Nottingham Contemporary

CAVES, DWELLINGS &VIBRATION

Sat 10 Dec
4:45 - 6:15pm

Rethinking Geologic Subjectivity in Broken Earths

Kathryn Yusoff
moderated by Andrew Goffey
Live transcript

Transcript

While every effort has been made to provide an accurate written record of this event, some errors may exist in this transcript. If you require further information please contact cmasters@nottinghamcontemporary.org

SPEAKERS
Kathryn Yusoff, Canan Batur, Andrew Goffey.

Canan Batur 00:03
Good afternoon and welcome back. I hope our next segment will excite you as much as excites us. It's humbling to be introducing our keynote speaker Kathryn Yusoff, whose work has been extremely influential in the process of plotting for exhibition Hollow Earth but also our research strand, Emergency and Emergence. Kathryn today will be lecturing on rethinking geological subjectivity in broken earth and will expand on what it means to be a geologic subject in the Anthropocene. And when and where are the Broken Earth of the planetary while thinking through the undergrounds as a potential sphere that disrupts the plasticity of the surface, this destabilising the politics of the present. Kathryn will time travel in the broken earth of the Anthropocene to unearth the historical constructions of racialized undergrounds of the indigenous black and brown life, cosidering underground's as archetypes in the production of knowledge and the materialising of colonial worlds. Yusoff will look to the mind and the cave to discuss accounts of materiality and geologic time. Understanding undergrounds as an effective medium of colonial earth. She will address questions of inhuman intimacy and subterranean tactics to redress the weaponization of geology. Our invitation to Kathryn Yusoff comes from a long lasting

inspiration from her work. This is not the first time Kathryn's research infused our programme and modus operandi in 2015, with humanity on the rocks the Anthropocene panel and over the course of 2022, our prominent collaboration with the trio colleges research group, manifested in the format of slow reading group our audiences focused on Kathryn's a billion black anthropocenes are none, which was led by our dear moderator Andrew Goffey. I'm also extremely grateful for the deep and careful collaboration Andrew has provided over the years from various different projects in the form of symposia, gatherings, discussions and in conversations, our collaboration with tree ecologies Research Group has been evolving shape shifting and developing many things then we're also working on an exciting programme together, and more to be announced soon, hopefully in the new year. So please stay tuned for that. More updates are coming. Without further delay. I'm very excited to introduce our keynote speaker Kathryn Yusoff who is professor of inhuman geography in the School of Geography at Queen Mary University of London. Her research examines and how inhuman and non organic materialities have consequences for how we understand issues of environmental change, race and subjectivity. Most recently, she's the author of a billion black anthroposcenes or none published by University of Minnesota Press in 2018. Image not geology is neutral right Kathryn Yusoff, rather than renaming and reclaiming the concept of Anthropocene which exhibits fundamentally a colonial and racist geology Yusoff offers a deliberately transformative vision, the non event of a billion black anthropocenes does against the reductive universalizing, homogenous anthropocene use of suggest not one but many anthropocene is by drawing on the work of Saidiya Hartman, Édouard Glissant, Fred Moten and scifi writers like NK Jemisin, who's broken Arctic triology found this place in the title of today's presentation. Yusoff makes some illuminating links between critical race studies and the Environmental Humanities. Yusoff is also the author of the theory, culture and society special issue with Nigel Clark, titled your social formations and Anthropocene which looked into the relationship between geological and social transformation and the contexts in which social relations emerge and geological effects on social as a way of enabling and organising social relations. Additionally, she is the author of Epochal Aesthetics, the mind in eflux and in the humanities in the annals of American Geographers. Her forthcoming book geologic life in human intimacys and the geophysics of the race addresses the racial genealogies of rocks. She is the recipient of the Association of American Geographers 2022 award for creativity in geography. I'm also delighted

to further introduce our moderator Andrew Goffey, who works at the University of Nottingham where he is the director of the Centre for critical theory. He's the editor of the Guattari effect, which Eric Alliez and of the allure of things with Roland Faber. He's the co author of evil media with Matthew Fuller. He has translated and edited books by Isabelle Stengers amongst others and is currently completing projects on the micropolitics of software and on the ecological thinking of Félix Guattari. A quick note for those who are joining us for the first time. There will be a q&a section at the end of the conversation between Kathryn Yusoff and Andrew Goffey for recording purposes please wait for one of our event assistants to bring you over microphone. Without further delay. The floor is your floor is yours dear Kathryn. Thank you

Kathryn Yusoff 04:59
So, what I wanted to talk to you about today was kind of also sort of represents a bit of a trajectory that I've had in terms of my work through thinking about this idea of geologic subjectivity. And thinking about it, particularly in this sort of moment of the Anthropocene of, of climate change of extinction events, and so on. And thinking also about how those kind of futures and those often apocalyptic futures relate to the various extinctions and Broken Earth that were kind of made in the process of making this Anthropocene. So we might think about the Anthropocene as a kind of, as a sort of product of, and a set of colonial practices that broke many earths, from 1492, right through to the present and continues to break Earths of people's life worlds. And often black and brown subjects, racialized subjects, poor subjects that are caught in the kind of crossfire of geologic extraction. And the reason that kind of I put race and geology together was when I first started trying to write a history of geology. And I started first started looking at the kind of histories of geology within colonial worlds. I found at the same time that palaeontologists who were kind of given advice on, on kind of geologic formations on rivers on silt on kind of various forms of kind of plantation farming and mining, were also producing discourses about race. So this kind of question of shaping the earth and kind of geo forming the earth was also kind of concurrent with this kind of terrorization of the Earth, through the subject, the subjugation of racial formations. So I always think, race and geology alongside each other, as kind of coming into the world at the same moment, and then coming to the world through these kinds of conjoined discourses. So this question of deep time, for me, always oscillates around a question of time in the subject, and how certain subjects are deep time, so how certain

subjects are produced this kind of fossilised are produced as backward in time. And we think about all these kinds of discourses of progress, and now and kind of development narratives around kind of the development of resources. And this idea of some kind of the natural resources, are the basis of an advancement in time, and how that's configured into understandings of human origins. So that's kind of where I, where I kind of ended up but I started very much in a kind of, in these kind of questions of geologic subjectivity, within the caves actually was what I did some time ago, and thinking about the sort of interrelation between non human and inhuman forces in kind of this art of narrative-ising, the human subject. And what's interesting about these kinds of caves, and also the, the ways in which the kind of the work in these caves described is the often buy kind of anthropologist, human origin theorists is always narrative, now devised around the kind of the human mark, but then, you know, when you actually go into the caves, and these are from Lascaux, very quickly, you realise that the cave is participating in this making, and the ocre of the rock, the images are made by spitting. They're made by kind of a mixture between kind of ground animal bones, and spit, and so on. So all at once. This is also a kind of multi species kind of production. And it's a relationship with the kind of inhuman and they're also kind of painted in the dark. So we heard earlier about kind of bringing light to those spaces. They were painted with the light of animal fat, and lines drawn on caves with with kind of animal paints. So there's this kind of, there's this question here about kind of how the geologic subject kind of comes into being. And often the kind of cave gets removed in that narrative. It becomes about a narrative of human origins, human creative creativity, and somehow that kind of the inhuman and non human get kind of segued out. So that's really kind of where I started thinking about geology. And then thinking about these kind of geomorphic aesthetics as a kind of space of engagement with an environmental epistemology. So a lot of these kind of caves, the paintings were done, sort of, you know, in cave spaces that emerged at the last glacial maxim. And I was kind of thinking then about climate change, and thinking about what the kind of, you know, what, what kind of human sociality look like, the kind of end of the last kind of climate epoch. And I began thinking with the caves as kind of specialities that actually drew kind of the images into being as much as kind of thinking with the kind of figure of the drawer. And particularly because these caves that caves of Lascaux were found at the very moment where surface the surface was under destruction in World War Two. So the, the French theorist Georges Bataille, he talks about, you can't think about the concentration

camps without Lascaux . And consequently, you can't think about Lascaux without concentration, camp so, immediately, for me, they set up this kind of imagination of the sort of discourse between what's underground and what's on the surface. And that relationship, often between kind of violence and kind of creativity, and things that are made for a time that may not arrive. So things that are made in, in the kind of in, in a kind of valuing of kind of engagement that is not necessarily about the surface and surface conditions. So I was kind of thinking around these ideas about what is the kind of rock touch into being in kind of inhuman in an engagement with inhuman that we've kind of very much has very much fallen out of our kind of discourses, at the moment where you have kind of the separation between the inhuman the nonhuman, and the human, and that kind of is through these discourses, and narratives of geologic time that are made by palaeontologists. Right at the kind of moment of colonialization. But also this kind of, there's something very, I think compelling about the idea of what geology allows in terms of survival for the future. So things marks that are made for a future that is yet to arrive and to think about this as a kind of almost like a speculative fabulation to use Donna Haraway's term or a kind of critical fabulation to you Saidiya Hartman's term, a way of kind of thinking into a future that is yet to arrive. So I kind of, and there's lots of other underground spaces that came in to kind of, to use the underground as a way to kind of challenge surface conditions. But also these kinds of diagramming of passages across entities to think about a much more kind of mixed ecological heritage across inhuman timescales, there's one thing of the inhuman gives us is it kind of gives us kind of different temporal frame a different kind of way to come at our kind of present conditions. So there's interested in the kind of origin stories that we're being told about the kind of caves and how origin stories were used to kind of shape, often ending stories. So in terms of the context of the Anthropocene, these kind of, you know, Apocalypse, often apocalyptic or utopic, kind of endings. So there's something interesting around what is hidden in these kind of, in in these kinds of images, which, you know, the kind of creating a sort of absent hand, an absent body. And you can see that this is kind of all these forms of, if those of you that have sort of been in any of these caves in southwest France or northern Spain, that there's a lot of kind of cross fertilisation between bodies, and there's, there's very, very few human bodies. It's a kind of riot of animality and

not animality in the way it sort of narrated as hunting kind of like it's actually like deers licking, other deers and all sorts of kind of intimacy is between kind of animality of which, you know, the human is part of and the other kind of set of cave paintings I was looking at with these kind of paintings up in the Gwion Gwion of Western Australia's sort of North caves. Western Australia and they're that this kind of swimming, dreaming In moving kind of humanoid creatures, but they're actually made and held together as an image through bacteria, and so there's another life form and they they resist each other, then they're different colours, so they keep growing. So this kind of these paintings are made with live living pigments that are constantly sort of regenerating at the speed of kind of bacteria, and other molecules. So this kind of image of, of kind of human animal welding is being carried forward by a kind of set of molecules. So, it kind of, you know, when we begin to think about the ground of the image, and then kind of, like what aesthetics is, and it gives us a very kind of provocative image of how we are carried forward by the world, and how we're made through these kind of different incorporations and kind of collectives of ecological life. So that's kind of where I started with caves. But where I kind of ended up very quickly, was this kind of with this question of colonial Earth, and colonial Earth, and it's kind of others particularly so if, if the Anthropocene is the outcome of colonial earth, there's lots of other black brown indigenous earths that were broken on the way to that kind of production and the kind of universalizing language of natural resources that now kind of organise our, our kind of colonial afterlife and to really kind of take seriously the forms of inhuman tactics that were made within the kind of the space of that oppression in the space of that transformation of Earth. And as I always thinking alongside N.K. Jemisin and particularly when I was writing Black Anthropocene, someone gave this to me and said, You must read this. And I was just like, wow, this this. And those of you that have read Broken Earth trilogy, it's really fantastic trilogy. It's all about this group of people origins who are enslaved. And they can also modify, and kind of change geology. So they kind of assess the earth, and they have these kind of, they have these abilities to actually both kind of shape geology, but also break it. But they're used by that kind of enslaving enslavers to basically protect them. So they they're used as a kind of buffer to regulate geologic shocks. And what happens through the course of this novel, is that they actually start to break the earth.

And this is kind of an NK Jemisin sort of take on this is really the kind of because people couldn't share, because these worlds, as you said, were built on a fault line of pain held up by nightmare. So like, so rather than thinking about the kind of lamenting the end of our particular world, that actually we should be thinking about why those worlds have existed for so long. And particularly in terms of the Anthropocene thinking about why have these kinds of colonial kind of homogenising forces around the kind of narrative of what the world is, why they've been sustained, and why they kind of been continually sustained for so long, given the kind of the forms of subjugation that they're built on. So she says, I wrote the Broken Earth trilogy, to speak to that struggle, and what it takes to live, let alone thrive in a world that seems determined to break you. So she's this this kind of motif of breaking Earth goes through the novel. And it's kind of alongside work that I've been thinking about, about kind of, what are the infrastructures of earth that remains and as this on the that side is, sort of Cecil Rhodes's head that's kind of been knocked off. But it's like, once we get rid of the kind of colonial, you know, sort of kind of figureheads in space, we're still left with the mind. So the infrastructures still remain and still remain kind of violently, kind of oppressive to very particular racialized groups of people. So this kind of this kind of came to inform my empirical work was really Thinking about the mind as a as a kind of paradigmatic as a kind of, you know, a human made cave in a sense, and to think about the underground as a racial repository. And I was looking at this in Alabama through convict lease labour. So convict lease labour was basically enforced carceral labour after emancipation. And it became another way in which you could, through the black codes actually kind of kidnap young black men and boys. And they built these prisons at the entrance to these mines here in Alabama. And the mines in Alabama were producing the materials for steel. And steel became the first billion dollar floated company in the US. And we're kind of part of the transformation of building that overground. So I became really interested in just the, what it takes to build an overground. So often with architecture, we just look at the the building the architecture, the object, but actually what every architecture relies on, often and on a racialized underground, and we can think about underground overground in terms of you know, dark kitchens, you know, fishing boats of Malaysia plantations. So there's, you know, we can begin to think about these kinds of ways in which the

underground is also kind of, in the overground. But in this particular case, in Alabama, and Alabama became the richest state in the country of leasing prisoners, to corporations, so it really institutionalised what we now call the kind of the prison complex in the US. But it was built on these kind of underground prisons. And I was also thinking about kind of the, the, the narratives around kind of white underground too and they are kind of increasing emergence within kind of, I guess, various kind of doomsday scenarios and prepping and we've got lots of kind of tech boys building kind of underground prep shelters in sort of, you know, the south of New Zealand and so on. And this was a really popular book, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's Vril. And he was actually the, in charge of the colonial office at one point. So he wrote this as someone who was within the kind of state government, organising colonial affairs, and it's called Vril, the Power of the Coming Race. And it's kind of you can probably figure out what it's who the coming race are. I won't go into that now. But Vril was the kind of power of, of this race. So they have this energy source called kind of Vril. And it's very much kind of, in some ways, collides with the way in which I've been thinking about kind of geo power as kind of coming out of this white geology, the harnessing of geo power, the ability to use the value and energy of power through these ratios through kind of keeping in place these racialized formations, whether we're talking about the mine, the plantation, or other kind of colonial formations of extraction. And this is just, I found this out from my colleague the other day, but Vril also kind of became the, the kind of the energy in Bovril, which was very much substance designed around cow parts to power the British Empire. So we can kind of see how these imaginaries start to kind of shift and move in these kind of colonial spaces. But they're already there, the underground of the overground are always across kind of the across the kind of bifurcation of race are always kind of talking to each other in in a kind of narrative discourse. And this is kind of a view of Ghana, you know, and it's this highly racialized kind of before colonialism and then there's kind of Bovril after colonialism. And all these kind of theories are so connect to as I when I saw the show is called Hollow Earth as a former polar kind of geographer How is that because Hollow Earth is very, very sort of active and polar imaginations through John Sims, but also because of the kind of all the sort of theories around the National Socialists and and Antarctica and going into Hollow Earth. So there was lots of and there

still are, as I found out when I looked on the internet, there's there are lots of Hollow Earth kind of conspiracies going on. And I don't know, they, you because they often involve these kind of like white aryan and kind of in some sort of magical world where clearly the problems of race don't trouble them anymore. So I started to think about race, as a geophysics, so not just as a kind of, you know, a metaphysics of coding people, you know, in sort of various kind of human sub human inhuman as well as the kind of organisation of the human and less than with the apex being kind of white hetero patriarchy. But extraction itself is a question of racial geophysics, a question of burdens of body burdens of weights of gravity's, and also in terms of kind of straddle, and stratigraphic positions in space. And that really kind of helped me think about how overground and underground are in this dynamic rip spatial relation. And sometimes that's happening on the surface of the air, sometimes it's happening underground. But there's this kind of dynamic movement between the cruel of value on the surface, and these kind of Underground's that sustain, but are kind of removed from accruing value. So this is, this is one of my kind of, for some reason, this image really sums it up for me, in terms of like kind of Anthropocene. But we can think about the accrue of stratal geo power, as kind of as a question of the outcome of colonialism. So the ability to transform the Earth has also been the ability to step back from the earth, to actually protect yourself from the earth's forces to protect your cell from certain kinds of intimacies with the earth that you don't get to have, if you're, you know, child kind of extracting coal, for example. And a lot of writers, postcolonial writers obviously picked up on the kind of the organisation of, of kind of humanism, with its kind of inhuman bedrock, and really kind of began to think with this in humanism is what I kind of call it, but began to think with the inhuman world as a mode of subjectivity. So if you think about kind of enslavement, brought people into a category of subjectivity, that designated them as in human property, and postcolonial thinkers decolonial thinkers involved in kind of liberation movements, had to find a way and a language to exist within subjectivity, that didn't, that couldn't kind of draw from the sort of dynamics and coordinates of humanist literature or humanist kind of thought. And as with Fanon in the Wretched of the Earth, but also Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, whose actual his supervisor was Bachelard. So Bachelard wrote The Poetics of Space and Édouard Glissant, the Poetics of

Relation. And you can see there that kind of shift from a kind of space as a kind of container or kind of organise a spatial organiser to space as a relationally produced thing. And that's, you know, I think kind of Glissant, takes his supervisors kind of intellectual engagement and stretches it across the Caribbean in really interesting ways. But these thinkers were thinking, again, it's kind of whiteness as a geo power, not just in organising subjectivity, but also organising the very kind of conditions of life, the material conditions of life. The and we can see it sort of a clearly etched into the rock there, which is, you know, Native American sacred site is the kind of the imprint of white patriarchy. So, a lot of, as I said, the Caribbean writers particularly really engaged with the inhuman, as a kind of site, a provocative site of thinking with the kind of inhuman in that category, rather than running away from it. So thinking further into the category of the inhuman, and to rocks into the kind of this categorization of deadness to really kind of bring back what I think is kind of what we might think of it as a different kind of material understanding of subjectivity. And it's a collective understanding of subjectivity. But it's collective, not just with others, but it's collective with the earth, and with the kind of the, the tectonic kind of movement of the earth. So Césaire, for example, talks a lot about the kind of the volcanoes under the Caribbean. And they're kind of in the connection between being like the connection of the kind of archipelagos of the islands. And I wanted to, how am I doing for time? Okay, so I wanted to kind of end really, where my work is kind of ended up now. And really, kind of just thinking about, alongside some artists that I've been thinking with, around kind of what, what, what kind of, how can we think about geologic subjectivities. Now, in terms of a kind of reparative model to colonial earth, so what are the ways in which not to just describe how colonial earth comes into being which, you know, I've been kind of very concerned about in terms of the kind of history of that, but also to start to, to think with what kind of new reparative kind of geologic models could look like. And Abbie Millet inspired, some of you might know their work Cave Bureau, who are a Nairobi group of architecture architects, directed by Stella Mutegi and Kabage Karanja. And they work with caves as their kind of primary architectural form, and particularly the kind of caves of the MOMO fighters who kind of who, who occupied the caves during kind of liberation movements. And they also, obviously, that kind of that iconography of the case speaks to things like the kind of the

Underground Railroad, and lots of histories of kind of fighters in caves and kind of caves has been spaces outside the state and our space from which to challenge the state. And they really kind of, they're also thinking with Shimoni caves, which are a network of caves along the kind of East Africa that supplied the East African slave trade so that so enslaved people were kept in the shamanic caves, as they were moved along to the eastern seaboard, which fed that kind of slave trade to Arab and Middle Eastern countries. So they're kind of working with these kind of spaces of trauma, and spaces of kind of, but also trying to think about how the spaces challenge and can be repurposed in a kind of revisioning of the kind of city and they call this the more than human city of the future paths. So they use the kind of the Shimoni caves to kind of, and they use the shape of the, the architectural shape of the case. And they sort of flip it up. So down to create this cow Maasai cow corridor through the city of Nairobi. And so the Maasai often bring their cows into the city to graze. But there's lots of kind of problems, obviously, with cars, and so on. And they created this whole kind of infrastructure through the city to create a Maasai cow corridor with salt licks with vetenarians to think about the kind of how the first inhabitants of the city so the cows and their Maasai keepers were, can be rethought into the kind of futurism into the kind of African futurism as a kind of challenge to some of the more kind of developmental projects that are going on. And so they're thinking about how to narrate this kind of geography and space of the cave differently to transform. It's kind of, you know, it's geo trauma as kind of spaces of subjugation. But it was expensive to think with it's kind of liberatory possibilities. So if we think about these kinds of caves, they think about them as kind of Anthropocene museums. But it makes me think about kind of Édouard Glissant, call to generate museums of non natural history. And he says like it If colonial history is all about the kind of master subject man, the white European, then we need to develop these museums of non natural history that talk to the kind of collective and sedimented histories, the ghosted histories, the raised and the kind of subjugated histories that lay across the continent of Africa, through the middle passage to the Caribbean, and in the Americas, and to start to develop languages to speak to the kind of all the histories, the billion black Anthropocene 's, for example, that kind of have been taken out of sight, when the, narrative of achievement is kind of colonial earth, and the narrative

achievement is the kind of continued transformation of kind of, of geology towards a certain kinds of futurism. So I, maybe I'll leave it there with those ideas, but we might think that caves perhaps are a place to start a place to think with in ways about how geology shapes us, and to think with the kind of possibility and emergence of challenging the surface through its underground spaces. So starting in the underground as a way to decolonize the surface. Thank you.

Andrew Goffey. 36:32
That's fantastic. Thanks ever so much, Kathryn. Okay, we've got, we've got a bit of time now. So the idea was to have a sort of first to have a kind of a conversation, and then to throw the floor open to questions. But I think actually, we will, we'll kind of get a bit of a discussion going here. But if, if, if people wish to interrupt, I've got things to say before the formal q&a. Please, please put your hands up. There's there are there is a microphone around? So don't wait, if a question comes to mind. Whilst we're having the conversation, that's fine to find to but in, I think I'd be more comfortable like that. Anyway. Thank you ever so much get and that was a really interesting, really fascinating talk. So it's all sorts of questions for me. I wonder if I'd just to start off a discussion, I could you tell us a little bit more about your, practice as as a researcher because I was struck by the, your engagement with Cave Bureau at the end, and I was thinking about how you work as a researcher, building up is very impressive body of evidence about race and geology. So I wonder if you could maybe just, I'm really thinking about just a concrete practice that you have as a researcher.

Kathryn Yusoff 37:56
I mean, one of the things like, I've been thinking a lot about my own inheritance in a geography department, and how I'm sort of situated by that, in being in one of the most kind of imperial disciplines, but also kind of thinking about what that means for the kinds of geographies that we tell, kind of. And, you know, within geography, there's been this very kind of huge sort of dominance of visual geography as a kind of as the sort of narrative and representation or scene and much to kind of, you know, overlooking all kinds of other ways in which people kind of build a world or have an epistemology, that kind of shapes. So I mean, I, I think I kind of look outside of disciplines, really, for other ways of

telling, narrating space, I think, and thinking about space and the politics of space, because I bet you become very aware that you're, you're the sort of dialectics of space that you're involved with, and the Academy is incredibly limited. So kind of engaging with creative practice is one way to kind of think about other ways of sort of hearing space differently and thinking about kind of some of the sort of resident narratives of those spaces. But also kind of just the as a practice of de institutionalising yourself. And I think as like academics, it's so easy to become, you know, maybe it was practitioners as well, you become very institutionalised in your in your worlds and I always kind of slightly trying to kick against that. That's how my rogue geology comes in to being

Andrew Goffey. 39:56
Nice. It's a nice expression, rogue geology I mean, it must make life a little bit difficult for him. It's quite, it's quite a challenging position for you to occupy. So I was wondering, we talked a little bit about this before the talk started, I wondered how how your work have been received, if you'd like to say a little bit more about how your work has been received, I'm thinking particularly with the issue with how your work was received by, firstly by other geographers, but also by by geologists, as well, because it's your work is, as articulates a strong position, which I imagine that some people found a bit difficult.

Kathryn Yusoff 40:36
Okay. Yeah, I mean, I think, like, weirdly, little, little, the little book, Billion Black Anthropocenes scenes just had a really interesting diverse circulation. So, you know, I got emails from miners in South Africa, from nurses in the States, and they really kind of broad range of, and that was really incredible, because I think it was like cheap, and you could put it in your pocket. And it's sort of, it wasn't too much of investment. And that was really incredible. But one of the sort of groups that very, I think engaged with, we're kind of young artists working around kind of questions of race, who got in touch with me, and, you know, and then asked me to write things. And so the the sort of next bit of work that follows this is really a kind of, is that discussion. But yeah, it, it sort of kicks against institutions, my work, and it's, they often has a much better interdisciplinary reception than, and the white supremacists really don't like it either. But apart from that, it's, you know, I think

geologists, I mean, we were talking about earlier that have found that confronting, but actually have kind of come down to kind of quite a, because they know, their own disciplines are changing. And they know, you know, that, that the question of racism is, is endemic in kind of the geosciences from kind of, you know, incredibly white geography and geology departments, right through to kind of the impacts. You know, it's, I don't think it's any wonder that, you know, one of the highest kind of categories of targeted people are environmental defenders across the world. And, you know, so and, you know, there's, there's very clearly a politics there. And actually, I've been surprised that how patient geologists have been with that work, which is, you know, kind of dense and a little bit unforgiving.

Andrew Goffey. 42:55
Do you sometimes feel feel like maybe you'll find it a bit of a losing battle, I'm struck by the, the massive scale of production, just in something like geographical knowledge. So these massive conferences that you have in the United States, where you have 1000s and 1000s of people presenting, and they're there from across the board, from the American military, to, to goldsmiths, sociologists, and things like that. It just feels like, it feels like it that in itself is a form of industrial production, that's quite difficult to, to, to comprehend, let alone to fight against it live, does it feel like a losing battle? Sometimes?

Kathryn Yusoff 43:35
I think, what became, like, yeah, I was just, I just finished a book that's taken me kind of 10 years, and it's a really big book, because I wanted to tell, I wanted to, well just show empirically, through kind of lots of archival work and how, how big or complex it is how, you know, you can look at kind of all these kind of, you can look at poetry, you can look at geologic kind of disciplines, you can look at extraction, and all these things form together, enter kind of what I call the plateau. But it's it's actually kind of it was really painstaking work. putting that all together, and trying to actually just show the kind of enormity of the but also the kind of discreteness of racial discourses within that. So I think it is, I mean, like, you know, one of the reasons a lot of people like myself migrate into geography is that is a bit of a pick and mix subject, you can kind of go and do what you want to do. And, you know, I think a lot of artists kind

of go and do PhDs in geography, because there's a certain amount of freedom to engage with material practices, and engage with kind of the geographical ideas, but you can kind of go off and do you know, if you don't mind kind of, you know, sort of of working in your own, you know, along your own kind of lines? Yeah. So I think it's it's a challenge, I think the area of the Geographic Sciences that is in real kind of ascendance is extraction. And, you know, the questions of extraction are going to be, you know, there are kind of endgame endwell questions. But I kind of wanted to show where that started. I guess that was I thought, okay, I can I can do that. We have NK Jemisin for the endings.

Andrew Goffey. 45:44
Well, I was, I was gonna ask you a little about, if you'd say a little bit more about science fiction, it's, it just struck me how ambiguous a resource science fiction might might be in the sense that on the one hand, there's the the amazing use made of science fiction, but also by people like Octavia Butler, for example. But then on the other hand, you've got, you've signalled the real narrative and the net, but nowadays, I suppose people are talking about super intelligence instead of becoming white. Could you say a little bit more about about how you see the value of science fiction in, in the work that you do?

Kathryn Yusoff 46:22
I mean, I think kind of, you know, yeah, speculating is, you know, is a very highly prized capitalist kind of activity at the moment, and kind of, you know, so I think, I never think about speculation as sort of, in an innocent way. But it's also, you know, it's an incredibly creative way of like, showing what a world could look like and helping, you know, and I think that's what artists and musicians, they allow us to feel, what a world might look like, that we might want to get towards, or kind of, you know, even or disrupt a kind of the skin of the world for long enough that we can just feel a different inhabitation. And so, you know, which I think kind of Lascaux in a weird way does in the middle of the Second World War, it sort of this. There's this other, this other way of being in the world, right. And, and so, you know, I think it's an incredibly rich vein to mine, if we're keep with the mining metaphors, but you know, I think the, you know, tech companies are very interested in speculation, too. They run a lot of the speculative fiction competitions, where they're getting people to,

you know, sort of Elizabeth DeLoughrey, has done some work around this, that where they're sponsoring, and particularly black and brown, queer artists, of course, because, you know, to write, Spectre efficient about renewables, and particular kinds of renewables and so on. And so, yeah, the ability to speculate and to dream is is never innocent. But it can be a good political tool. I think you probably know more about that than I do.

Andrew Goffey. 48:22
Well, I was I was, I really liked the quote that you that you put up on one of the slides, it was the Glissant quote about poetic knowledge, poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge. So one of the things I was wondering a little bit about, I've engaged up with the work of Isabelle Stengers and Stengers has a very complex view on scientific knowledge. And I'm wondering about the relationship between kind of poetic knowledges and science and and is there in your view, is there a possibility for kinds of scientific knowledge that, you know, stopping acting, the kinds of gestures of exclusion and hierarchisation and destruction that have clearly been operative? In the histories that you've been that you've been following? Or is it always poetics that is in a position of resisting?

Kathryn Yusoff 49:25
I mean, I don't think they are opposed. And I think there's, you know, there's obviously a great poetry of the rocks. But often it sort of has a sort of presumed innocence around other things. So you know, like Gerta was the director of mines, for example, like, you know, there's Thoreau was going on camping trips with Agassi, who has, you know, a kind of great racial, pseudoscience kind of propagator. So, you know, I think a lot of these kind of a lot of these kind of ways in which we try and separate out those productions of knowledge kind of, are often quite artificial. But I think kind of the, I mean, one of the things that I do think has become very normative is that language of natural resources that a particular kind of language of, you know, languaging of kind of, earth as either valuable or poetic. So it's in this dialectic, so it's kind of either or, and we, you know, consider it sort of both of those without each other, when in fact, they're kind of a continuous production. So I think where the kind of decolonial work of the kind of poetics of the Caribbean

writers really intervene, is to actually kind of restructure that dialectic and you know, sort of Fanon pretty much says no dialectic a cosmic Yes. And it's like, okay, we're going to think about the cosmic as a way to kind of intervene in this kind of bifurcation, which is also the bifurcation of the human and then human, the human and the de human that sustains forms of dehumanisation.

Andrew Goffey. 51:18
I wonder if maybe this is a moment to throw the conversation open to to the audience. Do people have questions?

51:31
You know, you're talking about inhuman intimacies and inhumanity. I just wondered if you could extrapolate on that a bit more. Obviously, we all know, some people who'll shoot are inhuman, and act in inhuman ways. Is that what you meant?

Kathryn Yusoff 51:47
I'm sorry, could you just say that last bit again, that we know that

51:53
we all know people who aren't human inhuman, and to do inhuman things? We all know that we most we all know someone like that.

Kathryn Yusoff 52:04
Yeah, I mean, I was, I was kind of looking at the proximities, between the inhuman as a kind of geologic category, and the inhumane and, you know, we can think about this in kind of contemporary terms of how environments are weaponized. So you know, the desert, between the Mexican kind of American border, the Mediterranean, the kind of, you know, you can think about kind of contemporary geographies of weaponization, where, you know, kind of inhumane acts, kind of reliant on inhuman environments. And there's this kind of proximity and intimacy that's created around certain kinds of racialized bodies in that space. So you know, there's very particular people being let drown in the Mediterranean, for example, on and in, you know, in the small boats, come into the British coast. So, but I was interested that also as a kind of historical category, so how, under kind of the industrial slave production

that people were literally categorised as inhuman property, and designated within that inhuman category. And at the same time, that sort of geologists are off in America, and lots of other places around the world, describing the kind of inhuman environment, they're also describing racializing people through this inhuman category. So those two things are happening together. And they're being done by the same people. So they're kind of, you know, the same people that mapping rock formations are also collecting skulls. So there's this kind of a, there's this very tight bond between the inhuman and the inhumane. But there's also something that happens in that kind of within that categorization of that actually kind of leads to the development of sort of inhuman tactics, we might want to call them forms of resistance to that subjugation. Does that answer your question?

54:36
Hi, thank you. It was really interesting. Could you say a little bit more about when you mentioned ecological endings, and how they're linked to the origin stories with a particular view on the subterranean world? Maybe anything around?

Kathryn Yusoff 54:53
Yeah, I mean, we could see but like, you know, you could think about the Anthropocene for example, as a consequence of taking a shed load of things that were struck, you know, stratified underground and putting them on the surface. And then on the surface, a different set of relationships happen, you know, because geology also has is kind of attracted to, you know, kind of the geochemical edge action, once you start kind of burning fossil fuels, for example. So, I think, you know, we've tended to think about a kind of, in some ways, the surface of the earth, and less about the kind of the eventualities and the kind of what it means to take a whole load of kind of, you know, past geologic eras, and kind of bring them up into the sunshine. So that's, that's kind of, you know, it's not necessarily ending as so much as a kind of transformation. But it does, you know, it does have a lot of violence, sort of, secreted in it, and, you know, that's often very differentiated violence in terms of where those impacts lie, and kind of how they impact. So that's, that's one kind of ending, but, I mean, I think we're kind of, you know, in terms of extinction, I mean, it's kind of interesting because the, the animal

the some of the longest surviving animals are animals that can borrow underground. So things like the Echidna, for example, that like, you know, if it's like a fire, you can go and kind of burrow underground. So like Underground's have always kind of being in some ways, spaces of, of waiting for time to change. And I kind of quite like that sort of, because it reminds us of the the possibilities of temporal difference. And what that can open up in terms of thinking differently about what the surface looks like.

56:56
Thank you for the talk has been so interesting, I suppose. Just want to ask if you could expand on that point, really, in terms of thinking about speaking a bit more into sorry, expand a little bit on that point about burrowing and waiting for time, in relation to some of the things you mentioned about bunkers, and who gets to have bunkers? And maybe that in relation to this whole conversation about the racialized geology or undergrounds?

Kathryn Yusoff 57:25
Yeah, not sure I have too much to say about the tech bros underground and apart from that would be a very good carbon storage if you like. But yeah, I think I mean, I think kind of thinking more of a sort of pyrolysis of the temporality as a kind of, you know, what allows us to shift our imagination to a different possibility is is often kind of configured in those temporal moments and that kind of temporal difference, you know, and you know, the flip side of this, which requires lots of mining and lots of underground is like to think about something like the diamond, you know, is this something that is sustains kind of hetero patriarchy because it kind of it outlasts, you know, it's sort of the beginning of the universe, and then it sort of, you know, it's, you know, it's meant to last as long as a marriage is meant to last and it's like, you know, it's, so the rock is meant to be there to kind of give this sort of testimony, in a sense, to a different temporality than, you know, maybe other forms of sexuality might kind of, you know, invoking is, so it sort of, like, it's there to remind you that like, but, you know, every cause is massive, like moving of land of, you know, horrendous, you know, still, you know, the conditions of labour in South Africa, for example, in, in diamond mines haven't changed very much since kind of, you know,

because labour is still so cheap, and it's so cheap, because of those kinds of conditions of apartheid that were generated through the kind of colonial franchise and of diamond mines by people like roads. So I'm always kind of like, you know, we always that's the thing, I think, with geologists, we look at the thing, and not the kind of and what are the shadow economies that kind of allow this thing to come into existence? So for every kind of thing, above ground that sparkly, normally a great big hole and some really horrendous relationships kind of, but also on the inverse of that, you know, the Underground has these kind of, you know, potentialities for waiting out, you know, you just think about the kind of the Underground Railroad and the kind of, you know, and some of those the creation of safe spaces within you know, the violent spaces.

1:00:04
And thanks very much. This has been fantastic. Just thinking about some of the things we discussed, between Flora and myself and Mulu, what fascinated me about this, of course, these are national parks it's a World Heritage Site almost completely because of the caves. It's a rainforest, of great beauty, but the caves are one of the things that attracts so many people. So in many respects, it's a great way of stopping the spread of palm oil, it's great way of protecting the forest. But it came at the expense of the Penan people, the indigenous people, they were a nomadic people. And now they they've had to settle, and what was their, their place of life and living, and it provided at all, largely now been taken away. And they have to make a living as part of the, you know, sort of the capitalist, tourist World Heritage Site world. And so just thinking again, about what you were saying there about national parks and the protection of the environment, but at the expense of the indigenous people. Yeah.

Kathryn Yusoff 1:01:19
Yeah. I mean, that's, yeah, that's a, that's a really important point. And national parks came into kind of, you know, they came into being as a kind of colonial artefact of preservation, which didn't include, you know, which was land appropriation. And I think it still is, you know, if you think about a lot of the offsetting projects, and they're kind of, they're about actually massive enclosure of land, and expelling and eviction of indigenous people. So I think, yeah, you're absolutely right.

It's an ongoing, and that's why I really like about Cave Bureau's project is because, you know, it's the sort of Maasai herders and, you know, they're kind of their take on it is just, you know, it's like, the sort of, you know, petrification, of the Maasai, within, you know, the sort of tourist economy of a national park. And actually, that allowing that mobility through the city through this kind of cow corridor that is shaped, like the caves is a kind of way to re, you know, to think with that past, and allow it to move again, and allow it to kind of live again. And, you know, that's an incredibly powerful kind of regenerative response to think that geo trauma of eviction, and I've kind of kind of various forms of petrification, both good, I'd say your project was very collaborative.

1:02:50
Thank you, hello. Just thinking more about the way that you present your research, and the kind of actual practice the creative practice, thinking about recording and sort of deadening subjectivities when they enter into the museum, and the resistance that that you said, the geography and geology departments have, how can you see the need for new creative narrative methodologies?

Kathryn Yusoff 1:03:19
I mean, I think yeah, absolutely. The, you know, thinking about kind of new methodologies and new and also, but also recognising that those, those methodologies also have been forged by lots of people in the kind of ongoing, so the indices of those struggles against kind of, against kind of, you know, deadening methods and organisation and categorization carcere ality of kind of subjectivity. So, yeah, I think I absolutely, and I think, you know, I think there's some really, you know, really exciting work going on at the moment that is really kind of, is thinking really methodologically and thinking kind of, with those deep time methodologies that like, how does the script of time actually script kind of relations and, you know, it's a how do we begin to script time differently and to start to kind of undermine the stability of some of those formations, I think, you know, kind of people like kind of black quantum futurism, for example, that are kind of really doing some really kind of grounded neighbourhood work, but also really trying to, you know, kind of attack these colonial scripts of time and so, yeah, I mean, I think that there's a lot of creative work going on and I think that

is that is just kind of, okay, so what what does a new, like a new kind of methodological approach to the environment that like the doesn't renew, you know, these kind of an extractive earth basically. I think that's the challenge.

Andrew Goffey. 1:05:14
Is it something that I mean, it's something that has to happen with alliances outside of academia isn't it's not something that really works as a kind of social science humanities type methodology that it's something that involves, involves a kind of, I guess Haraway might call it some sort of sympoetic kind of activity that is that how you see it as a, as a collaborative?

Kathryn Yusoff 1:05:42
Yeah, I mean, and but also like, Yeah, I mean, it's, it's kind of a much bigger task than all of us where he it's like, and and, you know, it's like, we're in we're in a world that is, is kind of collapsing in lots of different ways that need attention, and kind of, and I think there is a, there's a deficit of languages to really kind of apprehend that, that don't reinforce this kind of, you know, various forms of kind of utopianism, or kind of neoliberal, good life, you know, that actually, you know, I mean, I think there's a lot of work in kind of queer ecologies that's trying to grapple with those. And there's, you know, a lot of work emerging now, in kind of black feminism, black ecologies, and environmentalism is a very, you know, I mean, because of the, the sort of huge changes that are happening in Africa at the moment in different parts of Africa, that, you know, is kind of massive. And I think, yeah, that's, there's, it's a much bigger collective project. I mean, it always was, and, you know, and sometimes the academy isn't the best place to do those kinds of projects, right, because it's very institutionalised and institutions, are very slow. And so I think, you know, this, what I was kind of thinking about the inhumanity is that we need a parallel institution. So there's the kind of Humanities and it's sort of, it's got its discourses and its narratives, and its figureheads, and, and but there needs to be an inhumanities that actually puts the wretched of the warth at the centre of that creation of discourse, that kind of, and that, you know, is is able to kind of move through the language of natural resources.

Andrew Goffey. 1:07:37
This is a paper that you wrote a little while back, isn't it? Yeah.

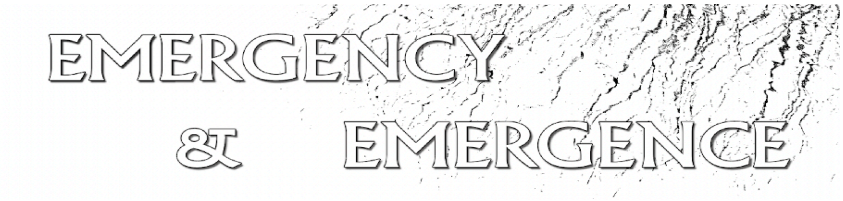
Kathryn Yusoff 1:07:42
Frustration paper. All right. All right.

1:07:47
I, I was just kind of thinking as well, or like, one of the things that I've been also. Yeah, thinking about is like, how, like lithium as well, for example, is now kind of this new gold. That is where actually, all of those mining extractivist? Yeah. Things kind of, like actions, like still kind of continuing to happen? And how, if you've done any research on that as well, since it is I think, kind of like a very contemporary, like, yeah, thing going on for all of the batteries that we're having constantly in our phones as well. And

Kathryn Yusoff 1:08:31
yeah, I mean, lithium ion is obviously a big, and not least, because it because lots and lots of water in places that don't have lots and lots of water. I mean, when the sort of part of a new project, that im just starting is around metals. Because one of the things that I think, you know, there's lots of focus. I mean, in geography, for example, there's lots of focus on renewable energy and renewable kind of, and things like lithium, but also along side those kind of the precious kind of earth minerals, there's also just a massive increase in the use of metals. And because of that sort of technological infrastructure, so they were mining much more metal than we've ever mined before. And so there's, like, you know, the sort of intensification of these kind of various different forms of and so the question becomes, how do we begin to join all these things up? How do we kind of begin to see that as a kind of, as a worldview as a kind of a way of apprehending the earth? And maybe how, how do we begin to disrupt that? But yeah, hugely important lithium.

Andrew Goffey. 1:09:53
We're getting the we're getting the please, please don't signal from Canan. So I'm sure you'd like to join me to think Kathryn again for a really stimulating interesting talk. Thanks very much Kathryn.

Nottingham Contemporary



Colophon

Curator: Canan Batur

Assisted by: Philippa Douglas

Technician: Jim Brouwer

Nottingham Trent University

University of Nottingham

Nottingham Contemporary trades under this name, company no. 5678059, registered charity no. 1116670.