



Review of

**Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera, editors,
Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology
(New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 414 pages.**

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As far as I am aware, this is the first and only book so far that attempts to bridge the gap between postcolonial theory and theology – two parallel discursive elements that, in the words of the editors of this volume, “(if) left to their own devices, would extend to infinity without ever intersecting.”¹ The volume goes on to demonstrate amply that postcolonial theory has influenced theologians considerably and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (Columbia University’s most

¹ Mayra Rivera and Stephen D. Moore, “A Tentative Topography of Postcolonial Theology,” in Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 3.

distinguished literary scholar in postcolonial theory), has been the most influential in this regard, even if the first ever direct informal encounter between Spivak and a few theologians took place only in 2006 at New York Theological Seminary. This book records the more organized conversation between Spivak and theologians at the seventh Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium organized by the Theological School of Drew University in November 2007.

Though Gayatri Spivak's agenda is not religious per se, the editors recognize that "her unique style of theorizing and trademark strategies of reading, however, are potentially invaluable models for theologies struggling to hold together the deconstructive imperative to engage in a critique of theology and self critique, on the one hand, and the ethical imperative to engage contemporary socio-political contexts on the other hand."² This colloquium and this collection of papers presented at that event stand testimony to the careful critical reading of Spivak's books and articles by theologians in their dialogue with her work. As Kwok Pui Lan testifies, "Spivak is one of those original thinkers whose work is pregnant with generative ideas that others can 'work on' and 'work with'."³

This book is a must for every student of theology as it describes the foundations of postcolonial theology and sketches out its general contours. The editors of this volume, Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera, identify the points of continuance between postcolonial and other liberation theologies, while also clearly defining the specific contributions of postcolonial theology. Postcolonial theology does build on the established themes of liberation and contextual theologies but with a difference. R.S. Sugirtharajah, one of the most well known of postcolonial theologians writes that liberation and postcolonial hermeneutics share a common vocation to "de-ideologize dominant interpretation, a commitment to the Other and a distrust of totalizing tendencies."⁴ The editors of this volume point out that postcolonial theology challenges the modernist framework on which liberation theologies were built. While liberation theologies have depended almost entirely on the Bible as an emancipatory text, postcolonial theologians have argued that religious texts need to be constantly critiqued because of the inevitable complicity between the colonizers and the text.

² Rivera and Moore, "Tentative Topography," 13.

³ Kwok Pui Lan, "What has Love to Do with It? Planarity, Feminism and Theology," in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 31.

⁴ Rivera and Moore, "Tentative Topography," 8, quoting R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 244.

Feminist theologians such as Kwok Pui Lan have made the dichotomy even more complex by exposing the dual feminist preoccupations with liberationist and postcolonial discourses and more importantly by raising questions about the assumed subjects of both discourses. Rivera and Moore urge that the differences should not be overstated because both theologies have in their own way, critiqued Eurocentrism, modernist epistemologies, colonialism, imperialism, global capitalism and other such realities.⁵

Planetary: The Next Step to a New Ethic of Resistance?

What struck me again on reading this pre-publication manuscript is that postcolonial theology has, gratefully, always averred to be but a tentative step in the activity of theologizing without claiming a universal or a “for all time” approach. This collection of essays confirms this heuristic approach which frees the mind and the space for creativity and further exploration. One exciting new feature of this book is the challenge from Spivak to imagine “planetary” over against the postcolonial, as in her view postcolonial discourse has restricted us to nationalism over against colonialism. The search is on always to find fresh ways to counter the globalized capitalism that is on its way to destroying human life, the earth, and the environment. Stephen Moore, in his article, “Situating Spivak,” describes the concept of planetary further. Moore quotes Spivak: “This will also entail a concomitant imagining of the ‘paranational.’” “The Earth is a paranational image that can substitute for international and can perhaps provide, today, a displaced site for the imagination of planetary... Consequently, even ‘transnational cultural studies,’ much less ‘postcolonial studies,’ will not suffice to name and contain an adequate analytic response to contemporary globalized capitalism.”⁶ Spivak’s move to a planetary discourse is built on the desire to evoke “a new imaginary in order to develop an appropriate ethic of resistance.”⁷

⁵ Rivera and Moore, “Tentative Topography,” 8.

⁶ Stephen Moore, “Situating Spivak,” 29, in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, quoting Spivak, *Death of a Discipline: The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 75 and 81.

⁷ Kwok Pui Lan, “What Has Love to Do with It? Planetary, Feminism and Theology,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 33.

Love: A Conversation

Gayatri Spivak chose to title the engagement between postcolonial theory and theology in the Drew colloquium as “Love: A Conversation.” This is explained further by Kwok Pui Lan in her article “What Has Love to Do with It? Planetary, Feminism, and Theology.” Kwok draws attention to the steady influence that Spivak has had on her own theological development and explores how Spivak provides “provocative insights into love in postcolonial feminist theology.”⁸ Kwok writes that the idea of “planetary love” is an invitation that encourages a capacious imagination that encompasses all the sentient and nonsentient forms of existence.” To Kwok, it is about love for the “female subaltern.” She appreciates the move to planetarity as it opens the space for theologians to enter more easily into the dialogue with postcolonial theory.

Kwok points out that, as early as 1984, the Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya had published a book on Planetary Theology – as a critique of the universal, eurocentred, clerical, and androcentric dominant theology.⁹ Spivak’s move to planetarity has a different entry point. She has been influenced by her new respect for the wisdom of Indigenous tribals in India, whom she views as the original practical ecological philosophers. Kwok points out that the edging towards an “animist liberation theology” has already been taking place among Asian eco-feminist theologians. Additionally, Asian theologians have stressed the immanence of God so as to overcome the schism between the earth and the Creator that is rooted in Western theologies. Based on her readings of East Asian philosophy, Kwok speaks of inter-subjectivity rather than seeing the Self and the Other as mutually exclusive. When Asian theologians speak of a correlative immanence (as suggested by Chinese philosophy) they, are in fact speaking of a planetary love.

Spivak “provides clues for a new mode of being in the world. This is turning yourself out in order to understand both who you are and who the other person is.” She demonstrates the possibility of a “deconstructive embrace” a gesture of “affirmative deconstruction” in which the Other is embraced while the differences are affirmed. To Kwok, “Such gestures of embrace are crucial today if feminists are to work toward planetary solidarity in a neoliberal economy.”¹⁰ Spivak rightly warns of the danger of complicity of postcolonial theologians, migrant scholars, and enlightened liberals when representing the subaltern and allowing the subaltern to speak

⁸ Kwok, “What Has Love to Do with It?” 32.

⁹ Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Kwok, “What Has Love to Do with It?” 42.

through us. Kwok heeds this word of caution to theologians and we are reminded that while Jesus chose to remain silent, others have throughout Christian history rushed to speak for him.¹¹

Kwok concludes that Spivak has much to offer for our theological revisioning of creation, anthropology, and even Christology. Kwok's invitation for a continuing search for a postcolonial planetary feminist theology needs to be heeded.

In response to Kwok Pui Lan, Laurel C. Schneider selects the words "planetary love" for special attention. Love is a difficult word in theology, she writes, reminding readers that many religious traditions associate their central concept of divinity to love. Therefore it cannot be avoided in theology and this makes it imperative that attempts be made to think through love critically, "with proper attention to vulnerability to abuse, its evacuation of meaning, its saccharine banality, and our relentless desire for it... Postcolonial and feminist critiques challenge all relations forged in support of patriarchal empires, and so we cannot take for granted loves that are sanctioned within."¹² She concludes that Kwok is arguing for reimagining planetary love with resources that are available to Christian theologians.

Anne Joh, in "Love's Multiplicity: Jeong and Spivak's Notes toward Planetary Love," calls for the learning of many different languages so that we can enter the epistemic structure of ordinary people if we are to receive Spivak's description of the human as "intended toward the other" as an incitement for constructive theological reimagining. Joh draws on the power of the Korean concept *jeong* a translation which she says, "risks fraying at the edges" but which she uses anyway as it combines the concepts of *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*. She challenges the Christian tendency to abjection of the other and to foreclose particular practices of love, so as to grant the subaltern, the foreclosed, and the abjected possibility of their own logic.¹³ Joh seeks to open spaces for a pluralisation of love to ground a politics of planetarity. In the same light one can read the article by Tat-Siong Benny Liew, who in his "Lost in Translation: Tracing Linguistic and Economic Transactions in Three Texts," focuses on the complex relations between language and money. He reminds readers about the losses in any translation - an unavoidable effect that, however, should not lead to the abandonment of translation and language learning but rather to

¹¹ See Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 173.

¹² Laurel C. Schneider, "The Love We Cannot Not Want: A Response to Kwok Pui Lan," in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 49.

¹³ Anne Joh, "Love's Multiplicity: Jeong and Spivak's Notes toward Planetary Love," in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 175.

their supplementation by a love that recognizes the “ethical singularity” of each and every encounter.

In “Love: A Conversation,” which took place between Spivak and several theologians during the colloquium, Catherine Keller lays out some assumptions on which the dialogue is to take place. Spivak has said that religions have been “too deeply imbricated in the narrative of the ebb and flow of power,”¹⁴ and therefore Keller reminds her of the work of postcolonial theologians who are “negotiating.....as the responsible form of resistance amid our privileged but inevitable complicities.”¹⁵ She asks whether there is a possibility for a pure secularism, and whether there could be a clean dividing line between atheism and theism? She concludes that perhaps “the test of that challenge lies not so much in the question of whether we free up the irreducible alterity from the admittedly chunky monosyllable ‘God’ but rather whether we free our planet lovingly and urgently enough from the Eurocentric anthropocentrism and androcentrism of imperial theologies?”¹⁶ Spivak affirms that, although she is not a religious person, she respects good people of faith.¹⁷ She is on the search for an animist liberation theology to deal with the global ecological crisis and her use of planetarity is a way to seek ecological justice.

Appropriations

The book brings together appropriations of postcolonial theory, and maps this under three primary themes: empire, identity, and the reimagining of Christian doctrines. Each contributor to the book, from their own stand point and theological discipline explore the writings of Spivak and engage in a dialogue with her. This review does not attempt to uncover the wealth of analysis and reflection in each of the articles, but gives but a glimpse of some of them.

In “The Pterodactyl in the Margins: Detranscendentalizing Postcolonial Theology,” Susan Abraham writes that “planetarity presents a more complex topographical context for ethics. It is not simply the planet that ought to be at the forefront of ethical inquiry; it is the manner in which

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 382–383.

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, with Serene Jones, Catherine Keller, Kwok Pui Lan, and Stephen D. Moore, “Love: A Conversation,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 56.

¹⁶ Spivak et al., “Love,” 57-58.

¹⁷ Spivak et al., “Love,” 61.

we live together as creatures that belong to the planet, “planetary subjects,” that is the more urgent frame for ethics.” An invitation to detranscendentalize the sacred is to reconfigure the relationship between transcendence and immanence. “Detranscendental postcolonial theology is resistant to those spatial and temporal maneuvers invested in the separation of transcendence and immanence.” Abraham calls for a planetary theology that detranscendentalizes theism and highlights the entanglements of the mundane and the divine.¹⁸

Jenna Tiitsman, in “Planetary Subjects after the Death of Geography,” builds on what Spivak offers on the neocolonial empire to explore its impact on theological discourse. She debunks the claims that communications technology has led to the death of geography. She says that the concept of the universal, immaterial sphere in which we are intimately connected as a common God-given humanity in fact emerges in the West from a confluence of events—the Protestant Reformation, the rise of capitalism, the advent of modern science, and colonialism. She writes, “the illusion of universal, disembodied sameness thrived only when geography and difference were adamantly ignored and simultaneously exploited.” She says that the fiber optic cables on which the globe runs today betrays histories of colonialism and imperialism, which attempt to mask empty promises of equality, democracy and intimacy. She holds that planetarity is also dependent on globalization and since modern religion since colonial times, was involved in the coercive assimilation of difference, she concludes that as postcolonial theologians we must recognise that religion has depended on and been shaped by geographic particularity and therefore, “The cultural topography we author as planetary subjects may provide an earth that facilitates the flourishing of local relationships as constitutive of the network of global connection in which they participate.”¹⁹

Sharon Betcher, in “Crip/tography: Of Karma and Cosmopolis,” focuses on another aspect of modern day globalization where “formerly colonial territories, held apart by the buffers of ocean, are today humanly enfolded—like origami—into any of the planet’s global or world cities.” The human body is managed in the cities, where the disabled and the homeless are defined by colonial understandings of difference and where civility and security are choreographed to avoid inter-dependence and facing up to difference. She therefore proposes

¹⁸ Susan Abraham, “The Pterodactyl in the Margins: Detranscendentalizing Postcolonial Theology,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 79-101.

¹⁹ Jenna Tiitsman, “Planetary Subjects after the Death of Geography,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 149-167.

crip/tography and as a way to be bent toward the other—being engaged in the wounds of other. She writes, “Crip/tography reminds us yet again that to become human it is not necessary to become whole but to attend to the call of the other—and thus to become just, and to practice love, pardon, tenderness, mercy, welcome, respect, compassion, solidarity, and communion among all our relations.”²⁰

In her article, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Theology: Constructing Public Theology from the Future,” Namsoon Kang proposes “cosmopolitanism” as a “stronger mobilising discourse” that would respond to the “politics of trans-identity of overlapping interests and heterogeneous or hybrid subjects in order to challenge conventional notions of exclusive belonging, identity, and citizenship, and to envision a planetary love through an ethical singularity aimed at a more peaceful and just world.” She believes that cosmopolitanism has the potential to vindicate “impartial, planetary, and egalitarian justice and solidarities across all the different forms of boundaries that divide people.” Identity politics in her understanding has provided the space for groups to establish their own power, but it also invokes a politics of separatism and overlooks the power disparities within their own group. Kang contends that “this theology embraces the ‘radical neighborly love’ that is the profound message of Jesus’ teaching, and which, I would argue, has certain affinities with Spivak’s concept of “planetary love.”²¹

The temptation to review every single article in this volume had to be avoided, as each one is so rich in content and reflection. But, due to my own interest in the ecumenical movement and the role that colonialism and mission history has played in fracturing the unity of the churches, the excellent analysis of the present crisis in the Anglican communion by Ellen T. Armour, in her “Planetary Sightings? Negotiating Sexual Differences in Globalization’s Shadow,” had to be included. This article traces the legacies of colonial strategies of othering in the contemporary empire, specifically their influence in the cultural wars over the status of sexual minorities, which threaten to divide the Anglican communion. The schism in the church seems to play up as a rift along old colonial lines. She writes, “The standard depiction of the controversy in the Anglican communion assumes a map that divides the planet into two relatively monolithic regions, the “global South” and the “global North.” Human, financial, political, and

²⁰ Sharon V. Betcher, “Crip/tography: Of Karma and Cosmopolis,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 303-330.

²¹ Namsoon Kang, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Theology: Constructing Public Theology from the Future,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 258-280.

theological capital is distributed asymmetrically between these regions.”²² I cannot but agree with her that the shape and emergence of particular sexual identities is bound up not only with gender, but with race and ethnicity—that is to say, with sexism and racism, and thus, in turn, with the imperialist project we know as colonialism, globalization’s predecessor. Alliances between Northern and Southern traditionalists as well as among progressives from both sides “must be carefully crafted in and through genuine engagement with differences as well as similarities, not in spite of them.”²³ Armour calls for the enactment of a “progressive planetary Christian sexual politics” to resolve the present impasse.

As mentioned above, the book *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* is a must for every student of theology. It offers insights into a future for planetarity and for a planetary theological movement.

Footnote: Spivak on the Dalit movement in India

While this last section is not directly a review of the book, it does provide a critique of just one aspect of the conversation with Gayatri Spivak. I was concerned about her rather dismissive attitude to the Dalit Movement in India and to Dalit theology in response to a question raised by Serene Jones in “Love: A Conversation.” In her words, “I am generally in favour of the Dalit movement, but I am also critical of the fact – and I am not alone in this – that the Dalit movement, as a structured movement, is not always negotiating its access to movement status in ways that are fully sympathetic to the realities of what is termed ‘Dalit’ in our very large country.”²⁴ She goes on to give the generic meaning of the Sanskrit word Dalit, (oppressed, walked upon, crushed underfoot). What Spivak fails to mention is that the leader of the Dalit liberation movement, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, had rallied Dalit communities together claiming this name as their identity marker. He was bringing together into the Dalit Liberation Movement those who are considered so polluted that they fall outside the caste hierarchy, those whom Mahatma Gandhi euphemistically called Harijans (children of God). As an upper caste Indian, she does not seem to recognize the pathos of the Dalit psyche, of the identity of a people who have been crushed not just by economic globalization but by religious sanction and by

²² Ellen T. Armour, “Planetary Sightings? Negotiating Sexual Differences in Globalization’s Shadow,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 218.

²³ Armour, “Planetary Sightings?” 223.

²⁴ Spivak et al., “Love: A Conversation,” 70.

occupation-based discrimination such as manual scavenging, by their landlessness, and by their sexual abuse and humiliation in the hands of upper caste landlords and others. Her concern for “Christians below a certain class demarcation in India”²⁵ is inconclusive if she does not include a caste-based analysis, to be fair to Indian realities, because it is Dalits who are the poorest of the poor. Her condescending approval of Dalit theology which “has used the text well in order to work in the interest of the suffering” should be reflected in her appreciation of the importance of Dalit theology, which has in recent years been challenging the very foundations of dominant theologies in India. I would remind Spivak of the Tat-siong Benny Liew’s call for vigilance “about not only postcolonial complexity, but also one’s complicity, even or especially when one begins with noble intentions for noble causes.”²⁶ How can we work for planetarity and a planetary feminist movement if we do not acknowledge these deep divides among us?

²⁵ Spivak et al., “Love: A Conversation,” 73.

²⁶ Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Lost In Translation? Tracing Linguistic and Economic Transactions in Three Texts,” in Moore and Rivera, *Planetary Loves*, 106.