



STREAM

S9. Elemental Affects and Atmospheric Wellbeing

STREAM ORGANIZER(S)

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DESCRIPTION

What would it mean to take the elements as organising contexts for affect studies? This stream proceeds from a series of emerging transdisciplinary fields—Critical Air Studies, Critical Forest Studies, Critical Ocean Studies, Critical Energy Studies, Critical Time Studies—assembling around shared elemental milieus: the air we breathe, the forests we walk through, the oceans we cross, the energy we metabolise, the historical time we are thrown into. In each case, it is an elemental milieu (with its particular thickness of bodily relationships and planetary forces) that draws researchers into unexpected collaborations across the humanities, arts, social sciences, and physical sciences.

The questions this stream poses to affect studies include: what role might affect play in drawing scholars into emerging elemental studies? Are there specific affects that circulate within and between elemental milieus? Does each milieu afford particular ways of registering and working with affect—different textures, tonalities, and affordances? What might an elemental approach to affect bring to place-based relationships, and what it means to live in good relations with land?

These questions emerge from the recognition that affect theory's primary conceptual vocabulary—intensity, capacitation, transmission, circulation—often begins with human social relations before moving outward. The convergence of new critical studies around forests, oceans, time, energy, and air invites a different starting point: the elemental milieu as protean condition for affective relationships from which sociality grows.

The concept of *atmospheric wellbeing* offers one worked example of what elemental affect studies looks like in practice (Rousell & Lupton, 2025). Understood as the affective and sensory dimensions of a body's entanglement with the air it breathes—its toxicities and breathabilities, political and climatic conditions, and intersectional angles of impact—atmospheric wellbeing names affects that exceed both individual health and planetary governance frameworks. Here the atmosphere is not background to affective life but its very medium of transmission: an elemental milieu that actively precipitates possibilities for sensing, feeling, and acting in the world.

An elemental turn in affect studies provides new critical tools for attuning to place-based histories of elemental milieus and how these are differentially impacted by colonial dispossession and toxification. Indigenous communities have long understood the elements as expressions of kinship, care, and sovereignty—not as passive media through which human social life unfolds, but as juridical, therapeutic, affective, and pedagogic forces (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Kimmerer, 2013; Tynan, 2021). These perspectives vary significantly across distinct peoples, territories, and geopolitical contexts and cannot be collapsed into a general elemental framework. The stream invites work that critically attunes to affective configurations of the elemental and the situated complexities of atmospheric toxicity and wellbeing.

The stream is co-convened by visiting and local researchers and proceeds in collaboration with Coast Salish (máthxwi and x^wməθk^wəy'əm) artist and facilitator Carman McKay, whose practice grounds our engagement with the specific elemental milieus of the conference's location on unceded lands.

We welcome work engaging with, but not limited to:

- Elemental affects and more-than-human wellbeing
- First Nations, Indigenous, and Global South elemental knowledges
- Critical Air, Forest, Ocean, Energy, and Time Studies
- Decolonial and extractive histories of elemental milieus
- Atmosphere as concept and method
- Affective, sensory, speculative, participatory, and creative methodologies
- Architectural, performative, and technological mediations of elemental milieus