

Geopoetics: Storytelling against mastery

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Abstract

In this engagement with Eric Magrane’s article, ‘Climate Geopoetics (The Earth is a Composted Poem)’, I follow two provocations: first, geopoetics as travelling through disciplinary turfs, and second, geopoetics as storytelling. Coming from a disciplinary trajectory that spent a long stop at international relations (IR), these provocations attach me to geopoetics as practice and a growing field. My engagement here is oriented to geopoetics not only at the threshold of geography and the arts and humanities, but also the intersections of geography and politics. I primarily propose that viewing geopoetics as an open space for experimenting allows for disrupting masterful understandings of the academic self and counters a univocal, universal narrative of the world.

Keywords

decoloniality, geopoetics, mastery, postcolonial subjectivity, storytelling

*A geographic constraint to respond to a quote,
one that wants to be read out loud.*

*Terrifying tensions arise,
a poem might throw off an ‘I’
fretting about disciplinary boundaries.*

*Our current moment in time
[extraordinary time]
will be littered with catastrophes,
water lines and extinctions,
stories and prophecies.*

*The earth as a poem
not always beholden to story,
woven excerpts, and
dry cracks of the ground?*

*What matters most is
what this work might do in the world.
What a reader might expect from a text?
What does it ask of you?*

I start with a found poem I composed based on Eric Magrane’s (2021) article ‘Climate Geopoetics (The Earth is a Composted Poem)’. I do this because I am not a poet, yet I readily take up Magrane’s invitation to conceive of a geopoetic practice as an open form in which we as readers, listeners, reviewers, or writers are invited to share in making meaning through reorganizing the wor(l)d. I take this to be the central and key invitation extended by geopoetics as a critical and creative practice while grappling with (inter)disciplinary forms, frames, and narratives of climate change. If geopoetics is a practice oriented to the metaphor and materiality of the world,

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perhaps we might approach it as making do with found words, objects, and matter?

In this engagement with Magrane's article, I wish to follow two provocations besides this central invitation to experiment in rearranging the world. The first is thinking with geopoetics as travelling through disciplinary turfs and the second is geopoetics as storytelling. Both provocations stem from an orientation to treat this engagement as a found composition. Coming from a disciplinary trajectory that spent a long stop at IR, these two lines attach me to geopoetics as practice, a growing field (Magrane et al., 2020), and an ontological question ('What might the earth look like – relationally, and in practice – in an ontology that conceives of the earth as a poem?'). In other words, my engagement here is oriented to geopoetics not only at the threshold of geography and arts and humanities, but also geography and politics.

Geopoetics as travelling

Magrane's article, as well as emerging literature on geopoetic practice (e.g. Banazek, 2020), rightly invokes a challenge to disciplinary grammars as well as acknowledging and even celebrating the vulnerabilities of inhabiting them. This is something I attempted to capture through the opening found poem. Weaving through Magrane's article is the recognition that critical and creative practices are not simply 'different kinds of interdisciplinarity', but that they also trouble academic subjectivity, modes of experimentation, argumentation, and audience. This troubling is always discomfiting. I like to think of geopoetics as a challenge to our imagination of masterful selves as academics and as narrators of the world. I like to think about the (un)disciplinary nudges in 'Climate Geopoetics (The Earth is a Composted Poem)' alongside Edward Said's notion of the academic traveller. Said closes one of his most heartfelt pieces with the heeding that 'we must always view the academy as a place to voyage in, owning none of it but at home everywhere in it' (1994: 17–18). The academic self is a mode in which we give up the fantasies of control, coercion, and mastery over our academic domains; we risk identity and in so doing inhabit

academic discourse in playful and mobile ways. In these ways, we might discover the self (and other) as well as traverse and crossover fixed positions and inhabit different rhythms, customs, masks, and idioms. These playful ways are something akin to Magrane's images of the playground as a space of playful experimentation with narratives of the world, or the park bench that Magrane sits on as a pigeon shits on his serious book about contemporary catastrophe. The academy as a place to voyage in, a playground, is the counter-image of the academy as site of mastery and sovereignty.

The traveller, however, is not always immune from ambivalent desires to mastery.

Magrane annotates the pigeon shit smudge . . .

I double checked my poem with a colleague just before I hit submit (just in case it is too unserious) . . .

And a geopoetic practice might still manoeuvre constraints and challenges. May be, like responding to a quote.

In *Unthinking Mastery*, Julietta Singh ends her book with an invitation to 'cultivate discomfort' (2018: 149–170) by re-reading Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)* and *A Small Place*. In them, Kincaid wishes to share discomfort as experienced and felt in her travels as well as her Vancouver garden (as threshold space between home-world/culture-nature that Magrane stays with in this article). Kincaid, in Singh's reading, recognizes a will to mastery over the material world, which causes discomfort. This discomfort is acknowledged, shared, and even scripted in prose as this attachment and fantasy to masterful gardening, travelling, and specimen-collecting is examined and stalled through interruptions in narrative. In addition to Kincaid's explicit postcolonial ecocritiques, particularly how her writing on gardening directly unpacks the masterful tendency to order the natural world, Singh points out the equally important political work that her *ambivalent prose* does. This ambivalence with language emphasizes the 'cracks in postcolonial subjectivity' by adopting 'a practice of representation that emphasizes, politicizes, and embraces the subject's contradictions and

slippages' (Singh, 2018: 159–161). Following Singh, who centres her attempt to unthink mastery on the matter-narrative threshold, we might propose with Magrane spending time thinking about 'the fleeting materiality of language: things represented and evoked; shapes and sounds of words; rhythms and patterns repeated, rhythms and patterns fragmented, splintered'. We might accommodate the fragmented materiality of language as a mode of storytelling the world without resorting to a universal univocal story.

Geopoetics as storytelling

The second thread that I would like to pick up and tug a little more from Magrane's work is the woven post-colonial critique that emerges and retreats at different points in the article. It appears in the poems as well as in prose. This appearance engages the question of difference and Chakrabarty's suspicion of the universal. I wish to unpack this further not only as an important caution when thinking about geopoetics, but to also think about what might geopoetics as a decolonial *political act* mean, do, or look like?

In his previous work, Magrane (2015) charts the myriad of utilizations, practices, and definitions of geopoetics within geography. From among this vast terrain, a particular conversation centres the decolonial question in geopoetics (also, see Ferretti, 2020; Last, 2017b, 2017a). One of the central inspirations in this multi-vocal work has been approaching poetics through the work of Édouard Glissant (1997), and this inspiration traverses practices in geography and politics. In geography, Angela Last has written about geopoetics while resisting the pitfalls of a romanticized, essentialist, or reactionary attachment to earth. This deployment of geopoetics emphasizes 'disruptive aesthetics' (after Glissant) (Last, 2017b: 161), and politicizes language as a practice of critique, translation, and resistance.

In a similar vein but a different discipline, Robbie Shilliam (2012) and Louiza Odysseos (2017) have both foregrounded the politics of poetics as a critical and anti-colonial/de-colonial praxis. In Shilliam's, as well as Odysseos', readings of Glissant, poetics is not separable from politics; indeed, it is

anti-colonial politics that unhinges the way we disclose the world (Odysseos, 2019: 346). Shilliam focuses on the poetics of slavery to address the residual and unspoken of imaginations inherent in the concept of civilization. In so doing, he interrogates the conversation between three registers: politics, science, and poetry following Michael Oakshott. From this perspective, the voice of politics is:

that of a desiring self, imagining the world as a set of facts by which pleasure can be attained... Poetry is the delightful pursuit of images and the connections between images that arise out of the contemplating self. (Oakshott quoted in Shilliam, 2012: 110–111)

Shilliam, extending this reading, sees the dominance of the political and scientific voices 'as precisely a colonization of the conversation of humankind and its transformation to a monotone' (2012: 111). Against these colonizing voices, Glissant (1997) conceives of poetics as of errantry, a movement that encounters others without being scripted in arrow-like nomadism, with an intentional will to colonizing the other. This encounter is neither one that explains the world away, nor one that desires to master it.

We might think of this discomforted, disrupted, desiring self of politics as Said's master of the academic domain, or the subjectivity of the 'I' that gets simultaneously centred and de-centred in Magrane's poetry. And, geopoetics, thus, might be a practice that is attuned to the political act of destabilizing rather than shoring off this self. By splintering and rearranging the materiality of the world, word, or this white page, we might come to play in an open space of multi-vocal story that does not fail to throw the sovereign 'I' off.

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