

Decolonising the earth: Anticolonial environmentalism and the soil of empire

Abstract

The relationship between humanity and the soil is an increasingly important topic in social theory. However, conceptualisations of the soil developed by anticolonial thinkers at the high point of the movement for self-determination between the 1940s and the 1970s have remained largely ignored. This is a shame, not least because theorists like Eric Williams, Walter Rodney, Suzanne Césaire and Amílcar Cabral were concerned with the soil. Building on recent work on human-soil relations and decolonial ecology, we argue that these four thinkers conceptualised the connection between soil, empire, and anticolonial revolt. Williams and Rodney ground understanding of soil degradation in global relations of economic power, while Césaire and Cabral reconceptualise postcolonial nationhood in terms of the mutability and diversity of the soil. The article concludes by suggesting that these two anticolonial counterpoints, global connectivity and more-than-human identification, anticipate and deepen contemporary attempts to decolonise ecological thinking.

Keywords

Anticolonialism, decolonial ecology, soil, monocultures, plantation, colonialism, self-determination

Introduction

Dutty Boukman was one of the first leaders of the Haitian Revolution. A charismatic religious leader, he played a pivotal role in the earliest days of the uprising of enslaved peoples against their owners in 1791. Most significantly, Boukman presided over a ceremony in the woods at Bois-Caïman that was the catalyst for the revolt. Very little is known about Boukman, with the historical records sketchy on his life prior to the outbreak of the insurrection in 1791, his role in the revolt, and the circumstances surrounding his death (Geggus, 2002; James, 1989). Nevertheless, it is generally thought that Dutty Boukman was bought by a slaveholder in St. Domingue from a plantation in Jamaica (Dubois, 2004). Importantly, the term *dutty* has a particular meaning in Jamaican creole. The word derives from the Twi (a dialect of Akan spoken in West Africa) word *dóte*, which translates as soil, earth, clay or mud, an association reinforced by the word's phonetic affinity with the English word *dirty* (Cassidy and Le Page, 2002: 166). *Dutty* continues to be used to refer to the soil or the earth by Jamaicans. For instance, Louise Bennett's poem "Dutty Tough" contains the following line: 'Rain a fall but dutty tough' (Bennett, 1966: 120). For the poor farmers of Bennett's poem, the hardness of the soil is one of the sources of their immiseration.

The name Dutty Boukman suggests the closeness of the Haitian revolutionary leader to the soil. Quite literally, he is an earthly man of the book, bringing together the intimacy with the soil experienced by labourers on the plantations of the Caribbean and a mode of knowledge that promised liberation from the degradations of enslavement. It would be wrong to say that there is any strong evidence that Dutty Boukman's association with the soil played a role in allowing him to assume leadership of the revolt. However, a leader who embodied the close relationship between enslaved Africans and the ground on which they laboured appears an ideal figurehead for the Haitian Revolution. What Aimé Césaire (1981: 195, our translation) calls the 'Boukman moment [...] of feverish inspiration and prophetism' in the early stages of the

revolution emerged out of the bowels of the earth, the soil beneath the feet of the planters suddenly crumbling to reveal an alternative future. Indeed, the resistive quality of the soil, that it could be made an ally in the struggle against slavery and colonialism, was also evident in the practices of maroon communities, who, according to Sylvia Wynter (n.d., 77), swore an oath of solidarity to each other and against the world of the plantation by ‘kissing the earth’.

It is our aim to demonstrate that these speculations on the relationship between the soil and anticolonial revolt inspired by Dutty Boukman’s sobriquet are not arbitrary. There is a rich tradition of anticolonial thinkers addressing questions of the soil, both to critique the environmental consequences of empire for the health of the earth and to elaborate a postcolonial world where human-soil relations are reconstituted on a new basis. In this article, we unearth the latent concern with the soil in the works of four iconic anticolonial thinkers of the mid-twentieth century: Eric Williams, Walter Rodney, Suzanne Césaire and Amílcar Cabral. In distinct but complementary ways, these thinkers were interested in the relationship between the soil, empire and anticolonial revolution. To borrow Adom Getachew’s (2019a: 2) term, they were engaged in the task of worldmaking, or the idea that the realisation of ‘self-determination’ required more than simply the foundation of new nations but, instead, the establishment of a ‘global anticolonial counterpoint that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination’. At the highpoint of the anticolonial movement between the 1940s and the 1970s, there was a desire for a totalising change, in which all the institutions of empire were put into question. We suggest that one of the old imperial practices that was problematised in this moment was the relationship between humanity and the soil. For Williams, Rodney, Césaire and Cabral, the degradations of the soil under colonial rule exemplified the problems of empire; the violent exploitation of the earth left a wasteland that required careful cultivation to be returned to a state of health. Struggles over the soil were thus one component of the

broader desire for self-determination in the mid-twentieth century; the world could only be remade by reposing and resolving the agrarian question.

The soil has become an object of explicit concern in social theory in recent years, with a range of scholars examining how the distinctive materiality of the ground beneath our feet interacts with social institutions and cultural imaginaries (for overviews, see Tironi et al., 2021; Krzywoszynska and Marchesi, 2020). The soil is not merely an ahistorical given, something that exists in all times and places in the same way, but instead something formed and reformed through the actions of humans and the impact of non-human forces, whether that be earthworms (Meulemans, 2020) or fertiliser (Clark and Foster, 2012). The task is to trace the ‘socialization of soils, and the soiling of the social’, as well as recognising the more-than-human nature of soil change and its distinctive life beyond human intervention (Tironi et al., 2021: 17). In this article, we use this literature as a lens through which to read Williams, Rodney, Césaire and Cabral. Social theoretical accounts of the soil provide a conceptual language through which to elaborate the relationship between the soil and self-determination in the work of anticolonial revolutionaries.

Now, it would be wrong to say that questions of empire have been missing from the recent social theoretical literature on the soil (see Tironi et al., 2021). Scholars have examined the imperial context of the emergence of the Dust Bowl in the United States in the 1930s (Holleman, 2017), how matsutake mushrooms help forests grow in landscapes damaged by colonialism (Tsing, 2015), and the distinctive forms of intimacy with the soil cultivated by Indigenous agroecology (Peña, 2019). We will draw on this work as we proceed, employing these accounts of the relationship between soil and empire to frame our readings of Williams, Rodney, Césaire and Cabral. However, this article adopts a distinct approach. Rather than examining concrete instances of soil degradation associated with colonial relations of power, we engage with the writings of anticolonial theorists to understand how they approached the

soil, digging up and remoulding their fragmentary insights to conceptualise the earthly dimension of anticolonial environmentalism. In a similar fashion to how social theorists have returned to Karl Marx's (1990) theory of the metabolic rift to elaborate the distinctiveness of soil erosion under capitalism (Foster and Magdoff, 2000; Saito, 2017), this article is both a work of intellectual history and social theory. It rescues a neglected aspect of anticolonial worldmaking and, on this basis, reflects on the wider implications of these conceptualisations of human-soil relations.

Given our focus on social thought, the article is concerned with the epistemic task of the 'decolonization of knowledge', something which involves taking 'seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South' (Grosfoguel, 2010: 66; see also Connell, 2007). One means of decolonising knowledge is by focusing on the anticolonial moment of the mid-twentieth century (Getachew and Mantena, 2021).¹ This moment represents a specific 'cognitive-political problem-space', a particular ensemble of theoretical questions and strategic dilemmas centred around the issue of self-determination, with colonial power understood as 'something to be overthrown, to be overcome, in order that the colonized can progressively retake possession of their societies and their selves' (Scott, 2004, 57, 118; see also Getachew, 2019a). The theme of self-determination cuts across the four thinkers examined here, with Williams, Rodney, Césaire and Cabral analysing how different modalities of human-soil relations either undermine or facilitate the sovereignty of colonised peoples.

The article is structured as follows. In the first part, we examine the entanglement of soil and capitalism in the colonial context. Both Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) posit that the intensive cultivation of cash crops in the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa resulted in the depletion of the soil. In the second section, we turn to the material and symbolic importance of soil to nation-building in the

postcolonial world. Césaire and Cabral question the idea, associated with Herder's plant-nation analogy, that there is an immutable connection between soil and people, instead emphasising the mutually reinforcing contingency and diversity of both elements. In the conclusion, we consider how these anticolonial counterpoints, the emphasis on global connections of economic power and ecological damage in Williams and Rodney and the recognition of the material and symbolic potency of more-than-human beings in Césaire and Cabral, anticipate and reinforce contemporary attempts to decolonise ecological thinking in response to the climate crisis.

The dead soils of racial capitalism

One way of telling human history is through the entwinement of the soil and labouring activities. On these accounts, 'the history of many civilizations follows a common story line', with groups of humans settling on fertile soil, ruthlessly exploiting this resource to produce food in an unsustainable fashion, and then suffering a catastrophic breakdown of social relations (Montgomery, 2007: 5). The past of humanity is littered with 'shocking examples of once-thriving regions reduced to desolation by man-induced soil degradation' (Hillel, 1992: 4). There are problems with this kind of narrative. Most obviously, it is empirically questionable. Simplistic accounts of the rise and fall of civilisations focused on the misuse of environmental resources fail to capture the sheer diversity of past ways of life. Indeed, many peoples of the distant past established sustainable economies, including the 'elaborate and unpredictable subsistence routines' of the early inhabitants of the Amazonian rain forest around 500BC (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 278).

Indeed, one of the insights of the social theoretical literature on the soil is that regimes of soil management are historically specific. In particular, as theorists who have returned to Marx's notion of the metabolic rift suggest, modern capitalist modes of agriculture have a different

relationship with the soil than pre-capitalist forms of agriculture (Foster and Magdoff, 2000; Saito, 2017). Marx (1990) drew on the work of the chemist Justus von Liebig to examine the problem of declining soil fertility in Victorian England. This crisis provoked drastic measures in the nineteenth century, from the use of indentured labour to extract guano in South America for the application on English farms (Clark and Foster, 2012) to employing workhouse inmates to ground up the bones of those that died on the battlefield of Waterloo to produce fertiliser (Ware, 2022). For Marx, the crisis of soil fertility was not simply another episode in the history of the failure of humanity to respect the limits of natural resources. As Kohei Saito (2017: 169, emphasis added) instructively remarks, Marx investigated ‘the causes of diminishing crop returns as a *specific modern manifestation* of material limits in the sphere of agriculture’. Capitalist society, in fermenting processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, ‘disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth’ through the emergence of the division between the town and the country, with the latter tasked with producing food for consumption by workers in the former (Marx, 1990: 290). The waste produced by the workers of the city fails to find its way back to the farms where food is produced, resulting in a situation where the Thames is polluted by human excrement while the soil in rural regions is starved of manure. The important point here is not that soil erosion is specific to capitalism. There are clearly precapitalist and (at least nominally) non-capitalist social formations, such as the Soviet Union, where agricultural practices had deleterious effects on the soil (Engel-Di Mauro, 2014: 119; Weiner, 2017: 536). Moreover, the metabolic rift thesis has important limitations, most particularly in terms of its difficulty in accounting for the ‘foundational liveliness of soils’ (Krzywoszynska, 2020: 229; see also Engel-Di Mauro, 2014; Münster and Poerting, 2016). However, the Marxian account is a useful starting point precisely because it draws out the historical specificity of the capitalist regime of soil management and, in doing so, questions the

universalising tendency of other histories of human-soil relations, ideas that are particularly important to the conceptualisations of the soil advanced by Eric Williams and Walter Rodney.

With Marx, both Williams and Rodney are concerned with tracing the contours of a modern mode of soil relations in terms of the rise of capitalism. At the same time, Williams and Rodney demonstrate that some of the features of soil exhaustion identified by Marx in the metropole do not hold in the colonial zone. The plantation system of production and colonial demand for cash crops intensified and altered key aspects of the capitalistic form of soil erosion. Williams and Rodney are concerned with how the coming together of racial violence, colonial domination, and capitalistic agriculture produced a distinctive mode of environmental destruction. Theorists of racial capitalism have asserted that the transatlantic slave trade expressed a particular logic of the modern world system; it is neither a hangover from a pre-capitalist mode of production but nor can it be reduced to the forms of exploitation found in the metropole (Vergès, 2017). The task for Williams and Rodney is similar: to demonstrate that soil erosion in the colonial world is both distinctly modern *and* different to that found in imperial centres.

Capitalism and Slavery, Eric Williams's famous study of slavery in the British Caribbean, is a bridgehead between debates on racial capitalism and social theoretical conceptualisations of the soil. The book is best known for offering an analysis of the abolition of slavery grounded in the history of global capitalism. Williams rejects a moralistic approach to abolition, which contends that the British decided to end the slave trade in 1804 and then slavery in 1833 because of a normative epiphany about its inherent wrongness. Instead, Williams suggests that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the economic function of slavery for capitalism was weakening. While slavery had underpinned the 'commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century', the 'industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century [...] turned around and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works' (Williams, 1944: 210).

Williams's account of the demise of slavery is laced with references to the soil. *Capitalism and Slavery*, though seldom read in ecological terms (see Eichen, 2020: 47), makes it clear that soil erosion was a necessary correlate of the emergence of the plantation in the Caribbean. The 'law of slave production', as Williams (1944: 145) comments, is that regions where 'soil was more fertile and less exhausted' were profitable in the short-term but were quickly degraded by the intensive cultivation associated with monocrops like tobacco and sugar. The slaveholders of the Caribbean faced not only the problem of controlling recalcitrant and rebellious labourers but also the limits of the earth on which their prosperity was based: 'From the standpoint of the grower, the greatest defect of slavery lies in the fact that it quickly exhausts the soil' (Williams, 1944: 7). This was not simply a choice by the plantation owners, something that they could conceivably have avoided had they adopted more sustainable agricultural techniques. It was built into the nature of plantation slavery as an economic system: 'The labor supply of low social status, docile and cheap, can be maintained in subjection only by systematic degradation and by deliberate efforts to suppress its intelligence. Rotation of crops and scientific farming are therefore alien to slave societies' (Williams, 1944: 7). Slave labour is 'given reluctantly, it is unskilful, it lacks versatility'; slaveholders struggled to direct their labourers in any coherent fashion, making it impossible to establish anything but the crudest forms of agricultural production (Williams, 1944: 6).

In fact, Williams suggests that, even if the end of slavery needs to be understood in economic terms, the *internal history* of slavery in the Caribbean is an environmental one, with the development of slavery in different regions dependent on the fertility of their soil. This was especially evident in the British Caribbean, which, as one of the first places where the plantation system was instituted, was also one of the first places where the soil became exhausted:

The British West Indies had clearly lost their monopoly of sugar cultivation. In 1789 they could not compete with Saint Domingue; nor in 1820 with Mauritius; nor in 1830 with Brazil; nor in 1840 with Cuba. Their day had passed. Limited in extent, slave or free, they could not compete with larger areas, more fertile, less exhausted, where slavery was still profitable. (Williams, 1944: 152)

Ultimately, however, no region could escape the ‘law of slave production’, with all ‘large tracts of fertile, unexhausted soil’ eventually degraded by the plantation system (Williams, 1944: 113-114).

Williams’s conceptualisation of the plantation system in *Capitalism and Slavery* proved influential for anticolonial thinkers of the subsequent decades. In particular, the scholars associated with the New World Group at the University of the West Indies and the Dar es Salaam School at the University of Dar es Salaam advanced a ‘theorization of the plantation as a modernizing institution that produced a distinctive colonial modernity’ (Getachew, 2019b: 41). Walter Rodney, who was from British Guiana but worked at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought together the insights of both of these schools in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, which was first published in 1972. At first glance, Rodney’s history appears less ecologically sensitive than *Capitalism and Slavery*. Whereas Williams shows an attentiveness to the dangers of soil erosion from the earliest pages of his study, Rodney (1981: 4) forwards a more conventional understanding of the relationship between humanity and the environment, defining ‘economic development’ as the ‘capacity to win a living from nature’. Development is understood in terms of the ability to exploit nature. The problem is that the peoples of Africa have not been allowed to exercise this capacity for development, with the forms of domination associated with European colonialism blunting their ability to win a living from nature.

Yet, it would be too hasty to suggest that, for Rodney, development consists in nothing more than a pitched battle between humanity and nature.² At key moments of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Rodney (1981: 6; emphasis added) offers a subtly different definition of development, stating that ‘development cannot be seen purely as an economic affair, but rather as an overall social process which is dependent upon the outcome of man’s efforts to *deal with his natural environment*’. Dealing with the natural environment suggests a less exploitative relationship than winning a living from nature, with Rodney implying that the task is to advance human capacities *with* rather than *against* nature. Indeed, an aspect of the underdevelopment of Africa is precisely the Europeans’ failure to deal with the environment in a sustainable fashion. As Rodney (1981: 40) notes, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, Africans had developed advanced knowledge of their environment: ‘Africans everywhere had arrived at a considerable understanding of the total ecology – of the soils, climate, animals, plants, and their multiple interrelationships’. If the ‘first prerequisite for mastery of the environment is knowledge of that environment’, then African agriculture before European colonialism was a success (Rodney, 1981: 40).

Pre-capitalist agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa, however, was fundamentally disturbed by European colonialism. Rodney emphasises that the demands by European powers for Africans to produce cash crops, whether via pressure on peasant farmers or the establishment of plantations, had destructive consequences. The rise of monocultures across sub-Saharan Africa – rubber in Liberia, cocoa in Ghana, cotton in Uganda, coffee in Angola, sisal in Tanzania – bound together the underdevelopment of the African economy and the degradation of its environment. On the one hand, the monocultures of the colonial zone ‘made colonial economies entirely dependent on the metropolitan buyers of their produce’ and thus created a relationship of economic subordination between Europe and Africa (Rodney, 1981: 235). On the other hand, monocultures are ‘very demanding on the soil’ (Rodney, 1981: 219). If

‘diversified agriculture was within the African tradition’ and allowed for the sustainable management of the soil, then monoculture ‘was a colonialist invention’ that steadily degraded the previously fertile farmland of Africa (Rodney, 1981: 234).³ Desertification was the most serious consequence of the rise of monocultures: ‘In countries like Senegal, Niger, and Chad, [...] the steady cultivation led to soil impoverishment and encroachment of the desert’ (Rodney, 1981: 219). In simple terms, ‘when the colonialists started upsetting the thin topsoil, the result was disastrous’ (Rodney, 1981: 40).

Capitalism and Slavery and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* suggest that European colonialism inaugurated a distinctive mode of human-soil relations. With Marx, Williams and Rodney emphasise that capitalistic agriculture disturbs the metabolic relationship between humanity and soil. Both plantations in the Caribbean and monocultures in Africa are essentially modern phenomena; they are novel forms of agrarian practice that are predicated on the drive to extract resources from soil as quickly and effectively as possible. At the same time, the mode of agriculture in the Caribbean and Africa is not simply a mirror image of that found in the metropole. Williams and Rodney bring the issue of soil erosion into dialogue with the question of self-determination. They are concerned with how the entwinement of global capitalism and ecological damage has undermined the economic independence of the colonial world. In the context of the broader anticolonial problem-space, the degradation of the soil has reduced the autonomy of the colonial zone and made it dependent on the metropole. The wastelands left by racial capitalism, including the dead soils of the plantation and cash crop monocultures, stand as a bulwark against self-determination in the full sense.

More specifically, Williams and Rodney highlight three distinguishing features of soil degradation in the colonial zone. First, most obviously, rather than highlighting the divide between the country and the city in explaining human-soil relations, Williams and Rodney emphasise the divide between the colonial zone and the metropole. The soil of the former is

sacrificed for the enrichment of the latter, with the fertile land of the Caribbean and Africa ruthlessly exploited and then abandoned. Second, in contrast to the crisis about soil erosion in England in the nineteenth century, the degradation of the earth in the colonial zone created no panic for the colonisers. All the time that ‘fertile soil is practically unlimited’ in the colonial zone, its depletion did not require a response (Williams, 1944: 7). Although the rise of monocultures may have spelt disaster for the peoples of Africa, resulting in ‘chronic undernourishment, malnutrition, and deterioration’, it posed no fundamental challenge for the Europeans; crops were grown and profits were made (Rodney, 1981: 236). Finally, soil depletion in the metropole spurred technological and scientific developments, with the discovery of new fertilizers and the transportation of excrement from the cities to the country providing means of easing, if not resolving, the metabolic rift (Clark and Foster, 2012). By contrast, the plantation and cash crop systems of the colonial worlds were dependent on subduing similar developments in the Caribbean and Africa, with Rodney (1981: 221) noting the ‘pitiable amount [of funds] devoted to agricultural improvement in Africa during the colonial period’. As a consequence, the underdevelopment of the colonial zone went hand-in-hand with the degradation of its soil; the two processes, economic and environmental, reinforced one another.

Nation, plant and soil after colonialism

For Williams and Rodney, soil is an economic resource, something that can be used (and abused) in different ways to meet the material needs of humanity. However, this is not the only way in which soil can be approached. The soil is a powerful means of making and remaking identities. As Mieka Erley (2021: 3) notes, modernity was accompanied by the emergence of ‘new mythologies of soil [...] in the cultural sphere’, with the flourishing of nationalism from

the eighteenth century onwards charged with a set of ‘myths, discourses, and metaphors related to soil’. Most famously, the virulent form of nationalism developed by the Nazi regime in Germany propounded the slogan “blood and soil” (Bassin, 2004). The soil referred not only to the idea that the German nation was inextricably bound up with the geographical area of Germany itself, but more profoundly that there was something in the soil that made Germans superior to others. These claims found philosophical expression in Martin Heidegger’s work, whose paeans for rural life in the 1930s were centred on the notion of *Bodenständigkeit*, which refers to ‘a people’s steadfast or long-established (*ständig*) rootedness in the soil (*Boden*) or native earth’ (Bambach, 1998: xx).

If there is one figure who embodies attempts to fuse the soil and national identity, it is the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. In the late eighteenth century, Herder posited a Romantic account of the nation. Herder repeatedly invoked the ‘organic metaphor of a plant’ when discussing nations, painting a picture of ‘the world as a garden in which nations grow like flowers, blossom, and bear fruit’ (Barnard, 2003: 176; see also Erley, 2021). For Herder (2004: 135), the soil in which the plant grows is fundamental to its constitution and form: ‘Look at this plant: how does it grow? Whence its blossom, its flourishing? It stands upon its own soil, in its natural place’. When located on their own soil, plants flower and flourish but, if moved to an alien soil, they are likely to wither and die. Consequently, ‘transplanted flowers in a foreign land’ long for ‘their native soil’ (Herder, 2004: 134).

In the metropole, an appeal to the symbolic power of the soil provided a means of consolidating a sense of national identity. The soil also played a role in anticolonial nation-building projects. However, Herder’s plant-nation analogy was adapted and changed in crucial ways by anticolonial intellectuals like Suzanne Césaire and Amílcar Cabral. It is worth noting here that anticolonial nationalism was more than a mere transplantation of the nationalism of Europe. Partha Chatterjee (1986: 18), primarily focusing on Indian nationalism, makes this point

particularly powerfully: ‘The national question here is, of course, historically fused with a colonial question. The assertion of national identity was, therefore, a form of the struggle against colonial exploitation.’ Similar dynamics are at stake in the Caribbean (Puri, 2004) and sub-Saharan Africa (Morier-Genoud, 2012), the two regions at stake in the remainder of this section, where notions of nationhood are marked and transformed by the colonial experience.

This is clear in Césaire’s account of rootedness in Martinique. In her account of Martinican identity in her writings in the 1940s, Césaire does not appeal to an unbreakable bond between people and soil. This is partly because the history of genocide and enslavement on the island made any narrative that grounds Caribbean identity in an immutable soil appear unconvincing. Since the Indigenous peoples of the island were decimated by European powers and the majority of the population originated from Africa, no one is able to claim the soil as their own. As Césaire (2012: 29) suggests in “Malaise d’une civilisation” [“The Malaise of a Civilization”] (1942), an essay published in the influential Martinican magazine *Tropiques* that was founded by Césaire and her husband Aimé Césaire, ‘the horrific conditions of transplantation onto a foreign soil’ disturbed any sense of rootedness. In a manner that recalls Herder’s plant-nation analogy, the Caribbean experience, for Césaire, involves alienation from the soil rather than a feeling of *Bodenständigkeit*: ‘Over the course of centuries, how is it that there are no viable survivals of the unique styles, for example, of those that flourished so magnificently on African soil?’ (Césaire, 2012: 28-29).

At this point, it appears that Césaire’s account of the relationship between people and soil confirms the essentialism of Herder’s conception. She appears to suggest that a healthy culture is dependent on an exchange with a native soil, something that is possible in Europe but impossible in the Caribbean. This position is apparent in the work of Aimé Césaire. His conceptualisation of negritude suggests that Black Caribbean identity can be revived through the imaginative return to African soil. In the first volume of *Tropiques* in 1941, he emphasised

the cultural infertility of Caribbean soil: 'A silent and sterile land. [...] No art. No poetry. Not one seed. Not one shoot' (Césaire, 1996: 88).

However, as others have noted, Suzanne Césaire alters and adapts key dimensions of Aimé Césaire's negritude (Rabbitt, 2008; Sourieau, 1994). She questions the idea that there is a fundamental relationship between any particular people and any particular soil, emphasising the historical mutability of both components. The 'geodeterminism' of Herder's plant-nation analogy is replaced by a 'constructivist' vision of a dynamic exchange between people and soil (Münster and Poerting, 2016: 252, our translation). So, rather than describing Martinican soil as sterile, she emphasises the consequences of the exchange between African labourers and the soil of the Caribbean: '[...] one cannot deny that on Martinican soil the coloured race produces strong, robust, adaptable men and women of natural elegance and great beauty' (Césaire, 2012: 28). In the centuries that have passed since the enforced transportation of Africans to Martinique, they have 'adapted [themselves] to this land' and are now in a position 'to produce authentic works of art' that express the distinctive historical and geographical experience of enslavement and its aftermath (Césaire, 2012: 28).

The implication of Césaire's account is that no people, even those who have not been subject to enforced displacement (like the descendants of the Africans in Martinique), can assume an identity with a particular soil. *Bodenständigkeit* is formed through action, a conscious attempt to ground oneself in the soil one is inhabiting; it is not a historical given. To put this in Stuart Hall's (1997) terms, whereas Aimé Césaire was concerned with roots, Suzanne Césaire was concerned with routes, searching for the way in which a distinctly Caribbean identity has been formed through the concrete experience of slavery and colonialism. The dialectic between people and soil is not assumed but instead constructed in the Caribbean: 'It is exhilarating to imagine on these tropic shores, finally restored to their inner truth, the long-lasting fruitful harmony of humankind and soil' (Césaire, 2012: 32-33). The task is not only 'a backwards

return' to an 'African past' but also the assembly of a new identity on an alien ground: 'This land, ours, can only be what we want it to be' (Césaire, 2012: 33). No Martinicans are born to the land; they are made by participating in the dynamic exchange between people and soil, with the project of nation-formation open to anybody willing to carry on the creative work of making and remaking land, and being made and remade by it in turn. Neither people nor soil, both of which exist 'under the sign of plant life', can be taken as an ahistorical given; they are always-already formed by socio-natural processes of change and development, with both the material and cultural realm defined by impermanence and contingency (Césaire, 2012: 33).⁴

Césaire's attempts to rethink the plant-nation analogy to respond to the dynamism of both soil and people finds a response in the work of Cabral, the famed revolutionary leader who led the resistance to Portuguese rule in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. It is important to note here that Cabral was trained as an agronomist. His 1952 BA thesis focused on soil erosion in Alentejo, a region in Southern Portugal (Cabral, 1988: 85-183) and he produced reports on soil erosion for the Portuguese administration in Guinea-Bissau (César, 2018; Saraiva, 2022). Like Williams and Rodney, Cabral (1988) highlighted how the colonial exploitation of the land for cash crops resulted in the rapid deterioration of the soil of the region. He undertook pioneering studies of soil erosion in rural Portugal that, whilst shaped by the *Estado Novo* dictatorship's agricultural policy, echo other Marxist-inspired accounts and prefigure the ecological concerns that distinguished the anticolonial struggle in Guinea-Bissau in the 1950s and 1960s (Saraiva, 2022). At the same time, in contrast to Williams and Rodney, Cabral's agronomy offers a longer-term perspective. Examining the life of the soil over not just decades but millennia, Cabral positioned Portuguese colonialism as a fleeting episode in a more expansive history.

For Cabral, soil is composed of both the million-year-old history of the planet and a specific set of political struggles. Importantly, the long-term history of the soil is punctuated by radical shifts, catalyzed by both human and non-human action. By digging into the land, Cabral reveals

the discontinuous history of the soil; it has not always been there and instead it is constituted and reconstituted time and time again. It is out of the process of meteorization of the rock that the outermost layer of the Earth that provides the foundation of terrestrial life on the planet, the pedosphere, is created. Cabral describes the meteorization of the rock as resulting from ‘the antagonisms between rock and climate.’ ‘Neither the rock disappears completely, nor the climatic phenomena cease to operate’ but rather, Cabral explains, ‘the rock gets integrated into a new form of negation-existence’ (1988: 92, our translation). Once created, the soil must be taken care of. The soil must be a ‘perennial good, used, and, as much as possible, enriched by the collectivity, as a contribution of each generation to the benefit of the prosperity of future generations’ (1988: 155, our translation). But colonialism is an obstacle to this: ‘Colonialism introduces in Africa a new system of production, translated as *économie de traite*. [...] From the contradictions created, day by day, the devastation of the African soil is accentuated’ (Cabral, 1988: 248, our translation).

From the perspective of the discontinuous history of soil formation, the plant-nation analogy undergoes a transformation. As Erley (2021: 3) suggests, ‘soil simultaneously attracts and frustrates attempts to give it form in our physical and cultural landscapes’, with the ‘resistance of the material itself’ confounding the stories we tell about it. In a similar fashion, Cabral deploys the socio-natural time of the soil to construct a different narrative about the nation to that conventionally implied by the plant-nation analogy. Whereas in Europe the soil was taken as a sign of the immutability of the nation, Cabral’s awareness of the radical changes in the structure of the soil, whether due to the ravages of colonialism or broader shifts over the eons of time, allows him to enlist the soil as an agent of novelty. The soil’s liability to explode into new forms is not simply an allegory for anticolonial revolution but, instead, the two processes are part of a single history of socio-natural development. The revolt against Portuguese colonialism extends a power that exists in the movement of the ground over time: to create

unprecedented forms of life. Cabral thus associates the soil with the new: ‘The nearly 10 years of struggle have [...] created a new man and a new woman [...] on the soil of the African fatherland’ (1973: 25). Anticolonial struggle ‘plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops’ (Cabral, 1973: 42). The form of nationalism that emerges from this soil is experimental and pluralist; it is open to the new. There is no one African culture that must be resurrected from the soil of the pre-colonial past but instead multiple ‘African cultures’ that are to be created from the dynamic movements of the earth in the future (Cabral, 1973: 51).

The anticolonial writings of Césaire and Cabral demonstrate the dynamism, both materially and metaphorically, of the soil in the postcolonial context. As with Williams and Rodney, Césaire and Cabral ground their conceptualisations of the soil in the broader anticolonial problem-space. They are concerned with how the soil can be enlisted as an ally in the project of achieving self-determination. Most particularly, they question the naturalness and permanence of the fusion between people and soil. Newly independent nations cannot depend on the people’s relationship with the earth to preserve their unity. Postcolonial nationhood must account for the fact that the materiality of the latter is defined by ruptures rather than stasis. Creative strategies are adopted by Césaire and Cabral to rework the Herderian plant-nation analogy in the Caribbean and Africa. In the case of Césaire, this involves highlighting how the concrete actions of Martinicans can make an alien land their own. The soil, which is not one, ceases to be a symbol of constriction, something that both binds and excludes in equal measure, but instead a material that encompasses the diverse range of experiences that have accumulated in the Caribbean. In a similar fashion, Cabral, using his knowledge as a soil scientist, appeals to the mutability of the earth, the fact that the ground beneath our feet has been subject to multiple revolutions, to pave the way for the construction of a new nation. The soil does not connote tradition alone but also the possibility for dynamic change, thus demonstrating the

fragility of the hold of Portuguese colonialism in West Africa and the possibility for new forms of political life.

To bring this section to a close, a concern can be raised about Césaire's and Cabral's attempts to rethink the relationship between soil and people in dynamic rather than static terms. While it might question certain aspects of European nationalism, it echoes settler colonial narratives. The suggestion that the bond between people and soil is contingent could be seen to reinforce the idea, propagated most famously by John Locke, that precolonial land could be justly appropriated because of the failure of its original inhabitants to engage in productive labour (Ince, 2018). However, there is an important difference here. As Lorenzo Veracini (2010: 34) emphasises, settler colonialism is often marked by the desire for 'the indigenisation of the settler collective', or the idea that there is an unbreakable connection between European settlers and the land they have appropriated. The plant-nation analogy thus returns via the construction of an *immutable* relationship between settlers and stolen soil. However, this immutability is what is resisted by Césaire and Cabral. They are concerned with creating provisional bonds between particular peoples and particular soils at particular historical moments. Neither soil nor people can be eternally fixed; each is diverse and plural, vulnerable to degradation and transformation.

Anticolonial soil, decolonial ecology, and the climate crisis

The preceding analysis has considered the conceptualisations of the soil advanced at the highpoint of anticolonialism in the mid-twentieth century. By way of conclusion, we would like to draw out some of the broader implications of the accounts of the soil offered by Williams, Rodney, Césaire and Cabral. Soil erosion experienced in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean is just one component of a broader ecological crisis inaugurated by colonialism. The anticolonial thinkers anticipate more recent attempts to formulate a decolonial ecology that is adequate to the catastrophic contours of contemporary climate change (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017; Ferdinand, 2022; Liboiron, 2021; Sultana, 2022; Vergès, 2017).

In broad terms, a decolonial approach involves recuperating the ecological knowledge of racialised and colonised peoples to articulate how *global* relations of domination and exploitation have contributed to the emergence of the climate crisis (Ferdinand, 2022; Sultana, 2022). Williams's and Rodney's accounts of soil erosion offer, in embryonic form, the outlines of a decolonial ecology. With their emphasis on the entwinement of the colony and the metropole, they demonstrate that the particular environmental challenges of any area of the world can only be understood in terms of a web of social and political relations. The fate of the soil of the Caribbean in the case of Williams and East Africa in the case of Rodney is structurally connected to a broader pattern of development and underdevelopment in which the peripheral zone is subordinated to the benefit of the core. The anticolonial counterpoint articulated around the issue of soil erosion, namely that it should be understood in terms of global relations of power and inequality, offers a particularly promising resource for deepening decolonial approaches to the climate crisis, providing a way of mending the theoretical 'fracture [that] separates the colonial history of the world from its environmental history' (Ferdinand, 2022: 3).

Decolonial ecology is not only concerned with the environmental damage associated with the rise of colonialism from the fifteenth century onwards, but also with the epistemic frameworks, particularly those that govern relations between humans and nature, fostered by coloniality. Echoing new materialist accounts of the soil (Krzywoszynska and Marchesi, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019), decolonial ecology rejects the reduction of non-human beings to inert matter that can be manipulated at will, suggesting that the sharp divide between human and non-human beings is key to both colonial domination and the climate crisis (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017). The task is to form ‘decolonial interspecies alliances’ between all those who suffer under colonial modernity, whether human or non-human (Ferdinand, 2022: 226). The drive towards the formation of an interspecies alliance is evident in flashes in Williams and Rodney, who have a keen sense for the simultaneous exhaustion of both labourers and land under the conditions of racial capitalism. However, it comes to the fore in the attempts by Césaire and Cabral to ground anticolonial modes of subjectification in the *dynamism* of the soil. They propose a mode of self-determination that forms a ‘symbiotic’ rather than ‘parasitic’ relationship with the bio-geo-chemical cycles of planetary life’ (Krzywoszynska, 2019: 672). More specifically, instead of treating non-human nature as an inert resource, they attended to the specific histories and compositions of the soils of Martinique and West Africa.

It would be wrong to suggest that the anticolonial accounts of the soil can be entirely reconciled with contemporary decolonial ecology. The anticolonial moment is a distinct problem-space that needs to be understood in its own terms. Some of the ‘old questions’ that guided anticolonial accounts ‘may lose their salience’ in the present epoch (Scott 2004, 4). Indeed, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2022: 228), in a critical commentary on Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s *The Ends of the World* (2017), notes that contemporary decolonial ecology sidelines the modernity of the anticolonial period: ‘It is interesting to observe that their method of effecting a “permanent decolonization” of anthropological thought [...] does not connect

with the emancipatory dreams not only of the late and revolutionary modernizers of Japan, China, India, and Africa, but also of someone like Frantz Fanon or, for that matter, B. R. Ambedkar.’

Williams, Rodney, Césaire and Cabral were, to one degree or another, committed to the project of revolutionary modernism in which nonhuman nature was understood as a resource to be used for social, economic and political advances. However, revolutionary modernism is not incompatible with the contemporary moment. As we have done here, past and present can be brought together to illuminate aspects of each. One of the insights of this article is that there is no strict divide between revolutionary modernism and decolonial ecology. The anticolonial moment, while not providing all the answers to issues such as the climate crisis, offers a set of concepts and provocations that reinforce and trouble attempts to decolonise ecology. Whether this be the demand for the restoration of diversified agriculture against colonial monocultures found in Williams and Rodney or the subversive accounts of rootedness found in Césaire and Cabral, the anticolonial moment offers an archive of muddy imaginaries that fulfil the promise of Dutty Boukman’s sobriquet: to decolonise the earth.

Notes

¹ Of course, no claim is made that focusing on the anticolonial moment offers the only strategy for decolonising human-soil relations. By foregrounding the contributions of the four thinkers focused on here, we hope to begin a broader dialogue, encouraging others to explore alternative decolonial forms of thought that may augment or challenge the insights of this article.

² While Rodney's ecology is largely overlooked, Leo Zeilig (2022) offers some brief comments in his recent biography.

³ Interestingly, Cabral (1988) traced the monocultures in Portuguese overseas territories to the introduction of maize monocultures in Southern Portugal in the 1930s, positing the latter as a form of internal colonisation that precipitated external colonisation.

⁴ On Césaire's (2012: 30) notion of the 'plant-human', see Nelson, 2020.

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