LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

THINKING SPACE

Thinking Space is a series of short position papers on key terms and concepts for literary geography. Cumulatively, these accessible and wide-ranging pieces will explore the scope, parameters, and critical vocabulary of the field, clarifying important issues and stimulating discussion and debate.

Literary Atmospherics

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Although "atmosphere" has long been a keyword in literary criticism and environmental studies, these fields have highlighted different aspects of the term. For literary critics, atmosphere often refers to 'the emotional tone pervading a section or the whole of a literary work, which fosters in the reader expectations as to the course of events, whether happy or (more commonly) terrifying or disastrous' (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 20). Used to indicate the distinctive style, tone, or mood (Gumbrecht 2012) of literature and other artworks—as well as the general tone of a social situation or historical moment— "atmosphere" is one of our most pervasive spatial metaphors. By contrast, environmental scholars and geographers generally frame atmosphere in the material terms of meteorology, air pollution, or global climate change. Thinking about literary atmospherics in the Anthropocene—an epoch that so far has been defined not only by the effects of human activity on Earth's atmosphere, but also by the uneven distribution of artificially produced air—requires connecting these two senses of "atmosphere": on the one hand, a work's

emotional tone as conveyed by style and form; on the other hand, the political conditions and the embodied effects of the air (or the differentiated *airs*) we breathe.

As an immersive material environment that influences diverse aspects of social and biological life—from the 'transmission of affect' (Brennan 2004: 1) to physical debility and premature death—atmosphere is at once a cultural and environmental product. Alongside literary language, we must add industrial emissions, air fresheners, chemical solvents, atmospheric weapons, ventilation shafts, agricultural pesticides, and a host of other products of human activity as contributors to actually existing atmospheres. In "Anthropocene Air," Tobias Menely critiques a persistent tendency in Western historical thinking to invoke air as a figure for insubstantiality and ideality: 'atmosphere as allegory of the outside' (2014: 94). This inability to think the materiality of air prevents historical materialism from reckoning with the vital questions posed by the Anthropocene: for 'Air turns out to be the matter of history, the substance the properties of which, however elusive, will determine the next phase of human and planetary history' (96). In *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf,* Jesse Oak Taylor suggests that literature might help us model a mode of atmospheric thinking that can negotiate the simultaneously material and abstract, local and planetary qualities of our changing climate: 'Atmospheric thinking emphasizes adjacency; it considers the way that bodies of all kinds influence the conditions of possibility in their vicinity' (Taylor 2016: 7).

Alongside the planetary threats posed by carbon emissions and climate change, modernity's atmospheric consequences also include more local instances of intentional and unintentional 'air conditioning.' Peter Sloterdijk's term underscores how human activity both conditions and is conditioned *by* artificially manipulated atmospheres. For Sloterdijk, the twentieth century's defining moment was the deployment of chlorine gas in World War I—an event that shifted our understanding of human life to include its dependence on the surrounding air. Sloterdijk details diverse instances of 'air design' ranging from military efforts to render air unbreathable to the spread of climate control technologies, from the gas chamber to use of subliminal scents as mood enhancers in shopping malls. Whereas global climate change emphasizes the planetary scale of the Anthropocene, Sloterdijk's attention to local and multitudinous instances of air design foregrounds questions of distribution and differentiation: what he calls the 'micro-climactic "fragmenting of the atmosphere"' (Sloterdijk 2009: 99).

According to the legal theorist Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, engineered atmospheres are designed to dissimulate the pervasiveness of the 'lawscape': the physical and affective comforts of an atmosphere prevent us from apprehending that the law is immanent throughout everyday spaces (for example in property law, safety regulations, trademarks, etc.). Whether in a shopping mall, a museum, or a bourgeois sitting room, we are held in an 'atmospheric captivity' whereby 'our needs are converted into one foundational need: the need *of* the atmosphere to carry on existing….' (Mihalopoulos-Philippopoulos 2014: 108). Because atmospheric comfort immerses and suffuses us as we breathe, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos argues that the air itself is an insidious, often unnoticed agent of interpellation: 'In a time of intense atmospheric engineering, Althusser's

interpellation is atmospherically diffused. No one needs to call us anymore. We do it ourselves…being interpellated not through ideology (this has been suffused in atmospherics) but of a constructed, furious desire to perpetuate the atmosphere' (136). Whereas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos underscores the need for atmospheric ruptures and ethical decisions to withdraw from atmosphere's affective enticements, Ben Anderson offers a more open-ended approach to 'affective atmospheres'. Noting that atmospheres are inherently turbulent, incomplete, and indeterminate, Anderson underscores how the aesthetic concept of atmosphere can illuminate the spatialized yet contingent nature of collective affects: 'On this account atmospheres are spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with' (Anderson 2009: 80).

Thinking air's materiality draws attention to the multifarious, shifting, and frequently unnoticed connections between atmospheric composition and lived experience. Sloterdijk's 'air conditioning' affects bodies, minds, moods and social relations, reproducing spatialized inequalities by partitioning, ventilating, and moving air around. If some engineered atmospheres are enthralling, others can have fatal or debilitating effects on breathers. Toxic factories, sick building syndrome, the siting of freeways and incinerators, the transfer of toxic waste and dirty industries to the Global South, and 'white flight' from disinvested urban centers to more breathable suburbs all contribute to the uneven distribution of air. The fragmentation and stratification of atmospheres is a powerful vehicle of what Rob Nixon calls environmental 'slow violence'—a mode of violence that frequently goes unnoticed because it is difficult to perceive and to prove as its effects disperse across time and space (Nixon 2011). In toxic, racialized geographies ranging from Bhopal to the Bronx, airborne chemicals produced for the sake of consumers located elsewhere have precipitated a range of health conditions including congenital disorders, cancer, asthma, fatigue, and depression. Atmospheric slow violence produces fissures in bodies and social relations that can have devastating consequences, though they're hardly noticed and often can't be quantified: cellular mutations whose effects unfold across years or generations; subtle shifts in mood; cognitive or affective changes that lead to social isolation and unemployment; debilitation that transforms people's capacities for movement, work, and play. Elaborating on the aesthetic subtleties and challenges posed by atmospherics, Neel Ahuja writes: 'Atmosphere names a space of unpredictable touching, attractions, and subtle violences—a space at once geophysical and affective, informed by yet exploding representation, a space where the violences of late-carbon liberalism subtly reform racialized sensoria through shifting scales of interface' (Ahuja 2015: 371). Literature can map these networks of atmospherically-induced transformation, tracing impalpable connections between air, aesthetics, and embodied experience.

While the sites for studying literary atmospherics are as diverse as techniques of 'air conditioning,' these become especially palpable in contexts of dramatic spatial and atmospheric transformation. Narratives of industrialization—such as Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861)*,* Émile Zola's *Germinale* (1885), and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906)—depict spaces and bodies steeped in smoke, soot, and the odors of rendered

meat. Naturalist authors like Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Ann Petry map the social atmospheres of rapidly expanding cities: *Sister Carrie* (1900)*,* for example, juxtaposes Carrie Meeber's rise to celebrity with the decline of a Chicago bar manager (a sort of atmospheric engineer 'keenly observant and sensitive to atmospheres of many sorts' (Dreiser 1981: 219)) as he deteriorates physically amid Manhattan's cheap hotels and boarding houses; eventually he commits suicide by wearily turning on the gas in a dingy boarding room. The occupational hazards posed by silica dust, industrial pesticides, and sick building syndrome have been detailed in texts such as Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938), Hubert Skidmore's *Hawk's Nest* (1941), Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), and Alison Johnson's *Casualties of Progress: Personal Histories from the Chemically Sensitive* (2000). Emerging in office buildings, suburban homes, industrial workplaces, environmental disaster sites, and imperial war zones, the diverse accounts of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity collected in Johnson's book attest to air's diverse effects on embodiment, cognition, mood, and sociality: for the chemically sensitive, the smell of perfume, deodorant, or diesel fuel can trigger nausea, confusion, irritability, and depression while putting strain on personal relationships. Disproportionately high rates of asthma in the Bronx and other black inner city communities have animated texts that chart the racial geographies of respiration: inhalers and respiratory disease figure prominently in the asthmatic filmmaker Spike Lee's *Red Hook Summer* (2012) and David Simon and Eric Overmyer's *Treme* (2010-13), and in a striking meditation on the politicization of Eric Garner's dying words—'I can't breathe'— Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze read Langston Hughes's poetic treatment of the stratification of air: 'Equality is in the air we breathe./ (There's never been equality for me….') (in Dillon and Sze 2016). 'Air conditioning' also underscores the transnational dynamics of environmental devastation in stories about places that absorb the atmospheric externalities of Western production and consumption. China's urban smog epidemic—which is largely the byproduct of manufacturing exports consumed in Europe and the US (Ziser and Sze 2007)—has energized the country's authors and artists to experiment with what the anthropologist Timothy Choy calls 'air's substantiations' (Choy 2012): examples include Nut Brother's production of a brick made of airborne particulates he gathered with a vacuum cleaner; Cao Fei's atmospheric film about urban zombies and Western-influenced consumerism, *Haze and Fog* (2013); and *Smog is Coming* (2014)*,* a popular novel by the environmental official Li Chunyuan.

If these texts demand that we attend to the materiality of literary 'atmosphere,' they may also help us approach aesthetic questions that are vital to broader research on atmospheres: what makes atmospheres become imperceptible or perceptible? How do the material, cultural, and affective aspects of an atmosphere interact? How do atmospheres congeal and transform across time, and what experiences of temporality do they instill in us? How does air transform bodies, and how can those bodies act to modify or withdraw from atmospheres? What is it like to internalize atmospheres, to move across them—or to inhabit the contact zone between distinct atmospheres? By exploring such questions, we might come to a more visceral understanding of how 'air conditioning' works, as well as how its components might be appropriated, transformed, or abolished.

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