MESH Leaf III.4
Project Reports from the Environmental Humanities
July 2025

From Soil to Soil: Weaving a MESH of Place-based Inhabitance

From Soil to Soil was part of the *Multispecies Storytelling Pop-up Exhibition* on October 19, 2024 in Cologne, Germany. The exhibition featured the works of participants in the Autumn Academy for Planetary Wellbeing organized by MESH, EUniWell, and BRIDGES.

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WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO INGRID LAMMINPAA[3], TANYA GAUTAM[1], NOÉMIE PASLIER[4], PHUONG NGOC DAO[5], AND OLA STÅHL[5]

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"We therefore commit the body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"...
- Book of Common Prayer (Episcopal Church, 1875).

... is a verse that might sound all too familiar to someone who has lost a loved one. Be it a relieving, or violent, reminder of the solemnity of Christian burial, it was this imagery that toiled repeatedly in our minds during a week-long workshop and symposium on "Multispecies Conviviality".

Throughout lectures on eco-anxiety, planetary wellbeing and interspecies empathy, we wrestled with the challenges of sharing a planet in peril with mammals, fish, fungi, viruses and bacteria. We discussed these challenges in our breakout group of seven, tearing them apart and piecing them together as we considered our enmeshment in a more-than-human world, and weaved in experiences from our own situated cultural backgrounds of Southern Africa, Western Europe, India, and South-East Asia. We dug open space and collectively held Ingrid (one of the group members) in it, as she uprooted contemplations, lamentations, and recollections of her mother, who had freshly passed, and was returned into Italy's soils the week prior.

Our discussions germinated from her grief, which reminded us of the ephemeral and cyclical nature of life. It raised our sensitivity to insights presented by Dr Laurel Kearns[1] on the

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Christian story of creation. Kearns expounded upon the second Genesis narrative, explaining how it situates humans and, ultimately, all life on Earth as products of the soil, whose bodies are destined to return there. Kearns explained that the name of the first man – Adam – in fact means "from soil dust." We grappled with the implications of this for human and more-than-human relations, and discussed how it related to, or contrasted with, other origin stories, such as the sacrifice of the Hindu God, Purusha, the gestation of Pangu's egg in Taoism, and the waterborne origins described in Iroquois and Zulu mythologies.

Dr. Sandra Díaz[2] explored this further in her presentation on the *Fabric of Life,* in which she explained how heterogenous groups of humans are intimately woven into their immediate surrounding ecologies through the cycling of molecules between the animate and inanimate. This observation was appreciated centuries before modern understandings of the universe, and is largely reinforced by contemporary scientific knowledge of geobiological decomposition on how nutrients from dead organisms support the life processes of the living (Díaz, 2022).

Our breakout group, guided by designer Ola Ståhl, explored how the environmental humanities helps to break down observations like this one and challenge the scientific construction of inorganic materialities as inanimate (Abram, 2012). Casting away the shackles of worldviews inherited from Gnosticism and modernity that the earth and the body are merely material sites for inhabiting, we adopted the perspective that plural micro- and macro- ecologies live in constant flux with one another. In particular, we considered the role of the non-human world as a "subaltern voice" through the ethnologies of multispecies anthropologists interested in how the deaths and lives of various creatures influence the social lives of humans and vice versa (Chakrabarty, 2012; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Seneviratne, 2004). Furthermore, we considered how scientific constructs are socially and culturally produced, as well as the implications of such constructs in the understanding of the mind-body in the context of sharing earth and water bodies with multiple species (Neimanis, 2017; Curbow, 2021). In other words, we acknowledged the intersubjectivity of other species in relation to our own (Bergmann et al. 2023; van Dooren and Rose 2012; Aaltola, 2013).

Ingrid drew on her own area of research of the human gut microbiome to illustrate to us how hidden species' relations in our gut (e.g. fungi, viruses, parasites and bacteria) are being revisited under a multispecies conviviality lens. She explained to us how traditional theorisations of 'foreign invaders' in a "host body" have already been demonstrated to be a socially and culturally produced understanding of the immune system, rather than a purely biological one (Marya & Patel, 2021). Similarly, microbiological relations in the gut are being called into a new focus, so that traditional categorisations of microbiota as commensal, pathogenic, or opportunistic can be better described as a function of their relationship to the environment of an individual rather than a hard-lined designation that assumes intrinsic affinity of a relationality type. After all, a commensal microorganism to some, can be fatal to another (Lamminpää et al., 2024).

"The soil speaks through the plants that grow in it, and the organisms living within"
- von Redecker and Herzig (2023, p. 29)

Seen through the lens of Ingrid's grief, Dr. Kearns and Dr. Diaz's lecture materials caused us to reflect deeply on: 1) the profound interconnectedness of creatures that clash in the contact zones of macro- and micro-universes; and 2) the reciprocal and cyclical nature of death and life, with inorganic materials, and the profound spiritual significance they play in different societies.

Pop Up Exhibition

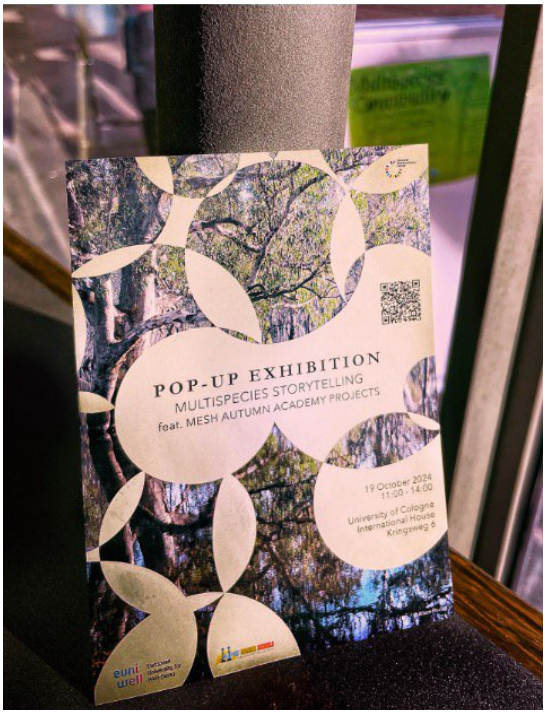


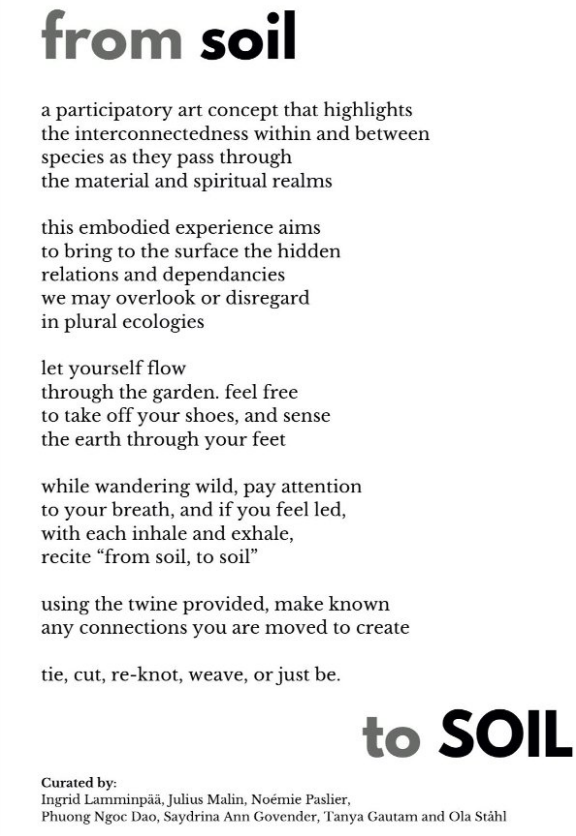
Figure 1. Pop-Up Exhibition Flyers were handed out over the course of the Multispecies Conviviality Symposium.
The exhibition was open to the public.

[2] Professor of Ecology at the National University of Córdoba, Argentina

Our group, like other groups participating in the autumn academy, were tasked with creating an exhibit to accompany the interventions from academics working in the field of multispecies conviviality. As we journeyed through the creation process, our group wished for participants to embody the contemplations described above, and to stimulate reflection on their respective place-based locatedness within their plural ecologies. Attendees were invited to leave the exhibition room, by way of the emergency exit, and stepping over the threshold *into* the outside. Here, the audience became the artists.

> *They shed their protective layers of sock and shoes, rolled up the ends of their long trousers, and planted their warm dry feet, into freshly dampened earth. The sun elegantly danced through the scattering clouds and a gentle light was cast. Cushioned by softened leaves, and pillows of invasive grass, these humans moved reels of twine through the garden, intermingling their corporeality with constellations of the more-than-human. Microbiomes clashing with macro, they carefully balanced their act of moving through the precipitating and thickening network of twine, their breath syncopating with the velocity of their thoughts… beating… repeating… "From soil… To soil"*

Participants were encouraged to meditate on the significance of participating in our exhibit by considering the importance of: playing as learning; doing as being; and civic participation as ecological care. They were later given the opportunity to express their reflections on the exhibit by writing them on sticky notes and displaying them on a whiteboard. At the end of the exhibition an *in-situ* discussion ensued in which participants asked questions and commented on the meaning of the exhibit to them.



from soil

a participatory art concept that highlights
the interconnectedness within and between
species as they pass through
the material and spiritual realms

this embodied experience aims
to bring to the surface the hidden
relations and dependancies
we may overlook or disregard
in plural ecologies

let yourself flow
through the garden. feel free
to take off your shoes, and sense
the earth through your feet

while wandering wild, pay attention
to your breath, and if you feel led,
with each inhale and exhale,
recite "from soil, to soil"

using the twine provided, make known
any connections you are moved to create

tie, cut, re-knot, weave, or just be.

to SOIL

Curated by:
Ingrid Lamminpää, Julius Malin, Noémie Paslier,
Phuong Ngoc Dao, Saydrina Ann Govender, Tanya Gautam and Ola Ståhl

Figure 2. *From Soil To Soil* participatory art concept prompt, that moved exhibition viewers from indoors to outdoors, and transmuted them from passive viewers to interactive creators.

The resulting exhibit was a dense interconnected woven mesh that hung from trees and dangled over the soil of the garden. It spored out, like unconstrained fungi over 500 square metres of green space. Its twine, varied between ankle, waist, and head heights, sometimes doubling and even tripling back on itself in places. The material, softened by dampness, represented the porous and malleable, rather

Figure 3. "Tie, cut, re-knot, weave, or just be". Humans playfully spin a web together.

than the rigid and fixed, and evoked the interflows and connections that were overlooked by strict binary thinking and theorising in parts of 20th century academia. Our co-created materialised *Fabric of Life* represented the delicate, often hidden, relationalities between different parts of ecosystems (in this case, the novel niche of manicured garden species thriving alongside sporadically-growing wild ones). We watched as insects took rest on the twine, before darting off and landing on nearby bushes. By making these metaphorical connections visible, we further symbolised immaterial spiritual relations. These were voiced by the participants as: the self-regulating "earth organism" according to Gaia theory (Lovelock, 1979); concepts such as paṭiccasamuppāda from Buddhism, i.e. the idea that everything that arises is dependent on other things; as well as Christian teachings of a cosmic Christ, in which a divine Jesus is seen as holding the entire universe together (Terego, 2013).

For Ingrid, it symbolised the continuation of time, of her lineage, of her microbiome passing through the matrilineal relations of her family, and being held up by the mesh of twine, participants, and multiple species present that Saturday morning.

Figure 4. (from left) Tanya, Ola, Julius, Noemi, and Ingrid are photographed by Saydrina the day before the exhibition. The group experimented together, and trialled their exhibition, to set the first layer for the public to intervene the following morning.

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With support and funding from

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