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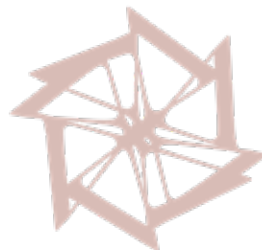
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“Humid Air, Humid Aesthetics”

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“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 Lamartinière, 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.

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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 Léonidas 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 Alegria, 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 Alegria 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 Generalismo 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 writer's 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 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 temporalities” 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.

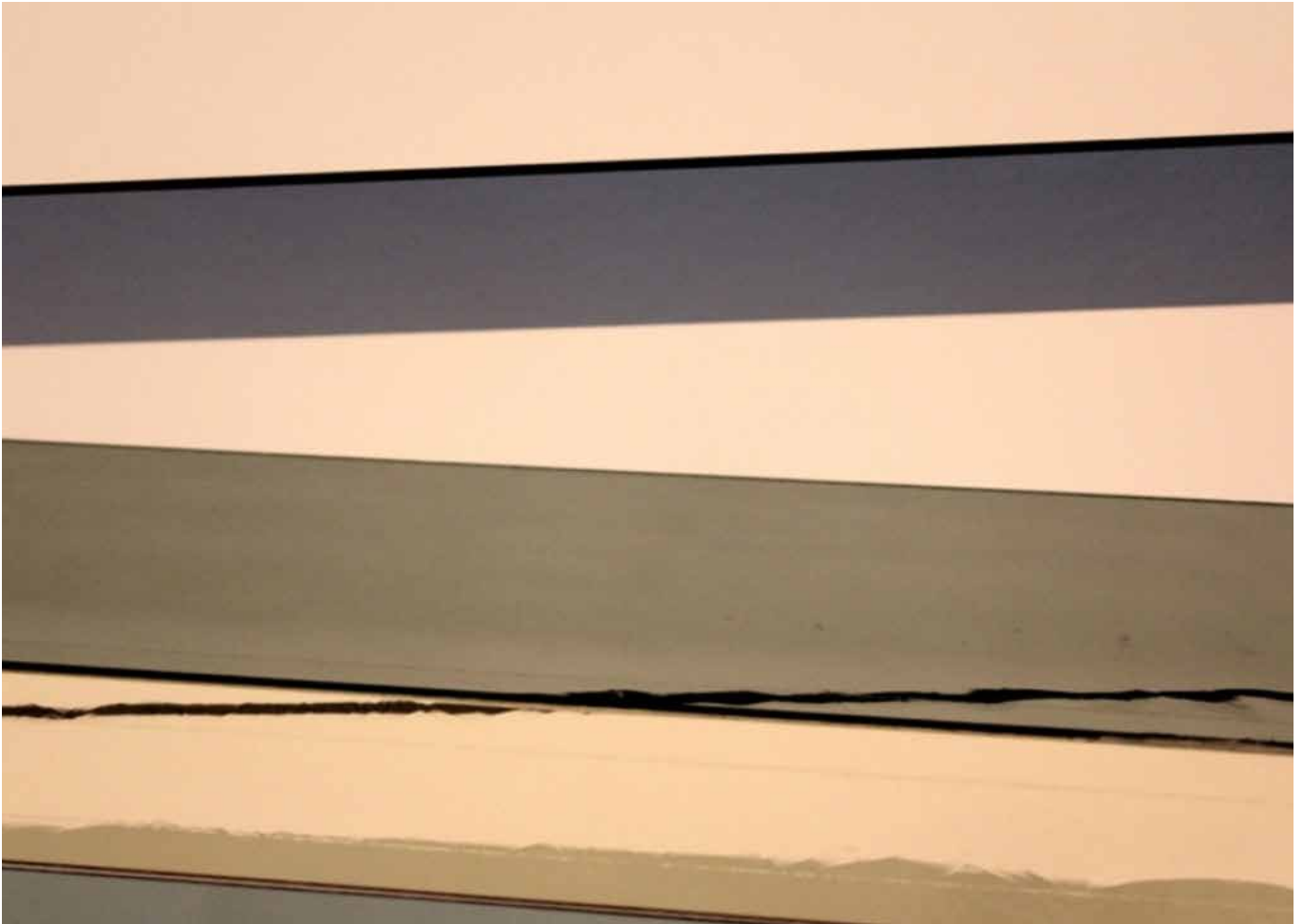
3. To date, a number of studies point to the differential outcomes for Black and Brown persons with COVID-19. See Gregorio A.

- 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 Lorgja García-Peña. Ernesto Sagás, *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville, UP of Florida, 2000); Lorgja 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 led 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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