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Settler Colonialism as a Structure?

Plantations in the Peatlands? Domestic Colonization and Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Dutch North

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A series of settlements in the Northeast of the Netherlands carry the epithet "colonial," for example the colonies founded by the Society of Benevolence in the provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel and the Peat Colonies (Veenkoloniën) along the provincial border between Drenthe and Groningen. To what extent can we identify (settler) colonial frames in the formation of these communities? Some settler colonial aspects appear to be present in the sense that *terra nullius* or "empty" land (in this case swampland) was occupied and cleared for cultivation. Patrick Wolfe's claim that "the colonizer came to stay—invasion is a structure not an event" (Wolfe 2006, 388) is less clearly visible in the Colonies of Benevolence, however. The underlying idea of Society colonies like Veenhuizen was the education and eventual reintegration of colonists back into society as virtuous citizens. The Peat Colonies served as a Dutch Frontier of sorts – newspapers from the 1850s described Drenthe as "Nederlandsch Californië" – where adventurous individuals and cash-rich corporations could make a quick buck. Large-scale agriculture and persistent poverty nowadays characterize society in the Peat Colonies (Meij, Haartsen, and Meijering 2020, 227). Combined, the Colonies of Benevolence (in particular Veenhuizen) and the Peat Colonies seemingly followed the extractive logic of the plantation with regard to labor, land, and natural resources. Did connections exist between these specific forms of settlement in the North of the Netherlands and plantation templates in other parts of the world, for instance Asia and the Americas? Besides investigating such interrelations, this essay also suggests a more global perspective to study the history of settlement and extraction in the Dutch North.

As a (settler) colonial institution and outpost, the Plantation stood in direct opposition to the Swamp. While plantations represented cultivation (both in an agricultural and a social sense, with the planter elite embodying aristocratic elan), orderliness, and productivity, swamps constituted wastelands that needed to be brought under human control to make them useful. Geographer Morgan Vickers designates the framing of marshy areas as abject spaces "swampification," which signifies the "process whereby governments, corporations, and the press socially (re)invented swamplands as uninhabitable spaces of death and disease to justify their destruction" (Vickers 2023, 1675). When Europeans began colonization efforts in Asia and the Americas, the plantation became an important settlement format to occupy new territories. After the North American colonies won independence from England, the frontier experience soon manifested itself as a principal state formation instrument and eventually a

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founding narrative for the United States. As historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued in his famous 1893 lecture "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," the frontier was a quintessential American affair that shaped the national character in terms of democratic government, opportunity, and individualism (Turner 1893). Together with the concept of Manifest Destiny – the idea that the United States has a divine mission to settle the North American continent in the name of progress and liberty – the Frontier Myth was central to the idea of American exceptionalism: a benevolent country committed to the expansion of equality and freedom.

These positive stories about the uniqueness of American expansionism hid the brutal realities of the settler colonial project in the United States, for instance the violent displacement of Native American peoples and the central role of the plantation (as an agricultural business and a socioeconomic model) in the settlement of North America. The so-called cotton frontier spread westward in the southeastern parts of the North American continent during the early nineteenth century, leading to the establishment of Deep South slave states like Mississippi (1817) and Alabama (1819). Although the Plantation Myth, much like the Frontier Myth, emphasized benevolence (the gentility of the planter class and the organic work relations between master and enslaved), the actuality of the plantation labor regime was in fact much less benign. It was a system based on brute force and the ruthless exploitation of enslaved laborers and the environment alike (Johnson 2013; Rothman 2005). Old-growth forests were cut down to make room for plantation farming. "There were oaks and cypresses, sweet gum and leafy cottonwood, persimmon and pecan, walnut, and maple. Cane grew to great heights to make an impenetrable jungle. Vines and creepers laced and interlaced in intricate tangle. Here was an animal's paradise of bear, deer, opossum, raccoon, rabbit, squirrel, panther, and mink," author David Cohn reflected on the Mississippi Delta's state of nature before the planters came. But that all began to change once they heard about the area's farming opportunities. "Rumors of the fertility of the soil of the Delta, then called 'the swamps,' began to drift back to Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and South Carolina," Cohn explained. "Planters made inquiries about this virgin land inhabited by only a few Indians, fugitives from justice, and wild animals. Then they purchased huge tracts and came with armies of slaves to clear the ground and open plantations along the rivers and on the creeks" (Cohn 1935). Cohn described the Delta – his home region – as *terra nullius* subsequently settled and cultivated by planters through enslaved labour.

Despite the claim that the frontier was a uniquely North American (or more specifically, U.S.) experience, in other colonized spaces plantations similarly functioned as frontier outposts destined to cultivate land and (indigenous) people. An example is the Dutch East Indies, where colonial officer Johannes van den Bosch purchased the plantation Soedimara on western Java in the early nineteenth century. Like Cohn, Van den Bosch characterized the land surrounding his new farm as an empty

wildland that he brought under control through cultivation. In a similar vein, he "taught" local people to perform agricultural work, because all they did was "waste their time" (Sens 2019, 86). Van den Bosch used both free and enslaved labor for rice production on his plantation. In 1810, he returned to the Netherlands. After being captured by the British on his journey home and spending two years in England as a prisoner of war, he finally arrived in the Netherlands in 1813, where he fought against the French occupation forces on behalf of the provisional Dutch government. After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Van den Bosch continued his military work for the newly established Kingdom of the Netherlands until 1818, when he founded the Society of Benevolence. The objective of this organization was to come up with a proper solution for the immense and widespread poverty problem the Netherlands was dealing with after the Napoleonic era.

The philosophy behind the Society appeared to be quite simple: transport the urban poor to the countryside and teach them agricultural skills there so they eventually would be able to take care of themselves (De Clercq 2018, 16-18). The idea of the industrious, land-tilling farmer as the epitome of virtuous citizenship was of course not new, nor was it limited to the Netherlands – or Europe, for that matter. "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens," American planter-politician Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1785. "They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds" (Jefferson 1785). Such thoughts already motivated Van den Bosch during his time as a colonial agent and planter in the East Indies and he brought those experiences with him when he started the Society of Benevolence. Van den Bosch chose the province of Drenthe as the starting point for his agricultural colonies. Nineteenth-century writers described Drenthe as a boggy wasteland, inhabited only by heather, moss, snails, water insects and swamp birds, a solitary hare, a small number of shepherds (if the soil was not too miry for grazing sheep), and a few hunters (Van der Woud 1998, 213). For Van den Bosch, the remote hinterlands of Drenthe were the ideal location for his civilizing mission. Through the swampification of these hinterlands, they were rendered as "uninhabitable spaces of death and disease" (to use the words of Vickers) ready for destruction through the transformation into farmland. The Colonies of Benevolence thus constituted a dual cultivation effort: "useless" poor would be turned into virtuous citizens by making them turn "useless" swamps into productive fields.

Anthropologist Albert Schrauwers points out how Van den Bosch applied his plantation knowledge in the design and implementation of the Colonies of Benevolence. On Soedimara, he (or better, the people who worked for him) had successfully drained swampy land through the construction of a canal, turning wetland into profitable wet-rice fields. As the antithesis of swamp ecosystems, the plantation model of agriculture, based on coerced labor, served as the blueprint for the Colonies of Benevolence (Schrauwers 2020, 358-359). The architecture of colony towns like Frederiksoord and

Veenhuizen follows typical plantation layouts, with straight lines and open fields that brought a sense of order to the landscape and enabled surveillance of the labor force. The domestic colonies of the Society of Benevolence thus constitute a manifestation of the "imperial boomerang" Michel Foucault wrote about. Europeans implemented their models (like plantation farming) in the colonies, but these templates sometimes traveled back to Europe, as was the case with Van den Bosch's settlements in the Drenthe wilderness. "A whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or an internal colonialism, on itself," according to Foucault (qtd. in Graham 2013).

The Colonies of Benevolence are located in the western parts of Drenthe. In the east of the province, on the border with neighboring Groningen, lie the Peat Colonies (Veenkoloniën in Dutch). Although they share the moniker "colonial" with the Society towns, their purpose was rather different. Instead of Van den Bosch's civilizing mission, the Peat Colonies' primary purpose was moneymaking. As the name already indicates, the Peat Colonies were rich in peat, an important source of fuel until the early twentieth century. Before the peat cutters arrived, the area was a rugged wetland named the Bourtange Moor. Starting in the 1600s, peat cutting operations slowly moved diagonally in a southeastern direction, toward the German border. Large groups of laborers from different parts of the transnational region and the country dug canals to drain the swamp and extract the peat, which was then transported to the big cities in the western Netherlands. The drained moor became farmland. Large-scale agriculture nowadays dominates the plantation-like landscape, with big farms, vast fields, and straight roads and canals – an orderly environment that stands in stark contrast to the swamp it once was. Not much is left of the Bourtange Moor. Bargerveen Nature Reserve is one of the few small patches of wetland that survived the colonization efforts by the peat-cutting business.

During the 1850s, provincial government officials and newspapers in Drenthe regularly employed American frontier rhetoric to describe the economic opportunities the Bourtange Moor offered, echoing settler colonial narratives about journeying to the Promised Land (Veracini 2024, 114). Politicians and journalists alike spoke and wrote about "Drenthe's California," making comparisons with the goldrush that was happening in the United States around the same time. They thought peat reservoirs worth millions of guilders were waiting to be dug up, providing land and a solid income to thousands of settlers. In 1868, reporter Harm Boon from the provincial capital of Assen gave his prediction for the future of the Peat Colonies: the rise of a major industrial metropolis comparable to the manufacturing towns in England, with factories, tall chimneys, the overwhelming noise of steam-driven machines, and streets lit by gas lanterns. Besides such visions of modernity, the treasure of the moorlands was also depicted in gendered terms. The regional newspaper *Provinciaal Drentsche en*

Asser Courant of 9 July 1853 for instance labeled the moor a "Veenbruid" or Fenland Bride, a virgin territory ready to be penetrated in order to reap its benefits (Visscher 2001).

Although similarities exist between colonial settlement patterns outside the Netherlands and the examples discussed above, obvious differences should not be ignored. An important distinction between settler colonies such as the United States and Australia and domestic colonial projects in the Dutch North is that large-scale elimination of (specifically racialized) native populations did not occur within the Netherlands. If we take a multispecies perspective, however, a different set of eliminatory practices becomes visible. Multispecies scholars want to move away from human-centered approaches and in doing so, intend to reframe "political questions: how do colonialism, capitalism, and their associated unequal power relations play out within a broader web of life?" (Van Doren, Kirksey, and Münster 2016, 3). From the sixteenth century onward, large-scale peat cutting almost completely erased the Bourtange Moor, a unique and expansive wetland ecosystem that took thousands of years to form – it once stretched for three thousand square kilometers, while Bargerveen totals a mere twenty square kilometers today.

In *Settler Ecologies*, Charis Enns and Brock Bersaglio examine the impact of settler colonialism on ecological relations in Kenya. Their objective is to demonstrate "how both of the defining characteristics of settler colonialism… – its logic of elimination and its endurance – are extended through the more-than-human world, resulting in the ongoing erasure and replacement of existing ecological relations with those of use and value to settler colonialism" (Enns and Bersaglio 2024, 13). What is the added value of such a multispecies approach to settler colonial studies, in particular related to the study of domestic colonization in the Dutch North, and which pitfalls loom by taking such an approach? In a critical discussion of the Plantationocene, a concept that emphasizes the massive impact of large-scale, plantation-like farming on issues such as global warming, species extinction, and climate change, geographer Janae Davis and her colleagues warned for a "flattened multispecies ontology – where difference between and among forms of life is obscured." On the basis of such an ontology, "multispecies assemblages of 'plants, animals, microbes, and people…' are flattened and simply appear as cogs in the wheels of capitalist destruction" (Davis et al 2019, 5). Davis and her co-authors are primarily concerned that understanding the Plantationocene through a multispecies lens obscures the racial politics that dictates a significant part of plantation life: "an interest in ecological ethics must not overshadow attention to the dynamics of power (racial, gender, sexual, or otherwise)," they write (Davis et al 2019, 10).

Without neglecting critical distinctions between plantation agriculture in the (former) colonies and its boomerang effects in Europe, it is hard to deny how internal colonialism had a devastating effect on the other-than-human world. In her non-fiction work *Fen, Bog & Swamp*, novelist Annie Proulx

exposes the systemic destruction of wetlands in the name of progress. "Today as the climate crisis begins to bite and the swelling numbers of the most populous mammal on the planet – 7.8 billion people – continues to grow some recognize that it is our ever-expanding human works and vast mechanized agriculture that have flattened the wilderness and introduce us to ever-new micro-organisms, while in the last fifty years more than half of the bird, mammal and amphibian populations have dwindled into memory or teeter on the edge of the extinction cliff," Proulx writes (Proulx 2022, 15) Such eliminatory practices operate on a continuum of histories between external and domestic colonialism. Political scientist Barbara Arneil deconstructs the supposed binary between internal colonization and (settler) colonialism overseas. She sees both forms of colonization as "*common* nodes within **transnational colonial networks**" and domestic colonies as "sites constituted by the **intersection of different colonialism(s)**, including… settler and/or radical colonialism" (Arneil 2017, 222). Globally operating models, partly springing from (settler) colonialism, inspired resource extraction and settlement in specific zones of the northern Netherlands. A plantation mindset and a frontier mentality led to the creation of outposts to bring the swampy wilderness of the Dutch North under human control.

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