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INTRODUCTION

On August 6, 1945 the daily forecast for Hiroshima, Japan called for clear skies and plenty of sun. According to John Hersey's account, "the morning was perfectly clear and so warm that the day promised to be uncomfortable."[1] Conditions were about to get worse. At 8:15 a.m., an atomic bomb burst in the air above the city center. *Hiroshima* (1946), which documents the bomb's aftermath from the rotating point of view of six survivors, also describes a series of strange weather events, both real and imagined. The atomic blast itself, in its unprecedented impact upon the human sensorium, was variously received, depending upon the person's position and perspective, as a weather event of unimaginable magnitude. To Mr. Tanimoto, a Japanese clergyman standing two miles from the epicenter of the blast, the luminous radiance of the flash "seemed a sheet of sun" (5). Less than a mile away, Father Kleinsorge, a German Jesuit living in the city, thought that the flash was the result of "a large meteor colliding with the earth" (12). A fisherman in his sampan on the Inland Sea, twenty miles from the city center, believed that the loudest sound he had ever heard was "thunder" announcing an oncoming, world-wrecking storm (6).

Although the atomic explosion was not, as its initial victims believed, a natural cataclysm, the energic effects of the blast did indeed significantly modify Hiroshima's weather world. "Why is it night already?" Myeko Nakamura asked his mother (19), after "such clouds of dust had risen that there was a sort of twilight around" (6). During the day, as the air "grew darker and darker," the weather got weirder and weirder (6). "Through the clouded air," Mr.

[1] John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1946; New York: Vintage, 1985), 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Tanimoto saw Hiroshima itself "giving off a thick, dreadful miasma" (18). Later in the afternoon, as refugees began to assemble in Asano Park, the "wind grew stronger and stronger," and a whirlwind whipped through the park, ripping up trees and pummeling bodies already traumatized by ghastly flash burns (39). In addition to all these meteorological anomalies, the weather was made strange in another sense as well. The people of Hiroshima could no longer tell whether the weather was natural or manmade. "When huge drops of water the size of marbles began to fall" (18), the people in the park began to panic, assailed by hail that they received as weaponized gasoline, dropped by American warplanes as a prelude to indiscriminate incineration (38).

Moreover, the atomic bomb's uncanny agency not only altered the weather, but seemed to alter the very nature of nature itself: the properties of light, the growth of plants, the biochemistry of the human body. The bomb "left prints of the shadows that had been cast by its light," indelibly imprinting the silhouettes of its vaporized victims upon sundry urban surfaces (73). When Miss Sasaki, a young secretary, first walked into Asano Park, she stood "horrified and amazed" by the sudden, florabundant eruption of plant life: "Over everything… was a blanket of fresh, vivid, lush, optimistic green; the verdancy rose even from the foundations of ruined houses. Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city's bones" (69). The bombing of the city was also a "bombardment of the body" (76). The invisible force of "neutrons, beta particles, and gamma rays" (76) lingered on in the "delayed affliction" of lethal radiation (71).

Hiroshima makes its readers acutely aware of "the historicity of the supposedly immutable atmosphere."[2] The human beings whom Hersey, with bitter irony, calls "the objects

[2] Tobias Menely, "Anthropocene Air," *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014): 93-101, 99.

of the first great experiment in the use of atomic power," confront a transformed atmosphere (49). In two senses. Not only does human action alter the material composition of the atmosphere, it also changes the way human beings inhabit the air, the way they experience their atmospheric habitat. No longer just a transparent medium, taken for granted as an intact part of the nonhuman environment, the atmosphere also becomes a formidable force.[3]

"Sentient Atmospheres" tracks the human transformation of the atmosphere across the twentieth century. "Only within the moment of time represented by the present century," wrote Rachel Carson in 1962, "has one species—man—acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world."[4] Like Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Carson's *Silent Spring* describes a world filled with invisible atmospheric agencies released by the power of humankind.[5] The white crystals that fall "like snow upon the roofs and the lawns" of suburban American homes are the toxic debris of DDT.[6] Strontium-90, the radioactive detritus of Cold War atmospheric nuclear testing, "comes to Earth in rain."[7] What Carson first diagnosed in 1962, and Bill McKibben announced as the "end of nature" in 1989, we have now begun to refer to as the "Anthropocene," a term proposed by Paul Crutzen in 2000 to name an epoch in which the human species has become a geophysical

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[3] I draw upon Peter Sloterdijk: "By using violence against the very air that groups breathe, the human being's immediate atmospheric envelope is transformed into something whose intactness or non-intactness is henceforth a question." For Sloterdijk, atmospheric modernity begins on April 22, 1915, in Ypres, France, with the weaponization of a chlorine cloud by the German military. Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 59.

[4] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 1962), 25.

[5] As Ulrich Beck puts it in regard to the toxic ecologies of risk society: "Threats from civilization are bringing about a kind of new 'shadow kingdom,' comparable to the realm of the gods and demons in antiquity, which is hidden behind the visible world and threatens human life on this Earth." Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (1986; London: Sage, 1992), 72.

[6] Carson, *Silent Spring*, 3.

[7] Ibid., 6. The Americans and the Soviets detonated hundreds of nuclear weapons in the planet's air from 1945-1963, but even a single explosion sufficed for global contamination. Radioactive fallout from the detonation of the 15-megaton thermonuclear bomb *Bravo* at Bikini Atoll in 1954 ultimately spread throughout the entirety of the Earth's atmosphere. See, for example, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Radiation Ecologies and the Wars of Light," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (Fall 2009): 468-498.

force operating on a global scale.[8] The human modification of the Earth system is "nowhere more evident than in the atmosphere," in the form of anthropogenic climate change, a hybrid entity that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, dissolves "the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history."[9] Now, we are the weather.

"Sentient Atmospheres" offers the first literary-critical account of this change in the weather. It argues that the sense of atmosphere shifts from descriptive medium to narrative agent in twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. For writers such as Henry James, Michael Herr, Ursula K. Le Guin, David Foster Wallace, and Colson Whitehead, atmosphere no longer functions as a scenic backdrop for human action or a screen for the projection of human emotion. Rather, it irrupts into the human lifeworld as a narrative actant, whether as rival, antagonist, paramour or partner. Collectively, these writers reimagine the relation between subject and atmosphere, registering and reframing salient moments in the modern history of atmospheric modification, from the environmental effects of world war, through the toxic ecologies and "designer air" of late capitalist consumer culture, to our current crisis of anthropogenic climate change. "Sentient Atmospheres" reveals how American authors elaborate atmosphere into an autonomous entity, always in dialectical interplay with human history, but operating in the human world with its own agential thrust.

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[8] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 58. The Anthropocene is put forth as the successor epoch to the Holocene, the last 10,000-12,000 years of relative climatic equilibrium, a planetary stability that enabled the exponential expansion of human civilization. Crutzen proposes the late eighteenth century (1784, the date of James Watt's invention of the steam engine) as the beginning of the Anthropocene, with the human transformation of the Earth system picking up velocity in the post-WWII era (what is referred to as "The Great Acceleration"). See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *IGBP [International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme]* Newsletter 41 (2000): 17-18, 17.

[9] Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature," *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36.8 (2007): 614–621, 616; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009): 197-222, 201.

But what is literary atmosphere? How do we get a conceptual grip on "something that is the most real, yet also the most elusive and least tangible of things?"[10] As its compound etymology suggests—"the englobing sphere (*sphaira*) of the indwelling vapor (*atmos*)"—atmosphere "not only envelops but literally per-vades by going *through* whatever is situated in it, much as a mood utterly pervades both a given situation and the people embroiled in it."[11] The latter metaphor of mood, rather than the notion of agency, predominates in the critical reception of atmosphere. Contemporary lexicons of literary theory, for example, define atmosphere as "the emotional tone pervading a section or the whole of a literary work," or as "the mood and feeling, the intangible quality which appeals to extra-sensory as well as sensory perception, evoked by a work of art."[12] More sophisticated critical studies, such as Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), also treat atmosphere merely metaphorically. For Ngai, every literary work emits a specific tone, a "global or organizing affect" or "organizing quality of feeling akin to an 'atmosphere.'"[13] Discussions of diegetic weather, as well, tend to elide the agential potential of atmosphere. In Roland Barthes's structural model of narrative, for instance, the sense of atmosphere oscillates between mood and meteorology. Atmosphere functions as both "informant" and "index": "To say that through the window of the office where Bond is on duty the moon can be seen half-

[10] Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 28.
[11] Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 219. Casey's italics.
[12] M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 20; J.A. Cuddon and M.A.R. Habib, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 57.
[13] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 28. Tone, as affective gestalt, is irreducible to "a reader's emotional response to a text" as well as "the text's internal representations of feeling" (29). Ngai follows Theodor Adorno when he posits atmosphere as "an objective determination of the artwork." "The atmosphere of the artwork," as Adorno has it, is "that whereby the nexus of the artwork's elements points beyond this nexus and allows each individual element to point beyond itself." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 274.

hidden by thick billowing clouds," at once informs the reader that the forecast calls for a "stormy summer night," and also indexes "atmosphere with reference to the heavy, anguish-laden climate."[14] In contrast to such stalwarts as plot, character, and style—or even more recent objects of critical attention such as objects themselves—atmosphere remains an underexamined dimension of narrative form, overlooked as incidental background, or reduced to an impressionistic synonym for the tone of a text.[15]

Even recent efforts to revive atmosphere as an object of inquiry omit its agentic aspects. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012) frames atmosphere as an aesthetic phenomenon, what he refers to as the "dimension of *Stimmung*."[16] "'Reading for *Stimmung*,' as Gumbrecht describes it, "means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality."[17] Literary forms may "absorb atmospheres and moods and later offer them up for experience in a new present," an ambient

[14] Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image, Music, Text* (1966; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 96.
[15] In regard to the above, authoritative books by Bill Brown (objects), D.A. Miller (style), Alex Woloch (character), and Peter Brooks (plot) come to mind. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, the Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Here, I develop an observation made by Jayne Lewis. See Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660-1794* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 7.
[16] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5. The semantic arc of *Stimmung* embraces atmosphere, mood, voice and tune, as in to tune an instrument (3-4). Gumbrecht draws upon Martin Heidegger, who posits *Stimmung* as a dimension of fundamental ontology, a pre-cognitive mode of world disclosure, "a fundamental way of being, indeed of being-there [*Da-sein*]." An "attunement [*Stimmung*] is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through." Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (1938; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67. See also Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (1927; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), 169-178.
[17] Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere*, 5.

effect that "involves the present of the past in substance—not the sign of the past or its representation."[18] Gumbrecht's thesis "is that concentrating on atmospheres and moods offers literary studies a possibility for reclaiming vitality and aesthetic immediacy that have, for the most part, gone missing," as many of us "suffer from existence in an everyday world that often fails to surround and envelop us physically."[19] But unlike, say, Walter Benjamin's account of the decay of aura in technocratic modernity, Gumbrecht neglects to account for the social, political and ecological mediations that inform our perceptual reception of the empirical world.[20] Gumbrecht's project brackets out the atmospheric history of modernity as well as the emergence of atmospheric agency.

Contrary to Gumbrecht's allergy to interpretive historicism, Jayne Lewis's *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660-1794* (2012) situates literary atmosphere within the modern genealogy of discursive formations about air. Lewis reads the rise of the novel alongside "the rise of atmosphere as an aesthetic program," and links literary atmosphere to "contemporary conceptions of the air as they were articulated in the interpenetrating spheres of natural philosophy, supernaturalism, and sociability in the period."[21] However, Lewis's conception of atmosphere remains squarely within the conventional

[18] Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere*, 16, 14. "Reading for *Stimmung*" is a continuation of Gumbrecht's theorization of "the production of presence," which privileges material affects (aesthetics) over meaning effects (hermeneutics). See Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
[19] Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere*, 12, 20.
[20] As set forth, for example, in Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938,* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a genealogy of Benjamin's concept of aura see Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 336-375.
[21] Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 1. A notable precursor for Lewis's work is Arden Reed, *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1983). Reed puts the longer history of meteorology in dialogue with the meteorological tropology of Romantic poetry.

dichotomy of mood and meteorology: "With respect to books, we can speak of mood and voice (the German *Stimmung*) or parse novelistic weather reports—'fog everywhere'; 'it was a dark and stormy night'—without arriving at much of a determination."[22] Moreover, like Gumbrecht, Lewis also regards atmosphere as an ambient effect of reader reception, focusing her attention upon the way in which "literary worlds come not just to seem but to *be* as if they are all about us."[23] Rather than atmospheric agency, Lewis accents the medial role of atmosphere, what she describes as "the readerly experience of being inside a self-contained world made up of mediating forms."[24]

Contemporary ecocriticism, the critical genre most concerned with the literary representation of ecological entities, lacks a single study of atmosphere as narrative actant. From Lawrence Buell to Tim Morton, and regardless of methodological affiliation or historical position, whether "first-wave back-to-nature deep ecologism" or "second-wave environmental justice revisionism," ecocritics elide the specificity of atmosphere, absorbing it within the macro-category of the nonhuman environment.[25] In his formative ecocritical study, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Buell defines an "environmentally oriented work" as a work in which the "*nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history*."[26] While atmosphere, both as agentic presence, and as the literal location, in regard to climate change, of the imbrication of natural history and human history, would seem to be an ideal object of ecocritical attention,

[22] Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 2.
[23] Ibid., 160. Lewis's italics.
[24] Ibid., 7.
[25] Lawrence Buell, "Foreword," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), x.
[26] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7. Buell's italics.

Buell's examples of "nonhuman environment" refer primarily to natural landscape or terrestrial setting. And while Buell's second book, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), expands the analytic range of nonhuman environment in order to embrace both built spaces and urban milieus, and foregrounds atmospheric topics such as "toxic discourse," atmospheric agency is noticeably absent as an explicit object of critical concern.[27] When atmosphere is explicitly thematized, as in Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), it is recast as a metonym for mood, in this case as the tonal texture of a spatial surround. While Morton reframes ambience as a "symptom of capitalist alienation," an emanative index of the effacement of labor and the "traces of misery and oppression" that haunt the unproductive waste spaces of the late capitalist lifeworld, he neglects to reflect upon the agentic operations of atmosphere.[28]

All of these approaches view atmosphere as a medium or mediating figure, whether as affective ambience or meteorological mise-en-scène. In contrast, "Sentient Atmospheres" envisions atmosphere as a narrative actant. Furthermore, the writers assembled in "Sentient Atmospheres" insist upon the trans-human extension of the concept of actant, anticipating thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett who regard "agentic capacity" as "differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types."[29] Latour defines an actant as "any entity that modifies another entity in a trial."[30] Bennett, following Latour, defines an actant as "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has

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[27] Lawrence Buell, *An Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
[28] Tim Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 86.
[29] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.
[30] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 237.

sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events."[31] Latour underlines the distinction between the source of action and its figuration, emphasizing that actants are "always provided in the account with some flesh and features that make them have some form or shape."[32] In particular, Latour accents the fact that "there exist many more figures than anthropomorphic ones."[33]

The works studied in "Sentient Atmospheres" show that the stakes of figuration are not just rhetorical, but political and ontological as well, as figuration helps to determine the public identity of nonhuman entities (think, for example, of how we choose to give "flesh and features" to the atmospheric agency currently known as "climate change"—or, as some prefer, "global warming").[34] Take the case of the iconic atmospheric actant of postmodern fiction, the "airborne toxic event" of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985).[35] The fulcrum of the novel's plot is the calamitous appearance of a toxic cloud, which interrupts the quotidian routine of the Gladney family's upper middle-class lifestyle, and forces them to evacuate from the quiet Midwest college town they call home. The cloud is a dense confection of Nyodene Derivative, a synthetic chemical composed of "a whole bunch of things thrown together that are byproducts of the manufacture of insecticide" (131). As the situation goes from bad to worse, the government's

[31] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii. Bennett's italics.
[32] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53.
[33] Ibid., 53. Latour borrows the term "actant" from the semiotics of A.J. Greimas. For Greimas, an actant functions as an abstract "syntactic unit" in the deep-structural grammar of narrative—for example, sender or receiver, helper or opponent. The same unit may be instantiated by a variety of figures, both human and nonhuman (in a fairy tale, for example, the helper function may be fulfilled by a fairy, a dragon, a magic wand, a magical spell, etc.). A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 5.
[34] See, for instance, the reasoning behind Tim Morton's decision to use "global warming" instead of "climate change" throughout his work. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 4.
[35] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 22. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

public announcements serially re-describe the cloud. The domestic comedy of the Gladney family at once reproduces and contests this commotion of figuration.

> “The radio calls it a feathery plume,” he said. “But it's not a plume.”
>
> “What is it?"
>
> “Like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?” (111)

> “That was the Stovers,” she said. “They spoke directly with the weather center outside Glassboro. They're not calling it a feathery plume anymore.”
>
> “What are they calling it?”
>
> “A black billowing cloud.”
>
> “That's a little more accurate, which means they're coming to grips with the thing. Good.” (115)

> “They're not calling it the black billowing cloud anymore.”
>
> “What are they calling it?”
>
> He looked at me carefully.
>
> “The airborne toxic event.” (116-117)

The government progressively de-agentifies and de-animates the cloud—“feathery plume” (vibrant avian metonym); “black billowing cloud” (residual hint of gothic menace); “airborne toxic event” (rhetoric of scientific objectivity)—in order to neutralize its ambient threat and

manage its political fallout. Although Jack complacently approves of the government's rhetorical policy, the intimate physicality of his casual colloquialism ("coming to grips with the thing") indirectly acknowledges Heinrich's figuration of the cloud as a growing, breathing, living thing. It also betrays his own anxiety as an embodied subject of risk society, vulnerable to slow violence: "This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born" (116).[36]

When Jack finally confronts the cloud, he tries to manage the menace of its threat, as well as the affective dissonance of its hybrid status—"Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event" (127)—by means of two strategies of containment, or re-figuration. First, he attempts to reassert, in fantasy, a realm of ecological otherness, re-figuring this "death made in the laboratory" as a natural anomaly: "we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado" (128). Next, Jack imagines the cloud as a generic instance of narrative "atmosphere," figuring the first responders as film crew: "They seemed to be spotlighting the cloud for us as if it were part of a sound-and-light show, a bit of mood-setting mist drifting across a high battlement where a king had been slain" (128). The novel itself reproduces these containment strategies in its descriptive rhetoric, as part of its satiric critique of postmodern meteorological simulation, what Andrew Ross calls the replacement of "our mental or cognitive maps of the psycho-geographical environment" by "the objectively simulated representation of an environment under the influence of weather."[37] Descriptions of "natural" weather, in *White Noise*, adopt the style of the mass

[36] Slow violence refers to a "kind of violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

[37] Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991), 230.

media weather report: "It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east" (4). DeLillo's novel suggests that our ubiquitous simulation of the weather world is a massive defensive reaction against the uncanny agency of our new manmade weather. Ultimately, Jack's anxiety remains uncontained, manifest in proliferating agentic figurations: the cloud as "some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings" (127); as "a roiling bloated slug-shaped mass" moving "horribly and sluglike through the night" (157); as a weird, self-engendered weather system, autonomously "generating its own inner storms" (157).

White Noise dramatizes the breakdown of conventional atmospheric rhetoric in the face of the manmade weather of postmodernity. In this regard, DeLillo's novel is representative of the literary field examined by "Sentient Atmospheres." As distinct from the rhetorical tradition of the personification of nature, which, as Buell observes, relies on "old-style pathetic fallacy rhetoric" in order to convey "the neighborliness of nature" and "bond readers with their nonhuman protagonist," the writers of "Sentient Atmospheres" tend to eschew the consolations of inordinate anthropomorphism.[38] Rather, by deploying non-anthropic or para-anthropic figurations of atmospheric agency, they register the alterity of the nonhuman. Not the human, then, but an array of entities in the ontological neighborhood of the human: slug, thing, growing thing, breathing thing, mythological death ship, self-generating weather system (DeLillo); monstrous vacuole, living thing (Wallace); spectral presence, elephant (Herr); zombie (Whitehead).[39] In contrast to conventional atmospheric rhetoric, which veers between reality-

[38] Buell, *Endangered World*, 211, 196.
[39] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1996), 807, 796; Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; New York: Vintage, 1991), 78, 4; Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 234.

effect and pathetic fallacy, these figurations allude to an uncanny agency at the core of the more-than-human world.

When the writers of "Sentient Atmospheres" do risk anthropomorphic tropes, the metonymic colorings are self-cancelling, and have the effect of estranging, rather than humanizing, the nonhuman environment. Philip K. Dick, for example, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), figures Terra's post-apocalyptic planetary air as a series of agentified negations: silence, emptiness, vacuum, void.[40] Dick's irradiated atmosphere, which assumes a strange animacy in the wake of a thermonuclear World War Terminus, besieges the dwindling population of terrene citizens. As when J.R. Isidore, a social isolate who shelters the novel's fugitive androids, suddenly encounters the envitalized "world-silence" (21): "Silence. It flashed from the woodwork and the walls; it smote him with an awful, total power… It managed in fact to emerge from every object within his range of vision, as if it—the silence—meant to supplant all things tangible. Hence it assailed not only his ears but his eyes; as he stood by the inert TV set he experienced the silence as visible and, in its own way, alive. Alive!" (20). The scene narrativizes "the intrinsic ambiguity of the nuclear body, suspended between the visible and the invisible," as well as its strange agency, "an elemental but utterly alien force lurking in, and belonging to, the world's material foundations."[41] Dick's figure, which encodes a tension between the empirical world and the "invisible but real" (231) entities that would "supplant all things tangible," captures both the tangible intangibility and the aggressive agency of the atmospheric actants of the Anthropocene.

[40] Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 20, 5, 67, 20. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[41] Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 221, 218.

What Dick describes as "*sentient* radiation" also alludes, in its vibrant aliveness, to the forms of animacy that inhabit the atmospheric figures—from zoomorphic to zombiemorphic—surveyed in "Sentient Atmospheres."[42] In his voluminous *Exegesis*, Dick figures the atmospheric actants of his sci-fi novels as sentient entities—Ubik is a "sentient, perhaps a bio-plasmic life form," VALIS (Vast Active Living Intelligence System) is a "sentient plasmatic entity"—and laments that our techno-scientific worldview "literally *prevents* us from seeing" that "the ecosphere is a continuum," and that "*it is alive.*"[43] Inspired by the ecological imaginary of science-fiction, in particular the sentient planetary atmospheres of Philip K. Dick and Ursula K. Le Guin, the sentient in "Sentient Atmospheres" is meant to conjure the intimate co-existence of human and nonhuman actants.[44] Thus, sentience also refers to the felt life of the embodied humans that are affected by such atmospheres. "What affects us," writes Kathleen Stewart, is the "sentience of a situation," the atmospheric "force field in which people find themselves."[45] While Stewart's project attempts to limn the intimate affective airspaces of late capitalism, what she calls "the sentience of a situation"—enlarged by a more capacious ecological intention—is a congenial figure for "Sentient Atmospheres." The "sentience" of a situation, in my sense,

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[42] Philip K. Dick, *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*, ed. Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 292. Dick's italics.

[43] Ibid., 67, 278, 821. Dick's italics. Ubik is from *Ubik* (1969; New York: Mariner Books, 2012); VALIS is from *Valis* (1981; New York: Mariner Books, 2011).

[44] Both the *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), which I examine in my second chapter, and its sister story, "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" (1971), which narrates the experience of a team of scientists who must confront the enigmatic agency of their object of study (the uninhabited World 4470), feature sentient planetary entities, what a character in the latter story describes as "sentience without senses" and "windborne sentience." As Ursula Heise notes, the science fiction of the late 1960's and early 1970's, like James Lovelock's Gaia theory, draws upon "a vision of global ecology" that views "all the planet's life forms" as "linked in such a way that they come to form one world-encompassing, sentient superorganism." Ursula K. Le Guin, "Vaster than Empires and More Slow," in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1971; New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 208, 212. Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

[45] Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29.3 (2011): 445-453, 452, 445. "Atmospheric attunements" refer to "scenes in which the sense of something happening becomes tactile" (445).

articulates the interface or chiasmic interlacement of sentient humans and "sentient atmospheres." By narrating scenes of contact between human characters and atmospheric actants, the writers of "Sentient Atmospheres" attempt to imagine new ways to inhabit our altered atmosphere.

"Sentient Atmospheres" begins circa 1915, when, as Peter Sloterdijk puts it in reference to the advent of gas warfare, the "air lost its innocence."[46] My first chapter, "Atmosphere in Late Late James," traces the chiastic trajectory that informs Jamesian sensibility, from his early definition of experience as "the very atmosphere of the mind," through the ambient cognition of the late fiction, to the ultimate development of a narratological ecology that features the mind of the atmosphere. I argue that James's unfinished *The Sense of the Past* (1917) responds to the atmospheric trauma of WWI by construing the circumambient air as an agential entity, itself capable of both breathing and thinking. Gas warfare, as historian Marion Girard observes, "did not limit itself to the battlefield," but "uniquely threatened both civilians and soldiers," at once suffusing the enemy's tactical airspace as well as diffusing an atmosphere of fear throughout the public sphere.[47] In this regard, I juxtapose James's atmospheric rhetoric, in which intersubjective affect becomes autonomous as sentient atmosphere, with contemporary representations of gas warfare. Popular genres such as political cartoons, journalistic discourse, and military iconography, I argue, endow atmosphere with agency in order to register the weaponization of affect in total war. I conclude with a critical appraisal of the utopian inflections of air in James's principal piece of wartime writing, "Within the Rim" (1915), which subsumes international

[46] Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 101.
[47] Marion Girard, *A Strange and Formidable Weapon: British Responses to World War I Poison Gas* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 6, 128.

political hostility in national atmospheric community, and wherein the atmosphere engages with the Jamesian narrator as both interlocutor and paramour.

While the nonhuman environment suffered collateral damage during the gas campaigns of WWI, it became an explicit target of American aggression in the Vietnam War. My second chapter, "'We Had the Air': The Atmospheric Form of the Vietnam War," reads the formal strategies of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1979) as a critique of the U.S. military's ecological warfare program, in particular its weaponization of herbicidal chemicals such as Agent Orange. I begin in the upper atmosphere, arguing that Herr assumes the hegemonic position of aerial vision in order to subvert its strategic logic. I then descend to the dense airspace of the combat zone, where breathing becomes difficult due to the agency of the atmosphere, and Herr's representation of respiration renders visible the slow violence of ecological warfare. Next, I place Herr's text in the context of the nascent environmental movement. Like the biocentric rhetoric of deep ecology, *Dispatches'* "combat ecology" relentlessly dissects the distinction between human person and nonhuman environment. The vivification of the nonhuman environment is also a classic science-fictional trope, and Herr's agentic atmosphere finds its sci-fi analogue in Ursula Le Guin's contemporaneous narrative response to the Vietnam War, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), in which the atmospheric agency of an alien planet undermines the military policy of its interplanetary invaders. If the U.S. military views the Vietnamese environment as an inert object of technological domination, Herr and Le Guin envision human corporeality as "trans-corporeality," wherein, as ecocritic Stacy Alaimo puts it, "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world."[48]

[48] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

In my third chapter, "This is Air: The Atmospheric Politics of David Foster Wallace," I read Wallace's work as a critique of late capitalist atmospheric culture. I argue that the forms of alienation that Wallace diagnoses in the late capitalist subject—rampant addiction, narcissism, and solipsism—are a social byproduct of what he calls "crafted atmosphere," the fabrication of artificial atmospheres in order to condition human subjects. Crafted atmospheres intervene directly in the human sensorium, preempting conscious cognition through coercive forms of climate control. I begin with Wallace's account of the air-conditioned consumerist world of a luxury cruise ship in the essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1996). Corporate atmospheric management induces hypertrophic habits of consumption by detaching the subject from her social and ecological context. Next, I turn to the atmospheric politics of *Infinite Jest* (1996), examining what Mark McGurl calls Wallace's "existentialism of institutions" from an atmospheric point of view.[49] Rather than operating as "a communal antidote to atomism," I argue that institutional air-conditioning systems promote atomistic disconnection. At both the microsocial and macrosocial levels, from interpersonal airspaces to the American government's re-engineering of North American weather patterns, climate control reinforces asymmetrical relations of social power. While Wallace methodically anatomizes the disciplinary technology of climate control, he also imagines forms of human embodiment able to resist the affective and cognitive pressures of crafted atmospheres, and the chapter also assesses aspirational modes of respiration in *Infinite Jest*.

Moving from climate control to climate change, "Sentient Atmospheres" concludes with a weather report on the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre. In an era in which we *are* the weather, operating as a geophysical force upon the planet's climate, the diegetic weather

[49] Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *boundary 2* 41.3 (2014): 27-54, 36.

becomes the narrative site for the rhetorical and ontological crossing of human agency and natural agency. My final chapter, "Narrating the Anthropocene: The Atmospheric Comedy," claims that fictions of the end of the world dramatize climate change through agentic atmospheres that antagonize or seduce the human subjects that inhabit them. I begin with Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), in which weather is "dead weather." *Zone One's* zombie meteorology offers an exemplary allegory for what Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to as the doubling of human agency in the Anthropocene, its dual status as both the "nonhuman-human" (geophysical force) and the "human-human" (phenomenological subject).[50] In the Anthropocene, humans make the weather; but, in turn, the weather returns to unmake them. What I call the atmospheric comedy names the narrative figuration of this conflict, in which the chiastic rift between subject and agentic atmosphere issues in a comic outcome. I track the atmospheric comedy across contemporary literature and environmental discourse, from Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989) to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). In conclusion, I consider the ecological counterpoint to the atmospheric comedy, the eroticization of air. Scenes of atmospheric eros stage a compensatory fantasy of renewed accord between subject and atmosphere within the distressed weather world of the post-apocalyptic genre.

"Planetary Air," as coda, situates literary atmosphere within an interplanetary horizon. With a manned mission to Mars planned for the coming decade, another planetary atmosphere is poised to enter human historical experience. Although modern thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, writing at the dawn of the Space Age, insist upon our terrestrial habitat as an irreducible dimension of the human condition, science fiction has always imagined human beings inhabiting another air. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1993-1997), which narrates

[50] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43.1 (Winter 2012): 1-18, 14.

the future history of the terraformation of Mars and the subsequent colonization of the solar system, anticipates the climatological concerns of our current moment by envisioning what our atmospheric lifeworld might look like after the end of nature. While offering an incisive critique of atmospheric modernity, Robinson also suggests that the end of nature may mark the beginning of new versions of human nature, as well as new ways of breathing the atmosphere—whether the atmosphere in question refers to the changed climate of our parent planet, or the alien air of an extraterrestrial world.

I. ATMOSPHERE IN LATE LATE JAMES

John Singer Sargent's painting *Gassed* (1919) depicts the aftermath of a German mustard gas attack during World War I.[1] A group of wounded soldiers with torn uniforms and bandaged eyes occupies the center of the composition, each with his hand resting on the shoulder of the soldier in front of him, a tottering, groping queue of the newly blind. Piled masses of prostrate soldiers, similarly bandaged, spread out before and behind the line of standing soldiers. A young man in overalls, the only figure in the foreground with undamaged eyes, helps two soldiers in the front of the queue step upon a plank whose full extension is interrupted by the right edge of the frame. Presumably, the plank leads on to an off-stage dressing station. However, it is as if the soldiers want to exit the frame in order to escape the atmosphere within the frame. Perhaps even more than the variously impaired human figures, it is the atmosphere itself that appears irrevocably altered. No longer the transparent, luminous envelope within which human beings and non-human things come to presence and form a vital world, the atmosphere seems transmogrified, a kind of thick, viscid, discolored paste, inimical to respiration and noxious to life. Sargent's use of color blurs the boundary between person and atmosphere. The mustard-colored uniforms of the soldiers seem continuous with the mustard-colored atmosphere, merely denser materializations of the surrounding air—as if this uncanny air, rather than sustaining the life of the persons it contains, would absorb them into its glutinous density. Walter Benjamin famously wrote that,

[1] For the story behind Sargent's painting see Stanley Olson, *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 257-62. For a discussion of James's reception of Sargent see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 136-140.

after the Great War, "nothing remained unchanged but the clouds."[2] But the altered atmosphere of *Gassed*, which elides the distinction between natural air and toxic air, suggests that, in the aftermath of the First World War, it was the clouds that changed most of all.

"I write you under the black cloud of portentous events on this side of the world, horrible, unspeakable, iniquitous things—I mean horrors of war criminally, infamously precipitated."[3] Writing on August 6, 1914 to Edith Wharton, Henry James's atmospheric figure—the "black cloud"—expresses his outrage at the outbreak of the First World War, what he refers to in a letter to Howard Sturgis, composed the previous day on August 5, 1914, as "a nightmare of the deepest dye" and "a huge horror of blackness."[4] The force of James's initial reaction remained unabated throughout the brief remainder of his life, which lasted until February 28, 1916. As the war progressed, the novelist developed a zealous sense of personal mission that assumed the form of proactive activism: James served as Chairman of the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps, repeatedly visited the U.S. Embassy to solicit aid for the Allied war effort, and frequented hospitals and shelters to offer succor to Belgian refugees.[5] He wrote to Hugh Walpole on April 10, 1915 that he had become wholly absorbed in the war effort: "one has too little of a self in these days to be formulated in any manner at all; one's consciousness is wholly that of the Cause."[6] In this chapter, I read *The Sense of the Past* (1917), the unfinished novel that James was

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[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1936; New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 84.
[3] Cited in Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Master: 1901-1916* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 511-512.
[4] Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James,* ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 384.
[5] See Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Master: 1901–1916* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 518 –527. See also Wai Chee Dimock, "Subjunctive Time: Henry James's Possible Wars," *Narrative* 17.3 (October 2009): 242-254, 245.
[6] Cited in John Plotz, "Henry James's Rat-tat-tat-ah: Insidious Loss, Disguised Recovery and Semi-Detached Subjects," *The Henry James Review* 34.3 (Fall 2013): 232-244, 243.

working on during his final years, in the context of James's experience of world war. Over the course of 1915-16, James was composing *The Sense of the Past* in the English countryside as toxic gas spread across the battlefields of the European continent. It is possible to receive James's metaphor of the "black cloud" in a more literal sense, reading the novel's narratological tactics as an aesthetic response to the advent of gas warfare. James's time-travel novel, which shuttles between 1910 and 1820, tells the story of Ralph Pendrel, a young historian from New York City who unexpectedly inherits a venerable London townhouse from a distant British relative. When Ralph, living in 1910, first crosses the threshold of the townhouse, he discovers himself in 1820, having somehow switched places, temporally speaking, with the patrician gentleman who inhabited the house in 1820. The extant chapters of the unfinished novel, focalized exclusively through Ralph's consciousness, depict his attempt to navigate the alien lifeworld of early nineteenth-century British society. However, as I will argue, rather than reproduce the period "atmosphere" of late Georgian England—as the generic codes of the conventional historical novel would demand—James recasts the diegetic atmosphere of *The Sense of the Past* as a narrative actant.

James's most famous critics, such as Percy Lubbock and Leon Edel, read the composition of *The Sense of the Past* as a gesture of self-consolation on James's part, as the novelist's substitution of fictional fantasy for historical reality.[7] Originally laid aside in 1900, James "went back to it [the manuscript] again during the first winter of the war, having found that in the conditions he could not then go on with 'The Ivory Tower' and hoping that he might be able to work upon a story of remote and phantasmal life."[8] However, James speaks of his return to *The*

[7] Percy Lubbock, "Preface" to Henry James, *The Sense of the Past*, vol. 26 of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 27 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1917), 3; Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper, 1985), 505.
[8] Lubbock, "Preface," 3.

Sense of the Past in somewhat different terms, as a renewed engagement with contemporary history, remarking that "the idea of trying if something won't still be done with it has come back to me within a few days, under pressure of our present disconcerting conditions, and yet the desire, combined with that pressure, and forming indeed part of it, to try and get back to some form of work adjustable in a manner to one's present state of consciousness."[9] Here, as opposed to a static opposition between fantasy and reality, imaginative desire is in dynamic tension with historical pressure ("forming part of it"), and the aesthetic act is dialectically motivated by history. Rather than an escapist fantasy intended to distract James from the overwhelming reality of the Great War, I suggest instead that James's time-travel novel offers an aesthetic remediation of the historical present.

In what follows, I argue that *The Sense of the Past* responds to the atmospheric trauma of WWI by construing the circumambient air as an agential entity, itself capable of both breathing and thinking. I trace the chiastic trajectory that informs Jamesian sensibility, from his early definition of experience as "the very atmosphere of the mind," through the ambient cognition of the late fiction, to the ultimate development of a narratological ecology that features the mind of the atmosphere. In my analysis of James's final unfinished novel, I show how James at once reproduces and revalues the properties of the gas cloud. Gas warfare, as historian Marion Girard observes, "did not limit itself to the battlefield," but "uniquely threatened both civilians and soldiers," at once suffusing the enemy's tactical airspace as well as diffusing an atmosphere of fear throughout both the theater of war and the public sphere.[10] In this regard, I juxtapose James's atmospheric rhetoric, in which intersubjective affect becomes autonomous as

[9] Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 361.
[10] Marion Girard, *A Strange and Formidable Weapon: British Responses to World War I Poison Gas* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 6, 128.

atmospheric actant, with contemporary media representations of gas warfare, which capture the ambient threat of gas. James, as well, endows atmosphere with agency as though to register the weaponization of affect in total war. I conclude with an examination of James's principal piece of wartime writing, "Within the Rim" (1915), which subsumes international political hostility in national atmospheric community, and wherein the atmosphere engages with the Jamesian narrator as a companionable presence.

From the Atmosphere of the Mind to the Mind of the Atmosphere

The rhetorical germ of Jamesian atmospherics, to borrow one of James's own favorite terms for the seed of a narrative trajectory, is present in the famous definition of experience in "The Art of Fiction" (1884). According to James, "experience consists of impressions" and impressions are "the very air we breathe."[11] James's definition of experience is also a manifold invocation of the atmosphere.

> What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.[12]

[11] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (1884; New York: Library of America, 1984), 53.
[12] James, "The Art of Fiction," 52.

Experience is based upon the mind's metabolism with the atmosphere, a perpetual process of conversion that transforms airwaves into revelations, but in the fluid interplay between mind and atmosphere, it's difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. The reciprocal flow of consciousness across the leaky boundary between mind and atmosphere will be a constant feature of James's later fiction.

If "The Art of Fiction" provides a point of orientation within Jamesian criticism, a good place to begin thinking about the novelistic pre-history of late Jamesian atmosphere is itself a place in a novel: the Maison Vauquer, in Balzac's novel *Le Père Goriot* (1835). In his early essay "Honoré de Balzac" (1875), James cited the famous description of the Maison Vauquer at length, calling the scene "one of the most portentous settings of the scene in all the literature of fiction."[13] Anticipating Erich Auerbach's analogous insight in *Mimesis* by more than half a century, the young James wrote that "in this case there is nothing superfluous; there is a profound correspondence between the background and the action."[14] Auerbach's exposition of Balzac orients itself around the same passage from *Le Père Goriot* that James cites in 1875, and his insight into Balzac's narrative deployment of the concept of "milieu," what Auerbach calls "the motif of the harmony between Madame Vauquer's person on the one hand… and what we (and Balzac too, occasionally) call her milieu," reads as an extended unpacking of James's epigrammatic formulation.[15] Auerbach writes that for Balzac "every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same

[13] Henry James, "Honoré de Balzac," *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel (1875; New York: Library of America, 1984), 52.
[14] James, "Balzac." 52.
[15] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 473.

time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux."[16] Balzac's passage thematizes the atmosphere in both the literal and figural registers: Madame Vauquer breathes the "warm and fetid air" of the pension without repulsion; her "blowsy *embonpoint*" materializes the circumambient "life" of the scene in the same way that the "exhalations of a hospital" produce typhoid; the walls themselves "ooze" misfortune into the surrounding air.[17] However, in Balzac's text, the atmosphere is not yet an autonomous object of representation, and not yet a narrative actant in the strong sense of an independent agent, but functions as a medium that bears the emanative traces of the objects that it envelops.

The arc of James's critical thinking about Balzac, which traverses over a quarter of a century, moves from an initial emphasis upon the things in the atmosphere, to an ultimate concern that the atmosphere itself is being obscured by the things within it. In 1875, James focused upon Balzac's "mighty passion for things": "The world that contained these things filled his consciousness, and being, at its intensest, meant simply being thoroughly at home among them."[18] Returning to Balzac in 1902, the focus of James's attention shifts from the things in Balzac's atmosphere to Balzac's atmosphere itself.

> We can never know what might have become of him with less importunity in his consciousness of the machinery of life, of its furniture and fittings, of all that, right and left, he causes to assail us, sometimes almost to suffocation, under the general rubric of things. Things, in this sense with him, are at once our delight and our despair; we pass from being inordinately beguiled and convinced by them to feeling that his universe

[16] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 473.
[17] Balzac's passage is cited in Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 468-469.
[18] James, "Balzac," 48.

> fairly smells too much of them, that the larger ether, the diviner air, is in peril of finding among them scarce room to circulate.[19]

Here we are able to observe James's rhetorical and conceptual disengagement of the atmosphere as such from the things contained in the atmosphere. The superabundance of things in the Balzacian scene at once deprives the reader of atmosphere ("suffocation"), and suppresses the atmospheric potential of Balzac's own narrative form. What James refers to as "the larger ether, the diviner air" is now an explicit object of his critical consideration.

In 1902, as James was writing about the insufficiency of atmosphere in Balzac's novels, he was also developing atmosphere as a narrative presence in his own late fiction. In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), for example, cognition itself seems to be indistinguishable from respiration. Late in the novel, after a difficult visit to the American heiress Milly Theale in her Venetian palace, Merton Densher reflects upon his own thought processes in atmospheric terms: "There was something he could only therefore read back into the probabilities, and when he left the palace an hour afterwards it was with a sense of having breathed there, in the very air, the truth he had been guessing."[20] Densher's cognitive activity is absorbed into, or is indiscernible from, his respiratory activity—as probability phases into certainty, thinking phases into breathing. As if playing upon an implicit pun in "inspiration," Densher literally inhales the truth out of the very air. Elsewhere, it is as if thoughts slide from the mind to the atmosphere, spatializing the process. At the conclusion of the novel, during his final confrontation with Kate Croy, Densher's self-knowledge is correlated with a material presence in the atmosphere itself: "He continued steady now; a kind of ease—from the presence, as in the air, of something he couldn't yet have named—

[19] Henry James, "Honoré de Balzac" (1902), in *Literary Criticism: French* Writers, 97.
[20] Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902; New York: Penguin, 2008), 415.

had come to him."[21] What we would think to find in Densher's mind, an intuition of his inner condition, is located instead in the surrounding air.

The proleptic drift of Densher's atmospheric intuition ("something he couldn't *yet* have named") is present also in the atmospheric register of *The Ambassadors* (1903). For instance, in the famous scene of recognition in the countryside, when Lambert Strether discovers that Marie de Vionnet and Chad Newsome are the real-life lovers of his idyllic daydream. Just before Strether spots the pair, whom he believes to be anonymous boaters, and realizes the true nature of their relationship, a sudden change in the air itself facilitates his knowledge: "The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent—that this wouldn't at all events be the first time."[22] Here, the boundary between the atmosphere of the mind and the mind of the atmosphere is becoming blurred. In addition to its anticipatory features, materialized as airborne intimations, the Jamesian air also possesses an archival dimension. Towards the end of the novel, after Strether's Parisian holiday culminates in anticlimax and disillusionment, he visits Maria Gostrey for comfort and company. Upon entering Maria's apartments, Strether immediately registers the recent presence of an absent person.

> He was sure within a minute that something had happened; it was so in the air of the rich little room that he had scarcely to name his thought. Softly lighted, the whole color of the place, with its vague values, was in cool fusion—an effect that made the visitor stand for a little agaze. It was as if in doing so now he had felt a recent presence—his recognition

[21] James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 529.
[22] Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1903; New York: Penguin, 2008), 418.

> of the passage of which his hostess in turn divined. She had scarcely to say it—'Yes, she has been here, and this time I received her.'[23]

The implicit physics of this passage would have it that the air itself is a kind of material archive that retains the traces of passing persons and events, as if a previous human presence is registered upon the air-borne particles that James invokes in "The Art of Fiction." Strether discovers his thought in the air before he discovers his thought in his mind. Sensory reception of the atmosphere—gazing, feeling—seems to enable thinking, or to function as a substitute for thinking. What is more, Strether's thought seems to flow through the air into Maria's mind as well, setting up a cognitive circuit between persons and atmosphere.

In *The Golden Bowl* (1904), as well, there is a permeable boundary between persons and atmosphere. Within the novel's diegetic atmosphere, what is inside a person seems to be susceptible to sudden extroversion into the surrounding air. In the beginning of Volume II of the novel, when Prince Amerigo returns from his adulterous dalliance with Charlotte Stant at the Matcham country estate, he unexpectedly discovers his wife, Maggie Verver, waiting at home for him in their townhouse at Eaton Square. The Prince's epistemological condition suddenly becomes an atmospheric condition: "She had indeed for just ten seconds been afraid of some such turn: the uncertainty in his face had become so, the next thing, an uncertainty in the very air."[24] What originates in the mind of the Prince suddenly migrates to the atmosphere that envelops the Prince. What is immaterial becomes material, and what is private becomes public. Or else, the immaterial psychic conditions that pertain to minds suddenly modify the material atmospheric conditions that pertain to bodies. Later in Volume II, when Maggie confronts

[23] James, *The Ambassadors*, 448.
[24] Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1904; New York: Penguin, 2008), 336.

Charlotte with her knowledge of Charlotte's infidelity, the boundaries between persons seem to break down as an affective situation becomes an atmospheric condition: "With which she saw soon enough what more was to come. She saw it in Charlotte's face and felt it make between them, in the air, a chill that completed the coldness of their conscious perjury."[25] Here, the condition of the atmosphere is not merely an objective correlative of the affective situation, but is rather the thermal effect of the affective situation. The passage stages a subtle slide from correlation to causation, as well as a corresponding slippage from the figural to the literal, as the "coldness" of the conscious perjury becomes a literal chill in the air.

In *The American Scene* (1907), the atmosphere assumes limited agency, becoming the rather garrulous subject of discourse, as the voice of the air resounds throughout the pages devoted to James's return trip to America.[26] William James, corresponding with Henry in 1907, comments upon the stylistic procedures of *The American Scene*, deploying a series of atmospheric figures that recapitulate the figurative tactics of Henry's text. Instead of saying something straight out, as William would have it, Henry breathes all round it, substituting respiration for description: "by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already," Henry creates "the illusion of a solid object" made "wholly out of impalpable materials, air," which the author works up "like solids."[27] For William, the object of Henry's narration is the impalpable material of air, worked up into a seemingly solid substance by Henry's respiratory activity. The atmospheric figures that William employs in his criticism of *The American Scene* become literal in Henry's final fiction.

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[25] James, *The Golden Bowl*, 508-509.
[26] Henry James, *The American Scene*, in *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed. Richard Howard (1907; New York: Library of America, 1993).
[27] Cited in Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 176-177.

In *The Sense of the Past*, respiration is not only a strategy of description, it is a mode of cognition, and the subject of cognition is often the atmosphere itself. If consciousness in late James, as Sharon Cameron has argued, is distributed between persons, promiscuously violating the subjective boundaries that would delimit or contain it, consciousness in the "late" late James of *The Sense of the Past* overflows its subjective sphere and suffuses the surrounding atmosphere, vivifying the very air.[28]

Agentic Air

Questions of atmosphere were on James's mind as he resumed work on *The Sense of the Past* in 1914 after an interval of fourteen years. In his "preliminary notes" to the novel, dictated while James was waiting for the arrival of the original manuscript of 1900, James remarks that "the production of the 'old world' atmosphere, the constitution of the precise milieu and tone I wanted" is "*the* difficulty, the crucial, the one I felt awaiting me, and that I seemed to hold off from, in imagination, as if for very dread."[29] Here, James identifies "atmosphere" with "milieu" in the manner of Auerbach in his discussion of Balzac. However, as James develops the plot of the novel over the course of 1915, he deploys atmosphere not just as a mode of ambience, but as a narrative actant. In what follows, I track the emergence of atmosphere as an agential entity in *The Sense of the Past,* wherein the surrounding air itself becomes the subject of respiration and cognition. But first, before sampling the air of *The Sense of the Past*, I would like to frame my discussion of the novel with an examination of the contemporary history of gas warfare— both on the battlefield and on the homefront—a historical context that James at once inhabited as a citizen and remediated as a novelist.

[28] Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
[29] Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, 365. James's italics.

For Peter Sloterdijk, the history of atmospheric modernity begins on April 22, 1915, in Ypres, France, with the release of toxic chlorine clouds by the German military in the first large-scale gas warfare operation in modern history.[30] As Sloterdijk observes, the weaponization of gas changed the nature of modern warfare by shifting the focus of targeting from the enemy's body to the atmosphere surrounding the enemy's body, replacing "classical forms of battle with assaults on the environmental conditions of the enemy's life."[31] Gas warfare turns the enemy's most vital ecological relationship, the act of breathing, against him, inducing "desperation in those attacked, who, unable to refrain from breathing, are forced to participate in the obliteration of their own life."[32] What's more, gas warfare weaponizes the atmosphere in a dual sense. Not only does the deployment of lethal toxic clouds render the enemy's air unbreathable, the omnipresent threat of potential deployment gives rise to an atmosphere of unbearable fear. "For the average soldier," write Robert Harris and Jeremy Paxman in their history of chemical warfare, "the strain of living in this alien, chemically-polluted environment was scarcely bearable."[33] Girard observes that gas "did not have to be deployed against a person to have an impact; it did not have to be used, in the traditional sense, to be effective."[34] "In the eyes of the military," she continues, "the threat of a gas attack could be as successful as a kill."[35] British Brigadier A. E. Hodgkin summed up the situation succinctly on April 25, 1917: "People are terrified of gas even now, after over 2 years of it."[36] However, the fear did not end with the end

[30] Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 9.
[31] Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 18, 16.
[32] Ibid., 23.
[33] Robert Harris and Jeremy Paxman, *A Higher Form of Killing: The Secret History of Gas and Germ Warfare* (London: Arrow, 2002), 55.
[34] Girard, *Strange and Formidable*, 128.
[35] Ibid., 12.
[36] Ibid., 52.

of the War. The poet Robert Graves, who participated in the British military's early retaliatory gas campaigns, wrote in his war memoir *Good-Bye to All That* (1929) that "since 1916, the fear of gas had obsessed me: any unusual smell, even a sudden strong scent of flowers in a garden, was enough to send me trembling."[37]

The affective effects of gas were not limited to the battlefield. Brian Massumi notes that threat operates as an "*environmental* power" that "suffuses the atmosphere."[38] In this regard, it is notable that both the British military and the British public referred to poison gas as "Frightfulness," a figuration that reveals the interleaving of physical and experiential atmospheres.[39] The British public, which, of course, at the time included James himself, experienced gas warfare as an emotional and mental ordeal. Although London remained at a distance from the front, the public feared that German zeppelins would fly over the city and drop gas bombs upon the civilian population.[40] The civilian fear of gas was amplified by its perpetual presence in the British press. Girard observes that "from the beginning of the chemical war gas invaded Britain's home front. By word and image it appeared in the press, frequently bombarding the public with reminders of its existence and forcing the general population to confront the threats and implications of the new weapon."[41]

Popular portrayals of gas warfare within the British press registered the ambient threat of gas through figurations of atmospheric agency. For example, the lurid image in Dutch artist Louis Raemaeker's *The Gas Fiend* features a French soldier sleeping in his trench, unaware of the menacing threat that hovers over him. From above, a sinuous serpent, flashing its flaming

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[37] Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That: An Autobiography* (1929; New York: Anchor, 1958), 267-268.
[38] Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 52, 62. Massumi's italics.
[39] Harris and Paxman, *Higher Form of Killing*, 44.
[40] Girard, *Strange and Formidable*, 150.
[41] Ibid., 126.

forked tongue, breathes out poison gas upon its unsuspecting victim. In a cartoon by Bernard Partridge, a terrified German combatant is shown cowering under an outspread cloak, running away from an animate black cloud labeled "Retribution." The psychological effects of gas warfare were also expressed in a more satirical mode. A cartoon from *Punch* depicts "the most omnipotent" German Kaiser perspiring with fear after his dentist asks him if he will "take gas." The representation of gas was also integrated into intimate scenes of everyday life. Another cartoon shows a woman exhibiting her new gas mask to her admiring husband in their bedroom after an evening out on the town. Entitled *The Old Formula*, the caption reads: "Look, George—my new respirator," as if she were showing off a new fashion item. Her husband responds: "Suits you devilish well, my dear." The cartoon's domestic setting indicates that WWI was a total war—gas affected everyone, both soldiers and civilians.[42]

As in these contemporary media genres, atmosphere is explicitly thematized throughout the diegetic environment of *The Sense of the Past*, and represented not only as a medium, but also as a narrative agent. This thematic focus begins with James's description of Ralph Pendrel's own personal sense of the past, which disregards the long view of deep time in favor of the embodied immediacy of the present moment. Ralph's true passion is not for the philosophy of history, or for the sense of the past in a scholarly sense; rather, Ralph desires the sensory intensity of a past present moment, its singular spatiotemporal texture. Ralph's sense of the past is irreducible to any mode of mediation, any historical "evidence" in the form of textual traces or archival access: "He wanted evidence of a sort for which there had never been documents enough, or for which documents mainly, however multiplied, would never be enough."[43] Like

[42] I gather these examples from Girard, *Strange and Formidable,* 2, 135, 141, 151. On the concept of total war see 155-156.
[43] Henry James, *The Sense of the Past*, vol. 26 of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 27 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1917), 49. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Benjamin's famous scene of auratic encounter, Ralph's fantasy scene is intensely atmospheric: "If his idea in fine was to recover the lost moment, to feel the stopped pulse, it was to do so as experience, in order to be again consciously the creature that had been, to breathe as he had breathed and feel the pressure he had felt" (48).[44] Historical recovery is literally a matter of respiration and air pressure, and not the reproduction of the diffuse ambience of a particular historical era. "He wanted the hour of the day at which this and that had happened, and the temperature and the weather and the sound… the slant on the walls of the light of afternoons that had been" (48). What Ralph really wants is not history exactly, but the temperature and the weather, as if the sense of the past could be registered on a thermometer or a barometer. Ralph's sense of the past is not historical as much as it is phenomenological. In *The Sense of the Past*, what James elsewhere called "the air of the past" becomes indiscernible from the air itself.[45]

Ralph first comes into contact with the air of the past shortly after his arrival in London, as he wanders through his newly inherited townhouse. Within the house, something has happened to the air itself—as if the house were a kind of container that preserved the atmosphere of 1820. James explicitly casts the interior air as a product of human modification—"inventions, corruptions had produced it"—in contradistinction to the purer air of a pre-lapsarian condition: "However else this air might have been described it was signally not the light of freshness and suggested as little as possible the element in which the first children of nature might have begun to take notice" (65). This air that has "lost its innocence," to echo Sloterdijk on gas warfare,

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[44] Benjamin writes: "What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938,* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 104-105.

[45] Henry James, "Preface" to *The Aspern Papers,* in *Literary Criticism: French Writers,* 1177.

operates as an autonomous narrative presence: "the queer incomparable London light—unless one frankly loved it rather as London shade—which he had repeatedly noted as so strange as to be at its finest sinister, and which just now scattered as never before its air over what surrounded him" (65).[46] The passage culminates by staging the migration of consciousness from person to atmosphere, as Ralph Pendrel becomes the object of recognition and the atmosphere becomes the subject of recognition. Uncannily, the atmosphere of 1820 is received by Ralph not only as a diffuse ambience, but also as a minded agent: "What was one to call the confounding impression but that… of a conscious past, recognizing no less than recognized?" (65). As soon as Ralph sets foot in the house, the boundaries between the atmosphere of the mind and the mind of the atmosphere begin to blur.

Similarly, in the scene that stages the event of time-travel, Ralph is absorbed into an agentic atmosphere, what James calls an "other medium," which literally reaches out and pulls Ralph into the past. Soon after his arrival abroad, Ralph realizes that the townhouse is also a time-machine, and he makes a conscious decision to travel in time, a decision which he subsequently communicates to his diplomatic friend, the American Ambassador to Great Britain. After offering the Ambassador his final farewell, Ralph remains standing before the door of the house, about to enter. As Ralph crosses the spatial threshold of the house he simultaneously crosses the temporal threshold of the era, literally moving from 1910 to 1820.[47]

> Whether these had been rapid or rather retarded stages he was really never to make out. Everything had come to him through an increasingly thick other medium, the medium to

[46] Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 109.
[47] For a reading of the house as time-machine in *The Sense of the Past* see Isabel Waters, "'Still and Still Moving': The House as Time Machine in Henry James's *The Sense of the Past,*" *The Henry James Review* 30.2 (Spring 2009): 180-195.

> which the opening door of the house gave at once an extension that was like an extraordinarily strong odour inhaled—an inward and inward warm reach that his bewildered judge would literally have seen swallow him up; though perhaps with the supreme pause of the determined diver about to plunge just marked in him before the closing of the door again placed him on the right side and the whole world as he had known it on the wrong. (114-115)

James's "other medium" operates as an atmospheric agency, its extending reach gripping Ralph from the inside and literally swallowing him up. Moreover, the elemental texture of this "increasingly thick medium" dynamically encompasses both the aerial and the aquatic, atmospheric respiration and underwater immersion. James's atmosphere exhibits the properties of the gas cloud, especially the effect of aqueous submergence that the cloud produced in its victims. As Sgt. Elmer Wilgrid Cotton of the Fifth Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers, expressed it: "Chlorine Gas produces a flooding of the lungs—it is an equivalent death to drowning only on dry land."[48] Wilfred Owen's famous war poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1920), with its complex play of elemental figurations, vividly depicts gas warfare's violent transformation of the atmosphere.

> Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling.
> Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
> But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
> And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime—

[48] Girard, *Strange and Formidable*, 1.

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The air is now fire, now water, now lime, but—as in Sargent's painting—no longer the pellucid, rarefied medium of human respiration. It is now a toxic force.

James at once reproduces and revalues the phenomenology of the gas cloud—although ominous in its agentic reach and absorptive pressure, James's atmosphere, unlike Owen's, is not overtly toxic. The immersive plenitude of Ralph's "plunge" into the atmosphere recalls what Emmanuel Levinas calls the experience of the elemental. The elemental is "pure quality without support" and has "no forms containing it," being itself "content without form."[49] Further, the elemental is correlated with the subjective sphere of enjoyment and sensibility: "Sensibility establishes a relation with a pure quality without support, with the element. Sensibility is enjoyment."[50] For Levinas, the "adequate relation with the element is precisely bathing… To bathe in the element is to be in an inside-out world."[51] The inside-out world of the house evokes a sphere of uterine immersion or sensory plenitude, as is evinced by the preponderance of the proximity senses (the motifs of olfactory and oral assimilation), the reciprocal sensuality that literally slides subject into object and object into subject (Ralph is at once the subject of inhalation and the object of ingestion), and the oceanic, uterine image of the "plunge." All of

[49] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 131.
[50] Ibid., 136.
[51] Ibid., 132.

these motifs evoke a primary phase of existence in which the subject is fusionally enfolded in its surrounding environment. James figures Ralph's removal from the air of the historical present as an absorption into a kind of enwombing atmosphere.

James's atmospherics also transmute the noxious effects of the gas cloud into an alternative respiratory economy. Rather than causing asphyxiation, it is the atmosphere's own breathing process that supports Ralph's conscious experience. When Ralph finally meets Nan Midmore, the youngest daughter of the patrician family whom Ralph is associated with in the 1820 world (in 1820, Ralph finds himself courting Molly Midmore, the elder daughter), and fails to recognize her as he has spontaneously recognized the other members of her family, this anomalous lacuna in his thought process renders legible its atmospheric basis: "this question of an identity thrust at him to which he couldn't rise and which didn't, like all the others, breathe on him after an instant the secret of the means of rising" (174). Ralph's knowledge of the 1820 world is literally inspired, breathed into him or breathed around him by the surrounding atmosphere. At one point in his dialogue with the Midmores, Ralph suddenly becomes aware of the strange impression he is making upon them, and this moment of self-conscious awareness again reveals the atmospheric dimension of his cognition: "So odd an apprehension could cast of course but the briefest shade: breath after breath and hint after hint—though whence directed who should say?—so spending themselves upon the surface of his sensibility that impressions, as we have already seen, were successively effaced and nothing persisted but the force of derived motion" (159). The atmosphere itself infuses thoughts into Ralph's mind through the epidermal impact of its breath, constantly bombarding the receptive surface of Ralph's sensorium. The only impression that remains in its aftermath is a global sense of the motion "derived" from the vectors of the atmosphere's respiration. If Jamesian impressions are "the very air we breathe,"

Ralph Pendrel's impressions are the very air that breathes upon him. James transvalues the immersive violence of the gas cloud, turning atmospheric envelopment into a kind of cognitive ecology.

Forms of ecological continuity, where person and atmosphere interfuse, extend to the novel's intersubjective sphere as well, wherein James figures relations between persons as modes of atmospheric contact. For instance, in the extended scene in which Ralph first meets Molly Midmore, his betrothed in the 1820 world. In this case, James transfers the dispersive properties of gas, its tendency towards spatial diffusion, onto the temporal dimension. An atmosphere that spreads across time as well as space envelops both Ralph and Molly.

> That he was to make love, by every propriety, to Molly Midmore, and that he had in fact reached his goal on the very wings of that intention, this foretaste as of something rare had for days and days past hung about him like the scent of a flower persisting in life; but the sweetness of his going straight up to her with an offered embrace hadn't really been disclosed till her recognition, as we have said, breathed upon it with force and filled him at once with an extraordinary wealth of confidence. He had stepped straight into that with his stepping into the room, and while he stood but long enough to know himself lifted and carried the taking in of what she was through all his sense completed the splendid rightness. (121)

Ralph's cognition—his anticipatory knowledge of his social and amorous situation in the 1820 world—is mediated by his envelopment in an atmosphere, an atmosphere that has hung about him for "days and days past," as the residual scent of a perished flower. Further, there is a

continuous extension of this atmosphere into the present moment of Molly's recognition—a recognition that itself assumes agency as the subject of respiration ("breathed upon it"), and which Ralph literally steps into when he steps into Molly's room—as if a physical atmosphere somehow expanded to cover two discrete moments in time. Relations between persons assume the form of atmospheric associations.

T.S. Eliot frames his discussion of social relations in late Jamesian fiction in similar terms. In 1918, in his article "On Henry James: In Memory," Eliot argues that "the real hero, in any of James's stories, is a social entity of which men and women are constituents," what he refers to as "a situation, a relation, an *atmosphere*, to which the characters pay tribute."[52] For Eliot, the fundamental characterological "units" in Jamesian fiction are assemblages, not singularities. "It is in the chemistry of these subtle substances," Eliot continues, "these curious precipitates and explosive gases, which are suddenly formed by the contact of mind with mind, that James is unequaled."[53] In James's late fiction, as Eliot observes, cognition occurs outside of individual minds, in the atmospheric interspace between persons. What Eliot, drawing upon the metaphoric legacy of gas warfare, calls the "explosive gases" which are catalyzed by the "contact of mind with mind," become atmospheric communities in *The Sense of the Past*.

As the darker colorings of Eliot's allusion to gas imply, *The Sense of the Past* is also a narrative meditation on the ecology of fear, and, like the contemporary media representations of gas warfare in the British press, James's atmospherics also register the embodied impact of ambient threat. In his notes to the novel, James repeatedly expresses his desire to create an atmosphere of fear in the encounter between Ralph Pendrel and the Midmore family of 1820,

[52] T.S. Eliot, "On Henry James: In Memory," in *The Question of Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. F.W. Dupee (1918; New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945), 110. My italics.
[53] Ibid., 110.

what he also calls the "intensity of malaise" that Ralph's presence induces in them (331). Indeed, Ralph himself is described as a kind of toxic cloud, with James invoking the "present Pendrel's pressure, his hovering, penetrating force" which instills an irrational fear in the Midmores, and which the Midmores register as an atmospheric impact (330). For example, when Ralph meets Perry, the eldest son and solitary male heir of the Midmore family, he begins to believe that Perry may be "on to him," somehow intuitively aware of his anomalous status as time-travel transplant, and this knowledge provokes the "first breath of a fear" that Ralph experiences in the 1820 world (153). However, rather than inferring the nature of Ralph's internal states from their external expressions, Perry literally inhales his knowledge from the surrounding atmosphere: "Perry scented his cleverness, so to call it, scented his very act of understanding, as some creature of the woods might scent the bait of the trapper" (153). Later on, Ralph reads Mrs. Midmore's own intuition of Perry's intuition in analogous atmospheric terms: "Wasn't there in her face during the moment a dim glimmer of inquiry?—something like 'What on earth is it, yes, that you're doing to him, what was it, yes, a few minutes ago, when if I hadn't been watching him he would have shuddered like a frightened horse who sniffs in the air the nearness of some creature of a sort he has never seen?'" (168). To recall Massumi's gloss on the affective impact of ambient threat, Ralph's presence operates as an atmospheric force that "*modulates* felt qualities infusing a life-environment."[54]

This atmosphere of fear reaches its narrative climax after Ralph attempts to assuage the Midmores "malaise" through an explanation of his own emotional situation. Ralph's presence provokes "a rupture of relation" with them that literally petrifies them with fear, presenting "them to his vision, during some moments" as "some mechanic but consummate imitation of

[54] Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact," 62. Massumi's italics.

ancient life, staring through the vast plate of a museum" (213). James's figuration of Ralph's gaseous presence reveals the interleaving of the ecological and experiential dimensions of atmosphere.

> It was for all the world as if his own interpretation grew, under this breath of a crisis, exactly by the lapse of theirs, lasting long enough to suggest that his very care for them had somehow annihilated them, or had at least converted them to the necessarily void and soundless state. He could understand that they didn't, and that this would have made them take him for mad, the chill and dismay of which —felt for that matter by Ralph too—turned them to stone or wood or wax, or whatever it was they momentarily most resembled. The chill was a true felt drop of the temperature, the waft across them all of a mortal element, mortal at least to the others and menacing, should it have continued, to himself. (213)

The failure of Ralph's reasoning and Ralph's rhetoric, and the collapse of affective community motivated by this failure, manifests itself in atmospheric terms. The "breath of a crisis" functions as the literal subject of respiration, as the "chill" refers at once to a drastic alteration of the communal mood as well as a thermal modification of the circumambient air ("true felt drop in the temperature"). James's atmospheric rhetoric, with its ecological figurations of intersubjectivity, at once captures gas warfare's weaponization of affect as ambient threat—which both the British military and the British public referred to as "Frightfulness"—and anticipates a modern phenomenological tradition that begins a decade later with Martin Heidegger's theorization of *Stimmung*—rendered in English as "attunement" or "mood"—as a

mode of atmospheric immersion: "Attunements are not side-effects, but are something which in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though an attunement is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through."[55] What Eliot, drawing upon the metaphorical legacy of gas warfare, described as "the explosive gases, which are suddenly formed by the contact of mind with mind," become literal clouds in *The Sense of the Past*, as James's redeploys diegetic atmosphere as narrative actant.

Air Capsule

James himself discovered a safe place to breath in the midst of the menacing atmosphere of the Great War in his late essay "Within the Rim" (1915). Standing on the strand looking across the English Channel towards France and Belgium, whom "one could hear pant, through the summer air, in their effort and their alarm," James perceives a "sudden new tang in the atmosphere, the flagrant difference, as one noted, in the look of everything."[56] James describes this difference as "a sense of the extraordinary way in which the most benign conditions of light and air," of "the most beautiful English summer conceivable, mixed themselves with all the

[55] Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67. In the first division of *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger describes *Stimmung* as a primordial mode of disclosure of Dasein's ontological status as being-in-the-world. Attunements disclose Dasein's sense of being "thrown" into a world, of always already discovering itself as environmentally embedded in its "there." In addition, attunements are "*prior* to all cognition and volition," both in the temporal and the evaluative sense of priority: "the possibilities of disclosure which belong to cognition reach far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods, in which Dasein is brought before its Being as 'there.'" Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), 173, 174. Heidegger's italics. For an exposition of the first division of *Being and Time* see Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

[56] Henry James, "Within the Rim," in *Within the Rim and Other Essays* (1915; London: W. Collins and Sons, 1918), 15, 12. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

violence of action and passion, the other so hideous and piteous, so heroic and tragic facts, and flouted them as with the example of something far superior" (16). Beyond the rim, on "the other side of that finest of horizon-lines," are "unutterable things, massacre and ravage and anguish, all but irresistible assault and cruelty" (20). Within the rim, James registers the historical pressure of the war, the "unprecedentedness" of "armaments unknown to human experience," as a change in the English air (23). For James, England manifests the "inviolate" (21) insular character of her indomitable nationhood as an atmospheric effect, "pouring forth" her identity "as atmosphere," in "the very measure and to the very top of her consciousness of how it hung in the balance" (25). As against the distressed atmosphere across the Channel, James asserts an amorous contact with the circumambient air, "a positive, a fairly sensual bask" in its "light, too kindled and too rich not to pour out by its own force" (32). The streaming radiance of this atmosphere, poured forth by its own force, provokes in James "an inexpressible romantic thrill" (12). James's sensual rapport with the English air may be read as a desire to imagine an alternative mode of atmospheric inhabitation in the midst of world war.

James was not alone in his wartime desire for purer air. By way of conclusion, and as complement to my introductory example of Sargent's painting, I would like to offer one more example of an emergent atmospheric thematic in modern art. The artist here is Marcel Duchamp, and the year is once again 1919, the same year that Sargent completed *Gassed*, and three years after James was forced to leave *The Sense of the Past* in a state of permanent incompletion. In this case, the "autonomous" aesthetic object is inseparable from the anecdotal rehearsal of its origin. On December 27, 1919 Duchamp was in Le Havre, waiting to board the *SS Touraine* to set sail to New York. Shortly before boarding the ship, Duchamp went to a local pharmacy and convinced the pharmacist to give him a clear cylindrical ampoule from his stock. The pharmacist

poured out the liquid contents of the ampoule and capped it with a rubber stopper. Duchamp then wrote the words "Air de Paris" on a piece of tape and wrapped the tape around the stem of the ampoule. Upon his arrival in New York, Duchamp presented the ampoule, filled to bursting with a generous sample of the "Parisian" atmosphere (50 cubic centimeters, to be precise), as a gift to his American hosts, the wealthy collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg. Duchamp thought that the air itself would be a fitting gift for the couple that already had everything. So it was that the atmosphere made its way into the history of the readymade.[57]

In retrospect, it is tempting to read Duchamp's gifting of the atmosphere as a kind of retaliatory gesture of atmospheric preservation, as an aggressive response, in the mode of aesthetic production, to the weaponization of the atmosphere in WWI. We might think of James's literary production during the war years as a similar effort. By 1919 the atmosphere had irrevocably "lost its innocence," both in art and in life. What James famously called "the air of reality" could now no longer be thought of without also thinking of—in the same breath, as it were—the reality of the air.[58]

[57] I borrow the example of Duchamp from Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 105-106. See also Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 208, 223, 374.
[58] James, "The Art of Fiction," 53.

II. "WE HAD THE AIR": THE ATMOSPHERIC FORM OF THE VIETNAM WAR

During the Vietnam War, Operation Ranch Hand, "a combat organization dedicated solely to the purpose of conducting war upon the environment," sprayed approximately twenty million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicidal chemicals on South Vietnam, defoliating approximately five million acres of forests.[1] But before they dropped Agent Orange upon the Vietnamese environment, the Americans dropped comic strips upon the Vietnamese people. Prior to spraying a populated area, the US military would distribute propaganda pamphlets about the benefits of herbicidal chemicals, cartoon comic strips with titles such as "Brother Nam has Questions about Chemical Defoliants." Brother Nam, the protagonist, a peaceable farmer living in a rural hamlet, is the hapless victim of Viet Cong violence. The initial frames of the comic strip depict diabolically clownish VC, flashing steel-toed boots and brandishing bowie knives, assaulting Nam's unarmed neighbors. Boats and huts burn in the background. In the following frame, an airplane floats across a sunlit sky, emitting two spiral plumes of herbicidal mist. Below, gleaming government agents, clad in elegant civilian attire, carefully spray the local verdure with backpack-mounted canisters labeled "defoliant." The government agents respond to Nam's questions about the safety of the chemicals—Won't the chemicals hurt my crops? Kill the animals and people?—with easy reassurance: "Nice to see you, Brother Nam. The only effect of defoliant is to kill trees and force leaves to wither, and normally does not cause harm to people, livestock, land, or the drinking water of our compatriots." The government agents continue: "Do

[1] I draw the quotation from Paul Frederick Cecil, *Herbicidal Warfare: The Ranch Hand Project in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 153. I draw the statistics from David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists who Changed the Way We Think about the Environment* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 2, 16.

you see how well I look, Brother Nam? Each day this is my responsibility and I normally inhale defoliant chemicals into my lungs, but do I look ill to you?" Nam concludes: "Now I fully understand and have no questions about defoliants. I now resolve never to listen to Viet Cong propaganda."[2]

The formal strategies of the comic strip reflect the tacit presuppositions of American military ideology. The propaganda's anti-ecological, abstract separation of human and environment, the false belief that one could harm a single element of the environment (trees) without also harming all the other elements (people, animals and land), goes hand in hand with its exaggerated emphasis upon the authority of sensory experience, in particular, the evidence of the eyes. In addition to the ocular rhetoric of the pamphlets—Do you see how well I look? Do I look ill to you?—village education teams, comprised of ARVN soldiers, would confirm Brother Nam's conclusions with live demonstrations, applying small amounts of Agent Orange to their skin in order to show the harmless nature of the chemicals.[3] The appeal to the immediacy of sensory perception functions as a dissembling presentism, obfuscating the invisible effects of the chemical. Depicting its effects as contained within strict empirical confines—limited in space to the sprayed sector, limited in time to the duration of defoliation—elides both the spatial diffusion and temporal extension of Agent Orange, what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence." Slow violence is a "kind of violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."[4] In the fictional world of American propaganda, the atmosphere acts

[2] For the contents of American propaganda, I draw upon Edwin A. Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science and the Politics of Uncertainty* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 75-77.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Nixon critiques the misleading nature of the media representation of Agent Orange, citing a 2003 *New York Times* editorial which situates U.S. aggression in Vietnam within the chronological limits of our "dozen years there," the clean-cut contour of the time interval obfuscating the ongoing aftermath of

as a discrete pocket of airspace, cut off from other spaces and times, an implicit boundary for the short-range radius of Agent Orange.

In reality, of course, the atmosphere ferries chemical agents across both space and time, and mediates the long-range effects of slow violence. Spatially, the distribution patterns of dioxin, the toxic core of Agent Orange, dissolved the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, war zone and civil sphere. In addition to inevitable leakages at every point in the military distribution chain—from transport to storage to combat—the disused drums, still laced with chemical traces, were re-used by the Vietnamese. In urban areas, drums were used as containers for fuel, spreading the toxin via dioxin-infused vehicular emissions; in rural areas, drums were used as trash bins or water buckets, tainting local ecosystems.[5] The long-durational aftermath of herbicidal warfare, as Charles Waugh observes, includes "the destruction of nearly an eighth of the Vietnamese environment," the creation of "dioxin hotspots scattered across the southern half of Vietnam," and "the cursing of multiple generations of human beings with a host of cancers, birth defects, and neurological, endocrinal, and psychological disorders."[6] The ultimate result of herbicidal warfare, as historian Edwin Martini writes, "was not simply the elimination of 'weeds,' but the destruction of whole environments upon which humans depended."[7] Contemporary critics in the scientific community, appalled by the scope of ecological devastation, dubbed the U.S. military's systematic assault upon the nonhuman environment "ecocide."[8]

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chemical warfare. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2, 14.

[5] Martini, *Agent Orange*, 28-30.

[6] Charles Waugh, "'Only You Can Prevent a Forest': Agent Orange, Ecocide, and Environmental Justice," *ISLE* 17.1 (Winter 2010): 113-132, 120.

[7] Martini, *Agent Orange*, 2.

[8] Scientist Arthur W. Galston defined the term "ecocide" in 1970 at a conference on "War Crimes and the American Conscience": "After the end of World War II, and as a result of the Nuremburg trials, we justly

In this chapter, I argue that the formal strategies of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), contra American propaganda, present a critique of the ecocidal tendencies of U.S. military policy in Vietnam. An iconic classic of the New Journalism, *Dispatches* is the result of Herr's decade-long effort to fuse the various pieces of his war journalism—"dispatches" sent home from Vietnam in 1967-68 to periodicals such as *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*, as well as more recent writing—into a single whole that would express the essence of his experience in Vietnam. Although, as I argue, Herr presents a trenchant, highly nuanced critique of American ecological warfare, his critics have remained largely silent on the subject of the environmental dimensions of *Dispatches*.[9] *Dispatches* has been received, almost exclusively, as a quintessential example of postmodernism, its virtuosic stylistic display swerving away from the representation of reality into the pure play of signification. Frederic Jameson's emphasis upon the "extraordinary linguistic innovations" of the work, which "open up the place of a whole new reflexivity," sounds the keynote of the book's critical reception.[10] "The 'real' cannot be retrieved," writes Brady Harrison, and Herr "places his faith not in a 'materiality resident in words,' but rather in language-based simulations, projections that lack materiality."[11] David Herman argues that, for Herr, "there is no question of perpetually adjusting representations to reality. There is merely the

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condemned the willful destruction of an entire people and its culture, calling this crime against humanity *genocide*. It seems to me that the willful and permanent destruction of an environment in which a people can live in a manner of their own choosing ought similarly to be considered as a crime against humanity, to be designated by the term *ecocide*." (Galston's italics). Cited in Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 19.

[9] Jim Neilson, in his polemical review of the book's critical reception, notes the absence without attempting to redress it. Neilson, *Warring Fictions: American Literary Culture and the Vietnam War Narrative* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 136-164.

[10] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 44.

[11] Brady Harrison, "'This Movie is a Thing of Mine': Homeopathic Postmodernism in Michael Herr's *Dispatches,*" in *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity*, ed. Michael Bibby (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 89-108, 95.

interminable analysis of representation itself."[12] As Thomas Myers has it, Herr represents "the emotional and spiritual terrain of the war," offering a stylistic tour-de-force appropriate for "a war of almost pure style."[13] For Philip Beidler, the book's first academic critic, *Dispatches* is not about the shattered landscape of Vietnam, but about the psychic landscape of its author: "The real terrain of *Dispatches* thus of necessity becomes the terrain of consciousness itself."[14]

Far from mere formal innovation, or postmodernist rhetorical pyrotechnics, *Dispatches* offers a critique of ecological warfare which occurs at the level of form: not only in the mimetic force of its verisimilar descriptions of the nonhuman environment, but in the rhetorical logic of its metaphors, images, and narrative structure. My focus is upon Herr's representation of atmosphere. I begin in the upper atmosphere, arguing that Herr assumes the hegemonic position of aerial vision, a position instantiated in *Dispatches*' diegetic world as the apical viewpoint of the helicopter passenger, in order to subvert its strategic logic. I then descend from the transparent atmosphere of the upper air to the dense atmosphere of the combat zone. On the ground, breathing becomes difficult due to the agency of the atmosphere, and I argue that Herr's metaphorics of respiration renders visible the slow violence of ecological warfare. Next, I place Herr's text in the context of the nascent environmental movement, in particular the biocentric rhetoric of deep ecology, reading *Dispatches* as a document of modern environmentalism. Here, atmosphere operates as the site of rhetorical and ontological displacement from human person to nonhuman environment. The vivification of the nonhuman environment is also a classic science-

[12] David J. Herman, "Modernism versus Postmodernism: Towards an Analytic Distinction," in *A Postmodern Reader,* ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 157-192, 183.
[13] Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 147, 155. Cited in Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, 154.
[14] Philip D. Bridler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 142.

fictional trope, and Herr's agentic atmosphere finds its sci-fi analogue in Ursula Le Guin's contemporaneous response to the Vietnam War, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), in which the atmospheric agency of an alien planet undermines the military policy of its interplanetary invaders. In their respective critiques of military environmentality, both Herr and Le Guin anticipate contemporary ecocritical thinking, such as that of Stacey Alaimo, which reimagines human corporeality as "trans-corporeality," wherein "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" and "the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment.'"[15] Whereas the American military frames the Vietnamese environment as an object of technological domination, the aesthetics of atmosphere militate against the U.S. military's fantasy of a sovereign relation to the environment, revealing the ecological foundation of human subjectivity.

Only You Can Prevent a Forest

As historian David Zierler observes, "The logic of herbicidal warfare, repeated consistently in U.S. military evaluations throughout the war, was straightforward: the use of herbicides improved vertical and lateral vision in forested terrain, which thereby limited the guerrilla enemy's capacity to resupply its forces and to attack soldiers, convoys, and bases."[16] The Kennedy administration believed that American technological prowess could effectively replace sheer manpower, and herbicidal warfare was intended to eliminate the enemy's primary tactical advantage: the "cover" provided by Vietnam's environment.[17] A report commissioned by the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, in January 1968 offers a

[15] Stacey Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material* Self (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2010), 2.
[16] Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 5.
[17] Ibid.

representative endorsement for the tactical advantages of herbicidal warfare as a solution to the "paramount military problem… of locating the enemy": "Without information about enemy dispositions our forces cannot exploit their advantage of superior firepower. Defoliation by chemical herbicides is the principal way by which Allied forces obtain visible observation of enemy forces."[18] The point was promulgated throughout all levels of the military hierarchy, up and down the chain of command. As an article in *Air Force Times* described it, the mission of herbicidal warfare was to "uncover Charlie" from his jungle hideouts.[19] General Curtis LeMay, urging a counterinsurgent role for the U.S. Air Force in the form of aerial detection missions, argued that the "very characteristic of the guerilla is his ability to disappear from regular intelligence surveillance."[20] General William Westmoreland, deeper into the war, and wearily familiar with the invisibility of the enemy, once compared the American military in Vietnam to a "giant without eyes."[21]

The scopic regime of the U.S. military forms part of the modern history of the weaponization of vision, what Rey Chow calls the "the production of maximal visibility and illumination for the purpose of maximal destruction" in the age of the "world target," or what Paul Virilio refers to as the "logistics of perception," the "deadly harmony that always establishes itself between the functions of eye and weapon."[22] Virilio draws the connection

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[18] U.S. Agency for International Development, Embassy of South Vietnam, and MACV, "Review: Herbicide Policy Committee," May 1968. Cited in David Zierler "Against Protocol: Ecocide, *Détente, and the Question of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam, 1969-1975*," in *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, ed. J. R. McNeill and Corinna R. Unger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 235.
[19] Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 235.
[20] Ibid., 57.
[21] Ibid., 79.
[22] Playing upon Martin Heidegger's explication of the epistemic shift that marks modernity—the "world picture"—Chow writes that "the world has also been transformed into—is essentially conceived and grasped as—a target." Heidegger emphasizes the coextension of being and representation: "World picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture… The Being of whatever is, is sought and found in the representedness of the latter."

between "atmospheric transparency and ocular targeting," and explicates the strategic logic that underlies the technocratic fetishization of the "logistics of perception."[23] Virilio reads the proliferation of light-intensification technologies, such as "pyrotechnic, electrical and electronic devices," as well as technologies that enhance or expand the prosthetic sensorium, such as "photogrammetry, thermography, infra-red scanning, and even specially invented infra-red film," as "frenzied efforts to overcome" the strategic blindness alluded to by General Westmoreland. These efforts ultimately "gave rise to chemical defoliation, whereby it finally became possible to empty the screen of parasitic vegetation."[24] Atmosphere, in the strategic eyes of the "logistics of perception," functions as a neutral background, a transparent medium for the reception and transmission of tactical data and the operation of aerial targeting systems. Ecological warfare eliminates the "clutter" of the nonhuman environment in order to dis-cover the unseen enemy, and render that enemy an object of visual knowledge.

In what follows, I examine those moments in *Dispatches* when Herr views the Vietnamese environment from the transparent atmosphere of the upper air. I argue that Herr inhabits the subject position of aerial vision, what Denis Cosgrove calls the "Apollonian eye" of U.S. militarism, in order to subvert its strategic logic.[25] Within *Dispatches'* diegetic world, this position is incarnated in the point of view of the helicopter passenger. As Virilio implies, U.S.

Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (1938; New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 129-130. Along with Heidegger, Chow cites W.J. Perry, a former United States Under Secretary of State for Defense: "If I had to sum up current thinking on precision missiles and saturation weaponry in a single sentence, I'd put it like this: once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it" (31). Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 30-31. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 84.

[23] Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 76.

[24] Ibid., 83.

[25] Denis E. Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3.

military vision suppresses the agency and materiality of atmosphere in its desire to clear the atmospheric screen. Herr, as it were, turns this transparency against itself, using the military's own privileged viewpoint as the focal point of his critical gaze upon ecological warfare.

Dispatches begins by placing the aftermath of ecological warfare within the reader's field of vision. The first character Herr encounters is an American information officer, whose job it has been, "for nearly a year now," to publicize the U.S. military's obliteration of the Ho Bo Woods.[26] The IO's ecocidal zeal is such that it "seemed to be keeping him young, his enthusiasm made you feel that even the letters he wrote home to his wife were full of it, it really showed what you could do if you had the know-how and the hardware" (4). Herr views the "vanished" Ho Bo Woods from the elevated vantage point of a helicopter.

> *The Mission was always telling us about VC units being engaged and wiped out and then reappearing a month later in full strength, there was nothing very spooky about that, but when we went up against his terrain we usually took it definitively, and even if we didn't keep it you could always see that we'd at least been there. At the end of my first week in-country I met an information officer in the headquarters of the 25th Division at Cu Chi who showed me on his map and then from his chopper what they'd done to the Ho Bo Woods, the vanished Ho Bo Woods, taken off by giant Rome plows and chemicals and long, slow fire, wasting hundreds of acres of cultivated plantation and wild forest alike, 'denying the enemy valuable resources and cover.'* (3-4)[27]

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[26] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; New York: Vintage, 1991), 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[27] Herr's italics. In addition to defoliation operations, the American military deployed a variety of environmental modification techniques: incendiary chemical weapons such as white phosphorous and napalm; saturation bombing using concussion bombs called "daisy cutters," each drop decimating areas the size of football-fields; prodigious bulldozers called Rome Plows, each capable of clearing 10,000 acres of forest per hour; the technical fabrication of forest fires through diabolical cocktails of chemical

As the IO's forensic protocol reveals—first the map view, then the helicopter view—environmental modification enables the correlation of map and territory, which has become undone in Vietnam. The VC vanish into the atmosphere like ethereal specters, perpetually slipping out of the field of vision, elusive and unmappable: "even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind" (3). The decimated Ho Bo Woods, on the other hand, offers an amenable object of strategic knowledge, as the evidence of environmental destruction remains permanently within the field of vision. Herr extends Virilio's analysis of the logistics of perception, completing the double-move of its dialectic: 1) we must clear the atmosphere, eliminate "cover," in order to observe the enemy; 2) however, because the enemy still remains invisible, we will leave our visible, indelible marks upon the enemy's territory, transforming the environment into a stable object of vision.

Dispatches mentions Operation Ranch Hand only once, but the allusion forms the core of Herr's critique of American environmental violence. Significantly, Herr brackets his citation of Ranch Hand with religious imagery, forming a kind of rhetorical triptych that elucidates the historical and ideological entanglement of Western religion and ecological warfare. During a "Chinook run from Cam Lo to Dong Ha," Herr sits next to a Marine decked out with crosses, one sketched on his flak jacket, another on his helmet cover (153). While Herr's companion, "getting very absorbed," peruses martial verses from Psalms (91:5), Herr peers out the helicopter door in order to observe the Vietnamese landscape (154). Beforehand, Herr imagines lush hills that were

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spray and incendiary bombing, as well as the weaponization of natural conflagrations. See Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 184.

once the "royal hunting grounds of the Annamese emperors" (151). Instead of the luxuriant verdancy of his pastoral fantasy, Herr views the terrestrial evidence of ecocidal violence, the "endless progression of giant pits which were splashed over the ground," the "acre-sized scars where napalm or chemical spray had eaten away the cover" (154). Herr follows up his description with a parenthetical nod to Operation Ranch Hand: "(There was a special Air Force outfit that flew defoliation missions. They were called the Ranch Hands, and their motto was, 'Only we can prevent forests')" (154).[28] The associative logic of the cinematic montage, jump-cutting between the vision of ecological devastation and the blindness of readerly absorption, suggests a connection between the environmental worldview of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the manifest effects of American environmental warfare. Herr implies that American technocratic arrogance has its historical and ideological roots in the Christian separation of spirit and nature, an invidious dualism that authorizes the domination of nature by "man." Herr's parenthetical gesture supplements the point by framing American frontier mythology, the ideological basis of Ranch Hand, as an extension of this worldview. As Charles Waugh points out, a "substantial part of the Ranch Hand ethos came from cowboy mythology," and not only were the Ranch Hands "cleaning up 'the ranch' by removing unwanted vegetation," they were also "taming the wild, assisting in the eradication of the 'Indian' and the 'Indian country' all at once."[29] In conclusion, Herr captions the episode with an alternative citation from Psalms. At the end of the scene, after the Marine goes "back to the book" and Herr "goes back to the door," Herr suppresses a "nasty impulse" to "run through Psalms and find a passage which I could offer

[28] The Ranch Hand slogan plays upon the caption of a well-known poster featuring Smokey the Bear: "Only you can prevent a forest fire." Waugh, "Only You Can Prevent a Forest," 129.
[29] Waugh, "Only You Can Prevent a Forest," 119. See, for example, an American captain's casual comment to Herr prior to an imminent combat engagement: "'Come on,' the captain said, 'we'll take you out to play Cowboys and Indians'" (61).

him, the one that talked about those who were defiled with their own works and sent a-whoring with their own inventions" (154-155).[30]

The narrative logic of Herr's episode echoes the discursive logic of a contemporaneous essay by historian Lynn White, Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," first published in the journal *Science* in 1967.[31] White argues that Christianity "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends," and that "the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature" is an "Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature."[32] During the historical transition from animism to scientific rationalism, "the spirits *in* natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated," and "the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled."[33] White caps his point in a sentence that takes on ominous resonance in reference to the accelerated pace of defoliation operations in the late 1960's: "To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact."[34] Herr makes a similar point, juxtaposing the denuded nature of technocratic rationalism with the vernacular animism of the poetic imagination. Ventriloquizing Robert "Blowtorch" Komer, "heartless CIA performer" and director of the American pacification program ("pacification, another word for war"), Herr writes: "If William Blake had 'reported' to him that he'd seen angels in the trees, Komer would have tried to talk him out of it. Failing there, he'd have ordered defoliation" (44). Herr's counter-factual flight of fancy, despite its satiric

[30] Herr alludes to Psalms 106:39 (KJV): "Thus they were defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions."
[31] The essay has since become a classic in the canon of ecocriticism. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3-14.
[32] White, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 10, 12.
[33] Ibid., 10. White's italics.
[34] Ibid., 12.

anachronism, is also trenchant environmental history. As one U.S. military official put it, the non-human environment itself, like so much rubbish, requires "clean up." It is not possible to "track down every band of guerillas hiding in the wooded areas," yet "it *is* possible to 'sanitize' an area with chemical weapons, with gases and sprays that destroy animal life and crops… We can clean up an area so that the enemy won't dare attempt to operate in it."[35] Paul Cecil, former Ranch Hand pilot and official historian of the Ranch Hand Vietnam Association, on herbicidal warfare: "Ironically, a military weapon specifically intended not to cause direct injury to living beings became the center of a controversy."[36] The implicit exclusion of nonhuman life forms such as plants from the category "living beings" indicates the definitive split between human and nature that fissures U.S. military ideology—human beings, to paraphrase White, have a monopoly on spirit.

Herr reveals the animistic basis of technocratic ecophobia, the disavowed desire for connection with nature that underlies ecocidal violence. When Herr surveys the ecological aftermath of Khe Sanh, the recent target of sustained "saturation-bombing techniques" that dropped "the greatest volume of explosives in the history of warfare" (153), he perceives a symptomatic excess in the American desire to express and to witness categorical forms of environmental vandalism. Not only in terms of depth—the Americans aren't satisfied until they can see the *inside* of nature: "The smaller foothills were often quite literally turned inside out" (153)—but also in terms of surface traces, in the fearful symmetries of pattern bombing.

[35] Anthony Harrigan, "The Case for Gas Warfare." *Armed Forces Chemical Journal*, June 1963, 12. Harrigan's italics. Cited in Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 68.
[36] Cecil, *Herbicidal Warfare*, 153.

> The bigger hills were left with scars and craters of such proportions that an observer from some remote culture might see in them the obsessiveness and ritual regularity of religious symbols, the blackness at the deep center pouring out rays of bright, overturned earth all the way to the circumference; forms like Aztec sun figures, suggesting that their makers had been men who held Nature in an awesome reverence. (153)

Herr's anthropological estrangement effect—placing an outside observer from an alien culture in the subject position of aerial vision—enables us, for a moment, to separate form (visual pattern) from historical context (American violence), and opens up a space for new interpretation: ecological warfare not as aggression against nature, but as a type of nature worship. The Aztecs held that the human heart is at once the vital core of the individual and a pulsating fragment of the sun, entrapped in the human body. The ritual performance of heart-extraction releases the solar substance, reuniting it with the sun.[37] The sanguinary theater of Aztec heliolatry gives ritual expression to the inalienable connection between human and nature. The logic of Herr's simile implies that the ecocidal impulse is a reaction-formation against a more primal sense of ecological affiliation, a negative acknowledgment of our interdependence with the nonhuman environment.

Breathing In, Breathing Out

As we have seen, the hegemonic optic of the U.S. military conceives of the atmosphere as a transparent medium, suppressing its agency and materiality. But when we move from the rarefied strata of the upper air to the thick of combat, from the detached distance of the visual to

[37] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_sacrifice_in_Aztec_culture (accessed August 7, 2015).

the embodied immediacy of the respiratory, Herr's atmosphere becomes an agential entity. In what follows, I argue that Herr's metaphorics of respiration disclose the slow violence of ecological warfare. Whereas American propaganda features respiration as the most spontaneous process in the world ("I normally inhale defoliant chemicals into my lungs, but do I look ill to you?"), in *Dispatches* there is nothing more difficult than breathing.

The spatial logic of *Dispatches'* diegetic environment informs Herr's atmospherics. Herr divides diegetic space into three quadrants, or sectors of experience, aligned along a vertical axis: from the aerial to the terrestrial to the subterranean. "The ground was always in play, always being swept. Under the ground was his, above it was ours. We had the air" (14). The air belongs to the American military. Underground is the exclusive province of the Viet Cong—this tellurian domain remains unseen, and unrepresented, omitted from the descriptive register of the text altogether. The ground is the scene of combat, the zone of "contact" between opposing forces. Its sites are the jungles, the forests, the hills, and the urban precincts that become theaters of war. These spaces have alternative chronotopes, sensory economies, atmospheric values. As we have seen, the atmosphere of the air, as it were, is transparent, a clear screen for the scopic regime of the American military. The atmosphere of the ground, on the other hand, is a thick, sticky medium, clotted with the byproducts of ecological warfare. Vision is always-already filtered, colored by an atmospheric tincture: webs of smoke, veils of mist, clouds of dust, cyclonic funnels of napalm. Other senses emerge: the auditory, the olfactory, the tactile. And other faculties. Above all, the respiratory.

On the ground, in the sphere of combat, atmosphere assumes agency. As we have seen, the American military frames the Vietnamese environment as a tactical obstacle, inert and de-animate—mere "cover," removable or eliminable, like a stage set or decorative ensemble, to be

cast aside at one's convenience. For Herr, however, the Vietnamese environment is uncannily animate, rife with agency: "Forget the Cong, the *trees* would kill you, the elephant grass grew up homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence, your whole environment was a bath" (66).[38] Atmosphere is the site not only of a kind of internecine strife among the elements themselves—for instance, in Vietnam, mists don't diffuse light, or mute its brightness, but swallow it whole: "It was at dusk, those ghastly mists were fuming out of the valley floor, ingesting light" (96)—but operates as an agential vector within the war's multiform field of forces. Saigon itself "breathed history, expelled it like toxin," incessantly exhaling miasmic emanations: "hot mushy winds that never cleaned anything away, heavy thermal seal over diesel fuel, mildew, garbage, excrement, atmosphere" (43). Even a "five-block walk" in Saigon shuts down cognition, causing Herr's head to fall "apart in sections" (43). Breath becomes difficult due to the agential impact of the atmosphere. Herr wakes up "gagging for air that wasn't 99 percent moisture," breathing "misty clots of air that corroded your appetite and burned your eyes and made your cigarettes taste like swollen insects rolled up and smoked alive, crackling and wet" (54). The atmospheric byproducts of combat, such as smoke, grip the throat like an iron hand: "Everything I see is blown through with smoke, everything is on fire everywhere… Some of it pours out of large tubs of shit being burned off with diesel fuel, and it hangs, hangs, taking you full in the throat" (108).

Most flagrantly, of course, atmosphere assumes agency due to the effects of ecological warfare. Whereas American propaganda brackets out both the spatial and temporal effects of "slow violence," Herr re-inscribes the slow violence of ecological warfare into the present moment by representing the poly-temporal thickness of the present. Critics such as David James

[38] Herr's italics.

claim that Herr's scenic focus upon the American "GIs' experience" of "the perpetual present of combat," mystifies the history of the invasion of Vietnam —in particular, the asymmetrical historical experience of the Vietnamese victims of American aggression—and that "the phenomenology of presence allows him to elide the 'realism' of the historical process as a whole."[39] The claim is not unjust, but it is partial. *Dispatches* has a narratological bias, due in part to the subjective slant of Herr's autobiographical prism, and fails to focalize through Vietnamese subjects. However, Herr inscribes an alternative history, the history of environmental warfare, within his scenic rhetoric, deploying the formal analogue of "the phenomenology of presence," the "literary simulation of a fire-fight," as a site for critique.[40] The "perpetual present of combat," for Herr, is not an empty frame for homogenous time, punctual and self-identical, but a nexus for multiple temporalities—and atmospheric agencies.

> With all of that dust blowing around, the acrid smell of cordite would hang in the air for a long time after firefights, and there was the CS gas that we'd fired at the NVA blowing back in over our positions. It was impossible to get a clean breath with all of that happening, and there was that other smell too that came up from the shattered heaps of stone wherever an airstrike had come in. It held to the lining of your nostrils and worked itself into the weave of your fatigues, and weeks later, miles away, you'd wake up at night and it would be in the room with you. (77-78)

[39] David E. James, "Rock n' Roll in Representations of the Invasion of Vietnam," *Representations* 29 (Winter 1990), 86.
[40] Ibid.

Herr's proleptic rhetoric prizes open the punctual space-time of the so-called "present" moment. The dust, the cordite, the CS gas, the atmospheric detritus of the dead ("that other smell"): all the atmospheric elements follow different durations of dispersal, unfolding "across a range of temporal scales."[41] And across a range of spatial vectors. The trope of blowback, with its recursive ironies—from the boomerang meanderings of the CS gas to the spectral return of the odor of the dead—reveals the topographical manifold that inheres in the "present" atmosphere. The slow violence of that "other smell," its temporal dispersion ("weeks later") and spatial diffusion ("miles away"), manifests as an uncanny atmospheric agency. What you breathe becomes a part of you, infused in your flesh and its material extensions, but then becomes *apart* from you, crystallizes out into a separate presence, attaining its own autonomy—in your lungs, but also in your room, bending over you like a dark visitant. Herr is still breathing the air of the "perpetual present of combat" weeks later, miles away. Herr's atmospherics show that slow violence is not just environmental, but psychological as well.

While the concept of slow violence renders visible "psychological effects far outlasting specific acts of discernible violence," Herr's atmospherics also reveal psychological effects that precede discernible acts of violence. Herr himself experiences the anticipatory anxiety, or "pre-traumatic" stress, of imminent contact as an atmospheric agency that crashes his respiratory economy.[42] "Whenever I heard something outside of our clenched little circle I'd practically flip… A couple of rounds fired off in the dark a kilometer away and the Elephant would be there kneeling on my chest, sending me down into my boots for a breath" (4-5). The atmosphere is also the site for a variety of virtual, immaterial entities, often situated as the unspecified

[41] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.
[42] I borrow the concept of "pre-traumatic" stress from Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

antecedents of the impersonal pronoun "it," that impinge upon the sensorium in the form of atmospheric impacts: "Sometimes you felt too thin and didn't want to get into anything at all and it would land on you like your next-to-last breath" (62). Throughout *Dispatches*, anxiety about the unbearable vulnerability of the body in the context of combat manifests as respiratory dysfunction: "you could take one neat round in the lung and go out hearing only the bubble of the last few breaths" (134). The descriptive details of Herr's Homeric catalogue of war wounds focus upon the interface between person and atmosphere, the contact zones of nose and mouth and throat: "there is a young guy who has been hit in the throat, and he is making the sounds a baby will make when he is trying to work up the breath for a good scream" (110). In combat, when you do get a clean breath, what you breathe is not oxygen, but the dense effluvium of human carnage: "you couldn't breathe anywhere in Hue without rushing somebody's death into your bloodstream" (243). Herr's inventory of chemical weaponry, which offers a connoisseur's taxonomy of smoke, accents atmospheric agency, from the ominous personification of white phosphorous to the asphyxiating grip of napalm: "Frail gray smoke where they'd burned off the rice fields around a free-strike zone, brilliant white smoke from phosphorus ("Willy Peter/ Make you a buh liever"), deep black smoke from 'palm, they said that if you stood at the base of a column of napalm smoke it would suck the air right out of your lungs" (10). The rhetorical trajectory of Herr's inventory, moving from the visual registration of atmospheric pollution to the embodied immediacy of respiratory incapacity, encapsulates *Dispatches'* critique of ecological warfare. Ecological warfare targets not only the environment, but also the sense of connection between human and environment, interrupting the subject's most intimate interaction with nature, the act of breathing.

Indeed, in *Dispatches*, the suspension of respiration is associated with the categorical negation of the relation between human and environment. Herr associates the ecocidal impulse with the lack of breath, or breath-taking: "Some people just wanted to blow it all to hell, animal vegetable and mineral… A lot of people knew that the country could never be won, only destroyed, and they locked into that with breathtaking concentration" (59). Herr reads ecological warfare as a compensatory strategy, a kind of substitute gratification for the impossibility of military victory. The Marines receive the hills as allies of the Viet Cong, and direct their ire indiscriminately across the spectrum of human and non-human enemies: "So when we decimated them, broke them, burned parts of them so that nothing would ever live on them again, it must have given a lot of Marines a good feeling, an intimation of power" (152-53). But Herr's metaphoric logic implies that "power" comes at the cost of severing the human connection to the nonhuman environment. His description of the ecological aftermath: "the cold, shattered, mist-bound hills, the same hills that had received over 120,000,000 pounds of explosives from B-52 raids in the previous three weeks, terrain like moonscapes, cratered and pitted" (146). Moonscape is an apt simile, both formally, in its surfacial analogy to an arid terrain of cratered rock, and thematically, in its provocative evocation of planetary alterity. Most poignantly, however, the trope of moonscape evokes the image of an environment that lacks an atmosphere, in which spontaneous, unmediated respiration is no longer an option.

Herr's critique of ecological warfare, which focuses upon the act of respiration, begins even before his story begins, in the design of *Dispatches'* chapters, which begin with "Breathing In," and end with "Breathing Out." Structurally speaking, the narrative arc of Herr's experience is compressed into the space of a single breath. Right from the outset, Herr shifts the reader's attention from the visual register to the respiratory sphere, and thus, implicitly, from the

distanced detachment of strategic command to the embodied experience of the grunts. Within *Dispatches'* diegetic world, the two termini come together only once, on a single syntactical occasion, connected by a coordinating conjunction. The relevant paragraph begins *in medias res*, as Herr converses with a young grunt: "'Boy, you sure get offered some shitty choices,' a Marine once said to me, and I couldn't help but feel that what he really meant was that you didn't get offered any at all" (16). The paragraph ends as follows: "He hadn't been anything but tired and scared for six months and he'd lost a lot, mostly people, and seen far too much, but he was breathing in and breathing out, some kind of choice all by itself" (16). In contrast to the "breathtaking concentration" of the ecocidal minds of Mission Control, Herr offers the respiratory process of an anonymous grunt. But what kind of a choice is breathing in and breathing out? Breathing, non-conscious and continuous, seems not so much a choice, but rather an irrepressible biological urgency. Herr re-imagines respiration as volition, at once the most urgent of all versions of what he calls "war metabolism" (13)—the accommodation of the organism to the rigors of warfare—as well as the most fundamental form of exchange between person and environment. But his ultimate point remains somewhat enigmatic. Perhaps each breath represents the reaffirmation of a non-combative accord between human and environment, the retention of some ecological relation that is not co-opted by the war machine, an act of self-assertion that is not also a form of bellicose destruction. Perhaps breathing, among a plethora of "shitty choices" which are not choices at all, is the only choice left.

Combat Ecology

As our discussion of the metaphoric logic of *Dispatches'* chronotopes of air and ground has shown, Herr's atmospherics offer an incisive critique of the environmental component of

U.S. military ideology. In what follows, I read *Dispatches* as a kind of environmentalist text, inhabiting the same conceptual and tropological space as contemporaneous environmental discourse, which articulates the interdependence of human beings and nonhuman nature. For Herr, as I argue, the experience of combat elicits the ecological dimensions of human being-in-the-world, the irreducible interconnection between person and environment. Atmosphere is the privileged site of the figuration of ecological coexistence, where persons phase into forms of weather, or modes of energy, or nonhuman life forms, or elemental material.

As historian Edwin Martini observes, the "debates among policymakers and military leaders over herbicidal warfare and crop destruction centered around a number of false distinctions," above all "that between 'the physical person' and the larger environment in which that body was located."[43] Ironically, the first American defoliation operation, in Spring 1962, coincided with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the iconic document of the modern environmental movement. Carson promulgated the ecological concepts of human enmeshment in nonhuman nature and of the irreducible interconnection of all entities within the environment.[44] Scientist Arthur Westing, one of America's most outspoken critics of ecological warfare in Vietnam, wrote in 1974 of the burgeoning environmental consciousness of the period: "A realization of the close interdependence of man and nature is only just beginning to emerge as a result of the increasing stress man is imposing on this relationship."[45] *Silent Spring*, perhaps more than any other piece of cultural production in the post-WWII era, helped transform the modern environmental imaginary, forcing a paradigm shift from thinking of person and

[43] Martini, *Agent Orange*, 61.
[44] Martini, *Agent Orange*, 10.
[45] Arthur H. Westing, "Arms Control and the Environment: Proscription of Ecocide," *Science and Public Affairs* (January 1974): 24-27, 27.

environment as separate entities, to a recognition of their reciprocal suffusion.[46] Carson's intervention catalyzed the rise of the modern environmental movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's, which produced such cultural artifacts as Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968-1972) and the world's first Earth Day (1970), as well as the more hardcore, or "deep green," offshoots of mainstream environmentalism, such as the strident biocentrism of the deep ecology platform, spearheaded by Scandinavian philosopher Arne Naess.

The "combat ecology" of *Dispatches*, in its insistent rhetorical slippage from person to environment—figuring persons as parts of the environment, rather than self-contained units—most closely resembles the biocentric rhetoric of deep ecology. Herr's discourse, like the discourse of the deep ecologists, relentlessly pressures the distinction between person and environment. Deep ecological texts consistently re-describe independent agents as scenic elements, and figure human persons as ephemeral epiphenomena of nonhuman nature. To employ the dramatistic terminology of Kenneth Burke, the scene-agent ratio, which figures the distribution of agency between person and environment, is heavily weighted towards scene at the expense of agent.[47] The "biospherical egalitarianism" of deep ecology, as Arne Naess expresses it, rejects the "man-in-environment image in favor of *the relational, total-field image,*" viewing humans not as discrete entities, but "as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations."[48] As ecologist Paul Shepard puts it, both our ideological formations and our linguistic forms "encourage[s] us to see ourselves—or a plant or animal—as an isolated sack, a thing, a

[46] On the history of the post-WWII environmentalist imaginary see Christopher Sellars, "Body, Place and the State: The Makings of an 'Environmentalist' Imaginary in the Post-World War II United States," *Radical History Review* 74 (1999): 31-64.
[47] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 7-9.
[48] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary" (1973), in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambala, 1995), 151. Naess's italics.

contained self;" whereas, in reality, individual organisms operate as emergent patterns within an ecological "choreography of materials and energy and information."[49] An ecological trope from poet-environmentalist Gary Snyder is representative: selves are not independent agents, but "interdependent energy-fields."[50]

Dispatches, as well, locates the source of agency in impersonal energy rather than individual volition. Action is neither intentional nor sourced in the subject, thus the tacit irony of the term "actor" in the scene of combat: "A lot of what people called courage was only undifferentiated energy cut loose by the intensity of the moment, mind loss that sent the actor on an incredible run; if he survived it he had the chance later to decide whether he'd really been brave" (66). In order to express the collective agency of the American military, Herr relies on a metaphorics of energetics, figuring American power as a physical force and a natural resource: "There was such a dense concentration of American energy there… if that energy could have been channeled into anything more than noise, waste and pain it would have lighted up Indochina for a thousand years" (43-44).[51] The human presences in *Dispatches* often seem like "knots in a biospherical net," mere nodes in the nonhuman environment. The first American combat operative introduced in the text, the "Lurp," a special operations officer whose lethality has become legendary, is less a human character than a natural setting. During his long-range reconnaissance missions, he merges into the milieu of the jungle: "In the coming hours he'd stand as faceless and quiet in the jungle as a fallen tree" (6). When Herr stares into his eyes,

[49] Paul Shepard, "Ecology and Man—a Viewpoint" (1969), in *Deep Ecology*, 134.
[50] Gary Snyder, "Four Changes" (1970), in *Deep Ecology*, 147.
[51] Herr's fantasy of a millennial fund of American electrical power seems less fantastic when one considers the statistics. American bombing raids, as Fred Wilcox relates, released the energy equivalent of "328 Hiroshima A-bombs." In terms of noise, waste, and pain, the bombs "left some 10-15 million large bomb craters as a semi-permanent feature of the landscape in Vietnam." Fred A. Wilcox, *Scorched Earth: Legacies of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 18.

hoping to catch a glimpse of what lies inside, what he discovers there is not the abyssal interiority of a human subjectivity, but simply an abyss: "All I ever managed was one quick look in, and that was like looking at the floor of an ocean" (6). The Viet Cong are received not as human persons, but as meteorological phenomena. Reading the faces of the Vietnamese is "like trying to read the wind" (3), and Marines endowed with "extra-sense capacity," such as superfine ambient awareness, "could smell VC or their danger the way hunting guides smelled the coming weather" (57).

For Herr himself, as well, the experience of combat motivates a rhetorical displacement from person to environment. Of his first taste of mortal peril, Herr recalls: "I don't think I said anything, but I made a sound that I can remember now, a shrill blubbering pitched to carry more terror than I'd ever known existed, like the sounds they've recorded off of plants being burned" (32). Unlike the divisive modes of de-personalization that cast the Viet Cong as part of the weather world, Herr's lurid identification with the vegetal victims of ecocidal aggression, his expression of a creaturely vulnerability shared by human and nonhuman alike, opens up an expansive sense of ecological intimacy.[52] Indeed, an intimacy that sometimes verges upon erotic intimacy, as when the onset of combat motivates modes of amorous sensuousness with the environment: "Contact. Then it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plow it with your whole body." Contact climaxes in ecological communion, ecstatically collapsing the distance between person and environment: "Under Fire would take you out of your head and your body too, the space you'd seen a second ago between subject and object wasn't there anymore" (63).

[52]The VC were also figured as pests to be eliminated by weed-killers, an identification implied by the Kennedy administration's insistence on the analogy between herbicidal aggression and domestic pest control, an analogy deployed to confute accusations of illegitimate chemical warfare. See Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 79-80.

The phenomenological pressures of combat continually undermine the binary oppositions that structure our environmental perception, what Lawrence Buell describes as the "sense of a 'within' and a 'beyond' the perimeter of the body" and "a domain of the consciously 'noticed' and a domain of the 'unnoticed.'"[53] Internal states of being leak into the external environment. Emotions and dreams become objects of sensory experience, apprehensible as olfactory trends within the atmosphere. Herr notes how "exhaustion and fear could be smelled" within the "mixing up" of "smells that were special to combat zones," and how "certain dreams gave off an odor" (128-129). In addition, the hitherto imperceptible dimensions of the environment bloom into vivid presence. Audition attains to extrasensory intensity, phasing into clairaudience. The thought that "hundreds of Viet Cong were coming and going, moving and waiting, living out there just to do you harm" can transform "any sudden silence into a space that you'd fill with everything you thought was quiet in you, it could even put you on the approach to clairaudience. You thought you heard impossible things: damp roots breathing, fruit sweating, fervid bug action, the heartbeat of tiny animals" (52-53). The supercharged sensorium of combat does not necessarily translate into tactical advantage—the preternaturally elusive Viet Cong remain spectral at best—but does yield a kind of ecological surplus value: root and fruit, insect and animal, burst into an expanded field of environmental awareness.

Herr points up the interconnection between person and environment even as he reveals how the Vietnamese environment has been remade by American environmental warfare. The history of environmental warfare not only informs the metaphoric logic of Herr's discourse, but also forms the literal matter of *Dispatches'* descriptive register. For example, a group of grunts gather together in the aftermath of a fierce firefight: "You'd all sit there with empty, exhausted

[53] Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 25.

grins, covered with the impossible red dust that laterite breaks down to, dust like scales, feeling the delicious afterchill of the fear, that one quick convulsion of safety" (90). The red dust is not a decorative reality-effect, a vivid environmental detail thrown in to vivify the descriptive prose, but rather a direct result of the American modification of the Vietnamese environment. As Fred Wilcox observes, herbicidal chemicals not only eliminated vegetation, but also vitiated the Vietnamese soil, "destroying the microorganisms needed to prevent erosion and removing the humus material," resulting in "the soil turning lateritic, becoming rock hard."[54] The gritty materiality of Herr's realism is also a tacit commentary upon the strategic ironies of ecological warfare. The squamiform second skin that sheathes the soldiers' bodies presents a palpable image of ecological embeddedness, and also casts an ironic sidelight upon the strategic concept of "cover." The purpose of defoliation is to eliminate cover for the Viet Cong. The upshot of defoliation is to literally cover the Americans, as it were, in their own environmental consequences.

Even modes of warfare that do not explicitly target the environment are experienced as environmental effects, as meteorological conditions or natural cataclysms. The Vietnamese refer to the sonic quake of American concussion bombs as "rolling thunder," and Herr mistakes the bombs' terrestrial impact for the shock of an earthquake: "From the center of the earth there is a tremor that shakes everything, running up through my legs and body, shaking my head… he called them Rolling Thunder, and it was incessant during the nights" (108).[55] The force of artillery feels like a "concentration of high-velocity wind, making the bodies wince and shiver"

[54] Wilcox, *Scorched Earth*, 18.
[55] Environmental effects operate at the level of discourse as well. An officer's forecast for imminent incoming fire takes the form of a weather forecast: "That's affirmative," the camp commander said, "we are definitely expecting rain" (11). The phrase "good luck," everybody's favorite valedictory "verbal tic," the linguistic bookend to all the war's ephemeral social encounters, is tantamount to "telling someone going out in a storm not to get any on him" (56).

(19), and helicopter rotors generate their own weather systems: "Everywhere within that circle of wind men turned and crouched, covering their necks against the full violence of it. The wind from those blades could come up strong enough to blow you over" (143). Even the "mist-clogged" (113) air of Vietnam, a recurrent atmospheric notation that suffuses *Dispatches'* diegetic airspace, may be a byproduct of the promiscuous application of chemical weaponry, rather than a product of the local climate. Or, in the play of its uncanny agency—"sudden, contrary mists" that offer "sinister bafflement" (94), mists that ingest light (96)—an ironic mimetic performance of the agentic effects of the notorious chemical. For Agent Orange, despite its colorful title, appeared as a diffuse white mist when sprayed from American aircraft.[56]

But not all the recursive ironies of Herr's combat ecology come at the expense of the human. At the end of *Dispatches*, just before he departs from Vietnam, Herr encounters a histrionic Marine nicknamed the "Entertainer," an antithetical counterpart to the Lurp from the beginning of the book, the legendary killer who stands "as faceless and quiet in the jungle as a fallen tree" (6). The grunt goes on to tell Herr that he sees his own ghost during nocturnal patrols, the spectral *doppelgänger* either walking ahead of him or following behind him. "I tried to say that what he probably had seen was the phosphorescence that gathered around rotting tree trunks and sent pulsing light over the ground from one damp spot to another. 'Crazy,' he said, and, 'Later'" (252). The Entertainer, in contrast to the Lurp, grows from a tree. The vision of the human as a phosphorescent emanation of an arboreal system—trees, in all likelihood, felled by the belligerent bulldozing of a Rome Plow, or singed in a weaponized forest fire, or defoliated by Agent Orange—offers a provocative image of the connection between human and environment, of the umbilical outgrowth of the former from the latter. But it also insinuates a subtle reversal.

[56] As Martini observes, "Agent Orange, like the other rainbow herbicides, was named for the 7.6cm band wrapped around the barrels in which they were shipped." Martini, *Agent Orange*, 43.

At the beginning of the book, phosphorous was given a proper name, its chemical agency as white phosphorous ominously personified in a well-known Marine incantation: "Willy Peter / Make you a buh liever" (10). Here, at the end of the book, phosphorous is at the root, literally, of the production of persons—even if phantom persons—rather than their destruction.

Geoshock

The vivification of the nonhuman environment is a classic science-fictional trope, and Herr's agentic atmosphere, as well as his figuration of the "malignant intelligence" of the Vietnamese environment, call attention to the chronotopic codes of sci-fi. As many critics of the genre have remarked, science fiction often functions as a narrative site for ecological critique, from the novels of H.G. Wells to contemporary post-apocalyptic cinema.[57] Ursula Heise, for example, has shown how the sci-fi of the late 1960's and early 1970's engages with the ecological issues that catalyzed the modern environmental movement, such as population explosion and industrial pollution.[58] However, what has been less discussed among literary critics is sci-fi's response, in the same historical period, to ecological belligerence in Vietnam. Perhaps the most eminent example of such response is Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), self-consciously conceived by the author as a narrative riposte to American militarism in Vietnam, both political and ecological.[59] Whereas Herr emphasizes the compensatory logic of ecological warfare—because we cannot destroy the enemy, we will destroy the enemy's territory; because the Viet Cong are invisible, we will leave visible traces of

[57] See, for example, the recent collection *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).
[58] Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[59] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World is Forest* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Publishing, 1972). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

our dominance upon the Viet Cong's terrain—Le Guin implies that the ecocidal impulse arises as a reaction formation vis-à-vis our ecological exposure, an aggressive disavowal of the fact that we are always already enmeshed in our environment. "Inhuman agency," as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, "undermines our fantasies of sovereign relation to environment, a domination that renders nature 'out there,' a resource for recreation, consumption, and exploitation."[60] Le Guin, like Herr, figures atmosphere as an agentic force, as the dimension of the environment that even the most sovereign self cannot seal itself off from.

Set in a science-fictional future of interplanetary politics, *The Word for World is Forest* tells the story of the Terran invasion and colonization of the planet Athshe, dubbed "New Tahiti" by the colonizers, and the subsequent subjugation of its indigenous population, a non-combative species of diminutive anthropoids that the Terrans call "creechies." The novel describes the Athshean society as a kind of organic extension of the planetary ecology, the two realms linked rhetorically by a series of metaphoric correspondences: the voices of the Athsheans are "like running water" (29); the Athshean town is but "one element" of "the living forest" (40); "like the forest they live in," as the Terran anthropologist Lyubov remarks of Athshean culture, "they've attained a climax state" (62). "The effect," as Rob Latham writes, "is to naturalize their culture and to see the violence committed against them as an environmental desecration."[61] Unlike the Athsheans, who do not distinguish between the natural world and the cultural lifeworld—and, thus, the semantic arc of their word for "forest" embraces both spheres—the Terrans treat the native environment as mere raw material for capital, wantonly razing the planet's lush forests in order to procure precious loads of wood for an ecologically degraded Earth. In her introduction

[60] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 15.
[61] Rob Latham, "Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction," in *Green Planets*, 90.

to the novel, written in 1972, Le Guin frames the science-fictional narrative as an extended critique of the ideological presuppositions of America's imperial adventure in the Vietnam War. Le Guin links ecological warfare with the "ethic of exploitation" that subtends both consumer capitalism and anthropocentric speciesism: "the ethic which approved of the defoliation of forests and grainlands and the murder of non-combatants in the name of 'peace' was only a corollary of the ethic which permits the despoliation of natural resources for private profit or the GNP and the murder of the creatures of the earth in the name of 'man.'[62]

Le Guin's fictional proxy for U.S. military ideology is Terran Captain Donald Davidson, whose character embodies all the values of "Man": "ecophobia, speciesism, racism, and misogyny."[63] As the U.S. military drew upon the ideological resources of America's frontier mythology in order to endorse its imperialist adventure in Vietnam, Davidson's consciousness secretes chauvinist fantasies of colonial conquest: "For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down… the primeval murk and

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[62] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Introduction to *The Word for World is Forest*," in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood (New York: Putnam, 1979), 151. The concept "Man," of course, is a self-serving abstraction constructed by historically situated men, and Le Guin's novel also offers an implicit critique of traditional Western narrative ideology. In her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," Le Guin draws a distinction between two types of narrative, the "killer story" and the "life story," each associated with primal, "prehistoric" forms of gendered being-in-the-world: the male hunter versus the female gatherer, the high drama of the perilous hunt versus the quotidian repetition of fruit gathering, the spear or sword versus the basket or carrier bag. The narrative mode of the hunter, like a phallic spear launched straight at its target, is linear and progressive, and inevitably ends in the "masculine" domination and exploitation of nature by the "Techno-Heroic" protagonist. In contrast, the "feminine" carrier bag narrative is circular in structure, and offers a vision of continuity and reciprocity between human social forms and the nonhuman environment. If the circuit of correspondence, both ecological and metaphorical, that structures the Athshean relation to nature represents a narrative realization of the carrier bag mode, the Terran intervention in Athshe's planetary ecology represents the belligerent chauvinism of the Techno-Heroic. Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 152, 153.

[63] Eric C. Otto, *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 11.

savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden" (3-4).[64] As Davidson explains to his colleague Kees, in an ironic inversion of the novel's ecologically inflected title, the concept of world is reducible to the concept of man: "When I say Earth, Kees, I mean people. Men. You worry about deer and trees and fiberweed, fine, that's your thing. But I like to see things in perspective, from the top down, and the top, so far, is humans" (5). "Perspective," for Davidson, is literal as well as figural, mapping ontological hierarchy onto point of view. Like Herr and Virilio, Le Guin links ecological militarism with the subject position of aerial vision. Davidson likes to see things in perspective, that is, through the apical optic of the god's-eye-view, a perspective that divides the Athshean environment into discrete units and turns the Athsheans into abstract targets: "He'd learned how to spot the things from the air; the giveaway was the orchards, concentrations of certain kinds of tree, though not planted in rows like humans would. It was incredible how many warrens there were once you learned to spot them. The forest was crawling with the things" (144). In his indiscriminate belligerence, Davidson lumps together the environment with the "things" in the environment, gouging "a big hole in the forest" and igniting a "forest fire" (145). From its first sentence, the novel insists upon the hypertrophy of the visual within Davidson's sensorium. He has an eidetic memory, and literally *sees* his past experience: "Two pieces of yesterday were in Captain Davidson's mind when he woke, and he lay looking at them in the darkness for a while" (3). The two pieces, linked metonymically in Davidson's mind, are two dimensions of expropriated, objectified "nature": a new shipload of women for the soldiers' sexual consumption, and reports of ecological devastation on Dump Island, an Athshean island that the Terrans ruin through defoliation and deforestation.

[64] On the relations between American frontier mythology and American ecocidal aggression see Waugh, "Only You Can Prevent a Forest."

As we know from our examination of *Dispatches*, aerial vision suppresses the materiality and agency of the atmosphere, and Le Guin's novel makes this point as well, presenting a subtle counter-narrative of atmospheric influence with its thematic of "geoshock." Somewhat along the lines of what Herr reports as the American syndrome of "acute environmental reaction" (91), the Terran invaders pathologize their relation to the Athshean environment as "geoshock," an aggressive disavowal of their own ecological being-in-the-world that also functions as a reactive negation of their creaturely community with the "creechies," whom the Terrans identify as unmanly in their ecological sensitivity. "It was this damned planet that did it to them. It took a very strong personality to withstand it. There was something in the air, maybe pollens from all those trees, acting as some kind of drug maybe, that made ordinary humans begin to get as stupid and out of touch with reality as the creechies were" (141). Davidson conceives of the self as a discrete unit, positing the integrity of personality as an ultimate bulwark against environmental influence. However, atmospheric agency, recurring like a leitmotif in Le Guin's narrative, insists that environmental influence precedes the constitution of the "person," always already present as a pre-cognitive, affective impact. At the beginning of the novel, during a casual stroll through base camp, Davidson is suddenly hailed by one of his subordinates: "Davidson turned, only a microsecond late in his reaction, but that was late enough to annoy him. There was something about this damn planet, its gold sunlight and hazy sky, its mild winds smelling of leafmold and pollen, something that made you daydream. You mooched along thinking about conquistadors and destiny and stuff, till you were acting as thick and slow as a creechie" (8-9). Atmospheric agency preempts volition, intervening at the pre-conscious level of affective input (the micro-temporality of reaction-time), disrupting the mind honed by martial discipline. What Davidson refuses to recognize is the fact that, as Stacy Alaimo has it, human corporeality is always already

"trans-corporeality," that "'the environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves."[65]

However, the disavowed dimensions of Davidson's embodiment manifest as post-traumatic symptoms. When the indentured Athsheans, organized as a "voluntary" workforce within the Terran colonial compounds, stage a successful prisoners' revolt, Davidson finds himself in a position of literal inversion, pinned down by a coterie of "creechies": "He had never looked up into a creechie's face from below. Always down, from above. From on top" (20). Davidson ultimately escapes, but this sudden upending of the "natural" order of Terran-Athshean relations leaves its traumatic traces upon his psyche. Davidson's post-traumatic reaction organizes itself around the image of an alternative sensory economy. In the immediate aftermath of the Athshean uprising, Davidson encounters the corpse of his murdered comrade Oknanawi: "And Ok's body, out where they'd slaughtered the logging crew, it had had an arrow sticking out of each eye like some sort of weird insect with antennae sticking out feeling the air. Christ, he kept seeing that" (80). The fantasy projection of a nonhuman sensorium onto a human body indexes a return of the repressed in regard to Davidson's hypervisuality—antennae replace eyes, haptics (feeling the air) supersede optics (seeing through the air). The obsessive iteration of Davidson's vision ("he kept seeing that") marks at once an attempt to master the trauma by re-inserting it into the visual register, as well as the irrepressible pressure of a suppressed dimension of his own sensorium, the atmospheric receptivity that indicates his inseparability from the nonhuman environment. Further, in response to this experience, Davidson's first impulse is to reassert the top-down dominance of synoptic surveillance, jumping in a gunship in order to convert the creechies into objects of voyeuristic sadism, and the atmosphere into a transparent

[65] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 4.

medium of vision: "Just take up a hopper over one of the deforested areas and catch a mess of creechies there, with their damned bows and arrows, and start dropping firejelly cans and watch them run around and burn" (95).

Davidson's demise dramatizes the revenge of the Athshean environment upon its Terran invader, in the form of a terminal transition from the hegemonic position of aerial vision to the immersion of direct contact. Correspondingly, agency shifts from the human subject to the non-human environment. Davidson falls into the hands of his Athshean enemies when his helicopter falls from the sky, tangled in the arboreal outcroppings of the forest canopy, and it is the forest itself, along with the atmosphere, that actively causes the crash. The atmosphere targets the sense of vision: "Blank wet dark was like black towels slapped on their eyes… Trees leaned hugely out of the night and caught the machine" (155). He comes to consciousness in the dense center of the forest: "The air was black and full of moisture, and you couldn't tell where to put your feet, it was all roots and bushes and tangles… He squirmed farther into the bushes. His brain was entirely occupied by the complex smells of rot and growth, dead leaves, decay, new shoots, fronds, flowers, the smells of night and spring and rain" (157-58). Contra Davidson's anthropocentric fantasy of a robust, self-contained subjectivity, disparate from its environment, the trope of "occupation" reasserts the imbrication of person and environment. The passage stages the occupation of the Terran brain by the planetary ecology—a subtle reversal, on the neurological level, of the political occupation of the planet. It also conjures, perhaps unwittingly, the psychoanalytic sense of cathexis, as libidinal investment or innervation (the German original for cathexis, the word *Besetzung*, means "occupation," as by a military force).[66] The atmospheric

[66] James Strachey, the British translator of the *Standard Edition* of Freud's works, introduced the word in 1922 from the Greek *χατέχειν*, to occupy. See the entry on "cathexis" in Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1974).

allure of nonhuman nature—the rich complex of olfactory stimuli; the heavy-handed uterine connotations of the dark, moist, cavernous forest; the voluptuous rot of vegetable generation—alludes to a disavowed desire for an alternative way of inhabiting the planet, for an ecophilic intimacy with the nonhuman environment.

Davidson's denial of his ecological embeddedness finds it objective correlative in his final destination, Dump Island, an island desecrated by Terran environmental modification and void of verdant life, the site of his interminable exile. In regard to the narrative arc of Davidson's destiny, the novel reads as a dark parable of what environmental philosopher Val Plumwood calls the "hyper-separation of human identity from nature": "To the extent that we hyper-separate ourselves from nature and reduce it conceptually in order to justify domination, we not only lose the ability to empathize and to see the non-human sphere in ethical terms, but also get a false sense of our own character and location that includes an illusory sense of autonomy."[67] If Dump Island represents the ecological nadir of the novel, its scenic analogue for "hyper-separation," Le Guin's depiction of the Athshean forest represents its utopian antipode. The second section of the novel, our introduction to Athshean culture, begins with an exuberant description of the forest.

> All the colors of rust and sunset, brown-reds and pale greens, changed ceaselessly in the long leaves as the wind blew. The roots of the copper willows, thick and ridged, were moss-green down by the running water, which like the wind moved slowly with many soft eddies and seeming pauses, held back by rocks, roots, hanging and fallen leaves. No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there

[67] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 8-9.

> always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves. The ground was not dry and solid but damp and rather springy, product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across. The smell of the air was subtle, various, and sweet. The view was never long, unless looking up through the branches you caught sight of the stars. Nothing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty. The colors of rust and sunset kept changing in the hanging leaves of the copper willows, and you could not say even whether the leaves of the willows were brownish-red, or reddish-green, or green. (25-26)

With its florabundant rhetoric of multiplex connection, both spatial (the immixture of air, water, earth and forest) and temporal (the interrelation of the organic and the inorganic in ceaseless cycles of regeneration), the passage reads like a rhetorical performance of what Tim Morton calls "the ecological thought," the interconnection of all entities within the environment.[68] In contrast to the technocratic fantasies of total control that informed the strategic rationalization of ecological warfare in Vietnam, the environmental ethic implicit in the passage suggests a stance of epistemological modesty in the face of ecological complexity.[69] An irreducibly recalcitrant object of knowledge, the forest resists diverse modes of knowledge: the epiphanic (revelation is lacking); the apodictic (no certainty); the optic (no way is clear, no light unbroken); the synoptic

[68] Tim Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.
[69] See Edwin A. Martini, "Even We Can't Prevent Forests: The Chemical War in Vietnam and the Illusion of Control," *War & Society* 31.3 (October 2012), 264–79.

(no seeing everything at once). The Terrans view the forest as mere matter, a "dark huddle and jumble and tangle of trees, endless, meaningless" (15), to be exploited as raw material, or eliminated as a tactical obstacle. The Athsheans experience the forest as a vital ecological whole, a site of "sentient connectivity."[70]

Le Guin's science-fictional forest offers a provocative counterpoint to the American vision of the Vietnamese environment. The inability to think "the ecological thought" is a salient feature of the American project of ecological warfare. Efforts to control nature are consistently belied by the upsurge of unpredictable environmental variables. This gives rise to what we could call forms of ecological irony, a kind of revenge of the principle of interconnection. The historical origins of Operation Ranch Hand are a case in point. The testing phase of the program, authorized by the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), and codenamed Project Agile, was directed by James W. Brown, deputy chief of the Crops Division at Fort Detrick, and an expert in the militarization of herbicidal application. In 1961, following the initial field tests of herbicidal chemicals upon the Vietnamese environment, Brown noted a kind of ecological catch-22 of defoliation. Defoliation, in its suppression of the lush foliage of the forest canopy, allowed sunlight to reach the forest floor, where it catalyzed dense vegetative growth, in particular bamboos and buffalo grasses. The resulting ground-level growth compromised lateral visibility along transportation routes and around military bases. The transparency gained for aerial reconnaissance was offset by the new opacity of lateral vision. Ecological irony: defoliation, intended to eliminate "cover," instead occasioned the emergence of another kind of cover. Also, a cover up: military assessment reports on the viability of the

[70] I borrow the phrase "sentient connectivity" from Ursula Heise, who deploys it in reference to the planetary ecology of the science-fictional world of another Le Guin narrative of the early 1970's, "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" (1971). Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 20.

defoliation program repeatedly minimized or marginalized Brown's discovery, thus smoothing the way for the large-scale weaponization of herbicidal chemicals.[71] As in so much of the convoluted history of America's military involvement in Vietnam, strategic objectives are, simultaneously, achieved and undermined.

[71] For this episode in the history of herbicidal warfare, I draw upon Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 70-74.

III. THIS IS AIR: THE ATMOSPHERIC POLITICS OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

On December 12, 1991, Lawrence Summers, director of the World Bank, sent out a confidential memo to a colleague that later became scandalously public. In the memo, which suggests outsourcing first-world pollution, Summers outlines his vision of political ecology: "I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that… I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles… Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?"[1] As Rob Nixon observes, Summers believed that "offloading rich-nation toxins onto the world's poorest continent would help ease the growing pressure from rich-nation environmentalists who were campaigning against garbage dumps and industrial effluent that they condemned as health threats and found aesthetically offensive."[2] What Summers ignored was the fact that, in a global ecology that is recursively interconnected, the idea of "sending from yourself what you hope will not return" is a self-serving fantasy.[3]

"Sending…" is drawn from David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*, and refers to the organizing fantasy of U.S. President Johnny Gentle's atmospheric politics. Summers's strategy of toxic offloading may have inspired Wallace's portrayal of Gentle's environmental policy. *Infinite Jest* depicts a toxically polluted near-future America during a "dark time when all landfills got full" and "sometimes in some places the falling rain clunked instead of splatted."

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[1] See Philip Arestis, "Furor on Memo at World Bank," *New York Times*, February 7, 1992. Cited in Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1.
[2] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.
[3] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Back Bay, 1996), 1031. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Gentle runs as a candidate for the upstart Clean United States Party (C.U.S.P.). C.U.S.P.'s political platform views "American renewal as an essentially aesthetic affair" (383) and calls for a "Spotless America" (383) cleansed of its ubiquitous "hideous redolent wastes" (382) and "toxic effluvia" (383), the ecological output of late capitalist hyper-consumption. After Gentle wins the election, he compels Mexico and Canada to join America in the trans-national Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N., a tri-lateral political formation known as "Interdependence." Next, the Gentle administration devises a program of "ecological gerrymandering" or "projected intra-O.N.A.N. territorial reallocations" (403), a clandestine plan to transform "certain vast stretches of U.S. territory into uninhabitable and probably barbed-wired landfills and fly-shrouded dumps and saprogenic magenta-fogged toxic-disposal sites" (402). President Gentle surreptitiously transports the nation's toxic waste into the upper Northeastern quadrant of the continental U.S. (Vermont, New Hampshire, upstate New York) and orders government agents to "discover" the waste and evacuate the affected populace. Gentle coerces Canada into accepting the toxic territory as part of its own domain, so that it will not sully the purity of the C.U.S.P-led U.S.A. Like the allusion to amorous self-reference contained in its Biblically resonant name, O.N.A.N.'s version of "Interdependence," what its politicians call Experialism, refers to a situation of unilateral exploitation that is covered over by the rhetoric of reciprocity. If "imperialism is about expropriating valuable natural resources from less powerful nations," as Katherine Hayles observes, "experialism is about forcing them to accept the industrial wastes that result when the expropriated natural resources are turned into capitalist commodities."[4]

[4] N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest,*" *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 675-697, 685. My thinking on the environmental dimensions of *Infinite Jest* is inspired throughout by the ecocritical analyses of Katherine

"Reconfiguration" euphemistically names the new environmental arrangements, which delineate a bowl-shaped area of uninhabitable contaminated land, what the Americans, facing northward, call the "Great Concavity," and what the Canadians, facing southward, call the "Great Convexity." The waste management system is organized around a recursive process called "annular fusion," engineered by polymath James Incandenza to contain the Concavity's ever-augmenting toxic waste by reconverting that waste into fuel. However, the byproduct of the fuel is more waste, engendering a vicious infinite regress of toxic production, what one character calls "a moving right-triangular cycle of interdependence and waste-creation and –utilization" (571), which contaminates the atmosphere of the North American nations. In order to perpetuate the annulation process, the U.S. must periodically catapult packets of toxic waste into the Concavity using Airborne Toxic Waste Displacement vehicles manufactured by the American Empire Waste Disposal (E.W.D.) corporation, "spectacular block-long catapults that make a sound like a giant stamping foot as they fling great twine-bundled waste-vehicles into the subannular regions of the Great Concavity" (240). To ensure that the toxic waste remains in Canada, the American government erects a bordering ring of formidable Lucite walls that repels incoming toxic products. Furthermore, "giant protective ATHSCME fans," produced by the American ATHSCME Family of Air-Displacement Effectuators corporation, sit "atop the hugely convex protective walls of anodized Lucite" and blow the airborne toxic detritus, which hemispheric air currents continually carry southward into New England, back northward into Canadian land (90).

President Gentle's environmental policy recapitulates his personal pathology. A "world-class retentive" with a "paralyzing fear of free-floating contamination" (381), Gentle polices the

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Hayles and Heather Houser. See Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

boundary between body and atmosphere with an array of defensive techniques. Gentle wears a Fukoama surgical microfiltration mask at all times, and showers in a Dermalatix brand Hypospectral Flash Booth that daily singes his outermost layer of skin into "epidermal-ash" (381). What's more, the President walks around in a portable bubble, a translucent sphere made of the vitreous polymer Lucite. Gentle's "oxygenated Lucite portabubble" (439) is a technical replication of the uterine scene, a kind of mobile womb that seals him off from the surrounding atmosphere (Gentle breathes his own purified air from within the confines of the bubble). The material composition of the portabubble, its Lucite shell, metonymically links the microsocial sphere to the macrosocial sphere. The walls of the Concavity are also made of Lucite, and have an analogous function of containment. Like the Concavity, the portabubble materializes the fantasy of an airtight autonomy, of the clean separation (pun intended), between subject and environment.

Gentle literally embodies the thematic core of Wallace's critique of postmodern culture, which turns upon that culture's production of socially detached, existentially isolated subjects. For instance, in an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace describes his typical "reader" as someone who, "like all of us," is "marooned in her own skull."[5] At the same time, the portabubble literalizes what Peter Sloterdijk refers to as a "sphere," which he defines as "immune-systemically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are operated upon by the outside."[6] Spheres, simply stated, are shared spaces of climate control, the atmospheric shells that mediate our relationship to the environment. Both the micro-sphere of Gentle's portabubble and the macro-sphere of O.N.A.N.'s Reconfiguration program, with its modification of North

[5] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (Summer 1993): 127-150, 127.
[6] Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 28.

American weather patterns, illustrate Sloterdijk's argument that politics has "become a department of climate techniques": "For present-day cultures the question of survival has become a question of the way in which they are reproduced as atmospheric communities. Even physical atmospheres have passed to the stage of their technical producibility… The air that, together and separately, we breathe can no longer be presupposed."[7] For Sloterdijk, we are always already enveloped in a sphere, "condemned to being-in," even if, in the historical moment that we inhabit, "the containers and atmospheres in which we are forced to surround ourselves can no longer be taken for granted as being good in nature."[8]

In what follows I read Wallace's literary production as a critique of late capitalist atmospheric culture, examining the "containers and atmospheres" of his fiction and non-fiction. I argue that the forms of alienation that Wallace diagnoses in the late capitalist subject—rampant addiction, narcissism, and solipsism—are a social byproduct of what he calls "crafted atmosphere," the fabrication of artificial atmospheres in order to condition human subjects. Crafted atmospheres intervene directly in the human sensorium, preempting conscious cognition through coercive forms of climate control. I begin with Wallace's account of the air-conditioned consumerist world of a luxury cruise ship in the essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1996). Corporate atmospheric management induces hypertrophic habits of consumption by detaching the subject from her social and ecological context. Next, I turn to the atmospheric politics of *Infinite Jest* (1996), examining what Mark McGurl calls Wallace's "existentialism of institutions" from an atmospheric point of view. Rather than operating as "a communal antidote to atomism," I argue that institutional air-conditioning systems promote atomistic disconnection.

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[7] Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, trans. Steve Corcoran, (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 245.
[8] Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 108.

At both the microsocial and macrosocial levels, from interpersonal airspaces to the American government's re-engineering of North American weather patterns, climate control reinforces asymmetrical relations of social power, and works to separate subject from environment.

Reconfigured Air

Reconfiguration unleashes a swarm of nonhuman actants that prey upon the citizens of O.N.A.N. In addition to "drooling and piss-colored bank[s] of teratogenic Concavity clouds" (93), a ghastly panoply of toxic byproducts emerges from the annular fusion process that cycles waste through the Great Concavity/Convexity: "Feral hamster… skull-deprived wraiths, carnivorous flora, and marsh-gas that melts your face off and leaves you with exposed gray-and-red facial musculature for the rest of your ghoulish-pariah life" (670). A plethora of damaged human bodies are the explicit casualties of C.U.S.P.'s "geopolitical anality and Experialism" (1030). For example, Canadian citizen Gertraude Marathe, the wife of arch-terrorist Remy Marathe of the militant Québécois separatist movement *Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants* (A.F.R.), was among the first children "born without a skull, from the toxicities in association of our enemy's invasion on paper" (779). As Marathe explains in his francophone English, Gertraude must wear a special helmet to hold the deliquescent elements of her head together, and "without the containing helmet all energies in her were committed to the shaping of the oral cavity in a shape that allowed breathing" (779). Hal Incandenza, son of James Incandenza and student-athlete at The Enfield Tennis Academy in urban Boston, accounts for Quebec's insurgent anarchist politics by detailing American ecological depredations: "It's eastern Québec that gets green sunsets and indigo rivers and grotesquely asymmetrical snow-crystals and front lawns they have to beat back with a machete to get to their driveways. They get the feral-hamster incursions

and the Infant-depredations and the corrosive fogs… it's Québec that's borne the brunt of what Canada had to take" (1017).

But, despite the atmospheric infrastructure that Gentle puts in place in order to contain the waste, the toxic effects of American Experialism return to contaminate American airspace. As Alain, a Canadian "prosthetic film scholar" who is one of the ephemeral minor characters in the novel's vast character-system, puts it at a cocktail party: "Fans do not begin to keep it all in the Great Convexity. It creeps back in. What goes around, it comes back around. This your nation refuses to learn. It will keep creeping back in" (233). President Gentle campaigns upon the promise to "rid the American psychosphere of the unpleasant debris of a throw-away past" (382), but what the novel's narrative rhetoric insists upon is the ecological connection between psychosphere and atmosphere, and the impact of literal toxic debris upon the metaphorical debris of the psyche. For example, the infrastructural apparatus of Reconfiguration—the prodigious ATHSCME fans and the Airborne Waste Displacement catapults—transforms the atmospheric background of everyday life, enacting forms of sensory violence upon the sensoriums of its citizens. Don Gately, a recovered addict who is now resident director of the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, daily confronts the sonic violence of the nation's atmospheric infrastructure. After "nine months of wearing a Goodwill rain-slicker every morning on the 0430 Green Line," Gately is finally "able to distinguish genuine thunder from the Enfield sounds of ATHSCME fans and E.W.D. catapults" (475). Gately mistakes the politically engineered atmosphere for natural weather. The sonic equivalent of thunder is the aural ambience of everyday life in O.N.A.N.'s Boston. The affective impact of the atmospheric infrastructure conditions the unconscious compulsions of the novel's characters as well. Randy Lenz, a sadistic drug dealer under Gately's supervision at Ennet House, clandestinely asphyxiates stray cats on

his nightly walk home after the mandatory AA and NA meetings. The novel's narrator observes that "Lenz's interval of choice for this is the interval 2216h. to 2226h. He doesn't consciously know why this interval" (542). Later in the same paragraph we learn that "between 2216 and 2226 the ATHSCME giant fans off up at the Sunstrand Plaza within earshot were typically shut off for daily de-linting, and it was quiet except for the big Ssshhh of a whole urban city's vehicular traffic, and maybe the odd E.W.D. airborne deliverer catapulted up off Concavityward" (543). Lenz's atmospheric sadism is unconsciously correlated with the daily rhythm of the ATHSCME fans. The airless interval of the fans' cessation corresponds to Lenz's asphyxiation of the cats. In an unconscious displacement of his own respiratory dysphoria in the polluted atmosphere of C.U.S.P.'s America, Lenz accounts for his anomalous solitary nocturnal walks by explaining to his Ennet House companions that "he needs the air" (539).

The ecological effects of the ATHSCME fans also contaminate the intimate spaces of the domestic sphere. Geoffrey Day, a recovering addict living with Kate Gompert in Ennet House, attributes the origin of his depression to the sonic effects of a domestic fan. One day, he was practicing the violin in his bedroom, when the fan's "position in the window made the glass of the upraised pane vibrate somehow. It produced an odd high-pitched vibration, invariant and constant" (649). The fan's vibration, in resonance with Day's violin, catalyzes the emergence of a "dark shape" that rises out of his "mind's corner on its own" and assails him from the air, and visits him off and on into his adult life: "it was as if I'd awakened it and now it was active" (650). The specific identity of this atmospheric entity remains indeterminate—"shapelessness was one of the horrible things about it. I can say and mean only *shape, dark,* and either *billowing* or *flapping*"—but its effect is unambiguous: "It was total psychic horror: death, decay, dissolution,

cold empty black malevolent lonely voided space" (650).[9] Mary Holland notes that "this thing in its horrible 'shapelessness' clearly recalls DeLillo's description of the Airborne Toxic Event as a metaphor for death and the existential crisis that attends our recognition of death's threat."[10] But more than its existential inflection, *Infinite Jest's* allusion to the "black billowing cloud" of *White Noise's* "airborne toxic event" alerts us to the atmospheric thematics of toxic pollution.[11] The point is driven home by the text's intra-diegetic allusion, as the "high-pitched" vibration of the fan also clearly recalls the "high-pitched fury" of the ATHSCME fans (242), making this domestic fan an analogue to the prodigious Air-Displacement Effectuators, and linking psychosphere and atmosphere in a recursive loop.

The co-articulation of atmosphere and psychosphere subtends the novel's representation of clinical depression. Kate Gompert, a marijuana addict and the novel's paradigmatic anhedonic, suffers both from affective dissociation and respiratory dysfunction. When we first meet her at the nadir of a depressive episode, she seems "both to be fighting for breath and to be breathing rapidly enough to induce hypocapnia" (69). Her respiratory issues reproduce those of the American atmosphere. Due to the waste management program of annular fusion, here glossed by E.T.A. student Michael Pemulis, the atmosphere itself hyperventilates: "you find you need to keep steadily dumping in toxins to keep the uninhibited ecosystem from spreading and overrunning more ecologically stable areas, exhausting the atmosphere's poisons so that everything hyperventilates" (573). As if staging its ecological etiology, mental illness itself manifests as atmospheric agency. During a recovery meeting, anhedonia itself hovers over the literally depressed heads of the anhedonics: "Nobody came right out and used the terms

[9] Wallace's italics.
[10] Mary K. Holland, "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Critique* 47.3 (Spring 2006): 218-242, 241.
[11] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 115.

melancholy or *anhedonia* or *depression*, much less *clinical depression*; but this worst of symptoms, this logarithm of all suffering, seemed, though unmentioned, to hang fog-like just over the room's heads… a gassy plasm so dreaded no beginner could bear to look up and name it" (504).[12]

Drug use, throughout *Infinite Jest*, dissociates the subject from his atmospheric environment, either by way of physical withdrawal or mental disconnection. "Serious tranqs," for example, "can make even breathing seem like too much trouble to go to," leading to fatal episodes of what ER workers unofficially refer to as 'Pulmonary Sloth'" (984). The psychotic episodes induced by "Madame Psychosis," a notorious psychoactive agent, transform its user's perceptual reception of the weather world into a meteorological simulation. After ingesting "The Madame," Dwayne Glynn, a recovering addict living in Ennet House, had "gone around for several subsequent weeks under a Boston sky that instead of a kindly curved blue dome with your clouds and your stars and sun was a flat square coldly Euclidian grid with black axes and a thread-fine reseau of lines creating grid-type coordinates, the whole grid the same color as a D.E.C. HD viewer-screen when the viewer's off," and "the Time and Celsius Temp to like serious decimal points flashing along the bottom axis of the sky's screen" (542). The passage reads like a parody of the ubiquity of postmodern weather mediation, what Andrew Ross calls the replacement of "our mental or cognitive maps of the psycho-geographical environment" by "the objectively simulated representation of an environment under the influence of weather."[13] But it also literalizes, in its atmospheric scenography, the diagnostic profile of anhedonia:

[12] Wallace's italics.
[13] Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991), 230.

"Everything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world. An anhedonic can navigate, but has no location" (693).

Don Gately's personal history illustrates the ecological connection between atmospheric pollution, psychological trauma and drug abuse. The etiology of Gately's adult addiction ultimately leads back to the atmospheric environment of his earliest childhood. Gately grew up "in a little beach house just back of the dunes off a public beach in Beverly" which "was affordable because it had a big ragged hole in the roof" (809), and Gately's "outsized crib had been in the beach house's little living room, right under the hole" (809). In an "attempt to deal with the hole," the owner of the beach house had "stapled thick clear polyurethane sheeting across the room's ceiling" (809). Eventually, the makeshift polyurethane ceiling burst, "leaving a ragged inhaling maw that tugged at Gately's XXL Dr. Dentons" (815). The novel implies that Gately's preadolescent exposure to New England's toxic atmosphere lies at the root of his future chemical dependency. The "terrible stomach-sinking dread" that Gately "always felt whenever everybody happened to ever leave the room and left him alone in a room," the unbearable "secret dread" that his drug use attempts to suppress, "dates all the way back to being alone in his XXL Dentons and crib" (923). Furthermore, the primal scene of Gately's childhood trauma is compulsively rehearsed within the hallucinatory phenomenology of Gately's opiate high.

> The worst thing about Dilaudid for Gately was that the hydromorphone's transit across the blood-brain barrier created a terrible five-second mnemonic hallucination where he was a gargantuan toddler in an XXL Fisher-Price crib in a sandy field under a storm-cloudy sky that bulged and receded like a big gray lung. Fackelmann would loosen the belt and stand back and watch Gately's eyes roll up as he broke a malarial sweat and

> stared up at the delusion's respiritic sky while his huge hands throttled the air in front of him just like a toddler shakes at the bars of his crib. Then after five or so seconds the Dilaudid would cross over and kick, and the sky stopped breathing and turned blue. (915)

The drug de-agentifies and de-animates the sinister sky, which breathes menacingly like an autonomous part-object, itself a "big gray lung." Ironically, the "womb-warm buzz" of narcotic ecstasy that distances Gately from the trauma of his atmospheric history, and separates him from his own emotions, operates by making him feel lighter than air: "pain of all sorts becomes a theory, a news-item in the distant colder climes way below the warm air you hum on" (890).

The ecological repercussions of Reconfiguration have an asymmetrical impact upon the urban population. While the working-class citizens like Gately and the other residents of Ennet House suffer the unmitigated effects of political-ecological fallout, the privileged student-athletes of the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), on the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, are offered high-end environmental shelter. Located on "the nicest site" in Boston's Enfield neighborhood (Wallace's fictional invention), E.T.A. was originally built by "shaving flat the top of the big abrupt hill that constitutes a kind of raised cyst on the township's elbow" (240). James Incandenza, the founder of E.T.A., intentionally chooses a site that offers a topographical perquisite for potential tennis recruits, "U.S. boys" who like "great perspectival heights and spectacular views encompassing huge swaths of territory" (666). E.T.A.'s eminence, in both the social and altitudinal senses, distances its residents from the atmospheric fallout of Reconfiguration, and secludes bodies from the surrounding environment (Ennet House, inversely, sits at the bottom of the hill, exposed to the atmospheric offshoots of E.T.A.'s institutional waste). Atop E.T.A.'s hilltop perch, the toxic background is agreeably aestheticized,

transfigured into the visual appeal of landscape. Hal remarks that "the sight of distant ATHSCME fans displacing great volumes of snowy air northward is one of the better winter views from our hilltop" (864). E.T.A.'s situation enables modes of mediation that transpose the ugly political reality of the government's "ecological gerrymandering" into a sensory assuagement: "There are smokestacks in the visual background slightly south of Sunstrand, though, from the E.W.D. hangars, each stack with a monstrous ATHSCME 2100-Series A.D.E. fan bolted behind it and blowing due north with an insistent high-pitched fury that is somehow soothing, aurally, at E.T.A.'s distance and height" (242). As Hal and his brother Mario converse in their dorm room before bedtime, Mario hears the "high-pitched fury" of the ASCHTHME fans as a soft susurrus shushing him to sleep: "'I can hear Schacht, you're right. Also the fans.' 'Boo?' 'I like the fans' sound at night. Do you? It's like somebody big far away goes like: it'sOKit'sOKit'sOKit'sOK, over and over. From very far away'" (772). For Mario, the thunderous thrum of the ATHSCME fans becomes the reassuring lullaby of a benevolent maternal presence. The fans' furious agency seems benign at E.T.A.'s elevation.

While they pour pollution into the shared atmosphere of the public sphere, the products of the ATHSCME corporation provide shelter for the members of the Enfield Tennis Academy. E.T.A.'s "Lung," an inflatable dome that protects the tennis courts from inclement winter weather, is powered by an "ATHSCME Exhaust-Flow Effectuator that an ATHSCME crew in one of the ATHSCME helicopters will bring in in a sling and cable and mount and secure on the Lung's nipply nacelle at the top of the inflating dome" (268). The "first night after Inflation," traditionally falling on "the fourth Monday of November," is an intra-academy holiday for the upperclassmen, who "play all night, sweating magnificently, sheltered for the winter atop Enfield's level-headed hill" (269). As the "nipply nacelle" implies, the Lung is not only a lung, it

is also a breast, a maternal shelter that ensures that the boys will be able to breathe easy, regardless of external atmospheric conditions. While the hole in Don Gately's childhood home exposes him to a toxified sky that itself breathes like a menacing lung, the athletes at E.T.A. have an artificial Lung that shelters them from the "diseased" sky of Reconfiguration (941).

Like its physical architecture, E.T.A.'s institutional ideology, embodied in and promulgated by athletic director Gottfried Schtitt, endorses a strict separation between the self and the environment. For Schtitt, the self occurs at the expense of the environment, as if the environment were a detachable exoskeleton that the self could put on and off like an optional covering: "Cold and wind is the world. Outside, yes? On the tennis court the you the player: this is not where there is cold wind… Is no cold. Is no wind. No cold wind where you occur. No? Not 'adjust to conditions.' Make this second world inside the world: here there are no conditions" (459). The fantasy of an autonomous self discrete from its atmospheric conditions, the "new type citizen" of "this sheltering second world," has explicitly authoritarian overtones: "'If it is hard,' he says softly, hard to hear because of the rising wind, 'difficult, for you to move between the two worlds, from cold hot wind and sun to this inside place inside the lines where is always the same,' he says, seeming now to study the weatherman's pointer he holds down and out with both hands, 'it can be arranged for you gentlemen not to leave, ever here, this world inside the lines of court'" (460). The fact that Schtitt's version of the iconic fascist commandant's baton is a weatherman's pointer may be read as a material emblem of his hubristic will-to-power over external atmospheric conditions. Rather than a vision of "trans-corporeality," wherein, as Stacy Alaimo puts it, "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" and "the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment,'" the disciplinary

technology of the tennis academy explicitly seeks to disarticulate the subject from her atmospheric environment.[14]

The paradigmatic figure for the dislocation of subject and environment is the eponymous, fatally addictive film within the novel, "Infinite Jest." Peter Sloterdijk observes that "it belongs to the essence of socio-technology to play with maternal capacities in non-maternal media. Modernity consists in finding technological substitutes for maternity, in every sense of the word."[15] The reproduction of the uterine scene through technological means is also the logic underlying the production of "Infinite Jest," which James Incandenza, its creator, intends as a media vehicle that will catalyze forms of human connection. In particular, he hopes to help lift his son Hal out of a precarious condition of existential disconnection: "His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him 'out of himself,' as they say. The womb could be used both ways" (839). Formally, "Infinite Jest" self-consciously aspires to reproduce the maternal scene in a non-maternal medium. Shot from a "crib's-eye-view," a specially designed lens reproduces the "infantile visual field" with an "auto-wobble" that simulates the "milky blur" of "neonatal nystagmus" (935-936). The reigning theory among non-viewers is that "Infinite Jest" is a "really sophisticated piece of holography" that offers "the neural density of an actual stage play" in combination with "the selective realism of the viewer-screen," and that the "visual compulsion" of "the density plus the realism might be too much to take" (490). Viewing "Infinite

[14] Stacey Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material* Self (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2010), 2.
[15] Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 215.

Jest" draws the viewer into a virtual atmosphere so all-encompassing that it supplants the external environment.

Intended as a high-tech media vehicle for human connection, "Infinite Jest" instead operates as a technological platform for the mass production of world-less subjects, absorbed into "a floating no-space world of personal spectation" (620). The ensorcelled spectators of the fatally entertaining film are reduced to a condition of catatonic immobility. The fate of Hank Hoyne, a researcher for Unspecified Services and an accidental viewer of the film, now helpless as "some drug-addicted infant," is representative (507). Hoyne's colleague U.S. Special Agent Hugh Steeply observes that "Hoyne is an empty shell... All gone. His world's as if it has collapsed into one small bright point. Inner world. Lost to us. You look in his eyes and there's nothing you can recognize in them" (508). The self shrinks to a point, deracinated from its world, "in exile from reality" (20).

The film only exacerbates the condition it attempts to ameliorate. Hal withdraws further inside himself, immured inside the "cage" of the self, to the point where he is unable to communicate with others and must be hospitalized (this is how we meet him at the beginning of the novel, which is also the end of the narrative storyline). Both the disciplinary technology of the tennis academy and the pleasure principle of "The Entertainment" issue in the same outcome: the separation of self from environment. Like Gentle's portabubble, they reinforce the fantasy of autonomy, yet ultimately result in pathological forms of solipsistic withdrawal.

As against the myriad forms of withdrawal from the world so prevalent throughout *Infinite Jest*, Gately's situation at the end of the story—I refer to the diegetic timeline, and not the end of the novel, which depicts the nadir of Gately's life—represents an alternative form of atmospheric relation. After a near fatal gunfight with separatist terrorists, Gately is laid up in a

hospital bed, his shoulder shattered, his body broken by multiple gunshot wounds: "The whole right side of himself hurt so bad each breath was like a hard decision. He wanted to cry like a small child" (818). Despite the agonizing pain, Gately refuses to take the hospital's opiate medication because he does not want to relapse into drug addiction. Gately's heroic refusal of painkiller enables a form of respiration that occurs in "the space between two heartbeats. A breath and a second, the pause and gather between each cramp. An endless Now stretching its gull-wings out on either side of his heartbeat. And he'd never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive. Living in the Present between pulses" (860). In Gately's case, "Living in the Present" becomes a mode of breathing that offers an ecological literalization of the conventional Alcoholics Anonymous wisdom (AA advises addicts to stop thinking—most substance addicted people "have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship to their own thinking" (203)—and live in the present). However, unlike the ultimately ineffectual self-medication of drug abuse, which only reproduces the trauma of Gately's past—indexed, as we have seen, by the traumatic flashback that routinely reemerges during his Dilaudid high—this respiratory form of presence does not separate Gately from reality, or sever the self from its environment. Although drawn in pain, Gately's breath is the closest Wallace comes to a representation of envitalizing or innervating respiration within the toxic atmosphere of *Infinite Jest*.

Crafted Atmosphere

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx observes that every mode of production possesses its own atmosphere: "In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others… It is a particular

ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it."[16] In late capitalism, Marx's metaphor becomes increasingly literal. Following Marx, Hardt and Negri propose that the particular ether of late capitalism is a mode of the immaterial: "In the final decades of the twentieth century, industrial labor lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged 'immaterial labor,' that is, labor that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response."[17] Nigel Thrift counts atmosphere as the paradigmatic product of immaterial labor in "an age intent on producing various new kinds of captivation through the cultivation of *atmosphere*."[18] For Thrift, the aim of late capitalism is "not to create subjects (as happened in the older disciplinary regimens)," but to fabricate their atmospheric lifeworlds: "In past consumer societies, the object world only very rarely was sufficiently populous that it could routinely produce atmospheres," but "the performative object-fictions" of late capitalism engineer total atmospheres "in which sight, taste, touch, and the other senses combine to trigger cognitive heritages we are only vaguely aware of."[19]

Wallace recorded his experience of the corporately engineered atmosphere of such a fabricated world in his essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," his account of his 7-Night Caribbean Cruise (March 11-18, 1995) aboard the luxury cruise ship *Zenith* (which

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[16] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (1857; New York: Penguin, 1993), 107.
[17] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 108.
[18] Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2007), 23. Thrift's italics.
[19] Nigel Thrift, "Understanding the Material Practices of Glamour," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 295, 299.

Wallace jovially re-christens the *Nadir*).[20] In a footnote towards the end of the essay, Wallace refers to "7NC Luxury Cruise's crafted atmosphere of indulgence and endless partying—Go on, You Deserve It," and the phrase "crafted atmosphere" nicely captures the motif of atmospheric engineering (319). In this case, crafted atmosphere refers to the strategic management of atmospherics, in the dual sense of affective quality and air quality, for the purpose of provoking hypertrophic habits of consumption. In what follows, I will examine the cruise's atmospheric construction of a consumerist subject. Wallace ambivalently inhabits this subject position for most of the cruise, but renounces it at the cruise's conclusion. Both the cruise's production of a fantasy of subjective sovereignty as well as Wallace's production of an alternative version of autonomy eventuate in forms of social detachment.

The boarding process proceeds in three phases: 1) a period of pre-boarding at Pier 21; 2) the boarding process proper; 3) chaperoned arrival at the passenger's personal cabin. The atmospherics of each phase are meticulously stage-managed by the corporate designers of the cruise experience. The atmosphere of Pier 21 strategically disappoints the cruisers' expectations of indulgent luxury. Before boarding begins, the passengers are treated to a protracted stay (over five hours) in the Pier, a vast vacant industrial warehouse (what Wallace calls a "blimpless blimp hangar") that serves as a pre-boarding holding area (271). Pier 21, as Wallace observes, "bears little resemblance to any of the stressless pamper-venues detailed in the Celebrity brochure" (272), and the Pier is striking in its incongruity to Wallace's anticipatory fantasy: "'Pier,' though it had conjured for me images of wharfs and cleats and lapping water, turns out to denote something like what *airport* denotes, viz. a zone and not a thing" (271).[21] Pier 21 is a pre-

[20] David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998). Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[21] Wallace's italics.

fabricated version of what anthropologist Marc Augé calls a *non-place*, a liminal zone lacking historical substance. The component parts of the Pier function as metonyms of various non-place genres: the waiting passengers have "the glazed encamped look of people at airports in blizzards" (272), the walls are like a "budget motel's walls" (273), the "perfect description" of the "at least 2500 orange chairs in rows of 25" is "*waiting-room* orange" (271, 274).[22] The Pier offers passengers an obtrusive atmosphere of sensory dysphoria: "it has walls of unclean windows on three sides" (271), the "acoustics are brutal and it's tremendously loud" (271), and its thermal texture conjures "massed public waiting areas with no AC and indifferent ventilation" (273). Wallace even invokes disciplinary scenes of modern history as dark analogues for the Pier: "There's an Ellis Island/pre-Auschwitz aspect to the massed and anxious waiting" (272).

The temporal organization of the Pier complements its non-place ambience. The passengers receive random "lots" that divide them into mass boarding groups and determine the sequence of boarding. This process simulates the aleatory workings of an impersonal Fate that will serve as a foil for the hyper-regulated temporality of the cruise proper, the benevolent Providence of "managed fun." At the same time, the lot system constructs a subject position of anonymity—"your number doesn't stand for you, but rather for the subherd of cruisers you're part of" (273)—and statistical identity—"Everyone's clutching his numbered card like the cards are identity papers at Checkpoint Charley" (272)—that will function as a foil for the sovereign subject position constructed by the cruise. Although gratuitous in a functional sense—the Pier could easily be made to conform to the cruise ship's standard of luxury—the Pier's resemblance to "areas of mass public stasis" (274) represents a canny strategy of atmospheric engineering on the part of the cruise designers. By re-entering the distinction between the real world and the

[22] Wallace's italics. See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995).

leisure world into the leisure world itself, the cruise line preemptively primes its passengers for entry into the antithetical atmosphere of the ship.

The boarding process stages the shift from Pier 21 to cruise ship as an atmospheric transition. Upon boarding, Wallace moves from Pier 21's atmosphere of sensory disharmony into an atmosphere of synesthetic sensory assuagement. Immediately washed "in high-oxygen AC that seems subtly balsam-scented" (olfactory), the "delicious feel of sweat drying" in "the first nip of AC chill" (tactile, thermotactic) is supplemented by the pleasures of "moving over plush plum carpet" (tactile, kinesthetic) and hearing soothing "mollified jazz" (auditory) (277). In the visual register, a series of "elaborate cross-sectioned maps and diagrams, each with a big and reassuringly jolly red dot with YOU ARE HERE" in its center, confront Wallace as soon as he steps on board the ship (277). Wallace reads the staging of the maps as a non-verbal assertion that "preempts all inquiry and signals that explanations and doubt and guilt are now left back there with all else we're leaving behind," and his insight pinpoints the maps' threshold function, the way in which they secure the border between real world and leisure world (278). However, in reference to the world of Pier 21, the maps have an additional function, forming a kind of spatial shell that insulates the passengers from the history and the geography of the pre-leisure "real" world. In contrast to the aleatory contingency (the "Lots" of the pre-boarding process) and thick temporality (the protracted waiting) of Pier 21, the perpetual present tense of the YOU ARE HERE maps marks a transition from time to space and from a state of disorientation to an abundant redundancy of orientation: "The *Nadir's* got literally hundreds of cross-sectional maps of the ship on every deck, at every elevator and junction, each with a red dot and a YOU ARE HERE" (264). Finally, the boarding process offers a pleasant rearrangement of the Pier's social system. The herdlike anonymity of the Pier is replaced by the narcissistic complement of a

hospitality ménage-a-tois: "we are getting greeted (each one of us) by not one but two Aryan-looking hostesses from the Hospitality staff" (277). The journey to the cabin is staged in a pleasure sphere, in Peter Sloterdijk's technical sense of a shared space of climate control, that functions as an atmospheric correlative for the fantasy of sovereignty that the cruise will now work to construct: "And the elevator's made of glass and is noiseless, and the hostesses smile slightly and gaze at nothing as all together we ascend, and it's a very close race which of these two hostesses smells better in the enclosed chill" (278). The headiness of this intimate airspace is immediately associated with a host of consumption options, as Wallace exits the elevator to encounter "little teak-lined shipboard shops with Gucci, Waterford and Wedgwood, Rolex and Raymond Weil" on his way to cabin 1009 (278).

The atmospheric system of the cabin offers its inhabitant a climate-controlled microcosm that is the scene of a sovereign subject. The cabin functions as what Sloterdijk calls an "egosphere" or "minimally complete world island for an individual," a self-contained "cellular world bubble" that supports the fantasy of autonomous self-sufficiency.[23] As Wallace observes, for "the agoraphobe" the "7NC Luxury Megacruiser presents a whole array of attractively enclosing options" and, if so inclined, the agoraphobe "need not leave her cabin at all" for the duration of her vacation (299-300). Wallace comes "to love very deeply Cabin 1009" and the cabin's material surfaces and infrastructural components function as potent catalyzers of affect (300). For example, the "Fawn-colored enamelish polymer and its walls are extremely thick and solid: I can drum annoyingly on the wall above my bed for up to five minutes before my aft neighbors pound (very faintly) back in annoyance" (300). The textual *fawn* embedded in that

[23] Peter Sloterdijk, "Foreword to a Theory of Spheres," in *Cosmograms,* ed. M. Ohanian and J.-C. Royoux (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005), 234; Peter Sloterdijk, "Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container," trans. Daniela Fabricus, *Log 10* (Summer 2007): 89-105, 90, 91.

glossy polymer surface signals Wallace's unconscious maternal attachment to his cabin, and the thick wall, unlike the "budget motel's wall" and obstreperous publicity of Pier 21, offers an impermeable membrane for seclusion from the social. Wallace's pounding upon the wall, just like his pounding upon the glass of his porthole ("You can thump the glass with your fist w/o give or vibration. It's really good glass"), is at once a confirmation and a performance of the immunological integrity of his microcosm (301).[24] Wallace also becomes cathected onto the cabin's modes of mechanical air pressure. The exhaust fan's "suction is such… that it makes your hair stand straight up on your head, which together with the concussive and abundantly rippling action of the Sirocco hairdryer makes for hours of fun in the lavishly lit mirror;" the shower's drain is "the size of a lunch plate and has audibly aggressive suction;" the "concussive suction" of the vacuum toilet, part of a ship-wide vacuum sewage system that "holds such a fascination" for Wallace, is "so awesomely powerful that it's both scary and strangely comforting—your waste seems less removed than *hurled* from you… a kind of existential-level sewage treatment" (303).[25] The various devices of high-velocity airflow model the policing of borders. The cabin's redundancy of suction at once literally performs and symbolically figures the distinction between cabin and environment, and the integrity of the membrane that ensures the autonomy of the cabin's closed world—and the sovereignty of the cabin's occupant.

[24] Also figured in the cabin's redundancy of security features are "three separate locking technologies and… a whole deck of DO NOT DISTURB cards hanging from the inside knob" (300). In addition, the microcosm of the cabin is itself microcosmically imaged in its "Wondercloset": "a complicated honeycomb of shelves and drawers and hangars and cubbyholes and Personal Fireproof Safe… so intricate in its utilization of every available cubic cm that all I can say is it must have been designed by a very organized person indeed" (300). The hivelike multiplicity of the Wondercloset's shelving system lends a sense of internal volume to the small world of the cabin, while it also models, on a smaller scale, the honeycomb organization of the ship's closed world—multiple interlinked cells packed into a single world, each a world unto themselves.

[25] Wallace's italics.

For Wallace, the core component of the cabin's atmosphere is its porthole ("In terms of its importance to the room's mood and *raison* it resembles a cathedral's rose window"), but the affective significance of the porthole also alludes to an ulterior aspect of the ship's crafted atmosphere: the labor that produces it (301). Hidden in plain sight are the workers, "a whole battalion of wiry little Third World guys who went around the ship in navy-blue jumpsuits scanning for decay to overcome" (263), whose labor maintains the "atmosphere" of Wallace's cabin: "Every morning at exactly 0834h. a Filipino guy in a blue jumpsuit stands on one of the lifeboats that hang in rows between Decks 9 and 10 and sprays my porthole with a hose, to get the salt off, which is fun to watch" (301). The conversion of labor into spectacle stages the social asymmetry that underlies the affective production of the leisure sphere, and this staging itself is integrated into the affective product. The cleaning of the cabin's porthole is an act of atmospheric production in two senses. The luminous glow of the clean window, like the lambent rose window of the cathedral, is the keynote of the cabin's ambience. The "fun" of watching the cleaning is already an aspect of the cabin's affective atmosphere. In the leisure sphere of the cruise, the affective labor that produces the ship's atmosphere itself becomes part of the product.

The cruise's crafted atmosphere also operates on the level of the political unconscious. The atmospheric structure of the cabin maps a geopolitical topography onto a phenomenological horizon—just as the Third World, in reference to the USA, is located at the periphery of global space, the Third World worker emerges at the periphery of Wallace's perceptual field. This structural correspondence at once effaces and reaffirms American geopolitical dominance, thereby reinforcing the sense of sovereignty of the cabin's reigning subject. The political unconscious of the cruise is temporal as well as spatial. What Thrift calls the "trigger[ing] of cognitive heritages we are only vaguely aware of" also operates across the overall narrative

trajectory of the cruise experience.[26] Take the constellation of allusions to German culture that Wallace deploys in the essay. Initially, they are dark indeed. The scene of waiting at the airport for transport to Pier 21 is an "unwitting echo of the Auschwitz-embarkation scene in *Schindler's List*" (270), and in Pier 21 itself there is a "pre-Auschwitz aspect to the massed and anxious waiting" (272). Fifty pages later, deeper into the cruise, things have changed. Extending the atmospheric allure of the fragrant Aryan hostesses who rode the elevator with Wallace upon boarding, the female voice of the ship's PA system "can make even German sound lush and postcoital" with the "quality of sounding the way expensive perfume smells" (321). The transposition of sound into scent captures the synesthetic allure of a crafted atmosphere as well as the complex cultural connotations enfolded in its sensory impacts. Read alongside the earlier allusion to the concentration camp, the transfiguration of the guttural stridency of German into a mellifluous, post-coital lushness has the flavor of a historical intervention—it reinforces, at the level of the unconscious, the effacement of political history and the entry into a para-historical world of unlimited consumerist fantasy.

Overall, the atmospheric staging of the initial phase of the cruise—from Pier 21, through the boarding process, to Cabin 1009—plots a narrative trajectory from anonymous mass subject identified by "Lot" number in the non-place of Pier 21 to self-contained sovereign in his cabin microcosm. The plot structure is that of the classical fairy tale, from anonymous orphan to the discovery of royalty. Many of the functions of Vladimir Propp's famous narratological diagram are deployed throughout the cruise to great effect.[27] For example, the function of doner or helper to the hero, fulfilled by the two Aryan hostesses who accompany Wallace to his cabin, offering

[26] Thrift, "Glamour," 299.
[27] See Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

the keys to comfortably air-conditioned sovereignty. Propp's threshold functions have their kitsch manifestation in the "Before/After souvenir ensemble" (277) photo with the captain that the Cruise offers its passengers upon boarding and de-boarding, as if the existential renovation induced by this mythic sea voyage registers at the level of physical appearance. Before the ship even sets sail, the cruiser is primed for a week of intense consumption in an "atmosphere of sybaritic and nearly insanity-producing pampering" (290).

The dramatic climax of Wallace's cruise comes shortly after the ultra-lux cruise ship *Dreamward* pulls into port right next to the *Nadir*. Wallace's meticulous catalogue of the superior luxuries of the *Dreamward* fills him with consumer envy. This sudden interpellation into the consumerist subject position that Wallace had earlier disavowed provokes a moment of self-conscious recoil, and Wallace refers this response to a particular part of himself, "that ur-American part of me that craves and responds to pampering and passive pleasure: the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS" (316). The Dissatisfied Infant is the subject of the foundational fantasy that informs the luxury economy, "the promise to sate the part of me that always and only WANTS" (316). "The thing to notice," as Wallace observes, "is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept, but that such a promise is keepable at all" (316). As in the Lacanian paradigm, in which the drive circulates interminably around *object petit a*, the circuit of consumer desire is a closed loop, repeatedly staging fantasy scenes of anticipated—yet inevitably deferred—fulfillment. Every experience of satisfaction is merely momentary.

> But the Infantile part of me is insatiable—in fact its whole essence or *dasein* or whatever lies in it's a priori insatiability. In response to any environment of extraordinary

> gratification and pampering, the Insatiable Infant part of me will simply adjust its desires upward until it once again levels out at its homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction. And sure enough, on the *Nadir* itself, after a few days of delight and then adjustment, the Pamper-swaddled part of me that WANTS is now back, and with a vengeance. (317)

In a dialectical reversal, the contrapuntal movement of the homeostatic cycle manifests as a disclosure of the ambient background: "By Ides Wednesday I'm acutely conscious of the fact that the AC vent in my cabin hisses (*loudly*), and that although I can turn off the reggae Muzak coming out of the speaker in the cabin I cannot turn off the even louder ceiling-speaker out in the 10-Port hall" (317).[28] The purpose of the "crafted atmosphere" of the Luxury Cruise is to keep the background in the background, to neutralize the myriad, ongoing processes of decay and disharmony that proliferate at the periphery of conscious awareness. Instead, Wallace witnesses the re-emergence of the ambience of everyday capitalism, the putative antithesis of the leisure space. The structural irony, of course, is that the perceptual cracks in the crafted atmosphere of *The Nadir* only reinforce consumer desire—the higher, and pricier, luxury of *The Dreamward*—and reproduce the capitalist subject position.

Wallace finally escapes this stifling climate at the end of his essay, by means of a strategy of atmospheric substitution. Both cruise and essay conclude with a performance by hypnotist Nigel Ellery. The performance stages the process of unconscious manipulation that the cruisers have undergone as unwitting subjects of the cruise's "crafted atmosphere." Wallace confesses his own susceptibility to suggestion, but transforms this passivity into creative activity. "Because my own dangerous susceptibility makes it important that I not follow Ellery's hypnotic suggestions

[28] Wallace's italics.

too closely or get too deeply involved, I find myself… going farther and farther away inside my head… sort of Creatively Visualizing… pulling mentally back, seeing… with the eyes of someone not aboard" (352). As if observing it from the outside, Wallace imagines the ship lit up at night, "complexly aglow, angelically white," and this act of imaginative transfiguration releases him from the spell of the cruise: "This deep and creative visual trance—N. Ellery's true and accidental gift to me—lasted all through the next day and night, which period I spent entirely in Cabin 1009" (352). For the managed fun of the cruise, and the hypnotic trance that is its emblem, Wallace substitutes the imaginative reverie. Here, the crafted atmosphere of the ship yields to the literary atmosphere of Wallace's representation of the ship—Wallace's creative trance is coextensive with Wallace's writing of his essay—and the microcosm of Cabin 1009 becomes a shelter for literary activity. However, like the isolated agoraphobe, Wallace ultimately remains locked in his cabin. The sense of community that arises at the end of the essay is the virtual community between author and reader, mediated by the literary atmosphere of Wallace's essay. But Wallace's substitution of literary atmosphere for crafted atmosphere remains ambiguous. The social alternatives remain those between self-enforced isolation and collective somnambulism.

Climate Control

In conclusion, I offer an analysis of two scenes from *The Pale King*, Wallace's final unfinished novel about the labyrinthine bureaucratic intrigues of the Internal Revenue Service. Each scene illustrates a different version of crafted atmosphere, and offers a window onto Wallace's later thoughts on atmospheric agency in late capitalism. The first scene stages the way

in which conscious awareness is preempted by pre-cognitive atmospheric impacts, and the second deals with institutional climate control.

In addition to the production of totalizing atmospheric environments like the crafted atmosphere of the cruise ship, late capitalism also redeploys atmosphere as a preemptive power in consumer culture. Luciana Parisi and Steve Goodman outline these effects in their description of what they call "affective capitalism."

> Affective capitalism is a parasite on the feelings, movements, and becomings of bodies, tapping into their virtuality by investing preemptively in futurity. Possessed by seductive brand entities you flip into autopilot, are abducted from the present, are carried off by an array of prehensions outside chronological time into a past not lived, a future not sensed. We term this mode of affective programming 'mnemonic control,' a deployment of power that exceeds current formulations of biopower.[29]

Wallace's final fiction demonstrates that "affective programming" is coextensive with atmospheric influence.

An early scene in *The Pale King* dramatizes the preemptive power of atmospheric agency. Upon arrival at the Peoria airport, IRS accountant Claude Sylvanshine and his employees take a company van to corporate headquarters. Sylvanshine hears, at first vaguely and intermittently, a melody in the air: "there was also a sound, gassy and tinkly like half a bar of

[29] Luciana Parisi and Steve Goodman, "Mnemonic Control," in *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 164. Cited in N. Katherine Hayles, "Cognition Everywhere: The Rise of the Cognitive Unconscious and the Costs of Consciousness," *New Literary History* 45.2 (2014): 199-220, 212.

calliope, when the driver downshifted or the boxy van swayed hard on a reverse-S."[30] Suddenly, the melody catalyzes an episode of involuntary memory: "there it was again, the snatch of forced-air music that Sylvanshine couldn't place but made him want to leave his seat and go chase something on foot in the company of all the children in the neighborhood, all of whom come boiling out of their respective front doors and hotfooting it up the street holding currency aloft, and before he could think" (49). Sylvanshine's colleagues inform him that what he hears as background sound is the brand melody of Mr. Squishy Ice Cream (the van is a former Mr. Squishy Ice Cream truck, acquired by the IRS at a tax auction, and recently re-functioned as an intra-agency commuter vehicle). The atmospheric impact operates at a pre-cognitive, affective level. Bodily activation ("made him want to leave his seat…") precedes cognitive reflection (Sylvanshine has yet to identify the music, much less interpret its meaning). Despite the hallucinatory immediacy of the memory, Sylvanshine realizes that its content is counterfactual: "The odd thing was that Sylvanshine's neighborhood in King of Prussia had been a planned community, with speed bumps, whose neighborhood association had prohibited solicitation of any kind, especially with a calliope—Sylvanshine had never in his life chased an ice-cream truck" (50). Even though Sylvanshine has never chased an ice-cream truck, the atmospheric stimulus provokes the *memory* of chasing the truck, as well as the affective experience, rehearsed by his body in the present moment, correlative to that memory.

Sylvanshine's experience illustrates the "preemptive power" of what Steve Goodman calls "anticipative branding culture," wherein atmospheric agency operates by "installing new memory that you have not phenomenologically experienced in order to produce a certain receptivity to brand triggers. No longer relying on lived bodily experience—actual sensory

[30] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 47. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

responses—brand memory implantation operates through the body's remembering a virtual sensation."[31] The "repetition of a memory that you have not had," as Goodman observes, encourages the "repetition of consumption."[32] Sylvanshine's subjective experience is culturally mediated and atmospherically catalyzed, eliding the distinction between phenomenology and consumerist fantasy. In *This is Water*, his 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address, Wallace remarks that "learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience."[33] For Wallace, "how we construct meaning" is "a matter of personal, intentional choice" and "the really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness" and the disciplined choice of perceptual objects.[34] However, the affective primacy of atmospheric agency complicates, if not undermines, the notion that the subject may consciously determine "the choice of perception's objects." In this case, Wallace's fiction remains at odds with his didacticism.

Wallace's vision of institutional airspace, as represented in the I.R.S. regional headquarters of *The Pale King*, presents an alternative form of crafted atmosphere. Wallace's aesthetic ambition, according to his notes, was to write a novel in which "nothing happens": "Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (546). The ultimate form of the novel will never be known, but chapter 25 of *The Pale King* asymptotically approaches Wallace's aspirations. The chapter represents a group of IRS examiners at work processing tax forms. Each page of text is set up in double columns in order to mimic the process

[31] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 153.
[32] Ibid.
[33] David Foster Wallace, *This is Water* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2009), 53.
[34] Ibid., 28.

of double-entry bookkeeping at the level of typographical layout. The action proceeds as follows: "Ken Wax turns a page. Harriet Candelaria turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. Ambient room temperature 80 F" (309). Later on we read: "David Cusk turns a page. Elipidia Carter turns a page. Exterior temperature/humidity 96/74" (311). And so on. Each IRS agent sits at his own separate desk, unspeaking, head bowed in a tight circle of light emitted from the green cone of a standard-issue desk-lamp.

The scene epitomizes the atmospheric aesthetics of *The Pale King*, its emphasis upon atmosphere rather than plot. For Katherine Hayles, the shift from plot to atmosphere refers to the historical emergence of a post-postmodern aesthetic, what she calls the "aesthetics of ambient emergence."[35] Hayles contrasts the old version of what she calls "immersive fiction" with the new atmospheric aesthetic: "Immersive fiction is said to create a 'world,' but in fact the evocation of an atmosphere typically occupies only a small portion of the text."[36] Rather, the central focus is on "the conflicts and resolutions that give plots their characteristic Aristotelian shape."[37] In contrast, atmospheric fictions attempt "to create something like an ambient environment that does not so much serve as background for plot development as displace plot altogether."[38] The descriptive notation of atmospheric conditions, which constitutes the extent of the descriptive register of chapter 25, in paratactic juxtaposition with the iterative "action" of the human characters, places both on the same level as equivalent narrative presences. Like the film "Infinite Jest," which absorbs its spectators in a virtual atmosphere that is fatal in its total

[35] N. Katherine Hayles and Todd Gannon, "Mood Swings: the Aesthetics of Ambient Emergence," in *The Morning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. Neil Edward Brooks and Josh Toth (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 132. For Hayles, this aesthetic shift is coeval with the cultural ubiquity of immersive virtual worlds. The salient historical threshold for Hayles's periodization is the global advent of the World Wide Web in 1995.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

envelopment, the climate-controlled sphere of IRS headquarters serves to sever the subject from her environment, reducing the subject to a robotic automaton in the interests of organizational efficiency. The challenge for the subjects who inhabit the crafted atmospheres of Wallace's fictions, to borrow from one of Wallace's fictional IRS workers, is to learn how "to function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air" (440).

IV. NARRATING THE ANTHROPOCENE: THE ATMOSPHERIC COMEDY

> … one of those days filled with so many changes of weather, atmospheric incidents, storms, that the idle man does not feel that he has wasted them because he has been taking an interest in the activity which, in default of himself, the atmosphere, acting as it were in his stead, has displayed.
>
> –Marcel Proust, *The Captive*[1]

> We have changed the atmosphere and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and this is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is its meaning*—without it there is nothing but us.
>
> –Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*[2]

What McKibben announced in 1989 by the name of the "end of nature," we now refer to as the "Anthropocene," a term proposed by chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 for the current, human-dominated epoch, in which the human species has become a geological force operating on a global scale.[3] While the concept still awaits formal ratification by the geological community (a

[1] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 5: The Captive and The Fugitive,* trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (1923; New York: Modern Library: 1999), 101.
[2] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 58. McKibben's italics.
[3] The Anthropocene is put forth as the successor epoch to the Holocene, the last 10,000-12,000 years of relative climatic equilibrium, a planetary stability that enabled the exponential expansion of human

matter of measuring the human species' stratigraphic impact upon the planet), it has attained wider cultural currency as shorthand for the dismantling of the ontological partition between the human realm and the natural realm, for "a new phase in the history of both humankind and of the Earth, when natural forces and human forces became intertwined, so that the fate of one determines the fate of the other."[4] As Crutzen and his colleagues observe, the human transformation of the Earth system is "nowhere more evident than in the atmosphere," in the form of anthropogenic climate change, a hybrid entity that dissolves the distinction between human artifact and natural fact, and "spell[s] the collapse," as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, "of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history."[5] For Chakrabarty, this conflation of natural history and human history also accounts for the "doubled" figure of the human, its dual status as both geophysical force and historical individual, "subject to both the stochastic forces of nature (being itself one such force collectively) and open to the contingency of individual human experience."[6] The human is at once a force of nature (in the era of climate change, we *are* the weather), and subject to this same force of nature (in the era of climate change, we are vulnerable to the weather as never before). This chiastic tension between human weather and human person is what I refer to as the atmosphere of the Anthropocene. My aim

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civilization. Crutzen proposes the late eighteenth century as the beginning of the Anthropocene, with the human transformation of the Earth system picking up velocity in the post-WWII era. See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *IGBP [International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme]* Newsletter 41 (2000): 17-18, 17.

[4] Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen and Paul Crutzen. "The New World of the Anthropocene." *Environmental Science and Technology* 44 (2010): 2228-2231, 2231. Cited in Thomas H. Ford, "Aura in the Anthropocene," *symplokē* 21.1-2 (2013): 65-82, 65.

[5] Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature," *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36.8 (2007): 614–621, 616; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009): 197-222, 201.

[6] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43.1 (Winter 2012): 1-18, 14.

here is to explore the relation between the atmosphere of the Anthropocene and the atmospherics of the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre, a genre that attempts to think through what it means to inhabit the altered atmosphere of a changed climate.[7] Thus, the following questions animate this chapter: How does narrative form process climate change? What happens to the diegetic weather in an era when we *are* the weather?[8]

As an initial response to these questions, and as a post-climate change counterpart to my Proustian epigraph, I would like to present a scene from Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), a film which depicts the apocalyptic advent of the planet Melancholia and its impact upon the lives of a single family unit (John, his wife Claire, their son Leo, Claire's sister Justine).[9] Von Trier invites us to view the film as a narrative performance of climate change, as all the earthly disturbances induced by the alien planet also take the form of atmospheric disturbances: for example, the anomalous midsummer snowfall that falls upon Claire and Justine as they work in the garden, or the torrential hailstorm that overwhelms Claire and Leo just before the planet's impact. But one image in particular, of Justine's body conducting lightning, reveals what an atmospheric aesthetics might look like in the era of climate change. The initial composition of the frame features Justine centered in the foreground, with an ominous, cloud-congested sky in the background, and blue corkscrews of lightning rising up from the caps of two distant

[7] "Apocalypse," as Lawrence Buell observes, "is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal." Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 285.

[8] In the context of this essay, atmosphere is synonymous with diegetic weather. In general, the sense of atmosphere tends to oscillate between mood and meteorology. For atmosphere's affective impact (*Stimmung*) see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). For the longer literary history of atmosphere, see Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660-1794* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). For a more philosophical reading, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

[9] Lars von Trier, *Melancholia*, Zentropa Entertainment (2011).

telephone poles. As Justine's arms slowly rise, tendrils of lightning suddenly rise from her fingertips—an atmospheric disturbance induced by the gravitational pull of Melancholia's invading atmosphere—forming a node of electric tactility that literalizes the sense of "a vaster world bursting into the human." [10] This sense of atmospheric agency ironizes the scene's initial set-up, wherein atmosphere functions as background for the foregrounded figure of Justine. The scene's sudden shift of focus from weather-as-background to weather-as-foreground, from atmosphere as ambient surround to atmosphere as agential force, formally encodes what Tim Morton describes as the radical shift in the weather performed by climate change, the fact that "the weather no longer exists as a neutral-seeming background against which events take place," but is now an event in itself.[11] In Proust, atmosphere functions as an environmental projection of the human, subject to a logic of metaphoric transference (the atmosphere acts in the human's "stead" or in "default" of the human). In von Trier, the atmosphere is no longer a symbolic proxy for the human; rather, it assumes agency, irrupting the frame of the human world, both formally and diegetically.[12] Thus, in reference to the difference that climate change makes for the diegetic climate, you could say, in the language of Bruno Latour, that the former décor of our narrative

[10] This is Tim Morton's gloss on the agential impact of climate change. Tim Morton *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 132.
[11] Tim Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 28; Morton, *Hyperobjects,*103.
[12] In the conventional sense, the weather assumes a quotidian agency in regard to human affairs. As in Proust, where the socially unfashionable Frobervilles obsessively "consult the barometer" in order to "anticipate with ecstasy the threatenings of a storm" that will "spoil the success" of the fashionable occasions they have been excluded from. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 4: Sodom and Gomorrah,* trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (1921; New York: Modern Library: 1999), 72-73.

plots has now itself become an actor; or, in the language of Kenneth Burke, that atmosphere has moved from the category of Scene to the category of Agent.[13]

In the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre, atmosphere no longer functions as mere atmosphere, as stage set for human action or screen for the projection of human emotion, but as a narrative actant with its own agential thrust.[14] Post-apocalyptic fictions dramatize climate change through atmospheres that antagonize or seduce the human subjects that inhabit them. In a historical era in which we *are* the weather, the diegetic weather becomes the narrative site for the rhetorical crossing of human agency and natural agency. I begin with Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), which represents the living dead as meteorological phenomena, and repurposes the figure of the zombie as an exemplary allegory for the atmosphere of the Anthropocene. I then move on to examine what I call the atmospheric comedy, in which the chiasm between subject and subjectified atmosphere issues in a comic outcome, and human weather returns to discombobulate the human. As coda, I discuss what I call atmospheric eros, a narrative alternative to the atmospheric comedy, which refers to scenes that stage a compensatory fantasy of renewed accord between subject and atmosphere within the distressed weather world of the post-apocalyptic genre.

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[13] See Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45.1 (Winter 2014): 1-18; Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969).

[14] As Barthes observes, the conventional function of literary atmosphere, in the sense of diegetic weather, oscillates between objective reference and subjective projection. Thus, in his example from a James Bond novel: "To say that through the window of the office where Bond is on duty the moon can be seen half-hidden by thick billowing clouds, is to index a stormy summer night," as well as to evoke "atmosphere with reference to the heavy, anguish-laden climate." Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image, Music, Text* (1966; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 96.

Dead Weather

In *Zone One*, weather is "dead weather."[15] While Whitehead self-consciously redeploys the traditional topoi of the zombie genre, he also enriches the genre with an invention of his own: zombie population as weather system.[16] *Zone One* follows survivor Mark Spitz across a single weekend in a near-future Manhattan in the aftermath of a global zombie outbreak. Stretching from Canal St. to Battery Park, Zone One names the first secured sector in the government's operation to reclaim Manhattan as a beachhead for civilization. In Zone One, Mark Spitz works as a "sweeper" in Sweeper Team Omega. After a vanguard wave of Marines clears Zone One of its lethal "skels" (the predacious, hyperkinetic zombies), the government hires groups of civilian recruits to sweep out the residual "stragglers" (the quiescent, slow-moving zombies). While the novel offers its reader an immoderate measure of zombie gore, *Zone One's* zombies have more to do with meteorology than they do with monstrosity. During his ordeal as a post-apocalyptic refugee, Mark Spitz realizes that the novel's zombie population constitutes an autonomous weather system: "'They blew in, they'll blow out'… The monsters were a kind of weather after all; Mark Spitz noticed that they'd started being described as such, among wanderers who had never met, in spontaneous linguistic consensus" (221). Conventional weather locutions like the "weather was light" (177), the "local blizzard was under way" (230), "taking the temperature" (311), now refer to the "vagaries of skel diffusion patterns" (310) as well as weather patterns. Indeed, "serious dead weather" (234) is often confused with the other kind of weather, as when Mark Spitz misconstrues his companion's allusion to the local horde of living dead: "She was at

[15] Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 234. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[16] For Whitehead's zombie influences see his online interview with Joe Fassler, "Colson Whitehead on Zombies, 'Zone One,' and His Love of the VCR," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 18, 2011. http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/colson-whitehead-on-zombies-zone-one-and-his-love-of-the-vcr/246855/. (Accessed March 28, 2014).

the window. 'Bad weather,' she said. He thought the snow had started; he'd smelled the impending snow since morning. Then he replaced her at the glass and saw Main Street" (155).

The novel also registers this change in climate at the level of diachronic form, as the alternative weather systems traverse the trajectory of its narrative arc. *Zone One* begins with Mark Spitz's recollection of his childhood "rainy-day visits" (6) to his uncle's apartment in downtown Manhattan, and ends with a metropolitan vision of a more ominous variety of stormy weather: "He strummed his vest pockets one last time and frowned at the density beyond the glass. They [the zombies] were really coming down out there" (322). Moreover, among the post-apocalyptic population, weather consciousness serves as a universal anthropological standard for differentiating between the living and the living dead: "They were people. They wore ponchos, and what else but a being cursed with the burden of free will would wear a poncho. The dead did not wear ponchos" (141). This logic applies to both skels and stragglers. Skels: "It walked in the rain in the way no one walked in the rain, in a downpour like this, without shiver or frown, the water popping off its head and shoulders into a spray like a swarm of gnats." (148). Stragglers: "How come, rain or shine, the stragglers stand at their posts? Hottest day of the year, monsoon, they're standing there foul and oblivious" (120). The dead are not subjects, and not subject to the weather. Rather, they are the weather.

Zone One juxtaposes dead weather with what we could call the "live weather" of modernity. Critics such as Andrew Ross and Jody Berland have analyzed the cultural colonization of "natural" weather, the way weather functions as "a site of continuous colonization or representational and technological practice," in which our "embodied experience of the environment arises from technological, social, and cultural mediations between the individual and collective body." This is precisely the kind of weather that is now an anachronism

in *Zone One*.[17] *Zone One* historicizes the culturally colonized weather of modernity by rendering it an object of nostalgic yearning among the post-apocalyptic population. For example, upon his initial arrival in Zone One from a refugee camp, Mark Spitz has a long initiatory dialogue with the Lieutenant, Zone One's executive officer, which revolves around the historical variability of clouds, both celestial and computational. The Lieutenant laments the loss of the latter: "'Used to be everything was in the cloud, little puffy data floating here and there. Now we're back to paper… I miss the cloud. It was all of me up there… The proof.'" (115-16). The cloud, an atmospheric archive for human identity, epitomizes the conversion of atmosphere into mediasphere, and the evaporation of the cloud threatens the Lieutenant's sense of self. Nonetheless, the Lieutenant still seeks solace in the anthropocentric potential of the old-fashioned clouds.

> 'Least we still have the old-fashioned clouds. What about you?'
>
> 'Me what, sir?'
>
> 'What do you miss?'
>
> Mark Spitz sat up straight. 'Traffic.'
>
> 'And where do you fall on the question of cumulus versus cirrus?'
>
> 'The puffy ones.'
>
> 'Cumulus! Has its plus sides, the Rorschach thing, but I'm a cirrus man born and bred. Can't beat a coherent layer of cirrus, self-organized, covering the sky. Sunset, bottle of Shiraz, and the usual double entendres? The way we used to do it.' (116)

[17] Jody Berland, *North of Empire: Essays on the Cultural Technologies of Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 235, 210; Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991).

The choice between cirrus and cumulus is the choice between atmosphere as screen for the projection of human emotion (Rorschach test), and atmosphere as stage set for human action (in this case, the chronotope of conventional romance). Despite the Lieutenant's distinction, the new clouds and the old clouds are not so different after all: like the "clouds" of cloud computing, the old-fashioned clouds operate as background for human operations. The mass cultural forms of the new world recapitulate the Lieutenant's nostalgia for live weather. In the new world of dead weather, the "Rorschach thing" applies to zombie bodies rather than atmospheric bodies, as in the popular post-apocalyptic pastime "Name That Bloodstain!": "What do you see?—that kid's cloud game gone wrong: Mount Rushmore, Texas, a space shuttle, a dream house, my mom's grave" (101). As a mass cultural symptom, the regression to the kid's cloud game expresses a collective effort to reconvert dead weather into live weather, to reposition dead weather under the rubric of human pattern recognition.

For Mark Spitz, nostalgia for live weather tends to crystallize around the core genres of weather representation, such as the mass media weather report and the microsocial ritual of weather chat.[18] Mark Spitz's desire for the pre-apocalyptic language games of weather—in which social discourse about the weather is not about the communication of information, but about the discursive reproduction of social systems—assumes the form of oneiric wish-

[18] The same could be said for Mark Spitz's author. When asked, during an interview with Terry Gross on *NPR*, to name what site he would return to if he were a straggler zombie, Whitehead replied: "Oh, probably on my couch watching the evening news and unwinding, waiting for a broadcast that's never going to come… For a weather report that really had no impact on me." Whitehead's personal nostalgia for an innocuous weather report participates in a general cultural nostalgia in the era of climate change. "When Zombies Attack Lower Manhattan," October 11, 2011. http://www.npr.org/2011/10/19/141422845/a-zone-full-of-zombies-in-lower-manhattan. (Accessed March, 28, 2014).

fulfillment.[19] His recurring post-apocalyptic dream features the living dead chatting incessantly about the weather: "The dead small-talked, recited speculation over tomorrow's cold front" (134). Similarly, Mark Spitz's waking fantasies invoke live weather as an apotropaic device. Surrounded by zombies after the breach of his rural hideout, and with the hideout in flames, he suddenly imagines himself as the protagonist of a special segment of the nightly news: "For a second he pictured himself underneath the news copter as the folks in more fortunate weather watched from home… Why do these yokels build a house there when they know it's a flood zone, why do they keep rebuilding? He says, Because this disaster is our home" (228). In other scenes, the novel externalizes Mark Spitz's desire for live weather by way of scenic metonymy. Towards the end of the novel, with Zone One on the verge of collapse, Mark Spitz visits the office of Fabio, Zone One's frantic ranking officer, where he discovers the digital music player looping old broadcasts: "Mark Spitz was startled by the DJ's sudden bluster: 'Hey! All you out there. Hope you're getting a chance to enjoy this sunshine today!' Surely there were no radio stations up yet. The DJ forecast fair skies for the rest of the afternoon" (252). However, Mark Spitz soon realizes that this "ghost transmission" of live weather "was a recording of a radio block from some random afternoon before the disaster," and realizes soon thereafter that a disaster of dead weather is about to breach Zone One's barricade (252).

The novel's climactic disaster of dead weather is figured in climatic terms: "The ocean had overtaken the streets, as if the news programs' global warming simulations had finally come to pass and the computer-generated swells mounted to drown the great metropolis. Except it was

[19] As Mark Seltzer notes, chatting about the weather is not a "matter of conveying information or communicating something (say, 'Look! It's raining!'). It is a matter of communicating communicativeness, of keeping ongoing the style of minimal sociality among strangers who may have in common only their commonness." Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations of Violence and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 60.

not water that flooded the grid but the dead" (302-03). The scene stages the conversion of live weather into dead weather, the transition from the media representation of climate change ("the news programs' global warming simulations"), to the realization of a changed climate ("computer-generated swells" that "drown" the metropolis). In the pre-apocalyptic world, that "other, less flamboyant, more deliberate ruination altering the planet's climate" had been subject to media capture by way of media marginalization, "squeezed in" to "the nightly news" if "there were no more pressing outrages, or a celebrity death" (240-41). In the post-apocalyptic world, global warming emerges as that which exceeds the media colonization of live weather, rendering explicit the metaphoric logic that transfers between dead weather and climate change.[20]

In this regard, and in the context of our current cultural moment's "zombie renaissance"—which, as Mark McGurl writes, "leads not to realism but to the weirdness of allegory"—you could say that the figure of dead weather develops the basic allegorical logic of zombie figuration.[21] If the figure of the zombie, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has it, "menaces the integrity of our systems of belonging, both metaphorical (the nation, the family) and literal (the body)," then it makes sense that our most all-embracing—and most menaced—system of belonging, the global atmosphere, finds its zombie analogue in the diegetic atmosphere of dead weather.[22] And if, as McGurl has it, "all these zombies represent a plague of suspended agency, a

[20] In this sense, the fall of Zone One's wall also stages the collapse of the "wall of separation between natural and human histories," which Chakrabarty sees as the consequence of climate change. Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial," 10.

[21] See Mark McGurl, "Zombie Renaissance," *n+1*, April 26, 2010. http://nplusonemag.com/the-zombie-renaissance-r-n. The zombie, as McGurl puts it, is a "kind of character" which is "a pure negation of the concept of character," their "flatness propelling us into speculation about what they might mean 'on another level.'" On zombies and the contemporary, see also Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," *boundary 2* 35.1 (2008): 85–108.

[22] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Undead: A Zombie Oriented Ontology," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23.3 (2012): 397-412, 401.

sense that the human world is no longer (if it ever was) commanded by individuals making rational decisions," dead weather allegorizes not merely the suspension of human agency, but the doubling of human agency in the Anthropocene, its dual status as both the "nonhuman-human" (geophysical force) and the "human-human" (phenomenological subject).[23] "When we say humans are acting like a geophysical force," as Chakrabarty writes, "we then liken humans to some nonhuman, nonliving agency." Dead weather, as a narrative figure for a human agency that is also nonhuman and nonliving (that is, undead), is a concrete representation of the "nonhuman-human," a version of the human as natural-historical force rather than as historical person.[24] Although zombie apocalypse is probably not what Chakrabarty has in mind when he suggests that we now need "nonontological ways of thinking the human" because "we are no longer simply a form of life endowed with a sense of ontology," *Zone One's* dead weather helps us "to think the two figures of the human simultaneously," thus offering us one way in which we may narrate the Anthropocene.[25]

Dead Weather, Part II

Dead weather, as zombie climate, is not the only mode of human weather that circulates in *Zone One's* atmosphere. The novel also dramatizes a different dimension of climate change: the dislocation between the empirical presence of weather and the absent presence of climate. We can see and feel weather, but we cannot "see climate changing or feel it happening.''[26] The novel's atmospheric economy processes this dislocation between weather and climate through its

[23] Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial," 14.
[24] Ibid., 11.
[25] Ibid., 10.
[26] Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 196.

representation of a second mode of dead weather: the ash that pervades *Zone One's* diegetic airspace, the atmospheric residuum of the government's ongoing effort to combust defunct zombie bodies. In this case, *Zone One* narrates the atmosphere of the Anthropocene—the chiastic rift between human and human weather—by symptomatizing Mark Spitz's aversion to this alternative version of dead weather.

The "particulate byproduct of high-temperature combustion" (234), the ash represents an airborne version of dead weather that has become indiscernible from the "real" weather—as Mark Spitz remarks, "This was not stuff you wanted on your skin, to see the residue from the rain when it dried" (79). The "pervasive, inexorable gray" of the "local atmospheric anomaly" (147) colors our initial vision of Mark Spitz, as we discover him undergoing a crisis of cognitive mapping in post-apocalyptic Manhattan: "He tried to orient himself: Was he looking north or south? It was like dragging a fork through gruel. The ash smeared the city's palette into a gray hush on the best of days, but introduce clouds and a little bit of precip and the city became an altar to obscurity" (9). Although the ash, in its gluey ubiquity, seems flagrantly empirical—it saturates the atmosphere, it filters the weather, it stains the facades of buildings, it sticks to the skin like glue—we later discover that the ash, as it were, is not as empirical as it seems. During a tour of Zone One headquarters (Fort Wonton, Chinatown) organized for a visiting government dignitary (Ms. Macy), Mark Spitz and the host delegation visit "Disposal" in order to observe the massive machines that the military employs to process zombie bodies—bodies that the machines emit as towering jets of ash.

> It could not be said the others in Zone One shared Mark Spitz's perception of the ash, its constancy and pervasiveness. The ash did swirl in a radius around the incinerators, it

> landed as dandruff on their shoulders, and, yes, perhaps a small percentage was conscripted by rain on its way down. Certainly the downdrafts and eddies created by high-rises, the suction currents and zephyrs generated by the smaller buildings, gusted the flakes in turbulent jets across downtown. Certainly when the machine fired, it generated a localized atmosphere. But the ash did not shroud the metropolis, it did not taint the air in any sickening measure… But for Mark Spitz it was everywhere. In every raindrop on his skin and the pavement, sullying every edifice and muting the blue sky: the dust of the dead. (232-33)

Is the ash in Mark Spitz's mind or in the world? How do we locate the determinate spatial limit of the incinerator's localized atmosphere? Even after the disclosure of this new narrative data, the novel remains provocatively agnostic in regard to the ash's precise location, both topographical and phenomenological: "He ran through the ash, which was really coming down now, in his mind or everywhere, in slow, thick flakes that eased to the sidewalk in implacable surety. He was close enough to the incinerators that it was possible it was real ash" (293).

The issue is not only phenomenological, but psychological as well. The novel codes the ash as a symptom of Mark Spitz's PASD ("Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder"), the new therapeutic brand name for "the vast galaxy of survivor dysfunction" (37) that afflicts the post-apocalyptic population.[27] As a symptomatic response to his traumatic encounter with dead weather, Mark Spitz's PASD reads like a narrative version of Tim Morton's claim that the

[27] Moreover, the phenomenology of ash is mediated by the history of genre, in particular Mark Spitz's childhood exposure to the "ash-smeared landscapes" of his father's "favorite nuclear-war movies" (147). On the chiastic relation—both rhetorical and ideological—between Cold War nuclear culture and the culture of climate change see Joseph Masco "Bad Weather: On Planetary Crisis," *Social Studies of Science* 40.7 (2010): 7-40.

weather, in the era of climate change, "turns out be a false immediacy, an ontic pseudo-reality," an epiphenomenal "symptom of a substance, global warming": "We took weather to be real. But in an age of global warming we see it as an accident, a simulation of something darker, more withdrawn—climate." The novel substitutes the absent presence of the unconscious for the absent presence of climate, an analogy that Morton himself theorizes.[28] As Morton observes, climate change de-realizes the weather by opening up a rift between phenomenology and ontology, between "the supposedly real wet stuff falling on my head," and "an invisible yet far more real global climate," a rift that undermines our common sense acceptance of the sense data of everyday reality.[29] "Common sense tells you that things you can see and feel like snow are more real than things like global warming, which must be abstract," but "global warming is far more real, while things like weather—things that appear to be immediate in our experience—are actually the abstractions."[30] In the same way, the ash's unstable oscillation between the phenomenal and the epiphenomenal—irresolvable in any given scenic instance—undermines our common sense acceptance of the novel's empirical data.

Zone One's atmospherics reproduce Mark Spitz's phenomenological distress at the level of reader reception. In narratological terms, Whitehead's delay of the revelatory data (page 232 of 322) constitutes what Gerard Genette calls a "lateral" ellipsis or paralipsis ("para-" because "it *sidesteps* a given element"), a "type of gap, of a less strictly temporal kind, created not by the elision of a diachronic section but by the omission of one of the constituent elements of a

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[28] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 103, 102. Climate change is the kind of "object" that Morton refers to as a hyperobject, an entity massively distributed in space and time, the withdrawn reality of which exceeds all of its local empirical appearances. Morton cites both the climate and the unconscious as different forms of hyperobject (48,184).

[29] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 103.

[30] Tim Morton, "Hyperobjects and the End of Common Sense," March 18, 2010, http://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/2010/03/hyperobjects-and-end-of-common- sense.html. (Accessed March 28, 2014).

situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover."[31] In this case, the retroactive impact of the elided element undermines the empirical consistency of the novel's diegetic environment, and prompts a revisionary reading of the novel's atmospheric notations. Atmospheric notations, as Barthes observes, function as "pure data with immediate signification" that serve "to authenticate the reality of the referent, to embed fiction in the real world."[32] *Zone One* de-realizes these atmospheric reality-effects by suspending their semiotic immediacy, forcing the reader to retroactively interrogate their reality. For example, a street scene in Zone One, a sudden change in the weather: "It started as a no-bother drizzle but Mark Spitz pulled on his poncho on account of the ash, and the others followed suit when the rain intensified" (135). Does Mark Spitz don his poncho before the others because he is more fastidious about the weather; or is it because, for them, the weather does not exist? During his dialogue with the Lieutenant after his initial arrival in Zone One, Mark Spitz looks out the window and turns "to the movement at the border of his vision. Outside the window, ash had begun to fall in drowsy flakes" (120-21). Upon a first reading, we receive this atmospheric notation as mere atmosphere, mere environmental background—a background condition reproduced in the focalization (border of vision, beyond the window)—and register the fall of the ash as a self-evident reality-effect. Upon re-reading, we realize that what we receive as mere ambience, as "the wider context within which everything else happens," is in fact radically open to question, is in fact a happening in itself.[33] Again, Mark Spitz looks out of another window after Team Omega "sweeps" out an office building in Zone One: "gray particles twisted through the air. The smoke from the gunfire was perfume hiding the

[31] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 51-52. Genette's italics.
[32] Barthes, "Structural Analysis of Narrative," 96.
[33] This is Jeffrey T. Nealon's gloss on our conventional notion of the weather. See "RealFeel: Banality, Fatality, and Meaning in Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*," *Critical Inquiry* 40.1 (Autumn 2013): 109-132, 131.

stench of the dead, reassuring Mark Spitz as it hovered in a dreamy layer. These aspects of the mundane, the simple physics of the world, always meant that the latest engagement was over" (33). Upon a first reading, we cannot know that the scenic apposition between the ash and the smoke belies their ontological asymmetry, or that the "dreamy" quality of the smoke is a metonymic displacement of the indeterminate ontology of the ash. The smoke is a "real" phenomenon; the ash oscillates between the phenomenal and the epiphenomenal. Read in retrospect, however, the simple physics of Mark Spitz's world seem anything but simple. Rather, in regard to atmosphere, the scene stages the novel's subversion of our hermeneutic assumptions about the "physics governing the most basic properties of the diegesis."[34] Refunctioning Žižek's remarks on climate change, you might say that *Zone One* does for the diegetic weather what climate change does for the weather, in that the novel undermines our most "basic trust in the background-coordinates of our [fictional] world."[35]

The "dust of the dead" that the incinerator emits into Zone One's atmosphere also refers to the epigraph of the novel's first section, taken from Walter Benjamin's "Dream Kitsch," his laconic, enigmatic commentary on Surrealism and the modern object world: "The gray layer of dust covering things has become their best part." Dust and ash are the material emblems of Benjamin's idiosyncratic concept of natural history (*Naturgeschichte*), which refers not to the history of nature, but to human historical culture as a kind of second nature. As Eric Santner puts it, "when an artifact loses its place in a historical form of life—when that form of life decays, becomes exhausted, or dies—we experience it as something that has been *denaturalized*,

[34] This physics refers to what Eric Hayot calls the "'physics' of aesthetic worldedness," which he defines as those "features in the diegetic sphere that remain largely in the intentionless preconscious of the text and constitute its unspoken, world-oriented ideological normativity." Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.
[35] Slavoj Žižek, "Nature and its Discontents," *Substance* 37.3 (2008): 37-72, 59.

transformed into a mere relic of historical being."[36] In Santner's account, natural history "transpires against the background of this space between real and symbolic death, this space of the 'undead,'" and it is this space that is the context for the most recent symptom of Mark Spitz's PASD.[37] During the latter part of his tenure in Zone One, Mark Spitz suddenly develops an unconquerable revulsion to the natural-historical detritus of the post-apocalyptic world, the myriad personal possessions—the "flavored gums and lip balms"; the "driver's license photos"; the "just-in-case tampons"; the "keys to empty apartments"—that constitute the "fossil evidence" of a vanished lifeworld: "The detritus that passed for identity, the particulate remains of twenty-first-century existence, fluttered down to settle at the bottoms of wallets and clutches and messenger bags… Touching these artifacts nauseated him now, in the latest manifestation of his PASD" (63). The "particulate remains" of this natural-historical debris, tending inevitably toward the condition of dust, constitute the symptomatic complement to the "particulate by-product" (234) of the ash. The novel's metonymic logic links ash and dust as the only two "particulate" entities circulating in its atmosphere, and both ash and dust mediate Mark Spitz's aversion to the novel's various versions of human weather.

The latest manifestation of Mark Spitz's PASD, like its predecessor, also has an atmospheric provenance. The new symptom's scene of origin is a party supply store on Broadway, filled with "dusty costumes" and "dead air," wherein Mark Spitz discovers a straggler "by the row of helium tanks, her hand dangling on the valve" (63). Unable to discover any material evidence that would yield insight into the zombie's former identity, or to conjure any

[36] Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 17. (Santner's italics). On Benjamin's concept of natural-history see also Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 13–23.
[37] Ibid.

plausible story that would account for her present position ("Why her post by the helium tank, the paw on the valve that complicated the mystery?"), Mark Spitz suddenly suffers a nervous collapse, the ensuing PASD an "invisible layer" that "divided him from the rest of the world" (66). For Mark Spitz as well as for the reader, the helium tank tableau remains enigmatic. But we might read into it a perverse aspiration for an alternative atmosphere, for a purer, private air that would supplant the atmosphere of dead weather. Perhaps the scene provokes Mark Spitz because it evokes the double-bind of a changed climate: he cannot breathe the current air, but there is no other air to breathe. As a fantasy substitute for oxygen, helium is decidedly double-sided: although it offers a short-term substitute for oxygen, the sustained inhalation of helium displaces oxygen and results in asphyxiation. The scene, which stages a repetition compulsion as its content, also constitutes a repetition of the original scene of Mark Spitz's PASD, occurring just after his rescue: "this drowning sensation was the first indication that something started to go wrong with him when he came in from the wasteland. He needed air" (45). Mark Spitz's symptomatic array is organized around a core need for air, a need to transcend the claustrophobic closure of the novel's human weather. With this in mind, we might view Mark Spitz's "fantastic visions of ash" (233) as a psychic defense directed against the change in climate. That is, Mark Spitz's symptomatic projection of dead weather works to re-contain it within the subject, recoding objective fact as subjective effect, thus removing the human from the atmosphere by moving the atmosphere within the human.

The Atmospheric Comedy

Having examined *Zone One's* representation of the chiasm between human and human weather, I now turn to the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre more generally. In what I call

the atmospheric comedy, this chiastic rift between human and human weather eventuates in a comic outcome. The sense of the comic in the atmospheric comedy alludes to Mark McGurl's concept of the posthuman comedy.[38] Beginning from Bergson's dictum that the essence of comedy is "something mechanical encrusted on the living," McGurl suggests that the ultimate comic mechanism is not mechanical, but natural, the "turn (and continual return) to naturalism": "This suggests that while mechanism in the modern technological sense is one key to comedy, even more basic are the mechanisms of nature, the entire realm of natural processes that enclose, infiltrate, and humiliate human designs."[39] However, in the Anthropocene, not only do the processes of nature humiliate human operations, but human operations have become processes of nature. Humans make the weather; in turn, the weather returns to unmake them. The incongruity between subject and subjectified atmosphere results in subjective dysfunction, an outcome that McGurl anticipates when he employs an atmospheric example to exemplify his sense of the posthuman comedy: "Think here of the pratfall, taking the human down (always down) as though in a sudden gust of gravity."[40] I will borrow the figure of the pratfall as an exemplary figure for the comic incongruity between subject and subjectified atmosphere. Indeed, we may now survey the atmospheric comedy in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction by way of a montage of falls.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, perhaps the iconic post-apocalyptic text of contemporary literary history, tells the story of a father's journey with his son across the charred landscape of a post-apocalyptic America. The following scene, narrated in the iterative mode, depicts the

[38] The posthuman comedy refers to "literary works in which scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem." Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy," *Critical Inquiry* 38.3 (Spring 2012): 533-553, 537.
[39] Ibid., 550.
[40] Ibid., 549-550.

father's repeated attempts to gather wood for a fire. The scene functions as a micro-narrative of the atmospheric comedy, staging a repeating series of falls, each fall arising from the uncanny agency of an altered atmosphere:

> The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination.[41]

In its figuration of a humanized atmosphere that alienates the human, McCarthy's "autistic dark" dramatizes the chiastic torsion of the atmospheric comedy. Rather than serving as a neutral background for human action, or a transparent medium for human perception, the atmosphere actively negates action (walking, standing) and perception (seeing, hearing). The negation is rhetorical as well, as the figure of "autistic dark" deploys the rhetoric of pathetic fallacy in order to subvert its conventional rhetorical function. Paradoxically, the anthropomorphic trope has the effect of estranging, rather than humanizing, the non-human environment. The change in climate provokes the pratfall—the fall arises from the comic mismatch between the man's biomechanical techniques, adapted to a pre-apocalyptic environment, and the inimical agency of the post-apocalyptic atmosphere. In this case, the atmospheric comedy is classically Bergsonian in its comic automatism: no longer able to rely on the unconscious coordination of his vestibular

[41] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 15.

system, and unable to adapt to the changed climate, the falling man continues "to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case [call] for something else."[42]

In Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, the apocalyptic catalyst is a lethal language virus that materializes the chiasm between human and atmosphere. The novel follows the fortunes of a middle-class family in upstate New York in the aftermath of a pandemic "speech fever," in which speech acts are conflated with weather phenomena. Human "speech, airborne now" generates "wind so thick it's like a person;" "blizzard[s] of Aesop's fables" blow like snowstorms; clouds become "vocal clouds."[43] Contact with this variant of human weather not only causes a "chemical disruption" that eventuates in terminal bodily dysfunction, but induces pratfalls as well, with adults "destroying themselves under the flood of child speech," and fatally "falling drunk" within "voice clouds."[44] The contagion spreads "like a mist borne on a climate," and the narrator's symptomatic response to the contagion motivates a kind of climate change: "Perhaps it's already winter and the climate is only slow to frost. I am not so troubled by the season; it's the shrinking of light that gives concern."[45] Like *The Road's* autistic darkness, the "soaking darkness" of the changed climate actively interferes with human action: "This darkness is different. It interferes more finally with one's passage through the woods, and one must halt all activity until the sun boils it off, if only partially, in the early morning."[46] And, as in *The Road*, the altered atmosphere produces repeated pratfalls: "It was so dark last night, I could not see my

[42] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (1911; Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 9. This "climate change" plays out on the discursive level as well. "Declination" plays inversely on the etymology of climate (Ancient Greek *klima*), which "refers not only to a latitudinal zone of the earth but also to an inclination or slope." Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4.
[43] Ben Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 132, 281, 143.
[44] Ibid., 22.
[45] Ibid., 38, 255.
[46] Ibid., 261.

hand in front of my face… I descended and climbed, then traversed along what was not the path. It was never the path… I stumbled, fell, sometimes stayed down."[47]

The atmospheric comedy operates in the realist text as well, surfacing when a post-apocalyptic chronotope irrupts into everyday reality. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, for example, which begins and ends with protagonist Keith Neudecker's ground zero experience of the event of 9/11, figures the fall of the twin towers as a weather event: "The windblast sent people to the ground. A thunderhead of smoke and ash came moving toward them. The light drained dead away, bright day gone. They ran and fell and tried to get up."[48] Windblast and thunderhead, grammatical as well as existential subjects, pursue their human victims with predatory agency, even as the humans fall in a medium of their own making, collapsing "in the ash ruins of what was various and human, hovering in the air above."[49] Within the novel's symbolic economy, the fantasy of removing the human from the atmosphere organizes the fantasy of reversing history. Lianne, the protagonist's wife, frames the historical trauma of 9/11 in terms of an historicization of the weather. Pre-9/11: "The skies she retained in memory were dramas of cloud and sea storm, or the electric sheen before summer thunder in the city, always belonging to the energies of sheer weather, of what was out there, air masses, water vapor, westerlies."[50] Post-9/11: "This was different, a clear sky that carried human terror in those streaking aircraft, first one, then the other, the force of men's intent."[51] One could argue, in this case, that the vocabulary of climate change functions as a kind of lingua franca for the expression of contemporary disaster. Desire for

[47] Ibid., 268.
[48] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 236.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 134.
[51] Ibid.

"sheer weather," for weather free from the shaping pressures of human history, reads like nostalgia for a climate before it changed.

The fantasy of sheer weather also operates within climate change discourse itself. Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, which teaches us that "there is [now] nothing but us" because "we have changed the atmosphere," concludes with a vision of the "vast nature above our atmosphere," an extraterrestrial space that "still holds mystery and wonder" precisely because it remains invulnerable to human intervention. "The ancients, surrounded by wild and even hostile nature, took comfort in seeing the familiar above them—spoons and swords and nets. But we will need to train ourselves not to see those patterns. The comfort we need is inhuman."[52] McKibben recommends the unlearning of the constellations, a perceptual reversal from luminous patterns of meaning into meaningless perforations of light, in order to recover a climate untouched by climate change. The scene of McKibben's concluding remarks is a mountain summit, to which he and his wife ascend in order to observe the annual Perseid meteor shower: "After midnight, it finally started in earnest—every minute, every thirty seconds, another spear of light shot across some corner of the sky… and when, toward dawn, an unforecast rain soaked our tentless clearing, it was cold—but the night was glorious, and I've since gotten a telescope."[53] Relegated to the background, atmosphere functions as a transparent screen upon which to project the sublime spectacle of meteoric pyrotechnics. Atmospheric activity is similarly absorbed into the spectacle: the rain shower is an ornamental detail, a scenic foil for the aesthetic splendor of the meteor shower.[54] McKibben foregrounds atmosphere at the theoretical

[52] Ibid., 185.
[53] Ibid., 184.
[54] In the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre, McKibben's meteors, no longer splendid shooting stars, recover the full etymological force of disaster (*dis-astron*): dysfunctional stars, anomalous astral deviations from the harmonious orbits of the spheres. On the longer history of the meteoric see Arden

level ("we are changing the weather"), but fails to realize the aesthetic consequences of this paradigm shift. A sense of atmosphere as mere atmosphere, as neutral environmental background, defines the aesthetic horizon of *The End of Nature*.

McKibben, writing in 1989, could still invoke the sense of sublime wonder as a redemptive aesthetic horizon. This is no longer the case after a historical interval that has seen the confirmation of most of McKibben's predictions for the progression of climate change. To echo Tim Morton, in the context of a changed climate we require an aesthetic of "disturbing intimacy" rather than sublime wonder, an aesthetic that registers the sense of "the oppressive claustrophobic horror of actually being inside" the hyperobject climate change.[55] At this point, it should come as no surprise to discover that *Zone One's* terminal catastrophe of dead weather, troped as a "global warming" event (302), happens to be a "tsunami" of pratfalling zombies: "The dead sloshed through the gap, clambering over the concrete ramp and the crushed bodies, losing balance on the uneven surface and spinning in ludicrous pratfalls onto Canal" (306). Rather than sheer weather, it is dead weather that epitomizes the human weather of the atmospheric comedy.

Atmospheric Eros

If the atmospheric comedy dramatizes the chiastic rift between subject and atmosphere in the era of climate change, what I would like to call atmospheric eros refers to scenes of amorous sensuousness that hyperbolize the sense of contact between subject and atmosphere. Scenes of atmospheric eros portray a rapprochement between subject and atmosphere—a sense of fusion

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Reed, *Romantic Weather: the Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1983), 8-9.

[55] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 132.

rather than fission—emergent within the distressed weather world of the post-apocalyptic genre. In *Melancholia*, for example, Justine's occult rapport with the planet Melancholia manifests as a hypersensitive receptivity to Melancholia's atmospheric manifestations. Justine breaks out of the dysphoric stasis of her own melancholia not through human intervention, but through Melancholia's atmospheric intervention. The first sign of change occurs during the anomalous midsummer snowfall that falls upon Claire and Justine as they work in the garden. Justine raises her face to the falling snow in order to feel the sensuous caress of each flake, her face in close-up finally relaxing its melancholic rigor, expanding in a voluptuous smile. Later in the film, Justine's contact with Melancholia climaxes in a dramatic scene of atmospheric eros. During the night, Justine walks to the river and lies down naked upon the riverbank, exposing herself to the ascendant planet in order to immerse herself in the eerie viridescence of Melancholia's invading atmosphere, which now saturates the Earth's atmosphere. The scene dramatizes the tactile plenitude of atmospheric envelopment, lingering upon Justine's manifest sensual delight in Melancholia's uncanny planetary light, which flows over her like water. The cinematography soaks the mise-en-scène in the palpable atmospheric glow, thus performing Melancholia's atmospheric agency at the level of visual form. Von Trier's direction theatricalizes the scene's eroticism: the montage features shot-reverse-shot close-ups between the nude Justine and the facialized orb of Melancholia; the soundtrack overlays the action with a gaudy blast of Wagner's prelude to *Tristan und Isolde;* meanwhile, intermittent flash cuts reveal Claire in the background, espying the nocturnal tryst from a clandestine distance, thus composing a scenic love triangle organized around a third, nonhuman vertex.

If the end of the world, as I have argued, is a diegetic conceit for the narrative performance of climate change, you could say that Justine makes contact with an alterity this is

both human and nonhuman, a narrative figure for the hybrid entity of climate change. In this regard, scenes of atmospheric eros, which hyperbolize sensory immediacy, stage attempts to force the absent presence of climate into palpable presence. If we cannot "see climate changing or feel it happening," if "the gulf between brute, visible reality and climate change is crowded with arcane mathematics, high-tech measuring devices, and inhumanly large temporal and spatial scales," if "the perceptual and cognitive regimes we have at our disposal are increasingly incapable of experiencing the mutations and changes that mark our climate," then there is now a problem *feeling what is happening*, an inability to make direct contact with the withdrawn reality of our changing climate, and a consequent longing to heal the rift between phenomenology (weather) and ontology (climate).[56] In staging the sense of feeling what is happening in the atmosphere, scenes of atmospheric eros offer a form of aesthetic compensation for what we do not feel happening in reality.

Like Justine, Mark Spitz is adept at feeling what is happening. Mark Spitz's "knack for apocalypse" (245) derives from his affinity for the atmosphere of apocalypse, his haptic aptitude for sensing atmospheres "in which the sense of something happening becomes tactile," what Kathleen Stewart would call his "atmospheric attunement."[57] Thus, Mark Spitz registers "the unsettling and 'off' atmosphere" of the world's final pre-apocalyptic evening as a sensation of air pressure: "the intensity of that moment, the pressure he felt, was the immensity of the farewell" (139). Similarly, he senses something anomalous in the air before the dissolution of Zone One:

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[56] The citations, respectively, are from Mike Hulme, Peter Rudiak-Gould and Tom Cohen. See Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree*, 196; Peter Rudiak-Gould, "'We Have Seen It with Our Own Eyes': Why We Disagree about Climate Change Visibility," *Weather, Climate, & Society* 5.2 (April 2013): 120-132, 121; Tom Cohen, "Introduction," in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change (Volume 1)*, ed. Tom Cohen (Open Humanities Press, 2012), 23.

[57] On the concept of "atmospheric attunement," see Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29.3 (2011): 445-453, 445.

"It's different, Mark Spitz thought. Wonton was off-kilter. A vibration insinuated itself, a disquieting under-tremor to every movement and sound" (239). While cognition continues to spin out its reassuring fantasies of the future, sensation registers the reality of the present moment: "In half an hour they'd be at Wonton and another week closer to the remaking of the world. He felt something in his skin, though, the faintest of vibrations" (283). When Zone One's wall finally falls, Mark Spitz's atmospheric aptitude attains its affective maximum.

> He was smiling because he hadn't felt this alive in months… as the kinetics of the artillery hammered through his boots, shuddered into his bones, and sought synchrony with his heart's thump, he'd entered a state of tremulous euphoria. He was an old tenement radiator sheathed in chipped paint, knocking and whistling in the corner as it filled with steam heat. The sensation peaked the instant the wall collapsed and, in its ebb, he was the owner of a woeful recognition: It was not the dead that passed through the barrier but the wasteland itself… It embraced him; he slid inside it. (311-12)

The force of Mark Spitz's feeling, climaxing in the coital communion of the final line, draws the "wasteland itself" into vivid atmospheric presence. Moreover, in a provocative act of agency, the wasteland itself initiates the contact ("It embraced him"). The novel tropes this scene of atmospheric eros with an atmospheric figure: the radiator's suffusion with steam heat, a charmingly homey version of the fusion of subject and atmosphere. We may read the scene's spatial logic of dead weather on one side of the wall and human radiator on the other as a kind of scenic dialogue—as if, in response to the altered atmosphere, the subject himself becomes an atmospheric apparatus.

If, in the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre, atmosphere has begun to assume the attributes of character, you could also say, in regard to the atmospheric affinities of Mark Spitz and Justine, that character has begun to assume the attributes of atmosphere. With this in mind, the figure of the radiator also recalls another atmospheric figure, the narrator of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, a self-styled "animated barometer."[58] Marcel is a human barometer; Mark Spitz, a human radiator. The move from barometer to radiator is a move from representation to action, from observation to participation, from analytics to kinetics. The barometer measures the atmosphere, while the radiator operates in the atmosphere, transferring thermal energy from one medium to another to heat its surrounding environment. The Proustian barometer is a technology for augmenting interiority, for layering the self in depth[59]; the radiator compresses the self into a dense point of peak sensation, evacuating interiority by opening outwards toward the atmospheric outside. Proust's barometer (as well as the Flaubertian barometer that serves to exemplify the "reality-effect" in Barthes's famous essay) looks different from our historical vantage point.[60] Read retroactively in the light of climate change, it refers to a different air altogether, an air in which "the very ordinary seriality of weather" forms a largely predictable background to everyday life, patterning the daily habits of Proust's narrator.[61] With the advent of

[58] Proust, *The Captive and the Fugitive*, 96. For a detailed reading of the Proustian barometer see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-41.
[59] Proust, *The Captive and the Fugitive*, 662: "Atmospheric changes, provoking other changes in the inner man, awaken forgotten selves [Les changements de l'atmosphère en provoquent d'autres dans l'homme intérieur, réveillent des «moi» oubliés]."
[60] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). Barthes famously claims that the presence of the barometer in Flaubert's *"Un Coeur simple"* is without functional significance, and therefore only functions to signify the real itself. For the subsequent critical reception of the Barthesian barometer, see Fredric Jameson, "The Realist Floor-Plan,'' in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious*: *American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16-17.
[61] I borrow the phrase from Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, 8.

climate change, the climate that informs fiction has changed. No longer mere atmosphere, mere environmental setting, my point has been that atmosphere is now an active agent in the plot, that the former décor of our human stories is now itself a leading actor. The atmospheric comedy is thus one way we may portray the Anthropocene's expanded cast of human and nonhuman actors; however, in an ever-changing climate, we will continue to need new ways to narrate the Anthropocene. After all, for the foreseeable future, the forecast calls for dead weather.

CODA: PLANETARY AIR

"The most profound and influential event of the 21st century," according to the website of MarsOne, will be "human settlement on Mars." Mars One is a not-for-profit foundation whose goal is to establish a permanent human settlement on Mars. The first unmanned mission is scheduled for 2020, to be followed by the first manned mission in 2026. Mars One is currently accepting applications—to date, they have received over 200,000 applications from astronautic aspirants around the world. The journey is one-way. The first wave of colonists will settle a new world, but they will never see the Earth again. Described as the "next giant leap for humankind," the human settlement on Mars "will aid the understanding of the origins of the solar system, the origins of life, and human's place in the universe," and, perhaps most poignantly, "bring the human race closer together."[1]

The buoyant optimism of the MarsOne project does not indicate the general tenor of modern thought on the question of space exploration. Indeed, at the beginning of the Space Age, much of modern thought remained earthbound. "The Earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human being with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice."[2] Writing in 1958, a year after the launch of Sputnik, Hannah Arendt equated the wish to transcend our planetary boundary with the "wish to escape the human condition." Arendt reads the modern desire "to escape from imprisonment to the earth" as a symptom of "modern world alienation,"

[1] http://www.mars-one.com/about-mars-one (accessed August 26, 2015).
[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.

with "its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self."[3] For her, the astronaut, "shot into outer space and imprisoned in his instrument-ridden capsule where each actual physical encounter with his surroundings would spell immediate death," exemplifies the estrangement of modern man, "the man who will be the less likely ever to meet anything but himself and man-made things the more ardently he wishes to eliminate all anthropocentric considerations from his encounter with the non-human world around him."[4] Like his former student, Martin Heidegger believed that the techno-scientific worldview deracinates human being from its ontological grounding in the terrestrial world. Heidegger, as well, found the extraterrestrial perspective less than inspiring. In a well known interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1966, Heidegger insists that "technology tears men loose from the earth and uproots them," and describes his response to viewing photographs of the Earth taken from outer space: "I do not know whether you were frightened, but I at any rate was frightened when I saw pictures coming from the moon to the earth… The uprooting of man has already taken place. The only thing we have left is purely technological relationships. This is no longer the earth on which man lives."[5] A quarter-century later, American environmentalist Bill McKibben still shares Arendt's and Heidegger's uneasiness with regard to trans-mundane trajectories. McKibben laments the "end of nature" due to the human technological colonization of the natural world, the fact that humans, by changing the atmosphere, have made "every spot on earth man-made and artificial," leaving "nothing but us."[6] Whereas Heidegger catastrophizes the view of Earth from outer space,

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[3] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2, 6.
[4] Hannah Arendt, "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man," *The New Atlantis* (1963; Fall 2007): 43-55, 52.
[5] Martin Heidegger "'Only a God Can Save Us': *Der Spiegel's* Interview with Martin Heidegger (1966)," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 103. Cited in Benjamin Lazier, "Earthrise; or, The Globalization of the World Picture," *American Historical Review* 116.3 (June 2011): 602-630, 609.
[6] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 58.

McKibben idealizes the view of outer space from Earth. *The End of Nature* ends in a scene of regressive wish-fulfillment, with McKibben gazing wistfully from Earth towards the starry heavens, overwriting history with fantasy: "We may be creating microscopic nature; we may have altered the middle nature all around us; but this vast nature above our atmosphere still holds mystery and wonder."[7]

At the same time that McKibben announced the "end of nature" due to the human modification of the atmosphere, Kim Stanley Robinson was beginning to imagine what our atmospheric lifeworld might look like after the end of nature. *The Mars Trilogy* (*Red Mars* (1993), *Green Mars* (1995), *Blue Mars* (1997)), narrates the future history of the human colonization of Mars, in particular the multi-generational political upheaval surrounding the issue of terraforming, the question whether or not to remake Mars in the biospherical image of Earth, or to preserve Mars in its original condition. Robinson's science-fictional vision of atmospheric politics anticipates contemporary spatial theory, most notably the "sphereology" of Peter Sloterdijk, who argues that politics and atmospherics are now coextensive: "The air that, together and separately, we breathe can no longer be presupposed. Everything must be produced technically, and the metaphorical atmosphere as much as the physical atmosphere."[8] Of course, the atmospheric dimension of terraformation, the technical production of a breathable layer of air on a planetary scale, is the axial conflict of the entire trilogy, focusing its ideological binaries and driving its political conflicts. However, at every level of analysis, Robinson's atmospheric effects show how ideological space and physical space coexist as covariant, codependent dimensions of Martian political ecology. Their scenic juxtaposition often gives rise to dark

[7] Ibid., 185
[8] Peter Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, trans. Steve Corcoran, (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 245.

political ironies, as on the eve of the first Martian revolution, which pits the colonial rebels against the meta-national capitalist conglomerate. Arkady Bogdanovich, the fiery revolutionary leader, walking among his comrades in their domed habitat, feels "*that difference in the air, the sense that they were all in a new space together, everyone facing the same problems, everyone equal*."[9] But, moments later, the "*euphoria of a new social contract,*" sensed as an electric atmospheric envelope, gives way to the power politics of the status quo. The mercenary army of the interplanetary capitalists preemptively sabotages the rebels' climate control systems. Without warning, Arkady hears a "*loud pop overhead*" and sees "*a small hole in the dome*": "*The air suddenly took on an iridescent shimmer, as if they were inside a great soap bubble. A bright flash and a loud boom knocked him to his feet. Struggling back up, he saw everything ignite simultaneously*" (476). Robinson reveals how political collectives, and the affective atmospheres that sustain them, are dependent upon an underlying atmospheric infrastructure. Conversely, the glossy allure of capitalist atmospheric aesthetics, designed to lure emigrants to Martian cities through artful simulations of Earth's atmosphere, may cover up more than just infrastructure. The trilogy's opening sequence juxtaposes a tour of the newly built city of Nicosia, whose invisible dome bubble makes it appear as if visitors "*stood in the open air*" (6), with the political assassination of John Boone, the liberal leader on Mars. After an unauthorized breach of the city's membranous boundary, hired killers cast Boone into the outer air without a spacesuit, his oxygen-deprived body unconsciously assuming the fetal posture of "the standard emergency air pocket" (21), albeit too late.[10] "Politics," as Sloterdijk puts it, has "become a department of climate techniques."[11]

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[9] Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 13. Robinson's italics. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[10] All italics are Robinson's.
[11] Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, 245.

The Martian atmosphere also provokes phenomenological anomalies that evoke the bio-historical legacy of earthly subjectivity. In the midst of his Machiavellian meditations on Martian *Realpolitik*, the American politician Frank Chalmers pauses to notice the sunset, and reflects upon the incongruity between the equatorial environment of human evolution and the present environment: "Sunset, more than any other time of day, made it clear that they stood on an alien planet; something in the slant and redness of the light was fundamentally wrong, upsetting expectations wired into the savannah brain over millions of years. This evening was providing a particularly garish and unsettling example of the phenomenon" (13). Within the world of *The Mars Trilogy*, atmosphere mediates planetary alterity, but the estrangement effect works both ways. The Earth itself, in its turn, becomes the alien planet. Fredric Jameson observes that "the obligatory return tourist trip to Earth itself" functions as one of "the great generic set-pieces of this narrative of co-existing worlds, and one which in genuine modernist fashion designates the utopian genre by its very exercise."[12] When Nirgal, a second-generation Martian born and raised on the red planet, first sets foot on Earth, he experiences the atmosphere not as a transparent ether, but as a dense welter of sensory vectors.

> [T]he air was salty, thick, hot, clangorous, heavy… there was a doorway glowing with light. Slightly dizzy with the effort, he walked out into a blinding glare. Pure whiteness. It reeked of salt, fish, leaves, tar, shit, spices: like a greenhouse gone mad… The stench was of a greenhouse gone bad, things rotting, a hot wet press of air and everything blazing in

[12] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 410.

> a talcum of light… The thick air reeked!… The singe of the sun in his eyes wouldn't go away.[13]

For Nirgal, the "natural" air of Earth is like the artificial air of a dysfunctional greenhouse, alien to his sensorium. The "rude shock of the planet's otherness," to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty, ultimately refers to the intra-worldly alterity of planet Earth.[14] The interplanetary change of climate functions as the sci-fi stand-in for the real world estrangement effect of climate change. As McKenzie Wark puts it: "Perhaps Earth is now a Mars, estranged from its own ecology."[15]

Not only the medium of political atmo-terrorism or phenomenological de-familiarization, atmosphere also functions as a new medium for Martian works of art. Jameson concludes his essay on *The Mars Trilogy* by citing, without comment, Robinson's description of a Martian artwork, claiming that the measure of "the imaginative qualities of a utopian text" is its "capacity to imagine properly utopian art works." The artwork shows up on Martian television one night, sandwiched in between the daily dose of socioeconomic strife and celebrity publicity.

> Mangalavid was showing the premiere performance of an aeolia built by a group in Noctis Labyrinthus. The aeolia turned out to be a small building, cut with apertures which whistled or hooted or squeaked, depending on the angle and strength of the wind hitting them. For the premiere the daily downslope wind in Noctis was augmented by some fierce katabatic gusts from the storm, and the music fluctuated like a composition,

[13] Kim Stanley Robinson, *Blue Mars* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 169-171.
[14] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories," *Critical Inquiry* 41.1 (Autumn 2014): 1-23, 23.
[15] McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2015), 212.

> mournful, angry, dissonant or in sudden snatches harmonic: it seemed the work of a mind, an alien mind perhaps, but certainly something more than random chance. The almost aleatory aeolia, as a commentator said. (293)

The grand Aeolian harp, Robinson's update of the classic Romantic poetic trope, is at once sculpture, habitation, and vital instrument of an "alien mind," linking the Heideggerean triad of building, dwelling, and thinking into a single, singing unity. This utopian inflection of built space is also a realization of ecological reconciliation, as the aeolia's sonorous music is the confluent product of mind and wind. The apertures of the aeolia are not political pressure points, like the lethal atmo-terrorist perforations of the domed cities, which exploit a rigid boundary between inside and outside, but porous portals enabling the fluent interplay of inner space and outer space.

Following up on the utopian intimations of the aeolia's atmospheric ecology, I would like to conclude with a scene from *Red Mars* that offers an image of a new relation between human and atmosphere. The scene depicts Nadia Cherneshevsky's experience of a Martian sunset. Nadia, an earthy, hard-nosed Russian engineer, feels like an alien in her own body when she ventures out in the Martian air: "It made her feel that she had gone hollow. That was it: her center of gravity was gone, her weight had been shifted out to her skin, to the outside of her muscles rather than the inside. That was the effect of the suit, of course. Inside the habitats it would be as it had been in the *Ares*. But out here in a suit, she was the hollow woman" (77). The spaceship *Ares* and the domestic habitats simulate Earth's atmosphere, which Nadia experiences as natural. The logic of analogy, with its asymmetrical play of identity and deviancy, frames Mars as an imperfect or deficient replica of Earth. Implicitly, Nadia conceives of her Earth self

as fully embodied. Her "hollow" Martian self is the negation of her Earth self, experienced paradoxically as embodied vacuity. However, during an expeditionary trip with the geologist Ann Clayborne, Nadia's epiphanic experience of a Martian sunset ruptures the analogical structure of her experience. Unlike Frank's sunset, which is bracketed by the deep time of human evolution, and oriented towards the earthly past, Nadia's sunset opens out toward a Martian future.

> The sun touched the horizon, and the dune crests faded to shadow. The little button sun sank under the black line to the west. Now the sky was a maroon dome, the high clouds the pink of moss campion. Stars were popping out everywhere, and the maroon sky shifted to a vivid dark violet, an electric color that was picked up by the dune crests, so that it seemed crescents of liquid twilight lay across the black plain. Suddenly Nadia felt a breeze swirl through her nervous system, running up her spine and out into her skin; her cheeks tingled, and she could feel her spinal cord thrum. Beauty could make you shiver! It was a shock to feel such a physical response to beauty, a thrill like some kind of sex. And this beauty was so strange, so *alien*. Nadia had never seen it properly before, or never really felt it, she realized that now; she had been enjoying her life as if it were a Siberia made right, so that really she had been living in a huge analogy, understanding everything in terms of her past. But now she stood under a tall violet sky on the surface of a petrified black ocean, all new, all strange; it was absolutely impossible to compare it to anything she had seen before; and all of a sudden the past sheered away in her head and she turned in circles like a little girl trying to make herself dizzy, without a thought in her head. Weight seeped inward from her skin, and she didn't feel hollow anymore; on

> the contrary she felt extremely solid, compact, balanced. A little thinking boulder, set spinning like a top. (109-110)[16]

The passage dramatizes the concept of "areo-formation," coined by the character John Boone, and expressed by Boone in a chiasmic formulation that enacts the ecological reciprocity it intends: "'So we terraform the planet; but the planet areoforms us'" (250). The logic of analogy and all it supports—history, memory, identity—yields to the fully embodied experience of a surging ingress of vitality. Nadia's sensorium becomes the site of the stretching and bursting of subjectivity beyond its rhetorical and ontological boundaries. Her spacesuit, no longer an insentient barrier, is now a fleshly interface ("like some kind of sex"). She is at once little girl, thinking boulder, spinning top. The metaphor of the "thinking boulder" alludes to Aldo Leopold's famous injunction to "think like a mountain," the rhetorical label for Leopold's concept of the land ethic, which extends membership in the human ethical community to nonhuman entities such as "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."[17] This enlarged concept of community frames Nadia's mergence with the Martian environment, which implicitly embraces non-terrene biospheres, and which is imaged most vividly by the breeze that begins *within* Nadia's body, and moves outward from her spine to her skin to the outer air. In its sense of ecological conjugation, the figuration of the nervous system as a weather system offers an evocative image for "sentient atmosphere."

Throughout "Sentient Atmospheres," from the sentient atmospheres of Dick and Le Guin to the zombie meteorology of the atmospheric comedy, we have seen the post-apocalyptic imaginary of science fiction represent planetary alterity through figurations of atmospheric

[16] Robinson's italics.
[17] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949; New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 204.

agency. For these authors, the manmade atmospheric calamities of the 20th century, from the radiation ecologies of the Cold War to the strange weather of anthropogenic climate change, resurface in narrative form as antagonistic atmospheric actants. While offering an incisive critique of atmospheric modernity, Robinson also accents the utopian dimensions of ecological otherness. Moreover, over against the terrene longings that inform modern planet thought from Arendt to McKibben, Robinson suggests that the end of nature may mark the beginning of new versions of human nature. The sunset scene has a sunrise feel to it. Although a mere moment within the multi-century span of the trilogy, it emits "the utopian afterimage" of some new mode of relation between subject and atmosphere, and anticipates new ways of inhabiting the world—or, rather, a world.[18] For Robinson's science-fictional future no longer seems so far in the future. In the 21st century, human beings will be breathing another air, whether in the changed climate of our parent planet, or in the controlled climates of an alien planet. Hopefully, the "sentient atmospheres" yet to come, whichever world they are invented on, will help us learn to breathe a little better.

[18] I borrow the phrase "utopian afterimage" from Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 411.

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