Kira O'Reilly, *Tide Turning, sea defence*, 2017,
for]performance s p a c e[WAKE Festival, Folkestone, 2017;
photo: Luke Jones

BETWEEN HISTORY AND MYTHMAKING: A LANDSLIDE

Madeleine Collie

Rubiane Maia, *WATERLINE / LINHA D'ÁGUA*, 2021, 'Art-Life Rituals for Radical Tenderness Series #1', curated by Dani d'Emilia and Vanessa Andreotti, the Warren, Folkestone, 2021; photos: Manuel Vason

> In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must firmly stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function.[1]

The Warren is metres from my former home in Folkestone;[2] in those years I would go there often. I watched the moon rise, snow fall, waves break. From the lip of the rise you can see a vast undercliff set against white chalk. A tangle of paths lead on one side down to an open beach and on the other into a forest. A train line cuts across the centre. Facing the English Channel, the Warren forms part of the coastal border – in the distance you can see France. It is one of the busiest and most dangerous places to cross the Channel by boat.

Each year more of the land crumbles into the sea. The landslides of the Warren start deep underground, 40 metres beneath the surface. Under layers of chalk, under clay and on beds of sand. Under the waterline, under the concrete weight, under blackberries, golden samphire, dancing crowds, and the waves.

Today I wear a fossil around my neck. As a geological guide it moves between times. I am far away, and I still hear the insistent sounds of the landslide. Driven by homesickness and somatic memories, I research obsessively to know more. I learn about the 12 slips that have occurred since recording began in 1765. Some so violent that entire lakes disappear, train stations are upended, earth turns and forests grow. I wonder what kind of knowledge people held of the landslide before these records.

Time erupts from the surfaces of the earth. Violent temporal shifts. How many times it slid before its first burst is unknowable. What I am trying to trace is what might have been born alongside these ruptures of the earth. I find the phrase 'the geologic turn' funny. Here the earth moves in what is called rotational shearing, a movement that turns layers of earth over and causes massive changes in the land's shape. There were once caves hidden in the cliffs, tunnels leading to smugglers' homes and hiding places along the coast. There is buried treasure here; gold, tobacco and rum perhaps trapped in the chalk.[3]

Is the landslide an event or an entity? A place or an almost constant discontinuity in time? Is the landslide an 'earth being' just as a river or a mountain might be? Is the landslide's endless turning not part of its nature? What would it mean for the landslide, a volcano, or a fault line to have rights of legal personhood? Is this destruction not a fundamental rupture in the concept of the earth as a figure, with stories shaped by western myths of geology?

The last major slide event, 'the Great Fall', happened in December 1915. Large rains fell and descended through the porous chalk, leaked into the place where chalk becomes clay and the clay started to slide. Then the water froze, expanded and cracked the chalk open. Huge chalk boulders slid off clay layers in the cliff and parts of the land moved by over a metre. The move pushed a train from its tracks and crushed the Warren station. A succession of smaller landslides through the 1930s and 1940s led to the rail company performing extensive geoengineering works in the cliffs to stop them from moving again. They drilled horizontal tunnels into the ancient chalk to lower the water table and reduce the slip between the chalk and clay. A giant concrete weight was added to the shoreline, millions of tonnes employed to hold the landslide in place. So far, this intervention has held off the inevitable and prevented the land from slipping further out to sea.[4]

We walk from cliff top to sea edge. The ground makes us move slowly across clay steps. We slide, sometimes falling. Our feet become heavy with dark grey clay. We move slowly so as not to wake her. Perhaps on this landslide, where the earth is constantly eroding, we are confronted with the task of finding other ways of being human.

Artists feel their way along the concrete stage, one holds a heavy mirror, reflecting back the porous white chalk cliffs above. Another crawls along a ridge in the cracked clay scarp, balancing an impossible weight out in front of them. Helen Davison holds an emergency heat blanket in their mouth, producing a cry of lament along the sea edge. Rubiane Maia performs a tide-length ritual at the waterline. She waits, opens her body to the sea, moves, waits again, tracing the vibrant matters of the Warren's waterline with her attention, waiting for 'the hole, the crack, the scission'.[5]

A group of us gather to chart the landslide against the planets. We study the heavens. Among other revelations, we find a spine-tingling conjunction between Saturn and Pluto occurring at the time of the recorded landsides. Pluto is the planet of the underground, of trauma, of mineral and material wealth; and Saturn the planet of time, restriction, agriculture and institutions. The astrocartographers we asked to join

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us believe these occurrences place the Warren and its landslides as actors in a much larger generational story.[6] One about the relationship between the knowledge born from the imaginaries of geology and the institutional systems of colonial governance and control that have held the world in their grip ever since.

The Warren is one of a few places in England where, because of the constantly changing landforms, it is possible to observe the stratification of being and time that emerged with the birth of modern geology. The site has what is thought of as a complete set of layers with which it is possible to date other samples of earth from across the planet. Each layer of earth makes myths of the earth's past. Relics of coccoliths in the chalk recall the frothy seas that swam with early life. Fossils, bones and shark's teeth ooze out of the gault clay and greensand of Copt Point, the western point of the Warren's Wear Bay. The list of fossils that can be found in the Warren is so extensive that collections are housed in natural history museums across Europe. In Folkestone, children gather on the shoreline to pocket fossils at low tide.

In Old English, landslides would have been known as *eorðgebyrst*: earth burst. The first recording of the landslide in 1765 was concurrent with the advent of the discipline of geology. The event drew the attention of many across Europe interested in extracting knowledge of the underground and in new ways to tell the story of the earth. A story that would shape institutional narratives, fixing and imposing an understanding of earth time in the colonial imaginary. Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751–65), a manual on Enlightenment thinking, lists *Géologie* under a branch of sciences called *Cosmologie*. It sits alongside *Aérologie* (study of the air) and *Uranologie* (study of the planets). Of these, geology persists as a means of reorganising and structuring our separateness from the earth below our feet.

Speculations on time are abundant here in the Warren, but I wonder if it is also possible to read the landslides as places in which times collapse and are destroyed. I wonder whether the interplay between the earth's surface and its inner layers are the ground on which the structures of temporality that govern the myths of modernity are maintained.[7] For Foucault, the monster and the fossil, each representing difference and identity, are figures that describe the inability of natural science to write the history of the earth.[8] Here the continuum appears as a destructive totality. The fossil is a figure of the past, an index of 100 million years of earth histories. But it is also here, now, appearing in the present, oozing out of the clay. This ordering of knowledge can only ever trace contours of the 'being' of the earth, while accounts of living and non-living entities are perceptible on the margins or as they slip between the cracks or erupt out of time.

Perhaps the Warren and the landslides beneath is an archive of different intensities. It has been studied, shaped, exploded, eroded. To be part of the story of the Warren is to face this landscape's place in modernity's orderings and reorderings of knowledge. Here we attend closely to the cracks in the ground on which

Helen Davison, *Lament*, 2020, SITE collaborative performance action, the Warren, Folkestone, 2020; photo: Ash McNaughton

we stand. To show that the story of modernity and its geological imaginary is being told on a landslide and the ground is always moving. I imagine rains will fall harder, the waters will rise, and the earth will slide once again, on the move towards the sea.

I dream of a band of drummers beating sticks along the million-tonne concrete weight that holds the landslide in place. People gather on the waterline, clambering over the fragments of broken concrete, sliding over gault clay steps into the belly of a rocky forest, assembling along the sliding fictional concrete border. They roam the edge eating blackberries in the salt air. Bodies lament. They hold. They twist. They wait. Already there are people who make a pilgrimage to this strange patch of earth. To lament the myths of modernity, the stranglehold of identity, or to simply wait for the sea to say yes.[9]

At home the landslide moves. I hold my heart in my chest to stop it from aching. The fossil, a gift from a friend, acts as a portal. I hold it close as I try to remember.

1. Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1972, p. 119.
2. The Warren has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest under the United Kingdom's *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981*. See *designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1003675.pdf*, accessed 31 January 2022.
3. George Ransley led the Aldington Gang that smuggled goods into England through the Warren. He was arrested in 1826 and transported to the violent prison island of Tasmania where, not surprisingly, he thrived.
4. A 2007 paper on the effects of heavy rains and a changing climate on the Warren landslide found the need for continued monitoring, with the current systems of geoengineering merely delaying the expected. See E. N. Bromhead and M. L. Ibsen, 'Folkestone Warren landslides and the impact of the past rainfall record', in Robin McInnes, Jenny Jakeways, Helen Fairbank and Emma Mathie (eds), *Landslides and Climate Change: Challenges and Solutions*, Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, 2007.
5. See *www.rubianemaia.com/waterline*, accessed 31 January 2022.
6. Our collective Speculative Landscapes were guided by Madeleine Botet de Lacaze in these readings in December 2020 with insights from Tom Nóbrega.
7. Speculative volcanologists ask questions of magma eruptions, proposing that 'subterranean geologic forces offer an excessive potentiality from which humans and other life forms select and actualise a narrower range of creative or generative possibilities'. They acknowledge the 'importance of "speculation" on mineral and energetic resources to the current global economic order'. See Nigel Clark, Alexandra Gormally and Hugh Tuffen, 'Speculative volcanology: Time, becoming, and violence in encounters with magma', in *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018, pp. 273–94.
8. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage, New York, 1994, p. 154 (originally published by Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1966).
9. Rubiane Maia includes this as an instruction to herself as part of her *WATERLINE* ritual for the Warren, Folkestone.

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