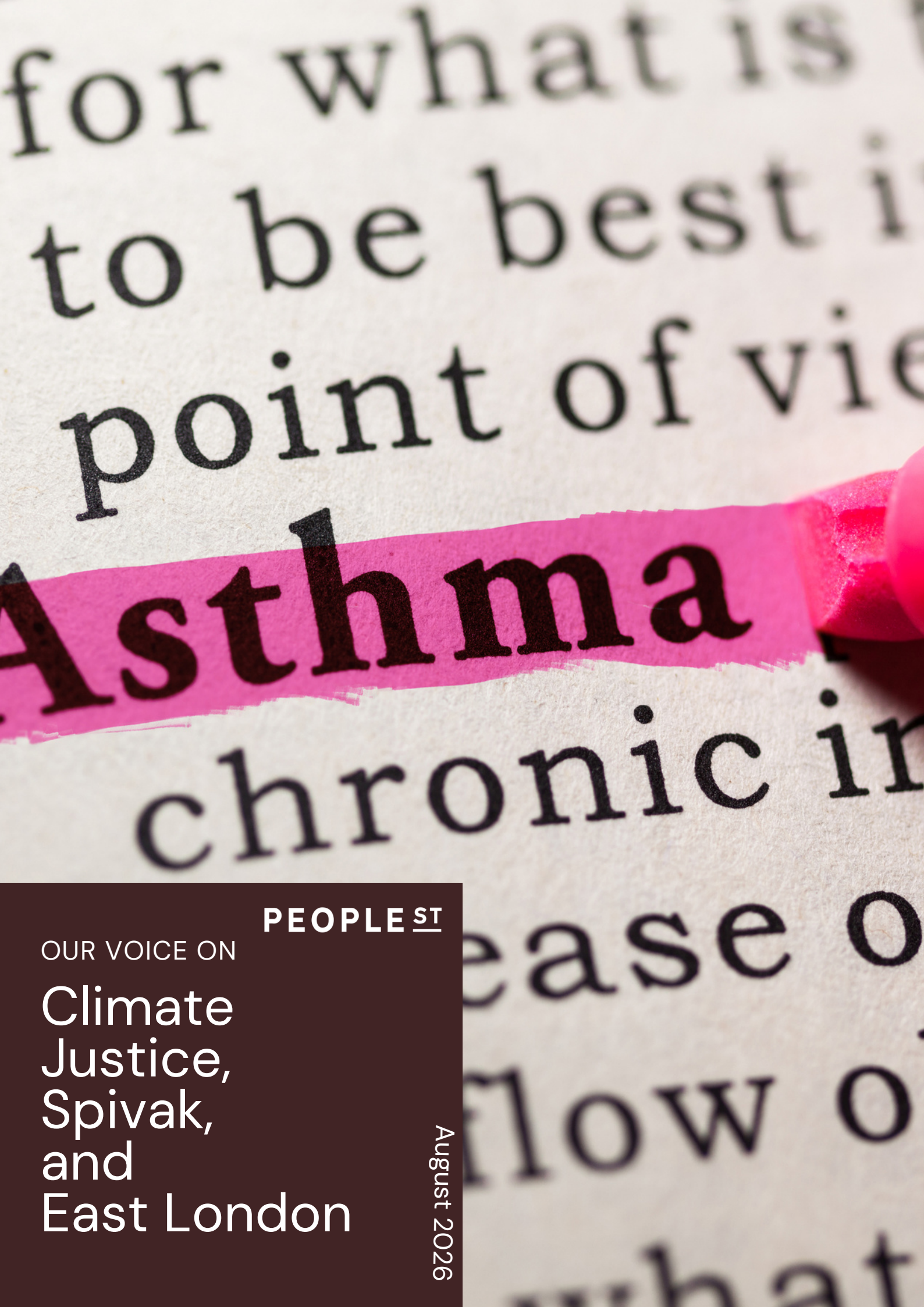




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PEOPLE ST

OUR VOICE ON

Climate
Justice,
Spivak,
and
East London

August 2026

East London is where People Street began. It's a place shaped by industry, by generations of migration, by rivers and low-lying land, and now, more and more, by climate change. Heatwaves hit tower blocks hardest. Air pollution settles unevenly, street by street with pollution rates intensifying since the opening of Silvertown tunnel.

Climate change is not felt equally across London. And climate research and climate policy don't always ask the right people the right questions. We've been listening to [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in conversation, Holberg Prize, Oslo, June 2025](#), where she turns to the planet itself, to what she calls planetarity. Her ideas are not easy. But they help us think more clearly about what climate justice actually asks of us, and how that connects to the work we do with communities across East London.

The planet is not "us"

Spivak describes the planet as something radically different from us. Not something we can fully know, master, or speak for. She calls it a "species of alterity," a kind of otherness. She says "I don't think you can think with other life forms...The project is to work for rather than think with."

This is a humbling idea. No one, not a scientist, not a policymaker, not a community group, and not us, can honestly claim to fully understand the planet, or to speak on its behalf. What we can do is work for it: carefully, responsibly, together, without pretending we've got the full picture.

For climate research, this matters. It means climate science needs the humility to admit what it doesn't know, and it means that communities living closest to climate impacts, in East London and everywhere else, have something real to bring to the table.

Not because they "speak for nature," but because their lived experience of heat, flooding, and pollution is itself a form of knowledge that gets left out too often.

Where the trouble begins

Spivak makes a striking point about where the Anthropocene, the age shaped by human impact on the planet, actually starts. It isn't just about factories or fossil fuels. It starts with something more basic: the human capacity to make more than we need. "Nature is adequate to itself."

A tree doesn't grow more than a tree needs to grow. But humans can, and do, produce a surplus, more than is needed to survive. Spivak points out that this same surplus is where love begins, and poetry begins, and also, troublingly, where capitalism begins.

The gap between what a worker needs and what a worker can produce is exactly the gap capitalism takes for profit.

This matters for climate justice because it reframes the crisis as a justice issue, not just an environmental one.

Climate breakdown wasn't caused equally by everyone, and it isn't experienced equally either. The people and places that took the least, historically, are very often the ones now carrying the highest cost, in flood risk, in heat, in poor air quality. That pattern will be familiar to anyone who has read Spivak on the subaltern: the same communities who are structurally left out of decision-making are the ones left holding the consequences.

From victims to agents

Spivak tells a story about her own community schools. She had been teaching children about the earth, about their connection to it, and about their responsibility for it, alongside its impact on them. She thought she understood what the community was asking her for. She was wrong, she says "They had wanted me to do it for the whole village, not just for the school."

The community didn't want to be taught about climate change only as something that happens to them. They wanted to understand their own responsibility and agency in it too, not just their suffering. Spivak admits she missed this the first time, and is now going back to try again.

This is a striking piece of honesty from someone who has done this work for over 40 years. It's a reminder that even careful, well-intentioned people can accidentally cast a community only as victims, rather than as people with insight, responsibility, and a stake in shaping what comes next. That shift, from victimhood to agency, is at the heart of what climate justice should mean in practice.

Not victims of the weather. Agents with a stake in what happens next.

At People Street, our approach has always started from design justice: centring the people most affected by a system in the design of that system, not just consulting them once decisions are already made. Our outreach is relational, not transactional.

We train and work alongside community researchers rather than acting as outside interpreters. Spivak's thinking gives us a sharper theoretical language for why this matters in climate work specifically. If climate breakdown is, at its root, a justice issue, then climate research that only extracts data or opinion from East London communities, without sharing power over what happens with it, risks repeating the same pattern Spivak warns against: speaking about people, rather than working with them as agents.

Communities across East London have already spoken, in surveys, consultations, and community meetings, about pollution and extreme heat. Too often, little visibly changes. Spivak helps us name why: being asked a question is not the same as being heard, and being heard once is not the same as having a real, lasting stake in the answer.

Unpicking the work: what progress could look like

Spivak doesn't offer a checklist, and neither will we. But her thinking points to some honest, practical directions for how we could deepen our climate justice work in East London.

Move from consultation to sustained relationships. Climate justice work needs the same patient, “textural” commitment as any other community research, built over years with community connectors and local groups, not squeezed into a single project cycle.

Train and resource local community climate researchers. Rather than outside experts explaining climate data to East London residents, the people best placed to gather, interpret, and act on that knowledge are often already in the community.

Ask what communities want to know and do, not only what researchers need from them. Spivak's village didn't want to be taught at. They wanted to be brought in, as adults and as a whole community, not just handled as recipients of information.

Be transparent about funding and purpose. Who is paying for a piece of climate research, and why, should be as clear here as in any other project we run.

Resist quick fixes. Climate solutionism, promising a tidy technical answer to a deeply unequal problem, is a trap. The honest work is slower, and never fully finished.

Be precise about who is subaltern, and who isn't.

Not every East London community facing climate impacts is subaltern in Spivak's strict sense.

Some already have real routes into local government, campaigning, or media that others don't. Just look at the Cyclist Lobby group in Hackney and residents of Forest Gate. Treating every excluded group the same risks missing exactly the people furthest from being heard.

This comes at a pivotal time in our thinking. We've been exploring what climate justice looks and feels like in East London, and we haven't the answers. We know what it shouldn't feel like. We hosted a panel conversation in July for UCL, a beginning of a conversation. We invite attendees and like-minded practitioners to join us and explore further.

Holding the tension

Spivak's planet is one we can't fully know, only work for. Climate justice, done properly, asks the same humility of us that good community research always has: don't assume, don't generalise, stay close, and keep repairing the fabric, thread by thread.

That is the work we want to keep doing in East London, quietly, collectively, and with care.

Glossary: Some of the words are academic ones. Here's what we mean by them, in plain terms.

Subaltern: A word from the thinker Antonio Gramsci. It doesn't mean "poor" or "marginalised." It means a position with no real access to citizenship rights, the vote, or a public voice that gets heard.

Planetary: Spivak's word for thinking about the planet as something we depend on and are entangled with, but can never fully know or claim to speak for.

Alterity: Otherness. Something that is fundamentally different from us, and can't simply be understood in our own terms.

Anthropocene: The current age, in which human activity has become the biggest force shaping the planet's climate and environment.

Surplus: More than is needed. Spivak points out that only humans, not the rest of nature, routinely produce more than they need, and that this surplus is where both creativity and exploitation begin.

Agency: The ability to make choices and take action, rather than simply having things happen to you. The opposite of being seen only as a "victim."

Climate justice: The idea that climate change is not just an environmental problem, but a justice problem, because it is caused unequally and felt unequally, often hitting hardest the people and places who contributed least to it.

Design justice: An approach to research and design that puts the people most affected by a system at the centre of designing that system, rather than simply asking them for feedback afterwards.

Extractive research: Research that takes information, time, or stories from a community without giving anything back, or without sharing power over what happens to that knowledge afterwards.

Community researchers: People rooted in a community who are trained to lead or take part in research alongside it, rather than having outside researchers interpret the community's experience for them.

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Reference

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