

Faculty Scholarship

Fall 2022

A Planetary Imagination: Responses to Chakrabarty's Socio-Natural Historiography, Editorial Introduction


Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

Case Western Reserve University, jeremy.bendik-keymer@case.edu

Author(s) ORCID Identifier:

 [Jeremy Bendik-Keymer](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.case.edu/facultyworks>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bendik-Keymer, Jeremy, "A Planetary Imagination: Responses to Chakrabarty's Socio-Natural Historiography, Editorial Introduction" (2022). *Faculty Scholarship*. 95.
<https://commons.case.edu/facultyworks/95>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@case.edu.

0. Editorial Introduction

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 essay in *Critical Inquiry*, "The Climate of History: Four Theses"¹ sent tremors through the environmentally aware humanities in the 2010s. Last year, he published the book that brought that essay forward into the present, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.² It's no overstatement to think of this book as having clanged the bell for a new normal in the humanities and social sciences when it comes to telling the story of ourselves, that is, when it comes to human history. Responsible history should today be geological even when recounting the human record. Chakrabarty raised a series of open-ended, difficult questions about a range of core concerns in the humanities and social sciences from how we can understand ourselves and society to how we ought to think about political economy and morality. How should these concerns be reconsidered – and their study reorganized – given the rupture of the Earth system sciences – and more generally the "planetary" – into their domains?

This question is not as easy as (what Neil Brenner in this issue calls) a "techno-scientific" ideology would suggest. Earth system science (ESS) is not unproblematic but is an episteme that has a location in the world that is powerful and fraught by the social construction at its base and of scientific practice. We need a dialectical understanding of ESS and a dialectical understanding of the planetary in order to discern, critically, what the planetary should mean to us. Moreover, our locations and trajectories, our traditions, are differentially situated and differentially affected in and by the social systems that should appear through a dialectical grasp of the planetary – e.g., capitalism, colonialism, industrialism, but also Indigenous law, national democracies, and cultural traditions of family systems – to merely scratch the surface of hard things with a single, nail-bitten, finger. What should it take to be able to relate well to and through knowledge of the planetary in a way that does not eclipse your story or simplify, even erase, your systemic social location? What is it to grasp the challenge to social and political thought of the planetary *of* ESS alongside the challenge *to* ESS of its relationship to, let's say for simplicity, coloniality?

One thing I have recently noticed is that some scholars of decolonial orientation push back against ESS, including against Chakrabarty's claims around ESS. Why do we need to focus on the planetary of ESS when Indigenous traditions of cosmology have long had – since time immemorial – a seemingly geological and certainly ecological orientation, at least as translated through spirituality? But part of the dialectical challenge of the planetary of ESS as Chakrabarty understands it is that the big-data driven, computer modeled, highly mathematical, and fragmentary episteme of ESS is itself discrete and novel in its particular illuminations, obscurities, obscurations, and projections. It's not enough – it is inaccurate – to say, "they did it too, and long before." They did it different, and ESS is doing it different.

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009), 197-222

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021

As an outgrowth of modern science, ESS has a distinctively powerful epistemology that cannot simply be reduced to one cultural construction among others. ESS is cultural in its genealogical history, but it is also an episteme that produces knowledge exceeding its cultural location as the history of modern science has shown with its power to build on itself and make effective connections and insights.³ Nonetheless, despite ESS's powerful tools with specific but non-binding socio-political locations and constructions, the question still today in the socially alienated world system is one of power/knowledge, to use Foucault's terminology: how has this form of knowing been shaped and situated to create disparate effects – on whom, and by what ontology? How does it form and affect relations, and again, of what or whom and by what ontology? What does it condition us to do, see, even feel – or not? What does it obscure and put out of play? What does it make possible? How to use it well?

The drivers of the social situation in which the planetary has been caught up are not new to us, but rather how to perceive and engage their effects responsibly is, to my mind, the core moral question. The episteme of ESS would not *be* a rupture if it were not for the existential situation produced by modern society and its colonialism, industrialism, and capitalism, but also its external forms of law and its short-sighted democracies and wanton international order. How to come to terms with the structural injustices and wanton disregard for the more than human world are the drivers making the rupture of the planetary of ESS so real and novel historically? The interaction takes us back, dialectically, to the episteme of ESS in its own power/knowledge formation, while reinforcing and modifying the stakes and challenges of the critique of modern social injustice. These are the lineaments of the dialectical understanding of the planetary that are so important. The special issue before you might be said to make some modest but insightful contributions to how to think about developing a social philosophy attuned to that task. For many reasons, we should see things in their specificity, and this means coming to terms with the discrete episteme of the planetary of ESS as it interacts with our inherited trajectories of structural injustice. *Pace* Thomas Nail's eloquent claims in this issue, that is something that only recently, and not "always" have we been able to *fragmentarily* do, and we do not know yet what, self-reflexively, it means for us to *be*. That's Chakrabarty's point, and it's why we have this special issue.

2. This interdisciplinary special issue of *Environmental Philosophy* includes scholars trained or located in environmental studies (Gibson), geography (Brenner), history (Chakrabarty, Chatterjee), international relations (Pedersen, Stevis), philosophy (Brenner, Gibson, Lisowska, Nail, and myself), political science (Brenner, Kalfagianni, Pedersen, Stevis, Winter), sociology (Celermajer, Brenner), and South Asian studies (Chakrabarty) – including a social scientist in a professorship of sustainability located within a faculty of geosciences (Kalfagianni). As such, it manifests the complex *thinking-with* that thinking the planetary demands. What is it to have a pluralistic and dialectical understanding of the planetary? The essays in this issue point toward answers to that question.

³ See Chris Haufe, *How Knowledge Grows: The Evolutionary Development of Scientific Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

3. This project evolved from conversations begun as a panel at the 2021 annual meeting of IAEP, the International Association for Environmental Philosophy, this journal's organizational home.⁴ Since I have been member-at-large since 2019, it was my duty to put together a panel, and I wanted to bring together a number of scholarly communities that have been important to me and for which I am grateful, exposing them to IAEP and IAEP to them. I wanted to emphasize their interdisciplinarity too. As a result, contributors to this issue became known to me originally through the Human Development and Capability Association (Christine Winter and Urszula Lisowska), and the Earth System Governance Project, particularly its Planetary Justice Taskforce (Stefan Pedersen, Dimitris Stevis, and Agni Kalfagianni).⁵ Only through having met David Schlosberg at the HDCA did I attend his 2017 conference on environmental justice where I met Danielle Celermajer and saw Christine Winter again. I met Julia Gibson at the 2019 annual meeting of ISEE, the International Society of Environmental Ethics, IAEP's sibling in the United States of America. Reviewing Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Earth for Environmental Ethics*, also a sibling of sorts to this publication, made it obvious to me that his work should be invited into this discussion around Chakrabarty's socio-natural historiography. Finally, reconnecting with my old friend Neil Brenner as he took a lead in developing the Committee on Environment, Geography, and Urbanization at Chicago seemed a natural addition, and his instincts led to inviting Liz Chatterjee too. From the initial conversation in 2021 to the paper workshops and interview organized in 2022, this written project became itself a multi-disciplinary conversation. Thank you for continuing it by reading.

4. The most obvious complexity to the issue is disciplinary. The authors of this issue include many social scientists and, depending on how one views the discipline of history, humanists outside of philosophy. Two of the authors in this issue are also specialists in Indigenous studies. The result of this disciplinary complexity is a wonderfully wide range of literatures that you will find in the footnotes. One of the pleasures of the issue for me was meeting up with sources that I had never heard of due to my disciplinary location and trajectory.

Still, as I have found is true in many environmental studies contexts, there is a shared spirit to the group which I would describe as broadly moral in orientation, concerned with environmental devastation. It is this same kind of shared spirit that binds together the wide range of disciplines and practitioner-areas in a project like the Earth System Governance Project. We are all concerned *by* our planetary situation, and we all want to respond thoughtfully to it, including politically. This allows one, I think, to trust in the unknown that appears as one reads work by scholars in disciplines outside one's own, including their terminology, styles of argument, and apparent in-house debates. It's okay. We're in this together, and we are concerned – enough to be political.

⁴ The project's deeper roots are in *Living Forms*, a semester long inter-institutional faculty seminar at Case Western Reserve University's Baker Nord Center for the Humanities in 2014. John Levy Barnard from the College of Wooster, now at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, co-organized the workshop and introduced us to Dipesh's 2009 essay which the seminar read and discussed in earnest.

⁵ Both of these organizations are affiliated formally with the United Nations, HDCA through the World Human Development Reports and ESG through UNEP (the UN's institution concerning the environment).

5. I arranged the contents of this special issue so that strongly decolonial and even speculative writing came first. I wanted things to push hard against the planetary up front and to push hard against the conventional philosophical canon. I wanted the *imagination* in “planetary imagination” to chorus the neighborhood like summer’s end crickets and grasshoppers at night. This gave us Gibson, Celermajer and Winter, and then Nail.

I then wanted political reflexivity to enter the mind – the shape of the neighborhood around midnight, so to speak. As you can see, my own view is that social alienation structures and disfigures academic debates far more than many may recognize. The truth of lost warmth is too uncomfortable. Many have sophisticated, narcissistic defences – in their (our?) minds, behaviors, practices, ideologies, laws, institutions, images, cultures, In this light, a lot of ontological, metaphysical, and epistemic issues are at bottom politically shaped, with a moral core that is the problem of domination.⁶

With that prejudice, then, the issue turns to institutional reflexivity in the broadly Marxist tradition. There’s Brenner and Chatterjee’s interview, the rich and complex history of “planetarism” with my colleagues from the Earth System Governance Project – Pedersen, Stevis, and Kalfagianni – and then my essay seeking to relocate the canonical discussion of the Kantian sublime within an analytics of social alienation. These are complex histories of education, politics, and aesthetic sensibilities clearing way for protest and organizational judgment.

Within our planetary condition, I believe that we’re called to think of the forms of knowing and reflexivity that are most open and capable of developing the discourse of the planetary in a moral, polyvocal, and dialectical fashion. In some such spirit, Lisowska’s essay, the last in the collection, focuses on the politics of wonder.⁷ It reminds me of the Eastern screech owl trill clear in the dark air.

6. All of the contributions to this issue discuss Chakrabarty’s work, mostly around his discourse of the planetary. In the series of discussions among the contributors that led up to this publication, Chakrabarty himself spoke highly of Julia Gibson’s summary of his position. For that, you may want to read section IV.i. in their piece, titled “Planet versus globe: time, politics, and species.” A plain overview of the book’s eight essays and postscript can be found in my piece in part I. Brenner and Chatterjee’s interview gives a picture of the institutional context at the University of Chicago influenced by Chakrabarty’s work, providing a setting for how what its theses concern might be said to affect knowledge production. If you are unfamiliar with *The Climate of History*, I suggest that you take some time to read these various parts before reading into the essays of this issue as a whole.

7. One of the reviewers for this issue asked that I reflect with the reader on the complexity of the issue. I appreciate this request, because otherwise my hesitancy to take away the effort

⁶ I see this problem as shaping the spiritual as well. The moral core must be grasped alongside the specificity of the epistemological, metaphysical, and ontological challenges. Otherwise, the soulful relation too will be askew or missing. This is not political reductionism but a dialectical approach that centers existential concerns as disclosing meaning and sense.

⁷ And the challenge of what ESG scholars call “ecological reflexivity” after John Dryzek’s work.

and joy of making connections on one's own might have prevailed. The reviewer is probably right. This is a gnarly (and I find beautiful) special issue, but the purpose of the whorls is to provoke more thoughtful pursuits.

I've already shared some of my reasoning for how the issue is arranged. But I now want to share the perspectives of six of the contributors to this special issue, three of them speaking in one voice. I asked the issue's authors how they read the issue, and these are the replies that came back at summer's end.⁸ Ursula Lisowska reflected:

I would say that what the special issue does is to respond to the (1) importance and (2) complexity of Chakrabarty's book, as well as reflecting the diversity of perspectives represented by the contributors.

One of the many reasons why Chakrabarty's book is important is because it locates the Anthropocene as a political challenge (and a/the challenge to politics) in the context of the entrenched concepts and thought habits of Western philosophy. The way I see it, one of the tasks of the issue is to comment on this setting (and the very setting of the book in this setting). This is done in two ways. Some of the papers (Jeremy's, mine) probe (but also revise) the Western legacy for helpful insights. Others apply unorthodox approaches (Thomas Nail) or go beyond the Western perspective (Julia Gibson, Danielle Celeremajer and Christine J. Winter). The latter strategy has the additional advantage of (respectfully) contributing to "the provincialization" of Chakrabarty's book.

The book is complex in at least two senses. First, its central conceptual distinction – between the global and the planetary – is not as neat as it may seem. Reading some of the papers (especially Julia Gibson's) helped me better understand the subtleties of this distinction. So, apart from the criticisms, challenges, and improvements that the special issue offers, I believe that it can also provide a good heuristic guide for the readers of Chakrabarty's book.

Second, the book covers a vast thematic scope. I dare say that it is impossible for any reader to fully appreciate the richness of *The Climate of History* (I, for one, missed many of its valuable points). While the special issue is necessarily selective and doesn't intend to offer a comprehensive overview of the book, it presents several vantage points from which the book can be approached. I think the diversity of the special issue is a great value; moreover, it is compatible with the nature of Chakrabarty's book.

Finally, while *The Climate of History* is obviously the focal point for all the papers, each text was written from a different perspective and is strongly rooted in its author's/authors' research. I think that this is also an asset because, as a result, the special issue opens in many directions. It could inspire the readers to follow up on some of those themes. Chakrabarty's book is rich enough; but I believe that it is a good thing that the special issue not only explores its complexity but also adds to it.

⁸ Several other authors had life-changing or seriously challenging circumstances, and many were travelling. Although I wonder over what they might have written, I refuse to pester my colleagues to pervert their work-life balance for the sake of a publication.

Moreover, the special issue is genuinely interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary (and the interview with Neil Brenner and Elizabeth Chatterjee, as well as the paper by Stefan, Dimitris and Agni actually thematize interdisciplinarity/transdisciplinarity), as it is often said discussions about the Anthropocene should be.

Overall, the issue could leave its readers with the impression that no single perspective is final. There is always something beyond, and sense-making requires inviting the diversity of points of view. This may be an obvious conclusion, but I think it is nonetheless a welcome one. As such, the issue is a work of wondering!

8. Homing in on some of the issue's big ideas, Stefan Pedersen, Dimitris Stevis, and Agni Kalfagianni noticed:

Although diverse in perspectives, the articles in this special issue underline several common themes that problematize the notion of the planetary in dialogue with Chakrabarty's work. Three such threads stand out in particular.

First, the need for collaboration between earth system sciences and social sciences and the humanities is underlined in almost every contribution. Such collaboration is necessary for any effort to understand the planetary and develop it as an analytical category that can guide new moral and governance principles for the Earth. Collaboration, however, needs to be on equal footing and avoid "devolving into relativism" as Brenner and Chatterjee put it in their contribution.

Second, the decolonial critique is present explicitly or implicitly across all contributions. Taking different forms, ranging from a critique to universality to embracing a new form of universality "without supremacist baggage" as Pedersen, Stevis, and Kalfagianni put it, decolonial and postcolonial thinking is considered necessary to develop a new planetary ethos.

Third, while change is necessary, there is already a basis of knowledge to build upon. This observation is underlined particularly by Celermajer and Winter in their study of "fables" from *Genesis* 2, and Maturanga Māori, and by Pedersen, Stevis, Kalfagianni in their history of environmental political thought. There is no need to start reimagining everything from scratch. There is a lot to learn and build upon by looking at bodies of knowledge that have been relatively neglected so far.

The difference and relations between the planetary and the global are certainly central but so are the relations between the human and the more than human and, equally importantly, the articulations of these dimensions.

Finally, another question that appears in a number of articles is whether the planetary, even if assumed to be different from the global, suspends the kinds of social questions that we would ask with respect to the global. Is there something in the nature of the planetary sublime that evades history, power, and justice?

9. Lastly, in their characteristically lyrical and down to earth manner, Julia Gibson wrote:

What strikes me the most about this special issue is its warmth. Here I have in mind the kind of pro-social warmth/warming that Jeremy Bendik-Keymer advocates for in

“The Planetary Sublime.” These are essays and authors eager to build something, with and towards. The atmosphere they generate collectively is refreshingly and decidedly constructive. Thomas Nail even adds playfulness to the mix. I myself close on joy. Nail also eloquently invokes the metaphor of waves to describe our encounters as readers with Chakrabarty’s text. Waves feature in the conversation between Neil Brenner, Elizabeth Chatterjee, and Bendik-Keymer as well. Naturally, now I can’t help but envision all of us playing together in the waves of this book. Sublimely, reverently, wonderingly.

I do not conjure this image to trivialize the book or this issue. I latched on to the idea of a “playful process” because it felt blessedly lively. Life—and death—affirming. This is a quality that is all too often lacking in professional philosophy, even (and most confusingly) environmental philosophy. Such a process/product stands in contrast to the tenor of work we produce when we engage with our red pens at the ready. *Let me play with you*, not as prey but as partner. We might still spar but that’s not the only dance we know.

I conjure this image because it helps me better understand what we are up to here with *The Climate of History*. Sometimes we are content to float on our backs and let the words move us, up one side of the wave and down the other. Others are riding boards into shore to see how far Chakrabarty’s ideas can take us. On the sand, work is underway digging trenches to channel these waters into a moat. There is talk of islands in the harbor and freshwater streams running into the sea; currents and salinity may not be what they seem. Someone else is monitoring and mapping the undertow (we may be at play, but we still remember basic water safety). How far does the undertow take us? Is this where the waves come from? What no one is doing is looking out at the ocean and bemoaning its placidity. There is plenty of movement to work with, and everyone is feeling the rising tide.

10. I think that these reflections are insightful in different ways. Gibson’s focus on the affective sensibility of the generation of our special issue is important because it takes seriously that the root of planetary injustice is still bad relations between people. It’s not the planetary that causes the injustice, but the bad relations. And if social alienation is as powerful in reproducing injustice – including the power/knowledge dynamics of how we approach, construct, and use knowledge – then figuring out how to produce inquiry in a way that works *against* or even dissolves social alienation becomes of the essence. One of the things that is most haunting about the planetary is not, *pace* Chakrabarty, how impersonal it is – why is it not awesome and beautiful? – but rather how *personal* the problems passing through its episteme are. They are on the same continuum of problems as the neoliberal state and market’s shaping of academic precarity, workplace indignity and disrespect, and the differential disadvantages of racism in policing. Social alienation links the personal to the planetary by way of the crises of structural injustice that are wreaking havoc through the Earth system. But given the distinct episteme of ESS and what it discloses of our aggregate effects, the personal continuum inside planetary injustice does not mean that we yet know what we should do or how we should be “planetary.”

One of the places where spirituality comes in is exactly here, but not in a simplistic manner that simply clears aside – or sweeps away – ESS and the challenges of becoming geological based on an ontology of motion and a biology of paleontological contingency punctuated by mass extinctions. Moreover, the spirituality of *traditions* ought to be a focus, where ritual practice and detailed, tough, intergenerational response-ability have often been woven into the quotidian and have simultaneously produced the quotidian as a place with integrity and continuance. Spirituality *intensifies* meaning in the details without which our lives are not really that worth living. At its best, spirituality resists social alienation and is hardcore in its power to withstand many aspects of structural injustice that infringe on and pervert social cooperation, care for life on Earth, and justice.⁹

The problem, though, is that spirituality is just as filled with domination and misdirection as any human institution. Romanticizing spirituality *in toto* only makes it harder to come to term with that historical truth. Spirituality is adverbial, which means that it potentially modifies everything that we do. But that can make routine injustice pass over into wickedness, doubling down on bad things, as the Catholic church has repeatedly shown. The dialectical applies to spirituality as well, and this time in a difficult relationship to modern autonomy as well as to what can be learned on structural and intimate planes by the conflagration *and* meeting of different cultures caused by the vicious history of the colonial world system. For myself, this means turning to thoughtfulness, trying to honor what is soulful, and respecting genuine spirituality when I meet it, even if it is not mine. What can I learn? What practices might be formed or transformed for a daily life my neighborhood could handle?

The point is: the elements of this issue are all fragmentary given the *event* we are in. Moreover, the planetary is, I agree with Chakrabarty, a rupture when seen with soulfulness *as the great condition differentially affecting all cultures on Earth modified fragmentarily by ESS with its own issues of power/knowledge*.¹⁰ Simply rejecting the point and saying either “we have seen this before” or “we got this” is not accurate, not precise, because there really has never been in human history the specific episteme we now have by way of ESS and its fragmentary projections about the unintended consequences of tens of thousands of years of human history. This does not make the planetary of ESS morally authoritative in a techno-scientific spirit; the situation makes coming to terms with what the planetary of ESS discloses morally vital. ESS’s tools are there, coloniality and all, and it would be irresponsible not to make use of them so as to have a better grasp on even one’s spiritual path indebted to premodern wisdom. We do seem to be in the early phases of a mass extinction after all, and the climate is destabilized, Earth’s systems unbundling and spinning apart decade by decade as in a vortex of wantonness from out of the long unwinding of the colonial world system. Chakrabarty is roughly right. But what he has opened has not become dialectical enough – not in decoloniality, not in spirituality, and not in moral, social and political philosophy. Again, that’s why we are here, reading, talking, being disturbed, and thinking together.

⁹ I say all this as an atheist and as a person without a spiritual tradition. Moreover, New Age spirituality strikes me as inauthentic and narcissistic.

¹⁰ I tend to speak of things being soulful rather than of them being “spiritual.” But we are in the realm of knowing by acquaintance in each, a shared logical domain.

11. Have I told you it is still summer, only just barely? The gorgeous weirdness of life is floating in the tame environs of my backyard even as I type. Danielle Celermajer expressed in her lament to the sixth mass extinction that banal mass killing is a condition of the planetary as we have come to know it.¹¹ That is a dialectical point if ever I have heard one. How should we think of ourselves and of this violence that touches on seemingly every being of the world of everyday life – and countless beings beyond it? What the *hell* are we going to do about our condition? Because, you know, it is really so wrong you just have to walk around half out of this world to not go bonkers facing it. We now can understand something of the planetary consequences in terms of deep time.

12. We would like to thank the editors and the production staff of *Environmental Philosophy*, our reviewers, and IAEP. I am personally grateful to my family for their support. As I write now, our new addition, Ellery, is on my lap, snoring. Ellery is 16 days old. I edited this issue from ceded land in violation of the Treaty of Greenville, 1795. Before American colonialists forcibly took this land and led to a cease-fire treaty, there were civilizations that stewarded the land imperfectly with forms of law containing ideas, intentions, and practices that are often much better suited to adjusting to our planetary situation than those many of our nation states have at their fingertips. I agree with Chakrabarty that the planetary has erupted into human civilization as a new, Earth-system-science articulated cosmology. But the intentions and formal ideas inside much Indigenous law contain glimpses of the world we should make together. How much planetary imagination, soulful justness, and political will will that take! I am hoping that it starts with you, too.

~ September 6th, 2022

Shaker Heights, Ohio, USA

Once and still rightful land of many nations

¹¹ Danielle Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future* (Sydney: Penguin Random House, 2021).