

Jean-Thomas

Tremblay

Aesthetics

Breathing

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For Sam, who reminds me that
function follows form

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PRESS

Contents

Acknowledgments . ix

INTRODUCTION: Ecologies of the Particular . 1

1. Breathing against Nature . 33

2. Aesthetic Self-Medication (Three Regimens) . 65

3. Feminist Breathing . 94

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

4. Smog Sensing · 13

5. Death in the Form of Life · 39

CODA: A Queer Theory of Benign
Respiratory Variations · 158

Notes · 163

Bibliography · 197

Index · 221



Acknowledgments

There is a concept that appears in this book’s third chapter: prepositional breathing. We owe it to the Caribbean Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip. The locution “I breathe,” Philip notes, would not be possible without the prepositional act of “breathing for.” Respiratory autopoiesis—the self-maintenance and self-renewal of organisms—necessitates a hospitable milieu. To breathe-for is to generate such a milieu. It is to create the conditions not only for other people’s survival but also for their flourishing. When others breathe for us, holding our breath with anticipation and running out of breath with exhaustion feel tolerable. I wish to express my gratitude to the following guides and companions who have had the generosity to engage in prepositional breathing, and who in doing so have made the genesis of this project, and life around it, possible.

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Introduction. Ecologies of the Particular

Breathing is inevitably morbid. This postulate may seem counterintuitive; after all, respiratory modulations often attest to energy or vigor. Steady breathing and held breath evidence stamina and athleticism, while deep breaths provide a sense of balance or presence. Moreover, breathing is key to autopoiesis, or the self-maintenance and self-renewal of living systems. But breathing makes life out of an orientation toward death. To be a breather is to be vulnerable; this is an existential condition. As long as we breathe, and as long as we're porous, we cannot fully shield ourselves from airborne toxins and toxicants as well as other ambient threats.¹ Becoming conscious of our breathing confronts us with our finitude. Not only have we been inhaling and exhaling both benign and malign air particles, but our awareness of this predicament does not grant us the means to remedy it.

The respiratory process through which life and death loop into each other as on a Möbius strip is best summed up by the notion of “negative refueling,” which in Michael Eigen’s psychoanalytic nomenclature labels the inseparability of affective “nourishment” from emotional “toxins” or “poisons.”² Eigen illustrates a theory of emotions with an anecdote about breathing: “I think of a wonderful philosophy teacher who had emphysema. In his first semester of retirement, he decided to teach in Switzerland, after years in New York. He died soon after arriving in Switzerland. I imagined his lungs could not take

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fresh air, after years of adaptation to toxins.”³ For Eigen, affective dynamics are analogous to respiratory dynamics: we incorporate and rely on productive and destructive affects, just as the professor’s survival appears conditional on his habitual exposure to toxins and toxicants. Eigen’s anecdote, meant to clarify figurative nourishment, doubles as a perspicacious statement on life in increasingly toxic environments—a life marked by the “vertiginous discovery of poison and nourishment mixed beyond discernment.”⁴ In this book, I grapple with this vertigo and stick around to see what respiration teaches us once the shock of the affiliation between life and death has dissipated.

That vulnerability is an existential condition does not mean that everyone experiences it consistently or equally. *Breathing Aesthetics* tells the story of how the respiratory enmeshment of vitality and morbidity has come to index an uneven distribution of risk in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Under racial and extractive capitalism and imperialism, breathing has emerged as a medium that configures embodiment and experience as transductions of bio- and necropolitical forces—forces that optimize certain lives and trivialize or attack others.⁵ The intensified pollution, weaponization, and monetization of air and breath since the 1970s amount to a crisis in the reproduction of life. Within this crisis, breath, a life force to be marshaled individually or collectively, reveals its contingency on environments, broadly conceived, that exhaust their occupants at different rates. Accordingly, articulations of survival become predicated on the management and dispersal of respiratory hazards.

The difference between breathing that kills and breathing that both enables and imperils life has to do with *mediation*: the linking of seemingly disparate or contradictory positions and processes by way of aesthetics. The term *aesthetics* featured in this book’s title does not, then, signal the limits of my inquiry. The aesthetic isn’t one of many, equally valid domains in which to study the contemporary dynamics of breathing. Instead, it is the aesthetic mediation or aestheticization of breathing that structures threat and injury into something like individual and collective persistence. I posit the existence of an aesthetics of breathing, rather than subsuming engagements with breathing under an all-encompassing aesthetics of sociopolitical and environmental peril, in order to underscore a distinct mode of creation and expression whose fluidity and translucence defy the codes of aesthetic judgment. As Hsuan L. Hsu explains, smell, a corollary of respiration, poses a problem for aesthetic inquiry: “the human body’s most sensitive tool for detecting invisible chemical threats across space is also deeply ambiguous, fraught with uncertainty, socially constructed, culturally neglected, and resistant to representation.”⁶ Dora Zhang similarly writes that “the up-in-the-air quality” of theorizing about the atmosphere is

“occasioned by the fact that this phenomenon defies our desire for conceptual integrity and resists our usual models of causality.”⁷ An aesthetics of breathing trains us to focus on exchanges between bodies and milieus. It also trains us to be receptive to a range of processes and phenomena that are related, yet irreducible, to speech and action.

Such a training is manifest in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE* (1982) and Orlando White’s (Diné) *LETTERRS* (2015), two celebrated experimental works that cultivate our attention to a breath that never exactly coincides with speech acts. In one case, breathing might, but doesn’t necessarily, flow into an utterance; in the other, breathing exceeds the utterances whose sonority it modulates. In both, signs of cultural vitality circulate through airways shaped by the deleterious pressures of colonialism, racism, and sexism. Early in *DICTEE*, a vignette titled “DISEUSE,” French for fortune-teller or psychic, features an account of the facial minutiae of breathing. A character—perhaps Cha, perhaps the *diseuse*, perhaps an individual to whom the *diseuse* is attuned—seeks to make an utterance from a position of gender, racial, and colonial subordination. Born during the Korean War, Cha, along with her family, migrated, first to Hawai‘i and then to San Francisco, in the 1960s. Unable to speak, *DICTEE*’s unnamed character resorts to mimicking the process, letting out “bared noise, groan, bits torn from words” along the way.⁸ These breathy noises correspond to what Cha, in an artist’s statement, calls the “roots of language before it is born on the tip of the tongue.”⁹ Free-indirect discourse in *DICTEE* reveals a character who tries to estimate her pitch, her reach: “she hesitates to measure the accuracy”; “she waits inside the pause.”¹⁰ The character speculates a sequence of adjustments that may conduce to speech: “The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away.”¹¹ Should the breath not fall away, the character might be able to convert the air she takes in “rapidly,” “in gulfs,” into a momentum that would conclude “the wait from pain to say. To not to. Say.”¹² She “gasps from [the] pressure” of not-quite-speaking, “its contracting motion.”¹³ When she cannot contort her breath any further, and I, as a reader, cannot hold my breath any longer, the speech act happens, at last: “Uttering. Hers now. Hers bare. The utter.”¹⁴ That utterance is *DICTEE*, all of it. With the convulsive formulation, “The wait from pain to say. To not to. Say,” the narrator lays out a paradox: breathing at once affords a thrust or rhythm and signals the pitfalls of a character’s effort to turn this force into language. Variations in the intensity of breathing, that is, register a painful effort to speak through oppression while offering respite from the pain of speaking of oppression. By introducing a

subject of respiration, one we get to know through her breathing (and not the inverse), Cha makes the conditions of minoritarian life's possibility coextensive with its conditions of impossibility. For this character, living on and losing steam constitute a false dichotomy. Although it signals an exchange between a character and her milieu, breathing is here described in solitary terms. *DICTEE* leaves us with the question of how breathing, a shared activity if there ever was one, might figure collective life.

White's *LETTERRS*—stylized to emphasize the errant quality of a poetry that dissents from colonial structures of language—grapples with this question. *LETTERRS*, like *DICTEE*, focuses on breath to dilate anticolonial communication.¹⁵ Whereas *DICTEE* examines breath in extreme close-up, *LETTERRS* moves between individual and communal respiration. The collection's opening poem, "NASCENT," slows down a newborn's first breath and cry:

It begins at a diacritical spark of breath and soma.
Vowel stress nasal enunciation the tenors of existence.¹⁶

White space prolongs caesuras. Its incorporation into the line suggests whiteness's saturation of Native people's breathing under settler colonialism. At the same time as it records an experience of colonialism, breath here animates an anticolonial poetics. In *DICTEE* breath precedes language, and in *LETTERRS* breath gives language its diacritics—its accents and tones. Breath's diacritical operation, mentioned at the beginning of the sprawling “*NASCENT*,” recurs some four pages later:

Pronunciation marks are proof
of one's own cultural sentience.
Those authentic reverberations
above the cap height where breath
pressures tongue against teeth,
below the baseline where throat
exhales the long accent vowel,
in that moment it echoes through
nose, quivers as phonemic air:
the ogonek tickle of ^{Hi.'17}

The respiratory gymnastics described in this sequence of dropped lines culminates with the utterance of the “ogonek tickle” or diacritic hook in “*ljj*” (horse in Diné Bizaad). Phonemes, these units of sound that distinguish one word from another, reside in the air. This isn’t to say that evidence of “cultural sentience” evaporates or becomes amorphous in White’s poems. On the contrary, air is a

conduit between the guttural and skeletal adjustments that produce breath and a destination that, throughout LETTERRS, alternately appears as the “collagen / of thoughts,” “the cochlea of thought,” “the narrative of bone,” “bone-shaped artifacts,” “where the calcium hardens,” “the notochord of thought,” and “backbone a sentence.”¹⁸ Breath leaves the skull to reossify as sharable artifacts like a thought, a sentence, and a narrative. Toward the end of “NASCENT,” breathing’s role in the mediation of a commons is reflected by the aerial manifestation of a Diné *we*: “vibration waves in air / until we materialize.”¹⁹

The “breath [that] falls away” in *DICTEE* and the “diacritical spark of breath” in LETTERRS function as figures for, and fickle archives of, historically and culturally specific iterations of negative refueling. Both breathing lessons telegraph efforts to make do through oppression and occupation. Cha and White model respiration as the negotiation of ambient or climatic colonialism, with White’s Diné poetics more specifically documenting life within what the anthropologist Kristen Simmons (Southern Paiute) terms “settler atmospherics.”²⁰ Simmons, a water protector who in 2016 protested the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, explains that the settler state puts Indigenous peoples, tribes, and nations “into suspension”: it uproots and immobilizes them through the ongoing operation of capitalism, militarism, and racism.²¹ Calling to mind the aerial emergence of Indigenous solidarity in White’s lines, “vibration waves in air / until we materialize,” Simmons notes that “those in suspension,” managed through riot control agents like tear gas and pepper spray, “arc toward one another—becoming-open in an atmosphere of violence.”²² Water protectors, Simmons’s account goes, had to turn to each other and breathe together as they cried or choked in the cold. The environmental and military violence opposed by water protectors at Standing Rock recapitulated a long history of colonial interferences with breathing. In the nineteenth century, the popularization of spirometry, a pulmonary function test, corroborated colonial and racial hierarchies of aliveness. As Lundy Braun recounts, biased medical models, developed in part in colonial India and on US plantations, equated lung capacity with “vital capacity” to justify the enslavement and oppression of Black and brown people.²³ The uranium mining and nuclear tests that took place on or near reservations a century later contributed to abnormally high lung cancer rates among Indigenous populations.²⁴ From medical pathologies to radiological and chemical weapons, colonial bio- and necropower have reproduced themselves by seizing breath and constraining Indigenous life.

The emergence of breath as both a record of injury and a political vernacular can be traced through Black studies. Anti-Blackness, as Lindsey Dillon and Julie

Sze note, circulates as “particulate matter”; it is ambient, and not just figuratively so.²⁵ Christina Sharpe argues that “aspiration,” or “keeping breath in the Black body,” takes place through and against asphyxia as the condition of Blackness.²⁶ Sharpe’s history of Black asphyxiation begins with the drowning of enslaved people thrown overboard in the Middle Passage and culminates with the killing of Eric Garner. On July 17, 2014, white New York Police Department officer Daniel Pantaleo put Garner, a Black resident of Staten Island, in a deadly choke hold for allegedly selling “loosies” or single cigarettes. Garner suffered from asthma, a condition that, according to epidemiological data, disproportionately affects African Americans.²⁷ Asthma was so central to Garner’s life that after his passing his mother, Gwen, would line a memorial to her son with inhalers.²⁸ In 2017, Garner’s daughter Erica, who following her father’s death staged die-ins and became a prominent critic of police brutality, would die of complications due to a heart attack, itself triggered by an asthma attack.²⁹ Garner’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” were also those of Elijah McClain and George Floyd, two other Black men killed by police just a few years later.³⁰ On August 24, 2019, in Aurora, Colorado, three police officers—Nathan Woodyard, Jason Rosenblatt, and Randy Roedema—arrested McClain, who had reportedly been listening to music and dancing while walking down the street. They held McClain on the ground for fifteen minutes, applying a carotid control hold. After paramedics injected him with a sedative, McClain suffered a cardiac arrest. He was pronounced brain dead on August 27 and was removed from life support on August 30.³¹ On May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, killed George Floyd, whom he had arrested for allegedly passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Chauvin pressed his knee to Floyd’s neck for almost nine minutes as three other officers prevented onlookers from intervening.³² In the wake of these public executions, “I can’t breathe” and “we can’t breathe” have become rallying cries in the fight against the institutions that orchestrate Black death.

Massive protests erupted in 2014 in response to the killing of Garner, and again in 2020 in response to the murders of Floyd, McClain, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson, and others. “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in US History,” read a memorable *New York Times* headline in July 2020.³³ The 2020 protests coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, which was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30 and a pandemic on March 11. Many of the symptoms associated with the infectious disease are respiratory, from cough to shortness of breath to loss of smell. Complications such as pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome also imperil breathing. Although it is, as of this writing, too early to assess the disease’s long-term effects, researchers have pointed to

limited lung capacity, kidney complications, and neurological problems such as inflammation, psychosis, delirium, nerve damage, and strokes.³⁴ Higher infection and hospitalization rates within Black communities have shed light on insufficient preventive health services, unaffordable medical care, and highly concentrated respiratory hazards in low-income and minority-heavy areas—all of which amount to structural and environmental racism.³⁵ Police violence and structural and environmental racism are two mutually reinforcing modalities of the necropolitics of anti-Black asphyxiation. One temporality is accelerative, and the other chronic; both are catastrophic.

Ashon Crawley's study of breath and Blackness is, like Sharpe's, haunted by Garner's death. Crawley reads "I can't breathe" as a refusal of the conditions that negate Black life.³⁶ Decades before Crawley, the West Indian psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon turned to breathing to anatomize the formation of a Black unconscious under colonization and imagine a collective release from enslavement. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952 in the original French), Fanon unforgettably writes, "It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his [sic] own that he [sic] is in revolt. It is because 'quite simply' it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him [sic] to breathe."³⁷ In late 2014, Fanon's claim was widely shared on social media, as an extension of "I can't breathe." By then, the subject of the claim had switched from the Indo-Chinese to the Black *we* whom Fanon had sought to activate. "We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe," now read the pronouncement.³⁸ In *A Dying Colonialism* (1959 in the original French), his account of the Algerian war, Fanon gives a name to the struggle against colonial pressures: "combat breathing."³⁹ Subjects engage in combat breathing when they must direct all their energies toward surviving state violence. Under such conditions, revolutionary action is a matter of life and death. Crawley shares with Fanon a political ontology of Black respiration that outlines a transition from debilitating to galvanizing breathing. The Blackpentecostal practices of shouting, tarrying, whooping, and speaking in tongues, Crawley offers, conjure "*black pneuma*," or a "fugitive inhalation of oxygen plus more and fugitive exhalation of carbon dioxide plus more," to "enunciate life, life that is exorbitant, capacious, and fundamentally . . . social, though it is also life that is structured through and engulfed by brutal violence."⁴⁰ Through breath, Crawley and Sharpe affirm the possibility of Black life from its conditions of impossibility—a tension that recalls the paradox animating the anticolonial aesthetics of *DICTEE* and *LETTERRS*. By turning to Blackpentecostalism's repertoire of aesthetic practices, Crawley defies respiratory obstructions with the creative possibilities of rhythmic and synchronic breath.

Across the contexts I've begun to map out, breathing traffics between the structural and the experiential. Breathing constitutes a sensory realm where bio- and necropolitical forces operating on the population scale are embodied. This isn't strictly a top-down process; breathing is a negotiation. For Cha's character in *DICTEE*, to breathe is to be hailed, nonverbally, coercively, into a subordinate position—but it is also to generate the rhythm and momentum needed to address subordination. In Sharpe's account of Black aspiration, an experience of violence morphs into a wish, an orientation toward the future. White and Crawley, for their part, show not just how populations are forced into shared breathlessness but also how solidarity arises from untenable conditions. White's Diné *we*, materialized from “vibration waves in air,” and Crawley's commons, held together by “*black pneuma*,” do not neutralize atmospheric threats; they rearrange, reconfigure, reorder them. Aesthetic experimentation cannot realistically solve breathing, or disentangle it from its status as evidence of vulnerability to violence or neglect. Aesthetic experimentation can however produce a breath that exceeds this status. The cultivation of such excess makes breathing, more than an index of crises, a resource for living through them.

Since the 1970s, writers, filmmakers, and artists have experimented with breathing with extraordinary frequency in an effort to shuffle the terms by which they relate to the milieus they inhabit. The breathing aesthetics rubric after which this book is named proves expansive; I've written elsewhere about the panicked oscillation between loss and triumph in popular music's bombastic respiratory anthems.⁴¹ Here I devote most of my attention to minoritarian works created by marginalized figures who tend to contest the genre and media conventions traditionally valorized by artistic and academic institutions. I say most of my attention because not every case study relays the book's radical commitments; the logic of exemplification isn't always straightforward. For instance, some of the figures who populate this book—from the antiheroine of Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995), who appears later in this introduction, to the singer-songwriter Kate Bush, in whose company we begin chapter 1—problematic aspects of a relation between breathing and whiteness that I seek to expose and displace. This said, I wouldn't qualify such figures as hegemonic just because they benefit, in some ways, from systems of domination. So much is true of many other figures, real and fictional, who show up in this book—figures whose identities ought not to be understood in monolithic terms. I use the attribute *minoritarian* to refer not to fixed positions but to an impulse, be it artistic or analytic, to contest the forces that make the world more breathable for some people than for others. A focus on minoritarian practices reveals, in Kyla Wazana Tompkins's words, “the art—and the artfulness—that emerges from

the everyday life of socially deviant peoples, people rendered deformed by capital, or simply understood as deformed within normative aesthetic frames.”⁴² As I answer Sasha Engelmann’s call to “engage the key affective and aesthetic dimensions of air, where aesthetics is taken to mean the broader, not necessarily human organisation of the sensible,” I insist on aesthetic criticism’s status as social and political commentary, rather than an exemption from it.⁴³ My guiding principles throughout *Breathing Aesthetics* are that respiration’s imbrication of vitality and morbidity is differently felt by differently situated people, and that minoritarian works best exemplify the function of aesthetics in registering and partially, only partially, diffusing the risks of breathing.

Breathing in Crisis

Breathing Aesthetics examines responses to a crisis in breathing that intensified around the 1970s. My proposed periodizing notion—crisis in breathing—does not imply a simple historical shift from easy to strained breathing. For one, as I’ve previously stated, breathing is inevitably morbid. Any fantasy of a past wherein breathing was strictly invigorating would be just that: a fantasy. What I label a crisis in breathing is the present-day configuration of the enmeshment of life and death. This configuration is typified by the increased pollution, weaponization, and monetization of air and breath, the consequences of which are unevenly distributed. By framing the crisis in breathing as a problem of the long 1970s, I posit exceptional, episodic, and chronic respiratory obstructions as metrics of a crisis in the reproduction of life that has worsened since that pivotal decade.

One shorthand for the crisis in the reproduction of life is *precarity*. Lauren Berlant outlines precarity as a problem both existential (we are contingent beings; life proceeds more or less without guarantees) and historical (economic and political conditions accelerate the wearing out of human beings).⁴⁴ Judith Butler distinguishes between precariousness, a function of our vulnerability and exposure that is given some political form; precarity, the differential distribution of precariousness; and precarization, an ongoing process that makes the precarious endemic, which is to say irreducible to a single event.⁴⁵ What Berlant sees as historical precarity and Butler as precarization refers by and large to the collapse, in the long 1970s, of the economic and political structures that had previously carried, at least for select populations, some of the burden of life’s self-perpetuation. To economic and political structures, we should add environments; as Pramod K. Nayar’s neologism “ecoprecarity” suggests, fragilized ecosystems and species extinction evidence a crisis in the reproduction of human

and nonhuman life.⁴⁶ As I use it, the concept of precarity tallies, among other things, the effects of the climate crisis precipitated by capitalism.

Some scholars—though neither Berlant nor Butler—see precarity, specifically ecoprecarity, as a great equalizer, heralding a condition that equally afflicts all organisms. This is the case of the philosopher Michael Marder, whose twist on the precarity concept, the “global dump,” entails the inescapable absorption by all of pervasive toxicity.⁴⁷ In the twenty-first century, Marder summarizes, “being is being dumped.”⁴⁸ He goes on:

It is not that the dump is over there, at a safe distance from the well-off members of affluent societies, who live at several removes from polluted water sources and open-air landfills. Radioactive fallouts know no national boundaries, microplastics are as ubiquitous in tap and bottled water as mercury is in fish, and smog does not stop at the municipal borders dividing the city’s poor neighborhoods from the rich. The toxicity of the air, the clouds, the rain and the snow; of the oceans and their diminishing fish and crustacean populations; of chemically fertilized soil and the fruit it bears—this pervasive and multifarious elemental toxicity is also in us.⁴⁹

Although Marder claims that “the arrows of toxicity do not discriminate among those they hit in a ‘toxic flood,’ [or] the anthropogenic emission into the environment of over 250 billion tons of chemicals a year,” there is copious evidence to the contrary.⁵⁰ As Dorceta E. Taylor reports, noxious and hazardous facilities are concentrated in minority and low-income communities; this is one of the forms that environmental inequality takes in the United States.⁵¹ While I agree with Marder that no one is fully protected from toxicity—I made a similar statement, earlier, in reference to the porosity of breathers—I maintain that toxicity does discriminate, and it does know boundaries. Marder mistakes existential vulnerability for proof of the flattening of class, racial, and gender hierarchies. And while it is true that all living organisms breathe some toxins and toxicants, the quality of air is not uniform across a given city’s neighborhoods, let alone on a national or global scale. The aerial reproduction of inequalities and hierarchies corresponds to what Hsu terms “atmospheric differentiation.”⁵²

The contemporary crisis wherein breath functions as a metonym for uneven precarities marks the confluence and acceleration of such historical processes as the weaponization, monetization, and pollution of air. An overview of these processes is in order. Although the weaponization of air precedes the 1970s, militarized police forces have deployed chemical weapons (CWS)—rebranded as riot control agents (RCAs)—with increasing frequency since that decade. Peter Sloterdijk argues that the proliferation of gas warfare in the early twentieth cen-

tury made environments, rather than bodies, primary military targets.⁵³ Sloterdijk simplistically casts bodies and environments into an either-or situation. If chemical and radiological weapons—from the phosgene, chlorine, and mustard gas of World War I to the nuclear bombs and missiles of World War II—have targeted environments, they have done so to attack bodies more efficiently. Making breath a prey in its own right synchronized occupation (atmospheric saturation) and injury (asphyxiation). International protocols and agreements, including the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972, a supplement to the Geneva Protocol of 1925, have sought to regulate the use of biological agents and toxicants. The 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) forbade the use of RCAs as a method of warfare. These accords have been imperfect, and their reach limited. The slow burn of carcinogens, whose power to debilitate and kill eludes spectacle, exceeds the purview of these agreements. Moreover, the CWC still authorizes the use of RCAs for domestic law enforcement in “types and quantities’ consistent with such [a purpose].”⁵⁴ No types and quantities of toxicant are consistent with the purpose of law enforcement, insofar as the rubric of law enforcement is called upon to justify extralegal acts. Tear gas, as Anna Feigenbaum notes, is often employed as a “force multiplier”; it induces disorientation, debilitation, and panic, increasing the effectiveness of other kinds of force, including baton beatings and bird shot.⁵⁵ The deployment of tear gas by city and university police has become a fixture of the repression of political struggles.⁵⁶ By appropriating CWS, police agencies have borrowed from the military rulebook on what types of violence register as “less lethal.” Filling the lungs with toxicants and burning the esophagus restrict alertness and mobility. Tear gas may trigger asthma attacks and aggravate other respiratory afflictions. Such strategies make respiration acutely morbid but not fatal. Not necessarily or immediately, at least.

Within the current crisis in the reproduction of life, respiration indexes privilege and disprivilege. With the 2017 installation *Breath* (BRH), Max Dovey satirizes the monetization of breath and air by using spirometry to mine cryptocurrencies.⁵⁷ Cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and the aptly named Ether (exchanged through the decentralized computing platform Ethereum) convey the fantasy of an immaterial capitalism, where frictionless transactions make value appear out of thin air and disappear just as easily. But finance capitalism seems immaterial only if we ignore its drain on energy resources. Its massive technological infrastructure pollutes the air and hinders respiration. To extract value from breath, Dovey developed a proof-of-work algorithm that solved a series of encrypted mathematical puzzles to verify transactions. The rewards were minimal. In four weeks, Dovey’s machine mined £0.02p.

Not only is there little money to be made from breathing, but we must now pay to breathe. The “breathfulness industry” ascribes therapeutic and monetary value to conscious respiration. In a piece titled “The Business of Breathing,” Kelly Conaboy relates her incursion into twenty-first-century “capitalist respiration.”⁵⁸ After sampling an array of luxury breathing sessions, Conaboy comes to an inevitable conclusion: “I don’t see breathing’s rise in popularity as a bad thing, though that is admittedly an odd sentence to have to write.”⁵⁹ Stretching breathing sessions into a 24/7 regimen of monitoring and adjustment, manufactured products such as costly wearable technologies record vital signs to integrate user and device holistically.⁶⁰ The Spire Stone, quasi-mystical in name, promises that its interface supplies an objective measure of optimizable breathing. A sleek pager, the stone converts the “realtime bio-signals” of “respiratory sensing” into “useful and actionable” data.⁶¹ Whereas in *DICTEE* variations in the intensity of breathing have to do with unrealized speech and action, Spire assures its customers that every datum draws the missing vector between breath and action. The Canadian company Vitality Air, whose product isn’t so much manufactured as packaged, differently abstracts life force from breath and air. The company bottles fresh air from the resort town of Banff, Alberta, which it then ships to Chinese, Indian, Korean, and now North American customers. Vitality Air’s sales pitch, indicative of the importance of resource extraction and circulation to the settler state’s sovereign imaginary, assigns each breath monetary value (“We pack the air pretty tight into these little cans. Through compression, we get you more breaths of air and oxygen for your money”); presents the air’s freshness as a quality that can expire, such that breaths of recently bottled air have higher value (“We all go outside for ‘fresh’ air, so how fresh is canned air? With our products, we stamp every one with the exact bottling date”); and casts (air) quality as an exportable, distinctly Canadian natural resource and civic virtue (“Our values of quality, service and innovation are all grounded in our roots as Canadians looking to be leaders in our market”).⁶² Vitality Air, as the company’s motto promises, “enhances vitality one breath at the time.”⁶³ The good news is that we can now buy our *élan vital*. The bad news is that we must now buy our *élan vital*.

The contemporary crisis in breathing is, above all, an environmental crisis. From a historical standpoint, breathing enters indefinite crisis when air is polluted faster than it is purified. Dating large-scale environmental transformations is a tricky endeavor, and something as vague as pollution’s irreversibility might be assessed by competing measurements. We can at least say with confidence that the modern environmental movement, as it has evolved in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, enables us to diagnose a crisis in

breathing and link it to attrition (a dearth of breathable air) as well as saturation (an excess of toxins and toxicants). In the United States, the implementation of the Air Pollution Control Act of 1955 and the better-known Clean Air Act of 1963, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970, and the celebration of the inaugural Earth Day that same year indicate a growing concern for, if not necessarily a willingness to adopt measures that would remedy, breathable air's scarcity. The analytic "late industrialism," which Chloe Ahmann and Alison Kenner borrow from the anthropologist Kim Fortun, identifies "the trouble in the air as a predictable outcome of industrial order."⁶⁴ Respiratory inequalities testify to an atmospheric differentiation that isn't "the accidental [byproduct] of industrial prosperity" but "its necessary underside."⁶⁵ Systemic asphyxiation is by design, and within the present crisis this design is coming into sharper focus.

The transformations I've sketched—from the weaponization of the air to its monetization, to its pollution—amount to a major shift in what it means to be a breather. The uneven distribution of risk renders unconvincing any conception of the breather as a universal subject. The anthropologist Tim Choy illustrates this point in an ethnography of ecological endangerment in Hong Kong. Choy treats breathers as scaled-down condensations of "air's poesis" who differently accrue the unaccounted-for costs of capitalist production and consumption, including climate-related injury and debility.⁶⁶ The breather, as anthropological subject, operates as a *catachresis* of sorts in Choy's study. Unable to hold together the experiences it purports to generalize, the breather demands to be particularized. Inspired by Choy, I follow breathers across the milieus they occupy in order to register precarities—in the plural form—that overlap but are not isometric. Whenever I refer to *we* or *us* in this book, I, too, do so *catachresitically*. I use these pronouns to make propositional statements about breathing as an existential phenomenon or a shared activity. But the collective subject behind these statements is differential: a contingent and provisional assemblage of incommensurate experiences.

Epiphenomenal Bodies

Breathing Aesthetics displaces sexuality studies: away from the body, and between bodies and milieus; away from speech and action, and in variations of breathing's intensity that may or may not rise to the status of event. Many of the contexts, aesthetic and critical, that this book occupies are feminist, queer, and trans, for those are categories, along with race and ethnicity, that expose the constitution and construction of bodies. The crisis in breathing prevents us

from presuming the integrity of the body as a unit of analysis. As Annabel L. Kim observes, “The ease with which *body* takes a definite article—The Body—is a testament to how naturalized and seemingly self-evident its existence as a thing is, and to how we take for granted the body’s epistemic accessibility and a certain democratization of experience (the body—now here’s something that everyone has and experiences).”⁶⁷ Kim sheds light on the ironic, silent agreement behind uses of The Body in cultural criticism: we tend to ignore that our concept for real experience—experience that, we somehow believe, resists abstraction or aggregation—presumes a universal metaphysics. Kim’s call for a defetishization of The Body appears especially suited to the study of respiration, a process that reveals bodies as contingent, constituted by exchanges and transactions. *Breathing Aesthetics* takes up Kim’s challenge and locates its examination of gendered and raced embodiment and experience in the flows and frictions between environmental and disability studies. I superimpose these heuristics to chart what I call *ecologies of the particular*: accounts of respiration that move across scales, assessing the broad impact of environmental harm without minimizing or universalizing the experiences of people living with respiratory disorders.

The notion that bodies are epiphenomenal to the atmospheres they breathe goes by many names in environmental studies and the life sciences. The cultural geographer Derek P. McCormack calls “envelopment” the emergence of forms of life out of atmospheres, those elemental space-times that are simultaneously affective and meteorological. Envelopment corresponds to “the process of partial enclosure through which a difference within and between bodies immersed in atmospheres is generated, a difference sufficient to allow for a relation of mediation to occur.”⁶⁸ McCormack’s account of envelopment approximates what Gilbert Simondon, in his philosophy of ontogenesis, names “individuation.” According to Simondon, the individual is but one phase of the metastable, nondyadic individual-milieu couple.⁶⁹ As Jason Read notes, non-coinciding individuations take place on multiple scales at once: collective individuations coexist with physical and psychic individuations.⁷⁰ In a logic of intensification, we undergo individuation by inhaling and exhaling the atmospheres we occupy. We become ourselves, if you will, by incorporating a milieu into which we are also pouring ourselves. Both epitomized by breathing, the concepts of envelopment and individuation show that corporeality is always “transcorporeality,” Stacy Alaimo’s term for the constitution of human bodies’ materiality by the more-than-human world.⁷¹

Disability studies, too, regards bodies—and bodily normativity and nonnormativity—as, among other things, the product of environments. It has become

customary to sort through disability discourses based on the model they ratify: either a medical model, treating bodies as the loci of disability, or a social one, pathologizing the built environments that disable individuals and, for that reason, necessitate intervention in the form of social justice advocacy. Tobin Siebers proposes, as an intermediary between these competing models, the “theory of complex embodiment,” which “raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people’s lived experience of the body, but . . . emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body.”⁷² While it may read as common sense, this theory makes an important intervention by formulating disability as mediation—a relation between bodies and environments. Such insight proves illuminating in the case of respiratory afflictions like asthma, allergy, and cystic fibrosis, all of which are tied to genetic factors but are exacerbated by environmental factors. Kenner contends that the asthma and allergy epidemics ought to be addressed alongside climate crisis, for higher asthma and allergy rates mean that more people will be acutely affected by extreme weather events as well as long, intense allergy seasons.⁷³

While environmental and disability studies have both elaborated paradigms that conceive of embodiment and experience as epiphenomenal to a mediation of which breathing is exemplary, these critical projects are not exactly congruent. Environmental illness, for instance, reveals a certain chasm between ecological and disability logics. Disability studies at least somewhat departs from medical pathologies to activate an identity politics whose program is to expose and rectify disabling environments. People living with environmental illness, by contrast, may not be granted access in the first place to a pathological realm they may then exit for political reasons. For people with multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) or idiopathic environmental intolerance (IEI), a syndrome associated with a severe sensitivity to pollutants, medical pathology would mean recognition and relief; it would stabilize causes that appear too environmental, thus slippery and evasive. Studies estimate that 80 percent of persons with MCS/IEI identify as women—though the uneven recognition of the syndrome by medical experts, the variability of symptoms, and a reliance on self-diagnosis complicate the production of statistical data.⁷⁴ Because their experience is rarely validated by doctors, people living with MCS/IEI must double as experts, amassing and trading unofficial knowledge about their responses to environmental conditions.

The self-diagnosis questionnaire that opens Dodie Bellamy’s essay “When the Sick Rule the World” formalizes just how difficult it is to trace the contours of an environmental illness. Without official pathologies and etiologies to work

with, Bellamy sets out to draw connections between a symptom like shortness of breath and such potential causes as exposure to chemicals and toxic metals, low air quality and strong smells in the workplace, mold in the home, and overdue maintenance work on air filters and ducts. I use punctuation, but Bellamy does not. Only a question mark concludes the three-page questionnaire: “have you ever smoked if so for how long have you ever lived with others that smoked if so for how long and how old were you how often do you eat fish what types of fish do you eat?”⁷⁵ The historian of science Michelle Murphy argues that the sick building syndrome, a relative of MCS/IEI prevalent in enclosed workplaces, poses a problem postmodern in form: a problem that lacks an essence.⁷⁶ Whether or not environmental illnesses have an essence, Bellamy is determined to search for one in the particulate and gaseous. Environmental illness prompts Bellamy to generate forms, such as the breathless questionnaire, for addressing injury outside of the (admittedly limited and ambivalent) comforts of pathology and identity afforded by the rubric of disability.

Todd Haynes’s independent film *Safe*, which narrates the deterioration of Carol White’s (Julianne Moore) health as she comes to terms with what is likely MCS/IEI, hoards symptoms and potential remedies with a maximalism that matches Bellamy’s. Carol exhibits hypohidrosis or low sweating; she faints near cans of indoor paint and cleaning supplies; she has an asthma attack while driving through fumes; she feels run-down; she’s stressed out and tired; her nose bleeds while she’s getting a perm; she has a headache; she convulses and vomits after hugging her husband, who has just sprayed aerosol deodorant; she can’t sleep because of “the air, the smell”; she has skin rashes; she’s feeling under the weather; she has a panic attack and wheezes after eating ice cream; she forgets where she is; her mouth swells during an allergy test; she coughs; she has a seizure; she feels dizzy on an airplane; she sobs; she has trouble expressing her feelings; she’s nauseous. Carol tries out an array of healing protocols, first in Southern California’s San Fernando Valley, where she resides, then at Wrenwood, a zero-chemical rehab facility outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico. She adopts an all-fruit diet; ingests unspecified pills; “slows down a little”; stays in bed; attends support group meetings; creates an oasis conducive to air quality control; undergoes homeopathic treatment; controls her “toxic load”; fasts; carries an oxygen tank; “gives herself to love”; and “just breathes.” Breathing suffuses both Carol’s symptomatology and her treatment plans. It’s the problem and, maybe, part of the solution. Even though Carol struggles to ascertain her illness’s causes, her racial and class privilege—not so subtly underscored by her last name—grant her access to a costly treatment facility. In one early scene where cinematographer Alex Nepomniashchy’s camera monitors her irregular

breathing, Carol occupies the center of a frame whose background features Latinx domestic workers and house painters (figure I.1). Their bodies are cropped by the kitchen bar, but we know from a prior shot that they are directly manipulating noxious chemicals (figure I.2). As Alaimo and Nicole Seymour have separately noted, *Safe* invites us to notice whose strained breathing qualifies as a problem, and whose, were it in focus, might be dismissed as an ordinary effect of racially stratified work cultures.⁷⁷

Safe's climactic scene dramatizes the imperfect alignment of environmental and disability rhetorics. Through Haynes's lens, MCS/IEI, which a poster visible in one shot names an "allergy to the twentieth century," partially allegorizes the fear of contagion prevalent during the HIV/AIDS crisis. *Safe* stages the HIV/AIDS moral panic's worst nightmare: the infiltration and dissolution of white heterosexual domesticity by an overpowering threat. At Wrenwood, a worn-down Carol brings MCS/IEI and HIV/AIDS together in a birthday speech delivered in a high-pitched voice and with erratic gesticulation: "I don't know what I'm saying, just that I really hated myself before I came here. So, I'm trying to see myself, hopefully, more as I am, more positive, like, seeing the plusses. Like, I think it's slowly opening up, now, people's minds, like, educating, and . . . AIDS . . . and . . . other types of diseases. And it *is* a disease because it's *out there*, and we just have to be more aware of it. People. More aware of it. And even ourselves. Like, reading labels and going into buildings and stuff." In Carol's address, met with blank stares, MCS/IEI and HIV/AIDS cohabit uneasily. Carol's juxtaposition of MCS/IEI with a medically recognized virus/syndrome and her attempt to derive a political statement from this juxtaposition occasion an epistemic crisis and the collapse of speech. The recurrence of "like" signals demonstration and exemplification, but what counts as argument or evidence is unclear. Breathy hesitations and false starts are corollaries of Carol's effort to make sense of an affliction that is "out there," "in the air"—an affliction that makes itself known through her breathing but eludes her as a marker of identity and an object of pedagogical and political discourse.

The methodological challenge of thinking *disability* in concert with *environment* is perhaps best summed up by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara. An "eco-crip theory," they show, would have to reconcile the widespread effects of environmental collapse with models of disability that, even when they account for the environment's role in constructing disability, tend to center individuals who identify or are identified as disabled.⁷⁸ Jasbir Puar offers one answer to this problem by supplementing the rubric of disability with debility and capacity. Debility, Puar explains, has to do with "the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled."⁷⁹ In a case study on debility that



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Figures I.1 and I.2. Stills
from *Safe* (1995), directed
by Todd Haynes. Criterion
Collection.



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illustrates the differential distribution of harm along ethnic and racial lines, Puar contends that the West Bank is controlled largely through checkpoints and “the Gaza Strip . . . suffocated through choke points” that obstruct the course of the workday and “[slow] down . . . Palestinian life.”⁸⁰ Puar states that “the capacity to asphyxiate is not a metaphor,” but it may be more accurate to say that choking evidences literal and figurative debility: a reduction in animation or life force as well as a hindered capacity to be mobile and earn a living.⁸¹

In a review of Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder contest Puar’s critique of disability activism’s demand for recognition from a state that debilitates subordinated populations through military occupation. Mitchell and Snyder observe that disability activism’s and disability studies’ attention to the ways “impairment disqualifies an individual from access to common participation in a multitude of activities” relays, rather than “a fetishization of citizenship,” a commitment to uncovering “how expectations of physical, psychological, and sensory capacities are unexpectedly grounded in the bedrock definition of participatory democracy.”⁸² Yet Mitchell and Snyder’s polemical claim that “debility studies might be ultimately understood as disability studies without disability” exaggerates Puar’s stance.⁸³ Puar insists that the notion of debility does not diffuse or departicularize disability. Neither does it imply that everyone is, to some extent, disabled. Disability, debility, and capacity exist in tension, at times convergent and at times divergent. Mitchell and Snyder’s criticism betrays a reluctance to evaluate disability studies’ reliance on individualistic models of impairment that, as Ray and Sibara have noticed, are not calibrated for environmental morbidity and lethality, the effects of which are measurable on the population scale.

Some of the writers, filmmakers, and artists featured in *Breathing Aesthetics* identify as disabled; others don’t. Others still might identify as disabled but haven’t made this identity public. Throughout this book, I maintain not only that it’s possible to uphold debility as a category of inquiry without detriment to disability but that the contemporary crisis in breathing demands it. A nexus where life is seized and manipulated, breathing marks the gray zone between individual and mass impairment where the boundary between disability and debility is perpetually negotiated. By approaching disability and debility as mutually constitutive, I map out ecologies of the particular. Although this phrase may appear pleonastic—ecology, a relation of interconnection and interdependence, inevitably asks us to articulate the particular vis-à-vis the general—the repetition is valuable. As a methodological principle, an ecology of the particular resists the idea that toxification and other environmental calamities homogenize, and as such departicularize, experience. An ecology of the particular can accommo-

date two or more truths: while air and breath channel bio- and necropolitical regimes that compromise the vitality of entire populations and ecosystems, it is also the case that the impact of these regimes is unevenly distributed and registered with particular acuity by marginalized individuals, including persons with disabilities.

Breathing Aesthetics

The act of breathing is omnipresent. And, as I've argued, respiration at once materializes and figures the uneven distribution of risk in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. So how could there not be an aesthetics of breathing? Perhaps less obvious is the perimeter of a breathing aesthetics—what objects count as exemplary of something as ubiquitous as respiration. Today's aesthetics of breathing ratifies a gradual disentanglement of breath from universal experience within philosophy and theory. For the Stoics, *pneuma* designated a universal breath or life force that in its highest form constituted the psyche or soul. *Qi*, in Taoism, and *prana*, in Hinduism, label vital forces that flow through bodies and are manifest in respiration. Throughout scientific modernity, as human beings have, in Steven Connor's words, "taken to the air," breathing has come to be understood as an index of geographically and historically specific conditions.⁸⁴ For example, Tobias Menely deciphers traces of Anthropocene thinking, or of human beings' consciousness of their status as a geological force, in the atmospheric lexica of Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. These figures, for whom atmospheres could no longer accommodate fantasies of unlimited replenishment, prompt us to comprehend the "catastrophe of the present" as an "accretion of the past, a thickening of the air."⁸⁵ The genealogy of "Anthropocene air" traced by Menely answers, for the most part proleptically, Gaston Bachelard's 1943 call for a "*physiologie aérienne*" (aerial physiology) that accounts for the relation between breathing beings and the "*douceur et violence, pureté et délire*" (softness and violence, purity and madness) of the wind.⁸⁶

Luce Irigaray has lamented that Western philosophy's engagements with breath and air have been too few and far between, and that its metaphysics has in fact been predicated on elemental repression. Martin Heidegger, she contends, flattens the air-filled "*ouvert*" (open or clearing) that makes possible a metaphysics of presence.⁸⁷ Since the 1980s, Irigaray has regularly swapped the "interval," her concept for a force of life irreducible to the two or more individuals who keep it alive, with the "*souffle*" (breath or blow). Remediating the interval's stagnant connotation, breath heralds the emergence of new forms

of life that are embodied but not possessed.⁸⁸ To cultivate breath is to usher in a world where “words are ethereal [or aerial]” and “the sensible remains sweet and carnal: living, pulsating.”⁸⁹ Air is a “fluid density which leaves space for every growth[, m]atter that, not yet divided in itself, permits sharing.”⁹⁰ It is as, among other things, a corrective to Emmanuel Lévinas’s philosophy that Irigaray designs a style of relation not premised on facial recognition. But while Lévinas is best known for his ethics of the face-to-face encounter, his “pneumatism” conceives of breath, specifically the instant of suspension between inhalation and exhalation, as something of a temporal counterpart to the interval that Irigaray figures in spatial terms.⁹¹ In the breathlessness that both unites and separates breathing in and out, we encounter otherness and find ourselves in the realm of ethics.⁹² Following Lévinas, Lenart Škof elaborates a philosophy of the “mesocosmic breath”—a breath that is endowed with spiritual properties and accommodates an “ethics of otherness . . . that will open up new grounds for future exchanges of *mild* gestures, such as compassion, patience and care.”⁹³ With Petri Berndtson, Škof has edited a volume announcing a “new respiratory philosophy” of relation and encounter, one that promises to account for the uneven availability of breathable air.⁹⁴

Inspiration provides a starting point for determining what distinguishes an aesthetics of breathing from a philosophy of breathing, which is to say what constitutes a breathing aesthetics beyond a set of thematic or ethical concerns. Theories of inspiration accredit aesthetic works to a life force breathed into, then breathed out by, artists.⁹⁵ The object of inspiration has evolved from a divine alterity that overtakes the subject (for Plato, in his musings on the Greek *enthousiasmos*), to an external force that kindles a potential already located in the subject (for Percy Bysshe Shelley), to a vector that moves poets, as mystics or prophets, beyond their historical conditions (for Allen Ginsberg, whose transcendentalism was inflected by New Age beliefs).⁹⁶ By the 1950s and 1960s, the poetic avant-garde pushed the inspiration concept one step further by taking an interest in the ways breathing’s physiology concretely shaped meaning and syntax. The urtext of what Nathaniel Mackey, in the essay “Breath and Precarity,” calls the “pneumatic turn” is Black Mountain poet Charles Olson’s 1950 manifesto, “Projective Verse.”⁹⁷ In this manifesto, Olson calls for a poetry that magnifies the “possibilities of breath, of the breathing of the man [sic] who writes as well as of his [sic] listenings,” in order for verse to catch up to the present.⁹⁸ Within this model, poems are formal extensions of the energy that animates poets.⁹⁹ Accordingly, poetic breath might signal a vitality in jeopardy. Mackey provides, as an exemplar of compromised vitality’s rhythmic manifestation, Robert Creeley’s writing and reading styles: “Creeley’s emphatic, signature

pause following lines as short as one or two words, one or two syllables even, his veritable pronunciation of each and every line break, conveyed a trepidatious, anxious apprehensiveness. His insistent, asthmatic employment of caesura, his halting, hesitant delivery . . . accorded with a radical loss of assurance regarding such basic amenities and givens as identity, relationship, knowledge, perception and language.¹⁰⁰ “Projective Verse” coincided with poetry’s evolution into a performing art; as Christopher Grobe writes, the poetry reading yoked the *I* “more tightly than ever to its living, breathing referent.”¹⁰¹ Mackey compares marshaling poetic breath to playing wind instruments. Circular breathing, a technique that jazz players in particular must acquire to produce a continuous tone, enables Mackey to move between midcentury breath poetics and a contemporary moment wherein asphyxia has imposed itself as a defining aspect of Black life.¹⁰² Mackey’s tentative juxtaposition of these two strikingly different contexts suggests that breath, as an index of endangered vitality, communicates individual crises as well as structural ones.¹⁰³ This said, poets of Black precarity might not have the luxury of opting into a breath poetics; their verse is inevitably, in Fred Moten’s words, “preoccupied / with breathing.”¹⁰⁴

The traditions just surveyed imply that poetry has a privileged access to breath. And yet scholars of literary fiction, film, and even video game also assume, often with convincing examples in hand, that theirs is the respiratory form or medium par excellence. In a study of respiratory afflictions in French fiction, François-Bernard Michel supplies a dogmatic formula for the relation between the author’s breathing and breath as literary content or form. Michel’s injective functions are unequivocal: Raymond Queneau gave life to asthmatic characters because he was allergic to grass pollen; Marcel Proust exhibited a literary sensitivity to the weather because he suffered from asthma.¹⁰⁵ Michel insists on the “unicité du symptôme respiratoire” (unicity of the respiratory symptom): literary eruptions of undermined breathing, he believes, always refer to the inflammation or obstruction of the author’s airways.¹⁰⁶ Michel overstates the synchrony between an author’s respiration and breathing as it manifests on the page, and other critics have taken a less deterministic approach to the emergence of respiratory symptoms in fiction. In a pair of judicious studies of the respiratory geopolitics of postcolonial novels, Arthur Rose argues that the way characters breathe reveals two negotiations: an atmospheric one (characters, for instance, register the impact of asbestos exposure in shipbuilding and shipwrecking episodes) and a generic one (literary genres entail distinct affective conventions as well as breathing conventions).¹⁰⁷

The insight that generic conventions include styles and modes of breathing impels screen studies’ engagement with breath. For David Scott Diffrient,

the still-breathing bodies of actors playing dead disclose one of horror cinema's paradoxes: that those who are tasked with maintaining the artifice of fictional death almost inevitably betray it.¹⁰⁸ Horror cinema's respiratory tropes are easily recognizable; threatened characters hold their breath to avoid detection or run out of breath in an attempt to escape. Linda Williams has identified horror as one of three "body genres"—the other two being melodrama and pornography—wherein excess or grossness urges bodily reactions on the part of spectators.¹⁰⁹ Visually, this excess exudes from spasmic bodies beside themselves with terror, despair, or pleasure. Aurally, excess comes across in "inarticulate cries" and sobs.¹¹⁰ Although Williams doesn't mention it, breathing constitutes a prime channel for these sensationalized disarticulations and inarticulations. According to Williams, the potency of the "spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion" is measured by the spectators' impulse to partake in the excess and mimic the characters' expression.¹¹¹ It is no surprise that theorists of breath in screen cultures such as Davina Quinlivan have concerned themselves with the interplay between on- and off-screen breathing.¹¹² By attuning themselves to the distress or elation of characters, spectators might reproduce, intentionally or not, the breathing they witness. Or a more sinuous mimetic circuit might develop. As Ian Bryce Jones contends, respiratory interpellations by video game interfaces aren't always met with compliance on the part of players, inasmuch as some games thematize or incorporate into their very mechanics the potential disobedience of rogue breathers.¹¹³

My point in using the generic label *breathing aesthetics* is that respiration is not the exclusive dominion of poetry or fiction, of film or video game. This isn't to say that all art exists on the same plane in this study. The respiratory tactics and strategies for living through precarity inventoried in this book are not only historically, culturally, and environmentally situated but also genre- and medium-specific. Works, like *DICTEE*, *LETTERRS*, and *Safe*, that fall under the breathing aesthetics header meet two criteria: first, they exhibit an attunement of content and form to respiration (though not necessarily the artist's breathing or the spectator's); and second, they relay a conceptual engagement with the sociopolitical and environmental dynamics mediated by breathing.

The aesthetics of breathing provides an opportunity to review the assumptions that inform ecocritical approaches to art. Some ecocritics assess the worth of aesthetic objects based on their ability to rouse environmental awareness or consciousness. Ursula K. Heise and Lawrence Buell, for example, separately underscore the role of literature and cinema in helping individuals and groups to become aware of large-scale ecological shifts and to project an environmentalist

agenda onto a planetary canvas.¹¹⁴ Likewise, Zhang offers that “sensitizing ourselves to the affective climates around us allows us to be more deliberate about creating the kinds of atmospheres amid which we want to live.”¹¹⁵ This scholarship accomplishes the important task of highlighting the ways art makes environmental challenges immediate and promotes sound behavior. At the same time, we should not overestimate the capacity of readers or spectators exposed to the inextricability of vitality and morbidity relayed by the aesthetics of breathing to step out into the world and transform it through sheer force of will. It would require a leap of faith to believe that all reactions to this aesthetics—from exhaustion to disorientation, to panic, to titillation—fulfill a civic purpose.¹¹⁶ Across *Breathing Aesthetics*, I consider awareness and consciousness from a technical standpoint (witnessing someone’s labored breathing makes me aware or conscious of mine) without sublimating them into civic or moral positions. In doing so, I account for a range of aesthetic responses not so easily subsumed under such qualities as being more conscious or being more deliberate.

Readers will notice the occasional commixing of literal and figurative breathing as well as intentional and unintentional breathlessness in both the art I showcase and my analysis. Some instances of mediation covered in *Breathing Aesthetics* organize or disorganize actual respiration. Others manage the range of figurative meanings that respiration takes on. Others still set out to do both, tweaking breath’s figurative work in hopes of producing a corporeal effect. Due to its ubiquity and its importance to scientific and cultural conceptions of life, breathing constitutes an especially busy intersection in the traffic between the literal and the figurative. Even though I regularly differentiate between breathing as experience, form, and symbol, the direction of this traffic isn’t always clear, nor is it always intuitive. What looks to me like a symbolic engagement with breath might not feel like an abstraction to its originator. For instance, in Ana Mendieta’s film work, brought up in chapter 1, an ostensibly intentional performance of difficult breathing symbolizing historical trauma might just as well be a slight accentuation of a respiratory difficulty that the artist, whether or not she was present to it, would have experienced as an unintentional symptom of such trauma. In any case, even deliberately erratic respiration can cause confusion and disorganization that exceed what an artist is capable of managing. While I acknowledge that there exists a distinction between not being able to breathe and performing not being able to breathe, I, as a spectator and a critic, am not always in a position to locate this distinction with accuracy. The same can be said of some of the individuals who turn breathing into (an) art.

Another question pertaining to intention deserves to be addressed: whether the writers and artists assembled in this study understand themselves to be contributing to a respiratory archive. The title of this book does not refer to a unified movement or program, and in my curation I oscillate between compiling works intended to address a contemporary crisis in breathing (for example, the practices of respiratory notation in chapter 2) and exposing the ways works not generally associated with respiration also address this crisis (the ceremonial poetry and fiction of healing in chapter 3, or the speculative city writing in chapter 4). The purpose of the case studies is to track how a number of works differently articulate the relation between respiration and art and, consequently, redefine the very idea of an aesthetics of breathing.

To feel out the contours of the aesthetics of respiration and start building this book's archive, I now turn to Fred Wah's *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (1981). This is a book of poetry, but one that is not tethered to the program laid out by midcentury breath poetics. Wah's work is indicative of a minoritarian formation of the aesthetics of breathing proper to the crisis in the reproduction of life that has raged since the last decades of the twentieth century. *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* contains untitled poems that range from short onomatopoeic couplets to plumper stanzas verging on prose poetry. The preface offers a statement on the book's ontology:

This is a book of remembering. I am trying to clarify what the language carries for me, the ontogeny. Somehow a selection of the information of a life is made and placed in such a way as to allow it to generate a truth otherwise impossible to locate. But the book is a "draft," since each incision (the beachwood, bookwood, and so runes, etc.) changes the whole thing it is part of. To select out a pattern of things having to do with any of it has to do with all of it. One of my teachers told me "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" and that makes more sense to me now.¹¹⁷

The nineteenth-century German biologist and zoologist Ernst Haeckel is generally credited for the phrase "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." The development of an individual organism, the principle goes, expresses the intermediate forms of its ancestors throughout evolution.

Environmental studies customarily treats breath as accretive.¹¹⁸ Each breath recapitulates the long history of respiration, and photosynthesis, and the wind; this is one, not strictly anatomical, way ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In the collection's inaugural poem, "breathin'" with an *n apostrophe* figures an open-ended synthesis:

I like the purity of all things seen
through the accumulation of thrust
forward between the vehicle
container maybe/or “thing” called body
because time seems to be only *it* appears
to look into the green mountain valleys
or through them to the rivers & nutrient creeks
where was never the problem animal is
I still have a name “breathin’ it
with a sigh”¹¹⁹

“The accumulation of thrust / forward” takes place between the “vehicle / container” “or ‘thing’ called body” and—and what? The prepositional phrase is incomplete. The poet rushes, maybe obsessively, maybe distractedly, to musings on time, landscapes, and animals. We are left assuming that the accumulation takes place between *body* and *not-body*. One word for this mediation is *breathing*. And indeed, breathing shows up in the penultimate line, at the end of processes of accumulation—first of thrust, then of digressive clauses.

Wah most often uses *to breathe* as a transitive verb; in the above poem, for instance, the speaker breathes his name with a sigh. It’s in another poem on naming that Wah’s musings on recapitulation most obviously coalesce into a concept of genealogical breathing. The poem opens with a figure of accumulation, “the buildup”:

the buildup
how I listen to myself make it
“hold on”
so that the day remains open
the next collision in the light
and catch up to the breath
breathing somewhere
the air
as it comes out ahead of me
wah^h, wah^h¹²⁰

This poem accrues momentum to culminate with a performance, rather than a description, of the poet’s act of breathing his name with a sigh. The ending can be read as two lines (“h h / wah wah”) or more cogently as a single, winding line (“wah—h, wah—h”). Each suspended *h* recalls the elevation of the shoulders

that amplifies sighing. The suspension also evokes superscripts or mathematical exponents. In this sense, each sigh is prolonged. When the notation reappears a few pages later, Wah's name has turned into the very sigh that previously accompanied it:

wuh^{h₁₂₁}

From “wah” to “wuh,” the tongue, at first slightly flattened and pulled toward the back of the mouth, relaxes. The change in vowel occasions a buccal release. Wah’s poetry resides in the tension between holding on and letting go, between catching up to the breath and sighing. The book’s title, *Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh*, predicates the poet’s exhale on the resilience of those who, well before him, bore the name “Wah.” The poet’s breath draws on a vitality sustained through experiences of displacement, Wah’s ancestors having moved from China, Ireland, Scotland, and Scandinavian countries to Saskatchewan, Canada.¹²² The intergenerational connection manifested by breath is contingent and provisional; as the preface notes, any change to the book would “[change] the whole thing it is part of.”¹²³ Wah’s genealogical breathing hints at an ecology of the particular: it inhibits possible interpretations of the recapitulation of phylogeny by ontogeny as delineating an even field of experience. Moreover, the triumph that we, as readers, might be tempted to project onto a poetics of resilience is deflated by the affectively ambivalent sigh—a sigh that might express exhaustion, exasperation, relief, or mourning. Vitality and morbidity collide in the poet’s “breathin’,” an accumulation of thrust synthesized by a decelerative sigh.

Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh models a respiratory subjectivity: the poet’s identity, indeed his very name, emerges through a sigh. Wah also relies on breath to foster modes of relation between the living and their ancestors that are informed by principles of inheritance, dependence, and contingency. Structured by the two processes modeled by Wah, *Breathing Aesthetics* sketches the development of respiratory subjectivities and the development of respiratory politics.

Aerial View

Breathing Aesthetics joins a humanistic corpus on breath that grew noticeably in the demi-decade over which the following chapters were written. The medical humanities’ examination of breath, on display in Rebecca Oxley and Andrew Russell’s June 2020 issue of *Body and Society*, titled “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World,” tends to assume an analogy between everyday and scholarly attitudes toward respiration: this life-giving and life-sustaining process is often taken for granted, and it has likewise been overlooked as a topic

of research.¹²⁴ This premise weaves into every argument a normative, meta-theoretical declaration: that respiration deserves our attention and is a worthy object of inquiry.¹²⁵ The impulse to validate the “unusual research concern” that is breath also animates Magdalena Górska’s *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Struggle* (2016)—but Górska’s contribution to feminist science studies goes further, showing what we stand to gain from attuning ourselves to breathing, namely, an appreciation of its function as an “ethical and political force for feminist political struggle.”¹²⁶ I am indebted to the turns to respiration within the medical humanities and feminist science studies, which have yielded, respectively, a relational model of embodiment and a politics of experience exceeding sexual politics in the strict sense. Yet I refrain from overstating either breathing’s idiosyncrasy or its novelty as an object of study. Following the lead of such theorists of the ordinary as Kathleen Stewart and Berlant, I operate on the assumption that intensities that never quite rise to the status of event might reveal just as much about contemporary crisis as events that occupy a properly dramatic register.¹²⁷ What is more, the equation between ordinary inattention to breath and a general silence around the topic risks concealing rich histories of respiratory research in scholarly and artistic disciplines. Traditions from psychoanalysis to performance have produced the conditions that enable scholars like Górska to speculate a radical ethics or politics of breath, and it is one aim of *Breathing Aesthetics* to excavate these traditions.

The encounter with breath staged in this book is more formal than those of the medical humanities and feminist science studies. Stefanie Heine attends to the formalization of respiratory sounds and rhythms in the meticulous *Poetics of Breathing: Modern Literature’s Syncopé* (2021). Heine describes how various twentieth-century writers attuned their practices to breath and, in doing so, reflected on the relation between corporeality, expressivity, and mediality.¹²⁸ Whereas Heine, in focusing on breath as a compositional principle or a precondition for writing, expands projectivism beyond the terms and corpus laid out by Olson, I am interested in what art does with and to breathing, specifically in how aesthetic mediation makes breathing available as a resource for living through crisis. In the pamphlet *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (2018), Franco “Bifo” Berardi turns to poetry to picture a collective release from such crisis. But across the book, both poetry and respiration lose their meaning: the former comes to designate a tension between chaos and harmony that the author spots everywhere except, it turns out, in poems; the latter is reduced to an attunement to a “vibration of the cosmos” compromised under finance capitalism.¹²⁹ So vaguely defined, respiratory poetry is but a promise of transcendence—an autonomous realm that, if we are to trust Berardi, enables us to escape pres-

ent conditions. The genre- and medium-specific analysis of *Breathing Aesthetics* is more pragmatic. The aesthetics of respiration is no antidote to the crisis of breathing. Or, if it is to be considered an antidote, it should also, per the logic of the *pharmakon*, be considered a poison. Respiratory tactics and strategies do not chart an easy way out of precarity, insofar as breathing makes survival and depletion inextricable—not to mention that depletion may feel like survival, and survival like depletion. “Seen not as an empty virtual space but as particular,” Jennifer Scappettone remarks, “air makes for a democracy of harm that has had artists and authors strategizing remedies for generations—remedies that are always necessarily incomplete.”¹³⁰

Breathing Aesthetics’ closest affiliates—an aspirational statement, to be sure—may be Crawley’s *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2016) and Hsu’s *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (2020), two monographs that map out respiration’s uneven geographies. Like Crawley, I see aesthetic mediation as a process that reveals and makes use of breathing’s contradictions, affirming the possibility of minoritarian life from its conditions of impossibility.¹³¹ And like Hsu, I take a comparative approach as I track the management of respiratory morbidity across media, environmental, and cultural contexts.¹³²

Five chapters and a coda follow this introduction. The first two chapters form a diptych on breathing subjectivity. Chapter 1, “Breathing against Nature,” describes respiration as a mode of spectatorship in the same class as watching and listening. Developed in the 1970s and 1980s, elemental media such as Ana Mendieta’s earth-body sculpture and Amy Greenfield’s cinema dance invite spectators to process embodiment as epiphenomenal to environments that are both sustaining and depleting. The artists make breathing the site of postpastoral experience, a dysphoric encounter with pastoral ideals of natural vitality and purity. Whereas in the first chapter being shocked or eased into a consciousness of breathing constitutes a disorganizing event, the second chapter, “Aesthetic Self-Medication (Three Regimens),” asks how writers and artists find order amid chaos by channeling their conscious breathing toward a more or less stable sense of self. Surveying the queer life writing and performance of Dodie Bellamy, CAConrad, and Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose, I argue that therapeutic notations of breathing, even incoherent or disorganized breathing, achieve aesthetic self-medication: they structure the experience of crises ranging from chronic illness to environmental collapse.

The third and fourth chapters diagram respiratory politics. Chapter 3, “Feminist Breathing,” further probes therapeutic approaches to respiration by tracing a genealogy of feminist breathing since the 1970s. Deviating from narratives

of decline that locate in that decade the end of breathing as a means of feminist socialization and politicization, this chapter demonstrates that Indigenous and Black feminisms have continuously relied on respiratory rituals as tactics or strategies for living through the foreclosure of political presents and futures. Linda Hogan's ceremonial poetry and Toni Cade Bambara's fiction on healing exemplify a feminist breathing that enmeshes restoration and risk to destabilize the wholeness or wellness it affords. The fourth chapter, "Smog Sensing," maps out the ethics and politics of opacity in multimodal works by Renee Gladman, in particular a cycle of speculative novels set in the city-state of Ravicka. In a context where the racial and sexual identity of characters is as inscrutable as the smog-filled city in which they dwell, relations are organized by symptomatic breathing, an interpretive attitude that consists in learning the limits of what is graspable about embodiment and experience. While chapter 3 surveys the political possibilities of synchronized breathing, chapter 4 approaches respiratory asynchrony as a resource in itself.

The fifth chapter, "Death in the Form of Life," turns to the discourses of the nonviolent last breath that circulate in Frederick Wiseman's and Allan King's cinema vérité. I lay out a paradox between, on the one hand, the limited consciousness and responsiveness that typify the good death in the era of life support and palliative care and, on the other, the dying subject imagined by witnesses: a subject who in the event of the last breath is present enough to "leave peacefully," one who returns to the scene of sociality only to subtract themself from it. The fantasy that in the last breath the dying individual encounters finitude on their own terms fulfills a social function, helping survivors to manage their own respiratory contingency—to keep breathing, with loss.

Like all genealogical inquiries into how the present became itself, this book contains the traces of alternative, unrealized presents—presents that, throughout, I seek to activate. Jayne Elizabeth Lewis writes, in a study of literature in the long eighteenth century, that air and "atmosphere cannot be stood outside of, so [they] can never be completely objectified, fixed, or, as a result, intellectually possessed."¹³³ Lewis is right that air, atmosphere, and breath are elusive objects of inquiry. However, more than two centuries after the period that concerns Lewis, air and breath appear, in at least some ways, to have been seized. Their pollution, weaponization, and monetization have turned them into dispositifs of state control and violence. It's also the case that, under such conditions, breathing has become a minoritarian aesthetic and political vernacular in its own right.

The figures who populate this book have had to come to terms with breathlessness—with what it means and what it does. Breathlessness is a modality of

breathing, not its negation. My contention in *Breathing Aesthetics* isn't, then, that breathlessness ought to be eradicated. Not all respiratory interruptions feel like injury or oppression, and it may be elating to have our breath taken away or to encounter someone or something breathtaking. Breathlessness, in short, may be life-giving and life-sustaining. Whereas Achille Mbembe, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, calls for a "universal right to breathe" and condemns "everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression," I do not believe it is logical, or especially productive, to speculate some easy, egalitarian breathing that would solve and exist apart from respiratory constraints.¹³⁴ Breath, even defined as "that which is both ungrounded and our common ground" or "that which we hold in common," mediates histories of asphyxiation.¹³⁵ What I'm after in *Breathing Aesthetics* is an imaginary that accommodates the fullness of breathing and makes room for a range of *benign respiratory variations*, a term I take up in the coda. In the chapters that follow, I assemble a repertoire of responses to crisis so that we may imagine breathing, indeed breathlessness, as greater than an occupational hazard of contemporary life.

The logo for Duke University Press is displayed. It features the word "DUKE" in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, set against a solid gray rectangular background. Below "DUKE", the words "UNIVERSITY" and "PRESS" are partially visible in a smaller, lighter gray font.

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Notes

Introduction

Excerpts from Orlando White's "NASCENT," from LETTERRS (2015), are reprinted by permission of Nightboat Books. Excerpts from *Scree: The Collected Earlier Poems, 1962–1991*, © 2015 Fred Wah, Talonbooks, Vancouver, BC, are reproduced by permission of the publisher.

- 1 *Toxin* refers to a poison produced within the living cells or organs of plants and animals, and *toxicant* to a synthetic, human-made chemical. Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 94.
- 2 Eigen, *Toxic Nourishment*, 3, 1, xiii.
- 3 Eigen, *Toxic Nourishment*, 3.
- 4 Eigen, *Damaged Bonds*, 32.
- 5 On the synergic operation of Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, see Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 32–36.
- 6 Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*, 6. "These problems with olfactory epistemology and representation," Hsu goes on, "have contributed to the denigration of smell in Western aesthetics. At least since the Enlightenment, smell has been framed as too immersive, imprecise, subjective, interactive, involuntary, material, promiscuous, and ineffable to convey aesthetic experience" (6).
- 7 Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," 124. Further complicating atmospheric description and theorization is the fact that "sensing an atmosphere cannot be reduced to the perception of any discrete elements or limited to any one sensory mode. Instead, such perception responds to the relation between all the elements in a

setting as they interact with each other in the environment created by their co-presence.” Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, 79.

8 Cha, *DICTEE*, 3.

9 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “Artist’s Statement/Summary of Work,” Cha Collection, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California, n.d., <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf4j49n6h6/?order=3&brand=oac4>.

10 Cha, *DICTEE*, 3, 4.

11 Cha, *DICTEE*, 3.

12 Cha, *DICTEE*, 4.

13 Cha, *DICTEE*, 4.

14 Cha, *DICTEE*, 5.

15 Originally from Tólikan, Arizona, White is Diné of the Naaneesht’ézhí Tábaahí and born for the Naakai Diné’e.

16 White, LETTERRS, 13.

17 White, LETTERRS, 17.

18 White, LETTERRS, 23, 43, 59, 67, 68, 71, 72.

19 White, LETTERRS, 21.

20 Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics.”

21 Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics.”

22 Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics.”

23 Braun, *Breathing Race into the Machine*, 13, 26. The history of aerial and respiratory colonialism also includes the circulation, until the late nineteenth century, of humoral and climate theories, with their anti-Black and anti-Indigenous concepts of racial difference and morphological change. See LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America*, esp. 32–62.

24 Brugge and Goble, “A Documentary History of Uranium Mining and the Navajo People,” 25–47.

25 Dillon and Sze, “Police Power and Particulate Matters,” 13.

26 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 109.

27 “Asthma and African Americans,” Office of Minority Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Social Services, accessed February 11, 2021, <http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=15>; “Inequitable Exposure to Air Pollution from Vehicles in California,” Union of Concerned Scientists, January 28, 2019, <https://www.ucsusa.org/clean-vehicles/electric-vehicles/CA-air-quality-equity#XFxySixKhxy>.

28 Taibbi, *I Can’t Breathe*, 74.

29 Laurel Wamsley, “Erica Garner, Who Became an Activist after Her Father’s Death, Dies,” NPR, December 30, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwoway/2017/12/30/574514217/erica-garner-who-became-an-activist-after-her-fathers-death-dies>.

30 Oliver Laughland, Jessica Glenza, Steven Trasher, and Paul Lewis, “‘We Can’t Breathe’: Eric Garner’s Last Words Become Protesters’ Rallying Cry,” *Guardian*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/04/we-cant-breathe-eric-garner-protesters-chant-last-words>.

31 Lucy Tompkins, “Here’s What You Need to Know about Elijah McClain’s Death,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-was-elijah-mcclain.html>. In photos taken at a memorial site for McClain, Aurora police officers are seen smiling, with one of them re-creating the carotid control hold that their colleagues put on McClain. Bill Chappell, “Three Police Officers Fired over Photos at Elijah McClain Memorial,” NPR, June 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/30/885178533/colorado-police-officers-under-investigation-for-photos-at-elijah-mcclain-memori>.

32 Two autopsies have determined Floyd’s death to be a homicide. Whereas the Hennepin County medical examiner concluded that Floyd had died by cardiac arrest while restrained by officers employing “neck compressions,” an independent autopsy commissioned by Floyd’s family found “evidence . . . of mechanical or traumatic asphyxia” as the cause of death. Frances Robles and Audre D. S. Burch, “How Did George Floyd Die? Here’s What We Know,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-autopsy-michael-baden.html>. When the full Hennepin County report was released, the public learned that Floyd, who had lost his security job at a bar and restaurant forced to comply with pandemic closure rules, had tested positive for COVID-19 in early April. Scott Neuman, “Medical Examiner’s Autopsy Reveals George Floyd Had Positive Test for Coronavirus,” NPR, June 4, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/04/869278494/medical-examiners-autopsy-reveals-george-floyd-had-positive-test-for-coronavirus>.

33 Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in US History,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

34 Zoe Cormier, “How Covid-19 Can Damage the Brain,” BBC FUTURE, June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200622-the-long-term-effects-of-covid-19-infection>; “Post-COVID Conditions,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed September 16, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/long-term-effects.html>.

35 “Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>; Chowk-wanyun and Reed, “Racial Health Disparities and Covid-19.” On the inadequacy of public health infrastructures and the displacement of risk onto private households in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, see Mitropoulos, *Pandemonium*. In reaction to the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and under the guise of ensuring public safety, Los Angeles County, in California, temporarily closed nineteen of its thirty-six free COVID-19 testing sites, preventing members of disenfranchised populations from accessing the service. Sareen Habeshian, “Half of L.A. County’s COVID-19 Testings Sites Remain Closed as Protests against

George Floyd's Killing Continue," KTLA, June 1, 2020, <https://ktla.com/news/local-news/half-of-l-a-countys-covid-19-testings-sites-remain-closed-as-protests-against-george-floyds-killing-continue/>.

36 Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 1. See also Crawley, *The Lonely Letters*, 41.

37 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 226.

38 See, e.g., Theodore Richards, "I Can't Breathe," *Re-imagining*, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://reimaginingmagazine.com/project/i-cant-breathe/>.

39 Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, 65. See also Perera and Pugliese, "Introduction," esp. 1–4; Rose, "Combat Breathing in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*," 118.

40 Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 38, 63.

41 Tremblay, "How Sia Kept Breathing and Became a Formalist."

42 Tompkins, "Crude Matter, Queer Form," 267–68.

43 Engelmann, "Toward a Poetics of Air," 431.

44 Puar et al., "Precarity Talk," 166.

45 Puar et al., "Precarity Talk," 169.

46 Nayar, *Ecoprecarity*, 8–9.

47 Marder, "Being Dumped," 180.

48 Marder, "Being Dumped," 182.

49 Marder, "Being Dumped," 182.

50 Marder, "Being Dumped," 188–89.

51 Taylor, *Toxic Communities*, 1; Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities*. See also Zimring, *Clean and White*.

52 Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*, 12.

53 Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 14.

54 Michael Crowley, "Drawing the Line: Regulation of 'Wide Area' Riot Control Agent Delivery Mechanisms under the Chemical Weapons Convention," Bradford Non-lethal Weapons Project and Omega Research Foundation, April 2013, https://omegaresearchfoundation.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Publications/BNLWRP%20ORF%20RCA%20Munitions%20Report%20April%202013_o.pdf. Despite a ban on use of chemical weapons across state lines, US border agents gathered media attention when in 2018 they fired tear gas grenades into Mexico, making explicit the role of asphyxia in the preemptive control of migration. "How Tear Gas Became a Favorite Weapon of U.S. Border Patrol, Despite Being Banned in Warfare," Democracy Now!, November 28, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/11/28/how_tear_gas_became_a_favorite.

55 Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas*, 70.

56 See Doyle, *Campus Sex, Campus Security*, 91–92.

57 Régine Debatty, "Using Respiration to Mine Crypto-Currencies," *We Make Money Not Art*, December 5, 2017, <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/using-respiration-to-mine-crypto-currencies/>.

58 Kelly Conaboy, "The Business of Breathing," *Damn Joan*, 2018, <https://damnjoan.com/business-breathing>.

59 Conaboy, "The Business of Breathing."

60 Kressbach, "Breath Work," 185.

61 “About Us,” Spire, accessed November 1, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181128091724/https://spire.io/pages/about>.

62 “About Our Products,” Vitality Air, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://vitalityair.ph/about-our-products/>.

63 Katie Hunt, “Canadian Start-Up Sells Bottled Air to China, Says Sales Booming,” CNN, December 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/15/asia/china-canadian-company-selling-clean-air/>.

64 Ahmann and Kenner, “Breathing Late Industrialism,” 417.

65 Ahmann and Kenner, “Breathing Late Industrialism,” 422. Ahmann and Kenner continue, “To study late industrialism is to reject the idea that we are living in the twilight of a once-ideal system, struggling to deal with unexpected glitches. Instead, we are living at a moment when industrialism’s systemic harms have begun to spill out of our blind spots” (422).

66 Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison*, 157.

67 Kim, *Unbecoming Language*, 169.

68 McCormack, *Atmospheric Things*, 32.

69 Simondon, *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, 21–23. I translate the French “couple individu-milieu” as “individual-milieu couple,” rather than “pair individual-environment,” Gregory Flanders’s translation as it appears in Simondon, “The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis,” 5.

70 Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality*, 5–6.

71 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

72 Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment,” 284.

73 Kenner, *Breathtaking*, 5.

74 Toxicology reports pin this gender asymmetry on a host of biological and social factors, such as the constitution of women’s immune system; their generally higher proportion of body fat, which tends to retain chemicals; their lower percentage of alcohol dehydrogenase, an enzyme that breaks down toxins; and their traditionally higher exposure to household chemicals. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 117.

75 Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World*, 27.

76 Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty*, 6.

77 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 117; Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 75–76, 90. On environmental illness in racially differentiated atmospheres, see also Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*, 52–54.

78 Ray and Sibara, “Introduction,” 1–5. The term “eco-crip theory” appears in the collection’s subtitle. Versions of Ray and Sibara’s research question are posed, elsewhere in the volume, in Johnson, “Bringing Together Feminist Disability Studies and Environmental Justice”; Kafer, “Bodies of Nature.” See also Cella, “The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature.”

79 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xiii–xiv.

80 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 135, 136.

81 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 135.

82 Mitchell and Snyder, “Is the Study of Debility Akin to Disability Studies without Disability?,” 665.

83 Mitchell and Snyder, “Is the Study of Debility Akin to Disability Studies without Disability?,” 665, emphasis removed.

84 Connor, *The Matter of Air*, 9.

85 Menely, “Anthropocene Air,” 100.

86 Bachelard, *L’air et les songes*, 269, 265.

87 Irigaray, *L’oubli de l’air chez Martin Heidegger*, 9.

88 On Irigaray’s substitution of *interval* with *breath*, see Tremblay, “An Aesthetics and Ethics of Emergence,” 290.

89 Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 11. I add “aerial” to “ethereal,” Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc’s translation of “aérienne,” to reflect the literary and figurative sense of Irigaray’s term of choice in *Être deux*, 26.

90 Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 2.

91 Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 181.

92 Marder, “Breathing ‘to’ the Other,” 98; Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 31; Feron, “Respiration et action chez Lévinas,” 203.

93 Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, 143, 5.

94 Škof and Berndtson, *Atmospheres of Breathing*.

95 For instance, Margareta Ingrid Christian observes in Aby Warburg’s dissertation on Sandro Botticelli that literal and figurative uses of the air pivot on the notion of inspiration, from the Latin *inspiratio* (to breathe in). Warburg believed that the reigning spirituality and mentality of Botticelli’s surroundings, or what was figuratively in the air, inspired depictions of actual air in motion in his painting—for example, Venus’s flowing hair in the *Nascita di Venere*. Christian, “*Aer, Aurae, Venti*,” 405.

96 Ursell, “Inspiration,” 709–10.

97 Mackey, “Breath and Precarity,” 5.

98 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 239.

99 Stefanie Heine identifies such a compositional principle in writing by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac (*Poetics of Breathing*, 49–116). Jason R. Rudy reads Olson’s focus on energy as evidence of “the staying power of Victorian physiological poetics, as well as the continued imbrication of physiological poetics with the language of electric charge” (*Electric Meters*, 185). Physiological poetics encompasses “Alfred Tennyson’s ‘poetics of sensation,’ the midcentury ‘Spasmodic phenomenon, [and] the so-called fleshy school of the 1870s,’ all of which demand ‘to be read as physiologically inspired: rhythms that pulse in the body, a rhetoric of sensation that readers might feel compelled to experience’” (2).

100 Mackey, “Breath and Precarity,” 6.

101 Grobe, *The Art of Confession*, 45.

102 Mackey, “Breath and Precarity,” 9.

103 With “Breath and Precarity,” Mackey reframes as a respiratory matter the tension between Black Mountain poetry or projectivism and Black experimental aesthetics that lies at the heart of his 1993 monograph, *Discrepant Engagement*.

104 Moten, *The Little Edges*, 4.

105 Michel, *Le souffle coupé*, 27, 73. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would later make the more

sophisticated point that Proust's interest in the weather problematized the relation between open and closed systems (*The Weather in Proust*, 4).

106 Michel, *Le souffle coupé*, 181.

107 Rose, "Combat Breathing in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*," 113; Rose, "In the Wake of Asbestos," 140.

108 Diffrient, "Dead, but Still Breathing."

109 Williams, "Film Bodies," 3.

110 Williams, "Film Bodies," 4.

111 Williams, "Film Bodies," 4.

112 Quinlivan, *The Place of Breath in Cinema*, 10–11, 48, 168.

113 Jones, "Do(n't) Hold Your Breath."

114 Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 117; Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 39.

115 Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," 123–24.

116 The ecocritical equation between aesthetic experience and the acquisition of civic virtues informs a wave of self-branded empirical research that purports to measure the influence of climate fiction based on responses reported by readers. This research presents some shortcomings: one, it presumes that readers are always present to their experiences, leaving out the role of the unconscious in processes of socialization and politicization; two, it flattens aesthetic experience by rerouting all responses toward such familiar destinations as liberal and conservative attitudes; and three, it produces a contradiction between the content of much climate fiction (depictions of radical vulnerability or multispecies entanglement) and the assumed subject consuming it (an agentive, reasonable, and rational subject). See, e.g., Schneider-Mayerson, "The Influence of Climate Fiction"; Schneider-Mayerson, "Just as in the Book?"; Schneider-Mayerson et al., "Environmental Literature as Persuasion."

117 Wah, *Scree*, 439.

118 See, e.g., Povinelli, "Hippocrates' Breaths," esp. 32, 34–35; Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 42–43; Kean, *Caesar's Last Breath*.

119 Wah, *Scree*, 441.

120 Wah, *Scree*, 455.

121 Wah, *Scree*, 459.

122 On Wah's poetics of ethnicity as "betweenness," see Wah, "A Poetics of Ethnicity," 108; Wah, "Is a Door a Word?," 39; Saul, *Writing the Roaming Subject*, 105.

123 Wah, *Scree*, 439.

124 In their introduction to the issue, Oxley and Russell write, "Despite the merits of exploring breath as a phenomenon that is at once intrinsically shared but contextually distinct, the meanings and embodiment of breath [have] seldom been examined as a central research theme in the humanities and social sciences" ("Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World," 4). Jane Macnaughton, a contributor, adds, "Nothing is so much taken for granted as breath, the literal source of our lifeblood. . . . So entangled is breath in everything bodies are, experience and do that it gets taken for granted, lost from view and is rarely a direct

focus of attention. Putting breath under the spotlight is, therefore, a daunting task” (“Making Breath Visible,” 30–31).

125 Macnaughton, for instance, attempts “to bring breath into visibility” (“Making Breath Visible,” 33).

126 Górska, *Breathing Matters*, 22, 284. Borrowing from the nomenclature of feminist science studies, specifically Karen Barad’s agential realism, Górska describes breath as a political process of “corpo-affective, material-discursive and situatedly dispersed agential intra-active enactments, metabolizations, transformations and resistances of intersectional power relations, and an enactment of alternatives” (284).

127 Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 262–63.

128 Heine, *Poetics of Breathing*, 3, 6, 31.

129 Berardi, *Breathing*, 17. I discuss the pamphlet and its case studies in my review (Tremblay, “Breathing”).

130 Scappettone, “Precarity Shared,” 47.

131 Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 23.

132 Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*. On smell and the negotiation of “privacy in public, a norm of personal territory that involved managing the boundaries of the body and its intrusion into circumambient space,” in the context of eighteenth-century sociability, see Tullett, *Smell in Eighteenth-Century England*, 2. On the politics of smell in nineteenth-century cities facing sanitary challenges amid rapid urban and industrial growth, see Kiechle, *Smell Detectives*.

133 Lewis, *Air’s Appearance*, 6.

134 Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” 561.

135 Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” 561.

1. Breathing against Nature

1 “Breathing,” written and performed by Kate Bush and directed by Keith MacMillan (EMI Records, 1980).

2 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 1. The nation in Berlant’s study is the United States, but the figure of the fetus has dominated antiabortion rhetoric well beyond the United States.

3 On the “lead panic” sparked by potentially toxic toys associated with Chinese manufacturers, Chen observes, “There is in fact very little that is new about the ‘lead panic’ in 2007 in the United States. . . . In fact, anxieties about intoxications, mixings, and Chinese agents have steadily accompanied U.S. cultural productions and echo the Yellow Peril fears articulated earlier in the twentieth century. That lead was subject to an outbreak narrative works synergistically with these anxieties, and these narratives may indeed have been partially incited or facilitated by them” (*Animacies*, 169). Chen adds, “The recent lead panic echoes, yet is a variation of, the turn-of-the-century Orientalized threat to white domesticity” (170).

4 Sheldon, *The Child to Come*, vii, 2–3.