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Trumpism and being in worlds that fall between worlds

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Abstract: *In response to Kyle McGee's forthcoming book, *Heathen Earth*, this paper says something about the place of toxic legacies in the rise and sustenance of 'Trumpism'. It takes an interest in rusting factories, boarded up housing, melting ice, etc., but as assemblages that are tricky because they concern a build up of externalities and relational factors for which there is a deficit of known coordinates. The term 'sludge' is sometimes affixed to these unexplained accumulations, which attend the (productive) neglect of externalities in overlapping schemas of relationality. The paper relates this 'sludge' to the emergence of a void, somewhere below the legal thresholds of accountability, into which words and actions can be thrown 'at will'. This void is muddy, and makes politics unbearable to watch; but, we are caught in a loop of reproducing the void through our own charting and supervision of action and, then, being shocked by the filth that comes out. The comment ends with a brief reflection on attending to the situation of forgotten existences and living with the ruins of past and present worlds.*

Keywords: Trumpism, Kyle McGee, toxic vitalism, accountability, legacy, void, sludge, le-geology

Rusting infrastructure, boarded up homes, crowded street corners, and empty pill packets: the remains of globalisation weave through the 2016 US election. Artefacts and anthropologies neglected by the present order of things were appropriated by Donald Trump's campaign (in particular) as signs of a fault line in the experience of globalisation. They became reference points for a 'forgotten people' – a people demanding to be 'forgotten no more'.

Climate instability, vanishing habitats, toxic water and air, and the scarring of industrial landscapes: environmental legacies accumulated over the same and (also) longer time frames shook, too, beneath the candidates' feet. This time, the remains were the source of considerable discord and contestation: their reality

emerged in disagreements about the existence and co-ordinates of ecological remains, and about the forces responsible (causation).

From the first chapter of *Heathen Earth* (2017), Kyle McGee refuses to make ‘forgotten peoples’ and the attendant fault lines of globalisation into a simple reason or foundation for the election result. The present author begins by agreeing with this: McGee is right when he says that neither voting records nor the variety of parties and positions that stand to lose or benefit from Trump’s election can support such an evaluation (2017 p. 19). Nevertheless, there is something important about the ‘charge’ of these rusting elements – about the neglected remains of past and present actions and their mobilisation over the course of 2016 – which is central to understanding and overcoming the particular kinds of violence embodied within Trumpism (and the divided worlds that bedraggle it). Existences neglected by the present order of things attract this author’s attention *not* because they ‘explain’ or ‘rationalise’ Trumpism – in fact, they more likely contradict it – but because of the steep void in accountability that they propound. This void feeds Trumpism’s murky or ‘post-factual’ character, and (importantly) changes the game for political ecology. The paper will explain both claims.

The re-surfacing of neglected remains from past and present action is definitive of the votes in 2016 (US election, Brexit) and beyond because it speaks, as McGee says, to the constructedness of society and economy (p. 19). The vulnerable and shifting shapes of things like abandoned factories, and melting ice, find their ‘charge’ by revealing themselves as replete with action and artifice – with practices, policies, institutions, strategies, technologies, objects, and other interactions.

To elicit the ‘constructedness’ of society and economy from the remains of late industrialism is to say something about the multiplicity of elements (human, non-human) that come together to make up an action, a network, and other assemblages in the world. It is to say something, too, about what happens to some parts when an action or assemblage no longer holds: things fall away, break apart; decay sets in, as in the case of our post-industrial worlds. As assemblages, however, rusting factories and the contested trajectories of melting ice are also tricky to handle because they include relational factors for which there is a deficit of known co-ordinates (in law, more generally). Factories, unemployment, and a housing crisis; toxicity, scarring, and the loss of species and habitats: these things are difficult to understand without crossing over into a realm that is not only shrouded but,

also, iteratively disavowed. They require crossing over to the other side of scripts that condition our understanding of 'what works' in the world.

Masses of externalities circulate in these 'worlds between worlds'; these worlds are host to the beings and things for which care and attention fall beyond the present order of things (as profit, growth, electoral gain, etc.). Uncared-for beings and things form into assemblages and material legacies over time, whereby they evoke post-industrial landscapes, ecological degradation, and the phenomenon of forgotten peoples, etc. They do so on account of the discontinuities and disavowals, which arise under the 'cover of law'. This 'cover' makes ecological disaster and commons destruction, abandonment, inequality, and never-ending amounts of financial fraud, 'everywhere, eminent, and normal' (Fortun 2014).

What is this cover? How does it appear? Scott Veitch traces the origins of the problem to the 'boundedness' of the (liberal legal) scripts that support action, and the emphasis on subjects that make sense of things by framing out a world (2007). Lines are drawn, beyond which accountability practices have little to no purchase (because the action and consequence occur 'off grid'). Voids form in which 'irresponsibility' is rife, but raises no sanction. These voids underwrite the (discursively civil but calculable) violence of a modern world.

Tight couplings between technical, legal, political-economic, social and discursive systems add to this view of things significantly. They create a really intense legal complex in which attention to 'what works' in the scripts of law, economy, culture, and politics, etc., increasingly intersect. Each loses its distinctiveness at the critical point of tracing and/or governing associations (and imposing correlative obligations), with the resultant density 'covering' abandonment and prolonged externalisation. They do so because intersecting networks (actually) cherish their darker legacies by corroborating one and another; they increase the range of their capabilities by installing certain (shared) exiles and external accumulations semi-permanently.

The term 'sludge' is sometimes affixed to the resultant mix-up of legacies and to the 'unexplained' accumulations, which attend the (productive) neglect of externalities in overlapping schemas of relationality (Fortun 2014). 'Sludge' captures the difficulties with tracing associations in a shrouded realm. Why the financial crisis happened, how many lives are defined by modern-day slavery practices, how many existences are threatened by a four-degree global temperature rise: these things involve a plethora of actions and assemblages, many of which cannot be read off the scripts or charts. Instead, parts 'of what things stand for' fall beyond (legal)

thresholds, into a sphere where connections are submerged or cut (this is what it means to create a closed interactional space, what it means to 'act'). But these lines of forgetting also become ground in, if parts (beings, things) fall out of the picture for a long time and if patterns set in. This happens when the intersecting networks that take precedence (competition, financialisation, fossil fuels, etc.) lock together, rigourising lines. It happens when actors or networks defend their exterior-side by 'derealising' (or 'managing') subalterns produced within the web of their calculations (Butler 2004, pp. 33-36). Elements externalised remain outcast insofar as they are stunned by the totalising stability of expansive networks and, under a rubric of 'precarity', begin to drift back to 'ground' (Butler 2009).

Implicated externalities, or parts, lose their shape and co-ordinates because they are piled up and held together – patterned but without distinction. They lose shape because, even off-grid, the forgotten parts encounter the same over-reaching pressures to be liquid and transform (to 'work'). A great big sludgery rises up over the *longue durée*, which (importantly) is perfectly *sub-factual*. It flows like effluent – releasing pressure, sometimes (even) invigorating the present order of things.

This invigoration of the present (order of things) is counter-intuitive, of course. Sludge is toxic, clatchy, and oozy stuff. It strikes a material contrast to the steel, glass, 'supertrees', and artificial waterfalls of the 'working side' (Myers 2015). As such (clatchy and un-dynamic), sludge would seem to ill befit the doing of vitalization or resurgence, and to inculcate the opposite set of intentions – e.g. of somehow disciplining the present by marking out worlds and existences that need accommodation and adjustment, attention and cleaning up.

Here lie the (remaining, tattered) fibres of modernism. But, if Latour is right, and 'we have never been modern' (1993), the two things (toxicity and the wish to clean up) do not necessarily synchronise in this order. Rather, a colossal amount of harms (crisis and inequality, debt-wrecked and financialised economies, ecological abuse and species wipeout) amass below the thresholds of accountability. And, as a colossal void in the network, this mass operates less like a discipline over actors and more like a field of opportunity – for resourcing actions and ensuring the maximum extension of the scripts. Off-grid worlds are an active site of dynamism and 'doing', thus – of 'toxic vitalism'. This 'vitalism' is toxic because it draws on opportunities implicit in the sludge to resource (or extend) action by 'managing' interruptive feedback (because so little of cause/genesis is known/charted).

It is hard to think about Trump, or Brexit, without thinking about this sludge and void in the modular scripts

through which we understand our past, present, and future. The two things underwrite the murky character of both votes – the plastic vulnerabilities, the fake news – more than the becoming of artefacts and anthropologies counted out as waste (which, as earlier stated, more likely contradict Trumpism). Sludge flows into a void that is sub-accountability, meaning that words and actions are ably thrown into it without consequence or grief. Companies have been doing this – profiting from artefacts and anthropologies for which no one is responsible – for a long time, with only irregular interruptions (Moncrieff, forthcoming). Trump's (own) sweatshops, prejudiced words and actions, and finance's resurgent power, henceforth, join commons destruction, beleaguered communities and workers as things that can be 'thrown in'.

This finding of 'sludgery' connects pretty well with what McGee says in *Heathen Earth* about the 'shifts' in the circuits of political enunciation that we are experiencing in real-time. Content is less important than tone; subjecting political claims to scrutiny is 'like nailing jelly to a wall' (McGee 2017, p. 23). The president taps into a 'subterranean, unofficial world of "dark causalities"', chains of qualification and categorization capably formed in a void, which challenge and amend the range of publicly acceptable explanations for the state of the world (p. 27).

McGee associates this outcome with the 'body of the despot' through which legal circuits are re-directed and re-shaped (p. 27). Exiles disavowed by the dominant modes of rationalisation (economic, financial, technological) move towards new (and uncomfortable) avenues for recognition and renewal (nationalism, law and order, racism and sexism, etc.). Stickiness matters in a void, where certain existences have ceased to count. And saying sticky things offers perverse 'comforts', reflects McGee, for those who value the chance to 'retroactively approve and endorse the destructive forces that have torn through their lives' (p. 22).

It is possible, however, to place too much emphasis on the supposed 'comforts' of a body here (sovereign, naturalistic, despotic, or otherwise) and to underplay the radical waywardness that spreading sludgery and the silos of disregard institute. Because it is this steep void – the patterning of displacement in interlocking networks, the eradication of inconsistent worlds on loop – that is muddy, and that makes politics unbearable to watch. We are caught in a loop of producing the void through our own charting and supervision of action, and then being shocked by the filth that comes out.

It is hard not to recognise McGee's discovery of 'geocide' as the inevitable outcome of this fork in the road, of 'Heathen Earth', of 'laying waste' the world that is 'already dead' (2017, p. 90). It is hard not to echo the

insistence on vital, creative and dynamic forces of the earth, human and non-human, as a mode of responsiveness (of 'response-ability') (p. 81). But these collusions must also force us back to the void and its potentially subterranean character. Because, importantly, the fork in the road that we stand before is not just between the vertigo of political sovereignty and the vitalist adventures of association that might bring politics 'back down to earth'. The fork, rather, takes us all the way down, like a lightning strike, to toxic vitalism and the possibility that this is something that drags existences somewhere below the surface.

Toxic vitalism is when beings shift between multiple reversals in directionality, loops, and unstable or unpredictable transmissions; when sludgery offers up new lands and inhabitants for reclamation and supports the reassertion of sovereign and extractive mentalities (Butler 2004). Crucial here is a boundary, or legal threshold, which has to be treated very carefully, because of its capacity to open onto more than two worlds (vital/inert, legal/illegal). Between these worlds is a void – shrouded and un-mapped, uncertain and indistinct – into which beings either fall and become 'forgotten' or must generously commit their energy 'to all'.

Forgotten workforces are here. Sweatshops are here. Victims of exploitative credit practices are here. Boarded-up communities, and peoples and minorities asked to keep their heads down are here. Austerity-wrecked parts of the European project are here. The testimony of ecological existences and 'non-humans' in our world suggest a long history of being here. Not legal or illegal, not vital nor inert, but intermittently drawn upon (for resourcing actions) and sacrificially dispensed with for the 'greater good'.

Again, I agree with McGee that the stories of these existences be unleashed and circulated, in whole and freely. I broadly like the idea of 'encircling enemies' to neutralize them (McGee 2017, p. 93), and petitioning for remedies through the sheer force of 'existential exigency' (p. 123). But, at the same time, I do not think that it is possible for the full spectrum of forgotten beings to press on thresholds, if their ordinary places of habitation are immersed in sludge (and they are there subject to extractive rationalities). And, as this is an ordinary and extended place of habitation for many, it is 'everywhere, eminent, and normal'; the void and sludge might meaningfully be *thought of* (and cared for) *singly*, as such.

What does this mean? I think it means, in practice, adding to and perhaps even complicating what McGee has to say about 'geodicy', or 'political contestation through the medium of ecology, its being and categories' (p. 91), and his ambitions to 'compose the maximally real world' (p. 98). McGee identifies a sub-set of 'low-lying

regions', where efforts at improving 'connective synthesis' could be concentrated. He associates these regions with 'the poor' (p. 101). But this category of beings ('the poor') needs more definition; and if we think about the homophonic link with 'geodesy', this definition might logically extend to laying down sets of co-ordinates (for beings and things in a void).

But where are they, 'the poor'? Where is the void? This brings the present author to an important point of conversation with McGee because she wonders about the singular reversion to 'grounded struggle' upon which geodicy's 'synthesis of diverse practices' relies. For this struggle to occur there is a loose assumption that we all share the same ground. But what if the low-lying regions of concern extend, in parts, into strata that look more like underground? What if they reach into subterranean zones beneath the earth's (juridical) surface, and between the minerals, rocks, and organic remains that we have come to experience as 'ground'?

These possibilities bring us back to the central claim, which is that scripts and concepts that establish connections between different entities generate their own forgotten worlds. We see eruptions from these worlds, as per Trump or Brexit, where decomposing materials are 'heated' and then 'heaved up, fractured, and contorted' (Hutton, cited in Lyell 1997, p. 14). We learn of their recovery and synthesis through the processes of 'jurimorphosis' that combine with wider efforts to expand our understanding of 'what works' in the world. But both of these things might still put us (stunningly) *before* the full complement of law's geographies, with a deficit in attention to law's subterranean deposits or sub-terrestrial threads, with the reversion to ground ('what works') scratching existential ignominy into the earth's surface.

What instead? Might we develop a set of more relevant extensions for sensing the subterranean parts to our scripts, assemblages, and formations? Might Trump and Brexit mark a necessary beginning for new routines of investigation, concerned specifically with what we might (boldly) call sub-surface 'le-geology'? The term draws our attention to the horizons of *time* and *legacy*, which do much in the earth sciences to extend our understanding into the earth's deepest and darkest places. Could these extensions assist us, too, in rooting through our own voids and sludgery and in '(re)-building worlds' (before ignominy or volcanicity set in)?

Attention to the temporal dimensions of forgetting and exclusion makes legible changes in the condition and perceptibility of the affected *over time*; it underscores clashes between different worlds, periods of disturbance and repose. Legacy thinking implies critical and empirical awareness of the wider demands, long and

short-range, made by actors and networks (state, corporate, financial etc.) on existences and the earth itself. The ambition is to use their combination to deliver the void to 'thought' (Haraway, 2016), and to bring into the present happenings and relations that are (now) absent (ibid, p. 36). Certainly, these horizons could strengthen caring by placing every one of us (beings and things) among the 'ruins of older worlds' (Hutton, cited in Lyell 1997, p. 14).

It is possible that working *among* the sludge might tempt us to *ballast it with more earth*; we might encounter the difficulties that McGee associates with politics, representation, and critique (avenues for potential totalisation). But the point that the author has tried to make in this short comment is that totalities are already at work: totalising networks and instrumentalities, which break often into sludge. Trump's politics are completely covered in filth. But they are filthy also because of a retreat from thinking the voids and from (critical) exposure of earths' (economic) systems, which for too long have roamed over us without adequate explanation or accountability (for their impact and resource intensity).

So, yes, bring forward the raw materials of the earth; allow this planet and its beings to finally seize us. But we must combine this with attending directly and with open eyes to the sludge, and to the 'worlds that fall between worlds'. We must do so because it is this void and this long-running sludgery which allow Trump to be Trump, Brexit to be Brexit, and existence to be always more shameful than 'what works'.

**NOTE on pages cited for McGee, *Heathen Earth*: page references to McGee may require some adjustment upon the book's publication; the paper will be updated accordingly.*

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