

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Atmospheric Literary Geography

Hsuan L. Hsu

Concordia University

Introduction

This themed cluster of articles engages with the elusive concept of atmosphere—a term whose interconnected aesthetic, affective, and material implications have recently drawn attention from researchers in architecture (Böhme 2017; Pallasmaa 2017), anthropology (Choy 2012; Ingold 2012; Stewart 2011), geography (Adey 2014; Anderson 2009; McCormack 2018), political theory (Mihalopoulos-Philippopoulos 2014; Zhang 2018), art (Cf. recent artworks by Olafur Eliasson, Tomás Saraceno Anicka Yi), gender and sexuality studies (Ahuja 2015; Brennan 2004), critical race studies (Mawani, n.d.), and literature (Gumbrecht 2012; Lewis 2012; Taylor 2016). Across these fields (which I discussed more extensively in the 2017 essay that set the stage for this cluster of articles), an “atmospheric turn” has been reframing how we think about the connections between bodies, minds, moods, and material environments: through the material agencies of air, geographically differentiated atmospheres have become increasingly intimate with human and nonhuman biologies (Hsu 2017).

Beneath the global, species-wide scale often associated with the Anthropocene, the derangements of climate change are experienced, mitigated, and exacerbated at a range of scales and with the help of diverse technologies: bodies with gas masks, aromatherapy, buildings with HVAC systems, tear gas and Skunk spray used to enforce borders (sometimes against refugees displaced by climate change), the siting of polluting industries and infrastructures. To better understand these local and intimate scales of atmospheric differentiation, geographers and social scientists have developed concepts ranging from Peter Sloterdijk’s *air conditioning* (whereby human activity conditions the air that conditions life) and Ben Anderson’s *affective atmospheres* (‘a class of experience that occur *before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity, *across* human and non-human materialities, and *in-between* subject/object distinctions’ to the Southern Paiute anthropologist Kristen Simmons’ *settler atmospheres* (‘the normative and necessary violences found in settlement,’ which Simmons considers through an assessment of the use of tear gas and pepper spray against water protectors at Standing Rock) and Renisa Mawani’s *racial atmosphere* (‘an

immanent field where things collide, attach, and combust, producing forces that draw humans, nonhumans, and things together, and generating conditions of life that are always uneven and ever-changing’) (Sloterdijk 2009; Anderson 2009: 78; Simmons 2017; Mawani, n.d.).

Literary studies—which has long considered atmosphere primarily in metaphorical terms as a background quality connected with mood or tone—has only recently begun to address these questions. Scholars such as Stacy Alaimo, Rob Nixon, and Jesse Oak Taylor have shown how genres ranging from Gothic horror and detective fiction to postcolonial picaresque and memoirs by people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity work to render atmospheric disparities as perceptible matters of concern. At the heart of these inquiries is the aesthetic challenge posed by what Nixon (2011) calls the “slow violence” characteristic of atmospheric risk factors: how can literary representation render perceptible the long-term, spatially remote effects of the diverse, accumulative atmospheric manipulations that have fuelled colonialism and capital accumulation? Attending to industrial smoke, organic miasmas, greenhouse gases, and atmospherically oriented geoengineering discourses, the articles that follow demonstrate how attending to atmospheric differentiation at a range of scales can direct and enhance our understanding of literary form.

The articles featured here consider how authors across two centuries have addressed the representational and ethical challenges posed by the intentional or unintentional ways in which human activity demarcates and transforms atmospheres. In “A Deep Lead-Coloured Cloud: Smoke and Northern English Space in the Industrial Novel,” Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins considers how two novels published in 1854, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* and Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, produced archetypal representations of Northern England’s smoky, industrial towns. Goodwin-Hawkins argues that, in these novels, the North is inextricably associated with a “smokescape” that is at once a “breathable reality” and semiotically unstable. Smoke brings the atmospheric background into consciousness, but in the hands of these novelists it simultaneously becomes a locus of enchantment, its “strange magic” taking the form of a “hybrid, serpent animism.” Goodwin-Hawkins concludes with a meditation on the contemporary post-industrial landscape, where nineteenth-century industrial architectures are accompanied by an uncanny, ambivalent “smoke-free” atmosphere.

Lauren Peterson’s “Miasmatic Ghosts in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’” blends an analysis of the story’s “stifling” industrial atmosphere with a striking theorization of the miasmatic ghost. Putting Stacy Alaimo’s theorization of “transcorporeal” material exchanges between bodies and environments into conversation with nineteenth-century miasma theory (which framed organic matter, including decomposing corpses, as inherently toxic), Peterson shows how chemical and organic emissions come together in transforming the story’s protagonist into a “toxic spectre.” In Davis’s novella, the mill town’s chemically burdened air compounds itself by producing corpses whose decomposition adds still more miasmatic “spirits” to the air. Building on recent work by Taylor and Sari Altschuler, this reading reframes the Gothic in rigorously material terms.

Whereas the first two articles read nineteenth-century authors' efforts to represent the industrial atmosphere at the relatively local scales of the town and the worker's body, the essays by Zachary Horton and Taylor McHolm turn to the aesthetic challenges posed by the Anthropocene: an epochal condition that is simultaneously local and global, lived and abstract, chaotic and systemic. In "Written on the Sky: Inscription, Scale, and Agency in Anthropocenic Semiotics," Horton draws on materialist media studies and poststructural theory to frame the anthropogenic transformation of the atmosphere as a problem of elemental inscription: in the Anthropocene, he writes, "'we' become unwitting authors who cannot recognize our own inscriptions." Horton's paired readings of speculative geoengineering proposals and David Antin's *Sky Poems* (1987-88) illuminate how each aesthetic project models ideas about reading and writing, non-human scales, and authorial agency. Whereas geoengineering collapses spatial scales while doubling down on the individual human subject as agent of atmospheric inscription, Antin's poems inscribed in the sky across time point towards a "trans-scalar" and "self-reflexive" semiotics that would be adequate to the imaginative problems posed by the Anthropocene. McHolm's "Mat Johnson's *Pym* and Reflecting Whiteness in the Anthropocene" underscores the racial and settler colonial histories that have been constitutive of capitalist modernity and the Anthropocene. Drawing on ecocritical scholarship on race and the Anthropocene, McHolm illuminates the racial and settler colonial atmospheres that underlie Mat Johnson's satirical rewriting of Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*—for example, when Poe's Indigenous Tekelians are displaced by the exhaust and heat emitted by a pastoral, air-conditioned biodome erected in Antarctica.

Although the papers submitted to this cluster are overwhelmingly focused on British and U.S. literary works, their methodological and contextual approaches to thinking about literary atmospherics might serve as productive points of reference—or points of tension—for scholarship whose focus lies beyond the Anglophone and Euro-U.S. contexts. Together, these essays illustrate the productive conceptual and interpretive contributions emerging from interdisciplinary work that bridges geography, literary ecocriticism, and an elemental focus on the atmosphere.

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Author contact: hsuanhsu@gmail.com