

LAB 1

**DOING
STS**

CLIMATE MOURNING, SLOW AND SOFT

The climate crisis elicits grief. In this workshop we'll explore practices of care, mourning, and rest through theories of disability justice and abolition feminism.

Through meditation, collage, and writing we'll explore how white supremacy replicates in the management of emotions and crisis.

Free public event

Led by Sarah Law 婉雯

1–4pm, June 3rd, 2023

Room 1315

SFU Harbour Centre

doingsts.com

WRITELAB

Climate Mourning, Slow and Soft

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WHAT CAN THEORY DO?

Theory is more than written word. Theory is found and felt in daily life. It transcends academic journals, books, notes apps, and Word docs. Theory is not immaterial to living, breathing, dying, or sensing. It is the extraordinary ordinary that Kathleen Stewart asks us to attune to. Theory can be a tool for mobilizing better futures, used in practical and emancipatory ways beyond academic capital. When we find theory in the everyday, it foregrounds forms of intimacy and imagination. Theory holds us and makes life legible. This is what theory can do.

Ecological grief is often understood as a psychological response to experienced and anticipated losses due to climate change. Most theories of eco grief are found in ecopsychology literature and relate to the mental health impacts of climate change. As a sociologist, naturally I come at this from a different angle. As a sociopolitically and culturally informed response to climate crisis, I offer an understanding of ecological grief through affect studies. I frame grief as a more-than-individual phenomenon, looking to the sociality of emotion as a cycle that is active—that moves and pulls us towards each other.

I have developed and iterated a model of ecological grief. The most current model (fig. 1) shows how each phase of grief fits into a cycle of practice: an embodied response that moves with us as we witness and anticipate climate-related loss. As such, my work frames grief not as a journey toward acceptance, but as a social practice of mourning where acceptance is continuous and not limited to environmental ruin—a process that holds the multitude of emotions that overlap and shape grief. This includes the loss of hope, faith in market-based solutions, resentment against institutions, frustration with political inaction, and the betrayal of greenwashing. I offer an understanding of “flat” affects (grief, depression, loneliness, sadness) as more than an individual, psychological, or diagnostic phenomenon in which grief is social and active. Grief informs and shapes how we understand climate crisis as a systemic problem that requires mourning ideas of the future and deeply held beliefs about our social realities.

WORLDMAKING

Late capitalist culture is marked by living with a sense of impending crisis: we come to learn how to live with the losses. This does not mean we learn to accept them. Climate justice is a movement that seeks a just future where no one is disposable or left behind. We fight for the equitable redistribution of wealth, the return of Indigenous lands, and the abolition of systems of extraction and incarceration such that all species might thrive and have a secure future. Climate justice is the death of capitalism, settler-colonial occupation, prisons, fossil fuels, and liberalism. It is the death of this world—the world we live in. But when this world dies, what are we left with? What do we have right now that we want to keep?



Figure 1. Model of Ecological grief

Mark Fisher opens *Capitalist Realism* with “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.” I turn to him often because his work makes me feel seen. His suicide left me feeling naked. As jarring as this quote is, it is critical to remember that the end of this world is not the end of the world. It is the end of a world: and other worlds are possible—some of which exist now. What Fisher teaches us is invaluable. His work is salient to the feelings of burnout that have risen so severely in recent years. His urgent call to politicize mental health—rather than its pathologized liberal psychol-





ogies and medicalizations—is a relentless ringing in my ear. I wonder what would change about his work if it engaged more seriously with Black feminist theories, crip theories, Indigenous knowledges, and other critical feminist theories of abolition? When I read his work around environment, mental health, and bureaucracy (as three capitalist “reals” where systemic change might happen), adrienne maree brown, Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Donna Haraway, Tricia Hersey, bell hooks, Leanne Simpson, Anna Tsing, Jackie Wang, and Amanda Watson tug on my sleeve.

What we learn from feminist, decolonial, and abolitionist scholars and theories is the importance of carework: kinship, relationality, feeling, interspecies interdependence. Love, leisure, and pleasure are the care practices of capitalist world-ending and worldmaking. These scholar’s work is my theoretical axis for understanding the world around me. I offer it up as a way to think about emotion and worldmaking, broadly, and about political mourning and eco grief. This is also what affect theories can help us do.

INVISIBLE LABOUR

The question is not “what is theory?” but “what can theory do?” I borrow this from Sara Ahmed who asks what emotions do—rather than what they are. She turns towards the soci-ality of emotion, shifting away from emotions as things that individual people “have.” I read this work alongside other anti-positivist pedagogies of feeling like Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, in which every sense of depression, anxiety, fear, bedtime routine, insecurity, flinch, love affair, or ounce of hope traces back to economic, political, and social climates of late capitalism.



STS is relatively new terrain for my work, but thankfully John Law makes a clear links with sociology: STS is the very matter of the social world. It is receiving a bouquet of flowers as a gift from a friend, holding its stems in my hand, thinking about its materiality and its sociality.

Where do these flowers come from? What did it take to put them in my hands? Where did my friend get the flowers from? Where did they grow? Were they bought? What is the economy of cut flowers? Its industry? What went into growing them? Whose labour, what systems, what science, what technologies make this social exchange possible? How are these practices interconnected? When I go home and place the stems in a vase, where does the water from my tap come from? The glassware? In my everyday life, chains of people's labours to plant, grow, pick, cut, and ship these flowers shape how I feel, act, and think when I sit by my coffee table where this bouquet keeps me company.

Sociology and STS make these processes analyzable and visible. And affect is the sense and feeling of attuning to these processes. It is stopping to look at plants that grow in grooves and cracks of cement sidewalks. It is pulling out invasive species on a walk. It is being late to dinner plans because I stop to look up at leaves and branches. It is smelling my neighbour's lilacs—now blooming earlier every year as spring gets hotter faster.

It is when the bouquet of flowers inevitably begins to wilt, and I hang the stems upside-down to dry or pick the first few dying petals and leaves to press. I decorate my home with things from people who I love and refuse to forget. When I craft with dead and dying matter, I make anew with these invisible labours: threads of science, histories of preservation. What I sense has never been only mine to feel.



Photo: Sarah Law

“I DON’T DO ANXIETY”

Fisher urged for mental health to be politicized in a way that cannot be reduced to including therapy in free healthcare. What he calls for, what I too am looking for, is what affect studies give us: a structural understanding and analysis of what composes our “mental health crisis.”

Every time I get an email that asks me to do an interview, join a panel, or host a workshop on “climate anxiety” I cringe. I reply: “I don’t do anxiety. I do grief.” My insistence on grief rather than anxiety is theoretical and pedagogical. I fear the impact of pathologizing climate emotions—of making them solely medical and individual. We cannot shop our way out of the climate crisis. Nor can we meditate, therapize, or medicate our way out. Injury, trauma, and illness are not healed by treating symptoms. I am not against therapy, it is a needed tool for coping with late capitalism. But therapy for the emotional impact of climate crisis will not liberate us.

As Ann Cvetkovich, Eva Illouz, Byung Chul Han, Dian Million, and Jie Yang have shown, therapeutic language, wellness culture, and liberal pop-psychology is a darling of neoliberal settler governance across Turtle Island and beyond—and not because of an ethic of care. What their work makes legible is how therapeutic practices and the language of healing are tools of maintaining regimes of settler occupation, violence, and capitalist production. To borrow from Audre Lorde, therapeutics have become a tool of the master’s house. They will not set us free.

I would argue that we should not necessarily want to avoid our grief either. It is an unrelenting intimacy with the world that shapes us. To pathologize and individualize political grief is to risk what we have seen happen with emotion:

that it is pitted against “reason” as a kind of weakness. Kelly Fritsch, Michel Foucault, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Tema Okun, Alexis Shotwell, and Sylvia Wynter remind us that deviations from the settler-capitalist project of exploiting bodies and lands are moralized and criminalized. Those that are not white or able-bodied are othered along racial, gendered, sexual, disabled, or mentally ill lines. These same systems, moral politics, and logics of white supremacy have lead us to believe that what is slow (like grief, mourning, or rest) and soft (like care, pleasure, and dependency) are to be avoided.

PRACTICE AND PUBLIC MOURNING

How might we sit with the soft and slow?

1. What would it mean to sit with the soft and the slow in a world that does not allow for it?
2. What would a world look like without capitalism or climate collapse?
3. What does a just climate future look like?
4. How do we rise to Donna Haraway’s call to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged planet?
5. What would these practices of sitting with and imagining otherwise look like materially, relationally, economically, politically, ecologically, and interpersonally?

This is a lot to ask. These are big questions. I want to offer a way of thinking about alternatives to capitalism, worldmaking, and liberation through theory and practice in the everyday. When we access the ordinary, what can our senses teach us? I hope to show you how uncomplicated these questions can be when we use our senses and everyday experiences to get at the heart of worldmaking: hope, imagination, ordinary practices.













CRAFTING AND FORAGING

Collaging is a kind of scavenging practice. I forage for, grow, receive, and find flowers to press and preserve. I create with them through paper mâché, resin, canvas, paper, glass, and other recycled, found, and reused materials. It is a practice of making do with what you have and finding joy, pleasure, and beauty in working with dead and used matter. It is also a practice of grieving and imagination that moves me to pay attention to place by foraging, noticing growing patterns and irregularities, attuning to invasive species in my area, engaging respectful picking practices, identifying plants on walks, feeling the changes in the seasons when gardening, caring for plants, and preserving bouquets of flowers that I receive as gifts. These practices often require multiple days if not weeks and months. In my everyday life, these durational habits orient me to the world around me. They are not methods of extraction, production, or consumption. I work with what I already have, what I am gifted, and what can be reused.

PRACTICE: STICKY NOTES

I invite you to think about what makes things soft or slow (and fast or hard) when it comes to politics, economy, labour, emotion, and feeling. Take 5 to 10 minutes to write what comes to mind on sticky notes. Reflect on the following questions.

QUESTIONS

1. What are slow and soft practices in everyday life? What makes them feel this way?
2. How can theories of disability justice, political economy, abolition feminism, and ecology help us to understand how the slow and soft are seen in capitalist culture?
3. What are the moral associations of words like lazy, dependent, or submissive?

4. How are such associations crafted using logics of white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism?
5. Where and how does nature show us that the fast and urgent pace of capitalist production is not as inevitable or “natural” as it has been made to appear?

PRACTICE: DEAD MATTER ANEW

Choose a keyword below to write with: how does the word texture your visions? You can write a burst of theory, a story, poetry, a list. Whatever comes to mind. Write for 15 to 20 minutes, then begin to use your writing for a collage piece. You can use any of the materials provided (including your writing) to create a mixed medium piece to express, reflect, and materialize your vision. In a workshop context, we do not have weeks or months to craft together. But just as I might forage in my garden, a patch of grass, on a walk, or in a park, you might “forage” for meaning, representation, and materials in collage materials: magazines, scraps, odds and ends.

KEYWORDS

Anxiety	Drown	Lean	Public
Bargain	Drying	Leave	Rage
Beginning	Dying	Living	Repetition
Bouquet	Dysregulation	Mourning	Resist
Burn	Emergence	Movement	Ruin
Collapse	Ending	Panic	Scavenge
Compromise	Extraction	Pattern	Searching
Cracks	Feeling	Permanence	Senses
Crafting	Flower	Petal	Slow
Crisis	Gift	Possibility	Soft
Dead	Grief	Practice	Urgency
Death	Heat	Preserve	Wave
Disruption	Imagination	Press	
Distraction	Invasive	Private	



Pressed flowers and flowers in resin, Sarah Law

THINKING WITH

Accidental alliterations

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Anticipation

Being late because I stopped to admire and identify plants and trees.

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Daydreaming out loud

Doing STS Team

Dr. Amanda Watson

Dr. Coleman Nye

Dr. Jie Yang

Dr. Kyle Willmott

Dying and drying lilies on my coffee table

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Foraged flowers

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Invasive species (especially attuned to morning glory, bluebells, and devils' ivy)

Keeping, pressing, and drying gifted bouquets of flowers

Lists

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Mol, Annemarie. 1999. "Ontological politics: A word and some questions," *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 1. 74-75.

My garden

My graveyard of grief

My therapist

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Pacing

Petal preservation and pressing purity politics.

Plant identification app

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