

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

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“I wonder if the ground has anything to say?”¹
Vicki Kirby

Looking back over previous submissions my enduring focus has been the political implications of the nature/culture division. As we are encouraged this year to “come down to earth,” to think the “terra” in Terra Critica, it seems especially appropriate to ask what is at stake when we build our arguments on this oppositional rupture. Indeed, what does the difference secure? Can we avoid it? And should its lack of justification – for surely it is more assumed than explained – give us pause?

In past sessions I’ve addressed Homi K. Bhabha’s appeal to move away from a dialectic of negation towards the blur and difficulty of involvement (p. 11). To recall the thrust of his argument, Bhabha champions “cultural difference” over “cultural diversity,” or identity politics, because the former acknowledges the instability and cross-referential nature of identity, whereas the latter attributes identity with given, or inherent, properties. In sum, we are presented with a sense of complex heterogeneity – the constitutive mangle of forces whose hauntology enunciates identity – versus an identity whose circumscription and autonomy are never in doubt. My intervention was to return to the foundations, or “terra,” of Bhabha’s argument to show its reliance on a nature/culture split that recuperates the very notion of identity his argument eschews. Of course, he is not alone in assuming that the identity of human species being requires no qualification, its unique properties (language and technology?) defined against what nature purportedly lacks. Is it inevitable that arguments that take their distance from a perceived mistake, a shortfall, a lack of some sort, will inevitably repeat the same errors they hope to correct?

Similarly, in another submission I refer to Gayatri Spivak’s well-known observation that “complicity” describes a structural involvement that is poorly understood if reduced to a moral accusation. However, if purity and innocence are fictional, a sign that the messiness of identity formation has been defensively repressed, we have cause to wonder why Spivak’s positive response to Mahasweta Devi’s work appears unequivocal. In one of the stories that we read for that session, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” (1995), and despite its value in other respects, Devi is explicit in her identification of indigeneity with the virtue and patience of nature. Given this, what are we to make of the violent divisions between the tribes and their well-documented participation in government assaults against each other? In what has become a well-worn trope in contact narratives Devi makes it clear that these are modern behaviours: violence and corruption come from the outside (xvi). This refusal to acknowledge the complexity of the native, the literacies, punitive implications of their lores and taboos, the politics of treachery that attend “being human,” or indeed, “being anything,”

¹ Vine Deloria Jr. in Ghosh (2021, no page numbers)

strips the native of political savvy and adaptive sophistication in order to *enforce*, as analytical departure point, an essential helplessness. Who benefits from this representation?

Important for both arguments is the reluctance to acknowledge “originary violence” as constitutive of all individuation. My reliance above on intellectual heavyweights is intended to underline the ubiquity of this refusal that fortifies human identity, requiring us to make nature synonymous with a comparative deficiency and incapacity, a before, an outside, whose otherness prohibits access. Should we comfort ourselves with this presumption by insisting that “nature” is a sign, an inevitable misrepresentation that culture claims as its own? Or can we flip these terms while retaining the intimate entanglement of an “inside,” a “systemic ecology,” whose translative and transductive ruptures generate individuations with no integrity? Impossible? It is my suspicion that what we are defending against is the suggestion that “humans” are not so much authors of language and technology as we are authored outcomes; our agency, not so much a unique capacity or personal property as an expression of these larger earthly forces.

But what about the legible destruction registered in the Anthropocene and our confession: We are the culprits? We did this? Is there virtue in such an admission? Jacques Derrida asks us to think again about the politics of responsibility that take confessional form when he takes us to a scene of first contact between Lévi-Strauss and the native Nambikwara of the Amazon Forest.² We may well be in sympathy with the moral misgivings that torture the anthropologist as he documents the injustice of the situation that sees the coming of technology, and we appreciate his awareness that the encounter will inaugurate the inevitable demise of a way of life for this people without writing. And yet, not only does Derrida illuminate the myriad literacies of these people – is it Lévi-Strauss who cannot read? – he balks at the anthropologist’s *mea culpa*, interpreting it as “an ethnocentrism *thinking itself* as anti-ethnocentrism, an ethnocentrism in the consciousness of a liberating progressivism” (1997, 120). For Derrida, the acknowledgement of guilt on the part of the anthropologist is only possible because the identity of “the other” (primitive) who suffers, the other who must submit to violation, is not the subject whose sovereign identity is made manifest as bad conscience. Difference here is difference from: the other is, by definition, incapable and inculpable because lacking the burden of enlightened consciousness and responsibility.

Let me take stock here. My intervention is not intended to dismiss the concept of “dispossession,” or even humanism, in any straightforward way. Indeed, I take my critical bearings from my perception of injustice and learn from its revelation, especially the more counterintuitive and subtle manifestations. But there will always be questions I am compelled to sustain, not despite that commitment but because of it. To explain this, what must dispossession be defined against in order to leverage its significance as out and out theft, an undeniable wrong? And if what decides “possession” is historically mutable and unstable, as Daniel Bensaïd on Marx makes clear, doesn’t this provoke us to maintain a sense of “the strategic” in our political and ethical commitments? If “the natural order” – and by this I want to evoke *every sense of material grounding*, or what earths the electrical current of our political manoeuvrings – will not provide the touchstone of a prior self-possession, an in-itself whose alienation has yet to take place, then can we benefit from Alfred North Whitehead’s proposition in *Process and Reality* that “life is robbery” (1978, 105)? Or Derrida’s inversion of the same assertion in his work on the gift which is always owed? In other words, what if

² It is odd that the scene is cast as one of first contact, even though Lévi-Strauss doesn’t hide the fact that the workers who accompany him are repairing an old telegraph line deep within Nambikwara territory.

“possession,” the naïve appeal to the integrity of identity, will not ground the politics of dispossession?

If critique is to acknowledge its ecological life, its immersion in earthly convers(at)ion (for Nature is surely manifest literacies), then we cannot be satisfied with arguments that claim human exceptionalism in terms of our alienation from nature. Put simply, if we are *of* nature and not simply *in* nature then what might a generalised debt, or theft, imply? What strange economy is at work that might value nature’s self-alienation, a dispossession that extends all the way down?

Finally, the chapter by Amitav Ghosh, “Terraforming,” gives us much to chew on, as we see in the comment, “That landscapes are alive has been reiterated again and again, throughout Native American history” (2021, no page numbers). We learn that the ecological reach of terraforming has planetary impact on the weather, a cause and effect description that could surely be reversed, or even entangled. However, the more important political point is that the colonialist tendency to create a landscape of “Neo-Europes” wrought havoc “upon the flora, fauna, demography, and terrain of Australia and the Americas (and also of islands like the Canaries and New Zealand)” (2021, no page numbers). And yet, European colonisation is not the starting point of significant terraforming activity. First nations’ people in Australia destroyed indigenous flora by firing the landscape: megafauna had nothing to eat and became extinct. Although the relationship was not causal because climate change was already underway, indigenous activity helped to speed things along. More spectacular was the arrival of Maori in Aotearoa, New Zealand. They permanently destroyed 40% of the natural vegetation by firing the land and hunted many animals to extinction. This is not to say that colonial destruction is just more of the same, but it does complicate the tendency to regard *significant* terraforming as a recent phenomenon, perpetrated by outsiders. Ghosh uses the notion to reveal the mentality of colonialists who envision(ed) space as a “frontier” to be “conquered” and “colonized.” But if all native peoples are terraforming?

Let’s finish up with Charles Darwin whose *The Origin of Species* (1859) discovers neither origin nor species, an antidote to origin stories and the belief that a species is easily identified.³ My focus is on his last manuscript, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms, with Observations of their Habits* (1881). In a life-long fascination with earthworms that conceded their intelligence, Darwin observed their dietary preferences, noting that “judging by their eagerness for certain kinds of food, they must enjoy the pleasures of eating” (34). In short, worms help to make soil, perhaps happily. And as Google tells us, “In one pasture study, earthworms consumed between 20 and 40 tons of soil per acre per year. In another study, earthworms were estimated to consume 4 to 10 percent of the top 6 inches of the soil annually.”⁴ Terraforming indeed, and no doubt with planetary impact.

Could our political interventions and the shape of our narratives prove more inclusive and less predictable if we acknowledge the ground, always terraforming, as an act of nature’s self-alienation, creativity and reinvention?

³ Even the sciences struggle to pin this concept down: “the word ‘species’ is actually fiendishly difficult to define. Despite decades of research, biologists do not agree on what constitutes a species. Several dozen definitions have been proposed” (Marshall 2019).

⁴ See <https://extension.psu.edu/earthworms>, accessed June 5, 2023.

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