



Air and
Environmental Health
in the (Post-)COVID-19 World

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Lecture Series

Air: Perspectives from the Environmental and Medical Humanities

Organizer: Tatiana Konrad, University of Vienna

Mondays, 4.45-6.15 pm (CET)

March 28 – June 20, 2022

The aim of the lecture series is to provide environmental and medical perspectives on air, in particular how it has historically been envisioned in American, Canadian, and British cultural and literary narratives. The lectures will explore how these representations can help us understand the complex nature of air as it pertains to the COVID-19 pandemic, air pollution, and broader environmental degradation.

These events, organized at the University of Vienna, will bring together national and international scholars in the environmental humanities, medical humanities, cultural studies, visual studies, literary studies, gender studies, disability studies, and history. The lecture series will last for one semester, with one lecture being delivered each week. Each lecture will be given by an invited expert, and will last for 45 minutes, followed by an enriching 45-minute question-and-answer session.

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Lecture 1 (March 28, 2022)

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Lecture 4 (May 2, 2022)

“Carried by Currents” (Jeff Diamanti, University of Amsterdam)

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“Points of View from Life without Air” (Arthur Rose, University of Exeter)

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“The Ocean of Air: Revisiting Romantic Airspace in the Age of COVID-19” (Siobhan Carroll, University of Delaware)

Lecture 7 (May 23, 2022)

“‘The Endless Space of Air’: Helen Keller’s Worldbuilding and the Resuscitation of Aura” (Jayne Lewis, University of California, Irvine)

Lecture 8 (May 30, 2022)

“The Importance of ‘Open-Air’ in a Time of Epidemics: From Tuberculosis to COVID-19” (Clare Hickman, Newcastle University)

Lecture 9 (June 13, 2022)

“Rumpled Bed Sheets and Online Mourning: Social Photography and the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Corey Dzenko, Monmouth University)

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“Breathing as a Transformative Phenomenon” (Magdalena Gorska, Utrecht University)

Lecture 1 (March 28, 2022)

“Dirty Air: Literary Tropes of the Canadian Nation”

Christian Riegel, University of Regina

Abstract

Published in 1997, Western Canadian author Birk Sproxtton’s novel *The Red-Headed Woman with the Black Black Heart* tells the tale of the 1934 mining strike in the northern Canadian town of Flin Flon, which was developed around mining and smelting, boasting until 2010 a 250-meter-tall smoke stack that polluted the air with arsenic, mercury, and lead. The novel’s concerns with Flin Flon’s industrial heritage and the railway that connected it historically to the rest of Canada intersect broader issues of the development of the Canadian nation, including settler colonialism, the extraction of natural resources, subjugation of Indigenous peoples, and development of industry, which are made possible by the construction of a railway across the nation. The novel serves as starting point for an examination of Canadian literary tropes that invoke the specter of nation building as a force that degrades the environment and the social, physical, and mental health of the individuals that are caught up in its fraught development. The works of descendants of European settlers such as Sproxtton and Robert Kroetsch articulate the tensions of occupying contested land, serving to signal how nation building and transformation of the landscape are central forces in the creation of Canada. Alongside these authors, works by Barren Lands (Cree) First Nation poet Randy Lundy and Metis poet and novelist Joan Crate are read to explore the uncertainties of nation creation from Indigenous perspectives. Flowing through the poetry and prose of these writers is the concept of air as polluted, whether it emanates from a smoke stack, is urban industrial smog, or flows from a steam engine or diesel locomotive. All who are touched by this “air” are affected by the negative effects of the nation-in-formation.

Biographical Note

Christian Riegel (PhD, FRSA) is Professor of English and Medical and Health Humanities at Campion College at the University of Regina. He has published widely on literature and health, including the books *Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning*, *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*, as well as on Canadian writing, including *A Sense of Place: Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing* and *Twenty-First Century Canadian Writers*. His co-edited volume, *Health Humanities in Application*, is forthcoming.

Lecture 2 (April 4, 2022)

“Air Pollution from Cars and Trucks: Can Regulating Emissions Reduce Greenhouse Gases?”

Gordon M. Sayre, University of Oregon

Abstract

Cars and trucks account for between a quarter and a third of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. To stave off climate catastrophe, these emissions need to be reduced. What regulatory regime can bring about such reductions? Since the 1970s, emissions regulations in the U.S. and Europe have succeeded in reducing levels of other pollutants. This success appears to prove that consumer movements can protect the environment. However, a case study in how these emissions regulations came about in the U.S. reveals a more complex story. From the 1940s to 1960s, movements for environmental regulation emerged in and around the cities of Detroit and Los Angeles. A concerted campaign by activist scientists and Southern California politicians brought about regulations that forced automotive engineers to modify car engines in order to reduce emissions. The catalytic converter was the key innovation. The regulations that came out of California are consumerist because they do not require car buyers or drivers to change their behavior, such as by giving up their cars, driving less, or driving smaller cars. Consumers demanded changes in the products they purchased, but did not change the way they used the product. The challenge now is: can the same type of consumerist regulations succeed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks? The nature of greenhouse gases makes them much harder to reduce. Burning fossil fuels of any type, in any engine, adds to carbon emissions. Consumers must either drive less, or switch to cars that use far less in fossil fuels. I argue that such a transition will be slow and difficult for many reasons, including trends we are seeing right now. The problem with the consumerist regulatory regime is that it promises, and relies upon, forthcoming engineering solutions such as more efficient batteries, or hydrogen fuel-cell cars that consume only water. These developments are not yet near ready for production.

Biographical Note

Gordon M. Sayre is a scholar of colonial American history and literature and Professor of English and Folklore at the University of Oregon. He is participating faculty in Environmental Studies and teaches an undergraduate course entitled *Car Cultures* that examines the history of the car industry and the environmental issues caused by automobility. He is also the author of “The Humanity of the Car: Automobility, Agency, and Autonomy” published in the journal *Cultural Critique* in 2020.

Lecture 3 (April 25, 2022)

“Where There Is Smoke... Making Climate Visible in a World on Fire”

Jesse Oak Taylor, University of Washington

Abstract

While the weather is immersive and immediate, climate is an aggregation of weather patterns over time, an abstraction, and hence something that eludes direct experience. Or so we thought. As climate change picks up speed, this longstanding truism is being thrown into question. Whether in extreme weather events, unseasonable temperatures, vanishing glaciers or dying trees, the climate crisis has become increasingly palpable, something sensed in the present rather than anticipated in the future. Nowhere has this proven more acute than in the spread of fire, both as a material phenomenon and quasi-metaphor for the climate emergency. Massive wildfires are extremely photogenic, providing terrifying images that counteract the invisible “slow violence” of much environmental harm. Furthermore, because of the long-range effects of smoke, fire renders the atmosphere not merely visible, but smellable, even tastable. No matter how much time you spend thinking about climate change, it is different when you step outside and smell the smoke. This talk will offer an overview of historical and imaginative attempts to render climate visible, with particular attention to sites of combustion, in order to think about how smoke helps render the atmosphere palpable, the body permeable. By placing literary and cultural representations of smoke and fire alongside other efforts to represent the atmosphere (isotherms, maps, climate models) I will attempt to illustrate the longstanding connections between energy and climate, while underscoring the distinctly immersive quality of the atmosphere.

Biographical Note

Jesse Oak Taylor is associate professor of English at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he also directs the undergraduate program. His book *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016) won both the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) book award in ecocriticism and the Sonya Rudikoff Prize for a first book in Victorian studies from the Northeast Victorian Studies Association (NVSA). He is co-editor (with Tobias Menely) of *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (2017), and has written numerous articles and chapters on literature, culture, and the environment.

Lecture 4 (May 2, 2022)

“Carried by Currents”

Jeff Diamanti, University of Amsterdam

Abstract

This talk is about being carried by currents. Both hydro-physical currents like the one carrying moist, warm air from the Caribbean to the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans—a torquing mechanism largely responsible for the weather patterns in Western Europe—but also psycho-social currents shared across epistemic habits, critical postures, and aesthetic iterations. I will spend some time thinking with a number of artworks that take up the current as both a pressure on form and an occasion to float in ecological media. But I also want to make an argument for how an ethic of being carried by currents opens up to a reconsideration of what a climate realism might involve, as an experience of 1) nested totalities through which the real becomes actuality, and 2) an always provisional and situated relationality (including its impediments).

Biographical Note

Jeff Diamanti is Assistant Professor of Environmental Humanities at the University of Amsterdam and is cross listed between Literary & Cultural Analysis and Philosophy. His first monograph, *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum* is out with Bloomsbury (2021).

Lecture 5 (May 9, 2022)

“Points of View from Life without Air”

Arthur Rose, University of Exeter

Abstract

In the opening Chapter of “The Matter of Air,” Steven Connor identifies two phases in the experimental investigation of air. The first, an exploration of air’s mechanics, found in the vacuum the means to analyze air “from the outside.” The second, an examination of air’s chemistry, used “factitious airs,” or “artificial variations in the form of air,” to determine its composition. In both cases, the experimental logic depended upon evacuating from the air that which made it ordinary to life, to establish a point of view from life without air. In this lecture, I examine techniques, used by Andrew Miller, Ted Chiang, and Daisy Lafarge, to focalize life without air through, variously, the novel, the short story, and the lyric. Miller’s 1996 novel, *Ingenious Pain*, Ted Chiang’s 2008 short story, “Exhalation,” and Daisy Lafarge’s 2020 collection, *Life without Air*, each reference key moments in the development of scientific observation. In recalling these histories, which range from Robert Boyle’s air pumps to Louis Pasteur’s experiments with fermentation, Miller, Chiang, and Lafarge variously draw on ekphrasis, memoir, and found poetry to address the problem of speaking from the point of view of a life without air. By extension, they remind us how, by changing the way in which air is framed, we may just change what we think we mean by “la vie sans l’air.”

Biographical Note

Arthur Rose is a Senior Research Fellow in English at the University of Exeter in the UK. He is based at the Wellcome Centre for the Cultures and Environments of Health, where he is affiliated to the Wellcome Trust Collaborative Award “Shame and Medicine,” led by Luna Dolezal and Matthew Gibson. His latest book, *Asbestos—The Last Modernist Object*, is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.

Lecture 6 (May 16, 2022)

“The Ocean of Air: Revisiting Romantic Airspace in the Age of COVID-19”

Siobhan Carroll, University of Delaware

Abstract

Marshmallow Laser Feast’s “We Live in an Ocean of Air” art installation uses virtual reality to envision the invisible, breath-borne connection between humans and the vegetative planet. As experienced in the time of COVID-19, however, this 2021 installation provokes reflection also on the problematics posed by the spatial flows of air. Returning to the eighteenth-century invention of airspace, this talk considers the conflicts inherent in artistic attempts to represent the personal and national intimacies of air-in-motion. If the eighteenth century’s invention of the hot air balloon forced a new reckoning with the atmosphere as space of transit, so too did it trouble concepts of air as medium of contagion and poetic inspiration. In speculative novels such as *The Last Man* (1826), Mary Shelley and her fellow Romantics argued for the terrors as well as the utopian potential of a new era of incipient aerial connection. The legacy of these Romantic aerial visions provides a useful perspectival point for pandemic-era analysis of recent speculative fiction and artwork’s exploration of airspace as site of ecological encounter.

Biographical Note

Siobhan Carroll is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Delaware with a specialization in British Romantic Literature. A writer as well as a scholar of speculative fiction, her work explores the historical interactions of empire, science, and the environment. Her first book, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750-1850* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), was the runner-up for the First Book Prize of the British Association for Romantic Studies. She is currently working on a new project on the nineteenth-century Anthropocene and the problem of agency.

Lecture 7 (May 23, 2022)

“‘The Endless Space of Air’: Helen Keller’s Worldbuilding and the Resuscitation of Aura”

Jayne Lewis, University of California, Irvine

Abstract

Walter Benjamin (1936) traced the decay of “aura” to the rise of mechanical reproduction, exemplified in the photograph. His canonical formula is subject to revision in the digital (and late-capitalist) era of post-mechanical reproduction. But it was countered even in its own era by the auratic “self-recordings” of the deaf-blind memoirist (and socialist) Helen Keller. The second of Keller’s nine autobiographies, *The World I Live In* (1908), develops a phenomenology of air which realizes it as “endless space” at once construed and constructed in its adjacency to simulated bodily surfaces. Especially as it coincides with Keller’s hyper-visibility as an extraordinarily photogenic photographic subject, this text provides a unique opportunity to investigate air’s potential meaning in and for the world of hypermediated postmodernity. In *The World I Live In*, Keller represents herself as what she calls a “vibroscope”: a historically determined instrument attuned not simply to its environment but to the “correspondences between the seen and the unseen” that make that environment up. Shaped by such surroundings, the photosynthetic subject that speaks in Keller’s writing represents itself as at once the matrix and the epiphenomenon of “this endless space of air.” Supplementary photographs of Keller “listening to trees” correspond with her claims that “between my experiences and the experiences of others there is no gulf of mute space which I may not bridge. For I have endlessly varied, instructive contacts with all the world, with life, with the atmosphere whose radiant activity enfolds us all.” Drawing on theories and practices of auratic photography contemporary with both Keller and Benjamin, this talk will explore Keller’s transactions with air’s “radiant activity” in her most challenging text and with them disability’s potential for illuminating trans-sensory environments in and through the apparently absent body.

Biographical Note

Jayne Lewis is Professor of English at the University of California, Irvine. She is the editor of the anthology *Religion in Enlightenment England* (Baylor 2016) and the author of *Air’s Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in English Fiction, 1660-1794* (Chicago, 2012). She has published numerous articles and books on Anglophone literature and culture in the Enlightenment and beyond. Her current work explores figures and fantasies of transpersonal embodiment as these integrate the forgotten literacies of an ostensible past with the post-literate media forms of an imagined present and the specter of an illegible and possibly non-occurring future.

Lecture 8 (May 30, 2022)

“The Importance of ‘Open-Air’ in a Time of Epidemics: From Tuberculosis to COVID-19”

Clare Hickman, Newcastle University

Abstract

The UK Office of National Statistics noted that when COVID-19 pandemic “lockdown restrictions lifted in summer 2020, people relied on the outdoors for leisure time and their holidays.”¹ This use of the “open-air” for both health and leisure reasons has a long history and the connections can be seen in this detail from a poster created by the New York State Department of Health in the 1900s and reproduced by Medical Officers of Health in Britain.² In this talk, I will trace the concerns around the use of countryside “air” as both a medical preventative and therapeutic measure in relation to chronic diseases such as tuberculosis at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries. Connections will be made between campaigns for open-air schools, country holidays for sick urban children, playgrounds, garden cities, and access to the countryside. All of these highlighted the importance of open-air for healthy bodies. Using both the published professional journals of UK Medical Officers and select case studies from key groups such as co-operative societies and holiday associations, I will demonstrate how medical concerns regarding the benefits of rural open air formed a key element in how the countryside was perceived and used in an increasingly industrial and urbanized populations in Britain. The talk will conclude by looking at the key concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the importance of accessing clean, rural air and how that is once again reigniting debates and tensions around inequalities and access to the countryside.



Biographical Note

Clare Hickman is a Senior Lecturer in History at Newcastle University working at the intersection of environmental and medical history. Her recent Wellcome Trust funded Fellowship, “The Garden as a Laboratory,” merged the history of medicine, health and science, with that of the landscape and environment and has resulted in her latest book, *The Doctor’s Garden: Medicine, Science, and Horticulture in Britain* (Yale University Press, 2021). She currently leads the Wellcome Trust-funded *MedEnv: Intersections in Medical and Environmental Humanities* network and the AHRC-funded *Unlocking Landscapes Network: History, Culture and Sensory Diversity in Landscape Use and Decision Making*. She is also Co-Investigator on the AHRC standard grant, *In All Our Footsteps: Tracking, Mapping and Experiencing Rights of Way in Post-War Britain* and the NERC-funded *Connected Treescapes* project.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/howhaslockdownchangedourrelationshipwithnature/2021-04-26>.

² This detail from a reproduction of the poster in *The Medical Officer*, 5 December, 1908, p. 432.

Lecture 9 (June 13, 2022)

“Rumpled Bed Sheets and Online Mourning: Social Photography and the COVID-19 Pandemic”

Corey Dzenko, Monmouth University

Abstract

New York City became an early epicenter for the spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. Due to the virus’ rapid transmission, the state’s governor declared an emergency executive order effective at 8pm on March 22, 2020. This “lockdown” mandated “non-essential” workers stay home, asked everyone to keep at least six feet apart, and forbade social gatherings. With air as the vehicle for COVID-19’s spread, many turned to virtual environments to avoid more dangerous “public” spaces. Photography in its various material forms often invites social interaction, from crowding around physical albums to conversing online via social media. This talk will focus on two photographic projects from NYC and the nearby region, both created early during the pandemic and made public virtually: documentary photographer Haruka Sakaguchi’s *Quarantine Diary* and curator and writer Marvin Heiferman’s ongoing Instagram account @whywelook.¹ Sakaguchi began her month-long diary on March 20, the day the governor announced his forthcoming mandate. A history of depression compelled Sakaguchi to take at least one photograph daily to help herself cope with the lockdown while living alone in NYC. She posted *Quarantine Diary* to her website and shared some of her images during her takeover of *The New Yorker*’s Instagram account. Heiferman’s husband, cultural historian Maurice Berger, died from COVID-19 complications on March 22. Since then, Heiferman has used Instagram to mourn, turning to photography when words fail him. In both instances, Sakaguchi and Heiferman addressed personal trauma publicly online, and, in doing so, created a collective environment for viewers to do similar. By examining photography’s role in such mourning, I expose the social life of photography, along with the ways the politics of identity and place have impacted the unfolding and effects of this global pandemic.

Biographical Note

Corey Dzenko, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art and Design at Monmouth University (New Jersey, USA). She focuses her research on contemporary art and photography in terms of the politics of identity. She was a Visiting Fellow in Art History at the University of Nottingham and a co-editor of *Contemporary Citizenship, Art, and Visual Culture: Making and Being Made* (Routledge, 2018). She is currently working on her book project *Great Escapes: Photographic Fictions, Whiteness, and Manhood in the Contemporary United States*.

¹<https://www.harukasakaguchi.com/quarantine-diary> & <https://www.instagram.com/whywelook/>.

Lecture 10 (June 20, 2022)

“Breathing as a Transformative Phenomenon”

Magdalena Gorska, Utrecht University

Abstract

Breath is commonly understood as a universal phenomenon—all human beings need to breathe in order to live. In this lecture I will, on the one hand, address breathing as an indeed shared phenomenon, where humans by virtue of sharing air and needing to breathe are understood as co-respirators. Simultaneously, on the other hand, I will discuss breathing as a phenomenon that is also differential, a process that is enacted through and enacting differences that matter politically. As such breathing will be discussed as a process that carries a transformative potential, a process that not only speaks of how power relations are incorporated bodily and affectively, but also a process that articulates political necessities for transformation.

Biographical Note

Magdalena Górska is Assistant Professor at the Graduate Gender Programme at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on feminist politics of breathing and vulnerability. She engages with breath through a nonuniversalizing and politicized understanding of human bodies as agential actors of intersectional politics. Her work offers anthropo-situated while anti-anthropocentric understanding of quotidian bodily and affective practices of living as political matters. She is the founder of the *Breathing Matters Network*. She is editor-in-chief (with Lenart Škof) of the Routledge Critical Perspectives on Breath and Breathing book series. She is currently preparing (with Milica Trakilović) edited volume on Social and Political Suffocations.