The Politics of Translation." What she reads as the lesson of "the (im)possibility of translation in the general sense" in *Beloved*, i.e. the ways in which "rhetoric points at absolute contingency, not the sequentiality of time, not even the cycle of seasons, but only 'weather'," I suggest, anticipates what she will explicitly theorize a few years later as the "experience of a planetarity equally inaccessible to human time": "By and by all traces are gone. And what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted-for; but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather."[39] Another important signpost along the way is the publication, beginning

[36] See Huma Bhabha, "We Come in Peace," 6th Roof Garden Commission, Met Museum, 17 April–28 October 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/huma-bhabha (accessed 21 May 2020).

[37] Spivak, 1999, p. 52.

[38] Spivak, 1999, p. 46.

[39] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New-York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, quoted in Spivak, 1993, p. 196, and then again in Spivak, 2003, p. 88–89.

in 1994, of stand-alone volumes of Spivak's English translations of Devi's Bengali fiction. "Politics of Translation" refers to Devi's work as I have already mentioned, but I would specifically like to draw our attention to Spivak's translation of her novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha" in the collection *Imaginary Maps* along with the commentary included in that volume in the shape of the "Translator's Preface," and the "Afterword."[40] What manner of intuition enables us to fathom science-defying encounter of the rational, progressive journalist Puran with the supposedly extinct, prehistoric creature, the eponymous pterodactyl of the story in an indigenous village only few hundred miles from his urban existence? As the well-meaning caste-Hindu outsider who is ancestrally complicit in the millennial marginalization of the indigenous tribal in India, Puran is called upon to bear witness without gaining admission into the secret of the "wordsoundless" exchange between the indigenous inhabitants and this primordial appearance among them. The pterodactyl does not translate—Spivak reads the prehistoric creature in the text as a "figuration of an undecidable planetary alterity"; while I am trying to read the intimation of the planetary in sci-fi in the above instance it is curiously the reverse: such a reading will understandably struggle for a foothold against the dominant, Jurassic Park-tainted imagination of "cyberpresent or science fiction adventure."[41] But this is what we get: "Just weather" in Morrison, the "untimely pterodactyl" in Devi—translation at a limit, the absolute contingency of geological time or the inter-species exchange that fails to go through; a failure, an experience of the impossible, that enables an intimation of the ethical. This, I submit, is the setting to work of translation in the mode of the planetary.

¶12 As the final movement of this article then let me focus a little more closely on the second essay by Spivak with which we began, "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet," in order to examine the genesis of this intriguing concept from the other end. As I have already mentioned, the occasion for Spivak's invocation of "the planetary," possibly for the first time, was the inaugural Mary Levin Goldschmidt-Bollag Memorial Lecture "on refugee policy and the politics of migration" delivered in 1997 at the Stiftung Dialogik in Zurich, Switzerland, a foundation dedicated to advancing "[h]ope for the future, made possible by the work of memory, and deeper

[40] Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, New York, Routledge, 1994.

[41] Spivak, 2003, p. 80–81.

knowledge of the challenges of our own time."[42] Her lecture inaugurated the turn of the foundation "from Holocaust asylum to migrant multiculturalism" with a new series of conversations on "refugees and immigrants" that wanted to respond to the crises not just with "advocacy or moral appeal," but with "critical imagination."[43] The question of borders, as I have argued, was then not only the substance of Spivak's essay, but also the provocation for these speculations. [44] Spivak will go on to restate the case for the planetary in subsequent years—most prominently, as I have already noted, in the "Planetarity" chapter of *Death of a Discipline*, and then again in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Here, I want to focus on the moment of its first articulation, in an attempt to catch the thought upstream from later variations, at a time when she could still call Migration Studies "a nascent academic subdiscipline." It is an occasion when Spivak was admittedly, even if uncharacteristically, speaking in "a somewhat utopian strain" as someone who belonged to "the very first waves of postcolonial migration, a *Mitmensch* who is not a *Mitvolk*," who was still, in the late 1990s, working "at the immediately postcolonial mandate of neighborliness rather than subjection." [45] Any serious conversation around the procedures of immigration and post-immigrant conditions in the host countries must take into account the deeply imbricated nature of national and international interests: for instance, it is not a secret that the imperative to "develop" "the South," as it begins to grapple with socio-economic-cultural realities in the aftermath of political decolonization is, as Spivak also notes here, often undertaken with a long-term view towards stemming the flow of immigrants from these countries to countries in "the North"; arrivals for which we in the "developed" countries risk remaining inadequately prepared. It is in this context that Spivak "propose[s] the planet to overwrite the globe."[46] Here is the extended quotation:

> Globalization is achieved by the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere [...]. The globe is on our computers. No one lives there; and we

[42] Spivak, 1999, p. 12.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[44] As I have already mentioned, "Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet" was reprinted in *An Aesthetic Education*, 2012, p. 335–350, and this is also why I decided to focus primarily on the first version of the essay throughout my article and not its latter, possibly better known, appearances in 2003 and 2012 respectively.
[45] Spivak, 1999, p. 38.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

> think we can aim to control globality. 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 "on the other hand."[47]

There are a couple of crucial points here to begin to understand Spivak's use of "the planetary." The first one pertains to the idea that "the planet" as it is invoked here "is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe." She observes: "I cannot say on the other hand"—unlike "the global," the planetary is not an option among other options. In contrast with the ways in which the planetary has come to be used over the last few years as almost a synonym for "the global," Spivak had insisted right at the beginning that it is the "particular non-relationship to the global" that lies at the heart of her conception of planet-thought, "a position whose defining other is the outer as such."[48] After all, the planet is "in the species of alterity, belonging to another system." In the selections included in *Death of a Discipline* a few years later she helpfully added a further clarification: "When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition."[49] And in *Aesthetic Education*, more recently: "It [the planet] will not engage in a double bind."[50]

¶13 The second related point has to do with the caution Spivak had already offered on the first occasion when she invoked planetarity, "I hasten to add that I am not writing to condone any and every use of the word 'planet'."[51] In the second iteration of the piece she would directly address the increasing use of "the planetary" merely as an ecological marker, something like a "green globalization," by stating, "The planet is easily claimed [...]. To talk planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided 'natural' space rather than a differentiated political space" can continue to serve the interests of dominant

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] Elias and Moraru (eds.), 2015, very helpfully track the use of planetarity from Spivak via thinkers like Masao Miyoshi, Wai Chee Dimock et al. to the contemporary moment. Even though the volume discusses the provenance of Spivak's usage, I think the distinctive nature of her conception of the planetary, as precisely not-global and not even merely ecological, is insufficiently emphasized.

[49] Spivak, 2003, p. 72.

[50] Spivak, 2012, p. 338.

[51] Spivak, 1999, p. 44.

paradigms of capitalist globalization.[52] In Spivak's thinking, then, planetarity appears to be not so much *in* as it is *of* the planet; it is not enough to think about planetarity as just an intuition or even an imaginary, but to listen to an "imperative to re-imagine the subject as planetary."[53] What I find most compelling is Spivak's attempt to wrench a familiar English word, "planet," away from its quotidian discursive location—"introductory astronomy"—and reposition it as an invocation of "the effort to figure the impossibility" of an intuition that is not derived from the subject, us. "Planetarity," unmoored from the familiar prior object "planet," emerges as ungraspable. What sets Spivak's invocation of the planet/planetarity apart, I argue, is its refusal to become anything like a method, on the one hand, and its resistance to being easily translated into instrumental, already accessible ideas like globalization and environmentalism, on the other. In classic deconstructive fashion we are offered the counter-intuitive challenge to encounter a seemingly familiar term that is being called upon to do entirely unfamiliar work, in a way, even the work of the unfamiliar. As Spivak observes, to think of it, thus, "is already to transgress."[54]

¶14 Halfway through the essay Spivak further suggests that her usage of the word "planet" is catachrestic—"catachresis" being a literary trope that she mobilizes to imply a master word for a group entity that has no real referent in the world. The planetary stands in as a figure for "inscribing collective responsibility as right."[55] An intimation of its otherness is "mysterious and discontinuous"—"an experience of the impossible."[56] In subsequent iterations of this argument Spivak will emphasize that translation operates within a double bind of being "necessary yet impossible" while the planetary, as I have mentioned above, will emerge as a position that refuses to engage in a double bind as such—no "planet or globe," no "outer or inner." The planetary in Spivak has also been provocatively read by interlocutors as a "paratheological concept."[57] An exploration of all of these divergent tracks of the planetary falls outside the scope of this essay. Here, I would like to restrict myself to retracing the moment of emergence of the planetary (and the translational) upstream in her thinking in so far as they illuminate border imaginaries. It is, I contend, a

[52] Spivak, 2003, p. 72.
[53] Spivak, 1999, p. 48.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 56.
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] See Stephen D. Moore, "Situating Spivak,"in Moore and Rivera (eds.), 2011, p. 15–30.

significant exercise for discussing the work of a scholar and thinker who, somewhat defying academic convention, has been known to not only think in print in public, but also revise, correct, and even acknowledge the limitations of her thinking over successive iterations of her work. As one commentator has remarked, the draft-like, almost work-in-progress quality of what are otherwise stunning and complex ideas is one of the attractions of Spivak's writing.[58]

¶15 What then do I mean by translation in a planetary mode? An instance of translation that puts pressure on the modality of the double bind, impossibility fleetingly overrides necessity—we desperately seek translation, but are unable to break through. Or, as she puts it in a later iteration, to begin to see "planetarity as the source of a double bind that will not bind."[59] In the brief instances that I have discussed in the film, the text, and the figurative sculpture, it is not just the idiom that does not go through in translation or the rhetoricity of the original that is lost, but language in its entirety risks remaining inaccessible, coming from an other that does not let itself be easily imagined as even minimally human-like. This impossibility of communication that reveals the inadequacy of our abilities while also offering a glimpse of that which lies beyond them is the experience of the ethical. It is precisely here, where the conventional scales explode and hegemonic assumptions fall short, that the planetary kicks in. Based on the above, what Spivak seems to propose, I would then argue, is the opposite of the familiar yet seemingly still limited "*sans frontiers*" paradigm of international aid work.[60] She does not make another impassioned case for a borderless, networked, dialogic, relational world, but blasts open the imagination of borders as we know them revealing the categories with which we try to make sense of them as themselves restrictive—a "here" whose "there" is infinite, a self whose other is plenitude. The planetary mindset—episteme, mode of intention, imaginary—is also an invitation to imagine a scale of time and space, survival and extinction, where events transpire as "just weather" or generate "wordsoundless" communication. Radical contingency; thus revealing the limitation of how we tend to think of earthly borders in the first place before making a case for crossing and obliterating them. This is the planetary figured as ethical, not merely ecological.

[58] Moore and Rivera (eds.), 2011, p. 45.
[59] Spivak, 2012, p. 335.
[60] For more on this topic, see Spivak, 2004, p. 523–581.

¶16 The way forward, Spivak seems to urge, looks like this: "If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us, it is not our dialectical negation [...]."[61] But then "access to planetarity" by definition can never really be formulaic; all that we will ever sense will probably be tracks of the planetary. Fleeting intimations, vanishing traces. In the literary text the planetary is figured as an experience of the impossible, but it is an impossibility that activates scales of imagination and measures of comprehension to reveal comings and goings at the level of the planet—a brief appearance of the extinct prehistoric in Devi, lives and deaths registered as fluctuations of the weather in Morrison; the experience of communicating with extraterrestrials in *Arrival*, or engaging with mutilated, unearthly sculptures by Bhabha. How does this link up with border thinking? Spivak invites us to ask what if South-North border crossings in the present, in so far as they get figured in literary representations of the marginalized, often in translation, implore us to imagine planetarity instead of mere globalization? "[A]s presumed collectivities cross borders under the auspices of a Comparative Literature supplemented by Area Studies, they might attempt to figure themselves—imagine themselves—as planetary rather than continental, global, or worldly."[62] This is the challenge she offers—to our imagination and intuition at large and perhaps to the field of migration studies in particular—before we can begin to undo insidious imperialistic assumptions, institute just policies of immigration and asylum, offer aid and refuge.

¶17 These are only conjectures about possible eruptions of the ethical, but perhaps one thing emerges as incontrovertible in them: intimations of the planetary in Spivak do not take speculation about the disappearance of borders as their ambit, instead they offer us opportunities to imagine being at the scale of the planet, impossibly borne across in the generosity of the *arrivant*. There is a moment in *Arrival* where the linguist, when asked about the translation of a particular alien logogram, suggests that it could mean "weapon" sending the earthly militaries into a frenzy in preparation for the coming conflict. But realizing what she has set off she quickly offers a correction by stating that the logogram could also mean "tool." This mistranslation is addressed when it is revealed soon after that the aliens come bearing the advance gift of clairvoyance—offering humanity the insight that they have the

[61] Spivak, 1999, p. 46.
[62] Spivak, 2003, p. 72.

"tool" to live together in peace in the present—in the hope that earthlings will come to their help when they need it three thousand years later. While we keep waiting for the barbarians who would supposedly come to annihilate us, we run the startling risk of misrecognizing the gift they bear as a threat: when "third-world" texts cross over into "first-world" classrooms and canons, when migrants and refugees arrive at borders, and perhaps the limit case when aliens and supposedly extinct creatures show up unexpected.

¶18 Perhaps one of the reasons why Spivak's pioneering discussion of planetarity is not more widely referenced in the literature on borders and migration is because its most commonly cited articulation is too closely identified with the fortunes of a single discipline, i.e. comparative literature. The excellent Summer 2017 special issue of *Aster(ix) Journal*, "Kitchen Table Translation," which explores "connections between translation and migration," is a welcome exception. We can hear a resonance of Spivak's concern with the ethical in acts of translation and border thinking when Madhu Kaza writes in the editor's note, "Translation can be a practice of hospitality that acknowledges that the host, too, will have to be changed by the encounter."[63] But perhaps another explanation of this as yet sparse engagement with Spivak in related fields like migration studies or history could be attributed to the fact that she refuses to offer a formula for access to the planetary. Whatever the reason, it is difficult to avoid hearing the echoes of her prescient "planet think" when Achille Mbembe, for instance, recently spoke about the political as "imperative to reconstruct the world in common" or more directly, the planetary as "a radical openness to and of the world."[64] Or, when Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his 2019 William James Lecture at Harvard University, remarked, "The planet is neither the globe nor the world, and definitely not the earth. These are all categories that, in various ways, belong to the structure of mutuality. The planet is different. We cannot place it in a communicative relationship to humans. It does not as such address itself to humans."[65] I have tried to show that planetarity in Spivak names the ethical

[63] Madhu Kaza, "Editor's Note: Kitchen Table Translation," *Aster(ix) Journal*, 9 August 2017, p. 17, https://asterixjournal.com/note-translation/ (accessed 21 May 2020).

[64] Achille Mbembe, Sindre Bangstad, and Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, "'Thoughts on the Planetary,' An Interview with Achille Mbembe," *New Frame*, 5 September 2019, https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/ (accessed 21 May 2020).

[65] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Planet: An Emergent Matter of Spiritual Concern," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Autumn/Winter 2019, https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-planet-an-emergent-matter-of-spiritual-concern/ (accessed 21 May 2020).

experience that is the lesson of the impossibility of translation. The planetary as uncanny is glimpsed if only in its absence. When read together, Spivak's writings on translation and planetarity, I submit, inventory the imperatives to prepare ourselves to receive and learn from the unanticipated gift that is an arrival rather than merely recognize in it a plea for acceptance into host cultures and societies.

Border Ethics: Translation and Planetarity in Spivak

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits two influential essays by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation" (1992) and "Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet" (1999), and aims to connect and foreground their shared preoccupation with the ethical as "experience of the impossible." I argue that, crucially for our contemporary moment, these two essays also think borders—linguistic, disciplinary, political, geographic—but eschew the familiar "bordered/borderless binary"; instead, Spivak seeks to displace the border question altogether onto the scale of planetarity, beyond categories of local/global or national/international where the planet is understood to be in a "species of alterity," an otherness that is not and cannot be derived from us, "the globe."

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article revient sur deux essais influents de Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, « The Politics of Translation » (1992) et « Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet » (1999). Il vise à relier et à mettre de l'avant leur préoccupation commune concernant l'éthique en tant qu'« expérience de l'impossible ». Je soutiens que ces deux essais pensent aussi les frontières — linguistiques, disciplinaires, politiques, géographiques —, ce qui est crucial à notre époque, tout en évitant l'opposition binaire habituelle « avec ou sans frontières ». Spivak cherche plutôt à déplacer la question des frontières à l'échelle de la planétarité, au-delà des catégories local/global ou national/international, là où la planète est comprise comme étant une « species of alterity », une altérité qui n'est pas et ne peut pas être dérivée de nous, « le globe ».

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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