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We are the world? Anthropocene cultural production between geopoetics and geopolitics

Abstract

The proposal of the ‘Anthropocene’ as a new geological epoch where humans represent the dominant natural force has renewed artistic interest in the ‘geopoetic’, which is mobilised by cultural producers to incite changes in personal and collective participation in planetary life and politics. This article draws attention to prior engagements with the geophysical and the political: the work of Simone Weil and of the editors of the Martinican cultural journal *Tropiques*, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire. Synthesizing the political and scientific shifts in human-world relationships of their time, both projects are set against oppressive or narcissistic materialisms and experiment with the image of the ‘cosmic’ to cultivate a preoccupation not (only) with a tangible materialism, but with an intangible one that emphasizes process and connectivity across wide spatial and temporal scales. The writers’ movement between poetics and politics will be used to enquire what kind of socio-political work a contemporary geopoetic could potentially do.

Keywords: geopoetics, Anthropocene, cosmopolitics, postcolonial ecology, experience economy, political aesthetics

‘The weakness of many people is
that they know neither to become a stone nor a tree’
-- Aimé Césaire, from the poem ‘Question Préalable’, 1948 (2011: 124).

Introduction

The proposal of the ‘Anthropocene’ epoch, with its narrative of humans as a geologic force, has been welcomed by many researchers across disciplines as a platform for discussing the future of humanity and its planetary habitat. Despite its attention to a wider set of human impacts, including radiation signatures from nuclear tests, the Anthropocene is frequently treated as a new opportunity for dialogue on human-climate relations, following the perceived climate change ‘gridlock’. Still regarded as unattached to any ‘negative baggage’ (Ellis, 2013), and as affirmative of human intervention, the Anthropocene has attracted a flurry of promotional activity, ranging from science communication based radio programmes, such as *Generation Anthropocene*, to art and design projects announcing a creative ‘geologic turn’ (Guzzo, 2012; Turpin, 2013). Although scientists have voiced reservations that the Anthropocene presents a far more ‘obscure’ concept compared with climate change, current ‘geopoetic’ activity does not appear to confirm this problem. The idea of the human as a geologic agent has, so far, fairly easily translated into a geologic aesthetic, including the archiving of modern and imagined future fossils (Linke et al, 2013; Villar Rojas, 2013), urban excavations and other ‘forensics’ (Franke & Weizman, 2014; Smudge Studio, 2012), a resurgence of interest in ‘pet rocks’ (Hoffman, 2011) and bird’s eye photographs of landscapes altered by human activity (Smith, 2012). At the same time, the proposal of the ‘Anthropocene’ has become linked with calls for a new ‘geo-politics’, characterised by notions of responsibility and care for the planet and planetary society: ‘rather than representing yet another sign of human hubris, this name change would stress the enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the Earth. It would highlight the immense power of our intellect and our creativity, and the opportunities they offer for shaping the future’, writes Paul Crutzen, prominent populariser of the new epoch (2012; see also Yusoff, 2013).

The calls for a new geopolitics that considers geophysical activity, linked with human creativity, also resonate in Anthropocene themed writing, art and design. Artworks often promote a closer identification with a greater planetary history that might translate into new political demands and new forms of identity and participation. At the same time, these prompts for greater, long-term care share a representational space with depictions of humanity as a perished remnant that seem to alter between the nostalgic and the melancholic. Due to their sudden proliferation, both ‘geopoetic’ directions have attracted criticism for partaking in a ‘fad’ – both intellectually and commercially. Regarding the latter, science writer David Biello points to the seamless absorption of the genre into consumer culture: ‘Resistance is futile and the ultimate art of the Anthropocene is co-optation’ (2013). He also criticises the vagueness and timing of the supposedly political aesthetic by posing a set of questions that he feels are missing in current Anthropocene themed art:

‘But if we are in charge of the planet now, who is this we? And why do we find atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen’s Anthropocene so much more significant than journalist Andy Revkin’s Anthrocene in the 1990s or, for that matter, an Italian geologist’s Anthropozoic first mooted in the 19th century?’ (Biello, 2013)

The question of ‘who is we’ is significant, especially if one considers who currently contributes to Anthropocene discourse (academics and artists from wealthier countries) and who is being called on as part of the Anthropocene’s intellectual (pre)history – in addition to Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, the primary reference points appear to be early Anglo-European geologists such as Hutton and Lyle. Climate change and Anthropocene discourse have been criticised for underrepresenting the neo-colonial element of the distribution of both human impact and intervention (e.g. see Gunaratnam and Clark, 2012). This also extends to Anthropocene aesthetics, diagnosed by Nicolas Mirzoeff as an ‘unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics’ that still distinguish between first world prowess and third world deficiency (2014: 220, 225-226). Against this background, the question of why the other proposals for an ‘Age of Humans’ did not catch on at the time of their conception might need to be supplemented with the question of *how* these and other proposals of humans as ‘geologic agents’ are made to matter now: what could a ‘geopoetic’, one that reconsiders not only human-planet relations, but the multiple asymmetry of such relations, potentially do in our time and predicament?

To approach this question, the article will turn to two ‘geopoetic’ examples from the turbulent times of resistance to the Second World War, both of which follow a ‘geophysical’ theme that also engages with inter-human violence. It could be said that at around the turn of the 19th/20th century, a seismic shift in human-world relationships occurred. Across a relatively short period of time, a breakdown of familiar relations ensued on more than one level, spanning politics, science and self: the tumultuous conversion from feudalism and imperialism to various types of nation states, the transition from classical to non-classical science and, lastly, the destabilisation of human identity through evolutionary and psychoanalytic theory, anti-colonial activism and women’s rights movements. These ideological struggles were accompanied by political as well as poetic experimentation. Material existence became a strong reference point in these experiments. The newly gained knowledge about the nature of the physical world – about matter, the universe, space-time relations – especially preoccupied thinkers invested in contesting popular materialist doctrines such as Social Darwinism and, later, Stalinism. George Bataille’s occupation with ‘base matter’ and solar energy (1985), and Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘great reality’ and ‘cosmic terror’ (1984) epitomise this trajectory. In many cases, the appeal for an expanded materialist perspective was made against a reality of persecution and dehumanisation. References to matter and the cosmic raised questions not only about a universal human experience, but specifically about the material, social, spiritual embeddedness of humanity in the universe, and the kind of politics that might be drawn from this image.

At present, a similar awareness is giving rise to new bouts of political experimentation with the material and the universal, for example, in the form of ‘green’ cosmopolitanism (Beck, 2010), ‘planetary’ (Spivak, 2003: 77), ‘planetary humanism’ (Gilroy, 2002: 2; see also Buck-Morss, 2009) and explorations of ‘cosmocracy’ (Serres, 2011: 145). Separated by nearly a century, current representations of the geologic and the cosmic are similarly diverse, but differ in the need to respond to a morphed opponent: while inequality, violence and oppression have continued, the player of nature has asserted its presence in the public conscious. Despite this apparent difference, earlier ‘geopoetics’ offer significant insights into our contemporary condition due to their focus on some of the underlying problems of our imagined relations with the planet. The material dimension of the authors’ ‘cosmo-political’

project appears to have become sidelined, but is gaining renewed significance through its implicit question: how can we have a more benevolent politics or sociality through a greater awareness of our embeddedness in matter, space and time?

As an example of a poetic ‘geo-politics’ or ‘geo-sociality’, the article will first consider the work of Simone Weil (1909-1943), a French philosopher and political activist whose work was mainly published posthumously. Weil is more known as a religious than as a materialist thinker, despite the centrality of the human as a material being in her work. She has notably been criticised for her conflation of the natural, political and spiritual and her supposedly ‘apolitical’ view of social forces (see Irwin, 2002: 42). At the same time, her work has been appreciated for its reframing of human vulnerability as a potential strength and grounds for action (Pick, 2011; Irwin, 2002). Weil’s experience of factory work and the physical violence of war (she took sabbaticals from teaching to gain first hand experience in both) disillusioned Weil with existing political options and led her to seek out more viable models for human society through the study of science, world religions and Greek philosophy. As part of her work for the French Resistance, she started preparing recommendations for post-war France, which could be termed both geopoetic *and* geopolitical in that they stressed the need for ‘creative attention’ to geophysical processes and its value for social interactions.

A different idea of ‘geo-sociality’ was pursued by the writers of the Martinican wartime journal *Tropiques* (1941-45), especially the work of its co-founders Suzanne and Aimé Césaire that will form the second part of this article². Their conceptualisation will be discussed in the second part of this article. Although the *Tropiques* editors underwent the same educational formation as Simone Weil – she and Suzanne Césaire even shared the same philosophy teacher in Paris³ – they operated from the opposite position in society, due to racial inequality and their status as colonial subjects. Associated with the ‘négritude’ movement, an alliance of Black writers from the French colonies who controversially took pride in their African heritage, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire worked towards a distinct Martinican cultural identity (and against colonial and fascist governance) through the publication of their journal. In their work, society and world are brought into dialogue in a rather different manner, through their affinity with a movement that Simone Weil despised: surrealism. Colliding with surrealists in places such as the colonial exhibition, against which both Weil and the *Tropiques* writers were protesting, Weil singled out surrealism as a harbinger of ‘barbarism and cultural decline’ (1968: 167). Suzanne Césaire, on the other hand, explicitly linked the strategies of surrealism to hope for ‘a more humane world’ (2012: 33). For the *Tropiques* writers, surrealism worked as an allied force, as well as a convenient mode of evading censorship from the Vichy government. Despite the feeling of kinship, the Césaires’ focus on natural forces, and on place as a key constitutional part of identity, was at odds with the surrealist preoccupation with the interior.

The two examples are connected with each other, and with contemporary Anthropocene discourse, through their attention to the relation between the material, the poetic and the (geo)political. In both cases, the world is linked to the body as something that forms part of material *and* cultural space, an association that determines or suggests modes of thinking and acting politically. Beyond this relation, they are also linked by their critical engagement with science with regard to its role in producing and perpetuating imaginaries of human-world relationships. While these twentieth-century authors regard these imaginaries as mostly destructive, given their deployment as part of European colonialism, they also hint at the

possibility of more constructive outcomes that enable new socialities. Specifically, the authors highlight matter as a socio-cultural blindspot that is entangled and selectively employed in power relations. The aim of this article is to explore these visions with regard to contemporary geopoetic and geopolitical imaginaries that operate along similar lines of thought.

1 The geopoetics of Simone Weil: 'I am in the world'⁵

'We should identify ourselves with the universe itself. Everything that is less than the universe is subject to suffering', writes Simone Weil (2003: 140). In Weil's thought, this identification is envisioned quite literally. Rather than an invitation for delusions of grandeur, Weil aims at the exact opposite: the elimination of the ego through true attention to one's material and social surroundings, at the greatest scale possible. By taking our material existence and its connection with larger cosmic processes seriously, Weil hopes to create an expanded view of socio-material relations. Other materialist theories such as historical materialism, in her opinion, despite all their insistence on realism and rationalism, seem to fall short of explaining persistent human suffering and oppression. In particular, she singles out the prevailing images of human-world relations of her time as the root of the problem. These materialisms, she proposes, are not equipped to tackle oppression, because they focus on a destructive group or class as the culprit for human inequality. By contrast, Weil proposes that it is *all* of society that 'give[s] birth to a false conception of the relationship between man and nature' (2006: 29) and thus participates in the perpetuation of oppressive structures (2003: 156). Consequently, this false relationship needs to be revised publicly and with the whole public, not just with particular social groups.

At the core of Weil's attempt to rethink human-world relationships is a move away from the goal to control nature for human well-being, and towards humanity's vulnerability to geophysical phenomena. Like other authors such as Hannah Arendt (2000: 352) and Mikhail Bakhtin (see Last, 2013), Weil draws attention to how we are governed by our aversion to an inhuman reality, that in turn leads us to the wrong means for safety – at worst a narcissistic and possessive materialism (2003: 142). Despite her sympathy for people's desire for social and material security, she argues that, in order to protect ourselves from continued oppression, we must stop participating in it. Her uninviting call for action reads: 'we must prefer real hell to an imaginary paradise' (2003: 53). Following a similar line of argument, Weil accuses scientific thinking and practice of pursuing a misguided materialism. While she applauds the displacement of Newtonian science (which she accuses of concealed 'discontinuities' and 'slave' mentality) by the 'new science', she worries about the lack of reflection on the value of its model (1968: 11, 22-24, 59-60; Morgan, 2005: 43-44). In pointing to the urgency for a dialogue between science and society, she complains that the new science has abandoned the search for values in favour of pure technical application (Weil 1968: 75). Science, too, participates in the creation and representation of human-world relations, but dodges responsibility.

Against this analysis of representational failure, how does Simone Weil utilise matter and the geophysical in her political work? Predominately, it seems, for their transformative effect on our attention. Here, it becomes important to point out Weil's image of matter, which can be

described as both scientific and spiritual. For instance, she regards the universe as a divine (but abandoned) creation, and studies natural processes as the seat of a deeper truth or beauty, with the goal of eventually replacing oppressive social constructions in order to enable a more spiritual existence (1956: 7). Although Weil looks towards the natural world as an inspiration for alternative socialities, she does not try to anthropomorphise nature, asserting that any intention behind natural phenomena ‘would not be analogous to human wills’ (1968: 6). A focus on pure, ‘matter-less’ social relations, Weil remarks, leaves humans with an inflated self-perception and an exclusive interest in means (wealth, power) rather than long-term ends (greater good) (1956: 547). By paying attention to material processes, humans are aided in freeing themselves from layers and layers of harmful constructions, to create, as Inese Radzins phrases it, ‘room to respond to the other’ (2010: 82).

To achieve this liberation at a larger scale, Weil puts forward different processes of mediation that relate her complex picture of the world to everyday life⁹. Here, reflections on material interrelations - from the infinitesimal to the cosmic - function as a practical guide (1973: 175). Despite her focus on making these relations sensible through everyday practices, she proposes to cultivate a preoccupation not so much with a tangible materialism, but with an ‘intangible’ one, focused on the embeddedness of our being and our thoughts in the ‘perpetual exchange of matter’ (2003: 142):

‘Matter becomes thought every day, in the sense that we breathe and eat; the energy liberated by chemical transformations becomes at any rate an instrument of thought. Eating is like absorbing springs whose subsequent release, operated by us, constitutes our action’ (1956: 165).

Weil compares our unawareness of these exchanges to the theological concept of transubstantiation: while we do not sense these material transformations, they still take place, and by making ourselves aware of them, our relationship to the world is changed.

The way Weil proposes to create this awareness is part of what she terms ‘creative attention’. According to Weil, ‘[c]reative attention means really giving out attention to what does not exist’ (1973: 146-149). With ‘non-existing’, she refers to anyone or anything that does not register in the social world: people without social status take on the same position as ‘matter’. Creative attention implies ‘unlearning’ social norms and becoming attuned to the level of matter or ‘necessity’ – in order to create the truly human(e) (see Frost and Bell-Metereau, 1998: 58). Although the objects of learning are all around us (she names earthquakes, stars, oceans, plants, microbes), this type of education offers little in terms of social prestige. However, if people seek to bring about change, they need to move away from the quest for social prestige and aspire to ‘feel the universe through each sensation’ (Weil, 2003: 141). This creative awareness to material interrelations also informs Weil’s idea of community. Far from envisioning community as being constituted by a free-flowing planetary species, she recognises people’s need to feel rooted in a particular place and social context. Creative attention, here, functions as a way to prevent people from imagining the wrong kind of roots, such as a belief in their ‘imaginary sovereignty of the world’ or competitive nationalism (1956: 213).

To summarise Weil’s take on materialism, one could describe it as an effort to place the inhuman at the service of greater humanity (in both senses of the word) and better politics.

Learning to become 'like matter' is not seen as a bad or apolitical path for Weil, depending on what it is leading towards. In Weil's case, 'inhuman' factory work and chronic migraines led her to experience herself as matter in a way that prompted political action. Yet she notes that her co-workers and other afflicted people would rather indulge in escapism than use their condition constructively (1956: 157). Nevertheless she persists in trying to imagine ways in which a large-scale education towards a new human-world relationship could be put into practice. In her proposals for post-war France, for example, she advises to teach farmers and other workers about their cosmic constitution by showing them examples of their involvement in the energy cycle through their soil, plants, work and meals (2009: 123, 378). She also recommends certain forms of music, art and poetry as media for reflecting on matter, space and time¹⁰ (1956: 155, 422, 554).

Crucial to Weil's geopoetics is her emphasis on the erasure of difference between an 'elite' science and a 'non-scientific' public. From her point of view, when farmers, sailors or pilots use the sun, the stars and natural forces as part of their work, they have the same access to gaining knowledge about their embeddedness in the world as a scientist. As Vance G. Morgan sums up Weil's position: '[s]cience understood in this way is no more the exclusive domain of an intellectual elite than is basic human labour; in both activities the human mind is in most direct contact with the world' (Morgan, 2005: 34). For both groups, the body becomes a way of accessing the universe, a medium that unites world and consciousness (Weil, 1956: 592). Following this reasoning, the human body needs to be supported in this access, for instance, through the invention of more 'humane' machines and forms of labour (Weil, 2009: 80-81). Simone Weil's ethos for a geopoetics places great importance on means and ends and thus highlights the constant danger of visions of the world – whether scientific, religious or other – becoming co-opted to function socially and politically as mere means. In our construction and mediation of human-world relationships, '[w]e must be careful about the level on which we place the infinite. If we place it on the level which is only suitable for the finite, it will matter little what name we give it' (2003: 55). Geopoetics as an end in itself will not be able to offer a new conception of human-world relations, but will only offer the illusion of a new world view or politics.

2 The geopoetics of Suzanne and Aimé Césaire: 'I am universe.'

The concern with means and ends of human-world imagery is echoed in the geopoetics of Suzanne and Aimé Césaire. Like Simone Weil's work, their work begins as a critique of capitalist rationality and the destructive form of globalisation it engendered. Written in prose as well as poetry, it represents an effort to unlink modernity, reason and globalisation from capitalist logic. Through founding the journal *Tropiques* with other Martinican writers - advertised as a folklore journal to subvert French censorship - Suzanne and Aimé Césaire critiqued the desire of people of African descent to integrate into the capitalist Euro-American society. As part of the *négritude* movement that claimed Blackness as a positive term, they pointed to the connection between the devastation of human communities and environments, and to the on-going masking of this violence through exoticisation (S. Césaire, 2002: 131; Arnold, 1981: 185). In their search for an alternative system to the one that had produced slavery, they looked for models of community in accounts of African societies. Although many Black intellectuals reproached them for wishing to retreat into an ill-constructed, nostalgic African past, some of their critics, such as their former patron

Paulette Nardal¹², distinguished the Martinicans from the more essentialist end of the *négritude* writers spectrum (Garraway, 2010: 78; Sharpley-Whiting, 2002: 17). Insisting on a more inclusive approach that considers other disenfranchised groups, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire maintained that, instead of solely constituting a celebration of African exceptionalism, their writing sought to draw out the faults of the underlying socio-economic structures that marginalise and dehumanise particular people (Arnold, 1981: 46). As Suzanne Césaire put it, referring to their efforts in Martinique:

‘it is not a question of a return to the past, of resurrecting an African past that we have learned to appreciate and respect. On the contrary, it is a question of mobilizing every living force mingled together on this land where race is the result of the most continuous brazing’ (2002: 134).

At the centre of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire’s writing lies the premise that social relations and one’s relation to the land is constructed according to how it suits the most powerful. This premise is paired with the awareness that the land and the world is not a ‘solid and expansive’ resource, but an increasingly out-of-balance system, both in social and material terms (S. Césaire, 2002: 135): the economy is out of balance with an already precariously balanced nature and, in turn, destabilises human society. As Aimé Césaire wrote in the editorial of the inaugural issue of *Tropiques*: ‘it is no longer time to be a parasite upon the world, it is a matter of saving it’ (1978: 5).

The strategy of the *Tropiques* writers to change their relationship to the world implied making contact with its origins, guided by a new poetics. In contrast to prominent Black Caribbean scientists of previous generations, such as Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin, Aimé Césaire stresses his scepticism of the transformative scope of the scientific method. More closely aligned with Weil’s division between scientific models and value, he writes in a 1944 essay on *Poetics and Knowledge* that science teaches men to use the world, but does not make them ‘masters’ in the sense that it does not convey anything beyond an instrumental, surface view of things (1978: 157).

‘It is an error to believe that knowledge, to be born, had to await the methodical exercise of thought or the scruples of experimentation. I even believe that man has never been closer to certain truths than in the first days of the species. At the time when man discovered, with emotion, the first sun, the first rain, the first breath, the first moon. At the time when man discovered in fear and rapture the throbbing newness of the world.’ (1978: 158)

Instead, Césaire champions experiments in poetic language that do not to explore narrow disciplinary knowledge such as ‘biology’, but to get to know the ‘great world’ (*‘gros de monde’*): ‘Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge’ (1978: 157). Especially in Césaire’s time, science remained noticeably silent about common materiality and preferred to create artificial boundaries in the service of imperialism. His poetics held science accountable for suppressing inconvenient representations of matter. If one manages to achieve true poetry, Aimé Césaire writes, one arrives at a moment where the text moves beyond the human (1978: 162-164). This view of poetry as an experimental ground for exploring a ‘fundamental unconscious unity in nature’ (Arnold, 1981: 60) is further elaborated by Césaire in his view of man and poetry as constituted by nature:

'In us [resides] the mankind of the ages. In us, all men. In us, the animal, the vegetable, the mineral. Man is not merely man. He is universe. Everything takes place as if, prior to the secondary separation of life, there had been a right primitive unity by which the poets continue to be dazzled' (1978: 162).

Like in Weil's texts, the body seems to become a medium between consciousness and the material history of the universe. Fellow *Tropiques* editor René Méné put it this way: 'our only access to the universe is through ourselves' (1978b: 57). As an example, in Aimé Césaire's poems, the material of stone is not inert and immobile, but generative and 'gives birth' to humans (Hénane, 2006: 213). This use of metamorphoses and the theme of communi(cat)ion with the universe can be attributed to the dialogue with surrealism, however, the focus on nature 'not as the analogue of poetry but its very source and substance' (Humphries, 2005: xx) seems to grate against the surrealist emphasis on the human 'interior world' as the source of a reconstruction of the world. At the same time, Césaire's nature may not be so much (only) exterior as interior. Despite his focus on sounding material origins, Césaire insists that, for humans, nature can only be cultural, in that, for humans to have any meaning or value, it needs to be taken out of the plainly material sphere (1978: XXI).

Poetry and poetics, seen as a medium to culturally explore humanity's geologic or cosmic origins, necessitate a very different engagement with colonialism and capitalism. Aimé and Suzanne Césaire's 'remixing' of colonial stereotypes through organic and inorganic imagery reflects the goal not to simply free the colonised from their status as 'nature', but to propose an alignment with the natural as a *more* valuable identity. Their play with stereotypes of colonised peoples and landscapes as savage entities to be domesticated results in ironic transformations that question the supposedly 'universal' European values. Suzanne Césaire's subversive embrace of cannibalism as a positive and selective method of cultural appropriation (S. Césaire, 2012: 27; Walker, 2012: x) and her pride in the African 'plant-man's' lack of 'effort expended to dominate nature' (2002: 131) complement Aimé Césaire's upholding of the 'monstrous' to the ostensibly 'civilised' and his disentanglement of the 'primitive' from the 'African' (Césaire, 1978: xix; Arnold 1981: 134). Again regarded as an absurd, scandalous strategy at the time by fellow Antillean intellectuals, including Frantz Fanon¹³, the search for empowerment in an alignment with the bodily, the natural and the cosmic was dismissed as an escapist, narcissist or even fascist tendency (Arnold, 1981: 49, 63, 68; Nesbitt, 2003: 84).

Indeed, one of the questions that Aimé and Suzanne Césaire tried to tackle was how to not fall into fascist rhetoric while using place, body and rootedness in the cosmos as a way of unifying a diversity of origins. Nick Nesbitt sees this tension as central to the early work of Aimé Césaire:

'That Césaire at once searches for and dramatizes the impossibility of any 'return to nature' is the measure of his revolutionary insight. His poetic subject never in fact becomes-animal, becomes-tree, but most continue to speak of doing so' (Nesbitt, 2003: 89).

Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé suggests that Suzanne Césaire, rather than celebrating nature as an essentialism, progresses in her writing towards 'establish[ing] a fundamental

relationship among all the elements existing on the island' (1998: 66). In this, Césaire seems guided by her observation that the spectacular Martinican nature¹⁵ also functions as a 'camouflage' for an exploitative reality that, if not utilised differently, will persist to function in this manner beyond colonialism. The contestation of this camouflage necessitates a disturbance of this reality in order to foster more productive and critical relations to the land and to one's situatedness in socio-political relations. As she writes: 'The most troubling reality is our own. We shall act. This land, our land, can only be what we want it to be' (S. Césaire, 2002: 134). Despite her insight that a change in human-world imaginations is key to political reimagination, the question of what such a change or action may look like, considering the constant threat of trading one essentialism for another, persists.

Suzanne and Aimé Césaire's geopoetics experiment with changing human-world relations in order to contest the capitalist view of nature and naturalised humans as resource. Despite this general approach, their focus on the body as a construct of universal nature/culture, but also a location of response to a particular nature and culture, they refuse a 'disembodied universalism' in favour of advancing a 'universalism that is rich with all that is particular' (A. Césaire in Kelley, 2000: 25). This recognition of the embeddedness of the human in not only a social but a material world represents, in their view, a 'humanism made to the measure of the world' (A. Césaire, 2000: 73), a humanism where '[e]verything has the right to life' (1978: 162).

3 I am of/with the world: what role for geopoetics?

Despite their different worldviews and choices of expression, Simone Weil and Suzanne and Aimé Césaire arrive at proposing new human-world relationships against hegemonic ones that sought (and continue to seek) to maintain an unequal and oppressive society. In both cases, the physical world does not constitute the ontological source of ethics or politics, but is represented in a way that would enable a new view of it – and of our relation to it. In Weil's case, it is an image of human vulnerability that promotes compassion and the search for a greater good, in the case of Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, it is an image of cultural (and to a degree natural) unity that advances a more inclusive 'universal'. Especially the Césaires, through their defamiliarisation of dominant representations of human-world relationships and their uncovering of how these images are used to exploit certain populations and landscapes, highlight how politics itself is based around a representational struggle – one in which geopoetics can intervene. As Simon Dalby recently worded it in his call for a challenge of geopolitical representations: 'geopolitics is quite literally about how the world is made known' (Dalby, 2013).

Surprisingly, the Césaires and their fellow *Tropiques* writers initially saw poetics as part of a cultural, rather than political struggle, although censorship was a constant reminder of the entanglement between the two (A. Césaire, 1978: vii). Poetics was seen as a means to hide political messages at a time where 'culture' was perceived as apolitical because of its focus on the 'inner life'. When the cultural became too political, the editors decided that the journal had to end (A. Césaire, 1978: vii). Co-editor René Ménil, on the other hand, views the link between poetics and politics slightly differently, in proposing that the *Tropiques* contributors used poetics to express concepts that are lacking in politics (1978a: xxxv). This is echoed by contemporary Guadeloupean poet and writer Daniel Maximin, who suggests that '[t]he

Caribbean opposed to the politics of space a poetics of space' (2006: 108). Poetics is envisioned as the reflexive other of politics or even, as James Arnold argues, as an alternative way of doing politics, a way that works through 'collective emotional shock' (Arnold, 1981: 59). This partly follows from Aimé Césaire's insistence on poetics as experimental ground for exploring alternative universalisms. Following Ménéil's view, one could argue that the moment that geopoetics become heard, it enters into and becomes politics.

By contrast, Simone Weil started off viewing the politics of her time as being based on a fantasy of domination over humans and matter, which she also saw reflected in the majority of artworks. Weil, strongly influenced by Plato, felt that poetics, in order to be spiritually and politically useful, would need to go beyond mere reflection of the social and ephemeral (Brueck, 1995: 39-40). The main reason why Weil detested surrealism is that she felt that it worked too uncritically from the socially formed self of the artist. Weil's expansion of Plato's idea of art consists of an attempt to democratise access to the 'creative attention' of poetics. Although poetics can be considered an individual experience, it must not remain in the realm of the private or of ideas: it must be put into action in order to bring about transformation (see Irwin, 2002: 43). Weil sees poetics very clearly as a means of communicating a new worldview more widely, and she deliberately attempted to link up poetics and politics, for instance, in her teaching, her vocational training proposals and her performative lifestyle. A poetics that mediates the 'genuine' relationship of humans and the world would help bring a new geopolitics into existence.

The problem of not knowing how to think at the 'the measure of the world' has become even more pressing in our time, as we are struggling with a potentially catastrophic rapport with the dynamics of our planet. In this light, Simone Weil's 'creative attention' to material processes, and Suzanne and Aimé Césaire's occupation with geologic imagery, gain a new relevance in relation to today's geopoetics and geopolitics. In particular, geopolitics has become regarded as an area that is struggling to come to terms with the impact of the Earth's geo-physical activity on human interests (see Chakrabarty, 2009: 199; Clark, 2011). While geopolitics has always claimed to take the geophysical into consideration, it seems to only have done so in a superficial, localised and politically convenient way (see Clark, 2012, Dalby, 2007, Elden, 2013). At best, geopolitics appears to view the 'geo' primarily as a resource and military playground. What alternative role for the 'geo' could a contemporary geopoetics conceive?

One potential example comes from current Caribbean discourse on the geopoetic. In dialogue with other Caribbean writers and artists (including the *Tropiques* writers) Daniel Maximin proposes that, in the Caribbean, nature has never just been a 'backdrop' for poetics and human history, but a 'protagonist in its geologic reality' (2006: 81, 97-8). Describing how models and strategies of resistance were derived from the physical environment (2006: 94), he maintains that the extreme weather and geologic events in the Caribbean put the apparent power and reason of the colonisers into perspective. The indifference of geophysical forces to human might, even if it destroyed coloniser as well as colonised, was still seen as something preferable: it did not merely provoke the wish for imitation in the form of violent revolt, but foremost led to thoughts about co-existence (2006: 94-100):

'At the core, these cataclysms, in their destruction of the forces of the oppressor, also demonstrate that 'the object of the reunion of mankind' is neither to fight

against nature through human superiority, nor to fight against other men by imposing superiority. The island thus became a place of inscription of the whole of humanity, forced to cohabitate ...' (2006: 100, author's translation).

This view of co-habitation, 'imposed' by the 'perils and offerings of nature', leads Maximin to cast humans and human identity not as rooted in the land, but as the 'fruit' of geophysical forces (2006: 100). This perspective, according to Maximin, unsettles the dominant Eurocentric paradigm of a balance than can be brought about through discourse:

'In this respect, one can say that the Caribbean is not a microcosm of four continents, but the opposite: the revelation of the presuppositions of their beliefs and their ideologies, those that explode the European macrocosm, the desire for likeness, for resemblance, for reason, for analogy, because every time the dream of harmony and balance that is at the heart of this representation will shatter in the history of the Caribbean' (2006: 106).

While Maximin's offering is not unproblematic in terms of natural and cultural essentialisms, it captures the image of conventional geopolitics as, on the one hand, upholding a determinism that ideologically favours a balanced geography, and, on the other, perpetuating a fantasy of balance that can be brought about through wars, 'the market' and political negotiations. It asks what a geopolitics might look like that proceeds from a 'geo' of permanent material imbalance. Read through Weil, a geopolitics that is in dialogue with the geophysical recognises that the social and the natural are uncomfortably united by a saturation with the inhuman (Irwin, 2002: 42). Hence, nature cannot serve as a model for new socialities, but merely as a reminder of human vulnerability. Here, geopoetics can help translate this vulnerability not into an acceptance of oppression in return for a protection from natural and political forces, but into an acceptance of the need for cooperation with other vulnerable entities on this planet.

As for the risks of such a geopoetic imagination, the work of Édouard Glissant offers a constructive warning. In his proposal of an 'aesthetics of the earth', Glissant struggles with the tension between a 'reactionary or sterile' embrace of the physicality of the earth and a 'passionate' relationship (1997:150). This dilemma leads him away from a celebration of superficial beauty and a rootedness tied to essentialisms, but instead, as with Weil, towards a wish to co-habitate with the earth in all its ugliness: mud, dust, epidemics, flies, frost, decay and death (1997: 151). Through a disruptive aesthetics such as this, he hopes to create a new relation to the world by disturbing narratives that promote a sentimental attachment to territory. Despite his optimism that new relations can be created, he continues to return to their fragility in the face of easier, but fundamentally destructive options. With this, he seems to imply that the creation of a new geopoetics with the view to bringing about a new geopolitics may be too risky. Equally, however, he seems to ask whether it may be the only option in the face of the material and social state of the planet.

Openings

The question that remains is how to act with geopoetics. How can one make the geopoetic inform one's political actions? In their respective proposals, Simone Weil and the *Tropiques*

writers place great importance on an understanding of the relationship between human-world relations and economic power. René Ménéil, for instance, commented on the easy absorption of surrealism by the dominant culture industry, by casting it as another version of the 'exotic' (1996: 178). Alexander Irwin's suggestion that Simone Weil chose to live as an example of her theories, instead of writing them down, also points to her doubts about the exposure of ideas in an arena that seeks to maintain the status quo (Irwin, 2002: 215-216, 210-212). A similar sentiment is expressed by Pheng Cheah who, while pointing to literature's structural capacity to create openings for the appearance of other worlds, understands that this world making activity is not innocent (Cheah, 2012: 138). As a cultural product, it is intrinsically linked with economic forces and their interest in maintaining a certain kind of order (Cheah, 2012: 142, 145). In order for geopoetics to create an opening, he implies, it has to 'negotiate and resist the flows that serve global capital' (Cheah, 2012: 145, see also Holmes, 2005). As some Anthropocene-themed artworks and cultural products are explicitly directed at participating in the current economic and political system, their value as agents of change could be disputed. To return to David Biello's criticism, the biggest dilemma of the geopoetic might be not how it translates into politics, but how it navigates between popularisation of an idea and incorporation into the experience economy.

Simone Weil's suggestion that 'a visible revolution never takes place except to sanction an invisible revolution already accomplished' (Weil, 2006: 175) might provide a helpful starting point: an 'invisible revolution' as a process that has to be set in motion and sustained. In this context, we may also need to ask from where the geopoetics that potentially feed this process will emerge. Do poetics necessarily have to come from art? After all, science is also a site of representational struggle and has recently seen a growing interest in its 'romantic era' (see Tresch, 2012). Considering it was the scientific proposal of the 'Anthropocene' that became the starting point for artistic practice, one could regard the proposal of the Anthropocene by scientists as much a geopoetic as a scientific project. Alternatively, it might be a productive provocation to ask: who is in a position to produce an alternative geopoetics? Does it matter, to paraphrase artist Andrea Fraser, what geopoetics are economically (Fraser, 2012)? In a time where self-censorship - in order to secure funding, status and employment - is increasingly common, Fraser proposes that alternative political proposals can only come from 'marginalized (often self-marginalized) arenas where there is nothing to lose - and little to gain' (Fraser, 2012). Conversely, writers on 'postcolonial ecologies', such as DeLoughrey and Handley, have voiced concern about the 'Western' appropriation of 'non-Western' ecological or eco-political relations (2011: 19-20). As indicated earlier, there might be a greater danger that only Western voices are granted airtime in the current discussions about the Anthropocene and its related poetics. Further, there is not only the danger of mere absorption by the 'culture industry', but also the threat of subaltern geopolitics becoming aestheticised as 'geopoetics', to prevent them from being debated in political arenas. On a more hopeful note, geopoetics could be understood as concepts that, while they may have economic value in that they are entangled with cultural production, still constitute a means of 'opening up new worlds' (Grosz, 2007).

What also marks the examples of Simone Weil and Suzanne and Aimé Césaire is their attention to the materiality of the body. For Weil, the body is a crucial nexus of matter, thought and action. Being matter does not preclude, but, contrarily, incites action. Her emphasis on living her ideas, as well as communicating them in prose and poetry, seems to stress that ideas, while being a product of matter, only come to matter when eventually

enacted physically. In the case of censorship or ridicule of one's ideas, one's actions (ideas translated into actions) can still affect something (see Irwin, 2002: 217). In Weil's case, this took the form of unpaid teaching for workers, refusal of the 'unarmed oppression' of university bureaucracy (2006) and, during the war, the fight for disruptive non-violent intervention and potential self-sacrifice. For Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, too, the assertion of bodily agency is crucial to their project - bodily agency connected to an understanding of how the representation of the materiality of the body (as part of the world) plays a role. In this respect, the geopoetic projects of Weil and Suzanne and Aimé Césaire can be regarded as calls for an action that takes the materiality of the world *and* its representation seriously, and that recognises the possibility for contestation through the material and representational capacities of the body. In this sense, bodies are capable of extending themselves towards both (geo)poetic and (geo)political interventions, since they have the capacity to progress beyond their function 'as backdrops for political ambitions or as territories to be conquered' (Fall, 2006: 677).

It has been pointed out that Anthropocene geopoetics, thematically united by the human as a geologic agent, could reinforce stereotypes of 'imperialist man' as the engineer of *his* own destiny¹⁶. Equally problematic is perhaps an overly mournful focus on geology, in which humans seem to become automatically interred, geophysically active, but politically passive. To return to the question from the beginning of how the image of the human as a geophysical entity matters now, a possible answer that the presented visions could provide is that the term Anthropocene represents (or can be made to represent) a prompt to finally confront the historically repeatedly masked and unmasked intersection of the (geo)political and the geophysical at all scales. In politics as well as other socio-cultural interactions, matter is everywhere and nowhere, and the image of the Anthropocene holds up a mirror that painfully reminds us of the inescapable and unequal materiality of our being. At the same time, this mirror reveals the geopolitical production of our current material condition and the on-going danger it poses to human existence. Bearing in mind the economic and political challenges that a new imaginary of human-world relations is up against, any responses to this prompt remain an extremely difficult undertaking. The work of Simone Weil provides us with an upbeat conclusion, in that 'the mere fact that we exist, that we conceive and want something different from what exists, constitutes for us a reason for hoping' (Weil, 2006: 21) - hoping for courage to undertake a myriad of different actions as geo-political agents. Here, Aimé Césaire provides a suitable call to arms: 'the only thing in the world worth starting: the end of the world, for Heaven's sake!' (1995: 99) The end of the world as it is.

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² Other co-founders included fellow teachers René Ménénil, Georges Gratiant, Aristide Maugée, Lucie Thesée.

³ 'Alain' (Émile-Auguste Chartier, 1868 - 1951) taught at the Lycée Henri-IV in Paris.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Formative Writings* (1987)

⁵ Simone Weil, *Formative Writings* (1987)

⁹ Weil's notebooks show frequent references to the scientific debates of her time, particularly physics, exemplified by mentions of Heisenberg, Dirac, Schroedinger, Einstein, Boltzmann and others.

¹⁰ Especially her poem 'The Stars' (1999: 409) closely reflects her 'geopoetics'.

¹² Paulette, Jane and Andrée Nardal were founders of a literary salon for Black intellectuals in the Parisian suburb of Clamart and involved in several journals as editors and writers.

¹³ Fanon mocked the négritude writers' choice of representations ('...“open to all the breaths of the world.” I embrace the world! I am the world!') (2008: 97), but also appeared to acknowledge their potential value (2008: 106).

¹⁵ Patricia Noxolo and Marika Prezioso point out, using the work of Maryse Condé, that this 'exotic nature' was fabricated mostly through European imports of African and Indian flora and fauna (2012: 126).

¹⁶ Example headlines include 'The Anthropocene: A man-made world' (*The Economist*, 26 May 2011) or the blog 'New Anthropocene' (<http://newanthropocene.wordpress.com>) initially subtitled 'It's silly to play victim when we are the instigators of change'.