

The Soil Speaks: Soil Artworks and the Discourse of Decolonial Art

by

Daniela Bosco

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice

OCAD Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond St W, March 6 – March 10, 2025.
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

© Copyright by Daniela Bosco 2025

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Abstract

This study examines how contemporary soil-based artworks critique colonial histories and articulate the profound interconnection between soil, human identity, and environmental responsibility. It emphasizes the vital relationship between humans and the natural world, arguing that art can function as an archive of history, cultural memory, and ecological consciousness.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates posthuman feminist theory with qualitative interviews with artists alongside archival and scholarly research, this research explores soil-based artworks that address the legacies of environmental and colonial degradation. Historically positioned within the Land Art canon, works from the 1970s often distanced audiences from the lived and ethical relationships between people and land. In contrast, certain contemporary soil-based practices restore relational engagement with the land through tactile and inclusive experiences that foreground colonial histories.

This thesis focuses on decolonial soil-based artworks that expose the toxic consequences of colonialism for the land and its inhabitants. By comparing earlier Earthworks with current practices, it traces a shift from aesthetic detachment toward politically and ecologically engaged artmaking. The analysis demonstrates how these artists and their works confront historical erasure and contribute to ongoing decolonial discourse.

Ultimately, this research argues that soil-based artworks not only serve as archives of the enduring effects of colonialism but also offer pathways toward restorative relationships with the land and forms of renewed healing.

Land Acknowledgement

OCAD University is situated on the treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. These are the ancestral territories of many nations, including the Anishinaabeg, the Haudenosaunee, and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land. Toronto is also home to many urban First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.¹

As a settler on these lands, I recognize that a land acknowledgment is not a substitute for relationship or accountability. I offer it as a commitment to ongoing learning and ethical practice in how I cite, interpret, and present land-based histories, especially when working with materials, histories and knowledge shaped by colonization and extraction, and in working to unlearn colonial narratives in my research and writing.

¹ OCAD University. "About OCAD U," under "Land Acknowledgement" accessed January 6, 2026, <https://admissions.ocadu.ca/discover/about-ocad-u>

Dedication

I DEDICATE THIS WORK TO MY MOTHER, MY BIGGEST CHEERLEADER. WHEN THIS JOURNEY BEGAN, I COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED THAT MY RESEARCH AND GROWING UNDERSTANDING OF SOIL WOULD HELP ME MOVE TOWARD A MORE PEACEFUL ACCEPTANCE OF LOSING HER TWO MONTHS BEFORE MY DEFENCE. THE LEARNING I ENCOUNTERED THROUGH THIS PROGRAM, MY PROFESSORS AND PEERS, THE ARTISTS, AND THE INDIGENOUS TEACHINGS AND SCHOLARSHIP THAT INFORMED THIS WORK RESHAPED HOW I THINK ABOUT PRESENCE AND CONTINUITY. I BELIEVE NOTHING IS TRULY BURIED; EVERYTHING THE EARTH HOLDS ENCLOSES. SHE IS STILL HERE; I'M JUST LEARNING TO LOOK FOR HER IN DIFFERENT WAYS.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dana Prieto, Eve Tagny, and Jude Norris/Bebonkwe $\wedge > ^\rho$ for trusting me with your artwork, your labour, and your truths. Thank you to my professors, cohort, and especially to my thesis advisors, Tairone Bastien and Amish Morrell, for encouragement and support, even when I chose to go about it my way. Thank you to Kenneth, Wade and Rui for believing in me, vouching for me and supporting my journey to this MFA. Thank you to maxine bailey, who assured me, "You're doing this," when I was nervous about returning to school. Thank you to my family. Thank you, Aunt Rose, for your thoughtful listening and interest. Thank you, Emanuele, Michal, Dom, Melanie, Teka, Vicky, Monique, Tricia, Deepika and Justin. And to anyone else who I've accidentally omitted, please know it's my memory, not my gratitude, that is failing me here. This process took me in many directions; you anchored me so I could reach this point.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Land Acknowledgement	2
Dedication	3
Acknowledgements	4
Table of Figures	6
Preface	7
Curatorial Essay: <i>The Soil Speaks</i>	9
Support Paper	24
Introduction	24
Early Earthworks and Posthuman Feminist Critique	25
Contemporary Soil-Based Works	32
Installation Review	42
Literature Review	44
Methodology	45
Bibliography	49
Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation	58
Exhibition Installation	65
Exhibition Opening	67
Appendix B: Exhibition Catalogue	68

Table of Figures

- Figure 1. Jude Norris/Bebonkwe Brown $\wedge>^{\circ}$, *toxic soil*
- Figure 2. Gallery view, *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 3. Dana Prieto, *Footnotes for an Arsenal*, (2022)
- Figure 4. Gallery view, *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 5. Gallery view, *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 6. Eve Tagny, *NW3 Landscape*
- Figure 7. Eve Tagny, *Untitled (1)*, *Unadorned Landscapes*
- Figure 8. Installation of *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 9. Installation of *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 10. Installation of *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 11. Installation of *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 12. Exhibition opening
- Figure 13. Exhibition opening
- Figure 14. Exhibition catalogue *The Soil Speaks*
- Figure 15. Exhibition promotional material

Preface

I enrolled in the Criticism and Curatorial Practice (CCP) program as an intentional career pivot: after more than two decades as a creative director in fashion and music, my interest in art superseded my commitment to those industries. I was ready to deepen my engagement with contemporary art, apply my critical skills more directly to that art, and focus on curatorial practice. Artworks articulate ideas and relationships that I often struggle to communicate in words, and the CCP program offered a framework for developing a critical vocabulary to complement my background in visual storytelling.

During my first semester in the CCP program, my understanding of soil shifted. Where once it was simply the ground beneath my feet, I began instead to recognize its ecological, cultural, and historical significance. This new awareness reshaped how I understood land and its meanings. What is often dismissed as inert or insignificant emerged as material imbued with layered forms of knowledge. This growing curiosity developed into a curatorial inquiry that considers soil as more than matter; it is a witness to colonial histories and functions as a living archive, literally and metaphorically.

Indigenous theory offers the most appropriate and necessary framework for thinking with land and soil, particularly in a project concerned with colonial histories and their ongoing material consequences. However, as I continue the process of unlearning colonial narratives and begin to learn from Indigenous scholars and knowledge keepers, I recognize that this represents a new mindset for me and acknowledge both my belatedness in coming to this work and the limits of my preparedness, and this project's temporal scope. I did not have the capacity within this thesis to undertake the sustained,

relational, and community-accountable research required to work with Indigenous theory in the rigorous and respectful manner it demands.

For this reason, I apply posthuman feminist theory as my methodological entry point, while recognizing that it is neither neutral nor autonomous. Posthuman feminism is deeply indebted to Indigenous epistemologies, Black feminist thought, and other racialized intellectual traditions from which it derives various of its foundational insights, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. This dependency produces a critical tension: by mobilizing posthuman feminism, I risk participating in a familiar colonial academic practice in which Indigenous and racialized theories are absorbed, generalized, and represented in more institutionally legible forms. I name this risk as part of my method.

Accordingly, I treat my theoretical framework as partial and provisional rather than comprehensive and universal. I prioritize artists' own vocabulary, situate concepts within their specific genealogies, and adopt citation practices that foreground origin, relation, and indebtedness rather than collapsing differences into a singular theoretical synthesis. This thesis maintains a self-critical awareness that there is no position outside complicity; the task is not purity, but accountability—stating limits, resisting extractive shortcuts where possible, and committing to ongoing learning beyond the scope of this research.

Curatorial Essay

Our art is our land made visible; it emerges from our relationship to place.

— Leanne Betasamosake Simpson²

The Soil Speaks expands the notion of soil beyond the earth beneath our feet, framing it as part of an ongoing conversation about the enduring legacy of colonization.

Artists Dana Prieto, Eve Tagny, and Jude Norris/Bebonkwe Brown ^{^>^}

(Nehiyàw/Anishinaabe/Métis)³ prompt us to reconsider soil not merely as a physical substance but as a living archive that holds the narratives of past generations and the potential for renewal. As a witness to history, soil is a repository of collective experience shaped by time, culture, and conflict. The artworks also highlight our deep, often-overlooked connection to soil, positioning it as an active force shaping our identities, lives, and ecological systems.

More than matter, soil records intricate and often painful histories. The artists reflect on extraction—not only of the soil itself but of the people whose lives and stories are embedded in it. Just as the land’s health mirrors the soil’s condition, it also registers the experiences of those who inhabit it, raising urgent questions about safety and the cost borne by those who are not protected. The exhibition invites viewers to reconsider

² Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2017), 22.

³ The artist has worked under the names Jude Norris and Bebonkwe Brown ^{^>^}The artwork discussed in this thesis was produced in 1998, during that period she was working under Jude Norris. In correspondence with the artist, she confirmed her preference is to be referred to as Norris/Bebonkwe ^{^>^} in this thesis, Artists “About” Accessed Jan 5, 2026. <https://www.winter-brown.com/about/>

their relationship with the ground beneath them—not as passive or mundane, but as an intimate participant in our shared past, present, and future.

The works in this exhibition use soil as their primary medium, building on the foundation laid by Earthworks of the late 1960s and 1970s. Moving beyond traditional media and the conventional gallery, land artists created work directly on the landscape, often using the natural materials they found there. These artists manipulated the land itself, challenging the established understandings of artmaking at that time.

In *Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* Suzann Boettger addresses the misconception that all artists of the movement were environmentalists, and that anti-establishment attitudes alone led them to remote locations.

Artistically, the development of Earthworks derived from the art world's increasing attention to sculpture, large- or environmental-scale work, public art, and innovative anti-traditional forms and media. Consistent with other post-minimalist work of the late sixties, the motivation was primarily anti-aesthetic and anti-formalist. But in the midst of the Vietnam War, the urban desire for a compensatory experience of the pastoral was so powerful that interpreters naturalized Earthworks' transgressions by assuming the artists to be friends of the earth and their works continuous with the period's nascent environmentalism. I address the lack at the time of women earth workers as a manifestation of both women's refusal of the potentially confining association, pre-feminist art consciousness, of "women and earth" and of the unavailability to them of the patronage

necessary to make Earthworks. Both male and female patrons gave such support exclusively to male sculptors.⁴

I note the environmental misconceptions surrounding Earthworks of that period, given the remoteness of their sites, which were located outside traditional gallery spaces. Because these works are often so remote and often require significant travel and planning to encounter firsthand, photographic and film documentation circulates in galleries as a more accessible proxy for the works themselves. Film production further complicated the formation of environmental associations, as it is dependent on raw materials such as silver gelatin and petroleum-based plastics. The result is a paradox: Earthworks' anti-institutional stance was frequently upheld through the resource-intensive production and circulation of images within the very institutions the movement claimed to reject. Reflecting on this paradox through posthuman feminist theory clarifies that the issue is not only representation but also the resource logic that makes certain lands, materials, and bodies available for extraction, use, and circulation.

In posthuman feminist theory, extraction is understood as a colonial and patriarchal logic. It renders certain human and nonhuman bodies available for use, depletion, and removal. Rather than engaging with land, soil, and racialized communities as partners in a shared world, patriarchal colonialism treats them as resources: mined, consumed, or exploited. Extractive frameworks disproportionately target racialized, Indigenous, migrant, and feminized beings, whose lands, cultures,

⁴ Suzaan Boettger, writer statement *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004), accessed July 13, 2024. <https://www.suzaanboettger.net/books>

labour, and knowledge systems are vulnerable to appropriation and subjected to use and depletion. Posthuman feminist thinkers argue that soil's contamination, displacement, and depletion mirror the experiences of marginalized bodies. Both are vulnerable within systems of domination.

Posthuman feminists advocate forms of living based on reciprocity, kinship, and mutual flourishing. They invite a shift from extraction toward ethical collective presence. Previous soil-based artworks often overlook the fact that land is not a neutral resource, but a complex entity intertwined with cultural identities, historical injustices, and economic interests that shape its value and use. Returning soil-based works to the gallery space foregrounds the inextricable connection between soil and its inhabitants. It invites viewers to engage with land in ways attentive to history, colonialism, and identity. In this context, the gallery becomes a platform for discussions about soil's role in shaping societal structures and histories, fostering new decolonial human-soil relations, and expanding the art canon.

Stacy Alaimo writes that the substance of the world flows through bodies.⁵ Her work on trans-corporeality emphasizes the deep interconnection of human and nonhuman worlds. Dana Prieto begins her artistic process by attuning to the ground beneath her feet, tracing the ways material histories flow through bodies, soils, and structures. When Prieto arrived in Toronto in 2012, she was struck by how “clean” the city was compared with Buenos Aires. She began making work that interrogated this cleanliness, starting with a project at OCAD University comprised of used dishcloths

⁵ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 104 also see 11. <https://iupress.org/9780253222404/bodily-natures/>

stained with dirt, which later expanded to include soil. As Prieto explains, this exploration “has permeated and leaked into many parts of my practice in different ways. I was thinking about soil and dirt in relation to extractive industries and practices, as well as in relation to learning about our relationship to the land, where we stand and how we relate to that ground.”⁶

During an early site visit for *Footnotes for an Arsenal* (2022), commissioned for the Toronto Biennial of Art, Prieto explored the Small Arms Inspection Building, a cultural space in Mississauga layered with military, industrial, and ecological histories. Prieto observed wildlife interacting with the former arsenal structures as plants and trees gradually reclaimed the architecture. Responding to the Biennial’s theme, *What Water Knows, the Land Remembers*, Prieto framed her work around the question, “What does it mean to be in relation?” Through this inquiry, she fosters kinship between human and nonhuman forces, highlighting the chemical, sensorial, and historical exchanges that connect bodies to places.

Prieto’s piece meditates on the past, present, and future histories of the Small Arms Inspection Building. Once a munitions plant for the Canadian Army, the site is now involved in ongoing biocultural remediation, including the containment of 70,000 tons of radioactive soil between the building and Lake Ontario’s shoreline. Between 1910 and 1974, the site housed the Long Branch Rifle Ranges, used for militia training and a Cadet program run by the Department of National Defense during World War I, before its conversion into a munitions plant manufacturing rifles during World War II.

⁶ Excerpt from “Dana Prieto and Katie Lawson,” *Toronto Biennial of Art Podcast*, June 28, 2022, 16:10-16:35 <https://toronto-biennial-of-art-podcast.simplecast.com/episodes/dana-prieto-and-katie-lawson>

Continuous use of lead and emissions from firing ranges resulted in elevated lead concentrations in surface soils. Lead particles do not naturally biodegrade for at least 700 years,⁷ underscoring how soil retains material residues long after the activities that produced them have ended.

Footnotes for an Arsenal, a sculptural installation consisting of two components: a sculpture and text — multiple terracotta-coloured tiles with clay vessels resting atop, ranging from blush to chocolate brown — arranged in a rectangular pattern on the floor. Terracotta, one of the least expensive ceramic materials, is fired at a relatively low temperature and remains quite porous unless glazed. Its porosity means it may retain traces of life in small air pockets and might also hold bacteria and minerals, much like soil. Before soil can be brought into a gallery space, however, it must be fired in a kiln to eliminate all forms of microbial life. In a gallery context, soil must often be stabilized or controlled. Here, Prieto's use of terracotta translates soil into a legible material language and record; it preserves the idea of porous, burdened ground while meeting the gallery's demand for controlled conditions.

Resting on these tiles are thirteen three-dimensional clay vessels in a natural, brownish-orange hue reminiscent of terracotta. The vessels vary in form: three hollow, upright containers resembling pails; four narrow, cylindrical sculptures resembling ammunition shells; one milk container. Among them are two small piles of bullets and three piles of clay soil. The milk container is the only vessel without multiples. Shaped like a plastic container that holds a single milk bag—a familiar object in both Canada

⁷ Mark A. Laidlaw et al., "Lead Exposure at Firing Ranges—A Review," *Environmental Health* 16, no. 1 (2017): p 2 of 15, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-017-0246-0>

and Argentina, Prieto's home country—it introduces a note of domesticity and nostalgia. Its presence conjures memories of sitting at a family dinner table or carrying water while playing outside as a child. The milk container evokes a sense of safety and home, and its domestic associations initially appear at odds with the installation's more overtly militarized forms.

From certain vantage points, all the works on the tiles come into view, the realism of their size and form suggesting objects carelessly left behind on the land outside—relics of past actions that help to explain the toxicity of the present soil.

The text, a poem by Prieto, is installed on the gallery's west-facing exterior, applied with white lime powder, a material Prieto recalls from childhood memories in Argentina, where she would see it used at construction sites. Read on glass, the poem begins “Do not dig this luminous playground we buried ourselves into.” The poem acts as a hinge between the gallery and the outside: it holds the viewer's gaze at the window, then releases it downward, where the glass pane transparency makes the ground newly present. The viewer's eyeline is gently guided from looking out to looking down, so the work registers as an invitation to reflect on what supports and surrounds us, linking the work's elements and prompting broader reflection on our connection to the world.

The Soil Speaks was exhibited in the Ontario College of Art and Design University Graduate Gallery, located at 205 Richmond Street West in Toronto, Ontario. Although the view from the window is of an adjacent building and the street below, the work is oriented toward Fort York National Historic Site. Established in 1793 by the British military to protect the settlement of York (later Toronto), Fort York and the Small

Arms Inspection Building were both subjected to activities that contributed to soil contamination.

First presented at Cooper Cole in Toronto in 2022, Eve Tagny's *Unadorned Landscapes* exhibition offers an introspective meditation on soil as a vessel of memory and history, one marked as "scarred terrain, bearing the imprints of both natural and human interventions".⁸ Using soil sourced from various sites, Tagny explores themes of colonialism, displacement, and memory. Her practice often integrates soil with organic materials, attending to the interconnectedness of human histories and ecological systems. Three works from Tagny's series—*Unadorned Landscapes* (2022), *NW3 Landscape* (2022), and *Untitled (1)* (2022)—are included in *The Soil Speaks*.

Unadorned Landscapes is a single-channel video that reflects on the relationship between the extraction of land, the people whose labour is similarly extracted, and bodies as sites of memory and displacement. The work was filmed at a construction site for the Université de Montréal's new campus in Outremont, a historically affluent neighbourhood. Tagny chose this site for its layered histories of colonial claims, population displacement, and the gentrification affecting the adjacent neighbourhood of Parc-Extension.

Parc-Extension, a working-class district built around rail freight transport, became home to successive waves of European immigrants, including a large Greek community, in the 1960s. When the rail yard closed in 1985, the area experienced economic decline. Remaining one of the most affordable neighbourhoods for newcomers, it

⁸ Keshav Anand, "Soil in Contemporary Art," *Something Curated*, November 15, 2024, <https://somethingcurated.com/2024/11/15/soil-in-contemporary-art/>

continues to attract diverse immigrant populations. Today, Parc-Extension is among the most multicultural, densely populated, and poorest urban areas in Canada. A large portion of its residents rely on rental housing and are therefore particularly vulnerable to the pressures of gentrification.⁹

Already affected by rising rents and real estate speculation, the neighbourhood now faces accelerated displacement precipitated by the inauguration of the Université de Montréal's MIL campus in September 2019. Dedicated to scientific research, the campus is expected to draw thousands of students and, in turn, facilitate the establishment of artificial intelligence laboratories by major companies such as Microsoft and Element AI.¹⁰

Unadorned Landscapes features two Black performers moving through an open pit on the construction site of the expansion, uprooted soil, and mounds of rubble. They move in slow, unrehearsed coordinated motion, though not directly beside one another. Both touch the soil and rock beneath them and, at times, rub the soil onto their bodies. For a moment, they lock their eyes and then, in tandem, redirect their attention to the weeds that grow despite the land's devastation. One performer lifts the other, carrying them on their back to a stable clearing atop a mound. The frame tightens as their bodies meet and their heads touch; they lean on one another's shoulders. The camera rests for a minute on their closed eyes, conveying a sense of safety between them; then, one performer gently pushes away from the other. Simultaneously, they perform hand

⁹ A. J. Youngbloom et al., "Gentrification, Perceptions of Neighborhood Change, and Mental Health in Montréal, Québec," *SSM – Population Health* 22 (2023): 101406, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2023.101406>

¹⁰ Maison de l'innovation sociale, "Accueil," accessed February 3, 2025, <https://mis.quebec/>

salutations that appear as gestures of mutual understanding. One performer exits the frame first; the other walks toward a lush green hill in the distance, passing patches of new green grass that will accumulate and eventually replace the mounds of extracted soil.

Even after its labour is extracted, the soil remembers. Jonathan Phillips explores the concept of “soil memory” through three overlapping ideas. First, soils are products of their environments, shaped over time by the interplay of geological, climatic, and biological factors: soils “remember” the conditions that influenced their formation, a principle often used in paleopedology to interpret ancient environments. Second, soils are repositories of historical evidence: they contain artifacts, fossils, and pollutants that preserve specific events that occurred within or upon them. Finally, soils function as dynamic, unstable systems whose development can be chaotic, with disturbances such as tree growth or erosion that persist even after visible signs have vanished. Phillips defines a “second soil memory,” where soils are “containers”:

A second soil memory concept is that of the soil as a container for historical evidence and artifacts. This can be independent of the factorial model in that soils may contain fossils, archaeological artifacts, pollen, charcoal, trash, and pollutants that are unrelated to the factors or soil formation, or whose interpretation does not require an understanding of their pedogenetic impacts. Thus, the soil “remembers” specific events and episodes that happened on or in it.¹¹

¹¹ Jonathan Phillips, “Thanks for the (Soil) Memories,” *University of Kentucky Department of Geography Blogs*, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://geography.as.uky.edu/node/474413>

In *Unadorned Landscapes*, soil is a site that retains and reveals history, resonating with the performers' gestures and underscoring how both land and body hold traces of what has shaped them.

Tagny's *Untitled (1)* is a colour photograph of a Black female figure standing against a backdrop of wooden walls and discarded construction materials. Her body leans forward; arms extended behind her, fingers curled as if securing an unseen object on her back—a body balancing the physical and societal burden. Outfitted in a uniform often associated with manual labour—black pants with reflective tape and heavy black boots—she casts her eyes down to the ground. Her silhouette is framed by a two-by-four wooden structure behind her, a reminder of how much has been built on the extraction of Black labour and continues to be built on it.

NW3 Landscape is a large-scale digital colour photograph printed on jute. Photographed with an iPhone in London, England, the work at first appears to depict a generic scene. Closer inspection reveals the image to be a reflection caught in the glass of a vacant storefront. Inside, piles of signage that may once have hung in the window now lie abandoned, in contrast to the row of old London homes reflected in the glass. A red horizontal line, handstitched in whipstitch, runs through the centre of the photograph. Recycled two-by-fours frame the work, which leans against the gallery wall. Its material elements—the hand-stitching, reclaimed wood frame, jute, the digital print and the placement of the work—all reference human labour and extraction. We see old homes but no people—are they being displaced by development? —and a vacant storefront: it is a city in transition. The reflection stages a familiar urban hierarchy, property and safety become visible while the labourers who maintain and service that

world remain outside the frame, structurally necessary yet rendered invisible. The stitching serves as a humanizing witness to that erasure.

Printed on jute, a natural vegetable fibre that is entirely biodegradable, *NW3 Landscape* is non-archival; it enacts its own eventual erasure. Over time, it will disintegrate and return to the soil. The piece reminds us that what once occupied space will eventually vanish, surviving only in the memories of those who witnessed it. Yet those witnesses will disappear in time, too. Tagny embraces the vulnerability inherent in artistic practice:

When you're making art, you're in correspondence with other people. So, in a sense, you're always vulnerable. At times, it can feel like a transactional relationship, or, if not transactional, it can feel like it has elements of judgement- or, you know, of being judged or seen. And that, I think, can be difficult. And it can be difficult to maintain a sense of value and the belief that you have a right to do what you do, to express yourself, and to know you're valid.¹²

Tagny's reflections on artistic vulnerability echo the realities of those who move through an ever-shifting city—often disconnected from the land and from one another—and amplify the central themes of *The Soil Speaks*.

Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ (Nehiyàw/Anishinaabe/Métis) is a multi-disciplinary artist. Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ created *toxic soil*, a video performance piece, in response to the sudden destruction of the green space outside her studio on River Street in Toronto. For

¹² Eve Tagny, "A Conversation with Eve Tagny," *Artspace*, YouTube video, April 17, 2021, 8:21–8:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEouzZQkyiU>, 8:21

years, the land had been rich with wild plants, shaded by a maple tree that offered both shelter and artistic inspiration. In 1998, a development company destroyed the green space within days, leaving behind large holes filled with oil-slicked water and exposed rubble. Norris/Bebonkwe ^{^>^} was told the soil was toxic and therefore had to be removed before construction on a new development could begin. *toxic soil* was Norris/Bebonkwe^{^>^} 's embodied response to this violent transformation. In the video, she wears a white wedding dress—a recurring motif in her work throughout the 1990s. For Norris/Bebonkwe^{^>^}, the wedding dress represents “marriage” as it relates to feminine identity, but it is also a deeply personal reflection on her struggle to survive in a toxic world. She explains:

At the same time, the dress, and the activities performed in it, addressed feelings I had about myself regarding some difficult personal relationships—and the struggles to not only survive, but also make sense of them in a world that is “toxic, on so many levels. I had at times come to feel that I was as ‘unusable’ as this urban scourge. In the face of this, it seemed pertinent to remember and embrace how all our relationships are underlined and defined by our relationship to the earth. How external toxicity is always mirrored internally, and vice versa. Amongst other things, toxic soil is a cathartic return to the land, both symbolic and literal. I wanted to embrace the landscape, even become it, no matter what state she was in, as an affirmation of the necessity of maintaining those

fundamental relationships; with the earth, ourselves, the spiritual—no matter how difficult or “dirty” they may become.¹³

Norris/Bebonkwe's words underscore how *toxic soil* transforms a site of environmental violence into a space for reconnection and reckoning and emphasize the inseparability of embodied experience and land.

Shot in grainy colour, the film follows Norris/Bebonkwe as she intuitively responds to the environment.¹⁴ Wearing a white short-sleeved dress with a train, she navigated the site cautiously, climbing the tall mounds of soil and rubble. As the frame widens, hydro lines and passing traffic come into view—markers of the urban development that will soon take over the area. Mixed into the soil are building materials: concrete, bricks, fencing, and other debris. Pools of stagnant water fill the large holes left behind.

As Norris/Bebonkwe takes in the altered landscape, she begins collecting branches from the maple tree and returns them to its trunk, which is now an uneven stump. She removes her boots and approaches one of the water-filled holes. The excavated ground beneath her feet is unstable, mirroring her dislocation imposed by urban development. Stepping into the water, she rubs mud onto her face before sitting briefly, then returns to the tree to retrieve her boots. In the final moments of the film, she sits on the bucket of an abandoned backhoe before walking off-screen.

¹³ Norris/Bebonkwe Brown / Bebonkwe, artist statement for *toxic soil*, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.judeNorris.com/live-art-for-video/toxic-soil/>

¹⁴ Norris/Bebonkwe Brown / Bebonkwe, artist statement for *toxic soil*, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.judenorris.com/live-art-for-video/toxic-soil/>

Norris/Bebonkwe's work encapsulates how soil and the human body can chronicle decades or centuries of history.¹⁵ In soil science, "soil memory" describes soil systems as in-place archives that store information about environmental factors and pedogenic processes in persistent features of the soil body.¹⁶ Soil scientists Daniel D. Richter and Dan H. Yaalon write, "As human natural systems, soils have long memories that accumulate over time," and those legacies continue to shape contemporary soil processes and land management.¹⁷ The human body, too, retains a durable "memory" of past environments. At the level of physiology and experience, trauma can be "stored in somatic memory" and expressed through persistent shifts in stress response.¹⁸

The Soil Speaks engages posthuman feminist critiques by framing soil not as a passive surface or resource, but as a collaborator, witness, and living relation. In the works by Prieto, Tagny and Norris/Bebonkwe, soil emerges not as a neutral medium but as a living archive: a site where colonial, environmental, and affective violences materialize. Contaminated lots, displaced earth, and disrupted ecologies echo the experiences of marginalized communities whose bodies and histories have likewise been extracted, erased, or displaced. Through care, presence, and embodied return, these artworks resist dominant social norms by renewing relations with the land.

¹⁵ Norris/Bebonkwe's artist statement for *toxic soil*, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.judeNorris/Bebonkwe.com/live-art-for-video/toxic-soil/>

¹⁶ Victor O. Targulian and Sergey V. Goryachkin, "Soil memory: Types of records, carriers, hierarchy and diversity," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Geológicas* 21, no. 1(2004):2
[file:///Users/danielabosco/Downloads/Dialnet-SoilMemory-821583%20\(1\).pdf](file:///Users/danielabosco/Downloads/Dialnet-SoilMemory-821583%20(1).pdf)

¹⁷ Daniel D Richter and Dan H Yaalon, "*The Changing Model of Soil*", *Revisited*, *Soil Society of America Journal* 76, no 3 (May 2012):78 accessed November 19, 2025.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233755781_The_Changing_Model_of_Soil_Revisited

¹⁸ Bessel A van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress" *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1, no 5 (January-February 1994): 253 accessed November 11, 2025. https://www.franweiss.com/pdfs/sensorimotor_vanderkolk_1994.pdf

Grounded in embodied and relational practices, these artists foreground the interconnected social, political and material conditions that create place. Soil, through its own material agency, remembers what society attempts to forget: labouring bodies, displaced communities, militarized grounds, silenced voices, and environmental wounds. By returning soil to the gallery as an active presence rather than inert matter, these works reassert its role as a witness and collaborator in shaping decolonial futures. *The Soil Speaks* contributes to a growing discourse in which art addresses structural racism and colonial legacies through relational practice. Ultimately, *The Soil Speaks* insists that decolonial art is inseparable from the work of tending to land and body—a perpetual practice through which intertwined histories are acknowledged and transformed.

Support Paper

Introduction

In *The Soil Speaks*, soil enters the conversation through the works of Dana Prieto, Eve Tagny, and Jude Norris/Bebonkwe $\wedge > \supset$, who collectively register extraction as material harm and a historical process. Soil not only reflects the land's condition, but also records uneven exposure, who bears the risk, who is protected, and who is left to absorb the costs. The works presented in *The Soil Speaks—Footnotes for an Arsenal* (2022), *Unadorned Landscapes* (2022), *NW3 Landscape* (2022), *Untitled (1)* (2022) and *toxic soil* (1998) challenge the framing of soil as passive matter, instead positioning it as an active witness to the ongoing material effects of colonization. Across these works,

soil emerges not as a mute substance but as a breathing presence that bears cultural displacement, environmental violence, and embodied histories. I use Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* as a point of departure and Delcy Morelos's *El abrazo* as a point of arrival, framing the thesis as a movement from soil as object to soil as witness, body, and voice.

The featured works from Prieto, Tagny, and Norris/Bebonkwe ^{Λ>²} align with a posthuman feminist ethic that understands soil as entangled with identity, life, and systems of power, offering an alternative to anthropocentric and extractive frameworks. This ethical orientation disrupts dominant Eurocentric narratives that position humans as superior and separate, expanding understandings of relationality and interconnectivity. Posthuman feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti frames the posthuman subject through relationality and embeddedness, emphasizing material interdependence and recognizing soil as a living presence rather than passive ground.

Early Earthworks and Posthuman Feminist Critique

Although the Earth Art movement of the 1960s–1970s is often framed through an environmental ethos, many of its canonical figures, including Walter De Maria and Nancy Holt, tended to position land as a medium or backdrop rather than as an agentic entity with its own histories, ecologies, and material agencies. Using posthuman feminist theory as a critical lens that foregrounds the entanglement and co-constitution of human and more-than-human bodies, matter, and ecological systems, this section approaches De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (1977) and Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973-77) as case studies into how institutional and artistic framings can neutralize

land's provenance and vitality, translating living ground into controlled display. To clarify how this neutralization is produced over time, I begin with De Maria's first iteration of *The New York Earth Room, Munich Earth Room* (1968), and trace how language progressively strips away material specificity, cutting out provenance, composition, and ecological life as the project moves toward its later New York form. The exhibition poster for *Munich Earth Room* describes the installation as:

*PURE DIRT · PURE EARTH · PURE LAND / NO OBJECT ON IT / NO
OBJECT IN IT // NO MARKINGS ON IT / NO MARKINGS IN IT //
NOTHING GROWING ON IT / NOTHING GROWING IN IT*¹⁹

Although it is unclear who composed the poster's wording, Heiner Friedrich, art dealer, collector, one of the founders of Dia Art Foundation, and a friend of De Maria, wrote the gallery press release, suggesting the possibility of collaborating to shape the works' public language. The poster's phrasing underscores distinctions between raw material, organic matter, and territorial sites, presenting soil as a passive, controlled medium rather than a living, relational entity. Friedrich's press release read: "*THE NEW YORK EARTH ROOM*, 1977, 222 cubic yards of earth 3,600 square feet of floor space 21" depth of material 220.000 lbs. weight of material."²⁰

Although the precise origin of the soil remains uncertain—some sources suggest it came from Pennsylvania—this omission reflects a colonial logic that treats land as blank, passive, and available for intervention and ownership by colonizing agents. I

¹⁹ Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution. "Smithsonian Learning Lab Resource: Walter De Maria, 50 M³ (1600 cubic feet) Level Dirt, Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich, Germany." Smithsonian Learning Lab. January 21, 2016. Accessed August 1, 2025. <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2016/12/21/material-remains/>

²⁰ Dia Art Foundation, "Walter de Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (1977) Reopens. *Dia Blog*. October 9, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2024. <https://www.diaart.blog/home/earthroomreopening>

visited *The New York Earth Room* multiple times in 2024, often discussing the work with Bill Dilworth, its longtime caretaker. In one conversation, I expressed my disappointment at the lack of smell; I had expected to be overwhelmed by the soil's scent. Dilworth explained that the original soil had been replaced:

BD: Years ago, you could smell the earth from the minute you entered the building. Unfortunately, we realized that the soil was becoming too moist, fungus was growing, and mold was accumulating due to excess water beneath the surface. The entire space had to be gutted, relined, and reinstalled, and an HVAC system was put in as a result; watering is now far less frequent. These changes altered the smell.

DB: So, is the soil technically alive?

BD: In theory, nothing can grow in it anymore after the original soil was replaced.

DB: Is this soil not the original? Was the exact origin of the original soil known?

BD: I have heard about various places mentioned, but it doesn't matter. It is here. It is for everyone. The difference between the two is that the original soil that was used had not been sterilized; it was alive with life.²¹

In researching *The New York Earth Room*, I noticed writers often refer to the soil as “dirt.” I argue that this word choice diminishes the integrity of the work and reinforces the perception of soil as an inert object. Soil is defined as “The layered material at the

²¹ William (Bill) Dilworth, Caretaker *The New York Earth Room*, interview by Daniela Bosco, unpublished transcript April 27, 2024. 04:40-04:45:14

earth's surface, which has resulted from chemical and biological processes and physical organization of minerals and organic matter, and which supports terrestrial ecosystems and humanity.”²² “Dirt is what’s left when soil is displaced, or even when it loses its vitality, even if it remains where it’s supposed to be. Dirt is displaced, dead, and disconnected from the soil ecosystem. It lacks biological activity, structure, and nutrients: the qualities that make soil fertile and suitable for plant growth.”²³ Dilworth reminds us that the original soil was fertile, abundant with scent and life, in contrast to the sterile earth that was brought in. While the installation’s current iteration may meet the technical definition of “dirt,” De Maria created his original using living soil. Its removal continues the colonial logic of extractive and lifeless treatment of land.

Occupying the loft that once served as Friedrich’s apartment, *The New York Earth Room*, originally a three-month exhibition, is now on permanent display. Visitors enter through a narrow hallway and encounter a glass barrier that separates them from the soil. The confined viewing area allows for only a few visitors at a time, encouraging focused attention on the composition. Together, the glass barrier and the soil’s unknown provenance reduce the soil to an object. De Maria retained the loft’s architectural structure, emphasizing the tension between human-made space and displaced earth.

I am reminded of a drawing by De Maria in the Dia archive depicting two line-drawn boxes—*Untitled (The Object, the Action, the Aesthetic Feeling)*.²⁴ This work

²² Alex B. McBratney and Alfred E. Hartemink, “Define Soil,” *Soil Security* 14 (2024): 100135, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667006224000091>

²³ Amy Rial, “What Is the Difference between Soil and Dirt?” *The Institute for Environmental Research and Education*, 2023. Accessed November 1, 2025. <https://iere.org/what-is-the-difference-between-dirt-and-soil/>

²⁴ Walter De Maria, *Untitled (The Object, the Action, the Aesthetic Feeling)*, c. 1960–61, ink on paper, 8.5 × 11 in. (21.6 × 27.9 cm), The Menil Collection, Houston.

condenses De Maria's artistic ethos, reducing practice to categorical terms. It mirrors his minimalist strategies and anticipates the frameworks through which works such as *The New York Earth Room* would be received. Read in relation to the installation, the drawing underscores how De Maria staged soil as both matter and medium, transforming the gallery into an altered space of encounter. Here, soil becomes the "object," its placement within the white cube constitutes "the action," and the viewer's sensory and affective responses comprise "the aesthetic feeling." The drawing offers a conceptual key to understanding how the installation organizes material, space, and reception.

Limiting interaction, obscuring origin, and replacing the original soil, which expressed its own voice and life through fungi reinforces extraction and containment, reflecting broader Western histories of land as a resource. Absent in De Maria's schema are ethics of reciprocity, care, and relation ethics that posthuman feminist and Indigenous thinkers identify as essential for encountering land as animate, agentive, and inseparable from human and more-than-human worlds.

Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) is situated on land that Holt purchased in the Great Basin Desert of northwestern Utah, on the ancestral territories of the Goshute, Western Shoshone and Paiute peoples.²⁵ Holt frames the desert as "empty" and available for art, making it newly visible to art audiences while erasing Indigenous presence and stewardship. Holt's approach enacts extractive visibility: transforming the desert for *Sun Tunnels* reproduces settler-colonial logics, and her monumental aesthetic

²⁵ Savannah Strott and Joey Lovato, "What to Make of Land Art in the Era of LandBack," *High Country News*, September 2024. Accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/what-to-make-of-land-art-in-the-era-of-landback/>

echoes industrial extraction, reinforcing the idea of land as an empty resource. The legibility the work produces becomes cultural capital for the artist and the Land Art canon. At the same time, land and community are positioned as mute context, reinforcing institutional patterns of extraction and erasure.

Both De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* and Holt's *Sun Tunnels* exemplify a shared logic of extractive visibility. *Sun Tunnels* renders the Utah desert legible to art audiences while occluding Indigenous presence and stewardship, and *The New York Earth Room* relocates soil into a controlled gallery space. Even as fungi occasionally emerge, the installation is a spectacle curated to stabilize an aesthetic. In both works, visibility accrues as institutional and cultural capital for artists and museums rather than for the land or its communities. Read against critiques of 1960s–70s Land Art's infrastructural scale and resource logic; these works aestheticize extraction rather than responsibility. Posthuman feminism interrogates not only what it means to be human but also how social hierarchies tied to gender, race, and class shape anthropocentric practices. Nature has long been deployed to justify these hierarchies. Parallels between the exclusion of nature and the marginalization of racialized peoples reinforce social and ecological inequalities, perpetuating the heterosexual, white, middle-class, male as the so-called universal subject. Attending to material histories, such as the origins of soil, allows for deeper critical engagement. Of course, artists are not required to address the power structures they either inhabit and/or perpetuate. Yet such attention among prominent white artists raises crucial questions about legacy, visibility, and responsibility in art practice.

In contrast to De Maria and Holt, artist Beverly Buchanan recalibrates “land art”

by insisting that land is never neutral: it is culturally produced, historically burdened, and materially specific. Buchanan's site-specific *Marsh Ruins* (1981), installed beside Highway 17 at the Marshes of Glynn in Brunswick, Georgia, comprises three amorphous mounds arranged in a triangular formation and intentionally blends into a tidal salt marsh rather than staging itself as a destination.²⁶ With no interpretive signage, the work's near-invisibility functions as an ethic: it refuses spectacle in favour of a quiet encounter with what the landscape already holds. Crucially, Buchanan's site-specific work is not only ecological but historical. *Marsh Ruins* is positioned near Igbo Landing (Dunbar Creek, St. Simons Island), widely remembered as an 1803 act of collective resistance in which enslaved Igbo people refused captivity, an event ending with mass drowning or suicide. The work's material logic reinforces this historical embedding: Buchanan layered concrete with tabby, a mixture that includes lime, sand, oyster shell, water, and ash, linking the sculpture to coastal construction methods and to historic materials used in the construction of homes of Black history in the South.²⁷ Buchanan's self-mocking drawing "Roadside Attraction" underscores this intent: she imagines herself directing passersby to the work with a lit sign, an ironic recognition of how easily Black histories embedded in place are driven past and unrecognized. In this sense, *Marsh Ruins* does not "use" land as a backdrop; it marks land as a layered archive of enslavement, history, labour, and ongoing erasure. Placed alongside De Maria and Holt, Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* clarifies the fault line in Land Art: whether land is treated as an empty surface for aesthetic intervention or as a historically burdened archive that

²⁶ Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, 2001. TCLF, <https://www.tclf.org/marsh-ruins>

²⁷ Sarah Louise Cowan, "To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 1980s," *Arts* 13, no. 1 (2024): 21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010021>

demands accountability.

Like Buchanan, the artists included in *The Soil Speaks* centre visibility as relational and accountable rather than extractive. Prieto interrupts the commodification of natural and cultural resources; Tagny engages with grief, memory, and repair; and Norris/Bebonkwe ^{Λ>³} practices survivance to assert presence rather than spectacle. Framed through relational care, visibility becomes a practice oriented toward situated obligations and ongoing relations, rather than the mere production of legibility.

Contemporary Soil-Based Works

Prieto's installation *Footnotes for an Arsenal* (2022) highlights the dual extraction of soil and of workers' bodies. First exhibited in the Small Arms Inspection Building during the Toronto Biennial of Art, the work confronts the legacy of a site where lead bullets were manufactured and where both land and labourers were subjected to long-term contamination. The dust generated by lead production infiltrates soil and bodies alike; it lingers in the air, settles invisibly across surfaces, and accumulates in ecosystems, producing a slow-moving violence largely absent from public memory. Prieto, who was born and raised in Argentina, often reflects on her early impressions of Toronto's "cleanliness," a surface-level orderliness that obscures the city's deeper histories of extraction, contamination, and uneven exposure. As she explains, "I remember when I came here...I was impacted by how clean things looked...there's this clean politeness."

²⁸ Her observation exposes how dominant settler infrastructures manufacture an illusion

²⁸ Dana Prieto, "Dana Prieto and Katie Lawson," *Toronto Biennial of Art Podcast*, June 28, 2022, 13:00–13:12, <https://toronto-biennial-of-art-podcast.simplecast.com/episodes/dana-prieto-and-katie-lawson-GFXUVyDu>

of purity that masks the environmental and bodily consequences of industrial processes.

Footnotes for an Arsenal consists of two components: a sculptural arrangement of terracotta tiles and vessels formed from soil collected on site, and a poem painted on the gallery's southwest-facing window. For the text, Prieto used a mixture of lime powder and water, a technique she remembered from her childhood in Buenos Aires, where it is used in a variety of everyday contexts, including construction, because it washes away easily without harming the environment. This choice suggests a material approach grounded in lived experience and practical knowledge, one that relates to land through reciprocity rather than extraction.

Rather than essentializing these practices as inherently “Indigenous” or “Racialized,” it is more accurate and ethical to recognize that they often emerge from relational epistemologies in which materials are chosen with attention to environmental impact, cultural memory, and responsibility to place. These ideas resonate with posthuman feminist theory, particularly Stacy Alaimo’s argument that the substance of the world flows through bodies, “Concern and wonder converge when the context for ethics becomes not merely social but material- the emergent, ultimately unmappable landscapes of interacting biological, climatic, economic, and political forces.”²⁹ emphasizing reciprocity and the co-constitution of human and nonhuman lives.

Prieto’s work embodies this ethic of reciprocity and relational accountability. Using site-responsive materials and techniques shaped by her lived experience, she underscores the entanglement of labour, contamination, environment, and memory. The installation challenges anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding the agency of

²⁹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

soil—its capacity to hold toxins, histories, and relations—and by revealing the shared vulnerabilities of bodies and lands shaped by industrial and colonial processes. The site itself reinforces this entanglement: decades of munitions testing and rifle production at the Small Arms Inspection Building resulted in elevated concentrations of lead in the soil, contamination that does not biodegrade and continues to affect the surrounding ecosystems and communities.³⁰

Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ (Nehiyàw/Anishinaabe/Métis) is a multidisciplinary artist who explores soil as both “literal and metaphorical toxicity.”³¹ In her 1998 video piece, *toxic soil*, performed on River Street in Toronto, soil becomes a container for personal trauma and colonial residue, revealing the entwinement of environmental and emotional harm shaped by colonial ideals. When the greenspace outside her studio was deemed toxic and removed by developers, Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ ’s unrehearsed response to what she witnessed was “toxic soil.” In the film, she moves through the upturned ground, at one point gathering branches cut from a tree and carefully placing them back at its base. Here, the overturned soil and felled tree bear witness to violence; at the same time, they are agents of continuity. Extending agency beyond the human, decolonial and Indigenous practices honour land, history, and the possibility of repair.

³⁰ Air Force Center for Environmental Excellence (AFCEE), *Technical Protocol for Determining the Remedial Requirements for Soils at Small-Arms Firing Ranges* (Brooks Air Force Base, TX: Technology Transfer Division, July 31, 2000), Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC), ADA418946, accessed September 24, 2024. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA418946.pdf>

³¹ Jude Norris/Bebonkwe Brown ᐱᐅᐅ, *toxic soil*, 1998, artist website, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://www.judeNorris/BebonkweBrown.com/live-art-for-video/toxic-soil>

During my phone interview with Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ, she emphasized the importance of consistently grounding her practice in self-identification: “My identity as an Indigenous woman is central to my art practice. How I identify shapes how I understand land, history, and responsibility.”³² For Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ, this identity is inseparable from politics and survival: “The question of who I am is always political. Being Indigenous means negotiating visibility, survival, and how we carry memory forward.”³³ At the same time, she underscores how the canon and colonial practices actively harm that identity: “The Western canon of art has erased and diminished Indigenous expression, making it harder for us to see ourselves reflected.”³⁴ She asserts that “colonial practices forced us into silence. My identity was something I had to fight to claim against those erasures.”³⁵

Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ described how institutional eligibility can reproduce colonial harm “they make you choose between fitting into their categories or being invisible”³⁶ to situate that critique without over claiming Indigenous theory, I draw on Vanessa Watts Indigenous Place Thought framework as she defines it specifically through Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies and with her explicit caution that her figure is not a universal model of how all Indigenous peoples think or believe.³⁷ Watts writes that “Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and

³² Jude Norris/Bebonkwe ᐱᐅᐅ, telephone interview by Daniela Bosco, Toronto, January 20, 2025. 01:15-01:16

³³ Ibid 01:45:35-01:01:46:03

³⁴ Ibid 01:20-01:22

³⁵ Ibid. 01:23:45-01:24:02

³⁶ Ibid. 02:45:03-02:46:01

³⁷ Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non- Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!)” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013):21, 23

thinking.” She links thought action and identity to “particular places and historical events” such that obligations and communication with place are consequent to who we are.³⁸ In this register, I use “soil as archive” carefully, not as soil functioning like a human mind, nor as a neutral container of data, but as a relational shorthand for how soil and place carry living histories that can shape identity and agency. Watts’s question “What happens when soil is removed from territory?” clarifies the stakes of extraction and relocation, which can absorb land/body into objects within the colonial imperative and into “epistemological space” for non-Indigenous use.³⁹ Within the epistemology-ontology frame of colonization, she further argues our “communication and obligations” are continuously interrupted, and colonization has “endangered agency among Indigenous peoples”.⁴⁰

An inquiry as to how soil carries displacement, interruption, and historical traces shapes Tagny’s work in the exhibition. Tagny contributes three works to *The Soil Speaks: Unadorned Landscapes* (2022), *NW3 Landscape* (2022), and *Untitled (1)* (2022). Tagny, whose practice is informed by her Québécois and Cameroonian roots, examines gentrification as a contemporary form of extraction in the *Unadorned Landscapes*. The work addresses the redevelopment of a historically immigrant neighbourhood in Montreal, where land and culture are commodified in the name of progress. The construction of a university bridge gentrified the area, displacing long-standing communities and revealing how systems extract labour and identity even from places built and maintained by racialized populations.

³⁸ Watts, *Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency*” 21, 23.

³⁹ Watts, *Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency*” 30, 31.

⁴⁰ Watts, *Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency*” 25

Tagny's interest in soil as a material initially emerged as a way of working through grief. As she recalls: "When I started working with soil, it was significantly linked to mourning, and I was just recreating the way that they make tombstones in Cameroon, also in South Africa, because my partner died there."⁴¹ These encounters with soil, both as a burial marker and as displaced material on construction sites, led her to view it as more than inert matter. She explains: "It's soil that's been extracted and therefore devalued because it's contaminated. But even if we reject its value, it's still teeming with life, producing and still inscribing itself; it's a wider cycle of life."⁴² In this sense, soil resists erasure, embodying cycles of renewal and holding the imprints of those who lived and laboured on it. In another interview, Tagny reflects on soil as a natural archive: "I wanted to position soil as a natural archive containing traces of people who have worked and lived on it throughout history."⁴³ She connects this idea to a critique of the capitalist logic of extraction: "How much violence are we going to enact to make sure profits keep going up? Who is enacting the violence, and what is the kind of madness that lies at the heart of these behaviours? I just imagine the soil as this witness. We come and go, and then you just still have this core accumulating all of that."⁴⁴

On view together, the three works present fragments of both real and reimagined geographies, collating multiple histories embedded in disrupted landscapes. The colour photo *Untitled (1)* explicitly references the extraction of Black labour. *Unadorned*

⁴¹ Eve Tagny, interview by Heather Canlas Rigg, *Bomb*, May 1, 2023, <http://bombmagazine.org/articles/2023/05/01/eve-tagny-interviewed/>

⁴² Eve Tagny, interview by Heather Canlas Rigg, *Bomb*, May 1, 2023, <http://bombmagazine.org/articles/2023/05/01/eve-tagny-interviewed/>

⁴³ Tamara Jones and Eve Tagny, "Building Anti-Monuments: A Conversation with Eve Tagny," *The Ex-Puritan*, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://ex-puritan.ca/building-anti-monuments-a-conversation-with-eve-tagny>

⁴⁴ Jones and Tagny, "Building Anti-Monuments."

Landscapes positions bodies as sites of memory and displacement, and *NW3*

Landscape ties environmental extraction to contemporary image culture through an iPhone photograph of a cityscape printed on jute. Tagny's material choices demonstrate the capacity of both humans and nonhuman entities to shed light on historical facts and to frame new histories.

Artists of colour have long engaged land as material, inscribing it with memory and identity. Through this engagement, the soil becomes an archive that counters dominant colonial narratives. Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series (1974) exemplifies this approach.⁴⁵ Mendieta's body imprints itself on the earth, literalizing the immigrant's longing for rootedness. She once explained, "Because I have no motherland, I feel a need to join with the earth, to return to her womb."⁴⁶ In a curatorial statement for the exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists in the United States* (1980). Mendieta, who co-curated the exhibition, wrote in the introduction, "As non-white women, our struggles are two-fold. This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being 'other'."⁴⁷ Mendieta's use of natural, earth-based materials resonates with Afro-Cuban and Indigenous traditions that claim a close relationship with the land, collapsing the boundaries between self and soil, memory and matter.

⁴⁵ Ana Mendieta, *Siluetas Series*, 1973–80, earth-body works (various media and sites), documentation accessed May 22, 2024, Ana Mendieta Estate, <https://www.anamendietaartist.com/>

⁴⁶ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 77.

⁴⁷ "Typewritten Introduction to *Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists of the United States*," ephemera, The Feminist Institute (TFI), accessed January 19, 2025, <https://www.thefeministinstitute.org/ephemera?id=604>

Delcy Morelos's *El abrazo* (2023) extends this trajectory by demonstrating how gallery spaces can honour environmental consciousness. The installation illustrates that contemporary art can function as both an ecological practice and a political statement, emphasizing land as a relational and ethical site. *El abrazo* brings the body into immediate contact with the material, collapsing boundaries between subject and object and calling attention to the agency of both human and nonhuman matter, as well as their potential for reciprocity.

In the text accompanying the exhibition *El abrazo*, the brochure notes that “to touch the earth is to be touched by her.”⁴⁸ The sensuality of this encounter is heightened by the fragrant aroma of the earth, enriched with cinnamon and clove (chosen for their natural antifungal properties) and copaiba, a medicinal tree, both of which are extracts commonly used in the Amazon. *El abrazo* disrupts sensory hierarchies that privilege sight as a basis of knowledge over touch and smell; the installation engages the body through scent, texture, scale and spatial presence. Such full-body engagement remains relatively rare in a gallery context. Constructed from clay sourced from the Dia Beacon, recycled garden soil, hay, and coir, *El abrazo* is conceived as a shrine to peat. Peatlands are accumulations of partially decomposed organic matter that trap carbon and are nutrient-rich. While peat is commonly used as a commercial heating fuel and in gardening, its extraction permanently damages bogs and releases stored carbon, rendering it a vital yet vulnerable resource. By evoking peat, Morelos situates her work within ecological cycles and underscores the material

⁴⁸ *El abrazo*, exhibition brochure accompanying *Delcy Morelos: El abrazo*, Dia Chelsea, New York, October 5, 2023–July 20, 2024.

consequences of human intervention. While formally engaging with the legacy of Land Art, gesturing toward its vocabulary of geometric abstraction, *El abrazo* reorients attention toward embodied forms of material and ecological knowledge. In doing so, Morelos cultivates moments of connection with what she describes as the “intimate humidity of the earth,” inviting visitors to “be in touch with the earth and to enter within it ... to be in touch with what constitutes and nourishes us; the bedrock where life develops while it is inhabited by the soul.”⁴⁹

Collectively, the works in *The Soil Speaks* are situated within a broader conversation about soil, colonial history, and environmental accountability. By incorporating soil itself, its materialities, and histories into their work, the artists in the exhibition create works that serve as archives anchored in time and place. They resist the flattening forces of colonial abstraction, instead showcasing the living, layered presence of soil. As Kathryn Yusoff, author and Professor of Inhuman Geography, argues in *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race*, colonialism is not only a political and economic project but also one that divides “flesh and earth through the grammar of the inhuman.”⁵⁰ Yusoff’s larger intervention is that geology is never neutral; the concepts and clarifications of “geologic life” have helped authorize extractive economies of life and land under colonialism and enslavement.⁵¹

I am reminded of author Yiyun Li’s reflection in *Dear Friend from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*. “Altered scenarios are best distractions or else settings for old

⁴⁹ *El abrazo*, exhibition brochure.

⁵⁰ Kathryn Yusoff, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), 4.

⁵¹ Yusoff, *Geologic Life*. 5.

habits, what one carries from one point to another geographically or temporarily is oneself, even the most inconsistent person is consistently himself,”⁵² Li’s passage insists that identity persists amid change and displacement. In this exhibition, soil is approached in a parallel register, not as a backdrop but as a material witness bearing residues of what happened on and in it, even when landscapes are remade, and meanings are overwritten. Read this way, soil’s voice emerges through the trace, what clings accumulates, what returns, and what refuses erasure. Can art that incorporates the material history of soil act as an archive beyond the art world? By including soil as a witness, the works in *The Soil Speaks* amplify this lineage of soil-based practices that confront colonial histories and foreground environmental accountability. The exhibition offers a decolonial counter-narrative that reveals these entangled histories of the land, body and power, and asks what it means to listen to the soil rather than look at it. These works function as archives within each artist’s practice, but the archival labour does not end at the artwork; the research, site histories, interviews, and documentation that informed these projects constitute an archive that exceeds the works and remains active beyond the exhibition context. In this sense, the installations operate as historical reference points that index environmental and political timelines within the underlying research archive, which preserves the conditions and relations that make these timelines legitimate. By attending to the voice of soil, we recognize that it does not speak in metaphor alone, but in material evidence, contamination, disconnect, regrowth, residue, and in how those traces ask us to respond. This is where the exhibition clarifies the limitations of canonical works such as *The New York Earth Room* and *Sun Tunnels*:

⁵² Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (New York: Random House, 2017), 4

when soil and land are treated primarily as static forms, abstracted from provenance and responsibility, the ground becomes spectacularly visible. In contrast, the histories it holds and the claims it makes upon us are harder to hear.

Installation Review

While planning *The Soil Speaks*, I aimed to prioritize environmental awareness, both as a personal practice and as a continuation of the exhibition theme. I aimed to give each work the intimacy and space needed, while also creating a cohesive flow for viewers. The curatorial statement was placed outside the gallery on the exterior wall. I did this intentionally to give viewers context and pause before entering the gallery for the exhibition. Second, because of the works' size relative to the gallery, I felt it was important that viewers be able to take in the works without the distraction of bodies reading the curatorial statement as they moved through the exhibit. I positioned *Footnotes to an Arsenal*, a large-scale installation toward the windows, at an angle, a first for the sculpture's layout. The placement requires viewers to move around it carefully and deliberately, making their viewing a bodily process rather than a glance. The text element on the west-facing window reinforced the work's message, creating unplanned yet striking resonance, pointing toward the contaminated grounds of Fort York and the Small Arms Inspection Building. *Unadorned Landscapes* was displayed on a monitor, *NW3 Landscape*, and *Untitled (1)* were framed and installed according to Tagny's specifications, and *toxic soil* was projected at life-size on the gallery's wall to put the viewer in relation to the performance and to enhance the grainy qualities.

Lighting the exhibition was difficult; the intention was to keep the overall effect soft rather than to light each work harshly. The exhibition's context guided this choice. Because of the pre-existing track lighting in the gallery, I had to experiment with removing and repositioning some of the track heads. It was nice to experience the exhibition in varying degrees of natural light from the gallery windows, since it took place in March, when natural light was not guaranteed. Sustainability informed every curatorial decision: I ensured that didactics, programs, and statements were printed on recycled paper, and that QR codes were placed next to the works, including each artist's bio and information about each work, eliminating the need to print additional handouts. We used recycled wood to frame Tagny's *NW3*, and lime powder to affix the textual element of Prieto's *Footnotes for Arsenal*. It was essential for us to find an alternative to plastic, and we researched various options. Removing the lime powder from the window only required water and did not add to any waste. Artist Deepika. R. Bhardwaj created the signage for *The Soil Speaks* using soil paste made from a houseplant, set in the exhibition's font, Helvetica. Positioned in a corner—across adjoining walls—and slightly under the halfway mark of the wall, the placement echoes the stratigraphic drawings. This signage was also easily removable using water.

Inspired by Delcy Morelos *El abrazo*, I ordered natural, soil-scented candles for the gallery. Their earthy fragrance grounded the exhibition's sensory experience. These gestures not only reduced environmental impact but also extended the artists' ethics into the gallery itself. Any materials that could be reused were donated to OCAD or to individuals who would reuse them.

Literature Review

My findings and my unlearning are informed by the writings of many scholars whose research demonstrates how curiosity can develop into knowledge. Central to my framework is Rosi Braidotti's theory of posthuman feminism, which offers a critical response to traditional humanist ideologies that have shaped Western philosophy and illuminates the multifaceted relationships between humans and nonhumans. I acknowledge that I use posthuman feminism rather than Indigenous theory due to my own limitations: my learning of Indigenous practices is only beginning. While awareness is insufficient, I am grateful for the patience, compassion, and teachings that Peter Morin, Ilene Sova, Xenia Benivolski, Lori Riva, and Dr. Andrew Gayed shared with me, and I recognize that this gratitude carries a responsibility for reciprocity.

Suzaan Boettger's *Earthworks Art and Landscape of the Sixties* grounds my understanding of the earthwork movement and the era's intention. *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* by Anna Lovatt, Anne Elizabeth Thompson, and Jenni Sorkin expands the foundation Boettger establishes. Thomas Kellein's *Walter De Maria: Conceptual Art, Minimal Art, Land Art* clarifies my understanding of De Maria's diverse practice. Maria Miles and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism* and Patricia Hill Collins's *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* strengthen my critical acumen and broaden my perspective.

Jane Blocker's *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity and Exile* and my return to bell hooks' *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, help me to articulate arguments that encompass both my emotional connection to the topic and my critical perspective on the

artworks themselves. Various academic journal articles and Smithsonian interviews — such as oral history interviews with Nancy Holt and Walter De Maria — and podcast episodes from Somerset House about the exhibition *Soil: The World at Our Feet* — bring both clarity and comfort. Together, these voices remind me of the layered knowledge and interpretation that come with researching soil.

Methodology

In researching this thesis, I sought not only academic rigour but also sustained direct engagement with soil-based artworks and the communities that surround them. My methodology combined close reading and archival research with repeated site visits, studio visits with artists, and participation in cross-disciplinary conversations around soil. I attended the 2024 Urban Soil Symposium in New York City titled “*Engaging the Nuances of Built and Natural Metabolisms*,” which focused on metabolic repair, sustainability, health, and wellness for all living beings. Over two days, speakers from various disciplines presented research and initiatives focused on advancing positive practices and finding innovative ways to protect, heal, and care for soil. I opted to participate in the two-day Living Soils Manifesto workshop to develop a collaborative, multivocal, and intersectional political poem—a manifesto—for soil. The goal was to begin developing a multi-vocal political poem-manifesto for the soils, collectively authored and generated. There was no expectation that the manifesto would be finished during the two-day workshop; rather, it would be the beginning, with an opportunity for people to share and contribute globally and ongoingly. As participants, we were asked

to join one of the four themes: disabled ecologies and disability wisdom, racialized ancestral knowledge and trauma wisdom, settler traumas and responsibilities and queer and trans wisdom. Each theme was given the same questions to reflect on as a group, and later to share and reflect with everyone in the workshop. Being in a room and connecting with strangers invested in soil and identity was unexpectedly comforting. I intend to continue contributing to the ongoing manifesto by organizing a workshop here in Toronto. I also participated in the OCAD University Sacred Spaces residency, led by artist and Associate Professor Ilene Sova in collaboration with Bahamian artist Antonius Roberts, which emphasized site-specific artwork, material exchange, sustainability, and ongoing reflexivity around critical methodology. As the only curatorial student in the residency, Professor Sova asked me to approach this program explicitly as an emerging curator. This entailed regular studio visits with the artist-in-residence, participation in critiques, and ongoing curatorial problem-solving, culminating in the opportunity to curate the exhibition *Sacred Spaces*. The hands-on experience clarified how my prior professional skills and the Criticism and Curatorial Practice translate into exhibition-making, time management, budgeting, relationship-building with artists, installation planning, and navigating the needs and expectations of different personalities. Just as importantly, the residency served as a methodological preface to *The Soil Speaks*, shaping how I approached research, dialogue, and care as curatorial responsibilities. In November, I travelled to the Bahamas with Professor Sova to assist with OCAD's booth at the Fuze Caribbean Art Fair. While there, I visited Roberts' studio, met with Bahamian artists-in-residence, and toured the National Gallery of the Bahamas and private galleries. This access to artists and institutions outside Canada, and the experience of

travelling with artwork and speaking directly with Caribbean galleries, layered my understanding of place-based practice and strengthened my commitment to decolonial curatorial methodologies grounded in context, reciprocity, and relationship. Repeated visits to *The New York Earth Room* and *El abrazo* helped me develop the comparative framework of this thesis, clarifying how different exhibition conditions and ethics shape and encounter meaning within institutional space. My first visit to *The New York Earth Room* elicited a complex reaction. The installation sits in the heart of the SoHo neighbourhood, where real estate is prohibitively expensive. At first, the work appeared almost anti-capitalist. Admission is free, and its location is one of the most expensive areas in the city. Inside the lofts, unaltered architecture and the sheer scale of the installation were striking. The absence of the smell of soil, and how little space there was to sit or linger and reflect on the work itself. During my repeated visits, seasonal shifts in daylight subtly altered the experience. Yet, the soil remained static and contained this contrast, sharpening my sense of the tension between the work's material presence and its treatment as an object. Conversations with Bill Dilworth, the caretaker of *The New York Earth Room* for decades, became an unexpected part of my learning. Speaking with him one-on-one, given his experience and history with the work, shifted my understanding of the installation away from soil as a spectacle towards soil as something continuously meditated on through maintenance time and the ethics of attention. Dilworth passed away on December 10, 2024. In our last meeting, we spoke about works as a living archive and the evidence of how soil can shape and be shaped by long-term human engagement. Dilworth was so generous with his time; I feel fortunate to have the memories of our conversations. To me, he will forever be

synonymous with *The New York Earth Room*. Morelos's *El abrazo* presents a different relationship to soil than De Maria's works. Where De Maria's soil is held behind glass and tightly controlled, Morelos's earth is porous, humid, and alive, drawing on Indigenous knowledge and ecological sustainability. The sculpture itself is so large that it is impossible to photograph the entire work in a single frame. *El abrazo* creates an immediate multisensory contact with a monolith of earth; gallery vents infuse the air with soil-based fragrances such as cinnamon, clove, and copaiba. Morelos invites viewers to touch and smell, rendering the atmosphere part of the work's relational field.

The installation's triangular opening admits only one person at a time, creating an intimate encounter. As I entered, I felt a physical vibration that I interpreted as the sheer power of the earth, a strong sense of connection and the awe of it all. Morelos returned the soil and any additional reusable materials used in the exhibition to their original Dia Beacon location, prioritizing ecological reciprocity. In the initial stages of my research, I had difficulty determining which feminist theory to engage. Ultimately, the experience that shaped this work returned repeatedly to a connection to community, to humans and nonhumans, and to the intertwined relations that make soil not simply matter but a living meeting point between them. Posthuman feminism offered a provisional grounding for this project's ethics and orientation, helping me name independence and relational responsibility while also requiring ongoing reflection on the limits of my own positionality and the risks of collapsing distinct indigenous intellectual traditions into generalized theoretical language.

Bibliography

- Air Force Center for Environmental Excellence (AFCEE). *Technical Protocol for Determining the Remedial Requirements for Soils at Small-Arms Firing Ranges*. Brooks Air Force Base, TX: Technology Transfer Division (AFCEE/ERT), July 31, 2000. Prepared by Parsons Engineering. Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC). Accessed September 24, 2024.
- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010
[.https://iupress.org/9780253222404/bodily-natures/](https://iupress.org/9780253222404/bodily-natures/)
- Anand, Keshav. "Soil in Contemporary Art." *Something Curated*. November 15, 2024. <https://somethingcurated.com/2024/11/15/soil-in-contemporary-art/Arnold>.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010.
- Blocker, Jane. *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999.
- Boettger, Suzaan. *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2003.
- Boettger, Suzann," <http://suzannboettger.net/books>" Suzann Boettger official site accessed July 13, 2024. <https://www.suzaanboettger.net/>
- Boetzkes, Amanda. *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Feminism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022.

Carreira da Silva, Filipe, and Monica Brito Vieira. "Amílcar Cabral, Colonial Soil and the Politics of Submission." *Theory, Culture & Society* 42, no. 1 (2024): 19–35.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764241253752>.

Cheetham, Mark. *Landscape into Eco-Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s*.

University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2021.

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution. "Smithsonian Learning Lab Resource: Walter De Maria, 50 M³ (1600 cubic feet) Level Dirt, Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich, Germany." Smithsonian Learning Lab. January 21, 2016. Accessed December 18, 2024.

Cowan, Sarah Louise. "To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 1980s." *Arts* 13, no. 1 (January 24, 2024): 21.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010021>.

De Maria, Walter. *The New York Earth Room*. Dia Art Foundation. Accessed February 3, 2025.

<https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/walter-de-maria-the-new-york-earth-room-site/type/permanent-site>.

Untitled (The Object, the Action, the Aesthetic Feeling). c. 1960–61. Ink on paper. The Menil Collection, Houston.

Dia. *El abrazo*, exhibition brochure accompanying *Delcy Morelos: El abrazo*, Dia

Chelsea, New York, October 5, 2023–July 20, 2024. New York, New York.

https://Diaart.Org/Media/file/23_1004_moreles%20brochure_for%20web.Pdf.

Dilworth, Bill. Interviews by Daniela Bosco. The New York Earth Room, New York, New York. April 27, 2024; April 28, 2024; and July 11, 2024.

Dudden, Alexis, and Kim Inthavong. "Okinawa: Territory as Monument." *The American Historical Review*, 127, no. 3 (2022): 1321–1338.

Typewritten Introduction to the "*Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists of the United States*." TFI. Accessed January 19, 2025.

<https://www.thefeministinstitute.org/ephemera?id=604>.

Foundation, Dia Art. "Walter de Maria's The New York Earth Room (1977) Reopens."

Dia Blog, October 9, 2020.

<https://www.diaart.blog/home/earthroomreopening>.

"Gentrification, Perceptions of Neighborhood Change, and Mental Health in Montréal, Québec." *SSM – Population Health* 22 (2023): 101406.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2023.101406>.

Hartemink, Alfred E., McBratney, Alex B. B Define Soil, *Soil Security*, Volume 14, 2024, 100135, ISSN 2667-0062,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soisec.2024.100135>.

Hogan, Linda. *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995.

"Oral History Interview with Nancy Holt, 1993 Aug. 3" | Smithsonian Institution.

Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Aug 3, 1993.

<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-nancy-holt-13162>.

“Oral History Interview with Walter De Maria, 1972 October 4 | Smithsonian Institution.”

Smithsonian Archives of American Art, October 4, 1972.

https://www.si.edu/object/oral-history-interview-walter-de-maria-1972-october-4:AAADCD_oh_212629.

hooks, bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

Jones, Tamara, and Eve Tagny. *Building Anti-Monuments: A conversation with Eve*

Tagny. Accessed August 19, 2024

[https://ex-puritan.ca/building-anti-monuments-a-conversation-with-eve-tagny - :~:text=ET%3AI did a show, the visible and the tangible](https://ex-puritan.ca/building-anti-monuments-a-conversation-with-eve-tagny-:~:text=ET%3AI%20did%20a%20show,%20the%20visible%20and%20the%20tangible)

Kaiser, Philipp, and Kwon Miwon. *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*. Los Angeles, CA:

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012.

Kellein, Thomas. *Walter De Maria Conceptual Art, Minimal Art, Land Art*. Munich,

DE: Schirmer/Mosel, 2023.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Kshyanaprava, Raj and Alok Prasad Das. “Lead pollution: Impact on Environment and

Human Health and Approach for a Sustainable Solution.” *Environmental*

Chemistry and Ecotoxicology, vol. 5 (2023): 79–85.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enccco.2023.02.001>.

Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

Laidlaw, Mark A., Gabriel Filippelli, Howard Mielke, Brian Gulson, and Andrew S. Ball.

“Lead Exposure at Firing Ranges—a Review.” *Environmental Health* 16, no. 1

(2017): 2 of 15.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-017-0246-0>.

Lawson, Katie. "Dana Prieto and Katie Lawson" season 2, episode 1, Toronto Biennial of Art Podcast, Apple Podcasts, June 28, 2022. 19 mins.

<https://toronto-biennial-of-art-podcast.simplecast.com/episodes/dana-prieto-and-katie-lawson-GFXUVyDu>

Leigh A., Lita Albuquerque, Alice Aycock, Beverly Buchanan, Agnes Denes, Maren Hassinger, Nancy Holt. *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*. Dallas, TX: Nasher Sculpture Center; New York, NY.

LeVasseur, Todd. "The Soil Is Alive: Cultivating Human Presence Towards the Ground Below Our Feet." *Open Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): [page numbers]

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2024-0010>.

Li, Yiyun. *Dear Friend, From My Life, I write to You in Your Life*. New York: Random House, Trade Paperbacks, 2018:4

Lippard, Lucy R. *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. New York, NY: New Press, 1983.

Maison de l'innovation sociale. "Accueil." Accessed February 1, 2025.

<https://mis.quebec/>.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation. "Marsh Ruins." Accessed December 1, 2025.

<https://www.tclf.org/marsh-ruins>.

"Ana Mendieta." ANA MENDIETA. Accessed May 22, 2024.

<https://www.anamendietaartist.com/>.

Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. 2nd ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

Minami, Katsuyuki. "Soil and Humanity: Culture, Civilization, Livelihood, and Health."

Soil Science and Plant Nutrition 55, no. 5 (2009): 603–15.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-0765.2009.00401.x>.

Nayssan, Jay Ezra, Eva Hayward, Maxi Wallenhorst, and McKenzie Wark.

Earthshaker. Del Vaz Projects, 2025.

Norris Jude, Bebonkwe Brown \wedge >³. “Artist’s Statement.” *toxic soil*. Performance artwork, 1998. Performed on River Street, Toronto, ON. Artists “About” accessed January 5, 2026.

<https://www.winter-brown.com/about/>

Norris Jude, Bebonkwe Brown \wedge >³. Interview by Daniela Bosco. Telephone Interview. February 01, 2025.

Norris Jude, Bebonkwe Brown \wedge >³. *toxic soil*. Video. 1998. Accessed December 18, 2024. 16:45 min.

[https://www.judeNorris/Bebonkwe Brown \$\wedge\$ >³ .com/live-art-for-video/toxic-soil/](https://www.judeNorris/Bebonkwe Brown \wedge>³ .com/live-art-for-video/toxic-soil/).

OCAD University. “About OCAD U.” Accessed January 6, 2026.

<https://admissions.ocadu.ca/discover/about-ocad-u>

Phillips, Jonathan. “Thanks for the (Soil) Memories.” University of Kentucky Department of Geography Blogs. Accessed September 1, 2025.

<https://geography.as.uky.edu/node/474413>.

Rial, Amy. “*What is the difference between soil and dirt?*” The Institute for Environmental Research and Education. 2023. Accessed November 1, 2025

<https://iere.org/what-is-the-difference-between-dirt-and-soil/>

Richter, Daniel D and Yaalon, Dan H. “*The Changing Model of Soil*”, *Revisited*, Soil Society of America Journal 76, no 3 (May 2012):78. Accessed November 19, 2025.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233755781> The Changing Model of Soil R
[evisited](#)

Rigg, Heather Canlas. "Eve Tagny by Heather Canlas Rigg." Eve Tagny Interviewed, May 1, 2023.

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2023/05/01/eve-tagny-interviewed/>.

Strott, Savannah, and Joey Lovato. "What to Make of Land Art in the Era of LandBack." *High Country News*, September 2024.

Shirazi, Sadia. "Returning to Dialectics of Isolation: The Non-Aligned Movement, Imperial Feminism, and a Third Way." *Panorama*, September 8, 2023.

<https://journalpanorama.org/article/asian-american-art/dialectics-of-isolation/>.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2017.

Stevens, A. P. "The Dirt on Soil," *Science News Explores*. Accessed 2025,

<https://www.snexplores.org/article/explainer-what-makes-dirt-different-soil>.

Somerset House. "Soil: Common Ground." *Somerset House Channel*. Podcast series, 3 episodes. Presented by Shenece Oretha. Produced by Jo Barratt and Alannah Chance. Released January 21–February 4, 2025. Accessed February 5, 2025.

<https://www.somerset-house.org.uk/channel/podcasts/soil-common-ground>

Tagny, Eve. "A Conversation with Eve Tagny." Artspace Platform. YouTube video. April 17, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEouzZQkyiU>.

Katie Lawson. "Dana Prieto and Katie Lawson" season 2, episode 1, Toronto Biennial of

Art Podcast Apple Podcasts, June 28, 2022. 19 mins.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/dana-prieto-and-katie-lawson/id1488944330?i=1000568008306>.

U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs “Learn about Indian Affairs.” Accessed June 18, 2025.

<https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/assets/bia/ots/webteam/pdf/idc1-028635.pdf#:~:text=USE%20CONSTRAINTS%20AND%20REFERENCES%3A,on%20a%20continuous%20basis%2C%20the>.

Vâlceanu, D.-G., R.-A. Kosa, and D.-G. Tămârjan. “Urban Landscape as Palimpsest.” Accessed July 7, 2024.

https://www.academia.edu/68280109/Urban_landscape_as_palimpsest.

van der Kolk, Bessel A. The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1, no 5 (January-February 1994): 253. Accessed November 11, 2025.

https://www.franweiss.com/pdfs/sensorimotor_vanderkolk_1994.pdf

Victor O. Targulian and Sergey V. Goryachkin, “Soil memory: Types of records, carriers, hierarchy and diversity,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Geológicas* 21, no. 1(2004):2

[file:///Users/danielabosco/Downloads/Dialnet-SoilMemory-821583 \(1\).pdf](file:///Users/danielabosco/Downloads/Dialnet-SoilMemory-821583%20(1).pdf)

Watts, Vanessa. “Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!).” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20–34.

<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

Weiss, Jeffrey. “The Principle of Impermanence: The Preservation of Walter De Maria’s

Earth Room.” *Artforum*, October 13, 2023.

<https://www.artforum.com/features/jeffrey-weiss-preservation-walter-de-marias-earth-room-512524/>

Young, Lisa Jaye. “LJY Beverly Buchanan.” ARTS Southeast. Accessed December.

<https://artssoutheast.org/ljy-beverly-buchanan.>

Youngbloom, J. et al. “Gentrification, Perceptions of Neighbourhood Change, and Mental Health in Montréal, Québec.” *SSM – Population Health* 22 (2023): 101406.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2023.101406.>

Yusoff, Kathryn. *Geologic life: Inhuman intimacies and the Geophysics of Race*.

Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 2024.

Zeynalov, Farman, and Victor O. Targulian. “Rhythm: Types, Hierarchy and Language

Diversity.” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 8, no. 7 (2021): 71–91.

<https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.87.10438.>

Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation

The Soil Speaks OCAD University Graduate Gallery
March 6-10, 2025.



Figure 1. Image of *toxic soil*, 1998. Norris Jude / Bebonkwe \wedge^{\triangleright} . Live artwork for video; running time 16 min 45 sec, Camera Stephen Rife, restored, digitized and distributed by Vtape.org. Projected on the south wall of the gallery. Photo L. Breau



Figure 2. Gallery view from the exhibition *The Soil Speaks*
Jude Norris / Bebonkwe ʌ>³. Norris *toxic soil*, 1998. and Dana Prieto *Footnotes for an Arsenal*, 2022, 2022. Photo L. Breau



Figure 3. Image of *Footnotes for an Arsenal*, 2022, 2022. by Dana Prieto, Terra cotta ceramic tiles and vessels, text applied on the west facing exterior gallery windows. Photo D. Bosco



Figure 4. Image of *Footnotes for an Arsenal*, 2022, by Dana Prieto, Terracotta ceramic tiles and vessels, text applied on the west facing exterior gallery windows. Photo L. Breau



Figure 5. Gallery view from the exhibition *The Soil Speaks* North facing wall of the gallery
Footnotes for an Arsenal, 2022, 2022., by Dana Prieto. *NW3 Landscape, 2022.*, Pdigital Print and jute, by Eve Tagny, *Untitled (1)*, Archival inkjet print, Eve Tagny, *Unadorned Landscapes, 2022.* Eve Tagny ,Channel video Edition of 3 2AP 10 min, 29 sec. Photo L. Breau



Figure 6. *NW3 Landscape*, 2022., Pdigital Print and jute, by Eve Tagny. Installed leaning on the floor on the north facing wall of the gallery. Photo L. Breau



Figure 7. *Untitled (1)*, Archival inkjet print, Eve Tagny, *Unadorned Landscapes*, 2022., Eve Tagny ,Channel video Edition of 3 2AP 10 min, 29 sec. Photo L. Breau

Exhibition Installation



Figure 8. Deepika. R. Bhardwaj creating the signage for *The Soil Speaks* using soil paste made from a house plant, set in the exhibition's font Helvetica. Photo D. Bosco



Figure 9. The Soil Speaks signage Positioned in a corner—across adjoining walls. Photo D. Bosco



Figure 10. Installation of the poem from *Footnotes for an Arsenal 2022, 2002*. by Dana Prieto Photo D. Bosco



Figure 11. Exterior of the Graduate Gallery Photo D. Bosco

Exhibition Opening



Figure 12. Opening reception *The Soil Speaks* March 6, 2025 Photo D. Bosco



Figure 13. Opening reception *The Soil Speaks* March 6, 2025 Photo D. Bosco

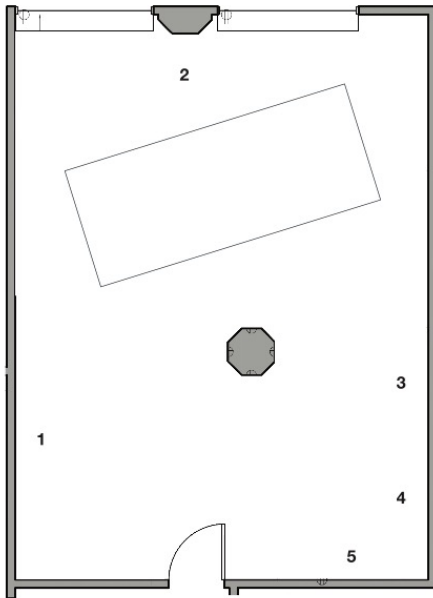
Appendix B: Exhibition Catalogue

THE SOIL SPEAKS

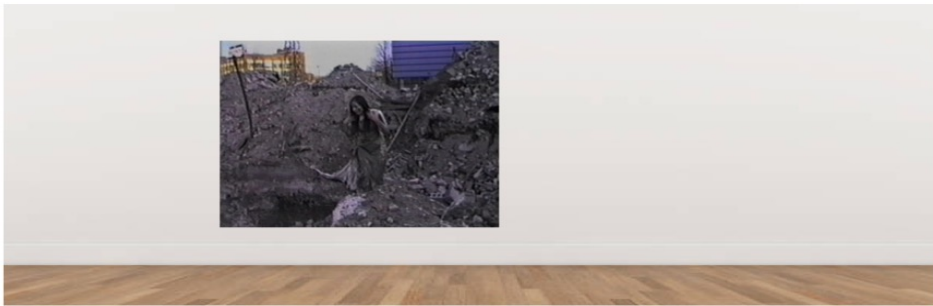
Curated by Daniela Bosco

The exhibition *The Soil Speaks* expands the notion of soil beyond the earth beneath our feet, framing it as part of the ongoing conversation about the enduring legacy of colonization. Artists Jude Norris / Bebonkwe ^{^>}, Dana Prieto, and Eve Tangy prompt us to reconsider soil not merely as a physical substance but as a living archive—one that holds the narratives of past generations and the potential for renewal. As a witness to history, soil is a repository of collective experiences shaped by time, culture, and conflict. Their work also highlights our deep, often overlooked connection to soil, positioning it as an active force, shaping our identities, lives, and the ecological systems that define our world.

More than just a material, soil is a living record—a breathing testament to the intricate and often painful histories that underpin our existence. Through their practices, the artists reflect on the act of extraction—not only of the soil itself but of the people whose lives and stories are embedded in it. Just as the condition of the soil reflects the health and vitality of the land, it also mirrors the experiences of those who inhabit it, raising urgent questions about safety and the cost borne by those who are not protected. The artworks challenge the notion that soil is inert, instead positioning it as a voice that bears witness to the ongoing impacts of colonization. By doing so, they invite viewers to reconsider their relationship with the ground beneath them—not as something passive or mundane, but as an intimate part of our shared past, present, and future.



- 1** | **Jude Norris/Bebonkwe Λ >**
toxic soil, 1998
 Live artwork for video
 Running Time 16 min 45 sec
 Camera Stephen Rife
 restored, digitized and distributed by Vtape.org
- 2** | **Dana Prieto**
Footnotes for an Arsenal 2022, 2022
 Terracotta ceramic tiles and vessels,
 fired soil, poem on window
- 3** | **Eve Tagny**
NW3 Landscape, 2022
 PDigital Print and jute
 60 (H) x 80 (W) in.,
 152.40 (H) x 203.20 (W) cm.
- 4** | **Eve Tagny**
Untitled (1), 2022
 Archival inkjet print
 40 (H) x 32 (W) x 1½ (D) in.,
 101.60 (H) x 81.30 (W) x 3.80 (D) cm.
- 5** | **Eve Tagny**
Unadorned Landscapes, 2022
 1 channel video
 Edition of 3, 2 AP
 10 min, 29 sec



Jude Norris/Bebonkwe Λ >

toxic soil, 1998

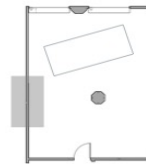
Live artwork for video

Running Time 16 min 45 sec

Camera Stephen Rife

restored, digitized and distributed by Vtape.org

1 |



Jude Norris/ Bebonkwe $\Lambda > \text{ } ^\text{3}$

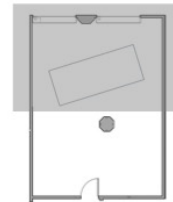


Jude Norris is a Plains Cree/Anishnawbe/Metis Nation multi-disciplinary First Nations artist. Jude is known as Bebonke Brown or Pilon $\Lambda > \text{ } ^\text{3}$ (Pih-poun), Her home territory is in and around Amiskwaciwáskahikan (Edmonton), Alberta, and she is a descendant of the Papaschase First Nation, which was disbanded as part of the colonial development of the city of Edmonton. She has been based in Brooklyn, New York, for 18 years, and has also lived for extended periods in Vancouver, Toronto, Brighton and London (UK), Poundmaker Cree Nation, Saskatchewan, and the Lower Similkameen Indian Band in Sylix territory in Central B.C.

Creating her artwork from the wahkohtowin perspective of connection and interrelation, Jude takes an empathic and prayerful approach her use of a variety of 2 and 3D media. She employs, combines and juxtaposes the unique qualities of First Nations and Western creative practices, media, and technologies to continue Indigenous embrace of oral and visual storytelling, often doing this abstractly. Her work draws from a foundation of ancient Indigenous perspective and paradigm, while pushing the boundaries of Contemporary Western new-media practices.



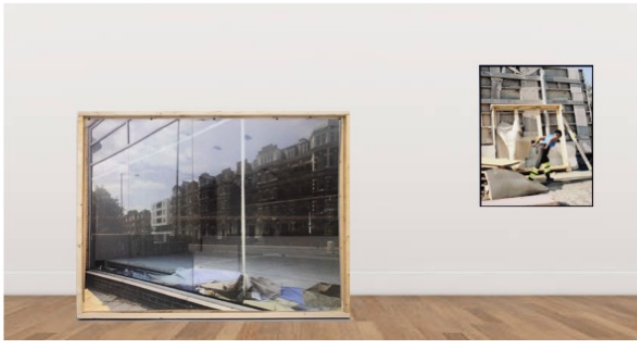
2 | **Dana Prieto**
Footnotes for an Arsenal 2022, 2022
Terracotta ceramic tiles and vessels,
fired soil, poem on window



Dana Prieto



Dana is an artist, educator, and researcher based in Toronto. Her practice examines personal and collective relations with colonial structures through a careful attention to the ground, and the different forms of living and dying within it. She studied education, architecture and ceramics in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and has a Master of Visual Studies from University of Toronto. Her work has been presented in national and international galleries, public spaces, and informal cultural venues. Dana is a research associate for Finding Flowers Project, and a project manager for the podcast Sounds Like Land. Dana is a co-founder and educator at SHEEEPschool, an experimental creative and learning space in Toronto



3

Eve Tagny

NW3 Landscape, 2022
 PDigital Print and jute
 60 (H) x 80 (W) in.,
 152.40 (H) x 203.20 (W) cm.

4

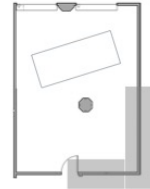
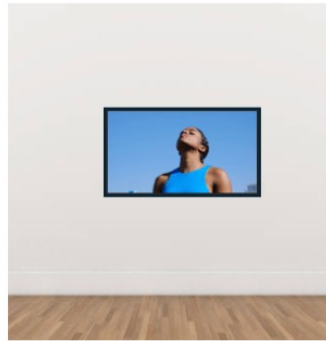
Eve Tagny

Untitled (1), 2022
 Archival inkjet print
 40 (H) x 32 (W) x 1½ (D) in.,
 101.60 (H) x 81.30 (W) x 3.80 (D) cm.

5

Eve Tagny

Unadorned Landscapes, 2022
 1 channel video
 Edition of 3, 2 AP
 10 min, 29 sec



Eve Tagny



Eve Tagny is a Tiohtia:ke/Montreal-based artist. Her practice considers gardens and landscapes as mutable sites of personal and collective memory — inscribed in dynamics of power, colonial histories and their legacies. Weaving lens-based mediums, installation, text and performance, she explores spiritual and embodied expressions of grief and resiliency in correlation with nature's rhythms, cycles and materiality. Tagny has a BFA in Film Production from Concordia University and a Certificate in Journalism from University of Montreal. Recent exhibitions include Henry Art, Seattle; MNBAQ, MAJ, Momenta and MAC, Montreal; Cooper Cole and Franz Kaka, Toronto. Recent performances include Swiss Institute, NYC; Nuit Blanche, Toronto.

Acknowledgements

In 1805, Tkaranto (Toronto) was surrendered through the Toronto Purchase (Treaty 13) with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

OCAD University is situated on the Treaty lands and territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, as well as the traditional territories of many nations, including the Haudenosaunee and the Huron-Wendat. These are the original owners and custodians of the land on which we stand. Tkaranto (Toronto) is home now to many urban Indigenous communities.

Developing a relationship with the land means also developing relationship with people. We welcome you to research and learn more about the land you are on. [Whose Land](#) and [Native Land](#) are great places to begin.



This exhibit was approached with a deep sense of responsibility toward the environment. Material choices were made carefully to contribute to the conversation about alternative ways of presenting art more sustainably. Together, we embraced the opportunity to reflect on our impact.

For Dana Prieto's work *Footnotes for an Arsenal 2022* (2022), the poem's text was applied to the window using lime powder, a material she often saw used at construction sites in Argentina. The exhibit's title signage in the gallery was handmade by Deepikah RB using nori paste and soil from a dead houseplant. The frame for the artwork *NW3 Landscape* (2022) was designed by Eve Tagny and built from recycled construction materials by Brett Paulson Design. All the printed paper used throughout the exhibit is 100% recycled paper. While these are the initiatives, we were able to execute, our commitment to sustainability is ongoing.

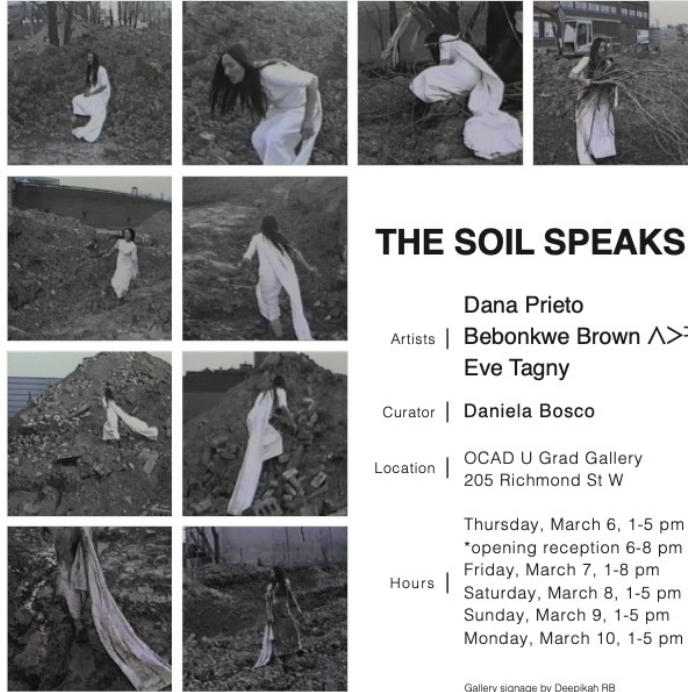
Earth is as fragile as we are.
If you hurt her, you hurt me, you hurt yourself.

To touch the Earth
is to be touched by her.

Delcy Morelos

Excerpt from Delcy Morelos, DIA Foundation

Promotional Material



THE SOIL SPEAKS

Dana Prieto

Artists | Bebonkwe Brown ^>>

Eve Tagny

Curator | Daniela Bosco

Location | OCAD U Grad Gallery
205 Richmond St W

Hours | Thursday, March 6, 1-5 pm
*opening reception 6-8 pm
Friday, March 7, 1-8 pm
Saturday, March 8, 1-5 pm
Sunday, March 9, 1-5 pm
Monday, March 10, 1-5 pm

Gallery signage by Deepikah RB