

To Risk the Earth – The Nonhuman and Nonhistory

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There is a moment that keeps returning to me.

At a conference on the Anthropocene a few years ago, a fellow white artist described her affective interactions with a volcano in the Caribbean.

I was familiar with this site. Not by visiting it in person, but by visiting it through the many accounts in French Caribbean literature. The site was Mount Pelée on the island of Martinique.

Mount Pelée, as some readers may know, is mainly known for one event: an eruption on 8 May 1902, an eruption that killed 30,000 people and completely destroyed the town of Saint-Pierre – to many abroad also known as ‘le Petit Paris des Antilles’. Among the many tragedies of displacement and mass deaths through volcanoes in the Caribbean, this event is so infamous not because of the number of lives lost, but because of the political circumstances behind it.

It was not that there weren’t ample warning signs of the eruption – in fact, these were rather dramatic and intensified over the course of several weeks: earthquakes, rising waters, freak waves, explosions, mudflows, smaller pyroclastic flows, ash showers... There were even full-blown eruptions on neighbouring islands such as Saint Vincent where much of the indigenous Carib population – who had been pushed towards the mountains by the British colonisers, and whose concerns about an impending eruption were mocked by the local administration – was erased (Cox, 2004).

Despite these events, the authorities held onto the belief that the volcano was dormant, and even if it wasn’t, the town was deemed ‘completely safe’ (Ursulet, 1997: 107). As if the knowledge of volcanoes wasn’t sketchy enough at the time, the authorities chose to rely on a science teacher with no specialism in volcanoes to promote the widely publicised mantra: ‘where better could one be than in Saint-Pierre?’ (Ursulet, 1997: 34).

There were other important concerns at the time, too. People were preparing for Ascension Day, which marks the resurrection and rise of Jesus into heaven and the end of his terrestrial life.

More importantly still, there was an impending election which the government did not want to move – and did not want to lose. The new ‘Progressive Party’ – an uneasy liberal-conservative project: industry-led, pro-French colonisation but promising better wages – wanted to remain in control of the island and saw themselves rightfully threatened by the darker skinned Radical-Socialist Party (Burand, 2002; Ursulet, 1997). ‘Race War!’, as the newspaper *Les Colonies* proclaimed (Ursulet, 1997: 127). The Radical-Socialists had almost won the initial election, and the advantage of the Progressives was slim, especially as more voters were expected to move over to the Radicals from the unsuccessful

third candidate of the Socialist Worker Party (Ursulet, 1997: 130). As it happened, the re-election had been scheduled for 11 May 1902. Since the majority of residents were not able to vote or did not claim the right to vote – neither literacy nor property were as widespread – it was feared that, if those who had the resources to evacuate left the island, the socialists might win by an even larger margin.

Whichever was the cause – lack or dismissal of scientific knowledge, suppression or manipulation of information to push for the maintenance of white supremacy, religious fervour or fear of lacking the infrastructure for the town's evacuation – the result was that everyone was urged to stay put and to conduct business as usual: just brush away the 'dust', sit back and enjoy the 'fantastic spectacle offered by nature' (see Ursulet, 253).

In the end, the election did not take place, as all of the people in Saint-Pierre and surrounding area (apart from one entombed convict) were killed by a rolling cloud of hot gas. The Progressive candidate survived, too – he had evacuated himself and his family to a holiday home.

All through the artist's talk I waited and waited for any reference to this event, but there was nothing. Just recent images of the volcanic rock, historical images of the famous 'charismatic' volcanic spine that emerged and then self-destructed a few months after the eruption, and, if I remember correctly, an image of the artist's white feet planted somewhere on a geologic rift.

I was stunned. Especially given the role of whiteness in the disaster. After the talk, the reason the artist gave for the absence of any mention of the event was that the paper sought to decentre the human by presencing the nonhuman, the deep time of the volcanic rock. The artist admitted that she was aware of the event, but felt that it distracted from the intimacy with the geologic that she sought.

The artist's paper is, of course, not the only example of this strategy to 'decentre the human', which is why I have left her anonymous. Her work stands in for countless papers, artworks and public engagements that long to 'reconnect people with the Earth' while ignoring their situatedness at sites of colonial trauma. Such experiments are left with the problem that the overcoming of Western hierarchies and anthropocentrism is achieved by celebrating nonhuman creativity over unequal human benefits from it. It is further achieved by remaining blind to how the processes that render 'nonhumans' nonhuman are the same that render the majority of humans 'nonhuman', including generations of academics of colour whose work on the intersection between environment and race is believed to be irrelevant to the project of decentring the human. This 'methodological whiteness', as Gurinder K. Bhambra (2017) calls it, ironically ensures that attempts to privilege the nonhuman reaffirm existing human privileges: new materialism must remain white, to paraphrase Michelle Ty, in order to remain able to perform 'white guilt' (2017).

At this point, I wondered what Martinican theorists themselves would say about this strategy - theorists who themselves worked on the contestation of European philosophical, social and political hierarchies through what new materialists currently term the 'nonhuman'. Theorists such as Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Raphaël Confiant and many others who saw that it was not only the Martinican volcanoes, plantations and beaches, but also European concepts that were burning and making people go up in flames.

I had to think of Edouard Glissant's *La Lézarde*, his book from 1958, named after a river in Martinique. In this book, Glissant experiments with the blurring of boundaries between the natural and human world, what he will later term his *philosophy of relation*. Traces of both worlds permeate virtually every sentence, and it is never clear how events actually unfold and where the agency lies. For example, until the end of the book, the reader has no definite clues as to what happens to the main characters or who the main characters actually are. Is the troubled landowner in the novel killed by the poor black youth hired by middle class wannabe revolutionaries? Did the landowner's bad conscience drive him to suicide? Or was it the river itself that decided to take his life?

This incessant presence of the 'nonhuman' enables Glissant to contest the purity of human sociality and human agency. Further, he later continues to pursue a more realistic, if not brutal *aesthetics of the earth*, one that emphasises events such as drought, decay and epidemics (2010: 151). Given such a strong investment in decentring practices and 'natural realism', one could argue that Glissant might be sympathetic to the side-lining of human disaster: one could argue that the volcano, in fact, has equal rights to be discussed as human politics.

At the same time, the movement that Glissant performs comes from a different direction. For him, the problem is that much of Caribbean human history has already been relegated to the domain of 'natural events', such as the 1902 volcano eruptions. He describes this silencing by category shift as 'nonhistory'. Given that the other category is natural history, one could also hear it as 'nonhuman history'. The same sentiment is echoed by many other theorists working at the receiving end of colonialism who contest the naturalisation of black or indigenous people apart from white people, into, as Frantz Fanon calls it, a 'zone of nonbeing' (2008: 2).

So what does an image of Mount Pelée tell Glissant? To him, it represents natural and human memory. In his writings that reference the eruption, the landscape becomes witness to common cosmic origin, the shaping of the Earth, as well as the emergence and annihilation of humans. For Glissant, it is the land that knows about all of history, and it is people who choose not to see, who chose to remain, as he puts it, 'asleep' (2011: 88; see also Hurley, 2000: 261-2): asleep to the knowledge of the 'fire mountain' held by the island's prior inhabitants, asleep to the earth's warnings themselves.

The performance of dormancy remains popular.

Meanwhile, with the scorched sand and volcano as witness, Glissant sees a different picture of a Caribbean beach idyll than the 'sleepers':

'I see the mockery of the image, and I do not see it. I catch the quivering of this beach by surprise, this beach where visitors exclaim *how beautiful! how typical!* And I see that it is burning.' (2010: 205)

The 'aesthetic connection with the Earth' that Glissant pursues thus does not wish to de-emphasise human history - it asks for its expansion, an expansion of earthly history. Glissant dares us to 'risk the Earth' and delve into what (relations) it knows, so that neither people nor the planet remain collateral damage¹.

What would Suzanne Césaire say? A theorist who wrote mainly in the 1930s and 1940s, during which Martinique was under both colonial and fascist occupation, Césaire became dedicated to decentring hierarchies, again through the 'nonhuman'. In particular, Césaire addressed the problematic popularity of the 'human' and the desire of black assimilation into this category (2012:31). For her, the contemporary ideal of the human pursued an exclusionary logic that also leads to a purely economic relationship with the land and with all matter (2012: 42). This way of relating would continue to create misery for all humans, unless new, non-economic ways of relating can be found. Following this logic, one might think that Césaire would be sympathetic to a contemporary attempt to foreground an affective relation with a landscape, especially if this is done by a white person who tries to break out of their own ideology.

Landscape, for Suzanne Césaire, however, is not an innocent piece of matter with which you can build a primordial relation. For her, landscape is culturally produced, and so are our interactions with it. How people from outside Martinique react to her island and to other Caribbean geographies is a key example within her work. The emphasis on the Caribbean sublime, the natural beauty of the islands, obscures the other reality of the landscape as 'factory' – a factory of destructive agriculture and the production of the 'negro' (2012: 42). In this camouflaging of 'nonhuman' suffering, the stylisation of the exotic paradise through the import of flora and fauna from other colonised lands plays as much a part as existing landscape features.

For Césaire, landscape functions both a means of contestation and as a mirror. In the case of the colonisers, she diagnoses a refusal to see themselves/ourselves and how they/we are related to everything/everyone else, an act that would reposition them/us in relation to their/our ideology. By selectively aestheticizing, they/we refuse to be part of the Caribbean, despite making claims of ownership of the land. They/we can comfortably ignore even their/our own self-destruction and celebrate charismatic geological events.

¹ A great example of such earthly human history can be found in Vanessa Agard-Jones' 'What the Sands Remember' (2012).

Selective appreciation or outright denial of the landscape remains a privilege of power, one that was taken to an extreme in 1902: where better could one be than at the foot of a throbbing volcano? It is a privilege that is still being enacted in 2018: the climate change denial, the billionaires' island paradises, the privatised public land, the environmental racism - but it is also still performed by those who see the signs of danger, but choose to ignore the mirror nevertheless.

For Suzanne Césaire, listening to 'earthly spaces' that tell us about different ways of belonging and being-with and being part also means listening to, as she writes, "the hungers... fears, and... hatreds that burn in the hollows of the mountains" (2012: 45). Listening to those spaces does not distract from decentering the human, from building new relations - it gives additional force. It includes looking at 'charismatic geology' and asking: who wants and gets to make these images? Who is even legally barred from doing so?²

To risk the Earth – not to seek a 'back to the land' reunification, but to sensitise oneself to disruptions and connections – to enact them (Glissant, 2010: 151). There is a call for this in both Glissant's and Césaire's experiments, and I think it is an important one to consider in any attempts to decentre "the human" and foreground the "nonhuman".

For Edouard Glissant, the understanding of being(s) is central to his own attempts at category shifting. He describes a being as someone who 'risk[s] the being of the world, or being earth' (2010: 187). As a place of difference – geographical, economic, cultural et cetera – the earth is pushing against universal categories. To risk the being of the world is to think with this difference, to realise how it is produced and interlinked, and to make it complicate the places in which we find ourselves, to make it complicate ourselves. As Glissant put it: 'Act in the world, and the world goes along with you. Think with the world, and it unfolds from where you are' (2005: 36).

What does it mean for me to look at the site of a volcanic eruption in the Caribbean and think with the world? There are follow-up questions that Glissant provokes: What does it mean to theorise away a universal humanity that never was in 'affective' European and North American academic and artistic spaces? Why were particular geological sites chosen over others, and what is my actual 'earthly' relation with them? The latter question is particularly significant: to think with the world, and to risk the earth, is also to understand that relations 'comprehend violence' (Glissant, 2010: 188, 142) – a violence in which anyone is implicated but that is often merely wished away in contemporary attempts at relating differently. How distant am I really to the distant events – whether it is 300 million years ago into the past, 1492, 1651³ or 1902? Which one does the most work against the categories, boundaries and events that I am contesting?

² This is written at the time of severe and apparently legal xenophobic immigration restrictions in the UK, US and other European countries.

³ 1651 marks the mass suicide of the last remaining Caribs on Grenada by jumping off a cliff. Many rocks and places in the Caribbean are named after Carib suicides under colonialism such as Caribs' Leap and Sauteurs on Granada and Tombeau de Caraïbes on Martinique.

These are questions that Suzanne Césaire might have asked, too. Her surrealist search for the Marvellous was explicitly directed at such boundary work and at challenging her own socio-cultural formatting. When Suzanne Césaire looked at Mount Pelée, she saw much more than sublime beauty or danger. Rather, she found the Marvellous in the volcano's exposure of contradictions and subsequent impossibility of rationalising the existing order – an order that the volcano literally elected to explode (2012: 26, 38). If categories hadn't needed such lethal protection, 30,000 people – of all skin colours and classes – could have remained alive in Martinique on 8 May 1902.

To risk the earth: to open oneself to 'terrestrial madness' (Césaire, 2012: 39). The object swallows the subject and, in the process, puts it in its proper place. Against imperialist claims of 'blood and soil' and 'back to the land', Césaire proposes cannibalism - a practice much feared by white supremacy then and now, as it allows for alliances whose terms would not be dictated by the coloniser (2012: 27, 33). To risk the earth: to move beyond the landscape we have been taught to see and the categories in which we have been taught to think. To search for the cracks in the surface, to use the inanimate's disruptive refusals. To risk such disruptions becoming realised (see Glissant, 2010: 1).

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