# THAT SINKING FEELING

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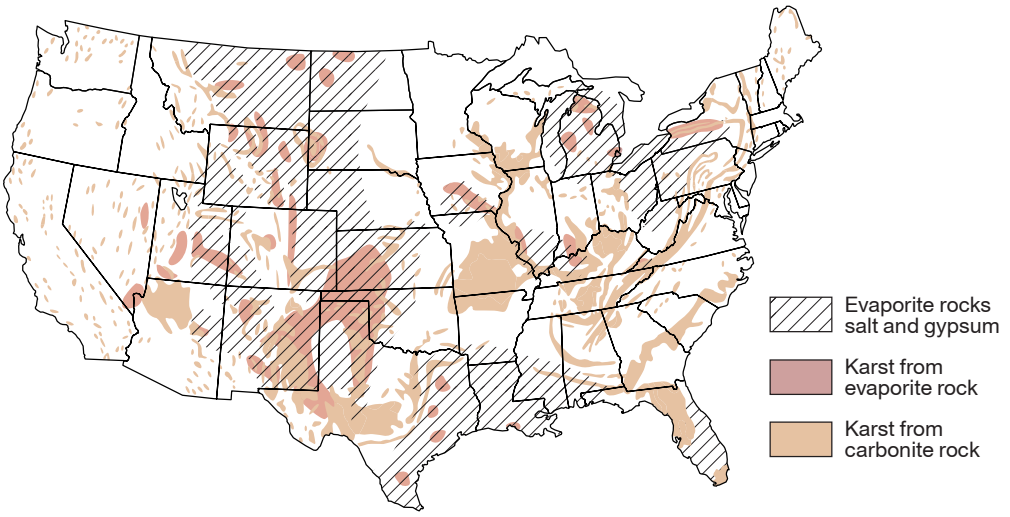
The District of Columbia, where I live, is not one of the parts of the world usually identified with sinkholes. It's not that they don't happen; they do. But they tend not to be numerous or dramatic enough—with one significant recent exception--to draw much media attention. Sinkholes can happen anywhere underground water meets porous rock. However, the riskiest sinkhole zones within settler-defined US borders include: most of the state of Florida, parts of Texas, Alabama, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and much of central and southern Pennsylvania, home of *Capacious*.




Map of sinkhole-prone land in US
modified from Davies and Legrand, 1972
(water.usgs.gov/ogw/pubs/fs00165)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I didn't know any of this until I was invited by Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman to participate in a WalkingLab event during the affect conference last year (Truman and Springgay). WalkingLabs are research-making events, occasions for "critical consideration[s] of place"; researchers and fellow travelers are asked to move their thinking through spaces that academics too often overlook when attending a conference or visiting a city for "work" (Truman and Springgay, 2). In this case, drawing on my interest in speculative geology, and motivated by the high incidence of sinkholes in the area—there have been, they told me, over a hundred of them in the past few years[1]—Springgay and Truman wanted me to bring the two together at a talk that would be delivered at the site of a recent sinkhole. Like many of the conference's attendees, I was unaware of the history of sinkholes in the area— even though Pennsylvania has a relatively high incidence of sinkholes, abetted by the area's porous bedrock, they rarely garner more than local media coverage, just as in DC.


Steve Herman tweets about the White House Sinkhole, May 22, 2018

Now I've said that sinkholes tend not to garner much media attention in the District. The White House sinkhole was, of course, an exception. After Voice of America correspondent Steve Herman posted the photos above, the sinkhole was immediately, gleefully taken up on social media. In effect, it happened twice: the first time geological, the second time virtual—as one headline neatly summed it up: "White House sinkhole engulfs DC Twitter feeds."


Twitter responds to the White House Sinkhole, May 2018

Some ascribed the hole to human activity, identifying it as an escape tunnel built by desperate White House employees, or by Melania. Others understood it as a sign of retributive geological agency, the earth taking appropriate action against the current presidential administration. The sinkhole soon opened its own Twitter accounts to confirm the latter view, declaring an alliance with its "natural di-sister," the hole that had opened on the street in front of Mar-a-Lago in 2017.[2] Though White House groundskeepers soon filled in the physical sinkhole, it

remained active on Twitter, taking issue not just with the White House's stance on environmental issues but also with other offenses, such as the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in fall 2018 and the racist behavior of Virginia lawmakers.


@WHSinkhole's Twitter

The feeling of glee that erupted across the Internet at the sight of this sinkhole was, geologically speaking, a bit unusual. Like other unpredictable geological phenomena, sinkholes tend to evoke a sense of dread: they are frightening reminders of life's precarity, the earth's indifference, and the threadbare fantasy—for

that subset of humans who lay claim to it—of human omnipotence. They remind us that no matter how carefully we tend our fantasies of the good life, at any moment, the ground can literally open up beneath us. This is not an easy feeling. Yet the response to the White House sinkhole was welcoming, even euphoric. This can be seen in the Twitter thread above, in which numerous respondents declare their support for the sinkhole's future presidential candidacy, while another user comments, "Such a weird thing to give me hope."

It isn't really that weird, on one level. Depictions of the White House sinkhole as retaliatory geology—the moral "just-desserts" of a planet-destroying administration—are part of a much longer geo-anthropomorphic tradition: the tendency to depict geological disaster (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions) as a mode of divine chastisement, a punishment for human hubris or wayward behavior. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) exemplifies this perspective, painting the first-century Roman CE city as a cesspool of sin ultimately cleansed by a well-timed volcanic explosion. By ascribing to the earth the capacity for ethical action that humans seem to lack, this sort of geo-anthropomorphic thinking effectively reverses figure and ground, rendering the earth agentially active so that humans in turn become inert, geological material—strewn about like the wreckage of earthquakes or, as indexed by the plaster casts made from cavities left by the vaporized victims of Vesuvius, literally turned to stone.[3] In the case of the White House sinkhole, it's especially satisfying to think this way in light of the current White House occupant's apparent ability to escape human justice systems. Something's got to catch up with him, we think: why not the planet itself?

And yet it also *is* a weird thing for a sinkhole to give one *hope*. Hope, here, seems to stand in for more than the possibility that the asshole in the White House might someday get his. As the gleeful nominations of the sinkhole for president suggests, hope, in the shadow of this administration, signals not simply retribution, but the possibility of active transformation. The weirdness of hope, in this light, is a departure from naïve optimism; it comes from the drive to think differently, to engage what José Esteban Muñoz, following Ernst Bloch, identifies as: a "certain practice of hope" that "helps [us] escape from a script in which human existence is reduced" (Duggan and Muñoz, 278).

So where are we, historically speaking, when the event of geologic collapse can become a sign and an agent of hope? In this context, geology becomes an accomplice of speculative thought.[4] The geological has been appealed to, in recent critical thought, as a means of opening new intellectual pathways: a way to

account for history differently, as in Manuel De Landa's experimental retelling of the rise of capitalism as in part a series of geological processes; to refocus critical attention away from the relatively unimportant actions of the human; or to imagine different futures, in which the human/nonhuman divide is displaced or dissolved (De Landa; Cohen; Yusoff). The positive zeal for the displacement of the human that accompanied some early instances of what Mark McGurl termed the "new cultural geology"—a series of appeals to geology as a kind of anti-anthropocentric toolkit, a way of emphasizing "the relative puniness of the human in the play of fundamental and evolutionary forces"—might give us pause (McGurl 380–81). For in dwelling too long on this point—the human's puniness—some inhumanist thinking ironically risks replicating the geo-anthropomorphic tradition. Even if the earth's indifference to, rather than its disapproval of, human agency is the point, it seems once again to be looking to the geological to chastise us for wrongdoing, and in this gesture failing to specify *which* form of the human needs to be cut down to size and neglecting the very histories that have produced the need to ask that question. Gesturing toward deep time and/or planetary indifference as, ostensibly, a mode of inhuman chastisement contains a paradoxical comfort for certain readers. Part of the appeal of such geologically-coded gestures as Quentin Meillasoux's turn to the arche-fossil, Elizabeth Povinelli points out, is that it neatly skips over the violence of human history: "things that existed before we got here…are the things we have been taught not to feel responsible for, things that cannot demand accountability from us" (Povinelli 76).

Yet not all inhumanist thinkers get stuck inside the geologic sublime. Rather, a generation of theorists has emerged who think through the instability of the human/nonhuman divide by amplifying the materialist implications of woman of color feminism, queer, decolonial and indigenous thought. Thinkers like Povinelli, along with Vanessa Agard-Jones, Mel Y. Chen, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Zoe Todd, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins engage materiality in ways that illuminate how speculative geological thinking might intensify rather than marginalize social and ecological justice projects—how the land can remember histories both deep and recent, and how our apprehension of that memory may create space for alternative futures. Inspired by these scholars and others, I want to ask not how sinkholes demand that we look away from or diminish human agency, but rather how we might begin to think it anew—to ask, that is, what sinkholes, acting co-agentially with humans, show us about ourselves, our hopes, our blind spots, and our failures, and how we might use these to begin to think and act differently.

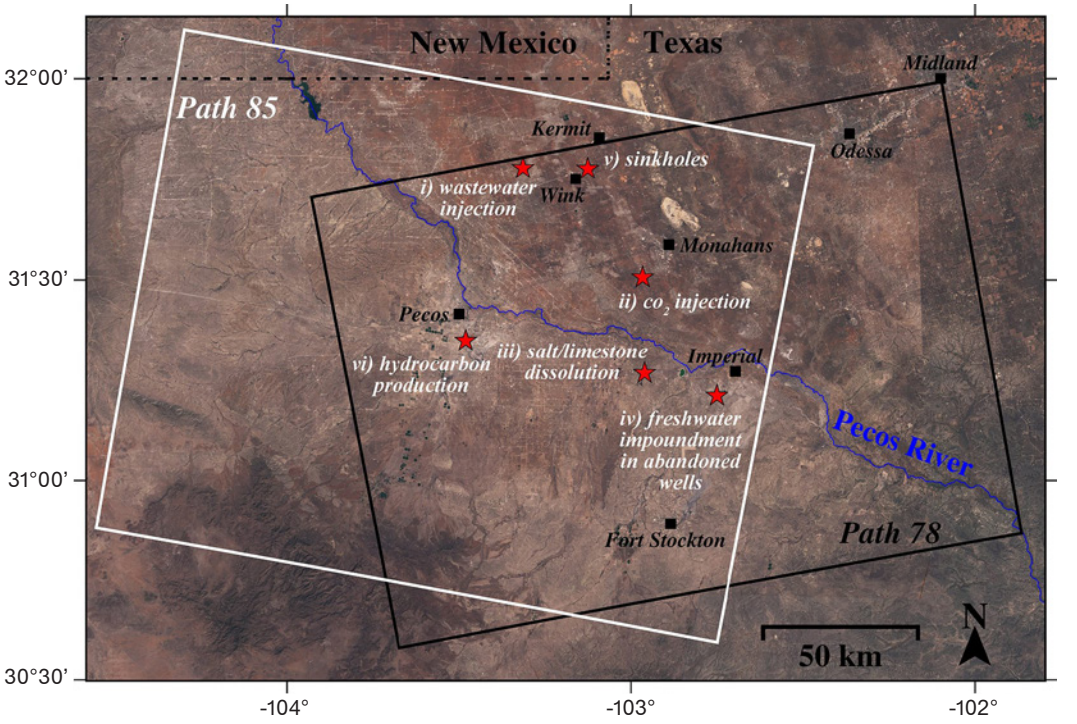
Thinking with the sinkhole, in this light, means eschewing the turn to geology as a pedagogy of awe or wonder. Instead, it offers a mode of "staying with the trouble" in located and historicized ways, of thinking about how the geological overlaps and intersects with, rather than overwhelms or chastises, human worlds (Haraway 2016). Now sinkholes are not always anthropogenic—unlike potholes, with which they are often confused. Potholes are the result of a seasonal *pas de deux* between human infrastructure and nonhuman nature. Water seeps into small cracks and holes in pavement and pushes down the soil below it, until the pavement above the resultant air pockets crumbles. Sinkholes, however, are a more complex, temporally dispersed geological phenomenon. Potholes originate just below the surface: sinkholes start deeper, resulting from erosion or displacement of the bedrock. Limestone (as in Pennsylvania) or other kinds of porous carbonate rock create the most sinkhole-friendly terrain, which the US Geological Service calls "karst terrain." They can form slowly (cover-subsidence) or quite suddenly (cover-collapse)—they can be caused entirely by nonhuman forces or partly by anthropogenic ones.

Yet like other geological processes in the Anthropocene, sinkholes are ever more frequently affected by human action, or lack thereof. And because they are local, located, and usually traceable events, they can pinpoint, often with uncanny precision, precisely what is going wrong. Urban sinkholes are usually the effect of neglect—often of aging, crumbling infrastructure, resulting from erosion caused

Sinkhole caused by leaking drainage pipe, Gwinnet, County, GA, June 2018 (ajc.com/news/photos-few-metro-atlanta-biggest-sinkholes)

by leaking sewer and water lines, etc.[5] This is made directly visible in the image below, a sinkhole that opened up in Atlanta, Georgia in June 2018.
In this sense, sinkholes can be understood to expose (sometimes literally) neoliberalism's history of deliberate *under*investment in systems of social support, both materially and ideologically.

Outside city centers, though, sinkholes also expose an *over*investment in the false promises of petromodernity. The map below, from a 2018 report by two geophysicists, links the incidence of sinkholes in West Texas with destabilization and erosion caused by oil and gas drilling in the area.




Sinkholes and Human Activity in West Texas, March 2018
(nature.com/articles/s41598-018-23143-6)

If the dream of modern energy infrastructures, in the minds of those for whose benefit they were built, was that they would be kept neatly out of sight, their toxicity hidden away or banished to somewhere else, the messy unpredictability of the sinkhole reveals that fantasy for what it is: a wish to be untroubled by our own implication in networks of ecological and social exploitation and domination.

This dual exposure—of infrastructural *over-* and *under-*investment—is crucial. It reminds us that despite the different means by which substructural erosion takes place, anthropogenic sinkholes insistently draw the gaze to that which petro-modernity's intended beneficiaries have been privileged enough, for a time, to overlook: its material and ideological disintegration as a supposedly progressive project. And that dual linkage might serve to remind us that a call to repair the crumbling infrastructures of the first example, a demand that we reinvest in public-sphere projects, cannot be undertaken apart from a move away from the global toxicity of petrocapitalism. We can't simply keep plugging up the holes; we need, rather, to reimagine infrastructures entirely, along with a concomitant reinvention of social relations. Sinkholes will keep happening. But if we want to lessen their occurrence and mitigate their harms, we need to think about re-building infrastructure as an ecological and justice-oriented, rather than a merely anthropocentric and convenience-oriented project (Boyer).

The sinkholes in DC and Florida have, unfortunately, not yet succeeded in getting rid of the current occupant of the White House. But if we keep paying attention to what sinkholes expose, we might see them working in tandem with humans, providing ways to envision interrupting the reproduction of structural and infrastructural damage. For instance, an increase in the number and severity of sinkholes in central Pennsylvania persuaded the state legislature, in the summer of 2017, to temporarily halt construction on the Sunoco pipeline, a potential proximate cause. The shutdown didn't last, unfortunately. Yet we can use this suspension as a hopeful moment. Imagining sinkholes as a partner in the increasing volubility of protests against pipeline construction might help us continue to imagine otherwise. Sinkholes can remind us both of how *little* power we humans possess and how *much* we do—they might help us to better attend to what it means to plan a human energy infrastructure around a geological substructure whose events we can't predict or control but whose harms we do, in fact, have some knowledge about how to mitigate.

## Endnotes

**1.** On the high incidence of sinkholes in the area, see: http://www.gis.dcnr.state.pa.us/maps/index.html?geology=true; https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Parts-of-Pa-Vulnerable-to-Sinkhole-Formation-197055451.html.

**2.** See @WHsinkhole 22 May 2018. Several Twitter accounts purporting to be the voice of the White House sinkhole were opened in May 2018. All quotes and references in this article are from @WHsinkhole, which remains active as of this writing.

**3.** These casts, first made by archaeologist Giussepe Fiorelli in the 1860s, have become iconic. See Victoria C. Gardner Coates, "On the Cutting Edge: Pompeii and New Technology," in Coates et. al., ed, *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), pp. 44–51.

**4.** For Nigel Clark, Alexandra Gormally, and Hugh Tuffen, for instance, speculative geology is "at least as concerned with creative, explorative, and conjectural probings as … with establishing causal relations or all-encompassing interpretive frameworks." See Clark et. al. (2018). Speculative Volcanology: Time, Becoming, and Violence in Encounters with Magma. *Environmental Humanities,* 10 (1), p. 276.

**5.** See, e.g. https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/huge-sinkholes-are-now-appearing-in-the-wrong-places/.

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