

**Position Paper - Terra Critica Meeting 2023**  
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Abusing the absolute distinction  
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Through the first figure of Amitav Ghosh's "parables", I made my acquaintance with Johannes van Keulen as a namesake and as a fellow townsman (Amsterdam, indicated at the bottom in the cartouche of the map).<sup>1</sup> That felt like a haunting of some possible ancestor of mine. Even if I did not learn to suspect quests for origins to establish ipseity, my effort to grasp the trembling that moved my comfort zone for a while did not have to do with epistemological problems in my ancestor's search, neither as far as I can tell with a variant of original sin, but rather more presumably with the (after)shock of the sudden eruption of this name embroiled in the colonial system, in short, a feeling of complicity.<sup>2</sup> That almost familiar Johannes was a deliverer of navigation soft- and hardware and functioned as an indispensable cogwheel, 'clean-handed', with his "VOC mentality" supporting the machinery of the most exploitative imperial institution ever, at least of that time.<sup>3</sup>

Suppose someone can be called a philosopher there and then — which can always be disputed — I borrow Ghosh's suggestive association as *founders*: "Coen, Sonck, and their predecessors", are "not just colonists but also philosophers, it was their violence, directed at 'natives' and the landscapes they inhabited, *that laid the foundations* of the mechanistic philosophies that would later be attributed to their contemporaries, like Descartes and Mandeville, Bacon and Boyle" (my italics). Possibly those unseen foundations of "functionaries of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated all quotes are from Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 2021, Ebook.

<sup>2</sup> Following Spivak a prerequisite of being able to think and act differently: "we must acknowledge our complicity", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "What's Left of Theory?", in: *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, 2013, 551, note 38.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Peter Balkenende, the Dutch prime minister in 2006, addressed the full parlement in a debate about economic depression with the memorable words: "Let's be happy with each other! Let's be optimistic! Let's say: The Netherlands can do it again! That VOC mentality, looking across borders, dynamics!"

violence”<sup>4</sup> still uncannily pushed me into the question: How can one become a functionary of nonviolence? Or should it be rather a nonfunctionary? Of nonviolence?

If it would be possible to determine modern imperialist colonialism’s point of departure, not to mention its end or final destination, and if only it would be possible to call it an “era”, as Arendt does, “the era of imperialism”, or “system”, as Williams does, would that make a significant difference?<sup>5</sup> Would it enable me to point at it as a closed period of “the imperialist concept of expansion”, “unlimited accumulation of capital”, or “aimless accumulation of power”? If it would be possible to designate *it* with “its logical consequences”, namely some source of “destruction of all living communities, those of the conquered people as well as of the people at home”, I would probably find myself for a while in a state of cartesian certainty, not only on a geographical distance, for I would have an idea what that “curse” was about, that it has its inherent about-ness, its objectivity, possibly even its antidote.<sup>6</sup>

Spivak has a point: Hannah Arendt “was altogether perceptive in suggesting that the putting together of nationalism with the abstract structure of the state was an experiment or a happening that has a limited history and a limited future.”<sup>7</sup> But can I therefore, because of this clear perception of the nationstate limitedness both Arendt and Spivak apparently share, conclude that “totalitarianism” is something of the past? Do not take me wrong, Arendt and Spivak seem to suggest differently. Yet, is it possible to see clear, and not clean as a certain abuse of *claire (et distincte)*? How to “productively undoing another legacy of the European Enlightenment”<sup>8</sup>, its metaphysical self, “the essence of man”<sup>9</sup>, as the founder and functionary of violence? Be it a fata or fatal morgana, or an imaginative reflex, would it not be marvelous if in someway “abusing” this cartesian ego differently could be dreamed of, not as a sheer illusive distinct topos, distopoi or anti-topos, but as a task or role imagined in a question: “Can this be historically our role? To make enlightenment open to a(n) (ab)use that makes room for justice, because it takes away the absoluteness of guarantees (...)?”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Penguin Classics 2017, 178.

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, *ibidem*; Raymond Williams, *The Country & the City*, 1973, 279.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *idem*, 178 and 379.

<sup>7</sup> Spivak, 2013, 279.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak, 2013, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *idem*, 390

<sup>10</sup> Spivak, *idem*, 21.

In his demand for justice Ghosh resonates with Arendt: her “functionaries of violence” did indeed think and act along the never suspected foundations of “Coen” and “Sonck”. Arendt: “Ever since man learned to master it (that is, “the, as it were, human aspect of nature”) to such an extent that the destruction of all organic life on earth with man-made instruments has become conceivable and technically possible, he has been alienated from nature.”<sup>11</sup> This “ever since ... being alienated” is in detail dissected by Ghosh in every move of the VOC functionaries as resulting from “a radically new way of envisioning the Earth, as a vast machine made of inert particles in ceaseless motion.” This “new way of envisioning” is not a suggestion of some armchair transcendentalist, the reverse is rather the case: Ghosh’s take on this relates to a clean(s)ing habit, a “new way” that may not be the cause but the effect due to ages of subduing and muting: “It was the *rendering of humans* into mute resources *that enabled* the metaphysical leap whereby the Earth and everything in it could also be reduced to inertness” (my italics). Resulting in “the absolute distinction between the natural and the human”. Inherited from ages of “colonial terraforming” the actual age of climate change cannot be understood otherwise than as “the burden” which obliges artists/writers “of imaginatively restoring agency and voice” to humans and nonhumans. Undoing, in Williams words, “a form of legalised seizure enacted by representatives of the beneficiary class.”<sup>12</sup>

It is impossible not to endorse Ghosh's plea and hope for liberating practices in an artisan-like way. Inspired by counter-acts guided by “vitalist politics”, aiming at “imaginatively re-creating an earlier metaphysic” (not pre-metaphysical) which should enable even modern ears and eyes to receive “Earth’s response to four centuries of terraforming”, Ghosh’s emphasis on receptiveness enables requirements that support justice. So if I felt compelled to understand the intention of this “completely different (...) “earlier metaphysic”, and abuse the signs of this “absolute distinction”, in what direction could that change (my) actions, attitudes, habits, sense of justice?

The imaginative archaeology of Ghosh summons us to a dislocation of our ego and identity, and perhaps of identity in general, toward a source around ancient volcanos, of countercurrents that call upon liberation of oppression. How to receive this counterviolence similar to some nuclear bang that is able “to shrink the four-hundred-year gap between 1621 and 2021 to a mere instant”? The vitalist

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<sup>11</sup> Arendt, idem, 390.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, idem, 98.

politics from which Ghosh draws inspiration, following Mahatma Gandhi's steps, and also "African American traditions of resistance", signify a turn of this violence with the organs of an aesthetics, into artistic practices, preshaping the telos of some cosmopolitheia, resetting/resetting Spivak's subaltern: "The subaltern is in our present, but kept premodern, *as if* the underived and unacknowledged private is only situated in a teleology." (my italics)<sup>13</sup> Playing with this "as if", that is undoing that "teleology", might be a start of facing/hearing the subaltern differently, with respect, as the actual voice of reason, rather than of "a preserved aboriginal community."<sup>14</sup> Even if we agree that "indigenous understandings of terraforming" are still far more sophisticated, the question is who is there to recognize its muting as (global) *injustice*, who would *not* listen to it and *not* respond to it?

The "indigenous understandings" are still not recognized as violated. If the cause of subalternity is about rather a specific social and political work of functionaries/practitioners, driven by an excessive desire (not a need); if it refers to an immeasurable shortage of, and a certain demand of justice (not charity), that should be recognized as *given* 'the right to have rights' (Arendt, 388), who can give them this right, back again? The other voice of the cosmopolitan subaltern (not only the Adivasis) should be heard by his/her legal alter-ego. In her *repressed* being as agency (there is not a fixed or undivided subject except by repression). This "kept premodern" other, its "indigenous understandings", demand the recognition of functionaries of law, to hear and respect *their own-and-other* interest as the common cause of all, because it is "impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not appear for an ego (in general)."<sup>15</sup> The necessity and force of this appearance have indeed been observed by Ghosh in the campaign "the Yanomami started to gain legal recognition for their territorial claims", and in the legal action against the terraforming of the rain forests: "In Brazil the judicial system presented stiff opposition to Bolsonaro". It seems possible or even unmistakably evident and necessary that subalternity should be regarded and respected by *its own* "bitterly resented and resisted alien law and religion".<sup>16</sup> The light of Ghosh's lamp that fell

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<sup>13</sup>Spivak, 2013, 280.

<sup>14</sup> Spivak, 2013, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas' in: *Writing and Difference*, translated, with an introduction and additional notes, by Alan Bass, London Routledge. Classics 2001, 154.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, idem, 286.

to the floor reads like a sign of “ab-use of the Enlightenment from below”, mobilizing that “one must combat light with a certain other light”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>First quote Spivak, 2013, 291, second quote Jacques Derrida, idem, 146.