

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

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

Jacques Lezra

Let's agree to distinguish two ways of opposing ecocide. Let's call them animism and technical under- and over-determination. I'm inclined to call them two *strategies*. If that's what they are, then we're licensed to use now one, now the other, and to range beyond them when necessary: strategies are not subject to principles of coherence or non-contradiction. When we're up against so incoherent, so diffuse a phenomenon as anthropogenic ecocide—and just who "we" is also incoherent, contradictory—we take what's to hand toward outcomes we envision hazily and in different times: we envision a world without extractivism; alternative institutions; other futures for species; a different biology. I've chosen to focus on just these two strategies because they're concerned with the *land* and with how it's to be thought, but also because they may help organize others, in the way that magnets dropped on a surface of iron filings will organize them into ghostly lines. But it's not clear that animism and technical under- and over-determination are strategies in the same way—if by "strategy" we intend a course of action I could plan out, a set of means to an end, a battle-plan. And this—which seems debilitating, even disabling: in the war against anthropogenic ecocide, wouldn't we want a coherent, intrinsically appealing concept, rather than a strategic account of the strategies on offer, for our use one now, another then?—this incoherence may turn out to be among our strongest resources, at a time when "we" seems determined only as a universally threatened, biological species-being.

Here's what I have in mind. First strategy: animism. This is Amitav Ghosh, in *The Nutmeg's Curse* of 2021:

There is a kind of enchantment in the air, but it has nothing to do with the landscape; it derives rather from Euclidean geometry and the lines that Europeans drew upon the globe as they set out to conquer the world...

[H]ere [the Four Corners Monument] the terrain is an empty, Euclidean space that has been invested with a particular meaning by a group of occupants. That meaning would be no different if the monument were located on a snowy mountaintop or a verdant valley instead of a dusty plain.

The scene is primitive—primitive, even primordial, with regard to Ghosh's argument; primitive in the elaboration of what you could rather generally call the decolonial lexicon, in particular the lexicon following the work of Walter Mignolo and others, where it restages the imagined encounter between the European *conquistador* and the indigenous peoples of the land he invades. Here is Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Where Ghosh gives us "empty, Euclidean space," de Sousa offers space—and thinking—he attributes to the name "Descartes," always the antagonist in the little psychomachia of decolonial reason: "[A]ll Western thinking, whether critical or not, is grounded on the Cartesian idea that nature is a *res extensa* and, as such, an unlimited resource unconditionally available to human beings." This (and Ghosh's version of the scene as well) is scandalously reductive, of course—polemical, strategic, propagandistic. Let's grant the polemic and be charitable about the reductiveness. (This is a battle, after all.) But there is also something

like a performative contradiction in assertions based on the universal quantifier *all*, as in “all Western thinking,” which simultaneously is critical of notion of *res extensa*, since the “allness” collecting all *Western* thinking stands on the attribute and mapping of physical extension we call the West. About this sort of contradiction we should show less charity.

Two peoples meet, though for each, what “meeting” is means something different. The physical encounter between two peoples is also a face-off between competing epistemologies, competing imaginaries, competing phenomenologies. Thus in Ghosh's scene two epistemologies meet, or an epistemology and something-else. Here, in Four Corners, the Rousseauian encounter between peoples (colonizers, indigenous population) is determined by at least two other, perhaps *prior* scenes, religious, philosophical:

--The Adamic, mythic encounter between the abstract human who possesses the power to name *and* the land the human first treads on, in the Garden or outcast, like Adam and Eve, with wandering steps and slow, their backs to the closed doors of Paradise.

--The second determining meeting takes place between, on one hand, what that abstract human *is* in “All Western thinking,” the subject, object, and means of that thinking: the system formed by the Cartesian couplet *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (for this little human-as-subject-object-means-of-thought a map, a regular space, can be provided: Leibniz); and on the other hand an entity—we won’t call it an “object” or a “thing” or a “system,” since these are terms drawn from the poisonous lexicon of “Western thinking”—an entity that is neither *res*, nor *extended*, nor *thinkable*, nor *thinking*, if these terms are understood on the definitions provided by that poisoned lexicon.

Here, in Four Corners, there stands on one hand the European colonial imagination: cartographic, mathematical. The space it maps will always and necessarily be empty, extended, regular; the points on it are mathematizable, abstractly equivalent. Naturally the space of *res extensa* is *terra nullius*; it is thinkable by a thinking thing, some sort of subject, just on the condition that it is abstract and *belongs* to no-one. (We’d say: it can be made-to-belong, it can be appropriated, to concepts and to colonizing projects, just on the condition that it be, first-off, *terra nullius*, no-man’s-land. It becomes property because its only property is extension.) On the other hand, we find the world inhabited or to be inhabited (it can be uninhabited and still be other than *terra nullius*), imagined, and experienced, by its indigenous populations: this world (thus Ghosh, de Souza, Viveiros, and others) is symbolic; it speaks or can come to speak to the population attuned to its words; it holds or can come to hold its inhabitants. (We’d say: “belonging” does not belong to land so imagined. It has properties, this land, it *is* the properties it has, but this land does not “have” properties that belong to it, or to which it belongs, in the mode of possession. It “has” features, a surface, flora, fauna, it “has” its indigenous inhabitants--they are all the land’s property, but not in a way that entails possession.)

Animism is the figure that *determines* this multiple face-off. It has an old, strictly “European,” strictly philosophical genealogy. For here, at the point where the four states meet, two “enchantments” face and determine each other. On one hand, “a group of occupants,” call them “European” or (de Souza) the sorts of subjects of “[A]ll Western thinking, whether critical or not,” draw abstract lines across whatever-entity *res cogitans* thinks. Here “there is a kind of enchantment in the air,” Ghosh writes, “but it has nothing to do with the landscape; it derives rather from Euclidean geometry and the lines that Europeans drew upon the globe as they set out to conquer the world...” Whatever sort of enchantment is entailed or permitted by the Euclidean imagination is secondary: derivative of what is drawn upon the globe rather than of what constitutes the globe. In this sense, whatever this enchantment is could be condemned on the

strong grounds that it is secondary to, product of, something already secondary, that is, to the lines that the Euclidean imagination adds to the actually existing ground. On the other hand, on the other side, we (but is it the same “we”?) find ourselves enchanted not by the lines but with what we might call the landscape itself or the land itself. We’re not facing on this side the idea of an idea, or the line drawn upon an idea but rather, Ghosh seems to suggest, the thing itself that serves as the material support for the idea of the land and for the lines drawn upon the idea of the land by the Euclidean cartographic imaginary. Ghosh’s little fable—and in its decolonial kin—associates the Euclidean cartographic imaginary with a merely secondary (or tertiary, or worse), imitative project. We are suddenly back in Plato’s *Greece*; we are in the American *Republic*.

The primitive (in the sense of primordial) Platonic distinction is weak, muddy, and contradictory to the polemical anti-European tenor of Ghosh’s tale (and of de Souza’s, and Mignolo’s, etc.). At least, it seems insufficient, philosophically as well as politically. Insufficient on both sides: the antagonist, “Euclidean space,” empty, continuous, and mathematizable, is made to speak (is animated: *prosopographia*) so as to take no account of the frame in which the geometrical imaginary emerges. I mean by this that the concept of an empty space needs to be historicized more rigorously precisely in order for it to do the sort of ideological, argumentative work that Ghosh requires. On the other side, the landscape is made to speak, animated, and to tell the enchanting tale of the heavily saturated symbolic landscape that Ghosh and others attribute to the experience of the indigenous populations also needs to be understood in the context of the colonial projection of *authenticity* upon the inhabitant. So the distinction between a European, Euclidean, empty vacuous space that can be populated through the animating fantasies of a cartographic imaginary on one side and on the other side the animating fantasy of a relation-to (not, exactly, conceptualization of) landscape as land to which an indigenous population belongs-without-possession, responsive to symbolic living, seems to me a double simplification.

I’m not sure this simplification, this weakness, is disabling; it doesn’t render the story useless strategically—to the contrary. The double simplification or double abstraction is also a characteristic of the current moment in which we find ourselves economically that is, that is, a moment in which the universalization of markets depends simultaneously upon the production of a notionally comparable, empty market space in which commodities can transit from the domains of extraction production circulation consumption among those domains on one side and then on the other side the fantasy that the embeddedness of commodities within the cultural domains in which they are extracted, produced, circulated, and consumed *adds value* to them--in other words the structure that gosh finds in this primitive scene is a structure that’s characteristic of the current moment of capital.

Let me offer you another scene. I’m using it to introduce what I opened calling the strategy of, or offered by, technical under- and over-determination. We are now in Appalachia. This is where my mother’s family comes from: Northern Appalachia, Wheeling, West Virginia, a city in the mountains between Pennsylvania and Ohio. It’s a heavily deindustrialized region, though the traces of the state’s primary extractive industry, coal mining, are not as evident, not as much marked on the surface of the landscape, as they are farther South. The radio station based in Wheeling had the largest audience for the very long time playing country and Appalachian music across the dial for hundreds of miles. There’s a sub genre of such songs that pertain to coal mining, and in particular to the kind of coal mining typical of the Appalachian region where a combination of geological, topographic, and economic factors makes the extraction of coal most attractive in the form of strip mining—rather than in the form of deep-vein, deep-bore mining. Now, the politics of coal mining in this region—as in all regions where coal is mined—are

violent; the technique's immediate environmental effects are catastrophic—more visible, more legible, so to speak, than the effects of nearly any other extractive procedure. And—to my point—there is a line connecting the means developed to assess the viability of surface-coal-extraction to the means used to assess the viability of extracting residual or inaccessible petroleum from already-mined, already-extracted surfaces: the assessment of land surfaces for application of the industrial technologies that we now call fracking. This is odd, because the two sorts of extraction technologies seem on their surface, on their face, inverses of each other: in strip mining the mountain is beheaded and the waste sloughed off into the neighboring valley; here the clearing-extraction of coal produces a scar upon the face of the land, and then immediately erases it. Fracking on the other hand takes place below the surface, almost invisibly, and the effects are secondarily felt upon the surface and upon its population in the form not just of the leaching of contaminants into groundwater and the surface soil, but also of subsidence and earthquake activity that can, if anything, re-scar the land's surface. The two extractive industries have in common—and in common with such industries as the grave-robbing of archaeologically-valued sites like Native American burial grounds—forms of mapping and cartography based on so-called Volumetric Three-Dimensional Display Systems, supported today by drone and satellite technology; video gaming technologies; and increasingly 3D Laser & LiDAR, or Lidar, Light Detection and Ranging Scanning. The group of techniques works to convert 2-dimensional images or sets of two-dimensional images into sufficiently detailed, granular, three-dimensional images to permit the extraction from the image of a topographical-feature rich map that allows geologists to predict where there might be coal or frackable gas and petroleum.

This, it seems, is the coarsest materialization of the enchantment of Euclidean projection upon the landscape: extractivist, entirely uncaring of the symbolic dimension of the land, this set of technologies is a simple step away from the tourism at Four Corners. It is the outcome of the submission of the land to the animistic couplet *res cogitans/res extensa*.

Except it is not, or not only that—since these techniques and technologies *also* serve conservationists, ecologists, and scientists bent on minimizing (at least) or eliminating extractivism altogether.

A surplus-utility over- and under-determines these mapping technologies, and shows the abstract “Euclidean,” “Cartesian” space to produce, unexpectedly and uncontrollably, value- and counter-value effects whose *strategic* value in the war against anthropogenic ecocide cannot be underestimate—but which also cannot be reliably *calculated*. This—which is the mark of the limit at which *res cogitans* meets its apparent object, *res extensa*, is *already* inscribed in the Cartesian concept of extension. (And this, among other things, should give us pause when we seek to use the name “Descartes,” or any other “Western” thinker’s name, strategically or polemically, as the objective antagonist.) Descartes hesitates, when defining extension: in the *Principia* he makes extension synonymous with both body and matter, which he coordinates with the famously ambiguous disjunctive conjunction *sive: corpus sive materia*. But *body* is not a synonym of matter (not all bodies, as for instance a body of thought, are material, especially for Descartes). His *sive* here is just as fraught, just as symptomatically over- and under-determine, as that much more famous *sive* that Spinoza placed, to the most lasting controversy, just where “nature” and “transcendence” cross: *Deus, sive natura*.