



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Beyond geopoetics: For hybrid texts

Citation for published version:

Cresswell, T 2021, 'Beyond geopoetics: For hybrid texts', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, pp. 204382062098639. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620986399>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/2043820620986399](https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620986399)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Dialogues in Human Geography

Publisher Rights Statement:

The Author(s) 2021

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Beyond geopoetics: For hybrid texts

Tim Cresswell

University of Edinburgh, UK

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–4

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/2043820620986399

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Abstract

This commentary responds to Eric Magrane’s welcome focus on the possibilities of ‘climate geopoetics’ as a way of accessing and thinking environmental crisis differently. It explores the problem of approaching the general through the particular and the affordances that poetry provides in making this leap. In addition, it questions the particular veneration of the poet and poem and, building on the experiments of both poets and academics, argues for the embrace of hybrid forms that transcends the poetry/non-poetry divide.

Keywords

Anthropocene, climate change, geopoetics, hybrid texts, writing

A question at the heart of Magrane’s (2020) argument for ‘climate geopoetics’ is how we might respond to such extraordinary times (even more extraordinary now, than when he wrote it). He invites us to consider the potential of what he calls ‘climate geopoetics’ in our understanding of the climate emergency we are in the midst of. As a geographer and poet, I am not in need of convincing here. Poetry, as normally conceived, certainly reaches parts of our make up that academic prose, as normally conceived, often fails to do.

Magrane points towards a number of productive differences between the normal practice of (most) poetry and the normal practice of (most) academic geography. He focuses on the binary of the abstract and the particular. Poetry, he suggests, following William Carlos Williams, rests on the idea that there are ‘no ideas but in things’ (Williams, 1963). Poetry’s strength, it is commonly asserted, is in the power of noticing. And noticing means focusing on the particular. As climate is an abstraction, and

climate change is an abstraction of an abstraction, the question is whether poetry can engage them successfully. Of course, not all poets necessarily agree with Williams and his urging was very much related to a particular mode of objectivism in poetry in the early 20th century – a poetry of nouns. Meta-physical poets in the 16th and 17th centuries such as John Donne embraced abstraction and its relation to philosophical inquiry. T.S. Eliot certainly did not fear the abstract in *The Four Quartets* (Eliot, 2001). Poets have struggled with ways to approach abstraction as much as anyone.

It is the relation between the particular (often very specific ‘things’) and the abstraction that is key here. Timothy Morton has referred to climate, and climate change, as

Corresponding author:

Tim Cresswell, School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh,
1 Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, UK.

Email: tim.cresswell@ed.ac.uk

'hyperobjects' – not so much abstractions as special kinds of 'thing' whose bounds exceed our ability to comprehend them. Hyperobjects, 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans' (Morton, 2013: 1) have a number of characteristics, one of which is that they are nonlocal – 'any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject' (Morton, 2013: 1). The bleaching of a coral off the coast of Australia is not 'global warming'. A problem for anyone attempting to approach something as massively distributed as environmental calamity in all its forms is this inability to comprehend.

Another, perhaps more productive, angle on the problem of the abstract and the particular is Anna Tsing's (2005) account of 'friction'. At the heart of her book is the recognition that really big things, hyperobjects perhaps, only take form as relatively small things. In other words, universals (such as truth, science, capital etc.) need to find purchase in the particular in order to exist. They happen in places. In some senses, there is only the particular. Perhaps it is through this friction that we can get a purchase on something as big as global warming or environmental degradation in general. Magrane is telling us that climate geopoetics can help us here. He shows us this through his poetry, where the hyperobject becomes grounded as 'dark beetles/chomp down forests' and the narrator clicks a button on his MacBook Air. The poet's quality of attention, of noticing, can help us to grasp something of the general from the particular – to see, as William Blake put it, 'a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour'.¹

I want to resist a certain kind of mobilization of poetry as a valorized form here and gesture towards the possibilities of a promiscuous version of hybrid geopoetics that does not venerate the specific form of 'the poem'. The poet and the poem, Magrane tells us, 'resists the solidification of a liberal humanist individuality'. This would be news to William Wordsworth or any of the host of other 'nature poets' that have formed the basis for widely received visions of the romantic poet, alone, walking through the wilderness, or holed up in a Paris attic. Poetry can reasonably be said to have played a

key role in the invention of the liberal humanist individual – or, what Kathleen Jamie has called, in a slightly different context, 'the lone enraptured male'. 'Who is that coming over the hill?' she writes, 'A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go, "discovering," then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words' (Jamie, 2008). It was a poet, after all, who wrote 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;/The proper study of mankind is man' (Pope, 1970 [1734]: 65). You would be hard pressed to come up with a more stereotypical liberal humanist individual than the figure of the poet.

This vision of the poet and the poem begins to break down in the playful hybridity of the experiments of both contemporary poets and non-poets. The specific utility of climate geopoetics, according to Magrane, is to embrace 'play and experimentation', juxtaposition and compression in ways that academic text (normally conceived) does not. While it seems that poetry and academic writing (particularly what might normally be called social scientific writing) are often at opposite ends of a spectrum, it is not just geographer-poets who are finding new ways to write the world – to embrace play and experimentation. Academic writing, or certain parts of the academic writing machinery, have been frequently mobilized by poets who have at best ambivalent relationships to the idea of the liberal humanist individual. The American poet, Susan Howe, for instance, combines research and poetry in her work, frequently making creative use of paratextual elements. In her book, *Pierce-Arrow*, for instance, she explores the life and thought of philosopher Charles S. Peirce combining what looks like lyric poetry with fragments of marginalia from Peirce's archive (Howe, 1999). Claudia Rankine's book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, is composed of passages of text ranging from single lines to short essay-like structures along with images (Rankine, 2014). Combined, it forms a single poem that addresses race, racism, and microaggression. Maggie Nelson's book, *The Argonauts*, defies categorization all together. It is composed of separate short paragraphs that often nod towards prose-poetry in order to explore questions of motherhood, gender,

and queer sexuality (Nelson, 2015). Quotes appear within paragraphs in italics while the origins of those quotes (the authors' names) appear in the marginal space beside the quote as a kind of spatially rearranged footnote (sidenote?). It is not exactly academic referencing, but certainly gestures towards it both conceptually and spatially. The question of whether or not it is poetry ceases to be interesting. It is hybrid in intent and form. Closer to the thematic specificities of climate geopoetics is the work of Juliana Spahr in her collection, *well then there now*, in which she combines eight passages that are clearly poetry (you can tell by the way they appear spatially) and passages which might best be described as essays (Spahr, 2011). Each section or passage is given specific co-ordinates which locate the text, but each is promiscuous in the way they reach out in time and space to designate the connectedness of ecologies. In one passage of prose at the end of a poem, she writes about her distaste for the term 'nature poetry' in the face of ecological disasters and their impact on, and locatedness in, Hawai'i. She turns instead to 'ecopoetics': 'a poetics full of systematic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture' (Spahr, 2011: 71). It is telling that, for Spahr, her ecopoetics (and ecopoetics in general) is involved in 'systematic analysis'. This is not a term often associated with the specific work that poetry does. The way she defines her task of ecopoetics might equally have been a definition for geography, or human geography, or cultural geography.

While poets have been busy enfolding the poetics of the academic page into their work, academics have been working in the other direction. There is something of a blossoming of geographers who are also poets at the moment, and most of them are mentioned by Magrane (Acker, 2018; Cresswell, 2013, 2015, 2020; de Leeuw, 2012, 2015, 2019; Magrane and Cokinos, 2016). There is also some history here – notably the work of John Wreford Watson (1950) and Jay Appleton (2009). A range of work in and on geopoetics can be found in a recent edited collection edited by Magrane and others (Magrane et al., 2020). But we don't have to look only to text clearly marked as poetry to see the work of poetics, eco or otherwise. Even at the level of the

sentence – a level that the specific art of poetry attunes us to, and which academic writing (as normally conceived) appears willfully ignorant of – we can see how academic writing and poetics are flirting. This appears to be particularly true in the space where ecopoetics meets feminism. Consider these lines by Astrida Neimanis as she explores the ecofeminist potential of the ecotone where land meets water:

Eco: home. Tone: tension. We must learn to be at home in the quivering tension of the in-between. No other home is available. In-between nature and culture, in between biology and philosophy, in-between the human and everything we ram ourselves up against, everything we desperately shield ourselves from, everything we throw ourselves into, wrecked and recklessly, watching, amazed, as our skins become thinner . . . (Neimanis, 2012: 93–94)

Read these lines aloud. It will add pleasure to thought. The sentences have rhythm. They use repetition. There is an alternation of short sentences and a long one. It is rhetorically structured in sets of three – three in-betweens and three everything's. 'Wrecked' works cleverly with 'recklessly'. It does not matter that there are no linebreaks to signify the presence of a poem. It is clearly eco (and geo) poetic.

Beyond the level of the sentence, we can look at the work of anthropologist Anna Tsing's (2015) book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, which knowingly plays with form in her exploration of the various lives of the Matsutake mushroom and what it/they tell us about Anthropocene life. Tsing joins with others in producing *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* in which the editors proclaim that 'Creative writing invites us to imagine the world differently, to listen beyond newspaper headlines to hear those quiet stories about the Anthropocene whispered in small encounters' (Tsing et al., 2017: M8–M9). Similar explorations in world-making and exploring through writing can be seen in the work of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart and literary scholar Lauren Berlant in a series of short essays limited by the constraint that they be exactly 100 words long (Berlant and Stewart, 2019). These texts are

knowingly ‘creative’ and in some sense ‘hybrid’. They challenge the conventions of both ‘poetry’ and ‘academic writing’, and it is in this hybridity that I see an emergent ‘geopoetics’ that provides new opportunities to grasp the hyperobject of climate change as well as other similarly ungraspable things.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. Auguries of Innocence. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>

References

- Acker M (2018) On not traveling up Tod Inlet (SNITÇEL). *GeoHumanities* 4(1): 220–229.
- Appleton J (2009) *A Love Affair with Landscape: Poems*. Teddington: Wildhern Press.
- Berlant LG and Stewart K (2019) *The Hundreds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cresswell T (2013) *Soil*. London: Penned in the Margins.
- Cresswell T (2015) *Fence*. London: Penned in the Margins.
- Cresswell T (2020) *Plastiglomerate*. London: Penned in the Margins.
- de Leeuw S (2012) *Geographies of a Lover*. Edmonton: NeWest Press.
- de Leeuw S (2015) *Skeena*. Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press.
- de Leeuw S (2019) *Outside, America*. Vancouver: Nightwood Editions.
- Eliot TS (2001) *Four Quartets*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Howe S (1999) *Pierce-Arrow*. New York, NY: New Directions.
- Jamie K (2008) *A Lone Enraptured Male*. London: London Review of Books, pp. 25–27.
- Magrane E (2020) Climate geopoetics (the earth is a composted poem). *Dialogues in Human Geography* X(X): X–X.
- Magrane E and Cokinos C (2016) *The Sonoran Desert: A Literary Field Guide*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Magrane E, de Leeuw S, Russo L, et al. Eds. (2020) *Geopoetics in Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Morton T (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Neimanis A (2012) Hydrofeminism: or, on becoming a body of water. In: Gunkel H, Nigianni C and Söderbäck F (eds) *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 85–99.
- Nelson M (2015) *The Argonauts*. Seattle: Wave Books.
- Pope A (1970 [1734]) *Selected Poems of Alexander Pope, Edited with an Introduction and Commentary by John Heath-Stubbs*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Rankine C (2014) *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press.
- Spahr J (2011) *Well Then There Now*. Boston: David R. Godine.
- Tsing AL (2005) *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tsing AL (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tsing AL, Swanson H, Gan E, et al. (eds) (2017) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Watson JW (1950) *Of Time and the Lover*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- Williams WC (1963) *Paterson*. New York, NY: New Directions.