

Editorial Essay

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for the UnderCurrents Editorial Collective



From the depths of Dante’s *Inferno* to Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, subterranean and subaquatic environments have often been depicted as repositories of primordial forces and abiding secrets in the Western tradition. The much-repeated (if somewhat misleading; e.g., Copley, 2014) claim that humans have “explored” more of outer space than of Earth’s oceans points to the mystique associated with the deepest regions of this planet. Though dramatic environmental changes are becoming increasingly evident all across the face of the Earth, we surface-dwellers can scarcely fathom what has been occurring below the ground and beneath the waves. In these deep places, rising temperatures deplete aquifers and destabilize sea beds; infrastructures (both old and new) wind through vast urban undergrounds; heavy industry delves ever deeper in its search for fossil fuels, rare earth metals, and geothermal energy; and plastics and other toxic contaminants come to settle among the extremophiles inhabiting the most remote reaches of the ocean.

This volume of *UnderCurrents*, like many before it, is an invitation to descend into the depths of these lively underworlds, with all their buried curiosities and submerged contexts. We explore what is going on beneath the surface in an effort to confront, expand, and/or interrogate existing understandings of the subterranean and subaquatic. We ask: how does the condition of being subsurface affect understandings of these physical environments and/or perspectives? Responses to this call took many forms, including scholarly articles, poetry, visual art, and conference proceedings. We are excited to present these collected works in Volume 22 of *UnderCurrents*, entitled *Below*. We hope that the provocative and thoughtful pieces in this volume inspire further subterranean and subaquatic investigations, and demystify and complicate the sub/surface distinction.

The three articles which open this volume demonstrate the breadth of scholarly approaches to the often-overlooked world beneath the surface. Métis historian David

McNab's essay, "Water is Her Life Blood: The Waters of Bkejwanong and the Treaty-Making Process," explores how water is considered in the treaty-making process between the peoples of Bkejwanong (what is now often called Walpole Island, Ontario, Canada) and the British Crown (and later the Confederation of Canada) since the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Noting that there are few references to water and water rights in treaties, McNab expertly chronicles the struggle of the peoples of Bkejwanong over water and demonstrates the importance of water to all life and survival. Artist Natalie Wood similarly braids the threads of water and life in her piece, "They Say We Can't Breathe Underwater," which documents Wood's solo art exhibit of the same name. For Woods, "many people of the African diaspora have an ambivalent relationship to the Atlantic Ocean" (2025/this volume, p. 27). She explores the "geo-tidal" (Wood, 2025/this volume, p. 27) space of the Atlantic, memorializing the millions of Black lives stolen through the transatlantic slave trade while also "remembering, memorialising, imagining Black futures that overcome the trauma of slavery... [wherein] caring for the environment and the ocean is synonymous with caring for ourselves" (Wood, 2025/this volume, p. 32). The final essay by environmental scholar Jason Young, "Nature Loves to Hide: Navigating Surface and Depth in the Anthropocene," investigates experience, representation, and ambiguity in understandings of nature's 'surface' and 'depth.' Engaging with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Craig Chalquist's (2020) work on "terrapsychology," Young points to the possibilities offered by embracing the ambiguity and uncertainty of nature's depths.

We are pleased to share a number of creative pieces that touch on the subsurface through various media. The intersection of arts and environmental thought is a rich space, allowing for intricate, imaginative, and surprising ideas to take form and be communicated with a variety of audiences. Performance duo VestAndPage (Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes) detail the creative and theatrical aspects of their experimental project, "STRATA: A Performance-Based Film Project on Deep Time in the Body and the Geologic," which took place in the Swabian Jura caves system in southern Germany and investigates "the human body as a site that exists in continuity with the geological" (2025/this volume, p. 50). Robert Budde and Corey Hardeman's "Petrichor and After Hardeman's 'Petrichor'" is a compelling combination of visual art and poetry that explores grief as a function of surface and depth together. For "In Depths," George Hiraoka Cloke and Anna Luy Tan utilize sound (hydrophone recordings) to contemplate subaquatic assemblages of diverse marine life, radars, and excavation equipment and "refute portrayals of an 'intact and uncompromised' ocean floor untouched by anthropogenic activity" (2025/this volume, p. 76). Two works of creative fiction dealing with the subterranean are published in this volume. In "Nun Cho Ga (Big Animal Baby)," Shelley O'Brien details the discovery of a baby woolly mammoth in the Yukon, Canada, and ponders the life experiences of this mammoth and how they might guide us into unknown futures. In "A Network Beneath the Soil," Savi Gellatly-Ladd writes about a young person who turns into a network of fungi; in turning to mycorrhizal fungi, Gellatly-Ladd delves into what humans might learn from subsurface symbiotic relationships. Lastly, as nods to possible futures, Subham Mukherjee and Mengzhu Fu offer two distinct calls for reflection. Mukherjee poetically conceives of a new ocean through their piece, "oceanic tauromachy," and Fu's "Future as an Underwater World" comic depicts a dream of a submerged future for humans who live in underwater cities. Together, these

creative works implore the reader to ponder and feel: What worlds will we be compelled to create, on the surface and below?

The volume is rounded out with a conference summary from sessions held at the American Association of Geographers 2023 Annual Meeting. Geographers Una Helle and Flora Parrott introduce the two sessions they convened that brought together scholars and artists whose research centers “the more-than-human within the subsurface” (2025/this volume, p. 96) and engages “these underground beings, habitats, and imaginaries” (2025/this volume, p. 96). In addition to this introduction, Parrott, R. L. Martens, Dara Saville, and Helle provide extended outlines of their arguments and works.

Taken together, the works in UnderCurrents Volume 22, Below, point to the importance of attending to the relations, dynamics, and processes that exist below the surface. These pieces explore the possibilities that emerge when one is willing to explore where sunlight does not reach and where new forms of life emerge. As Young argues (2025/this volume, p. 42), “while surficial thinking *represents* objective realities and quantifiable phenomena, the ambiguity of depth *manifests* through image, affect and correspondence.” It is through embracing this ambiguity that new perspectives emerge.

References

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