

Introduction to “Thinking with More-Than-Human Subsurfaces”

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As part of an interdisciplinary research team called “Thinking Deep,” which looks at “novel creative approaches to the subsurface” (Royal Holloway, University of London, n.d.), we registered a growing interest in the more-than-human subsurface across art, geography and beyond. As such, we put together a call for papers for the 2023 American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, inviting papers that give thought to the environments below our feet—environments which have been “decentred from our imagination” (Hawkins, 2020, p. 4). In response, we received a wide range of interdisciplinary presentations that were willing to think-with cave-, marine- and soil-dwelling creatures; microbial networks and other elements of the subsurface. We ran two sessions and heard from academics and artists whose research centres the theme of the more-than-human within the subsurface, and who explore the ways in which our disciplines can best engage with these underground beings, habitats, and imaginaries. The papers interrogated the implications that thinking-with the more-than-human can have for human interactions, whether in maintaining infrastructure, ingesting and excreting other species, or making offerings to spirits of place. The presentations also engaged with sensory, collaborative, and artistic responses to underground spaces, as well as fantastical and mythical narratives that intersect with the more-than-human world.

In the first session, we heard from Dhiraj Nainani, who gave a paper titled “Notes from the Underground: The Spatio-Legality of More-Than-Human Wastewater Assemblages.”

Through a critical legal geography approach, and using Singapore as a case study, Nainani's talk considered what the spatial and legal implications would be if the wastewater surveillance deployed throughout the COVID-19 crisis were to be used after the pandemic recedes. This research is currently being prepared for publication. Co-organiser Flora Parrott gave a talk titled "Invisible Fish" in which she described an ongoing artistic collaboration inspired by the moment of encounter between a cave diver and a recently discovered species of cave fish. In the paper "Repairing Memory and Place: The Undergrounding of Water in Naarm (Melbourne)," Marilu Melo Zurita discussed an interdisciplinary research project she is part of, involving academics and indigenous elders. The project aims to repair memories of water through a healing process that incorporates indigenous ways of knowing into current urban water management practices. The project is in its beginning stages and will result in an exhibition in four years' time. Finally, herbalist and PhD Student in Geography Dara Saville described the interspecies knowledge exchange and collaboration she has with the plants betony, globemallow, and vervain in her talk "Stories from the Botanical Underground: Medicinal Plants as More-than-Human Knowledge Keepers."

The second session began with co-organiser Una Hamilton Helle, whose talk "Beneath Clouded Hills: A More-Than-Human Approach to 'Deep England'" presented an art project that aims to pierce the popular notion of England as a pastoral surface and shed light on the subsurface myths present in popular culture and rhetoric post-Brexit. Taylor Coyne next described "The Vibrant Soundscapes of Sydney's Subterranean Water Kininfrastructures," presenting a plea for care, duty, and kinship when dealing with the ecologically vibrant subterranean worlds of our cities. Coyne described how he used sound and field recordings to pay attention to the often ignored more-than-human elements of urban infrastructure. Readers can hear the "multispecies symphony" of a "speaking subterranean" on his Soundcloud (<https://soundcloud.com/user-45158901>). Our final presentation was by R.L. Martens, titled "Deep Listening: Tending Future Soil Song." Here, the possibilities of the practice of Deep Listening, to "read the ground as an archive" in response to settler colonialism and environmental degradation, were opened up.

The two hybrid sessions ran consecutively and featured a panel debate at the end with all participants. What emerged was a rich discussion about methodological approaches and a real sense of new insights to other ways of working. What became clear through the resulting conversation were the ways in which subsurface lives are often starkly different from those above ground and necessitate other ways of adapting, sensing and thinking, whether one is visiting, inhabiting or even imagining these spaces.

We are grateful to all our speakers for their participation and to those authors who were able to share their work in transcripts. We would also like to thank the *UnderCurrents* editorial team for their generosity and support in the process of bringing this work together.

References

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Conflicts of Interest

The research was conducted in the absence of any conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Una Hamilton Helle (NO/UK) is a multidisciplinary artist, curator and researcher currently undertaking a practice-based PhD in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway, University of London, with the working title *Spirits of place: Thinking through subterranean subjectivities*. In addition to a written thesis, the outcome of the research will conclude with a number of creative responses realised as exhibitions, sound works, and artist publications. The first instalment of this was *Beneath Clouded Hills*, an exhibition at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, 18 May – 17 June 2023. <http://www.unahamiltonhelle.co.uk>

Flora Parrott is a practice-based researcher working primarily in sculpture and textiles. The work looks at notions of the subterranean, experiences of darkness and the restructuring of the senses. Based in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway since 2016, initially as Leverhulme artist in Residence and then as a Techne PhD student, the artistic practice is informed by contemporary thinking in geography and the geohumanities. Parrott trained in Printmaking at Glasgow School of art and the Royal College of Art, the practice is still rooted in the techniques and approaches of printmaking workshops; using materials and processes as a way-in to making.