

Position Paper - Terra Critica Meeting 2023
Terra Critica X Rural Imaginations

University of Amsterdam
Veenhuizen/Amsterdam, 14-17 June 2023

‘The Frame of World-as-Resource’

SAM McAULIFFE (June 2023)

I.

The notion of terraforming introduced by Amitav Ghosh in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, central to his understanding of the European settler-colonialist project as an undertaking that re-fashions, re-casts, re-engineers the territories it encompasses with such force and at such scale that it amounts to a “weaponization of the environment,” this notion is organised around and administered through a particular epistemological framework, referred to by the author in the following terms: “The project of terraforming enframes the world in much the same way that the Banda Islands came to be seen by their conquerors: this is the frame of world-as-resource, in which landscapes (or planets) come to be regarded as factories and ‘Nature’ is seen as subdued and cheap.”¹ Within this frame a territory finds itself on the receiving end of this sustained exercise in appropriation, subject to a process of extraction in view of a property relation the supporting infrastructure of which confounds any simple opposition between, say, lawfulness and lawlessness, peace and war. Once it has been determined as such, the “world-as-resource” will be drawn upon unreservedly, with every increasing intensity, up to and including its complete extirpation. It is a feature of this framing function that the extractive process it presides over is carried to its maximum, with the consequence that the land shaped in accordance with this schema is progressively undone as a ground. “In principle,” Ghosh continues, “there is no reason why reducing any particular terrain to a resource should lead to its depletion, in terms of either meaning or productivity. It should be possible, after all, to ‘use’ that terrain rationally, matching ends and means. And yet that is not what happens. It would seem that there is an inherent instability to the framework of world-as-resource that impels it to devour that which it enframes.”²

¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. p. 71.

² Ibid.

But colonised land is not simply drawn upon. At the same time its appropriation forces it to serve, at first inadvertently, then by design, as a repository for the deleterious substances and materials generated through its utilisation as resource. In other words, terraforming can also take place through the formation of a “sacrifice zone.” As Ghosh makes clear in his account of the European settler conquest of the Americas, the history of the indigenous peoples over the course of this conflict and its aftermath is a history marked not just by territorial dispossession but forced proximity to and containment within such zones, with the attendant exposure to various forms of bio-chemical hazard.³ This outcome of the colonialist project is also recognized by Max Liboiron in *Pollution is Colonialism*, with the sink, “a site of storage for waste,” identified there as a fundamental piece of “colonial technology.” Whatever its medium, dimension or scale, the function of this apparatus is to receive and then retain the hazardous within the prescribed limits of the locality in question, holding the latter in a state of containment. Indeed, for Liboiron, the schema informing this technology continues to determine the systems and standards by which environmental degradation is modelled and responded to. It does so through the principle of *assimilative capacity*: “the theory that environments can handle a specific amount of contaminant before harm occurs.”⁴ Once the threshold of tolerance has been established and then codified as a binding legal-technical standard, the consequence of this epistemological arrangement is that it grants “the ability to waste, even the right to waste,” up to the specified limit. It thereby cultivates a “sacrifice zone, designed for pollution”: “Today, the logics, techniques, and infrastructures (in forms from pipelines to policy) of maximum use of sinks uphold land as something that is not only pollutable, but properly so.”⁵ Environments managed in accordance with this principle thus provide an exemplary demonstration of “the frame of world-as-resource,” the “discovery” of assimilative capacity yet one further means of augmenting the productivity of a territory, deriving from it an additional strain of value: “Assimilation theory transforms bodies of water and other environments into a Resource for waste disposal.”⁶ And as Liboiron insists, this arrangement has the settler-colonialist project as its historical condition: “Pollution is not a manifestation or side effect of colonialism but is rather an enactment of ongoing colonial relations to Land.”⁷

II.

³ Ghosh, pp. 68-70.

⁴ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. p. 39.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 57; 70.

⁶ Ibid. p. 40.

⁷ Ibid. p. 6.

What frames the world-as-resource in our own period, Spivak argues, what secures continued access to the world in this particular mode, is *the globe*. The latter should be understood as a frame inasmuch as it is a purely theoretical construct, and thus (as with every frame) set apart from, not a part of, what it enframes. “The ‘globe’ is counterintuitive,” she writes. “You walk from one end of the earth to the other and it remains flat. It is a scientific abstraction inaccessible to experience. No one lives in the *global* village. The only relationship accessible to the globe so far is that of the gaze. Both the Greek and the Sanskrit words for transcendental knowledge or theory – *theoria* and *darsana* – relate to seeing.”⁸ It is through the abstraction of this viewpoint that the globe comes to act as a frame for the world *in toto* (for the frame in this form there is no out-of-frame). But what consolidates this frame, what allows it to be brought to bear directly upon empirical reality, is, in Spivak’s words, “the gridwork of electronic capital.” Each provides the other with its condition. On the one hand, “Globalization can now be seen as the establishment of the same system of exchange globally – made possible by electronification”;⁹ on the other, “Capital, being the abstract as such, has no other path but toward globalization.”¹⁰

Now, if this arrangement corresponds with Ghosh’s idea of “the frame of world-as-resource,” it is precisely insofar as the globe conceived as such has, so Spivak insists, *the rural* as its primary field of application. “It is possible, however, that the real terrain of globalization is the spectralization of the so-called rural... Today’s global front is in what can be called the country, not the city at all.”¹¹ Here “the rural” refers less, or not only, to a discrete physical space, but to a complex of intersecting properties and processes “coded” in accordance with the investments of financial capital and the infrastructures of international civil society, with the mapping and modelling of this complex across a series of informational systems allowing for unprecedented forms of mining and capture. “The silicon chip puts the rural into a general equivalent form, not money but data.”¹² Mediated in this way “the rural” becomes a term bearing an open-ended series of significations. “This spectral rural is

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Cultural Talks in the Hot Peace: Revisiting the “Global Village,”’ in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, editors. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. p. 329. For an account of the historical development of the globe as frame, see Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘What’s Left of Theory?’ in *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge Ma and London: Harvard University Press, 2012. p. 212.

¹⁰ Spivak, ‘Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet,’ in *Aesthetic Education*, pp. 344-45.

¹¹ Spivak, ‘What’s Left of Theory?’ p. 212.

¹² Ibid. p. 213.

not the empiricity of green fields and vials of blood; it has, in the manner of catachreses, no literal referent.”¹³

At the same time, however, insofar as the rural is revealed to be the “front” of globalization, this means it is also the site from which, through which, resistance to the global may be countenanced. To take one example, in ‘Cultural Talks in the Hot Peace,’ Spivak broaches this resistance through the concept-metaphor of *globe-girdling*. To girdle is to make a cut within the surface of a body otherwise contiguous with itself, and then trace the resulting incision until it meets up with its point of departure, so as to form an unbroken ring, separating the body from itself, splitting it in two. To girdle the globe is thus to break it up as a frame.

In any case, it is important not to pass over the implications of Spivak’s claim here. If it is true that the rural has become the global’s front, does this not call into question the longstanding association between politics and the city (*polis*), the premise that the formation of the city is the founding condition of the event of politics and the site of politics proper? What would a politics consist in if it were undertaken in terms irreducible to the *polis*, if it understood and inhabited the rural as something other than the city’s mere periphery? What types of agency, what forms of subjectivation, what modes of practice does this “rural theatre” call for?

In ‘~~Megacity~~,’ Spivak’s response to these questions takes the form of an appeal to the notion of *inter-diction*. The latter is defined there in precise terms: “An ‘inter-diction,’ in Roman law, came between two contenders to break up a dispute. It is a convenient name for a practice that does not take sides, but uses what is strategically important.”¹⁴ The inter-diction is an instrument of interruption. It makes its intervention within a given field not to bring a conflict to resolution, nor to dissolve the relation altogether, but to reconfigure the sanctioned form of the field itself, redistributing the terms of the opposition altogether, so that these terms no longer encounter one another in the same way. For Spivak, resistance to globalization takes the form of an inter-diction in this sense. “The non-Eurocentric new social movements, working for ecological agriculture against biopiracy, for women’s general health and infrastructurally supported family planning against pharmaceutical dumping and population control... These movements directly confront the global and produce the interdiction between global and local.” And the position from which this resistance is asserted? The

¹³ Ibid. p. 215. A lack or absence of this kind with respect to the rural, when framed through the global, is also noted by Vandana Shiva in *Biopiracy*, through the notion of *empty life*: “the jurisprudence of intellectual property rights related to life forms is in fact a jurisprudence of *Bio Nullius*.” See Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016. p. 29.

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘~~Megacity~~,’ in *Grey Room*, No. 1. (Autumn, 2000). p. 13.

rural. “In the strictest sense, the ‘rural’ is the inter-diction of the local and the global-in-urban-space.”¹⁵

¹⁵ pp. 16; 18.