



Soil Care Network: Caring for Soil as Building Relations

Anna Krzywoszynska

I HAVE OFTEN found speaking of and for soils unsettling and uncomfortable. I am an environmental social scientist. Social scientists are supposed to deal with people. In this context, my interest in soil not just as an object of private ownership or governance but as a diversely understood and experienced thing in the world — the soil in the gutter, the soil under your house, the soil in the farmers’ field — was puzzling to some of my social science colleagues. According to our disciplinary traditions, things in the world, as distinct from things in society, are spoken for by natural scientists. But I did not fit in with the natural sciences either. My lack of formal soil science education, my enthusiasm about soils’ liveliness, my insistence on the social nature of soil (which some of my colleagues saw as negating its status as *natural matter*), and my boundless critical curiosity about the scientific methods for probing, poking, stimulating, and simulating soils marked me as an outsider. How could I purport to speak for soils if I had never come to know them through the scientific method?

The questions I was asking about soils, and the ways in which soils moved me and continue to move me, sat uneasily with both ways of making sense of the world. According to many social sciences, the “problem of soil” can be solved through appropriate governance. According to many natural sciences, the “problem of soil” can be solved through a sufficiently accurate description of reality. Faced with such obvious solutions, my heartfelt insistence that something more is going on, that neither approach identifies the problem and therefore that neither is able to conjure a solution, was understandably met with consternation by both sides. I was uncomfortable with each epistemic tradition’s assertion that they knew either *what* soil was or *how* soil-human relations should be structured. I felt, and I still feel, a gap, a shape that is missing.

It was as such an uncomfortable “messmate”¹ that I attended the 21st World Congress of Soil Science in Rio de Janeiro in 2018. To celebrate this huge academic gathering, the organizers displayed a large monolith of local soil — towering

by the entrance at around two meters tall, and a meter square. Its horizons, colors, and structure were there for all to see, laid bare to scientific curiosity. Being separated from its environment, however, is not healthy for soil. On the second day, the monolith was visibly suffering, shedding entire clods as its sides dried out in the summer heat. A small army of attendants was enrolled to spray the surface with water to slow down this degradation. On the third day, a wide band was in place to hold the monolith together and stop it from collapsing; the deepening cracks showed the increasing strain it was under. The soil was losing its integrity. It would not be long before this slice of the underground world which had been formed by geological and biological activity over eons, which had formed part of a greater whole, which could only *be* as part of a greater whole, ceased to hold together entirely.

This suffering monolith taught me a lot. It taught me that thinking of soil “as soil,” as somehow separate from the processes in which it is embedded, is absurd. Separating soils from their

- 1 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 296.
- 2 See www.soilcarenetwork.com.

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FIGS.: A — The monolith being sprayed with water to halt its progressing degradation, 2017. B — As deep cracks appear, a band of material is added to hold the soil together, 2017. C — Members of the Soil Care Network read the industrial history of Sheffield by analyzing soils at the University of Sheffield campus during a workshop, 2017. D — The manifesto of the Soil Care Network.

environments is impossible without simultaneously destroying the very things which make them more than just piles of dirt. It is the relationality, the connections, the exchanges, the processes, which make them a functioning element of the larger life sphere of the Critical Zone. The monolith also taught me that human care can be part of that relationality which keeps soils functioning (although once the soil is rendered extremely vulnerable, as the monolith was, even a great amount of care may not be sufficient).

These lessons in epistemic uncertainty, functional relationality, and the need for care have led me to found the Soil Care Network,² which I see as a meeting place for people who are troubled by soils. A meeting place for those who feel curious about, and seek to be attentive to soils as entities the shape of which we do not quite grasp yet, but which call for our attention. For those who are not entirely certain where soils end and other things begin. For people interested in soils and human-soil relations as more than whatever a narrow practical experience or an academic

discipline may suggest to them already is — for people interested in expanding their soil horizons (forgive the pedagogical pun). Every month, I create a newsletter for this community, sifting through research and news stories about soils and land. I observe a growing sense of alarm about soils and land whose life-giving relationalities have been undermined and which are, as a result, disintegrating and breaking down. I amplify the voices of those communities, most often colonized, uprooted, and disadvantaged, who seek to return to the soil and become part of these relations through everyday labor and care. I also see that those who had previously been well served by curtailing soil's life-giving connectedness, such as modern farmers, town planners, and engineers, are now trying to restore it. These powerful interests increasingly speak of “nature-based solutions” to problems such as erosion or flooding, which arise from the cutting of soils' relations. But there are also other people, who seek to maintain the narrow focus on soil as just one thing — a medium for crop yields, a

mechanism for capturing atmospheric carbon, a foundation for high-value urban developments, a source of sand for the concrete industry. And these people who would continue cutting soils apart often represent powerful interests.

My role, as I see it in this time of brewing conflict, is to keep open the question of where soil ends and other things begin. To speak for soil as connected, made by and for more than one entity or process. To enable people to speak to one another and not over one another as we try to find our feet on this shifting ground. To condemn the destroyers and to praise the heroes of soil, those who act for soil without certainty, but with dedication. They understand that to care is to always be provisional, partial, and evolving. To try and try again, without certainty, and with openness; to try and connect.