Losing Ground: A Collection of H◎les

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The end of the world, he thought, might be like the sinkhole.

– Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *The Yearling*

Why holes?

Where do they come from?

…

…

How come they appear all over these pages?

Perhaps a special issue on holes deserves some contextualisation. After all, how can we justify dedicating a collection of seven articles to a "thing" that might not even exist?

We write in a context in which both material and figurative holes feature prominently in news headlines across the world (e.g. National Geographic News, 2013; The Telegraph, 2014; The Guardian, 2014). Our own thinking about holes coincided with Donald Trump's electoral Presidency, and this was not entirely accidental. Trump's racist reference to "shithole countries" (Kendi, 2019) attempted to *unmap* large parts of the world from white significance. Around the same time, a sinkhole in Guangxi province in China uncovered a 118- and 200-metre-long deep cave complex, inviting geologists to map the region's newly discovered subterranean territory (China Daily, 2018). A "Subterranean Geopolitics", to echo the title of a recent special issue by Squire and Dodds (2020), seems to unevenly slide and thrust itself with a more than metaphoric force into academic and popular visibility (see also Bridge, 2009a, Dobraszczyk

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and Galviz, 2015, 2016 and Garrett, 2019). Holes can be “moments of intrusion”, as Bridge (2009b) tells us, making the outside, inside and the inside, outside.

Black holes are the biggest holes of all. We often imagine them as a monstrous symbol of an unescapable end. “Today many wonder whether capitalism is a black hole” (Bryant, 2014, p. 208). It was only yesterday that scientists found the largest observed black hole to date. It is so large, so hungry for more materiality that it “has either swallowed up the closest stars or tossed them toward the galaxy's edge” (Engadget, 2019). Some black holes, equally esoteric, appear nearer by. Labour MP Clive Lewis’ tweet situated the location of the black hole “in the 10 Downing St. Brexit policy unit – scientists say it is surrounded by orbiting wreckage being slowly consumed and now identified as political careers, credibility and trust” (Lewis, 2019). A black hole is not only an end, but also a promise of new beginnings. Andrei Belibou (2017), one of our collaborators in this project, writes that “as far as our knowledge of black holes is concerned, we are, quite literally, in the dark.” And yet, even a black hole offers glimpses of hope for those in search of knowledge. In 2016, researchers announced the discovery of the first direct detection of gravitational waves that resulted in the first observation of a black hole merger (Caltech, 2016).

Imagined or real, holes appear to be cropping up all around (and inside) us. Here, in this special issue, we arrested a few of them, but only temporarily, to help us think and feel through our worlds a little differently. “Physical surroundings are usually considered to be ‘reliable’, such as the ground being solid”, but, to follow Adams-Hutcheson (2017, p. 110) a bit further, what happens when the ground cannot be “trusted”? Affect and (im)materiality, two themes that run as silent threads in the different texts, is the experiencing and encountering of a loss of ground; a transformative emotional geography. The idea for this project springs from a workshop and an art exhibition held in early 2017.

In this collaborative work, we propose to think of holes as an invitation to a geological poetics. Rather than trying to govern and fix them, we appreciate holes as openings of, and onto, the world. Holes entangle the metaphorical and the material, the cultural and the natural, the embodied and the emotional, in unexpected and surprising ways. Sinkholes appear in contemporary film as eschatological signs of Earth’s ending and ecological apocalypse, as Karl Schoonover (2019), one of our workshop participants, recently explained. Holes can refer to implosion, a void, decomposition and absence. Bullet holes etch the memory of past and enduring acts of violence. Pores and orifices rework ideas of the borders that contain the self and delimit others’ skin (see in this issue: Hawkins, 2019; Nieuwenhuis, 2019; Sinan, 2019). Narrow passages, dangerously revolving doors, corridors to new senses, feelings, places and bodies. Holes are channels that invite curiosity, vulnerability and empathy, - “forms of

openness" (Irigaray, 1985). Intimacy itself surely must be a holey affair. Holes can be felt as something absent or lost, as a dent in a surface, an interruption, an incomplete sentence, or a silence...

(Something appears to be missing here)

… how does that make you feel? Irritation? Confusion? Frustration? Chaos? A plot hole. For better or worse, holes imply and create change and movement. They are contradictory and seem to cause contradictions. A hole is a verb as much as it is a noun. In fact, we argue that it might be more appropriate to describe a hole by reference to its doing than to its being. A hole is not a space but it *spaces.*

Holes are formative forces not only in space but also in time. Holes can come as sudden and isolated shocks, creating events and pathing new histories, but most of the time they are the result of much older, longer and interconnected temporalities. To return shortly to where we started, just like a gorging sinkhole, Tump's Presidency is not a product of blind chance. The seeds for his all-but-inevitable rise were sown a long time ago. Sinkholes are reminders of the inseparably "deep" connections that exist between the social and the environmental worlds (see for example Reckdahl and Hanusik, 2019; and in this issue Koerner, 2019). "Karst," a subterranean type of terrain characterised by cavities, caverns and even tunnels, is birthed out of the meeting between subsurface water and carbonate rocks, beds of rock salt or gypsum (see in this issue: Melo Zurita, 2019 and Perlin et al., 2019). Anthropogenic climate change, mining, chopping, cutting, fracking – they are all causal political-economic ingredients in Earth's transfiguration into a Swiss cheese (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 413). With ever-intensified political and economic extraction of human and non-human resources, holes appear to crack open and rupture material and social infrastructures in a spectacular and foreboding manner (see also Bridge, 2009a).

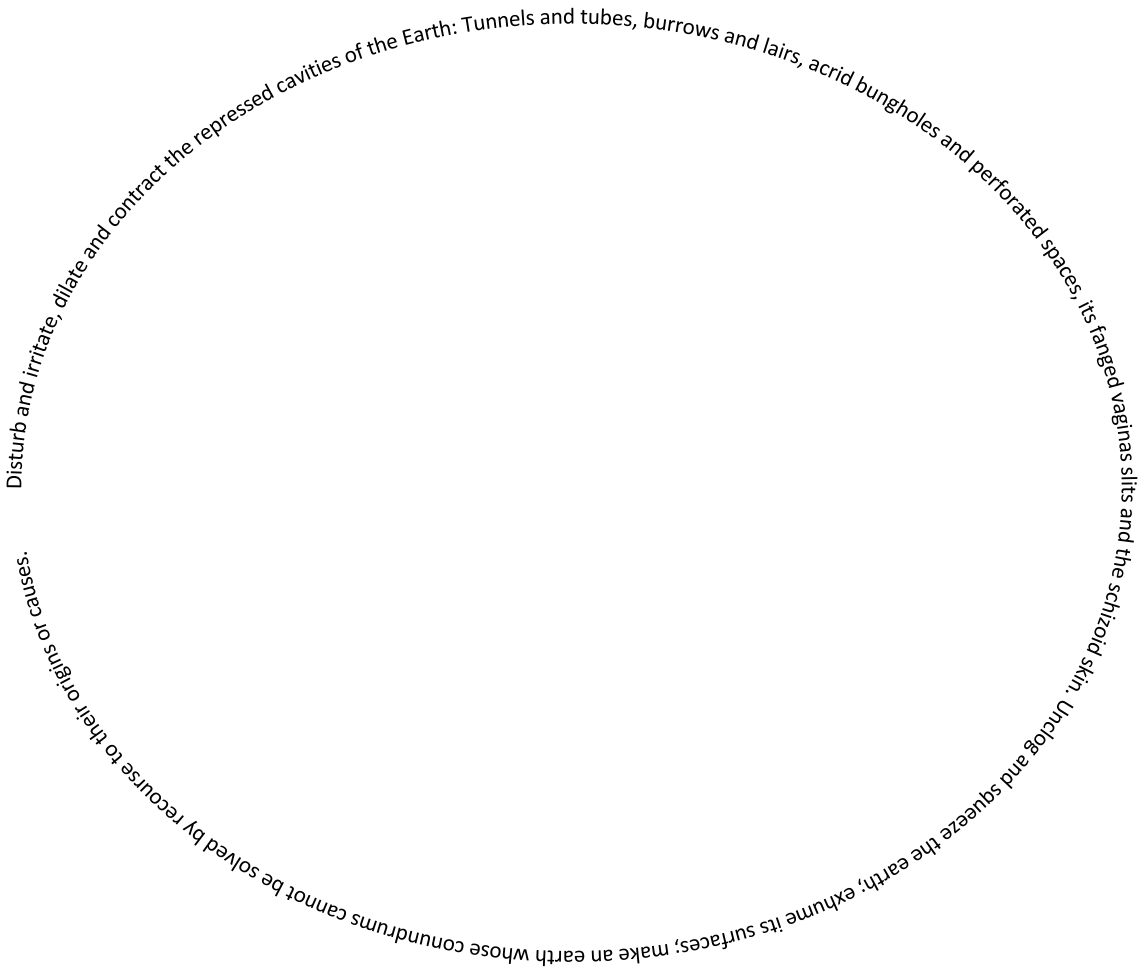
Holes might be quick to appear, or slow. They can be experienced as a sudden and dramatic consuming of the ground, but they can also unfold as part of the slow crumbling of geological substrata. Holes collapse surprisingly and creep unnoticeably into everyday lives, always directing our eyes towards the ground to guard the safety of our feet. UK councils spend on average around £169 on repairing a single pothole (Confused.com, 2019). The number of reported potholes is over half a million, which some say is a conservative estimate (HuffPost UK, 2019), and their total size reaches a combined length of almost

three times the depth of the Pacific Ocean (Confused.com, 2019). It would cost cash-strapped English and Welsh councils approximately £10 billion to fix these cracks of austerity (ITV News, 2019).

A hole can be a glitch in our social and material world. Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 5) conceives of a glitch as an infrastructural failure that interrupts the reproduction of life, a "crumbling at a threatening pace" and a marker of politics in times of crises. While Berlant reminds us that crises and catastrophes are slow, ordinary and part of our everyday, Ann Laura Stoler (2016) writes that colonial ruination endures. Holes hint at the long processes of decay, extraction, destruction and "exploration" (Bridge, 2009a; Gordillo, 2014; and in this issue Melo Zurita, 2019), as well as the instant spectacles of implosions and demolitions promising fantasies of the new (Cairns et al., 2014; and in this issue Fasnacht, 2019). Materially and metaphorically, holes invite us to suspend the temporality of collapse (Stoppani, 2015a), to look for presence in absence (cf. Bondi et al., 2016), to capture destruction at a liminal point where solid space, at least as we know it, is both there and not there. It is, therefore, not possible to think of holes without paying attention to their role in the unfolding of time. Holes accelerate *as well as* slow down time.

As a metaphor, a hole is a political actor, and like all metaphors, it is never precise (Stoler, 2013, p. x). A hole unsettles the line dividing inside/outside, above/below, in/out, absence/presence, past/present, order/disruption. A hole plays with the very performativity of the "slash" (/ and \) (derived from the act of stroking, cutting or breaking with an edged weapon or instrument), that divides what is and what is not. Holes memorialise and efface memory; they enfold vision and obscurity. They draw boundaries, yet, as the (impossible) borders of a hole appear, they also disappear. Holes are constantly about both the fear and promise of change. A hole invites us with the "possibility of politics" (Massey, 1992) in a world where the fixity of ground(s) is always giving way.

The politics of losing ground



– Adapted from Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 2008, p. 5.

The loss of ground, we suggest, transgresses geographical, social and philosophical worlds. It challenges the material stability of the *geo* in geography, as well as the authority of *sophie* in philosophical imaginations (cf. Clark, 2011; Marder, 2014, p. xiii; Peters et al., 2018). It confronts us with our hidden affective attachment to the *solid* ground and our complicit investment in its many myths.

The myth of the *terra firma* of Earth seems to be more an anthropocentric metaphysics than it ever was a geological physics. In contrast, terrestrial porosity and fluidity, qualities of Earth's becoming, never quite seem to have achieved societal or political acceptance. For a long time already, the term "ground" has been used to identify a foundational quality in the making of rational claims, social progress and the recovery of factual evidence. Think, for instance, about "grounded truths and arguments", the search for the "bottom line", the building of "common ground", "gaining ground" … etc. The ground claims a hidden transcendental status in modern law. This remains noticeable in the

German rendering of “basic” (from Old French *bas* “bottom, ground”) legal terms, such as “*Grundregeln”* [foundational rules], “*Grundnorm*” [foundational norm] and “*Grundrecht*” [foundational law]. After all, the loss of ground, like the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, remains a classic event of catastrophe engrained in the story of Western enlightenment (Clark, 2011; Passannante, 2019; Yusoff, 2009). It seems to be easier for us to imagine and experience the hole as a surprise and an exception. Holes *overmine* the affect of surprise and *undermine* our trust in the *terra firma* on which we have built houses of existence.

Holes are melancholic (Atkins, 2017). We mourn over them. They drown meaning, evoking feelings and emotions of dread in response to a loss of familiarity, fixity and stability. Holes arouse angsts that are associated with the *Abgrund*, the abyss or the fear of an impossible black void. Nevertheless, they are also things of curiosity, creativity, invention, hope and potentiality. A hole does not only induce anxiety, it can also offer intimacy and the comfort of protection: for instance, in the symbolism of a womb or a cave (in this issue Perlin et al., 2019; Hawkins, 2019). Holes are gendered, visceral, atmospheric and affective (Anderson, 2009). They are affective because they have an ability to provoke a vast series of bodily and instinctive reactions that can range from shock, fear and solitude to curiosity, wonder and promise. Holes, rich in diversity, are windows onto light and dark, play and drama, and a myriad of things in between.

When ground gives way, we might feel encouraged to interpret holes differently, not as ends, but as potentialities. Oliver Marchart (2007, p. 169) reminds us that “the political”, or the struggle for what he calls the “post-foundational”, only appears in those circumstances in which the myth of the ground gives way.

> Groundlessness… must not be mistaken for the simple absence of all grounds or for the simple opposite of ground in the singular. The abyss does not serve as a new ground – not even in the negative, as a bottomless or groundless 'black hole' – but as the very moment of the *withdrawal* and *retreat* of ground (Marchart, 2007, p. 77, original emphasis).

This radical and disruptive potentiality to decline, or “impotentiality,” is where, as Agamben (1999, p. 182) famously argued, the “root of freedom is to be found”. To break open groundedness from the inside to the outside, helps facilitate the “emergence of new life forms and collective particles as an insider takeover, the rise of a new people” (Negarestani, 2008, p. 90).

Far more modestly, but also somewhat differently than Reza Negarestani’s speculative holes, we aim in this special issue to extend an invitation to think, feel and imagine the world otherwise. To reflect on

a hole is to ask what happens when the ground gives way? What does it mean emotionally, politically, conceptually, and architecturally to lose ground? As soon as holes emerge or submerge as an intervention, a rupture or disruption, a tremor or a silence, in the form of a question mark, or in the experiencing of a revelation, an idea, they appear to be everywhere. Holes seem to be committed to a continuous process of spacing, negating, becoming, exposing, rediscovering and reinventing. Holes are mysterious, powerful and dangerous, all at the same time, and yet they are under-theorised and, for the most part, not-yet-thought, or even imagined. How, after all, can we account for something that *is* by *being not*?

Writing holes

> *we broke the earth and now we fall through time. deep gashes in the ground. we scale the edges of our knowing. the smoother the worse, the more jagged the more better. what we stand on is not masonry. it is the torn place unhealed. the footholds come from how unclean the break.*
>
> – Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World.* p. 139

What kind of language can we deploy to talk and write about holes? Holes demand a radical rethinking of the politics of *Earth-writing* (Barnes and Duncan, 2013). A rethinking that accounts for the work holes do, and, in turn, the work we do with and through holes. "To dig, to drill, to burrow, to punch, to enlarge, to fill up, to fall in, to jump over, to look through, to hide in – all of these, and indeed many others, are things we do with, around, inside, and through holes" (Casati and Varzi, 1995, p. 5). Holes not only instruct us to displace grounded epistemologies and ontologies of the stable, but also caution us against the disciplinary practice of fixing them in writing and thinking.

It is tempting to act as a plumber and to "fix" holes. Naeem Inayatullah (2011), the esteemed IR scholar, writes how a crisis begets pedagogy, how it entices experts to pave over it with knowledge, expertise and language. The abruptness with which the ground gives way to its own hollowness, and with which the Earth swallows cars, homes, livelihoods and infrastructure, finds its equal in the hurried instinct to repair. As such, we, as academics, cannot help but feel drawn to, even fascinated by, holes. To resist the urge to plug and pave over what appears to be "perforated", we try in this collection to arrest the hole and experiment with the ways through which we make sense of our porous world; the way we master it in words, grammars and architectures.

Admittedly, holes usually do not feature much as a topic of interest in Geography or the Social Sciences. A very small field of dedicated "hole-specialists" has emerged at the fertile margins of philosophical debates (Casati and Varzi, 1995) and cognition studies (e.g. Palmer et al., 2008; Bertamini and Croucher,

2003), but until now geographers have seemed hesitant to discuss the immaterial materiality of holes. Holes can scar(e) and even disgust (Giles, 2019). Our collection of holes, collected in this special issue, bores a network of tunnels – some connecting, others disconnecting – across disciplines, registers and genres. Our aim is not to provide a set framework, or a complete methodology of the potentialities of (im)materiality, but to think *with* slippages, trips, gaps and uneasy juxtapositions.

As we previously mentioned, this special issue is based on an academic workshop and an international exhibition conducted in 2017 at the University of Warwick in the 'porous' city of Coventry (Nieuwenhuis and Nassar, 2018). The event brought together geographers, social scientists, artists, architects, planners and scholars from across the humanities. Since then, we have endeavoured to work with, and sometimes to unlearn, disciplinary languages. We find this conversation necessary because it allows for the creative and sometimes loose deployment of vocabularies. As guest speaker and Professor of Architectural Theory Teresa Stoppani noted during the event, a hole invites a conversation in which we all know we are being misunderstood, but it is precisely this misunderstanding that allows for the conversation to go on.

Our "undisciplinary" approach begins with an artistic introduction to holes. Our two interlocutors inspired us to make sense of the (non)sensicality of holes. We read the sculptural, filmic and performative practice of both Heide Fasnacht's *Suspect Terrain* (2015) and Jenny Perlin's *One Hundred Sinkholes (2014)* and *The Long Sleepers (2017)* as engagements with the playfulness of holes. In different ways, and though various media, the two artists work to denaturalise the rhythm of a hole's appearance and disappearance.

Fasnacht's installation is a giant sinkhole in Socrates Park, in which a house stands amidst cracked and collapsing ground (Figures 1 and 2). Instead of digging a sinkhole, Fasnacht "creates" it above the ground. Instead of digging the sinkhole, the hole sits on the ground. It feels as if "we", as participants, are sinking together with this medium-sized house. This *loss* of ground expresses the precarity of both material and social infrastructures. Fasnacht's installation, as well as her artistic practice in general, is particularly sensitive to the cycle of the built environment (see in this issue: Fasnacht, 2019). She momentarily suspends destruction, collapse, implosions, demolitions and hole-making (Stoppani, 2015a, 2015b). Sinkholes, here, are not merely a loss and mourning of meaning, as shown in her pausing of a sinking house, but, rather, and maybe more crucially, they constitute the transitional state from which reconstruction and rebirth is made possible, visualised by the children playing on top of the artwork.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: *Suspect Terrain*, courtesy of the artist and Socrates Sculpture Park

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2: Image by Michael Shorris, courtesy of the artist and Socrates Sculpture Park

The social urge for ground is an issue that is taken up by Jenny Perlin in her film and exhibition *One Hundred Sinkholes* (2014), exhibited at the Simon Preston Gallery in New York. Perlin carefully draws very large sinkholes collected from media coverage on watercolour paper, filling them with colours and geometric lines (Figure 3). In doing so, she transforms their photographic realism into a smaller and more manageable form. The whole process is recorded with her 16 mm camera. "The film renders these images in graphite, each insistently filling the emptiness of the void. As a sinkhole emerges, it quickly disappears into the unsteady rhythm of the animation" (Simon Preston Gallery, 2014). The film depicts the unexpected repeatedly through animation and repetition. The sinkhole becomes something that moves discontinuously, and almost cathartically, creating space rather than fixing or effacing it. In this special issue, Perlin continues her engagement with the un(familiarity) of holes. In her contribution, entitled *The Long Sleepers,* she takes us on a documentary journey through caves, surfaces, underground waters, silences, disorientation, and the spaces in between light and dark. In our accompanying interview with her she reflects on her art and her ideas about plot holes, holes in film, soundtracks and cave tourism (see also in this issue: Melo Zurita, 2019). *The Long Sleepers* was exhibited in part at the Simon Preston Gallery in New York (2017).

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 3: *One Hundred Sinkholes*, Jenny Perlin, courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston Gallery, New York

The other five articles tease out other threads from the original provocation of holes. A central question for this special issue is the way the body lives *with* and *in* several holes. This becomes especially clear in the contributions of Tarquin Sinan (2019), Marijn Nieuwenhuis (2019) and Harriet Hawkins (2019). Sinan's paper focuses on the renowned British sculptor Anthony Gormley. Covering 20 years of sculptural practice, Sinan demonstrates how Gormley's sculpting makes the body known through its holes. This journey starts with corporal orifices and ends with an explosion, which is an attempt to communicate somewhere that is in between the inside and the outside. This attempt occurs through a destruction and fragmentation that "takes space" and hangs suspended. Nieuwenhuis' paper similarly challenges the idea, modern in its origins, of a wholesome, complete(d) and sealed body. His

historicising of corporal porosity, situated in Western philosophical and medical traditions, argues for a more atmospheric approach to the body. Holes, in his phenomenological history, feature as the protagonists in the feeling and (re)making of corporal meaning. Hawkins' paper proposes an argument in favour of intimate geologies, particularly in relation to (w)hole imaginaries and scales of the Anthropocene. Her paper centres on Ana Mendieta's *Untitled* (*Silueta* Series*,* 1976) and Michael Heizer's *Munich Depression* (1969). It reads these two artworks as embodied and affective experiences."

Hawkins joins other contributors in this special issue who deal with the "geo" as the archive of the planet, and with holes, openings and absences as plot holes in memory, or sites of reminiscences and alternative historicising. Like Hawkins, Natalie Koerner uses land art to question the temporal disconnections that underlie the assumption of ground as something stable and passive. Her paper focuses on *Il Grande Cretto* by Alberto Burri (1915–1995), a land artwork, in order to explore the archival potential of geology even through upheaval. Deploying – what the author terms – a "geological mode" to the ground (Koerner 2019, p. 1), the paper explores the potential of Burri's monument to document the aftermath of ground giving way. The monument commemorates the destruction of the town of Gibellina in Sicily caused by the 1968 earthquake. However, as Koerner explains, even the commemoration in concrete is inevitably porous. Finally, Maria de Lourdes Melo Zurita's article focuses on sinkholes, she directs our attention to underwater sinkholes. By taking the case of the world's most extensive flooded cave systems, and based on interviews with cave divers, Melo Zurita's article untangles the affective, the commodified, the mythical and the explorative threads that put *cenote* diving at the heart of Mexico's tourism industry. In so doing, her paper opens up multiple subterranean stories drawn from human yearnings for exploration, echoing the concerns raised by our two artistic interlocutors.

Through weaving together the metaphorical, the creative, the corporeal and the (im)material, we aim in this collection to attune ourselves and the reader to the relations that make our porous worlds, and to explore the different ways we are affected by their porosity. We encounter multiple holes: some are horrible and horrifying, such as the ones we started with, but there are also others that are intriguing and hopeful. Through holes, we tell stories by trying to make sense (of them). Always elusive and withdrawn, their ambivalence and excess of meaning allows for the accommodation of the contradictions we have begun to identify and collect in this editorial introduction. A sinking, crumbling, imploding and breaking Earth confronts us with the poetics of hole-writing gestured at in this section's epigraph. Such a poetic may perhaps endow us with the generosity required to find new ways to make knowledge – not instead of but different from the exactness and solidity of our grounded reason.

Instead of fetishising the catastrophic, which, admittedly, is easy to do today, we hope that a careful consideration of holes might orient us towards a less complacent relationship with the social and material world. Perhaps it is time to move closer to a more reflexive geography of the holes, gaps and silences

between the letters and words, which make them

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