

# Learning Grounds<sup>1</sup>

Re: next meeting - visit to Pablo's exhibition in Amsterdam

Turner, D.R.(Renée) <[REDACTED]>  
Thu 24/03/2022 16:23

To: Julia Wilhelm <[REDACTED]>; Lerma Gonzalez,  
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Hello all,

My apologies, but I cannot attend the embroidery workshop or the garden session because I still have Covid :(

I really wish I could be at both sessions.... I love the power of the subversive stitch (yes, yes, embroidery, weaving and beadwork!), and forms of lateral agency and solidarity that emerge through being busy sewing, cooking, and gardening.

As I don't want to spread the bug, the only thing I can remotely contribute is a few quotes below.

Enjoy the day together, and I hope to see you in the next session,

Renée

1. Through our ongoing generative and nourishing conversations, Renée Turner—artist, educator, researcher, Rotterdammer, and gardener—and I have often exchanged experiences on the ways we are collectively learning, dreaming, imagining, and cultivating practices through and with our gardens. Renée contributes the essay “Slow, Situated & Reparative Reading: THE GARDEN EDITION (This is not a manifesto; it’s a manifestation.)” in this publication.

On the necessity of tactility:

*We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form. Our tactile experiences are elemental. If we reduce their range, as we do when we reduce the necessity to form things ourselves, we grow lopsided.*

(Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (pp. 44-45). Princeton University Press.)

The garden as a space of disturbance and colonial legacies:

*The appearance of the garden in our everyday life is so accepted that we embrace its presence as therapeutic. Some people say that weeding is a form of comfort and of settling into misery or happiness. The garden makes managing an excess of feelings—good feelings, bad feelings—rewarding in some way that I can never quite understand. The garden is a heap of disturbance, and it may be that my particular history, the history I share with millions of people, begins with our ancestors’ violent removal from an Eden. The regions of Africa from which they came would have been Eden-like, and the horror that met them in that “New World” could certainly be seen as the Fall.*

Jamaica Kincaid, (2020, August 26). *The disturbances of the garden*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/07/the-disturbances-of-the-garden>

On March 25th, the day you are in Michelle’s garden, Derek Jarman wrote this journal entry about his Dungeness garden in 1989:

*The sun rose and remained for the rest of the day, warm with a light breeze. At ten, I walked down to the sea to pick up flints. The sand flats were quite deserted, except for a small boy sobbing as he dug for bait. I heard him clearly on the wind, he was far out near the breakers. My own sadness, which set in last night with the television screening of War Requiem, swept away. There are so many strangers crying in England these days.*

*All along the Ness they are putting up fences—more people are travelling out to the lighthouse. The local, the Britannia, has changed its name to the Smugglers’ to cash in. Even this remote spot changes. My neighbours brought me a purple sage—the first gift the garden has received. It grows apace.~ *Salvia salvatrix*, sage the saviour. ‘He that would live for aye must eat sage in May.’ A man’s business thrives or falls like the herb in his garden. Pepys writes in his diary that he saw a churchyard in*

*which sage was grown on every grave. Gerard says: Sage is singularly good for the head and brain, it quickeneth the senses and memory, strengtheneth the sinews, restoreth health to those that have the palsy and taketh away shakey trembling of the members. Sage attracts toads. Boccaccio's toad that lived under the sage bush was one of a long line. Thomas Hill writes: Serpents greatly hate the fire, not for the same cause, that this dulleth their sight, but because the nature of fire is to resist poison, they also hate the strong savour far flying the gar/ike and red onions procure. They love the savin tree, the ivy and fennell as toads do sage, and snakes the herb rocket, but they are mightily displeased and sorest hate the ash tree, in so much as the serpents neither to the morning nor the longest evening shadows of it will draw near, but rather shun the same and fly far off. In the evening I walked to the Long Pits, the violets under the ash tree glimmering in the dusk. No serpents about, just the hum of the power plant. In the foundations of the ruined school house, periwinkle had run riot, covering an area of several hundred square feet.*

*Brought back a small piece to plant in the garden.*

Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (The Journals of Derek Jarman) (p. 41). Random House





The Promiscuous Care Study Group arranges chairs in a circle for a meeting in Michelle Teran's recently acquired garden, March 25, 2022.

*This is a text about personal loss. It is about losing my mother. It is also about collective grief and how practices of collective grief are, for the most part, absent in dominant Western cultures, in institutional spaces of higher education, community organizations, even family circles. Although this text will touch on these three areas, I will mostly be speaking from an educational context, with a focus on potential pathways to collective learning that can build capacities for holding painful experiences and conversations. In this text, I will also partly speak from my allotment garden in the South of Rotterdam where I ask how can we learn through and with collective grief?*



## [falling]

Last February, you fell. For one or two days, I am still unsure. You lay on the floor of your apartment, in the living room. I don't know what time of day it was, whether the lights were on, the television blaring, whether you tried to sit up if you were, at any point, conscious. I don't know your thoughts, whether you were afraid or felt yourself exposed and vulnerable. What little I know is that you fell, and you were alone.

## [Breaking]

For many days, as you were lying on a hospital bed somewhere in Calgary, I was in Rotterdam between office and home. For days, for a week, then longer than a week, I kept up with you through daily check ins with my sister, who, because of proximity, could be with you. And I waited for a moment when my presence would be more supportive and less of a hindrance. COVID-19 restrictions limited the hospital visitors to two people; I was not one of them. To be honest, I was not ready to face the heartbreak that awaited me. Meanwhile life continued.

And so I continued working at the art academy where I work as a researcher and educator. My work calendar shows that during that period I prepared for and then: taught a seminar, attended a webinar for a new accounting system, had a meeting with my dean, read a book, printed out posters for a workshop, facilitated a workshop, continued with two research projects and prepared an abstract for yet another, perused a budget, submitted paperwork, sent and received emails,

moderated two panel discussions at an online conference, attended and facilitated multiple meetings whose atmospheres varied from the creative and inspirational to the mundane.

Also present on the calendar was my appointment for a COVID-19 antigen test but not that I waited for the results, which were positive. Apart from a brief entry stating “Go to Arif with tree work,” there is no evidence of the red storm warning issued by the Dutch government for Storm Eunice, one of the worst storms in decades wreaked chaos across the country, as closed train lines, roads, and airports curtailed all travel. Schools, offices, stores and businesses shut down. For 24 hours I witnessed on television, social media and through my living room window the flying debris, ravaged rooftops, airborne cars, capsized boats, and felled trees. After the storm had passed, I, still infectious with COVID-19, decided to walk along the canal, through the park, to my garden, recently acquired a little over three weeks ago, to inspect for any damage. I discovered two large trees that had succumbed to the winds now blocking access to the garden. I climbed over the thick trunks, slick with mud. The following week, I planted two rows of potatoes in the back of the garden.

Not making any appearance on the calendar was a full-scale invasion by Russian ground forces of Ukraine, and their ballistic and cruise missiles striking multiple Ukrainian cities and airfields. That COVID-19 claimed 75,000 more lives and created 16 million new cases. A UN report warned of a climate disaster-fueled global wildfire crisis, while wildfires burned nearly 2 million acres of drought gripped Argentine wetlands. A Portland man opened fire on racial justice protesters, killing 1 and injuring 4 others. A jury found Ahmaud Arbery’s murderers guilty of US federal hate crimes. Mining companies drove destruction of the Amazon and violated indigenous rights. Haitian police killed a journalist amid ongoing protests by exploited garment workers.



And then, as the world continued, frenzied, I was suddenly on a flight to Calgary, to your hospital bed where you lay quietly dying.

[Stopping]

Reading through what I have just written, I experience both a sensation of nausea and intense vertigo to the normative yet dizzying pace of the world, including my personal world.

I am sitting with the vulnerability of my sorrow and the disquieting stillness of your passing.

I am experiencing feelings of sorrow and heartbreak in ways that are more than just feeling 'sad'.

## [Metabolizing]

Dear Cash, dear Malkia;

Thank you for your words. Thank you for your offerings. You both have often written about grief, pain, and suffering and how, through our socialization in dominant (modern, Western) ways of knowing, we are taught that they are unwelcome visitors that we must push away and eliminate.

Cash, as an esteemed scholar and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous People's Wellbeing, whose research focuses mainly on pain and our relationship to pain; you have often spoken about how "dominant ways of knowing and being (often called Western or modern)"<sup>2</sup> consider pain an individual problem linked to personal suffering. Translated into modern health and mental health practices, pain becomes a condition of individual problems and the elimination of it is the pathway to individual wellbeing and quality of life. You understand this as dominant ways of dealing with embodied problems where pain becomes an unwelcome presence in everyday life that must be regulated, managed, numbed, and eliminated.

Malkia, activist, writer, and speaker on collective grief; you once referred to this numbing, overwriting and erasure of pain as a form of gaslighting. Grief—within the dominant narrative of business as usual, and predicated on productivity and the linear movement of progress at whatever costs—is this wild unruly, unwelcome presence. If grief were personified, it might be the one that stumbles in late to an important meeting, hair unkempt and unwashed, crumpled shirt showing last night's liquid dinner, mismatched socks, and torn pants. One who, before gobbling down the entire plate of pastries around the coffee table, struggles to find a seat amidst the discomfort and agitated others sitting around the table. "Security! Nobody wants this presence in the room. It's killing the vibe."

2. Cash Ahenakew, *Towards Scarring: Our Collective Soul Wound*, (Guelph: Musagetes, 2019), 19.

3. Malkia Devich-Cyril, "To Give Your Hands To Freedom, First Give Them To Grief," in *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*, ed. adrienne maree brown (Chico: AK Press, 2021), 75.



For example, when you write:



*Dominant narratives about grief have turned gaslighting into an art form, convincing us that it is safer to deny grief than to feel it. At every turn, we are persuaded that grief is a wild, unacceptable emotion that must be handled, managed, overwritten, and hidden. We are pressured by political and even physical force to prioritize productivity over personal wellbeing, to seek eternity over embodied presence, even as we live through the most traumatic losses.<sup>3</sup>*

4. This scenario is a creative adaptation of the methodology for critical inquiry entitled “The Bus” developed by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective. See: <https://decolonial-futures.net/portfolio/the-bus/>.

Yesterday, as I sat in my garden, writing, I imagined a scenario where you, Cash and Malkia, were invited to a meeting. At this meeting—let’s say in an academic workplace—teachers, students, management, and support staff are invited to a conversation to speak openly about their grief and immense sorrows. You are not asked to speak but to observe the room. What are you observing? Hypothetically, you might witness visible embarrassment and nervous glances. There are some dull, vacant looks. One person becomes short-tempered and starts picking fights with the others, growing louder and shouting above the rest. Somebody, feeling overwhelmed, bursts into tears. One small group claims their pain is the only pain that matters. Another somebody, becoming increasingly withdrawn and shrinking into their seat, tries to ignore the conversation. Others check the time on their phones and numbly doom scroll through the newsfeeds. Someone else is trying to rationalize their pain by paraphrasing a text they read in a book. There is a to-do list made by yet another on what to do about the pain. Yet another still, increasingly impatient, asks in an agitated manner if there is any point to this meeting and when it will end.<sup>4</sup>

Cash, I wonder if you would think that what you are witnessing in the room is dominant culture’s (read: Western or modern) way of saying, “This is embarrassing. Try to pull yourself together.” In the room, multiple responses try to evade the conversation’s painful discomfort by managing, assessing, evaluating, analyzing, critiquing, diminishing, or becoming otherwise overwhelmed in a way that reinforces separability and polarization. You might lament that it rules out the possibility to see pain as a teacher and to experience suffering’s profundity as a way of listening beyond the limitations of the personal and the individual.<sup>5</sup>

Malkia, I also wonder if you might think this is what unprocessed grief looks, sounds, feels, and smells like. By getting to know your writing, I understand that unprocessed grief happens when grief that is not given the care and space to digest and reflect upon, nonetheless remains present. You once casually remarked, "How many people have lost their jobs because of grief? Getting into fights with people, being short-tempered because they were grieving."<sup>6</sup> It makes me think about how within the grind culture of my academic workplace, grief is so often left untended. I think about the presence and silencing of grief. Within an educational environment defined by precarity and insecurity, where pervasive stress and panic manifest in unmanageable to-do lists, deadlines and overbooked schedules, in ongoing crises and crises management, incessant worry over non-permanent contracts and future employment, and the soul-crushing weight of emotional labor in the face of daily microaggressions, gaslighting, and paternalism;<sup>7</sup> let's just say that grief is rarely acknowledged. It is not even part of a conversation. This state of affairs was exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic when many of us were asked to continue working and to keep classes running amidst an adrenaline-saturated double workload coupled with the individual and communal strife and loss occurring outside of the workplace. How is this grief being addressed?

In writing about grief and productivity, Malkia, you begin by revisiting your experiences of personal, profound loss and how it affected your work and life. I appreciate your willingness to bring in the intimate and personal into conversations on grief. I want to tell you about my experience of trying to return to work after suffering my own profound loss. I want to recount how personal loss and grief derailed my sense of time, obligation, and even my capacity to speak. I felt my grief a cursory hiccup, a floundering about, an embarrassment even, within the normal flow of the workplace. For weeks, I stumbled through the offices, classrooms, and corridors as a somnambulist, ill-equipped for the measured, machinic pace of institutional time. Cacophonous sounds of chatting and laughter, scraping chairs, loud pop music from the cantina reverberating off the smooth concrete walls and glass vitrines of the building. I experienced them as needle-like daggers piercing my raw unsteady and tender body. My returning self felt entirely out of sync with the rhythm and pace of the building that was ill-equipped to harbor grief, even of an individual nature.



5. Ahenakew  
(n 2) 35-36.

6. Malkia Devich-Cyril, "Radical Grievance with Malkia Devich Cyril," The Emergent Strategy Podcast (podcast), June 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1A-jW8v05FwD-VuqC0Z6c5XJ>.

7. Alfrida Martis and Ali Şahin, *We Have to Change: Advisory Report by the Office for Inclusivity on the State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity at WdKA* (Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academy, 2022), 37-40.

From what I have learned about your social activism and organizing work, I recognize that when you write about grief, you also consider how it acts within the realm of dominant systems of modernity, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy; systems that beget death to the land and also untimely and lonely death to bodies. You make palpable the ubiquitous undercurrents of grief though century upon century of harm; genocide and oppression, poverty and inequality, raging fires and rising sea levels. You see it every time somebody gets murdered because they have the wrong skin color, at the destruction of ecosystems and planetary collapse, the dispossession of land from Indigenous communities, and otherwise as the planet is treated as if it were nothing but a giant shopping mall for consumption without consequence.<sup>8</sup>

8. Devich-Cyril (n 6) 74-77.

Reading, and nodding in agreement, I play an imaginary dialogue with you where I respond by saying that I also grieve whenever someone asks, "why can't we just stay positive?" but are not willing to do the work of critical inquiry; when they lack humility, or if they demonstrate boundless arrogance and an unrepentant ego that perpetuates business as usual, of which I am also complicit. I grieve for gratuitous waste and dispensability, of bodies, lives, and land. I grieve for a system prioritizing busyness and productivity, and also for simply aging, and for my own dying and for death.

The world continues spinning, with crises upon crises and days stretched to their limit with busy schedules. How is it possible to hold that much sorrow, that much grief without feeling completely overwhelmed?

And what happens if you don't?



What happens when grief is left unattended, unprocessed, and left to its own devices? Just because you choose to ignore grief doesn't mean it goes away. Malkia, you mention that no matter how much one tries to silence, ignore, or overwrite grief, it will come back at you, in unhealthy patterns and self-destructive behavior for vengeance. Grief needs the space and care to be experienced fully. This space of care<sup>9</sup> works

for grieving the people we have lost, those close to us, and all the societal ills and global loss. You note that unprocessed grief—in-sufficiently tended grief—resurfaces as burnout, as dissociation and detachment, numbness, apathy, unfettered rage. It resurfaces in addiction.<sup>10</sup> I understand what you are saying. Truly. At the same

time, from my own uncomfortable place of loss, I understand that grief is such an overwhelming place of suffering, and of becoming untethered. I lose touch with the once familiar ground because the ground has shifted. Grief is such an uncomfortable place of loss.

I lost myself. I wonder how reconnection is possible after such complete loss of self and connection to the surrounding world?

Malkia, you write that "we should sit and take action from a place of grounded grief,"<sup>11</sup> because it could lead to feelings of joy. I freeze mid-page of your essay to stop and contemplate what you're trying to say. Because I was trying to imagine my or any other grief as joyful in any way. Upon further contemplation, I grasped it as your way of telling me that by taking note of grief by listening to what it needs, one can develop the capacity and stamina to open up to my and others' sorrows, big and small. And that by opening to others, in an embodied entanglement of grieving collectively, it could carve the path for other ways of becoming and taking action in societal transformation. Gargi Bhattacharyya refers to this as the revolutionary potential of collective heartbreak because it is only by making space for our collective sorrow that we can imagine remaking the world.<sup>12</sup> Grief, and by this I mean collective grief as you both have eloquently stated, can therefore be an intensely liberating and a communally joyful experience... That is, if you give grief the time it needs.

What would it take to *sit and take action from a place of grounded grief*? To do it in the profundity of sorrow and immensity of heartbreak that one person should not hold alone, to build stamina and capacity to hold grief collectively? Not as a pathway to healing, mending, to make everything whole again, but with the intention of fostering the capacity for discomfiting conversations around the cracks of a crumbling, dying system that no longer serves.

*What I am really trying to ask you, all of you, is how we can learn from grief? How can we learn to grieve collectively?*

9. michelle cassandra johnson, "Episode 119: Michelle Cassandra Johnson—Finding Refuge Healing Collective Grief," Banyen Books Branches of Wisdom (podcast), November 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5dAfZgHyJACfQ1IX-s5us5T>.

10. Devich-Cyril (n 6) 75. See also: Steffi Bednarek, "Climate Change, Fragmentation and Collective Trauma. Bridging the Divided Stories We Live By," Future Foundation (website), [https://futuref.org/climate\\_change\\_fragmentation\\_and\\_collective\\_trauma\\_en](https://futuref.org/climate_change_fragmentation_and_collective_trauma_en). Bednarek is a psychotherapist who works around climate psychology, studying the affects of collective trauma through the climate change crisis. Bednarek argues that "the efforts to meet the challenges of climate change need to go beyond a mere reduction in CO2 emissions. They require a maturing of the collective culture into a much larger capacity to process painful experiences whilst holding the interconnected, non-linear complexity in life. This includes the ability to acknowledge fragility, to bear the unbearable with dignity and to bring integration into the frozen and fragmented states of collective trauma."

11. Devich-Cyril (n 6) 75.

12. Gargi Bhattacharyya, *We, The Heartbroken* (London: Hajar Press, 2023).

## [Noting]

13. michelle cassandra johnson, *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2021), 62.

What else needs to be said about grief?

*I often feel a hankering to scream, "We are dying! We are dying, and we are killing one another. We are sick and we aren't interested in being well. We are entitled and our entitlement is causing oppression and suffering. We must stop. If we do not, we will not survive."<sup>13</sup>*

14. Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power* (Novato CA: New World Library, 2022), 68-69.

*Each day we lose valuable parts of our biosphere as species become extinct and eco-systems destroyed—yet where is their funeral service? If our world is dying piece by piece without our publicity and collectively expressing our grief, we might easily assume that these losses aren't important.<sup>14</sup>*

15. Bhattacharyya (n 12) 4.

16. Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance* (London: Little, Brown Spark, 2022), 33.

*When I speak of our heartbrokenness, I am trying to capture this sorrow that moves between individual grief and the consciousness of all that is so broken in our world [...] I don't believe we can build a different, better world without being heartbroken.<sup>15</sup>*

17. Devich-Cyril (n 6) 70.

18. Bayo Akomolafe, *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences: Letters to My Daughter On Humanity's Search For Home* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2017), 19.

*I am inspired by grief, mourning, and lament. I feel like these places are vulnerable and generative spaces for healing.<sup>16</sup>*

*Denying grief denies humanity.<sup>17</sup>*

*Edges bleed into traces of becoming, melding, dying and living, beginning and ending, into an always pregnant middle. A thick middle.<sup>18</sup>*

[Pausing]



*I am feeling quite full. Are you still breathing?*

*Can we please have one minute of silence?*

19. On questioning: Bayo Akomolafe writes about the potential of generative and humbling questions. Rather than using questions as a logical means to solving the world's problems, Akomolafe offers questioning as means of opening up to how we are already mattering and showing up in the world. See: Akomolafe (n 18) 243.

## [Tending]

My allotment garden in the south of Rotterdam is a five-minute bike ride from my apartment. When I acquired the garden a little over a year ago, I wanted to mostly grow organic food (which I now produce prodigiously), introduce some regenerative agriculture experiments (that are ongoing and expanding), and meet some of my neighbors (who are caring and incredibly generous). Surprisingly (at least for me), it has also become a place for grounding grief—for giving grief the space that it needs.

There is always something happening in my garden, and also, compared to the daily onslaught of news announcing the latest global catastrophe, very little at all. In the garden, time stretches and slows down into an unhurried, tender, intimate attunement that unfolds in bodies, breath, rhythms, reciprocal acts of care, and forms of listening. I am attentive to what grows and flourishes from what I have sown and I recognize what emerges of its own accord. I am also witness to what is decaying and dying away. Death and decay are all around me. Many of my fellow gardeners (mainly older women) are also attuned to these cycles of life. As the summer season slowly comes to an end, I observe my neighbors wandering around the garden's complex and nearby park, searching for decaying plant matter; dredging the nearby canal, foraging for garden waste in the compost piles, and picking up fallen weeds that they will collect in heaps and transport back to their gardens in order to nourish the soil for the coming seasons. And I think it is partly due to these humble acts of the transference and transmutation of dead and decaying matter and the promiscuous abundance of the garden and this actually real and grounding experience with circular time that has helped catalyze and connect me to specific questions. With questions, but not necessarily in the quest for answers,<sup>19</sup> around death, decay, and for the processing of grief. I do this for my own and my collective sense of grief.



## [Practicing]

Let us sit in a circle, each with a bowl of water and a pile of stones. We have collected the stones by walking around our surroundings (a park, a garden, a forest, a city street). Before taking each stone, we make sure to ask first for the stone's permission. Now sitting around the circle, whenever a grief comes to each of us, we pick up a stone, say the grief out loud and then place the

stone into the bowl of water. We remember to take time to breathe, pause, and acknowledge each grief entering the circle; not trying to analyze, debate, discuss or resolve any sorrow that is named. Each participant continues speaking of their grief out loud and placing their stones into the bowl until there is nothing more to say. Now each of us takes our bowl somewhere outside and returns the water and the stones to the soil.<sup>20</sup>

### [Reading]

In December during one of the year's coldest and darkest days, I organize a reading event around death and decay and collective grief in my garden.<sup>21</sup> I propose two activities: one that looks like reading a book, and one that I now understand as reading an ecology through the act of constructing raised beds.

For the event, we are reading the section "Toilet Teachings" from a chapter in the book *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* by Vanessa Machado de Oliveira.

In her text, Machado de Oliveira writes that because modernity imposes distancing and separability from our shit it has taken away our metabolic literacy about reading dead and decaying matter. Modernity controls death and decay by pushing it away and removing it from sight. She refers to the shit that comes from our bodies and the other 'shit' that is not so easy to decompose: plastics, toxic waste, and other pollutants. We flush shit away; flushing it through pristine, white, clean, shiny toilets; the other shit gets put into shipping containers and sent away to remote and out of site locations. But there is no 'away'. We are entangled with everything else; with the birds, the soil, the squirrels, the trees, the poisonous sludge, contaminated water, the earth gutted by copper mining, and the carcasses of the expendable and exploitable. We are implicated as well. These things are all part of the same metabolism, the pleasant and amiable,

20. Since 2022 I have been fortunate to be part of a study group who meets online monthly. The study group is composed of educators, researchers, facilitators, health practitioners, a journalist, among others, whose members are scattered throughout Canada, The United States, The Netherlands, Italy, and India. In the sessions, two study group members co-facilitate a session where they invite the group to think through texts and practices around hope and hopelessness, living in uncertainty and complexity, entanglement, and ways of holding grief collectively. During one of the sessions, one of our group members proposed an adaptation to a collective grief practice by grief activist Francis Weller. See: Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 163.



as well as that which generates visceral fear and disgust.<sup>22</sup> Reading is the ability to see and recognize waste as part of a life cycle where waste returned to the land becomes soil and food before becoming shit once again. This literacy to read decay and waste welcomes death as part of this living cycle while also allowing us to decipher which waste causes sickness and which provides nutrients for new life. Machado de Oliveira, therefore, advocates for regaining our connection with both nature and life's processes. She reminds us that death is part of life's metabolisms and to understand ourselves as a living metabolism through learning how to 'read' decay and to decipher which provides nourishment and which poisons land and bodies.<sup>23</sup>



21. I organized this event together with student initiatives Reading Rhythms Club and SPIN collective. Reading Rhythms Club experiments with forms of embodied, situated reading. SPIN collective works on climate and social justice issues as well as being stewards of a rooftop garden at the Willem de Kooning Academy.

22. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 121-122.

23. Ibid 222-228.

24. The garden bed is now replete with succulent beets, spinach, kale, fennel, spring onions, and leeks, colorful nasturtium and calendula flowers accompanied by the continuous buzzing of bees.

We begin the day with a collective action where our group wanders through the garden and its surrounding neighborhood, 'reading' for any dead and decaying organic matter suitable for making a garden bed. We gather desiccated leaves around my garden, and from the main garden entrance. We excise the slimy remains of artichoke leaves from one of the other garden beds. We break brittle stems off of barren pepper plants, hack and uproot towering sunflower husks, and collect the branches strewn from recent storms. With this accumulated material, we construct the raised bed—piling soil over leaves over rotting organic matter over branches over salvaged cardboard. Then we leave it to rest until the following spring.<sup>24</sup>

Once the bed is completed, we move ourselves into the garden hut to read the text from *Hospicing Modernity*. One of the participants starts a fire that produces a lot of smoke but sufficiently warms the hut enough so that we can read in comfort. The warmth from a smoky fire, with cookies, empanadas, cornbread, and other delectables fuel our reading and infuse it with pleasure. The group works on a collaborative quilt, transmuting the words we read into images of shit, decay, and visualizations of metabolic entanglements. The toilet in the hut has been turned off to prevent pipe damage from the intense cold. The small greenhouse in the back becomes our temporary toilet instead, where

the readers take turns making trips in order to relieve themselves of their liquid waste that they know, from reading the text, will be used to fertilize the soil.

25. Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (London: Hajar Press, 2021), 119.

## [Loving]

All images taken by Michelle Teran in her garden, April 2022-December 2023.

A sunny early Monday morning in the garden. Tucked away under sagging grape vines, laden with swollen, ripening fruit. Between pauses and shed tears, deep breaths, and gulps of water, I carefully blend you, my mother's ashes, together with fresh soil, then release handful after handful of the fresh mixture into newly dug holes awaiting the echinacea, monarda, yarrow, tulip, and dahlia plants, near the front of the garden. As the morning progresses and the garden awakens, some of my neighbors pass by on the way towards their own gardens. H peeks over the hedge to admire the new flowers and then offers me a hazelnut to plant into the soil. T stops by to say hello, smiling widely. Lovingly.

"What would it mean to approach loving the earth? [...] To look at soil and see more than dirt," writes Lola Olufemi.<sup>25</sup>



## [Learning]

This is not an ending but an invocation for learning.

When I go to my garden, I feel this underlying sadness that brings me to tears. We are feeling a systemic collapse with its death and mass extinction, through our bodies.

When I am in the garden, I dream of it as a ground for learning that allows for learning with grief. How do we learn to grieve? We are learning with

the sowing of grief, to all things living and that which is dying away  
 a grief that is so immense that it can only be done in community  
 with others, human, nonhuman, and more-than-human  
 the pause within the gap and the capacity to stay within the discomfort of the overwhelming and the unfathomable

what lies under the surface  
 what is not readily seen or understood or analyzed or solved  
 decay as nutrition, food, and shit  
 lifeless matter that is not lifeless  
 flesh that decomposes, leaving bones that will disintegrate, become soil  
 a way of keeping time that recognizes the circularity of change, and  
 the thickness of mutual co-dependence and entanglement  
 the embodied, the relational  
 the affective ways of knowing and being in relation  
 grief as with-ness, breathing with  
 intergenerational learning, soil memory  
 decline coupled with growth when you least expect it  
 the potential rippling effects of small, humble acts  
 difference that is not separability, complexity in abundance  
 giving support when support is called for  
 energy in sadness, energy in joy  
 living well, dying well  
 a change that is constant.