

Position Paper - Terra Critica Meeting 2023

Terra Critica X Rural Imaginations

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Return To the Periphery

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Pondering the questions posed in this year's TC workshop, I am interested in staying with the following: "How can we critically distinguish modes of returning to these peripheralized places?" An epistemological, imaginative, material, political 'return' to peripheral places – like the rural, the hinterland, and other non-urbanized geographies, communities, and subjects – is often insidiously conjured as a spatiotemporal retreat, a going back to some kind of before or left-behind, a return to some simpler epistemological idyll and/or journey to exotic epistemological wilderness that, through urban rediscovery, offers some sort of rejuvenation or reenergizing of critique.

This makes me think it is not so much about critically distinguishing modes of returning to peripheralized places, as critically distinguishing the methods of movement, organization, and navigation that we employ in understanding and thinking with peripheralized modes of spatialization and modes of spatialized being.

Our group also asks "What critiques are emerging from the rural, from the wilderness, from the land of indigenous traditions that is not thought as bounded property, and from the earth (the *terra* in Terra Critica)?" Indigenous critiques and practices of resistance to settler-capitalist forms of world-making are as much emergent to some as they are residual to others, but such designations also risk losing a critical attendance to indigeneity as *now* and *here*. While 'peripheralized' and Indigenous critiques remain variably illegible because they cannot be read through Eurocentrically-inherited epistemological modes that desire settlement, ownership, and extraction, they require a different attending to as present, pressing, and moving. How hard it is, I imagine for many of us here, to attend to the peripheral, to

the Indigenous, to the non-urbanized other while foregoing the desire to recover, to enfold, to remove, to bring into 'our' urbanized now something from a (long) lost past and premodern place that promises a "return" to the future of progress.

As Mishuana Goeman reminds us, Indigenous American epistemologies attend to so-called peripheral places as both affected by the *longue durée* of settler colonialism, forcing Indigenous people to continue to (onto-epistemologically) inherit the afterlives of property while also maintaining that despite this hegemonic understanding of peripheralized space such land is still and always already navigated and cared for as Indigenous: as more than just property, as more than just periphery. What kind of understandings of the periphery, the rural, the wilderness, the hinterland, and the earth emerge when Indigenous (*and* other peripheralized) modes and methods of knowing space and time are undone of their reserved status; what kind of affective relations to the earth and to human and more-than-human others do these modes perform; and how might these modes dictate the undoing of the latent settler colonial desires of critique?

This paper is shaping up to be a nagging return of questions. The question now (still for me) is how 'we' - this non-Indigenous, urbanized we of *terra critica* - move in formation with knowledges of these so-called spatialized peripheries in order to effectuate a more-than-oppositional understanding of our own centers and peripheries, our specific urbans and hinterlands, our various relations to indigeneity.¹ And with that understanding of engaging peripheralized knowledges I mean not only the divergent Indigenous ways of knowing and making the wor(l)d that critique continues to desire and amalgamate in a latent settler colonial fashion, but also the knowledges of those (often white) rural, resentful, left-behinds that make us "so-called critical" and urbanized-folk so anxious. We do our workshop on the grounds that testify to this anxiety: where these troublesome Dutch paupers were peripheralized. What happens when you also choose to "return" to those knowledges? What happens when you peripheralize the anxiety of being determined crazy by attending to these resentful rural people, and rather give in to the desire to assert - however risky that might be - the coalitional potential between oppositionally-imagined non-urbanized subjects, communities, places and their epistemological traditions? What if you desire to think together the "storied site[s]" (Goeman 2015, 72) divergently disenfranchised rural communities mourn and critique?

bell hooks does something like that in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009). She attends to the history and culture of Kentucky and the wider Appalachian region,

¹ I keep returning in all my TC papers to the we of critique: How, 'we'? How do we perform and enact a less exclusionary we?

explaining how non-urbanized epistemological traditions have been played out against each other through the supremacist logic of the US state:

Individual Kentuckians, white and black, still managed to create a sub-culture, usually in hollows, hills, and mountains, governed by beliefs and values contrary to those of mainstream culture. The free thinking and non-conformist behavior encouraged in the backwoods was a threat to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, hence the need to undermine them by creating the notion that folks who inhabited these spaces were ignorant, stupid, inbred, ungovernable. By dehumanizing the hillbilly, the anarchist spirit which empowered poor folks to choose a lifestyle different from that of the State and so-called civilized society could be crushed. And if not totally crushed, at least made to appear criminal and suspect. (hooks 2009, 20)

This is how hooks conjures the radical historical potential of hillbilly epistemologies; this is how she reasserts a hillbilly politic and critique as a potential coalitional method of worldmaking.² hooks shows us how these non-urbanized coalitional criticalities have been hollowed out, segmented, polarized, and whitened so that they can be comfortably dismissed by an urbanized us, laughed at, feared. hooks shows how such otherworldly coalitions become illegibly settled in the peripheralized past of the colonial-cum-capitalist urban teleology and epistemology of progress. I also question why these particular elements of hooks' work – her returning critical engagement with non-urbanized spaces and communities – remain, somewhat, critically unattended to: why is hooks not more pertinently read as a *rural* black queer feminist cultural critic? And what kind of potential coalitions in critique does a refusal or inability to read hooks as a rural critic foreclose?

Reading hooks I wonder if part of my nagging line of questioning is desiring an experiment with how to return to, for example, the hillbilly so as to seduce the resentful US rural white subject away from the insidious and cruel promises of contemporary supremacist worldings. In the "The New Metropolis" Raymond Williams states,

we have got so used to thinking of common experiences through the alienating screens of foreignness and race [I would include, among other things, place/space] that all too often we take the particularity of these stories as merely exotic. But as we gain perspective, from the long history of the literature of the country and the city, we see how much, at different times and in different places, it is a connecting

² A method of hillbilly and Appalachian worldmaking that hooks also imagines through an affirmation of coal-mining that she desires to dislodge from the violently extractive practice of fracking and mountain top removal.

process, in what has to be seen ultimately as a common history.
(Williams 1973, 288)

Williams words make me think of how the insidious racialized and sexualized logics of settler property have come to inform our understandings and experiences of identity as property. The misrecognition and misreading of identity *as* property has led to sinister proprietary engagements in divergent approaches and fields of cultural critique and study. Anxieties abound (internally/externally) in taking serious and thinking together the desires and resentments of so-called peripheralized communities. How crazy it must be to desire critique as an indeterminate coalitional project that cares for both those subjects that are seduced by xenophobic, racist, and heteropatriarchal promises of normativity, progress, and revenge as well as those subjects that have continued to exercise opaque modes of being in order to hold on to knowledges of the wor(l)d that keep warm the potential shattering of settler-cum-capitalist forms of undoing the earth.

Where and who are the peripheries of critique? In Patricio Guzmán's film *Nostalgia de la Luz* (2010) there is an archeologist, Lautaro Núñez, who ruminates on the peripheral space of the Atacama desert – a space so often imagined as empty of life, as empty of history, as empty of critique when, in fact, the afterlives of settler colonialism (as Guzmán's film poetically makes legible) are as geographic here as they are in the postcolonial-postdictatorial metropole. Núñez asks:

How many secrets are we keeping about the nineteenth century [of the Atacama desert]? We have never acknowledged that we marginalized our Indigenous peoples. It's practically a state secret. We've done nothing to understand why in the nineteenth century those staggering economic phenomena such as saltpeter appeared and yet today there's nothing left. [...] It's absurd, it's like we avoid looking at this recent history. (Núñez in Guzmán 2010)

Núñez says: "We've hidden away our nearest past". The word he uses for hidden is "encapsulado": *encapsulated, wrapped and hardened with a firm coat so to make difficult trespassing and to prescribe and govern how periphery and past are dosed*. Guzmán's film uses a method to disrupt this encapsulation, to undo that hardening coat, to relinquish proper dosages of space and time. *Nostalgia* questions how history, how time, and space are in solution – a periphery, to paraphrase Williams, in dis/solution (1977, 132).

I think of how Guzmán attempts to distinguish and practice a mode of returning to peripheralized space and time without trying to fall back on the latent desires to unveil and include some kind of minoritarian History or exotic lesson, to extract some kind of good feeling that will contribute to forestalling the undoing of

settler critique. Guzmán's turn to the Atacama as a storied site is to identify a different system of organization. To coalitionally inherit this so-called passed periphery in a disorganized way, as something that makes us approach that periphery with an uncertain feeling about *whose* periphery it is: the Indigenous peoples that traversed and shaped the Atacama desert; the Indigenous and mestizo indentured laborers that worked the saltpeter mines; the people tortured and killed in the Chacabuco concentration camp of the Pinochet regime; the *desaparecidos* from urban and rural scattered in tiny bone fragments across the desert; the mothers, sisters, lovers searching for these little traces of what is left of their loved ones after the colonial-fascist-neoliberal project is done with them (but will always fail to be done with them); the astronomers who look to the stars – who look to the so-called future in search of our past – only to find the calcium that is in our bones is in the stars; and the urbanized narrator Guzmán who practices a mode of critique and storytelling that is predicated on bringing together indeterminacy and illegibility so as to imagine a being together in ambivalence. Not in order to return to a periphery but to inter how 'we' turn and return to the periphery, and to mourn it well.

References

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