



Fruit of the cyclone: Undoing geopolitics through geopoetics

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ABSTRACT

How can a geopolitical worldview be undone? Can it be undone? These questions have played a central role in critical geopolitics, particularly with feminist and postcolonial authors who seek to show how geopolitics are constituted through everyday processes. This article puts this work into dialogue with a relatively recent strand of geopolitics that attempts to re-examine its environmental foundations. What role might geophysical forces play in challenging hegemonic geopolitical worldviews? The role of materiality in geopolitics will be examined through the work of Guadeloupian author Daniel Maximin. In his book *Les Fruits du Cyclone: Une Géopoétique de la Caraïbe*, Maximin argues for the unique position of a Caribbean geopoetics, channelled into the figure of humanity as the 'fruit of the cyclone', to challenge contemporary geopolitics. In turning to both the natural and the political disasters that visit the Caribbean, he illustrates how impoverished understandings of the geophysical lead to a continuation of colonial patterns. Against this background, Maximin calls for a decolonisation of the coloniser through unsettling their geographical imagination. This decolonisation utilises the geophysical not as a model for human or human–world relations, but as a tool for re-situating oneself and for reimagining global divisions.

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1. Introduction

How does a hegemonic geopolitical worldview come into being – and, more importantly, how can it be changed or resisted? In geography, these questions have been the object of critical, and especially feminist, postcolonial and popular geopolitics. In most cases, the answer has been to propagate counter-narratives – world views silenced by official sources. Authors in critical geopolitics have made use of the term 'geograph-ing'¹ to emphasise the writing and re-writing of ideological narratives that enlist geography, making literal use of its meaning (Dalby, 1993: 440, 452; O'Tuathail, 1989; Sparke, 2000). Proposals for counter-narratives have frequently included calls for a 'humanising' of geopolitics, for instance, through the consideration of the embodied nature of geopolitics (Dowler, 2012; Hyndman, 2001), an inclusion of 'Third World' voices (Slater, 2004; Sharp, 2013), or an emphasis on the mundaneness of world view 'maintenance' (Dittmer, 2012; Dittmer and Gray, 2010; Gregory, 2004: 16; Holmes, 2007; Sharp, 2000; Wallerstein, 1991: 11). Recently, proposals have also extended to

the inclusion of the geophysical dimension, which is understood to also shape geopolitical views and conflicts (Clark, 2011; Dalby, 2007; Yusoff, 2013). For obvious reasons, the proponents of these two approaches have been suspicious of one another's focus. Authors focusing on the 'human' aspects of geopolitics have been alarmed about a perceived return to geopolitics' dubious origins in environmental determinism and meta-geographical pseudo-science (see Lewis and Wigen, 1997). Conversely, authors advocating a re-engagement with the 'geo' of geopolitics have argued that they are not interested in the physical as an 'anchoring ground', but as a means of destabilisation (Clark, 2011: 20).

The debate has parallels in the wider discourses around re- or de-materialisation in postcolonial theory, for instance, in Gayatri Spivak's eschewing of 'globality' for a consideration of a more material 'planetarity' (2003). A particular focus of critique has been the on-going use of the European nature–culture distinction by major postcolonial theorists (Jackson, 2014). Other than as raw material or backdrop, a universal, material nature poses a problem within a discourse about the construction of symbolic hierarchies (Jackson, 2014; Jazeel, 2011; Spivak, 2012). This article tries to establish a dialogue between these two fields and discussions via a discourse that appears to be particularly productive in its theoretical provocations around materiality, culture and representation – the discourse between generations of Caribbean authors around identity, materiality and race. Authors such as Aimé Césaire,

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¹ The term 'geo-graphs' places different kinds of emphasis across authors. For example, Dalby uses the term to quite generally mean 'geopolitical presuppositions', whereas Matthew Sparke's geographs are distinctly informed by the work of Derrida and Spivak.

Édouard Glissant and Maryse Condé exemplify a spectrum of positions as they embrace or reject materialisations to productive and challenging effects. Much of this work has been subject to intense analysis in literature studies (e.g. Allewaert, 2013; Britton, 2008; Deckard, forthcoming; Nesbitt, 2013) but not in geography, despite its acute relevance (see Noxolo and Preziuso, 2012: 123). As I propose in this article, this debate may be particularly valuable as a bridge or translation between the critical and the ‘new materialist’ geopolitics approach, with its focus on socio-material cultural practices – or ‘geo-social formations’ (Clark and Yusoff, 2014) – as a means of geopolitical contestation.

Since an overview of the debate, especially when going beyond French Caribbean sources,² would be outside the scope of an article, I attempt to channel it through the example of the Guadeloupian writer Daniel Maximin. As an author who explicitly seeks to negotiate between different Caribbean theoretical positions, Maximin’s novels as well as his essays are dotted with references to other, mostly francophone Caribbean writers, and sometimes even include characters reading or citing these writers (e.g. Maximin, 1981: 240–241). Yet far from assembling a mere collage of positions, Maximin stresses the political potential of the meeting ground. He handles other authors with an almost jester-like manner, placing them in dialogue with one another through his characters³ and his own – part serious, part tongue-in-cheek – concepts. Through the construction of a ‘Caribbean geopoetics’, Maximin explicitly enlists geophysical forces in his critique of geopolitics and in an attempted ‘decolonisation’ of Europe. By the latter he means the liberation of the ‘West’ from its Europe-centred and impoverished worldview that it imposes on the rest of the world.

The limitation that Maximin satirises is the apparent European blindness to the inter-connection and interdependence of the social, cultural and material – while strategically using a skewed awareness of it against its colonial subjects. Indeed, Maximin constantly shifts the boundaries between the three spheres. With the image of the Caribbean as the path breaker for human liberation, Maximin affirms the arguments of authors such as Susan Buck-Morss (2009), Doris L. Garraway (2008) and Sibylle Fischer (2001) who advance the claim that the radical challenge of the Caribbean to European notions of freedom and equality has been disavowed. Like these authors, Maximin not only grapples with the representation of Caribbean history, but with necessary revisions of (representations of) history in general. In comparison with these authors, however, Maximin seems alone⁴ in what could be described as a materialist pursuit and an interest in the inclusion of natural history (also see Allewaert, 2013: 48–49). The reason for taking this risk, especially with regard to the difficult standing of materiality in postcolonial theory, appears to be the destabilisation of multiple binaries that this pursuit allows.

Experiments with constructive destabilisation take place throughout Daniel Maximin’s texts. The main publication that I will be drawing on for this article is *Les Fruits du Cyclone: Une Géopoétique de la Caraïbe* (‘Fruit of the Cyclone: A Caribbean Geopoetics’) (Maximin, 2006). This work of non-fiction draws extensively on his prior novel trilogy *L’Isolé Soleil* (translated as ‘Lone Sun’) (1981), *Soufrières* (named after the volcanoes of the same name, literally means ‘sulphur pits’) (1987) and *L’île et Une Nuit* (‘The Island and a Night’) (1995), in which Maximin explores

ways of resisting a European processing of Caribbean history (again, including natural history). *Les Fruits du Cyclone*’s subtitle ‘Une Géopoétique de la Caraïbe’ (A Caribbean Geopoetics), introduces ‘geopoetics’ as a means of challenging classical geopolitics, which, for Maximin, are clearly still in operation. Geopoetics appear as a poetics that takes geographical features and geophysical forces seriously as an element of geopolitics, while seeking to constructively reinscribe them as a means to counter imperialist aspirations and hegemonic worldviews. In short, they represent a materialist, decolonial process of rewriting geopolitics.

Here, Maximin’s use of geopoetics contrasts with what has generally been discussed in geography under the term ‘geopoetics’, such as the work Franco-Scottish poet Kenneth White (Gillet, 2009). Although White’s work, and many other examples of European geopoetics, are also directed against a nature–culture division, nature is often idealised and essentialised, with culture representing destructive consumerism, loss of the world and loss of ‘deep purpose’ (White, 2004: 230; see also Bönisch, 2015). White’s poetry specifically is inflected with quasi-colonial, masculine rhetoric about adventure, including penetration fantasies of non-European (feminised) lands (2003: 310). By contrast, Maximin’s geopoetics attempt to show the opposite: that nature–culture relations are intertwined, even when they are being denied. He contests essentialisms, even as he celebrates the unique position of the Caribbean as a particularly fertile ground for geopolitical contestation. Instead of ‘glamorising’ local knowledge (Dodds et al., 2013), he regards the Caribbean, through its turbulent cultural, political and natural history, as a source for more generally applicable means to reconsider our geographical and geopolitical imagination. With this, Maximin continues fellow Caribbean writer Frantz Fanon’s vision of the necessity for a new (geo)political imagination to emerge from the former colonies (2004: 239; see also James, 1989: 377) and for decolonisation to involve unifying and diversifying moves that revoke European dichotomies (Fanon, 2004: 10).

The specific geopoetic image that I am focusing on in this article is that of humanity as the ‘fruit of the cyclone’ – the product of geophysical forces and natural disaster. Set against the enduring European pastoral imagination as well as against on-going efforts to control ‘nature’, especially in ‘unruly’ non-European regions, the image of the ‘fruit of the cyclone’ serves several purposes: to destabilise existing boundaries, to rethink alliances and to resituate ourselves. These movements are part of rewriting geopolitics and are also reflected in the structure of this article. The first part traces Maximin’s satirical engagement with classical geopolitics and his related engagement with the late Martinican cultural critic Suzanne Césaire. In this satire, he contemplates the limits of deconstructive critique and justifies the necessity for geopoetics as a decolonial tool. The second part introduces humanity’s geophysical origins as a *common* alterity within but also stresses the inescapable entanglement of matter and ideology. As I will show here, the image of the ‘fruit of the cyclone’ enables Maximin to play with the symbolic and material nature of culture, and therefore with the environmental determinist tendencies of geopolitics: is it nature or culture that shapes geopolitics and justifies (neo)colonialism – and what if the two cannot be separated? Further, the image allows him to bridge between essentialist and anti-essentialist readings of landscapes and forces: that we are all born from geophysical forces makes neither us nor them a political force – how are we distributing agency? The third part highlights the dangers of ‘re-materialising’ geopolitics and discusses what, according to Maximin, his geopoetics can and cannot do. The final section re-emphasises the relevance of maintaining openness as well as a sceptical attitude to materiality in critical geopolitics, and extends the issues raised by being ‘fruit of the cyclone’ to bear on the practice of our own individual geo-graphy.

² For an excellent example of anglophone and francophone Caribbean literature and its relevance to the discourse on materiality, (postcolonial) geography and geopolitics, see Noxolo and Preziuso, 2012, 2013.

³ The characters in Maximin’s novels tend to be largely female and named after figures of resistance from Caribbean history. Overall, Maximin is very attentive to gender e.g. in his treatment of history. Two chapters in *L’île et une nuit* are also narrated from the perspective of the hurricane/the eye of the hurricane.

⁴ Maximin is not alone among Caribbean poets across history.

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