"Earth ... without us": Earthlessness, Autochthoneity and Environmental Risk in Negotiating Mining in Germany

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Abstract

This contribution troubles the making absent and present of earth and earthliness in references to the Sorbs, a primarily German West Slavic minority group, in Lusatian lignite energy future discourse. Lusatia, in Eastern Germany, is one of the two major German regions for opencast mining, feeding some of Europe's largest coal-fired powerplants, amongst the top 6 carbon emitters of Europe. I proceed by first (re)constructing an ensemble of discursive fragments, documents of a wooden artistic intervention, a music video, as well as a document by the Sorbs cultural representation body *Domowina*, as well as a policy/epistemic intervention by environmental scholars and activists. This ensembling is motivated by these experiences: (a) stories of a Sorb-ish village destroyed for mining, (b) the village's emplaced collective and its utopian acts; and these two puzzle me, as they contrast (c) the modern ontologies employed in current energy politics contestation. Second, I analyse this ensemble for how they trouble earth or earthly entities and their relations to humans. This move is inspired by a Foucauldian problematisation analytics with a Harawaynian twist. I explore what troubles the ensemble's pieces configure and how these troubles trouble mining. This method can be understood as a form of empirical philosophy. It serves to stay with the trouble of earth, its evocations, presencing and absencing. Analysing earth-human relations in this case requires to not only consider modern "nature" "out there", but also how the autochthonous group with its language naturalises itself (or is so by others) and its relationship to the ground they dwell on and in. I propose that this analysis helps critically thinking about the configuration of the space of participation in nature and energy politics.

Introduction

Lignite open cast mining in Brandenburg, Eastern Germany, has implied the destruction of village sites for decades. Preparing just such a destruction, 1983 the inhabitants of the Lusatian village Łakoma (Lakoma or Lacoma) were informed of the upcoming destruction of Łakoma.¹ The village was to be wipped off, simply "weg" (non-existing, Reaves 1996:237). Then, however, the transition from GDR to FRG (end of cold war) disrupted also the coal economy: energy demand and mining speed decreased. Still, most villagers, including 112 Sorbs, were resettled in 1991 (ibid). Few stayed, and by 1992 a first wave of occupants of Łakoma arrived, and in the early 2000s a second. The latter was specifically characterised by a commitment to ecological lifestyle and infrastructure (e.g. renewable energy) and environmental education as well as maintaining the village's tradition and a Sorbic/Wendish identity.

Having joined a number of events in the village in the early 2000s, struggling against the Swedish mining company Vattenfall, I frequently came across the figure of the "Sorb". What 15 years later caught my attention is a pattern of argumentation. On the one hand, activists of Lacoma reasoned that electricity can be produced without destroying the village and its environments. This positions these activists as participating in the contestation of how energy infrastructure transitions ought to be pursued (*Energiewende*). At the same time they argued that the ecology in Łakoma's environment was home to endangered and threatened species (e.g. *Oderma eremita*, *Bombina bom-*

1 <https://web.archive.org/web/20140712035410/http://www.robinwood.de/german/energie/braunkohle/Chronologie%20des%20Kampfes%20um%20Lacoma.pdf>

bina, *Lutra lutra*, *Botaurus stellaris*, *Upupa epops*), and managed to facilitate that, eventually, the habitat was formally recognised with the European protection status FFH (before its destruction around by 2008). On the other hand, reference to the Sorbs typically took and take the form of calls against threatening their cultural heritage, their language and identity.

I am puzzled in the apparent friction between the emplaced collective of and for Lacoma with its utopian aspirations and how the Sorbs have been represented and, as I shall show below, represent themselves within a very classic modern order, employed to contest energy politics. So, I got to wonder: how does the group of Sorbs participate in nature and energy politics?

To address this question, an introduction to the Sorbs and lignite is helpful. The Sorbs are a primarily German West Slavic minority group. Their existence is legally recognised by the German government (BMI 2018) as well as in two of the German republic's states (*Länder*), Saxonia (referring to Sorbs only) and Brandenburg (referring to Sorbs and Wends).² Both *Länder* recognise the Sorbs' autonomous settlement zone as historically emerged; the German federal government suggests Sorbs as settled in Lusatia since the year 600 in the Christian world order (BMI 2018). Both *Länder* define that the identity of being a Sorb, sharing its' national identity as a people, is not regulated by the *Länder* (it is free). Both *Länder* governments, too, recognise the significance of Domowina, the umbrella organisation of Sorbic cultural associations. Domowina claims autochthonous status of the Sorbs. The governments avoids recognising the Sorbs' identity as a autochthonous people and instead refers to it to a minority people. The Sorbs' status of being an autochthonous group is contested.³

Lusatian lignite has been excavated for centuries (illustrated well in the study by Plettner, 1852). By end 2017, for lignite more than 884 km² have been used, that is comparable to the area of Germany's capital Berlin.⁴ Whilst steadily decreasing labor intensity (2002-17 -16%)⁵, Germany continues to be the largest producer of lignite, over 17% (172 million tons) of the global production, larger than China and Russia (specifically, soft brown coal, see BGR 2017: 63). Lusatia is one of the two major German regions for opencast mining, feeding two of Europe's most emitting powerplants, amongst the top 6 carbon emitters of Europe (EEA 2017, E-PRTR 2018). In addition to impacting the atmosphere, lignite mining affects water household significantly, yearly, over a billion cubic meter of water was pumped off Lusatia for lignite mining (LMBV 2017).

Whilst literature on lignite, coal and energy transitions, even with respect to Lusatia, as well as a literature on Sorbic culture and identity abounds, the intersection of both seems rarely studied. An exception is Reaves' (1996) dissertation that attends to ecological critique developed within Sorbian literature. He shows how Sorbian literature was relatively more free to develop ecological critique than German literature under German Democratic Republic's government and that Sorbian authors troubled lignite mining in several ways. For this, authors drew on the widely accepted model of Soviet village prose that performed critique of technology and managed to adapt this to develop a distinct figure, "the old Sorbian, traditionally living in a symbiotic relationship with

2 For Brandenburg, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20181024150933/https://bravors.brandenburg.de/gesetze/swg>, and for Saxonia https://web.archive.org/web/20181024150946/https://www.revosax.sachsen.de/vorschrift_gesamt/3019/33827.html. The notions Sorbic and Wendish are use in a range of ways to differentiate different language and cultural groups. Hannelore Schmidt-Hoffmann (2008) offers insight into recent lived experiences in negotiating these two terms in Brandenburg and Saxonia. I use the notion "Sorb" inclusively.

3 See Kosel (2013) for a discussion of the political implications of recognition of Sorbs as autochthonous.

4 <https://web.archive.org/web/20181024154352/https://kohlenstatistik.de/files/rekult.xlsx>

5 <https://web.archive.org/web/20181024154845/https://kohlenstatistik.de/files/beschaefigtigke.xls>

nature but turn from this condition by the incessant plunderings of the surrounding civilisation” (Reaves 1996: 168). His analysis of Jurij Brězan’s parable “Der kleine Bach Satkula” (181) offers an in helpful perspective to how Sorbs, nature, coal, economy and culture might be interwoven: cutting down forests destroys the home for fairy tales; without forests, what to burn? Coal can be burned, opencast mining destroys the fields. “With no fields of flowers, the lovers produced no songs”. Coal made people rich, and now they can buy songs, love and stories, and humans – in cans.

This paper seeks to trouble the making absent and present of earth and earthliness in relation to the Sorbs in contemporary Lusatian lignite energy future discourse. The next section introduces an analytical apparatus to perform this troubling. Subsequently, I employ the apparatus to present and interpret four artefacts or documents of discursive interweaving of Sorbs and lignite mining. The conclusion attempts to contribute to critically thinking about the configuration of the space of participation in nature and energy politics.

Analytical apparatus

This paper’s methodology takes the form of empirical philosophy, rather than of sociological qualitative data analysis. For my analysis I have constructed an empirical body, an ensemble of discourse fragments, that serves to interrogate the earthliness or earthlessness of Sorbic discursive performance of autochthony. The ensemble is not shaped to meet specific sociological or ethnographic criteria. Constructing the ensembles serves here to allow the reader relate and attend to key empirical detail, strengthening my ability to respond to the troubles I identify in these fragments.

The contribution that I attempt to carve out with this text is to narrowly focus on analytically on how the ensemble takes part in shaping the earthliness of autochthony. This is motivated by a Foucauldian analytics of problematisation. This analytics explores how an epistemic object, like sexuality or madness, is relationally constituted and rendered self-evident. The analytics, thus focuses not on the object but on the relations that effect the object. By that this analytic seeks to understand how the contingent emergence of the object became possible. This analytics shapes my reading of Haraway’s (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*. I read her book as an invitation to attend to socio-techno-cultural configurations, such as arts projects, as problematisations. She explores configurations that invite the reader/user into engaging with the tensions and frictions, unexpected, unruly, relations that are not neat, but may smell, be bulky, in short, trouble. Analysing configurations as troubles explicates the relationality that create effects. These relations are deeply heterogeneous, from capitalist and colonial to the epistemics and materiality of technoscience.

With this, I seek to explore what troubles the ensemble’s pieces configure and how these troubles trouble mining. It serves to stay with the trouble of earth, its evocations, presencing and absencing. Analysing earth-human relations in this case requires to not only consider modern “nature” “out there”, but also how the autochthonous group with its language naturalises itself, or is naturalised by others, and how the group relates to the ground, the soil, they dwell on, in or with.

I engage here with autochthony in an attempt to explore what kind of earthly relations are woven into it. As I do not expect a universal answer (or I do not want to engage in games of definition), I employ the ensemble below as an occasion to think through earthliness and earthlessness. Rather than approaching autochthony legally, I turn to its semantic and performative constitution,

trying to trouble it. Intuitively, a first troubling attempt employs the Greek “origin” of the concept of autochthony. Being “from the soil itself” is widely connoted with territory, used historically to divide between natives and immigrants, e.g. in colonial or fascist contexts (see Bowen 2000). Haraway invites us to engage with the matters and critters making up soil, via process of composting. “From the soil” does not necessarily need to be read as referring to the two-dimensional surface but could be considered as referring to a multi-dimensional volume, in which soil is an emerging entity, rather than just a plane for the people. Soil and, thus, earth, in their depths, are, and could be, so much more than low-dimensional discursive constructions. Ingold’s (2000) topology problematises how we approach human-environment relations. The discourse of global environmental change implies humans live on a globe, resonating with a satellite view onto Earth. He contrasts this with positioning humans as living within a lifeworld, within a sphere. Similarly, we might approach the human relationship to soil. Are we part of earthly processes, of composting, or just living on top of earth? Asking this seems specifically pertinent given that the topic of coal is one of entering soil, rather than staying on top of it. With these sensibilities, I proceed, now, by constructing the ensemble and exploring its versions of earthliness.

Ensemble

In this part I (re)construct an ensemble of discursive fragments, a photo of a wooden artistic intervention, a music video, as well as a document from Domowina’s website, as well as a policy/scholarly intervention by environmental humanities and social science scholars and activists. These fragments, I shall argue, make differently present and absent the relationship between lignite open cast coal mining and the Sorbs. I briefly describe each artefact and sketch how these artefacts make absent and present earth or earthliness.

Ensemble piece (1) “Communal statement by Domowina and Vattenfall – in responsibility for the Sorbic population in the mining regions of Lusatia”

This is a statement⁶ that has been renewed three times between 2007 and 2013. Its latest 2013 version sets out its preamble from a historic position, claiming the historic co-existence of lignite mining and Sorbic settlement zone. It suggests that transtemporally social stability in the Lusatia region primarily depends on the resource of lignite. And this resource is presented as having gained economic and energy security importance recently, thus, mattering for the economic future of the region. The document recognises that lignite extraction generates positive and negative changes for the Lusatian population. It then suggests that resettling communities for opencast mining operations implements a shared policy of recognising and maintaining sorbic language, customs and traditions, in short, culture. The remainder of the preamble evokes in several ways that and how conflict is unnecessary for the continuation of opencast mining as the latter is politically desired.

The statement’s two opening sentences are most specific to my analytic concern. In it the Sorbic settlement zone is first presented as a location in which lignite is extracted. Then the statement suggests that lignite mining has shaped, formed and left an imprint on the settlement structure, landscape and humans in Lusatia. Evoking later then resettlement as effectively achieving the maintenance of Sorbic culture, performs culture as decoupled from earth. The politico-analytic claim here

6 <https://web.archive.org/web/20181023234452/https://www.domowina.de/gemeinsame-erklaerung-der-domowina-und-vattenfall/>

is, then, differentiated: whilst lignite mining shaped landscape and humans, the landscape or the non-exploited earth do/did not shape humans. Any specific Sorbic settlement is independent of place, earthly relations.

In contrast to GDR practice of tearing apart the humans of a community and splitting them up, since 1990 communities have been, as the statement words it, resettled “socially acceptably”. This, again, renders the social as independent of specific connectedness to places or earthly or otherwise natural entities. The document, in sum, presents the Sorbs as existing in the the sphere of culture that is devoid of an environmental-material dimension: a social sphere around the environmental globe.

Ensemble piece (2) “The moving house”

The house is presented on German Wikipedia’s Lakoma page as having been constructed by a local environmental activist in the tradition of Sorbic wood construction.⁷ Another wooden house, at various stages of its construction, is a backdrop of Vivien Treuleben’s political documentary that attempts to trouble the Vattenfall’s impact on Lacoma (2005).⁸ In the relevant segments of the documentary, the viewer gets to know how the house’s basic baulks are assembled as well as how its finishing details are completed. The activist seen as having constructed the house suggests that the house serves to remember, contemplate, retreat, and hope. Also this house is seen as being moved repeatedly.

Typically Sorbian house construction, according to the German Foundation for Monument Protection (DSD 2018), primarily used pine. They removed the bark spirally, inducing the pine to increase resin exudation. The pine tree does so to close its “wounds”. Sorbs used this to render the timber more durable. The Lacoma activists have been attracting wood constructors and artists regularly, with several wood sculptor festivals across the years, connecting Sorbic, German and Polish sculptors.⁹

The repeated use of a moving house house in the documentary, on Indymedia (Figure 1)¹⁰ as well as on Wikipedia reflects its role as a symbol. I interpret it as resonating with the environmental activists’ agenda of experimenting with green lifestyles, not just rhetorically but materially. At the same time, the reference to the Sorbs can be read as a form of localising house construction. With trees growing in soil, performing wood house construction constitutes a form of material relation to earth. The trees are used as a resource for house construction, and soil serves as a resource for the trees.

Figure 1: “Moving House”, source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170913055138/http://de.indymedia.org/2007/09/195301.shtml>

Ensemble piece (3) “Indigenous peoples’ natural resource rights and the Sorbs/Wends”

Häfner and Laschewski (2013) have edited a report, offering the proceedings of a meeting at a local

7 <https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Lakoma&oldid=180404227>

8 The house appears at time codes [00:34:40-00:35:55], [00:36:03-00:36:01], [01:59:44-2:00:31], [02:01:17-02:02:05] and [02:02:20-02:02:21].

9 <https://web.archive.org/web/20170530140710/https://www.kein-tagebau.de/index.php/de/aktuell/193-tagebau-cottbus-nord-jahrzehntelange-zerstoerung-hinterlaesst-unkalkulierbare-risiken>

10 <https://web.archive.org/web/20170913055138/http://de.indymedia.org/2007/09/195301.shtml>

university in Lusatia, at Cottbus, that addressed whether or how the International Labour Organisation's convention on *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* (ILO No. 169),¹¹ and its potential ratification by Germany, might inform the rights for self-governance by the Sorbs/Wends and a right to govern lignite open cast coal mining. The meeting was cofinanced by the German socialist party's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and set out from the concern of lignite open cast mining as threatening the core settlement zone of the Sorbs/Wends. In their preface, Laschewski and Häfner (2013) note that cultural development is significantly shaped by control over material resources. Laschewski (2013) develops this analysis, suggesting that not only are cultures based on the availability of material resources for economic use but also for the shaping of meaning. Knowledge and language, for him, are partially defined by the space of nature. He links this consideration to the theme of indigenous knowledges and their relevance for sustainable resource use. The latter he conceptualises in terms of commons, specifically common pool resources (CPR). Laschewski notes examples of common pool resources and regimes of their governance and then observes that they are concerned with renewable resources only. By stating that lignite is not a renewable resource, and by identifying no alternative renewable material resources that might be subject to Sorbic/Wendish governance, he suggests to turn to immaterial and cultural resources as an object of governance instead.

This report and the meeting's contributions that the report entails were motivated to explore the scope for governing natural resources by the Sorbs/Wends. Whilst the report also attends to how other indigenous communities have related to nature, that is as resource (Ramstedt 2013) or in terms of the rights of nature (Colell 2013), the report does not engage with the specifics of coal or other natural entities or relations. Laschewski's (2013) contribution comes most closely to attending to opening up modes of how Sorbs/Wends can be considered as relating to nature, but it stops short of turning to the currently existing Sorbic/Wendish places that allow for renewable resource management or ways of relating to nature informed by indigenous ontologies.

Ensemble piece (4) 'Přeco dale' – Lignite and the Sorbs

Kobela (2008) has directed a clip with 13 children who enact a hip hop inspired performance, in Sorbic language, that addresses the relationship between Sorbs, energy demand, coal mining and earth. The music clip's title 'Přeco dale', 'ever more', prefaces a visualisation of planet earth that, by zooming into the visualisation, positions the viewer in the midst of the lignite mining landscape. The song text¹² evokes earth as eternally rotating,

Figure 2: Still "Přeco dale" [02:16]

independently of the humans, and positions against this eternity the current socio-political situation with winners and losers against a background of looming catastrophe, in relation to which they position the older generation viewer, who might not have to experience that catastrophe. The still (Figure 2) shows some of the performers in front of a bucket-wheel excavator. German excavators are among the largest globally. The excavator is shown transporting soil, moving slowly and mightily on a railroad, and shoveling soil or coal. The children

11 The convention itself was adopted in 1989, in force since 1991 and may be announced 2021-2.

12 I ground this presentation in the reading of the German subtitle.

raise critical questions, on the ownership of earth, on earth's perceptions ('who asks Earth, whether she wants to offer its coal to us') and position the critique in relation to human electricity consumption. They continue by turning to economics, noting that excavation does not seem to know limits, 'ever more', and that for the coal, and the profit, 'our mother earth is sold'. Again they point to the viewer, as a collective that consumes energy, and as an individual operating a light switch, whilst the electricity meter runs 'ever more'. They end by wondering whether future generations might understand the independence of earth of the human, 'that earth does not need us, that 'that earth sphere will rotate without us'.

The clip is characterised by the gap between what is shown and what is voiced. Silence on mining – but mining is shown again and again; yet coal burning, electricity generation and emissions are left implicit and invisible. Only the mining can be seen. The version of earth that is made explicit is an astronomical earth. In astronomy, the spherical earth rotates and will continue so – astronomically long. In the clip, then, the anthropocene does not actually impact this earth, as the planet is understood as continuing to rotate even after humans have killed themselves or evolved into not-anymore-humans. The clip's 'earth ... without us' is positioned against the viewer, who is treated as an universal human, and essentialised *homo electrico*, humans need electricity.

An alternative earth is tweaked in, but only very marginally. That is an earth that is mother and that may have feelings – which may have something to say about whether coal is reaped off her.

How to think further?

The very concept of Sorbian settlement zone naturalises in a very specific way: In this discursive framing, Sorbs settle on the area, and thus, they can as well be resettled, as they are not bound to any land. Mining does not get troubled in this way. The ensemble indicates several ways of how relatedness into soil and earth are avoided, rendered discursively absent. Mining is troubled as impacting an abstract earth, a globe. This soilless earthliness contrasts with Reaves's (1996) literary figure of symbiotic relation of the Sorb *in* nature. I wonder whether the discursive space of participation in nature and energy politic could be reconfigured by attending to Sorbic historic participation in digging *in* earth, mining, growing and caring for plants and trees in the midst of, and with, which Sorbs live, and swimming in earthly lakes and rivers, not yet polluted or dried up.

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