

Anthropogenic SOILS: Recuperating Human–Soil Relations in the Anthropocene

Ursula M. Koy

Soils are central to understanding and responding to the contemporary environmental crisis. The survival of terrestrial life depends on healthy living soils, yet in the Anthropocene soils are increasingly affected by industrial agriculture, extraction, pollution, erosion, and climate change. At the same time, communities across the world continue to develop diverse practices of soil care, restoration, and repair. I currently lead the interdisciplinary research project “Anthropogenic SOILs” at the University of Oslo, funded by the Research Council of Norway until 2028. The project conceptualizes soils not as passive natural resources, but as lively and dynamic natural-cultural formations shaped through human and more-than-human relations. Bringing together research from the humanities, social sciences, arts, and natural sciences, the project investigates how human activities transform soils in different parts of the world and explores possibilities for ecological repair and more sustainable multispecies futures. The project combines ethnographic, multispecies, praxiographic, and artistic methodologies to examine practices of soil recuperation in landscapes damaged by industrial agriculture, toxic contamination, radioactive fallout, mining, and extractive industries. Empirical case studies range from microbial technologies used by farmers in South Asia to restore soil and human health, to technoscientific experiments in postindustrial regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and efforts to recuperate contaminated Arctic soils in Northern Norway.

At the same time, the project approaches the environmental crisis of soil as a crisis of imagination. Its speculative and artistic work packages explore how Indigenous writers, artists, farmers, and local communities offer alternative ways of relating to soils and imagining possible futures of earthly survival.

During my time at the RCC, I will focus on how an engagement with soils transforms our ways of thinking about Anthropocene landscapes, multispecies relationships, and possibilities for collaboration across disciplines within the environmental humanities.