

Birgit Mara Kaiser; Kathrin Thiele

**Terra**

2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1829>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Kaiser, Birgit Mara; Thiele, Kathrin: Terra. In: Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser, Kathrin Thiele (Hg.): *Symptoms of the planetary condition. A critical vocabulary*. Lüneburg: meson press 2017, S. 205–210. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1829>.

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

**Terms of use:**

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Share Alike 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

# Terra

Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele

*Terra*, a feminine noun in Latin, refers to “earth; land, ground, soil; country; region” (Morwood 2012). It is used in English frequently in science fiction to designate planet earth, and appears in colloquial language mainly in composites, such as *terra firma*, *terra nullius* or *terra incognita*, and then usually in figurative speech. *Terra incognita*, as perhaps the most prominent example, has become the figurative expression for an unknown or unexplored region. In a similar vein, Sigmund Freud **metaphorically** referred to female sexuality as a “‘dark continent’ for psychology” (1959, 211). Both *terra incognita* and *dark continent* designate metaphorically the unknown. Yet, underneath their “mere” metaphoricity, the literal reference to geographical regions of the earth that are uncharted by Western explorers – that is: the terms’ colonial heritage – is audible in both cases. Freud’s implicit reference to a continent that Joseph Conrad had figured two and a half decades before as the *Heart of Darkness* (a novel in turn written in the wake of the Berlin Conference in 1884 and the ensuing European “scramble for Africa”); and – somewhat less immediately perceptible and temporally more remote – Captain John Smith’s introduction of the term *terra incognita* into the English language in his *A Description of New England* (1616). A soldier and explorer for the English crown, Smith endorsed the Virginia Company’s promotion of the colonization of New England and

206 was famously involved with the founding of Jamestown, one of the first European settlements in the New World. His *Description* encouraged the founding of colonies by the British, since there were “such large Regions ... yet vnknowne, as well in *America*, as in *Affrica*, and *Asia*, and *Terra Incognita*” ([1616] 2006, 45), the latter referring to territories occupied by Spain, but in a way a synecdoche for all of these “large regions yet unknown.” Since the vast, uncharted geographical expanses promised profits, the British should do as the Portuguese in Africa, for “had not the industrious Portugales ranged her vnknowne parts, who would haue sought for wealth among those fryed Regions of blacke brutish Negroes” (21).

In her work on rewriting knowledges, the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter has powerfully traced the discursive and political shifts that different figurations of the earth have effected – shifts that were informed by empirical experiences of travel and trade, as well as bound up with changing cosmologies. The truth an epoch or a culture holds about the earth is of fundamental significance to that epoch’s, that culture’s, and that earth’s onto-epistemological, symbolical, economical and political make up. In her article “1492,” Wynter notes – much like Smith, but with reversed value – the unsettling effects that the Portuguese voyages to Africa had in this regard. The Portuguese rounded the “hitherto nonnavigable Cape Bojador on the bulge of West Africa” (1995, 9) in 1441 and established a trading fort at Elmina (present-day Ghana, a fort which Columbus was to visit) in about 1482. This circumnavigation and the subsequent existence of the fort called into question the feudal, Christian, medieval geographic imagination of the earth as divided into inhabitable and uninhabitable zones. As Wynter explains, Cape Bojador “had been projected, in the accounts of the earth’s geography given by medieval Christian geographers, as being the *nec plus ultra* line and boundary marker between the habitable temperate zone of Europe and the inhabitable [*sic*] torrid zones” (9). Such a projection was congruent with the cosmology of

Latin-Christian Europe, Wynter argues, and its “feudal image of a nonhomogenous earth” (25). The medieval Christian cosmology structured itself around a master code of “Spirit/Flesh” (see also Le Goff 1985) – a “represented nonhomogeneity of substance between the spiritual perfection of the heavens ... as opposed to the sublunar realm of the Earth ... as the abode of a post-Adamic fallen mankind” (Wynter 2003, 278) – a master code which was equally projected onto the geography of the earth. In similar spirit/flesh (or life/death, elevated/fallen) terms, the earth was

divided up between, on the one hand, its temperate regions centered on Jerusalem – regions that, because held up above the element of water by God’s Providential Grace, were inhabitable – and, on the other, those realms that, because outside this Grace, had to be uninhabitable. (278–279)

This imagination of an “uninhabitable torrid zone” (Wynter 1995, 22) south of Cape Bojador was ruined and slowly eroded as a result of the Portuguese landfall south of the line after 1441 (and a complementary set of onto-epistemological shifts including the emergent humanism), and once the Portuguese had rounded the cape and had – as Smith notes applaudingly – “ranged ... [Africa’s] vnknowne parts.” Now, America had become possible, and what had been torrid zones, uninhabitable, became “large regions yet unknown” of a *terra incognita*: unknown, yet inhabitable and therefore exploitable.

In her work, Wynter traces these cosmological-geographical **transformations**, and with and through them the seismic philosophical, symbolical, and political transformations with which they are **entangled**. Wynter does so especially in view of the dominant notion of what it means to be human. For the notion of *terra* that is central here, and its critical purchase, the relevance of Wynter’s analysis is clear: Our cosmologies have geographical, spiritual, philosophical, political, epistemological, ontological, and ethical implications; they inform and delimit our conceptions of the earth and vice versa. As a consequence,

208 then, the imagination and empirical experience “we” have of the earth – and it would be crucial to consider the plurality and differentiation of that “we” to which Jacques Derrida gestures at the end of his essay “The Ends of Man” by asking “But who, we?” (1982, 136; see also Wynter 2015, 23) – can be read as one symptom of the *critical* conditions of our times. Understanding in its entangled complexity how “we” imagine the earth is a step toward understanding the current order of things. It is part of a **symptomatology** of the present.

Today, the **experience** of the earth as divided into inhabitable and uninhabitable regions has lost traction – even as a vast expanse of lands that are unknown and out there to be explored and exploited, although the spirit of the latter still lives on in current practices of deep sea oil drilling, Antarctica mining projects, fracking and the like. Despite these very real **specters** of the earth as mere resource, “we” *experience terra* increasingly – and more or less globally (a more or less that is crucial to take into account as it signals fault lines of exclusion, **responsibility**, and **power**) – as a closely interwoven ecosystem, a finite planet whose climate is changing and whose natural resources have been nearly exhausted by the dominant habits of Western man. There are no longer any *terras incognitas* (beyond the merely economic fantasies of subterranean chemical fossils), but there is a *terra critica*: one earth in critical economic, ecological, symbolic, socio-political, intra-species condition. As Félix Guattari puts this in *The Three Ecologies*, “[t]he Earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations. If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet’s surface” (2000, 19).

However, the critical purchase of *terra*, as the term is proposed here, lies slightly elsewhere than in the eco-critical investigations of climate change or what has become known as “the Anthropocene” (e.g. Chakrabarty 2009; Cohen, Colebrook, and Miller 2016; Stengers 2015). Here, *terra* – unlike globe or planet

or even its English **translation** as earth – does not so much designate the geological body and ecosystem we inhabit, whose climate change and human grooving need to be examined. Rather, as exhibited here by tracing the historical shifts that Wynter points out and that Smith served to exemplify, *terra* (in its Latin garment) designates the *imagination* of the earth; the way “we” figure and narrate the earth, a figuration that is always crucially interwoven with empirical experiences of it. Since airplanes reach the other side of the globe within the maximum of a day, families span distant geographical locations and virtual spaces enable us to connect across continents, these historical experiences give rise to imaginations that are quite different from feudal Christian Europe or the colonial period. As Édouard Glissant argues in *Poetics of Relation* (1997), five centuries of colonial domination, migration, deportation and slavery, cultural contact, and genocide were not only nourished by the imagination of *terra(s) incognita(s)*, but *at the same time* also made the imagination and praxis of “Relation” possible, and made it apparent as the (post)colonial condition of earthly existence. The plantation system, Glissant suggests,

is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent and professed dehumanization, forms of humanity persisted. (1997, 65)

Its “always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle” (71) counteracts the clear, linear, appropriative order of Western thought and narrative. What Glissant calls *Tout-Monde* (one world in relation) became possible through this; and what had been “large regions yet unknown” of a *terra incognita* are slowly becoming apparent as a *terra critica*. Acknowledging and keeping in mind the violence, exploitation, and asymmetry that are primary here, this critical condition of *terra* might be a locus from where to give rise to other imaginations of the earth.

- 210 Thus, for us, *terra* does not designate the geological object of investigation, but a **perspective**: it calls for the examination of these imaginations, their transformations and for the critical **creation** of new ones for a co-habitable – not merely inhabitable – earth. If after Elmina America became possible, what will have been possible after the Middle Passage, after Fukushima? New archipelagos of oppression or a drift to earthly gentleness?

## References

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2): 197–222.
- Cohen, Tom, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller. 2016. *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*. London: Open Humanities Press.
- Conrad, Joseph. (1902) 2007. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1982. "The Ends of Man." In *Margins of Philosophy*, 109–136. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1959. "The Question of Lay Analysis," translated by James Strachey. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XX (1925–1926), edited by James Strachey, 177–258. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Guattari, Félix. 2000. *The Three Ecologies*. London: Continuum.
- Le Goff, Jacques. 1985. *The Medieval Imagination*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary 2005: Latin–English, 3rd ed. Edited by James Morwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, John. 2006. "A Description of New England (1616): An Online Electronic Text Edition." *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, Paper 4. Accessed April 9, 2016. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/4/>.
- Stengers, Isabelle. 2015. In *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. London: Open Humanities Press; Lüneburg: meson press.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 1995. "1492: A New World View." In *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, edited by Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, 5–57. Washington and London: Smithsonian.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument." *The New Centennial Review* 3 (3): 257–337.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2015. "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanity a Different Future: Conversations." In *On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, 9–89. Durham: Duke University Press.