

Soil {Refusal}: {Thinking} {Earthly} {Matters} as {Radical} {Alterity}

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ABSTRACT ORIGINAL

Olivia had been telling me about planting a magnolia tree for a while. She is an enthusiastic and skillful gardener and spends long hours among her plants. Every time I visit her, I return home with seeds, baby plants, lemons, and even small trees. She talks passionately about the cactuses, roses, and lavender bushes she nurses in her garden. The toxicity of La Greda, her hometown, hasn't discouraged her. La Greda is a small hamlet in the Puchuncaví Valley in central Chile, and adjacent to the infamous Centro Industrial Ventanas (CIV), one of the most polluted industrial compounds in Latin America. CIV hosts 27 petrochemical industries, including one copper-smelting complex and four coal-burning energy stations. Stories of ecological collapse abound in the area—and are dramatically evident after spending some time in La Greda. Actually, Olivia and her plants live just across from the now abandoned La Greda elementary school, closed down in 2012 after several children and teachers fainted owing to high levels of sulfur trioxide. Visible from almost all sides of her home, the abandoned building is a ghostly reminder of the chemical violence to which Olivia and her plants are constantly subjected. For the last decade, I have been paying attention to soil–plant–human relations, in Puchuncaví and elsewhere. I'm interested in how people like Olivia establish deep ethico-practical commitments with plants and soils in a context of chronic industrial violence, and in the way these human–soil–plant embroilments allow for a politics of intimate resistance (Tironi 2018). I have also paid attention to how earth scientists relate to inapprehensible geological matter, including topsoil, and to what extent these engagements recompose bio-geo arrangements (Tironi 2019). Spending time with neighbors from Puchuncaví and with geophysicists as they relate, sound, remediate, and work upon soily things has allowed me to get a sense of the kind of alliances articulated among different kin for vital endurance and knowledge production. One week after Olivia got the magnolia tree, I visited her so that we could plant it together. It was perfect timing, she told me, ideal for planting because of the full moon. When I arrived, she had already decided where the magnolia tree would be sited: a