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AIR——EXPERIENCE——AESTHETICS

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Understanding atmosphere as the social and affective mode of air, this issues focuses on atmosphere as a means of relational experience. We begin with Eva Horn's article on the theme of air as a social medium, progressing to the phenomenological and affective theories of atmosphere(s), before conceptualizing and unpacking the disciplinary contexts and applications of atmosphere and the broader themes of ecology in the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

ATMOSPHERE

Vol. I / Issue I

FALL 2020

Cover Design by Chris Fernald
Photograph by Jessie Alperin

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ATMOSPHERE

Volume One, Issue One

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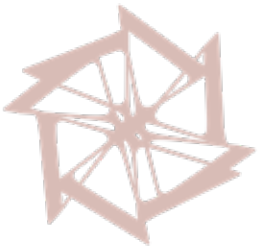

EDITORIAL BOARD

OVERVIEW

Venti: Air, Experience, and Aesthetics invokes both the number 'twenty' and 'the winds.' Conceived in the year 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLACK LIVES MATTER protests, the journal is a forum for discussions centered on the year's foregrounding of air, its related themes, and historical, interdisciplinary, and critical resonances. Venti asks: how do we become aware of something invisible and of things that are always in the air — such as the air itself? Investigating this query in a series of thematic issues, *Venti* explores the indexical qualities of air and our awareness of it through effects and affects.

Venti's inquiries into the field of the atmospheric humanities unfold through a series of multidisciplinary readings on a range of topics. Attempting to fulfill the impossible task of grounding air, *Venti* strives to do so through the unfolding of questions and answers within each particular issue and across all twenty. Containing interdisciplinary investigations and concluding each issue with a thematic definition allows *Venti* to become not only a collective but also a collection, acknowledging and preserving relevant approaches to understanding the world and its atmosphere today.

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Dedication

2020 has been host to multiple crises in the air. They are all too familiar by now: amidst global climate catastrophe, a virus that targets our lungs has affected lives, economies, and sharply refigured our social and political atmospheres. Simultaneously, the death of a Black man at the hands of the police has laid bare the conditions of austerity and violence that the United States' racialized poor must endure.

Though having inspired many who believe in a future where people might one day be allowed to breathe easy, these tragedies continue to stifle the air of thousands across the globe. We take this moment to thank medical workers for their tireless efforts to heal us from a devastating pandemic; we thank those who continue to do the work and speak out, holding us all in bated breath for the change we know is yet to come. We also take a moment of silence to recognize and remember all those who have lost their breath in 2020.

It is to these people, and to those who love and continue to fight for them — for all of us — that *Venti* is humbly dedicated.

We recognize these events could neither be fully spoken to nor accounted for by a dedication. At its best, intellectual dialogue supplements and informs action. *Venti*, in its simple bid to think about the air, might be just one tool among many for weathering this tragic, tempestuous, yet hopeful moment.

As we continue to move through the topic of air, we believe it is our duty not only to mourn but to also derive inspiration.

Preface

Picturing Atmosphere

Kate Moger

"We can take the story apart, we can find out how the bits fit, how one part of the pattern responds to the other; but you have to have in you some cell, some gene, some germ that will vibrate in answer to sensations that you can neither define, nor dismiss."

-Vladamir Nabokov on Kafka's Metamorphosis[1]

Atmosphere is difficult to imagine, existing as more of a feeling than a concrete concept. To write about atmosphere is to embark upon the difficult task of pinning down a concept that is, quite literally, up in the air. Philosopher Gernot Böhme describes atmosphere, those feelings and tensions saturating the space around us, as "suspended in the air."[2] Similar to mood lighting or perfume, atmosphere charges the air with a certain attitude that inhabits and shapes our experience. It describes the feeling that forms between subjects and objects in a specific place at a specific time. In its most literal sense, atmosphere refers to a meteorological concept: the gases that surround our Earth and, by extension, each and every one of us. Atmosphere is not just in the air, it *is* the air.

There are a number of connections between air, breath, and speech within our colloquialisms; pretension is "hot air" while small talk is "shooting the breeze." We inhale air and exhale language. The interrelations of air, atmosphere, and language make it somewhat ironic that, when sitting down to write this preface, I found that words were not enough. I turned to the American photographer Alec Soth's elegiac monograph *Niagara* because images can provide a way of expressing atmosphere that language alone cannot.[3] It seems that to talk about atmosphere is really to talk *around* it. The inarticulable becomes identifiable as a negative space.

The first time I encountered *Niagara* was in 2016. I ran into a friend of mine visiting New York City, himself a photographer, in a cramped subway car. As we attempted to cram a year of our lives into a 45-minute commute, he pulled out his phone and showed me a series of images that — even displayed on a cracked LCD screen — affected me deeply. Since then I have spent countless hours with Soth's monograph, each time a revelation. The entire collection of photographs, taken between 2004 and 2005 across both sides of Niagara Falls, emanates a looming sense of heartsick longing. The topography is studded by wedding chapels, pawn shops, and hotels with names that sound as though they are making some sort of promise, like the Happiness Inn or the Bonanza Motel. These faded signs flank drab structures and nondescript, outdated interiors: two polyester towels twisted into swans resting on a drab floral coverlet, the kitschy wall of mirrors surrounding a heart-shaped jacuzzi. It is clear, looking at these images that are both overflowing and entirely empty, that Soth's central concern lies not entirely with the subjects of his photographs but, rather, with the construction of an atmosphere.

The first photograph in *Niagara* (Figure 1) confronts the viewer head-on with an orderly two-story red brick structure. Its cheery yellow doors, their faces punctuated by painted white diamonds, serve as funky remnants of a tourism boom that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than a glamorous destination for young lovers to elope, the tawdriness of the towns surrounding Niagara Falls reflects a general state of economic decline. The American side of the falls has double the national average for unemployment; a specter of loss underlies the book as almost a condition of the landscape. The retro zig-zag ironwork baluster, also painted white, formally echoes the white parking divider lines cutting across the black asphalt, extending toward the viewer like fingers outstretched in desire.

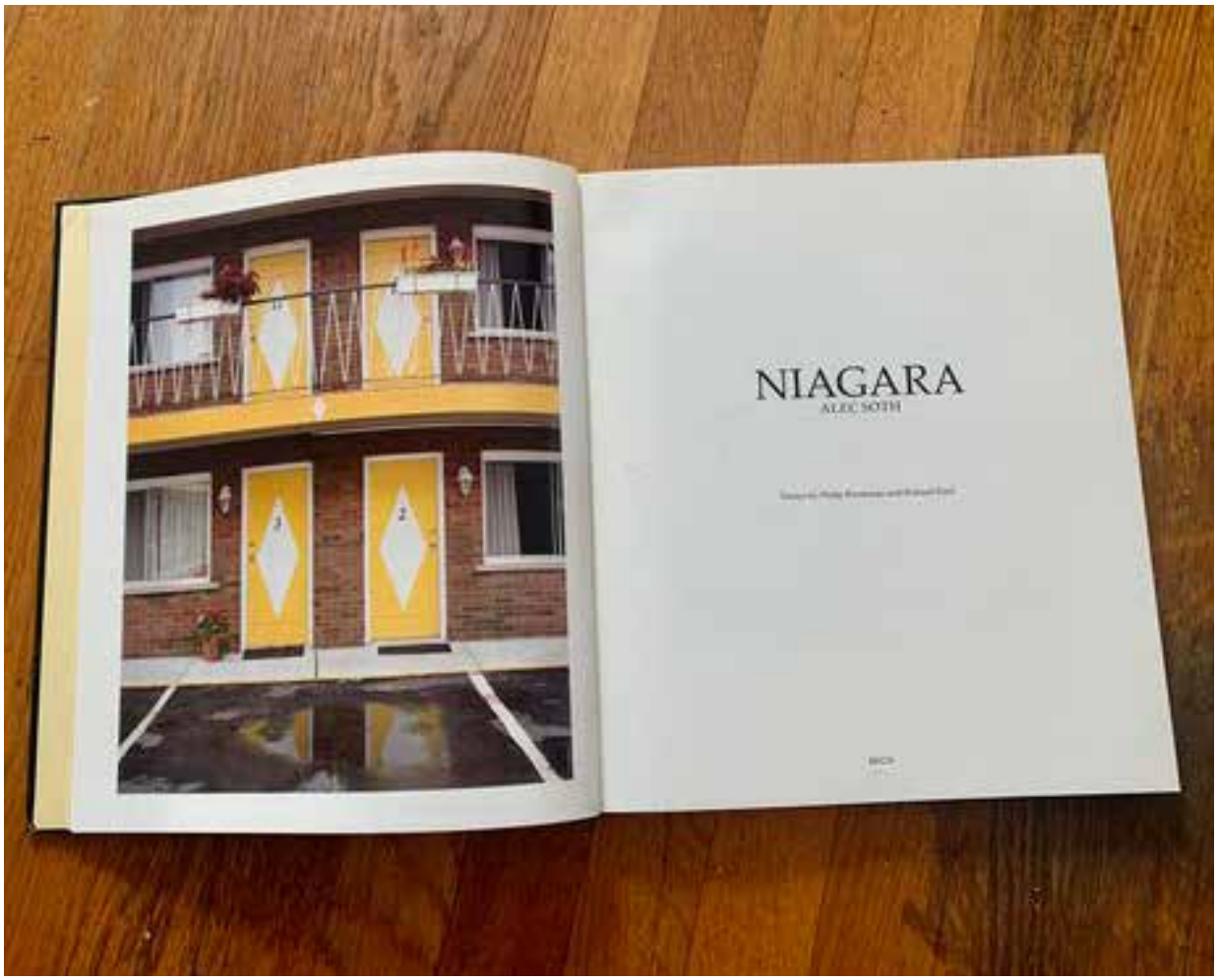

Figure 1. Reading Soth's *Niagara*. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. *Casino interior*, Las Vegas, Nevada. Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

The melancholia throughout *Niagara* dominates and renders — to borrow American Professor Timothy Morton's term — dissonant spaces, characters, and objects into "one all-encompassing rhythm or hue."[4] The architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown famously noted in *Learning from Las Vegas* how the dimly lit, maze-like interiors (Figure 2) of the strip's casinos manipulate time and space to disorient their inhabitants and encourage, by definition, reckless gambling.[5] The casino interior, like the pages of *Niagara*, smoothes out inconsistencies and links disparate elements to achieve physical and social unification. The nineteenth-century English writer and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton called this effect of atmosphere "deception" or "phantasmagoria."[6] Soth acknowledges that his work is not necessarily an accurate social portrayal of the towns. He has always maintained that he is a poet, not a documentary photographer. His dysphoric photographs seem to ask; What will remain once all this is gone? What does it mean when we are all distant and can't be together? What do we turn to when the future evaporates into thin air?

Over the past few months, the SARS CoV-2 crisis has made us ask ourselves these kinds of questions daily. We socially distance from our families, co-workers, and places of worship, as we do from strangers in the self-checkout line. The future is unclear for many of us as quarantine in the United States continues to limp forward with no end in sight. Wearing a mask has made walking down the street a meditation on the unseen particles that we assimilate into our bodies with each breath. We are aware now, more than ever, that the air surrounding us is thick with the invisible. In "Airborne: Air as a Social Medium," Eva Horn probes the unseen social forces that blow in with the wind and buffet our world in the age of coronavirus. Air, by itself, is invisible and inapparent and yet we are regularly made aware of its presence. In his article "It Blows where it Wishes: The Wind as a Quasi-Thingly Atmosphere," Tonino Griffero explores forces like the wind that jolt our recognition of the air around us as an ephemeral, haptic form of atmospheric communication. The escalating effects of climate change, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the SARS CoV-2 pandemic are forces that cause both an embodied awareness of our presence in the world similar to the haptic qualities of weather events and a recognition that atmosphere is a social space.

Mark Cheetham asserts in "Atmospheres of Art and Art History" that weather events bring the climate (otherwise invisible and unfelt like air) to our attention through their immediacy and abnormality. Cheetham in his examination of "ecological art" and "eco art history," claims a powerful role for the aesthetic as a potential disruptor of the status quo. He imagines a new, ecologically-conscious approach to art history that responds to the shifting and — since the beginning of the Great Acceleration in the eighteenth century — increasingly devastated environment around us. Sugata Ray's article "Art History and the Political Ecologies of Air," suggests another means of displacing the entrenched biases of the discipline. Focusing on the writing of the Moravian-Austrian art historian of Buddhist and Hindu art Stella Kramrisch, Ray examines ways that *prana* (a form of yogic breathing) can be linked to representations of the body in Indian sculpture. The act of breathing, and by extension the atmosphere, becomes "a locus of political struggle in the early twentieth century, in turn linking art history to struggles over subjectivity and agency." These new forms of atmospheric art history have the ability to re-invest the discipline in our lived environments.

Working in this vein, Sara Gabler Thomas frames the oeuvre of Hatian-American author Edwidge Danticat, among other texts from the archipelagic Americas, within a tactile and social understanding of humidity. The feeling of air, thick with moisture, emerges for Thomas on both the level of content, as part of the narrative, and the level of tone, as a global feeling or attitude. Humidity sparks a relationship between a specific body, its sensory experience, and its environment. Thomas's literary analysis positions humidity as a force to escape established literary conventions by empowering the specific narratives of non-Western bodies. Frantz Fanon, as cited by Ellen Tani in "Darkening Atmospheres," described colonialism as "atmospheric violence" and the colonial state as a breathing body. The air around us, once again, is made tangible as a force acting upon us. In her article, Tani analyzes works by the African American conceptual artist Lorna Simpson that critique the normalized atmospheric condition of racism in the United States. The "racial climate," imagined by Simpson

through her body of work "Darkening," challenges the neutrality of the atmosphere as merely meteorological or purely affective.

"Eco Art History," *prana*, humidity, and Simpson's racial climate emphasize that, although invisible and intangible to some bodies, racism and colonialism buffet and act upon all of us. However, only certain, less-privileged bodies are made aware of its presence through atmospheric pressures. Yubai Shi explores how an oppressive public policy that is only sensed by certain bodies can be interpreted by artists and made sensible to a broader range of bodies in "Shuai Yang's *Wombs:* Affective Interpretations of the One-Child Policy." Shuai Yang's *Womb* series directly responds to China's One-Child Policy, perceptible by the women who were forced to use IUDs as an invisible yet physical presence within their own bodies and as an absence of children unable to be conceived. Shi posits that, while the history of the policy is well-known, Yang's sculptural installation offers a different perspective through affective sensorial experience. This alternative to the historical record provides a more evocative voice to an entire generation of women.

In grappling with the crisis of our contemporary environment, both the ecological and social, it is easy to slip into the elegiac mode. Rather than indulging in this fatalism, Jayne Lewis searches for an alternative in "Unmourning Atmosphere: Mary Webb's Shadow Play and an Alternative to Elegy" by drawing upon the Shropshire novelist's concept of local atmospheres. These atmospheres are specific and intimate rather than expansive and all-encompassing. Webb's novels weave characterizations into mutually transformative atmospheres that are fleeting and predominantly sensorial. The rejection of the mournful in Webb's novels transform our relationship to the atmospheric into an anticipatory embrace of the unsustainable. The current moment is no longer belated; it races forward expectantly through a discrete body's experience of a specific space in time.

Andres Rauh claims in "Changing Tensions: Viral Atmospheres as Quality Compass" that this atmospheric awareness of the now is most apparent within transitional spaces. The network of embodied feeling and ephemeral sensation is replaced by an experience of locales and temporalities compressed into the pixels of our laptops and smartphones. Putting on a mask to leave our house emphasizes the difference between the comfort and safety of our private spaces and newly-strange public space. Marco Caracciolo's article, "Strange Times and Weird Atmospheres," explores the literary genre of the New Weird as a means for navigating our tense atmosphere. Rather than try to escape our discomfort, we must embrace the weirdness and redefine human-nonhuman relations. Facing this decentering of the anthropocentric inspires a dread that, like the elegiac, refuses a horizon of potential in favor of a mournful retrospective focus on the past. By embracing the strange, and relinquishing the illusions of control over our environment, we embody an atmospheric way of being — moving forward in a world of uncertainty.

While reflecting upon the articles in this issue, I found myself continually coming back to Soth's The Falls #55, a sweeping view of Niagara Falls (Figure 3) illuminated by a moody pink glow. In the back of the book, accompanying the image captions, Soth notes that the rainbow of changing lights has illuminated the waterfall almost every night since 1925, with the exception of blackouts during World War II. There is a certain irony in the artificial lighting, which expends massive amounts of electricity, becoming the waterfall's "natural" state. Humanity's dominion over the ineffable transforms it into a kitschy kaleidoscope. Looking at the photograph, one can imagine the darkened falls during the war as a manifestation of a national atmosphere: feelings of fear, paranoia, and patriotism hanging in the air. However, the darkness also reestablishes the sublime. Imagine standing above the black, inky abyss listening to torrents of water crash against rocks over a hundred feet below.

With the darkened Niagara Falls in mind, I wonder now what a history of human failure and ecological resilience would look like. The return of wildlife to the Chernobyl exclusion zone, thriving coral reefs growing on World War I shipwrecks, and the reduction of carbon emissions as a result of the SARS CoV-2 pandemic all belong in this canon. Returning to the beginning of this issue, as Horn aptly identifies, atmosphere is a social space extending beyond the human.

It exists in a grand in-between, one as ineffable as the wonder and majesty of Niagara Falls. Through Soth's photographs, we discover that atmosphere does not originate spontaneously within the individual viewer as a product of internal cognition, but also cannot be entirely attributed to the photographs or the subjects and environments pictured within them. These images invite a certain affective participation in the world, one that allows us to enter into an intermediary space. This dialogue between human and nonhuman forces escapes concrete description, vibrating in answer to those sensations that, as Nabokov claimed, we can neither define, nor dismiss. Enveloping us entirely and underlying our every experience, both a part of the natural world and extending beyond it, we find that atmosphere is ultimately too big for words.

Notes

1. Vladimir Nabokov, "Franz Kafka: 'The Metamorphosis,'" *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. p. 251.
2. Gernot Böhme, "The theory of atmospheres and its applications." (2014). p. 3
3. Alec Soth, *Niagara*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2006.
4. Timothy Morton, "Why ambient poetics? Outline for a depthless ecology." *The Wordsworth Circle*, 33 (1), 2002. pp. 52-56.
5. Robert Venturi, Brown D. Scott, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1972. pp. 49-51
6. Edward Bulwer-Lytton quoted by Friedlind Riedel in Jan Slaby & Christian von Scheve (eds.), *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2019. p. 85.

Kate Moger has a BA in Art History from Hunter College - CUNY in New York City. She is interested in questions of overflowing materiality, destabilized spectorial space, and the many afterlives of objects. She has published through SUNY New Paltz an essay that applies theories of suture and abjection to the Venetian Renaissance painter Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*.

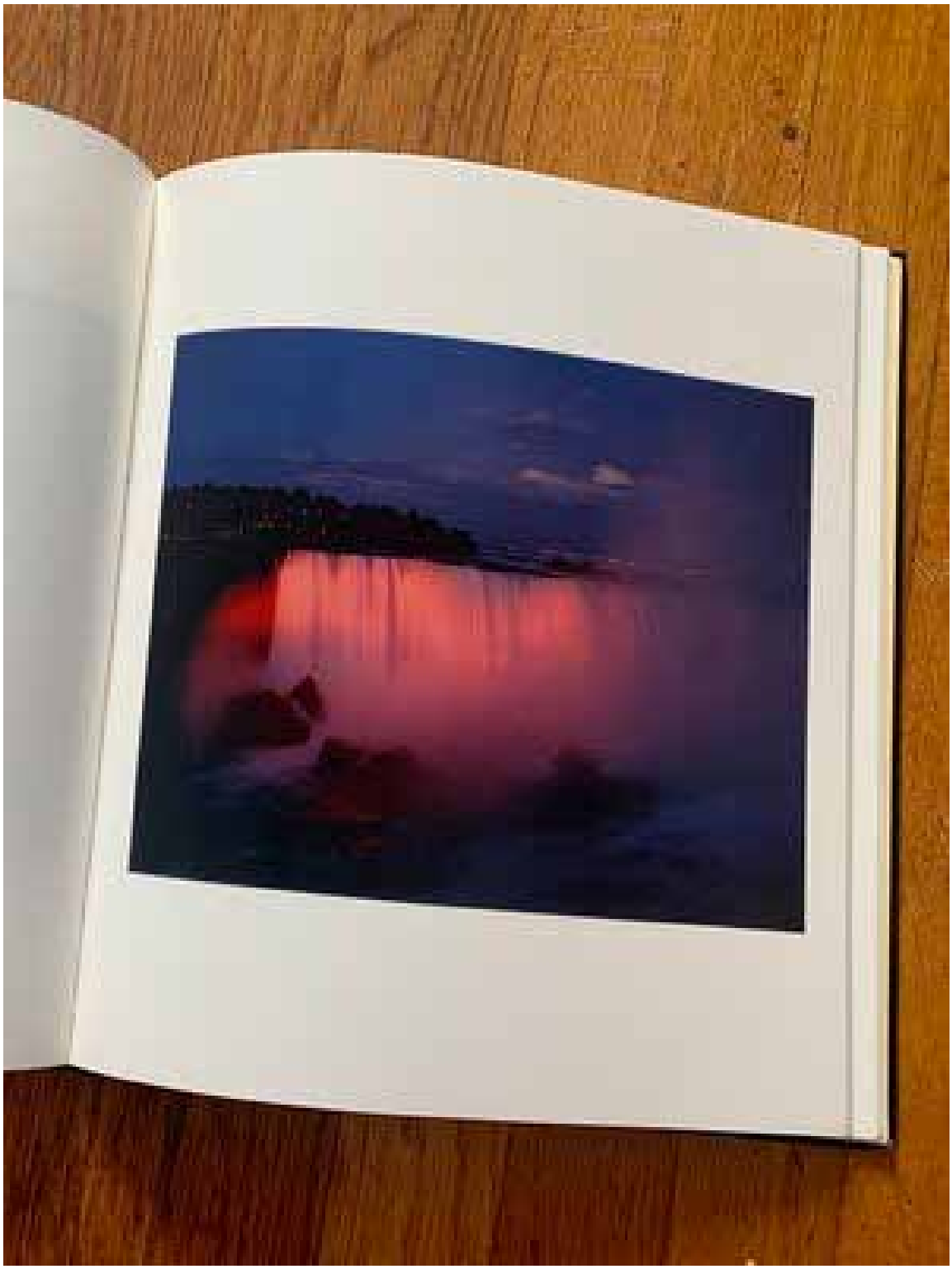

Figure 3. Reading Soth's *Niagara*. Photograph by the author.

People Near the Storm

James Engell

I foresaw a caravan go by in
Single-filed rich array, and dressed in
Silk and gaudy bright brutality, thin
Figures painted all around, demeaned in
  Squinting at leaders before, those walking
    Close behind, cordons winding, trailing from
    The dark to a black massed heart of storm.
      So they went. But some left to follow first
        Pressures, merely turning the ghost leaf back,
          Giving birds a last flight; their thirst and grass
        Waiting for rain from anvil-headed black.

Those remaining walked past all these, still to
  The storm, peering at their own line—wordless,
    Full of stops and cares, carrying their deceased
When they would topple and start to pitch through
      The airy trail; they tried remembering them.
  But the errant ones in open artfulness,
    Common dreamers perhaps with common dream,
      Fled instead to tops of breezes; and quick,
    And self-rising to the tempest, now seem
          To see a form or figure on the ridge
      Beyond the curtained rain, falling for the sick,
  But unheedful of their state; and above

Even that they could find clear winds
Continually blowing over peril, no less
Over calm, not waiting, but receptive,
With rites of fleeting grandeur staged for flesh.

Then again the line's full, and rife with talk,
Curt murmurings and half attempts from those
Who've returned; the squall is up, sudden
Shift, a writhing, break, and pours of rain
Swamping in confusion those dumb again who walk,
Pulling hoods to heads where their necks have froze
In stares as questions that are asking, "When?"
My children have been late out into the night,
They're under the low scudding clouds:
Could one say succor, help, and not feel right?

The storm moves, or there, do the people?
The sight's surely been a dream gone
Like it was not, unheard, inviting some
Interpretation, futile if only
Found again in transitory flight.

James Engell is Gurney Professor of English and Professor of Comparative Literature, a member of the Committee on the Study of Religion, and a faculty associate of the Harvard University Center for the Environment. He has directed dissertations in American Studies, as well as Romance Languages & Literatures (French).

Color copper engraving of Doctor Schnabel [i.e Dr Beak], a plague doctor in seventeenth-century Rome, published by Paul Fürst, ca. 1656.

Air has long been associated with health and disease. Affirming this, we need look no further than the disquieting images of seventeenth-century plague doctors, whose unsettling, beak-like masks were thought to protect their wearers from the dangers of miasma, "bad air." In "Airborne: Air as a Social Medium," Eva Horn acknowledges the ways in which we proceed with this same line of thought today, in the midst of an airborne pandemic, and how we now use — or disuse — factual science to uphold our systemic, social beliefs. Looking specifically at the effects of COVID-19 on media and interpersonal communication, Horn cautions us to remember that air, as a topic of discussion, also serves as a vessel for society's ills. Unlike plague doctors, we can not wave a wand through the breeze and pray for the dissipation of pathogens — whether politically, economically, or in terms of our collective health, we have no choice but to breathe in the social atmosphere around us.

- The Editors

Airborne:
Air as a Social Medium

Eva Horn

Since antiquity, it has been the winds that bring disease. In Hippocrates' writings on epidemics, certain kinds of winds were said to transport particular varieties of fever. According to Hippocratic medicine, the seasons and the particular courses they take — whether it be a markedly cold or excessively mild winter, for example — were responsible for the prevalence of certain sicknesses in a region. And there was of course the widely held belief that the local climate could be either beneficial or harmful to one's health. For centuries and across many different cultures, it has been the air that was thought to bring disease. In traditional Chinese medicine, fever is referred to as *shangfeng*, which means "injured by the wind," and in Indonesian the term for a cold is *masuk* angin, or "the wind has entered." In Europe, people believed for centuries that the soil, and in particular wet areas like bogs or stagnant waters, were the source of foul and harmful gases. In the cities, sewage canals, cesspools, tanneries, and even cemeteries were suspected of spreading disease with their stench.

And so, long before the air pollution of today, the air was the subject of the worst health fears. It contained the evaporations of the earth, and other bodies, the by-products of putrefaction processes (so-called "miasmas" or "exhalations"), flakes of skin, small stones, plants, sweat, dust, insect larvae, pollen, seeds, fats, gases, steam, sulfur, salts, ash, and much more. Neither in the city nor the country were you thought to be safe from these vapors, which is why there was a flood of advice on how to protect yourself from them: the frequent airing out of a room (or precisely not), fragrant essences to be held under the nose, not sleeping facedown, allowing the north winds into your house but by no means the south winds. The Sirocco, it was thought, could trigger contagious disease, insanity, and outbreaks of violent crime. The air, by this regard, not only carries diseases from human to human (as today we know). The wind itself was seen as a pathogen.

As outdated as these medical theories may sound, they express something that still holds true today: air is not only a medium of the physical life of humans, animals, and plants. It is also a medium of society.[1] To socialize with someone means not only to breathe the same air but also to occupy the same atmosphere as they do. It means sharing something with each other that consists not only of moods and emotions, but is situated somewhere between culture and nature, such as aerosols, particulate matter, body odors, CO_2 — and of course germs. This makes air, in the words of Bruno Latour, not simply a "matter of fact," a factual given, but also — as we have discovered since the advent of air pollution and climate change — a "matter of concern," a contentious issue of political debate. Air is society; society is the shared experience of "being in the air."[2]

In Adalbert Stifter's short story, "Granit," written in the middle of the nineteenth century, we read of the plague: "We do not know where it came from: Did people bring it with them, did it come in the mild spring air, or have winds and rainclouds brought it? No matter, it has come..."[3] Is it the people or the weather? There was beautiful spring weather in mid-March when COVID-19 came to Vienna, the city where I live. In the initial days of the Austrian lockdown, it was seductively warm, the city was in full bloom, and the Viennese swarmed out into the parks and forests. Friends shared a Coca-Cola, small groups enjoyed a picnic, young men stood smoking together. No one complied very closely with the order issued by the police to only take walks alone or with members of the same household. At the very moment of its disappearance, I realized that being social means sharing the same air — even at the risk of becoming infected.

SARS CoV-2 is an airborne pathogen, as we know from the crash course on epidemiology conveyed to us by the media and politics.[4] It spreads primarily through fine droplets emitted in a cough or a sneeze and can hover, as recent studies have shown, in the air as an aerosol for quite some time. COVID-19 is a sickness that floats through the air. And so, the air, in all of its variants — as seasonal weather, as a medium of transmission, but also as a suddenly declining level of air pollution — forms a kind of omnipresent backdrop to the COVID-19 crisis. Over and over we heard epidemiologists — but also non-epidemiologists like Donald Trump — exasperate on the question of whether the wave of infections could wane with the onset of spring.[5] Once it got warmer, the American president prophesized in early March, the whole thing would be over. Many contagious diseases do in fact have seasonal rhythms, most famously the flu. But the plague often arrived in spring, being transmitted by fleas that only become active at temperatures above 10 degrees Celsius. Pestilences are like the weather conditions. Only COVID-19 — thank God! — is not the plague and has so far, evidently, not kept to the seasonal rule.

On the contrary, pandemics quite often cause the dissolution of every rule and regularity, including social ones. They are a completely different type of catastrophe from earthquakes, floods, or even war. In these cases, disaster sociology has observed, societies often come together in a spirit of spontaneous solidarity, which while fragile and often fleeting, can for the moment create an uplifting, productive energy. People survive because they help each other. Rebecca Solnit described this phenomenon as "A Paradise Built in Hell," a groundswell of social closeness, pragmatism, and individual heroism.[6] Contagious diseases, by contrast, affect not only individual bodies but also the social fabric itself. Helping is dangerous, if not deadly for the helper — and often of no effect for the patient. Stifter said of the plague with brutal laconicism: "The children no longer loved their parents, nor the parents their children, they just threw them into the ditch and walked away."[7] Diseases such as the plague or Ebola hardly allow for taking care of the sick (except in massive protective suits). And they prohibit taking final leave of the deceased in customary burial rituals.[8] Contagious diseases isolate people, as we all have learned in the past months. Not only were we not allowed to touch each other, we were not allowed to breathe the same air. That is the essence of *social distancing*.

It is an irony of history that through the radical reduction of air traffic, automobile and industrial emissions, and not least of all the sharp drop in production of goods of all kinds, air quality has suddenly improved worldwide. In China, the levels of harmful particulate matter fell by 25% during the shutdown. Some cities saw blue skies for the first time in 20 years.[9] There, the deaths that COVID-19 causes are counteracted by the temporary decline in deaths from respiratory and heart disease that come as a result of the heavy air pollution. While you can perceive good or bad air, at least to a certain extent, through the senses, through smell, through the feeling of breathing, or simply by the sight of the grayish-yellow smog, there is another pathology of the air that is completely imperceptible: the share of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, or climate change. The imperceptibility is what SARS-CoV-2 and climate change have in common: an undetectable component in the air.

Climate change, and the numerous other massive changes to the earth system which we now summarize under the keyword Anthropocene (species extinction, land use, the ozone hole, ocean acidification, changes in the phosphorous and nitrogen cycle, toxins in the environment and much more) is, as I wrote some years ago, an imperceptible *catastrophe without event*.[10] A stealthily creeping shift in the factors which make up the highly complex earth system and which contributed to the unusual stability that characterized the Holocene epoch. The COVID-19 crisis, by contrast, is a *catastrophe as an event* per se: the sudden, traumatic collapse of many of the structures that have shaped and defined our social and private life. This means not only our jobs and our workplaces by which we make a living, but also the social networks and activities which determine who we are. Now we are realizing: sharing the air with others was in many respects a defining aspect of our existence.

However, this social and economic existence of ours — as travelers, workers, or consumers — was one that, in turn, by way of climate change, air pollution, and the ozone hole, affected precisely that medium which it is based on: the air. The COVID crisis disrupts not only economic life, but also the rapidly accelerating, yet imperceptible process of

climate change. It forces us to pause, to break through routines and the lack of alternatives. It is — for good and for bad — a testing laboratory of political contingency. Now we see: everything can be different. For a brief and uncanny moment, the imperative of economic growth, the laws of the labor market, the necessity of working to the point of burnout, the inevitability of mass consumption and travel — all of that has proven to be optional. There are alternatives to them. Maybe in this way, COVID-19 provides an opportunity for reflection and change, and for training our sense of possibility. Before the crisis, any significant carbon tax was deemed inconceivable in most European countries, and, as we had repeatedly heard, with a view to the economy or the transport sector, "impossible to implement." And this despite the fact that, e.g. a carbon tax has been successfully implemented in British Columbia and Sweden.[11] By now we have learned that in the event of a grave threat to the population, much heavier things than a simple tax can be implemented, such as lockdowns, massive interventions in the national budget, and radical transformation in the way people work.

COVID-19 will continue to change our lives long after we are all immune, or dead. Perhaps this pandemic is a wicked, bitter ruse, a revenge of the air. It reminds us that it is a medium, a medium of life, but also of being social. The most individual, intimate necessity of breathing connects us both to a pandemic and to the planet's atmosphere. Yet, the consequences of climate change will make the effects of COVID-19 pale in comparison — but maybe only for our grandchildren. Whereas climate change — despite it being a known fact for 40 years — has only marginally managed to become a matter of concern, an occasion for radical measures and an internationally coordinated political effort, COVID-19 has at least achieved the former in one brutal, previously unimaginable coup. It is teaching us a lesson — and not only about inadequate disaster protection, the disadvantages of just-in-time production and globalized supply chains, the lack of political foresight, an idiotic skepticism of science, and our fragile healthcare systems. COVID-19 also reminds us of our political, economic, and individual scope of action. Once we return — and hopefully soon — to the social space of being together in the air, once we are back together at a table dining with friends and discussing with colleagues, we will have to put this lesson into practice. Until then: hold your breath.

Notes

1. Eva Horn, "Air as Medium," *Grey Room* 73 (Autumn 2018): 6–25.
2. Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, (Winter 2004): 225–248.
3. Adalbert Stifter, "Granit," in: ders., *Bunte Steine* [1853], Stuttgart 1994, p. 33.
4. Neeltje van Doremalen, Trenton Bushmaker and Dylan H. Morris, "Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1," Letter to the Editor, *New England Journal of Medicine* (17 March 2020): n.p.
5. Andrew Freedman and Jason Samenow, "Coronavirus may have a seasonal cycle, but that doesn't mean it will go away this summer, experts warn," *Washington Post*, 11 March 2020; [online]: https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/03/11/coronavirus-may-have-seasonal-cycle-that-doesnt-mean-it-will-go-away-this-summer-experts-warn/
6. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, (New York and London: 2009).
7. Stifter, "Granit," p. 34.
8. Amy Maxmen, "How the Fight Against Ebola Tested a Culture's Traditions," *National Geographic*, 20 Jan. 2015.
9. Lauren Summer, "Why China's Air Has Been Cleaner During The Coronavirus Outbreak," *NPR*, 4 March 2020.
10. Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe. Disaster Imagination in the Modern Age*, (New York: 2018). On the Anthropocene see Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *Anthropocene – Key Issues for the Humanities* (New York/Oxon: 2020).
11. Several concrete examples have long proven that it is possible, and that it even works well. See Government of British Columbia: British Columbia's Carbon Tax, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/climate-change/planning-and-action/carbon-tax

Translated by Peter Rigney

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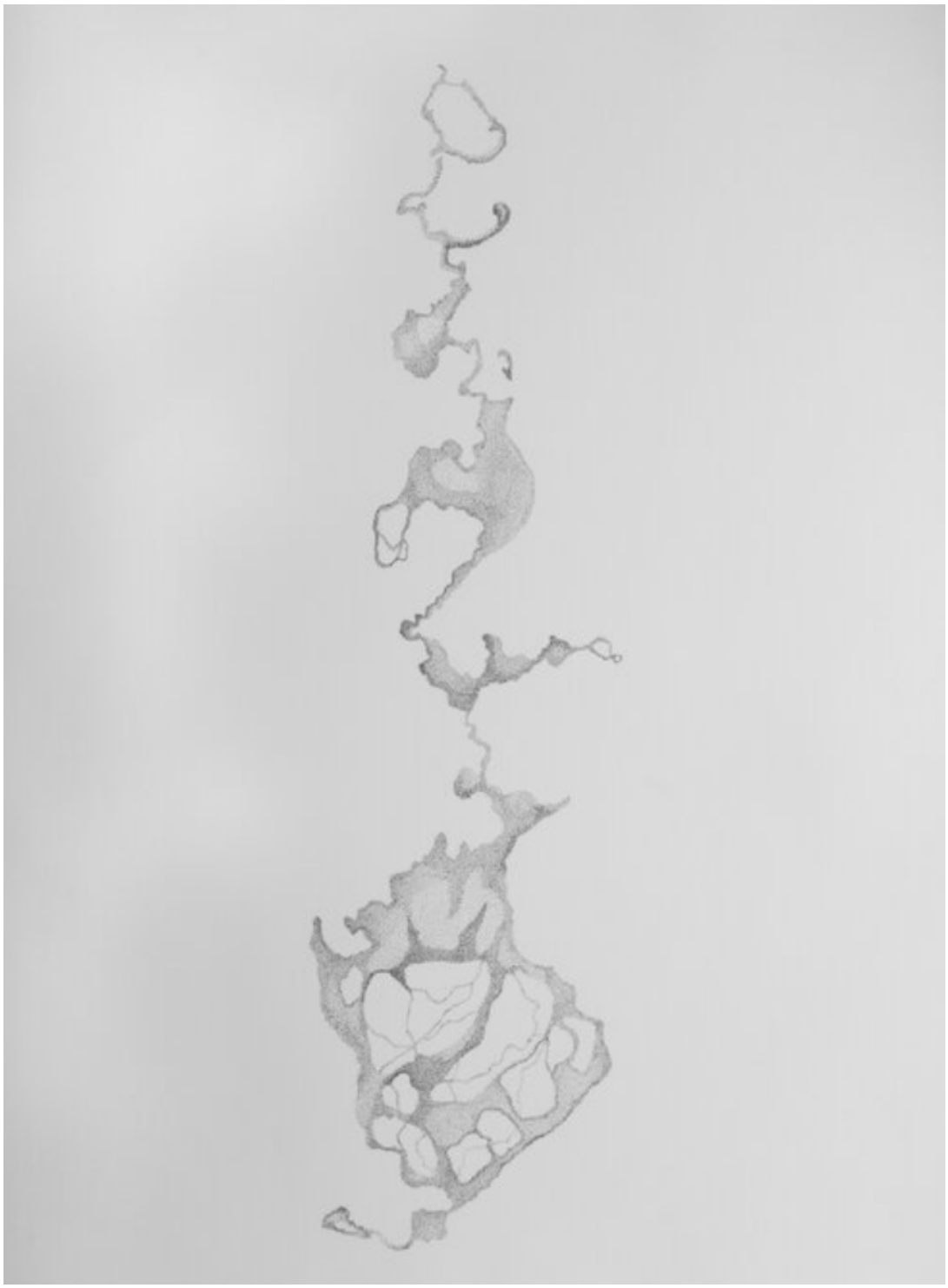
Emotional Landscapes

Emily Fritze



Interspersed throughout the inaugural issue of *Venti* are ink drawings created using a stippling technique by emerging artist, Emily Fritze. At first glance, these pieces look simplistic, wisps of smoke floating over the paper. Continuing to look, patterns and texture emerge in the soft curves and winding lines. Each piece has intentional absence, where the white space that fills the majority of the paper is interrupted by the soft subtleness of the ink. This binary of cream paper and dark, yet vaporous forms belies the traditional harsh contrast between positive and negative space and instead composes the page as gentle and nurturing. Entitled *Emotional Landscapes*, Fritze uses daily intuitive drawing to trace the "emotional movement" in her body. Combined, the series title and the subject blend two of the oldest, most classical, forms of artistic creation — sketches of the human body and the landscape.

Portrayals of the body typically start as images of rough, round drawings of limbs and torsos. From Michelangelo to Manet, the forms are jotted quickly to capture movement and structure that can be later elevated into rich, realistic musculature and flesh. Fritze's forms use the subtlety of shape and shade to suggest particular parts of the body, "remnants of feelings that have come and gone, proof of their existence in [her] life and in [her] body." These emotional remnants take shape on paper in weaving and overlapping lines, at times resembling bone-like structures, drawing parallels to a vertebra or a collarbone. Spotlighted separately from the rest of the body, these shapes abstract the human form into its component parts, a different sort of portraiture than those of centuries past.

The landscape in the history of art is a visceral, textural image of sweeping Italian vistas or lush English countryside, packed Parisian streets or celebrations of the American West. Here, Fritze expands the medium of landscape from the exterior world to the world within the individual. Flesh and bone act as dirt and stone, the emotions the current of a flowing stream we follow across the paper. Tracing the emotions through her body, Fritze creates the sweeping terrain of her sketched landscapes, an internal mountain range made external for us to view.

When installed in the Graham Gund Gallery in 2019, the experience is more restrained, stripped back. A selection of the *Emotional Landscapes* are displayed opposite a set of ceramic "nests." hanging directly into the gallery space and exuding at times haunting, at times comforting sounds from Fritze's life while she created this series. People chatting, guitar strumming, birdsong and wind in the trees, even a flowing river reflect the moment in which they were made for the artist. Even calling these ceramic speakers "nests" adds another component reminiscent of the natural world that the shapes seem to replicate on paper, floating in the air above hardwood floors rather than a bird's nest tucked into a tree trunk. These sounds fill the air with a new layer of ambiance, breaking through the typical silence of the gallery's white cube, just as the textured cream paper with dark ink interrupted its stark white walls. The sound and drawings together create the intimacy of confiding in a friend, not with words but by showing the strength of the pools of feelings flowing through your limbs. They create a gentle but specific atmosphere for the viewer to take part in, enter and then leave again.

The sounds mirror the ink's swirls and collects together in spindling curves and dense collections over the paper. From a distance, these patterns of emotions could be mistaken for a topographic map of rivers winding through the Earth's surface. The fluidity of the strokes and diffusive sounds bring the idea of the aqueous image from paper to ear, from the material artifacts of sight, touch, and sound to the airy realms of imagination and feeling. However, the images capture not a leaf's trajectory through a forest creek or morning wind but the emotions that flowed through the artist on that particular day. They become a portrait of that moment, that feeling, and the atmosphere.

Emotional Landscapes series, Ink on paper, sound compositions, 22.5" x 30"

Written by Jenna Wendler

Artist Statement

Every day for the past year, I've intuitively drawn, with my eyes closed, the emotional movement I feel in my body from head to toe. I have collections of these drawings strewn around my apartment and studio, they've become remnants of feelings that have come and gone, proof of their existence in my life and in my body. Having made an archive of these drawings I've found that the ways in which their forms grow and shrink, darken and lighten, and curve and hollow, create patterns that help me understand my emotions, and where in my body I hold them. The meditative process of making these maps each day has become a ritual for me, and these drawings have become a language.

For this piece, I chose seven meditative drawings whose original forms I have expanded with a stippling technique. In the gallery space, the sounds that play from ceramic nests hung in front of the drawings. The sound nests and the drawings are meant as a call and response. The sounds of my life, of friends laughing and the river moving, have deeply and beautifully influenced the ways I've felt and the shapes that the drawings take. While I began this project from an introspective place, I've come to realize that it is more about connection than anything else. Understanding how I carry emotion in my body means understanding how it originates, how we affect each other, and how we relate. Pairing sound with my drawings is my attempt at reaching outwards, of inviting the viewer into my own emotional landscape and asking them to think about their own.

All works are for sale, please contact emilybfritze@gmail.com for more information, or go to her website, emilyfritze.net.

Emily Fritze is a recent graduate of Kenyon College with a B.A. in Studio Art and a Minor in Anthropology. She is a multimedia artist. Her work has been shown in The Gund Gallery & Horvitz Hall in Gambier, OH and in the Schnormeier Gallery in Mt. Vernon, OH.

Jenna Wendler is a first year graduate student of Art History at American University. She is interested in art from the Renaissance to the Modern period, especially women artists, portrayals of gender, domesticity, everyday life, and portraiture.

Blue Topographies, Letterpress prints, 8”x14”, 6”x10”

Edward Lear, "Plate 4: E.L. Continues to fly straight forward," *A Walk on a Wind on a Windy Day*, 1860. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Public Domain.

The wind is, for this boldly ambulating protagonist, a very real thing indeed: in Edward Lear's short, playfully illustrated story "Walk on a Windy Day" (1860), portly and hirsute E.L. decides to take a walk on a windy day. Up he's plucked by the breeze, though, which carries him, through gooseflock and ether, to eventual oblivion. Pictured here is Lear's fourth narrative sketch (of nine), in which L., cheerfully, "continues to fly straight forward." As for Lear's hapless hero, the wind for us is so inestimably present as often to be unaccountable — until, of course, it whisks us briskly away. In his essay "It Blows Where It Wishes," Tonino Griffero maps just such a strange ontology of atmospheres. Into a phenomenological tradition which drastically privileges things — things that we touch, things that are there and continuous — Griffero interjects an affinity for "quasi-things," affects and airs and environments that are tough (in more ways than one) to quite put your finger on. Such quasi-things surround us, even if we don't typically pay them much mind; but if they're everywhere, then shouldn't we start?

- The Editors

It Blows Where it Wishes:
The Wind as a Quasi-Thingly Atmosphere

Tonino Griffero

A Phenomenology of the inapparent and the ephemeral?

Hardly anything can bring attention to the insidiousness of the air more than the current pandemic. In unraveling once again how harmful the phenomenologically latent can be, the latest coronavirus clearly reveals all the limits of a phenomenology traditionally considered to be a thought of a phenomenon that is identified only with what appears. These limits of phenomenology were first felt very lucidly and precociously by Wilhelm Schapp, one of Edmund Husserl's first pupils:

> Phenomena seem to be solid and resistant, but why should solid and resistant mean real? Phenomena do not show any stable delimitation, but why should the real be stably delimited? Phenomena come and go without leaving a trace, but why should the real leave traces? Phenomena cannot be grasped or weighed, but why should the real be able to be grasped and weighed? ... I do not find any principle by which things should be the real. I do not find any principle by which daylight and a foot's distance should present us the world as it is. Why shouldn't twilight and a thousand feet's distance present us the world more exactly?[1]

Taking these caveats seriously and refusing to make phenomenology coincide with the visible, with what lies in the light of day or can fully be brought to light, this essay attempts to broaden the meaning of "phenomenon" (meaning what shows itself) to also include the invisible and un-appearing. What is inapparent is affective and a felt-bodily experience: if not all that epistemically exists appears, all that appears surely exists and must be taken seriously phenomenologically. This way one can and must challenge the traditional ocular-centrism, completely tantalized by boundaries of stable and knowable objects at a distance, and thus rile up traditional ontology.[2] By overcoming the existential narrowness of philosophers who seemingly limit their scope and case studies to books and desks, one should leave the desk (or, if you prefer, the Lucretian topos of "shipwreck with spectator") and give due attention not only to latency but also to subjective facts.

Traditional Western ontology puts substances, things in themselves, before relations, and the dualism subject/object before the in-between preceding them, thus following the classic hierarchical three-branch system of substance-relation-accident.[3] Similarly, it puts being before becoming, solid bodies — cohesive, solid, continuous objects that are mobile only through contact — and the central field of vision before what is vague, ephemeral, and peripheric. It also puts single entities before situations. I would like instead to understand situations, neo-phenomenologically, as gestaltic wholes made up of an internally diffuse-chaotic meaningfulness and a non-numerical manifoldness whose only unquestionable evidence comes from felt-bodily touching. Traditional ontology defines perception as a distancing-constative, as a merely ocular process and not as a deambulatory, peripheric, and synesthetic experience. Unfortunately, these parameters end up exiling everything

that is vague, flowing, atmospheric into an alleged inner and private world of the soul. The soul, in turn, is conceived as a solid and stratified body — as a bundle of perceptions or as an ineffable inner theater.

In an ontology such as this, atmospheres and quasi-things are obviously not welcome. My argument suggests that instead, ontology should recognize that people are not surrounded by meaningless things whose qualities would be nothing but the outcome of projected physical data, but rather by atmospheric feelings and quasi-things that are innately affectively connoted. Embracing new and unthought ontological categories like those of "atmosphere" and "quasi-thing"[4] allows us to leave behind the pragmatic purposes and the representational advantages attributed to objectivity and the artificial denial of invisibility. This acceptance of the elusive permits the admittance that, without being a substance or an accident, felt-bodily experience affects us like an extraneous agent; therefore, in turn, it gives full legitimacy to an expanded ontological repertoire.[5]

My atmospherology aims at developing exactly this suggestion. I assume that the variable and the ephemeral, the fluid and the vague, are no less "real" phenomena than the permanent.[6] This implies that one should not neglect the challenging chaotic character of what one might perceive as an epistemic deficit; however, this can only be achieved by freeing oneself from the overestimated gnostic paradigm in favour of a pathic one.[7] Transforming one's lifeworld into the affective brushstrokes of a painting, rather than the accuracy and schematic simplification of a map, allows us to preserve every sensible-qualitative involvement from scientific reductionism.

This path led me, over time, from a neo-phenomenological atmospherology to an ontological theory of quasi-things.[8] Over time and more recently, I have developed a comprehensive theory of "pathic" aesthetics, which focuses on the ability to let oneself go: a skill largely unacknowledged by the rationalistic post-Enlightenment dogma of subjective autonomy and finalistic action. By "pathic," I refer to the perceiver's affective, life-worldly involvement that belongs to the domain of feeling. The pathic therefore disables the perceiver from reacting critically, and leaves one forced to be amongst the intrusion of experience and the elemental. My atmospherological-pathic approach teaches us how to expose oneself to be a means of what happens rather than as a traditional subject who may transform every instance into reflection and every given into something done. This approach could and should focus attention on the quiet and indiscernible phenomenon of air. Air is not only weightless, invisible, and imperceptible, but also, unlike things in the proper sense, fully coincides with its affective, continuous, and situational appearance without being reducible to mere components of something else.

Whether they be natural phenomena such as twilight, luminosity, darkness, the seasons, the wind, the weather, the hours of the day, the fog; or relatively artificial ones like townscape, music, soundscape, the numinous, dwelling, charisma, the gaze, shame, quasi-things express themselves as atmospheric influences. As affective affordances they are salient and real in the full sense of the word: not despite their being inapparent and ephemeral, but precisely because of it. They trigger an experience that is epistemologically vague but pathically certain, irreducible to causes or origins. The experience of a quasi-thing expresses (and certifies) our embeddedness in a lived space, reminding us of our being-in-the-word, better than other traditionally privileged states, such as the overestimated cogito. Restoring pathic experience (or mineness) to a central position, returns worldliness to a state outside the bounds of cognitive dualism and beyond Husserl's phenomenological method of mediating one's surroundings with one's own ego. Thus, one gradually learns to appreciate the importance of entities that are vaguer than the solid, three-dimensional, cohesive, contoured, identified, and persistent things prevailing in traditional ontologies. Holes and shadows, clouds and waves, atmospheres and the wind play a completely new role within a phenomenologically legitimate ontological inventory, based not only on a material stability at the expense of fluidity or single things and their eventual constellations, but rather on influential qualitative nuances and fluxes with their evanescent yet meaningful impressions.

This is not, of course, the place to delve into my atmospherology; however, let me briefly offer that I understand atmosphere as an influential affective presence: as feeling poured out into lived spaces and thereby resonating with, and

even into, felt-bodily processes. The affective presence of atmosphere acts through affordances of environmental invitations (precisely through motor suggestions and synesthetic characters) that are not limited to the visual or pragmatic. The non-objectifying externalization of atmospheres allows them to be perceived as a spatial state of the world rather than a very private psychological state; thus, while their intensity also depends on the subject, their phenomenological apparition is objective — at least when manifested in prototypic form.[9] Due to this objectivity, atmosphere cannot be explained through conventional and associative language; instead, perceiving atmospheres means to communicate with all that is perceived through the felt-body and the affective charge of things, quasi-things, and situations., thus, arriving at an emotional segmentation of the lifewordly reality. Atmospheres are fully consistent with the neo-phenomenological redefinition of philosophy in terms of "thinking in situations" — in terms of a self-reflection of people regarding their "subjective facts" and how they feel in a certain environment.[10]

But let us return to the issue of the phenomenology of the inapparent. We can begin, for example, with an umbrella term like "air." When I mention air, I do not mean in Heidegger's ontological sense,[11] nor in the technological sense of making the invisible-ephemeral airy background visible,[12] nor as a synonym for sociological climate,[13] or as a social-cultural fact. Instead, I would like to apply my neo-phenomenology approach of the inapparent to the more "ontically," quasi-thingly phenomenon of air, particularly its windy atmospheres. This method of inquiry implies the "rediscovery of air" carried out by Hermann Schmitz's phenomenological focus on the quasi-thing, as well as Sloterdijk's rendering of atmoterrorism as an epochal event due to the modern tendency to make explicit the implicit and bring the imperceptible to the fore.[14]

This brings the philosophical thematization of speech as epistemically naive and pathically precise to the fore — such as in phrases like "there is something in the air" or "the wind is changing." Speaking metaphorically like this means that one is feeling what is in the air, and, at the same time, that what is in the air is what one feels. These expressive phrases are both irreducible to cognition and to elementary sense-date; thus, the atmosphere described acts as a scaffolding of affective life. The de-psychologization of the emotional sphere is precisely apparent in the way in which the wind modulates our lived space and resonates with our felt-body.

Windy Atmospheres

Of course, there are many ways of treating air as an atmosphere. Smell, not surprisingly, is often considered the atmospheric phenomenon par excellence. Just because smell has neither "sides and therefore presentations per profiles (*Abschattungen*)," [15] nor precise and defined edges, angles, faces and colors, it could be argued that smell is the atmosphere itself. Scent is something that, impregnating the lived space, deeply involves us — namely, a pre-dimensional space without surfaces, lines and points. The olfactory is also something we "breathe in," that penetrates "through all the pores of [our] being" and sometimes "can become unbreathable as much on the physical level as on the moral one."[16] By saying that atmosphere is an affective "air," it is also consistent to say that it is a "more": something beyond language that remains unspoken in many sensory experiences, even though it is felt and evokes value-laden impressions.

Nevertheless, the air's elusiveness — together with its effect on human politics, scientific knowledge, and processes of nature — is not what I want to talk about here. I'd rather focus on the atmospheric specificity of the wind, relying on its phenomenological-ontological analysis as a quasi-thing. The wind thus turns out to belong to a "big and colorful family" of physiognomic "characters"[17] : occupying a vast territory between the (so-called) mere qualia and things in the proper sense; exerting on the perceiver a more direct and immediate power than full-fledged things. These qualities allow me, on the one hand, to claim the central role played by an "attenuated reality" in making our everyday life richer and more colorful, and, on the other, to highlight wind's atmospheric charge.

The wind is the topic of a highly desirable "aesthetics of air [that] must first render air sensible by being an aesthesis

of air."[18] More specifically, it is a very good example of an atmospheric quasi-thing, as religions have always recognized, pointing out that it blows where it wishes: "you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."[19]

As something apparently inapparent, air actually occurs mainly *ex negativo*, when one misses it. And yet the wind especially affects us on the affective-bodily level in the form of an atmospheric feeling poured out into pre-dimensional space: that is, as a very concrete experience, significantly both climatic and affective, physically and felt-bodily. Provided, of course, that the wind, exactly like the weather, is duly subtracted to the prognostic obsession of today, inscribed in the flood of "weather forecasts," and synthetically testifies to the quality of our emotional involvement — exactly like the Japanese notions of *ki* or *fūdo*, understood as pre-dualistic coexistence of self and world.[20] It thus provides a first starting point for a long-awaited philosophical climatology (from Montesquieu and Herder on) mainly based on elemental media — something never realized, also for excessive fear of climate determinism.

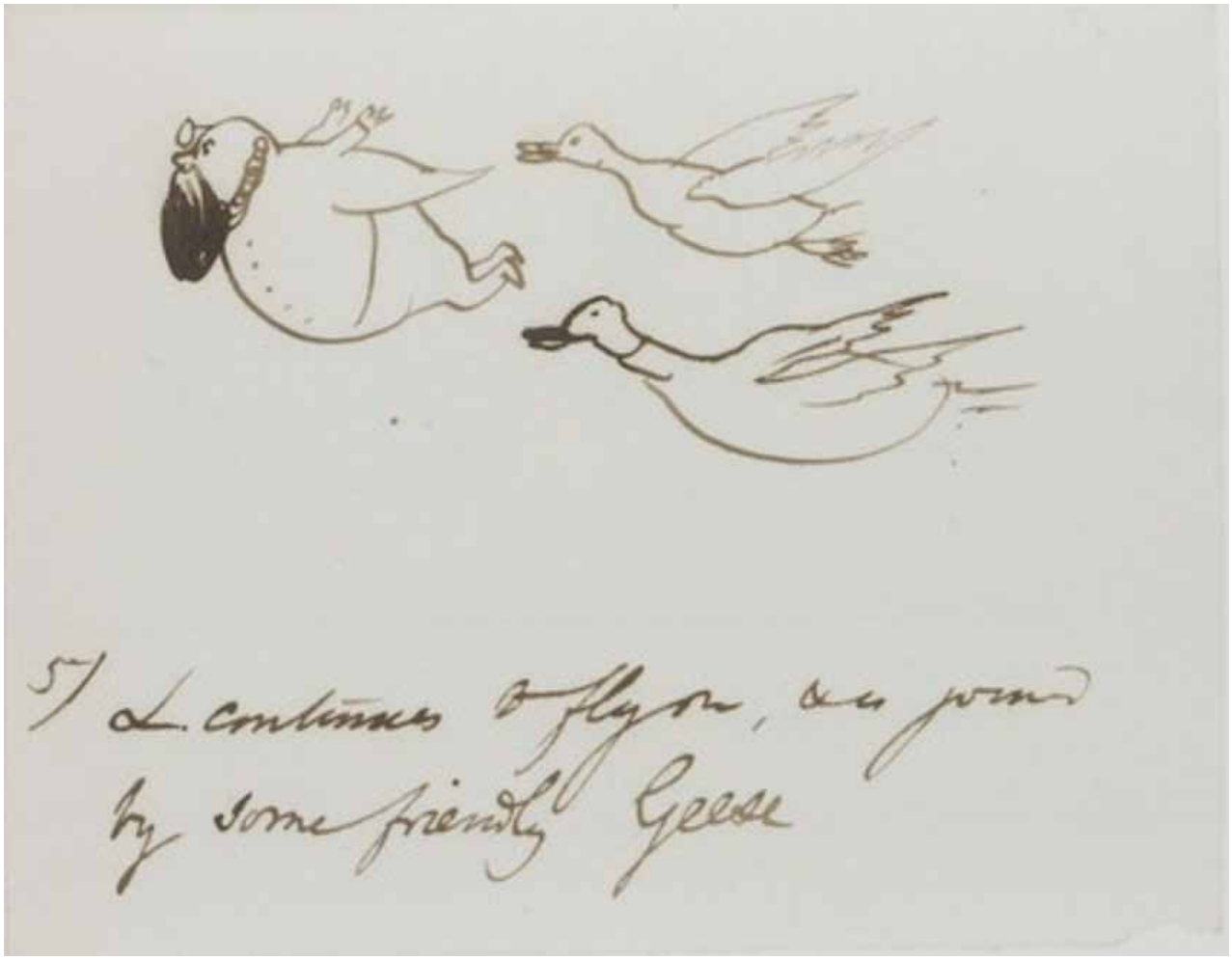
The relative phenomenological inaccessibility of air certainly ceases to exist rightly when it comes to the wind. Wind has always been the object of the human attempt to catch it and exploit its power. The wind can be directly experienced thanks to a felt-body resonance even in the absence of optical data as it forcefully hits us. It shows itself indeed not only, for example, in an inflated dress or in the bent branches of a tree, in a waving flag or in its effects on the clouds and on water, but also in how it atmospherically and "ecstatically" affects our surroundings. Fully coinciding with its own flow and thus being an event in the proper sense (a "pure act," in a way), it pervades space with its particular voluminousness, tuning it in this or that way (obviously a breeze is affectively different from a hurricane) and arousing specific motor suggestions and synesthetic affordances.

Since wind is always a mediated and thus indirect manifestation, as a gestalting appearing a back-and-forth switch of figure and background, we are required to observe it in a definite context and perspective. This means that wind cannot be experienced in general or in an abstract way: strong or gentle, still or storm-like in different moments or places. Apparently omnipresent, the wind ignores boundaries, and land-borne boundaries in particular. But, above all, wind is irreducible to air moving, as Western ontology instead usually claims, thus thickening it and turning it into a thing in order to reduce its particular intrusiveness.[21]

Maybe it is time to better detail its quasi-thingly features:

A. The wind is not edged, discrete, cohesive, or solid, and is therefore hardly penetrable like things. Nor does it properly possess the spatial sides in which things necessarily manifest themselves and from whose ortho-aesthetic coexistence one can usually gather their protensional regularities. Thus, we do not perceive in it a side hiding while announcing the others, which means that if a thing can still deceive us by having concealed sides — temporarily or eternally hidden inner strata and only apparent qualities — a quasi-thing like the wind never deceives, because it totally coincides with its phenomenic appearance.

B. Things possess immanent and regular tendencies. An object weighs and tends to fall; the pages of a book turn yellow; if we don't lift something it stays on the ground. Because of these immanent dispositions, also proving their compatibility or incompatibility with other bodies, things testify to us their physical-bodily presence. While things have these tendencies even without interaction (the glass remains frangible even if nobody breaks it), which confer to them a future as well as a past revealed by signs, marks, fractures, etc., because of its relative immateriality the wind does not seem to have actual tendencies (nor does it have a history). In their atmospheric and quasi-thingly effect, night, anxiety, and the wind, for example, don't ever get old and don't show any temporal patina. By virtue of its absolute "presentness," the wind is not the continuation of



Edward Lear, "Plate 5: E. L. Continues to fly on, and is joined by some friendly geese," *A Walk on a Wind on a Windy Day*, 1860. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Public Domain.

something prior, but something always new and so radically evenementiel that it does not require a genetic phenomenology and etiologic explanation.

C. While things transcend their momentary character — in the sense that neither are they born nor can they die all of a sudden, but instead bear the signs of their own specific history; and that one can possess them, portion them, save them, or annihilate them — the wind can appear in a partial form, without this necessarily meaning that it does so through fragments and sides. So, if I can point at a single object made of silver to demonstrate what silver is, in the same way, I can refer to this wind, regardless of its specific present variant, to explain what the wind is in general. And this is because a single wind is not the portion of a larger wind-thing but fully expresses the "character" of its appearance. In the same way that a different tone does not make the voice of a person (another quasi-thing) a different one (warm, metallic, polished, hoarse), a quasi-thing like the wind has its own distinct identity, which, within certain limits, can be traced back to types, but not to universal-conceptual genera.

D. Above all, the wind is (felt as) more immediate and intrusive than things, because it is able to generate inhibiting and sometimes even unbearable motor suggestions. The felt-bodily communication triggered by it can be summed up as an alternation of encorporation and excorporation much more intense than that triggered by things. As a "center of encorporation"[22] able to occupy some surfaceless and lived spaces, as a violent "attractor of our everyday attention,"[23] it is often more incisive and demanding than things in the strict sense.

E. But perhaps the most philosophically intriguing point is that the wind dies down with the same inexplicable immediacy with which it rises. Even if, as we have seen, it has a "character," i.e. it is this or that particular wind (as we say of other quasi-things, "Here's my usual pain in the shoulder," "Here's the melancholy of an autumn evening," etc.), it doesn't have the same continuity of existence of things, which as a rule cannot disappear from a point in space and reappear in another. For this reason, the embarrassing question asked by the child ("What does the wind do when it isn't blowing?"), implying in a thingly way a being separate from feeling it,[24] turns out to be an excellent — qua upsetting and disturbing — philosophical question. The normalizing and reifying answer usually given by the adult ("It has died down," or even "It went to sleep") disregards its importance.

Though they are things that are not perceived,[25] quasi-things like the wind have rather an intermittent life, and it would make no sense to ask where they are when they are not present yet or when they are no longer there. Their intermittence produces a kind of broken biography that cannot be filled in principle (does the wind, or a certain type of wind, have a history?) and is very different from the latency periods normally belonging to things that are temporarily not perceived. Just to prevent this uncanny experience — to mitigate the anxiety provoked by the incessant change of *qualia* — standard ontology has no other option than to subsume atmospheric perceptions under genera and to give priority to tangible and well-determined entities, which are endowed with a regular, homogeneous, cohesive, and three-dimensional shape and can be singled out through genus and species.

F. Lastly, following Hermann Schmitz again, like all other quasi-things the wind does not have a threefold causality (cause-action-effect) but a twofold one (cause/action-effect). Very briefly, while a book is a book that eventually falls later on the floor and breaks a glass if it hits it, the wind — which in a certain sense "is precisely this blowing and nothing else"[26] — does not exist before and beyond its blowing. So to speak, it is an aggression without an aggressor (a cause) that may be separated from it and be prior to it. In other words, the wind is atmospherically an actual fact (a pure phenomenon) and not a factual fact (the wind as a physical-climatic element). When it hinders our way and perhaps makes us fall it is an action coinciding with its cause.

Traditional Western ontology felt compelled to transform bipolar causality into a tripolar causality, because obviously only if cause can be separated from effect (i.e. a necessary substrate from its more or less accidental manifestation) can science express its prognosis and operate in a preventive way. This indistinction of cause and action confirms a fortiori that the somewhat unexpected appearance of a quasi-thingly configuration is necessarily followed by an involuntary experience, a pathic-atmospheric and felt-bodily involvement that is at least initially uncontrollable.

The quasi-thingly wind characteristics examined here apply without doubt to every atmospheric experience and not only to elemental atmosphericness. And here it should open a long speech on general types of resonance triggered by windy atmospheres (narrowness and vastness) and the resulting felt-bodily communication.[27] Just to give a very simple example on how the discourse should develop: resonance can be a.) discrepant and b.) syntonic. By inhibiting fluid bodily behaviour, the atmospheric discrepancy (when you are not friends with the wind, when the wind kicks up because it is strong, harsh and biting) induces an epicritic contraction. It gives birth to individual felt-bodily isles of which the subject was previously unaware. But awareness can sometimes lead to their pathological disorganization, or independence. On the other side, by facilitating bodily behavior, the atmospheric syntony (when the wind favors us, is a sweet breeze or gently refreshes a muggy environment) provides a protopathic felt-bodily state of well-being, which momentarily prevents some particular isles from emerging and even promotes an uncritical fusion with external reality.

Obviously, the phenomenological cases of our encounter with the air and the wind (what I called "atmospheric games") is necessarily much more complicated.[28] Here I am merely sketching a phenomenological atmospherology of quasi-things that aims at integrating the traditional ontologic "catalogue" starting precisely from the wind. However, it does not amount to corroborating the universal tendency (onto- and phylogenetic) to reification, whose advantages do not compensate for the loss of the semantic-pathic polyvocity of reality. My double-track aim rather consists in taking relations and events as (quasi-)things while taking many things as less thing-like: in fact, many so called things (a mountain, a road, etc.) are not much more defined than the atmospheric feelings they irradiate — with the significant difference that the atmospheric quasi-thingly repartition depends on a segmentation of what we "encounter" that is not so much artificial (functional) or cognitive-semantic but rather affective and felt-bodily. In short: quasi-things have quality (intensity), extension (non-geometric dimensionality), relation (to other quasi-things and the perceiver's states of mind), place (they are here and not there, even if only in the lived space) and time (they occur right now, etc.). My aesthetic-phenomenological survey of the windy atmosphere should be seen precisely in this light.

Notes

1. Wilhelm Schapp, *Beiträge Zur Phänomenologie Der Wahrnehmung*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1981), 95.
2. "So far there has never been a philosophy whose conceptual elaboration was guided by what one can hear, smell and taste." See: Ludwig Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1954), 3: 296.
3. As when an un-splittable circumstance, characterised by an intensive magnitude, is not yet transformed into a reversible relation.
4. These half-entities were something so unthought of that they didn't even have a name before Schmitz raised them to the status of authentic ontological category (*Halbding*) in the last volumes of his *System*. See: Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1978), 5, *Die Wahrnehmung*: 116-139.
5. Which reminds me to some extent of the brilliant Sartrean pages of *Being and Nothingness*, which are devoted to pain as a psychic-affective object with its own reality, with intermittent time and life, habits and "melodic" developments. See: Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 335–337.
6. Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (Burlington: Ashgate Pub., 2014).
7. Erwin Straus, *The Primary World of Senses: A vindication of sensory experience*, trans. Jacob Needleman (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

8. Tonino Griffero, *Quasi-things: The Paradigm of Atmospheres* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2017).
9. It is worth pointing out that I do not fully embrace the neo-phenomenological campaign of desubjectification of all feelings (See: Hermann Schmitz, "Situationen und Atmosphären. Zur Ästhetik und Ontologie bei Gernot Böhme," *Naturerkenntnis und Natursein. Für Gernot Böhme*, ed. Michael Hauskeller, Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, and Gregor Schiemann [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998], 176-190, and especially Hermann Schmitz, *Atmosphären* [Freiburg-München: Alber, 2014]) and prefer to admit that there are three different types of atmospheres. There are prototypic atmospheres (objective, external, and unintentional and sometimes lacking a precise name), derivative ones (objective, external and intentionally produced), and even some that are quite spurious in their relatedness (subjective and projective). This also leads to different types of emotional games. In a nutshell: (a) an atmosphere can overwhelm us (ingressive encounter) and be refractory to a more or less conscious attempt at a projective reinterpretation; (b) it can find us in tune with it (syntonic encounter), to the point that we don't realize we entered it; (c) it can be recognized (be it felt as antagonistic or not) without being really felt in our body; (d) it can elicit a resistance that pushes us to change it; (e) it may not reach the necessary threshold for sensorial-affective observation, thus causing an embarrassing atmospheric and social inadequacy for oneself and for others; (f) it may (for various reasons, also absolutely idiosyncratic) be perceived differently in the course of time; and (g) it may be so dependent on the perceptual (subjective) form that it concretizes itself even in materials that normally express different moods.
10. See: Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1964-1980). For a brief introduction see: Hermann Schmitz, *New Phenomenology. A Brief Introduction* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2019).
11. Phenomenology is a phenomenology of the inapparent, insofar as it "is a path that leads a way to come before," from the presencing to the unconcealment. See: Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars (Studies in Continental Thought)*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 80.
12. On how to visualize and design a no-thing (not a nothing) like the air, more exactly not so much air as such as its dynamic and transient, aperiodic and turbulent behaviour (its atmospheric forces), see: Malte Wagenfeld, "The Phenomenology of Visualizing Atmosphere," *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology* 26, no. 2 (2015): 9-15.
13. Joseph De Rivera, "Emotional climate: Social structure and emotional dynamics," *International Review of Studies on Emotion* 2 (1992): 197-218.
14. See: Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres Volume III: Plural Spherology* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016).
15. Hubert Tellenbach, *Geschmack und Atmosphäre* (Salzburg: O. Müller, 1968), 28.
16. Eugene Minkowski, *Vers une cosmologie: fragments philosophiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1936), 117-118.
17. Schmitz, *System Der Philosophie*, 5: 134.
18. Eva Horn, "Air as Medium." *Grey Room*, no. 73 (Fall 2018): 22.
19. John 3:8.
20. See: Tetsuro Watsuji, *A Climate: A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: Printing Bureau, Japanese Government, 1961).
21. The alternative strategy is tracing a quasi-thing back to perceptions so chaotic and de-contoured that they end up being considered as something anomalous, if not pathological.
22. Schmitz, *System Der Philosophie*, 5: 169.
23. Jens Soentgen, *Das Unscheinbare: Phänomenologische Beschreibungen von Stoffen, Dingen und fraktalen Gebilden* (Berlin: Akad.-Verl., 1997), 13.
24. A question that can be asked of all quasi-things: "What does a voice do when it is not heard?"; "Where is pain when I do not feel it?"; etc.
25. Even when the waves cease to crease it, we still see the water; but when the wind stops, there is no perceptible air left.
26. Albert Grote, *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1972), 251.
27. Tonino Griffero, "Felt-bodily communication: a neophenomenological approach to embodied affects," *Sensibilia* special issue, *Studi di estetica*, 4th ser., anno XLV, no. 8 (February 2017): 71-86.
28. Tonino Griffero, "Felt-Bodily Resonances: Towards a Pathic Aesthetics," *Yearbook for Eastern and Western Philosophy*, no. 2 (2017): 149-64.

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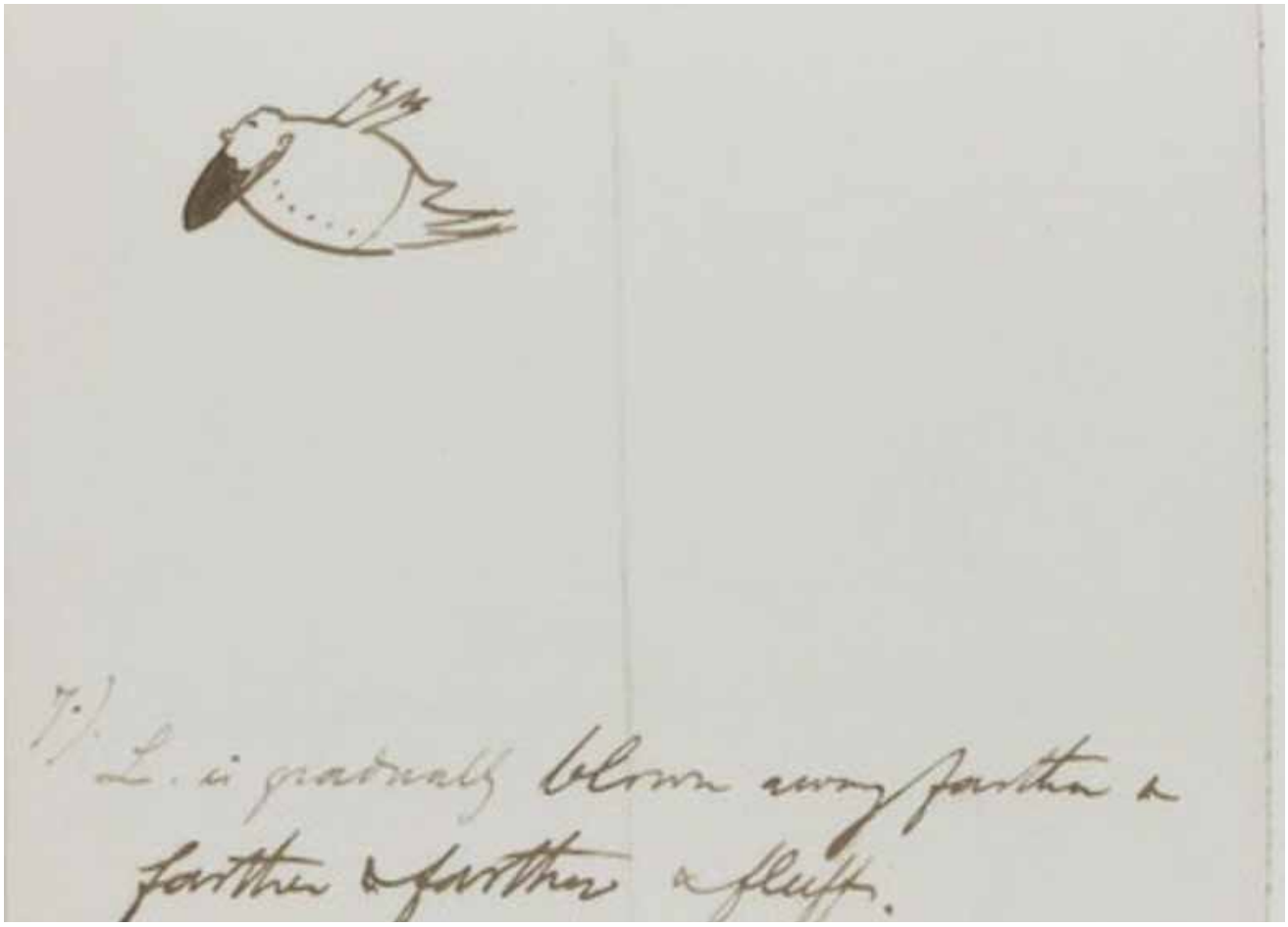

Edward Lear, "Plate 7: E.L. is gradually blown away further and further..." *A Walk on a Wind on a Windy Day*, 1860. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Public Domain.

"The Birds Try to Beat Down the Ocean," page from a dispersed series of the *Panchatantra* (Artist/maker unknown, India, 18th Century) Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994.

In the twenty-first century there is a growing struggle for the atmospheric commons and the very right to breathe. Studying the history of how the atmospheric and cartographic sciences developed alongside colonial extraction and weaponization of the air helps us to understand how the air is anything but an empty vessel or neutral presence. Studying the representation of breathing is also an important task for scholars seeking to decolonize art history. The watercolor, "The Birds Try to Beat Down the Ocean," tells the story of a family of lapwings, which are nesting shorebirds, who seek help from Garuda, the vehicle (*vahana*) of the god Vishnu, to rescue their eggs from the ocean. The image tells a different story of the air and the ocean than cartographic or atmospheric drawings of the same period by European artists and scientists. This image is located in the Stella Kramrisch Collection. Kramrisch is the Moravian-Austrian art historian of Buddhist and Hindu art who Sugata Ray looks to in his essay, "Art History and the Political Ecologies of Air." In Kramrisch's work on the representations of the Buddha's body, Ray finds a decolonial impulse that counteracts colonialist and masculinist representations of breathing.

- The Editors

Art History and the Political Ecologies of Air

Sugata Ray

Zyklon-B, a gassing agent utilized by Nazi Germany in Auschwitz; Agent Orange, a defoliant chemical used by the United States in Vietnam; glyphosate, a toxic herbicide aerially sprayed by the Israeli military along the borders of Gaza. The weaponization of air and breath through chemical warfare — "atmo-terrorism"[1] in Peter Sloterdijk's words — over the last hundred years or so has made it amply clear that the freedom to breathe "good" air is differentially arranged across the axes of empire, race, and capital.[2] If technofuturist gurus today dream of the privatization of breathable air via climate-controlled hermetic bubble neighborhoods, life — both human and nonhuman — in many parts of the Global South (and elsewhere) smothers under the tyranny of capitalism's asymmetric toxic flows. It is under such oppressive circumstances, further amplified by the impasse of a global pandemic, that philosophers such as Achille Mbembe now conceive of another future of breathing as "a fundamental right to existence."[3] The recent demands to reclaim air as an indispensable "in-common, that which, by definition, *eludes all calculation*"[4] has taken on a very particular valence in the aftermath of the *longue durée* history of the commodification of the atmosphere. This is, of course, a history that stretches from early modern seaborne settler and extractive colonialism to today's neoliberal global capitalism, one that aspires to mutate the invisible gases that surrounds the earth into a tradeable commodity.

We may recall that the earth's wind system had been subjugated by European cartographers, meteorologists, and geographers into an exploitable resource to buttress colonial expansionism from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Until the popularization of steam engines in the nineteenth century, wind was the key source of propulsion for sailingships, and Europe's conquest of the earth's wind system turned the atmosphere into a powerful instrument of colonial governance and revenue generation. Think, for instance, of the English astronomer Edmond Halley's 1686 nautical diagram of the tropical trade winds, which is considered to be the first published meteorological chart (Figure 1).[5] Even though traders and pilgrims had, for millennia, mobilized seasonal monsoon winds to travel across East Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, Halley's chart based on data collected from ship logs became a tool for the East India Company's empire-building project in the Indian Ocean region.[6] A categorical purging of medieval cosmological conceptions of both wind and oceanic waters was critical for such early modern techno-rational data visualizations; the result was the production of an aerial space that could be exploited. Much like the transfiguration of oceanic space "from a commons into the property of the Western state"[7] in this period, the secularization of air in Enlightenment thought and visual culture turned the atmosphere into a measurable natural resource that reinforced the global flow of imperialism and capital.

Yet, just as wind increasingly became a tactical resource that propelled Europe's global sea-borne aspirations, air lost its power in Western philosophy. "The forgetting of air," Luce Irigaray reminds us in her meditations on breathing, occurred in Western metaphysics as philosophers confronted the viscous weight of the earth as the ground for life and speech.[8] Irigaray's subsequent encounter with theories of breathing in Hindu treatises allowed the feminist scholar to further sharpen her critique.[9] Despite naïve essentializations — and much has been penned about the philosopher's adulation of the purported "masters of the East"[10] — Irigaray's reflections nevertheless take on great urgency in the context of our current crisis. We could say that the rationalist computations of post-Copernican imperial sciences that made air into a quantifiable

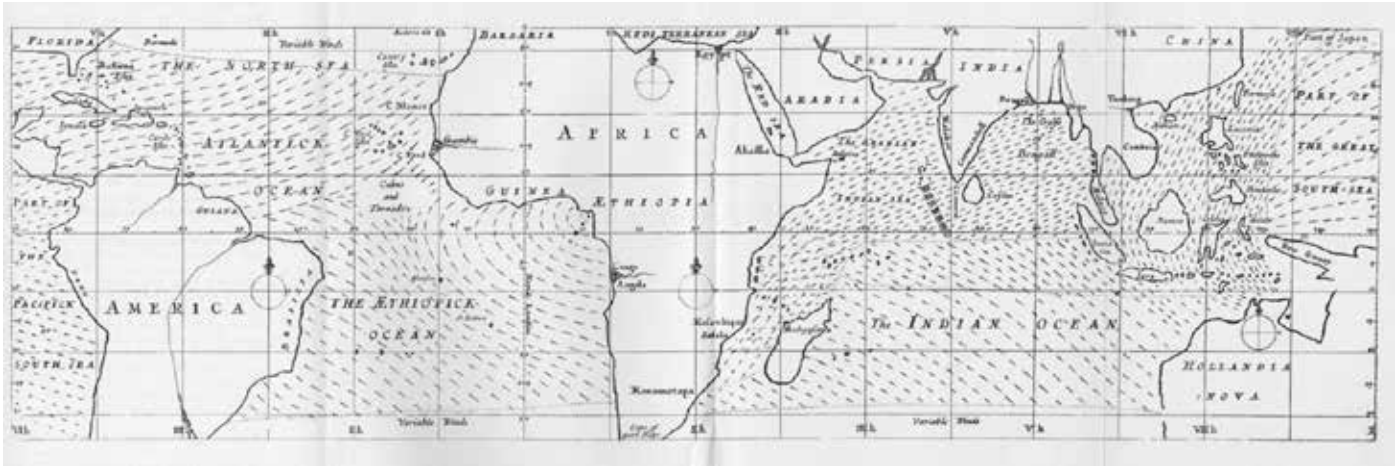

Figure 1. Edmond Halley, *A Map of the Global Trade Winds*, n.d. Published in Edmond Halley "An Historical Account of the Trade Winds, and Monsoons, observable in the Seas between and near the Tropicks, with an attempt to assign the physical cause of the said winds," Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society 16 (1686): 153 – 68. Public Domain.

Figure 2. *Standing Buddha from Sarnath*, 476/477 CE. Sandstone, 200 cm (height). Repository: Archaeological Museum, Sarnath, Public Domain.

Figure 3. *Seated Buddha from Bodhgaya*, ca. 384 CE. Sandstone, 117.5 cm (height). Repository: Indian Museum, Kolkata. Artwork in Public Domain.

commodity has failed us. Perhaps Irigaray sensed this failure. Moreover, her interest in yoga and breathing was not facile; *prana* — usually translated as vital breath or life force — offered the feminist scholar the possibility of envisioning the breathing body beyond Europe's phallogocentrism.

From within art history, the idea of *prana* has its own trajectories, which are embedded within early twentieth-century anticolonial discourses.[11] The concept of *prana*, of course, precedes the birth of the discipline of art history in colonial India. In early philosophical and liturgical treatises such as the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (ca. seventh or sixth-century BCE), *prana* had been extolled as the life force that animates the human body and the whole universe. In later texts on Yoga, Ayurveda, and Tantra, the term — etymologically suggesting a forward activity — also became associated with breathing and breathing exercises as activities of the heart, mouth, and nose.[12] And it was in the early twentieth century that the term entered art history with the Moravian-Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch's contention that yogic breathing practices, based on moving breath or *prana* along the internal channels of the body, played a significant role in visualizing the idealized body in Indian sculpture. In a 1931 essay, *Die figurale Plastik der Guptazeit* (followed by the more celebrated 1933 monograph Indian Sculpture), Kramrisch proposed that the movement from the corporeal physicality of second- and third-century Buddhist sculpture to the sensuous ethereality of fifth-century sculpture was a result of yogic breathing (Figures 2 and 3).[13] In this seminal text — one that would subsequently define the historiography of Buddhist art history — Kramrisch read the male body as nature itself. Describing a 476/477 CE sandstone sculpture of the Buddha as a "supple, delicate vessel of rarified, superhuman bliss,"[14] Kramrisch compared the late fifth-century body typology that had evolved in the Sarnath region in north India to earlier Buddhist sculptures to suggest that the taut corporeality of early Buddhist imagery was superseded in the late fifth century by a new physical form that gave life breath or *prana* to the Buddha's body.

The slender body of late fifth-century Buddhist figures was, according to Kramrisch, an effect of transubstantiation that resulted as the vegetal, or nature, migrated into the male body. Unlike earlier Buddhist sculptures, the late fifth-century Sarnath Buddha was thus not merely an image of a corporeal male being. Rather, as a visualization of an embodied philosophy of the movement of air and life, the body was the "without when transferred into the within becomes identical there with the beyond."[15] Decentering the hypermasculine male body that had been naturalized in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, Kramrisch explored an art history that did not measure the sculpted form in phallogocentric terms. Even though recent scholarship has suggested that the earliest datable evidence of the *suksmasarira* practice — that is, practices based on moving breath or *prana* along the internal channels of the body — appeared only in the seventh or the eighth centuries, Kramrisch's imagination of the Buddha's body as nature itself had a specific and undeniably inventive resonance in the canons of art history.[16]

A Jewish émigré with a doctoral dissertation on early Buddhist art from the University of Vienna, Kramrisch was well aware of late nineteenth-century fetishizations of the hypermasculine male body in Europe and its subsequent misappropriation in Nazi Germany.[17] In 1921, the year Adolf Hitler was confirmed as chairman of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, Kramrisch had migrated to India to teach art history at the poet Rabindranath Tagore's school in Santiniketan. Although Kramrisch had escaped from Europe almost two decades before Zyklon-B gassings were carried out at Auschwitz, she would have undoubtedly been acquainted with the cult of the hypermasculine male body in interwar Germany that glorified classical Greek ideals of male virility. Hans Surén — a German military officer who joined the Nazi Party in 1933 — had, for instance, published in 1926 a wildly-popular book, *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (*Man and Sunlight*), that conjoined nudity and exposure to air and sunlight as essential to the well-being of the Volk.[18] Surén, as scholars have noted, "was fascinated by the classical body of Ancient Greece and his efforts to retrieve this 'lost' physicality (as depicted by classical sculpture) resonate throughout *Man and Sunlight*."[19] A potent concoction of *Nachtkultur* or naked culture, the atmosphere's therapeutic properties, and the purported beauty of classical Greco-Roman sculpture underwrote Surén's expositions. This is perhaps best illustrated in the cover of *Der Mensch und die Sonne*, where we see the painting of a nude

Figure 4. Hans Surén, *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (Stuttgart: Dieck & Co., 1925). Public Domain.

Figure 5. *Standing Buddha from Gandhara*, 3rd century CE. Schist, 92.7 cm (height). Repository: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Denise and Andrew Saul Gift, in honor of Maxwell K. Hearn, 2014. Artwork in Public Domain.

muscular man, probably the author himself, turning toward the sun (Figure 4). From Surén's eccentric propositions in the mid-1920s to the Nazi usurpation of the Greco-Roman past in the 1930s, it was a direct course. This, on the one hand.

On the other hand, Kramrisch, a strong supporter of India's anti-colonial nationalist movement, had to contend with the idealization of "Greco-Buddhist" sculptures from the Gandhara region in northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan in colonial art history, archaeology, and Indology (Figure 5). European archeologists such as James Fergusson and Alfred C. A. Foucher had proposed that the origin of the Buddha image "was the consequence of India being brought into contact with the Western world," and that the task of the scholar was to unravel how "the arts of the Western world exerted their influence on those of the East."[20] The colonial tenor of such an endeavor was evident; the aim was to underwrite the first burst of largescale art production in the subcontinent as a derivative discourse rather than the product of a cosmopolitan global trade that connected the Mediterranean world to East Asia. It is in this intersecting milieu of the celebration of the Hellenic male body in both Weimar Germany and imperial art history that Kramrisch turned to precolonial philosophies of breathing to visualize the transcendent body in the colony. By underscoring the significance of the visualization of breathing practices in shaping figural representations of the Buddha's body, Kramrisch argued that the "toughness of the body" of early Buddhist sculpture had been distilled to its "purest plastic essence" by the fifth-century in north India.[21] The move away from the Gandhara Buddha's markedly muscular body in the fifth century, Kramrisch claimed, occurred because of an awareness of bodily modulations achieved through yogic breathing. Her aim was to sever art history in the colony from imperial superlatives of the purportedly flawless European body, itself imagined through fictive homologies with classical Greco-Roman sculpture.

Today, propelled by the uneven distribution of resources and the immense violence of neocolonial corporations and states, thinking through the political ecology of air and breathing has accrued a different urgency. It is within this context that Kramrisch's mediations too gather new texture: the imagined intimacy between yogic practices and the aesthetics of the sculpted body makes visible how the act of breathing became a locus of political struggle in the early twentieth-century, in turn linking art history to struggles over subjectivity and agency. The decolonizing impulses that Stella Kramrisch, among others, bring to bear on art history then allows for a reimagination of sovereignty as breath. In the process, air becomes both a genealogy and a methodology to deracinate the Eurocentrism that still haunts our discipline today.

Notes

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).
2. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, an Air Quality Index value of 50 "represents good air quality with little or no potential to affect public health." United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Air Quality Index: A Guide to Air Quality and Your Health* (Research Triangle Park, NC: U.S. EPA Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards, 2014), 2.
3. Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe," *Critical Inquiry: Posts from the Pandemic*, April 13, 2020. https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/, accessed September 1, 2020.
4. Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe." My Emphasis.
5. The chart was published in Edmond Halley, "An Historical Account of the Trade Winds, and Monsoons, observable in the Seas between and near the Tropicks, with an attempt to assign the physical cause of the said winds," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society 16* (1686): 153–68. For Halley's work, see Alan H. Cook, *Edmond Halley: Charting the Heavens and the Seas* (New York: Clarendon, 1998), among others.
6. Much has been written on the history of precolonial Indian Ocean trade and monsoon. See, for instance, Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
7. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Sea and the Land: Biopower and Visuality from Slavery to Katrina," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50, nos. 2–3 (2009): 292.
8. Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary B. Mader (London: Athlone, 1999).

9. Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. Stephen Pluhácek (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
10. Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 7. For critiques, see, for instance, Penelope Deutscher, "Irigaray's Between East and West and the Politics of 'Cultural Ingénuité'," *Theory, Culture and Society* 20 (2003): 65–75.
11. An expanded version of the arguments presented here is published in Sugata Ray, "The 'Effeminate' Buddha, the Yogic Male Body, and the Ecologies of Art History in Colonial India," *Art History* 38, no. 5 (November 2015): 916–39.
12. See James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin, 2017) and David G. White, *Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), among others, for this history.
13. Stella Kramrisch, "Die figurale Plastik der Guptazeit," *Wiener Beiträge zur Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Asiens* 5 (1931): 15–39. Alan Shapiro translated the essay into English with further revisions by Kramrisch. The notes in this essay refer to the 1983 reprint. Stella Kramrisch, "Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period," in Barbara S. Miller, ed. *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 181–203. Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).
14. Kramrisch, "Figural Sculpture," 192.
15. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, 55.
16. Scholars discuss the *Hevajra Tantra*, perhaps dating from the late eighth or the ninth century in its present form, as one of the first Buddhist texts to describe these practices. See David N. Lorenzen, "Early Evidence for Tantric Religion," in Katherine A. Harper and Robert L. Brown, eds. *The Roots of Tantra* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 25–36 and Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2008), among others.
17. The late nineteenth-century European invention of a new idealized male body based on classical Greco-Roman sculpture is discussed in Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-siècle France* (London, London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), especially Chapter Two and David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For Nazi appropriations, see Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016) and Karl E. Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture 1910–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), among others.
18. Hans Surén, *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (Stuttgart: Dieck & Co., 1925). The book went through sixty-one printings in one year and sold 250,000 copies.
19. Nina J. Morriss, "Naked in Nature: Naturism, Nature, and the Senses in Early 20th Century Britain," *Cultural Geographies* 16 (2009): 296.
20. James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1876), 48. Although European scholars such as Gottlieb W. Leitner had described Buddhist sculptures from Gandhara as "Graeco-Buddhist" in the 1870s, it was Alfred C. A. Foucher who most strongly advocated the Hellenic origin of Gandhara Buddhist sculpture. See Gottlieb W. Leitner, "Graeco-Buddhistic Sculpture," *Asiatic Quarterly Review* 7, nos. 13/14 (1894): 186–9 and Alfred C. A. Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art And Other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology*, trans. L. A. Thomas and F. W. Thomas (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1917).
21. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, 65–6. Along with Kramrisch's interventions, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's 1927 *Art Bulletin* essay on the origin of the Buddha image, among his other writings, lucidly denounced the colonialist tenor of earlier European art history that had posited the Gandhara region as the crucible where contact with the Hellenic world had led to the visualization of the Buddha's body. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *Art Bulletin* 4 (June 1927): 287–329.

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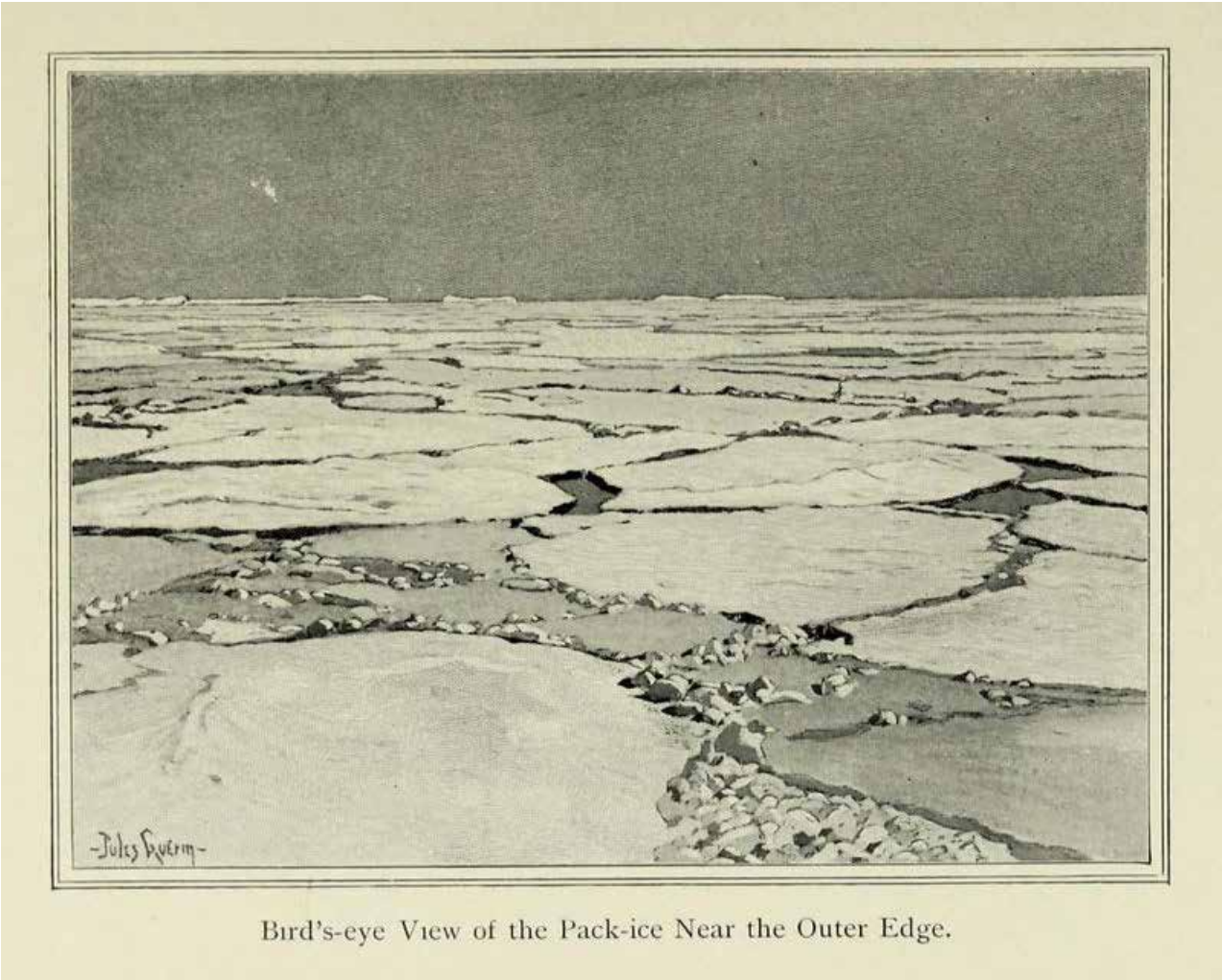
Ritorno — Return

Translation of an Italian poem by Giorgio Caproni

Jessica Lane

Ritorno	*Return*
Sono tornato là	I went back there
dove non ero mai stato.	where I have never been.
Nulla, da come non fu, è mutato.	Nothing, as it never was, has changed.
Sul tavolo (sull'incerato	On the table (on the waxed
a quadretti) ammezzato	squares) half-formed
ho ritrovato il bicchiere	I found the glass
mai riempito. Tutto	never filled. Everything
è ancora rimasto quale	still, just as I
mai l'avevo lasciato.	never left it.

Jessica Lane graduated from Kenyon College in 2020 and majored in Art History and Italian. She spent her Junior year living abroad in Italy, and worked as an intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy.



Bird's-eye View of the Pack-ice Near the Outer Edge.

Frederick Albert Cook, *Through the First Antarctic Night*, 1898 – 1899 (London: Heinemann, 1900). University of Toronto Libraries.

As demonstrated by Frederick Albert Cook's late nineteenth-century photographic memoir of his expedition to the Arctic, visual elements have long been a part of our ethnographic account of the natural world. It is no surprise, then, that artists, curators, and art historians have focused increasingly on broadly environmental issues in recent years, creating a wide array of artworks, exhibitions, and scholarly analyses of global climate disruption. In this essay, Mark Cheetham considers potential connections between such scholarly and artistic outputs and our growing awareness of the accelerated change taking place in our natural world. Looking toward the atmosphere and the oceans — and drawing specific evidence from research on hydro-imperialism of Arctic voyaging in the nineteenth century, not unlike that of Cook's expedition — Cheetham analyses how a visual culture of the planetary has come into focus as a way to consciously examine our fraught relationship with the environment.

- The Editors

'Atmospheres' of Art and Art History

Mark Cheetham

The Disciplinary and Material Metaphorics of Atmosphere, Weather, and Climate in Art and Art History

Let me begin with two uncontroversial observations. The term "climate change" suggests a departure from the long-established planetary norms of the Holocene into today's accelerating changes in the atmosphere, land, and oceans. Climate scientists agree that the accumulating carbon-producing activities of some human beings and their technologies have occurred over centuries but have become increasingly rapid and detrimental since the so-called "Great Acceleration," which began c. 1945 with the testing and use of atomic weapons and a stupefying increase in many other impactful metrics. Second, artists, curators, and art historians have focused increasingly in recent years on changing phenomena in the environment and responses to them, creating noticeably more artworks, exhibitions, and scholarly analyses of the much-discussed crisis of global climate disruption and its increasingly tragic ramifications. How might we bring climate issues into the ambit of art and Art History? Both "ecological art" and "eco art history" embrace a range of practices — contemporary and historical — that investigate the environmental, aesthetic, social, and political relationships between human and nonhuman animals as well as inanimate materials.

It is useful to recall the truism that we don't directly experience climate (the macro systems that play out over extended timeframes and geographies) but instead the immediacies of weather, often the decidedly relative category of "strange" weather in a given place and time, that is, what appears unexpected or abnormal. We extrapolate to longer-term climate change. Building on the work of John Durham Peters, among others, Eva Horn has recently argued that we can think of the air (and of atmosphere) as a *medium*. "Elements of nature such as air, climate, the ozone layer, fire, water, and soil are not just the material basis of life; they are its *conditions of possibility*, its 'infrastructure,'" she claims.[1] Horn details the connections between these concepts, emphasizing

> the twofold nature of air as both "climate" and "weather." A climatic understanding of air, on the one hand, involves a territorializing principle of place, of environment, of a culture's situatedness in nature and nature's gentle force within culture, a sense of seasonal cycles, of repetition and stability. Air, in this sense, is about states and conditions; it determines the quality and the many different modes of human life. On the other hand, air understood as "meteos" or weather refers to a deterritorializing principle of planetary dynamics and forces, of unsteadiness and singularity.[2]

In my view, because the concepts are linked, there will always be slippage in our thinking between "climate" and "weather." We can productively work with, rather than try to contain, this play of meanings.

Motivated by the recent efflorescence of ecoart and directions in eco art history, this article aims to catalyze discussion by imbricating the primary, "planetary" meanings of climate change and the more local inflections of weather and atmosphere with questions about how Art History is and might be conducted.[3] I hope to add to Horn's discussions

by emphasizing that people speak metaphorically of the "atmosphere" of many situations and institutions — of labour negotiations, for example, or of university departments or art museums. Most collectives can be said to have an atmosphere or a climate in this sense, whether warm and supportive, chilly, or even threatening. In the terms suggested by Tonino Griffero in his phenomenological readings of climate environments as emotional entities, we might say that we encounter not only organisations, ideas, objects, or even people in the world, but also their attendant "atmospheres," which are affect-laden and metaphorical but also "quasi-things."[4] Atmospheres are palpable in physical and psychic environments. This latitude gives "atmosphere" both its theoretical and practical efficacy in this article because it is at once ecological and institutional. Let's speculate then that Art History has an "atmosphere" (or many, depending on personnel and locale), that these perceived norms and circumstances are "media" in Horn's and Peters's sense, and that they inevitably change. But how and why do they change? How can such atmospheres be both figurative and material, abstract and down-to-earth? Can what might be called an "ecological turn" in the field affect these norms in the classroom, at an exhibition, or within a new scholarly journal?[5] We might analogize further to say that these local and immediate inflections are the "weather" of a field, that we can take the "temperature" of a discipline at a given time and place. The weather and atmosphere of Art History have changed in recent years partly through an increasing attention to issues of climate and weather in their primary context: that of the planetary, phenomenal environment.

Weathering Art History

Art History might benefit from more extreme "weathering." Henri Matisse famously claimed that art should be like a comfortable armchair.[6] I don't agree. Art History might better be weathered in a less restful, more "distressed" way. Perhaps art historians should pose "inconvenient" questions about climate disruption in the sense made famous by Al Gore's documentary film about climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) — that is, uncomfortable, threatening, and inevitable. I'd like Art History to be worn and abraded in this way as it responds even more to distressing environmental concerns and their many implications for involuntary human migration and non-human life, for example. As an active member of the Environmental Humanities, perhaps the field could become like the weathered canoes that have conveyed people and materials across the waterways of Turtle Island for millennia. One model is *Canoe: to the North Shore*, 2003, by Anishinaabe artist Bonnie Devine (Figure 2). Her craft's exterior displays inscriptions that track her scientific and personal research on the devastating effects of radiation from uranium mining on people and ecologies in her home area of Serpent River. Matisse's armchair seems static; a canoe is a vehicle. What could be cognate qualities in Art History? They would include a practice adapted to its present circumstances, including the environmental crises that we now witness and their concomitant, pressing, and seemingly intractable social issues, a field that is not so much at home with itself as commodious in the questions asked and the agency of the people asking. Thus to "weather" Art History is more than just to survive it as a discipline. Weathering could bring the material realities of planetary phenomena to bear on the understanding of artworks and their contexts of creation *and* modify the discipline by articulating the importance of these perspectives. This suggestion implies nothing more — or less — than a difference in emphasis, perspective, and atmosphere. I will return to these coordinates when I consider the responses to environmental forces in nineteenth-century Arctic voyaging from the Anglosphere. First, however, other broad considerations about present and historical acknowledgements of weather in art are worth noting.

The increasing attention to issues of climate, weather, environment, and ecology in both recent and historical art has changed the discipline of Art History in the last decade or so.[7] But hasn't some art always been ecoart, at least in retrospect? Perhaps our ancient forebears left images of their hands in caves in what is now Indonesia or France or Spain because they knew the pigments they used wouldn't last outside. Or maybe they painted outside too, but weathering

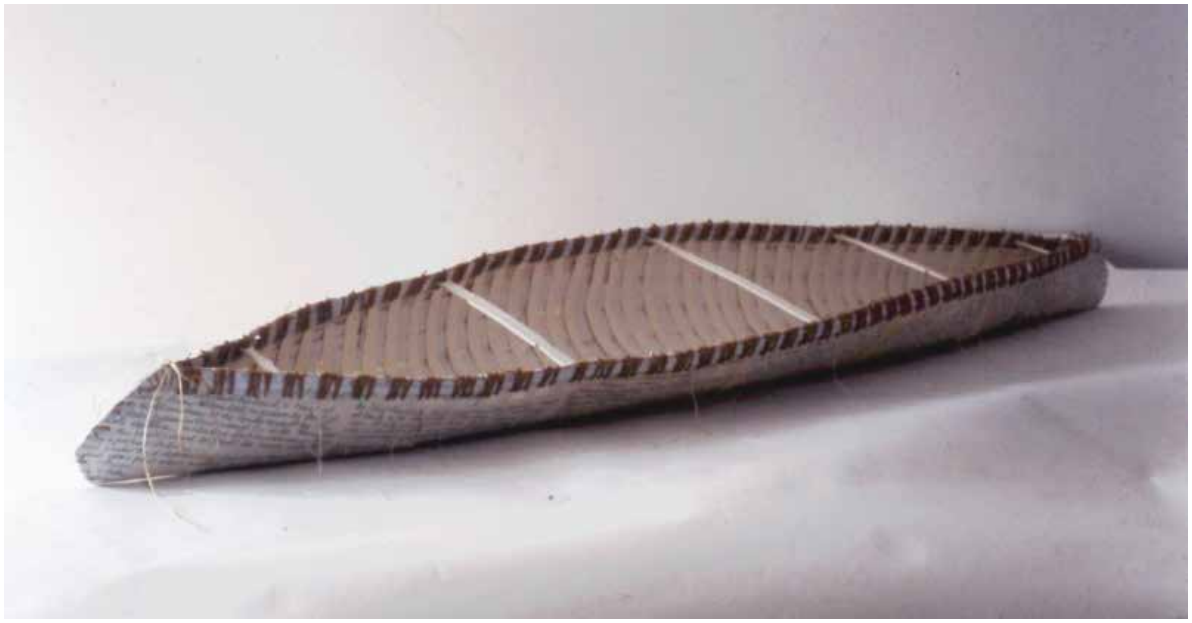


Figure 2. Bonnie Devine (1952-), *Canoe: to the North Shore*, 2003. Graphite on paper, thread, waxed twine.157.5 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

removed such traces. Cataclysmic weather has been imaged for centuries and in many art traditions; think of Leonardo's deluge drawings from the early sixteenth century. Early landscape painting in China showed flooding, though portraying nature as an ideal refuge was a much stronger inclination there and worldwide, especially in garden design. For example, the well-known anonymous Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) scroll painting *Yang Pu Moving His Family*, shows a scholar moving house in some haste across a river. Contemporary artist Jun-Fei Ji alludes to this type of work as a response to the human and planetary scars inscribed in China recently by the Three Gorges Dam project. *Below the 143 meter watermark*, 2006, depicts the human and environmental chaos caused by forced domestic migration ahead of the impending flooding that created the dam's massive reservoir. As Corey Byrnes suggests about Ji's projects in this region, the artist "uses historical styles to create systems of signification for the present. Through his evocation of the Northern Song (960–1127) monumental landscape style, for example, Ji introduces traces of an allegorical system in which the structure of a landscape represents an ideal political and cosmic order that he uses to draw attention to the average people who have been displaced by the dam project."[8]

Landscape as a genre in Europe perhaps inadvertently recorded climate changes such as the so-called "Little Ice Age," when temperatures in Northern Europe were much lower than today.[9] In Bruegel the Elder's famous *Hunters in the Snow*, 1565, an exhausted hunting party returns, almost bountyless, through a snow-covered landscape. The year was the coldest of that century in this region. There are also examples of what we could call environmental protest around exploitative land use, such as Félix Émile Taunay's arresting *View of Native Forest being reduced to Coal*. c. 1840 (Figure 3). The composition of this painting is jarring, bifurcated as it is into two unequal, off-balance zones, defying the academic conventions of the landscape genre. On the left, we see the practice of "contract slavery," in which notoriously exploited black workers clear and burn the forest for its charcoal, while the right presents the Edenic lushness of Rio de Janeiro's Tijuca Forest, contemplated rather than felled by two onlookers. In retrospect, we can also find images of colonizing agriculture as abuse of both enslaved peoples and the land. In William Clark's, *Planting the sugar cane. Slaves working on a plantation in Antigua from Ten Views in the Island of Antigua* (Figure 4), the punishing circuits of slavery and sugar cane are intertwined.[10] Of import in this example is also the rendering of the human and environmental implications of monocultural agriculture. In art practice, then, there has been a notable awareness of what we would today call environmental concerns, both in what is construed as nature and in effects on people, non-human animals, and inanimate reality. This is explicitly the case in contemporary art. But what about earlier art? Eco Art History has also taken on its own momentum, with many art historians and museum professionals now consciously reflecting on how the planetary past might inform art from many locales, traditions, and times. This work is not anachronistic but instead a reorientation in the way we construe art's histories.

A Cold Case Study

The rich image culture of weather and other natural forces surrounding Arctic voyages from the Anglosphere — including the peculiarities of the exotic polar north that were an obsession in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States of America — arose at a time when artists, art historians, and curators were largely not explicitly thinking about ecology, yet it provides an example of the atmosphere of Eco Art History now. Focusing on past visual cultures of weather as an atmospheric phenomenon can also lead to the weathering of Art History that I am seeking, both in terms of theme and in the sense that it raises (but cannot always satisfactorily remediate) the scientific and imperialistic practices that generated the visual artifacts that we can study today. Eco art history has to be evaluated in part by what it can reveal about art and the broader visual culture. Where the first two sections above were speculative in nature, what follows is necessarily more specific and detailed in its engagements with images of and ways of measuring weather.

Figure 3. Félix Émile Taunay (1795-1881), *View of Native Forest being reduced to Coal.* c. 1840. Height: 134 cm (52.7 in); Width: 195 cm (76.7 in). Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro. Wikimedia. Public Domain.

Figure 4. William Clark, *Planting the sugar cane. Slaves working on a plantation in Antigua from Ten Views in the Island of Antigua*, 1823. Aquatint. Wikimedia. Public Domain.

In the nineteenth century, lavish illustrated publications, sublime landscape paintings and heroic portraits, copious botanical, zoological, ethnographic, and meteorological prints, state of the art panoramic spectacles, the reprehensible display of Indigenous peoples and animals, Indigenous narrative and visual representations, and remarkable scientific instruments for navigation and meteorological prognostication were integral to a ramifying imperial infrastructure in and about the Arctic. The voyages and their aesthetic and scientific manifestations took place in the Arctic and across Anglo-American spheres of influence. "Hydroimperialism" (the domination of the Arctic Archipelago by sea from Britain, the USA, and, to the East, Russia) and one of its prime levers, what I call "imperial empiricism" (the uses of measurement, numbers, and statistics to command and naturalize this territory) was sometimes consciously, sometimes in spite of Western voyagers, in collaboration with Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* (traditional local knowledge of the land, sea, and weather).[11] Several Arctic voyagers sought out and practiced Inuit ways and were condemned for their efforts (the Scot John Rae and the American Charles Francis Hall, for example), while others — most notoriously John Franklin, who, with his entire crew, perished on his infamous expedition of 1845 to sail the Northwest Passage — held to the presumed superiority of their own technologies, whether in food, navigation, or clothing.

A potent example of imperial empiricism is the concerted and successful effort to find the north *magnetic* pole, an essential coordinate for successful navigation through the Northwest Passage. As opposed to geographical north, the magnetic pole moves. Recent scientific findings demonstrate how this force affects local weather and indeed the planet's climate. It was pinpointed in 1831 by James Clark Ross, nephew of the seasoned, if controversial, Arctic voyager John Ross, who commanded this expedition. Arctic voyagers habitually published extensive accounts of their journeys, often to great acclaim and profit. John Ross was no exception: his 700-plus page account published in 1835 details the discovery in 1831 of the position of the north magnetic pole. The book's scale perhaps mimes that of Ross's extraordinary journey, during which he and his crew "hibernated" in the pack ice for no fewer than four winters. *Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of North-West Passage, and of a Residence in The Arctic Regions During the Years 1829, 1830, 1831, 1832, and 1833* is replete with meteorological data in the form of charts and tables. Data from this and his earlier Arctic journeys — as well as those published by Ross's nephew and other voyagers — is today valuable to climate scientists for comparison with current conditions. One recent scientific source claims that "Meteorological records from about 30 British Navy ships that overwintered in the Canadian Arctic islands between 1818 and 1859 are the earliest detailed baseline of direct historical data in this region against which modern and future climate trends can be assessed."[12] Combined with artistic images of the Arctic as such information perennially was, the illustrated travel accounts are a key example of the collaboration of art and science in the nineteenth century. The nascent discipline of meteorology into which the voyagers' copious observations fed slants towards the normalization of weather patterns that is essential to forecasting. Endless empirical detail is a management tool, both practically and psychologically. The abstractness of numbers and charts had the advantage of almost universal translatability and of facilitating communication at a distance. The local is shown in a way that is not only local; it can be compared instantly with similar reckonings from anywhere on the planet, or indeed in the Empire, thus establishing an always comparative, always relative network of data.

On one plane, *Com'rRoss Planting the British Standard on the True Position of the Magnetic Pole* in Robert Huish's unauthorized account of Ross's exploits focused on atmospheres in the environmental sense (Figure 5). It vigorously displays what had become *the* atmosphere meme of the polar region, the Aurora Borealis. A crewmember observes the sky with a telescope. More significant than the Earth's firmament, however, is the atmosphere of celebration conveyed – perhaps in ironic jest — by the three Inuit dancing in the left foreground as the British visitors enact the inevitable proprietary ritual of planting the Union Jack, one of many instances of what Adriana Caciun drolly calls the "territorialization of the Arctic Ocean."[14] Two other hunters spear a seal, oblivious to the "civilized" scientific discovery at hand and to the celestial display. James Clark Ross's account of his affirmation of the pole's location is also a prime example of the casual and largely

Figure 5. *ComR Ross Planting the British Standard on the True Position of the Magnetic Pole from Robert Huish, The Last Voyage of Capt. Sir John Ross to the Arctic Regions for the Discovery of a North West Passage; performed in the Years 1829-30-31-32 and 33.* London: John Saunders, 1835. Public Domain.

Figure 6. George Merryweather, Tempest Prognosticator from *An Essay Explanatory of the Tempest Prognosticator in the Building of the Great Exhibition for the Works of Industry of All Nations.* London: J. Churchill, 1851. Public Domain.

eliding "collaboration" of voyager technology with that of the area's original inhabitants: "Having gained the calculated position on the 1st of June, without having been able, from the unfavourable weather, during that interval, to obtain any more observations, I availed the snow huts of a recently deserted Esquimaux village as observatories, camped the party at a sufficient distance to ensure their being beyond of producing any influence on the needles . . ." .[15]

Meteorology perceives and predicts change in the atmosphere. The accurate determination of atmospheric pressure as an indication of changing weather was as crucial to voyagers as compass measurements and the location of the magnetic north pole. A remarkable case in point is the eponymous Dr. George Merryweather's invention, the "Tempest Prognosticator," short for what he more descriptively called the "Atmospheric Electromagnetic Telegraph, conducted by Animal Instinct," sometimes also referred to as the leech barometer (Figure 6). Designed in the form of an Indian temple – the gizmo was shown in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, the first such display of the inventions and wares of the British Empire, including India's – this improbable apparatus deployed the tendency of leeches to rise when atmospheric pressure changed. When a storm was coming, up the bottles they went, running into a piece of whalebone (likely harvested in Arctic waters), which triggered bells at the top. Merryweather's experiments with 'animal instinct' demonstrated to his satisfaction

> that it is not thunder which acts upon the leech, but the electrical state of the atmosphere, which precedes thunder; and for that state of the air, all my experiments tend to prove leeches have (if I may be allowed the expression,) the most remarkable sympathy. It was thus I found out, that before a storm could take place, there must be a preparatory process in the atmosphere, of which the leech gives unequivocal evidence. ... The apparatus being now ready for action, I beheld an Atmospheric, Electro-magnetic Telegraph.[16]

The potentially inaudible individual chimes triggered by single leeches were amplified by teamwork: the more bells, the more likely the storm. The Prognosticator was a collective.

The atmosphere was a daily concern in Arctic expeditions and of course in the lives of Inuit. Perceived changes in climate were also of fundamental importance in the entire enterprise of nineteenth-century Arctic voyaging. British naval and whaling vessels had been travelling to this region in numbers since the sixteenth century. They always contended with pack ice, often with tragic results. In 1817, however, the whaler and inveterate observer of natural phenomena, William Scoresby Jr., wrote to Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society of London, noting what he took to be auspicious decreases in pack ice west of Greenland and suggesting that the time was right for more polar expeditions. John Barrow, 2nd Secretary of the Admiralty, already believed in the longstanding speculation that the Polar Sea was ice-free and acted on Scoresby's recommendations. He sent out two sea expeditions in 1818, one to find the North Pole via Svalbard – John Franklin commanded one of the ships – the other, led by John Ross and including William Edward Parry – to find the Northwest Passage (both failed). This intimation of longer-term change in the climate of the north was not entirely wishful thinking; polynyas, large areas of open sea very far north, had been reported for centuries. What were believed to be positive weather signs thus suggested to some an end to the Little Ice Age, which lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and particularly the "Year without a Summer" of 1816, which had largely been caused by the eruption of Mt. Tambora in Indonesia in 1815 and influenced Mary Shelley as she wrote *Frankenstein*. Arctic warming appeared to be a good thing.

Such changes in the Arctic climate are more alarming today and there is a corresponding plethora of new ecological artworks by Indigenous and other artists devoted to environmental change in this region. Will any of this work directly ameliorate climate disruption? Likely not. But in potentially influencing human behaviour towards the planet, there is a powerful role for the aesthetic. The same can be said of research and writing in Art History. By looking at the visual cultures of weather and atmosphere, past and present, I have claimed that the discipline can be weathered thematically

and in terms of what we can call the textures of its expression and thinking. That grain would not be smooth or unified, tidy or comfortable. Yet such engagements have the advantage of being "contemporary" in the sense of working through consequential issues pertaining to the planet and of bringing historical art and material culture into these discussions. Bleak? Certainly. Hopeless? No.

Notes

1. Eva Horn, "Air as Medium," *Grey Room* 73 (Fall 2018): 6 – 25, 9. See also John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
2. Horn, "Air as Medium," 13.
3. The intricacies and nomenclatures of thinking about the planet, earth, and global are examined by Dipesh Chakrabarty in "The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category," *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (Autumn 2019): 1 – 31.
4. Tonino Griffero, "Something More. Atmospheres and Pathic Aesthetics," in *Atmosphere/Atmospheres: Testing a New Paradigm*, eds. Tonino Griffero and Giampiero Moretti (Milan: Mimesis International, 2018), 49. As Griffero and his co-editors and co-authors note in this and other publications, the literature on 'atmospheres' is vast and continuously expanding. Another expansive text on the notion of atmospheres is Gary Shapiro, *Nietzsche's Earth: Great Events, Great Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
5. This turn in the discipline is perhaps *structurally* much like many others, including (in no specific order and among others), what have been called the linguistic, material, global, spatial, temporal, and neurological turns of recent decades. It is a new emphasis or point of departure, one that is not independent of or that seeks to replace those that have gone before. But to construe responses to contemporary climate crises as a mere change of emphasis in the field is to many, including this author, to underestimate both the crisis and the import of refocusing our professional interests.
6. "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" (1908), cited in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 135.
7. I have traced several trajectories of this change in art and Art History in *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature since the '60s* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018). That this is an accelerating process is witnessed by academic courses, special issues of journals (for example, *Archives of American Art*, Spring 2020), and theme years at research institutions (including the Getty Research Institute in 2019-20). An outstanding example of "ecocritical art history," as the authors call it, is Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock, *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment* (Princeton University Art Museum and Yale UP, 2018).
8. Corey Byrnes, *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China's Three Gorges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 212.
9. See Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
10. See Charmaine A. Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montréal and Jamaica* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
11. A powerful source for understanding this concept is the 2010 documentary *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, directed by Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro (ISUMA TV). On the many collaborations between Western science, empires, and imperialism globally, see Christopher Carter, "Magnetic Fever: Global Imperialism and Empiricism in the Nineteenth Century," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, Vol. 99, No. 4, 2009.
12. Catharine Ward and Julian A. Dowdeswell, "On the Meteorological Instruments and Observations Made during the 19th Century Exploration of the Canadian Northwest Passage," *Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research* 38, no. 3: 454 – 464, 454.
13. Robert Huish, *The Last Voyage of Capt. Sir John Ross to the Arctic Regions for the Discovery of a North West Passage; performed in the Years 1829-30-31-32 and 33* (London: John Saunders, 1835). Ill. faces p. 589.
14. Adriana Caciun, "The Frozen Ocean," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (May 2010): 693 – 702, 699.
15. James Clark Ross, "On the Position of the North Magnetic Pole," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, Vol. 124 (1834): 47 – 52, 49.
16. George Merryweather, *An Essay Explanatory of the Tempest Prognosticator in the Building of the Great Exhibition for the Works of Industry of All Nations* (London: J. Churchill, 1851), 44, 46.

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Mary Byrd Land

Petra Kuppers

(in response to Black Lives Matter activist Syrus Marcus Ware's Antarctica, an installation that imagines a group of Black, trans and disabled people setting up a new form of home on unclaimed Antarctic land)

Let's go birding. Out into the open. Out into post-smog clear.
Let's go birding, past the carcass of Sir Victorian Albatross.

Misplaced polar bear reluctantly takes a knee,
beats the ground to drum up Wendell Seal.

The holograph deep-sixes, shift historic mirage.
Howl sound remembers Arctic Tern:

wheel in the windy passage, pole-vaulter,
breach the globe's ley-lines, stay in the light.

One for the life list, two, fifty-three.
Leopold seal changes her bioluminescent spots,

code-switches into adaptation for prosthetic shrimp,
for tiny pink crustaceans. Pluralized to krill,

they show no allegiance to rapid-switch compass.
Let's go birding, push ancient border claims.

Southern Elephant seal roars over floes.
Expedition-level foot-wear spans the crevasse.

Neon-rappelling gear ticks as you search
for the miraculous cave, cyber-whispered sugar.

Blue-eyed Imperial Shag lump together.
They panic the fish till they have nowhere to go.

Bird beak opens wide. Just pick them off, one by one.
Archaic nature programs offer explanations, you suck a cube.

Focus on Tardigrades, water bear sticks sensitive antennae
onto salts: hormonal load, high cortisol keen.

Chinstrap penguin makes noise, pushes into the void.
When you go birding, rub your skin in fat.

When you go birding, project your camouflage.
Crevasse ghost recognizes kin and kin, old dream horizon.

One hesitant bipedal steps on purple post-oil sole.
Binoculars: Amazonian rubber pads against frozen eyelashes.

See Giant Petrel glide up there, soar the sky,
never never touch rotten clear of ice, rank mist full earth.

Blue ice, old oxygen bubbles next to methane haze.
New thermals rise it into cauldron, maelstrom, evaporate.

New soups boil your tired bones, so clean, so clear.
Compound round welcome. Alien tents appear.

Petra Kuppers is a disability culture activist, a community performance artist, a Professor at the University of Michigan and an advisor on Goddard College's MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts. She leads The Olimpias, an international disability performance research collective. Her academic books engage disability performance; medicine and contemporary arts; somatics and writing; and community performance. She is also the author of a dark fantasy collection, *Ice Bar* (2018). Her most recent poetry collection is the ecosomatic *Gut Botany* (2020). She lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where she co-creates Turtle Disco, a somatic writing space, with her wife and collaborator, Stephanie Heit. Petra is a Black Earth Institute fellow.

"Humid Air, Humid Aesthetics"

Sara Gabler Thomas

Edwidge Danticat's recently published short story, "One Thing," tells of a Haitian woman's efforts to communicate with her husband, Ray, who is hospitalized with COVID-19 in New York City.[1] The story reveals Ray's illness indirectly, as when his wife imagines him describing a particular cave in the south of Haiti as "breathtaking — though he'd no longer use that particular word."[2] With her usual care and deceptive simplicity, Danticat places the current pandemic against a backdrop of the beauty of the Haitian landscape and the beauty of this couple's love. The relationship between the cave and Ray's illness hinges on the way that "breathtaking" turns from the awe-inspiring subterranean environment to the twin pandemics of racism and the coronavirus that steal the breath of Black people. "Breath-taking" resonates with the refrain, "I can't breathe," mobilized by the Black Lives Matter movement and with the breath-taking disease to which Black people face disproportionate rates of infection and death.[3] Ray's breath links this story, which is most explicitly about COVID-19, to a Black Studies orientation to time that asks how past histories of violence, enslavement, and revolution still suffuse the present. "One Thing" brings together the past and present, love and loss to produce an affecting atmosphere that stalls time in order to keep Ray alive by letting in a little bit of air from other times of great joy and pleasure, as with his memory of the cave. The story is not just affecting because of its context but because of its thick sense of lived time suffused with other times.

Reading fiction about the pandemic while living through it produces a range of affective responses which make it possible to apprehend the present crisis alongside a range of historical feelings. In "One Thing," affect connects Haitians and Haitian-Americans across diaspora communities, signals ties to the lands and waters of Haiti, and, via one health crisis, echoes another: Haiti's cholera epidemic caused by UN peacekeepers following the 2010 earthquake.[4] Across her oeuvre, Danticat breathes the past into the present by pointing to the conjunctures of social and material atmospheres; her work therefore grounds my elaboration on a method for reading the relationship between atmosphere and affect in hemispheric American literature. "One Thing" is so affecting because it points to a growing acknowledgment of the relationship between the materiality of the air we breathe (as in the aerosol particles that carry the coronavirus from one person to another) and social atmospheres (like the supremacist ideologies that foster un-belonging across the Americas). Using Danticat to open up a reading of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, I discuss literature's attunement to and blurring of the distinction between social and material atmospheres by tracing two nexuses of atmospheric aesthetics: first, how literature represents the atmosphere's relationship to bodies by indexing the air in specific environments, and second, how these texts mediate the relations between environment, affect, and the past through their humid literary atmospheres.

As Eva Horn observes, now more than ever modern meteorology and climatology produces a wealth of knowledge about "air," but "never before has the air been so drained of all cultural and symbolic significance."[5] She advances instead a return to the "complex *cultural* understanding of climate that has been lost with a modern understanding of atmosphere."[6] This return to a more nuanced meaning of "climate" emphasizes atmosphere as the material *and* cultural phenomenon "of a culture's situatedness in nature and nature's gentle force within culture" that "facilitates a broader understanding and appreciation of the role air plays in conditioning and articulating forms of life."[7] Nature's force may not be so gentle, as when

Christina Sharpe diagnoses the pervasive cultural atmosphere of antiblackness, saying "the weather is the total climate; and the climate is antiblack."[8] Collapsing the difference between weather and climate, Sharpe suggests that antiblackness cannot be approached as only an event (i.e. the weather) or state of being (i.e. the climate).[9] Sharpe connects ecology and history by tracing how forms of antiblack subjection fill the air from the rupture of the Atlantic slave trade to contemporary literary responses to this history. She argues that, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, there is "one ecology of the ship that continues into the present."[10] Sharpe particularizes Horn's insight which leads to a renewed sense of the cultural meaning of atmosphere through a Black Studies emphasis on the *longue durée* of racialization and subjection in the Americas.[11] Danticat's fiction sits in this lineage of Black feminist literature that aligns historical violence with its resonances in the present by showing how forms of life are bound to social and material atmospheres, whether they emerge from the ecology of the ship or the ecology of the cave.

In "One Thing," Danticat scales between the total climate Sharpe diagnoses and the more specific weather of the cave that the couple made plans to visit before the pandemic. Like the wife, the cave had "been named for a nurse and soldier, Marie-Jeanne Lamartiniére, who dressed as a man to fight alongside her husband against the French colonial army during the Haitian Revolution."[12] The Marie-Jeanne cave is located in southern Haiti near the town of Port-à-Piment. It is one of the longest in the Caribbean and contains Taíno engravings. The cave serves as a tether between the couple now living in the US and their parents' birthplace in Haiti, as well as a semantic tether between Marie-Jeanne who fights to support her sick husband and the history of Black women's resistance in the long struggle for Black freedom played out in Haiti and across the Americas. The air of the cave produces a subterranean atmosphere of Black revolution that lingers and proves to be a powerful "articulation of forms of life" that stalls — if briefly — the "total climate" of antiblackness in the Americas, thus responding to Sharpe's search for "way-making tool[s]" in literature for living in and surviving the atmosphere of antiblackness.[13] The irony of "breathtaking" signals a close association between the beauty of aspirations for freedom and the tragedy of Ray's fight to breathe. The language produces a thickness of feeling which is so characteristic of Danticat's literary atmospheres.

The thickness of the atmosphere and the thickness of human feeling are joined in instances of high humidity. Because humidity is common to the islands and coastal regions of the archipelagic Americas, it signals a relationship between the body in space that links affect, sensation, and environment.[14] As a weather condition, humidity describes the amount of water vapor in the air.[15] High humidity, when combined with high temperatures, provokes a set of unique physiological responses: it makes one's skin sticky and it can feel like your body is moving through thick, aqueous air. The porosity of the body can be mood altering.[16] Thus, humidity is a measurement of comfort. Too high (or too low) humidity can cause discomfort. Though humidity itself is not an affect, it enables certain affects, such as irritation, which arises on the skin due to a change in embodied and affective equilibrium. While being careful to avoid climate determinism, the fact that humidity verges on affective states and indexes tropical and post-plantation climates allows me to hold together and explore intersections between affect studies, environmental studies, and critical race studies.

Humidity bridges two essential elements of atmosphere: the material (as in the air that you breathe in a specific environment or place) and the metaphoric (the character, feeling, or mood of a place or situation).[17] This dual aspect of "atmosphere" is what makes it such a generative as well as ephemeral object of analysis. We are often not conscious of the materiality of the atmosphere around us; air is ubiquitous and often taken for granted (that is, unless we're attuned to aerosols or pollutants), but that doesn't mean it's not acting on us. The metaphoric valence of "atmosphere" can be viscerally felt, as when a space's "mood" becomes palpable, from a prickle on the skin at a memorial or the hush of a suddenly silent party. The palpable "mood" of a place suggests there is an affective density, a thickening of the air, as if it is humid with feeling and meaning. As Dora Zhang describes, "Moods are not intentional, not directed at specific objects, but are instead more ambient and hazy, like a surrounding or encompassing cloud."[18] Even the metaphors used to describe mood make use

of the language of the weather, from "atmosphere" to "cloud," suggesting the implicit affinities of these processes. And more than individual experiences of place, moods are social.[19]

Theories of literary "tone" draw on the atmospheric valence of affect in order to understand a text's atmosphere as part of aesthetic form and experience. As Sianne Ngai argues in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), tone means "a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and the world."[20] Scaling between text and context, tone mediates — or stands between — the text and the larger set of social relations that produced it and its audience.[21] In order to read a text's tone, one must perceive what is between foreground (the content, or what is being represented) and the background (what is contextual or atmospheric). This can be challenging because often affect "seems a fugitive presence attached to or hovering in the vicinity of words."[22] Because tone is perceived in the space between foreground and background, it has often eluded analysis. Ngai's work is helpful here because she insists that by understanding tone, readers will be better able to understand a text's ideological position, stating that tone is "the formal aspect that enables... affective values [like paranoia, euphoria, and melancholy] to become significant with regard to how each critic understands the work as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations."[23] Ngai's understanding of tone as a "holistic matrix" resonates with Sharpe's understanding of antiblackness as the totality of the climate. Both treat atmospheres as macro-level phenomena. Building off Ngai's claims that tone is emblematic of a text's ideological environment, I extend Ngai to include the non-human environment as it gets taken up by texts. Though "One Thing" speaks to the totality of antiblackness, it also scales down to the uniqueness of the Marie-Jeanne cave and its "fugitive" atmosphere, suggesting that understanding the particularity of singular historical or weather events is helpful for analyzing the effects of social and meteorological atmospheres.

Ngai's understanding of tone as a "holistic matrix" resonates with Sharpe's understanding of antiblackness as the totality of the climate. Both treat atmospheres as macro-level phenomena. Building off Ngai's claims that tone is emblematic of a text's ideological environment, I extend Ngai to include the non-human environment as it gets taken up by texts. Though "One Thing" speaks to the totality of antiblackness, it also scales down to the uniqueness of the Marie-Jeanne cave and its "fugitive" atmosphere, suggesting that understanding the particularity of singular historical or weather events is helpful for analyzing the effects of social and meteorological atmospheres.[24] Humidity hints as to why atmospheres linger: the air is saturated with particles which make the embodied and affective encounter with the air seem to stall the progress of time. In Danticat's writing, the atmosphere of the cave suffuses the text and becomes the "one thing" that helps the couple remain together in the present moment. The humidity of literary atmospheres also produces a sensation of the intermingling of the past and the present. For instance, in "One Thing" the resonance of "breathtaking" with "I can't breathe" draws out a collective sense of antiblack violence rooted in a history of dispossession. The notion that the past of slavery is connected to structural racism and, more specifically, state-sanctioned police violence continues to galvanize Black Lives Matter uprisings. Appeals to the history of dispossession suggests a continuity between the past and the present sometimes referred to as "afterlife of slavery," a thesis which Stephen Best describes as integral to Black Studies accounts of temporality.[25] For Best, the afterlives thesis is epitomized in Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the past is not past. Creative work and scholarship in this vein foster a sense of melancholy that, along with an ethics focused on redeeming the past, speaks more to contemporary desires to recover the past than to what is actually knowable about that past. Though there are resonances of the afterlives thesis in Danticat's work, she more forcefully recounts Black women's revolutionary history as it remains relevant for breathing life into the present crisis. The ecology of the cave makes the past available to the present, but that atmosphere is not the atmosphere of the hold which Sharpe discusses. The way that the past lingers in moments of humidity can evoke how the past of slavery continues to have ongoing material effects; but humidity does not necessarily point to the total atmosphere of antiblackness. The cave in "One Thing" suffuses the story of Ray's illness, bringing with it a different breath-taking atmosphere, one that reaches back to the aspirations of freedom of revolutionary Haitians, if not further. That "One Thing" holds together the Marie-Jeanne cave and COVID-19 indicates how the past extends into the present in multiple ways via what is "in the air."

Humidity also literalizes the stickiness of affect that Sara Ahmed theorizes, making central the role of skin in perceiving atmospheric change. Affects travel via impression, a capacious term that signals the body's relationship to the world, a relationship that Ahmed understands as primarily social. Ahmed uses "impression" to mean that affects circulate through social atmospheres and attach to raced and gendered bodies under specific socio-historical conditions. For Ahmed, it is important to consider the skin as a "surface that is felt only in the event of being 'impressed upon' in the encounters we have with others."[26] These impressions are experienced affectively and become meaningful through the socio-cultural emotions we have available to us. Extending this claim, we might say that we are "impressed upon" by the human and more-than-human world and are open to being impressed upon and made sticky by heat and humidity especially.[27] Heat and humidity are aspects of the weather that influence human behavior and perception, and the skin mediates the body's relationship to the exterior atmosphere. Heat and humidity are also increasingly effects of anthropogenic climate change, making them both social as well as "natural" phenomena. This insight helps us to take seriously the "atmosphere" as a material index of a given time or place. The palpable relationship of the air on the skin allows me to trace the material and metaphoric valences of atmosphere and affect as I look at texts whose literary atmospheres are humid with feeling and historical memory.

A Case for Humid Aesthetics

"One Thing" is exceptionally affecting because its sense of time is protracted to make a space to preemptively memorialize this one man's life. By focusing on the cave, the story slows time so that the cave holds a humid space for the couple's love. In the story's final lines, Marie-Jeanne muses on how the air of the cave can hold the sound of Ray's voice: "She remembers him once telling her that inside the Marie-Jeanne cave, sounds carry weight and travel in waves... She imagines herself standing at the lowest depths of this cave... and hearing again what he whispered in her ear during their wedding dance."[28] The atmosphere of the cave mediates Ray's words, as if the story is trying breathe for him, to keep him alive, in the air.

Danticat's characters often experience personal loss alongside the loss of or alterations to their sense of place, primarily through experiences of diaspora and genocide. But even though Danticat often writes the Haitian landscape and history together, her work is not traditionally read within environmental studies of literature, though she has much to add to this field.[29] Turning to Danticat's 1998 historical novel, *The Farming of Bones*, in which the non-human world functions similarly to the cave in "One Thing," I will show how the process of narrating historical violence produces the novel's "humid aesthetics."[30] Whereas in "One Thing" the main effect of humidity was that time was protracted, in *The Farming of Bones*, the past comes to circulate in the present, amplifying the sense of humid time. In shifting to *The Farming of Bones*, it will become clear how the intimacy of one woman's loss stretches to provide an atmosphere where it is possible to mourn collective loss, especially losses from antiblack and anti-Haitian violence.[31]

The Farming of Bones remembers the Parsley Massacre of 1937, a flash point in the complex history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in which the latter's dictator, Raphael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, sanctioned the genocide of thousands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans living and working in the Dominican Republic.[32] The novel provides an opportunity to reflect on the experience of living on the border at the time of the massacre and to represent forms of grief (collective and individual) from the intimate perspective of Amabelle Desir, the Haitian protagonist of the novel who works in the home of a Spanish-Dominican military family. Jennifer Harford Vargas calls the constellation of bodies and voices the novel's "testimonial archive."[33] The genre of *testimonio* gives individual and collective voice to the Parsley Massacre and bears witness to an often suppressed event in Haitian/Dominican national relations.[34]

The intimacy of Amabelle's first person narration creates a slowly growing awareness of the thickening of the social atmosphere, which bears out on the characters' skin. The death of her lover's friend, Joël, is one of the early tragedies of the

novel. He is struck and killed by a car driven by Amabelle's employer. That night Amabelle visits her lover, Sebastien, at the cane mill compound where he lives and works. The brutal nature of the work has left him scared and bruised and she tries to comfort his many wounds: "Sebastien had a bunch of carbuncles over his hips and belly. As I rubbed the poultice on them, I didn't feel as though I was touching him. It was more like touching the haze of anger rising off his skin, the tears of sadness he would not cry, the move san, the bad blood Joël's death had stirred in him."[35] In this scene the outlines of their bodies blur as Amabelle touches "the haze of anger rising off his skin." It's as if he gives off an affective charge, creating the humid air around him.

Later, Amabelle is fortunate to flee the massacre that takes place in Alegría, but Sebastien is not. The loss of Sebastien is devastating. Back in Haiti, Amabelle and other survivors line up for days to give testimony of their loss to Haitian officials, sometimes in return for monetary compensation but often for the value of the testimony itself: "I dream all the time of returning to give my testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalísimo himself."[36] Amabelle's desire to give testimony to non-human entities like the river and the waterfall suggest that she has an understanding of how the human and non-human are imbricated in vital ways. In moments of tragedy and unbelonging, Danticat's narrators often turn to the non-human world to imagine forms of sociality with water and caves, which suggests how non-human environments, the weather and not the climate of a place, both contribute to and ameliorate human suffering. In her dreams, Amabelle imagines that Sebastien's death would matter to the waterfall, as it *should* matter the political leaders. Giving testimony of Sebastian's life to the waterfall is an epistemological claim about how human loss reverberates and how verbal testimony needs to be repeated. By the end of the novel Amabelle returns to Alegría where she hopes to find Sebastien behind a waterfall.

For Amabelle, remembering is a practice that brings Sebastien into the present in a transmuted physical form as he becomes part of a humid, palpable atmosphere. This atmosphere has a fleshiness. When she is reminded of the Parsley Massacre she reflects:

> This past is more like flesh than air; our stories testimonials like the ones never heard by the justice of the peace or the Generalísmo himself... I wish at least that [Sébastien] was part of the air on this side of the river, a tiny morsel in the breeze that passes through my room in the night. I wish at least that some of the dust of his bones could trail me in the wind.[37]

In this passage, Amabelle desires a material remnant of her lover — something as small as a particle of his body carried in the air. At first, there's some confusion in the syntax about whether flesh or air is a superior vector for her lover. If "this past is more like flesh than air," then it appears as if she would prefer memories to be embodied things. Rather than wishing for Sebastien's physical form to rematerialize, Amabelle in her grief asks for air. But air itself is an entity full of fleshly particles. In the final sentence, the flesh and the air meet as the dust of Sebastien's bones trail her in the wind. The non-human world (the wind, the air) mediates her loss, as the cave preemptively mediated Ray's loss in "One Thing."

The air, suffused with fleshly particles, is itself a material conductor, not only of pieces of Sebastien to Amabelle, but of aspects of the past that circulate in the present. As Black Studies scholars have remarked about Walter Benjamin's musings on the Angel of History, the wreckage of the past is one long vista of chaos that must be seen and understood in order to operate on the future. As Amabelle desires a material particle of her lover in the air, she literalizes Benjamin's musing that "the past carries with it a secret index" which tells us how feelings exist "only in the air we have breathed."[39] The use of the past-perfect tense suggests that it is not just the past that has a "secret index" but that we, who have ingested the past in the air we "have breathed," also carry the past within ourselves. Benjamin emphasizes breath a second time: "Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well?"[40] If that "secret index" is more than memory and instead the

material particles of the air, then the past is something that is not past, but metabolized by those in the present in our bodies and through aesthetic experience. The artist (or historian), then has a unique role in mediating the past so as to redeem it. To redeem the past is necessary so that the deaths of Ray and Sebastien, for instance, are not meaningless wreckage lost to those in the present.

Amabelle desires a material link between the past and the present, one more tangible and visceral than mere memory which gives meaning to the chaos of the past. The novel's tone in these passages is humid, thick with feeling as the literal condition of humidity is a measure of the saturation of water vapor in the air. The quality of carrying the past via the air we have breathed is not consciously perceived. The novel makes this process known by formalizing the presence of Sebastien "in the air" through its bolded chapters. These bolded chapters alternate (for most of the text) between the main chapters of the linear narrative which are in regular type-face. Each bolded chapter is narrated in the present tense, and they occur outside of the linear progression of the main narrative. In the first bolded chapter, Amabelle describes waking one morning to find that Sebastien had already left for the fields. She "**can smell his sweat, which is as thick as sugarcane juice**" and "**can still count his breaths**."[41] More than flashbacks, each bolded chapter stands on its own, as if Sebastien trails Amabelle's journey before, during, and after the Parsley Massacre. Thus, not only is the novel's tone thick with meaning and feeling regarding antiblack violence in the Dominican Republic and Haitian borderlands; the novel literalizes Amabelle's desire for Sebastien to trail behind her in these textual spaces. This formal aspect of the text makes it possible to see humidity as an aesthetic quality of *The Farming of Bones* in order to see how the past exists in bodies. As seen in Amabelle's wish, Danticat can draw together issues of memory (human or non-human) and atmosphere (of history and particles in the air). Breathing and remembering serve the same function.

Like "One Thing," *The Farming of Bones* exhibits a tone that is both tender and tragic. The texts' feelings about the past and responses to the present scale between the emotions and experiences of individual characters and the larger tragedy of which they are only a part. At the level of both content and tone, the novel works to unsilence the historical event of the Parsley Massacre by making Amabelle's losses a constant presence as Sebastien circulates through its bolded chapters.[42] Making the Parsley Massacre legible includes making it felt through Amabelle's intimate narration.

A Problem of Humid Time

Faulkner's "postage stamp of native soil" is itself a literary ecology saturated with affect: white Southerner's pride and shame; black Southerner's rage, pride, and discomfort; male impotence and outrage; lust and desire; fear and hate on all sides; and more. In many of his novels and short stories, the heat of a Mississippi summer day rustles up dust that carries with it a weightiness and a protracted duration of time. Whereas the humidity of *The Farming of Bones* made the effects of the Parsley Massacre perceptible, the humidity of the southern environment in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, occludes struggles against antiblackness in the longue durée of the circum-Caribbean, in which the Haitian Revolution is one node.[43] I read Faulkner's misrepresentation of the Haitian Revolution as an effect of the humid atmosphere of the southern gothic genre. Humidity can be either revealing or confusing, thereby reflecting the ideological values or limitations inherent in a writers' atmosphere.

Faulkner is very good at representing how the atmosphere carries particles of the material of history. In the opening scene of *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Quentin Compson is summoned to Rosa Coldfield's house to hear her tale of Thomas Sutpen's "demonic" rise and fall, Quentin enters a space in which the past is palpably present. He sits with Rosa in "a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers... which... became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes" into which Sutpen's ghost emerges "out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust."[44] The room is saturated with the past that is materialized in the "victorious dust" of the southern landscape of plantocracy and

chattel slavery and becomes a perversion of the "moonlight and magnolias" trope that romanticized the antebellum South. The dust is the "secret index" of bodies, crops, trees, detritus — the corporeal materials of the past that suffuse the present. Though the scene literalizes the weight of history that is too frequently mystified within the genre of the "southern gothic," in it Faulkner dehumidifies this scene so that it is contains only Rosa's warped, airless, and arid understanding of the past, not the thickness of the humid Mississippi air.

The dusty and thick atmosphere of *Absalom, Absalom!* slows the sense of the passage of time, especially when Quentin is in charge of the narration. While at Rosa's house, Quentin feels suffocated by the stillness of the air which has compressed all the years of Rosa's outrage at Sutpen into a single confined space: "in the gloom of the shuttered hallway whose air was even hotter than outside, as if there were prisoned in it like in a tomb all the suspiration of slow heat-laden time."[45] The hallway is so saturated with air and dust and affect that it grows more and more humid. The humidity of the scene seems to have physiological and time-altering effects, such that it is not just that the past converges in the present through the atmosphere of dust, but that it compresses to the point of breaking through the present and into the future. As Quentin recounts to his college roommate Shreeve, during the buggy-ride he took with Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred the dust appeared again, "enclosing them with not threat exactly but maybe warning, bland, almost friendly, warning, as if to say, *Come on if you like. But I will get there first.*"[46] As the anthropomorphized dust shoots past Quentin and Rosa it takes on a life of its own. The thick atmosphere can make the ride seem slower and more labored because it is ubiquitous and inescapable. The stalled and saturated sense of the present is emblematic of the Faulknerian phrase, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."[47] The line is materialized in the dust-filled atmospheres of *Absalom, Absalom!* that haunt Quentin Compson.

But other histories emerge in the novel with some complications and factual errors, namely in the ways that Faulkner misrepresents the Haitian Revolution. Following Ngai, the atmospheres of the novel also index the ideological, isolationist context of the 1930s when Faulkner was writing *Absalom, Absalom!*.[48] If Haiti appears in Faulkner's novel in the 1930s — though, as many other scholars have noted, he gets the dates of the Haitian Revolution all wrong — it's to emerge again as a threatening symbol of the political feelings and movements that a tropical environment could incubate.[49] Faulkner describes Haiti as "the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization."[50] Playing up the tropical climate of the island, Faulkner represents Haiti as detrimental to Sutpen's success in Mississippi because he carries with him the traces of Black revolution via the enslaved persons he brings with him and the stigma of miscegenation. Sutpen himself has a kind of amnesia about his time in the West Indies, of which the details are sparse: he worked as an overseer on a sugar plantation where he acquired his Creole first wife, and supposedly single-handedly staved off a slave revolt only to escape with a mixed-race family and gold.

From this vantage point, we can see how the amnesia about and tropicalization of Haiti in Faulkner's novel is a process impressing certain racialized spaces and persons with climate-based and biological characteristics that support white supremacy in the US South. This explains why, when Haiti is mentioned, the narration itself stalls as if oversaturated with anxiety about naming Black revolution. As Ikuko Asaka argues, efforts to curtail black revolutionary struggles in the Americas "entailed the imagining and pursuit of a racially demarcated Atlantic space in which places of black and white freedom were geographically segmented according to a racial taxonomy of climate."[51] In other words, black resistance becomes attached to tropical island spaces like Haiti, but this is perceived differently for Faulkner than it is for Danticat. In Danticat's "One Thing" the atmosphere of the Marie-Jeanne cave offers a different possibility, one which has the potential to redeem the past and connect one island (Haiti) to another (Brooklyn, Long Island). In Faulkner, the oversaturated air results in historiographic errors about and omissions of the Haitian Revolution contributing to an affective atmosphere in the text that reflects racial anxieties of white Southerners in the 1930s US South. This atmosphere is also hot and stifling for Quentin Compson who, when he narrates the story with Shreve in their dorm room in Boston, has to open the window to

let in the winter air to cool their passions and avoid the humidity that this history might impress upon him.

The Tropics of Time

The Farming of Bones and *Absalom, Absalom!* produce humid atmospheres that disrupt linear temporality by stalling time and saturating the present with material remnants of the past. In addition to Black Studies "afterlives" temporality, literary studies scholars are increasingly interested in non-linear time and "new temporalities." As Amelia Groom advances in her 2013 introduction to the edited volume *TIME*, twenty-first century texts re-present the past and "mark a thickening of the present to acknowledge its multiple, interwoven temporalities."[52] Danticat's and Faulkner's texts create "multiple, interwoven temporalties" via what I am calling their humid aesthetics. "Centered firmly in studies of contemporary literature and art, the new temporalities dismantle the teleology of linear chronology and reconceive time as multidimensional and multiplicitous."[53] The environments within and transmitted by each text offer a theory of how the past circulates in literary texts, as in Sebastien's circulation in the air or the dusty malaise of Quentin's narration. Their internal literary atmospheres are thick with the past, and especially in the case of Danticat's prose, are thick with feeling. As these two examples show, humidity also operates on the sense of the "thickness" of the present. The weaving of temporalities in Danticat and Faulkner occurs in conjunction with each author's attention to the local environments — the significance of water and air for transmitting and transmuting human feeling — and to social conditions of belonging and unbelonging that have been taken up in literature prior to the twenty-first century phenomena Groom identifies.

By scaling down from the climate into one aspect of the day-to-day condition of the weather, i.e. humidity, I have shown how the atmosphere is a trans-human phenomenon impacting human life and culture. As a quality of the environments of the literature that I study of the archipelagic Americas, humidity is a good indication of the "push and pull between the metaphoric and the material" which "serves to mediate the phenomenology of humans' cultural relation to the solid and liquid materiality of geography."[54] Humidity appears not only at the level of content, but at the level of form in the text's tone, its global feeling or attitude to the world. Humidity affects a text's temporality, performing an aesthetic experience of how human and environmental timescales converge.

Humidity is a meteorological effect that could be helpful for the humanities for thinking about how the past circulates in the present, as well as the ideologies and aesthetics of this phenomenon. Reading humidity is not to reproduce a tropology of bodies in particular spaces, but to tropicalize theories of time/history to certain ecological patterns. There might be other meteorological metaphors to describe time and feeling; perhaps a text could be frigid, sultry, wet, etc. What I am suggesting is that there is something unique about humidity that explains how and when feelings stick, especially in the context of the archipelagic Americas. Along with the turn to affect and the turn to new time studies, humidity bridges the gap between feeling and time, or more accurately, how feeling and time are mediated by environments — social, ecological, or otherwise atmospheric, as in Sharpe's concept of the "weather" and on the skin. The significance of my approach to humidity bears out in the way it reveals where the social and the weather meet: in the air and on the skin.

Notes

1. Edwidge Danticat, "One Thing," The Decameron Project, *The New York Times Magazine*, July 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/07/magazine/edwidge-danticat-decameron.html

2. Ibid.

3. To date, a number of studies point to the differential outcomes for Black and Brown persons with COVID-19. See Gregorio A.

Millett et al. "Assessing Differential Impacts of COVID-19 on Black Communities." *Annals of Epidemiology* 47 (July 2020): 37-44; Richard A. Oppel Jr. et al. "The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), July 24, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html.

4. Danticat has also written about the US's plans to deport Haitians amidst the coronavirus pandemic, stating that "under the guise of immigration enforcement, the United States can further destabilize Haiti, both by inserting new players into its current political powder keg and by increasing the chances that COVID-19 could ravage a country that is scarcely prepared for it." "U.S. Deportations to Haiti During Coronavirus Pandemic Are 'Unconscionable,'" *Miami Herald*, May 10, 2020. https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article242631891.html. Paul Farmer in *Haiti: After the Earthquake* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011) and Mark Schuller in *Killing with Kindness: Haiti, International Aid, and NGOs* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012) have written about the 2010 earthquake and subsequent cholera epidemic through a critique of humanitarianism.

5. Eva Horn, "Air as Medium," *Grey Room*, no. 73 (2018): 14.

6. Ibid., 9. Original Emphasis.

7. Ibid., 13, 9.

8. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 104.

9. "Atmosphere," by definition, can apply to both macro- and micro-level phenomena: it is "the whole body of terrestrial air" and "the air in a particular place." "atmosphere, n." *OED Online*, June 2020, Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/12552. Horn also discusses the dual nature of "atmosphere" as the weather (also referred to as meteorology) and the climate. "Air as Medium," 13. The meteorological specificity of weather slips into totality for Sharpe as she tries to describe the pervasiveness of antiblackness: "it is not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather." *In the Wake*, 111. Within environmental studies, the conflation of weather and climate is critiqued because it produces an entirely different political outcome than Sharpe's poetic language; the misunderstanding of the difference between climatic and meteorological process produces problems such as climate denialism. See Kath Weston, *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World* (Durham, Duke UP, 2017).

10. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.

11. The feelings of belonging and unbelonging are tied to processes of racialization in the Americas. Anne Anlin Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (Oxford UP, 2001) links emotion and racial identification for minoritized groups via what she calls "racial melancholia."Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that "racial emotions" are key to understanding how political life works. "Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (February 2019): 1-25.

12. Danticat, "One Thing."

13. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 107.

14. The archipelagic Americas stretch from the edges of southern North America, northern South America, and the Caribbean isles. See Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Anne Stephens, "Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture" in *Archipelagic American Studies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017): 1-56.

15. Instances of high humidity give a sense of dampness or a thickening of the air. Relative humidity is the calculation of the ratio of the partial pressure of water vapor to the equilibrium vapor pressure of water at a given temperature, expressed as a percentage and is the way that humidity is reported in weather data reports. "Humidity," UCAR Center for Science Education, accessed Aug 2, 2018, https://scied.ucar.edu/shortcontent/humidity.

16. A rise in humidity corresponds to a rise in temperature for humans (and other animals) because humidity hinders the body's ability to perspire — evaporative cooling being the body's main operation of temperature control — making it more difficult for the body to sweat and therefore rid itself of excess heat. "What Causes Humidity?" *Scientific American*, Aug 1, 2005. Accessed Aug. 2, 2018. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-causes-humidity/. When high humidity and high temperatures coincide, other physiological processes are affected — the blood moves to the surface of the skin and extremities, rather than the vital organs, causing fatigue, mental sluggishness.

17. "atmosphere, n."

18. Dora Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," *Qui Parle* 27, no. 1 (June 2018): 125.

19. On the sociality of moods, Sara Ahmed's work is especially instructive. Ahmed claims that "emotions are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects, a process which suggests that the 'objectivity' of the psychic and the social is an effect rather than a cause." *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 10. Furthermore, she suggests how affects have a fugitive existence outside of subjective experience, they circulate through the world (they're "sticky") and mediate people's self-perception (as in her analysis of Fanon

and racialization) and gather people into collective organizations (like the nation). See also, Sara Ahmed, "Not in the Mood," *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 82 (2014): 13-28, muse.jhu.edu/article/558908.
20. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 43. Ngai recuperates tone from its conservative (and conserving) function within New Critical scholarship and uses it instead to index social conditions.
21. "mediate, v." *OED Online*, Mar. 2020, Oxford University Press, Accessed Mar. 26, 2020. www.oed.com/view/Entry/115659.
22. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 46.
23. Ibid., 43.
24. Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," 125.
25. Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, Duke UP, 2018). Best instead advances the non-relationality of the past to the present and strives to articulate a politics that is not tied to collective dispossession.
26. Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh UP, 2014): 25.
27. Other affect or environmental scholars will trace this connection between feeling and environment through the lens of toxicity. I am less interested in a literary historiography of toxic environments than I am in holding onto the literariness of atmosphere and so depart from feminist new materialism. See Stacey Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010); Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).
28. Danticat, "One Thing."
29. Jill Bennett, in tracing an ecological aesthetics, suggests moving beyond the emphasis on representation in environmental arts, saying "we must look not especially to the genres of environmental arts for ecological thought but to the aesthetics of engagement, of sense perception and affect." "Atmospheric Affects" *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, (I.B. Tauris & Company, 2012): 103.
30. Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (Soho Press, 1998).
31. On *antihaitianismo*, see Ernesto Sagás and Lorgia García-Peña. Ernesto Sagás, *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville, UP of Florida, 2000); Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* (Durham, Duke UP, 2016).
32. Danticat is one of a handful of contemporary writers — both Haitian and Dominican, including René Philoctète, Julia Alvarez, Rita Dove, and Freddy Prestol Castillo — who write about the Parsley Massacre, though this history is suppressed not only in Haiti but across the Americas. Lucía M. Suárez, Richard Lee Turtis, and Maria Christian Fumagalli discuss the unsatisfactory reporting on the massacre and the difficulty of documenting the number of victims. Estimates range from 9,000 to over 20,000 persons. See Lucía M. Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (UP of Florida, 2010); Richard Lee Turtis, "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: the 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002): 589-635; Maria Christiana Fumagalli, *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic* (Liverpool UP, 2018).
33. Jennifer Harford Vargas, "Novel Testimony Alternative Archives in Edwidge Danticat's the Farming of Bones," *Callaloo* 37, no. 5 (2014): 1162.
34. See April Shemak, "Re-membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 1 (2002): 83-112; Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*," *Antipodas* 20 (2009): 5-26.
35. Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*, 109.
36. Ibid., 264.
37. Ibid., 281.
38. Reynaldo Anderson and Tiffany E. Barber, "The Black Angel of History and the Age of Necrocapitalism," *Terremoto*, June 12, 2020, https://terremoto.mx/article/the-black-angel-of-history-and-the-age-of-necrocapitalism/. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford UP, 1997).
39. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis II," *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History"* Michael Löwy. (*Verso*, 2016): 29-30.
40. Ibid., 29.
41. Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*, 3. Original Emphasis.
42. Danticat's novel responds to a central concern in Haitian historiography: the silencing of the past. Defined by Michel Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Beacon, 2015), the silencing of Haitian history began with Western responses to the Haitian Revolution.
43. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, Vintage: 1990).

44. Ibid., 3, 4
45. Ibid., 6.
46. Ibid., 143. Original Emphasis.
47. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York, Vintage: 2011): 73.
48. In the 1930s the United States was in a period inward-facing consolidation. The Great Depression led to a more isolationist stance, culminating in FDR's "good neighbor policy" that lead to the softening (not an end) of US imperialism in the Caribbean and Latin America. In 1934, the US pulled all of its troops from Haiti.
49. Hosam Aboul-Ela writes that "While he may have been confused about the exact dates of the Haitian Revolution, however, it seems clear that Faulkner was in no way mistaken about the role. White privilege played in the colonial economy, nor was he confused about the spatial trajectory that would have been necessary for Sutpen to go from subaltern to elite." *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition*, (U of Pittsburg P, 2007): 153. See also Richard Godden, "*Absalom, Absalom!*, Haiti and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions" *ELH* 61, no. 3 (1994): 685-720. www.jstor.org/stable/2873340.; John T. Matthews, "Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back" *American Literary History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 238-62. muse.jhu.edu/article/54817.
50. Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 202.
51. Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham, Duke UP, 2017): 2.
52. Amelia Groom, *TIME* (MIT Press, 2013): 16.
53. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Alternatives to Periodization: Literary History, Modernism, and the 'New' Temporalities" *Modern Language Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (2019): 1270.
54. Roberts and Stephens, "Archipelagic American Studies," 7.

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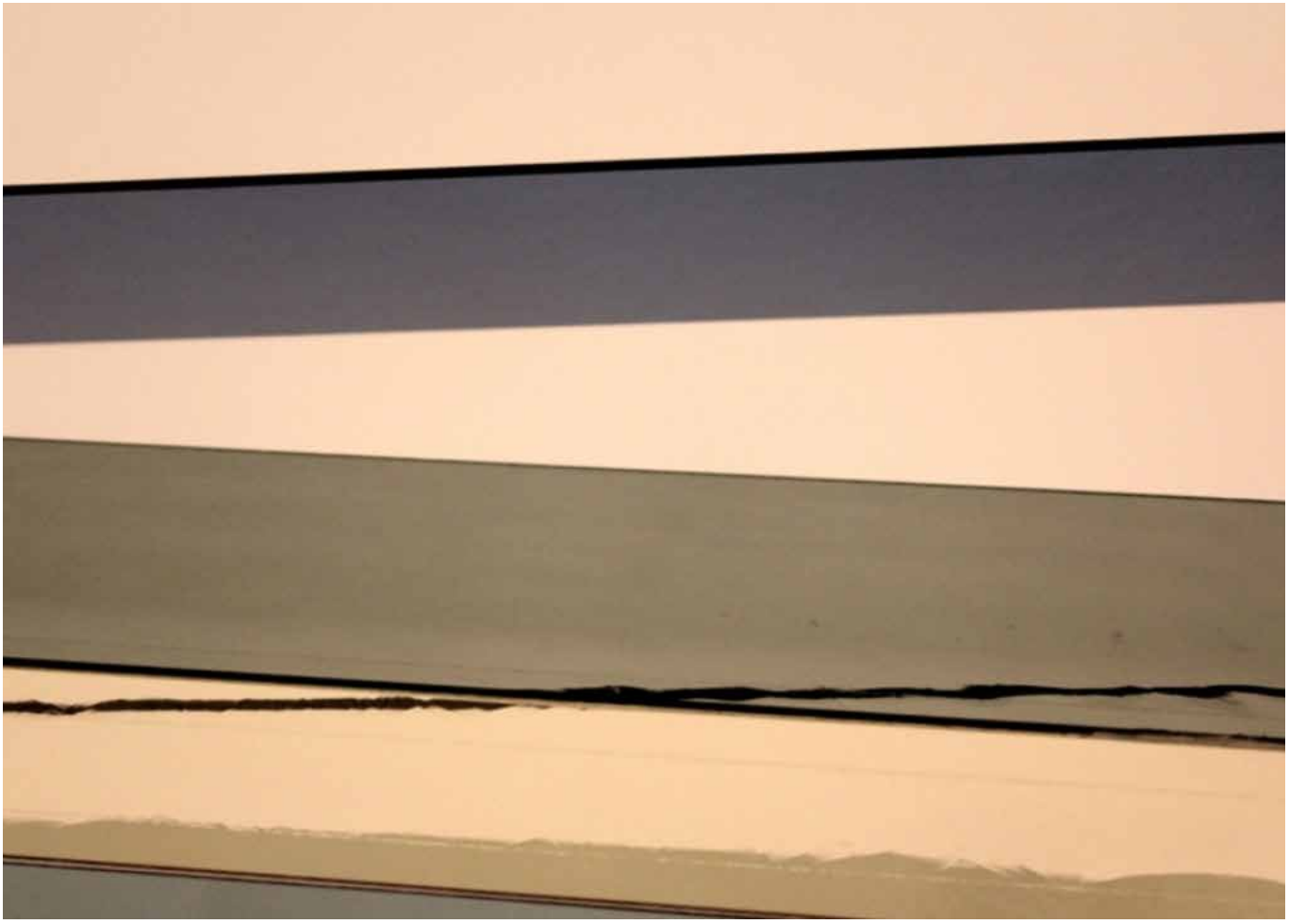


Unknown Maker, *Kometenbuch (The Comet Book)*, 1587, Universitätsbibliothek Kassel, Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel.

A brightly rouged skyline darkling into the broad black night; a cloudy slab of dawn acceding to a bright stain of horizon. In this image from 1587's gorgeously illustrated *Kometenbuch* (an anonymously made Flemish treatise on comets and the stories about them), the horizon serves as more than just simple scintillating vanishing point: it is manifold, recessive and originary, both graspable in its hazy relief and absolutely enveloping. The above scene from the Kometenbuch is at once set against and revealed through its horizon — it is ambivalently light or dark, immanently and vibrantly atmospheric in its sort of portentous instance of "darkening." It reveals a powerful ambiguity at the valuative core of this word "darkening" and the processes is connotes, one which Ellen Tani, in her essay "Darkening Atmospheres," mines for its deep resonances in the struggle for racial justice. Paying close attention to the conceptual-meteorological investments of artist Lorna Simpson, Tani's essay presents a rubric for thinking art and race together, atmospherically. It encourages us to understand darkenings as atmospheric invitations, not just states to be endured but moments whose odd horizons may contain opportunities for resilience and transformation.

- The Editors

Darkening Atmospheres

Ellen Y. Tani

Atmosphere, writes Tonino Griffero, is "philosophically interesting not *despite* but *precisely because of [its] vagueness*"[1] the semantic plasticity of the term itself generates its own atmosphere of ambiguity, such that atmospheric description can designate a given situation in a vague way, or a vague entity in a precise way. And it's true, too, that we conjure the atmospheric when no other verbiage will do, or when we don't know how to make sense of an unfolding situation: "There is something in the air." We connect by talking about the weather to cut through silence, because the temperature outside and the air we breathe may be our only known commonalities with strangers in our midst. Atmosphere is a totalizing paradox: it encompasses everything we know on this planet, but it is also something we are constantly seeking to measure and inhabit; it envelops our world without a surface of its own, and yet it makes possible our perception of the world's edges — through the aesthetic experience of sunrise and sunset in radiant colors, through nothing but refracted light. This essay posits the paradoxical qualities of atmosphere as essential to a methodology of reading and representing the indeterminate, the invisible, the un-nameable, the in-becoming, and the totalizing forces that shape our perception. More specifically, it proposes these qualities of atmosphere as a rubric for understanding the idea of "race" in contemporary art practice: not as a subject of representation with any stable meaning, but rather as a dynamic process of distinguishing the human from the non-human, whose aesthetic lingers in the space between bodies rather than in or on their surfaces. In the hands of artists who have experienced racism's dehumanizing consequences, atmospheric practice introduces important paradigm shifts between the body, the object, concepts, and space.

When it rapidly developed in the eighteenth century, the field of meteorology saw in the weather and more broadly, the atmosphere, a richness of information with which to forecast, or interpret what the future would hold. The premonitory power of atmosphere as a realm of predictive experience extends its rhetorical application toward describing tense social situations (an atmosphere of suspense or tension), tracking overwhelming, destabilizing social and political conditions by way of atmospheric effects (a "maelstrom," a "hurricane," a "tsunami"). In other words, the rhetorical function of atmosphere aligns the behavior of humans with the often predictable — yet rarely controllable — conditions of the weather; atmosphere is elemental, but it is also sociality. In recent years, and in decades past in other forms, advocates for social justice cry "I can't breathe" to echo the suffocating machinations of antiblack culture and state power. Millions have called the names of Eric Garner and George Floyd, whose murders by asphyxiation have catalyzed widespread recognition of the stifling atmospheric conditions of American racism. The vagueness of atmosphere — its invisible operations — has also been invoked in the name of post-racialism: because one does not directly see racial violence in one's immediate community, then it must not exist. The interdependence of visibility and existence makes it extremely difficult to recognize what occludes or enables recognition; reading cultural, political, and social phenomena atmospherically helps illuminate these conditions. As regards artistic practice, this essay understands the dematerialized and atmospheric strategies introduced by conceptual art

in the late 1960s as a significant force that has shaped atmospheric approaches in contemporary art, for which the work of Lorna Simpson will serve as a case study.

Beyond invocations of ecology and atmosphere in discourses of climate change, the political valence of atmosphere, particularly its weaponization and totalizing capacity, remains underexplored. Peter Sloterdijk, in his book *Terror from the Air*, considers how, when poison gas was first used in WWI, the human condition could be conceived as "being-in-the-breathable."[2] This concept implies that we are not contained entities, but interdependent with our environment — that our existence is conditioned by the composition of the atmosphere that surrounds us. Architect Léopold Lambert, for instance, invokes Sloterdijk's ideas to describe toxic atmospheres, building on Christina Sharpe and Frantz Fanon's observations about the atmospheric conditions of racism and colonialism as atmospheric forces of social death. Fanon consistently descried the colonial state as a breathing body, and colonialism as a totalizing environment of "atmospheric violence."[3] Likewise, Christina Sharpe, in her indispensable text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, advances the term "the weather" as one of the ongoing locations of being "in the wake," the spatial concept for existing within the legacies of slavery despite its denial of Black humanity. "The weather," she writes, "is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack."[4] Slavery was, like the weather, totalizing — not a singular event but a recurring phenomenon that appeared under particular circumstances; as the climatological condition of antiblackness, it produces new ecologies.[5] As Sharpe reminds us: that Black being persists despite its ontological negation, creating its own ecologies out of that weather, is a beautiful paradox.

The clearest art historical example of atmospheric practice is conceptual art and, by extension, conceptualism, which introduced experimental sensibilities that live on in contemporary art's resistance to medium specificity and its wavering loyalties to form and feeling. The atmospheric experiments of John Baldessari (*Cigar smoke to match clouds that are the same [by sight — side view]*, 1972-3), Robert Barry (*Inert Gas Series*, 1969), and Michael Asher (*Vertical Column of Accelerated Air*, 1966) seem to pursue a literal corollary for the theoretical premise of conceptual art, which Lucy Lippard and John Chandler characterized by way of the artwork's dematerialization (into idea). Some artists saw, in the forces that exceeded the boundaries of the physical object such as entropy and infinite expansion, a counterforce to the cybernetic drive of technoculture and its reliance on closed systems and feedback loops. Pursuing environmental art and systems aesthetics, they utilized atmosphere as an open system whose conditions are subject to circulation and dissipation, and whose aesthetic thus cannot be fully controlled.

Critical conceptual artists addressed other environments: the institutional spaces in which art is defined and the invisible forces that shape its existence, such as economics and power dynamics. In Hans Haacke's series of condensation cubes, for example, simple objects rendered the invisible visible: clear plexiglass cubes, each with a small volume of water placed inside, generated cycles of condensation in response to the temperature and humidity of their environments (most often the space of an art gallery) at any given time. These and other conceptual propositions by Haacke put atmospheric processes into metaphorical and metonymic dialogue with the increasing agitation over social and power relations in the late 1960s. Using interior environments as their mediums, some artists made space itself the subject of attention, short-circuiting the exhibition as a platform for the display of objects, as in Barry's *Closed Gallery Piece* (1969-70) or Asher's removal of the partition separating office from exhibition space at Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles (1974). At the same time, others utilized atmospheric blur (fog or clouds) to obscure the materiality of architecture with seemingly immaterial atmospheric effects. Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya, as a member of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), created a misty shell for the Pepsi Pavilion at Expo '70, anticipating Diller Scofidio + Renfro's 2002 pavilion for the Swiss Expo: *Blur Building*, an "architecture of atmosphere" occasionally shrouded in a cloud of mist pumped from the lake over which it was constructed, immaterializing architecture. Experiencing architecture thus, not as containment but rather as "white out" or "white noise," obfuscates its physical status, leaving instead subject and atmosphere, qualities essential to architecture yet

often not recognized as a part of it. In ways such as these, conceptual art offered a theoretical platform from which artists could advance ideas while holding the object in suspension.

Conceptual art's embrace of the speculative — in the interest of restructuring the perceptual, and in the relationship between artistic process and artistic product — coincided with a broader atmospheric turn in philosophy, architecture, performance, music, and visual arts that embraced phenomenological concerns with the construction of meaning through embodied experience and space. German philosopher Gernot Böhme has advanced this development within aesthetic theory, challenging a model of aesthetics rooted in judgment about form — what constitutes the thing and differentiates it from another — and instead turning to the "ecstasies of things" as a way of discerning how things affect space (or, the activated zone between subject and object). "In classical thing-ontology," he writes,

> the form of a thing is conceived as something delimiting and enclosing, namely as that which encloses the thing's volume to the inside and delimits it to the outside. But a thing's form is also *effective* to the outside. It radiates into the surroundings, as it were, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions and movement suggestions.[6]

Atmospheres have an intermediate status: they exist between subject and object and, as mercurial phenomena, are spatially unbounded — "moving emotional powers, spatial carriers of moods."[7] If we understand race as an atmosphere — something not located within a body, but between bodies — it becomes clear that racism, a tool for categorizing individual difference, depends on race as a medium for transmitting feelings about what that difference means.

The elemental conditions in which conceptual art arose are broader than the information age, with which it has consistently been associated; the constellation of civil rights, women's liberation, gay rights, and anti-war movements are less obviously connected to what conceptual art did in practice.[8] Some conceptual artists stuck to philosophical (and at times solipsistic) modes of inquiry into art's fundamental essence; others, like Adrian Piper, engaged the atmospheric conditions of their moment, many of which had long been considered to lie outside of art. For example, Piper, whose performative works in the 1970s used direct address to manifest xenophobia in the discursive space between artist and viewer, participated in the 1970 exhibition *Information* with the piece *Context #7*. It presented a three-ring binder full of blank pages in which visitors were requested to "write, draw, or otherwise indicate any response suggested by this situation (this statement, the blank notebook and pen, the museum context, your immediate state of mind, etc.)." Piper's piece can be understood as a meteorological tool that measured the discursive, social, artistic, and political climate of the gallery in the form of the creative, participatory (at times confessional) inscription. As homage to the comment book — the analog vehicle of capturing visitor feedback — *Context #7* became an atmospheric timestamp of the exhibition and its elemental conditions.

A more recent example stands in the work of Lorna Simpson, whose artistic practice has traversed various atmospheric registers — from the environmental, like fog, clouds, and ice, to the affective, like sound, texture, and absence — in an ongoing investigation of representation, history, desire, and the figure. Invoking buried histories of racial violence, sexual exploitation, and dehumanization of African slaves and their descendants, while simultaneously conveying the joy, mystery, and power of Black culture, Simpson mobilizes atmospheric effects like darkening, sublimation, and disappearance to make evident the paradoxical condition of what scholars have referred to as existing within the racial atmospheres that, more broadly, constitute "the weather."

An African American photographer who emerged in the late 1980s, Simpson developed her lucid and critical perspective through graduate study at UCSD under the influence of conceptual artists Eleanor Antin and Allan Kaprow; filmmakers Chantal Akerman and Babette Mangolte; and classmate Carrie Mae Weems. Then as now, her use of photography, language, and the Black body melds the poetics of Blackness with clinical display and seriality informed by

minimalism. She presented the Black female body, her most common motif, in a fragmented manner, only ever captured partially by the camera and thus never completely fulfilling the viewer's scopic desire. Her early work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, installations of text plaques and framed photographs, posited the relationship between photography and language as an environmental condition. Picturing the figure (nearly always a Black woman) with their back turned away from the camera or their face cropped out of the frame, these phototexts asserted presence but not selfhood, frustrating a key claim of portraiture.

Extending her photographic practice into printmaking and film in the 1990s and early 2000s, Simpson in 2015 began painting large-scale canvases filled with deep blue hues of varying opacity, often combined with silkscreen archival photographs and appropriated images. She debuted these paintings in 2019 in the exhibition *Darkening* at Hauser & Wirth Gallery in New York City. The title referenced the aesthetic and temporal conditions of nightfall as a metaphor for the state of the world: "I... feel that living in America right now is like living in a darkening, a very dark period. So there was this way of thinking about color and thinking about night, but also about atmosphere and inhospitable conditions, and how to survive those conditions."[9] Darkening is an essential atmospheric operation, a signal of the passage of day into night or a premonition of bad weather. It represents transition, highlighting the horizon during sunset when, as the light of the sun recedes from its diffuse medium, the atmosphere becomes most coloristically visible. Darkening is a premonition for nighttime — its mysteries, its magic, its mythologies, as well as its metaphorical association with covering, veiling, and concealment. W.E.B. Du Bois described living as an African American as living "within the veil," channeling the occlusive effect of racial perception: one's Blackness is perceived at the expense of the true self; but one is also endowed with a unique mode of perception which Du Bois described as "second sight": the ability to see through one's Blackness to understand how one is perceived by others.[10] The term "darkening" also refutes the assumed ideals of skin lightening, especially concerning the marketing to Black consumers of cosmetic products that promise to lighten complexion toward an ideal white beauty standard.

In one of these works, *Three Figures*, Simpson embedded a screen print of an existing photograph within an ink painting, suturing canvases together in an assemblage-like construction. The photograph shows three youths linked by their clasped hands; their silhouettes face away from us, backlit by an incoming deluge of sprayed water. Luminous and sublime, they stand on icy, white ground that drips with ink washes as if it were melting away, while whorls of black ink above their heads suggest a fiery sky.

The source photograph is by Bob Adelman, whose documentation of the May 1963 Birmingham civil rights campaign captured in poetic and graphic terms the violence withstood and resilience exhibited by young protestors. In these images, Adelman captured children marching peacefully, then instinctively resisting the physical force of high-pressure firehoses turned on them by Birmingham police, often by maintaining their connection to each other. In many of these photographs, the atmospheric haze of water — in the form of high-pressure streams, residual mist, drippings from bodies, or vapor steaming up from puddles on hot asphalt — appears as an omnipresent mediation of police and protestors which undergoes various phase shifts. Indeed, the channeling of elemental force — in this case water, a public utility most commonly used for firefighting — and its weaponization against specific bodies introduces water and fire as metonymic referents for control and resistance. "They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out," read the famous photo essay published in the May 17, 1963 issue of *Life* magazine. Andy Warhol used those images, taken by Charles Moore, in his *Race Riot* paintings, initiated in 1964. The apocalyptic headline aligned firefighting, a high-stakes struggle between humans and nature, with the struggle to control a natural groundswell of hot emotions and impassioned energies in the interest of social justice, likening the inflammatory racial tensions in the city of Birmingham to an uncontrollable and destructive transformation on the level of natural disaster. Yet for many readers, the use of the firehose as a tool of suppression produced ambivalent feelings about the co-optation of an instrument of public safety to efficiently snuff out protestors' control over their own bodies in public

Lorna Simpson, *Three Figures*, 2014. Ink and screenprint on clayboard. 12 panels total, overall: 116 ¾ x 97 ½ x ¾ inches. Photo by James Wang.

space. Moore and Adelman's iconic images of protest were invaluable constructions of the feeling, tempo, and temperature of the Birmingham campaign, especially as historic documents for artistic interpretation.

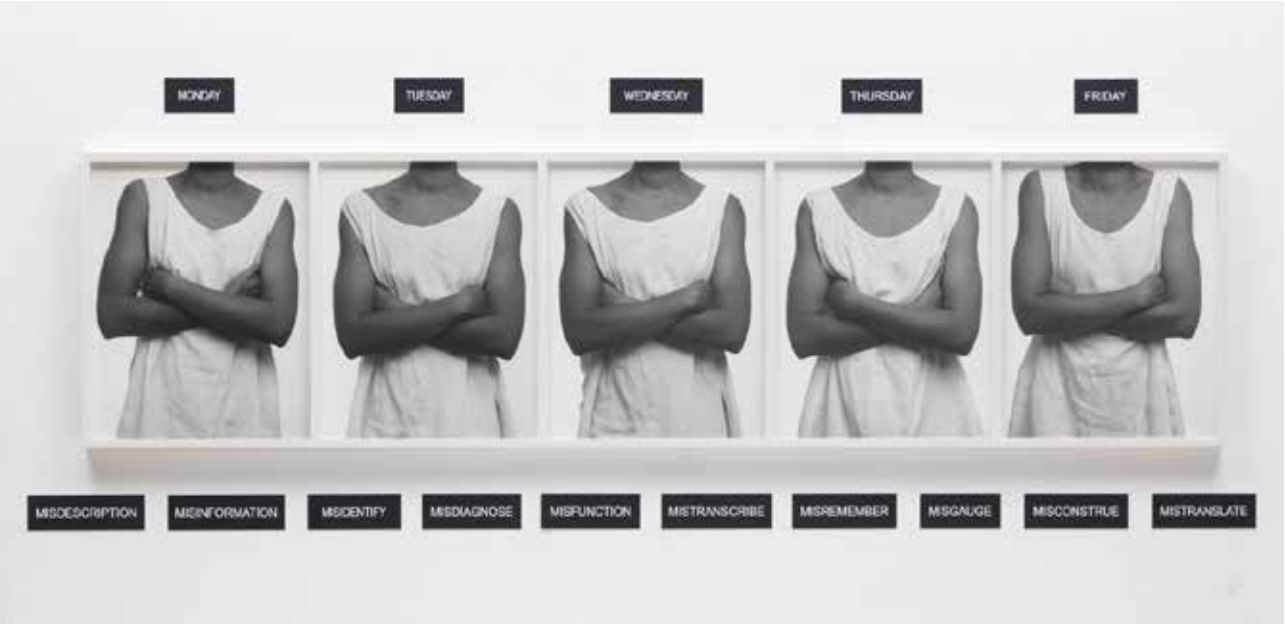
The grid of canvases that comprises *Three Figures* begins to fall at its right edge, like a fault line or a cleaving iceberg. It breaks the unified front of the peaceful youth protestors as one figure, a boy, slips away from his two female companions. In 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, igniting nationwide protests calling for the protection of Black life. Just a few years earlier, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was walking home from the store when he was hunted down and fatally shot by a civilian who suspected him of criminality. In 2015, when *Three Figures* was shown at the Venice Biennale, young Black men were 5 times as likely to be killed as white men. The works in this series seem to weep and seep and melt — something that requires a more liquid medium than the photograph and its material basis in light. Interested in the magnitude of the ongoing environmental crisis, in which landmass-sized icebergs melt and cleave away, Simpson posits Black fortitude — the efforts to hold together against overwhelming environmental forces — as part of what's at stake in the current state of ecological precarity. Whether slow or dramatic, the constellation of forces that will dismantle what we once thought was permanent is an apt metaphor for the steady erosion of Black life by the persistent condition of white supremacy.

While Simpson's more recent paintings pursue the sublimity of climate change as a metaphor for mourning the persistence of violent histories in the present, earlier works also channel the conditions and language of weather. *Five Day Forecast* (1988), one of Simpson's earliest works, is a wall installation of five large-format polaroids of a Black woman wearing a white shift, her bare arms crossed in front of her body in a gesture of closure. Her posture — perhaps guarded, perhaps defiant — varies ever so slightly in each frame, creating a filmic rhythm as one "reads" the work from left to right.

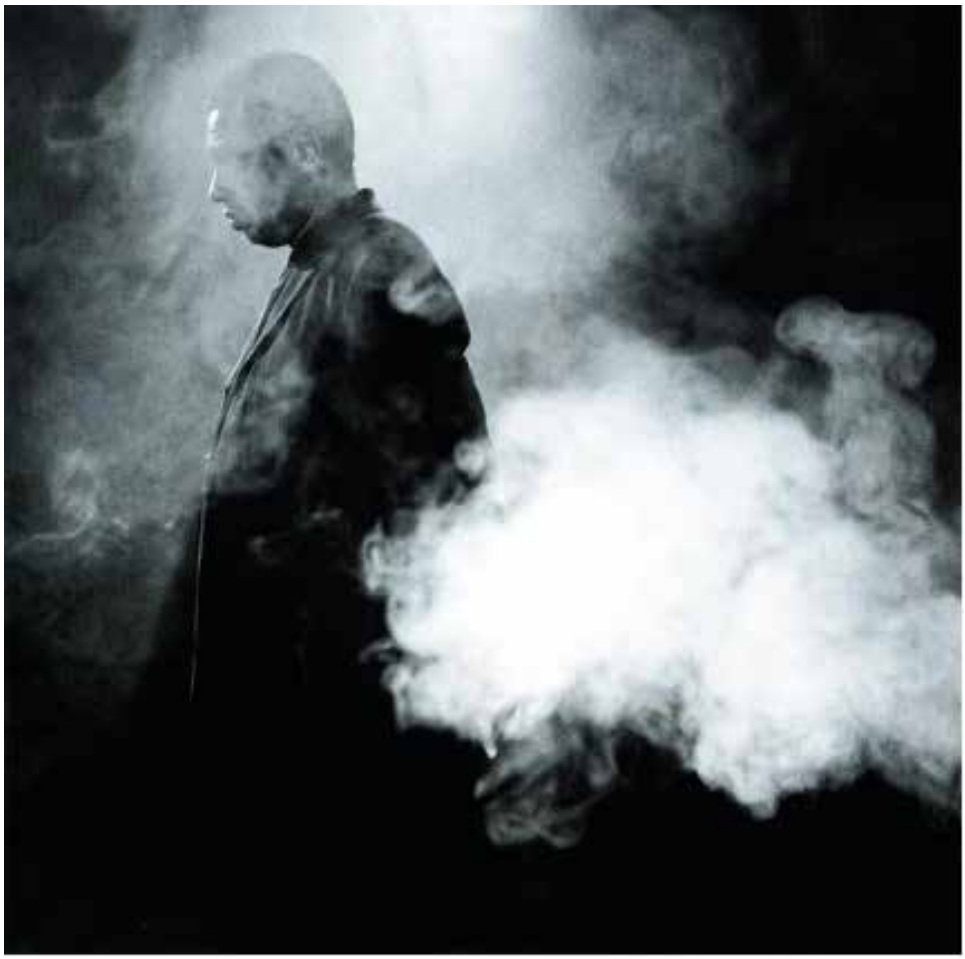
The frames cut the figure at the neck and pelvis, revealing incomplete cues about the subject's identity, height, age, and expression. Above the photographs are plastic plaques with the names of the days of the work week, and below is a litany of words using the prefix "mis-." The installation utilizes *stereotype* (an image perpetuated without change) as a photographic and conceptual device, repeating the image of the body — a Black woman's body — atop a platform of words that describe errors and mistakes. Some, such as "misdescription" and "misdiagnose," relate to medical racism and disparities in care. Others, like "misremember" and "misfunction," are euphemisms for lies and failures. In writing about this work, curator Okwui Enwezor understood this strategy of repetition as essential to Simpson's invocation of the "racial sublime," whose methods of subjection and denial ground American culture in a particular epistemic violence that is atmospheric in nature: "Simpson deploys a staccato device, a kind of mechanistic action of repetition and differentiation. One feels as if doused with a shower of recriminations."[11] Hemmed in by the standardized march of time (and the plodding rhythm of the workday) and a foundation of concepts that evoke errors in behavior, communication, and judgment, the Black woman's body lives out the "changing same" of the monotonous weather pattern of everyday racism.

Atmosphere refers to a mood or a feeling that fundamentally exceeds an individual body, instead pertaining primarily to the overall situation in which bodies are entrenched.[12] Considered experientially, atmosphere slips in and out of perception: once inside a cloud, we cannot perceive its form. Mary Jacobus argues that "clouds puzzle us by representing, not so much the mind in a state of reflection, as the latency involved in all visible representation — not fullness versus flatness only, as [Hubert] Damisch argues, but absence itself; the ungraspable; what we can't see as well as the visible."[13] But atmosphere at its most visible — in the horizon — offers a useful ontological allegory. Philosopher Linda Alcoff invokes the horizon in her theory of identification. Identity is not intrinsic to the self but rather encompasses "positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives. ... [W]hen I am identified, it is my *horizon of agency* that is identified."[14] One's "horizon of agency" is circumscribed by their background assumptions, as well as by their position within the social structure or hierarchy.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Simpson turned away from racialized and gendered bodies in her work, privileging



Lorna Simpson, *Five Day Forecast*, 1988. 5 silver gelatin prints, 15 engraved plastic plaques. Overall: 24 ½ x 97 inches. Tate Modern. © Lorna Simpson, Courtesy Salon 94 New York.



Lorna Simpson, *Cloudscape*, still, 2004. Single-channel video installation, black and white, sound; 7 minutes looped.

atmosphere and absence over bodies as content. Adopting the cloud as both motif and tool of abstraction, Simpson offers an atmospheric metaphor for the sublimating forces of racial violence in the video piece *Cloudscape* (2004). If the central paradox in *Five Day Forecast* was its anticipation of predictable inaccuracy, *Cloudscape* eschews any efforts to read the future and turns to the atmospheric in more formal terms, using the cloud as an ephemeral sign of a persistent voice whose figure oscillates between processes of coming into and out of view.

Cloudscape articulates the sublime semiotics of atmosphere through breath, voice, and the grammar of the body. It features a well-dressed African American man (the sculptor and musician Terry Adkins, 1953-2014) illuminated in an otherwise dark and empty room. Hands in pockets, he slowly whistles an unnamed, plaintive tune.[15] Adkins is erased by the encroaching frame of the camera's slow zoom while he is obscured by the gathering cloud, seemingly enveloped by the very breath with which he blows his tune. As he disappears, his whistle continues to pierce what obscures him, tethering the spectator with all that remains of his body — a breath, shaped into a melodic whistle by the mouth. At the halfway mark, the video reverses and Adkins' whistle sounds uncannily as the screen of fog recedes to reveal his body again.

While the work's title suggests that the "cloud" we see consists of vapor, the context of Simpson's other references to racial violence suggests an atmosphere evocative of both lyrical fog and ominous smoke, lingering traces of the ritualized public spectacle of antiblack terror. The cloud conjures other associations as well: climate (a frigid chamber, the fog of one's breath), science (the sublimation of water from liquid to vapor), superstition (spirits, oracles, genies, and ghosts), special effects (a fog machine), and finally, language (whether in author Ralph Ellison's invocations of invisibility to describe the existential state of Blackness or in the verb "to cloud": to obscure, to visually conceal, or to be psychologically confused). The affective and verbal associations explicitly reference Simpson's consistent use of language in her work, now formed associatively in the mind of the viewer as Adkins' lone whistle continues. The melody, intended to sound like something from the nineteenth-century, is derived from the negro spiritual "I couldn't hear nobody pray," which Adkins and Simpson had found on an early twentieth-century recording by the Fiske Jubilee Singers.

Destabilizing the African American figure through simple, cinematic means, *Cloudscape* brings Blackness into poetic suspension between spirit and flesh, subject to terrestrial gravity but creating a pull of its own that conjures the audible past. Scholars have associated its cloud with a liberatory potential that transmits, as Okwui Enwezor writes, "a song of departure from the charnel house of the racial sublime."[16] The concept of escape may also allude to the artist's own feelings of entrapment as a spokesperson for Black women, and her desire to dislocate her autobiography from interpretations of the work, instead making known the structures which govern the appearance of Blackness in a specific time and place.[17] Finally, the cloud offers a corollary for the process of losing oneself in music, in memory, in dreams; when the whistled melody is fully detached from the visible body, we understand that sound as breath, as atmosphere.

Simpson's work advances different hypotheses of envelopment and mood: in large-scale paintings that spatially overwhelm the viewer, in a video of a man becoming enveloped in (or exhaling) a cloud, and in the photo-linguistic metaphor for everyday slights and microaggressions based on visible identity.[18] Throughout her work, she acknowledges racism as an atmospheric condition that engenders disappearance, and imagines the resilient presence of Blackness within it, outside of the vicissitudes of time and place. Returning to Gernot Böhme's theorization introduced earlier, an aesthetic of atmospheres addresses experiences that no longer relate to tangible artifacts, but instead to atmospheres, "tuned spaces" shaped by sound, mood, or what Walter Benjamin referred to as "aura."[19] It is perhaps only possible to identify the concept of race and the context of racism in visual art in terms of tuned spaces, elemental conditions, and atmospheric frameworks — evident not in the visible subject of the work, but in the air that surrounds it, whether as the space between the body and language, the mists of concealment and revelation, or the horizons of our perception.

Notes

1. Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 7. Original emphasis.
2. Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
3. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), 31.
4. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 104.
5. Ibid., 106.
6. Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere, a basic concept of a new aesthetic," in *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 22-23. Original emphasis.
7. Ibid., 20.
8. For an illuminating discussion of the sociohistoric intersection between conceptual art and identity politics in the 1960s and later, see Nizan Shaked, *The Analytic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
9. Thelma Golden and Lorna Simpson, "Lorna Simpson in Conversation with Thelma Golden," Hauser & Wirth (May 14, 2019), https://www.hauserwirth.com/stories/24565-lorna-simpson-conversation-thelma-golden.
10. For a study on the link between DuBois' concept of "second sight" and the extra-visual experiments of conceptual artists, see *Second Sight: the Paradox of Vision in Contemporary Art*, ed. Ellen Tani (New York: Scala, 2017).
11. Okwui Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation — Lorna Simpson's Iconography of the Racial Sublime," *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Abrams, 2007), 122
12. Friedlind Riedel, "Atmosphere," *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, ed. Jan Slaby and Christian Von Scheve (London: Routledge, 2019), 85-95
13. Mary Jacobus, "Cloud Studies: the Visible Invisible," in Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
14. Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 96. My emphasis.
15. Adkins (1953-2014) was a sculptor, multimedia artist, experimental musician, and friend of Simpson's. At his *alma mater*, Fisk University, Adkins studied with Aaron Douglas and Martin Puryear. The tune is an old spiritual from the Fisk University singers (per an interview with Adkins from September 2013). Simpson had discovered a turn-of-the-century songbook in a thrift shop and, with Adkins' help, selected a melody that would sound interesting played in reverse as well as forward. Joan Simon, "Interview with Lorna Simpson," *Aperture* (June 25, 2013), http://www.aperture.org/blog/interview-with-lorna-simpson/. Accessed 8/21/14.
16. Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation — Lorna Simpson's iconography of the racial sublime," *Lorna Simpson* (New York: American Federation for the Arts, 2006), 130.
17. Huey Copeland, "Bye Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 62-77.
18. Envelopment, writes Derek McCormack, is a condition for thinking about atmospheres, one that acknowledges atmospheric force without reducing atmosphere to entity or object (or an atmospheric materialism and an entity-centered ontology). See Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 14.
19. AC Engels-Schwarzpaul, "Approaching Atmospheres: Translator's Introduction" in Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017): 1.

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Three Poems

Yi Feng

Peep

The world looks into the black screen
See a virtual world
The male looks at the world in a mirror
See a mother
The female peeks into the screen
See the illusory Zoom background
Non-human peeks at mother nature
See desperate humans
The virtual world is on the other side of the screen
Look into the hyperplastic world
The mirror has been broken and blurred
Reflecting the surroundings

Who Knows me the most

Who knows me the most
The data collectors

Two of my friends met their loves in the Zoom meetings
True love can grow wildly

Zoom is the tomb of social interactions
and the room of conversations

Your email is never private since it can be forward infinite times
Draw a plume and wing it into a computer screen

I see these 3-D pictures of Beethoven and Mendelssohn
They look as cool as the real

It is not so bad to extend any boundary by technology
Just wait for a second

We are detached only for a short time
but are distanced for a long time

Freud studies human's psyche by playing Bitcoin
Economy is different

Lao Tzu does a thorough investigation on the internet
And finds Nothing

There is no shadow in the virtual world
But there is everything about it

My dog looks into my computer screen
And understands me well

Technology marks the boundary of virtual world
What I click controls me and my detached world

Hollow-carved world

Hollow-carved world is
A Piece of paper cut

When you receive a gift
You lose the opportunity to get the gift

Fragile and hollow
It falls from the sky

Countless purchasing online
Are you satisfied and content

Various species on the Earth choose their territories
Man had the word and named them

The twitters are the tailors
Who know my size

The freedom of choice is not in the world
The word is stuffed and faked

Desires come and desires gnaw
Fill the hollow-carved until dying with a smile

Yi Feng is a scholar, translator, poet, and Associate Professor at Northeastern University, China. Her English poems have been published in *The Penn Review*, *Model Minority*, and *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, etc.. Her Chinese poems have been published in *Lotus* (芙蓉) and *Chinese Poetry Website*. She has translated Chinese poets and American poets, including Shuguang Zhang, Susan Howe, Rae Armoutraut and Charles Bernstein, among other poets. Her translation of poems appeared in journals in China and the US, such as *Poetry Monthly* (诗歌月刊) in 2019 , *DoubleSpeak* in 2020 and *Anomaly* (forthcoming). She was awarded the Hunt Scholarship in 2016. She has won the Bronze Prize in an International Chinese Poetry Competition in 2017. She lives in Shenyang, China.

Detail of the cover of the magazine *Die Zeit* 17/2020 (www.zeit.de/2020/17/index), Screenshot [AR] dated 16.04.2020.

As disorienting as some atmospheres can be, so much more so is the disjuncture between two dissimilar ones. But it is in such spaces, spaces of discomfort or disruption, that we are made to be who we are. Typically, we're inured to these spatial dissonances which structure our lives, but in times of crisis — times much like our present — even the most quotidian environment, like a gallery or grocery store, can reveal itself as a proving ground for our subjectivity. In his essay "Changing Tensions," Andreas Rauh provides a rubric for atmospheric attunement, urging us to pay closer attention to the physical heres and nows which condition our experience of the world.

- The Editors

Changing Tensions:
Viral Atmospheres as a Quality Compass

Andreas Rauh

Our modern world has made the dream of travelling through time and space come true. How convenient in pandemic times! And so, I travel back in time to the year 1485 to find myself in front of a 1.72 x 2.78m canvas. It is Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* — actually the arrival of Venus at Cyprus' shores — in tempera paint. By means of the zooming feature of my space and time travel assistant, Wikimedia Commons, I contemplate the delicate stroke that is the Venus' right elbow in the high-resolution image. Her hair is flying in the wind, and yet these are only golden yellow lines. The west wind Zephyr is giving his all. Still, the flood and the wash of the waves, which carry the seashell to the beach, appear to be fragile. I would not have detected the drawings in the figures' contour if it had not been for my digital travel assistant. These well-balanced strokes adding to the painting's composition easily get lost in the overall view. Even more so if one is standing in the halls of the Uffizi in Florence, with the painting blending in with the other works of art, and with me being just one spectator of many in the constant flow of tourists. Yet our modern world also fosters zoonoses and, thanks to pandemics, inhibits physical journeys through space.

Something is conspicuously missing in the case of digital contemplations of images: the physical presence in the concrete here and now, in the Botticelli Room in the Uffizi, for instance, at a particular time of the day. Standing in line in front of the museum in the heat of the day; the creaking of the hard wood floor in the cool building; the smell of canvas and wood; the distances, marked by barrier tape, one must keep away from a painting — these are unheard of in the virtual space, as would be one's playful conversation with a partner about whether the scene depicted is not a surfer scene after all.[1]

With the absence of physical presence, what is missing is the actual sensing of the atmosphere of the place. This atmosphere is not only shaped by the work of art, but precisely by the spatial and temporal circumstances of on-site perception. Without its surrounding atmosphere, a painting can only be mediated quantitatively — by means of the bytes and pixels transmitted over the internet. The qualitative mediation depends on the space and the sensing body therein.[2] We experience space primarily atmospherically, and we sense its spirit physically: whether it is "sublime" or "common," "festive" or "mundane," "warm" or "cold." Referring to a space as being "full of atmosphere" even suggests that a space is comparable to an envelope or a container, which can be "full" — full of atmospheric qualities. This is also the reason why, for atmospheres, there can be gradual differences, like in a container (i.e., some atmospheres are distinctly recognizable while others are like a gentle breeze and can hardly be felt).

All spatial atmospheres are felt in the here and now as a site-specific interplay between the dominating qualities of the surrounding and the subjective being in these very qualities.[3] Thus the being is not only a where-being, but also a how-being. The sensory and affective quality of the atmosphere tinges the way we perceive our surrounding environment and the way we emotionally orient ourselves in it. "Air, ambiance, aura, climate, environment, *genius loci*, milieu, mood, numinous, *Stimmung*, *Umwelt*"[4] — these are terms to describe the atmospheric, which seems, in fact, to point to its vagueness. The vagueness of atmospheres, however, is not a flaw at all. Atmospheres surround and influence us like a gentle breeze — a venti-something — like how the where- and how-being of Venus is influenced by Zephyr. What is moved (physically and mentally) is the body, which, as an organ of atmospheric perception, determines the human dimension of sensing. The referentiality of

atmosphere and a body sensing this atmosphere is that of a communion and reciprocity between *eros* and *pathos*. Desire and attention are coupled with suffering and aversion. The process of atmospheric perception is rated as a relation of inherence and subsistence, rather than the relation of a one-sided cause and an unambiguous effect. Being confronted with this kind of sensing can teach us to appreciate staged atmospheric emotional worlds or to assess them critically and, moreover, to enjoy the manipulative potential of atmospheres (or to contain it). In this context, the (perceptional) relation of objects *in situ* and the design of a space for one's own current being in a given locality plays the most important role.

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, I frequently went grocery shopping for my family, and particularly my parents, who stayed at home.[5] The lack of knowledge and uncertainty concerning the virus, the restrictions and propagandistic announcements in the supermarket ("Thanks to our staff members for their incredible work!"; "Please keep your distance!"; "Please follow the instructions of our staff members at all times!"; "Please do not bring your children to the supermarket!"), the social distancing and trying to evade fellow customers, the self-imposed rigid hygiene measures: it was all very depressing — I could hardly breathe, and that was not because of the mandatory mask-wearing (which, by then, had not been put in place). I felt a depressing atmosphere, comparable to a tension clasp, wrapping itself around my chest.[6] The supermarket had its very own atmosphere, an enclosed environment for me as a sensing being. Obviously, upon entering the store I can be drawn into this atmosphere, I can dive into it. Upon leaving the store, there is another atmosphere I can change into; or rather, this other atmosphere is clearly discernible, in stark contrast to the previously felt one, even resistant to it. In order to recognize this change of atmosphere, transitional zones ranging from well-marked to less well-marked ones are needed, such as the way to the supermarket and back home. As a transitional period, as an atmospheric buffer zone, this passage keeps strong atmospheres from clashing. This buffer contributes to the fact that one consciously experiences the change of atmosphere. If it were possible to enter the supermarket or the Botticelli Room directly from one's own apartment, the contrast would be overwhelming. Consequently, when it comes to a digital visit to a museum, the atmosphere cannot be felt not only because one is not physically present in this particular location, but also because one does not have to get there. Getting there is the path one must metrically tread and stride through as a kind of preparation and slow attunement to the already existing spatial mood *in situ*. Getting there contributes to the atmospheric success.

Not only is the atmosphere of the supermarket different from that of one's own apartment. The supermarket itself has a unique atmosphere in pandemic times. A change is perceptible that takes the experiences in the supermarket and the knowledge about current health risks into account. In addition to the objects *in situ*, the spatial design and one's own current being — past events as well as the already thought — play a role in the context of the constitution and reception of atmospheres. In the following, "tension," "change," and "experience" are crucial terms for my investigation; I want to ask how tension is caused and how it can be reduced, how the change of atmospheric tensions takes place or how it can be triggered, and what role one's own experience plays in this context.

The sensing of atmospheres is comparable to a tension clasp. As bodily sensing persons, we encounter atmospheric areas of tension, climatic conditions of our being in the world without which we would not be in the world. Bodily sensation operates by means of the "tension clasp" — environmental conditions which one usually does not recognize, that is, can cause tightness (tension in a positive sense) or stiffness (tension in a negative sense). These conditions can change, which can also be deliberately initiated, yet one can easily (and rather unconsciously) fall back to the original state. If I want to generate an atmospheric tension, I have to make sure to maintain a particular aesthetic tension over a certain amount of time and duration. If I perceive an atmosphere, the tension is on my body. Upon easing, this tension does not vanish into thin air and disappear, but it is at the body's disposal as a possible connecting factor in case of a relapse. This is also the reason why atmospheres, which one successfully perceives, can become experience points, or anchors of atmospheric experience. These experience points, in turn, can become expectation points. One falls back to past events against which present events are pitted. A game of points and tensions emerges — like the different respirational phases, breathing in and breathing out

as bivalent, contrary, yet necessary coherent conditions of the lung. In addition to objects, the spatial design, one's own being, past events and the already thought, the expected, and the imaginary obviously play a crucial role in the atmospheric interplay.

Someone who runs an election campaign, for instance, builds on experiences and already existing things. Here, the ambiance is fueled to heat things up. An election campaigner refers to, extends, and elaborates on personal ambiances; they make implicit thoughts explicit to bring about an intensification of the atmosphere among their followers and a change of atmospheric perception among their opponents. The question is: how can this change be controlled? This is because the starting point of the everyday sign-based perception is precisely that atmospheres are there but no one notices them. Atmospheres are real, sometimes one can feel them rather powerfully, and sometimes one cannot feel them at all. Where are they if they are not there? Is this question even worth asking? Is it advisable to ask this question more specifically? What does it do to our understanding of being? Are misunderstandings inevitable? And what if one wants to scrutinize it: Does it still comply with academic standards? A comparison to the novel coronavirus suggests itself. In this case we are dealing with something not directly visible, not even an independent living thing, but rather a condition. A vague entity is threatening our reality. We sense the invisible by means of the atmospheres that are co-determined by it — comparable to the situation in the 1980s when insights gained from the discourse on nuclear power (the non-noticeable nuclear radiation as opposed to the clearly noticeable nuclear threat) brought the atmospheric phenomenon to the center of phenomenological debates revolving around ecological aesthetics of nature. Yet, similar to atmospheres, this virus is not just a conversational topic that can be argued away and which dissolves in other discourses. Resulting uncertainties are due to the difference between the phenomenon itself, the very term of the phenomenon, and the term's correct use. If, for instance, there are no active cases of coronavirus in my administrative district, this does not mean that there are no new cases at all. It only means that nobody has tested positive for COVID-19, or that the results have not been reported yet.

Now the question is how this change of atmospheric sensing in the museum, in the supermarket, or at an election campaign rally or a protest march comes to pass?[7]

The starting point is the sensing of atmospheres in a tension clasp. The tension is a condition I am in, but for which I am seemingly only partially responsible. If these conditions are the result of a design (supermarket) or a staged process (election campaign), they attract interest and inspire further perceptions, designs, or stagings. In this sense, tension serves as an indicator that shows the degree of positive tension (tightness) or negative tension (stiffness) which I have changed from or into. The specific moment of this change is not determined by the removal, addition, or supplementation of creative elements, but by becoming aware of the atmospheric interrelatedness of these elements and one's own perception of one's own body at a specific place at a specific point in time. The change of perception that enables the perception of atmospheres is characterized by a kind of inconstancy.

In the game of tensions, in the change of referentialities, the points of experience and the points of expectation of one's own perception collide. As the lifeworld has always been basic repeated praxis, implicit as well as explicit experiences almost automatically accumulate as knowledge. No one has no experience. Atmospheric events only become instructive experiences if they contribute to an instruction in the sense of an exceptional encounter with the atmospheric tension. The tense atmosphere in the supermarket once again made it clear to me that I am living in a tense societal surrounding that is threatened by a virus. Atmospheric instruction in this context is the educational process that takes place in the constant sensing — in the course of change and in the relation of referentiality and subjectivity. The point of expectation is the condition of tension that is implicitly based on experience and that is responsible for somewhat erratically getting ready for whatever might happen — an impatient patience as one does not know what is going to happen; but one wants to know what is going to happen, as one appreciates what happened in the past. This appreciation is both an expression of affection for the explicit past experiences and a guessing concerning the implicit ones.

In contrast to visiting a museum or going grocery shopping, mingling with the crowd at an election campaign rally or at a protest march even more clearly demonstrates that atmospheres are, in fact, contagious. They go viral as sentiments and one is easily infected by them. If they spread and multiply, they can become broadly effective like an extensive firestorm. The contagious atmosphere carries and transposes ideas and feelings. It affixes itself to new places and multitudes of bodies, it is attached to unfamiliar sentiments and defines a sphere of activity. The latter then becomes the space of transmission to indicate another contagion as well as to foster further dissemination of the atmosphere. Far from offering an exact definition as to how infectious atmospheres are in metrical terms, it can be said that they are as contagious as viruses. They dispose of certain ways of dissemination, which become apparent by means of the change of perception and the change of meaning — based on the contact at a particular "here" and a particular "now." To be sure, atmospheres like viruses do not compare to living creatures. However, they are alive in their respective medium (host), which helps to transmit them. Characteristically, when shared, they become more rather than less.

A change of atmosphere as a change of mood is a diversion; it is a way away from the familiar, a change of the surroundings. The semantic field of individual words can become important in this context — the fact that a word is not simply a word but dynamically shaped by many different perspectives. The experience of art at the museum demonstrates that specific experiences can (only) be made at concrete places, which leads to a certain exclusivity that is perhaps not easy to comprehend, such as the primacy of bodily presence in concrete atmospheric experiences. The shopping experience at the pandemic supermarket reveals how fast certain behaviors and (re-)configurations can turn something normal into something abnormal or even depressing. The atmospheric sentiments and their changes resulting from different influences (i.e., the transmission of ideas) during an election campaign show that even intimate ideas or feelings can be passed on to others — beyond mere imitation. Influencers, who want to shape atmospheres, and instigators, who want to direct a change of atmospheres, need to have perspectives; they need to develop and spread them for others to catch, absorb, and adopt them. That is the moment of change. The way I perform and behave at a particular place shapes the place and the people currently present in it and, in turn, it shapes my and our very experiences at the place in question. There is a difference between wandering through a museum and running through it, between concentrating on the texts printed in the exhibition catalog and freely associating. And even if terms may have different and changeable semantic fields, in an atmosphere, at a concrete place, it is possible to have the experience that such a field can actually be a broadly delineable space. Therefore, the terms are never entirely vague, but they do have rough boundaries and concrete areas. The recollection of and talking about an emotionally attuned atmosphere (even in a vague sense) is less suspicious than the reference to a remembrance in the context of cognitively stored knowledge. This is because the atmosphere creates a feeling of safety about a certain situation, which possibly supports the cognitive retrieval of knowledge and, in so doing, prevents false memories or helps to conceal them.

The change of tension is a solvent; when the tension dissolves and shifts, ideally when a negative tension (stiffness) becomes a positive one (tightness) — that happens when I am leaving the pandemic supermarket, when I am stepping out of the depressing atmosphere. The tension is only an experience if it is possible for me to refer to it, if I become aware of it — if it changes, if my tonicity alters. The changing experiences are the quality compass that helps to categorize the change of tension and perspectives — that happens, for instance, when I return home after the shopping spree and recount the experience, how I felt and that the threat I felt earlier has almost disappeared by now. An atmosphere is (comparable to) a solvent that eases tensions and allows for them to change. The change then becomes the quality compass that facilitates the change of perspective.

The restrictions caused by the pandemic and the necessary focusing on digital alternatives have shown that the concrete space of the here and now is indispensable for being infected by atmospheres and for becoming emotionally attuned and affected. Impressive experiences (of art) become stale. Ordinary shopping tours become risky. Impressions become

less lasting as do the passing on of ideas — this becomes clear if, for instance, a global protest movement like "Fridays For Future" no longer acts by means of masses of people, but solely digitally. The digital world is good and allows travelling through time and space. That being said, the digital world lets us feel the loss of atmospheres. Venus is surfing on a seashell, not on the internet, as she wants to arrive at the shores and enter life: she is about to be born. We make experiences always and everywhere. The way they make us tense, and how a change goes on smoothly, is something that should not remain undetected.

Notes

1. All examples in this essay are based on my own atmospheric encounters and experiences, and they have been peer-reviewed in various workshops. This initial example is the result of a conjunction of a stimulus from the cover of the magazine *Die Zeit* (which featured an image of Botticelli's *Venus* with a faint facemask), the memory of my visit to the Uffizi and the surfing discussion with a fellow student, and the digital availability of the image on the Internet. Especially the question of the possibility of digital transformation of atmospheres is highly topical in the pandemic, but is also discussed in the context of, for example, video games. Can video games create real atmospheres or just remind us of real atmospheres? Here the question of lived bodily presence and a phenomenological approach to perception becomes essential. To determine the character of an atmosphere, however, it is exciting to ask: how does the image affect perception? Does this effect remain constant, or by what can it change?
2. In aesthetics, atmosphere is above all a spatial phenomenon. However, temporal aspects also play an increasingly important role in many research projects. For example, especially with a phenomenological focus, archaeologically inspired works are concerned with how an atmosphere from the past can be adequately reconstructed. This applies to the design of memorials and historical museums, but also to art history. Was an atmosphere that seems relaxed today really relaxed then? And how can the atmospheric effect be transported, not only through space (for example, by exhibiting the same pictures in a different place), but also through time.
3. See Andreas Rauh, *Concerning Astonishing Atmospheres* (Milano: Mimesis, 2018), p. 21, 40.
4. See "About," *Atmospheric Spaces*, July 6, 2020, https://atmosphericspaces.wordpress.com/about-2/.
5. See "#StayTheFuckHome," *A Movement to Stop the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2020, https://staythefuckhome.com/.
6. The term "tension clasp" is a novel attempt to describe lived bodily sensing in the atmospheric situation in which one intentionally deals with an atmosphere. The openness of the essayistic format allows me to use this and other evocative formulations that may serve as an occasion for discussion. How do you feel a certain atmosphere? How do you deal precisely with something vague? How do you achieve the cross-over of (technical) language and (emotional) involvement?
7. The three selected atmospheric situations show different aspects in which the phenomenon of the atmosphere is discussed or can be discussed. They denote fundamental relations in atmospheric perception: namely towards things/works of art, towards designed spaces and towards other people and groups of people. Apart from the question discussed here of how the atmosphere can change, these three dimensions are also a good basis for the respective question of how a digital implementation or modification of the atmospheric dimensions is possible.

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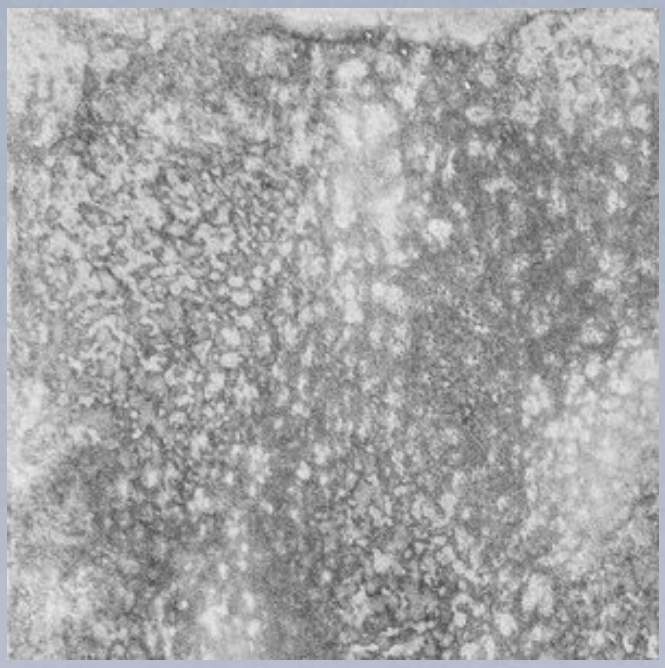

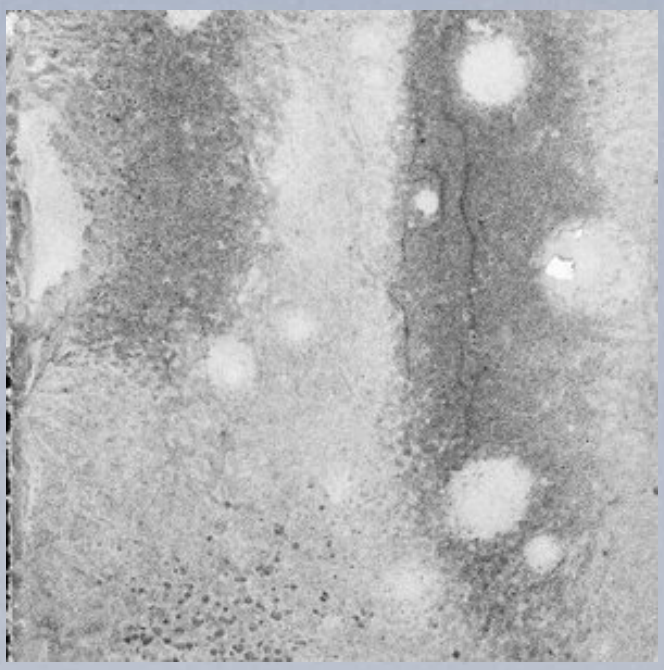

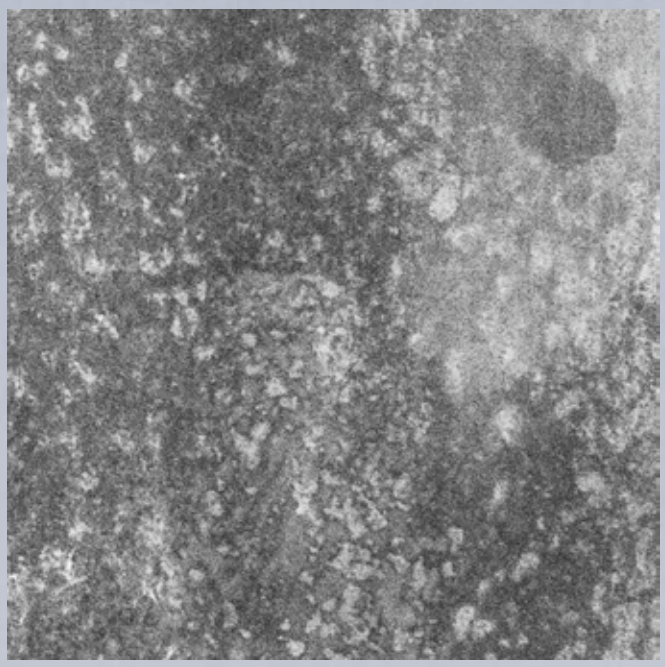

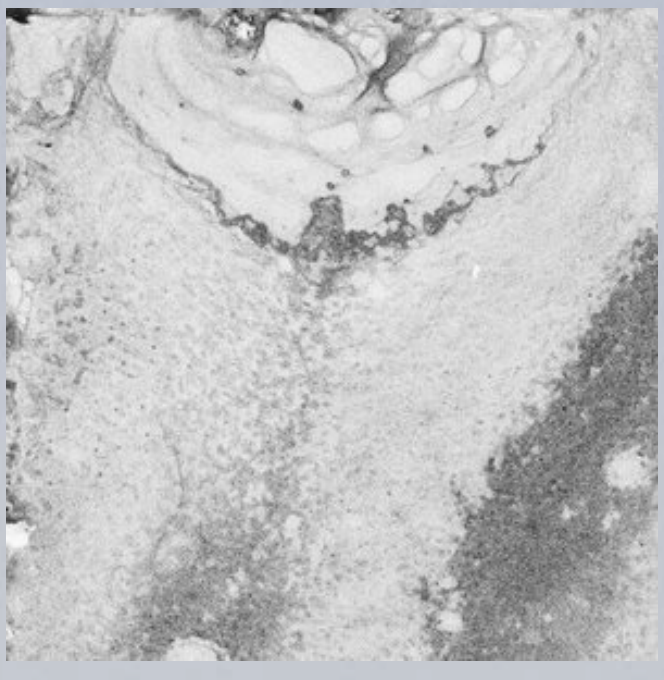

Musical Interlude

Stasis is one thing that Brad Nath's music sounds like; envelopment, too. It's all frantic and stillness and it churns like the sharp flow of air inside a space that's smaller than itself, because that's sort of what it is. Nath embeds contact microphones in construction materials — concrete, silicone, plaster, wax, dirt — to get at how our built world sounds at scales we don't see. His contribution to this issue casts concrete, silicone, and plaster ringing and lugubrious; taps and thick billows, the strange sonic expressions of a building block, keep rhythm beneath the stuttering shrillness of the same thing at some other register. Like atmospheres, these are sounds that, in their ooze through the things around them, imbricate themselves, too.

Nath's accompanying photographs visualize the stuff his music sets to sound. Taken while drying concrete blocks were made to vibrate at their resonant frequencies, the images register, in almost cosmic terms, the formative interaction between sound and substance. At once earthy and astral, they are odd, intimate looks at the most manufactured material on the planet.

—The Editors

Brad Nath is developing listening techniques that compose new forms of empathy between humans and their environments. His material research, live performances, music, and sound structures intend to expose the ways humans are terraforming Earth by revealing the sonic processes below the surface of the world we are building for ourselves — often his process involves amplifying bricks in an effort to deeply listen to one of the fundamental modules of the Anthropocene.

Nath is currently enrolled in the Masters of Solo/Dance/Authorship program at HZT in Berlin and holds a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Cornell University in New York where he studied Sound Art with Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri in the Department of Music. His thesis, titled "Acoustectonics," was advised by professors in both the Architecture and Music departments and was awarded a medal by the faculty for its outstanding merit. He has performed and exhibited his work at the ARSENĀLS Exhibition Hall of the Latvian National Museum of Art, the Berlin Performing Arts Festival, Potsdamer Tanztage, the Amplify residency at ACUD Macht Neu, the Ferrara Sotto Le Stelle in Northern Italy, the Field Kitchen Academy, the In Parallel Spaces Festival in Leipzig, the Cesis Art Festival in Latvia, the Faculty of Music in the University of Toronto, the AIAS event Crit X Live in New York, and spaces throughout Berlin where he has been living since the summer of 2018.

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Shuai Yangs's *Wombs*: Affective Interpretations of the One-Child Policy

Yubai Shi

> *Some time ago, women in the countryside were compelled to go group by group by automobile to the hospital in the city for IUD insertion, abortion, and sterilization. The family planning cadres surrounded them. They guarded the gate out of the ward. They even watched the women when they went to the bathroom because they were afraid [the] women would run away. Then, I performed many 'family planning' operations.*[1]

I first heard the term IUD during a gathering my mother and her female friends held a long time ago, when I was still a child. They mentioned it briefly while talking about a person who used it to their advantage to seek U.S. asylum. The underlying assumption of the conversation was that everyone present had an IUD in their bodies, including my mother. As a child who had happened to overhear this intimate conversation, it felt inappropriate for me to ask: "What is an IUD?"

Shuai Yang's *Womb II* is composed of a large piece of red paper that hovers in the air, as well as a pile of paper scraps on the floor. Light penetrates the paper's negative spaces and creates a silhouette on the wall behind. The work is from a series called *Wombs* (*Womb I*, *Womb II*, and *Womb III*) which revolves around the One-Child Policy, a population planning policy implemented in China from the 1980s until 2013; the title "womb" refers directly to the uterus (Figures 1-3). Seeing these for the first time brought back memories of that conversation between my mother and her friends, as the works' interplay between negative and positive spaces reminded me of the IUD's function and shape. The paper design is based on a repetition of children holding hands. They are individuals, yet as copies of each other, they are fundamentally one single child (Figure 4). The paper scraps on the floor are carefully arranged into a shape that resembles both a uterus and an IUD (Figure 5). As a contraceptive means, an IUD makes void: it prevents pregnancy and refuses fertilisation to take place in the body. Yet, paradoxically, as the most intrusive contraceptive method, its physicality is vividly present in the uterus. Similarly, *Womb II* plays with the paradox between presence and absence. The body of the paper material intrudes into the space and air, yet the silhouette on the wall cast from the piece's negative spaces is a reminder of the irreparable void.

After learning of Yang's works, I had a conversation with my grandaunt about her experience as a gynecologist in a rural area in the Hunan province in the 1980s. As a rural gynecologist, she was only in charge of deliveries and abortions, not the contraceptive procedure, which was the family planning office's responsibility. Nevertheless, she worked closely with the office and told me that, one year, around 150 women in the area were forced to receive IUDs. Her description of how abortions were performed and her patient explanation of the difference between abortions and labor induction still stuck with me as the narrative of a person who went through the strictest period of the policy in the 1980s. IUDs, abortions, women's bodies: these are the concepts that I thought of when I saw the *Womb* series.

Stepping into the gallery space where the artworks stand, we assist in the process of cutting. As viewers, we cut open the space and enter a metonymic site of the female body. In the room, we either see a piece of delicate paper nailed to the wall (*Womb I*) or hover in the middle of the room (*Womb II* and *Womb III*).

Figure 1. Shuai Yang. *Womb I*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

Figure 2. Shuai Yang. *Womb II*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

Our perspective within the space creates both an intimacy with the works and also a sense of intrusion. The shadowing effect, the lighting, and the air envelops and infiltrates the works. Yang indicates that the entanglement of shadow and light is a vital component of the series. A dimly lit room is an ideal condition, she says, as it allows fluidity and stretches time.[2] Our bodily effects permeate both the work and the gallery space. We shift our bodies around and approach to examine the shapes, the patterns of designs in the form of children, and the material details. When looking from a close distance, our bodies block out the lighting, eclipsing the silhouette on the wall behind it, and filling into the shadow's positive spaces. We come into contact with the works and become part of them through our bodies, even though such interaction is constantly shifting depending on our movements in the space.

From afar, the crowd of yellow and red paper scraps on the ground resembles fallen leaves. Looking closely, it turns out that this field of debris matches the work's cut-out negative space (Figure 5). The paper scraps are on the ground but not grounded. We can crouch down to investigate their meaning on the floor. Standing too close, we risk making too much bodily agitation and disturbing them, as the featherlight scraps are susceptible to receiving our bodily energies transmitted through the slightest amount of airflow. Suspended in the air, indeed, but the works are not suspended in time. When our bodies move in the gallery space, the works' physicality also shifts.

Due to the works' direct reference to the most stringent population planning policy in modern history, categorizing the series as works that offer critical reflection on the history of state dominance over human life seems an evident choice. But by interacting with them, they offer more fluid messages. Instead of focusing on the objectivity of history, Yang investigates the effects produced by the policy from a different perspective and creates an atmospheric sensibility that interacts with and envelops the viewer. My own experience with them was quite personal as a result. My method focuses on conversations with the artist, personal narrative, and oral histories to align with the intimate dimension of the works. While the methodology challenges the objective history, it echoes the works' physical and sensorial ethereality, centering on an exploration of feelings.

The History of the One-Child Policy

The One-Child Policy was inaugurated as a nationwide reality in September 1980. The Chinese Communist Party delivered an open letter to its members and the Communist Youth League formally advocating for a one-child-per-couple policy to address the issue of population growth.[3] However, there had already been various birth regulations put in place across China. In October 1978, the Birth Planning Leading Group of China, along with the Central Committee, advocated for a policy that followed the slogan "one is best, two at most," which then quickly evolved into "encourage one, prohibit three."[4]

The strategies for enforcing the Policy gradually grew more stringent once Xinzhong Qian (钱信忠) stepped up as the chairman of the National Family Planning Commission in 1982. Enforcement of contraception, sterilization, and abortion as a final resort were the central methods of Qian's agenda.[5] Furthermore, Qian "authorized people to use any means necessary, including force and late-term abortions," to achieve the birth targets.[6] Methods of punishment for couples who violated the regulations varied widely from region to region but centered on financial penalty and exclusion from or limited access to social welfare.[7] In rural areas, the Commission deployed extreme tactics such as destroying one's house, confiscating furniture, utensils, and livestock, and even conducting surprise inspections to people's houses at night.[8]

Even though various regulations and levels of implementations divided social spaces, such as rural and urban, one thread links these intersections together: the female body. Concerns about "the side effects and complications of male sterilization and the traditional concept that men are not responsible for contraception led to the declining trend in male sterilization and the rather low level of condom use."[9] In 1988, almost a decade after the Policy's birth, the percentage of women using IUDs was 42.1%, and that of women who were sterilized was 37.2%. Of men, only 7.4% were sterilized, and

only 3.9% used condoms as a contraceptive measure.[10]

Yang directly engages with the history of the One-Child Policy in her works. However, her approach also challenges and differs from the objective history by focusing on the female body and adding a personal and intimate dimension to her narrative.

Personal History

Born in 1998 in Beijing, Yang was among the generation born when the Policy had already become a well-regulated reality. Both Yang and I are single children, the products of these strict rules. Similarly, the *Wombs* collection is a result of the Policy. When I asked Yang about what led her to create *Wombs*, I was curious about the political intention behind her works. In my mind, I was expecting a sharply defined commentary about the long-lasting harms and damages caused by the strict enforcement of the One-Child Policy in the 1980s and 1990s. I was expecting the works to reveal something significant. Instead, what Yang told me was more nuanced:

> I do not want to define the Policy as "good" or "bad." It was effective if we consider it strictly as a population planning policy, yet from the perspective of ethics and morality, the means of implementation were inadequate, violent, and inhuman. I think it cannot be simply reduced into the binary of "either good or bad."[11]

Though she did not answer my question as I originally had envisioned, Yang did share with me the personal stories she collected from women of different generations that had been dear to her: the experiences of a friend who is an "illegitimate" second child, a personal account from a teacher born in the 1980s, and more importantly her mother's removal of an IUD in the summer of 2018. It was at that time that she first learned about the device's existence within her mother's body, and the revelation started a personal journey to come to terms with the history of the Policy. As she told me, "the stories that happened during its history of implementation are more attractive [to the artist]."[12]

The statistics that construct an objective history demonstrates that the Policy targets the female body. Yet crowded together, the numbers become disorientingly performative and lose their original intention that originated from the care to repair what really happened during the decades when the Policy was a harsh reality. The statistics detaches feelings and emotions from the bodies by converting them into abstract numbers. In turn, while providing the reader an overarching context of the collective history, the statistics also create a distancing barrier between the reader and what the reality in flesh means. On the contrary, if objective history evolves around hard statistics, the stories that *Wombs* narrate come from lived experiences. *Wombs* first stemmed from the artist's personal journey. Starting from there, the series explores stories and feelings rather than institutional policymaking or the political regime. The emotions woven into the works push back against the objectivity and scientism of history with a capital "H."

Atmospheric Materiality in the Art-Making Process

The materiality of the paper medium and its porosity makes *Wombs* extremely flimsy. Yang made *Womb I and III* from pieces of Chinese rice paper (or *xuan* paper, 宣纸), known for its delicate thinness (it is predominantly used for practicing calligraphy). *Womb II* consists of a type of red paper conventionally used for spring festival couplets (*chunlian*, 春联). Although thicker and stronger than the rice paper, the red paper remains fragile as a medium. When making *Womb I*, the artist first drew a cardboard template that resembles a pair of children whose heads and legs are connected to one another respectively. Tracing the template, she cut the rice paper into the two figures and then patched sixteen pieces of the

Figure 3. Shuai Yang. *Womb III*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

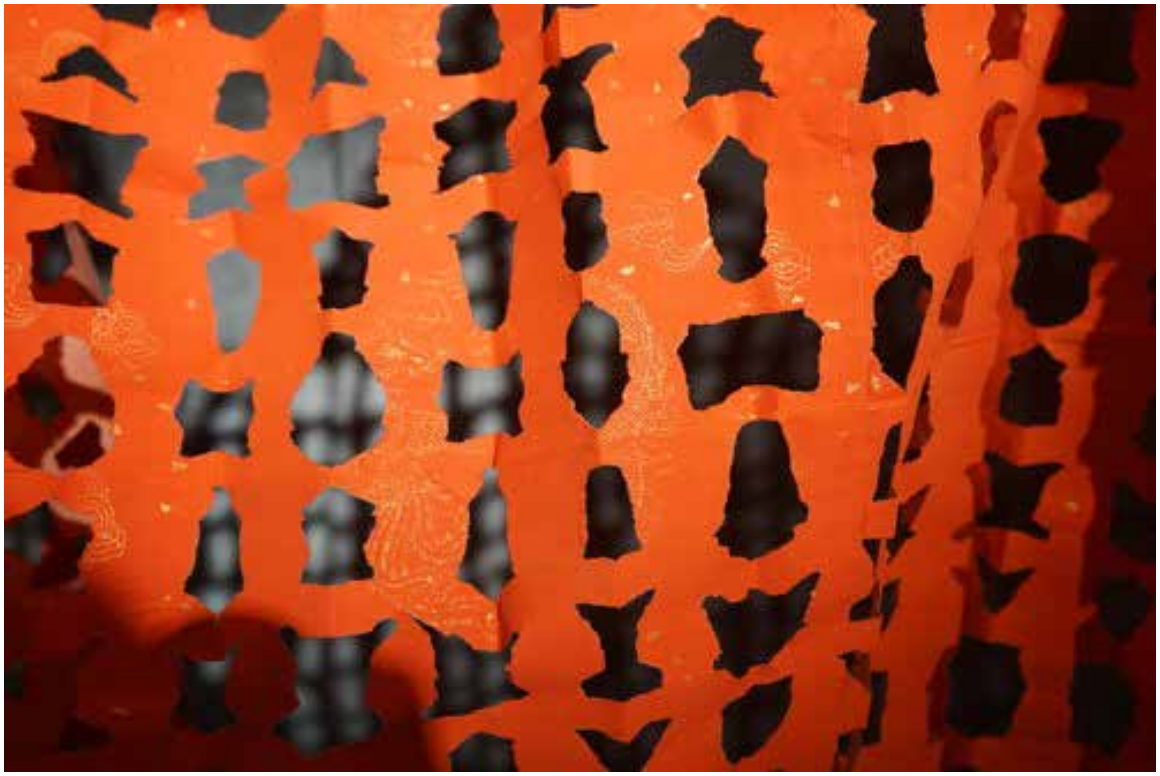


Figure 4. Shuai Yang. *Womb II [Detail showing the shapes of children holding hands]*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

Figure 2. Shuai Yang. *Womb II*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

Figures 6 and 7. Shuai Yang, *Womb III* [Detail showing paper scraps arranged on the floor, covered with the handwritten words "Elder brother, little brother, elder sister, little sister…"] (Left); *Womb III* [Detail showing the words "Elder brother, little brother, elder sister, little sister…"] (Right), Photos Courtesy of the Artist.

paper together.[13] The other two works were made through a similar making process, except that *Womb III* involves more layers of complexity. The artist used screen printing to add a textual layer to its surface.

These physical characteristics, as well as the strenuous process of art-making, align with the stories that the artist wishes to tell through her work. Yang finds it regrettable that "the generation of our parents don't want to share their experiences due to the influences and constraints of many factors, like how they were educated about the Policy under the state's propaganda."[14] As there are few people who tell the stories, our understanding of this period of history becomes limited. Both my mother and Yang's lived through the height of the One-Child Policy and rarely talked about it with us. It is through overhearing or accidental revelation that we started to know and understand. To counteract this reluctance to tell, Yang seeks to share personal stories by weaving them into the process of art. By coming into contact with raw pieces of paper, the artist pours emotions into them.

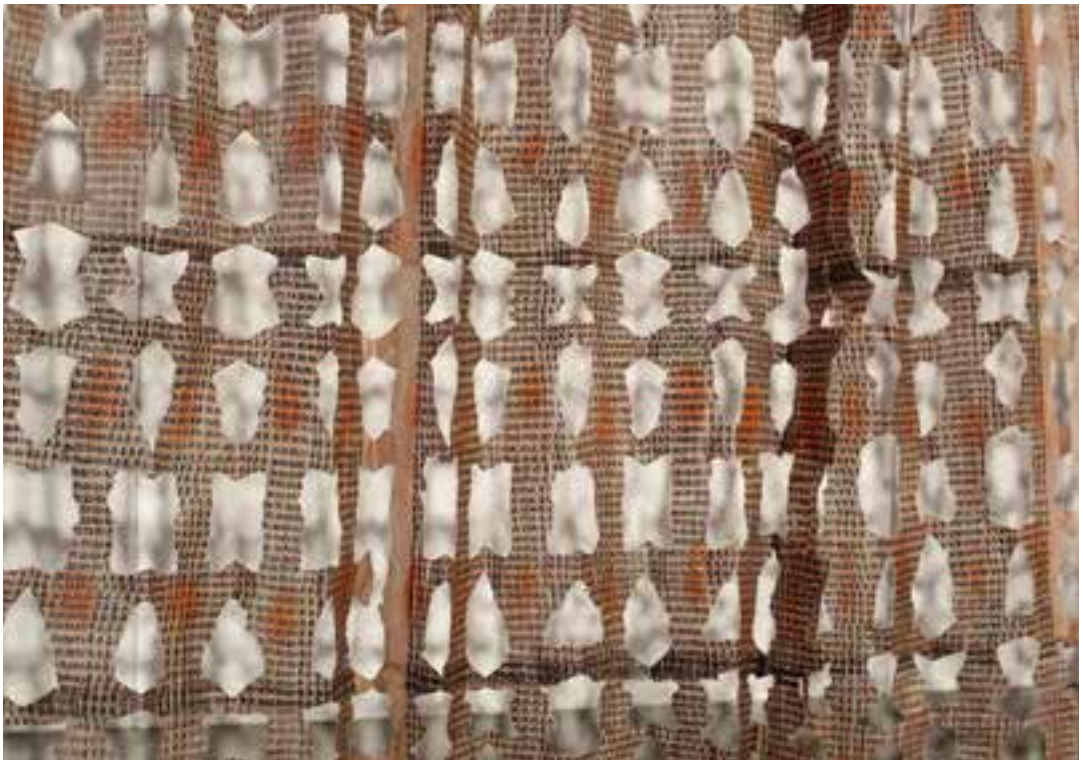
Red is a leitmotif that unites the series. In *Womb I*, the paper shows faint traces of red squares drawn with dotted lines, a physical trait inherited from the paper's original function: to practice calligraphy (Figure 8). For Yang, the rice paper represents her identity and childhood, when she was encouraged to practice handwriting through tracing exercise books made of such rice paper.[15] I, too, share this childhood memory. The red paper used for spring festival couplets in *Womb II* reminds one of writing or buying couplets for spring festivals during childhood. The medium is flimsy, yet its specificity also sparks communal memories and sentiments.

However, red can also be interpreted as a symbol of violence or a sign of the menstrual cycle. The title *Wombs* directly guides us to the uterus, an organ that physically structures the sex and socially mandates the implications of womanhood. Therefore, red also signifies the works' underlying connection to womanhood. Yang painted across the surface of *Womb III* an orangish-red with a writing brush, referring to menstrual blood (Figure 9).[16] The womb bleeds and sheds, its lining represented in Wombs as the fallen paper scraps, which remind us of the creative process, which heavily relies on cutting.

In the context of the works, the symbolic violence that the color red brings forward can be connected to abortions. When the birth planning policy moved forward, the state mandated abortion for couples who already had a child in order to further control the population growth: objectively, when contraception and sterilization failed, it became the necesssary step to ensure the Policy's effectiveness. As the artist's hand refers to her bodily affects in the form of intimate touch with the artworks, it also resonates with the gynecologist's touch. The hands performed the cuts through the scissor, an instrument whose shape evokes dilators and the curettes, medical instruments used for abortion. Seen closely, the shapes show the traces of the scissor which left the edges with ragged outlines (Figure 4). Moreover, the fallen paper scraps cut away from the wombs recall the dilation and curettage process in abortions, and their ragged shapes resemble the aborted bodily tissues.

It is by cutting away the negative spaces that the children holding hands emerge on the papers, and through cutting that the artist creates a twofold shadow. One is the silhouette of the work as reflected on the wall. Another is the fallen scraps as the shadows of the children holding hands together. The ghostly presence of scraps suggests the concept of unregistered personhood. In China, the *Hukou* system is a birth and household registration without which one is denied the access to (or required to pay extra fees to enjoy) essential benefits such as education, housing, and health care.[17] Since the implementation of birth planning policies in the late 1970s, the process to obtain a birth certificate and birth registration for one's children necessarily went through the Population and Family Planning department.[18] Therefore, families had to pay financial penalties to register an unplanned child, or had them unregistered as people living outside of the legal structure. Although the government has banned local governments from excluding out-of-plan children from being registered, "many illegitimate children have remained outside the registration system for years, becoming not just unplanned children, but also unplanned adolescents and even young adults, statuses fraught with difficulties."[19]

Yang confirms that the paper scraps are an integral part of *Wombs*.[20] Subtracted by creation, they signify the



Figures 8 and 9. Shuai Yang, *Womb I* [Detail]; *Womb II* [Detail] (Right), Photos Courtesy of the Artist.

children that fall away either through abortion, abandonment, or as unregistered human ghosts. They also stand for the sisters and brothers that people born under the One-Child Policy could never have. They are a reminder of the void in between the children's holding hands, a visual silence reinforced again by the floating silhouette on the wall. Recall the unplanned children born under the One-Child Policy: "Although literally created by the birth program, [they] represent its dark underside."[21]

Once we enter the gallery, our bodies cut through the space and interrupt the atmosphere. We are implicated in the works' interplay of void and intrusion, absence and presence. We create a presence in the space by casting our shadows onto the work, yet our presence is only transient. What we leave, what stays with us, are feelings and memories that the works evoke.

Conclusion

Seeing the *Womb* series also reminded me of a conversation I had with my mother in 2013. When my mother asked me, "Do you want to have a younger sibling?" I immediately refused. The context behind her question was the imminent implementation of the Two-Child Policy, which became a reality in 2015.[22] My mother was already in her mid-forties at the time, and pregnancy would have caused severe burdens to her body. Yet the more haunting thought at the back of my mind was that I did not want a sibling. I had been a single child for the first eighteen years of my life and had never thought about what it would mean to have a sibling. My selfish reaction to my mother's question may have been peculiar, but it was the residue of the complicated effects the Policy produced in our generation of single children. *Womb*s reveal something significant. Through the works, the artist explores experiences both intimate to her and people around her regarding the Policy. They offer an intimate viewing space where bodies interact and exchange feelings.

Ms. Deng said that she had four children — the living daughter and the three aborted fetuses. She called each of her fetuses the little child (xiao wawa), observing that she often thought about "how old they would now be if they had lived":

> *"Three times I saw rolls of fine hair (rongmao , i.e., the aborted tissues, which resemble such rolls). After seeing them, I felt the little child (xiao wawa) was really pitiful. If the Policy [had] allowed, they would have been born. They were very little. If they were bigger, I would feel much worse. Everyone has emotion, right? I often think of them. I often imagine how old they would be if they had been born. If they had been born, one of them would have been in senior high school now."*[23]

Notes

1. Jing-Bao Nie and Arthur Kleinman, *Behind the Silence* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 175-176. Quote taken from the account of Dr. Zhang, an OB/GYN doctor of sixteen years at the time of the authors' interviews.
2. Shuai Yang, video interview by author, June 27, 2020.
3. "Open Letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the General Membership of the Communist Party and the Membership of the Chinese Communist Youth League on the Problem of Controlling Population Growth in Our Country (September 25, 1980)," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 24, no.3 (1992): 11-16.
4. Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2008), 87.
5. Liang Zhongtang 梁中堂, "Jiannan de licheng: cong Yitaihua dao Nü'erhu 艰难的历程：从"一胎化"到"女儿户" [The Tortuous Course: From "One-Child" to "Daughter-Only"], *Kaifang shidai* 开放时代 3 (2014), 26
6. Susan Greenhalgh, "China's Population Policies: Engendered Biopolitics, the One-Child Norm, and Masculinization of Child Sex Ratios," in *Markets and Malthus: population, gender, and health in neo-liberal times*, ed. Mohan Rao and Sarah Sexton (Sage Publications, 2010), 305.
7. Liang Zhongtang 梁中堂, "The Tortuous Course," 15.
8. Ibid., 27.
9. Xiaoying Zheng, Lingfang Tan, Qiang Ren, Zhijun Cui, Junqing Wu, Ting Lin, Jie He, and Hua Chen, "Trends in Contraceptive Patterns and Behaviors during a Period of Fertility Transition in China: 1988–2006," *Contraception (Stoneham)* 86, no. 3 (2012), 206.
10. Ibid, 211.
11. Shuai Yang, interview by author, June 27, 2020.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Li Shuzhuo, Zhang Yexia, and Marcus W. Feldman, "Birth Registration in China: Practices, Problems and Policies," *Population Research and Policy Review* 29, no. 3 (2010), 298.
18. Ibid, 305-313.
19. Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's population: from Leninist to neoliberal biopolitics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 277.
20. Shuai Yang, video interview by author.
21. Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's population*, 277.
22. The Two-Child Policy is a modification of the One-Child Policy that allows each couple to have anywhere between one child or two, depending on the condition that one of the parents is a single child. The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress officially passed the Policy in December 2015. For more details regarding the Two-Child Policy, see also the announcement made on the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee.
23. Jing-Bao Nie and Arthur Kleinman, *Behind the Silence*, 142.

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Henri-Edmond Cross (Henri-Edmond Delacroix), *Landscape with Stars*, ca. 1905 – 1908, Watercolor on white wove paper, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain.

Golden stars amidst a bleak landscape of blues and greens; Henri-Edmond Cross's *Landscape with Stars* seems to meditate upon the uncertain, yet mystical, elements of the world around us. So, too, does Shropshire novelist Mary Webb wax the precarious characteristics of our atmosphere and nature. In "Unmourning Atmosphere: Mary Webb's Alternative to Elegy," Jayne Lewis uses Webb's novels to explore a drastically reduced conception of our natural environment. Atmosphere is not the heavily conceptualized envelope of gases with which we have become familiar. Rather, like stars, atmosphere provides an intimate and expressive presence of individual bodies that persists through a mutually transformative exchange. Emphasizing Mary Webb's writing on discrete bodies and the local atmospheres they create, Lewis urges us to remediate our own vexed, possessive relationship to the atmosphere at large.

- The Editors

Unmourning Atmosphere: Mary Webb's Alternative to Elegy

Jayne Elizabeth Lewis

For the imagination sees the highway of mortal existence where it ends abruptly, penumbrous, flecked with shade from the heart-shaped leaves of the Tree of Life: and the shadow is the sign that we have come at last within the pale of the tree's mysterious whisperings.

- Mary Webb, The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing (1917)

In order for a climate to exist, all the elements within a given space must be at once mixed and identifiable—united not through substance, form, or contiguity, but through the same 'atmosphere.'

- Emanuele Coccia, "Leaf Theory: The Atmosphere of the World" (2018)

Because climate change is climate loss, speaking about "the" atmosphere today seems to compel the elegiac mode. Numbers — CO_2 concentrations, methane potentials, time horizons — are the metrics, if not the very meter, of the mourning. Yet because complete loss is still imminent, atmospheric elegy feels fated to participate in what Timothy Morton deems a dark ecology; one must somehow mourn not just what was but what is about to be. In the context of climate change, Morton supposes, complete mourning for our natural environment is impossible precisely "because we are so deeply attached to it." This possessive bond suspends the natural environment's lamented future between two logically contradictory conditions where "there is nothing left for elegy at all" and yet "there is no end to the work of mourning."[1]

Melancholia was the name that Freud gave to the stymied, circular mourning of things that are not quite things but that we stubbornly treat as if they were. (He called them ideals.) Is there any alternative to it? The Shropshire writer Mary Webb (1881-1927) proposed one; her two most significant works on this front even appeared in 1917, the same dark, modernity-defining year of war in which Freud published "Mourning and Melancholia." Its shadow status in relation to the modernist literary canon — and modernist theories of atmosphere — notwithstanding, Webb's writing experiments with a conception of "atmosphere" that is uniquely specific, generative, and diverse. Indeed, the radically graphic forms of that writing transfigure dark ecology into bright shadow, an ever-present aura birthed perpetually from conspiracy between the linguistic medium and the bodies that speak through it.

Webb is occasionally likened to one of the exemplars of Morton's dark ecology, the environmental fatalist Thomas Hardy. But a more important, if implicit, interlocutor was yet another contemporary: Walter Benjamin. Often mediated in his own writing through the figure of the shadow, Benjamin's reflections on aura have shaped recent critical theories of atmosphere as an aesthetic category, even as idiosyncratic literary latticework like Webb's has languished beneath that theory's notice. Arising from the printed page rather than from the photographic medium that Benjamin held in fascinated and melancholy contempt, Webb's auratic atmospheres achieve an ironic immediacy. This quality in turn gives rise to affective and aesthetic possibilities undreamed of in our enlightened natural philosophies — possibilities unshadowed by pathos and freed of the will to materialize, to conceptualize, and ultimately to possess.

I

What modern people call "the atmosphere" became ours through language. As Leo Spitzer observes in one of the many footnotes that ring his influential genealogy of ambiance, "atmosphere" was for the Greeks the "name... invented for the ring or orb of vapor... supposed to be exhaled from the body of a planet and to be part of it, which air itself was not considered to be." Over time, but specifically with air's isolation as an object of scientific analysis in the seventeenth-century, "the" atmosphere lost this auratic quality, and its name "was extended to the portion of surrounding air occupied by this, or supposed to be, in any way, within the 'sphere of the activity' of the planet, and finally, with the progress of science, to the supposed limited aeriform environment of the earth or any other planetary or stellar body." We come, almost, full circle: "this 'surrounding air' reminds us of *aer ambiens*."[2] But precisely because our gaseous, quantifiable envelope of surrounding air is a reminder, it also marks our distance from *aer ambiens* — the impossibility of sensing it with the immediacy imagined to have been available to the Greeks. We're left with dead property.

This sense of loss as an epiphenomenon of enlightenment subtly conditions modern critical theory of atmosphere, where Spitzer (writing in the middle of the technological nightmare of the second world war) remains a key figure. Ironically, it may be because of its prescribed, quasi-scientific detachment from its topic that prose criticism hosts so many poignant reflections "on" atmosphere: one thinks not just of Spitzer but of such undisputed (and oft-cited) *evocateurs* as Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme, Emanuele Coccia. Schmitz's lyrical 2012 essay on "Atmospheric Spaces," for example, appreciates atmosphere not as a location within which orientation is possible but as the experience of space "without area." Because atmospheric spaces are "spanned by ... movement," they afford volume without dimension.[3] Part of what it is to be atmosphere is to be "without"; put another way, this withoutness is precisely what puts "us" *within* atmosphere, transforming the loss of something (in this case, spatial coordinates) into the ongoing experience of "occupation." Indeed, for Schmitz, "such area-less spaces are not merely shadow-like side-effects and symptoms of the locational space that is familiar to us, but are rather its indispensable preconditions."[4] Schmitz's "atmospheric spaces" are compensatory, but they also replicate the loss for which they compensate. Their preconditional privilege becomes apparent only when their (implicitly derivative) shadow-likeness is devalued.

As confirmed in his essay's robust if diasporic afterlife in the footnotes of others, Schmitz's dialectic of not-quite loss and tenuously renewed lease consolidates and seemingly solidifies an international critical community, one that is able to take on a shared sense of "atmosphere" even though its members are so widely distributed in physical space that they may never have breathed the same air. At once gathered and diffuse, this community tends to be phenomenological rather than ontological or epistemological in its philosophical orientation. Often inspired by Benjamin's impressionistic materialism, it embraces (perhaps is embraced by) the supple genre of critical reverie, fragments of which float from site to site of atmospheric reflection, their temporary coalescences and containments a postmodern compensation for the sense of loss that attends the modern demand for separation and objectivity.

The actual groundlessness of that sense of loss was, of course, a proposition floated in Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), an influential work of postmodern critical theory that begins, interestingly enough, with Latour's (or his narrator's) nose buried in the daily newspaper. On its fourth page, he encounters the growing hole in the ozone layer, but by his own page seven he is reassuring himself that, like the ancients, "we too think that the sky is falling. We too associate the tiny gesture of wielding an aerosol spray with taboos pertaining to the heavens. We too have to take laws, power, and morality into account in order to understand what our scientists are telling us about the chemistry of the upper atmosphere."[5] Almost thirty years on, the "anxieties of ecologists"[6] have been trumped by the anxieties of epidemiologists, the sweeping "we" exposed as a presumption of privilege, and the daily newspaper with its tangible, sequentially numbered pages all but supplanted by the digital cloud. So Latour's consolations — "our" inevitable mixture with the objects of our

thought means that "we," having "never been modern," can't yet have lost the past — can seem like misdirections. It's in its atmospherics that *We Have Never Been Modern* turns out to be, well, modern. Something has indeed been lost. It's sad.

The critical community of modern atmospheric elegists seems to include few women. The unmitigated grief and prophetic furor of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, or Elizabeth Kolbert's more recent *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, may be more our style. But here too is a version of elegy, cheated by the impending disappearance of the object it would apostrophize. So perhaps for a true alternative we should try looking nowhere at all. That might be not to theory, to criticism, or to the lyric science writing that dominates literary journalism today, but instead to the more specific and yet less referential — the more speculative and yet less rarefied — art of fiction as practiced in the modern past.

II

Some time ago now, I was in the midst of mourning someone. She had died young, of one of those melanomas (squamous, odious, insidious); it is hard not to trace to some hole in the ozone layer. In the midst of mourning this friend, I began reading a writer I knew she'd loved, a spinner of fictions whose position at a point of numerous transitions — historical, linguistic, geographic, generic, even bodily — advances her candidacy as an elegist of atmosphere.

Reading Mary Webb isn't much like reading anybody else; the Virago Press cover of Webb's best-known novel, *Precious Bane* (1924), quotes the Independent's baffled verdict that "there is nothing quite like it in English literature." Indeed there is not. It isn't even really like itself. Along with the rest of Webb's fiction — most notably 1917's *Gone to Earth* — *Precious Bane* has been classified, never with complete conviction, as "rural romance," as nature writing, as regional literature, as redacted folklore, as secular mysticism, as feminist and even ecofeminist allegory. You could also fix Webb's work in the lens of disability studies: *Precious Bane*'s protagonist, Prue Sarn, comes off as a witch thanks to her prenatally imprinted harelip, and Webb herself suffered from a disfiguring autoimmune disorder. She died at 46, though not before publishing several popular novels during and just after the First World War. (The so-called "scarlet war," whose mustard gas lent material form to the first modernist modern atmospheres, is registered aslant in *Gone to Earth* in the menacing figure of its protagonist's seducer, Jack Reddin.) Webb was not ignored in her time: *Precious Bane* won the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse prize in 1926, netted respectful reviews in high places, and even milked a fan letter out of then-prime minister, Stanley Baldwin. After Webb's death, whole books were devoted to tracing her Shropshire "haunts."[7]

Webb looks very much like a writer of place. Her fiction's invariable setting, the English/Welsh border county of Shropshire, was her birthplace. This "delicate home/of color and light" remained such a home off and on for much of her life. She's buried there, as happens to be my friend. Yet in Webb's fiction, Shropshire is never directly named. It's therefore peripherally recognizable, available only insofar as it is obliquely suggested by fiction that tended to get written from afar, while Webb was living, unhappily but ambitiously, in a flat in Bayswater. Though the preface to *Precious Bane* expresses Webb's sense of "good fortune in having been brought up in [Shropshire's] magical atmosphere," it also suggests that most of the book's linguistic contacts with that place are derived from "the authors of *Shropshire Folk Lore*," presumably Charlotte Sophia Burne's *Shropshire Folklore: A Leaf of Gleanings* (1883).[8] Otherwise, Webb only summons Shropshire as (and through) voice. Dialogue approximates its spoken rhythms and turns of speech; a torqued, unpredictable diegetic syntax both echoes and reshapes — conspicuously remediates — that same unheard dialogue. ("'*The Maister be come*.' The words made such a murmuration, and were so piercing-sweet, that I wrote them in my book."[9])

"Shropshire" itself was felt to be vanishing in Webb's own day. Vanishing as a linguistically specific region demarcated by a compressed, elliptical dialect that was neither archaic nor new-made, neither familiar nor alien to the ear of convention ("*Maister*," "fritten," "summat"). Vanishing too as a geocultural area that had been slow to industrialize (and self-commodify) relative to other counties in the British archipelago. Recent criticism mainly gauges Webb's interventions in the politics of

landscape, setting her rural worlds against the establishment of the National Trust or the metastasis of factory farming in the first half of the twentieth-century, finding "opposition between sustainable traditional ways and a destructive modern way of seeing the land."[10] These are productive ways of thinking about Webb's relationship to loss, but the aim of this kind of criticism is to cut its own losses — to produce the sort of political and economic critique that can console critics of culture for their near total lack of actual cultural authority. Theme is a commodity in the economy of literary analysis, form a currency in the economy of lamentation.

As an aesthetic category, atmosphere is distinct from form and theme, even as, in its indistinctness, it seems to arise from their interaction. Emanuele Coccia: "the relation between container and contained is endlessly reversible."[11] But while for the well-accompanied postmodern theorist this dynamic rescues atmosphere into a kind of detached, free-floating phenomenology, for the modern fiction writer it portends isolation and a confrontation with the limits of the linguistic medium. Indeed, while Webb's "atmospheric spaces" are highly evocative in their "intangible sentimental quality," they are also often conspicuously artificial. Airtight. Not for the claustrophobic.[12] Glen Cavaliero, the *eminence grise* of Webb studies (such as they are), judges *Precious Bane* frustratingly "remote from ordinary concerns," projecting "no real sense of an England existing outside [Webb's] fictional Shropshire."[13] Webb's own contemporaries found that "her narrative is strange, fantastic, symbolical," Webb herself "a rustic" who "neither cares nor is able to dissociate the seen from the unseen."[14]

This refusal of dissociation arises from circumstances under which the impersonal unseen inexorably orders — even as it mediates — what persons see, whether they are characters who represent embedded and embodied centers of perception "in" Webb's novels or living readers positioned more or less outside it. It is a strange effect, well-rendered in a contemporary review that characterized *Precious Bane* as "a conceit in the old sense of the word," akin to "a sampler stitched through long summer evenings in the bay window of a remote farmhouse."[15] If such analogies oddly reproduce the fusion of perspective and perceived object that we find in Webb's fiction, they capture a quality that is dissonant — indeed dissentient — from both Webb's seeming naturalism and her aspirational abstraction. Bending toward the moral and political as often as toward the mystical and interior, this dissonance is only intensified by Webb's biting wit; though Hardy is most often named a significant influence, she was a more ardent admirer of Jane Austen's "trenchant wit" and "ladylike Falstaffianism," enabled as these were by the "circumscribed outlook of her time."[16]

If Webb imagined that she could meet "our immortal Jane" only "in a problematical Heaven," her own sentences are mannered, even constrained by their own artifice. "She borrowed shapes and was afraid to put anything inside them," wrote Ernest Baker in 1936, detecting "a lack in her books of a certain liveliness and assuring feel of reality."[17] This awkwardness redoubles in light of what has begun to be retrieved and sensitively analyzed as Webb's mystical "ecopoetics."[18] Indeed, it is felt most strongly in her almost improbably evocative natural atmospheres. "Sunshine, mist, storm sweeping over or enveloping the hills color the human drama and even guide its course," reported a TLS review of her first novel, *The Golden Arrow*. G.K. Chesterton found in the fiction of "the Shropshire lass" "a light not shining on things but through them" such that "solid things become transparent, a diffused light."[19] Webb's only biographer received her "naturalistic allegory" as a non-mimetic, non-reflective treatment of the sensible world, identifying it with the mysticism that Webb cultivated less through exposure to nature than through her reading of figures from Julian of Norwich to Sir Thomas Browne.[20] This genealogy turns individual paragraphs into intricate codes of signatures transmitted through an energy of light that surrounds not just discrete natural objects — flowers, foxes, trees — but people and even pictures as well. Highly individuated, such atmospheres are mimetic in the way that protective coloration is mimetic; they merge the bodies that they surround with a determining environment that also transmits information about them. Such an environment will perforce be most immediately experienced by Webb's reader as linguistic, as fictitious, and even as lexical. And it's definitely disorienting, not least because it looks so orienting.

It is difficult to describe Webb's atmospheric techniques. This is in part because they develop in and through her

Henri-Edmond Cross (Henri-Edmond Delacroix), *Landscape*, n.d. Watercolor over graphite, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain.

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techniques of characterization. The best examples come from *Gone to Earth*, wherein (or whereabouts) an intimately omniscient third-person narrative voice organizes itself around and through the responsive, embodied intelligence of Hazel Woodus, a countrified gypsy's daughter and parson's wife who in a typical passage "turned home. At that moment a note of music strayed... and ran down the silence like a spray of water. The air was lost in distance."[21] Though she seems like a pilot through a web of sensations and atmospheric effects, Hazel here is actually peripheral to the movement of this music; its loss "in distance" makes distance the only possible actor or presence here. Likewise, Hazel Woodus's very name seems to point to something tangible (hazel wood) but the "us" at the end of it shades a seeming noun into the secondary qualities that make things available to sensation.

True to form, Hazel doesn't appear in the opening paragraph of *Gone to Earth*. But then so little does:

> Small feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky — shepherdless, futile, imponderable — and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.[22]

This lucid, almost ruthlessly specific sentence tenders virtually no object of direct perception, apart, maybe, from the little clouds. But clouds are not quite things, hence their steady employment in literature as figures for the atmosphere they also help create. Nor does this sentence, so full of activity, actually hold any active agent: the clouds, if they exist in the first place, "were hurried," but not by anything except perhaps their quality of being hurried. They "were torn," yes, but "on," not by, the "fangs of the mountains" — and which mountains we are never told. Yet despite its vagueness, this remains not only a visual scene but a highly determined, even contrived one. Its elements are perceptibly directed by the invisible medium that conveys them. (Invisibility itself is the attribute the narration will later assign to a "Power... so immanent that it pressed upon the brain."[23])

Gone to Earth's opening lines proleptically echo its closing scene, where brutal hunters and their hounds run Hazel to earth with her pet fox. This fatalism isn't like Hardy's: it's a matter of (saved) appearance. Hence the "ending of [the] ephemeral adventures" of the clouds *as if* they were appearance, future *as if* it were past. These fictional effects are realized, and multiplied, in the paragraph's last word. "Tears" connotes both the weeping of an invisible percipient and tatters. Or perhaps rendings: the second connotation (tatters) tears again between those two possibilities, extending the word "tears" as an unhearable echo. That echo becomes visible in, through, and against convention: the formal curvature of the printed sentence.

The clouds that begin this sentence end (with) it. Yet they return some pages later as "hill-wanderers" that "were as fiercely pure, as apparently imperishable, as a great ideal. With lingering majesty they marched across the sky, first over the parsonage, then over [Hazel's lover] Reddin, laying upon each in turn a hyacinth shadow."[24] Strikingly, the clouds themselves are never seen. They've been absorbed into Webb's highly artificial image of "hill-wanderer" and into their own adjectival affinity with an "ideal." As for the "hyacinth shadow," at once singular and plural, it too evades direct perception unless as a specific urgency. As such, however, the shadow(s) transform(s) the too-substantive "Reddin" from a character and proper name into a temporal and tonal effect of color (reddening). Eventually "redding" bends into a pun on "reading," which activity proceeds, now in a perceptible passing tense, under the custody of the hyacinth shadow.

As for Reddin and Hazel as characters, they are soon to "kn[o]w a sense of the pressure of night." Within a few pages it will have

> appeared to them to stoop nearer, blind, impassive, but intensely aware of them under their dark canopy of leaves. Some Being, it seemed, was listening there, and not only listening, but imposing in an effortless but inevitable way its veiled purpose. Hazel and Reddin — he no less than she — appeared to be deprived of identity, like hypnotic mediums. His hardness and strength took on a pitiful dolt-like air before this prescient power.[25]

Here atmosphere's peripheral, transient, elusive quality mixes with its supreme power as a perceiving and perceptible medium, one distant enough to satirize the "dolt-like air" that Reddin's qualities of "hardness and strength took on," passively, as cloth takes on dye. It is not clear to what or whom Hazel and Reddin "appeared to be deprived of identity," contained within a single "hypnotic medium." But whatever "prescient power" is registered here, it seems to move both Hazel and Reddin out of transience into presence. "Before" modulates from a temporal term implying an "after" to a spatial one meaning "in front of." Loss never quite happens.

We might think of atmosphere as expansive, infinitely reverberant, but Webb's atmospheres, as exemplified here, are writ as vanishingly small as alphabetic characters, realized from there in specific and minute lexical effects. Such effects are experimental enactments of Webb's formal critical remarks on "atmosphere, that whimsical artist," who in a playful 1917 essay "transforms the already brilliant world by clothing things in tints other than their own. ... The haze that clings in the hearts of autumn trees ... lends the trees more loveliness than their own." Amplified in the repetition of "than their own," as it aligns "other" with "more," Webb's slightly forced rendering of "atmosphere" avows what "things" "own" (even if that is only certain "tints") by virtue of their existence through a medium that explicitly makes those things other and more than their own. Webb continues, or possibly reverses: "Near sunset, soft films gather imperceptibly, stealing over everything, so that all colours, while keeping their individuality, are mixed with gold medium. The clearest atmosphere throws a veil over actual things."[26] If the veil turns back to mystical allegory, atmospheric "films" register contemporary changes in the technology of the photograph. Recent chemical innovation had coaxed plates that had spent the nineteenth-century sheathed in a nitrocellulose camphor compound into shedding their skins. The resulting celluloid strips had begun capturing temporal movement through as yet silent film.

The history of photography would soon be bound to critical theory of atmosphere via Webb's contemporary Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's ironically long-lasting 1935 reflections on the "decay" of aura famously trace it to the rise of mechanical reproduction, which is exemplified in the still photograph, though its "most powerful agent is the film." Benjamin's aura makes Webb's atmospheres seem prescient. But unlike Webb, Benjamin renders "aura" as figure of mourning: its decay is arrested and redeemed only in the evocative inscription of its loss — a loss that, in turn, yields the consolations of analytic insight into the material and economic foundations of modern life and art. Hence Benjamin supposes that "the concept of aura... with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones." He famously proceeds:

> We defined the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, whole resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura.[27]

The aura works here as an intratextual teaching aid even as it has subsequently solidified Benjamin's aura into valuable currency in critical writing "on" atmosphere. Such writing seeks an escape from critical objectivity into an experience of tangible presence and expressive community. For instance, echoing Benjamin's suggestion that "to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return," Gernot Böhme supposes that atmosphere necessarily includes the "affective impact of the observed."[28] Thomas Ford is right — and brilliant — to perceive that in subsequent "atmosphere criticism" Benjamin's historicized aura actually functions ahistorically, since it's through its specification as aura that "atmosphere" becomes translatable, "'breathable here and now' no matter where and when it might be."[29]

This, needless to say, has not been the fate of Webb's auratic atmospheres, which in any case arise from the "type" of mechanical technology of visualization that Benjamin would have blamed for their decay. For Webb, the relevant technology

would be the character-based one of writing, ultimately manifesting in "type" itself.[30] Her female characters often explicitly acquire writing, and they are idiosyncratic, synesthetic readers. As for Webb's own writing and its reader, the particulates that make up printed lines flow in the manner of "films," as here: "A star shone through the trees, but it was not a friendly star. It was more like a stare than a tear."[31] As "star" literally modulates into "stare" and away from "tear," distance presents — is charactered — as intimacy.

In turn, at the level of characteriza*tion*, "aura" at once surrounds living bodies and removes them. Hazel senses not her upright husband Edward's body but rather his "presence, in the aura of which no harm could come."[32] Such specifications, like the shading of "star" toward "stare," identify individual characters with the medium that communicates them to Webb's reader. Hence Webb's attention to their specific, personal "atmosphere[s]." Hazel's Bible-thumping mother-in-law is endowed with "that most adamantine thing — an unsympathetic atmosphere"[33]; the predatory Jack Reddin likewise "took his own atmosphere with him."[34] Hazel herself, who moves "regardless of direction,"[35] does so through a different atmosphere, one that aligns her with Webb's own medium: "Light seemed to be her natural sphere,"[36] and Edward knows "the charmed circle of her presence"[37]; "pictures [of her] c[o]me dimly yet radiantly before him"[38] and she herself recognizes that "I be like a picture"[39]: "How like a sacred picture she looked,"[40] Edward thinks, and "the blue sky received his certainty."[41] Just so, "the light poured on [her] as it does from a burning-glass held over a leaf. It burned steadily on her, and then was moved, as if by an invisible hand."[42]

As techniques of characterization, such human atmospheres seem to transpose the haloes of the medieval saints into an equally naturalistic and aesthetic key. It's a naïvely conspicuous effect when set alongside Benjamin's subtleties, but this does not make it less effect*ive*. Indeed, the differences speak to literary fiction's potential as a participating elucidator — a realizer — of atmosphere. As Benjamin would be, Webb was interested in shadows as atmospheric figures. *Gone to Earth*'s "hyacinth shadow" makes explicit and active the "as if" implicit in Benjamin's melancholy "as when" rendering of aura via the shadow of a distant branch. Proleptically *contra* Benjamin, Webb's 1917 essay "The Beauty of Shadow" proposes that, far from being the phenomenon of distance, "shadow is one of the easiest to perceive of all nature's beauties. As one may see the charm of a profile for the first time when looking at a silhouette, so one becomes aware of the perfection of a natural outline more quickly by seeing it drawn in one colour. ... Without shadow things would seem unreal, unbreathing as figures in a dream... With it come reality and rounded loveliness. It is only the bare winter tree, the barren heart, that are shadowless."[43] Webb's transition from sensation and perception to morality and affect simulates the shadow's transition between the impression of unreality and the impression of reality. These are all matters of "becom[ing] aware" of specific bodies within a single medium that is shared by the seer and the seen. This awareness is immediately manifested in the shadow that communicates it.

A bit like Peter Pan's shadow, Benjamin's aura detached itself from three rich discursive contexts, two of which Webb allowed to color and shape her fiction, while the third is outlying modern fiction like Webb's. One such context was that of contemporary spiritualism, diffused through the publications of such female-dominated organizations as the Oxford Psychical Society. (Their investigations were occasionally conducted through visual art, as in the case of the abstract, presciently modern spirit paintings of the Victorian medium and automatic writer Georgianna Houghton.) British women's writing on mysticism also pursued the idea of aura as at once the expression of an individual and the property of the medium that conveys it. Notable here: Evelyn Underhill, who began her literary career as a novelist before turning to popular explications of mysticism. Webb owned a great many of her great many books.

Second, the aura was an object of scientific and medical knowledge that united a far-flung community of British and American physicians and chemists during and after the first world war. Drawing on recent photographic innovations, they developed technologies for detecting and measuring what their pioneer, Walter Kilner, called "an exceedingly faint haze [that] can be seen extending outwards a very long distance" from the human body. This haze "gives the impression that we are aware of its presence but are not quite able to distinguish it."

Kilner entitled his 1911 study *The Human Atmosphere* so as to set "the subject apart from all occultism." In declaring his eponymous "human atmosphere" to be "the prototype of the halo or nimbus constantly depicted around the saints," Kilner both premodernized the secular, electromagnetic aura and conferred a kind of aura on his own aura photographs as "made visible" — read: objective, even "real" — on and through his patented Kilnascreen.[44] "I always associate a halo with part of the uniform of a saint," wrote Kilner's disciple Oscar Bagnall, "something unreal and 'pictured strange in musty unread book.' The haze with which I intend to deal is no saintly decoration, but shines forth alike both from the just and the unjust."[45] From a historicist and materialist perspective, we might say that, as screens, dyes, lenses, and electrical currents replaced that strangely pictured "saintly decoration," the aura was democratized, or that its transit from unreality to material reality made it the property of watercolor manufacturers, laboratory technicians, photographers. But it also reveals itself as the property of the medium that transmits it. It is "*symbolically*," Ursula Roberts would note, that the "radiations" revealed through the Kilnascreen "can be defined as the field of electricity which every individual manufactures from the materials at its disposal."[46]

Webb's fiction shows individuals engaged in this process as they move through the fictive medium that literally symbolize them. It's via sentences that synthesize — might even be said to synesthetize — Bagnall's disparaged "unreal" into a condition of presence that Hazel Woodus passes through "narrow ways, lit on either side by the breath-taking freshness of new hawthorn leaves." Primroses "eyed [her], as Madonnas might." Eventually she finds herself inside "a shop where sacred pictures were displayed. ... There was one of an untidy woman sitting in a garden of lilies — evidently forced — talking to an anemic-looking man with ... a phosphorescent head. Hazel did not know about phosphorus or haloes, but she remembered how she had gone into the kitchen one night in the dark and screamed at the sight of a sheep's head on the table, shining with a strange greenish light. This picture reminded her of it." Hazel doesn't "like this shop." That's because "perhaps she had seen in her dim and childish way the everlasting tyranny of the material over the abstract."[47]

Here the material and the abstract, phosphorous and halo, perception and percipient blend within the same discriminating yet indiscriminate scrim. Hazel herself is lit by "a green flame of passionless devotion to loveliness as seen in inanimate things."[48] But "glow-worms" also "shone incandescently in the long grass, each with her round, wonderful greenish lamp at its brightest." Themselves neither animate nor inanimate — suspended between the insect genus *lampyridae* and lamps themselves — the glow-worms are then said to register the "very remote personality... that lit those lamps."[49] The same impersonal personality illuminates Hazel, who looks away from the glow-worms only to see what "she thought... was an angel just beginning to appear," a "phantom" that "shone as the glow-worms did" and "had a strange effect, standing there bathed in its own light... shining with the phosphorescence of corruption."[50] The phantom might turn out to "be" a tree but women, worms, angels, pictures, trees, and phantoms all serve, reveal, and are conveyed through the film, the haze, the veil of the same medium.

What response does this sense of atmosphere elicit? Not elegy, exactly. The subtitle of Webb's "little book of healing" essays on color, light, and shadow promises wholeness when we embrace those unsustainable qualities of atmosphere. The moving lines of her fictions realize them not as a lingering past but as a present future.

Notes

1. Timothy Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Susan Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 2010), 252-4
2. Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3 (1942), 188.
3. Hermann Schmitz, "Atmospheric Spaces/Espaces atmosphériques" (2012), trans. Margret Vince. *Ambiances* 2016 [online https://doi/org/10.4000/ambiances7.11], 2-3.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1993), 7.
6. Ibid., 11.
7. See W. Byford-Jones, *The Shropshire Haunts of Mary Webb* (Shrewsbury: Wilding and Son, 1948), atmospherically billed on its cover as "charming in matter as in appearance" but seldom able to track down a local who actually remembered or had ever heard of Webb.
8. Mary Webb, "Foreword," *Precious Bane* (London, Virago, 2014), 6.
9. Ibid., 112.
10. Simon White and Owen Davies, "Tradition and Rural Modernity in Mary Webb's Shropshire: *Precious Bane* in Context." *The Space Between Literature and Culture, 1914-1945* 15 (2019), 12. See also Danielle E. Price, "Controlling Nature; Mary Webb and the National Trust." *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History* 43 (2014), 225-52.
11. Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants; A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan J. Montanari (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 29.
12. Erika Duncan, "Rediscovering Mary Webb." *Book Forum* 4 (178), 27.
13. Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in The English Novel, 1900-1935* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 138.
14. Gerald Gould, *New Statesman* (29 September 1917), cit. Coles, 178-9.
15. John Franklin, *New Statesman* (30 August 1924), cit. Coles 271.
16. Mary Webb, "Our Immortal Jane." Unpublished MS. Mary Webb Digital Archive. RM009: 10.
17. Ernest Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (London: H., F., and G. Withley, 1936), 221.
18. Rosalind Davie offers a sensitive, linguistically nuanced reading of Webb's "pantheism and nature spiritualism" in "The Other Side of Silence; The Life and Work of Mary Webb." PhD. Dissertation, University of Gloucestershire, 2018.
19. G.K. Chesterton, Introduction to *The Golden Arrow* (Jonathan Cape, 1928), 8.
20. Gladys Mary Coles, *The Flower of Light: A Biography of Mary Webb* (London: Duckworth, 1928), 116.
21. Webb, *Gone to Earth* (Cirencester, UK: Echo, 2004 [1917]), 103.
22. Ibid., 3.
23. Ibid., 60.
24. Ibid., 83.
25. Ibid., 113.
26. Mary Webb, *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* (London and Toronto: JM Dent, 1917), 107.
27. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Mariner 2019), 188.
28. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean Paul Thibauld (New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.
29. Thomas Ford, "Aura in the Anthropcene." *symplokē* 21 (2013), 69.

30. For a palpable sense of Webb's interiority to her own writing as it has adapted itself to a new media atmosphere, one could do worse than visit the holograph manuscripts preserved in Stanford's Mary Webb digital archive: http://marywebb.stanford.edu/contacts/index.html.
31. Webb, *Gone to Earth*, 114.
32. Ibid., 152.
33. Ibid., 50.
34. Ibid., 95.
35. Ibid., 95.
36. Ibid., 68.
37. Ibid., 72.
38. Ibid., 74.
39. Ibid., 77.
40. Ibid., 79.
41. Ibid., 81.
42. Ibid., 98.
43. Webb, *The Spring of Joy*, 97.
44. Walter John Kilner, *The Human Atmosphere, or, The Aura Made Visible by the Aid of Chemical Screens* (New York, Rebman), 82.
45. Oscar Bagnall, *The Origin and Properties of the Human Aura* (York Beach, Main: Samuel Weiser, 1937), 6.
46. Ursula Roberts, *The Mystery of the Human Aura* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1989 [1950]). Original Emphasis.
47. Webb, *Gone to Earth*, 56.
48. Ibid., 104
49. Ibid., 105.
50. Ibid., 106.

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Surface Tension

Eric Trinh Chu

On a night relentless waves of raindrops threw themselves onto concrete, Eli perched, naked as a jaybird, on top a closed toilet lid. Tape recorder in one hand, two-toned lilac-aquamarine ball in the other, they could stand if they wanted to, but it would be a tight fit between the antique sink cabinet and oblong toilet bowl. To their left, a flimsy plastic patio chair stood as a makeshift barricade against the toilet and door. And on their right, a bathtub filled rapidly with scalding water. The window above sat just a tiny sliver ajar, funneling the wind into a manic wail.

Ball in right hand redolent of dill, shaving cream, lavender, and the ocean; fresh and bracing, sweet and calming, evocative of some small, un-namable, pinpoint ache. "*You need to pamper yourself a little more, bb*," Chi-anh had said. Bourgeoise nonsense, but far too expensive a gift to just throw away. The glittering orb slipped under the water, burst into bubblegum clouds, so bright a contrast against the faded cream tone of the tub and its mottling of soap scum and mold. The wind wailing so shrill and insistent that it might be worth holding the window shut even if wouldn't stay.

Recorder at the edge of the tub. Its red button, inlaid with a smooth groove for fingertips, yielded with an audible click.

"Testing, testing," Eli intoned. The wind's howling became almost quizzical.

"La-la-la-lariat. Laputa. Last ditch effort."

In lurching steps, they lowered their legs into the iridescent water. The temperature was still nearly unbearable, but they deserved it.

"Switchblade...apricot...needlepoint...absolution."

If only forgiveness were as simple as this.

"I am become one with ze bath bomb." Click. "*Testing, testing*," the tinny voice repeated. "*La-la-la—" click.*

The key to courting madness is to invite just enough to keep life at bay. In the confines of that sweltering room, hermetically sealed but for the window's gash through which the wind cried out its occasional response, Eli spoke words both real and imagined, strung fragments and chased thoughts as diffuse as the steam that rose from the bath. What heated moisture stole away out the window instantly condensed, joined millions of other droplets plummeting onto the earth. Perhaps a man in the adjacent slice of the projects could be lighting a cigarette, the flame's flicker and the cig's fleeting mote a momentary respite from the heavy dark. Perhaps he was due to turn in for the night; a future husband, perhaps, whittling away the minutes before sleep arrived. How many months of wages was he was supposed to blow on a set of twee little wearable rocks

that would neither feed him nor keep him warm? The diamonds wouldn't, but they might just win him a wife who would. His form in the dark would be reclining on a loveseat the shade of vomit brown. Fiction, for the aspiring bathtub poet or the imaginary working man, maintained that delicate balance, that translucent boundary between the yearnings of a human heart and the vast incomprehensibility of an uncaring universe.

A knock. Eli could almost pretend it was a trick of the wind until three more came, then another three, and then: "Elina!"—that strange sound, repulsive in its familiarity yet increasingly alien, like a name meant for a palm-sized pet transliterated into the wrong language.

"I'm coming in!" the voice declared. The door met quick resistance from the chair barred against it. At the realization that yes, their dipshit brother would really try and force his way in, Eli shouted: "fuck *off*, Vincent!" But before his name could stop echoing through the paper thin walls, he'd slammed his entire weight into the door—the chair, utterly hopeless against this man who had trained his body for violence, first compressed like an accordion against the toilet before its pliable legs snapped off its frame, and shards of bigger and smaller once-chair clattered around the cramped bathroom. Steam whirled inward from the intrusion, parted and then resettled around the pieces of projectile plastic.

A rush of cold air followed Vincent in. Eli curled into a fetal position, but the water only rose to a little above their shins now that they turned to face him, knees hugged against chest, toes pressed flat against the side of the tub. They shivered as their upper half met cold air and then shuffled their arms over their shoulders. "Get *out*," they said.

Vincent glared pointedly to one side. His eyes darted left and right from the pieces of the fractured patio chair, to the brightly colored water, to the tape recorder that had fallen on the floor. Its reel was still spinning. He directed his response towards the sink:

"What...*are* you doing." An accusation, not a question. "It's called self-care. You should try it after you get the fuck out," Eli replied. A spasm of something that could have been laughter started at his chest before it squeezed its way between his tightly clenched jaws: "You?! Self-care? That's rich. That's really rich, Elina—" A flash of anger: "I told you to stop calling me that," they said. "Well it's the name on your goddamn license, it's the name mom gave you, and if you think you know better, then go get it changed!," Vincent roared at the window above Eli.

"Or what?" Eli said. They studied his posture, the set of his hands. "Are you going to arrest me," they asked, "you fucking pig?" There: his overgrown hands clenched into fists, unfurled, clenched again, unfurled. "*What*—" he started. Now that Vincent finally looked into the eyes of the sibling he thought he had known his entire life, he saw a caged animal staring back. He bit his tongue, averted his gaze again. "Look," he said, "I was just worried about you, ok?" His hands found their way back into his pockets. "You mean what I'd do *this* time?" Eli said. Above the sink, the hinges where a mirror's frame should have pivoted were visibly warped where the frame had been ripped off the wall. "Mo lei," he muttered under his breath as he reviewed the old damage. He continued his scan around the room: the shelves of the medicine cabinet, still emptied; the plastic pieces of chair strewn about—no sharp edges; nothing on the ground or the edge of the tub or on the windowsill but the toppled tape recorder; the feral adolescent in the candy-colored water clearly on guard, but intact.

"You can't just waste water like this," he said, "unless you're the one paying for it."

"If I had the money, I'd buy actual locks," Eli said.

"Ha, ha. I'm sure mom would be *so* down with that. Why don't you ask for a tattoo while you're at it? Or break a few more things that you can't pay for?," he said. "I *do* work," they said. "Well find work that actually pays," he said. "I'd rather s-starve than do what y-you do," they said. The bathwater had lost most of its warmth. "All c-cops means *all* c-cops, p-pig," they hissed. "FYI," he said, "hating on people who risk their lives to keep you safe isn't a valid personality. You're lucky we still care

about you. Even mom still loves you, even though you're a—" *oof.* An abrupt pause, his jaws clenched tight again, his eyes back to the window.

"Even though I'm a *what*, Vincent?" Eli hated how their voice climbed two octaves then, how *this* was always what it came down to. Their arms returned to a tight wrap around their knees, a score of fine criss-crossing lines paling into sight on their skin pulled taut.

"An asshole. Now get out before you catch a cold. Chop chop!" He shut the door, not ungently.

Behind the door, a garish soup of lukewarm, not-quite-purple and not-quite-blue water swirled down the drain. A not-quite-child, not-quite-adult Eli squatted, swathed in towel, gazed out the window at the stormy sky. The endless keening of the wind was both a song of yearning and a manifesto composed by the broken seal between inside and outside. Eli wondered what it would feel like to finally escape their narrow existence, to join millions of other rain droplets as they became something more than themselves.

Her. Chi-anh, who smelled of apricots and coyote brush. Chi-anh in the sun, a smile to match the floppy cloth sunflower on her hat, aficionado of gifts both gag and sincere, Mercedes-whisperer, star-child, smart as a whip and oh so terribly soft. Chi-anh whose first words in the hazy space between their waking dreams and memories were "*you need to get out more, b*" and whose last words to them were "*I really don't think so, Eli.*" Chi-anh whose perfect smile was immediately recognizable from rows and rows of animated faces, some eating, some surreptitiously adjusting their hair, and others, like Eli, resigned to allow a darkened square with their name printed across to hold their place in digital space.

"Doesn't it feel strange, to hold a celebration like this?," said Tam Pau Lee. The accordioning yellow bar underneath her static portrait was the only indication she was speaking. Her portrait depicted, in black-and-white, a young woman in her twenties, fist raised in solidarity at some march. This march probably took place a long, long time ago; if you stared long enough at the photo you could almost hear Tam cry *ain't no power like the power of the youth cus' the power of the youth don't stop—say what*! Oh, Tam was still a force of nature, only now she led rallies in a wheelchair. Her raspy and genial voice rang out from Eli's tinny speakers: "I am sure some of you are quite sick of this by now—the ten, fourteen, fifteen hours you spend every day on the inter-web!," Tam continued. Eli shook their head, even though nobody could see them. "I, for one, sure feel like my butt has atrophied! Or maybe that is normal for my age," Tam cackled, causing a ripple of motion as each person in the video mosaic of participants laughed in response. "Let's start off with a performance from one of our own, very special, musically gifted fellows!" said Tam. A small kernel of something cold and painfully heavy seemed to condense in the pit of Eli's stomach.

Chi-anh, whose voice was worth drowning in. Chi-anh, who held her ukelele like a small child. The microphone icon with a red slash vanished from beneath her video tile. For the first time in twelve revolutions of moon chasing sun, her voice shot again into Eli's ears, a timbre so beloved and familiar, sparking warm recollection, a constellation of pinpoint pricks of light behind their eyes. "This one's for all you movement babes," she began. A dull ache pulsed in their lungs. "A reminder that we are joined not only by a shared analysis of our material conditions, but by our mutual struggle for liberation. We cannot be liberated until we *feel* liberated," Chi-anh said. Utter bullshit, meaningless and hollow, craven, shameless, so sincere, so sweet. There was no such thing as liberation. Liberation was somewhere locked deep, and dark, and far underground, bound and pressed against Chi-anh. Chi-anh who began to sing:

"Three little birds, sat on my window / And they told me I don't need to worry."

Eli pointed their mouse cursor over Chi-anh's tile. The prompt over the chat box changed from Everyone to Private Message: *BanAnhAnh97*

"Summer came like cinnamon, so sweet."

A flood of text erupted, Eli's fingers flying over keys: *Please tell me what I did wrong. I'm sorry. I miss you.* Absolute certainty that this was a terrible idea.

"Little girls double-dutch on the concrete."

Click. Immediate regret.

"Maybe sometimes..."

Chi-anh, whose eyes were an ocean of brown,

"...we got it wrong..."

glanced at the flicker of text,

"...but it's alright...,"

and plucked the wrong chord, harsh and discordant. Unease rippled through the faces on the video mosaic. Some emoted concern or sympathy, while others waved jazz hands as a sign of support. None of them mattered. None of them would take her away again.

"Sorry, let me try again," she said.

Two years ago, Chi-anh threw a party. Friends of friends arrived at this inter-org exchange. *Party Worker* thumped in the background. "You sure you should be giving me this?," Eli said, holding up their glass. Chi-anh rolled her eyes, shot a conspiratorial smile. "You need to get out more, b," she replied, raising up hers in response. A clink, barely audible, as they toasted to that summer's successful wage theft campaign. Eli's first taste of liquid fire, or molten stars. Before long, the two of them were taking turns trying to spin a plastic step stool like a top. The movement elders watched with benign disapproval until Tam approached. "Sweetie," Tam began, "wouldn't I get in trouble with your mom if she found out I let you break all her furniture?" she asked. "Tam-uhhhh," Chi-anh whined, "it's from the dollar store!" "Right," Eli snorted, "why do you even have one of these?" Tam gave Eli a conspiratorial look. "I'm pretty sure your mom has a few, Lina. I'm pretty sure everyone here's mom does," Tam said.

That was probably true, "but...," Eli said, gesturing loosely at the furniture around—the expansive refrigerator with its built-in icemaker, the wall-to-wall glass windows, the giant television on the wall, the diplomas framed around it. "And..." they said, pointing at the plastic orange bath stool wobbling haphazardly on its edge.

"Bud," Chi-anh said. "Buddy. Budderino. Let me tell you something." She threw an arm around Eli, pulled them close. She swept her other arm in a wide arc, as if to unveil some fundamental truth about the universe:

"You're never too rich for the dollar store."

How long after until they lay in bed in each other's clothes? Flouting shelter-in-place felt so deliciously taboo, and time seemed to have loosened its grip. Chi-anh's bedroom was almost as big as the entire room of Eli's SRO in the Tenderloin. Quiet, sealed off, no puddles of shit or dirty needles on the sidewalk outside. Her thumb slowly traced a circle over the back of Eli's hand, a circle matched in time to the recorder's spinning reel held up close to their ears.

"So you just...like, what, free-associate when you're in the bath?" she asked.

"I guess you could call it that," they said.

"Well what would *you* call it then?" she said.

"Free-associate, *dis*associate, what's the difference," they said.

"Nooo-uh," she said. Her playful grin turned serious. "Don't joke about that." There was nothing to say to such naive sincerity. Chi-anh's hand gripped tightly around their wrist, as if to hold them fast to this shared bed. This shared breath, inches apart. These satiny sheets, this cavernous room. This slice of suburbia, this momentary still in a world that would surely storm again. Perhaps she would hold them this tightly if they leaned over the balcony outside, if they teetered over its edge.

Of course not. No one would. She would get tired of holding on, like everyone else did. It would be for the best. Maybe no one would notice. They could be here, but not here—here just enough to skim across the rooftops like Karl the fog, *not* here just enough to be possible to love.

"Well, whoever you are, whatever you're called, you are welcome to stay," she said. Chi-anh in the dark, her index finger tracing circles over Eli's navel. Chi-anh, her lips over their ear: "Lina; Eli. My best kept secret."

She was still holding on that afternoon she drove them to the clinic, Eli in the back, a black cloth bandana tied over their face. Chi-anh and her mother bickered over the roar of wind whipping in through the open windows and the muffling of their airtight N95's. But for a few English words like "racecar" and "dangerous," Eli could not understand the finer points of their argument, but they could at least guess the topic of Mrs. Tran's lecture.

Chi-anh, completely unable to drop an argument. She pulled the family Benz into the incoming plaza without missing a beat in their dispute. Mrs. Tran now seemed to shift topic, waved in Eli's general direction, let off a volley of rapid-fire points. What was it *now*? The glare of the late afternoon sun off the pavement was blinding. A mischievous idea emerged. With a flourish, Eli tore off their facial covering. Mrs. Tran stopped mid-sentence. She regarded the ruddy face of her daughter's friend with surprise, then suspicion. *Now let's see if I can get this right*, Eli thought.

Honored matron, I would request your daughter's hand in marriage," Eli said in their best impression of a scene they had watched with Chi-anh. The car screeched to a sudden halt, drawing a salvo of irate honks from the line of cars behind Chi-anh's. The shock on her mother's face turned to frustration again as she barked a series of commands and directions. Now, finally parked, her mother stomped a foot outside the door. "I see you are enjoying history dramas of Vietnam," Mrs. Tran said into the rearview mirror. "That is good thing for you," she said, before taking off towards the plaza storefronts at a determined pace. The silver icthus fish brooch on her purse caught the sun's glare, glinting like a small alarm.

"What the fuck, Eli!" Chi-anh seethed. Chi-anh, who sulked and pouted when she didn't get her way. "Are you *drunk* right now?," she asked. "When am I not, baby?," they said in their best impression of Elvis, which even on a good day was not very good at all, just all-around garbage like the rest of them. "You could buy us a fifth, get your mom back in here and do some xe đua," they said. "Eli, that's not funny. I hate it when you get like this. You're not like this—" Chi-anh, whose lips tasted like sugarcane and pandan that afternoon.

"If you knew me at all, you wouldn't force me to stay in the closet for you," Eli said, their hands at the buttons of Chi-anh's blouse. "No, Eli," she said, her voice gentle now. Chi-anh, whose eyes always promised more than she could give. "You know that's not how this works," she said.

The last messages between them:

So you'll still be around, right? So will I. What's the point in being strangers? Let's be friends.

I really don't think so, Eli.

Why not?

Message Not Sent: You cannot reply to this conversation.

The group chat began to flood with support for Chi-anh, and some of the fellows from their partner orgs unmuted their mics for a moment: "You can do it, girl!"; "You sound great!"; "Run it back!"; "Let's gooo, Chi-anh!"

Chi-anh, who had returned a smile to her face. Her fingers moved over her ukelele again, and her voice blossomed over airwaves to a hundred listeners who did not deserve her:

"Summer came like cinnamon, so sweet / Little girls double-dutch on the concrete," she sang.

Chi-anh, who would not, perhaps could not, follow them into the storm.

"Maybe sometimes we got it wrong, but it's all right."

Chi-anh, who held little desire to dash what inside her had no name against the closest things Eli knew to oblivion: a warm body, or fermented grapes, or a three-word lie told over and over again until it became truth.

"The more things seem to change, the more they stay the same."

Perhaps, once, she was willing or able to tell that lie, but if she was no longer willing, then Eli did not want to spend the rest of their miserable, short life wondering what had changed.

"Ooh, don't you hesitate."

Chi-anh, whose growing silence would only make her more and more impossibly beautiful with each passing day—more tragically, insufferably, unreachably soft, and warm, and worth hurting for.

Eli hovered their mouse over the chat. The recipient indicator reverted to Everyone.

"Girl, put your records on, tell me your favorite song."

Chi-anh Tran, if you don't answer my messages right now I am going to go away, forever, they typed. The message was quickly washed away by the tide of other fellows who, similarly without webcams, had only the chat box to communicate.

"You go ahead, let your hair down."

I have a plan, I will leave where no one will ever find me again and it will be entirely your fault, Eli continued. Messages of confusion began to appear, but Eli was focused only on Chi-anh's video tile. Chi-anh, however, had begun to hit her stride, and her eyes were screwed shut as she hit the high notes:

"Sapphire and faded jeans / I hope you get your dreams / Just go ahead let your hair down."

I'll be waiting on my phone. Call me or else, Eli concluded.

"Eli!" Tam shouted, her voice garbled as scores of other participants also unmuted themselves to try and intervene, "*do not*—"

The screen went black. Eli took their finger off the power button of their dusty desktop tower, tapped their phone against the desk. They lost count over how many thundering heartbeats passed before Chi-anh called:

"Eli." Just business. The voice she used when canvassing for-profits for donation.

"You know what I want," Eli said. "Answer me. What the hell is going on?"

"Eli, I don't owe you an explanation for why things didn't work out." Like hell she didn't.

"Okay, but what can I do? What do you want me to do? You know we still have to work together, right?" This wasn't quite true. She could go wherever she wanted. She didn't need the money. Their fellowship would end, she would remain on staff or whatever, they would likely go their separate ways. If they didn't do something now she might flit away forever.

"*I don't want you to do anything, Eli.*" Her voice, though weary, seemed to soften a touch: "*I want you to go college and forget me, forget this happened. It was a mistake, I should have known better, I shouldn't have led—*"

"I'm an adult! I wanted this too!" they hated the sensation of warm tears rolling down their face. Wanted and still wanted, forever—maybe not the painful parts, but even those were better than silence unbroken.

"*Eli, you exhaust me. You just do things sometimes, and it's like you completely ignore how others can feel, or what you might do to yourself. It's scary.*" Sinking. They should sink into the ground. They didn't deserve to live.

"*You need to understand how hard it is for me to even tell you this. I-I'm gonna go, but know that if we're ever going to see each other again, you need to give me, give us, some space.*" Death would certainly hurt less than this, wouldn't it?

"I don't know how I could go on without you. You *promised me—*" Eli started.

"*To care for you, Eli. And right now, the only way I can do that is to ask you what hospital you would prefer—*"

"Fuck you." Eli hung up. An electric agitation began to course through their veins. An ache that urged them to jump down the stairs, a whole flight, maybe several, at a time. Vincent was ready for them in the landing. "Move, pig, I'm not in the mood," Eli said, before spotting the cuffs in his hand. "What...?" they said.

It wasn't the first time the two had fought, tooth and nail, loudly enough to disturb the other tenants of the building. But this time, only Eli screamed, and this time Vincent had grown much larger since they were children.

This feral youth, not quite Eli, not quite Lina. Eli under a darkening sky that warned of imminent rain. Eli, wrangled into the backseat of a two-tone cruiser, told "we're getting you help." Eli, screaming and thrashing, their head turned upward toward heaven. The door forcefully thrown shut; a pocket of air burst in their ear; the first drops began to crash onto earth.

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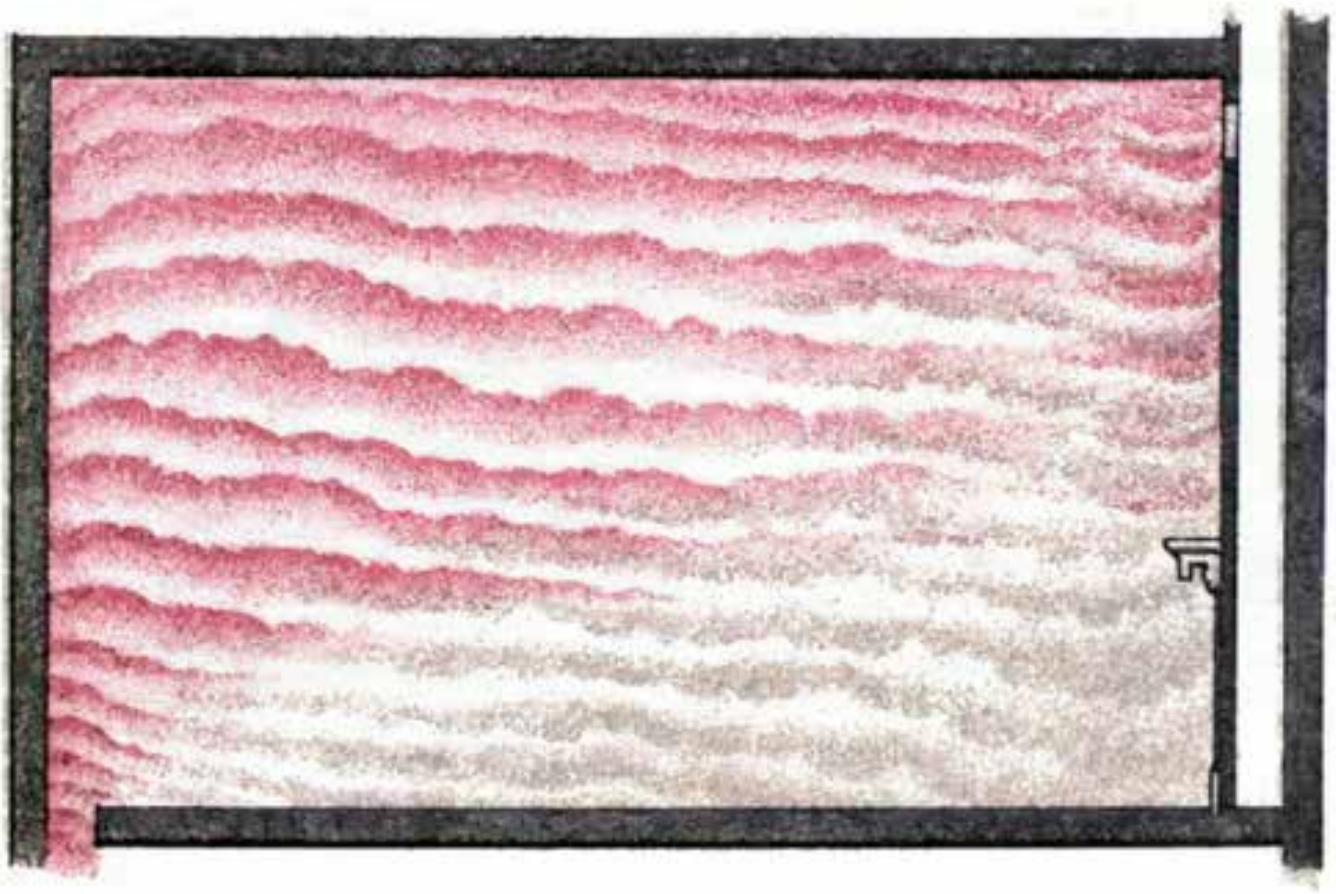

Lewis W. Leeds, from *Lectures on Ventilation*, 1869, Lithograph.

Taken from Lewis W. Leeds's *Lectures on Ventilation* (1869), this image is part of a series used to illustrate the movement of air through various rooms. In this figure, brown-gray, cold air has come inside via a fireplace and combined, though not fully, with the room's red, hot air. While other images in the series seem more active (like one of hot air flowing through a flue), this looks like something closer to an ominous room filled with gradient clouds. The air does not seem to flow, and what results gives the image a sense of eerie stillness. Perhaps that is what contributes to a feeling of atmosphere; however changing the air in a room is or isn't, it is our perception that most informs what we experience. In his article, Marco Caracciolo explores how our sense of the world has changed with the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of weird fiction. By comparing works whose characters connect with their weird atmospheres in opposing ways, Caracciolo pushes us to understand how we navigate our own weird atmospheres and that the key to a more stable atmosphere just might lie in our ability to embrace the weirdness.

- The Editors

Strange Times and Weird Atmospheres

Marco Caracciolo

"I hope this message finds you well in these strange times." At the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, my inbox was filling up with messages that used variations on that line to signal the tumultuous weirdness of the early stages of the pandemic. The stay-at-home orders, the shuttered stores and restaurants, the inevitable awkwardness of video calls — all conspired to create an atmosphere of striking strangeness. If the virus was not in the air physically, it was in the air emotionally, tangible through unusually tense faces and restrained silence. To most of us living sheltered lives, such atmospheres are (or were, until the outbreak) the stuff of fiction. Yet it gradually became clear that what we were experiencing wasn't the average post-apocalyptic film, with its spectacular action and plot-driven trajectory. This was a slow-moving, baggy drama in which the villainous "monster," the virus, had to be accepted rather than defeated — at least for the time being. The "new normal" that governments keep bandying about is, in fact, a state of uneasy and precarious coexistence with the possibility of new waves in the outbreak.

One literary strand that trades in such strangeness is a genre known as weird fiction. In H. P. Lovecraft's influential definition, weird writing evokes a "certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces."[1] The weird, as Mark McGurl has suggested, is a surprisingly apt literary mode to capture the slow temporality of geological history.[2] One may add that it is also particularly well suited to channel a crisis whose source remains invisible and elusive, such as the coronavirus outbreak or the complex transformations in the Earth system that we discuss under the label *climate change*. Lovecraft's legacy, with its anti-humanist and racist tendencies, is deeply problematic, so much so that many contemporary "New Weird" writers have felt the need to distance themselves from it.[3] Authors such as China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer — to name two writers typically associated with the New Weird — evoke unspeakable threats reminiscent of Lovecraft's fiction while steering clear of his disturbing politics. Indeed, their New Weird works display a marked interest in linking the genre's signature existential dread to real-world political and social issues — for instance, state surveillance in Miéville and environmental devastation in VanderMeer.[4]

Yet, New Weird writers do take on board Lovecraft's intuition that the weird is, fundamentally, a matter of "breathless and unexplainable" atmosphere. It is this atmospheric dimension of the weird that is the focus of this article, particularly for its power to speak to the destabilization of human societies' relations with the nonhuman environment in times of climate change. The atmosphere of the COVID-19 pandemic can thus be seen as a prefiguration of a more radical, and weirder, disruption to come.

In *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht offers an insightful discussion of the literary significance of atmosphere.[5] Gumbrecht remarks on the unique etymology of the German word *Stimmung*, which points to the sensory domain of sound and not to inner feelings (as in mood) or to an external, objective reality (the Earth's climate). In this sense, *Stimmung* suggests an atmosphere that works in a nonbinary way, blurring the boundary between the inner and the outer, the psychological and the material.[6] Thus, Gumbrecht proposes, "'reading for Stimmung' always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality — something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved."[7] Although weird fiction is not

part of Gumbrecht's archive, it resonates strongly with his embodied account of atmosphere. Similarly relevant is Derek McCormack's approach to atmosphere as a mode of envelopment that "[modifies] and [mediates] the exposure of bodies to an outside."[8] As a literary mode, the weird builds on an atmospheric disruption of distinctions, entrenched in Western culture, between human agents and a passive and inert nonhuman world. The weirdness lies precisely in this atmospheric envelopment within a reality that defies assumptions of human mastery — an envelopment that is both unsettling and grounded in bodily experience. Read in this light, weird fiction echoes the uncertainties of the present moment, with its perceived loss of human control, and provides perhaps a means of negotiating its most debilitating anxieties.

Two examples of the contemporary weird will guide this discussion. The first is a novel by Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (2014), the second volume of the acclaimed *Southern Reach* trilogy. The other example is a video game developed by Remedy Entertainment, *Control* (2019), which also inscribes itself in the weird tradition (not least through several allusions to VanderMeer's works). In both narratives, the protagonists are recently appointed directors of federal agencies tasked with managing inexplicable events that challenge consensus reality. VanderMeer names his agency the Southern Reach: its mission is to investigate a coastal region known as Area X, where the ecosystem has been upended by a contagion that may or may not come from outer space. In *Control*, the New York City headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control has been taken over by a malign presence known as "the Hiss." Both works take place in an extremely mundane setting: Each has its own version of a maze-like government building with largely monotonous offices and corridors. But as the directors — a character nicknamed Control, in VanderMeer's novel, and Jesse Faden in *Control* — familiarize themselves with these spaces, they discover unsettling realities beneath the façade of paperwork and administrative procedures. While Gumbrecht's account of atmosphere as *Stimmung* foregrounds sound, both my case studies use touch to break down dualistic barriers between (human) subjectivity and (nonhuman) materiality. Hearing is a distal sense: the distance between the perceiving subject and a sound source can easily slide into a subject-object binary, a sense of separateness from the non-human world out there. By contrast, as a quintessentially proximal sensory modality, touch eliminates any perceptual distance. The weird atmospheres of *Authority* and *Control* envelop the experiencing character and put them in contact — physically — with disturbing nonhuman realities. Touch thus becomes a means of thinking about the materiality of atmosphere and its disorienting effects on the perceiving subject, who is suddenly made aware of the non-human world's ability to affect us.

This key scene from *Authority*, for example, depicts the dull corridors of the Southern Reach morphing into a far more ominous spatiality: "[Control] turned the corner into the corridor leading to the science division, kept walking under the fluorescent lights. ... Control reached out for the large double doors. Reached for the handle, missed it, tried again. But there were no doors where there had always been doors before. Only wall. And the wall was soft and breathing under the touch of his hand. He was screaming, he thought, but from somewhere deep beneath the sea."[9] Touch is central to Control's experience of unstable spatiality. The mainly visual (and thus distal) language of the first sentence — the "fluorescent lights" — gives way to the organic image of the "soft and breathing" wall, which is apprehended by way of touch. The affective and the material fuse in an atmosphere that is tangible in the etymological sense of "capable of being touched." The effect is unsettling because of how it challenges expectations of spatial stability — e.g., an upright, solid wall — as well as distinctions between life and nonlife (a "breathing" wall). Through such cues, which recur throughout VanderMeer's novel, the protagonist (and, vicariously, the novel's readers) are enveloped by a uniquely weird atmosphere.

Remedy's video game, *Control*, evokes a similar affect, marrying the mundane to the supernatural. The player advances the plot in a relatively linear fashion by defeating enemies and solving puzzles in an attempt to counter the Hiss. While the basic gameplay formula is no different from many other action games, *Control* stands out because of its uniquely atmospheric game world. In part, the game's atmosphere emerges from the consistent chromatic palette, which is rich in shades of gray and burgundy. But there is more to the game's atmosphere than this visual backdrop: nearly everything

in the office environment can be manipulated and weaponized (Figure 1). The player-controlled character, Jesse, is able to grab desks, chairs, and photocopiers through telekinesis and hurl them at hordes of oncoming enemies. The spatial construction of the Federal Bureau of Control shifts constantly as the player reclaims it from the Hiss. Just as in *Authority*, dream sequences surface periodically, transporting the protagonist to the mysterious "Oceanview Motel," which would not feel out of place in a David Lynch film. Again, the emphasis is on touch: players feel their way through *Control* by learning to manipulate the game world to their strategic advantage. A number of everyday objects — a fridge, a rubber duck, a projector — tear through the boring fabric of office life by taking on autonomous agency. Jesse's narrative arc involves asserting dominance over these "objects of power" — mostly through physical contact. In both *Authority* and *Control*, the weirdness is a source of spatial destabilization that envelops the audience by troubling basic ontological binaries of Western thought, particularly life vs. nonlife and human agency (or subjectivity) vs. nonhuman, inanimate matter.

Yet, despite their uniquely weird atmosphere and the obvious similarities in their narrative set-up, *Authority* and *Control* move in profoundly different directions as they imagine ways of relating to an ominous nonhuman. While the "authority" of VanderMeer's title is largely ironic, *Control* takes its title seriously. VanderMeer's protagonist is unable to live up to his role as the director of the Southern Reach. Ultimately, the plot impels Control toward an acknowledgment of powerlessness that is also, on a larger scale, a relinquishment of human agency. In the novel's final scene, Control confronts a character named Ghost Bird. Despite looking like the biologist of the trilogy's first instalment, *Annihilation*, Ghost Bird is actually an emanation of Area X — a human-nonhuman hybrid who enters the stage of the novel and steers it away from anthropocentric assumptions. Together, Control and Ghost Bird head into Area X: "He took one last look back at the world he knew. He took one huge gulp of it, every bit of it he could see, every bit of it he could remember. 'Jump,' said a voice in his head. Control jumped."[10] This leap into the unknown forges an uneasy alliance between a flawed human character and the nonhuman-infused Ghost Bird. The pretense that Area X can be "managed" by a human institution, the Southern Reach, is abandoned once and for all. Instead, Control braces himself as he leaves "the world he knew" behind. This opening onto an uncertain future intimates that the fate of human societies is deeply entangled with nonhuman realities that we cannot — and should not — fully *control*.

It is not a coincidence that the final volume of the trilogy is titled *Acceptance*: as Pieter Vermeulen puts it, "the final instalment... conveys a sense that altering the terms on which human and nonhuman lives coexist is something to welcome rather than resist."[11] The weird, in VanderMeer's storyworld, poses a profound challenge to human mastery over the nonhuman. The weird atmosphere decenters anthropocentric thinking and displaces the human subject, just as it renders Control's nickname entirely ironic. Importantly, the dynamic of the novel's plot prompts an embrace of such weirdness; it conveys a sense that the strangeness of human-nonhuman relations ought to be respected rather than explained away. Not so in *Control*. Despite the game's deep fascination with nonhuman agency, Remedy Entertainment's video game ends with Jesse regaining control over the "Oldest House" (the Bureau's building). An anthropocentric order is reasserted: the objects of power are mastered, the Hiss subdued. "The lockdown [of the Oldest House] can't be lifted until any trace of it [i.e. the Hiss] remains," remarks Jesse, in a statement that rings eerily prescient in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. Jesse's view is that the weirdness has to be contained and suppressed, rather than embraced as a fundamental dimension of humanity's entanglement with nonhuman realities.

In this way, *Authority* and *Control* demonstrate two profoundly different ways of relating to the nonhuman, even as they tap into the same weird atmosphere, with its destabilization of concepts such as human agency vs. nonhuman matter and life vs. nonlife. The affective dynamic generated by the plot spins the atmosphere in opposite directions — toward epistemological modesty and acceptance of human limitation in the face of nonhuman realities, in VanderMeer's novel, and toward a reaffirmation of human mastery, in Remedy Entertainment's video game.[12] This difference does not make the game less enjoyable from a gameplay perspective, or less aesthetically and narratively refined. However, the trajectory of *Control*'s

Figure 1. Director Jesse Faden hurling desks in *Control*.

plot does limit the capacity of its weird atmosphere to address the anxieties of the present moment, including those bound up with the coronavirus pandemic and (somewhat farther down the line) the climate crisis.

These crises of the present call for a profound rethinking of our stance vis-à-vis the unknown, the unpredictable, and the uncontrollable, rather than the knee-jerk imposition of human domination. We must learn to welcome the openness of our shared future and use it to refashion society along more ecologically and ethically responsible lines. Such openness can be profoundly unsettling, of course. Weird fiction like VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy teaches us to negotiate the uncertainties of the contemporary and turn our anxieties into a more balanced acceptance of unstable futurity. The atmosphere of weird fiction can inflect and steer our experience of the present, affording, paradoxically, both insight into and imaginative distance from the unease we feel as our lives are upended by the outbreak. Weird writing can perhaps serve as "formative fiction," in Joshua Landy's terminology, that equips readers with affective and conceptual tools to imagine themselves in a world reshaped by nonhuman forces — like the coronavirus, but even more fundamentally the climate transformations unleashed by global capitalism.[13] Not all weird fiction is equally formative, equally conducive to acceptance of nonhuman agency, as my discussion has shown. Nor should we think that fiction can, by itself, do the trick: without thoughtful commentary and collective debate of the kind practiced by teachers and students of literature at all levels, even the most radically weird narratives lose grip on reality. Paradoxically, then, the interpretation and critical discussion of fictional worlds in prose and other media become uniquely capable of bringing readers back in touch with our weird times.

Notes

1. H. P. Lovecraft, "Introduction to Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Sandner (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 105. For more on the definition of weird fiction, an inherently elusive and hybrid genre, see Roger Luckhurst, "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1041–61.
2. Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 542–47.
3. Jeff and Ann VanderMeer's editorial work played an important role in establishing this "New Weird" label. See Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, eds., *The New Weird* (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2007).
4. VanderMeer's engagement with the ecological crisis in detail. See Gry Ulstein, "Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's 'The Southern Reach,'" *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2017): 71–96; Benjamin J. Robertson, *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
5. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
6. I discuss mood and embodiment in a more narratological vein in "Perspectives on Narrative and Mood," in *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*, ed. Jan Alber and Greta Olson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 15–28.
7. Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere*, 5.
8. Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 6.
9. Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 290.
10. Ibid., 339.
11. Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.
12. On how specific rhetorical devices can steer atmosphere towards a critique of human exceptionalism, see also Heather Kerr's discussion of personification in "Museal Moods and the Santos Museum of Economic Botany (Adelaide Botanical Garden)," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 12 (2016): 143–52.
13. Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Marco Caracciolo is Associate Professor of English and Literary Theory at Ghent University in Belgium, where he leads the ERC Starting Grant project "Narrating the Mesh." Marco's work explores the phenomenology of narrative, or the structure of the experiences afforded by literary fiction and other narrative media. He is the author of four books, including most recently *Embodiment and the Cosmic Perspective in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Routledge, 2020). His new book, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press), is forthcoming in 2021.

Suggested Reading

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Dish with Three Jars, c. 1680-1690, Porcelain with underglaze blue and overglaze polychrome enamels, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.

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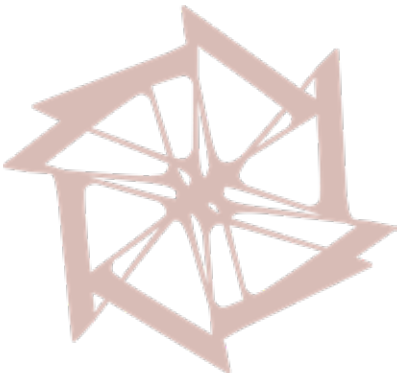

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