

Position Paper- Terra Critica Meeting 2023

Terra Critica X Rural Imaginations

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Starting my reflections on this year's readings and the overall theme for our workshop 'Terra Critica x Rural Imaginations', I have to confess that I experienced greater difficulty than expected to de-center critique, i.e. to not once more capitalize (on) it. When studying the texts we have with us at our table this year, I noticed the constant drive to *figure out* the critical intervention these texts make; where they would produce a shift or disrupt dominant visions and understandings, rather than letting myself be drifted somewhere else with them, other places, as the call for papers spells it out as 'peripheral places often conceived as extractive *hinterlands* or [...] the more-than-human lives they harbor'. I suspect, however, that it is not only because of me, inhabiting the critical entanglements so naturally when thinking of our meetings together. This critical instinct to figure out transformations or shifts is also related to dividing lines structuring those texts which aim to inspire us this year to "call into question the urbanist teleology of the European tradition" (Spivak 2012, 210).

So, this position paper will be a very rough (I fear) and definitely too short reflection on how the divisions, to say it exemplarily with Raymond Williams (1973, 279), between the 'metropolitan', i.e. the 'advanced', 'developed', 'industrialised', *versus* 'country', that is 'under-developed', 'agricultural', '*hinterland*', functions as a foundational splitting, and what effects it has for moving other places than the capital(s) of critique.

What I want to think along with in view of our discussions on *terra critica x rural imaginations* is thus the heavy reliance on splitting as critical or argumentative gesture in (most of) our readings, all of which I can read in ways that link to the foundational nature/culture split so essential to capital(ized) critical or continent(al) thinking (translated then in our texts into city/country, dis/possession, de/humanization, colonizer/indigenous/native, native/stranger). And yet..., I also see articulations of other lines of flight at work, maybe we can call those a

more ‘down to earth’ criticality; one, however, that doesn’t seem to me to do away with the splits but instead generates a different handling of them – producing different effects than a continuous hierarchical splitting (with its well-known consequences of silencing, sacrificing, killing ‘the other’). Is it possible?

To contextualize my notes still further, I want to quickly think back to 2020 when I prepared Terra Critica’s theory/practice workshop, envisioned in cooperation with the CSSSC in Kolkata. Theory/practice as yet another translation of the foundational dualist split of nature/culture. There, in view of Spivak’s im/possible imperative to indeed ‘call into question’ both the cliché of practice/praxis as simple, as applied, as mere policy and an always already assumed ‘metropolitanism’ of abstract continental/critical thought I wrote that

Spivak’s move [...] is definitely a call to disrupt Marxist “urbanist teleology” (Spivak 2012, 204), which can, as she continues, only move in the “noisy sphere [the marketplace]” (204). And yet, Marx’ “revolutionary rallying cry” can also not simply be *translated* – leaving behind the urban, turning somewhere else (the rural; indigeneity). Instead, Spivak’s thoughtful point is an *impossible practice*. What is suggested by her, if I understand correctly, is that only by way of acknowledging – opening up to, confronting and encountering – the structural aporias that produce halts and precisely allow no move at the very heart of the wish to “[s]eek [...] to encounter the other” with “respect, humility, and a desire to learn” (205), something will be moving. Spivak specifies deconstruction as the critical force with which we learn to practice that “thought of non-passage is a passage” (205).

Why I come back to these earlier reflections is that in light also of Mahasweta Devi’s novella ‘Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha’ (which was on the list of readings for our theory/practice workshop, too), what Spivak claims is that encountering the other isn’t ever achieved by siding with them, nor even by moving to their side, i.e. flipping the coin, pretending the coin is a *tabula rasa*, a *terra nullius* that can be flipped. No, what Devi’s novella offered to me engaging with it at this time and in that context is the radical impossibility of just turning things around (which means that sustainability and greening efforts *are* the continuation of the capital(ized) development-logic on which globalization runs, and it cannot be otherwise).¹ And yet..., there are also the words of Devi’s imagination when she lets her protagonist’s, i.e. Puran’s mind speak at the end of the story, that love, “a tremendous,

¹ I would also like to mention in this context a statement by Vicki Kirby which in my eyes brings to the point what I mean to say here. In ‘Un/limited Ecologies’ (2018) she writes: “Cartesianism isn’t an accusation that can be remedied with a corrective because both its affirmation and its critique install the *cogito* (Man) as the site of claim and counterclaim” (123). I have tried to think alongside this statement, and what it might mean in view of a different criticality, in my chapter in *The Ends of Critique: Methods, Institutions, Politics* (2022).

excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work when the century's sun is in the western sky" (Devi 1995, 195-196).

Coming back now again to 2023, it is in this spirit that I want to note down a few thoughts still; or maybe they are more issues and questions that occurred to me while reading, which I hope can contribute to our discussions on “[w]hat 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*)?”. One (conceptual) worry I have, for example, is that we start using Williams' sharp and far-reaching analysis in 'The New Metropolis' (1973) of the imperialist demarcation of city and country, approached from within and bolstered by (English) history, as a too easy spring-board to critically explain away rather than stay with the inter-dependency of city/world and country/land/earth, their always/already entangledness with no option to move 'to the other side' – not even affectively, for moral, political or ethical reasons. The same holds for Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). In view of his multifaceted narration of today's catastrophic planetary condition, his thinking-with the (his)story of the nutmeg as emblematic of globalized Western colonialism: How to keep (with) the complexity of the critical matters at stake, that while his text is a scathing critique of Western colonialism, imperialism, and 'modernization' – and in that sense it fits neatly with Williams (even though not ideologically I would say) – and Ghosh is arguing for a different *terraforming*, one that is not even to be invented as it is there for all the time(s); but how to keep with the complexity that his text is not about any direct passage to the other (to speak with Spivak)? Or if it is, depending on how one reads the text, then I herewith raise the issue that I fear Ghosh misses the complexity that is needed to move at all, anywhere.

I could continue here with these intellectual worries which I also see occurring in James Baldwin's presentation of the foundational split between the native Swiss villager ("who had never seen a Negro") and the 'Stranger in the village' (1955) ("no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came"), or a reading of Mishuana Goeman's 'Land as Life' (but also Guzman's *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) and Fremeaux & Jordan's *We are 'Nature' Defending Itself* (2020)) as yet further spring-boards to short-circuit the "unsettling" of "the logics" as an all-encompassing critical undoing, a move again as open passage which only if

followed through – finally – ‘we’ would move. It is to be seen how our discussions turn on these matters.

Before I close, however, the other side of the story I seem to be after in preparing for this year’s Terra Critica meeting should also still be mentioned. And maybe it is contradictory to what I have just tried to articulate; and maybe that is my current state in view of critique as a ‘down to earth’ praxis, a way of thinking and living in view of the lands where it could be inhabited.

And yet..., a different modality of thinking is also at work in the texts I spoke of here before – Williams, Ghosh, Baldwin, Goeman – a modality that in somewhat radical manners *ab-uses* (trans: ‘away’-‘use’) and *sub-verts* (trans: ‘from below’-‘to turn’) the splitting structure of capital(ized) thinking. In my reading, this modality is neither about getting rid of foundational dualisms, nor is it about moving to one detectible good side, thereby ‘correcting’ hierarchical dualism. Instead, it seems to be about generating something from dualism’s very interior which with all its force it cannot ever make disappear; or even more so, which dualism cannot ever do without. Paying more attention to these (constitutive) cracks in or drifts from the continental splitting might create breathable critical pockets, more so than many of us allow ourselves to see when faced with the continent(al) blocks of (Western) dualism.²

I want to return here once more to Baldwin’s s poetic account of the duality not only of native/stranger, but within it, of course, the (American) structure of white supremacy.

Instead of resolving the dialectics of black-white, he ends with the following sub-version or ab-use:

I am not, really, a stranger any longer to any American alive. [...] This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. [...] It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again. (Baldwin, 1955)

Is there any stronger resistance to the subjugating binarism or dualism than what is stated in this last sentence: “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again”?

² I seem to have needed this last year in (toxic) academic contexts to grasp more fully this aspect of dualism, but with it also the insight (with Spivak again) that the ‘thought of non-passage is [or can be] a passage’.

In a similar vein, also Ghosh doesn't look for the resolution or the correction of the colonial mindset in world history. He shows so detailed in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) how deep-seated and intentional, because also bolstered by the dominance of Eurocentric evolutionism in the sciences, colonialism was and continues to be. And yet..., at multiple points in the book, he also sub-verts or ab-uses the difficult to swallow (historical) details with what in one passage in chapter four reads as follows:

Yet what was once considered a certainty by Western scientist and administrators, educators and intellectuals, *has not come to pass*: neither the Pequot, nor the Diné, nor the Bandanese have disappeared. Having lived through the ending of their worlds, they have found ways not merely to survive, but even, in some instances, to flourish. (52, emphasis added)

There is no 'so, and' or 'therefore' to be followed from here; no conclusions drawn at this moment for me. What these (and other) passages in the different readings articulate for me is what 'peripheral places often conceived as extractive *hinterlands* or [...] the more-than-human lives they harbor' could perhaps signify when re-focusing on *terra* in critical endeavors. This other modality at work which I also connect to the affordance of an 'and yet...', I allow myself here to read also as one possible version of Devi's earthly praxis of love that can 'dedicate us to this work when the century's sun is in the western sky'. This modality might always already harbor (or generate) a different onto-epistemology, one that doesn't merely flip or exchange the lands of critique, but materially attends to multiple undercurrents, grounds or ecologies – waters, soils, weather.

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