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Dismay, Disassembly and Geocide: Ways Through the Maze of Trumpist Geopolitics

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Abstract Written in the still-unfolding aftermath of Donald Trump’s accession to the office of President of the United States, this article picks up and expands upon some of the key points raised by Kyle McGee’s *Heathen Earth*, particularly concerning the forms of political violence emergent in an age ever-increasingly defined by climate change and the strategies of analysis, theorisation and critique that these geohistorical developments demand. Much like McGee’s book, it takes a particularly troubling contemporary political event as a spur to develop thoughts deriving from more long-term projects concerning the way we have come to divide up the world and the manner in which these divisions are contested.

Keywords Climate · Geodesy · Geopolitics · Theodicy · Trump

The Aftermath of Indeterminacy

It is a simple truth that bears repeating: the election of Donald Trump was not inevitable. Hillary Clinton may have been up against engrained sexism, amplified by her opponent’s unashamed misogyny. She may have been hampered by Russian hackers and hamstrung by the various sleazy buffoons sauntering beside her at the dynastic apex of the Democratic Party. A million and one things could have worked out differently in those last few weeks and tipped the Electoral College the way of the popular vote, putting all our narratives about ‘the last gasp of neoliberalism’ (West 2016) on their heads (or back on their feet). But that is the thing about tipping points: once they have tipped, none of that erstwhile contingency makes a damned bit of difference. The formula failed (and only centrists could not see it coming): the

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economic *status quo* plus incremental social reforms plus glossy celebrity endorsements—a misapprehension of the moment that will echo down the ages. The endless op-eds that had it pinned as her election to lose not only underestimated Trump’s charisma, they overestimated Clinton’s competence.

However, if this moment has something of the tipping point about it, it also has something of the logical conclusion. For all his gurning, guffawing man-child idiocy, Trump was not born yesterday and neither was Trumpism. His story follows on from that of the Tea Party since 2009, from that of the Republican Party since Nixon and, indeed, from US history going back several hundred years. However, we should be careful of lurching too quickly to overarching conditions. Remember, we were told it would not happen, could not happen. Mitt Romney’s defeat in 2012 was supposed to be the end of an epoch, a last hurrah. It was no longer possible to win on an old-fashioned right-white ticket. Inexorable structural forces were rolling over the horizon, much to the delight of everyone reassured by them. Demography had spoken and would only speak louder in four years’ time. Hispanics were the coming electoral ‘superpower’ (Rajan 2012). The black/white lines of WASP¹ ethnonationalism would now become so much grainy, monochrome stock footage. Republicans would have to moderate, accommodate, reach out. What could one do but sit back, relax and marvel at the march of progress?

Trump and co. (let us give them their due) blew this smug liberal complacency to smithereens and then held a rally on the dying embers. Republicans had not become Republican enough. Double down, then again and then double down some more.² The only way out is through. Well, hadn’t malcontents left, right and centre been crying out for a ‘conviction politician,’ for someone who ‘says what he means’? No doubt, they got a man who says what he wants. To what extent he can be considered a ‘politician’ and to what extent much of what he says can be said to have ‘meaning’ is another matter (Conway 2017). Disassembly becomes a way of life—both in the sense of the dismantling of an assembly and in the sense of feigning, evading and distracting. Is Trump a devious genius who plays the public sphere like a fiddle or an uncomprehending clown whose pathologically entitled bumbling functions ‘as if’ it were an intelligible strategy due to the sheer force of inherited privilege and presumed authority from which it issues? The two are perhaps not mutually exclusive. How, then, to parse meaning from the wilfully meaningless? How to resist disassembly?

Nailing Jelly to a Wall

I write this from the west coast of Wales, looking out at the Irish Sea—a long way from anywhere that Donald J. Trump would be given the time of day, Brexit or no Brexit. Being a white European who has never set foot on American soil (north or south) but who is as knitted and knotted to the Anglophone mediascape as anyone, I

¹ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

² In the card game, Blackjack, doubling down means doubling one’s initial bet, requiring an additional card to be drawn. It is a term widely used to indicate a strategy of embracing risk, whether through conviction or recklessness.

must confess that I first felt like I understood the burning core of the Trump phenomenon when I watched D.W. Griffith's notorious 1915 cinematic epic *The Birth of a Nation*.³ Lily-livered white Congressmen are co-opted by treacherous, lecherous blacks—but here comes the Ku Klux Klan, riding in to save the day in all their arms-bearing glory! This was the first US blockbuster. In the presence of Woodrow Wilson, it was the first film to be screened at the White House (Ambrosius 2007). Indeed, the film quotes from the 28th President's own historical writings: 'The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation ... until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country'. So wrote the still-venerated peacemaker. That Wilson's legacy has enjoyed persistent apologism in the United States and beyond surely goes without saying.

Nothing new, then—and nothing all that distant. The blinking, sheltered naïfs who 'don't recognise their country anymore' have been justly ridiculed. What is it that makes memories so short? Even Bush 43⁴ has begun to rehabilitate himself as the wise old statesman—he whose almost unprecedented unpopularity made nightly mockery a mass entertainment phenomenon. Now these slickly suited juggernauts of satire rattle through their repertoires night after night, shredding the latest virulent Trumpeme in a vibrant plume of live bands and celebrity interviews. Oh, for the days when facts were facts—when bi-coastal common sense could ignore the inconvenient post-truth.

Nostalgia makes us stupid. Whether thought along the lines of the 'tipping point' or the 'logical conclusion', we are faced with nothing truly unprecedented. After all, if Obama et al. had not built such impressive planet-straddling platforms of digital surveillance and drone violence, would the unabashedly fascist *éminences grises* lurking behind the car-crash charisma of their figurehead-leader have quite such leering menace? However, we should also resist the cynicism of 'seen it all before'. This is not just another reactionary resurgence; not just more white supremacist revanchism. Not only is its virulence and volatility off the charts, this heavily descending moment constitutes a stress test of political constitutions the world over—and at precisely the point that geochemical dice-rolling is to bring untold torsion to our every collective practice.

If, as a British Prime Minister once put it, a week is a long time in politics then Trumpian politics makes a week seem like an eternity. This in itself constitutes a stressful test for critics and commentators, academic or otherwise. No sooner have we pinned down the toxic flapping than it scoots off in some other direction. It is with a certain degree of daring, then, that Kyle McGee undertook to write *Heathen Earth: Trumpism and Political Ecology*. Penned in the weeks running up to the Inauguration on 20 January 2017, it captures a snapshot of an ongoing array of concerns and thought processes. It is, as a consequence, an urgent, angry and deeply personal work. However, it does not, for the most part, indulge the personal in an

³ Based on the novel (and play) *The Clansman: A historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan* by Thomas Dixon Jr. (1905).

⁴ George W. Bush, 43rd President of the United States, as distinct from his father George H.W. Bush, the 41st.

autobiographical sense. It is, instead, densely theoretical, issuing from a desire to understand so as to imagine the possibility of resistance and change.

Whether the Trump regime endures or whether it burns out in a fireball of its own absurdity is hardly worth speculation at this point. The potential is there for any and all outcomes and anticipation of an imminent demise over Cyrillic-scripted scandals or a collapse of Congressional willingness to collude betrays more than a hint of wishful thinking. Having taken a snapshot of my own provincial impressions of the present situation, we might now wade into the thickets of the more expansively theoretical.

The Armed Lifeboat

In his 2011 book *Tropic of Chaos*, Christian Parenti discusses a form of political adaptation to climate change: ‘the politics of the armed lifeboat,’ which responds ‘to climate change by arming, excluding, forgetting, repressing, policing, and killing’ (p. 11). This strategy, he warns, is very much underway. A geopolitics of border walls beside sea walls, barbed wire beside fibre optics—gone under and shut out versus dug in and bailed out. Perpetual counterinsurgency will be nothing new to large swathes of the drone-menaced and satellite-surveilled planet. However, to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—never was this a more expansive category. One might say that we all share in this much. However, the ‘all-in-one-boat’ brigade have their metaphor all wrong. There will be many boats and many torpedoes.

Previously, ‘geodesy’ (from *daiein* meaning divide) signified the science ascertaining the shape of the earth—dividing, so as to measure, so as to own. Over the course of the past several centuries, the shape of the earth was settled. And yet, in that same process, the earth was also unsettled—revealed to be the unsettled and unsettleable entity par excellence. Today, the earth sciences make all too clear the direction of earth systems. However, precise destinations remain to be determined. The morphology of the emerging geopolitical shatterscape therefore calls for another geodesy altogether—premised not on static possession but on emerging dispossession and encompassing a far more sophisticated distribution of agencies than any mode of geopolitical analysis hitherto devised.

The politics of the armed lifeboat cannot possibly succeed, as Parenti knows full well:

If climate change is allowed to destroy whole economies and nations, no amount of walls, guns, barbed wire, armed aerial drones, or permanently deployed mercenaries will be able to save one half of the planet from the other (2011, p. 11).

His division down the middle is a little rough and ready, as is his air of inevitability. Nevertheless, his argument carries with it an important point: we are faced with active modes of political imagination utterly un beholden to the truisms of the crumbling centre-ground. At risk of similar oversimplification, one half of our political elites are defending sustainable development while the other half are developing sustainable defence. If neither stand a chance of enduring the oncoming

stress tests, this is beside the point—both will give it a good go. Double down, then again and then double down some more.

From Ecocide to Geocide

The earliest use of the word ‘geocide’ that I have been able to find (excluding the many typos of ‘genocide’) is found in *Prohibiting Military Weather Modification*, a record of the hearings before the US Congressional Subcommittee on Oceans and International Environment in July 1972. The Subcommittee was encouraged to ‘hold hearings in the near future to consider the wisdom of proposing the adoption of an ecocide or geocide convention to compliment [sic] the Genocide Convention’. In December the same year, Aurelio Peccei and Manfred Siebker, both members of the Club of Rome, presented a paper on *The Limits to Growth in Perspective* to The Economic Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (*The Limits to Growth* itself having been published earlier that year). Among a number of epigrams, they quote the psychiatrist and historian, Henri Ellenberger: ‘The greatest crime is not described in criminological books: it is geocide, the destruction of life, of the biomass of the Earth’. It is not clear where this quotation came from. In any case, while ecocide was in frequent usage in academic, legal and political discourse by the early-1970s (e.g. Weisberg 1970; Johnstone 1971; Fadiman and White 1971; Falk 1973) and was commonplace by the 1990s (e.g. Feshbach and Friendly 1993; Grinde and Johansen 1995), geocide was almost unused until around thirty years ago and remains obscure.⁵

This minor feat of philology proves nothing except that, while often interchangeable, the eco- has historically prevailed over the geo- when it comes to shaping the signification of political violence in relation to the so-called human environment. Recently, by contrast, geo- has become the go-to prefix for almost everything. ‘Geoengineering’ inspires lowest common denominator Hollywood blockbusters,⁶ poets and philosophers are analysed in terms of ‘geopoetics’ (Last 2015) and ‘geopolitics’ is reclaimed from its mid-twentieth century associations with Nazi militarism to signify not only the competition of states over territories but the broader politics of the Earth in all its fractured, dynamic vastness (Conway 2016). In the shift from eco- to geo- we encounter not only a shift from the *hearth* to the earth (eco from *ο κος* [*oikos*] meaning house; geo from *Γα α* [*Gaia*] meaning earth; hearth from the old English *heorð* meaning fireplace, portion of a floor on which a fire is made; earth from *eorþe* meaning ground, soil or district). We wander onto the *heath* of the titular *Heathen Earth* (heath from *hæð* meaning unworked land or wasteland; heathen from *hæðen* meaning Pagan, not Christian or Jewish). As these etymologies indicate, this is a matter of magnitude and movement, community and exclusion. No longer going round in circles in the realm of local environments, we encounter sprawling Earth systems—and the vast machines that assemble their comprehensibility (Edwards 2010). This is a shift, then, to the contemporary: Earth

⁵ This is helpfully visualised with the aid of Google’s Ngram tool: <https://goo.gl/2PvA5U>.

⁶ At least if the early trailers for Dean Devlin’s *Geostorm* are anything to go by.

system science as such emerged at NASA in the early 1980s, in part as a response to modelling the effects of nuclear winter (Conway 2010). However, it is also a dislocation with a deep past: into geological time but also into the political-mythological time of barbarians and monsters, the other and the unclean.

It is noteworthy, then, that McGee titles the pivotal third chapter of his book ‘Geocide and Geodicy’. While the latter struggles ‘to defend and to become worthy of the Earth and its active/reactive materiality’, the former resides on a dead Earth, ‘after the end times’.

They see the signals, they understand the data, and still they do not act, or on the contrary, they act far too much, calling for the revitalization of coal mining facilities and coal-fired power plants (‘clean coal,’ to appease those with doubts) and the wholesale deregulation of the fossil fuel industry. They are *disinhibited* precisely because they know, for certain, that the end has come: instead of geodicy, they advocate *geocide* (2017, p. 86).

It is useless attempting to persuade them with evidence or argument. Not because they are unreasonable so much as that the terms in which they encounter reasoning are incompatible with the geodicy cosmology (p. 87). They are not in the ‘same boat’, they are barely even in the ‘same world’.

‘Global warming is a business opportunity’ (p. 89). This we know. However, given the radically racialised agenda of Trump and his various pseudo-intellectual imperial prince-whisperers, it could also be seen as a geostrategic opportunity. Precisely those areas of the planet that are collectively pathologised by extremist paranoia are those that stand to suffer the worst effects of global warming. ‘All the hotbeds of terrorism will be parched, starved, burned away’ (p. 91). No, no, we are *not* all in this together.

‘Winnable’ Global Warming

During the Cold War, the military-industrial complex was chock-full of Dr Strangelove-types assured that a nuclear war was ‘winnable’. True, there were far more who thought it a tragic impasse of human nature; an irresolvable inclination towards mutual destruction that could not be eliminated, only managed on the teetering cusp of actualisation. If, as the cliché goes, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, this is because we know full well that there are those who would rather *end the world* than witness even a moderate challenge to its prevailing configuration.

Academic analyses of the oncoming geopolitical situation (in the fullest sense of ‘geopolitics’) are fundamentally undermined by the insistence upon treating powerful actors as though they all thought like university professors. It is commonplace to demand more creative and expansive imaginaries of possible futures beyond the hegemonies of the present—and rightly so. However, there are more modes of imagination than are dreamt of in academic philosophies. Indeed, many of the most dynamic and creative of these modes are far from counter-hegemonic. In the inequities of the present they see a world not yet sufficiently

itself; a world that must be made the same but more so. The coming stress tests give these imaginaries their opportunity.

How, then, to resist? *Heathen Earth* could not be less of a ‘last word’—its very *raison d’être* is to the contrary. Nevertheless, it offers a formidably thoughtful series of talking points and starting points, creative speculations and learned articulations, only a handful of which have been addressed herein. Among these, I have been most exercised by the distinction of geodicy and geocide.

Recovering the thread of terrestriality, struggling to defend and to become worthy of the Earth and its active/reactive materiality, is the prospect of what may be called *geodicy*. As Leibniz sought to defend the justice of God in his *Theodicy*, so geodacists advocate for the justice of the Earth (2017, p. 85).

There is much more that could be said on this subject (and I hope much more will be). However, a couple of questions, I think, follow most immediately. First, to what extent is it advisable to take the Earth to be ‘just’ as such? Certainly, this statement compels recognition that the terrestrial environment, as we tend to call it, is not and will never be made habitable by our own hand. We receive it. It is a gift that could be rescinded (Clark 2010). However, at the same time, if the Earth is just, it is unevenly and inconsistently so. Habitability is never received passively. In the terms of Étienne Souriau (2015), it is always a matter of instauration—of an inheritance perpetually remade at each moment of receipt. Or, in more classical terms, it is never absolved of labour. This brings me to my second question: if one paramount objective that follows from this diagnosis involves ‘how to amplify the worldings of the domestic and international poor’ (2017, p. 103) then how are we to engage with the means by which such worldings occur, with all due hesitation and disinclination as regards making any claim to speak for them or even to speak *with* them uninvited? This hesitancy need not suggest a pious quietism or any sort of bashful, guilt-ridden political disengagement. The important point is that any coming geodicy will be radically polytheistic and that any successful amplification must issue from the strengths and skills of those made poor by received injustices. These are questions that take us beyond the useful operating range of theory.

Out of the Bag, the Cat Went Feral

It was the ruse of classical geopolitics that a week was no time at all. True, rational strategy rested on stable material foundations—mountains, rivers, soil. Foreign policy laid on such grounds could not fail, not over the long term. Suddenly, such Victorian temporalities are scrambled. The future remains inscrutable but is ever more present in the present. Mountains melt, rivers rise and it is the supposedly arbitrary and malleable mores and emotions that we find to have the glacial lethargy of the *longue durée*. And yet, how fast things move as they stay the same. Like an automobile about to take a cinematic cliff dive, we rubberneck the roiling Trumpian calamity expecting a fireball. By the time these words appear in print, perhaps it will have materialised (but then again maybe not). In any case, the cat is out of the bag as regards the strategy that put Trump in power and it would take a spectacular feat of

self-destruction indeed to dissuade wholesale imitation of it in the coming years. However, the matters explored in the above go beyond Trump and Trumpism, taken narrowly. Only today, as I write this, Vladimir Putin is reported to claim that global warming is not anthropogenic and therefore cannot be stopped, only adapted to (South China Morning Post 2017). Thawing Siberian permafrost—a harbinger of accelerating systemic feedback or a means of neo-imperial resurgence? In the arms race of imagination, we have work to do.

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