

Conference

Underground Monuments in the Literatures and the Arts of the Global South

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Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3

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Drawing inspiration from the volcanic landscape of Martinique, Édouard Glissant establishes a crucial connection in *L'entretien du monde* between the concept of « the deep » — which, for him, refers to the tangible materiality of the underground—and power. Glissant imagines the deep as a vast subterranean network in which all the Caribbean volcanoes are linked « by streams of lava, which are the highways of their power and overflow ». Beneath the surface of the world, a force would be concentrated at the core of matter, capable of shifting boundaries and challenging hierarchies by establishing « from below » the connection between all « here ».

Following the lava flows that, according to Glissant, traverse the depths invites one to conceive an alternative form of power originating from the underground, one that does not seek to impose itself upon the world. Instead, it works to invigorate the world in such a way that its presence circulates and radiates from its very thickness. If it unfolds from the geological or symbolic underworld of a subaltern position, underground power, in our view, does not seek to hide in the shadows of the subsoil in order to exist and act covertly. On the contrary, it claims its presence and makes it visible. In opposition to the crushing verticality of monuments—triumphal arches, columns, or palaces erected in glory of the conqueror—it would inaugurate another mode of the monumental that would diffuse into places, materials, actions, and into the lives, both human and non-human, that it nourishes and connects.

Thus, during this conference, we will aim to question the modalities through which an underground power could be exercised and embodied, one that refuses to establish domination, whether through its actions or through the signs that materialize it. We propose to conduct this reflection from the perspective of the Global South, as spaces that are often identified, notably, by the subordinate position they are deemed to occupy within historical, cultural, and economic power relations in colonial or postcolonial contexts. Reflecting on the conditions under which an underground force and monumentality might emerge could allow for a reconfiguration of the established balances within the Global South, by considering other criteria for defining power.

Rejecting the codes of architectural or artistic works that celebrate authority, the monuments through which it seems possible to explore the scope of underground power are, therefore, particularly fluid.

Firstly, this power seems to find expression in political action that unfolds in counterpoint to dominant authority. One could examine the specifically subterranean forms that such counter-power may take, whether it is compelled to act clandestinely or to occupy actual underground spaces in order to unite. In this regard, one might think, for example, of the resistance to colonial authority that unfolds through a network of caves and galleries extending beneath an imaginary city resembling Algiers, as described in the novel *Qui se souvient de la mer* by Algerian writer Mohamed Dib. Similarly, in *Black Sunlight*, Zimbabwean novelist Dambudzo Marechera locates the headquarters of an anarchist movement within a vast cave dug into the heart of a mountain. By erasing the speaker, underground spaces become places of intensification of enunciation. In these spaces, the enunciation gains in intensity and political force, to the point of becoming an address to the empire originating from the depths. The power expressed from the underground would therefore be aimed at making itself heard, bursting forth in a flash to short-circuit the various levels of domination.

The idea of an underground power of monumental scope seems, secondly, to be understood on a more metaphysical level. In this case, the focus would be on indigenous cosmogonies that invest the underground with a supra-human life. Whether considering the spirits hidden beneath the roads of Nigeria, who threaten to swallow travelers, Mami Wata, who inhabits the deep waters of the African continent, or the demonic figure of Supay, who haunts the Bolivian iron mines, the depths of these territories are places imbued with the power of divine beings who reign there according to local beliefs. Their power reaches the surface, where it is manifested in often spectacular actions that fuel the political, literary, and artistic imagination. Recognizing the intense presence of occult forces acting from the underworld thus offers an opportunity to reverse the process of secularization of the subsoil, which, as Mohamad Amer Méziane analyzes in his recent essay *Des empires sous la terre*, enabled their mining exploitation during the colonial period and contributed to the domination of societies above them by denying the reality of their spiritual entities.

Finally, the Glissantian imaginary of an intense vital energy that animates the deep—an exceptional space of relation—invites us to more broadly question the relationships between different forms of the living and the non-living. Underground worlds, conceived as spaces where a shifting power liberated from the will to dominate is expressed, would allow for the development of the ideal of an ecosystem in which human and non-human entities interact outside of any hierarchical relationship opening the door to potential exploitation, as defined by the ecologist Jacques Tassin in *Pour une écologie du sensible*. In this view, it would be the ecological model itself through which the living is conceived that would constitute a subterranean monument, one whose architecture abolishes any form of hierarchy between beings.

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Proposals (title, abstract of approximately 400 words) in french or in english accompanied by a brief CV should be sent for **May 16, 2025**, to the following addresses:

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