

# Matter Unmined and Undermined Matter

In my first chemistry lesson in school, I was introduced to the periodic table. From then on, each pupil in our class had their own small periodic table that they carried with them to each lesson. It became our continuing companion, a key to understanding the world on one flat laminated piece of cardboard. This table introduced us to the scientific terms for material, making of what we had until then known as gold and silver, 79 Au and 47 Ag. I remember feeling mature, having transgressed from what I was made to think was a primitive to an "*enlightenment understanding of nature and its "properties"*" (Yusoff, 2021). The mine does not appear in chemistry or any other subject of natural sciences.

The periodic table, as a means of representation of matter, works in favour of the imperial narrative that sees western societies as keepers of knowledge. It is a so-called "*rational*" body of knowledge that claims to be "*objective, disinterested and value free*" (Ahmed, 2002, p.49). During a process of colonial appropriation, matter has undergone what Yusoff (2021) calls a "*practical purification*". It is presented reduced to an element and its assigned "*Physical properties*". Ahmed (2002, p.54) argues that "*the construction of white and black bodies was crucial to the discursive transformation of the imperial project from one of violent appropriation to a natural process, and then moral imperative*". In a similar way the periodic table can be understood as a strategic reformulation of matter. A necessary simplification to allow a result-oriented thinking, that is freed from the moral burdens that the paths to the extraction of matter would unfold. A path of blood, suffering, dehumanisation, slavery, displacement, extinction and exploitation.

Enlightenment has produced the periodic table as the new starting point of matter and the laboratory as the starting point of creation. The laboratory exhibits scientific labour like a museum exhibits its objects in a steril blanc setting. Both are places in which the celebration of scientific ingenuity takes shape. Both are places in which matter is turned into 'white' intellectual property, places in which black history is "*silenced*" (Yusoff, 2021) and in which their bodies are objectified. The intellectual value that is assigned to matter in the theory of enlightenment is a way by which the colonizer justifies a violent accumulation of knowledge. Colonised land and indigenous people are thus seen as testing grounds. In project 4.1. (1) sick Marshallese are brought to the

laboratory not as people but as carriers of matter. Their bodies literally become mines.

The periodic table uses its lines to separate figures rather than to create a network linking figures to one another. When extracting an element from the table, the structure of the table remains unchanged, whereas extracting an element from a network would cause the network to collapse. In other words, elements in the table are matter in isolated form, they are individual constants held together by the stable structure of a grid. This suggests an inexhaustible supply of matter ever available to fuse into new material. It does not show the imbalance that extraction causes. Any form of “*geologic disruption*” (Yusoff, 2019, p.4) is lost in the means of representation.

The table is part of a mapping of terrain on two axes, a superficial view onto the world. Superficial as it does not permeate the ‘white’ colonial surface which separates the world into over- and underground. (Yusoff, 2021) The top-view makes this surface a flat, opaque and impenetrable border. A border that separates the colonists from the colonised. The colonised are buried underneath this imaginary surface and placed in the mine. The subterranean space, in which extraction takes place is out of sight. Hidden behind two-dimensional representation, it becomes an unapproachable and mystified place. Social hierarchy manifests itself spatially (Yusoff, 2021), where matter is extracted it creates holes and disruption.

The institutional separation of natural and social sciences has led to a notion of matter as something that can exist independently from its extraction, as something inorganic. A notion of matter on the periodic table. The enlightenment body of knowledge has been mined. It is knowledge that has come to existence through the appropriation of matter and living bodies. The mine is a deadly and dehumanizing space. As mining is continued and the mine as a space grows, larger parts of the earth become deadly and uninhabitable. As the mine grows not only the people in it but also the people above it sink further into the ground. The terrain becomes fragile, and cracks begin to appear on the colonial surface, cracks that prove the network of matter, cracks that prove that matter is organic and inseparable from human life.

## Notes

(1) „*The Bravo detonation instigated the human experiments in Project 4.1, a secret US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) study, which was planned for and then authorized while Marshallese were being treated on Kwajalein and continued for years to monitor the effects of radiation on a human population*“ (Yusoff, 2019, p.9)

## List of References

Ahmed, S. (2002). *Racialized Bodies. Real Bodies*, pp.46–63.

Yusoff, K. (2019). *White Utopia/Black Inferno: Life on a Geologic Spike - Journal #97* February 2019 - e-flux. [online] [www.e-flux.com](http://www.e-flux.com). Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/97/252226/white-utopia-black-inferno-life-on-a-geologic-spike/> [Accessed 16 Dec. 2021].

Yusoff, K. (2021). *Mine as Paradigm - Architecture - e-flux*. [online] [www.e-flux.com](http://www.e-flux.com). Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/survivance/381867/mine-as-paradigm/> & [http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article\\_252226.pdf](http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_252226.pdf) [Accessed 16 Dec. 2021].