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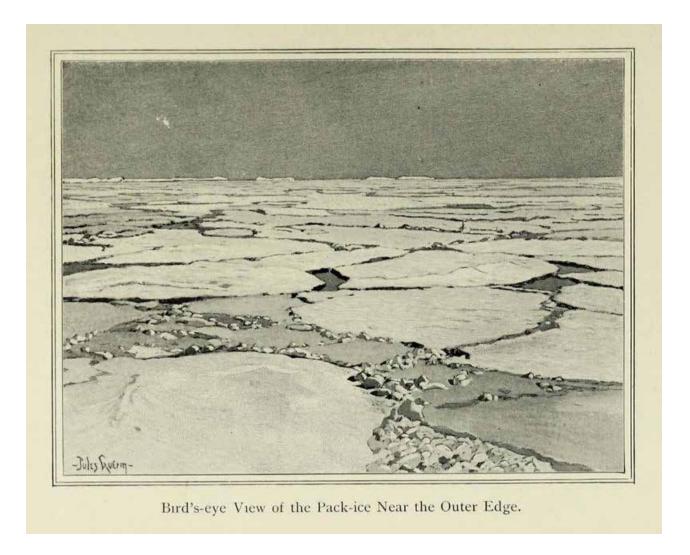
ATMOSPHERE

'Atmospheres' of Art and Art History Mark Cheetham | essay | 50

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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 longestablished 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

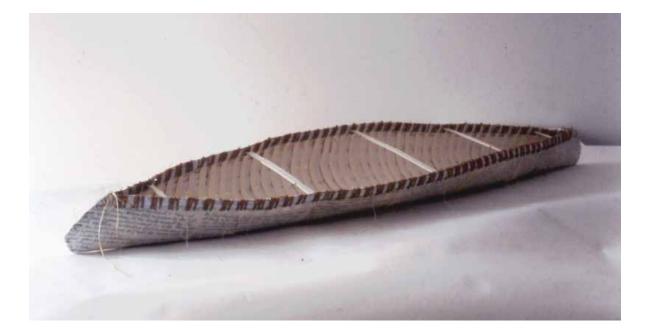


Figure 2. Bonnie Devine (1952-), *Canoe: to the North Shore*, 2003. Graphite on paper, thread, waxed twine.157.5 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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)." 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 elothing.

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 Cacium 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, and 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).

II. 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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