

Misplacing matter? Vertical practices and (hi)stories of space and power

Workshop: 6th – 8th September 2023, Augsburg University, Germany

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January 2023: activists face a bucket-wheel excavator in an open-pit coal mine in Lüzérath, Germany.

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Bruno Latour invites us to become “critical zonists”. Herein we find a call for attention to flows, exchanges, and movements in “the thin skin of the living earth” (the zone) and the urgency to consider the lasting, devastating effects of humans on the environment (2020:3). This premise that the ground is not a sealed off entity pushes us to tackle the many ways in which humans intervene in the interrelations between above ground and below ground. Such a view includes a shift from an understanding of the social world as flat to one of depth and manifold movements that proponents of the vertical turn (Braun; 2000, Elden; 2013) have done much to bring to the attention of those studying the social. Typically, largescale territorial projects are mapped onto a horizontal reading of space and time, managed at a distance, be it through geological projections or engineering feats.

Open pit mining (see image); pumping oil from the ground (Ferguson; 2005), or the tracking of groundwater (Ballesterio; 2019) all point to human practices that engage with depths and the movement of matter. Re-casting landscapes, creating voids and heaps, redirecting rivers, draining wetlands, and capturing carbon from above or heat from below at unprecedented rates repeat the same gestures: of extraction, and its counterpart: dumping. These approaches frame the environment as a ‘resource’ to exploit, focusing on its potential value, rather than the physical materiality of matter and the social cost of its movement.

Addressing the misplacements of matter from the field of the environmental humanities is to understand them not only as physical entities, but as ideas and as such as expressions of power. To do so takes more than reorientating the gaze of humanities scholars and social scientists from a horizontal to a vertical plane.

(Post-)colonial histories, geopolitical agendas, socio-technical projects, economic interests, all participate in determining the movement of matter. Which in turn shape bodies of land and violently mark bodies of people in perceivable and sometimes imperceptible ways (Yusoff; 2018). The stakes are often high to demonstrate control over these movements. Yet, they are hardly ever clean nor neat operations (Hecht; 2018).

To unseat the power that forges the movement of matter across an imagined dividing line between above and below ground, across time, this workshop therefore calls for a closer look. This sometimes entails holding the ear to the ground to discern the resistance or friction that these materials encounter (Tsing; 2005) and the obstacles that these materials pose. Matter that is moved tends to leak, shift, trickle, react, decompose (Murphy; 2017). These undesired effects may be silenced or diverted from public attention but require careful multiple readings.

To dig into the mechanisms of misplacement, displacement, and replacement of solid, liquid or gas, acid, toxic or inert matter: on-going, past, or planned we therefore invite historians, anthropologists, artists, activists, environmental humanists, political ecologists, STS scholars, to come together around a table for two days of discussion and a site visit. We want to kindle an in-depth exchange across disparate fields of inquiry into a critical study that takes concrete empirical examples as its starting point.

We warmly invite you to propose an aspect of your research or practice that relates to one of the themes laid out or responds to our call more generally:

- * Reflections on verticality as an expression of flows, exchanges, and movements in “the thin skin of the living earth”.
- * Accounts of the kinds of relations, ontological, symbolic, or cosmological, that emerge around these mass movements of matter, across time.
- * Historical or contemporary accounts dealing with protest movements against dumping or extraction.
- * Stories about abandoned mines, drained wetland, waste dumps, dams, or whole regions that are lived in and by populations that inherit modified undergrounds.
- * Narratives about what moves alongside, unexpectedly, or inevitably with the matter that is intended to be moved.

Due date for proposals: no more than 500 words and one image **23rd June 2023**.

Send to simone.mueller@uni-a.de & livia.cahn@rcc.lmu.de.

The first workshop session is planned in person for September 2023 at the University of Augsburg, Germany. Accommodation and travel costs within Europe can be covered. This workshop is supported by the German Research Foundation at the University of Augsburg.

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