Geopoetics: On organising, mourning, and the incalculable

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Abstract
In this commentary, I trace some of the earthy, mineral, and more-than-human properties of Magrane’s climate poems in order to emphasise the urgency of the geopoetics project. In particular, I consider Magrane’s use of constraint, de/composition, and juxtaposition as geopoetic techniques. In addition to challenging abstractions of climate change and enlivening critical and creative approaches for geography and the geohumanities, I propose that geopoetics may cultivate humility and participate in gestures of mourning. In closing, I suggest further questions for the grammar of geopoetics and geography in the midst of the current intersecting ecological, medical, economic and social crises.

Keywords
earth, energy, geography, geopoetics, language, materiality

At the 2019 American Association of Geographers (AAG) conference in Washington DC, I attended a session in which Eric Magrane performed several of his climate poems. It was an unseasonably hot April afternoon. Bodies worked their way into a tiny room at the Marriott hotel, squeezing into corners on the floor and sharing chairs. In this densely packed space, Magrane’s poems did something noticeable. They reorganised matter and energy. Despite the palpable conference fatigue, listeners leaned forward and laughed at the pigeon allegory in ‘Lots of trouble, lots of kin to be going on with’. Sore shoulders relaxed. Attention softened. There was an effect on time, too. As we heard of protesters and ‘the orange faced one’, bark beetles and island nations, minutes stretched and contracted. As one of the bodies in the room that day, I can testify that the climate poems caused ripples of feeling in the microcosm of that session. When fragments of the poems echoed in conversations later that evening, I realised the ripples had worked their way outward into the larger ecosystem of the AAG.

I start my commentary with this story because I want to underline several ways in which Magrane’s climate poems operate and do work within and beyond the page. When Magrane (2021) writes that ‘a poem is a reorganisation of matter’ and geopoetics ‘a compressed energy construct’, he does not mean this figuratively. Rather, the climate poems literally reorganise matter and energy for readers, for listeners, and for Magrane himself. This work of reorganisation necessarily extends to the earth...
resources, elemental processes, and nonhuman gestures that precipitate the arrangements of words in the poems as well as the air that mediates voice and the servers that store the poems as digital files. At times, in his article ‘Climate Geopoetics (The Earth is a Composed Poem)’, Magrane (2021) draws slightly back from the material-energetic potential of the poems, writing, ‘It’s unlikely that a poem can effect the change that would keep net global warming under 1.5 C’. Yet he playfully adds ‘although how could one trace this?’ (my emphasis). In this commentary, I want to trace some of the earthy, mineral, and more-than-human transformations generated in and by Magrane’s climate poems in order to emphasise the urgency of the geopoetics project. In closing, I turn briefly to compositions and decompositions of language to propose further questions for the grammar of geopoetics and geography.

In order to grasp the material and energetic qualities of Magrane’s climate poems, we need to start with their mode of production, how they come into the world. Magrane writes that his climate poems are responses to a specific ‘constraint’: ‘gather quotes on climate change by a variety of voices and respond to each of those quotes in poems’. Thus, a process of gathering precedes the writing of the poems and is crucial to the forms they ultimately take. Gathering is work; it involves searching, sifting, scanning, paging, clicking, and querying. It probably includes listing, relisting, editing, and crossing out. Matter and energy are rearranged in the gathering process, yet the point of this process is to create an orbit within which poems can emerge. In this way, somewhat paradoxically, greater freedom is achieved: ‘Constraints are both limiting and freeing, as they put boundaries around a project and also focus content into a form’. Not unlike building a small tower of wood on a beach to nourish a flame, it is through a process of identifying, selecting, and gathering that the climate poems gain their energetic potential.

Once this potential has been intensified and nurtured, which material properties emerge? For Magrane, materiality is epitomised in ‘minerals, fossils, plastic bags, the decayed remains of marine life powering our machines’. He then continues, ‘one way to understand a poem is as a reorganisation of matter’. How would a poem reorganise minerals, fossils, or plastic bags? The question may seem strange, but only, Magrane suggests, if we limit our notion of what geo-poems are. Indeed, in his previous work, Magrane (2015) has argued for a ‘geopoetics as geophilosophy’ in which large-scale earthworks and hydrological projects are geopoetic because they are earth-making devices. Over several years of engaging with Magrane’s work as a fellow geohumanities scholar, I have always wanted to know more about the operative scale of ‘geopoetics as geophilosophy’ and what counts as earth-making in this equation. And as a creature of the air, I have also wondered: are aerial infrastructures or entities geopoetic? These questions notwithstanding, in Magrane’s climate poems, ‘geopoetics as geophilosophy’ is summoned in the lines: ‘the earth is a composted poem/art interspecies material practice’. There is much to think and work with here. If the earth is a composted earth, then poems are composted earth. In this sense, a poem can reorganise minerals, fossils, and plastic bags because it is already a compost of these earthy, geological, and petrol-derived materials. Lest we make the error of assuming the poet is an omniscient earth-scribe, the next line – ‘art interspecies material practice’ – describes the distributed act of composing and composting poetry. This is not the work of an all-seeing human. Rather it is the work of ‘microbial flora’ and ‘microbial collaboration’ with some human input along the way.

Key to the climate poems are tactics of juxtaposition: ‘water surges over Staten Island/the Rockaways, New Orleans/Barhadesh, water seeps into/and up through the porous ground of Miami/good luck getting insurance’. In these lines, Magrane employs the word ‘water’ like an interstice or a hinge that enables a form of contact between disparate geographies. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the term ‘juxtaposition’ referred to composite crystals: two or more crystals joined along a plane (OED, 1989). Magrane’s climate poems join images together so that their intersecting facets and interior logics are reflected and illuminated. I do not use the crystal image entirely metaphorically either: these poems bio- and geo-mineralise in the fibres of inked
pages and in the liquid crystals of computer and mobile phone screens. These mineralisations have consequences. As Magrane writes, ‘The juxtapositions that can happen in a poem may dislocate routinized patterns of categorisation or thought’. Therefore, the effect of juxtaposition is not only one of drawing together but also of disrupting codes and constructs that separate, for example, Olafur Eliasson from the Great Acceleration or Science from Prophecy. In other words, what happens in the interstices of the climate poems queries the epistemological bifurcations that mark post-Enlightenment thinking and that have led to a situation, in the exacting words of Denise Ferreira da Silva, in which the ‘accumulation of atmospheric gases’ expresses ‘the extent of expropriation and the intensity of the concentration of expropriated internal (kinetic) energy of lands and labour facilitated by coloniality and raciality’ (Ferreira da Silva, 2018: n.p.). In resonance with Magrane, Ferreira da Silva does not figure histories of colonialism, racism, and climate change along an arrow of time but instead as a series of material ‘phase transitions’ (Ferreira da Silva, 2018).

Attending to the mineral and material qualities of the climate poems helps to foreground the urgency of the geopoetics project. Let us consider, then, what the geopoetics project entails. Magrane writes that geopoetics can help us to find ‘new and creative ways to approach, understand, represent and to trouble climate change’ and that ‘a climate geopoetics may help re-situate some of the ways that climate change is approached’. In a disciplinary vein, geopoetics can ‘enliven both the geo and the poetic, in turn opening up human geography to... alternative ways of making worlds’. While I agree with Magrane about the importance of challenging climate representations and abstractions, and while I also affirm that geopoetics plays a vital role in marshalling critical and creative energies for geography and the geohumanities, I feel there are other issues at stake, too. For, a geopoetics practice borne of the slow processes of gathering materials, harnessing energy, and forging juxtapositions is a practice that engages the incalculable and the unknowable just as much as the earth under one’s feet and the microbes in one’s gut. In other words, in the earth-writing that is geopoetics, many things elude even an interspecies collaboration. To use an aero-poetic conceit: just as the flying of kites is a technique via which grounded beings can extend their awareness into the elements while never fully grasping the uncontainable wind and the errant flight of birds (Revel, 2008), geopoetic practices may help us to reach into new spaces of feeling and knowing while impressing on us a sense of humility towards what we don’t know. To recognise humility as central to geopoetics is to practice what Astrida Neimanis, after Gayatri Spivak, calls ‘knowing-with or knowing-alongside’ as a corrective to ‘a colonial drive to mastery’ (Neimanis, 2013: 103). For a climate geopoetics, this would mean being accountable to what we know, and ‘what we know sufficiently’ about climate change, while cultivating our capacities to respond to ‘what cannot be fully known or controlled’ (Neimanis, 2013: 103). As a practice that problematises the hubris in terms like ‘ultimate drivers’ (Steffen cited in Magrane, 2021), geopoetics is uniquely placed to cultivate humility in the face of the incalculable.

If it can aid us in facing the unknowable dimensions of climate change, might geopoetics help us to register and honour what has and will be lost? My second point about the significance of the geopoetics project draws from Karen Barad whose work is key to the entanglements of matter and meaning discussed in this commentary and rife in Magrane’s article. Through a close reading of Kyoko Hayashi’s semi-autobiographical novel, *From Trinity to Trinity*, about a Nagasaki bomb survivor who journeys to the Trinity Test Site in New Mexico where the first atomic weapon was detonated in 1945, Barad urges us to consider ‘the work of re-turning – turning it over and over again – decomposition, composting, turning over the humus, undoing the notion of the human founded on the poisoned soil of human exceptionalism’ (Barad, 2017: 86). In many ways, these lines echo Magrane’s own. However, Barad’s use of de/composition is more specifically about gestures of mourning, or, our ‘responsibility to the dead, to the ghosts of the past and the future’ (Barad, 2017: 86). Is there a place for mourning in geopoetics? Is there a geopoetics that responds to the ‘ghosts of past and the future’ by crafting rituals of turning-over the soil?
This is an earth-making as un-earthing, and a check on claims to novelty. Crucially, and as scholars like Christina Sharpe (2017) and Vanessa Agard-Jones (2012) elaborate, it is a geopoetics that recognises soils, sands, and oceans as archives of trauma and suffering whose properties exceed forensic analysis or elemental classification.

My aim in this commentary is to take the climate poems as ‘hybrid forms’ in which the placement of words is inseparable from geomaterial processes, politics, and events (e.g. Berrigan, 2018) and in which semiosis is a more-than-human affair (e.g. Kohn, 2013). Keeping with the miscibility of matter and meaning, I want to conclude with some notes on the grammar of geopoetics in the midst of the decades-old climate crisis, the novel coronavirus crisis, and the ongoing socio-economic and racial crises that are, as I write this, precipitating the reorganisation of matter and energy from Minneapolis to Auckland to Paris. For some commentators, ‘The language we have at the moment is weak’ (Hildyard, 2017: 25); we need to move beyond the vagueness of the ‘globe’ or ideas of ‘connection’ towards a more visceral and embodied language. For others, including Magrane, a language that is adequate to the urgencies of the present requires acts of ‘pushing and building’ so that ‘there is something of a deformation of existing forms’ (Magrane, 2020; see also de Leeuw and Magrane, 2019). As I watch Killer Mike speak from behind a podium on CBS News, weaving together eulogy, plea, spoken word verse, and prayer while Atlanta burns, I notice the rage he skilfully and tearfully wields as he repeats: ‘plot, plan, strategise, organise and mobilise’ (Killer Mike, 2020: n.p.). He makes a hinge, or perhaps a constraint, within which his inexhaustible anger may be felt, and yet simultaneously directed towards the work of peace-making and organising. Even under great duress, he speaks with the rhythm of a poet and lyricist. How many fires were not lit because of Killer Mike’s speech? How many bodies gathered together in sitting rooms and bedrooms, how many went peacefully to the streets? From the depths of trauma and despair, Killer Mike’s address reaffirms the possibility of world-making and community-making poetics. His words give another meaning to the poem as a material-reorganisation device.

What does this moment ask of us as humans? What might it mean for the grammar of geopoetics and geography? I ask these questions together because they are co-implicated. This moment, entangled with many that came before, should remind us of the stakes in our work as critical geographers and geopoets, stakes in living through and despite these times. It should make us ever more perceptive of what Toni Morrison called ‘the proud but calcified language of the academy ... the commodity driven language of science’ (1993: n.p.). As Magrane shows, there are powerful ways to write de-calcified – microbial, interspecies, and humic – prose and poetry, and to publish it in leading disciplinary journals, books-as-field-guides and artistic venues alike. This moment may challenge us to not only get better at prioritising and expressing feeling in our writing, gathering, and organising, but also to do so with greater acuity, or as Magrane writes, ‘[striking] at all of these tones and emotional registers’. For all of these reasons, the radical moment that Killer Mike urges us to face and ‘get ahead of’ is an earth-shaking moment that compels an earth-making, or geopoetic, response.

At the same time, this moment once again proves, in the words of Toni Morrison (1993: n.p.), that ‘Language can never “pin down” acts of violence, terror, or environmental injustice, ’Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable’.

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