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Introduction: Pandemic and the Global South

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Introduction

Pandemic and the Global South

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Critical Humanities is a child of the coronavirus pandemic. As paradoxical as it may sound, the journal was born of our desire for community, conviviality, and survival in a world ravaged by disease, despair and death. An astronomical increase in the use of social media and technology to combat lockdowns, quarantine and isolation,¹ and an explosion of virtual conferences, seminars, symposia and talks as tools to carry on our research and teaching activities are testaments not only to our resilience, but also to our hunger for knowledge and community in the face of adversity.²

Both “critical” and “humanities” in the title of the journal bear some etymological and semantic affinity to the term “pandemic.” The proto Indo-European *krei* is the root from which derive both *critical* and *crisis*, and, as

we know, a pandemic signifies a serious health crisis which involves the entirety of the human species. Another layer of this genealogical thread connects these three terms; and this layer also weaves through the root *krei* and its manifestation in Greek *krinein* meaning to “sieve,” “separate” or “judge.” Neither “humanities” nor “pandemic” has been used in the title in a universalist way to represent an uncritical collectivity. Though “pandemic” literally denotes pertaining or belonging to all people, the *demos* (from which derive “democracy” and “demotic” as well) especially refers to the common or “vulgar” people as is shown in Plato’s *Symposium* in which Pausanius separates earthly love (Aphrodite *pandemus*) from heavenly love (Aphrodite *Ourania*).³ As the title suggests, then, the main object or subject of study for the journal are these common, “vulgar” people

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/07/youtube-is-social-medias-big-winner-during-the-pandemic.html>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56247489>

³ Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato Vol II: The Symposium*, trans R.E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 120-121.

who are exposed to a perpetual state of pandemic caused by systemic economic disparities, socio-cultural injustices and political-legal discrimination, subjugation, and violence.

Though the journal's conception coincided with the advent of the pandemic, and with the "liberty" believed to have been bestowed upon us during our forced or self-imposed captivity, which made us issue a morally fraught self-regulating injunction "something to do in our free time," the desire driving this initiative is devoted not to self-actualization⁴ but to sublimation or the desire of the Other.

The phrase "the desire of the Other" here is used not just as a gnomic formula of idealization⁵ or as an articulation of "the impossible nonobject of desire" necessitated by our entry into, and engagement with language,⁶ an inevitable destiny of all discursive practices. *Critical Humanities* is a manifestation of the desire of the Other in the most mundane sense of the term as well. First, the coronavirus pandemic has rendered unheimlich many familiar aspects of our lives and the world we live in. Second, unlike our individually authored works of art or scholarship and even unlike anthologies carrying the critical works of an academic collective (which could be interpreted as expressions in various degrees of what Jean-Paul Sartre

characterized as the interconnected categories of "doing, having, being"),⁷ *Critical Humanities* as a blind peer reviewed journal providing a forum for scholarly publication is a more other-directed, collaborative and ongoing activity which resists the very process of doing something to possess it through an internal ontological bond of being.

The third layer of other-directedness of *Critical Humanities* is added by its affiliation and commitment to Open Educational Resources Commons, whereby it, unlike the digital archives that require subscriptions, guarantees access *gratis* to quality academic research and scholarship for its global readers. Another instance of this journal's dedication to the desire of the Other is its refusal to confine its inquiry to a single discipline and its willingness to engage in the production and promotion of multidisciplinary research and writing. The journal's emphasis on publishing interviews, book reviews and creative pieces along with regular research articles provides a glimpse of how *Critical Humanities* intends to bring multivocality and polysemy to academic research.

The most important articulation of the desire of the Other emerges from this journal's focus on the Global South, which, to recall a critic's summation (albeit laced with a healthy degree of cynicism) on the topic, simply represents "the latest articulation of

⁴ Zadie Smith, *Intimations* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 21.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 129.

⁶ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 74.

⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans Hazel E Barnes (New York: Gallimard, 1996), 736-37.

alterity.”⁸ Undoubtedly, the phrase “global south” is a fluid and fungible theoretical heir to such institutionally established and recognized critical terms as “multiculturalism, postcolonialism, transnationalism [and] posthumanism,”⁹ and it is also self-evident that the phrase “would be a conceptual tool to question ‘northern’ perspectives” that often-times masquerade as universal.¹⁰ Is the Global South, then, merely “a [new] fashionable expression” in town,¹¹ “an academic fad”¹² only?

To what extent does the Global South as a critical category differ from or interrelate with its predecessors such as postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and transnationalism? Cognizant of the fact that these last three iterations of our engagement with the Other fall short in tackling the most persistent and pressing political, economic and cultural issues plaguing the Global South, *Critical Humanities* would be specially interested in exploring the ways in which the invocation of the Global South enables us to overcome post-colonial theory’s push for not only “normative dewesternization”¹³ but also its epis-

temological elision of the “the self-marginalizing or self-consolidating migrant or post-colonial” and “native informant,” a name that is a “mark of expulsion from the name of Man.”¹⁴ *Critical Humanities* intends to invoke, engage with, respond to, and trace this figure of native informant in its attempt to analyze discourses on the Global South.

Concomitant with the conceptual or theoretical discussions of the genealogy of the Global South is the question of identifying, demarcating and locating this nebulous region, as best as one can. Though a fictional or “invented space in the struggle between imperial global domination and decolonial forces,” the Global South represents a “geopolitical concept replacing the ‘Third World’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union.”¹⁵ Long before the disintegration of the USSR, however, the Independent Commission for International Development Issues published a report whose cover contained an image of the world divided into two – a poor global South and a wealthy global North – by a line now known as the Brandt line, named after the chair of the commission.

⁸ Dorothy Figueira, “‘The Global South’: Yet Another Attempt to Engage the Other,” *The Global South* Vol 1 No 1 (Winter 2007) 144.

⁹ Figueira, 144.

¹⁰ Pablo Palomino, “On the Disadvantages of ‘Global South’ for Latin American Studies,” *Journal of World Philosophies*, Vol 4 No 2 (2019) 22.

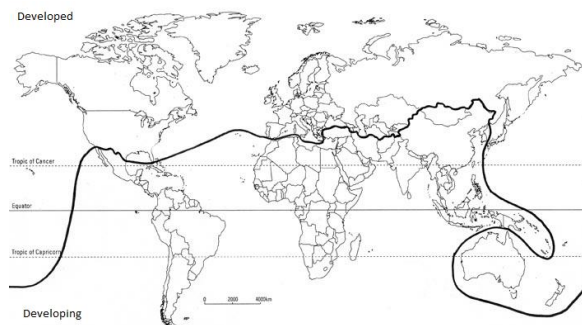
¹¹ Walter Mignolo, “The Global South and World Dis/order,” *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol 67 No 2 (2011), 165.

¹² Roberto Dainotto, “South by Chance: Southern Questions on the Global South,” *The Global South*, Vol 11 No 2 (2017) 41.

¹³ Wendy Willems, “Beyond Normative Dewesternization: Examining Media Culture from the Vantage Point of the Global South” *The Global South* Vol 8 No 1 (Spring 2014) 7-23.

¹⁴ Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

¹⁵ Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangrajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran, “Introduction: Ecocriticism of the Global South,” *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 2-3.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons)¹⁶

Though the neat binary created by the Brandt line has been challenged since by economists, historians, and political scientists alike, many argue, citing “the best quantitative evidence” that “on global issues, the Brandt Line [still] remains relevant”¹⁷ insofar as “there is no sign that the states of the Global South are any less dissatisfied [now] with their positions in global economic and political hierarchies.”¹⁸

Yet global economic or political hierarchies are not the only rifts dividing the two hemispheres. A survey of 362 articles published in three geography journals revealed that “fewer than one in eight [articles] had a primary and explicit concerns with countries, conditions and processes in the Global South.”¹⁹ One of the primary reasons behind the creation of *Critical Humanities* is to correct this imbalance in academic research;

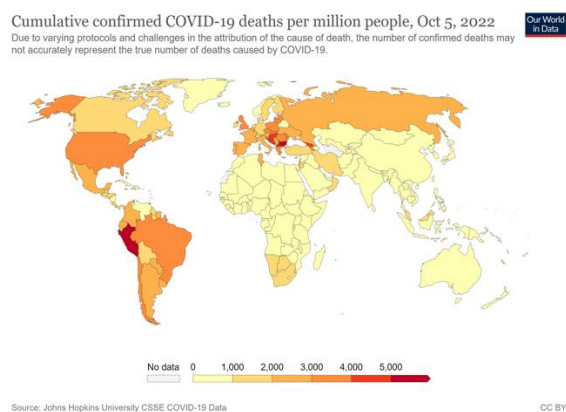
¹⁶ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Brandt_Line.png

¹⁷ Nicholas Lees, “The Brandt Line after forty years: The more North–South relations change, the more they stay the same?” *Review of International Studies* Vol 47 Issue 1 (2021), 105.

¹⁸ Nicholas Lees, 87.

¹⁹ Jonathan Rigg, *An Everyday Geography of the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2007), 2.

and we hope that our contributors in this and in the upcoming issues will revisit the regions dubbed as “periphery”²⁰ and ignored by North-focused academic journals. On the one hand, these venues of publications continue to reproduce and reaffirm the Brandt line, on the other, their silence on and marginalization of the Global South brought the division identified by the Brandt Commission to the very heart of academia. This imaginary division is so pervasive that it is implicated in all of our political, economic, pedagogical, cultural, academic and even our medical activities and practices.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons)²¹

As the image above demonstrates, the pandemic reaffirmed the existence of the Brandt line, but it also revealed that it is not a horizontal rift dividing the planet neatly into two;

²⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 12.

²¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:World_map_of_total_confirmed_COVID-19_deaths_per_million_people_by_country.png

rather it is a crisscross of several intersecting lines cutting through and shedding light on our ubiquitous and interrelated economic, geographical, racial, ethnic and health inequities. As these lines proliferate, solidify, get intertwined and become too abstruse for a simplistic analysis, the Global South presents itself as a potential critical category for the (im)possibility of thinking about and imagining the world.

Critical Humanities welcomes debates and discussions that review and revise such narratives which present the Global South as a fixed geographical location - an example of which would be the so-called G-77 [a coalition of developing countries whose count currently stands at 134] established in 1964 by the first session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva. The Global South being a complex and dynamic entity resists such mathematical approaches. The journal is also invested in revisiting the historical investigations that seek to establish ideological connections between the Global South and various political anti-colonial and postcolonial events and movements including the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (1955), NAM in Belgrade, Serbia (1961), and the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba that brought together delegates from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Refuting the rigid geographical North-South binary, some historians argue that the Global South encompasses a diverse outburst of protests such as Occupy Wall Street, Tahrir Square March “against the theft

of the commons, against the theft of human dignity and rights.”²² We can easily expand this list by adding more recent protests such as the Women’s March of 2017 and local pride marches periodically taking place across the globe.

As we expand from our understanding of the Global South from its depiction as a conglomeration of countries or continents to a more nuanced characterization as communities engaged in simultaneously fighting contagion and economic disparities and seeking to resurrect, protect and expand the commons, a new map of the Global South begins to emerge, and the linearity of the Brandt line gets refined by a more complex and multidirectional web of contests and creativity. This new angle of analysis rooted in the experiences of the pandemic not just helps us rethink the logic of world-formation inherent in the Brandt line, G-77, and Tri-continentalism, it also enables us to critique two other lines of thinking about the Global South: namely, South-South cooperation and the North-South dialogue.

Born out of America’s failures in Vietnam and the staunch opposition to racial and gender discriminations at home in the United States, the Brandt Commission viewed the necessity of the North-South dialogue as a program for survival for both parties. Needless to say, the North wanted a “bigger slice of an international economic cake” by expanding trade and commerce to the newly independent and resource rich South.²³ At the

²² Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London: Verso, 2012), 9.

²³ *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (London: Pan Books, 1980), 2.

same time, other areas of mutual interests were also identified by the Commission's report as crucial agendas for the North-South dialogue to come. The agenda items of this imaginary dialogue predictably included "energy commodities and trade, food and agriculture," but also "the depletion of renewable and non-renewable resources throughout the planet, the ecological and environmental problems."²⁴

Established in 1987, the South Commission also stressed the need for the dialogue between the North and the South and stressed the importance of removing poverty for the protection of the environment and treating world health as "indivisible" by citing smallpox and AIDS as epidemics "spreading relentlessly despite attempts to stop [them] at national borders."²⁵

South-South co-operation is a positively charged particle of the nucleus of the Global South and is rightly considered to be its "locomotive."²⁶ and China's or India's vaccine diplomacy in Africa and Asia could be interpreted as an example of how this locomotive could be more effective.

The infancy of planetary thinking stunted only by the North's economic and political interests and the South's inability to mobilize

itself as an alternative political and economic force, nevertheless, remains germane to the dominant critical and visionary impulses of the discourses on the Global South.

Reaffirming the efficacy of a constructive dialogue, *Critical Humanities* plans to provide a forum for scholars located on both sides of the divide to engage in the exchange of ideas, opinions, and knowledge in order to foster planetary thinking and to promote discourses of decolonization, democratization and social justice. This task would require not just a fresh critique and rejection of the canonical narratives of Euro-American modernity, which often refuse to acknowledge the existence of the South either by characterizing it as a region "enveloped in the dark mantle of Night,"²⁷ or as an entity from which [n]othing important can come. History has never been produced in the South."²⁸ Equally important is the interrogation of the narratives that portray the South as "a thirsty desert" or "wilderness of Southern desires," and, in the name of "empire writing back," lapse into revenge and murder.²⁹

Patricia Yaeger opens her book *Dirt and Desire*, which analyzes US Southern Women's Writing with this statement: "We have rather ordinary expectations about the South and

²⁴ *North-South*, 20.

²⁵ *The Challenge to the South: the Report of the South Commission* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990) 7.

²⁶ Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations*, 143.

²⁷ Georg Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans J. Sibree (New York: Cosimoclassics, 2007) 91.

²⁸ Seymour Hersh, "The Price of Power: Kissinger, Nixon and Chile," *The Atlantic* (1982), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/12/the-price-of-power/376309/>

²⁹ Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans Denys Johnson Davies (New York: The New York Review Books, 2009), 32.

what we will find in Southern literature.”³⁰ This assessment could very well be applied to our perception about the Global South as well. Depicted as a region crushed by poverty and corruption, and shrouded in darkness and nothingness, the Global South fails to inspire hope. In fact, when Antonio Gramsci summarized this southernist position by arguing that Northern Italy considered Southerners to be “biologically inferior beings, either semi-barbarians or out and out barbarians by natural destiny,”³¹ he was quoting from a large repertoire of southernist discourses applicable to all subalterns from the entirety of the Global South.

Critical Humanities offers an intellectual forum to artists, creative writers, and scholars to launch a critique of southernist (in Gramsci’s sense of the word) positions of all stripes. This journal should invoke, invite, and inspire a different force of desire and academic rigor to reimagine the world from the perspective of the multitudes inhabiting the Global South by attending simultaneously to their unique identities, locations, or differences and what they hold in common with one another.

³⁰ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), IX.

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³¹ Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, trans Pasquale Verdichio (New York: Bordighera Press, 2015), 20.

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