

## Position Paper- Terra Critica Meeting 2023

### *Terra Critica X Rural Imaginations*

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#### *terra*

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Sitting down to write this position paper, I realize that the preparation for this year's *Terra Critica* meeting feels different. As we are entering year eleven of our cycle of meetings, we decided to try and "shift terrains"- we want to shift focus onto *terra*, after having made *critica* our conceptual anchor point in the past decade to reconsider practices of critique for the 21st century. As I think about this paper and my response to the assigned readings, that feels like a challenge. I realize that I find it quite hard to develop a "critical" stance or a question relating to land or *terra*, or the rural for that matter- although these imply slightly different things. While I couldn't agree more that it is crucial to "think about other sites of critique" than what Spivak calls the "urbanist teleology of the European tradition" ("What's Left of Theory?" 210-211)- after all, that has been *Terra Critica's* self-proclaimed goal from the beginning- I am challenged by our new focus on *terra*. I am excited to discuss the questions the organizers raised, but fear that my position paper will be more a series of scattered remarks than a position. A few remarks threaded along four words that kept surfacing during the readings: rural; village; terrifying crisis; barbarians.

#### *rural*

Ingenuously, this meeting also literally shifts terrain, taking place in a setting that is different from earlier ones. Not only will we be a small group of "just us" (with even three core members unable to join) and the ERC-project "Rural Imaginations." But we also hold the meeting in the countryside, in the agrarian pauper colony turned UNESCO world heritage site of Veenhuizen. This "house in the country" is far from idyllic, though. The hotel in which we are staying, called *Bitter en Zoet* (bittersweet), still marks the complicated legacy of the place in its name. Its 15 rooms- the webpage tells me- are in the colony's former staff residences called *Toewijding* (devotion), *Plichtgevoel* (sense of duty) and again *Bitter en Zoet*, with 6 more rooms located in the former hospital *Vertrouw op God* (trust in God).<sup>1</sup>

I appreciate that the hotel makes evident rather than obfuscate the links of its location's Christian missionary tradition of charity, benevolence, and soul-saving with dispossession, poverty, and the exploitation of labor "in the rural"; all of which also played into justifying the dispossession of colonial *hinterlands*. To demystify the rural idyll and to make tangible its complexities seem an important step when thinking about *terra*. The mythification- and actual practice for some- of the rural as "a place to retire to" (Williams, 282), an idyll to withdraw to from the cares of the world, is so connected, as Williams demonstrates, to aristocratic-turned-bourgeois imaginations of the social that we need to tackle those myths to get to any critical thinking about land. We must start with what Deleuze in *Logic of Sensations* calls "clearing the canvas".

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bitterenzoet.nl/hotel>

So, as a first point: the rural is not idyllic, nor is urbanity a guarantor of civilization or critique.

Secondly, Williams and Ghosh, as well as Bensaïd, highlight how the rural is entangled with the urban. Rurality is the generated capitalist counterpart, the co-constituted other of urbanity. The rural is inside the enclosure of capitalism, as its allegedly underdeveloped, extractable reserve of labor and resources slash idyllic retreat. Many recent protest movements and critiques of capitalism have come from this in/excluded site of the rural. In the European context, for example the Gilets Jaunes in France since 2018<sup>2</sup> or the Dutch farmers' protests since 2019,<sup>3</sup> but we could also think of the trucker protests in Canada in 2022 and more widely the protests of Covid19-measures which were articulating forms of critique coming from elsewhere than the "urbanist teleology of the European tradition" (Spivak). These might be one type of critique (if one can typify these different movements) that is "emerging from the rural" or "so-called peripheral places often conceived as extractive *hinterlands*" (to quote the program for this meeting) - but they are not thereby *per se* proposing to depart from land "thought as bounded property" or start thinking "from the earth" - as in the questions that we are asked to consider. Mixed in with more classically critical and urgent demands for economic justice, they are claiming the right to emit nitrogen, to meat-farm on an industrial scale, to emit CO2, or to avoid vaccination, often out of fear of alleged conspiracies against (white, Christian) humanity.

So, second take away point: we must carefully differentiate between the rural and the land of indigenous traditions, between what is within the enclosure of capitalism as its constitutive other and what might possibly (?) be at its limits. Between the more-than-human lives the rural harbors (including gigantic amounts of livestock) and the attention paid to those lives in these places.<sup>4</sup> And we might have to attend to the ways in which this rurality is not one.

### village

On that note, even though I might find it hard to come to a "critical position" on the question of land or rurality in relation to critique, I *can* start by noting the place "in the rural" from which I am writing this paper (I'm not sure that that makes developing a "critical position" any easier, though). Having benefited from the exploding realty market in the urban parts of the Netherlands over the past decade, we bought a little place in the country in the North-East of Germany two years ago, in a village of about 250 people, formerly GDR, east of the river Elbe, first recorded existence in 1363. This is where I'm writing this paper, at a desk that is very literally situated within a late effect of what Williams calls the "country-house system" (280). The study is overlooking the garden, stretching out onto wide fields. Over the past two years, we have come to know the complexities of this village (one into which we came, unlike Baldwin, sharing the same language, passport, and skin color as practically everyone in the village,

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<sup>2</sup> Sparked by rising fuel prices (a disproportionate burden on rural populations depending more on cars than urban populations, often also resulting from defunding public transport in rural areas after waves of privatization), but more broadly economic inequality, taxation policies and austerity measures.

<sup>3</sup> Channeled into the populist right-wing party BoerBurgerBeweging; explicitly pitted against the urban center of the Netherlands (paradoxically called "Randstad") as disenfranchising rural areas. The movement- sparked by the central government's ordered reduction of nitrogen emissions into nature reserves- mobilizes myths of idyllic, small-scale farming and the farmers' indispensable role in national food supply-chains, while most farms are agrarian mega-producers for export.

<sup>4</sup> I am also sitting with questions about the nonhuman agency of viruses in shifting perceptions and practices of land, given that one wave of the Black Death in England (and the subsequent loss of population) was intersecting (not necessarily in straightforwardly causal ways) with the rise of the enclosure movement; and the Covid19-pandemic has created new skills of online life that might shift the divisions between urbanity and rurality.

although not sharing the same type of occupation, education, income, or sexuality). This sharing/not-sharing has not produced negative responses so far, though. Quite the contrary, we like it in the village. But things are complicated.

For one, the seemingly idyllic fields behind our garden are farmed, we learn, by Germany's largest potato producer and our communist neighbor suggested we find out together what pesticides they are using. We also learned that the village is split into three fractions along lines of social status connected to landownership (newly grooved along pro and contra support for a wind park, planned by an international corporation, from which landowning villagers would profit disproportionately). We are in the *Häusler* (cottage) section, the poorest part, where people own(ed) only small houses and a few animals (some still keep sheep and chickens) but hardly any land. Our part is on the village outskirts to the west, along what were formerly sand paths into the forest, from where people get wood supply for heating (with the current energy prices a "highly sought-after raw material" (Bensaïd, 9)), along an intricate system which is not quite wood theft, but also not the commercial purchase of chopped wood in bags that we know from the city.

The rest of the village apparently calls us the *Sandhasen* (sand bunnies), but our neighbors assured us that people from the other parts "do speak to us"...even though we are not invited to their festive events. These others are the *Büttner* (coopers), who had small plots of land, and the *Bauern* (farmers), who own(ed) enormous farmhouses, many hectares of land and forest and are (or think themselves, I'm not sure yet) on the upper echelons of village hierarchy. Their entitlement to land ownership somehow survived GDR collectivization and they were able to sell it at a good profit to Dutch farming investors after the *Wende* in the 1990s, reconfirming a social distinction that had developed over centuries and was only briefly mitigated- so we hear (or shifted along lines of party adherence/dissidence)- during the GDR. We are not the only newcomers, there are many native villagers but also many who recently moved in. One of those newcomers from the former West flies the *Reichskriegsflagge* in his garden,<sup>5</sup> other long-time villagers have the red flag or the Cuban flag in theirs; some newcomers are part of the Hamburg left and commute, others are from Saxony (former GDR) and their tattoos indicate weirdly Celtic, if not far-right alliances. It's complicated. But there is an overall sense- as far as we can see- of live and let live. We have not yet witnessed any reductively oppositional us/them, although there are fierce debates over the wind park. Mostly, we've seen negotiation of interest, partial alliances, and pragmatism.

So, I note: the village is complicated. We ourselves are in complex ways part of the capitalization of the rural, a differentiated place, but we do not belong to this land east of the Elbe. People in their sixties who moved to the village at the age of four still say that they are not "from here". Thus, we are unlikely to ever be. And yet, strangely, this feels like a return of some sort.

### **terrifying crisis**

Part of the motivation for this little house in the country stemmed from that "global crisis [that] is terrifying" (Williams 288). In 1973, Williams refers to the uneven development and dispossession effected by global capitalism. In the 2020s, the extractive logic of that economic system has also become tangible in the climate catastrophe, a global crisis (or better: catastrophe) whose extent is indeed terrifying. It was partly at the back of our minds (my mind?) when thinking about moving east; concretely, the threat to land in global coastal

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<sup>5</sup> An icon of the German extreme right, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reichskriegsflagge>.

regions, including the Netherlands, posed by sea level rise, once, say, Thwaites Glacier collapses (Thwaites really being a synecdoche here for the global loss of ice mass).<sup>6</sup> This might be far past my lifetime, or it might not. Who knows? Does it matter? In any case, in addition to the complexities of the rural, what kept coming back to me during the readings was terror as in "terrifying" crisis.

As I found out, *terror* and *terra* are etymologically unrelated. But from the readings it seems they are not entirely separate. The colonial claims to land on the Banda Islands, for example, were enforced by terror. In 1621, on Lonthor Island, Sonck "has seized the best houses for his troops, and he has also sent soldiers swarming over the village, terrifying the inhabitants" (ch. 1, page 2).<sup>7</sup> Jan Pieterszoon Coen, presumably himself terrified during the ambush of his troops in 1609 "on the shores of Banda Naira" (9), seemed to feel entitled to think he had a score to settle. The Dutch troops expel the islanders and seize their land (already seeing it as a nutmeg producing commodity) by sheer brutality- according to the principle attributed to J.P. Coen that "[t]here is nothing in the world that gives one a better right than power" (8).<sup>8</sup> This is something slightly different from the assertion of *terra nullis*.<sup>9</sup> There's not even the fig leaf of feigned ignorance (pretending that there are no inhabitants with rights to the land). Rather, sheer force and terror are means to empty the land and seize it as private or national property for capitalist production and profit.

So, I note: Territorial acquisition by terror, by barbarous cruelty. By means of inflicting terror, *terra*- the earth, someone else than a soil producing tradable goods- is turned into land-as-resource and property, which can be owned, grabbed, stolen.

But I'm also thinking about the link of terror and *terra* in view of our own time, and I wonder who feels terror in our current terrifying crisis- for example at the indication that already by 2027 the earth will pass the threshold of 1,5 degree of warming?<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that "we" (in scare quotes, with Wynter and Derrida) feel vague forms of anxiety, unease, and foreboding (or denial), but not terror. Thunberg's "house on fire" pathos expresses that, I think. And yet, Williams is right to call global capitalism (and *its* climate emergency, I'd add) a "terrifying crisis." Why do "we" not feel more terrified in view of it (or do "we")? Perhaps, because "we" have been so trained into feeling a "natural" right to the land on which "we" live? Perhaps "we" are so deeply rooted within the legacy of colonial-capitalist land seizure and

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<sup>6</sup> I've become quite obsessed by the unique formation and life of Thwaites Glacier. Also here, complexity, or what *Nature* calls "heterogeneous melting" (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-05691-0>): the images and measurements that underwater vehicle Icefin produced in recent studies (started 2019, published February 2023) show that Thwaites *melts* at a slower pace than deduced earlier from the glacier's visible retreat, but *breaks up* faster than expected; leaving scientists with "substantial uncertainty to twenty-first century sea-level projections" (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-05586-0>).

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, the OED lists as one of the first records of (non-Biblical, worldly use of) *terror* in the English language a 1615 publication by George Sandys, *The Relation of a Journey begun an. Dom. 1610, in four books* (recording a journey to the Levant and Turkey). In the same month of the same year as the lamp fell in Selamon, April 1621, Sandys takes up the position of colonial treasurer of the Virginia Company in Jamestown. That terror crops up as a term in his books even before he gets involved with the VC signals that terror must have been in the air, as the *Zeitgeist* accompanying travel and land-seizure.

<sup>8</sup> The legacy of that brutalization and the Dutch colonial project has not been dealt with in the Netherlands yet. The fact that I wrote all my other *Terra Critica* position papers at my desk in the Jan Pieterszoon Coenstraat in Utrecht- and that there are streets called Jan Pieterszoon Coenstraat in practically every Dutch town of some size - is one indication of that.

<sup>9</sup> Curiously, neither *terra nullis* nor *terra incognita* are listed by the OED under *terra*.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/may/17/global-heating-climate-crisis-record-temperatures-wmo-research>

property that "we" cannot imagine losing the entitlement to the grounds under our feet? Or, if there is a link between terror and the transformation of *terra* into land-as-resource-and-property, then perhaps terror might be the last thing we want to feel. Perhaps rather than feel terror, "we" must find ways to un-terrorize or un-terrify *terra*.

I'm not arriving at a "critical position" here, to be put forward in a position paper... so far all I have are questions and a haunting constellation of terms. And there's a last one, before I end: barbarians.

### barbarians (just briefly)

While the rural is within the enclosure of urbanity / capitalism, the barbarians are usually the ones outside the walls. Of course, Bensaïd reminds us that "[t]he deliberately confused presentation in imperial rhetoric of an obscure and ungraspable terrorism [...] build[s] on fear and anxiety, the vision of a world under assault from barbarians. It masks the fact that this barbarism is in no way foreign to civilisation, being rather its reverse and inverse side. It is *its* barbarism." (quoted in Nichols, xxii) When thinking about critique and land, though, we might need to see how rurality relates to and differs from barbarism. How these are inverse sides of urbanity and civilization, but inverse in different ways.

There's much to unpack, I think. J. P. Coen's barbarity- pitted as enacting a natural right given by power (and a Christian god)-enabled his troops to seize the Banda Islands, whereas in the conventional colonial lexicon the barbarians are the others. They are the threat to newly founded settlements and outposts (thinking of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*). Barbarians are not extractable labor, they are destructible. Outside the walls, beleaguering civilization. This is a slightly different in/outside than rurality as exploitable *hinterland*. In the Roman Empire, terminologically, "[t]he *leges barbarorum* was a Latin compendium [...] of the common law of various Germanic tribes from the fifth to the ninth centuries." (Marx, note 12) Looking up the map of the Roman Empire I realize that the land east of the Elbe was never part of it. Even the briefly lived Roman province of Germania Antiqua (7 BC to AD 9) ended west of the river Elbe.

So, by way of closing, I realize that we moved (back) to the barbarians, east of the Elbe. Being certainly fully alive to the barbarism of German history, I was not equally alive to the lines running across the lands that have terraformed over millennia (and, crucial sidenote: one barbarism is not like the other here). Yet, even if I might not be aware of all these shifts and scars and groovings of *terraformation*, the land (like the specificities of the Rhineland, that Bensaïd and Marx remind us of) bears the marks. Even if I don't pay attention. What to do with that in our forms of critique? Pursue as many of these complicated lines as possible? Trace the formation and its shifting in the present? Look as closely as possible (which Ghosh does wonderfully), while keeping in mind from where, when and for whom?