

ANIMIST TIME AND THE WHITE ANTHROPOCENE

Jason Allen-Paisant

Abstract: This article considers the Western civilisational ethos of the human person as an ethos of mastery with respect to the natural world. The age of climate disaster has begun to turn this ethos into an object for thought, as is evidenced by an increasing number of eco-poetic and eco-philosophical writings and reflections that seek to re-think or un-think prevailing Western construals of the human. My own entry point into the conversation is through Afro-diasporic knowledge systems that evidence construals of the human being not rooted in the Western paradigm of the individual. I ask how such knowledge systems help us to achieve a necessary thought revolution with respect to the current dangers of our technological civilisation (particularly climate disaster and capitalist extractivism). I emphasise the fact that animist thinking systems have for centuries, due to the violences of modernity, existed in a parallel space and time to what I call ‘capitalist time’ and propose that the failures and crises of Western industrial/technological civilisation warrant renewed examinations of their benefits in human living practices.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Vodou, extractivism

If you are a wise human being, you will be able to hear the first breath of life taking form under the rock, you will know the joy of the blade of grass that rises to meet the sun in the dew of the morning, or the euphoria of the hind that runs on the paths of the forest. You will feel all of that because you have been here before. All of it is forever inserted into the recesses of the memory of these microscopic time spaces of spirit that form your body and carry your ‘I’ ...

Jean Charon

Listen to the white world
horribly weary of its immense effort
its rebellious joints crack under the hard stars
its stiffness of blue steel piercing the mystical flesh

listen to its prodigious victories touting its defeats
listen to its pitiful stumbling in grandiose conquests

Pity on our omniscient and naive conquerors!

Aimé Césaire

For me, to consider current responses to the Anthropocene is to consider them through the lens of my own subjectivity – as a black person from the Caribbean – and through my community’s experience of Atlantic slavery and colonialism and their continually unfolding effects. I cannot read the Anthropocene without placing myself within the narratives of race that the Anthropocene, as a geological discourse, too often obscures. How do I, and how can I, as a person from the African diaspora, read the rapidly expanding corpus of writings (poetry, documentary non-fiction, philosophical treatises) addressing it, if not through the lens of imperialism and colonialism? If I have developed an interest in contemporary literary and philosophical reactions to the Anthropocene, these expressions have rendered more poignant older, sometimes prophetic, responses to ecological injustice from among communities and groups who have been battling the effects of the Anthropocene long before it was known as such. Indeed, black and brown people have been living the Anthropocene for centuries, long before it became a problem for the West. It is perhaps Kathryn Yusoff who expresses this reality most eloquently, and here it is worth quoting her at some length:

If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilisation, progress, modernisation, and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence. The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom.¹

Before Yusoff, Donna Haraway et al had unmasked some of the conceits of the Anthropocene, including its ‘simplifications of both time and space’² and its Euro-American bias, proposing the term Plantationocene to take account of the central significance of slavery and the plantation system in the Americas in producing the environmental concerns that define the current era. ‘[O]ther words and worldings’, states Haraway helpfully in that conversation, ‘help us to reimagine our current urgencies’ (*Anthropologists are Talking*, p548).

As I write these lines, the Bahamas are experiencing the most catastrophic hurricane in its history. 2019 marks the fourth consecutive year that the Caribbean has witnessed an extremely devastating Atlantic hurricane season. The phenomenon that is Dorian, the category five hurricane that has struck the Bahamas, cannot be divorced from the continuing rise in greenhouse gases

1. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2019. (Hereafter *Black Anthropocenes*).

2. Donna Haraway et al., ‘Anthropologists are Talking – About the Anthropocene’, *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 81, 2016, 535-564, p547. (Hereafter *Anthropologists are Talking*.)

3. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019, p18.

in the atmosphere. Hurricane Dorian crystallises the existential threat posed to the islands of the Caribbean by the ongoing climate emergency. These states, rendered fragile by systemic global exploitation, are disproportionately affected by natural disasters of this kind, though, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and others document,³ the large industrial nations of the north bear the lion's share of the responsibility for the disasters. In this and many other climate crises, we witness the unfolding effects of colonialism, and the black geologies of the Anthropocene.

To be cognisant of the racial dimensions of the 'ecological crisis', to remove from obscurity the histories of those who have been living the Anthropocene for centuries, to shine light on the living practices and creative strategies of those who have existed with the reality of environmental injustice for many generations, and who are now on the frontlines of climate disaster, is to place focus on the temporal determinations of the Anthropocene. At the heart of the matter is time, all the more since geological epochs are ultimately temporal designations.

Accordingly, writings by black and brown people that have long denounced the harms of white extractivist cultures provide for me a necessary counter-analytic to the blind imaginaries of an only just declared Anthropocene. Such writings, reflecting critically on how persons and things are constituted, challenge Enlightenment orthodoxies and some of the most deeply held values of Western civilisation – as they relate to time, and, as such, to the nature of 'self' and of 'mind', values that sustain, even as they reflect back, racialised, imperialist orders of knowledge.

II

The struggle of Caribbean poets is certainly to be understood through this lens. The fact is that the issue of geology, land and the environment are such embedded concerns of Caribbean poetics to the point of being unarticulated. Now that we have entered an age of environmental collapse and ecological emergency, as viewed from the West, numerous works of Caribbean poetry shine a retrospective light on the colonial roots of the Anthropocene, and emphasise the fact that issues of nature and the environment have always been central to Caribbean critiques of colonialism.

I say 'environment', being aware that this is a word that writers like C. L. R. James, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, and René Ménil, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, may not have chosen to use, at a time when the West had not even invented a vocabulary around the idea of ecological consciousness.

When Walcott writes about the compulsion and primordial duty of the Antillean poet to name his surroundings as a first step to truly inhabiting it, in the sense of being at home in it, he is writing about the 'environmental' fracture. One of the implications of this gesture is to shine light on a people's

physical and ontological alienation from land. One of the energies that drive Walcott's poetry is the urge to transform bare life into a connected life, a life where the essential human connection to the land is restored. When Kamau Brathwaite writes about the relationship between enclosure and physical violence in *Trench Town Rock*,⁴ indeed about the *kind* of violence constituted by spatial enclosure, he is writing about the environmental fracture. Literature from the region has often highlighted the environmental impacts that grow from systemic colonial/neo-colonial dispossession. Orlando Patterson's *Children of Sisyphus* (1968) is a striking example, a narrative set in the Dungle, an abject, misery-ridden urban shantytown whose denizens ransack the garbage to feed themselves. Esther Figueroa's novel *Limbo* (2014), arguably the first self-consciously 'environmental' novel from the Caribbean, is somewhat in the lineage of *Children of Sisyphus*, though it is focalised through the eyes of an 'up-town', brown-skinned Jamaican woman. Engaging Dante's *Limbo* and its constant sighing, Figueroa's narrator passionately grapples with the permanent crisis of ecosystem destruction amid the realities of Jamaica's liberalised 'tourist paradise'.

The critique of the destruction of ecosystems, closely linked to the critique of colonial and neocolonial domination, is therefore not new; it is, in fact, co-substantial with a history of Caribbean writing, appearing in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), Jacques Stephen Alexis's *Les Arbres musiciens* (1957) and so many other works. What is new at this conjuncture is perhaps the willingness for it to be heard, now that, as Yusoff argues, the Anthropocene 'proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities' (*Black Anthropocene*, p?).

III

Where Aimé Césaire is concerned, the current ecological crisis helps to open up new understandings of his work, even as his writings, and the poetic and artistic movement known as Négritude, shine light on contemporary eco-poetic and eco-philosophical writings that confront the Anthropocene.

I want to use Césaire's work as the touchpoint for a locus of epistemic significations which I refer to as 'animist time'. I use this term to refer to a sense and experience of time deployed as a counterforce or corrective to the alienation of 'capitalist time', or modern technological time, in which money, commodities and machines are fetishised to the point where they have a temporality of their own as autonomous agents of productivity. Integral to the armature of capitalist time is coloniality, the systemic relation between colonialism and the narrative of Western progress. Capitalism is a transformation of slavery.⁵ Its cannibalistic organisation of the social and cultural appropriation of geographically remote labour and land is a particular view of temporality.⁶ It works against a more ancient sense of time physicalised in dwelling practices oriented towards plurally-determined, interspecies

4. Kamau Brathwaite, *Trench Town Rock*, Lost Roads Publishers, Providence, 1994.

5. David Graeber, *Possibilities: Essays on hierarchy, rebellion, and desire*, California, Oakland, AK Press, pp57-84.

6. For reflections on this idea, see Jonathan Martineau, *Time, Capitalism, and Alienation: A Socio-Historical Inquiry into the Making of Modern Time*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2015; Giordano Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013; and Eve Ruhnau, *The Deconstruction of Time and the Emergence of Temporality*, in H. Atmanspacher and E. Ruhnau (eds), *Time, Temporality, Now*, Springer, Berlin, 1997, pp53-69.

existences, rather than blind extraction.

The need to account for a different, alternative sense of temporality is one that resonates in Césaire's essay 'Poésie et connaissance', which argues, among other things, that body memory is earth memory, that our bodies are dependent on the planet as one part of an organism to another: 'Within us, all the ages of mankind. Within us, all humankind. Within us, the animal, the vegetal, the mineral. Mankind is not only mankind. It is *universe*'.⁷

I speak about Césaire's idea of respect for the vegetal, mineral and animal *within us* as a manifestation of a sense of 'animist time', one which offers a way out of reification and 'a world of efficiency, in which man himself becomes a thing, a world where time is no longer time, but a kind of space, filled with qualitatively measurable things'.⁸ In this sense, the conflicts between capitalist realism and other scales and rhythms of time may be understood as a battle of temporalities, one which becomes highlighted in the material realities of the present. Through environmental degradation, we become aware of temporality itself in ways in which we might not have been before. Could the Western world ever recover an understanding of Earth not equated with property. In this sense, we cease to think about Earth and geology through the prism of the individual, but through the lens of all those with whom we share the space, including ancestral communities and the unborn. Or will the West forever be locked into the capitalist view of nature oriented towards time management, to facilitate progress, based on productivity and extraction?

'Poésie et connaissance' emphasises that to be materially porous is to be temporally porous. More, that the awareness of this porosity leads us into a different relationship with time, one that emphasises our status as co-dwellers in a world of communicative, multi-species life. To experience the biocentric world as aware, agential and conversational, as Césaire's poetry does, is to be intertwined with other strata of time, to be in deep time, rather than simply in the narrow present or future of technological time. The understanding of time evidenced in his poetry is a sense of 'deep time'.

IV

In 'Discourse on African Art' (which echoes the concerns of the much earlier text 'Poésie et connaissance'), Césaire argues that poetry plays a big role in providing a different sensibility towards the planet in light of the Western reification of the natural world that had marked the colonial age and resulted in various ills for Europe itself. De-alienating the human being of Western (industrial) civilisation, involved revitalising (or 're-personing') its relationship with nature. And in this task, poetry played an instrumental role.

Why did Césaire attach so much importance to the 're-personing' of nature, to the point where he associated it with the epistemic struggle of Négritude? One only need read 'Discours sur l'art africain' to understand the

7. Aimé Césaire, 'Poésie et connaissance', in A. J. Arnold (ed), *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours*, CNRS Éditions/Présence Africaine Éditions, Paris, [1944] 2013, 1373-1390, p1382. (Hereafter *Poésie*.)

8. Aimé Césaire, 'Discours sur l'art africain', in A. J. Arnold (ed), *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours*, CNRS Éditions/Présence Africaine Éditions, Paris, pp1562-1570. (Hereafter *Discours sur l'art*.) Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of works in French are mine.

reason. Given his understanding of the human dweller on earth, Césaire saw poetry and art as forms of knowledge that preserve the connection between human beings and nature. Poetry and art lead human beings into a rite of communication-identification with the natural world, over and against the disassociation induced by the mechanical and technological relationship to nature valorised by Western culture. Our capacity to briefly perceive the natural world in its reality, our ability to go behind or beneath surface appearances, to sense the real nature of time, is, for Césaire, a kind of seizure. And it is art-cum-metaphysic of participation and enmeshment (this is what poetry expresses) that leads us into this state of mind, one attuned to the personhood of nature, rather than one that objectifies it: 'Art and poetry re-establish the dialectic of the human and the world' (*Discours sur l'art*, p1563). For Césaire, human objectification of nature in the West had resulted in the human itself being turned into an object. Thus, the devalorisation of the natural world places the human on an inescapable trajectory of 'hatred, contempt, war, the exploitation of the human by the human'. The hunger for poetry, Césaire's argument goes, evoking a pre-Socratic conception of *poiesis* (in other words, the kind of creation sparked by the human's dwelling *with* the world), increases in moments in which human dissociation from the world reaches intolerable levels:

With poetry and art, we cease to see the world as a collection of things and, instead, we view it in all its fullness, its totality and its harmony. And that is why poetry is youth. It is that force that gives back to the world its original vitality, which gives back to each thing its aura of the marvellous, by placing it back into the original totality. So that to save poetry and art is to save the human being of modernity by re-personing humanity and revitalising nature.

If one needed proof, I would say that one need only observe that the need for poetry is never felt as intensely, and that people never become as attuned to the poetic, desperately clinging to it as to the last plank of wood from a sinking ship, as when they emerge from periods of ... war, be they warm or cold. In other words, when they emerge from periods in which non-communication and reification have been exacerbated to intolerable levels (*Discours sur l'art*, p1563).

Today we can associate non-communication and reification with aspects of our technological civilisation that did not even exist when Césaire wrote these words. And yet, they still have an intense force of truth: non-communication and reification have arguably been exacerbated even more than in the post-war years by the technologies of the virtual and their alienation of human beings from the real. Our mobile phones and numerous gadgets all depend for their existence on the extraction of many African and Asian mineral resources, half

9. See Dev Nathan and Sandip Sarkar, 'Blood on Your Mobile?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45, 2010, pp22-24.

10. Sylvia Wynter, 'Ethno or Sociopoetics' in *We Must Learn to Sit Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays 1967-1984*, Peepal Tree Press, Leeds, 2018, 377-400, p389. (Hereafter *Ethno or Sociopoetics*.)

11. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, Oxford University Press, New York; Oxford, 1997, p74.

12. Leo Frobenius, *Le Destin des civilisations*, Gallimard, Paris, 1940, p211.

13. J. Michael Dash, Édouard Glissant, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p148.

14. Aimé Césaire, 'Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner, Paris 1975' in J. Leiner (ed), *Aimé Césaire: Le terreau primordial, Vol. I*, Gunter Narr, Tübingen, 1993, 111-128, p123. (Hereafter *Entretien 1975*.)

of whose names we do not even know, even if this mass extraction of resources is the source of countless untold civil wars and atrocities.⁹

Needless to say, capitalism is an *ethos* committed to the planet's exploitation, and that exploitation has been intimately associated with the domination of black bodies. From the Renaissance onwards, the exploitation of the natural world began to be seen as the domination of the primitive, with which the global exploitation of black and brown peoples also becomes associated.¹⁰ To say that the capitalist ethos is based on the elimination of the primitive is simply to emphasise the fact that European Man, as rationalist Man, is Man that sees in a particular way; he is the human whose system of knowing the world is unquestioningly anthropocentric.

V

I must hasten to say that Césaire's conception of the primitive (from the Old French *primitif*, meaning 'primary') goes wholly beyond *primitivism* in the Romantic sense or what Saidiya Hartman describes as a 'reductive metaphysics of Africanity that produces Africa as the temporal other of the West and the values of Africanity as little more than a shorthand for sensuousness, instinct, rhythm, superstition, improvisation, naturalness, and physical prowess'.¹¹ One key source of Césaire's ideas around 'primitive thought' is the work of the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius, who debunked the dichotomy of civilisation as social order and refinement in opposition to cultural 'backwardness', challenging the reduction of primitive lifeways to those incapable of understanding or integrating Western thought/culture.¹² This is critical to the work of Césaire, whose poetry envisions, not some facile 'time before', as some critics have erroneously characterised it, describing it as a 'pre-modern' poetics¹³ which the work of an Édouard Glissant would supersede. Rather, it emphasises an *alternative temporality*, a temporality of the sacred, that works against the predations of 'colonial time'. We may hear echoes of this concern in certain modernist 'recoveries' of indigenous culture and knowledge systems: H. D., Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and so on. But an important issue is the locus of enunciation from which artists speak about primitive practices, and whether the primitive is invested as dwelling practice, or contrarywise, as an idealism or an aesthetic devoid of an ethical burden. Suffice it to say that the tag of 'black primitivism' attached to Négritude is the fruit of an Enlightenment epistemology, one that instinctively couples 'the primitive' with 'the black' or 'the African'. One of the lessons of Césaire's work is precisely the need to uncouple this connection, to affirm that primitive belief is 'not necessarily African'.¹⁴ As he states:

The Vates! What interests me is *primitive* Greek poetry, *primitive* Greek tragedy. Moreover, I only appreciate Latin culture and Greek culture in their primitiveness. Aeschylus, for example, seems more important

than Euripides. Deep down, one notices that Roman civilisation or Greek civilisation were not, at their beginnings, very far from African civilisation.¹⁵

For Césaire, recovering the primitive was a way of challenging an Enlightenment view of history, by highlighting a different space-time consciousness. Let us not forget that the primitive becomes co-opted into colonial ideology, as an epistemic marker, in the wake of the Enlightenment, and of figures such as Kant and Hegel. The discipline of ethnography that emerges in the nineteenth century helped shore up this epistemic category and furthered the interests of colonial administration and ideology.¹⁶ Ethnographers such as Lévy-Bruhl viewed Africans as ‘lesser races’ on account of their proximity to nature.

It should also be observed that knowledge in the Enlightenment episteme involves the idea of thought or knowing as transcendence and separateness from the natural. (Of course, the roots of this idea go all the way back to Plato.) But even more importantly, separateness from phenomena marked a boundary between Europe and the savage. For Laurent Dubreuil, it conscribes a zone of discourses which finds within its boundaries ‘the practice of a *possession*’:

The colonial empire is described and controlled as the land of enchantment – of magicians, phantoms, spirits, ecstasies. Beyond the effective appropriation of resources, of labor and of bodies, the description of savages as possessed, and their transformation by texts into magical primitives, serve the illusory design of civilisation – that fallacious process that would banish the supernatural while trying to propagate its practice outside the closed field of Europe.¹⁷

Dubreuil’s summation is as terse as it is vigorous: ‘The colonial *phrase* of possession organises imperial politics’ (p?). This is why, for Lévy-Bruhl, ‘participation’, the mark of the ‘primitive mentality’ is ‘prelogical’.¹⁸ For Lévy-Bruhl, the fact that ‘the mentality of primitives does ... more than imagine its object: it possesses it and is possessed by it’ (*Les fonctions mentales*, p426), makes it inferior to the Western way of functioning: the rationalist ‘law of contradiction’ makes it impossible for a thing to be both itself and other than itself (p112).

Césaire’s work seeks to rethink this separation, and in doing so, recuperate the function of *le primitif* as *part of civilisation*. Simply put, he means ‘of course not at all primitive in that stupid use of it as opposed to civilised’, as Charles Olson puts it in his own remarks about poetry and history.¹⁹ It is this de-ideologised view of history that can allow for Césaire’s comparison between pre-Socratic Greece, with its cultic rites (to Dionysus, etc.), and Haitian Vodou (*Entretien 1978*, pxix). And indeed, since blackness was an invention

15. Aimé Césaire, ‘Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner’ in J. Leiner J (ed), J-M. Place, Paris, 1978, v-xxiv, pxix. (Hereafter *Entretien 1978*.)

16. Michel Leiris, ‘L’ethnologie devant le colonialisme’ in *Brisées*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1966, pp125-145.

17. Laurent Dubreuil, *Empire of language: Toward a critique of (post) colonial expression*, Cornell University Press, London and Ithaca, 2013, p9.

18. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, Alcan, Paris, 1910, p112. (Hereafter *Les fonctions mentales*.)

19. Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997, p251.

of the imperialist mind, Négritude's affirmation of ancestral connections and recovery of African knowledge systems was much more about the recovery of *humanness* than of blackness as an end in itself. The *primitif* was shorthand for the recovery of human being's relationship to the realness of the world. The quest for the primitive was a metonymy for 'the quest of *human being* ... reified into a commodity' (*Ethno or Sociopoetics*, p391), the quest for a different form of human being, a different imaginary of being-human, beyond the confines of Western Man.²⁰

It is unsurprising that Césaire's conception of civilisation was not a progressive, evolutionary Enlightenment one. For Césaire, civilisation was lived above or through human beings, as distinct from the Enlightenment-cum-capitalist schema of civilisation as human progress (*Entretien 1978*, pxix). Therefore, for him, concinnity and co-naturalness with Earth and a sacred sense of temporality are not a matter of race but of civilisation, and for us to treat phenomenal reality any differently than as part of our own process is to be outside of the real.

VI

Perhaps the most neglected aspect of Césaire's work is the way it constellates nature, coloniality and art in its analysis of modernity from the very early 'Poésie et connaissance' to the 1966 essay 'Discours sur l'art africain'. Césaire was unambiguous in his belief that the expansion of the human's technological mastery over the world, as it was understood in the modern Western society with its capitalist formation, was a danger to humanity itself: 'we are facing a progressive devaluation of the real which leads to the appearance of an inhuman world naturally filled with contempt, hatred, war, the exploitation of man by man' (*Discours sur l'art*, p1563).

But underscoring this seemed less a question of rejecting technology altogether than an attempt to think about how humankind could remain attuned to what he described as 'the primitive' (*Entretien 1978*, pxix), the ability to be seized by the essence of life. Césaire's knowledge of the function of spirits and of living with spirits in primitive culture is evident. I say 'primitive' *à propos* Césaire here, knowing it requires an effort of the Western bourgeois imaginary to conceive of the term 'primitive' as other than 'barbarism' or 'backwardness'. To understand the poet as vates or seer was to understand poetry as a manifestation of connection to the earth. For Césaire, poetry is the language of animacy. It offers paradigms of humanness that accommodate more-than-human worlds, and which suggest, if not offer, what Sylvia Wynter calls 'an alternative process of making ourselves human' (*Ethno or Sociopoetics*, p394). The poet is:

Pregnant with the world ...

He speaks and his words bring language back to a pure state ... I mean

20. Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3, 2003, pp257-337, p288. It should be no surprise, given her project that seeks to define the outlines of a new human, that Wynter's work repeatedly invokes Aimé Césaire (see 'Ethno or Socio Poetics', for instance).

subject not to habit or thought, but to the very thrust of the cosmos. The word of the poet, the primitive word: a rupestrian design in the body of sound.

The poet's sentence: the primitive sentence, the universe played and mimed (*Poésie*, p1384).

According to Césaire, poets have kept the bedazzlement [l'«éblouissement»] of the 'knotty primal unity' of the universe that existed before the 'secondary scattering of life' (*Poésie*, p1383), which suggests a belief in poetry's capacity for energetic connection with the world, a kind of primal and shamanic capacity within all humans of 'becoming-similar'²¹ to nature, or, as Césaire puts it, of 'penetrating the universe' (*Poésie*, p1384).

Césaire's vision of the poet as the human being surrendered to the world is reminiscent of Frobenius's account of the artistic faculty, an inbuilt drive to find similarities between self and the world. Here, the human being's in-built connection with 'the essence of life' is evoked. Numerous European ethnographers have underscored this, despite ideological deformations. So too has Freud,²² despite his obstinate attempt to locate the spiritual in the *human* unconscious, and worse yet, to pathologise it.

For Césaire, to 'mime the world' was to identify spiritually, to profoundly acknowledge one's co-naturalness, with the world, since, as Frobenius observes, 'Man can identify himself with the "seized" part of the Real, for he himself is a part of the Real. It is the real identity of every living being with life that allows identification'.²³ Building on the work of Frobenius, Léopold Senghor also views the Black African conception of art as 'the sense of life' or 'the perfection of the essence of life'²⁴ that comes about when the human being is 'moved ... to "act", to relive the Other – plant, animal, star, etc. – first to dance it, then to sculpt it, paint it, sing it'. Thus, for Senghor, art, as the 'essence of life', its 'rhythm', comes about through possession: the "possession" of the ego by the Other and the reaction of the ego to the Other' (*Lessons of Leo Frobenius*, pix). The convergence with Césaire's views on poetry and African living philosophy are striking, if unsurprising.

This belief is echoed in the cosmogonies of Western Africa, but also in the everyday rhythms and relationships to the world that underpin it. Wole Soyinka emphasises this when he writes that 'Yoruba traditional art is not ideational ... but "essential". It is not the idea ... that is transmitted into wood or interpreted in music or movement, but a quintessence of inner being'.²⁵ In other words, in the African metaphysic scope, it is the 'essence of things' that seizes the human being and renders it capable of manifesting art.

To 'mime the world' was, therefore, for Césaire, a fundamental connection between the human being and the natural world, a fundamental co-dependence and co-penetration, which goes against the separation of nature and culture in the Western philosophical tradition since Plato, emphasised in the Enlightenment. A coloniality of the mind/body relationship

21. Walter Benjamin, 'Doctrine of the Similar', *New German Critique*, 17, 1933 [1979], 65, 69, p69.

22. Freud describes the 'uncanny' as residual primitivity and animism. See Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in J. Strachey (ed), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIII (1913-1914)*, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1955, pp217-256, pp240-241. But for him, that is all it can be: the uncanny return of 'animism' in modern Western society is at best allusive.

23. Leo Frobenius, *Le destin des civilisations*, Gallimard, Paris, 1940, pp210-211.

24. Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'The Lessons of Leo Frobenius', in E. Haberland (ed), *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art, and Culture*, Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 2014 vii-xiii, pix.

25. Wole Soyinka, 'The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy' in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1976, pp144-160, p141.

underpins Western industrial civilisation, with its ethos of mastery of nature. Consequently, to re-emphasise this conception of dwelling and being is to affirm a different conception of art, one which fundamentally related deeply to humanness. And to affirm this different account of humanness was to challenge the hegemony of coloniality in the realm of the senses, to challenge, as Wynter puts it, 'our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man' (*Unsettling*, p257). This 'miming', thus conceived as the co-penetration of world and being, fundamentally alters the way in which we encounter, and relate to, the world, posing a fundamental challenge to capitalist modernity.

Thus dislodged from its Platonic paradigm of representation, philosophy is presented as an entanglement with the intelligence all around us, something which, for Césaire, was needed for the flowering of humanity and its preservation from its expanding tendencies to war, genocide and greed. This is why spirit possession was viewed by him as a paradigm of human consciousness, since it was understood to reaffirm 'the ties with the ancestral spirits and the community, and the Earth',²⁶ including a respect for the vegetal, mineral and animal *within us*.

Many will read 'mimesis' here, which is not an African term but a European one, and as terms go, carries the baggage of the culture from which it comes, though in invoking a pre-Socratic notion of 'miming the world' (*Entretien 1978*, pxix), Césaire seeks to philosophically transcend the intervening history of the West. Many Western scholars have examined mimesis in the twentieth century and up to the present (Benjamin, Adorno, Taussig, Borch-Jabobson, Lacoue-Labarthe, etc.), often through an ethnographical interest in studying indigenous spiritualities. In African metaphysics, however, what I've described is, for many, a vital way of being in the world. Vodouists may speak about being 'mounted' by the *lwa*, Myalists may talk of 'working with the spirits', etc.; in Espiritismo, Lucumí and Vodou, 'knowing who walks with you' is simply an important part of life.²⁷ The results of diasporic attempts to 'grapple with a new Nature', to affirm the ancestral ties that bind the community to Earth, maintaining humanness, are well known. '[The cosmological systems] of the territories of West Africa, Dahomey, Yorubaland, Ghana, and Benin' clarifies M. Jacqui Alexander, 'brought a varied and related spiritual lineage observed through *Lwa* Guinée, Spirits of Haiti, Lucumí of Cuba (more widely known as Santería), Shango of Trinidad, the Orixás, *minkisi* (medicines), and Vodun of Candomblé in Brazil, the Winti system of Suriname, and Vodou of New Orleans and the southern United States' (*Pedagogies*, p319). When the spirits manifest themselves in these sacred praxes, one begins to speak with the voice of another, to move like another, to feel the emotions of another: being simultaneously self and other-than-self is a vital praxis. The understanding that this implies no contradiction is also a vital worldview.

These living philosophies relate to what I call *thinking with spirits*. The

26. Sylvia Wynter, 'Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Topwards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process' in *We Must Learn to Sit Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays 1967-1984*, Peepal Tree Press, Leeds, 2018, 192-243, p203. (Hereafter *Jonkonnu*).

27. See M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005, p331.

conjunction ‘with’ here has the double connotation of, in the company of, and, by means of; that is, it shows us how thinking may be co-constituted, implicating not just other humans, but other manifested and non-manifested beings, and that our bodies do not define the boundaries of all that we are. It is significant that Césaire links his notion of ‘miming the world’ to the example of Vodou spirit possession and it is important, therefore, to think from the site of African metaphysics. The sense of knowing, thinking, and acting *with* the world is fully here:

Those who died have never left
 They are in the shadows that grow lighter
 And in the darkness that grows darker,
 The dead are not under the ground
 They are in the quivering tree,
 They are in the groaning wood,
 They are in flowing water,
 They are in the hut, they are in the crowd
 ...
 They are in the fire going out
 They are in the rock that moans,
 They are in the weeping grass,
 They are in the forest,
 they are in the home.²⁸

VII

For Césaire, the non-human world thinks, it acts, it moves. His work shows how much nature is resistant to our usual forms of seeing, the idea that nature hides so much from us, despite the capitalist extractive ethos that views the natural world as the object of human needs. Even in our age of hyper-visibility, our knowledge of nature’s operation remains at the surface. Scientists must still carry out imaginative scientific work to try to understand the nature of time. As early as 1946, Césaire’s poetry was concerned with challenging an ethos of human mastery. It was challenging us to think of the world other than through an anthropocentric lens.

Collections such as *Soleil cou coupé* (1948)²⁹ and *Corps perdu* (1950) evidence a desire to move beyond the ‘art of description’ and towards a renewed focus on the material and energetic, rather than primarily visual aspects of land, minerals, plants, trees, etc. The preoccupation with the tree in his elemental poetics outlined in ‘Poésie et connaissance’ and demonstrated in the poetry produced or revised in the late 1940s is illustrative of his attempt to become-similar to nature through gestures of inter-energetic exchange, rather than objectify it through representation. Speaking to Édouard Maunick in an interview, Césaire links the centrality of the tree in his poetry to an animist

28. ‘Ceux qui sont morts ne sont jamais partis/ Ils sont dans l’ombre qui s’éclaire/ Et dans l’ombre qui s’épaissit,/ Les morts ne sont pas sous la terre/ Ils sont dans l’arbre qui frémit, / Ils sont dans le bois qui gémit,/ Ils sont dans l’eau qui coule,/ Ils sont dans la case, ils sont dans la foule// ... Ils sont dans le feu qui s’éteint,/ Ils sont dans le rocher qui geint,/ Ils sont dans les herbes qui pleurent,/ Ils sont dans la forêt,/ ils sont dans la demeure’. Birago Diop, ‘Souffles’, *Leures et lueurs*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1960, pp64-66.

29. Aimé Césaire, ‘Soleil cou coupé’, in A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (eds), *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2017, pp306-475. (Hereafter *Soleil*).

30. Aimé Césaire, 'L'homme insulaire: Entretien avec Edouard Maunick', *Archives sonores de la Littérature Noire*, réalisé en coproduction par RFI et le Club des lecteurs d'expression française (CLEF), 1980. 2 Disques vinyl et livret de 20 pages, Face A.

31. Aimé Césaire, 'La poésie, parole essentielle: Entretien avec Daniel Maximin', *Présence africaine*, 126, 1983, 17-23, p9.

32. For more on this Vodou view of time, see Clinton Hutton, *Colour for Colour Skin for Skin: Marching with the Ancestral Spirits into War Oh at Morant Bay*, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, 2015, p154; and Karen McCarthy Brown, 'Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou', in Donald J. Cosentino (ed), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 1995, pp 205-223, p206.

33. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999, p137.

34. Maureen Perkins, *The Reform of Time: Magic and Modernity*, Pluto Press, London, 2001, p12.

35. E. Gariguez, *Articulating Mangyan-Alangans' indigenous ecological spirituality*

adoration of them, referring to 'my ancient pagan cult of the tree, because I am very vegetal [le vieux culte païen que j'ai de l'arbre, car je suis très vegetal]'.³⁰ Becoming one with nature, being overtaken by the enspirited world, fulfils the poet's desire for a kind of selfhood that is inextricably immanent with nature and pluri-subjective: 'I am drawn to pantheism. I'd like to be all. I'd like to be all the elements ... [J'ai la tentation panthéiste. Je voudrais être tout. Je voudrais être tous les éléments ...]'³¹

VIII

Time is, of course, one way we understand ourselves as humans and our relationship to the planet and to being. Is it a coincidence that most, if not all, animist ontologies propose a radically different understanding of time from the linear, time-as-a-resource metaphor of Western industrial civilisation? That Vodouists, for instance, see past and present not as analytically divided as we usually do in the West, but as mutually animating each other, even as the world of the living and that of the ancestors constitute one reality existing on a continuum?³²

Time cannot be conceptualised on its own terms. Any concept of time is constituted metaphorically and metonymically – that is, relative to other concepts such as motion, space and events.³³ Our conceptualisations of time therefore relate directly to our cosmological and ontological beliefs. 'The nature of time is not simply "there", waiting to be discovered', as Maureen Perkins argues, 'it is a component of cultural communication ...'³⁴ Among communities in which the archetype of human connectivity with Earth is prevalent, traditional notions of time are intimately tied to the well-being of the earth and to an ethic of stewardship. This ethic of stewardship arises, Gariguez tells us, from a sense that 'the ancestral domain comprises of interacting landscapes of human community, nature ecosystems and the living spirits of the land, which include also the spirits of their ancestors'.³⁵ The ancestors' presence in the landscape

suggests a temporal dimension to this ethic which stretches backwards in time in a way that renders the living responsible for maintaining the dwelling places of the ancestors which include the same forests, rivers, mountains and oceans that are targets for various forms of resource extraction.³⁶

Traditional Vodou thought also operates based on a cyclical reality, far from the linear, progress-oriented conception of time that underpins capitalist realism, to use a term coined by Fisher.³⁷ The degree of 'integrated acceptance of this temporal sense in the life-rhythm, mores and social organisation of society'³⁸ is certainly worth emphasising with respect to world-views such as Vodou, 'being a reflection of that same reality which denies periodicities to the

existence of the dead, the living and the unborn' (*Myth*, p10). The implication of this intertwinement of Earth and being is that 'temporal space is not seen as separate from matter and consciousness, but as a single substance that unfolds ... in concentric spheres and logarithmic spirals'.³⁹

IX

Spirit possession, a constitutive practice of most, if not all, animist practices, is linked to an understanding of time that departs from the spatialised conception of temporality generally encountered in Western cultures. This can certainly be said of Haitian Vodou, a knowledge system which contains a number of beliefs that might be called 'animist', even if Vodouists do not have a language that knows the world in that way.

Spirit possession, in 'miming the world', conveys the idea that not only humans, animals and trees are alive but that so are mountains, boulders, winds and fire. If all the world pulses and acts and nothing is merely acted upon, then the urge to be possessed by the god, the ancestor, the snake, the river and so on, is the deep awareness of the animacy of the world acting upon self, of billions of neutrinos constantly penetrating our human bodies, and so on. Spirit possession in Vodou, rather than the pathological dissociation which it is often thought to be in the West, may be the manifestation of an intense awareness of the millions of eons that form one person and that think with it, that 'have thought and lived since the beginning of time',⁴⁰ and that are inextricably associated with the 'I'. What if the human was not an *individual*? If people could be taught to see themselves as penetrated by other lives, they would embrace a version of the 'I' that is manifold, enmeshed with all that is in the world.

X

Indeed, the turning of nature into an object has gone hand in hand with turning certain humans into objects. The emergency thus produced, from the ontology of the Western entrepreneurial individual, is a disavowed planetary emergency that places its most vulnerable victims into a war of time.

Fighting the resource-based epistemology of time has been the struggle of many advocates of cultural decolonisation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Frankétienne in Haiti has long advocated and sought to demonstrate the notion of 'spiral' time as necessarily a communal and pan-subjective narration of time, one distinguished from the 'productive', progress-oriented formations of capitalism. In Frankétienne's work, the awareness of deep time is also the awareness of the imperative of living the world in common, not only as communities with communities, but also as human communities with non-human ones: 'Know that all the elements of the Universe are interconnected ... Animals, trees, minerals, you and I are

as paradigm for sustainable development and well-being, Asian Social Institute, Manila, 2008, p212.

36. P-F. Tremblett, 'The ancestral sensorium and the city: Reflections on religion, environmentalism and citizenship in the Philippines', in Graham Harvey (ed), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2014, pp113-123, p118.

37. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?*, Alresford, Zero Books, 2009.

38. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p10. (Hereafter, *Myth*.)

39. O. Taiwo, 'The Dance of the Return Beat: Performing the animate universe', in Graham Harvey (ed), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2014, pp491-500, p498.

40. Jean Charon, *LEsprit, cet inconnu*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1977, pp192-193.

41. 'Sache que tous les éléments de l'Univers sont interconnectés ... Les animaux, les arbres, les minéraux, toi-même et moi-même nous sommes liés, reliés par des connections invisibles'. Frankétienne, *Melovivi ou le piège, suivi de brèche ardente*, Riveneuve éditions, Paris, 2010, p27. (Hereafter, *Melovivi*.)

42. 'Ils ont déréglé la planète. Ils ont déréglé toutes les planètes du système. Ils ont bouleversé les climats. Ils ont débalancé la nature. Ils ont saccagé le filet magnétique de l'atmosphère et chambardé l'univers. Ils ont chatouillé les mamelles du cosmos et chamboulé la vie de tous les êtres. Ils ont modifié nos vibrations. Ils ont perturbé la fréquence de nos vibrations. Ils ont dérythmé l'horlogerie musicale de notre terre.' (Is this italicised in the original?)

43. 'Quand meurent toutes les clartés, il ne reste que le rêve, la subversion des cris imprononçables, l'anarchie du silence aux racines souterraines, la pureté des symboles, la sève subtile des signes et la moisson future des utopies vivaces.'

linked, connected by invisible connections'.⁴¹

Nature is the 'gravitational field' of many of Frankétienne's 'spirals', and whether this is the impossibility of nature or the desire for nature, his poetics search for an answer to how the human can survive the predations of capitalism and social death. It is about answering how the (poetic) word might generate life in a Haitian existence that has endured such an onslaught for centuries. In Haiti, the natural world, rather than a place of peace and refuge, has become a place of terror:

*They have disrupted the planet. They have upset all the planets in the system. They have changed the climates. They have overtaken nature. They have ransacked the magnetic field lines of the atmosphere and disrupted the universe. They have tickled the udders of the cosmos and turned the lives of all beings upside down. They have changed our vibrations. They have disturbed the frequency of our vibrations. They have disturbed the rhythm of the musical clock of our land (Melovivi, p30; original emphasis).*⁴²

Yet, the answer to these terrors lies somewhere in the world itself, in its mystery and invisible workings:

*When light dies, only dream remains, the subversion of unpronounceable cries, the anarchy of silence with underground roots, the purity of symbols, the subtle sap of signs and the future harvest of living utopias (Melovivi, p92; original emphasis).*⁴³

Through vegetal and agrarian metaphors, the poet denounces the death of the natural environment and the separation of a people from the natural world, both the result of colonialist exploitation, and the active destruction of Haiti by the forces of capital. This environmental degradation, which is exacerbated with each drought and hurricane season, goes back to French colonial rule over Haiti when the land and forests were abused, rendering large swathes of the country barren and infertile.

Yet, as he suggests here, only an attunement to the sacred – liberated from the ideologies of the religious – can preserve the human in these circumstances. The question is: how can one reconnect with the flux and flow of the natural world, in a world where nature has been 'unbalanced' and 'pillaged', and in which the 'rhythm of the musical clock of the earth has been broken'?

Not easily, perhaps.

Haiti is a country ecologically ravaged by the predations, and the exclusions, of capitalism in its different phases. However, the metaphysics of belief systems like Vodou allow for a form of intimacy with the natural world, insofar as this is available. My intention is not to romanticise Vodou, which, it must be said, has also been used against emancipation – one need look no

further than Papa Doc. However, though Afro-diasporic spiritual practices do not *always inherently* propose emancipated alternatives, their metaphysics enable us to negotiate the material complexity of neoliberal colonialism and have been a lever that has enabled confronting colonial capitalism through embodied, prefigurative thinking. In this sense, the intimacy with Earth in Vodou, a thought system formed and expressed under the duress of physical domination,⁴⁴ has been an important means of parrying the idea of ‘social death’, viewed properly, in the words of Vincent Brown, as ‘a compelling metaphysical threat’.⁴⁵

The cultivation of such an intimacy, despite the attempted destruction of pre-colonial African culture and the killing of the soul, is, as Sylvia Wynter suggests, the very foundation of the black civilisation in the ‘new world’. In a kind of ‘trafficking’, Black people stripped down to ‘bare life’ have learned over the centuries to embed their relationship to Earth in underground, fugitive gestures of speaking, moving, sounding, in the various rhythms of daily life. The relationship to space becomes marked by ‘stolen life’ (to evoke Moten),⁴⁶ marronage (apropos Rex Nettleford).⁴⁷ The basis of culture in the Caribbean was, and is, a form of re-spiritualising the world, of taking back time.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand recounts being told by a neighbour from her childhood that this neighbour ‘was a Shango mother and that she knew many people who could go back to Africa when they “caught the power”’.⁴⁸ Brand concludes that ‘Getting to the Door of No Return [back to the point of forced departure, of foundational, ontological rupture] then needs no physical apparatus except the mind; the body is the prison’ (p45). But is it? It strikes me that the body is indispensable for the travel, that there is no travel in or through the mind without the body. It is true that the body can never entirely be a prison, even in slavery, whose claustrophobic and terrifying coercions are unimaginable, unsurvivable, unspeakable. It is a mystery – that the body can never entirely be imprisoned. Even the enslaved have a way of handling their body that escapes the control and the viewing reality of the white society, that is, even under its gaze. It suggests to me what I have sensed to be a belief – in Vodou, Lucumí, and other sacred praxes of the diaspora – in the idea that body and spirit are points on a spectrum, an inextricable fusion that renders the body’s materiality always greater and more ungraspable than what appears. I am tracking, in other words, what I sense to be a deep awareness, in Afro-Caribbean sacred praxis, of the body’s *psychomateriality*,⁴⁹ as Frankétienne calls it, its entanglement with Spirit, a fact which seems key in its ability to slip control. This body slips control through the kinds of breathing available to it, through the forms of breath – meaning the kinds of movement, co-movements, and sounds – that amplify it; through the gestic repertoire and aesthetics, and the ‘underground ... sociality’⁵⁰ through which it traffics life.

44. Alfred Métraux, *Le vaudou haïtien*, Gallimard, Paris, 1958, p116.

45. Vincent Brown, ‘Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery’, *American Historical Review*, 114, 2009, pp1231-1249, p1244.

46. Fred Moten, ‘The Case of Blackness’, *Criticism*, 50, 2008, pp177-218, p179.

47. Rex Nettleford, *Dance Jamaica: Cultural Definition and Artistic Discovery: The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica 1962-1983*, New York, Grove Press, 1985, p20.

48. Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Toronto, Vintage Canada, 2022, pp44-45.

49. Frankétienne, ‘Entretien avec Jason Allen-Paisant’, <http://africultures.com/pour-sauver-le-monde-il-nous-faut-linvisible-entretien-avec-franketienne>, 10 April 2021.

50. Fred Moten, ‘Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)’, *Southern Atlantic Quarterly*, 112, 2013, pp737-780, p742.

Malcom Ferdinand's *cri de cœur* in the recently published *Une écologie décoloniale* (Éditions du Seuil, 2019) is an attempt to shine light on this fracture and its continuing manifestations; to show the organic links between colonial history and environmental history; to decry 'the "invisibilisation" of colonisation and slavery in the genealogy of ecological thought, producing, in return, a colonised ecology'.⁵¹

51. Malcom Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale: Penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen*, Seuil, Paris, 2019, p22. (Hereafter, *Une écologie décoloniale*.)

52. Luc Multigner, Laurent Brureau, Pascal Blanchet, 'Le cancer de la prostate aux Antilles françaises: état des lieux', *Bull Épidémiol Hebdomaire*, 39-40, 2016, pp730-735.

Denouncing the obscuring of the Anthropocene's genesis in race and colonial history, this *cri de cœur* is from a native of a country where the overexploitation of land has produced and continues to produce material and existential damage that threaten the well-being of the populations whose lives have been shaped by French colonialism. The unusually high rates of prostate cancers⁵² linked to the toxic pesticide chlordane, a known carcinogen and endocrine disruptor banned in the US in 1975 and in France in 1990, but used on the *béké*-owned banana plantations in the French West Indies until 1993, is but one example of the environmental disasters engendered by (neo) colonialism. The story of bauxite in Jamaica and its links to land destruction, displacement, precarious livelihoods, respiratory illnesses and destruction of ecosystems, is a similar narrative, as documented in *Cockpit Country – Voices from Jamaica's Heart* and other films by Esther Figueroa.

What violence when nature becomes, at least in one's perception, an enemy, highlighting systemic poverty, producing natural disasters that increase in number and intensity year by year! From a long historical viewpoint, nature has for centuries been turned into an enemy for enslaved people in the Americas and for their descendants. As Wynter points out, the African 'himself served as the *ox* for the *plough* of the plantation system which brought about the technical conquest of Nature' (*Jonkonnu*, p198):

The fracture in the relationship with land is also evidenced in the [slave's] inability to take part in the decisions relating to the use of land, and to the products that come from it. Slaves found themselves subjected to a rhythm and intensity of work, to a set of tasks and a social hierarchy, that structured their existence and their relationship to the world, including their relationships with other slaves, their family relations, their dwelling places, their possibilities of movement and speech, without allowing them to take part in the organisation of these structures (*Une écologie décoloniale*, p97).

Yet, the African presence, Wynter observes, '*rehumanised Nature*, and helped to save his own humanity against the constant onslaught of the plantation system by the creation of a folklore and folk-culture' (*Jonkonnu*, p198). The Africanist construal of the land as always *Earth*, the centre of a core of beliefs and attitudes, would constitute 'the central pattern which held together the

social order’ (p198). Through sacred rituals (dance, drum rhythms, forms of ‘earthing’ through possession rites, masquerades that enacted the drama of the gods), Afro-Caribbeans created a different temporality. This is the sense in which I understand the phrase ‘animist time’. The maintenance of a sense of the sacred, and the affirmation of ancestral ties that bind the community to Earth – meaning ground, land, water, meaning *dutty*, the earth-bound consciousness of the divine.

XII

You don’t expect to see this sort of thing in the US. You’d expect it in Bangladesh and similar places.

John Snow talking about Hurricane Katrina

The current boom of eco-poetic and eco-philosophical works (both in literature and film) reflects the reintegration of the environment into our social and anthropological consciousness to an extent never before witnessed. The search for nature is one of the most personal and profound searches that have emerged in urban environments that are increasingly technicalised, bureaucratised and industrialised.

According to critic Amitav Ghosh, writing about Elizabeth Kolbert and *The Sixth Extinction*, ‘The closeness of the focus [on disappearing species] creates a powerful sense of empathy, not just with the vanishing creatures but also with the writer as she struggles to account for the horrors to which she is bearing witness’.⁵³ This suggests the urge for creaturely connection with a world that one fears may soon be inaccessible.

In the eco-poetics/eco-philosophy of the contemporary moment, we see these works calling upon a rethought understanding of time, matter and spirit. The idea of the human being as an ‘intersection’, that is, as temporally porous can be observed in recent writings denouncing ecological injustice/decrying ecological collapse. In *Underland: A deep time journey*, Robert MacFarlane argues that humans are not solitary beings, but ‘collaborative compound organisms’.⁵⁴ Quoting the philosopher Glenn Albrecht, he advances that humans are ecological entities ‘consisting of trillions of bacteria, viruses and fungi that coordinate the task of living together and sharing a common life’ (*Underland*, p104).

In recent creative works dealing with the Anthropocene, the idea of other beings within the self is often associated with an organic sense of time. In *Underland*, animacy often relates to the notion of living with beings from other times. For Richard Powers in *The Overstory*, animacy is associated with the idea of ‘beings passing into and through [the] body’, to the idea of others within the self.⁵⁵ These others within the self are not necessarily understood as possessing spirits, even if in the case of Powers’ character, Olivia Vandergriff, they certainly seem to be. Indeed, Olivia’s very understanding of animacy

53. Amitav Ghosh, ‘Life stories: books about a planet in peril’, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/04/books-make-sense-wounded-planet-amitav-ghosh, 4 October 2019.

54. Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A deep time journey*. Hamish Hamilton, London, 2019. (Hereafter *Underland*).

55. Richard Powers, *The Overstory*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2018, p163. (Hereafter *Overstory*).

suggests a state of living with spirits, one in which we are never alone, in which we are traversed/transversed by the 'emissaries of creation' (*Overstory*, p163). To believe that 'places remember', as Olivia asserts, is to believe that places are shot through by presences and that, by extension, so through is the rest of matter, including bodies. The belief evokes the idea that spatialised matter may also be temporally porous.

I keep coming back to Césaire the more I consider the ways in which he anticipated what we may now call Anthropocene ecopoetics, of which the writers I have discussed are only some examples. Of course, I have nothing against white people writing about ecological disaster. They will, since it is affecting them, and of course, they should.

But I fear these stories will be of limited effectiveness, if they remain narratives about the perspectives of white middle class persons on a disappearing nature – if they do not also foreground the people who have already physically experienced the ends of worlds. Here, works such as Bruce Albert and Davi Kopenawa's *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*⁵⁶ brings new sounds to a field of publishing that does little to decolonise environmentalism and ecology.

56. Bruce Albert and Davi Kopenawa, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2013.

XIII

If colonial expansion 'mostly had to do with the reallocation of the Earth's resources and their privatisation by those who had the greatest military might and the largest technological advantage',⁵⁷ then decolonisation, by definition, must entail the unthinking of the colonialist approach to nature and to time on a planetary scale. Decolonisation and ecological justice cannot be thought of without one another, if either is not to be an ideological phantasm.

But both decolonisation of knowledge and ecological justice entail a decolonisation of Spirit. In this essay, I have argued for a revitalised conception of poetry, understood as a sensuous, 'animist' mode of knowledge. For Afro-Caribbean poets such as Césaire and Frankétienne, articulating what sort of knowledge an African/diasporic praxis of poetry achieves on its own terms has gone hand in hand with their attempts at jumping the colonial clock, at sliding away from the world as proposed by actualising the sacred and by probing submerged knowledges. A renewed gaze on such praxes of poetry in Africa and its diaspora, on its significance as embodied, living philosophy, reveals its epistemological significance as an organisational code used to make sense of the world. To resituate poetry in the movement of Spirit, to recast poetry as movement of Spirit/of spirits, following Aimé Césaire, is to be open to an emancipatory Afro-diasporic aesthetic and a cosmology that renews a sense of deep time and of co-naturalness with the world.

If 'what might save us as we move forwards into the precarious unsettled centuries ahead is ... mutualism, symbiosis, the inclusive human work of collective decision-making extended to more-than-human communities'

57. Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, 'Thoughts on the Planetary: An interview with Achille Mbembe', www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe, 5 September 2019.

(*Underland*, p113), then surely poetry can be seen as attempting to invent a language for such a disposition, to push us into a new language for the ways we relate to each other and to the living world. But to view poetry, only now, in the contemporary context of environmental crisis, as a ‘language that recognises and advances the animacy of the world’ (p112), would be to occlude the *work* of poetry within the long history of colonialism, in which it has functioned as a *language* of animacy for those who have had to suffer the predations of capitalism and its globalising epistemologies. Négritude is only the most visible, political face of this resistance that avoids the otherworldly lure of the religious, even as resists the (post-)Enlightenment world’s violence against magic and myth on the desacralising grounds of transcendental reason.

Jason Allen-Paisant is an academic, poet and essayist whose interdisciplinary work explores embodied experience in the context of Afro-diasporic politics and worldbuilding. His most recent works reflect on the complex meanings of nature in Black life. He is a Lecturer in Caribbean Poetry and Decolonial Thought in the School of English and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Thinking with Trees* (Carcanet Press 2021) and of *Thinking with Spirits: Engaging Art and the Political through Aimé Césaire* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press). He’s also developing a nonfiction book entitled *Primitive Child: On Blackness, Landscape, and Reclaiming Time*.