

**The Narrative of Landscape.** People can find meaning in their lives by communicating, talking, writing and telling stories. Landscapes and places are not able to do this. And yet, they tell their stories to those of us who are able to decipher them. The identity of a place reveals itself to those who speak the language of landscape and know how to interpret shapes, structure, materials, form and function the same way they interpret words. We shape landscape and language – and they shape us. The articles in this issue, which are as diverse in genre and theme as always, ranging from short stories to films and dramas, question this narrative of the landscape.

# 88 2014 The Narrative of Landscape

MARIEKE TIMMERMANS READING A LANDSCAPE • DANIEL CZECHOWSKI THE LAYERS OF LANDSCAPE • RICHARD SENNETT NARRATIVE AND AGENCY • MARTÍ FRANCH DISCOVERING THE LIQUID LANDSCAPE OF LA TANCADA LAGOON, SPAIN • LUIGI LATINI CULTIVATION IN LANDSCAPES OF WAR, BOSNIA • ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER CINEMATIC LANDSCAPES • SASKIA SASSEN LAND AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LIVING • ADRIAAN GEUZE THE NARRATIVE OF STOLEN PARADISE • J. M. LEDGARD, MATTHEW SKJONSBERG ON EARTH – A CONVERSATION ABOUT AFRICA

The Narrative of Landscape

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Beasts of the Southern Wild, Seville International

64 The story of the six-year-old Hushpuppy in the film “Beasts of the Southern Wild” refers to the degraded landscape of the Louisiana marshlands.



Jeroen Musch

88 A pergola in Máximapark in Utrecht, The Netherlands, by West 8 surrounds the green courtyard, evoking illusions of paradise.



Martin Wegmann

102 Soil is crucial for living in Africa. The photo shows a dirt road in Atakora Province, Benin, West Africa, close to the border of Togo.

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# ON EARTH

Informed by his experience as a frontline correspondent for *The Economist*, J. M. Ledgard's second novel, *Submergence*, speaks of the enduring narrative of earth and water entwined through personal and political dynamics, and will now be the subject of a Hollywood screen adaptation. The architect and urban designer Matthew Skjonsberg recently spoke with the author on a sunny roof terrace in Lausanne. The following text is an excerpt from that conversation.

Maybe the first thing to say is that for the last decade I was living in Africa, specifically east Africa, and this is where our species *homo sapiens* evolved. This is where we are from. I started thinking there about this paradox of our human nature, which brings us directly back to soil. Okay, so we grew up as a species in the Rift Valley. There were not many of us. We know that. And then some of us left Africa across the narrows of the Red Sea, the Bab-el-Mandeb, "Gateway of Tears", between Djibouti and Yemen. And they went off into the world. We don't know exactly when this happened, it wasn't more than 60,000 years ago, but we can be sure that there were only a hundred or so individuals and all of us who are not African are descended from those individuals. So that's something. There are two basic points to make here. First: For nearly all of our evolution, our understanding of soil was a very different understanding than the understanding of agricultural peoples. The earth was beneficent, it gave us roots and fruits, but we were not manipulating it in any way – we didn't put a blade to it. And that was true of African cultures until the late Egyptian civilization penetrated down the

Nile and spread out gradually. Then different crops came and so on. So you have this prehistory of our species where we were aware of soil in very different ways – perhaps the texture of it when it was dry and hard, and its softness and smell after rain when the insects have burrowed out. The second point: I want to say that Freud was just scraping the surface. Our relationship to light, to shadow, to sky, to animals, to sex, to violence, and to soil is African. Let's emphasize the maths here. If you go back through all the hominids to *Australopithecus*, that's 3 million years of evolution, and only 60,000 years outside of Africa. So it's not surprising when people go to Africa they often feel this inexplicable sense of familiarity. Funnily enough, Jung did go to Kenya and he claimed that he had his personal epiphany when he went and stood on the Athi Plains just outside Nairobi. That's where Jungianism was born, in our ancestral home, though Jung could not know that then. We know too much science to be Jungian anymore, I mean it doesn't add up, but yet there is something: You walk barefoot on African paths and study the termites moving down into the earth and there is something deep.



Soil tells the narrative of Africa. The photo shows a dirt road in Atakora Province, Benin, West Africa – close to the border of Togo, looking southward (2007).



The basalt plateau of Ethiopia is very fertile (top), but intense cultivation has accelerated erosion and seriously reduced soil depth, with a negative impact on soil-water storage and productivity (opposite page).

**O**n top of old Africa is “new Africa” and soil is at the heart of it. We can look at northern Nigeria or south Somalia and say the al-Qaeda insurgencies there are intimately related to the soil. Why to the soil? Because the communities there are trying to make a go of it in semi-arid climates, which are getting more and more difficult – the topsoil has been baked and blown off. There are likely to be some worsening effects still to come from climate change. We don’t know – in some regard this is as a red herring. Because the main thing for these semi-arid areas, everywhere in Africa in fact, is you’ve just got a lot more people! In 1950, you had 229 million Africans and 550 million Europeans. By 2050, you will have 2.7 billion Africans and 741 million Europeans. We need to walk our head around figures like these. So I believe that when we talk about soil in the 21st century we are going to be talking a lot more about African soil – and in highly political and strategic terms. I’m not a neo-Malthusian, I am not saying that we are going to break apart and be shattered, but the topic of soil is urgent – we must rethink our relationship to the land itself. What is it really? How do we share it? It’s going to be very messy. It will be like medieval Europe, where you had division of land plots, and then people had to move in the 16th century towards towns, which created early modern Europe. In western Kenya, for example, you have average plot sizes of about half a hectare. What we are running against is that, even with innovative farming, it is hard to raise enough food for a family on that kind of plot size. And when you cut it and divide it up again you get this terrible hunger for land. People are desperate for land. Very weird things happen, like the revival of witch trials in some parts of Africa. It is directly related to old ladies, and sometimes old men, but particularly old ladies. They just won’t die! say the young people. They won’t get out of the way so somebody can have their little plot of land, you know? So it

“Somewhere along the way the land just died. It was bleached out and the cracks that were in the soil ... had here become deep enough to fall into. The insides of these cuts were twisted with roots and there were flints and fossils exposed. The badlands stretched out of sight.”



mutates in a very sick way into some sort of black magic. “Oh, but she is bad.” Then they burn her and take her little plot of earth.

So there is this tremendous growing human competition in poorer countries for land, but when we talk about land we are really talking

about soil. Well then, what is the quality of the soil? Well, we have massive degradation of soil in many African countries because of very poor land management. Without even going into larger issues about climate change and land grabs, what we know is that the drought cycle has tightened from one year in seven to one year in two in many dry bits of Africa. Or again, you've been growing maize in your little plot and you've used up the nutrients in the soil. And these nutrients need to regenerate. We know from farming, from time immemorial, that you can't be too greedy with soil – you have to give it a fallow period. But

“If this was happening in a science-fiction world we would see it clearly for what it is, but we don't because it's happening here and now.”

if the little postage stamp of a plot is all you have, there is never going to be a fallow period. In order for us to survive as a species we have to approach the way we manage ourselves in a much more crowded environment. You only have to look at the Rhinish towns of the 12th and 13th centuries and you see that they had already developed guilds and land-management structures, and here in Switzerland you can go up to Gstaad and see the way they divided their Alpine cow pastures as early as the 16th century.

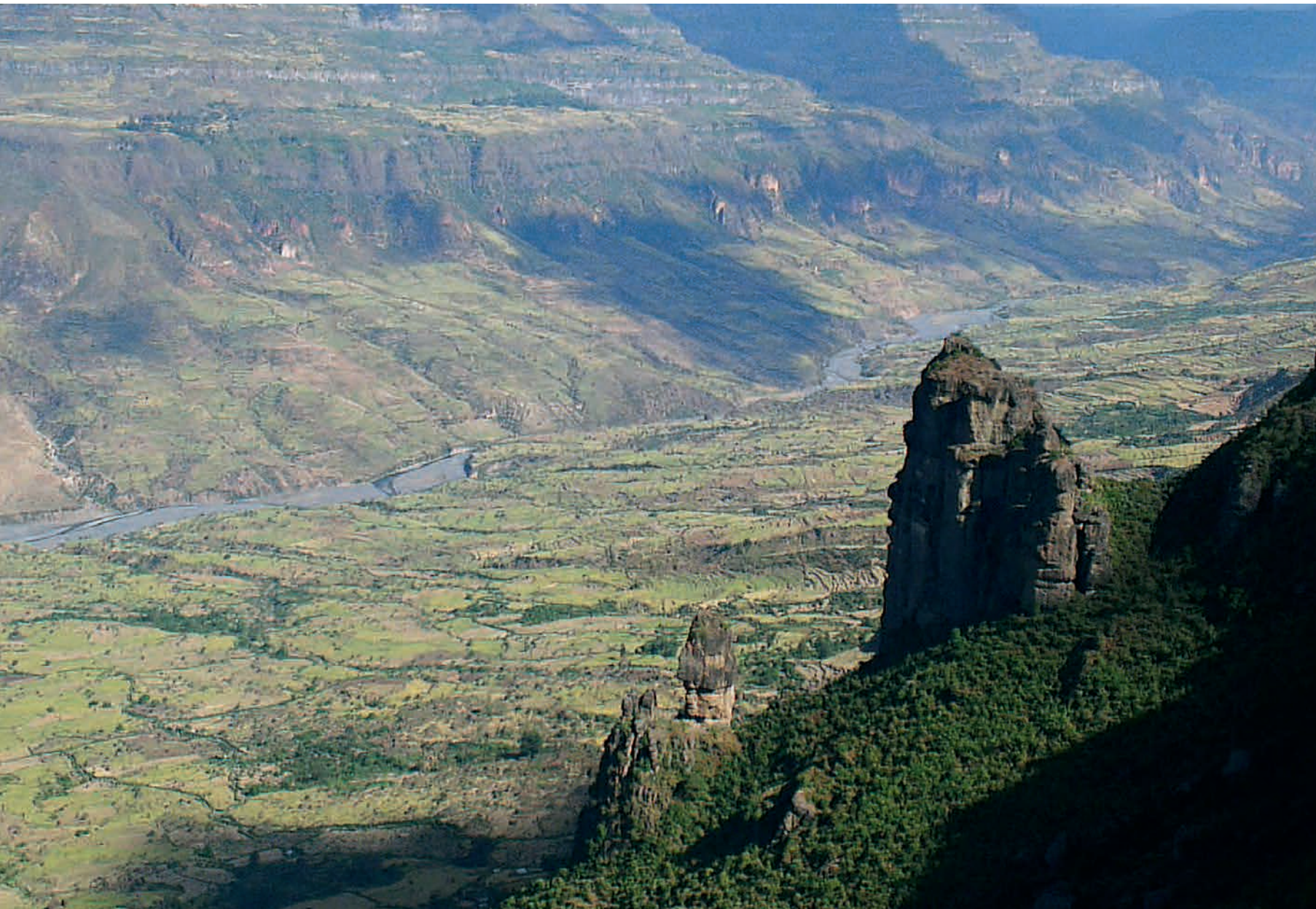
It is not clear whether new Africa has developed a way of sharing land and soil that is strong enough to secure political stability. You know the World Bank now reckons that 75 percent of African youth – 15- to 24-year-olds – will not find a salaried job in the next decade. Some of them will be out hawking, selling this or that, getting by on casual labor. But most of them will be

picking away at their tiny plot of land, cutting the soil, again and again. We don't have to be CIA analysts to realize that this is making for a very fragile near-future. So I think your subject of soil is very elegant. We can really say that soil is a binding point to the coming decades.

Compare us as a species living on the soil with the viruses and archaea and bacteria in the soil. Many of these life forms have been in there for 2 billion years or more, while we only started farming some 10 thousand years ago. We are the farming species, we are supposed to be about stewardship, but you can see we have the look of a magnesium stick burning up ever so brightly and ever so fast. Each of us will be overtaken by these microbial life forms; they will literally eat us up, from the inside out and the outside in. We don't even need to take a spiritual approach of resignation; there is just simple mathematics behind it. The body rotting in the soil is as corporeal as it gets.

So again, that binding point is soil, right? I think that is one of the points I make in *Submergence* and I also made it in my first novel, *Giraffe*, which is the weirdness of being a species that is anchored to the soil by gravity. We are bipedal, so we are walking on the earth, and our relationship with it is vertical, and despite all our learning and excellence – such that we can put ourselves high in a spy plane, or in a helicopter, or put ourselves below the deep in a submersible, or even beyond the planet in a spaceship, whatever – the fact is that 99.99999 percent of us as a species, we want to walk across the fields and smell and touch the fresh-ploughed earth. In the end, as a species, it is just as Shakespeare had it in *The Tempest* when Gonzalo pleads not to drown: “Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground: long heath, brown furze, anything. The wills above be done, but I would fain die a dry death.” When it comes to soil, we are closer to the mole than we are to *Star Trek*.

The quotations are taken from J. M. Ledgard's second novel “Submergence”.



The aerial view shows the fertile basalt plateau of Ethiopia. An incision in the plateau illustrates the enormous risk for further acceleration of erosion.



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