



International Conference
Université de Montréal
February 5-7, 2027

Call for Papers

Geo-Medical Syndemics: Earthquakes, Geotrauma, and Mental Health in the Planetary Imagination

While geo-medicine usually refers to the impact of geography on health, this conference uses *geo* in a geological sense and considers how geo-medical imaginaries emerge at the intersection of medical and geological events and their diverse aftermaths and embodiments. Geological-medical imaginaries operate in multi- and para-disciplinary ways, across trauma, gender, postcolonial, and Anthropocene studies, the environmental medical and health humanities, and pluriversal concepts of planetary health. Our aim is to assemble and investigate historical and contemporary representations, formations, and critiques of syndemic “Earth events” (Clark and Szerszynski 126), primarily in—but not restricted to—the cultural, literary, and medical imagination across multiple geopolitical terrains and geological timescales. Historically, seismic events, such as the earthquakes that took place in Shaanxi, China (1556), Santiago, Chile (1647), Lisbon, Portugal (1755), Cape Ann/Boston, USA (1755), and Meknes, Morocco (1755), as well as those that occurred more recently, in Athens (1999), in Haiti (2010), Tōhoku, Japan (2011), and Mexico City (2017), triggered tsunamis, epidemics, and one major nuclear accident. They generated staggering death tolls, long-term destruction and displacement, and chronic physical and mental health conditions. While they amplified pre-existing health vulnerabilities, food insecurity, and local impoverishment, they also prompted and continue to prompt new medical and planetary health imaginaries. The latter mediate the excess of human-nonhuman relationships and conceive of ways to cope and live with an innately dynamic planet.

Until the eighteenth century, earthquakes were frequently explained as an expression of moral and divine retribution, the subterranean movement of a living and embodied planet, or as a cosmic imbalance that exposed and rectified economic, political, and social injustices. With the advent of the European Enlightenment, imperialism, and natural philosophy in the eighteenth century, seismic events were interpreted as natural events with scientific causes. For example, the American mathematician and natural philosopher John Winthrop used the then widely accepted medical miasma theory to argue that earthquakes resulted from rising subterranean temperatures whose accumulated pressure produced “vapors” that “discharge[d] themselves into the open air” and “infect[ed] the air with, and br[ought] on pestilential distempers” (24-25). To such rationalist polymaths as Winthrop, Gottfried Leibniz, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant (e.g., in his three essays on the Lisbon earthquake), earthquakes were caused gradually by the “ripen[ing of] proper materials [i.e. “fermenting minerals”]” into vapors. Their purpose was to counterbalance the

Earth's decreasing reproductive "fit[ness] for the production" and "grow[ing]" of mineral "bodies ...within [it]" (Winthrop 29). This gendered rhetoric of the Earth's alleged fragility appealed to the nascent natural sciences, which depended on the logic of resource extraction and anthropocentric care and control, thus eroding gender-based and animist Earth narratives and prompting "the death of nature" (Carolyn Merchant). In Europe, the incomprehensible force of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake instilled a deep sense of terror, arbitrary violence, and awe in Enlightenment individuals and thinkers like Kant, whose aesthetic philosophy of the sublime would subtend the settler colonial imagination. Politically and economically, the Lisbon quake also served to fortify and expand Portugal's investment in the transatlantic slave trade, whose profits helped rebuild Lisbon and its public health system. On a planetary scale, as Kathryn Yusoff explains, the Lisbon earthquake propelled the making of "colonial earth" as "*extractive earth*" and fortified "whiteness as a geopower (a terrorizing and territorializing force)" (5; 64-68).

Syndemic Earth events can be defined as seismic events whose effects unfold simultaneously on different and uneven social, medical, anthropogenic, and environmental registers and cause various comorbidities of mutually reinforcing physical and mental health conditions on a local and planetary scale. They are not simply "natural disasters" but can be defined as combined medical, geological, and geoengineered events that must be situated within broader political and colonial histories of governmental failure, public health vulnerability, and structural violence (Singer 2009). The 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province, China, offers one example. Likely related to the geoengineering of the Zipingpu mega-dam (Rigby 51), it brought on cholera, typhoid fever, hepatitis A and E, *Shigella dysenteriae*, PTSD, insomnia, and chronic anxiety (Mavrouli et al. 2023). In literary and cultural texts, geo-medical imaginaries make visible forms of trauma that are at once bodily, historical, and planetary. They register the Earth not as passive setting, but they interweave the planet's own traumatic "multiplicity" (i.e., its asymmetrical and ongoing "self-differentiating" mobility and transformation; Clarke and Szerszynski 143) with histories of racism, fascism, colonialism, and non-Western practices of communal healing. Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), for instance, links the collective trauma of the Holocaust, the psychic trauma of its seven-year-old Polish survivor Jakob Beer, and the Earth's "geotrauma," imagining these as interrelated or "nested" traumas (Negarestani in: Matts and Tynan, 157). Myriam J. A. Chancy's novel *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021), by contrast, turns to the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the subsequent cholera outbreak, to show how humanitarian interventionism, colonially inherited and patriarchal structures of racial and sexual violence become part of the earthquake's syndemic "aftershocks." At the same time, Chancy's novel engages non-Western cosmologies of shared planetary habitability, communal repair, and collective healing.

This conference invites participants to broaden and investigate given, emerging, and new notions of *geotrauma* and its "combined material effects and psychic affects" (Yusoff 11). If, as Yusoff observes, "[c]olonialism is an expression of *geotrauma*," because colonialism's "extreme" extractivist materialism "transformed the planet and its geopower to extract and explicate value in such a way as to build a new earth at the scale of the planetary" (11), then colonialism and its contemporary incarnations need to keep inventing Western Earth "origin stories" and eliminating "geologies that belonged to other imaginations of earth" (1). This conference asks how geo-medical crises may generate transformative, alternative, and emerging Earth narratives and "geological intimacies" that challenge "the normative register of colonial materialities" (Yusoff 9), disaster capitalism (Naomi Klein), and disaster extractivism," namely, the intensification of

violent extractive resource depletion during pandemic-related health crises, specifically in Honduras, Chile, and Ecuador (Artiga-Purcell et al. 2023). Furthermore, although *geotrauma* invokes Nick Land's early work on "geotraumatics" (Mackay and Brassier 60), it can be read more simply as a reminder of Earth's interplanetary formation.

When, 4.5 billion years ago, Earth collided with the Mars-sized planetary embryo, or protoplanet, Theia, this cataclysmic collision, a recent study at Caltech suggests, destroyed the outer crust of Earth and the core of Theia, and the resulting debris exploded into space and solidified into the Moon. It shifted Earth from its axis, thereby changing its angle towards the sun, and thus preparing the ground for the terrestrial seasons and burying Theia's continent-sized sheets of hot rock 3000 km underneath Africa deep within the bowels of the earth (Schroeder 2024; Dajose 2023). This primordial geo-cosmic trauma not only implies that coexistence is a painful process, but, according to Land, it also generated a planetary unconscious that contests the separation of the geological from the biological. It is this traumatic dimension of Earth's ancient "multiplicity" (Clark and Szersynski) that carries "scars . . . throughout terrestrial matter, instituting a register of unconscious pain" (Mackay and Brassier 60-61) and affecting human and nonhuman bodies. This trauma also speaks to the possibilities of a "new earth" (Deleuze and Guattari) and to decolonial and Indigenous astronomies, such as, for instance, Nolan Oswald Dennis's ongoing art installation "Black Liberation Zodiac" (2022).

The idea of geotrauma expands both Freud's biocentric and Deleuze and Guattari's socio-political trauma into a geological perspective that centers planetary deep time as a site of trauma and reconnection. Timothy Morton calls this repressed planetary trauma, its violent yet relational and generative rupture and fusion, the "*arche-lithic*, a primordial relatedness of humans and nonhumans that has never evaporated" (63). It manifests through a desire to dissociate from the planet and its unpredictable forces through forms of depression and anxiety that occur specifically after massive syndemic Earth events. As anthropologist Lachlan Summers observes, survivors of the 2017 Mexico City earthquake manifest such diverse symptoms as weight loss, dizzy spells, insomnia, panic attacks, migraines, claustrophobia, diarrhea, diabetes, weakness, and anxiety, and describe themselves as having been "touched" by the planet's "deep time" (463-464). "Earthquake sickness" (466), or being touched by deep time, cannot be easily measured or diagnosed but requires new modes of narrating and thinking about how deep time erupts into human and nonhuman lives and causes "nested," syndemic geotraumas. Geo-medical imaginaries must then be attuned to the coloniality of geotraumas and syndemic Earth events, while also acknowledging when and how geological and geophysical ruptures become geopsychic ruptures. This conference asks how the creative imagination, the telling and sharing of stories of geotraumatic excesses (regardless of genre or format), may offer diagnostic tools and help develop pluri-epistemic and decolonial geomedical imaginaries, practices of geo-sensing, and planetary wellbeing.

Questions to be addressed at the conference may include but are not restricted to the following:

- How do fictional and narrative accounts of being "touched" by the planet's "deep time" (Summers 463) render and, perhaps, mitigate the long-term mental health struggles of earthquake survivors and imagine collective responses to an increasingly self-transformative planet? How do geotrauma, anticipatory climate grief, and solastalgia translate into chronic conditions?

- How do literary, poetic, visual, and cinematographic renditions represent, visualize, and narrate human and nonhuman encounters with the planet's geological forces and develop new languages, aesthetics, and idioms through which to rethink existing anthropogenic grammars of planetary health and collective planetary inhabitation? How do they contribute to communal healing, social and health justice?
- How do non-Western “geo-intimacies” (Yusoff) generate and recuperate silenced geo-medical imaginaries? In what way can geo-medical imaginaries be curative rather than another instance of “palliative imperialism” (Mukherjee 18) or Western humanitarian interventionism?
- How do different narratives and genres of encounters with the planet's (anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic) geological forces and geotraumas help decolonize geotrauma?
- What are the lessons of earlier fictional and non-fictional narratives and theories of historical seismic events and their impact on cultural, scientific, and medical imaginaries? How can these be adapted and rethought in light of contemporary syndemic Earth events?
- How do multiple geo-medical imaginaries and onto-epistemologies navigate between the tectonics of geo-medical metaphors and the uneven medical embodiments of syndemic Earth events? To what effect?
- If the planet's geomorphic movements create radically uncertain environments and vulnerabilities, how do we understand, narrate, and treat illness as constituted by an “unsettled earth” (Oguz 417)? How do we need to rethink dominant narratives of health and “normativity”? How do critical disability studies offer critical frameworks that allow for the development of equitable and intersectional responses to syndemic Earth events?

Geo-Medical Syndemics: Earthquakes, Geotrauma, and Mental Health in the Planetary Imagination is an international conference convened by the interuniversity health humanities research collective “Viral Conjunctures,” which is based at the Université de Montréal (<https://viral-conjunctures.com>) and supported by Canadian national and provincial research granting institutions. We invite conference proposals from scholars, students, artists, teachers, and practitioners working in and across various academic disciplines, health sectors, para-disciplinary and activist contexts, socio-political and pedagogical communities. Proposals for individual presentations, panels, and posters may address one or more of the above questions, be between 300 and 400 words, and include the presenter's institutional affiliation and short biography (80 words). The conference will take place **in person** at the **Université de Montréal from February 5th to February 7th, 2027**. Keynote speakers will be announced in the fall. Following the conference, participants will have the opportunity to submit revised versions of their presentations to collaborative publication projects with established academic journals. The **firm deadline** for proposal submissions is **SEPTEMBER 8, 2026**. All proposals will be peer-reviewed, and responses will be sent out by September 22, 2026. Please send your proposals to: camille.houle-eichel@umontreal.ca or submit them at: [Submit Proposals - Viral Conjunctures](#)

The Viral Conjunctures Conference Committee: Heike Härting (Université de Montréal), Heather Meek (Université de Montréal), Shane Neilson (McMaster University), and Cecily Raynor (McGill University)

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