

## Afterword Speculative Earth

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The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself? The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights.

—William James, *Pragmatism* (1975: 62)

### Strangers in Flight

*A flight after the unattainable.* This is how Alfred North Whitehead (1929: 65) chose to characterise the “disturbing element”, the generative impulse which gives rise to the singular experience and practice of speculation. Not the conquest of the unknown, not the prophetic mastery over the future, not the progressive composition of a good common world, not the transcendental access to some great beyond—*flight*. The world suspended mid-air. Life in the imperfective. An immanent experience of fugitivity and divergence that is engendered in giving oneself over to an imaginative improvisation, to an unsettled dance, to the ongoing and unfinished experimentation with that which escapes even the most capacious of systems and shrugs at the most settled of foundations. Hence Whitehead’s proposition, despite his insistence on the immanent requirements of coherence and logic, that speculation is “in its essence untrammelled by method” (1929: 65). For its function is none other than that of *inventing* the very methods that here and there push thought and life out of bounds, over the guardrails, to the outlaw edges of the territory governed by the rational, the probable, and the plausible (Savransky, 2022). Its function is to pierce beyond habitual methodologies of life so as to give way to a homeless space that makes of flight itself its groundless ground and makes of the disturbance of the present its precarious chance to attend to that which insists and persists “below the rim of the world” (Whitehead, 1929: 65), in its interstices and crevices, fabricating possibles out of the impossible, inventing forms out of the unformed.

To characterise the experience and practice of speculation as a “flight after the unattainable” is therefore to associate it with an attempt to step out of the settled and the bounded, to flee the homeland of the actual and its attendant image of thought in a fugitive act of refusal which enjoins us,

to borrow Maurice Blanchot's (1993: 127) haunting words, "not to be content with what is proper to us (that is, with our power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I)." Refusing to give to our reasons and principles a power they do not have, speculation— "which made systems and then transcended them", "which ventured into the furthest limits of abstraction" (Whitehead 1929: 76), which gropes in the dark for insistent possibilities that remain impossible for us to envisage but disturb the terms of order and demand an imaginative response (Savransky, 2021a)— is nothing if not the very name for the event of a becoming alive and present to the forces of an immanent and inappropriable outside: to a kind of exteriority that is infinitely further and infinitely closer than any external world, to a zone of generativity, alterity and multiplicity which remains unattainable not because it lies beyond, within the confines of some Great Outdoors, but because it is radically fragmentary and multifarious, permanently in the making, a groundlessness that rumbles under any precarious ground, a runaway metamorphosis which evades every operation of capture and precedes every taking of form, which resists finality and escapes totality.

Isn't it precisely the attempt to step out from the settled and the ready-made, to think from the irrepressible plurality of the present, that *Speculative Geographies* collectively dramatises? In the wake of its Black and Indigenous SF stories of human habitation in post-apocalyptic presents, of its experiments in heterotopic urban planning and speculative taxidermy and the complex possible historicities of nuclear remains, of its imaginative pedagogies for NeoRural futures and plastic childhoods, of its affirmative excursions into speculative reproduction and philosophies of soils and dust, of its passionate cries against cynicism and calculation and its provocative ventures into sonic atmospheres and the aesthetics of intensification, of its calls for experimentation, for careful abstraction, for passionate thought, for a pragmatics of faith— in the wake of the many declarations and propositions that each of the chapters that compose this book proffer to the world, is it not by way of this free and wild creation of divergent practices, concepts, methodologies and sensibilities that they collaborate in nourishing the growth of a reality of a quite different kind? After all, at stake is nothing less than the permanent pluralisation, intensification, and amplification of what Nina Williams and Thomas Keating (this volume) call "the apprehension of experience". Nothing short, that is, of the effort to push settled modes of reason and judgement out of their depth so as to give oneself over to an ongoing and unfinished experimentation with other modes of sensation, perception and imagination, with ways of opening the present up to alternative trajectories of becoming, to an immanent outside whose faint murmurs call for the invention of other forms of sociality, of other times to come, of an Earth to be inhabited otherwise.

Then again, nothing can protect us from the risks we run in partaking in such a lawless and unsanctioned endeavour. Whitehead (1929: 66-67) may have found some solace in the hope that, thanks to the Greeks' discovery of an "almost incredible secret", it was not only possible but entirely reasonable to affirm the possibility of being "bounded by method even in its transcendence," thereby stripping speculation "of its anarchic character without destroying its function of reaching beyond set

bounds.” If there’s any evidence for the existence of any such speculative *reason*, which “appeals to the orderliness of what is reasonable” while expressing “the transcendence of any particular method,” it is surely Whitehead’s own work. And yet his own lukewarm reception in the annals of respectable thought is among the many testaments to the fact that no amount of reasons, of caveats, of methodological or ethical prescriptions, will allay the thundering down of judgements, aggressions, and disqualifications issued by the settler and by the very modes of settlement which speculation disturbs and from which it takes flight. “However modest the demand, it always constitutes a point that the axiomatic cannot tolerate: when people demand to formulate their problems themselves, and to determine at least the particular conditions under which they can receive a more general solution.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 471). Alas, no amount of clarifications and fine-grained distinctions will erase speculation’s enduring association with “the presumptuous, ignorant, incompetent, unbalanced band of false prophets who deceive people,” that “shady lot with a bad reputation” (Whitehead, 1929: 67).

So be it. I reckon there is more to be discovered and collectively fabricated amongst a motley crew of wayward seers and failed prophets than amongst those whom Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994: 51) called “functionaries,” those who never venture outside and who, “enjoying a ready-made thought, are not even conscious of the problem and are unaware even of the efforts of those they claim to take as their models”. After all, before the Greeks turned their almost incredible secret into the power of taming the anarchic character of speculation and of regulating the borders of Reason, speculation appeared “in the guise of sporadic inspirations”, through the practices of outsiders, of migrants, of travellers, artisans and merchants, seers, prophets, and madmen— in a word, *philosophical labourers* who “brought to the world fire, or salvation, or release, or moral insight” but whose common character “was to be the bearers of some imaginative novelty, relevant and yet transcending traditional ways” (Whitehead 1929: 66). And if speculative thought is a form of *flight* it is not least because, while philosophy may be Greek, “philosophers are strangers” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 87) They are the “strangers in flight” who broke “from empire and the colonized peoples of Apollo” and ventured outside to find in Greece the chance to give oneself over to an archipelagic and plural mode of co-existence, to “a pure sociability as milieu of immanence”. A milieu that, “opposed to imperial sovereignty”, implied no prior interest – “because, on the contrary, competing interests presuppose it”. As such, they found pleasure in forming and breaking up associations, in infinite conversation, in the irreducible sociality of a life and thought lived collectively in the flight after the unattainable, in the ongoing elaboration of sporadic inspirations and imaginative novelties that upend the *imperial spatium* of the reasonable and the rational by bringing experience and thought, through a speculative mode of apprehension, into an immediate and generative relationship with the rustling murmurs of the outside.

All this is to say that speculation is never a matter of right. It is never reducible to a licence or prerogative to indulge in the abstract glories of the upper ether for the sake of theoretical renewal and conceptual rejuvenation. Flight is not tourism. And if speculation is above all an experience and practice of flight after an immanent but unattainable outside, such escape is always a matter of *necessity*. It is a

matter, in other words, of the need to respond to the insistence of a problem which demands to be thought and posed anew yet whose primary power is to precipitate a metamorphosis that dissolves the ground for stable representations and upends the order that would sustain the reproduction of consensual references and invulnerable rationalisations (Savransky, 2021b). Hence Isabelle Stengers's (2015: 189) proposition, that the act of speculation, as an immanent art of creation, "would be the act of giving to an imperative question the power to claim the concepts it needs in order to obtain its most dramatic, forceful necessity, in order to force thinking in such a way that the philosopher can no longer say "I think," can no longer be a thinking subject." Refusing to be content with what is proper to us, with the manner in which the problems that gnaw at the edge of the present are posed, the flight after the unattainable is therefore precipitated not by an "I think" but by the impersonal and singular forces of what William James (1890: 225) called an "'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows'". And in the wake of the earth-wide homogenisation and ecological devastation that the five-hundred-year history of colonialism, capitalism and extractivism has wrought, what are such forces today if not those runaway terrestrial forces that, with the most dramatic necessity, connect manifold "it rains" and "it blows" with the imperative of a speculative "it thinks"? To what would the possibility of a speculative *geography* respond if not precisely to the very metamorphoses that have made of the Earth itself the unsettled milieu of immanence that dissolves the ground of stable representations and upends the territories of modern forms of habitation?

### **It Rains, It Blows, It Thinks**

It cannot be denied that the ongoing dynamics of geological and ecological turmoil and catastrophic change that form part of the current environmental conjuncture –and are coextensive with the history of modernity itself– testify to the geopowers of an imperial project I would call *terraforming colonialism*, a project which sought to shape vast swathes and strata of the Earth in Europe's image, just as it became itself shaped by the environments it sought to conquer and subjugate. Terraforming colonialism, in other words, is the name for the world-making project of interiorisation, assimilation and regulation that since the 1440s saw the thorough deforestation of the Mediterranean forests in the making of slave and imperial ships; that harnessed the winds and ocean currents to turn the Earth into means of commerce and an object of government; that precipitated the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Black lives by the million in the extractive projects of geology and in the monoculture world of the plantation; that mobilised an army of European animals, weeds, seeds, and diseases to turn other soils into European soils, other lands into sugar and cotton, other fauna into European food, other mountains into silver, gold, coal; that reduced other forms of life to property and other lives bygone into fuel; that invented "Man" through the inscribing of the geological colour line; that sought to stitch up the fragmented shards of Pangaea and ravaged multifarious places, natures and

cultures in the construction of an undifferentiated operation space; that devastated other worlds in the making of the Globe (see Crosby, 1986; Davis, 2017; Ross, 2019; Yusoff, 2018, Wynter, 1994). And this is the project that, in the name of a global alliance against climate change, today gives rise to a geosocial formation that at once dreams of a geoengineered Earth and lives off the promise of all manner of practices of planetary management and global government to patrol and regulate Humanity's fate within the territory which the new earth-system sciences designate as "safe operating space" (Rockström et al., 2009).

Because this world is the outcome of such a project, because it is in its shadow that the world reproduces itself even as it buckles under its weight, neither can the history of contemporary geological and ecological turmoil be reduced, in relay and return, to a one-way story of planetary humanisation, or of the unfortunate side-effects of a modern pursuit of "progress" on a global scale (Savransky, 2021c; Savransky and Lundy, 2022). For it is the very geosocial consequences of what Sylvia Wynter (2003) calls "Man" as overrepresented geohistorical settler that simultaneously force us to open history and our understandings of it up to the speculative forces of Earth itself, to those metamorphic processes of geohistorical flight by which "planetary dynamics, geological disjunctures and earth-historical trajectories may themselves have left their mark on the social beings we have variously become" (Clark and Yusoff, 2017: 5). It goes without saying that these distinct geohistorical threads interlace in radically uneven and asymmetrical ways. But whatever the rather self-flattering evocations of many a narrative sustained under the sign of the "Anthropocene," the ongoing dynamics of geological and ecological turmoil and catastrophic change that form part of the current environmental conjuncture also make present that we never know what the Earth itself may be capable of in its potential to suddenly shift states, to give itself over to its own forms of flight, to engender ongoing and unfinished experimentations with its own modes of biogeochemical organisation, through the multiple forms of (non-)life that give rise to it and to which it gives rise. In other words, these geohistorical shifts themselves make perceptible what, in *Planetary Social Thought*, Nigel Clark and Bron Szerszynski (2020: 172) call the Earth's own "planetary multiplicity": the immanent outside which renders the Earth restless and rumbling, plural and radically heterogeneous, "self-incompatible, always out of step" with itself, never a self-enclosed object or a homeostatic organism cut off from the outside, but a self-differentiating, multi-layering *passage* "held far from thermal and chemical equilibrium by constant dissipation, as energy from [its] hot interior and [its] parent star passes through the system, preventing any part of it from settling."

Williams and Keating (this volume) are therefore entirely right to suggest that *Speculative Geographies* is "not intended as a guide to living on in the Anthropocene." And they are right not least because it is in and through the abstraction of the Anthropocene that the project of terraforming colonialism lives on, that the attempt to interiorise speculative forces –of thought and Earth– is now forged, that the technocratic effort to regulate social and political life within safe operating space is performed, that the *imperial spatium* of the modern territory holds on. Yet the imperfective runs all the

way through. And if it is through such tempestuous shifts and ongoing mutations that it becomes indeed possible and vital to say “it thinks” just as we say “it rains” and “it blows”, it is because “thinking takes place in the relationship of the territory and the earth” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 85). Thought takes the Earth with it. (So too does the Earth.) And when the impersonal event of an “it thinks” is at stake, it is the immanent and impersonal forces of thought as much as the Earth which refuse to be content with what is proper to them, which refuse to partake in the territorial regulation of safe operating space so as to open and respond to an elsewhere, to an outside, so as to merge “with the movement of those who leave their territory en masse, with crayfish that set off walking in file at the bottom of the water, with pilgrims or knights who ride a celestial line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 85). Not content with what is proper to us, what *Speculative Geographies* puts forth, what it makes resonate, is at once the possibility and the necessity of what, with Stephanie Wakefield (2020), we might call an ongoing “experimentation in unsafe operating space”: speculatively developing concepts, methodologies of thought and life, strategies, designs and propositions that are not defined by what they oppose, that respond to what is underway without allowing the response to stifle the forces that called for it in the first place, that give to the ongoing dynamics of geological and ecological turmoil the power to activate thought by connecting the “it rains” and “it blows” with an “it thinks”.

Indeed, whether it is through a revaluation of the passions or a reclaiming of faith, whether it is through a micropolitics of expression or an eco-poetics of feeling, at stake is always the imperative to give to what implicates us the power to claim the concepts it may need, not in order to be finally able to claim “I think,” but to become lured by something else: by the very possibility of making of thought, of the flight after the unattainable, a space of passage and refuge for the invention of other forms of assembly, of other temporalities, of other modes of human and more-than-human sociality as and through the storm that has now become our precarious milieu of immanence. It thus becomes perceptible that the call for speculative *geographies* today is more than a justification for the alluring title that christens this book. And it is just as evident that the call resounds decidedly outside any attempt to subject speculative experimentation to the disciplining powers of thought and knowledge that the modern process of professionalisation and specialisation brought about and through which the territory of (Human) Geography –and every other discipline– has been drawn (Whitehead, 1967). If the manifold experiments that compose this volume manage to conjure the faint possibility of “speculative geographies” into existence, it is not least because they dramatise the fact that the flight after the unattainable must betray the territory of Geography itself. In other words, it is because they together make perceptible that to step outside is also to step out of the bounds that would bind the experience and practice of speculation to the settled disciplinary histories and the same modes of abstraction that have rendered us collectively unable to fabricate the imaginative novelties that this imperative question now demands.

Indeed, if the ultimate aim of speculative thought corresponds to what Didier Debase (2017: 81) calls the *intensification of experience*, which is to say “to make experience *matter*, to make it

important, to intensify it to its maximum,” it is Geography and its modes of abstraction that must rediscover their passion for the outside, which is also here a passion for those spaces of what AbdouMaliq Simone (2019: 14) calls a “concrete darkness” that makes life in the imperfective a matter of necessity and intensity, that lays waste to every guarantee but “provides a home for impossible socialities that nevertheless assume an inscription, materialize lines of flight, attack, and articulation ‘grooving’ the terrain.” If it is through an attention to planetary multiplicity that, amidst this shifting and multifarious Earth, the fragility of the geohistories that compose the present might become perceptible, it is through such ongoing improvisations in the dark that the possibilities that still fester in its interstices and outlaw edges and insist and persist therein might become a lure for feeling. It is by means of such speculative experimentations that we might become implicated in the collective desire and spirit of escape, in the common efforts to pluralise, amplify and intensify divergent experiences as they pass through “diverse ‘earthly’ processes and virtual potentialities” (Williams and Keating, this volume).

## Writing Earth

Which is why perhaps the single most important proposition of *Speculative Geographies* is to make of the possibility and the necessity of fabricating “speculative geographies” its very first speculative wager, its first fugitive gesture: one that would seek to give to the imperative questions of a multifarious and diverging Earth the power to claim the concepts they may need in order to obtain their most dramatic, forceful necessity, *in order to force Earth-writing to become affected by the fugitive dynamics of Earth writing itself in the imperfective*. “What becomes of the practice of earth writing,” ask Williams and Keating (this volume) in a way that lures the other contributors to proffer each their always singular and imaginative response, “when it is directed towards a reappraisal of the abstractions it uses to think the experiential?” Reprising a central theme of Whitehead’s thought, they rightly remind us that speculation is not a protest against abstraction as such, and neither is it an attempt to finally reach a felt, more concrete and experiential Earth. As their question suggests, the experiment instead consists in *reappraising* abstractions, in revaluating as much the power that is conferred upon them as the manner in which they are brought about. Whitehead (1967: 59) always insisted that, while a “civilisation which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress,” one “cannot think without abstractions.” Yet to affirm that one cannot think without abstractions is neither an indictment nor a transcendental limit. We’re not being asked to resign ourselves to the sad but inevitable fact that, as thinking beings, we’re forever trapped within a world of abstractions we can never hope to escape. If Whitehead (1967: 50) simultaneously claims that one cannot think without abstractions and that, as such, “it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your *modes* of abstraction,” it is because to abstract is neither to represent or to

generalise, nor is it an operation that (human) thought alone performs away from the earth of things and up in the glories of the upper ether.

The imperative to revise our modes of abstraction, to burst through settled abstractions and abstract settlements, emanates from the fact that such bursting is already underway across the Earth, that abstraction “expresses nature’s mode of interaction and is not merely mental” (Whitehead, 1927: 26) but characterises entire choreographies of earthly habitation which—in the passage from potentiality to actuality each abstraction engenders—give shape as much to habits as to habitats, to their modes of attention and sustenance, attunement and sensation, to their purposes and improvisation, to their divergent configurations of the within and the without. As such, when it abstracts, “thought is merely conforming to nature— or rather, it is exhibiting itself as an element in nature.” (Whitehead, 1927: 26). In performing its lettered abstractions, earth writing stands therefore in an immanent connection with the Earth; it expresses something of the Earth’s own writing of itself. “We rise upon the earth,” writes James (1996: 171), “as wavelets rise upon the ocean. We grow out of her soil as leaves grow from a tree.” Yet this is no call for earthly-reverence, for a romantic immersion, a becoming-one with the common flesh of the Earth. For indeed,

The wavelets catch the sunbeams separately, the leaves stir when the branches do not move. They realize their own events apart, just as in our own consciousness, when anything becomes emphatic, the background fades from observation. Yet the event works back upon the background, as the wavelet works upon the waves, or as the leaf’s movements work upon the sap inside the branch. The whole sea and the whole tree are registers of what has happened, and are different for the wave’s and the leaf’s action having occurred. A grafted twig may modify its stock to the roots:—so our outlived private experiences, impressed on the whole earth-mind as memories, lead the immortal life of ideas there, and become parts of the great system, fully distinguished from one another, just as we ourselves when alive were distinct, realizing themselves no longer isolatedly, but along with one another as so many partial systems, entering thus into new combinations, being affected by the perceptive experiences of those living then, and affecting the living in their turn—altho they are so seldom recognized by living men to do so. (James, 1996: 171-172)

To burst through the territory of settled abstractions is therefore to give oneself over to a speculative pragmatics of earth writing: of the divergent practices, concepts, stories and modalities by which sunbeams are caught or lost, by which waves are made and unmade, by which lives are improvised and concepts are forded, by which possibilities are brought forth and backgrounds are made to fade away;



but this is simultaneously an art of consequences, of the manners in which each of these divergent modes of abstraction in turn work back upon the Earth, thereby engendering a transformation of so many partial systems brought into new combinations by the very speculative gestures of imaginative novelty that each form of life, each practice, each concept, each wavelet, add to the becoming of the world.

As such, to seek to connect the practices of earth-writing to the fugitive dynamics of Earth, writing, is neither to call upon earth writers to “solve” climate change nor to submit to the settled technocratic abstractions by which terraforming colonialism might become resilient enough to drive catastrophic changes underway to its own ends. As so many experiences of divergence and fugitivity that make of the Earth’s own fugitivity their home and make of the disturbing dynamics of geological and ecological turmoil their chance to attend to that which insists and persists below the rim of the world, what speculative geographies provoke, in the end, in the beginning, is nothing other than the ongoing and unfinished task of daring to write with the Earth in the imperfective, of giving oneself over to an imaginative improvisation that, in joining one’s forces with its forces, seeks to respond to an immanent and riotous outside whose faint murmurs call for the invention of other forms of sociality, of other times to come, of manifold practices of a geosocial otherwise. It rains, it blows, it thinks, it writes. A flight after the unattainable indeed. And yet, Whitehead (1929: 76) put it best: “To set limits to speculation is treason to the future.”

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