ENV198: Idleness and the Environment: What Does Sustainable Work Mean?  
Professor Kate Neville  
Winter 2021, Tuesday online synchronous on Zoom 2-4pm (Eastern time)  
Class will start on “UofT time” – 2:10pm

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Office hours: online, tbd

Course Description: In a fast-paced, high-tech world—and one that must rapidly decarbonize to address the climate crisis—labour and production dynamics are rapidly changing, and so is our environment. This course explores the intersection of work, production, and the environment, considering how ideas of leisure and idleness might offer pathways to a more sustainable future.

The course will consider the nature and future of labour and production in an era of rapid social and environmental change. In an era of the gig economy, increasing consumption, and expanding global trade, the course will consider a wide range of production-environment intersections, including just transitions for communities dependent on fossil fuel extraction and unsafe working conditions of labourers involved in e-waste recycling. Students will examine different approaches for addressing environmental injustices and unsustainable social and environmental conditions, from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Drawing on scholarly, literary, and popular sources, students will consider economic, political, social, and philosophical perspectives on work and idleness, growth and consumption, and stability and sustainability.

Course format, assignments, & website: The course is offered online on Zoom. Please monitor the Quercus course site closely and read announcement emails! The format involves 12 two-hour virtual classes, online discussion board tasks, readings, and assignments. Readings are extensive and diverse in format, style, content, and discipline. They form the basis of our work together, and so are essential to the course!

Assignments:

- Participation 10%
- Class notes 5%
- Seminar facilitation 15%
- Two critical reflection/analysis papers 40%
- Final project 30%

Assignment details:

1. General participation 10% (continuous)  
   a. Attendance and active participation in the seminar are expected, although given circumstances, there are exceptions  
   b. In general, participation should reflect active listening, knowledge of the readings/assigned material, preparation for discussions, constructive engagement with peers, and participation in in-class writing and discussion tasks  
   c. If in-person attendance is not possible in a given week/ weeks, discussion board participation is expected (barring illness and other circumstances)  
   d. Post-class discussion board reflections are encouraged from all students, and can contribute to participation grades, but are not mandatory
e. Students should set goals for their own participation at the beginning of term, and keep notes on their experiences each week; a self-evaluation of participation in the class will be required at the end of term.

2. Class notes 5%
   a. Each student will be assigned one week to take notes in class on the seminar, and post these to the discussion board. It can be challenging to take notes in a seminar class, as there are not always clear learning outcomes and the structure is often fluid. This is a chance to practice note-taking, share notes with peers, and develop a collective record of course discussions. For students with note-taking accommodations or challenges in attending class/staying connected, alternate arrangements are possible.

3. Seminar facilitation/leadership 15% (varying deadlines)
   a. Each student will be assigned a week to help facilitate discussions—no coordination with other facilitators is needed
   b. Assigned facilitators will:
      i. Before class, on the discussion board, post a 500-word critical reflection on the week’s readings, and post 2-3 discussion questions with some of your own initial answers to them before class
      ii. In class, come prepared with answers to at least 2 questions posted by other facilitators that week, ready to actively engage (be prepared to be called on and share your answers orally, or if technology/connectivity does not permit, be prepared to share your answers in writing on the chat or discussion board during or shortly after class)

4. Two critical analysis/reflection papers 40% (20% each, due Feb 2 and March 2)
   a. Each paper will be a 750-word essay, each involving a task followed by a written critical analysis. For each, you will draw on course readings, class discussions, and additional scholarly research.
   b. The first paper will involve a quiet reflection task (where possible, including an outdoor component)
   c. The second paper will involve a solo or shared creative task
   d. Both papers will ask you to engage in critical analytic writing, linking personal experience to scholarly writing. Further details on each paper will be provided.

5. Individual contribution to class anthology project 30%
   a. As a seminar class, we will create a compilation of materials by other writers/thinkers about idleness and the environment, as though we were developing an edited book. These may include academic articles, philosophical treatises, creative non-fiction essays, short stories or excerpts from novels, poetry, or other forms. This involves identifying course themes, conducting research into different possible readings and materials, analyzing the content and relevance of different sources, and engaging closely with one of the pieces in an analytic way. Each student will provide a section for the anthology, with:
      i. A theme for the section in the anthology;
      ii. A list of three contributions for that section;
      iii. A one-to-two-page (500-750 words) introduction to the section, providing guidance to readers about the chosen pieces—explaining and critically analyzing: the ideas, content, and form of each piece; how they relate to each other; and what they reveal about the section theme.
Grade flexibility, assignment weights, and late submissions: We’re in challenging times—not just the Anthropocene, but specifically the pandemic. In case of unexpected challenges (student illness, caretaking emergencies, unplanned moves, other contingencies), grading policies may be changed as follows:

- deadlines may be moved (as a class or individually); late penalties can be waived; extensions are possible, within UofT limits and rules; and
- grades can be redistributed across assignments; and
- alternate assignments can be arranged to address accommodation needs (even if accommodations are not formally documented).

Usually late penalties are 3% per day. But these are not intended to be punitive: extensions are possible and reasonable, and late penalties can be waived even after deadlines have been missed. In general, I need advance warning for late submissions and extensions must be negotiated—that’s the reason for these penalties, to provide that incentive for reaching out to me. Exceptions can be made after the deadline when reasonable. I do not need details about your personal circumstances, and in many cases do not require documentation. General categories can be sufficient (illness/lack of wellness, illness of loved ones, unexpected personal upheaval, etc.). I also need some warning to be able to plan my own grading and schedule. Please be in touch early and often as challenges arise.

Course outline by week:
Throughout the course, we will ask the questions: What is work? What kinds of work are there? What is work for? Who works, and for whom? And with all these questions, we’ll keep our attention on the question of what this all means for people and the planet.

PART I: What is work?
- Week 1: Jan 12 – Idleness and industriousness—and the virtues of staying still?
- Week 2: Jan 19 – Silence and turning away
- Week 3: Jan 26 – Sustaining and progressing?

PART II: Who works, and for whom?
- Week 4: Feb 2 – Productive vs. generative work?
- Week 5: Feb 9 – The sharing economy vs. gifting practices: What is being exchanged?

READING WEEK: Feb 16: no class
- Week 6: Feb 23 – Taming nature? The displaced burdens of control

PART III: Resilience, rest, and justice
- Week 7: March 2 – Lying fallow: Recovery in an overburdened world
- Week 8: March 9 – Efficiency vs. redundancy?
- Week 9: March 16 – The commodification of leisure and wellness

PART IV: Refusal and reciprocity: A new way forward?
- Week 10: March 23 – Jobs vs environment: Just transitions
- Week 11: March 30 – Live to work or work to live?
- Week 12: April 6 – Creating a new path: Scholarly and creative work for the future
Policies and Expectations

In general: We’re gathering in this class in a challenging global time: in the intersecting acute and chronic crises of an ongoing pandemic, systemic inequality across economic and racial lines, accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss, and more. This means we’ll need to be flexible, patient, and brave—taking on challenging topics in a time of personal and professional/scholarly upheaval. That said, given these challenges, I think this course is more important than ever: we all need the tools to analyze the changing world around us—both to make sense of the unfolding events across the planet and to imagine new ways forward.

So, in this course, you can expect that I will strive to be fair, respectful, prepared, and responsive. In return, I anticipate you will be respectful of your classmates and of me and strive for academic integrity in all forms. I also expect you will engage in our offline activities, be prepared and on time for online classes, and meet deadlines for assignments—all to the best of your abilities, knowing you might be facing tough circumstances outside our virtual classroom. I hope that together we can foster a safe and engaging virtual space for thinking about big questions, and I will be relying on all of you to help create that space.

Unlike an in-person classroom, you’ll need to find your own strategies to limit distractions while in class: we’ll work together on this, but I hope that while in online classes, you’ll turn off your text/social media/email notifications, avoid scrolling on other websites, limit activities unrelated to the course as much as possible, and do your best to be present and attentive.

Online learning, recordings, and security: I’ve borrowed some of this guidance and cautionary note from a colleague, Dr. Ron Diebert (whose work we’ll learn from in our course this term), and some from the University of Toronto.

The global pandemic has forced us to radically transform the way we work, teach and learn. Our homes, wherever that is in the world, are now our new classrooms. However, there is something really important we need to discuss: If you are a citizen of another country, and/or accessing your courses at the University of Toronto from a jurisdiction outside of Canada, you remain subject to the laws of the country in which you are residing, or any country of which you have citizenship. You may be assigned readings or asked to discuss topics that are against the law in other nation-state jurisdictions. Your online activities may be monitored or surveilled from within the country where you are studying. There is nothing that the University of Toronto can do about this reality. You may be already familiar with this problem or this may be a new concern. Either way, it’s important that you know your local laws.

Students in mainland China: In order to provide access to UofT online resources for students and others residing in mainland China, the university has signed a contract with Alibaba for a network service. Chinese companies are required to operate in accordance with China’s cyber security laws and there is an inherent risk of monitoring for individuals in mainland China using any network solution. Unfortunately, there is no simple or secure alternative we can recommend to reduce your risks of connecting from mainland China.

Recordings:
This course, including your participation, will be recorded on video and will be available to students in the course for viewing remotely and after each session. Course videos and materials belong to your instructor, the University, and/or other source depending on the
specific facts of each situation, and are protected by copyright. In this course, you are permitted to download session videos and materials for your own academic use, but you should not copy, share, or use them for any other purpose without the explicit permission of the instructor. For questions about recording and use of videos in which you appear please contact your instructor.

Students may not create audio recordings of classes—with the exception of those students requiring an accommodation for a disability, who should speak to the instructor prior to beginning to record lectures. Students creating unauthorized audio recording of lectures violate an instructor’s intellectual property rights and the Canadian Copyright Act. Students violating this agreement will be subject to disciplinary actions under the Code of Student Conduct.

Course videos may not be reproduced or posted or shared anywhere other than the official course Quercus site and should only be used by students currently registered in the course. Recordings may be saved to students’ laptop for personal use. Because recordings will be provided for all lectures, students may not create additional audio or video recordings without written permission from the instructor. Permission for such recordings will not be withheld for students with accommodation needs.

**Backups and rough drafts:** You are strongly advised to keep rough drafts and backup copies of all assignments and essays you submit for this class. Also, please take a minute at the start of the term to set yourself a backup strategy. Whether it's a backup external hard drive, a web-based cloud service like Dropbox or Google Drive, or some other option, it's important that you have multiple copies of your work in the case of a hard drive failure or computer problem. In general, extensions will not be provided due to technical problems, although in a time of home-based work (where you have differing levels of internet connectivity and stable electricity, access to your own electronic devices, etc.), more flexibility will be available than usual.

**Names:** If the name on the official course registration list does not, for any reason, match the name by which you would like to be addressed, please let me know. I am not able to change official course lists, but I can call you by your preferred name in our email exchanges and in office hours. Please let me know the pronouns you use (mine are she/her).

Professional titles are a sign of respect in the academic world, but there are varying degrees of formality among scholars. I encourage you to start by calling all your professors by "Prof" or "Dr." [Last Name]; they can indicate if they'd be open to more informal exchanges. Some students like a more informal exchange, while others feel most comfortable with a formal distinction between their course instructors and their peers and friends. I tend to be open to a less formal environment, but also want to make sure all students feel comfortable. For our online course this semester, I'm happy to be called "Prof./Dr. Neville," or "Prof./Dr. Kate," whichever suits you best. Please sign your emails with the name you'd like me to call you by.

**Email and communication:** In a virtual course, email is more important than ever! I’ll do my best to respond quickly, but please note that I often only check email once a day and may not check on evenings and weekends. I am also in a different time zone for our online course, so our hours of emailing might not be aligned – please be patient and try your best to plan ahead. Please also use the Quercus discussion boards to communicate with each other, as you might be able to help answer your peers’ questions.
When you reach out by email, please:
- include the course code (ENV198) in the email subject heading;
- write from your University of Toronto email account or through the Quercus email function;
- treat emails as a professional form of communication—I anticipate you’ll use proper grammar, sentences, and formal greetings and sign-offs; you can expect the same from me.

**Writing and Research Support:** Research and written communication are core aspects of this course. As second-year students, I anticipate you are still learning how to write analytical research papers and engage in scholarly research; I encourage you to make use of the resources available in these areas, for instance, at the Writing Centres and UofT Libraries—e.g., [http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres). These centres have been operating online and remain available to students in virtual forms.

**Exceptions and Assistance:** The University has many resources to help students who need assistance, including: Accessibility Services, Students for Barrier-free Access, the Hart House Accessibility Fund, financial assistance, library resources, academic resources, health and counseling services, and peer mentoring systems. The University also is committed to providing allowances for religious observances. If you anticipate needing help with your coursework for academic and/or personal reasons, or you encounter unexpected challenges or crises during the term, please seek the support you need. This may include challenges with physical and mental health, securing food or housing, dealing with loss and grief, parenting or elder care or other care-giving, and more. If you do not know the options, do not hesitate to ask. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, even if you have not yet gone through all the official channels, it is best to let me know right away that you are seeking assistance and may need accommodations (you do not need to disclose the details of your situation to me).

I know that these services are usually overtaxed, and even more so at the present moment. I also recognize it can be difficult to secure support when you are facing acute or chronic crisis conditions. If there are ways we can amend course requirements to help you learn and succeed in this course, I am open to discussions (without requiring specific details of your situation)—please try to contact me in advance to let me know you require or would benefit from accommodations, and we can see what might be possible. (Please note that I’m also managing an unusual teaching situation, and this is a large class; I will do my best—but am still learning!)

A few helpful resources:
- Accessibility Services: [http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca/](http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca/)
- Health & Wellness: [http://healthandwellness.utoronto.ca/](http://healthandwellness.utoronto.ca/)
- Writing centres: [http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres)
- Religious accommodations: [http://uoft.me/religiousaccommodation](http://uoft.me/religiousaccommodation)
- Positive space (LGBTQ+ resources): [http://positivespace.utoronto.ca](http://positivespace.utoronto.ca)

**Academic integrity:** Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of Toronto is a strong signal of each student’s individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously, seeing these as serious academic offenses.

The seriousness of academic integrity really cannot be stressed enough. When you use ideas, evidence, or direct words from another scholar, you must cite that scholar. This is about giving credit where it is due, and also about helping readers of our work find out how our ideas were developed and where we found evidence to support our claims.
If you use someone else’s words, these must be in quotation marks, with the page number indicated. If you use someone else’s data, the citation must also include the page number for that information. If you use someone else’s ideas, summarized or paraphrased in your own words, you must cite that source. Changing a few words, or substituting synonyms is not the same as paraphrasing: you must substantially change the way in which an idea is expressed. Please consult the library resources and seek help from the librarians and/or writing centres when working on your assignments and papers.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from your instructor or from other institutional resources.

- [http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm](http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm)
- [http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources)
- [http://www.utoronto.ca/academicintegrity/](http://www.utoronto.ca/academicintegrity/)

Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

- Using someone else’s ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement
- Using someone else’s words without using quotation marks
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor (please note that this includes not only full assignments, but also copying sections from an assignment handed in for another course)
- Making up sources or facts
- Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment.
- Looking at someone else’s answers during an exam or test
- Falsifying institutional documents or grades
- Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University

In this course, we may use the online system Turnitin for term papers: *Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.*
Course Schedule: This is a provisional syllabus and still subject to amendment.

PART I: WHAT IS WORK?

Week 1. Jan 12 – Idleness and industriousness—and the virtues of staying still?
This week is an introduction to the course and the themes we’ll examine throughout the term. We’ll open up an early dialogue on ideas of idleness, stillness, laziness, sloth, rest, recovery, slowness, alongside work, production, industriousness, efficiency, speed, and more. In a fast-paced, mobile world—but one recently (and in many places currently) under lock-down, these ideas and meanings are more important than ever.

Readings:

Week 2. Jan 19 – Sustaining and progressing?
What does work sustain—what is being sustained through that work? We pick up on discussions of refusal and of equity from last week to delve further into the ideas of development, progress, and sustainability. We consider how certain systems of labour and property have been built through dispossession, violence, exclusion, and exploitation, with particular attention to contemporary forms of capitalism. We also discuss who can opt out, whether this path is available to all, and what forms of inequality might be intensified through a commitment to progress.

Readings:

Readings for assignment 1, due Feb 2 (more details to be provided)

Week 3. Jan 26 – Silence and turning away
We turn this week to silence, and its rarity in a fast-paced world. What does it mean to stop doing, making, working, and instead pause and just be? What do we miss in the world when we omit listening? What happens if we refuse the call to work? And what might we recognize (or miss) if we acknowledge and embrace silence?

Readings:
- Perez, Craig Santos. 2014. ginen the micronesian kingfisher [i sihek] [poem]. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57826/ginen-the-micronesian-kingfisher-i-sihek
PART II: WHO WORKS, AND FOR WHOM?

Week 4. Feb 2 – Productive vs. generative work?
This week, we consider different kinds of work: what are the differences (if any) between waged work, care work, creative work, and other kinds of labour? What about work done not just by and for people, but by or in collaboration with or for other-than-human life? What are we doing and making when we work, and what are the consequences?

Readings:
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. Corn Tastes Better on the Honor System. *Emergence Magazine*, 3: https://emergencemagazine.org/story/corn-tastes-better/ (read online with multimedia form, or listen online to Kimmerer reading the work)

Week 5. Feb 9 – The sharing economy vs. gifting practices: What is being exchanged?
This week, we consider different economic models of exchange, considering the role of labour (whose labour, to what ends, with what rewards) in these dynamics. Drawing on a range of worldviews and political economy models, we interrogate “sharing” and “gig” economies, alongside ideas of reciprocity and gifting.

Readings:

READING WEEK – NO CLASS – FEB 16

Week 6. Feb 23 – Taming nature? The displaced burdens of control
This week we examine what burdens and harms are displaced onto others—other people, other places—by a renewed commitment to certain forms of production. Does technology solve this? We consider how efforts to control nature, contain uncertainty, and even address environmental damage, come with costs that are always borne somewhere, by someone.

Readings:
PART III: RESILIENCE, REST, AND JUSTICE

Week 7. March 2 – Lying fallow: Recovery in an overburdened world
Is rest the opposite of work? Are rest and work intertwined? This week, we look at ideas of recovery and of lying fallow, considering how these are entangled with production, generation, and creation.

Readings:

Week 8. March 9 – Efficiency vs. redundancy?
This week we interrogate the seeming virtue of “efficiency,” considering how the push to reduce the balance of inputs to outputs often creates environmental harm. We consider the popular appeal to “lean in” to work as a feminist response to ongoing gender gaps in industrialized/capitalist labour forces. We address how attempts to both (paradoxically) minimize and enable labour can reinforce social and environmental inequality and injustice.

Readings:

Week 9. March 16 – The commodification of leisure and wellness
In this week, we turn to questions of ethics of care, and especially the labour involved in caregiving and caretaking relationships. The focus on self-care as a response to overburdened lives has meant, for many, a turn to consumerism; we consider instead how networks, communities, and wonder might provide paths to wellness in challenging times.

Readings:

PART IV: REFUSAL AND RECIPROCITY: A NEW WAY FORWARD?

Week 10. March 23 – Jobs vs environment: Just transitions
This week, we consider the false dichotomy of a “jobs versus environment” debate, and—drawing on themes discussed in previous weeks—consider how different labour alliances might support and catalyze change, what different forms of political economy might mean for labour in the future.

Readings:
- Cassidy, John. 2020 (February 3). Can We Have Prosperity without Growth? *The New Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/10/can-we-have-prosperity-without-growth
- Watch the short video on Iron and Earth: https://www.ironandearth.org/ (2:27min)

**Week 11. March 30 – Live to work or work to live?**
This week, we turn to both the pressures for overwork—specifically conditions of social and economic precarity—as well as strategies to change social systems of wage-labour work, and what changing these conditions might mean for the environment and our communities. We return to readings from early in the term to re-investigate their ideas of refusal, autonomy, and control.

Readings:

**Week 12. April 6 – Creating a new path: Scholarly and creative work for the future**
In our final week of class, we’ll spend our time sharing the work we’ve co-created to deepen our collective understanding of the relationships between work, life, security, precarity, equity, and the environment.

Readings:
- This week, you’ll be asked to read some of the materials chosen by your classmates for our anthology. Materials tbd.