In the mid-nineteenth century, two Swiss geologists, Amanz Gressly and Jules Thurmann, coined the term “orogeny” to describe the process of mountain creation. Since then, geologists have identified numerous periods of mountain formation, including the relatively recent Alpine orogeny, which produced the Alps, the Hindu Kush-Himalaya, and the Rocky Mountains, all of which are still growing. The recent spate of scholarship in the past several years focusing on mountains suggests we are now entering yet another period of orogeny, though this one is social, cultural, and political. Mountains have a geological history, created through crustal dynamics and other geological forces. But, they also have a human history, created through our ideas and imagination. Mountains are as socially constructed as they are geologically formed.

For the next Malone conference, we would like to extend this scholarship both upward and downward, from the high mountains to the deep ocean, from the space exploration undertaken by private companies to the mining ventures backed by huge conglomerates. The spatial turn in history has been primarily limited to the horizontal: to the territorial vision of nation states, the oceans they must cross, or the landmasses they attempt to conquer. “The Heights and Depths of History” Conference could turn this horizontal bias on its side, revealing a rich analytical framework in which to study human history.

Our focus would be part of a broader attempt to give value to the vertical realm. It would

extend recent work by scholars, made up primarily of cultural and political geographers, focused on what Stephen Graham has called “vertical geopolitics.” These scholars are interested in state power and control, on how territories are bordered, divided, and demarcated, and the significant role played by architects and urban planners. Rarely have these things been studied through height and depth. Our analysis would focus specifically on subterranean spaces below and surveillance and warfare spaces above. It would acknowledge space as three-dimensional, with oceans and trenches, tunnels and caves, sanitation systems and mines, hills and mountains, skylines and airways.

As Bruce Braun has argued, eighteenth-century explorers had to learn to see the world through its layered spaces below its surface. It took a concerted effort to view the world through its depths. If, in the past, viewing the world through a vertical framework required a cultural shift, today, for us historians, it requires an analytical shift. The world is layered with scientific, political, strategic and authoritative significance. In many cases, it is literally layered; in other cases, the process remains symbolical and hidden, though no less strategic or powerful. Such a view can be radically de-centering. It confuses our usual break-up of regions, not just because it decentralizes nation states, but also the actual regions of the land itself. The Alps or the High Atlas, for instance, turn out to be highly constructed concepts. A view from the vertical is also a way to get beyond the questions of centers and peripheries; it creates a liminal zone where different cultures, ideas, and technologies meet. It can change our understanding of what to look for. Once we start thinking about the creation of knowledge in this way, it exposes all the

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difficulties – access, control, exclusion – that concern humanists and social scientists. These regions are viewed differently by different cultures at different times. It is by looking at the tensions associated with these different and often competing spaces that we can gain a more nuanced view of how the environment in general functions in shaping world history.

We believe a Malone Conference focusing on the heights and depths of history would harness the research and teaching strengths of the department and College. It would draw on the strengths of those studying in National Parks, mining, mountains, and oceans. It would encompass a wide framework of approaches and interests, from political and cultural history, to those studying sacred spaces, to resistance movements, to land and water resource and development. But, it would also fan out beyond our department to include political science, anthropology and archaeology, Native American studies, nature writing, geography, and the earth sciences. Done correctly, it could interest physicists working on space exploration at MSU, along with those in LRES, ecology, even the Center for Biofilm Engineering, who study organisms in extreme environments (high up in Yellowstone, in the deep recesses of geysers and mud pots).

We envision broad, interdisciplinary involvement, and will apply for additional funding to supplement the Malone funds – for instance, from NSF’s funding for Workshops, Conferences, and Symposia, which specifically focus on interdisciplinary work linking the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.