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Cultivating Soil, Cultivating Self

Lauren E. Cagle

I'll begin with a story about one of the most right things I have done in my life. When I moved to Kentucky in 2016 for my first faculty position, I was in an emotionally abusive marriage, smoking almost a pack a day and drinking far too much, to mute the abuse. And even as that was daily life, I was also excited to finally live somewhere that I could put down roots. I grew up a military brat, and lived in Boston and Memphis for college, Las Vegas for my master's, and Tampa for my PhD. I had never lived anywhere more than four years. I had no permanent home, no roots. Yet I study environmental rhetoric, so I was excited in an intellectual, abstract way about the idea of having a place, because I wondered how I could really understand environmental work if I wasn't attached to a place.

In Kentucky, my then-husband and I moved into a shotgun rental house at the far end of a gentrifying neighborhood. I thought it was perfect. I was going to learn how to garden, and I was going to plant things in the long narrow yard behind the house. I didn't know how to grow anything. I didn't even have houseplants. But it turned out that I couldn't plant things in that yard, anyway, because the ground was full of broken glass. I couldn't make up a better metaphor if I tried.

I remember asking friends online, what do you do with a yard full of broken glass? The answer was that you cover it in topsoil. And that seemed, and still seems, to me like an unideal situation. There's still broken glass down there. We cover up adulterated soil. Why do we not amend the soil, so that as it turns over, as plants' roots stretch down, as we dig for potatoes and carrots and beets, we don't cut our hands?

The non-metaphorical question about glass in the soil became moot six months later, when I walked out on that relationship and had a very sudden divorce. The house I moved into then was the first place I had ever lived by myself. The backyard was tiny, with a disused gravel path that led nowhere and a single rotting raised bed next to sparse grass. I was there for four years. I started gardening, first in pots, then in the ground itself, under the rotted raised bed I had broken up and cleared away. I grew butter lettuce and sparkler radishes and hollyhocks and red Russian kale and rainbow carrots and sunflowers and Bloomsdale long standing spinach and one single, perfect cauliflower. I started composting, and then added the finished compost to my garden. I learned how to hoe and till and amend and mulch and weed, sometimes from friends, sometimes from YouTube.

When I moved out of that house, a friend asked if I was bothered by having put so much effort into the soil, which I was now leaving behind. I had made a garden where there wasn't one. And my answer came immediately, though I did not know I knew this before I said it to her. I said, "There is so much soil all over this world. I have lived in so many places and walked on their soil. I have eaten food from infinite-

ly more plots of land. So much soil has kept me alive and fed me during my life; the least I can do is not begrudge this soil whatever I've put into it."

Knowing and then saying that is one of the most right things I've ever done. Developing that relationship with the soil, that care for the soil I gardened with, that accountability to the soil that nourished me before I ever became a gardener, that was right.

It is not a relationship that sprang from nothing. I can trace the ways I was prepared to encounter soil in that way. Being in relation with the people I'm writing with in this symposium prepared me. Developing research collaborations with geologists and agricultural extension specialists and arborists prepared me. Reading work by Robin Wall Kimmerer and Kathleen E. Absolon Minogizhigokwe and Zoe S. Todd prepared me. Learning from Earth First! activists and water protectors at Standing Rock and nuns from the Sisters of Loretto protesting the Bluegrass pipeline prepared me.

What we know, even what we don't know we know until we are asked to say it, rests on layers of what came before: the things we read, the images we see, and the relationships we cultivate.

Much of what I read, see, and cultivate comes from academia, including many of the roots of my relationship to soil. There's something oddly beautiful about an institution as fucked up as academia leading me to this relationship. That beauty is tempered by the fact that I can only enjoy it as much as I do because I have privileges that allow me to escape many of the harms academia causes. For me as an individual white, middle-class woman whose parents both have graduate degrees, academia is a place of welcome. I have access to academia, and to the resources it offers those invited in.

So, when I think of relations in relation to my academic work, I know that I am often in a position to offer academia's resources to those I am in relation with, including those academia may not have invited in. People often characterize my work as community-based participatory research, but most of my collaborations are with organizations, and not necessarily community organizations in the sense of community-led grassroots organizations, but largely with institutionally sanctioned organizations. For me, doing community-based work involves working with organically developed groups of people who coalesce around shared characteristics —e.g., living in the same neighborhood—or issues—e.g., being downstream of point-source pollution. Of course, these groups might organize into some kind of official structure; a neighborhood coalition focused on environmental justice might file the paperwork to create a non-profit, for example. So, the presence of an official structure or organization does not necessarily mean that there isn't a community there, but the organizations I work with are typically composed of professionals brought together by their expertise or work experience, not by shared personal characteristics or interests. And these organizations often hold institutional power—even when they're chronically underfunded. One of my closest collaborators, the Kentucky Geological Survey, is literally mandated to exist by law, which is about as institutionally sanctioned as it gets in the contemporary U.S.

Not intentionally, but through layer upon layer of relation-building and decision-making, I have aligned my research and teaching with these institutionally well-established organizations. That alignment is not necessarily a bad thing. There are benefits to having someone who has been taught to think about community and relations involved with these organizations; my role can become one of relationship-building between organizations and communities. In other words, when we think about the complex issues people face, the stakeholders frequently include official organizations such as my collaborators: the Kentucky State Division for Air Quality or the UK Recycling office, for example. These organizations have a service mission—and because of my personal research interests, I gravitate towards environmentally focused missions. But rather than beginning by working with a community or community group impacted by those organizations, I've found myself working with the organizations and then helping those organizations work with stakeholders outside, who may or may not self-identify as belonging to various communities.

But, through my engagement with my co-authors here, and the larger conversation we're pulling together about access, I have been thinking of late about how to articulate my role in these collaborations as an access point, whether that's to a community I've been asked to help scientists connect with, or perhaps to the resources of academia I'd like to put in the hands of under-resourced non-academics. More and more, I find myself telling my academic colleagues to not just go into communities, to not ask for non-academics' unpaid time, and to not assume that our research has value to the communities around us. Instead, I say, let us ask people in the communities where we want to do research what they need and want, and let us pay them—in funds or other reciprocal relations—for their time and expertise and goodwill. It has taken the layering of time and experience to be able to understand myself this way.

This understanding began for me in graduate school with courses on participatory action research and feminist research methods. But it is only in the building of relationships with official organizations trying to serve communities, and me trying to figure out my role and obligations in that process, that I have come to see how important access—granted or denied or negotiated—is to being in relation with people outside the academy. Ultimately, to even be in relation, I choose to give access to myself, and I ask for access to those with whom I am in relation. Being honest about the vulnerability that exchange demands allows me to take care with any responsibility for access I am given.

Whether or not I want the role, academia has made me a gatekeeper to its resources. I'm still working through what that means and all the ethical dimensions of it. But it's important to note that I haven't been made gatekeeper because I am somehow uniquely positioned to know best what others need. Rather, it's just because I happened to get this job as a tenure-track faculty member in rhetoric at an R1 university in the U.S. So, it's up to me to figure out how to take this imposed responsibility—gatekeeping the academy's resources—and manage it ethically in conversation with those I'm hoping to collaborate with on gaining them access to those resources.

My impulse when talking about good relations is to focus on how to have good relations with whomever you've already decided to work with. But as I foreground

access in the relationships I build as an academic, I am taking a step back to ask a preceding question, with whom I want to have good relations. The relations we cultivate cultivate us in turn. I can open myself to that which will cultivate me well, and I can choose what and who that is. And I cannot cultivate good relations with others simply to produce something just for me or because I think I can cultivate them. I am the soil. I tend to the soil. I am not in control but what I do still matters.