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# Concrete Utopianism and Critical Internationalism

*Refusing Left Realism*

Above all he fears being duped, so his actions and relations are characterized by a fundamental mistrust. . . . This boy—or this girl—is a realist. . . . He (or she) is . . . unwilling to commit himself beyond the present moment . . . he is more than capable of facing up to things (immediate, given things), distinguishing between what he will find possible and impossible. . . . He looks at the things around him, and the people. They are what they are, no more, no less. . . . He thinks that anyone who wants to change the world must be slightly unhinged. . . . [He tends] to believe that “ideals” fool people and are deliberately used to fool people, that ideals are a hypocritical front for unscrupulous manipulation. . . . He thinks rebellion is stupid, but that does not stop him from deeply despising society as it is.

—HENRI LEFEBVRE

Critical theory . . . confronts history with a possibility which is always concretely visible within it . . . mankind was not betrayed by the untimely attempts of the revolutionaries but by the timely attempts of realists.

—MAX HORKHEIMER

Like philosophy, [critical theory] opposes making reality into a criterion in the manner of complacent positivism. But unlike philosophy, it always derives its goals only from present tendencies of the social process. Therefore, it has no fear of the utopian that the new order is denounced as being. When truth cannot be realized within

the established social order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia.

—HERBERT MARCUSE

In the previous chapter, I argued for a poetic politics of the possible-impossible. This would require dialectical optics that might enable us to transcend realist epistemology. The latter's tendency to posit provincial notions of space, punctual notions of time, and homogeneous notions of identity obstructs concrete utopian visions of societal transformation in which translocal and cross-group solidarity would be both a means and an end of struggle. In this chapter, I underscore how realist epistemology and political realism reinforce each other. Specifically, I discuss how political realism cannot adequately grasp the kind of anti-imperial internationalism that animated projects as different as Senghor and Césaire's postnational federalism and Samir Amin's Fifth International. At the center of this discussion is a critical reading of Partha Chatterjee's recent writing about internationalism and cosmopolitanism.

I do not employ "political realism" in the conventional sense to figure politics as the intentional pursuit of interests through the use of power whose aim is greater power. This usage counterposes realism to an idealism that understands politics as the exercise or pursuit of ethical values and abstract principles. Rather, I use political realism to describe a presentist reduction of politics to the practical engagement with concrete concerns, immediate goals, and the given order.<sup>1</sup> This orientation tends to conflate idealism and utopianism such that the latter signals unrealistic aspirations, unattainable ideals, or impossible hopes that can only exist in the imagination rather than in the real world. Such an understanding of utopian idealism connotes naïve optimism or delusion. Rather, I oppose political realism to concrete utopianism. The latter seeks to relate real conditions to desirable futures that appear to be impossible from the standpoint of the existing order. Concrete utopianism seeks to identify possibilities for radically different arrangements that may already dwell within or be emerging from an actually existing situation. It is at once grounded in the present and is future-oriented. It entails anticipatory practices that are mediated by political imagination. This kind of orientation has nourished internationalist projects through the modern period.

### **Actually Existing Internationalism**

In October 1945 the United Nations began its official existence when the five permanent members of the new Security Council and a majority of other signatories ratified the Charter.<sup>2</sup> In January 1946, the first session of the UN

General Assembly convened in New York and established the general outlines of the new postwar order. It also responded to more immediate challenges including the question of decolonization. The General Assembly created the Trusteeship Council to oversee the administration of colonized, or “non-self-governing,” peoples in accordance with the Charter which had pledged to promote their “well-being” and “to develop self-government” for them “according to the particular circumstances of each territory . . . and their varying stages of advancement.”<sup>3</sup>

Over the next ten years, a growing number of colonized peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East obtained political independence. For most anti-colonial movements (whether moderate or revolutionary, liberal or socialist) throughout the world, the national state became the unquestioned framework through which self-determination would be secured. Notably, this preference for a national form of decolonization was shared by the existing world powers. When France and Britain, for example, recognized that they could no longer remain imperial states, they negotiated bilateral agreements with moderate nationalist allies to create spheres of neocolonial influence. The United States pursued a similar strategy toward new Third World nations. It cultivated blocs of non-communist allies, exploitable resources, and potential consumers within a system of “free trade” among nominally sovereign national states.<sup>4</sup>

These powerful international actors were equally invested in a UN world order committed to a stable interstate system.<sup>5</sup> It was to be organized around the already existing principles of territorial integrity, national independence, and state sovereignty. It would be policed and protected through a directorate of great powers (the Security Council) and administered through a series of international agencies staffed by bureaucratic and technocratic experts. Of course, it would also have the ability to override the national sovereignty of member states when it was determined that they violated their own population’s human rights. But this *ad hoc* ability to elevate abstract humanity over state sovereignty did not fundamentally challenge the principles of territoriality, nationality, or sovereignty around which the world order would be organized. On the contrary, this internationalist capacity was meant to protect the interstate system that the United Nations supervised.<sup>6</sup>

Geopolitically and economically, the postwar world would be framed by this structure linking great powers, nominally sovereign states, abstract individuals (now possessing human rights), and international agencies and experts. Despite appearances, nationalism, human rights, international law, and global governance composed a single order, or *nomos*, that presupposed the norm of territorial sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> This *nomos* would create conditions favorable for new types of neocolonial capitalism and legalized imperialism.

Since the end of the Cold War and the intensification of neoliberal globalization, the inability of state sovereignty to create conditions for substantive freedom and human flourishing and the failures of internationalism to create conditions for global justice and human solidarity have become evident everywhere. Even if populations manage to empower democratic popular assemblies to promote their social and economic well-being, crucial decisions that would determine their life chances are made elsewhere — by private economic actors, unaccountable international agencies, and technocratic experts.

The fictions of national self-determination and universal human rights are underscored by recent developments within Europe. Consider the European Union's punitive treatment of Greece for trying to resist the authoritarian dictates of global finance through a popular Left government. For many critics this confirmed the priority that national sovereignty should have over international association. But we might also read it in terms of the European Union's disastrous decision to constitute itself as an economic and administrative confederation of states led by experts and bankers rather than as a truly democratic federation led by a continental association of self-governing peoples for whom resources were shared, risks were socialized, and autonomy was meaningful. Or consider Fortress Europe's criminal response to the flow of refugees from the Eastern Mediterranean following the civil war in Syria. This crisis does not simply reveal the moral failure or hypocrisy of the West and the "international community." It makes clear that the existing global order, organized around and managed by the interlocking actions of nominally sovereign states, international agencies, and the U.S. imperium, cannot meet the most basic requirements of global coordination, democratic participation, self-management, human rights, and social justice.

The bankruptcy of international law has long been revealed by Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestine and, more recently, by Russia's unilateral annexation of Eastern Ukraine. Such violations pale in comparison to the mass violence, in the name of liberal internationalism, perpetrated by the post-Cold War U.S. state, which is legitimized through UN-sanctioned doctrines and policies regarding human rights, humanitarianism, and the "responsibility to protect."

The dangers of cultural and territorial autarchy have recently been demonstrated by massacres of foreign workers in South Africa, the mass deportation of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, the flight of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, and the internment of Central American children in the United States. Such dangers were amplified by a Donald Trump administration, which abandoned liberal internationalism entirely in the name of "America First." Immediately after assuming office, Trump pursued immigrant round-

ups and Islamophobic travel bans, manufactured a military threat from Iran and antagonized China, expressed sympathy for Russian Crimea and offered tacit approval for Israel's likely annexation of parts of Palestine. His rule further underscored the limitations of international law and the lack of frameworks for long-distance solidarity today. The latter was certainly evident as the world watched the Islamic State's siege of Kobani in northern Syria in 2014–2015.

In recent years, scholars have developed valuable critiques of existing forms of internationalism and corresponding cosmopolitan ideologies.<sup>8</sup> Such criticism is warranted and welcome, especially when directed at pious acolytes of international legal procedure, righteous proponents of humanitarian intervention, patriotic defenders of Western civilization, and the unaccountable technocrats who administer the global order. Much of this work comports with the important critique of European internationalism developed by Carl Schmitt in *Nomos of the Earth* (1950).

Schmitt identifies the system of public international law and its humanist ideology as the legitimizing expression of a European imperium based on the sanctity of property and the force of geopolitics. These, he argues, functioned perversely and paradoxically to legalize extreme violence against non-European populations. But we should also recall that Schmitt regarded Europe's invidious humanist internationalism as inseparable from the *nomos* of sovereign states. Far from establishing a boundary between internationalism and state sovereignty, he demonstrated how each required and enabled the other. Moreover, Schmitt developed this critique to advance a reactionary vision of imperial spheres of influence corresponding to civilizational mandates. It was a brief for politics as permanent war undiluted by legal veils or liberal pieties.

I am not suggesting that critics of actually existing liberal internationalism are all realpolitik opportunists or covert nativists. But I would like to underscore the inadequacy of one-sided critiques that simply challenge internationalism from the standpoint of state sovereignty (or vice versa). Such arguments tend to employ an either/or logic that conflates existing forms of liberal internationalism with internationalism as such. It follows, according to this thinking, that the only radical alternative is a realist acceptance of state sovereignty as a quasi-natural fact and territory-ethnicity-force as the inevitable truth of world politics. Such thinking forecloses discussion of alternative forms of radical internationalism as both means and ends of anti-imperial and anticapitalist struggle. The violence and failures of liberal internationalism suggest that the existing *nomos* of the world is entering a moment of unsustainable crisis. Under such conditions we cannot but think seriously about novel forms of political consociation that might at least be adequate to the plural, translocal, and

entangled conditions of our world-historical present. As important, we need to envision political forms that might address the dual imperatives of popular sovereignty (or autonomy) and international solidarity (or interdependence).

### **Internationalism as Democratic Dilemma**

In different ways Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt explore how internationalism—some version of planetary politics—is at once a necessary condition of possibility of human freedom and a grave threat to that freedom. Their writings illuminate a democratic dilemma that continues to haunt modern political life.

In his reflections on universal history, cosmopolitan rights, perpetual peace, and world federation Kant certainly makes many dubious and, from our vantage point, outmoded claims that warrant criticism.<sup>9</sup> But preemptive rejections of these writings by current critics often have more to do with how he has been claimed by liberal internationalists than with what he actually wrote. On the one hand, Kant argued that all humans have a right to be free within a self-governing polity. By this he meant full participation in the process through which community members define generally valid laws to which they would voluntarily subject themselves on a basis of equality with all other citizens who would be governed by the same laws. This is a conception of political freedom as self-determination whereby humanity would be composed of separate self-governing polities. Each would be sovereign insofar as it was only accountable to itself; no outside authority could rightfully legislate or rule in its place. In this view, legally governed social relations and democratic self-government worked together to create a state of political freedom and public peace. On the other hand, Kant argued that insofar as there existed no overarching legal or constitutional order regulating relations *among* these separate polities, they lived under a permanent threat of unregulated outside aggression. He reasoned that neither political democracy nor human freedom could be fully realized, even for members of self-governing polities, under such lawless conditions within an agonistic international order.

In short, Kant explained that real freedom required the existence of separate sovereign states *and* that such sovereignty would make real human freedom impossible. Conversely, in his view, only the creation of a global political agency could guarantee freedom for self-governing peoples even as such an agency would, by definition, undermine such freedom. His ambiguous response to this dilemma was to envision a federal world republic or world republican federation. By this he meant neither a world state nor a simple confederation of sovereign states agreeing to follow the rules of interstate be-

havior (as in commercial or nonaggression pacts). Rather, Kant envisioned a self-governing federation of self-governing peoples on a worldwide scale. Through this ideal, he hoped that humanity would be able to reconcile popular sovereignty with planetary entanglement and cosmopolitan responsibility. He thus attempted to envision a cosmopolitan arrangement in which self-determination would not require state sovereignty, and one in which popular sovereignty would not be violated by an unaccountable world government.

Regardless of how we might now evaluate Kant's underspecified suggestions, we should appreciate that he defined a profound and persistent problem for democratic politics. This dilemma did not disappear when, following the French revolution, the Jacobin model of a unitary national state enjoying total territorial sovereignty within its borders became the normal and desirable form through which peoples sought to protect or pursue self-determination. Nor did it disappear in the nineteenth century, when, as the industrial revolution unfolded and capitalism increasingly transformed social relations throughout Western Europe and its overseas empires, sovereign national states facilitated the growth of distinct national economies (and vice versa).

After the end of World War II, Kant's democratic dilemma reappeared as a concrete problem for global politics. Following Europe's self-implosion, the genocidal mass murder of its Jewish "minority" populations, and the dawn of mass movements for decolonization, intellectuals, activists, and policy makers engaged in public debates about the problem of freedom, asking how best to reconcile the imperatives of democratic self-government, national independence, state sovereignty, international law, and global justice. Hannah Arendt, for example, maintained that peoples' humanity depended on their place and participation in a concrete political community through which (public) action becomes (publicly) meaningful. Thus her celebration of the ancient Greek polis as an ideal form of political association.<sup>10</sup> But she reasoned that since citizenship in the modern West had become dependent on national identity, one's human rights could only be recognized and protected through the framework of a national state.<sup>11</sup> In her view, European history between 1917 and 1945 demonstrated that under existing conditions, the concept of human rights was an empty and dangerous abstraction. But we should recall that this insight was paired with a critique of parochial nationalism as the agency that had degraded democratic politics in the modern period. She demonstrated that in a world order grounded in national xenophobia, race thinking, and imperialism, as growing numbers of people were compelled to reside within the boundaries of national states to which they did not legally or ethnically *belong*, nation-states became incapable of guaranteeing them concrete human rights in the form of real citizenship and political belonging.

Like Kant, Arendt recognized that sovereign states were indispensable for a human self-realization that they also made impossible. She demonstrated how this deep and persistent contradiction was revealed in the catastrophic twentieth century when European nation-states and the international order they comprised were unable to address the political problems that they themselves had created, as embodied by diasporic Jews, national minorities, stateless peoples, and refugees. Likewise, neither national nor international legal orders were capable of adequately conceptualizing, let alone addressing, Nazi genocide as a crime against humanity.<sup>12</sup> She insisted that “the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself,” even as she conceded that “for the time being a sphere that is above the nations does not exist.”<sup>13</sup> She responded to this dilemma by proposing various forms of multinational federal democracy for European Jews and small states.<sup>14</sup> One does not have to accept Arendt’s programmatic solutions to appreciate the problems they were meant to address: Are there frameworks for transnational solidarity and postnational democracy that would not invest already powerful states or a new superstate with quasi-imperial authority over other parts of the world? Is there a way to organize the world order such that the autonomy of vulnerable peoples or nations would be protected while also allowing them to make claims on the international community, whether against local states or great powers?

At the inception of the postwar period, a range of political thinkers in and beyond the West shared Arendt’s concern with imagining frameworks for transnational solidarity and postnational democracy that would not invest already powerful states or a new superstate with quasi-imperial authority over other parts of the world. New arrangements would have to respect the autonomy of vulnerable peoples or nations while also allowing them to make claims on the international community, whether against local states or great powers.<sup>15</sup>

## **A Possible-Impossible Decolonization**

Imperial states had long subjugated non-Europeans under the guise of protecting populations, generalizing liberty, and improving humanity. They violated subject peoples’ autonomy and territorial integrity on the erroneous grounds that they were not capable of self-government. This at a time when the logic of global politics held that a people could not be recognized as a legitimate political actor without being organized as an independent state. Under such conditions, state sovereignty, national independence, and territorial integrity certainly promised a robust alternative to, and protection against, colonial domination by foreign powers. Any international arrangement that



would open the door to new forms of intercontinental paternalism and supranational authority would be rightly suspect.

At the same time, many anticolonial thinkers, especially across the Black Atlantic, wondered whether the sovereign national state was the best form in which to realize substantive self-determination. Given the relations of entanglement and dependence that would continue to subordinate postcolonial societies to international economic domination and strong states, formal political liberty would not adequately protect them from the depredations of uneven development and Great Power geopolitics. They foresaw that the relative poverty of their countries would make impossible the experiments in social democracy or state socialism then being instituted in Western and Eastern Europe. Moreover, they insisted that much of the West's wealth and power had been founded upon the exploitation of enslaved and colonial labor, the expropriation of overseas natural resources, and the relations of intercontinental inequality that imperial capitalism had instituted worldwide.

From this perspective, many engaged in the decolonization struggle believed that these small countries should constitute themselves as larger regional federations. Others believed that there should be non- or supranational mechanisms through which this interdependence could be democratized, reciprocity guaranteed, and colonized peoples provided with an enduring claim on the wealth in which they already had a rightful share. How could the West be compelled to pay its historical debt rather than re-subordinate postcolonial national states through financial debt for development projects? What mechanisms for international economic solidarity, political accountability, and justice could help to repair the harms of imperialism, prevent its reemergence in a different form, and ground substantive decolonization?

Of course, the U.S.–UN system that emerged to govern the postwar global order turned out to resemble the very type of international dictatorship of powerful states against which Albert Camus and W. E. B. Du Bois warned contemporaries. Its primary aim was to ensure order among sovereign national states rather than provide a framework for social justice or democratic accountability on a planetary scale. The UN Charter made provisions for checking state sovereignty, whereby it could punish national states for violating individuals' human rights. But these were usually defined according to a set of Western norms to which the West rarely held itself. Moreover, the subjects of this law were individuals rather than communities. In other words, the United Nations defined conditions under which the international community could interfere in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. But it never attempted to create an alternative *nomos* of the world that would not be founded upon territorial nationality, state sovereignty, and individual citizenship.

By the mid-1950s most colonized peoples—led variously by peasant mobilizations, radical trade unions, nationalist political parties, and urban intellectuals—pursued decolonization through struggles for national independence and state sovereignty. We should also recall that once the movement for decolonization gained historical momentum, colonial powers, the United States, and the United Nations all concurred that separate national states should be the form through which colonized peoples would be emancipated and around which the postwar international order should be organized.<sup>16</sup>

This is the context in which Léopold Sédar Senghor, from Senegal, and Aimé Césaire, from Martinique, attempted to reconcile the imperatives of self-government, translocal interdependence, and human solidarity. Their analysis of mid-twentieth-century conditions led them to conclude that genuine African and Caribbean self-determination would have to entail abolishing colonialism *and* overcoming the unitary national state. Accordingly, they pursued a constitutional struggle to transform the imperial republic into a translocal federation. Socialist and democratic, transcontinental and nonnational, this new type of polity would include former colonies as freely associated and self-governing members. The aim was neither to join nor to separate from the actually existing French state but to explode it immanently. Their starting point was the entangled histories that bound overseas and metropolitan peoples and prospects to one another. It followed that if decolonization did not also seek to revolutionize metropolitan social relations and reconfigure the very *nomos* of the world, it could never ground substantive emancipation.

I have written at length elsewhere about the logic, politics, and limitations of this “untimely vision.”<sup>17</sup> Here I would like only to underscore that however contradictory and imperfect, this was a concrete utopian project that sought to address a set of real dilemmas by anticipating another possible world. These efforts were both rooted in a canny reading of the existing world-historical situation and an attempt to draw political poetry from a future that did not yet exist. Senghor and Césaire proceeded from a belief that imperialism itself, by establishing long-term relations of interdependence between seemingly disparate peoples and places, had created the lived conditions and institutional infrastructure for a new form of transcontinental political association. Just as Marx believed that industrial production had itself opened the door to a postcapitalist form of socialism, they believed that empire itself had created pathways to a postnational form of democracy. In Marxian terms, they recognized empire as federation in alienated form.

As political actors, critical intellectuals, and *engagé* poets, Senghor and Césaire developed a pragmatic and experimental relationship to politics. Rather

than make transhistorical claims about intrinsically correct political arrangements, they were open to various possible means to best pursue the desired end of substantive freedom in the world they confronted. At the same time, they practiced a proleptic politics, acting as if seemingly impossible futures were already at hand, precisely by recognizing transformative potentiality within existing arrangements. Their multifaceted interventions illuminate the affinity between immanent critique, political imagination, and poetic knowledge. They envisioned and pursued a possible-impossible decolonization that recognized the underlying uncanniness of imperial France *and* sought to invent a new set of arrangements within which familiar assumptions about here-now-us would be rendered uncanny.

Post-Cold War developments have revealed that there is no necessary relation between state sovereignty and self-determination, let alone between being human and possessing rights. Under such conditions human freedom has again become a public problem for which there is no self-evident institutional solution. However problematic Senghor and Césaire's vision of self-determination without state sovereignty may have been, they sought, through this program, to preempt the very national internationalist world that was in fact established in the postwar period. They rightly feared that such an order would enable powerful territorial states to continue to dominate nominally independent nations for whom genuine economic development, democratic socialism, and international standing would become impossible. Likewise, they recognized that as long as there was an expectation that territory, nationality, and state should align, real democracy in plural societies would be impossible. They refused the false choice between sovereign national states, on the one hand, and either an unaccountable world state or a powerless set of international agencies and ethics, on the other. Their unrealized aim—to ground substantive freedom on a planetary scale by democratizing unavoidable interdependence between former colonies and former metropolises—continues to haunt our world-historical present.

We live in an era when planetary predicaments require planetary politics. The imperative to transcend state sovereignty while protecting popular sovereignty persists. Anti-utopian political realism, subtended by a realist epistemology that reifies inherited conceptions of *here*, *now*, and *us* cannot rise to this challenge. Nor can it help us to grasp the potentiality that may be crystallized within (even failed) internationalist experiments to challenge the structural logic of the given global order. Political realism does not recognize how such concrete utopian efforts could have both recognized *and* refused the world as it actually is. It employs an either/or logic that requires us to decide once and for all whether such internationalist experiments were, or are doomed

to be, successes or failures. It forecloses the opportunity to allow such past experiments to illuminate present predicaments. It certainly does not invite us to explore ways to reactivate their unrealized potentiality.

### Limitations of Left Realism

A recent essay by Partha Chatterjee, one of our most insightful analysts and forceful critics of colonial politics, illustrates the limitations of this kind of Left realism. Chatterjee usefully reminds us that the dominant currents of twentieth-century internationalism were oriented toward securing national self-determination for all peoples through state sovereignty. These included Soviet-led Communist internationalism and the post-Bandung “internationalism of the nonaligned.” Chatterjee contrasts these forms of nationalist internationalism to current forms of liberal internationalism which use a “discourse of human rights to “justify intervention in the sovereign domain of non-Western governments by a global civic community acting on behalf of humanity itself.”<sup>18</sup> Chatterjee rightly criticizes the “new forms of imperial power” that are enabled by these invidious types of “international politics” and “cosmopolitan imagining.”<sup>19</sup> But he then dismisses cosmopolitan politics as such, denouncing them as the “utopian dream” of “a global intellectual elite located principally in Europe and America.”<sup>20</sup> He thus leaves us with a false choice between actually existing liberal cosmopolitanism or sovereign national states.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, he professes a “realist perspective based on the actual record of history” and declares that “cosmopolitanism as a concept . . . is extremely limited in its historical potential.”<sup>22</sup>

On what basis does Chatterjee make such a categorical claim? We might identify three entwined lines of argument. One, as the quotes above indicate, he treats actually existing liberal internationalism as delimiting the horizon of possible cosmopolitan or internationalist projects. He contends that the latter are only the concern of Euro-Americans and inevitably facilitate new imperial relations. The indisputable fact that postwar internationalism and post-Cold War cosmopolitanism have been instrumentalized by Western states and international organizations to reaffirm existing global inequalities leads him to an unqualified defense of national sovereignty as the only legitimate and viable modality of anti-imperialism today.

A second line of argument treats historically contingent achievements as inviolable aims. Chatterjee does not only honor the historic significance of anticolonial freedom struggles for national independence. He claims that “the principal achievement of anti-imperialism in the twentieth century” was “the establishment of a universal civic constitution based on the formal equality of sovereign nation-states” which is institutionally “enshrined principally in

the General Assembly of the United Nations.”<sup>23</sup> But even if we allow this debatable proposition, we might question Chatterjee’s demand that our politics continue to align with these past achievements, however contradictory, calcified, instrumentalized, or anachronistic they may be.

We can agree with Chatterjee that “the equal sovereignty of all member states” enshrined by the UN General Assembly “became the site of the internationalist aspirations of the formerly colonized world.”<sup>24</sup> We can recognize the right of national self-determination for colonized peoples as a monumental historical accomplishment. But these should not lead us either to reify postcolonial state sovereignty as a transhistorical political good or denigrate those anticolonial actors who sought to envision nonnational futures. Yet Chatterjee contends that the very attempt to think with Senghor and Césaire about the prospect of federal forms of self-determination within an alternative postnational world “seems to deny not merely the overwhelming structural logic of the new global order as it was unfolding in the period but also . . . the most powerful ideas of collective justice sweeping through the whole world.”<sup>25</sup> Isn’t there an important difference between denying the reality of a conjuncture and tracing the ways that political struggles sought to reject and overcome that reality? For Chatterjee such concrete utopianism, along with scholarship that attends to it, signals a refusal to see the real world as it actually was (as if actuality proves inevitability).

By sacralizing past achievements, Chatterjee implies that it is naïve or dangerous to act against the general direction in which history has unfolded. This belief feeds a third line of argument. He discounts future-oriented visions of postnational politics on the grounds that their outcomes are uncertain. He recognizes the existence of “global social movements” that “represent a critique of . . . existing institutions of popular sovereignty within the nation-state” and “point to the possibility of a future global order that could possibly transcend one where the nation-state is the normal institutional form of the political.”<sup>26</sup> But he criticizes the fact that “the institutional shape of that future” is still quite unclear” and that he himself finds it “hard to describe what that form might be.”<sup>27</sup>

He thus discounts these movements on the grounds that they do not offer us a “blueprint” for the world they desire.

The various global social movements I have mentioned often succeed in building broad based coalitions of social forces, cutting across classes and social identities. . . . But they do not . . . present anything like a blueprint for a cosmopolitan global order. The latter can only be found in the writings and saying of a global intellectual elite located principally in Europe and America.<sup>28</sup>

I would suggest that it is an analytic and political mistake to conflate utopian visions of possible worlds with technocratic blueprints of what their specific institutional form should look like. Concrete utopianism is propelled by a dialectic of experimental practices and political imagination, not blueprints that contain prescriptive policies for an unknown future.

Chatterjee also criticizes these Global South solidarity movements on the grounds that they are not likely to succeed and may be instrumentalized by reactionary forces. Anticipating objections to his position, he notes, "It could, of course, be argued that the realist perspective based on the actual record of history is precisely what needs to be overcome and rejected. After all, is it not true that many a great idea that came to exercise a profound impact on history began as a utopian dream?"<sup>29</sup> But in response, he doubles down on his realism: "While that may well be true, the question to ask is: which are the social forces that are likely to drive forward and actualize the utopian idea of cosmopolitanism?"<sup>30</sup> This is certainly a relevant question. We need conjunctural analyses in order to calibrate political strategies to relations of force. A politics that wholly disregards "likelihood" can lead either to premature reconciliation or revolutionary suicide. Both outcomes effectively leave the existing order untouched. But it is quite a leap from treating "likelihood" as an important consideration to fetishizing it as the primary determinant of political vision and strategy. Doing so preemptively concedes the political field to whatever forces are currently more powerful, better organized, or have a more clearly defined program.

These three lines of argument converge in a tacit belief that the given world-historical situation is unsurpassable, that the real is rational. Chatterjee buttresses his statist position by ascribing it, without support, to "popular mobilizations" in Africa and Asia:

The strongest defense of the historical achievements of popular anticolonial nationalism comes not only from the ruling elites of postcolonial countries, though they may be some of the most cynical advocates. The defense also comes from popular mobilizations that demand from postcolonial nation-states a rapid material improvement in their living standards and livelihood opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

This assertion reinforces the idea that internationalism is somehow intrinsically Western, elite, or liberal. We can agree that existing political communities surely care about defending the historical achievements of anticolonial nationalism. But this neither means that all they *really* want is improved living standards nor that they would be necessarily indifferent to what a world organized around internationalist or cosmopolitan principles might offer. Any

number of displaced migrants, refugees, and stateless people would likely have a different view.

But let us concede Chatterjee's assertion that ordinary people in the Global South only want national states to secure their material well-being. Such seemingly realist expectations may actually be unrealistic in a world in which global capitalism and U.S.–UN imperialism render Global South national states—many of whom are only nominally sovereign—incapable of addressing such demands. Under these conditions, a rigid defense of state sovereignty as guarantor of a population's material well-being seems to be the utopian position (in the colloquial sense of the term), while pursuing a new set of arrangements in which self-governing peoples can secure economic security and meaningful autonomy would seem to be a more realistic position.

Chatterjee rightly reminds us that a political generation's hard-won gains are not to be dismissed lightly. Certainly, self-determination and popular sovereignty are precious capacities, indispensable for any attempt to organize a just society and world order. But rather than accept a false choice between self-determination and cosmopolitan internationalism, why not envision ways, under current world-historical conditions, to ground each in the other. The question is not whether to support or reject popular sovereignty as such but to envision arrangements that might now make it possible to realize the kind of meaningful self-management and genuine autonomy that are indexed by self-determination and popular sovereignty. The political challenge of our now is to conjugate self-management and translocal solidarity, autonomy and interdependence, and singularities and relational networks.

Chatterjee neither engages such issues nor suggests that others should. His important critique of liberal internationalism and current discourses of cosmopolitanism could be an entrée to doing so. But he takes such questions off the table. He does not call on Left internationalists to elaborate a fuller vision of a possible cosmopolitan future. He does not ask how the lineaments of that desired future might be glimpsed immanently or emerge dialectically from within existing arrangements. Nor does he exhort Left internationalists to persuade ordinary people that another world order might be worth fighting for. He simply concludes that if outcomes are not guaranteed and a blueprint does not exist, then there is no point to the struggle. *For Left realists, it is always already too late.*<sup>32</sup>

But how can we afford to take off the table cosmopolitan internationalism, postnational democracy, and transnational polities when our world is characterized by imperial wars and occupations, mass displacement and labor diasporas, the criminalization of refugees and migrants, and imminent environmental catastrophe? It has never been more urgent to fashion effective

democratic frameworks through which accountability, legality, and justice might be pursued either on scales that exceed the boundaries of any particular political community or within plural polities. How can the good of popular sovereignty be reconciled with the demands of global solidarity or plural democracy? How might we protect a people's right to self-government while recognizing how entwined histories, common futures, and a shared planet implicate seemingly separate peoples in each other's calamities and potentialities? How do we preserve the indisputable benefits of being a full citizen within a democratic political community *and* empower such citizens to make claims on distant actors and agencies whose decisions circumscribe their life chances? Criticism of existing arrangements should be relentless; the dangers of certain alternatives should be specified. But the fact that inventing new internationalist forms will be difficult, risky, and contradictory are reasons *for* taking it seriously as an object of study and aim of praxis. It is precisely because the worldly dilemmas that a cosmopolitan internationalism needs to address are real that mechanical critiques of liberal internationalism from the standpoint of national self-determination are analytically and politically inadequate.

### **For an Internationalism of Peoples**

Chatterjee's state-centric assertions about what people *really* want is belied by the long historical record of radical internationalism among non-Western anti-imperialists and socialists. If space provided, we could follow a line of descent beginning with the internationalist "motley crew" in the early modern period and stretching through Caribbean antislavery insurrections; Haiti's nationalist internationalism; Simón Bolívar's pan-Latin American federalism; Mazzini's Holy Alliance of Peoples; Marx's International Workingmen's Association; the Paris Commune's "universal republic"; anarchist anti-imperial internationalism; the internationalist facet of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevik state; the Soviet-led Communist International, which was increasingly internationalized by African, Asian, and Black American comrades; parallel and intersecting forms of Pan-Africanism (especially in relation to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia); internationalist anticolonial struggles; the Bandung project; Cuban-led Tricontinentalism; further experiments in Afro-Asian cultural solidarity; the Non-Aligned Movement; the World Social Forum; the Zapatista struggle and vision; and the ongoing experiment in Rojava, Syria.<sup>33</sup>

Countless other movements and thinkers could be named. This legacy reminds us that internationalism has never been the exclusive purview of Europeans, liberals, elites, on the one side, nor the Soviet Comintern, on the other.



Such internationalist experiments were pursued against the grain of dominant historical developments and doxa. Their very point was to refuse alignment with the existing *nomos* of the world by forging transversal connections, however ephemeral, tense, or contradictory, across supposedly incommensurable places, peoples, and times. These translocal solidarity practices were always bound up with the provincial forms of statism, territorialism, and domination that they challenged. Rather than choose between self-determination and solidarity, most of these actors struggled to envision forms of internationalism that would not violate the principle of self-managing autonomy. If such experiments were imperfect and short-lived, this was because they were confronting real political dilemmas embedded in concrete historical situations for which there could be no ready-made solutions.

By linking conjunctural analysis and strategic choices to political vision and ultimate aims, they pursued a politics of the possible-impossible. These were not simply idealists who privileged principles over power or fantasy over reality. To insist on a gap between the world as it is given and as it ought to be is not to confuse the latter for the former. These experiments remind us that the opposite of realism is not idealism, but a concrete utopianism that displaces the false dichotomy between realism and idealism.

This is the perspective from which I would like to recall the legacy of Samir Amin. The great Egyptian thinker and activist offers a useful counterpoint to Chatterjee's national statist realism. Amin was a militant anti-imperialist whose conjunctural analyses, political practices, and long-term vision were radically internationalist. This orientation may appear to be an outmoded artifact of a superseded historical epoch. If so, Amin was fiercely anachronistic. Until the end of his life in 2018, he insisted that a new "internationalism of peoples" was the only realistic means of confronting the "worldwide apartheid" created by neoliberal capitalism. Amin underscored that "this stand does not put me among the Third Worldists, as many of my superficial critics concluded, but shows my fundamental stance as a universalist internationalist."<sup>34</sup>

Amin is perhaps best known for his landmark analyses of the relation between accumulation on a world scale, uneven development, and global polarization. This work was informed by decades spent trying to link theory to practice. In 1947 he moved from Egypt to Paris where, through the 1950s, he was an active member of both the French Communist Party and the anti-imperial student movement. During this period, he obtained university degrees in law and politics and wrote a doctoral dissertation in economics on development theory. Rather than pursue a traditional academic career, he served in Egypt's Economic and Development Organization under the Nasser regime (1958 to 1960) and then in Mali's Ministry of Planning under its new socialist presi-

dent, Modibo Keita (1960 to 1963). He then accepted a position as professor of political economy at the UN-sponsored Institut Africain de Développement Économique et de Planification (IDEP) in Dakar, of which he later served as director (1970 to 1980).<sup>35</sup>

In his early work, influenced by Maoism and anticipating world-systems theory, Amin demonstrated that “underdevelopment was not a backward phase of development” and that “polarization is not an accident attributable to specific local causes in culture or demography. . . . It is inseparable from actually existing capitalism.”<sup>36</sup> It followed that under twentieth-century conditions, colonial countries and Third World nations with weak economies would never be able to pursue the “autocentric” policies that had allowed Europe and the United States to secure their positions at the center of the global capitalist order. On the contrary, they would be compelled to “adjust” their economies to the structural demands of the center and thereby reproduce their subordinate status within the existing global order.

Amin criticized the postwar development ideology that was embraced by Western social democrats, Soviet-oriented Marxists, and Third World nationalists. They all shared what he called a “modernist (hence capitalist and bourgeois) vision” that it was possible to *catch up* to the West economically through accelerated industrialization.<sup>37</sup> Such thinking, for Amin, was crystallized at the 1955 Bandung Conference which assembled newly independent non-Western states. On the one hand, Amin criticizes “the Bandung project” for remaining “trapped in the bourgeois concept of ‘closing the historical gap’ through participation in the international division of labor.”<sup>38</sup> These participants, he contends hoped to improve their positions within the global economic order through national development but did not question the capitalist law of value that was the real source of their persistent underdevelopment.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Amin believed that these Third World states should “negate” the international division of labor by “delinking” from the dominant system of global capitalism.<sup>40</sup> They might then be able to pursue self-directed, or “autocentric,” development strategies oriented toward their own social needs.<sup>41</sup> He argued that economic delinking might enable small powers in peripheral regions to act as “genuine partners” within a “multipolar” world.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, Amin praises the “Bandung era” for placing real constraints on the capitalist world system through “strong solidarity among the states of Asia and post-colonial Africa . . . in their political support for the struggles of colonial peoples.”<sup>43</sup> He regrets the fact that following the demise of the postwar order, “the South in general no longer has a project of its own.”<sup>44</sup> This, at a moment when “the construction of a front among the peoples of the South” is crucial to combat American militarism, to prevent global “apartheid,” and to construct “a genuinely multipolar world.”<sup>45</sup>

*In short, Amin calls for a new “common front of the South” that would both revive the solidarity spirit of the Bandung era and transcend the Bandung project’s economic and political limitations.* These limitations became even more significant after the end of the Cold War. Amin contends that in the neoliberal era, postcolonial states can no longer purport to be legitimate agents of national development or leaders of an anti-imperialist alliance. His work suggests that old axes of international inequality have shifted in ways that require new anti-imperialist strategies. Given what he calls the “re-compradorization” of the postcolonial periphery combined with new forms of dispossession in the center, it is no longer adequate simply to posit a categorical opposition between the exploiter North and the exploited South. He argues, “All countries in both core and periphery are beset with social contradictions” such that “rulers and ruled do not necessarily have the same perception of internal or external challenges and of the responses that need to be made to them.”<sup>46</sup> Amin reminds readers, “The victims of the development of liberal capitalism include the majority in every region of the world. Socialism must be capable of mobilizing this new historical opportunity.”<sup>47</sup> Post-Bandung solidarity within and across the Global South could not simply be a function of national unity, shared cultural heritage, or political geography. Nor could this task be ceded to national states. Moreover, a radical internationalism capable of challenging ongoing imperialism and global capitalism could not be confined to the South.

For these reasons, Amin concludes that a straightforward “‘remake’ of Bandung, uniting peoples behind their governments, is today an illusory prospect. The solidarity that is needed today will have to be built primarily by the peoples themselves.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, a revived “common front of the South” would need to be part of a “new internationalism of peoples” understood as a radical political project that cuts across regions and hemispheres.

Amin was never naïvely optimistic that such a project could be easily realized in the post–Cold War period. He recognized that “the unequal development associated with the global spread of capitalism has always presented serious difficulties for the internationalism of peoples.”<sup>49</sup> He acknowledges that “the construction of a front among the peoples of the South . . . will be a long and difficult process.”<sup>50</sup> He offers no “advance ‘recipes’ for the shaping of [a] future” that can only be “produced through struggles whose outcome is not known in advance.”<sup>51</sup> But, he insists, the undertaking is imperative, for “capitalism is a world system. Its victims can effectively face its challenges only if they are also organized at the global level.”<sup>52</sup>

Amin pays special attention to what we might call the difficulties posed by cultural and political diversity. In his view, the task is to overcome harmful divisions without erasing cultural differences or minimizing political ones. He

calls this work “organizing convergence while respecting diversity.”<sup>53</sup> He thus emphasizes that a new internationalism will require maximum respect for cultural diversity within and across potential solidarity partners. Yet he warns against the forms of “culturalism” employed by ethnic, nationalist, and fundamentalist religious movements that fetishize “inherited diversity.”<sup>54</sup> Because such movements, he explains, often criticize Western imperialism without engaging “the logic of internal conflict” within their own societies, “they end up counterposing a ‘nation’ stripped of contradictions to ‘the outside world.’”<sup>55</sup>

They reify cultural unity while eliding internal sociopolitical divisions in ways that often collude, however unwittingly, with the interests of global capital and Western imperialism. The North, he reminds us, essentializes differences, treats other societies as self-identical wholes, and works to keep the peoples of the South divided. Amin notes that “what is called the ‘clash of civilizations’ is, in reality, a political strategy developed systematically by the collective imperialism of the triad.”<sup>56</sup> When “the social movements on the side of the victims adopt” this discourse, he explains, they “contribute to making [the clash] a reality.”<sup>57</sup> He thus warns against “reactionary forces” that “exert systematic efforts to legitimize conflicts of cultures . . . supposedly based on invariants transmitted by historical heritage, particularly religious ones.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast, “the internationalism of peoples must fight these cultural interpretations” by foregrounding “the modern era’s true conflict of cultures” which is “between the values of socialism and the culture of capitalism.”<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, he calls for a “humanist alternative to worldwide apartheid” that does not “feed on nostalgic delusions” but seeks “to construct a new, post-capitalist form based on real equality among peoples, communities, states and individuals.”<sup>60</sup>

Likewise, Amin praises efforts by the anti-imperial Left to embrace political diversity in the service of internationalist politics. He invites militant movements to welcome the “confrontation between different viewpoints” and counsels against the temptation to “excommunicate . . . unbelievers.”<sup>61</sup> This entails the difficult work of collaborating with allies who may emphasize different issues, from the standpoint of other ideological frameworks, grounded in diverse cultural assumptions and value systems, with varying degrees of radicalism. In this way, Amin challenges dogmatic tendencies among orthodox Marxists and sectarian socialists.

At the same time, he seems to be warning emerging forces, such as the alter-globalization movement, that their inclusiveness risked devolving into liberal pluralism.<sup>62</sup> Like his World Social Forum comrades, Amin appreciated that the multiplicity of antisystemic forces in the post-Cold War moment was a great boon for the Left. They opened new possibilities for translocal alliances that

could garner mass support and pursue struggles on multiple fronts. He also recognized that the dominant order provokes and profits from conflicts among the oppressed. But he had no patience for those in these movements who renounced political judgment and made a virtue of inclusivity as such. When he calls for movements to create broad alliances between revolutionary and center-Left participants, he is not suggesting that all actors and groups should be included in a given coalition regardless of their ideology and aims. On the contrary, he warns against including “reactionary movements,” however popular, “that are not working to build a ‘different’ (for example, a multipolar) world.”<sup>63</sup> Amin insisted that Left movements have a responsibility to establish criteria for inclusion and to exercise political judgment about potential allies. Solidarity, he insisted, should only be extended to groups that “support . . . struggles working for social progress,” whose economic policies are based on “social objectives” and will be pursued through “democratic methods.”<sup>64</sup> Conversely, he argues that a demand “is clearly reactionary, and serves the aims of dominant capital, if it presents itself as [being] ‘without a social program’ . . . claims not to be ‘hostile to globalization’ . . . [or that it is] alien to the idea of democracy (on the grounds that [democracy] is ‘Western.’)”<sup>65</sup>

We may not accept Amin’s political metric. But he makes the important point that “it is not possible to dispense with detailed analysis and criteria of judgment that only have meaning in relation to the viewpoint of a *plan for the society that one is attempting to promote*.”<sup>66</sup> Creating a multipolar, democratic, and socialist world requires not only “profound and systematic debate,” but “a clear choice of objectives and the organization of appropriate campaigns of action.”<sup>67</sup> He warns, “The mere accumulation of demands by victims of the systems, though perfectly legitimate, does not constitute either an alternative (which calls for political coherence) or even a strategy for advance.”<sup>68</sup> Amin insists that Left internationalism cannot avoid exercising leadership, creating institutions, or engaging with labor unions and peasant organizations (despite their past limitations). Above all, this canny critic insists that a new internationalism of peoples must be informed by a vision of “the world we wish to see.”

Against a new generation of activists who believed that it was possible to “change the world without taking power,” Amin called for the “movement to become . . . materialized in a party that could respond to the challenge of our era.”<sup>69</sup> *A new internationalism of peoples would require a new International capable of organizing convergence while respecting cultural and political diversity, one that would avoid the pitfalls of culturalism, dogmatism, liberal pluralism, and horizontalism.*

Amin’s critical analysis and utopian vision indeed converged in his bold

call for a new Fifth International that could “provide an effective framework for the construction of the unity necessary for . . . the struggles undertaken by peoples against capital.”<sup>70</sup> Given what he regarded as the historic limitations of the Second and Third Internationals, on the one hand, and Bandung statism on the other, Amin instructs, “The Fifth International should not be an assembly exclusively of political parties, but should gather all peoples’ movements of resistance and struggle and guarantee both their voluntary participation in the construction of joint strategies and the independence of their own decision making.”<sup>71</sup>

A Fifth International would require and enable a new “front of the peoples of the South” through which “to bring about the convergence of struggles of peasants, women, workers, the unemployed, informal workers, and democratic intellectuals.”<sup>72</sup> Such an organization would also require and enable new forms of North-South solidarity. He writes,

The objective of the Fifth International . . . is to contribute to the construction of the internationalism of peoples. Note that the phrase refers to all peoples, North and South, just as it refers not only to the proletariat but to all working classes and strata that are victims of the system, to humanity as a whole, threatened in its survival. This internationalism does not preclude strengthening the solidarity of the peoples of the three continents (Africa, Asia, Latin America) against aggression from the imperialism of the triad. On the contrary, these two internationalisms can only complement and reinforce each other. The solidarity of the peoples of the North and South cannot be based on charity, but on joint action against imperialism.<sup>73</sup>

Most immediately, this Fifth International would contest Western militarism and neoliberal hegemony. Its ultimate aim is to overcome imperial capitalism and create a polycentric world as part of a “long transition to world socialism.”<sup>74</sup> This is the perspective from which Amin identifies himself as a “universalist internationalist” and calls for a “humanist alternative to worldwide apartheid.”

Certainly, Amin’s analysis begs many questions. He is too quick to dismiss all forms of political Islam as reactionary fundamentalism. The standpoint from which to determine whether a movement is “working for social progress” is not self-evident. And of course, the task of “organizing convergence while respecting diversity” is no straightforward matter. (We might usefully understand the latter as a calling for the kind of practices of translation I discuss in the next chapter.)

It would be easy to dismiss Amin’s archaic language and expansive hopes,

easy to wrinkle brows at his identification with a “humanist” and “universalist” socialism or to roll eyes at his extravagant call for a Fifth International. But our current reluctance to recall traditions of radical universalism and radical humanism—the fact that nonliberal and nonabstract forms of universalism are not legible to so many Left critics today—is a loss. Influential currents of critical theory today have made it difficult for young thinkers to recognize militant anti-imperialists as “universalists” or “humanists.” Such terms, if not the very project of socialist internationalism, are too often disqualified as historically superseded or insufficiently attentive to how solidarity politics may reproduce racial and imperial hierarchies. Conversely, recent scholars who *are* enthusiastic about internationalism often look nostalgically to earlier experiments in Afro-Asian solidarity, without asking difficult questions about the bourgeois character of the Bandung project or the statist character of the Tricontinental project.

Samir Amin cuts across these positions. He was a fierce critic of the entwined power of global capitalism and imperialism who critiqued Marxism’s unexamined Eurocentrism *and* Third Worldism’s uncritical culturalism. Amin’s work challenges both those Eurocentric Marxists who do not adequately attend to the imperial polarization propelled by capitalist accumulation and those anti-imperialists who bracket the social polarization produced by capitalism in the West. When he calls on Left critics to recognize the contradictions that exist *within all societies* in order to envision new alliances among popular forces in both the North and the Global South, he implicitly reiterates Lenin’s call to transform the imperial war into a civil war.

The center of gravity of Amin’s thinking shifted over the years from delinking to multipolarity to a Fifth International. But he continued to identify with a tradition of anti-imperial socialist internationalism. His engagement with a changing present was refracted through unrealized past possibilities. Said differently, he developed immanent critiques of the First International, the Bandung project, and the World Social Forum; he identified aspects of each that pointed beyond their actually existing forms. This allowed him to translate insights from these earlier moments of struggle to the neoliberal conjuncture. Amin looked to the past without insisting on orthodoxy or slipping into melancholy. He regarded earlier iterations of international socialism and anti-imperialist internationalism as resources from which to anticipate—to envision, enact, and pursue—the world we wish to see.

At the same time, Amin’s internationalist analyses, political projects, and utopian vision were nourished by decades of practical work as an activist-intellectual located primarily in Dakar. As director of the IDEP, he transformed a school for the technical training of African development economists

into an influential center for continent-wide research and debate about global political economy and alternative visions of African development. Hoping to challenge the hegemony of French development orthodoxy and “to break the isolation in which colonialism had encircled Africa,” Amin organized two major gatherings of African intellectuals with, first, Latin American dependency theorists (in Dakar 1972) and then Asian (primarily Indian, Indonesian, and Malayan) social scientists (in Tannarive 1974).<sup>75</sup> Amin recalls that the institute became both a hub of intellectual ferment and a site for consultative visits from governments, African regional institutions, and Third World organizations including the nonaligned Group of 77. Amin also used his position as director to create the Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique (CODESRIA) and the Third World Forum, both located in Dakar. These were meant to protect and extend the work he initiated at IDEP, which was increasingly threatened by anti-Left U.S. administrators who had some oversight of the program.

Amin envisioned CODESRIA as an African analogue to the anti-imperialist Latin American Council of the Social Sciences (CLASCO) founded in 1967. The Third World Forum would be even more ambitious. With colleagues in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Amin persuaded Salvador Allende to host a planning meeting in Santiago, Chile, in 1973. The new organization was officially launched at a meeting the following year in Karachi, Pakistan. On the one hand, the Third World Forum was to be an alternative to the World Bank’s “Society for International Development,” which espoused “the mainstream economics of market liberalism.”<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, Amin regarded this network as extending while also correcting some limitations of earlier efforts of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization, created by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1958, and the Tricontinental, created by the Cuban state in 1966.

The Third World Forum was first organized around three regional bureaus in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Amin was responsible for coordinating their relationship with each other. Describing the Forum’s initial orientation as “Third World nationalist,” he recalls,

The first aim was to give critical Third World thinkers the means to begin correcting the fundamental imbalance within all international bodies, where the world is always seen from the North. A different perspective had to be opened up, and a pluralist critique developed of ‘Eurocentrism’ . . . Marxist currents obviously had their place within this, but so did other approaches. The main thing was to avoid imprisonment in any orthodoxy; our ambition was to become . . . a center for critical debate.<sup>77</sup>



A few basic criteria held that participants must be: Third World nationals, interdisciplinary thinkers rather than overly specialized academics or development technocrats, and “critical.” The latter meant recognizing, first, that the expanding capitalist world system was not favorable to Third World development and, second, that development had to be popular, serving the needs of whole populations. As its work deepened through subregional branches and focused working groups, so did the Forum’s internationalist orientation.

Amin recounts that the group’s diverse activities were united by a “methodological choice” to treat “each region of the world as part of an integrated system . . . the principal unit of analysis is ultimately always the world system.”<sup>78</sup> Each country was analyzed “within the broader ‘Third World,’ itself a component of the world system,” whose historical evolution was also examined.<sup>79</sup> This entailed close attention to “the emergence of qualitatively new forms of polarization . . . to the new kinds of ‘social movement,’ and to the evolution of ideological debates (increased salience of cultural and religious dimensions, etc.).”<sup>80</sup> Intellectually, the overarching aim was “to study ‘the world as seen from the South,’ rather than ‘the South in the World’” and thereby “challenge the North’s monopoly on theoretical reflection concerning globalization and its uneven impact on its geographical components.”<sup>81</sup>

In 1980 Amin left the IDEP to direct the Third World Forum. This became an important matrix and medium for Amin’s political vision of how a “pluricentric and democratic world system” was integral to “the long transition to world socialism.”<sup>82</sup> The Third World Forum participated in the creation of the broader World Forum for Alternatives forged at a 1997 meeting in Cairo. Two years later, with Amin as chair, this group organized a surprise “anti-Davos” gathering adjacent to the neoliberal World Economic Forum meeting in Switzerland. It included “committed intellectuals and figures from mass movements in the five continents.”<sup>83</sup> This event became the basis for a more enduring network of networks, the World Social Forum, which was inaugurated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, with Amin as one of the cofounders. All of these efforts were based on the recognition that “capitalism has built a world system and can really be overcome only at the level of the planet” through “a united front against social and international injustice.”<sup>84</sup>

During the aughts, Amin was among those who worked from within the hyper-inclusive World Social Forum to push it further left. This aim is expressed in the Porto Alegre Manifesto (2005)—subtitled, “Twelve Proposals for Another Possible World”—and the Bamako Appeal (2006), which emphasizes the forms of worldwide solidarity and internationalism necessary to realize these aims.<sup>85</sup>

Understanding that many Left critics will dismiss both this vision and hope, Amin notes, “The strongest argument for pessimism about the future is based

on the lack of visible subjects capable of undertaking the necessary historical transformation.”<sup>86</sup> But he refuses the realist defeatism that draws political conclusions based on immediate appearances: “The optimist that I am will reply that active subjects appear only for relatively brief periods in history, when a favorable combination of circumstances allows the different logics of social existence . . . to converge. . . . At such moments . . . impossible to predict in advance, potential subjects may crystallize into decisive agents of change.”<sup>87</sup>

By calling for a common front of the South that may form the basis of a more expansive internationalism of peoples in order to envision the world we wish to see, Amin points beyond the limitations of political realism. He recognizes that post–Cold War developments made the project of socialist internationalism only more imperative. He was not an idealist who privileged principles over power or fantasy over reality. He was a critical political economist who placed a premium on political imagination. He sought to link conjunctural analysis and strategic choices to political vision and ultimate aims. In other words, he called on militants to pursue the possible-impossible. His life work emphasizes that despite the evident difficulties, a concrete utopian internationalism of peoples through which to overcome imperial capitalism and create a polycentric, democratic, and socialist world is the only “realistic” option, given the threat to humanity posed by neoliberal capitalism today. This is the standpoint from which Amin demanded that we *revive and rework* the spirit of Bandung for new times.

In order to hasten alternative futures through solidarity practices and produce solidarity relations by envisioning alternative futures, we need to displace the nexus linking realist epistemology to political realism.<sup>88</sup> But in times of systemic crisis and reaction, such as we now confront globally, the appeal of political realism intensifies among frightened liberals and beleaguered Leftists. Think of how the U.S. Democratic Party warns that unless we support moderate, centrist, and “electable” candidates, the Right will continue to triumph. Similarly, liberal commentators challenged the credibility of radical popular movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter on the realist grounds that they have no clear policy goals, electoral prospects, or even desire for governmental power. Political realism also informs the Left Brexit position which concludes that, because the European Union serves to reproduce neoliberal conditions and norms, political autarchy is a radical move. A similar realism buttresses those who argue that the Greek debt crisis proved that national state sovereignty is the only effective protection against postnational political experiments, which are necessarily imperial. A different conclusion would be that the European Union was always a technocratic

instrument of neoliberal accumulation organized along bureaucratic-statist principles, rather than a real experiment in popular federal democracy. Left realism suffuses the national-statist visions of anti-neoliberal politicians like Jeremy Corbyn of the British Labour Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the French Left Party. Such realism may also be recognized in the fateful choice by Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela to enter into financial partnerships with Western oil companies in the service of a policy of massive resource extraction in order to fund Chavismo social redistribution projects.<sup>89</sup>

Varieties of anti-utopian political realism also run through diverse currents of recent critical theory. In the following chapters, I will explore two of these tendencies, which I call Left culturalism and Left presentism. We have already seen how Chatterjee's realist critique of cosmopolitan internationalism links a culturalist claim that solidarity practices necessarily enable imperial arrangements to a presentist claim that it is dangerous or naïve to envision another possible world. Such thinking erects a disabling boundary between the possible and the impossible.

### 3

## Practicing Translation

### *Beyond Left Culturalism*

Much of what passes for radical and critical thought rests on the notion that the very aspiration toward translocal solidarity, community, and interconnection is tainted.

— PAUL GILROY

One way to begin thinking about “organizing convergence while respecting diversity” is through a practice of translation that makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. The task is to do so in ways that emphasize both the irreducible gap and possible relation between strangeness and familiarity. This potential affinity between translation practices and solidarity politics is foreclosed by currents of Left culturalism whose important attention to cultural singularity often leads to a quasi-ontological insistence on categorically incommensurable forms of life. This tendency to ontologize cultural differences is evident in their one-sided critique of translation (or solidarity) as an instrument of racial or imperial subordination. After outlining this tendency, I will engage other thinkers who elaborate understandings of translation as a critical practice oriented toward the creation of differential unities. From this angle of view, translation could serve as both medium and model for the solidarity practices that Amin’s “internationalism of peoples” would require.

### **From the Incommensurable to the Untranslatable**

The recent discourse of Afro-Pessimism exemplifies the way an insistence on ontological incommensurability implies a presentist assumption that current conditions are unsurpassable. Frank Wilderson, the thinker who has elab-

orated this position most forcefully, declares, “The structure of the entire world’s semantic field—regardless of cultural or national discrepancies . . . is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. . . . Afro-Pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness . . . as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions.”<sup>1</sup> He insists on a “profound and irreconcilable difference” not only between Black and non-Black experience, but between anti-Blackness and all other forms of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> Jared Sexton, another influential advocate who identifies this position as a “theorem of political ontology,” writes,

Afro-Pessimism is thus not against the politics of coalition simply because coalitions tend systematically to render supposed common interests as the concealed particular interests of the most powerful and privileged elements of the alliance. Foremost, Afro-Pessimism seeks, in Wilderson’s parlance, “to shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*” because coalitions require a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition. . . . The ever-expansive inclusionary gesture must thus be displaced by another more radical approach: ethics of the real, a politics of the imperative, engaged in its interminably downward movement.<sup>3</sup>

From this perspective, Sexton criticizes “‘the hope creed’ characteristic of those engaging the politics of everyday life through the assumption of a general consensus disrupted by conflict.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, he identifies Afro-Pessimism with “a certain conjuring of spirit, or attitude, of those still willing to fight for what is right and necessary rather than simply in the immediate interest.”<sup>5</sup>

The radical implications of the Afro-Pessimist starting point are evident and welcome. If anti-Blackness is woven into the very fabric of the contemporary social order, Black humanity can only be realized by abolishing that order. But transhistorical claims about anti-Blackness as “the structure of the entire world’s semantic field—regardless of cultural or national discrepancies,” do not allow for the kind of openings that this aim would require. Moreover, because these Afro-Pessimists do not specify the locus of this anti-Black ontology, it is difficult for readers to understand what overcoming it might entail. Is the aim to abolish actually existing U.S. society? The West? Racial capitalism? Modern forms of consciousness and their underlying epistemologies? Also unclear is what the aim of such a revolutionary struggle would be. What kind of world do they wish to see? Such questions relate directly to their rejection of coalition politics on the basis of “ontological incommunicability.” We are left with an unspecified “ethics of the real” as the basis for an antipolitical politics.

Are all solidarity practices necessarily based on a “hope creed” that assumes general consensus? At what cost can any subaltern community preemptively and categorically reject the prospect of an intersectional “we”? If we accept that racism and capitalism are indissociably entwined, and if we recognize the planetary character of racial capitalism, the radical struggle against anti-Blackness demanded by Afro-Pessimism would have to entail solidarity and internationalism.

Afro-Pessimism’s ontological orientation is a more explicit and hyperbolic iteration of the culturalism that runs through some recent currents of postcolonial thinking. A first generation of postcolonial critique tended to deconstruct the dubious categorial distinctions upon which colonial ideology and imperial power rested.<sup>6</sup> But a second generation of postcolonial scholarship began to treat abstract universalism as the primary modality of (post)colonial domination and to treat concrete particularity (e.g., local communities, cultures, and consciousness) as the self-evident standpoint from which to challenge it. As a result, such thinking often emphasized, even ontologized, categorial, cultural, or civilizational differences between Western and non-Western peoples. Incommensurability and untranslatability become privileged arms in the fight against Eurocentrism.

Consider Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influential argument about the distinction between what he calls “History 1” and “History 2.”<sup>7</sup> He identifies the former with abstracting and universalizing forces of Western capitalism and imperialism that seek to eradicate or assimilate any differences they encounter. He identifies History 2 with concrete forms of life (cultural practices, beliefs, categories) that are incommensurable with and inassimilable to the universalizing logics of capitalism and imperialism. Chakrabarty argues that the forces comprising History 1 regularly encounter the phenomena of History 2, which they can never fully grasp, assimilate, or eradicate. He thus posits the existence of essentially different kinds of history that are external to one another even as they encounter and interrupt each other.<sup>8</sup>

At another level, Chakrabarty argues that because the Western human sciences view the world from the standpoint of History 1, they misrecognize or disavow the singularity of the culturally specific phenomena that comprise History 2. By seeking to “translate” such singular objects into supposedly universal categories, these forms of knowledge extend the violent abstracting work of capitalism and imperialism. At the same time, he argues, they obscure (or cannot recognize) the fact that such categories are themselves rooted in provincial European experiences and assumptions.

Chakrabarty’s call to “provincialize Europe” and its ways of knowing is an indispensable intervention that has rightly influenced a generation of scholars

interested in historicizing supposedly universal categories and experiences. But it also reifies the very dichotomies—universal/particular, abstract/concrete, capitalism/culture, center/periphery—that also need to be historicized as instruments of capitalist and imperial domination. In Chakrabarty's framework, the constitutive entanglements between History 1 (primarily identified with the West) and History 2 (primarily identified with the non-West) are elided. This analysis leads to a one-dimensional view of the universalizing West that is counterposed to self-identical Heideggerian lifeworlds.<sup>9</sup> We are left with something like the ethnological concept of culture that early post-colonial thinking had rejected.

A similar current of culturalism may be identified in Talal Asad's influential writings about Islamic tradition. Asad challenges the secular, liberal, Western discourse that consigns Islamic beliefs, practices, worldviews, and societies to a prerational, unchanging, and dogmatic tradition to which adherents are blindly obedient. He rejects the widespread Western assumption that Islamic tradition is based on the singular truths of sacred texts or a theological dogma decreed by (opportunistic or despotic) religious authorities. In contrast, he treats Islam as a discursive tradition that is characterized by intergenerational conflict, debate, persuasion, and revision. Shifting attention from theology and belief to everyday practice and lived experience, Asad also treats Islam as an embodied tradition; it mediates and is mediated by concrete ways of life (subjectivities, dispositions, sensibilities, conduct, norms, institutions, etc.). He thereby emphasizes that Islamic tradition is no less critical and self-reflexive than secular liberalism purports to be. Conversely, Asad demonstrates that despite its claim to have overcome tradition through reason, secular liberalism is itself an embodied form of life rooted in a concrete tradition.<sup>10</sup>

This incisive critique does not only challenge the self-congratulatory and hypocritical discourses that Western liberals employ, often to justify exclusion or violence, against Islam. It also challenges many of the binaries—modern/traditional, reason/culture, secular/religious—that ground Western forms of knowledge. But Asad's analysis also implies a civilizational divide between Western and Islamic traditions that calls to mind History 1 and History 2. It recognizes that Islam as a form of life is internally contested. But it does not attend to the heterogeneous character—the processes of cultural, religious, and ideological multiplicity and mixture—of societies in which Islam actually exists. It cannot easily accommodate, for example, Islamic Marxists or feminists who may challenge the same forms of conservative piety or political Islam that Western liberals do but on different grounds and for different aims. Asad's account implies (and many of his epigones suggest more directly) that to question certain forms of pious conservatism and culturalism is to endorse lib-

eral secularism. Ultimately, we are left with a categorical distinction between Western and Islamic ways of life as incommensurable and untranslatable.

Such culturalist thinking is even more pronounced in Walter Mignolo's influential writings about decolonial epistemology. His argument builds upon Anibal Quijano's important analysis of the "coloniality of power" in which the interlinked forces of racism, colonialism, and capitalism form the substrate of a worldwide modernity that stands in a mutually reinforcing relationship with Eurocentric forms of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Quijano challenged orthodox Marxism from a Latin American Marxian perspective. He explained that capitalism there always also contained quasi-feudal arrangements. It produced neither a proletarian majority nor a unified working class. Because Latin American social classes are racially inflected, he explains, national independence never led to a bourgeois democratic society. From this perspective, he challenged any conception of the linear transition from feudalism, through bourgeois capitalism, to socialism. Quijano concludes that a revolutionary "socialization of power" would require overcoming not only the bourgeois state and market, but racism, the "coloniality of labor," and Eurocentric epistemology.

Mignolo takes up Quijano's important project to decolonize knowledge. But he reduces Quijano's revolutionary project to "epistemic disobedience."<sup>12</sup> Mignolo's "decolonial delinking" transposes what Quijano regarded as a crucial epistemic-political struggle *within* an entangled colonial situation into categorical claims about incommensurable difference *between* Western and non-Western epistemologies or civilizations. Mignolo distinguishes his "decolonial thinking" from postcolonial critique.<sup>13</sup> But by "unveiling the regional foundations of universal claims to truth as well as the categories of thought and the logic that sustain all branches of Western knowledge," it seems to align with Chakrabarty's project.<sup>14</sup> Like him and Asad, Mignolo insists that all ways of knowing are bound up with particular ways of living. But he grounds this important insight in a reductive dictum: "I am where I think."<sup>15</sup> In so doing, he elevates into a "basic epistemic principle" the very cultural and territorial ontology that allowed colonial power to racially define and rank peoples and regions.<sup>16</sup> Mignolo rightly challenges a colonizing logic that disavows non-European ways of living and knowing. But he links this claim to a dubious conception of self-identical cultural subjects and civilizational wholes. It is difficult to understand how he can reconcile such categorical thinking with his promising invocations of "puriversality as a universal project," a polycentric "world in which many worlds would coexist," "border thinking," and "inter-cultural . . . or inter-epistemic dialogue."<sup>17</sup>

Mignolo also distinguishes Marxism, which he defines as "the struggle against capitalism," from "the decolonial option," which he defines as a proj-



ect of “delinking from Westernization.”<sup>18</sup> He opposes “Marxism focused on class struggle” from “decolonialism” which focuses “on the racism that justified the exploitation of labor in European colonies.”<sup>19</sup> We should recall that Quijano did not reduce Marxism to a critique of capitalism focused exclusively on class struggle. Nor did he gloss his focus on the colonality of modern knowledge and power as a one-sided call to delink from Westernization. Rather, like Mariátegui, he sought to compel Marxism beyond mechanical materialism to attend to the racism, imperialism, and Eurocentric forms of knowledge that anchor modern forms of capitalist domination.

Not surprisingly, Mignolo’s culturalism leads him to indigenous epistemologies as the locus for decolonial delinking. His civilizational ontology requires him to identify an outside of colonality as a standpoint of critique. Like Chakrabarty and Asad, he reduces the modern to the West, the West to white, and the white West to an all-encompassing liberalism. This operation leaves us with a monocultural West and a one-dimensional modernity that can only be criticized from the standpoint of categorical cultural difference.<sup>20</sup>

I am not suggesting that the West should be defended. My point is that such approaches elide internal heterogeneity and contradictions. They disregard processes of historical, sociocultural, and epistemological entanglement, mixture, and mutual implication. Their way of figuring globality differs fundamentally from a Marxian understanding of unevenness within a differential and asymmetrical unity (i.e., the capitalist world system). Thinkers like Samir Amin and Anibal Quijano were no less critical of the Eurocentric universalism that underlies liberal and orthodox Marxist understandings of linear, progressive, teleological history. But they recognize what Chakrabarty refers to as History 1 and History 2 as one-sided aspects of a single but nonidentical world-historical process. Their work demonstrates how capitalism is not only able to accommodate supposedly incommensurable differences (i.e., noncapitalist modes of production and forms of life) but also requires and thrives on them.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective it is not possible to maintain a categorical distinction between an abstract, universal, Western history that is propelled by capitalism and concrete, particular, non-Western histories that are simply rooted in embodied forms of life. Nor is it possible to ignore the long-standing traditions of anticolonial internationalism among non-Western radicals, many of whom were heterodox Marxists. Indeed, such political traditions call into question supposedly self-evident boundaries between distinct ways of life as well as what it means to be a “member of a tradition.”

This culturalist orientation is evident in these thinkers’ one-sided critique of translation as a violent operation whereby incommensurable differences are reduced to a transparent sameness through the mediation of an abstract

universal metric that produces a false equivalence.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, any engagement with the politics of translation must recognize these critical insights into translation as an instrument of colonial domination and cultural hegemony. Such work usefully attends to how—in confrontations between stronger or majoritarian and weaker or minoritarian languages, especially under conditions of colonial and racial inequality—translation can reproduce hierarchies. In such situations, the forces of domination seek to know subjugated people (through translation) in order to better dominate them. The latter are compelled directly or indirectly to conform to dominant linguistic and cultural norms. At a deeper epistemological level this work challenges any notion of translation premised on an idea that there can be a seamless transparency across texts, languages, or cultures. Such an approach to translation will lead, at best, to misunderstanding. More dangerously, such practices of translation become integral to power/knowledge regimes that sustain forms of racial and colonial domination.

But what conclusions should we draw from this important critique? Should we reduce dense networks of social relations that often traverse any number of supposed social and cultural boundaries to delimited traditions or forms of life? Should we try to distill what seem to be universal aspects of social life from what is singular and essentially untranslatable in order to erect a categorical boundary between essentially different types of history—one that is abstract and universal and the other that is concrete and particular? Should we pursue a program of “epistemic delinking” in order to erect rigid boundaries between Western and non-Western epistemologies?

I would argue that the tendency to address the problem of translation by making ontological claims about languages, cultures, and lifeworlds is analytically dubious and politically limiting. The critical challenge is to insist on entanglement and attend to impurity while respecting, even producing, singularities. Are there practices of translation that can recognize incommensurables, refuse to posit false equivalences, and renounce the existence of an abstract universal metric while forging mutually illuminating connections across real differences? Should we not attend to how translation may work precisely to identify, not erase, moments of opacity and incommensurability as starting points for solidarity politics that do the same?

We can usefully route such questions through the remarkable and influential *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, a grand collective project edited by the French philologist and philosopher Barbara Cassin. The *Dictionary* seeks to provincialize supposed universals—in this case, philosophical concepts—from the standpoint of *untranslatability*. It, too, provides a critique of what we might call the fallacy of misplaced equivalence. Most immediately, Cassin

challenges the cultural hegemony of English as the common language of the European community. More fundamentally, she challenges analytic philosophy's assumption that there are universal concepts that transcend linguistic and historical specificity. In this line of thinking, because language is supposed to be neutral and concepts universal, the latter can be seamlessly translated into any language without semantic damage or philosophical consequences.

Against global English and analytic philosophy, Cassin contends that languages do not simply reflect the given world. Rather, "the perspectives constitute the thing; each language is a vision of the world that catches another world in its net, that performs a world."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, words do not simply refer to transhistorical concepts. "The universality of concepts is absorbed by the singularity of languages."<sup>24</sup> This means that concepts are always embedded in and assume meanings through specific languages, semantic networks, and historical situations.

On these grounds, Cassin's *Dictionary* seeks to "make perceptible another way of doing philosophy, which does not think of the concept without thinking of the word, for there is no concept without a word."<sup>25</sup> Philosophy must attend to the dynamic relationships between concept, word, and world. By examining the meaning of supposedly universal concepts in specific languages, as well as the modifications undergone in their movement across languages, the *Dictionary* productively introduces the problem of translation into the practice of philosophy.

We have tried to think of philosophy *within* languages [. . .] In order to find the meaning of a word in one language, this book explores the networks to which the word belongs and seeks to understand how a network functions in one language by relating it to the networks of other languages [. . .] from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed. . . . Each entry thus starts from a nexus of untranslatability and proceeds to a comparison of terminological networks.<sup>26</sup>

For Cassin, understanding is not simply a matter of placing meaning in context. It requires us to reconsider context itself by tracing linguistic and semantic "crossings, transfers, and forks in the road . . . turnings, fractures, and carriers."<sup>27</sup> It requires attention both to the multiplicity of languages and to multiplicities *within* any given language.

This interest in dynamic processes of crossings, transfers, and fractures distinguishes Cassin's untranslatable from Chakrabarty's seemingly similar conception of the incommensurable. Cassin explains that the *Dictionary* is opposed *both* to the "logical universalism" of the analytic philosophers that is

“indifference to language” and to the kind of “ontological nationalism” promoted by Herder and Heidegger which “essentializ[es] the spirit of language.”<sup>28</sup> She writes, “Our work is as far as could be from such a sacralization of the untranslatable, based on the idea of an absolute incommensurability of languages.”<sup>29</sup> Cassin underscores, “To speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: The untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating.”<sup>30</sup>

Once again, the question is what we should conclude from Cassin’s powerful formulation of translation as *what one keeps on (not) translating*. At one point she declares, “Babel is an opportunity.”<sup>31</sup> But she does not develop this promising idea. She is more concerned with how the attempt to translate untranslatables across languages “creates a problem.”<sup>32</sup> Her focus, certainly important, is on challenging erroneous assumptions about abstract concepts, neutral language, and transparent equivalence. She wants to interrupt philosophy’s misrecognitions and mistaken impositions. The *Dictionary* gives pause to those who assume that translation is not a problem. But, however implicitly, it still regards translation as a problem—an unavoidable obstacle or necessary evil. In contrast, I would like to consider a constellation of thinkers who treat the dangers of translation as a starting point for analysis rather than the aim of critique. They may help us to more directly embrace *Babel as an opportunity*.

### **Babel as Opportunity**

Cassin invokes Gilles Deleuze’s conception of deterritorialization to support her understanding of the untranslatable as “what one keeps on (not) translating.” But I read this as a Derridean formulation which displaces any easy binary between territorialized and deterritorialized thinking. Recall that for Derrida, the biblical Tower of Babel story figures translation as both necessary and impossible, as something that God, through the imposition of linguistic plurality among humans, both demands and prohibits.<sup>33</sup> Derrida challenges the conventional dream of translation as seamless equivalence “without remnants.”<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, his work suggests that every utterance, even within a given language, must both cross and create the gaps that characterize translation. Demonstrating how singular proper names and iterable common nouns always presuppose one another, Derrida deconstructs the supposed opposition between translatability and untranslatability. Arguing that each is always the condition of possibility of the latter, he figures translation as an inescapable aspect of signification that operates within and across languages.<sup>35</sup>

Derrida crystallizes this orientation in seemingly paradoxical declarations such as, “One never writes either in one’s own language or in a foreign language” and “I only have one language and it is not mine.”<sup>36</sup> These are abstract philosophical formulations that also describe concrete historical situations and lived experience. In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida relates the singularity of his own predicament as an Algerian Jew whose only language is French. He recounts being triply alienated: from his Jewish (linguistic) heritage, his (Arabic or Berber speaking) Maghreb milieu, and metropolitan France (which, despite his being a Francophone, remained utterly foreign to him). In the eyes of the French state he was a colonized “native” whose citizenship was conditional and revocable (as was proven during the Vichy Occupation). This situation, shared by colonized peoples and subaltern groups around the world, provides the ground for what Derrida calls the two-sided “law of translation”: “1. We only ever speak one language. 2. We never speak only one language.”<sup>37</sup>

Derrida’s reflections underscore that this “law,” along with the predicament it embodies, is both an oppressive burden and a subversive opportunity. He relates how as a student in Algiers and Paris he was driven to master French, a language that could never fully be his own. Paradoxically, his “hyperbolic taste for the purity of language,” which included an attempt to erase any hint of idiomatic foreignness from his own speech and writing, led him to develop a singular style that made his written French subversively uncanny. It was at once utterly correct (familiar) and idiomatically singular (strange).<sup>38</sup> Like Aimé Césaire, he challenged his (post)colonial predicament through a kind of excessive correctness. This strategy opened the path to a critical method through which a given language or text may be recognized as, or rendered, *other than itself*, because of *itself*.<sup>39</sup>

Derrida thus developed a kind of polyglot monolingualism that disordered the already impure identities that existed on both sides of the translational exchange. When Derrida recounts, “I always surrender myself to language,” he is referring to just this hyperbolic fidelity that transforms both the translator (i.e., reader or writer) and the original language or text.<sup>40</sup> This type of subversive surrender was bound up with his desire, regarding French, to “appropriate, domesticate, coax [*amadouer*], that is to say, love by setting on fire . . . perhaps destroy, in all events mark, transform, prune, cut, forge.”<sup>41</sup> His dream was “not that of harming the language” but “perhaps to make something happen to this language” such that “it loses itself by finding itself, by converting itself to itself.”<sup>42</sup> Derrida thus appropriated French in a way that was correct yet could not be appropriated. He translated the untranslatable into something legibly untranslatable (even within French). His hyperbolic surrender

and transformative appropriation may be understood as a practice of translation that rendered both his own discourse and the French language more idiomatic, less legible, and resistant to easy translation. But it did so through a kind of excessive fidelity to pure French. This is one perspective from which to understand Derrida's claim that all languages or texts are simultaneously translatable and untranslatable, that translation is both necessary and impossible, that every language is, or can be made, foreign to itself.

Derrida's attempt to deconstruct the untenable opposition between translatability and untranslatability is indebted to Walter Benjamin's "Task of the Translator," which he reads closely in "Des Tours de Babel." Note that "tour" connotes both a thing (i.e., a tower) and an action (e.g., a walk around the neighborhood, taking turns, turning a screw, a turn of events). Derrida thus embraces Benjamin's understanding of translation as an ongoing practice. He cites Benjamin when he declares that "a text lives only if it lives *on* [*sur-vit*] and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable."<sup>43</sup>

Benjamin maintained that the most sophisticated texts—those which are singular and idiomatic, whose deepest meanings can never be simply transferred from one language to another—are the *most* translatable. Challenging the putative superiority of an "original" text, Benjamin declares, "In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air."<sup>44</sup> This is because translation is neither a matter of "communication . . . of information" nor of establishing "likeness to the original."<sup>45</sup> Shifting focus from dead texts and fixed meanings to living languages and the *practice* of translation, Benjamin calls on translators to pay more attention to an original's "way of meaning" than to what is meant.<sup>46</sup> In his view, translation does not aim to recreate a perfect fit between content and language, which he likens to a fruit and its skin. Rather, it seeks to index how that fit is established in any given language.

For Benjamin, the task of the translator is to illuminate the mediated character of all linguistic exchange in a human, which is to say fallen, world characterized by what he calls the "foreignness of languages."<sup>47</sup> The latter refers not only to the way "natural" languages differ from each other, but to the differences within any given language that reveal themselves, and must be translated, across various discursive registers (e.g., ordinary, literary, sacred). *Benjamin argues that the act of translation elevates and transforms the original text, the original language, and the translator's language.* Consider the remarkable citation where he notes the "mistaken premise" of translators who: "want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his

language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.”<sup>48</sup> For Benjamin, translation is a (self-)transformative practice that refuses to sacralize original languages, original texts, translations, or languages of translation.

Both Benjamin and Derrida challenge the idea that any signifying practice can exist outside the space of translation. Each understands translation in ways that explode identitarian logic by, for example, displacing the linguistic hegemony and deforming the linguistic certainties of “major” languages. As importantly, each figures translation as an ethical relation in which submission (to the other/s language) and subversion (of the given) are conjoined. Both thinkers also point to a politics of translation. But they do so at a highly abstract level in order to make general claims about language, texts, and meaning. Benjamin, for example, suggests that translation offers glimpses of a seemingly impossible reconciliation or redemption that, apart from the Messianic end of history, only social revolution could bring about.<sup>49</sup> But he does not offer any clues about how such glimpses may be transposed into the kind of revolutionary action he discusses elsewhere. Derrida asserts that translation (or the impossibility of monolingualism) “opens onto a politics, a right, and an ethics.”<sup>50</sup> But he never develops his assertions about how the translator’s ethical indebtedness points to an internationalist politics founded upon responsibility for and hospitality to the other. Rather, he examines the singular situation of Algerian Jews in order to elaborate what he regards as a universal predicament bound up with signification as such.

Despite these limitations, Benjamin and Derrida alert us to *Babel as an opportunity*. For both, translation is a transformative practice with subversive possibilities whereby the movement of singular meanings across incommensurable semantic fields may render the strange familiar and the familiar strange. They remind us how translation may emphasize rather than elide just such uncanniness. We may usefully put them in dialogue with Global South thinkers who engage explicitly the ethical and political potentiality of translation as a practice that forges relations across singular differences. These thinkers help us to recognize how translation may serve as a medium and model for solidarity, or how the latter is a fundamentally translational affair.

## **From the Ethics of Translation to the Politics of Relation**

The Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne has spent his career examining the entangled character of African, Islamic, and European thought. Through this work, he develops a translational understanding of philosophy as an ethical practice that affirms singularities, forges productive connections, and attends to novel configurations.

In *The Ink of Scholars*, Diagne criticizes both Eurocentric assumptions about the nonphilosophical character of African knowledge and ethnological, ontological, or autarchic conceptions of African philosophy. He recognizes that Western philosophy has always been bound up with processes of racialization, social exclusion, and colonial subjection. He explains how, in response, many African intellectuals developed a forceful critique of philosophy itself as a Western instrument of domination that is necessarily foreign to Africa. Diagne appreciates this reasoning but argues that, ultimately, it only affirms the kind of racist claims made by Hegel and Heidegger about Greek and German as the only true languages of philosophy. He reminds us that nineteenth-century Europeans themselves invented this idea that philosophy is intrinsically European.

Diagne rejects the linguistic nativism, ethnological relativism, and Nietzschean perspectivism that would divide human thought into irreconcilable and mutually unintelligible blocs. Sociologically, he contends that “an ethnic worldview carried by every element of the group and naturally expressed in its language, gestures, judgments, postures, et cetera, and serving as thought makes little sense.”<sup>51</sup> Epistemologically, he contends, “the differentialist posture, which betrays the ethnographer’s initial conviction that he is dealing with an *other* way of being . . . does nothing but invent what it is looking for.”<sup>52</sup>

But Diagne recognizes that philosophical orientations are embedded within specific African forms of life. He is a critic of ontological culturalism, yet also insists that philosophical insights are bound up with specific languages and historical experiences. He challenges philosophy’s racist and Eurocentric heritage without renouncing philosophy as a general, and generally available, truth-seeking practice. He argues, for example, that African reflections on temporality do not simply demonstrate a specifically African conception of time. They illuminate something about time itself. Rather than characterize African thought as either universal or incommensurable, he invites philosophers to treat it “as if it is born under the gaze that gives it life, careful not to pin it like a dead butterfly . . . with the inventory of ethnographic details . . . which can hardly explain its *presence*: its existence outside of its own time.”<sup>53</sup> Like Cassin, with whom he has collaborated, he argues that philosophical insights are always rooted, situated, and worldly.<sup>54</sup> But he also insists that their significance may transcend the linguistic cultural contexts within which they were immediately produced. He thus works to de-provincialize African thinking.

Careful not to treat thought like a dead butterfly in a museum vitrine, Diagne regards philosophy as a dynamic and open-ended practice, not a static body of knowledge. He crystallizes his nuanced position in a multivalent call



to “philosophize in Africa” [*philosopher en Afrique*].<sup>55</sup> I read this as a declaration that Africans both should philosophize in African languages and should not hesitate to philosophize in non-African languages. Against the idea that Africans should only seek to produce “an other philosophy, which would keep close to each language’s way of speaking,” Diagne argues that to “philosophize in African languages” is “a means of thinking philosophically in translation and in crossing perspectives.”<sup>56</sup> This orientation frees Diagne from becoming preoccupied with origins vs. imitations, or authenticity vs. alienation, which frequently accompany debates about the colonality of Western thought. The latter often rely on assumptions about linguistic or conceptual purity that disregard entangled histories and polyglot situations. In contrast, Diagne declares that “only translations exist, without a text that could be claimed as the original one, written in a sacred language.”<sup>57</sup>

Rather than debate whether a given philosophy can be adequately translated, Diagne develops an understanding of philosophy itself as a practice of unending translation. Citing Cassin, he rejects any notion of translation as a matter of finding “equivalents of the same concept in different languages.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast, he invokes Hannah Arendt’s image of “the faltering equivocality of the world.”<sup>59</sup> Against reductive, appropriative, and ethnocentric types of translation which erase differences, Diagne endorses an understanding of translation as a process or practice of “putting in touch.”<sup>60</sup> This is both an epistemological and an ethical operation. In his view, translation enacts a responsibility to the other whose alterity it seeks to honor, not destroy. We might say that he treats translation as a process of self-displacement (that renders the familiar strange).

Diagne beautifully conveys this orientation when, contra the Italian commonplace “traduttore, traditore” (translator, traitor), he writes, “Translation is treason? Certainly, but this betrayal is the only fidelity.”<sup>61</sup> I read this to mean, first, that we must countenance the universal philosophical truths expressed in and through African knowledge and, second, that we must recognize the singularity of the history, modes of understanding, and forms of life that accompany, haunt, and cross Africans’ use of Western philosophical languages, discourses, frameworks, and genres. For Diagne, neither philosophy nor translation should begin with a will to transparency or a desire to overcome singularities. He treats both philosophy and translation in terms of opening, dialogue, and *métissage* across different traditions.<sup>62</sup> In his account, these are relational practices that mediate between singularity and universality, situated forms of life and transversal connections, without an assumed metalanguage.

Diagne’s understanding of translation as an ethical practice of “crossing perspectives” and “putting in touch” may be usefully read alongside Édouard Glissant’s world-figuring “poetics of Relation.” Both help us to think further

about Babel as an opportunity for solidarity practices. Running through Glissant's reflections on Relation is the problem and promise of translation. Glissant challenges the modern imperial dictum that offers colonized peoples wanting to speak their own language an unacceptable choice: "Either you speak a language that is 'universal' . . . and participate in the life of the world; or else you retreat into your particular idiom—quite unfit for sharing—in which case you cut yourself off from the world to wallow alone and sterile in your so-called identity."<sup>63</sup> Conjuring the spirit of his elder interlocutor Aimé Césaire, Glissant rejects this false alternative between "either . . . seclusion within a restrictive particularity or, conversely, dilution within a generalizing universal."<sup>64</sup> Such a logic is unable to recognize, let alone embrace, "relations of multiplicity or contagion" when "mixtures explode into momentary flashes of creation."<sup>65</sup>

Glissant thus rejects the alternative, which so often defines colonial situations, between an abstract universality that purports to open access to the whole world and concrete particularity that would seem to lock actors in provincial lifeworlds. Against a reductively "monolingual" orientation to the world, Glissant insists that "speaking one's language and opening up to the language of the other no longer form the basis for an alternative."<sup>66</sup> Offering a relational and reciprocal understanding of linguistic plurality, he writes, "'I speak to you in your language voice, and it is in my language use that I understand you.' Creating in any given language thus assumes that one be inhabited by the impossible desire for all the languages in the world. Totality calls out to us."<sup>67</sup> He proposes that when a specific "people speaks its language or languages" it makes its more general "relationship to the world concrete and visible for itself and for others."<sup>68</sup> For Glissant, universality is not abstracted into an underlying or overarching sameness. Nor is singularity reduced to a particularism. He figures Relation as an open totality that points beyond the binary of universality vs. particularity.

Glissant thereby attempts to overcome the false opposition between, on the one hand, a world organized around a united humanity with a universal language that elides differences and, on the other, a confusion of local languages that partitions peoples from each other and precludes translocal relations. This is the basis for his alternative view of Babel:

On the other side of the bitter struggles against domination and for the liberation of the imagination, there opens up a *multiply dispersed zone in which we are gripped by vertigo*. But this is not the vertigo preceding apocalypse and Babel's fall. *It is the shiver of a beginning,*

*confronted with extreme possibility. It is possible to build the Tower—in every language.*<sup>69</sup>

This call to build a Tower of Babel in every language conveys a vision of multiple universals, each of which is internally heterogeneous. In this view, every place, language, or text crystallizes a world and refracts the world. Far from signaling a fatal incommensurability, Babel creates an opportunity for worldwide Relation.

Glissant characterizes Relation as an “open totality” wherein “the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is total diversity.”<sup>70</sup> Closed or self-identical totalities are founded upon a “root identity” that grounds myths of pure origins and continuous lineages.<sup>71</sup> Root identities also authorize the colonial expropriation of other peoples’ territory. In contrast, “Relation identity” is based on the “contacts among cultures” that create a “chaotic network.”<sup>72</sup> Relation “opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent.”<sup>73</sup> It “does not think of land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with [*donner-avec*] rather than grasps.”<sup>74</sup>

Glissant’s open totality, a transversal and relational whole, embraces singularities (often produced through mixture) and entails reciprocity. Central to his vision of Relation as a ramifying network of singularities is his concept of opacity, which he distinguishes from a conventional understanding of difference. He recognizes that “the theory of difference is invaluable” insofar as it has enabled struggles against racism and for minority rights.<sup>75</sup> But he warns, “Difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent.”<sup>76</sup> It does so by seeking to “understand and accept” others in terms of “an ideal scale” that creates grounds for reductive comparisons and judgments: “I understand your difference . . . I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, an identitarian right to difference can enable ethnocentric translations. On this basis, Glissant exhorts readers to demand “not merely . . . the right to difference” but “the right to opacity.”<sup>78</sup> Opacity cannot simply be assimilated (or translated) into some other’s schema. Yet opacity “is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy.”<sup>79</sup> It is both “subsistence within an irreducible singularity” and “the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”<sup>80</sup> This because, “Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.”<sup>81</sup> This fabric does not encompass “Humanity,” it expresses “the exultant divergence of humanities.”<sup>82</sup>

Glissant's vision of irreducible opacities and divergent humanities coexisting, converging, and weaving themselves into larger tapestries transcends the conventional opposition between transparent equivalence (which informs a traditional notion of translation) and incommensurable alterity (which informs culturalist assertions about untranslatability). Relation constitutes a worldwide weave whose innumerable threads remain irreducibly themselves. This open totality both negates and realizes the very idea of totality. Relation names a dynamic network of opaque singularities that is simultaneously one and many.

Glissant grounds this abstract conception of Relation in the specific historical situation created by the Middle Passage, anti-Black slavery, and plantation production. He argues that "the Plantation matrix" established dehumanizing conditions which dialectically fueled what he variously calls detour, diffraction, errantry, creolization, and Relation.<sup>83</sup> In Glissant's account, the New World plantation was a scene of extreme alienation and dispossession. But these, in turn, created fertile conditions for linguistic and cultural proliferation, connection, and creation. The plantation was designed as an "enclosed space . . . defined by boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden."<sup>84</sup> It reinforced supposedly self-evident racial taxonomies and social boundaries. Yet the plantation also generated multilingual and creolized networks, non-identical ways of life and political sensibilities.

We might say that Glissant traces a dialectic of Plantation and Relation through which specifically Caribbean languages and lifeworlds "entered with the force of a tradition that they built themselves, into the relation of cultures."<sup>85</sup> Of course, this was a peculiar "tradition." It called into question traditional assumptions (identical, territorial, and monolingual) about what constitutes a tradition. *Relation names a fundamentally modern Caribbean tradition that is also the tradition of modernity.* Glissant identifies the Plantation, a "monstrously abortive failure, composed of so many solitary instances of sterility" as a source of "multilingualism" where "the meeting of cultures is most clearly and directly observable. . . . Here we are able to discover a few of the formational laws of the cultural *métissage* that concerns us all."<sup>86</sup> Despite being a space of supposed "autarky," it actually became "one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. . . . In this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity began to be detectable."<sup>87</sup>

This conception of Relation overturns conventional assumptions about place and identity. "Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian.

What is here is open, as much as this there. . . . This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries.”<sup>88</sup> Rather than either seize centers or defend peripheries, Relation “makes every periphery into a center . . . it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery.”<sup>89</sup> Relation, like translation, is a dialectical optic through which “the landscape of your world is the world’s landscape . . . its frontier is open.”<sup>90</sup> Each may render the world productively uncanny.

Glissant warns that the reality of Relation exceeds the grasp of the established human sciences. “Within the space apart that [the Plantation] comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order” of ‘Western thought.’<sup>91</sup> Relation can only be understood through alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and saying—through a form of poetic knowledge or a “poetics of Relation.” As Glissant uses it, “poetics” signals an intersecting aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and political sensibility. “Aesthetics is an art of conceiving, imagining, and acting.”<sup>92</sup> He explains that “a poetics cannot guarantee us a concrete means of action. But a poetics, perhaps, does allow us to understand better our action in the world.”<sup>93</sup> Such action is never a matter of following fixed rules or “the preconceived transparency of universal models.”<sup>94</sup> Rather, “this is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance.”<sup>95</sup> In Glissant’s world, ethico-political action is situational, improvisational, and experimental.<sup>96</sup>

The ethics and politics of Relation are transversal and reciprocal. When Glissant invokes “the complicity of relation,” he reminds us that the entangled and dynamic histories of Relation implicate peoples in each other’s situations and prospects.<sup>97</sup> He often refers to this as a matter of “giving with” [*donner-avec*].<sup>98</sup> This figure echoes the translational ethos discussed above, nicely captured in Glissant’s reflections on “consensual, not imposed, sharing” whereby “each is changed by and changes the other.”<sup>99</sup>

For Glissant, Relation opens “*the possibility for each one at every moment to be both solidary and solitary.*”<sup>100</sup> It cuts across any clear boundary between autonomy and interdependence, or singularity and solidarity.<sup>101</sup> Honoring “the opacity of the other,” Glissant explains, “To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (or become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image.”<sup>102</sup> On the one hand, reciprocity does not require understanding and solidarity does not require transparency. On the other, it must be “implemented by me and you to join the dynamics to which we are to contribute . . . in which each is changed by and changes the other.”<sup>103</sup> Conjuring the paradoxical potentiality created by the plantation, Glissant writes,

“Thus, we go into the open circle of our relayed aesthetics, our unflagging politics. We leave the matrix abyss and the immeasurable abyss for this other one in which *we wander without becoming lost*.”<sup>104</sup>

We might say that Glissant’s reflections on the reciprocally transformative character of Relation convey a *translational* situation, form of life, and ethical orientation. It posits a world in which every people would enjoy the right to opacity and can build its own Tower of Babel. Here, any specific utterance calls forth all the languages of the world. There are neither universal meta-languages nor self-identical native languages. This is a translational world in which anyone may wander without becoming lost.

Diagne and Glissant may be usefully placed in touch with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who explicitly links translation to Global South solidarity and a new internationalism. This Portuguese social theorist and alterglobalization militant collaborated with Samir Amin in establishing the World Social Forum (WSF) and signed the 2005 Porto Alegre Manifesto. From the standpoint of “epistemologies of the South,” Santos argues that there can be no social justice without cognitive justice.<sup>105</sup> The latter requires grasping non-Western forms of knowledge on their own terms. But cognitive justice also requires an ongoing practice of what Santos calls “intercultural translation,” which “consists of searching for isomorphic concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures . . . and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication.”<sup>106</sup> He reminds us that “translation undermines the idea of original pure cultures and stresses the idea of cultural relationality. . . . [C]ultures are monolithic only when seen from the outside or from afar. When looked at from the inside or at close range, they are easily seen to comprise various and often conflicting versions of the same culture.”<sup>107</sup> Translation, in other words, illuminates the disjunctures within as much as between cultures, peoples, and social groups.

Santos characterizes “intercultural translation” as a “living process” that unfolds within the “translational contact zones” created by global capitalism and imperialism.<sup>108</sup> These are zones of historically constituted diversity, inequality, and conflict that compel acts of translation. Santos recognizes that in such situations, practices of “mediation, confrontation, and negotiation” may reinforce existing hierarchies.<sup>109</sup> But he also emphasizes that these are “relatively uncodified” zones in which there is no singular truth or meta-language to which translational differences can be referred or disagreements adjudicated.<sup>110</sup> Here, “the work of translation is basically an argumentative work, based on the cosmopolitan emotion of sharing the world with those who do not share our knowledge and experience.”<sup>111</sup> For Santos, this is a relational and conflictual space in which *assumptions about cultural premises become*

*arguments over premises that can never be definitively resolved.* Though such spaces are typically organized around structural inequalities, the imperative to translate in the “absence of a general theory” may also provide opportunities “for normative and cultural experimentation and innovation” that could transform actors’ understandings and identities.<sup>112</sup> The result may be new kinds of “equality in differences” or “hybrid cultural constellations.”<sup>113</sup> Such translation “aims at reciprocity instead of worrying about source cultures and target cultures.”<sup>114</sup>

Santos underscores that intercultural translation as a “living process” through which “to cope with diversity and conflict” is “not a gesture of intellectual curiosity or cultural dilettantism. Rather, it is an imperative dictated by the need to broaden political articulation beyond the confines of a given locale or culture.”<sup>115</sup> Accordingly, he invokes the “interpolitical translation” that is indispensable for “intermovement politics.”<sup>116</sup> Santos thus figures translation as a mode of political articulation in the absence of a “single universal social practice or collective subject to confer meaning and direction to history.”<sup>117</sup> Acts of translation can only be conjunctural, experimental, and strategic. Like Amin, Santos calls on militants “to identify, in each concrete historical moment or context, which constellations of practices carry more counterhegemonic potential.”<sup>118</sup>

Santos’s vision of interpolitical translation in the service of intermovement politics is not based on the Comintern model of a central directorate, orthodox ideology, and party line. It shares more in common with Glissant’s vision of Relation as a worldwide network of entangled but irreducible singularities. For Santos, the aim of translational practices and solidarity politics is to create powerful blocs that do *not* need to be organized under a single directorate, whose multiple political orientations do *not* need to be standardized within an identical program. We may understand interpolitical translation as a concrete utopian practice that anticipates new forms of being-together. “The work of translation . . . is a work of epistemological and democratic imagination, aiming to construct new and plural conceptions of social emancipation.”<sup>119</sup>

Of course, “there is no guarantee that a better world will follow or that all those who continue to struggle for it will conceive it the same way.”<sup>120</sup> Interpolitical translation risks reproducing existing norms and inequalities. But Santos’s work suggests that this risk cannot be avoided; such future-oriented wagers must be made. This is because: the earth is shared, modern Western forms of domination have created webs of global interdependence and subordination, there is no being-outside-of such modern spaces, there are no pure cultures, all peoples are mutually implicated, global forms of systemic domination cannot be overcome through local acts of refusal or resistance, and

counterhegemonic projects must somehow seek to operate on global scales to address global problems.

Santos's thinking about intercultural translation for intermovement politics was nourished by his engagement in the World Social Forum. He was one of an international group of founding activists, scholars, and writers (including Samir Amin) that were involved from the start with this experiment in solidarity politics.<sup>121</sup> Its first meeting in Porto Alegre Brazil in 2001 gathered representatives from antihegemonic movements throughout the world in order to enact an internationalist sphere of popular opposition to the existing global order.

The WSF was distinctive for the diversity of its participants, the scale of its organization and imagination, and the absence of a centralized leadership structure. Like its alterglobalization counterpart, it was a movement of movements "opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and . . . committed to building a planetary society centered on the human person."<sup>122</sup> Its "Charter of Principles" declares, "Another World Is Possible!"<sup>123</sup> Santos characterizes the WSF as a "radically democratic utopia" whose "openness" distinguishes it from various "conservative utopias" that deny alternatives in the name of singular visions: "The other possible world is a utopian aspiration that comprises several possible worlds. The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative."<sup>124</sup> He thus describes the WSF as a "realistic utopia" opposed to neoliberalism's "conservative utopia."<sup>125</sup>

The WSF was an imperfect initiative that risked misunderstandings, inequalities, and ineffectiveness.<sup>126</sup> But, once a general theory or single strategy was renounced, it was a remarkable experiment in intercultural and interpolitical translation. When Santos notes that "the alternative to a general theory is the work of translation," he is not making a facile statement about easy reconciliation based on naïve optimism.<sup>127</sup> Santos recognizes that "fragmentation and atomization . . . are the dark side of diversity and multiplicity."<sup>128</sup> But his efforts were guided by the recognition that an alternative global hegemony will only be possible through the "aggregation and articulation" of struggles. Such risky, difficult, and messy work "entails a wide exercise in translation to expand reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of the partners in translation. . . . Through translation work, diversity is celebrated, not as a factor of fragmentation and isolationism, but rather as a condition of sharing and solidarity."<sup>129</sup> We can debate the methods and merits of the World Social Forum. But this historic experiment in critical internationalism warrants our attention. It underscores the close relation that may be forged between



translation practices, solidarity politics, and a concrete utopian insistence that another world is possible.

### Translating Solidarity

Diagne, Glissant, and Santos share an affinity with Chakrabarty, Asad, and Mignolo. They, too, begin with a critique of Eurocentric knowledge, provincial universals, and fictions of intercultural transparency. They also reject conventional notions of translation that create false equivalences between languages, cultures, or texts, as if meaning were not inextricably bound up with the specific language or lifeworld in which it is expressed. Each of these thinkers recognizes and values the existence of qualitatively singular phenomena that resist conventional translation. Yet, like Benjamin and Derrida, they recognize that there is no outside-translation. They help us to see that every utterance both crosses and creates the gaps that characterize translation. They attend to the way translation inevitably occurs *within* nonidentical languages, communities, and groups.<sup>130</sup> Each challenges ontological notions of language, cultures, or civilizations. When considered together, they offer us a relational view of social life as mediated by acts of translation in which the prospect of experimental connection and unforeseen creation across incommensurable differences is always possible. We might call this a *translational* vision of sociality. It recognizes translation as an unavoidable imperative, an ethical responsibility, and a potentially transformational political practice.

Because there is no *outside* of translation, there can be no choosing for or against translation. Incommensurability and untranslatability compose the very terrain of our thinking and acting. The question is whether this or that mode of translation affirms or disrupts existing assumptions and arrangements. Certainly, we must reject any positivist or imperialist understanding of translation as transparent equivalence. But to only regard translation as an instrument of domination is to miss the transversal practices and aims that have long fueled radical anticolonial, anticapitalist, and internationalist politics.

Recall Lenin translating Marx into Russian, Langston Hughes translating Nicolas Guillen into English, Paulette Nardal translating Claude McKay into French, Ali Shariati translating Frantz Fanon into Persian, and the militants of Socialist Lebanon translating Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, and Che Guevara into Arabic.<sup>131</sup> Writing about José Rizal, the Filipino anticolonial novelist, Benedict Anderson evokes the polyglot character of late-nineteenth-century radical internationalism.

Filipinos wrote to Austrians in German, to Japanese in English, to each other in French, or Spanish, or Tagalog, with liberal interventions from the last beautiful international language, Latin. Some of them knew a bit of Russian, Greek, Italian, Japanese, and Chinese . . . real communication required the true, hard internationalism of the polyglot. Filipino leaders were peculiarly adapted to the Babelish world.<sup>132</sup>

Ralph Ellison, describes a scene in the late 1930s where he, not yet a published writer, and Richard Wright, who was about to publish *Uncle Tom's Children*, attended a party in New York where they hoped to raise money for Wright's new literary magazine. Ellison recalls that this was both where he "first heard the folksinger Leadbelly perform" and where he met André Malraux, who was there "to make an appeal for the Spanish Loyalists" then fighting Franco in the Civil War. "I had never dreamed that I would be in the presence of Malraux, of whose work I became aware on my second day in Harlem when Langston Hughes suggested that I read *Man's Fate* and *Days of Wrath*. . . . And it is this fortuitist circumstance which led to my selecting Malraux as a literary 'ancestor.'"<sup>133</sup>

Recall the meeting in Mexico between C. L. R. James and Trotsky. He advised the exiled revolutionary on how to translate Fourth International aims and strategies into a movement to organize African American workers in ways that would transform Marxism itself.<sup>134</sup> This, according to James, was one of the lessons he learned from Lenin, whose "life's work was to translate Marxism into Russian terms for the Russian people."<sup>135</sup> Likewise, James insisted that they could only build a mass party in the United States by reconsidering Marxist theory in relation to American history and conditions. In his plenum address to the 1944 Workers' Party national meeting, James declared, "*To Bolshevize America it is necessary to Americanize Bolshevism.*"<sup>136</sup> This would not be a simple act of domestication. This task would require and produce a web of transversal translations among James's cohort of U.S. comrades in the New York section of the Workers' Party.

Translation was at the very center of their friendship, their theorizing, and their politics. Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American militant with a PhD in philosophy, relates how translation was a source of productive excitement and explosive insight. She translated Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from German while Raya Dunayevskaya, the ex-Trotskyist Russian émigré activist, translated Lenin's notebooks on Hegel from Russian. The ensuing discussions enabled James to write *Notes on Dialectics* (1948). Such efforts allowed them, as the Johnson-Forest Tendency, to grasp the specificity

of the American workers' movement in 1947. The point is not that sacred texts gave them the transhistorical truth, but that the practice of translation helped them to develop a conjunctural analysis of their own specific political situation. Thinking across the semantic networks offered by German, Russian, and English, but also the historical experience of the industrial West, the rural East, and the colonized Caribbean, helped them to grasp the form of racial capitalism that they confronted. It also helped them to envision a revolutionary movement propelled by an autonomous party composed of insurgent Black masses. Here we can recognize translation as an instrument of concrete utopian thinking, acting, and being-together. Boggs recalls: "C. L. R., Raya, and I were inseparable . . . Our energy was fantastic. We would spend a morning or afternoon writing, talking, and eating and then go home and write voluminous letters to one another extending or enlarging on what we had discussed, sending these around to other members of our tendency in barely legible carbon copies."<sup>137</sup> The practice of translation allowed these comrades to anticipate the world they wished to see. Recall that they hoped to situate an independent U.S. Black people's party within the framework of a postwar Fourth International that was opposed to both Western and Soviet variants of state capitalism. We should locate Samir Amin's post-Cold War vision of a Fifth International that would pursue a polycentric, socialist, and democratic world in just such a translational tradition.

In the spirit of Lenin's call to turn the imperial war into a civil war, translation helps us to recognize that what appear to be reified differences *between* groups, cultures, or languages can be refigured as ramifying differences *within* them. The thinkers discussed above illuminate the intimate relation between translation practices and solidarity politics. They help us forge a translational orientation that embraces Babel as an opportunity. In so doing, it challenges culturalist assumptions about self-identical wholes, categorical differences, and impassable boundaries. Insofar as we might envision a world organized around translational relations of reciprocity and solidarity—a world in which anyone may wander without becoming lost—this orientation also points beyond the melancholic presentism I discuss next.

*Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 7–8. Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” in *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 151.

73. Leiner, “Entretien avec Aimé Césaire,” xiv–xv.

74. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 28.

75. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52.

76. It is telling that the term emerged at a specific moment in the intersecting histories of science (concerned with optical truth, the regularities of heavenly motion, and natural laws of the material world), philosophy (concerned with epistemological truth, the regularities of society, and natural laws of justice), and art (concerned with perspectival truth, the regularities of bodily motion, and natural laws of light and pigment). Each field was founded upon a realist epistemology that put great stock in the link between optics and reality, vision, and truth. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

77. Voloshinov understands ideology as composed of signs, especially words that are at once elements of a given material reality and *refract* another reality. He also refers to the “refracting powers of the socioeconomic conditions” to underscore the “social existence refracted” in language. V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 9, 15<sup>8</sup>

78. Heidegger also recognizes the productive force of uncanniness. But rather than fuel a poetic politics of the possible-impossible, his uncanniness propels actors out of the inauthentic state of average everydayness into a resolute embrace of their singular Being-toward-death—an apolitical condition of authentic existence that separates the human being from society, locates them outside of history, and leaves existing arrangements undisturbed. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

## 2. Concrete Utopianism and Critical Internationalism: Refusing Left Realism

1. For the ways that neoliberal capitalism creates the illusion that there is no alternative to the given world, see Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

2. Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: The Origins of the United Nations and the Search for Postwar Security* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001)

3. Article 2.7, Charter of the United Nations, 3.

4. William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Decolonization,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, no. 3 (1994): 462–511; William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, “Empire Preserv’d: How the

Americans Put Anti-Communism before Anti-Imperialism,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara (London: Routledge, 2004).

5. Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

6. For an overview, see Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations*, vol. 1: *The Years of Western Domination, 1945–1955* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1982). On the imperial genealogy of the UN, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

7. For the use of “nomos” as a way of referring to the global political order, see Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of a Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Condor, NY: Telos Press, 2006).

8. For example, Talal Asad, “Thinking About Terrorism and Just War,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1 (2010): 3–24; Asad, “Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 390–427; Ayça Çubukçu, “Thinking against Humanity,” *London Review of International Law* 5, no. 2 (2017): 251–67; Richard Falk, *Humanitarian Intervention and Legitimacy Wars: Seeking Peace and Justice in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Richard Falk et al., “Humanitarian Intervention: A Forum,” *Nation*, June 26, 2003; David Kennedy, *Of War and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Moyn, “Soft Sells: On Liberal Internationalism,” in *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (New York: Verso, 2014).

9. For example, his conviction that greater commercial intercourse among distant and different peoples would promote planetary reconciliation and universalist politics rather than interstate conflict and global imperialism. Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” and “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

10. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

11. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

12. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 294.

13. Arendt, *Origins*, 298.

14. Hannah Arendt, “The Minority Question” and “The Political Organization of the Jewish People: Articles from *Auftau*, April 1944–April 1945,” in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 125–34, 199–240.

15. For example: Albert Camus' demand that the planned United Nations be constituted as a genuine “international democracy” with a true “world parliament” able to enact binding legislation; W. E. B. Du Bois's insistence that the United Nations strip imperial powers of their colonies, declare itself unconditionally

opposed to colonialism, and include delegates from colonized territories; Gandhi's vision of a world federation of free, equal, and interdependent states through which the powerful nations would serve the weak, partly through resource redistribution, with the aim of creating "one world"; and Harold Laski's idea that a truly democratic world system could not be based on the principle of state sovereignty and required that capitalism be overcome. See Albert Camus, *Camus at "Combat": Writing 1944–1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 172–73; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945); Manu Bhagavan, *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2012); Harold Laski, "Toward a Universal Declaration of Human Rights," in *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretation: A Symposium Edited by UNESCO* (1949).

16. This fact alone should make us pause before any claim that anticolonial nationalism is intrinsically emancipatory and internationalism is inevitably imperial.

17. See Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

18. Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism: Some Observations from Modern Indian History," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 36, no. 2 (2016): 330.

19. Chatterjee, "Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism," 332.

20. Chatterjee, 333.

21. For an account of nonliberal forms of Indian internationalism that belies the claims that twentieth century internationalisms either served the aim of national self-determination or were Eurocentric and elitist, see Manu Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (December 2012): 1461–85.

22. Chatterjee, 332.

23. Chatterjee, 332. The same anti-utopian realism (which conflates transformative political imagination with extravagant idealism) runs through much of Chatterjee's later work. See Chatterjee's *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); "Lineages of Political Society" and "Tagore's Non-Nation," in *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); and *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). I would argue that this orientation marks a sharp turn from his pioneering *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986). The latter demonstrates how the (very structural logic of the) national state necessarily foreclosed the prospect for meaningful popular democracy in independent India.

24. Chatterjee, "Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism," 330.

25. Chatterjee, 326.

26. Chatterjee, 332.

27. Chatterjee, 332.

28. Chatterjee, 333.

29. Chatterjee, 333.

30. Chatterjee, 333.

31. Chatterjee, 333.

32. A similar orientation informs the work of Samuel Moyn. He makes the important point that most colonized people after World War II were more concerned with securing substantive social rights through national states than abstract human rights. But rather than attend to the possibilities for “transnational politics” (whose absence he bemoans) by nonliberal forms of cosmopolitanism and internationalism, he simply declares that “the nation-state won as a political form and nationalism won as a political ideology,” as if that settles the matter. Samuel Moyn, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 in the History of Cosmopolitanism,” *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Summer 2014): 369. Here, as in Moyn’s *Last Utopia*, a realist analytic leads him to ignore competing historical alternatives and posit a simple dichotomy between liberal internationalism, human rights, and empty cosmopolitanism on the one side, and the national welfarism of sovereign states on the other. He thereby implies that the historical triumph of the UN human rights order has exhausted the space of and ruled out the possibility for any other form of cosmopolitan internationalism. Moyn rightly challenges the depoliticizing character of human rights politics. But he does so on the grounds that they are utopian, not that they are liberal and imperial. Following this realist logic, in his book *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), he treats the welfarism of the New International Economic Order as the best political alternative to human rights without recognizing that human rights and welfarism simply express, in another register, an unacceptable choice between national states and liberal internationalism. This is the perspective from which, like Chatterjee, he dismisses past attempts to enact nonnational political forms as fantastic and unrealistic, as losing out to or not being in sync with the new global order that became hegemonic—as if being aligned with the dominant direction of historical development is a political virtue. See Samuel Moyn, “Fantasies of Federalism,” *Dissent* (Winter 2015).

33. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Julius Scott, *Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993); Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004) and *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Picador, 2013); Jean Casimir, *La culture opprimé* (Lakay, 2001), Jean Casimir, *La culture opprimé* (Lakay, 2001); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Giuseppe Mazzini, *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini’s Writings*

on *Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations*, ed. Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anticolonial Imagination* (New York: Verso, 2005); Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); reports of the International Socialist Bureau and International Socialist Congresses available at Lenin Marxists.org; Leon Trotsky, “The Program of the International Revolution or a Program of Socialism in One Country?,” in *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2010); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 71–102; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 13–59; Philippe Dewitte, *Les mouvements nègres en France, 1915–1939* (Paris: Harmattan, 1985); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 149–200; Christian Hogsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘This Ain’t Ethiopia, But It’ll Do’: African Americans and the Spanish Civil War,” *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 123–60; “Final Communiqué of the Asian-African conference of Bandung (24 April 1955),” *Asia-Africa Speak from Bandung* (Jakarta: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955); Anne Garland Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), <https://www.thetricontinental.org>. For an indispensable synoptic account of Third World internationalism, see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007).

34. Samir Amin, *Re-Reading the Postwar Period: An Intellectual Itinerary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 168.

35. For his autobiographical reflections, see Samir Amin, *A Life Looking Forward: Memoirs of an Independent Marxist* (London: Zed Books, 2006) and Amin, *Postwar Period*.

36. Amin, *Postwar Period*, 63, 64.

37. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?: Assessing the Prospects for a Multipolar World* (London: Zed Books, 2006), 90.

38. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 91.

39. Amin regards the subsequent project for a New International Economic Order as a similar effort that “aimed at modifying the rules of the game to give capitalist development in the peripheries a second chance. As the strategy was in



contradiction with an autocentric strategy of delinking, it was bound to fail.” Amin, *Postwar Period*, 165.

40. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 91.

41. This conception should not be confused with the kind of epistemological boundary policing that, as I discuss in this chapter, Walter Mignolo characterizes as “decolonial delinking.”

42. Samir Amin, *Delinking: Toward a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1990), 68, 74.

43. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 84.

44. Amin, 150.

45. Amin, 1, 107, 156.

46. Amin, 6.

47. Samir Amin, *The World We Wish to See: Revolutionary Objectives in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 71.

48. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 106.

49. Amin, *World We Wish to See*, 7.

50. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 106.

51. Amin, 152.

52. Amin, 152.

53. Amin, *World We Wish to See*, 63.

54. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 150, 154, 180.

55. Amin, 92.

56. By “triad” he means the U.S., Europe, and Japan. Amin, *World We Wish to See*, 45.

57. Amin, 45.

58. Amin, 63.

59. Amin, 63.

60. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 155

61. Amin, 63.

62. On alterglobalization, see Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (New York: Verso, 2004).

63. He refers to comprador labor unions, patriotic organizations, and religious sects in Northern centers as well as religious and ethnic fundamentalisms in the Global South. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 162.

64. Amin, *World We Wish to See*, 39; emphasis added.

65. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?* 155.

66. Amin, *World We Wish to See*, 39; emphasis added.

67. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?*, 161

68. Amin, 161.

69. Amin, *World We Wish to See*, 40.

70. Amin, 77.

71. Amin, 79

72. Amin, 75.

73. Amin, 79.

74. Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony?* 157.

75. Amin, *Life Looking Forward*, 204.

76. Amin, 222.

77. Amin, 224.

78. Amin, 236–37.

79. Amin, 236–37.

80. Amin, 236–37.

81. Amin, 236–37.

82. Amin, 219, 240.

83. Amin, 246.

84. Amin, 241, 244.

85. An English translation of the Porto Alegre Manifesto can be found at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/porto-alegre-manifesto-in-english/>. Amin glosses the Bamako Appeal as a more modest iteration of his envisioned Fifth International. Dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference, the Appeal calls for “a new popular and historical subject” that is “diverse and multipolar,” committed to the “radical transformation of the capitalist system,” to “harmony in societies by abolishing exploitation by class, gender, race, and caste,” and to “a new balance of power between the South and the North.” The Bamako Appeal is published as Appendix 2 in Amin, *World We Wish to See*. On the genesis of the Appeal in anticipation of the Polycentric World Social Forum meetings in Mali, Venezuela, and Pakistan, see John Catalinotto, “‘Bamako Appeal’ Promotes Struggle Against Market-Driven Society,” *Workers World* (January 27, 2006); Marc Becker, “Report from the World Social Forum VI: Civil Society Meets Chavez’s State,” *Dollars and Sense* (March/April 2006): 7–8.

86. Amin, *Life Looking Forward*, 249.

87. Amin, 249.

88. In recent years, antirealist orientations have propelled some of the most insightful and subversive critiques of actually existing arrangements today. Here we might think of the commitment to enacting desired worlds and the festival-like atmosphere that suffuses disorderly General Assemblies and Occupy encampments; the absurdist campaigns launched by the anarchist collective Anonymous; the speculative fiction of radical thinkers like Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler; the fantastic—precisely because they are hyperbolically literal—accounts of everyday American racism in Paul Beatty’s novel *The Sellout* and recent films such as *Get Out* and *Sorry to Bother You*.

89. Edgardo Lander, “The Venezuelan Oil Rentier Model and the Present Crisis the Country Faces” and Fernando Coronil, “Oilpacity: Secrets of History in the Coup against Hugo Chávez,” in *The Fernando Coronil Reader: The Struggle for Life Is the Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

### 3. Practicing Translation: Beyond Left Culturalism

1. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 58.

2. Frank B. Wilderson III, “Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption,” *The Occupied Times* (March 30, 2016), 5, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=14236>. For further elaboration of this position, see Wilderson “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal,” *Social Justice* 30, no. 3 (2003): 18–27.

3. Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes* 29 (2106), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html>.

4. Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism.”

5. Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism.”

6. Rather than critique colonial universalism from the standpoint of local particularism, or colonial particularism from the standpoint of universal humanism, the very universal-particular binary needs to be historicized, criticized, and displaced. See Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 47–71.

8. This framing closely resembles the categorical distinction between system and lifeworld in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

9. On this basis, Chakrabarty treats liberalism and Marxism as two sides of the same Eurocentric coin. He mischaracterizes Marx’s critique of how capitalism creates abstract equivalences across incommensurable differences (in order to reduce life to labor, and labor to value, which alienates humans from their land, their work, their social communities, and themselves) as Marx’s normative vision of society.

10. Talal Asad, “The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East: Notes on Islamic Public Argument,” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). This insightful analysis begs questions about the ways that some traditions may be discursive but not embodied.

11. Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000): 533–80.

12. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xviii, 54, 74, 97.

13. He contends that decolonial thought is rooted in the Americas and seeks to transform social knowledge whereas postcolonial critique is rooted in the analysis of British colonialism in South Asia and seeks to shift academic knowledge.

14. Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 116.

15. Mignolo, 80.
16. Mignolo, 81.
17. Mignolo, 34, 54, 61, 70, 258.
18. Mignolo, 326.
19. Mignolo, 326.
20. Cf. Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder, “Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial Contemporary,” in *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present* (New York: Forham University Press, 2018), 1–30.
21. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Random House, 1963); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (New York: Verso, 2018); Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 1994); Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012); Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
22. Mignolo, *Darker Side*, xxvii; Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). When discussing intergenerational debates and revisions within the Islamic tradition Asad here employs a more nuanced understanding of translation as a practice of ongoing interpretation. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 71.
23. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. and ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), xix.
24. Cassin, *Dictionary*, xix.
25. Cassin, xx
26. Cassin, xvi
27. Cassin, xvii
28. Cassin, xviii.
29. Cassin, xviii.
30. Cassin, xvii.
31. Cassin, xix.
32. Cassin, xvii.
33. See Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

34. Jacques Derrida, "Living On/Borderlines," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Routledge, 1979), 119.

35. He endorses Jakobson's typology of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation. See Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

36. Derrida, "Living On/Borderlines," 101; and Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.

37. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 10.

38. Derrida, 49.

39. Cf. Adorno's "interpretive eye."

40. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 47.

41. Derrida, 50-51.

42. Derrida, 51.

43. Derrida, "Living On/Borderlines," 102.

44. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 257.

45. Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," 253, 256.

46. Benjamin, 260.

47. Benjamin, 257.

48. Benjamin, 261-62.

49. See also Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," in *Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

50. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 24.

51. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *The Ink of Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa* (CODESRIA, 2016), xx.

52. Diagne, *Ink of Scholars*, 16-17.

53. Diagne, 34.

54. Diagne contributed several entries to the American edition of Cassin's *Dictionary*.

55. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "Philosopher en Afrique," *Critique* vol. 8-9, no. 771-72 (2011): 611-12.

56. Diagne, *Ink of Scholars*, 30.

57. Diagne, 64. Here, he is referring specifically to African socialism. He makes a similar point about the absence of an original or singular "Islam" (prior to any translation) in *Comment Philosophe en Islam?* (Paris: Éditions du Panama, 2008).

58. Diagne, *Ink of Scholars*, 24.

59. Diagne, 24.

60. Diagne, 17. He borrows this formulation from Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

61. Diagne, *Ink of Scholars*, 51. Diagne makes this point in dialogue with Léopold

Sédar Senghor, who reminds readers that Birago Diop understood this Italian warning when he “translated” African folktales into written form. Rather than seek word-to-word equivalences, Senghor explains, Diop was a creative artist who rethought and reworked them.

62. In his own work, Diagne places African philosophy, literature, religion, and art, “in touch” with a wide range of Islamic and Western philosophers.

63. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 103.

64. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 103. In his 1956 resignation from the French Communist Party, Césaire famously refused the false alternative between a narrow particularism that would lead to walled-in segregation and dilution in an emaciated universalism. He envisioned an alternative “universal . . . enriched and deepened by all particulars, by the coexistence of all particulars.” Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), 156.

65. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 103, 105.

66. Glissant, 107. Note that Derrida first presented the paper that would become *Monolingualism of the Other* at a conference organized by Glissant. In it, he invokes Glissant’s conception of Relation but does not take it up in ways that might have helped him to displace rather than reproduce the old antinomy between universality and particularity.

67. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 107–8.

68. Glissant, 108. This dialectical understanding of place and world is further developed in Édouard Glissant, *Traité de Tout-Monde*, Poétique IV (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1997).

69. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 109. Emphasis added.

70. Glissant, 192.

71. Glissant, 144.

72. Glissant, 144.

73. Glissant, 19.

74. Glissant, 144.

75. Glissant, 189.

76. Glissant, 189.

77. Glissant, 190. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

78. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

79. Glissant, 190.

80. Glissant, 190, 191.

81. Glissant, 190.

82. Glissant, 190.

83. Glissant, 73.

84. Glissant, 65.

85. Glissant, 71.

86. Glissant, 74.

- 87. Glissant, 65.
- 88. Glissant, 190.
- 89. Glissant, 29.
- 90. Glissant, 33.
- 91. Glissant, 71.
- 92. Glissant, 155.
- 93. Glissant, 199.
- 94. Glissant, 293.
- 95. Glissant, 155.

96. I do not concur with the common interpretation that with *The Poetics of Relation*, the focus of Glissant's work shifts from politics to poetics, from concrete to abstract concerns, or from attention to Antillean specificity to generalizations about the world. I would argue that he seeks, in all his work, to explode these very oppositions. The register of his writings along with certain key terms may have shifted, but his underlying investments remained remarkably consistent. We might ask those who insist on a break between the early and late Glissant about their understanding of "politics" as self-evidently distinct from poetics and as only legible or legitimate when it takes the form of anticolonial nationalism. See the otherwise insightful analyses of Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), 66–142; Chris Bongie, "Édouard Glissant: Dealing in Globality," in *Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World*, ed. Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009); Nick Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 133–56, 231–50.

97. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 147.

98. Betsy Wing translates *donner-avec* as "giving-on-and-with" (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 142).

99. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34, 155.

100. Glissant, 131.

101. Following Marx's Hegelian distinction between universal, particular, and singular, I use singularity to mean that which is irreducible and must be grasped on its own terms. The singular is not simply a part of a larger whole. The term "difference" usually functions to establish boundaries, whether in terms of the binary of same vs. different or between categories of phenomena. In contrast, singularity, as I employ and understand it, typically confounds categorization, classification, and tendencies to ontologize "difference" in determinate ways. My sense of singularities as being capable of entering into endless configurations with other singularities as source and force of transformative political potentiality, is informed by the way the concept is employed by Glissant, as discussed in this chapter, and in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). See also Chapter 11 of this book.

102. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

103. Glissant, 155.
104. Glissant, 203. Emphasis added.
105. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
106. Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 212.
107. Santos, 228.
108. Santos, 215, 216.
109. Santos, 112.
110. Santos, 219.
111. Santos, 232.
112. Santos, 213, 219.
113. Santos, 217, 218.
114. Santos, 214.
115. Santos, 214.
116. Santos, 213.
117. Santos, 222.
118. Santos, 222.
119. Santos, 233.
120. Santos, 233.
121. Signatories of the WSF's 2005 Porto Alegre Manifesto included those from Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, France, Italy, Mali, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Portugal, Spain, United States, and Uruguay. See "Annexe III: Manifesto of Porto Alegre: Another World Is Possible: Twelve Proposals," in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006).
122. "World Social Forum Charter of Principles" (April 2001), <https://fsmm2018.org/world-social-forum-charter-principles/?lang=en>.
123. "World Social Forum Charter of Principles."
124. Santos, *Rise of the Global Left*, 11, 12.
125. Santos, 129.
126. It was criticized by some Leftists as a gathering of representatives that were too focused on deliberation and should not have excluded revolutionary organizations involved in armed struggle.
127. Santos, *Rise of the Global Left*, 132.
128. Santos, 132.
129. Santos, 133.
130. Cf. Bakhtin on heteroglossia in M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
131. On the latter, see Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). On what grounds could we say that these non-Western radicals were *not* members of the Marxist tradition?
132. Anderson, *Under Three Flags*, 5.



133. Ralph Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, revised and updated (New York: Modern Library/Random House, 2004), 205.

134. C. L. R. James, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question (1939)” and “Notes Following the Discussion (1939),” in *C. L. R. James on the “Negro Question,”* ed. Scott McLemee (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996).

135. C. L. R. James, “Education, Propaganda, Agitation: Post-War America and Bolshevism,” in James, *Marxism for our Times*, ed. Martin Glaberman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 199), 16.

136. James, “Education, Propaganda, Agitation,” 16–17

137. Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 60–61.

#### 4. Of Pessimism and Presentism: Against Left Melancholy

1. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 244.

2. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 244, 245.

3. Cf. Joan Wallach Scott, *On the Judgment of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

4. Fadi Bardawil, “The Solitary Analyst of Doxas: An Interview with Talal Asad,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36, no. 1 (2016): 156.

5. Bardawil, “Solitary Analyst,” 164.

6. Bardawil, 164.

7. Bardawil, 170–71.

8. Bardawil, 171, 155–56.

9. Bardawil, 167.

10. Bardawil, 167.

11. Bardawil, 170.

12. Bardawil, 165.

13. Cf. Derrida on “waiting without horizon of expectation.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 211.

14. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 199.

15. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

16. Berlant, 229–30.

17. Berlant, 224, 227.

18. Berlant, 229, 230, 231.

19. Berlant, 259.

20. Berlant, 259.

21. Berlant, 259.

22. Berlant, 260.

23. Berlant, 260.