

Author: Dr Angela Last (angela.last@glasgow.ac.uk)

Paper presented as part of the session 'Postcolonial geographies, political ontology and posthumanism', 28 August 2014, RGS-IBG Annual Conference, London, UK. Paper title: 'Fruit of the cyclone: A Caribbean proposal on how to deal with the nonhuman in postcolonial geography'

INTRO

So, this session has asked: 'Is postcolonialism commensurable with political ontology? My paper is coming from a somewhat other direction to answer the question this session is posing. It asks: what can postcolonial conceptualisations of the nonhuman and of material relations contribute to the currently hegemonic ones coming from sciences studies etc. The paper emerges from my own journey from science and technology studies into postcolonial literature. Although I could appreciate what some of the STS writers were doing – and I am lumping quite a few people in there including Latour, Stengers, Haraway, Barad - I always felt that something was missing in such conceptualisations of the nonhuman and of relations. There are basically two directions I turned to: interwar materialisms and recent French Caribbean literature that explicitly engaged with the material relations of colonisation. – Here I agree with Pat Noxolo that literature hasn't been used enough in postcolonial discourse and that just a very limited number of postcolonial theorists are being drawn upon - These writers, I felt, had a better sense of the power and violence of relations that encompass both the human and the nonhuman. In fact, many of the authors show a clear bemusement at European tendencies of conceptualising material relations without strong attention to power dynamics.

For me, someone who brings together some of these themes of the debate is the Guadeloupean author Daniel Maximin. He is not very well known in the English-speaking world – especially as his work hasn't really been translated and is pretty intranslatable because of his reliance on word plays, including anagrams. He is still alive – just toured round French departments in the US – and he could be described as a feminist author with an ironic sensitivity to relations between human and natural history. He grew up between Guadeloupe and Paris, and started off his writing career with an attempt to rewrite the history of Guadeloupe, in a way that might make it less appropriable. While Maximin is often portrayed more as a diplomat between different Caribbean writers, especially the French Caribbean ones, such as Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Édouard Glissant and Maryse Condé, and their respective positions, he has also developed his own take on materiality, especially on relations between human and natural history.

In this paper I will be drawing on four of his books, a trilogy of novels and recent a nonfiction book called 'Fruits des Cyclones'/Fruit of the Cyclones (2006) that synthesises and extends the main themes of these novels.

The first novel, *L'isolé soleil* (1981), which has been translated as 'Lone Sun', is the one that is most strongly focused on rewriting the history of Guadeloupe. The following two novels, *Soufrières* (1987) and *L'île et une nuit* (1995), shift the focus to the role of natural disasters in the history of the Caribbean. *Soufrière* deals with the 1976 evacuation for the anticipated outbreak of La Grande Soufrière volcano on Guadeloupe (some people might know the Werner Herzog film about this – it's free online – happy to send the link to anyone) and *L'île et une nuit* narrates one night of cyclone (and cyclone related human) activity.

In his texts, Maximin proposes that coming to terms with the nonhuman – or inhuman, as he frames it, and by this he especially means the natural disasters in the Caribbean – is an integral part of the decolonialisation process and involves decolonialising the coloniser, too. I am going to get to this via two satirical critiques that he makes of European (as he calls it) discourse on the nonhuman.

1 – The nonhuman is a recent European concept

A strong focus of Maximin's satire is the European (I'm sticking with Maximin's term here – I guess you could argue that the US is still run like a European colony in many ways, looking at their prison population) and the European relation to the nonhuman. In a staged dialogue between Guadeloupean officials and French scientists, for instance, he makes both parties enact entrenched stereotypes about risk perceptions in the North and South, while drawing out the utilisation of risk for continued domination.

'Certainly not, the officer replied quickly, it would be better for everyone if she [the volcano] gave birth to something more... substantial. You have to understand, dear Professor, that nuclear fear does not concern us here, as elsewhere throughout the Third World – it is a luxury anxiety for Westerners. As for the hunger in the world, they have always escaped it, even in times of slavery. Luckily, two centuries of faithful cyclones and erratic eruptions have managed to put a bit of anxiety in the heart of these Antilleans who are good at hiding their dynamism and their serenity under the mask of carefree fatalism. Thanks to our abilities – and those of the volcano – we have the most beautiful opportunity to show off our capacity to control this situation and thus to ensure our legitimacy, as long as the noise of the eruption resonates in their ears. The instructions from Paris are very clear in this respect: the eruption must only cause a single death – that of 'the idea of independence'!

Here, the volcano and its agency appear as the partner of the European who profits from on-going natural havoc. 'Of course nature has agency, and we can make it work in our favour.' The people in the Caribbean cannot but choose their

dependency: either be victim to the volcano or victim to imposed French policies. This is also expressed in Maximin's staged conversation between a local communist politician, who rants against the on-going French occupation, and an old lady in the audience. The politician says:

'One can only be outraged that the colonial powers, who from 1635 until today have never cared to organise life in this region based on its geophysical make-up.'

And the old lady interrupts him by saying:

'Quite the opposite, actually. They haven't done anything but, ... and, to our great luck, as my father used to say, they haven't always succeeded.'

So-called post-colonial life continues to be shaped by external utilisation of geography, and infrastructures around it, in detrimental ways. In this way, the nonhuman is a European concept.

2 - The nonhuman is not a European concept

A further element of Maximin's satire is the reversal of this framing, which could be described as: at last, the nonhuman has made it into the European awareness! After spending centuries in a state of oblivion about anyone and anything else but themselves, there is finally an acknowledgement of the possibility and validity of an other - other than as a resource or insult.

In the Caribbean, Maximin argues, nature is neither a backdrop nor an ornament, but 'a central figure in its history' (2006: 81). Whether it is

- the nature that showed the slaves that it is significantly mightier than the European military;
- the nature that, in destroying both oppressor and oppressed, taught slaves the value of the universal equality of man – and woman;
- the nature that withdrew its symbolic support, by not exploding or flooding at the right time, thus teaching slaves that it is not interested in enacting 'terrorism by proxy' or at the service of humanity in general;
- or the nature that, through its cyclical and erratic cataclysms, showed the slaves the fragility of human history.

Slide: 'What does this earth fire signify? Neither the fire of the falling sky of divine punishment nor the maternal deluge to wash away the sins of the world. Even fatalism has at least the need of a regular rhythm to justify catastrophes. The

cyclones know it, true to their August-September season every three years. But what does this magma tell us that takes twenty years, three centuries or twenty thousand years to point to the last encounter, the time it takes for the island to forget that it is inevitable?’ (Daniel Maximin, Soufrières, 1987: 11)

These clear messages were evidently lost on the Europeans, who preferred to believe in superiority, inequality, their ability to dominate nature and the eternal glory of their history.

Long before Bruno Latour noticed ozone holes and viruses in his daily paper in the early 1990s, the people in the Caribbean were aware of the social presence of nature and the human drama it creates.

Although, things may be changing: Using examples of contemporary evacuations or lock-ins, Maximin carefully follows the social climbing of volcanoes and hurricanes across radio, television and neighbourhood chatter. At the same time, however, the European processing of extreme natural events increasingly prevents people in the Caribbean from accessing the wisdom acquired at the receiving end of nature’s inhumanity.

‘Today, when it was programmed, announced, christened at its birth, followed until its end, the cyclone was only left to invade an island that was exposed in its geography, abandoned as much as possible by an all too fragile humanity, leaving emptied streets and boarded up homes. Enclosed in the blindness of the lone waves of the radio masters, people could not hear any more the messages hidden in the roar of wind’ (Maximin, 1995: 73-74).

Confronted with on-going epistemic violence, Maximin proposes the only possible strategy in the face of on-going colonisation: the coloniser itself must be decolonised. This is not necessarily a new strategy, but one, so Maximin, that has not yet made enough use of the link between nonhuman and the inhuman.

3 – Europe and its concept of the nonhuman need to be decolonised by the people of the Caribbean

For Maximin, the Caribbean is a relatively isolated site comprised of an uneven amalgamation of four continents, as well as four natural disasters that affect everyone on the archipelago. The daily life and events on each of the islands are affected by these forces across humans and nonhumans. Humans become not merely onlookers or users of nature, but, like animals, plants, rocks, emerge as a ‘fruit’ of geophysical forces. But identity is not only a fruit of nonhuman, but also inter-human inhumanity. In negotiating these two influences, their connection becomes clearer: common exploitation, common vulnerability, common terror, in

short, a common materialisation in the service of those who are ostensibly beyond matter and its limitations.

At the same time, this kind of identity perhaps allows one a certain resistance to colonisation – consciously embraced, identifying as a fruit of geophysical forces – a fusion of subject and object - might fall so much out of the accepted system that it can never be othered or appropriated (see also Allewaert, 2013: 138). Here, Maximin’s fruit of the cyclone shares similarities with Monique Allewaert’s parahuman who, in consciously embracing the nonhuman as part of their identity, rejects passive dehumanisation. Both Maximin and Allewaert stress the material dimension of colonisation and decolonisation and especially the body’s role – every body’s role - in negotiating the particularities of human-nonhuman assemblages. In Maximin’s, words, for the YOU, the other, to embrace and become the WE, one first has to decolonise one’s body.

So, in response to the session’s main question, whether ‘postcolonialism is commensurable with political ontology’, I have tried to show how there are examples already within postcolonial writing that answer in the affirmative – and I am sure there are more such examples.

Moreover, these conceptualisations of political ontology, for me at least, address a lack of many hegemonic materialisms that fail to deal with power dynamics and with the violence inherent in any type of assemblage. With this, they confront the spectre of dehumanisation that has always haunted violent human relations, and try to build and disseminate strategies of resistance through embracing the material. These strategies are a call towards building a new WE – not through a levelling of differences through materialisation, but by way of creating a particular kind of difference. This difference is based on the recognition that one needs to interfere in the inevitable materialisation of oneself and of others, and it requires the construction of more-than-human assemblages that jam or otherwise interfere with the system. And the exploration of this construction has to start with oneself.

--

Slide : [explain]

Je ne pourrai aimer que quant j’aurai aussi décolonisé mon corps.

je,
tu,
île,
aile,

Il faut faire avec ce que l’on EST.
(Maximin, XXXX : 98)