

Fade-in (00:00)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (00:00.75)

For our third series of conversations in the Ecologies in Practice podcast, our theme looks to the earth beneath our feet. And with that in mind, a series of fascinating conversations around soil health, toxicity, and land-based practices. Through the eyes of artists engaging with landscape and soil, to scientists exploring regeneration and nutrients, to scholars celebrating Indigenous stewardship and language, we explore our human relationship with the earth, including extraction and regeneration.

Over the next four weeks, I'll be in conversation with Dana Prieto, Geneviève Metson, Renée Lemoyne, and Genevieve Robertson, each introducing us to unique practices, methodologies, and perspectives on how art, science, and stewardship can reveal our deeply complex and significant relationships with the earth.

Dana Prieto is a multidisciplinary artist, researcher, and educator whose responsive work examines social, political and chemical ties that connects us to the land.

Geneviève Metson, associate professor at Western University in the Department of Geography and Environment, examines how we can better manage resources and nutrients in diverse socio-ecological contexts to ensure food security and water quality in a rapidly changing world.

Renée Lemoyne, a first year medical student in Thunder Bay, explores land-based practices and the benefits of learning Indigenous language in a holistic and immersive way.

And Genevieve Robertson, whose work sits at the intersection of visual art and environmental studies, introduces us to the ecosystems she focuses on and engages us in her material-driven and place-informed practice.

Through these various conversations across disciplines, join us as we learn together and as we consider our connections to the earth beneath our feet, exploring how artists, scientists, and researchers can help us to understand our relationship with the earth, with soil, and with the land in many different ways. What kind of work and research teach us about understanding the entangled nature of life? Be sure to subscribe to the podcast and stay connected as we continue to explore the intersections of ecology, art, and activism through earth in the weeks ahead.

Until next time, take care, stay curious, and let's keep the conversation flowing.

Intro Music (2:26)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (02:38)

Okay, it is Wednesday, August 14th, 2024. Today we are joined by Dana Prieto, who has not only graciously contributed to the Ecologies and Podcasts book, but is also an artist and

educator based in Toronto. Her site responsive work examines our deep relations with colonial structures and infrastructures through a careful attention to the ground and the different forms of living and dying within it. Thank you so much for joining us today, Dana. It's a pleasure to have you.

Dana Prieto She/her (03:07)

Thank you, Ashar.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (03:09)

Could you start by sharing a little bit more about yourself and elaborating on your work?

Dana Prieto She/her (03:15)

Yeah. Well, yeah, my name is Ana Prieto. I'm excited to be here because I love being in conversation with others and a lot of the work that I've been doing in the past, maybe 10 years has involved being in conversation. So it was really a luxury to be in part of the book with Alicia and Amanda and all the contributors and now to be in conversation with you, Ashar. I am an artist and a researcher, an educator, mom, a partner, a daughter and I'm joining from Toronto right now. I have lived here for the past 12 years and I was born and raised in Buenos Aires where my family lives or most of my family lives.

A lot of the work that I do involves material and conceptual inquiries on my personal and collective relationships to the land, the sites where I live and work. And I think it has to do with me arriving here not so long ago and doing work here and learning what it means for me to be living and doing work here. And this takes different shapes. Sometimes this could be a ceramic installation. Sometimes it's a conversation or a physical chemical study of a particular soil sample. Sometimes it's a poem or a walk or stillness. Sometimes it's learning to ask difficult questions to the institutions I work with and working within those questions.

And I also the research associate for the project, Finding Flowers, that is led by Anishinaabe artist and curator and educator Lisa Myers and conservation biologist Sheila Cola. And we've been doing work together for the past five years. I'm also

I'm educator and I teach in formal and non-formal places. I've been teaching for maybe 15 years. So yeah, that's a little bit of what I do. And I think that I bring, I keep bringing all of these educator, mom, partner, daughter, artist, researcher roles together as much as I can to make sense of life. They inevitably kind of mash up with each other.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (06:16)

Yeah, that's awesome. So you mentioned that a lot of your projects deeply engage with soil and the layered histories of place. Would you talk a little bit more about your approach and care for the soil, the ground and the life that it nurtures in your practice?

Dana Prieto She/her (06:36)

Yeah, thank you for this question. I always go back to like one of my earliest memories I have of independent play and rigorous play and joy as a little kid is playing with soil and finding little things in the soil and making meaning of those.

And like when I speak with my sister about my work, she's like, you keep doing the same thing over and over since I'm apparently very, very young. So I think that there's many different ways that I have engaged with soil through my life, but I could somehow trace like a wiggly line of a practice, a very long and unsteady practice.

And when I'm close to the ground and working with soil in particular, but with different things that I find on the ground, I was thinking, like, perhaps it's similar to looking very closely to the stars or to the water. It just becomes really evident how we're all connected and how all life is connected; how everything is dust. There's this artist, just makes really beautiful illustrations, Oli Costello that has a pin that was gifted to me that says, we are only temporarily not dirt. So like really when working closely with soil, that becomes like very clear to me that we are really soil and dust and dirt as well and this also involves that we are part of the relationships, the reciprocity, the responsibility of being part of that soil, being that soil too. And also the violence and the dispossession and the extraction that is part of that soil that is exercised on that soil continuously. And so we are also part of that.

Yeah, so I think it really teaches me about relationships in different ways, human and otherwise.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (09:17)

That's beautifully put. Thank you so much for sharing. Let's talk about specifics. One work that we're eager to discuss is your recent project, *Footnotes for an Arsenal*. Could you talk a little bit more about the concept and history behind this 2022 exhibition and how it all came to life?

Dana Prieto She/her (09:35)

Yeah, for sure. *Footnotes for an Arsenal* was a work commissioned by the 2022 Toronto Biennial of Arts. And it was a work that was made and commissioned to be presented at the Small Arms Inspection Building in Mississauga. Because a lot of the work that I do is site responsive and it involves quite a bit of research on the sites where I work. This site is very important, part of it, yeah, it's central to the work itself. The small arms inspection building was a munitions factory and they inspected arms, small arms and bigger arms, and it has a huge shooting range. It's right by the water in Mississauga. And it was built in the First World War and used in the Second World War and a little bit after by the Canadian Army.

The building where the gallery is, so there's this gorgeous, huge building that has this post-industrial lore. It has windows all around and on the top has really beautiful light pouring in all day and all these trees around. It's a really, really stunning building. And it was created, its whole architecture was designed to produce weapons. There is a lot of resonance of that in the architecture itself. So was interested in being in conversation with the building itself, like the physical, the colors, the textures, how the light pours in. I was responding to a lot of material, physical, sensorial information of the site, as well as the histories.

The building, I believe is the last one standing of a complex of many buildings from the army. And the land outside also tells really important pieces of the history of how that land was used.

As I was doing research on the site, I learned that the land is in an ongoing process of remediation and has been in a process of remediation since the early 90s. It was purchased by partially by the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority. And those are the people who have been remediating it because when they got that land, they found that there were like extremely high levels of PCBs and heavy metals and radioactive materials on the land. And part of the remediation process involved the creation of a consolidation mound, which holds 70 ,000 tons of radioactive materials. And the mound is between the gallery and Lake Ontario.

When I learned about this, I was doing early research on the work, and was pregnant. And I knew that pregnant and breastfeeding people are particularly or are at high risk of being close to radioactive materials and PCBs. So this research made me slow down a lot, made me step back a little bit. I still went to see the site and walked around the site, because I really wanted to know what a consolidation mound was.

And so I did and it took me like three trips to see what the consolidate to understand what is the consolidation mound because I kept missing it and It's this like very easy-to-miss slope of grass.

A lot of different areas in that site are fenced because of the remuneration. It's not easy to see that it's particularly fenced. It's just like normally fenced. And there's a lot of golden rods and different grasses and the tiny little sign that says do not dig and then tinier, it says like radioactive materials.

So I was interested in like how banal and how unassuming this mound was. And at the same time, I was very concerned about carrying a human inside of my body. And the work that I did was sort of overall responding to this research and to the histories of the land that I found through this research and to the histories of containment in those lands. I was really thinking about the ways that containers hold and preserve and nourish and restrict and they inevitably leak. And I was thinking of the land and the mound itself and the building as containers, but also my own body as a container and the bodies of all living things around that site as these porous, nourishing, leaky containers.

So the work involved is mostly a ceramic, large scale ceramic terracotta installation with like a floor of tiles of 20 feet by 10 feet with an arrangement of containers on top that reference forms of life of that site. And the color, the terracotta color and material itself was a way for me to like breathe earth into that building that is very like cold and it has a lot of concrete, has this rectangular long shape, so I was mimicking the shape a little bit of the footprint of the building and the footprint of the consolidation mound outside of that building. And the work also involved the creation and the display of a poem that is directed to the consolidation mound.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (16:56)

Wow, that's so fascinating. It seems like you had to consider a lot of things and there's quite a few factors here at play. One thing I'm interested in knowing is would you say that the social, environmental, historical and chemical entanglements of the site played an advantage or would you say that it was more of a challenge when you were creating the work in itself?

Dana Prieto She/her (17:18)

I'm interested in finding the edges. I'm really curious about edges and learning to see what factors are in tension in those edges. Like just like even like in a very abstract way, I'm interested in containers and in walls and in separations and boundaries and just like trying to walk that edge with my work and see what happens there, why was that wall built, why do we have these institutions that contain us? What is the porosity of these institutions? When do they crumble? How do they crumble? How do they stay up? As well as relationships also. Anyway, so I think that there were like both, there are always both a lot of challenges. So for instance, and they were in challenges are obviously very personal because the way that I encountered that will be different than anyone else encountering them. So in that moment that I was pregnant, I had this work commission and I had some other exhibitions on the go - because of COVID things were postponed - like kind of like randomly fell all together when my kid was six months.

Everything was like lined up and I was totally not ready to be so productive in something else. I wasn't like bringing a life to this world. So, something that happened there that was both a challenge and an advantage was, for a big part like sort of really painful learning process but I just needed to make the work with other people. I could not make it on my own. So for instance, I commissioned for the work in the biennial, I commissioned a fantastic ceramic maker to make the containers for me because I didn't have access to a studio and I didn't have capacity to make large -scale work myself. And I asked a friend of mine, I hired a really beloved friend of mine to help me put my ideas together. So I had like, for the first time, something like a studio assistant that was like really helping me like crack ideas, even like what comes first? Like do I call this person or should I go to their home? Just like simple ideas or like ways of making things because of COVID and pregnancy. Things didn't make so much sense to me so I really needed to think with others and make with others and I hired other people. I was lucky to have a good budget for production so I used it for whatever I needed it to actually make the work. Even though perhaps the materials themselves were not as expensive, the making of the work needed more people.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (20:54)

Wow, thank you for sharing. So you mentioned COVID, and I think a lot of Canadians would agree that all of us felt this sort of blurring of time. And when we think of time, it seems as if in *Footnotes For An Arsenal* and a lot of your other works, you navigate this complex interplay between past, present and future. Would you say that that's a fair interpretation? And how do you conceptualize work, or sorry, time in your work? And more broadly in relation to soil.

Dana Prieto She/her (21:25)

I think it's a fair interpretation. I think that this idea of time is also related to different forms of life. I think soil, like to me, soil folds in different forms of life and different timelines of these forms of life. I love learning about geological processes and like deep, long histories of materials becoming one another, you know, and shifting from place to place through time. And it's so easy to disconnect from that kind of timeline, so from that deeper timeline. And I find it significant. find that thinking with the time of soil, it just makes the pace and the timeline of production, like it just makes you consider different things in that timeline. Even like in our own practice as artists in working towards exhibitions or grants and deadlines and just moving at the time of soil or thinking with the time of soil, really like pushes something else there, some other considerations.

And at the same time, I think it just relates to me to what we were talking before, which is that this interconnection among all living things. There's this very famous saying that comes from anthropology, and it's attributed to different people, but that dirt is this place matter or it's matter out of place. And I think things move through place and time, but matter is still here. it makes, I think that making sense of these longer timelines also makes you realize how everything is still here. Like there is no such thing as the elimination of matter or like you know when you trace those timelines you see how just things keep reappearing and it makes a sense of like cycles too.

So yeah I guess I'm not completely sure what my work does in relation to all that, but I would just say that I'm just very interested in that. And I think that perhaps just the material presence of soil in a lot of my work potentially has that amplitude to hold people in a bit of that timeline.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (24:55)

Yeah, thank you for sharing that perspective. You explain it so poignantly. Let's focus in on materiality. And I want to talk more about the significance of materials in your practice, particularly the use of clay and hand building. Also, how do you navigate the tension between familiar forms like vessels and tiles and the theme of toxicity?

Dana Prieto She/her (25:18)

So like you were asking about COVID before in relation to time. also think COVID brought a lot of urgency for sensorial stimulation, different forms of sensorial stimulation. This is something that I was also very interested in before, in the before times. But after enduring COVID, I became more aware of the use of materials that will invoke people's senses in present time in this space. So the use of smell and the textures, the dimensions of things, how long people will have to take to walk through an artwork and how does it hold people in place around a place like a gallery space where the artwork is.

Yeah, so like I do use clay and ceramics and soil a lot yeah, the use of sound became so important even if it's yeah, even if it's implied sounds like even just knowing how things sound the cracking of a ceramic tile or the emptiness of that vessel. I don't know, the implication, the sensorial implications became very important to me through COVID and playing a little more intentionally with this elements in my work. I feel like, I don't know, I mean, I can still trace the

clay, the use of clay in these wiggly timeline that I was talking about before, but. I started using ceramics more consistently. I started ceramics in Buenos Aires in like 2010, 2011, 2012. think that's when I moved to Canada and then I switched. And I stopped using ceramics, but then they came back, they called me back. And I think that there's many things that really make sense to me about the ceramic work from the profession itself, the ways that ceramicists share their knowledge and work with each other, just like the practice, I'm really interested in the practice itself. The type of labor that it invests you in, the attention to air, to water, to fire, to soil, to the components of what soil is composed of. I create, like I'm still making installations and sculptures with it.

And I, the same time since I came to Canada, I've been really interested in the histories of extractive capital in Canada and how Canada has been funded in as a nation in the extraction and dispossession of land. I think that I'm still holding that interest and the questions around that become somehow easier or interesting for me to process with soil itself and with materials that come from the land or that potentially all materials come from the land, you know that are less processed than other materials. Just more visibly connected to the ground, I guess.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (30:20)

So you mentioned sensory experiences and I wanted to ask you what role does the written word play, if any, in your work? Going back to *Footnotes For An Arsenal* and you had mentioned this when you were describing the work, you've included the second stanza from Alexis Shotwell's poem titled *Against Purity*. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Dana Prieto She/her (30:52)

Yeah, just to have to correct you the work of Alexis Shotwell is not a poem. So I included a quote from a text by Alexis Shotwell in the second stanza of my poem. And that was a book that the book is called *Against Purity*. That was a book that I was in conversation with for some time when I was making that work. And as I mentioned, that work really pushed me to be in conversation and in collaboration with others in the making. So I think that the word, the written word became almost like a relief of like, okay, I can put these thoughts and these words that have been part of these conversations in and I can speak them out loud. I can make them visible for others to see. And maybe a bit of my brain in that moment, like I could only produce a poem. Like I was not able to make an essay. I commissioned another friend to help me write like even the artist statement. I was like, these forms of writing, these forms of institutions, everything felt like I needed to be in conversations with others to project a form. And with the poem, maybe the conversation was with Alexis and with everyone else too. Alexis, I don't know Alexis, but I'm just calling them Alexis now.

So the book, or that part of the book speaks about, I can't remember, the phrase is something like, I think it's like, there is no primordial state we may wish to go back to. I think there was something very, sharp about for me as a recent like recent new mom to think about the romanticization of something primordial and that there is no primordial state we may wish to go back to felt sharp and like a good challenge for me as I was also doing research on this side and deciding not to walk so much near contaminated radioactive grounds. I was also aware and

in this book it's very explicit that everything is contaminated, in that we are also toxic beings, in that we are all damaged. It's not like a damaged site and an undamaged site. Everything is entangled in webs of toxicity and damage. And so are we. So I think that this saying was something that felt that resonated. keep thinking, sure, but you know, like it had this edge to me that was important for me to remember as I was making this work. Yeah, and I felt it wasn't something that I needed to translate into the poem. It was just like, I needed to just leave those words to resonate there by themselves.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (34:30)

Thank you for sharing the process. It's very interesting. How do you see your work, research and these collaborations contributing to environmental conversations and what role do you think art can play in these discussions?

Dana Prieto She/her (34:45)

I would be very curious to ask the same question to you and to everyone. You know, like I feel, I feel I have some interests and responsibility in it, but I'm very curious about how we collectively do this more than independently. I think that the work that I'm interested in doing often involves making myself present and hoping that that will bring others to some form of, I don't know, rootedness or like being literally present, aware of the present time that they're living and what that involves. I think that I'm interested in making environmental conversation. I truthfully don't think about like an issue as an environmental issue. I think it's like, it's a confluence of an issue is always a confluence of many things. So it's environmental, it's social, it's personal, it's political, it has all those things together. So, in considering that as environmental, consider that environment holds all those complexities. I tried to make things, those complexities near to the touch, sensible to the touch, to the sense, to the senses. I tried to make things, bring things a little closer.

And sometimes there are things that are really close to us like the soil beneath our feet. It's not that it's like something that is far away that I'm like, "look at it now, you've never seen it before" It's usually things that are already there that I'm bringing but I'm somehow try to bring them within something new or something different something that perhaps brings you in or comes kind of invites you in a different way, lets you in perhaps in a different way, or takes you to a different consideration of time, you know, as we were talking before. I also think in particularly now in the past year or so, I've been learning more and more about how artists individually and collectively working in these and other fields and with these and other interests pertaining environmental issues in these broad sense are showing the possibility, the options to stop, to hold, to refrain, to refuse as something really powerful, you know, it's something that can be done individually, but also in solidarity to with others, and how that could show as artists with our work with the power that we have in showing or not showing our work or making or not making our work in conversation with or in association with some institutions, some power structures that we want to disentangle from or try to disentangle from.

Sometimes it's choosing who to entangle with, right? So sometimes in my work, this, so I'm speaking perhaps in very abstract ways, in more particular ways, more specific ways,



sometimes the work has moved me to be part of a movement, like for instance, in a work that I did in relation to Canadian mining in Argentina, for the past eight years, I've been in conversation with this particular movement in Catamarca that has been resisting this particular mine, Canadian mine. So part of my work has been learning how to support their work, resistance and refusal to this mind in different ways from sharing the work that they do to collaborating with them to donating money to them as part of my practice. So yeah, maybe there's something about like the association of like, how do we associate with each other with others in this.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (39:50)

Yeah, that's beautiful. Thank you again for sharing that perspective. You really do have a way with words. It's great to hear about. Yeah, you put it very poignantly. My last question to you would be if you'd be okay sharing what you're currently working on and what excites you most about the future in terms of your work.

Dana Prieto She/her (40:10)

Yeah, thank you. I made notes. That's the way that I have with words. But also perhaps being in conversation, the work that I'm doing now and I see quite a bit I will still be doing is that I continue doing research on nuclear power and sites of nuclear waste disposal around Toronto.

And this work keeps bringing me to be in conversation with others. Like it just, it is such a daunting and expansive work that I just submerged myself in research and in conversation with other people that are also asking. similar or, you know, like, I just send questions and doing work in this field.

I'm not sure, I don't know if I can say what's exciting for me about it. I would admit that there is, that at some point there was something sort of mysterious and appealing about the immensity of these. The timeline of radioactivity is beyond my comprehension and perhaps anyone's comprehension. There are materials that are labeled to be forever, forever chemicals, forever things. So there's something very like sci -fi and mysterious and like appealing about that in a potentially not very productive way, but that's just something that happened to me in the beginning. And then now I'm trying to find to keep connecting to things that are exciting and appealing to me in this work.

I think that I just enjoy going through the tunnels of these entanglements of power and violence and understanding and trying to pull them apart and separate them and making them simpler and making them bit more legible for myself and perhaps for others, hopefully for others. And I really needed to go in those rabbit holes with other people for this one. So I think part of the excitement and the joy of the work is to learn from other people's brains and interests and curiosities and other people's rabbit holes, you know, just dive in with some other folks.

Yeah, and I'm still using ceramics. Another piece that is exciting for me is how things come kind of like weave back together and I feel like ceramic as a medium reappears. And I'm sure that if I was looking at metal, don't know, steel, I'm sure that I will see steel reappearing every time. It's

just like things just come back all the time once you look closely. But for instance, a lot of ceramic materials, very, very common ceramic materials like bentonite or like different forms of porcelain or just like soil and water are really key elements in the architecture of these highly engineered, deep geological facilities for nuclear waste, or even the consolidation mounds that like low level containers of radioactivity of nuclear waste also are like there is the most important elements to take into account in these things. Not being an engineer myself, but you know, learning about them, like soil, clay, water are like the base of our whole... the physics and the chemics of those materials whole the entire architecture of nuclear containment. So it's interesting to see how things move back closer to me in ways that I wouldn't expect.

And yeah, and I feel like I'm really at the start of this research of this work, even though perhaps it was like with the biennial like two years, three years ago that I started it. I really feel like I'm still starting this work. So it's exciting to have to keep learning.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (45:48)

Yeah, everything you've described, it's so exciting, so interesting. I definitely wish you all the best with your future endeavors and projects. I wish I could keep asking you questions about your artistic practice and your research practice. But unfortunately, our interview has come to an end. Thank you for just taking the time to talk us through about the way that you think of these themes, how the careful considerations that go into creating the work. It was very, very fascinating.

And I really do mean it when I say that it's this beautiful point and intersection that you're currently at. And I like the way that you describe how you say you're still at the beginning of the work. And I think that's a great way of putting it. And I think there's a lot of exciting things ahead of you. I will eagerly be just seeing what you're up to. Yeah, so thank you so much for sharing all of this with us.

Dana Prieto She/her (46:38)

Thank you so much, Ashar, and thank you for the beautiful questions.

Music (46:39)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (46:43)

Ecologies in Practice is hosted by Ashar Mobeen and produced by editors Elysia French and Amanda White, with music and audio editing by Adam Wiebe. This season was made possible through the generous support of the Sustainability Impact Fund at Western University, in collaboration with Brock University and the Centre for Sustainable Curating. We'd love to hear from you. Visit our website at [ecologiesinpractice.ca](http://ecologiesinpractice.ca) to get in touch. There, you'll find details about each episode, transcripts, and further information about our guests and links to relevant projects and organizations. The book *Ecologies and Practice in Environmentally Engaged Arts in Canada* is now available through Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Outro Music (47:20)