

Alterstories from the Soil – Exploring Ecological Un/Belongings

A one-day hybrid symposium 15th June 2022

9.00-6.30pm at the University of Warwick

Registration is free: [LINK](#)

Please note all times are in BST (British Summer Time, GMT +1)

9.00 - 9.30 - Coffee/Arrivals -

9.30 - Welcome & Research Context - Maria Puig de la Bellacasa & Lucy Michaels

10.00 - 11.30 – Co-Chairs – Shela Sheikh & Maria Puig

Ros Gray

“Sensing Soil: exciting/inviting soil curiosity at the Lewisham Way Art Research Garden”

Åsa Sonjasdotter

“Overcoming Monoculture”

Lesley Green (Remote)

“A Cosmopolitical Approach to Ubuntu Environmentalism”

- Coffee break -

12.00- 1.15 – Co-Chairs – Maria Puig & Lucy Michaels

Greg Muldoon & Adele Mary Reed

“Coventry Digging Deep: Photographic Storytelling with New Allotment Holders”

Nirmal Puwar

“Walking along with...”

1.15-2.30 Lunch

2.30 - 4.00 – Co-Chairs – Maria Puig & Giulia Champion

RL Martens (Remote)

“Sonifying Soil Microbes: Tending Future Soil Songs”

Pat Noxolo

“Black Sisters in the Soil: A Short Reflection on Tia-Monique Uzor's ‘The Noise My Leaves Make’”

4.00-4.30 - coffee & open conversation

- Break -

5.00 - 6.30 - Public talk: Malcom Ferdinand, *A Decolonial Ecology*, with a response by Shela Sheikh

Abstracts & Bios

Ros Gray – “Sensing Soil: exciting/inviting soil curiosity at the Lewisham Way Art Research Garden”

Abstract: Located at the juncture of busy arterial roads, the Lewisham Way Art Research Garden is the backyard of a Victorian house owned by the local authority and leased to Goldsmiths, University of London. The garden was previously little used and is hardly an idyllic site, though an old ornament cherry tree provides welcome shade in summer months and in mid-winter surprises visitors to the garden with its delicate white blossom. It has a gate onto the street, and in recent months this has opened to welcome participants of the *Sensing Soil* project, who have been gathering to touch, observe, listen and grow things in soil. Led by artist-in-residence Harun Morrison (They Are Here), soil scientist Dr Jacqueline Hannam (Cranfield University) and myself as Principal Investigator, the Natural Environment Research Council-funded *Sensing Soil* Creative Climate Partnership is a collaboration with Lewisham Migrant and Refugee Network that seeks to excite/invite *soil curiosity*, explore embodied ways of knowing soil, and deepen and share cultural and scientific understandings of soil. Facing the planetary problem of climate breakdown from where we are situated in Lewisham means mitigating increased risk of flooding and food poverty that is already a crisis. The Lewisham Way Garden provides a space for different kinds of knowledge co-production in and with the garden that are distinct from the types of knowledge typically generated in university contexts. How, we ask, might everyday practices of soil care, awareness of its liveliness and attentiveness to the specificity of soils from places that are special to us not only mitigate climate impacts but also nurture belonging and connection?

Bio: Dr Ros Gray is the program leader of the MA Art & Ecology at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a writer, researcher and educator who specializes in art, ecology, and planetarity, with particular focus on artistic responses to climate crisis and ecological emergency that involve cultivation and rewilding through anti-racist, anti-colonial, indigenous, feminist and queer approaches to multispecies sites, histories and materials. She has also extensively researched twentieth-century militant filmmaking networks dedicated to anti-colonial revolution and decolonization, especially in Mozambique. Her monography, *Cinemas of the Mozambican Revolution: Anti-colonialism, Independence and Internationalism, 1968–1991*, was published in 2020 by James Curry. Ros is a member of the Editorial Board of *Third Text* and has coedited two special issues: *The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions* with Shela Sheikh in 2019 and *The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography* with Kodwo Eshun in 2011, among numerous contributions to other academic publications and artist’s books. She co-commissions the *Planetarities* book series published by Goldsmiths Press and MIT Press. At Goldsmiths, she has coordinated the Goldsmiths allotment for more than five years and is currently leading the development of the Lewisham Way Art Research Garden and is Principal Investigator of the Natural Environment Research Centre Creative Climate Partnership *Sensing Soil*.

Åsa Sonjasdotter – “Overcoming Monoculture”

Abstract: This alterstory departs in soils rich in clay and nutriment, beloved and trusted by humans for their extreme generosity for life to grow. Farmers say it's impossible not to gain good yields, no matter how careless the cultivation. It's as well the place where farmers who gained wealth from land reforms carried out in the 1820s, some decades later opened an institute that would become the site for monoculture plant breeding instigation. The land reforms had altered the custody of common land and farming from being a shared responsibility of all members of each village, to become privatised property of enlarged farm fields owned by single farmers, mainly always a man in the household. This radical shift in human and more-than-human relations would enable mono-agri-culture to manifest. This alterstory shares the experiences of a return to the moment of mono-agri-culture invention, it's continuation and expansion through fascist uniformities and global agro-business property-claims, and the persistent insistence by farmers and breeders to mobilise for the restitution of crops and regeneration of poly-agri-cultural relations to the habitats and the soil.



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Bio: In her practice, artist, researcher, writer, and organiser Åsa Sonjasdotter engages in processes of rehabilitation and re-narration of livelihood relations. Through cultivation of outlawed crops and close readings of related archival matter, lost knowledge and imagination is brought into re-existence. Sonjasdotter is a Doctoral Researcher in Artistic Practice at HDK-Valand, the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her most recent book *Peace with the Earth, Tracing Agricultural Memory – Refiguring Practice* is published by Archive Books in 2019. Sonjasdotter's work is presented and exhibited in numerous international contexts. For further information: asasonjasdotter.info.

Lesley Greene (Remote) – “A Cosmopolitical Approach to Ubuntu Environmentalism”

Abstract: When 90% of the city of Beira, Mozambique, was destroyed during Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in April 2019, the damage came not only from the storms, but from massive timber harvesting, much of it illegal and contrary to climate agreements, that had left soils unable to hold water and vulnerable to landslides, with the result that thousands of tons of mud swelled river stormwaters, with agrarian livelihoods swept out to sea. On the coast, prior damage to the mangroves left the city vulnerable to storm-surge from hurricane-force winds. Who would have thought that these forests were, in the time of their deforestation, protected by the strongest ever international agreements, under REDD+ agreements in terms of which polluters elsewhere can continue to pollute, as long as they pay Africans or Asians or Latin Americans not to use their forests? And who would have thought that, six months later, an effect of tree and soil loss would be a climate refugee camp where an increase in teen pregnancies and HIV testified to the necessity of transactional sex for survival without trees?

The failure of REDD+ to protect forests in Mozambique is a shock to those who thought that the financialisation of the environment would save planetary systems from further harm. The devastation of Beira suggests that on the contrary, financialising forests instead installs a paradigm of resource exploitation that depends on policing to install its ethics. In this paper I propose that a cosmopolitical alternative, in African environmentalism, is in the recovery of an African environmentalism that begins with soil. Drawing from the work of Wangari Maathai and Amilcar Cabral, I suggest that recovering the relations of soil exemplified in the phrase “Sons and Daughters of Soil” holds the potential to frame an alternative environmental ethic: that of desire not control; of tending soil as tending earthly fecundity, and past and future generations.

Bio: Lesley Green is based at the Environmental Humanities South, Humanities Faculty, University of Cape Town, and Global Food & Environment Institute, School of Earth & Environment, Leeds University. Her work has explored the challenges of decoloniality and the indigenous knowledge movement for the sciences and social sciences in Southern Africa. She is the author of, *Rock | Water | Life, Ecology and Humanities for a decolonial South Africa*, where she examines the interwoven realities of inequality, racism, colonialism, and environmental destruction in South Africa, calling for environmental research and governance to transition to an ecopolitical approach that could address South Africa's history of racial oppression and environmental exploitation. Green analyses conflicting accounts of nature in environmental sciences that claim neutrality amid ongoing struggles for land restitution and environmental justice. Among her in-depth studies of environmental conflict in contemporary South she examined the potential for a politics of soil in the call for land restitution. Her other publications include *Contested Ecologies* (Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2013) and *Knowing the Day, Knowing the World: Engaging Amerindian Thought in Public Archaeology* (Arizona University Press, 2013).

Greg Muldoon & Adele Mary Reed – “Coventry Digging Deep: Photographic Storytelling with New Allotment Holders”

Abstract: Greg Muldoon and Adele Mary Reed present “Coventry Digging Deep”, a project commissioned by The Pod and Food Union in which Adele Mary Reed documents allotment holders in Coventry, UK, who have taken on a plot since the start of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The stories are told through repeated visits over multiple seasons with photographic portraiture and conversational interviews. The project builds on the work and membership of Food Union by encouraging people (and the city) to see both the quietly nurturing and revolutionary benefits of growing food and being with nature. The project is part of The Pod's commitment to #GreenFutures and their partnership with Coventry City of Culture 2021 as well as their ongoing ethos to encourage dialogue. View the project here: <https://dig.thegardenzine.co.uk>

Bios: Adele Mary Reed was born in 1988 in Warwickshire, UK, and is now based in Coventry in the West Midlands. She has been experimenting with and exploring photographic imagery, written word, collage and video through diaristic practices from a very young age. She graduated with a First Class BA [Hons] in Photography from Coventry University in 2016 and has exhibited widely across the UK. She carefully documents observations of the places she finds herself in seeking to playfully highlight the inconspicuous beauty occurring during day-to-day life. She is interested in analogue methodology and the materiality of film and video tape, taking unplanned walks, plant-life, elusive moods of stillness and balance, topographical themes and since her child was born in 2017, representations of mothers and maternal figures. View her work at adelemreed.co.uk or @thecatbath on Instagram

Greg Muldoon is a Food Union Coordinator and Green Futures Project Lead. As a coordinator of Food Union he leads sessions with the organisations members, teaching them how to grow their own produce with a focus on sustainability. On top of this, Greg also manages all of Food Unions artistic endeavours, coordinating with artists in residence, organising Song and Soil events and overseeing all the work Food Union has managed as part of City of Cultures Green Futures Program.

Nirmal Puwar – “Walking along with...”

Abstract: The intrepid walker, activist and writer Rebecca Solnit, states in *Wanderlust*, “I began hiking ten years ago to walk off my angst during a difficult year. I kept coming back to this route for respite from my work and for my work too...” During the pandemic, walking became, within a bounded area of 5 miles in the lockdown, a source of mental and physical health. Those of us who can have walked. There is a growing area of ecological literature on how walking, as a way to process difficult and even traumatic times. As I tried to recalibrate myself by moving back to my hometown Coventry, to be near my elderly ailing mother in 2016, I realised that as I walked I was responding to how the place was decomposing and recomposing. Through the process of writing short pieces, I was becoming Writer-As-Resident (someone who writes about where they live) as a returnee who had an investment in the place, with a longstanding connection, as well an ambivalence to a city I had at one point chosen to leave for university. This talk will take us through some aspects of a one mile walk, that is intimately known to me in Coventry.

Bio: Nirmal Puwar has been an academic at Goldsmiths, University of London since 2003. She will speak from her forthcoming book, written from her home ground, along a mile walk, as she reflects on decompositions and recompositions, whilst working along with different figures and materials. This will include her writing collaboration with the POD + Food Union. [Meeting Places](#), [Walking Through Litter](#) and Mint, [Brutalist Architectures](#) and Comrades for the City feature in her collaborative creative non-fiction works on memory, place and civic care. Her book *Space Invaders* (2004) generated a framework for considering the conditions of inclusion within institutions. She experiments with a range of research methods. The project [Noise of the Past](#) collaboratively re-figured the global war dead and memory with a post-colonial centre point. [Live Methods](#), co-edited with Les Back, is one of eighteen collections she has co-edited.

RL Martens (Remote) – “Sonifying Soil Microbes: Tending Future Soil Songs”

Abstract: What can the practice of listening to soils, both as historical archives and as living assemblages, do? How can sonifying soil microbial activity help humans think about the collaborative nature and temporal scale of soils as living archives? Can the slow rebuilding and caretaking of soils (always a collaboration between humans and the earth) be thought of as a practice of producing future-songs? I attend to two soils, degraded by interconnected monocultures and dispossession, to ground this speculative listening exercise.

Bio: RL Martens is a conceptual artist and transdisciplinary scholar. Martens’ work slips between geologic and human timescales, telling stories grounded in the earth but entangled with the social. Through place-based, historical, and often idiosyncratic research, Martens produces objects that act as mnemonic devices and sites for wit(h)nessing, activated through dialogue and participation, in addition to written work, images, and video. RL is a founding member of the New York City Urban Soils Institute’s Art Extension Service, and helped design Project: Soils, a collaborative initiative between artists and soil scientists. They recently spoke at the VISUALIZING CARE conference at Duke University, and their project, *Material Witness*, appeared at the Arlington Arts Center and the D.C. History Conference. For further information: rl-martens.net.

Pat Noxolo – “Black Sisters in the Soil: A Short Reflection on Tia-Monique Uzor's ‘The Noise My Leaves Make’”

Abstract: Tia-Monique Uzor’s ‘The Noise My Leaves Make’ is a beautiful short film that re-imagines Black embodiment in the English countryside. Although the film engages with many elements in the landscape, this short reflection considers what the film raises about soil in particular, between the toes, under the nails, in the hair of Black women.

Bio: Pat Noxolo’s research brings together the study of international development, culture and in/security, and uses postcolonial, discursive and literary approaches to explore the spatialities of a range of Caribbean and British cultural practices. Recent work has focused on: re-theorising Caribbean in/securities; theorizations of space in Caribbean literature; Caribbean laughter and materialities; re-thinking the decolonial city; and African-Caribbean dance as embodied mapping. Pat Noxolo is lead researcher on the *Caribbean In/securities and Creativity* (CARISCC) research network, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. She is chair of the Society for Caribbean Studies, co-editor of *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, and secretary of the RACE group of the Royal Geographical Society.

Public talk by Malcom Ferdinand followed by a response by Shela Sheikh

Bios: Malcom Ferdinand is the author of *A Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Polity Books, 2021). He holds a Doctorate in Political Philosophy from the Université Paris Diderot, and is also civil and environmental engineer from University College London. He is now a researcher at the CNRS (IRISSO/University Paris Dauphine). At the crossroad of political philosophy, postcolonial theory and political ecology, his research focuses on the Black Atlantic and particularly the Caribbean. He explores the relations between current ecological crises and the colonial history of modernity.

Shela Sheikh teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she directs the [MA Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy](#) and co-leads the [Critical Ecologies research stream](#). Work on colonialism and ecology includes ‘The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions’, a special issue of *Third Text* co-edited with Ros Gray (2018). Her current research, which takes a decolonial perspective, interrogates various forms of witnessing between the human, technological and environmental, as well as experimental forums for environmental justice claims such as tribunals and staged hearings.