
Soil Within Us: An Autopedology of Migrant Family History and Mourning through the Medium of Soil

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Abstract

Drawing on personal experiences, ethnographic observations, novels, videos on social networking sites, a poem, and a family diary, this essay explores the mourning of deaths in one's family history and in the migrant community against the backdrop of political events, including the Russia-Ukraine war, and geological occurrences. Paying attention to how soil manifests itself in these events, the author investigates the potential of soil to serve as a medium for experiencing and coming to terms with the world. The study proposes a genre of autopedology in which the ethnographer writes about events through soil and undergoes the process of formation together with the soil. The essay travels a road of six signposts, from the embodied to the ontological, then to the destructive, to the decomposing, to the consumable and consuming, and finally to the mourning soil. It is shown that the soil within us offers the means to express and stand up against unjust deaths. The study is complemented by photography as a means of visualisation of the process of mourning with soil.

Key words

Ethnographic assemblage; migration; soil; death; grieving; resistance.

Introduction

As a migrant anthropologist from the Soviet Union, raised in Russia and educated in Japan, I have been involved in researching the practice of grave care among local migrants. By participating in the cleaning of migrant graves and working with soil, I found a way to mourn my country's past and present and the ancestors I never met. This essay delves into that process and opens up possibilities for situating soil as a powerful actor in the making of who we are.

This essay is about soil—chilly and sweet-smelling, ripe and black, greasy and comforting, warm and inviting, dry and sandy, wrinkled and tired, cracked and scarred, polluted and hazardous, windblown and shallowed, repellent and deadly soil. It is about physical soil and

soil as an embodied metaphor. It is also about humans and soil or, more precisely, humans *with* soil. It is about how humans interact with soil and ‘think with it’ (Salazar et al., 2020). This piece of writing seeks to bring to light various affective dimensions of soil and to inquire about their shaping of the corporeal, existential, and ontological being of human beings. It explores how soil can be a medium for uncovering the ways in which human beings, as earthly and *earthy* creatures, experience the world. As Jacques M. Henry and F. Daniel Cring commented, ‘gravity binds us to the ground’ (2013, p. 179). This essay aims at a grounded perspective to *dig out* new and intimate ways of experiencing the world through soil.

Daniel D. Richter calls for a shift in human positioning in pedology from someone who disturbs the soil to someone who forms it. According to Richter, soil is a ‘function of the large-scale factors of climate, organisms (biota), relief, parent material, and time’ (2019, p. 1–2). Along the same lines, this essay responds to the call by Anna Krzywoszynska to situate soil as ‘an object of inquiry beyond the natural sciences,’ formed ‘within’ the practices of human interaction with it (2019, p. 2–3). It also echoes Manuel Tironi et al.’s (2020) insistence on overcoming the ‘separation between soil and the lived experience of social life’ (p. 18). By imagining soil as containing agentic potencies of both life and death (Lyons, 2016), I illustrate how soil is a lived and living force of the world experienced *through one’s gut*. As such, soil is simultaneously an acting subject, a medium for experiencing the world, an object of inquiry, and a tool for understanding how contemporary humans engage the world cosmologically.

The structure of the essay is inspired by Marylin Strathern’s (2018) ‘signposts,’ a term that implies a rhetorical-structural delimiter to integrate heterogeneous anthropological material. Disparate pieces of data are assembled and considered in relation to one another. The data include field observations and autoethnographic ponderings by this essay’s author. Since soil as an alive and lively element (Krzywoszynska, 2019) is central to this work, the essay evokes a certain degree of multispecies hybridity. Following Travis Brisini’s work on the art of crafting multispecies autoethnographies, I incorporate into my essay ‘multitextuality, bricolage, the compilation of texts, and ... interdisciplinary citationality’ (Brisini, 2023, p. 20). Among the data are passages from an autobiographic novel by Soviet-Russian writer Alexander Chudakov, a literary account based on oral history by Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, video conversations publicised through social media, an anonymous poem, and my great-grandmother’s diary. The study is complemented by photography as a means of visualising the process of mourning *with* soil. After a discussion with the author, the photographs were taken by a Russian-speaking migrant photographer in Japan at an immigrant cemetery. The photographer was interviewed after the photo session to probe the commonality of the understandings presented in this essay. I first offer a glimpse into how this assemblage came to be and highlight the autoethnographic dimension of this essay.

As part of my anthropological research, I have been following for several years the activities of Russian-speaking migrants in Japan that are organised around the cleaning of graves (Golovina, 2020). Since this practice involves a considerable amount of interaction with soil (as well as plants and insects), the issue of soil stayed with me. I found myself paying more attention to the soil beneath my feet, noticing its texture and smell and feeling compelled to touch it. Stories told by my friends about their composting initiatives in Japan’s urban areas seemed alluring. When I visited the National Museum of Nature and Science in Ueno, I stood mesmerised in front of the displays of multicoloured soil layers from different parts of Japan. These were the affective encounters (Stewart, 2007), the tangible sensations of which latched

onto something inside me that I was unable to verbalise at the time. Henry and Cring (2013, p. 181) state: ‘To enter the body, soil must go through the human hand and thought,’ —and it was this process of going through my body and mind that the soil underwent to become part of me.

In parallel with my research in anthropology and my focused readings, I was reading works of fiction to understand the context around Russian-speaking migration from a historical perspective. During this time, an intersection of the political and the personal inevitably occurred (Docot, 2019). This brought me to a point where, as I considered the themes of the twentieth-century history of my homeland, my family history ceased to be ‘history’ in the sense of an objectified event and became—even more than when I had heard the stories directly from my family elders—a subjective experience.

The medium that played a role in this transformation was soil. For me, soil was a new element that was positioned outside my body but somehow also inside it. My engagement with and imaginings of soil made it sink into me that the ‘history’ of the twentieth century had mercilessly wiped out five men and a male child from three generations in my kin through political repressions and wars (the author’s great-grandmother’s handwritten diary, 1993; hereinafter ‘GGHD, 1993’). I realised that although some of these men have been rehabilitated posthumously, their murders and deaths entail incommensurability that calls for a larger-than-life way of taking responsibility for the historical injustices. Through my readings, I found myself mourning my family’s long-dead members and *kinning*¹ with them through mourning. Is the grave of four-year-old Stasik, who died from starvation and a contagious disease following evacuation during World War II (GGHD, 1993), still intact? It was located some 1350 km away from my place of birth and 7190 km from where I now live.

I also thought about migration. Labelled ‘a wife of an enemy of the state,’ my great-grandmother had hidden in the caves (soil again!) in Central Asia (GGHD, 1993). In what way does that label contrast with the current practice of designating individuals and entities as *inoagent* or ‘foreign agents’ in Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2022)? How would my great-grandmother’s experience differ from that of migrants who have recently fled Russia, for political reasons, in countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan? Will they be safe in the face of state violence?

Parallel with my research project on graves among the Russian-speaking community in Japan, I was thinking about death and burial in migration across the globe and about the modes of *kinning* with bygone and contemporary migrants. The label ‘foreign agent’ removes a person from a system of imagined national kinship and prompts their absorption into the *kinning* practice of mourning migrants.

As I was thinking and reading, my mind captured a multitude of soil-related pieces. It kept them solidly in memory, combining them into an assemblage of affects, bodily sensations, and unverballed realisations. Methodologically, I was in a state of being *disponible* to everything related to soil. The term refers to a ‘state of attentiveness in which the seekers should remain in order to be ready when events, objects, or people come to them’ (Meulemans et al., 2017, pp. 31–32). I only later understood that my participant observation-based experience of cleaning migrant graves in Japan had, for me, come to be associated with the process of

¹ In this essay, the term ‘*kinning*’ is used to refer to the creative and materially rooted process of making kinship with humans and nonhumans, living and dead, and across space and time.

mourning my own country's past and present and the ancestors I had failed to meet. If the child Stasik had lived, he would have grown up to become my great-granduncle. As a mother, I now think—with inexpressible dread—of how it must be to lose one's child.

The medium of soil performed its deed of firmly encrusting these affects into me. Yet, I still experienced an unease regarding writing about these memories, fearing what Dada Docot explained as 'how self-regarding, or even vainglorious, autoethnographic works can appear' (Dacot, 2019, p. 778). However, when, on February 24, 2022, Russia's government waged a military offensive on Ukraine, it all fell into place. I realised that by having let myself fall into a sort of distorted 'warped mourning' (Etkind, 2013), I was complicit in the act of concealing the state's historical violence. It was time to recognise the dead, translating my mourning into an act of resistance (Etkind, 2013).

As I have become enmeshed in soil through these academic, self-reflexive, literary, and mnemonic moorings, I have found myself unable to disengage from it. This essay is an attempt to excavate the soil from within myself, while also presenting an account of how soil can be a potent medium for making sense of the world.

Autoethnography becomes autopedology

Autoethnography is defined as a methodology in which social life is approached through the lens of the author's voice, 'demonstrat[ing] the epistemic potential of personal experience' (Adams & Herrmann, 2023, p. 2). Conceptualizing autoethnography, Docot (2019) introduced the concept of 'furtherings,' which are 'self-reflexive explorations that surround or are embedded in the object of study itself ... and that flesh out aspects not immediately visible' (p. 776).



Autoethnography also gives way to a self-reflective *excavating* view that is not necessarily possible when looking at things through the eyes of others. The therapeutic and reconciliatory effect of autoethnographic writing has also been noted (Ellis et al., 2011; Jangbar, 2023). In view of the potential to overcome an anthropocentric agenda, there enters a new genre of multispecies autoethnography that focuses on the 'vibrant borderlands between humans and nonhumans' (Brisini, 2023, p. 12). I attempt to further erase such borders and imagine humans as soil, and vice versa, producing an ecological mode of thought in which one experiences what soil feels. In this essay, such 'furthering' is akin to *digging* (Fig. 1). It could be productive when conceived of as not merely autoethnography but rather autopedology.

Fig. 1: Digging into the soil. Photo by Olga Shibazaki.

The word ‘autopedology’ appeared only once as I conducted a web search. It was part of Aimee Harrison’s (2014) thesis on creative writing and poetics. Harrison’s dissertation contains many words that start with ‘auto,’ and the 278-word chapter titled ‘Autopedology’ describes Harrison’s reading of the literary works of British author Jeanette Winterson. In the chapter, the only marker directly related to pedologic processes is the mention of a ‘body victimised or decomposing’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 72). Harrison uses this reference as a negation, pointing out that Winterson’s views on passion are not that kind of body ‘but a lyric’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 72). She goes on to note that reading Winterson ‘first made [her] want to tell stories’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 71). Since pedology is broadly the study of soil formation, perhaps Harrison uses ‘autopedology’ to allude to her own formation as part of the earth, where the desire to experience passion—which is at once embodied and ephemeral—and to tell stories are understood as part of a formative process for human beings.

Building on these poetic usages of the term, this essay’s autoethnography-turned-autopedology is a way to imagine oneself as containing soil within. The same methodology enables uncovering the encounters that this imagining can prompt.

Soil and body. Signpost 1.

The novel-idyll *Gloom Descends Upon the Old Steps* (2018[2000]) describes an intimate family history in twentieth-century Russia against the backdrop of devastating historical events. The protagonist, Anton—whose character is based on the novel’s author, Alexander Chudakov—delves into the experience of pit-digging (translation from Russian mine):

There was another duty he had for many years: ... Anton dug a big pit every year. Never did he enjoy reading or writing a paper as much as he did digging a profound pit. At the museum, he would immediately, while everyone was still hanging around, smoking, sitting on the porch, take a shovel and start. Dig! And while someone was lazily raking garbage, someone was burning dry leaves; he was digging into the ground. And soon, he was waist-deep in the hole, and by lunchtime, only his head was sticking out of it. ... He who knows how to dig properly does not need to take off his shirt. ...

A pit is science. The hardest part is the first hole. Then, you have to make a narrow hollow—however shallow—along the whole width of the pit. No shallower than two-thirds of a blade. By any means, by any effort. Even if you have to unprofessionally scrape the ground. But then you start to cut the earth, and it falls off easily, and the hard soil is no longer a punishment but a joy, it is not crumbling but slices into wet slices, akin to round bread, that sit on the shovel, and you throw them out at once rather than picking up earth a handful at a time. With each penetration, the shovel goes lighter, goes deeper—now down to a full blade. You do not rest, so you do not interrupt your enjoyment. You do not stop—you can work for hours in this rhythm: push—intercept—throw—push (pp. 147–148).

The passage recounts how, with proper bodily technique, a strenuous labour of digging is transformed into enjoyment, with the soil responding plastically to the movements of the digger and his tool. The initial effort is replaced by effortlessness; the hardness is recast into malleability. The process is seamless. It absorbs the digger into an affective state of pleasurable

flow. Interrupting this flow appears to be impermissible. The body, the shovel, and the soil are interconnected through an exchange of decentralised agency. It becomes impossible to say which of these actors' forces are responsible for each of the initiations, continuances, and transformations of the motion.

As Tim Ingold describes in his discussion on the anthropology of skill, the observed process is of the 'total field of relations constituted by the presence of the organism-person, indissolubly body and mind, in richly structured environment' (2001, p. 21). Each single motion does not repeat itself but requires interminable fine-tuning and coordination for the process to continue (Ingold, 2001). Because of the unevenness of the soil, from topsoil to subsoil and finally rock—and these layers' further asymmetries, given the history-contingent constituents of that particular soil—the way the soil responds to the digger varies in each instance. The organic nature of wild soil makes the tuning process less predictable than when a craftsman engages with a unitary mass of processed clay or yarn.

As much as digging has to do with other forms of skill in terms of bodily engagement and intentionality (Ingold, 2001), it also holds the potential for intensification because digging augments the living life-form of soil. Soil is as much external to a human being as it is—unlike glass or cotton—internal. It is soil that, through agriculture, feeds a living body and absorbs into itself a dead (but as Strathern (2018) reminds us, resonating) body. This absorption, in turn, extends the body of soil by producing new soils. As Germain Meulemans et al. (2017) have it, 'Soils are primarily *pedogenesis*: processes of soil formation to enfold other movements of the environments such as the decay of organisms, the passage of seasons, the climate, or indeed the modes of dwelling of humans that inhabit the surface' (p. 26) (emphasis in the original). To engage with soil externally is to engage with one's mind-body internally. It is to dig into oneself, into one's own experiences and potentialities of life and death.

Chudakov's reader soon learns that the skill of pit-digging and handling of soil recounted by the protagonist was passed to him by someone who had mastered the skill as a forced labourer in the digging of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, which opened in 1933. In this agentic assemblage, there enters a key operator (Bennett, 2010), the state. 'A total field of relation' (Ingold, 2001, p. 21) is now that of a state-guard-labourer-shovel-soil. The soil and bodies are coopted for the benefit of the overreaching state. As the labourers' bodies infuse with their substances the soil upon which they labour—or disintegrate into soil buried beside the canal in burial pits, if dying en route—the material boundary between soil and bodies disappears.

Engaged in pit-digging as a young adult employed by a museum somewhere in the 1960s, Anton cherished this embodied skill of taming the soil. Although his description is that of the unification of body and soil and of the accompanying pleasure and ease, the trope of state-ordered forcedness still foreshadows this endeavour. Because digging is akin to memory (Etkind, 2013), the protagonist's skill holds onto the affective memories of forced labour in the former Soviet Union. Did any of my own dead ancestors dig in the labour camps? One thing I know—they did not come back.

The life of Chudakov, the novel's author, ended tragically in 2005. The 67-year-old writer was attacked in front of his apartment building and hit on the back of the head with something heavy. Chudakov made it to the stairwell of his building, where he lost consciousness, and later

died in hospital. The attacker was never found.² His untimely death seems to have multiplied the number of so many phantasmagoric deaths of his characters, attributed to the violence of the former Soviet Union and the socio-infrastructureal degradation. The warpedness of mourning (Etkind, 2013) surrounding the tragedy can be sensed in how many sources summarise the cause as ‘a severe head injury suffered under *unclear* circumstances’ (BBC News Russian, 2011, n.p.) (emphasis mine). In light of these events, the title of Chudakov’s novel—*Gloom Descends Upon the Old Steps*—reads autoprophetically. The stairs, the steps on which the writer lost consciousness, and which are as much a part of the geological world as they are of the urban landscape, must be walked upon repeatedly, albeit in the imagination, to clear out ambiguity and call a murder a murder and allow for the realness of nationwide grieving.

Ontological soil. Signpost 2.

Some two decades after the events described by Alexander Chudakov, a different kind of interaction with soil happened. My close family member worked as a liquidator at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, as did some of the relatives of my migrant informants (Golovina, 2023), and so the following excerpt stood out piercingly upon my reading of *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2019[1997]) by Svetlana Alexievich (translation from Russian mine):

As for us, we buried the soil... We would cut it off and roll it up into large sheets... I’ve warned you. There is nothing heroic about it... ..

We buried the forest. Sawed off trees by a meter and a half, wrapped them in cellophane, and piled them in the landfill. At night, I could not sleep. I’d close my eyes: something black was moving, turning... Like a living thing. Living layers of soil... With bugs, spiders, and worms... (pp. 53–54).

Similar episodes were recounted by many people appearing in the novel by Alexievich. They surfaced along with the emotion of terror at having to engage in the macabre activity of doing something so counterintuitive to the life-form of soil: to roll it up and bury it away. The emotion was intense in its incommensurability. Something similar can appear in dreams when the dreaming person finds they can walk only backwards or when all uttered words appear in the reverse order. It is a distortion of enormous proportion, an ontological rupture, the end of the world for those involved.

In one of his lectures, arguing about how industrialisation and the accompanying preoccupation with resource extraction have changed how people engage with soil, Ingold (2020) (emphasis mine) said the following:

Now, of course, it is *not literally possible to roll up* the ground like a sheet of parchment. You only ever see it rolled up in garden centres. ... But normally, *it is not possible to roll up* the ground as if it were a sheet of paper or parchment. But it is *possible to turn the ground* when you consider, for example, the medieval plowman who would turn the ground with every seasonal turn in the agricultural calendar in April for spring crops, in June for the late summer harvest, and in October for winter wheat and rye. The purpose of plowing was

² Personal communication with Chudakov’s publisher (April 18-19, 2023).

both to prepare the earth for future planning by breaking up the surface residues of the previous crop and to bring up nutrient-rich soil from deeper down. And thanks to this *continual turnover*, the ground would continue to yield year after year following a cycle of rotation, fertility borne of the past (11:05).

Against this impossibility, what was experienced by the Chernobyl witnesses was exactly the need to *roll up* and bury away the soil. These acts could be conceived as a form of the ‘agriculture of death’ (Lyons, 2016, p. 66)³. Many locals who participated in the liquidation effort had been engaged in agriculture before the disaster and had relations of mutuality established with soil. For non-commercial farmers, such relations would incur the conditions of ‘*turn[ing] the insides of soils out, allowing for the aeration ...—digestion, defecation, and decomposition—to proliferate*’ (Lyons, 2016, p. 71) (emphasis in the original). Structurally, the action of *rolling up* and burying away the soil means breaking the cycles of rotation and fertility, of life and rest, and infusing the process with eschatological underpinnings. The soil’s potential to form and mimic human processes of recreation and reproduction was shattered, as were the livelihoods of people who liquidated Chernobyl’s earth. It was the devastation of ways of meaningful engagement with familiar materialities that defined the immediate experience of that region’s dwellers.

My relative survived and was granted a disability card. He now spends his days digging in the soil, gardening for his own sustenance, and raising chickens. His raspberries are particularly tasty, enjoyed by local children and neighbourhood dogs alike. These activities foreground the ability of gardening to fulfil one’s ‘future-oriented needs—allowing people to feel control over some part of their environment and destiny’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2010, p. 502). There, in Chernobyl, my relative made a deal with the soil—and he has continued digging in the soil to accomplish his part of the deal.

Destructive soil. Signpost 3.

In June 2021, after four days of torrential rain, a catastrophic mudslide occurred in Atami City, Japan, running two kilometres to the sea and destroying over 130 houses along the way (Yanagawa et al., 2022). Atami is a resort town, famous for its beaches and hot springs. Some Russian-speaking migrants have *dacha*⁴ homes in the area and visit frequently. I spent many a day exploring Atami’s landscapes.

The moment of disaster—the fast descent of dark, muddy mass—was captured from various angles by survivors and posted on social media. It was raining heavily, and the sky was gloomy. The debris-laden mudslide ruthlessly painted the surrounding area a brownish shade of black, erasing man-made infrastructure along the way and connecting the earth to the sky with a deadly touch of liquid mud. In the pandemic air of 2021, where face masks and anxiety had already constricted people’s breathing, it now became impossible to catch even the slightest breath.

A woman’s voice calls in one of the widely distributed social media videos, seconds before the mudslide appears in front of her eyes: ‘Eh, it’s scary. It’s all right, isn’t it? Is it okay? This can’t

³ Kristina Lyon’s use of the term is based on that of her colleague Heraldo Vallejo. The term is used to describe the extractive practices that occur when farmers begin to see themselves as external to, rather than integral to, local ecologies (Lyons, 2016, p. 66).

⁴ A summer house often used for recreation and gardening.

be true!’ (The Asahi Shinbun Company, 2021, 0:01). As the mudflow descends from behind a red building within her field of vision, the woman attempts to self-soothe—the unfolding events cannot be happening.

At its source in the upper part of a mountain, the mudslide left a profound hollow. Its footage, taken from above, was repeatedly shown on television, becoming one of the most recognisable images of the catastrophic event. Twenty-eight human lives were lost, and the last victim required nearly two years for her bones to be located. Finally, as the Japanese language has it, she ‘returned back to the family’ (Uozumi et al., 2023, n.p.), hopefully alleviating their protracted state of ‘ambiguous mourning’ (Mirto et al., 2020) (Fig. 2).



The event was attributed to ongoing rains and the complex geological structure, which was in turn impacted by manmade fill mounds placed at geologically hazardous junctures, such as between the longitudinal sections and upper surface of volcanic rocks (Kimura, 2021). Journalistic investigations later revealed that the city administration had been at least partially aware of the danger of the mounds’ location and had regularly visited the site for photographs (TBS News Dig, 2022). These actions by the administration served to demonstrate that the event had been anticipated. Simultaneously, however, perhaps because of optimism bias (Rittichainuwat et al., 2018), the administration had tried to convince itself to the contrary, reassured by the peacefulness of the site upon the taking of photos.

Fig. 2: *Ambiguous mourning*. Photo by Olga Shibazaki.

A hollow space near the ‘safety measure’ lines had been left unfilled in the handwritten application by the initial landowner and an applicant to the municipality for the placement of fill mounds (TBS News Dig, 2022). This space became the metaphorical foreshadowing of the hollow space left behind by the mudslide. The hollowness of the post-slide void, as if epitomizing the wasting and emptying out of lives and livelihoods, struck in its nullifying omnipotence no less than the unruly stream of mud that characterised the unfolding of the event. To borrow from Anne Allison in her ethnography of *Precarious Japan*, published after the 2011 tsunami and earthquake, ‘[t]his crisis oozed mud that literalised a muddiness that existed already’ (Allison, 2013, p. 7).

Following the publicization of the news regarding the maintenance of the fill mounds, the disaster, which had originally been viewed as a geological misfortune, began to be reformulated as a man-made catastrophe. The bereaved families initiated a lawsuit against the local administration (The Japan Times, 2022).

The soil at the top of the mountain, if left undisturbed by humans, would have been doing what it has been doing for millions of years: eroding, shifting, sliding, and relocating itself, influenced by underground rocks, ground waters, plants, winds, and rains. The contribution of the man-made mounds to the event is indicated by the fact that the mounds were built without regard to the laws of geology and the implementation of safety measures. The multitude of trajectories of the butterfly effect within this network of human and nonhuman actors is still to be fully grasped (Latour, 2005). In this network, stretched across space and time, actions were done, not done, or undone; words were said, hesitated on, or silenced; intentions were manifested, slowed, or concealed. Nearly two years later, the investigation is still active; the hollow, while equally deep, has been covered by new layers of dust, fallen leaves, insect carcasses, and fresh grass.

The devastating effects of soil, conceived as an actant embedded in the politics and power relations pertaining to governance, bureaucracy, land ownership, real estate and tourism development, and construction, on humans, lead to what Giorgia Mirto et al. (2020, p. 111) identified as the process of mourning in multiplicity. These effects simultaneously flesh out the precariousness and powerlessness of people (Allison, 2013) in the face of state-mediated multi-actor entanglements.

Broadcasted on television in Japan and shared through social networking services, the hollow that remains on top of the mountain cradles the memory of lost lives, inviting a state of profound mourning by people across the country.

Soil as decomposer. Signpost 4.

I continue with a recent occurrence—a Ukrainian woman who, in February 2022, told occupying Russian soldiers to put raw sunflower seeds in their pockets. ‘Like this,’ she says, ‘there will at least be some use of you; the sunflowers would grow after you die on our soil’ (Oboz TV, 2022, 0:00). The video was recorded and disseminated on social media. It has since become a powerful affective trope and an internet meme. Just over a minute long, the exchange contains references to many botanic and pedologic markers linked to the Ukrainian national identity. They are sunflower seeds, sunflowers, fertile soil, and sun. The woman speaks in ecological categories of fertilizing and recycling. The invitation to die on Ukrainian soil enacts the process of life-death cyclicality; bodies ought not to be wasted. The energy of decomposition ought to serve the soil; it is to become the force for new growth (Strathern, 2018).

Reflecting on the episode in *The Philosophical Salon* journal just two days after the encounter, philosopher Michael Marder noted that by being ‘willing to admit [the soldiers] into the more-than-human community of a local ecosystem,’ the Ukrainian woman offered them the chance of ‘vegetal redemption’ (2022, n.p.). Marder also observed the spatiotemporal directionality of the woman’s address as that of futurity: the future land is imagined as covered by blossoming sunflowers. Interestingly, and perhaps unbeknown to the people involved in the encounter, sunflowers can accumulate a toxic pollutant, cadmium (Meulemans et al., 2017, p. 33). Cadmium is widely used in military machinery and weaponry. Sunflowers can thus also serve as cleaners of soil contaminated by warfare.

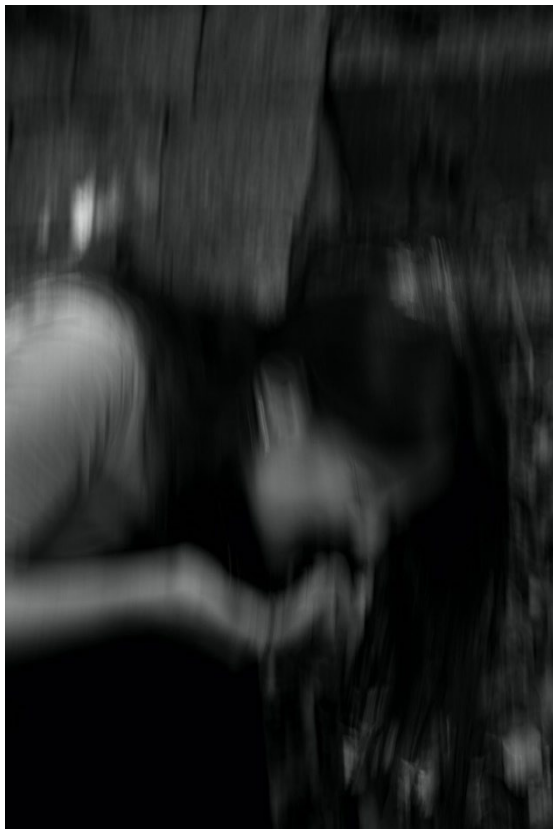
The man who taught me to harvest sunflowers was my late maternal great-uncle, a towering figure in my childhood memories, affectionately known as Uncle Vanya. He was a tall man with unruly hair who always wore a long white shirt. I recall the image of him standing among

fields of sunflowers, their stalks twice as high as my small frame. We were in a southern village, just over 150 km from the Ukrainian border. Will I ever see those fields again?

Consumable and consuming soil. Signpost 5.

This section deals with a type of geophagy in which an individual consumes soil, driven by a strong urge. Unlike pica, which has been documented, for example, in pregnancy (Placek, 2017), this is not a physiological craving that persists over a specific period and can be at least partially explained in terms of nutrition and immunity. The geophagy described below may be connected to forms of earth-eating that occur in times of ‘cultural change’ (Woywodt & Kiss, 2002, p. 146) as evidenced by soil consumption among enslaved and immigrant populations (Woywodt & Kiss, 2002; Henry & Cring, 2013). This urge may tend to occur during intense situations, such as dealing with a catastrophic event or mourning a loved one at their grave (Fig. 3). According to Gerald Callahan (2003, p. 1016):

Other than water, what little stuff we humans have inside us is largely dirt. Admittedly, this dirt is sometimes highly processed before we receive it, but most solids that make up humans and other creatures either are now or recently were dirt ... transformed by sunlight into plants and animals.



If that is true, be it soil, a plant, an animal (including a human in an act of anthropophagy), essentially, what humans consume is dirt—or soil. However, when consumed in its original form, especially outside of a nutritional context, soil that is eaten speaks to the desire to convey an emotion so great that all other forms of expression fail. In some historical circumstances, such as the consumption of soil by slaves on plantations, it may have led to death (Anell & Lagercrantz, 1958, cited in Woywodt & Kiss, 2002). Hence, an aspect of self-annihilation cannot be ruled out. A case from the psychiatric field showed that geophagic behaviour can develop as a bereavement response to an intensely traumatic event (Atay, 2014). Since soil is considered a ‘planetary boundary’ (Salazar et al., 2020, p. 3), the desire to consume it is, in terms of structuralism, a desire to cross one’s own boundary and induce action within.

Fig. 3: *Eating the soil.* Photo by Olga Shibazaki.

In an anonymous poem by a migrant from Russia, which circulated privately after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, there surfaces a trope of eating soil (translation from Russian mine):

Crawl to the Ukrainian border
On your stomach,
And preferably so that from each wound
Snagged by a twig,
Shattered by stones
Oozes blood.
As you crawl up to it,
Eat some black earth,
And better that this black earth
Enters your whitish eye sockets
And fills your ears and mouth.
Dig into the earth so that your fingernails stretch into the roots,
And sweat and blood turn into the sap of the trees,
Watch with your inner eye a ray in the 'fly-all-you-want' sky
While wriggling in the wordless despair.
And even this way, after giving yourself to the particle,
The sin will not be washed away
Committed by the capital of the land,
Given to a panzootic beast for over a century.

The trope of eating soil offers a way to reconcile the emotions of terror and shame in the person mourning the war deaths and urban devastation. Along with guilt, fear, contempt, and anger, shame has been reported among anti-war Russians outside of Russia (Mukhina, 2023). Readers are instructed by the poet to 'eat some black earth' as they crawl to the border of a self-defending state. The black earth (*chernozyom*) is linked to the idea of the Ukrainian soil's fertility (Dokuchaev, 1892). Soil-eating in the poem progresses to the filling of various body parts with soil and an ultimate unity of the body and soil through the decomposition of the former into the latter. It is a two-way encounter of eating soil and being eaten by it.

What might the invitation to eat soil further signify in this context? Despite the extraordinary nature of the craving, it may be related to the themes identified earlier in the literature on mortuary anthropophagy. It offers a hint about establishing the link between death and ingestion. Discussing mortuary anthropophagy among the Wari' people of the Amazon, Conklin emphasised 'the idea of the human body as a locus of physically constituted social relationships and identity, and ideas about human-nonhuman reciprocity' (1995, p.76). He stated that the consumption of the dead body presents an 'amalgam of myth, eschatology, ideas about the human body, and social, psychological, and ecological concerns' (Conklin, 1995, p. 94). Rather than being related to the dietary needs of the eaters, mortuary anthropophagy is about paying the highest possible form of respect to the dead. It also provides a way to

reconstitute and reorder relations at the level of humans as well as the animal world and cosmos (Conklin, 1995).

Far from being a representative of Amazonian culture, the poet experiences such a strong desire for the reconstitution of events and relationships that they cannot imagine anything else but eating the soil. Moreover, the poet does not stop at eating the soil but strives for a complete reversion of events. Consequently, by being absorbed by soil through the world-facing openings of ears and mouths, and by feeding the soil with the substances of sweat and blood, the poet sacrifices themselves in the hope of atonement and rectification. This is done in the face of the ongoing trauma and death of war, which renders the actions in the poem a mortuary rite.

Jane Bennett gives us another point to ponder on this subject. Introducing a ‘case of worms as vibrant material actants’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 98), she draws on Charles Darwin’s description of worms’ ability to make vegetable mold through digesting the soil. The eating of soil—we are reminded—is not just an act in itself but has a far-reaching regenerative aim. It has the potential to invite regeneration, reconstitution, reordering, and reversion. Reading the poem over and over, I cannot not help but desire to follow the poet’s lead—to eat the soil.

Connecting and mourning soil. Final signpost.

Finally, I arrive at my field site, a large immigrant cemetery near Tokyo that is firmly interlaced by climbing trees and plants, with crisscrossed branches above the paths, graves, and statues. I sit there alone, reminiscing about the migrant grave-caring gatherings that were placed partly on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic. I recollect how the participants laboured around the graves, handling tools, with their nails brownish from soil and grass, while being attacked by thirsty mosquitos. The scenery now evokes the scene then: here these people are, in front of me, tending to the graves. I remember that several years ago, I could still write that there had not been many deaths in the migrant community, and the ones that did occur were not necessarily visible to the community because the migrants were often buried by their Japanese family members (Golovina, 2020). I also remember Vika and Alexey, bygone friends I knew privately. Then I recall Natasha’s son and Gabi, people whose deaths I recently learned about in the community. They are now resting in the Japanese soil. I still have Vika’s music scores, which she gave me when I last visited her home; we wanted to sing something together. Migrant community members do not know where she was buried. When her closest friends reached out to the surviving family, the family chose to not share that information.

Just recently, the Russian speakers in southern-central Japan gathered to visit Alexey’s grave and to pay tributes. It was Alexey who taught me the name of an unusual plant I found at a graveyard during fieldwork: *mube* (six-leaved stauntonia). I remember Alexey every time I see this evergreen vine. Should I not have asked him about anything related to the graveyard biota? Alexey was also the one who immediately identified—from my clumsy description of an unusual inhabitant of muddy puddles that had fascinated me as a child—the name of *Triops cancriformis* (tadpole shrimp), and he went on to tell a story about how old this ancient-looking species is.

I want to lie down on one of the century-old graves in this old cemetery to pay tribute to my dear friends, to tell them I miss them. I will also tell them that things are not going very well. There is a war raging in Europe, my home country is on the side of the invader, and there have

been moments when the Russian-speaking migrants in Japan could barely hold themselves together out of shame and fear (Mukhina, 2023).

What will the next local grave-cleaning event be like? Will it still be about kinning with the previous generation of migrants? Will it be about envisioning one's own death in Japan and—through placing a symbolic stake on current graves—one's future grave being similarly taken care of by future migrants (Golovina, 2020)? Or will grave-tending also be about mourning the ones who have recently left the community, even if their resting places are kept away from the migrants by their Japanese family members or they are buried in faraway locations? Will it be about mourning their deceased family members and ancestors in the home country, from whose graves the Russian-speaking migrants are now separated, not only by the physical borders but also by the difficulties of actually reaching their homeland due to international sanctions and the fear of political persecution (Golovina, 2023)? Will it also be about mourning the victims of the ongoing war? (Fig. 4) As Olga and I walked through the cemetery during our later photo shoot, she kept reading the birth and death dates of the 19th- and 20th-century migrants buried there. 'Look how young he was! Imagine, the youth of the current war on both sides are the same, leaving life much too soon.' We thought the same thing.



Fig. 4: Mourning with soil. Photo by Olga Shibazaki.

Concluding remarks

I am still at the cemetery, and the draft of this essay is in the pocket of my vest. I open its fourfold pages. Among the grave-cleaning tools, I have a small shovel. When my gaze falls on the page about Anton-the-digger, I first try to dig a little into the earth under my feet. The shovel immediately encounters a dense layer of roots. The wet, sweet smell enters my nostrils. My shovel has broken the trunk of a fragile plant, and it is oozing sap. I stop digging for a moment. The soil is still tame. I could put some of it in my pocket and take it home to scatter among the few solitary plants I grow, to give it a new life of its own.

Then I think about what it would be like to do something counterintuitive, like dig up the soil and put it in plastic bags to hide from one's sight. How would it be there, inside the deadly

packaging? I try to imagine what would happen to the soil if it were piled up on top of a hill, which would disrupt its natural drainage; would it not want to slide down? Or perhaps it would be the soil underneath that would want to free itself from the piled burden and breathe again.

As I sit in the cemetery, I find myself picking up a tiny bit of soil and putting it in my mouth. It is not enough to swallow but only to fill my mouth with the mystical taste of life and death. I feel closer now to those who are gone. I feel liberated to talk about them and mourn them. I feel that I have begun the process called for by the author of the anonymous poem: To own my grief, and, where death has come through human complicity, to be righteously angry at those responsible.

In a manner of autopedology, this essay has dug its way from the embodied to the ontological, then to the destructive, to the decomposing, to the consumable and consuming, and ultimately to the mourning soil. The *soil within us* offers the means to mourn—to recognise, voice, and resist the unjust deaths, without negating their incommensurability.

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Conflict of interest

Nil.

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