

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

WE DON'T BREATHE ALONE:

FORMS OF ENCOUNTER IN ANGLOPHONE NORTH AMERICA SINCE THE 1970S

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I think of a wonderful philosophy teacher who had emphysema. In his first semester of retirement, he decided to teach in Switzerland, after years in New York. He died soon after arriving in Switzerland. I imagined his lungs could not take fresh air, after years of adaptation to toxins.

—Michael Eigen, *Toxic Nourishment*, 3

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## Abstract

Breathing and the air are omnipresent in contemporary literature and film, be it in engagements with ambiance, atmosphere, aura, ether, inspiration, influence, mood, and weather, or with coughing, gasping, sighing, smoking nervously, seductively, or with relief, being breathless, short of breath, or out of breath, breathing heavily or loudly, blowing out, having one's breath taken away, and of course just breathing. And yet breathing and the air have yielded minimal attention in literary and film criticism. It is easy to write off scenes of breathing as clichés, platitudes, or fillers, but doing so means ignoring the possibilities of a self- and world-making that cannot be defined through speech or action.

“We Don’t Breathe Alone: Forms of Encounter in Anglophone North America since the 1970s” tracks and interrogates these possibilities. I argue that breathing operates across various avant-gardes and minoritarian aesthetics as the foremost concept for configuring multiple kinds and scales of encounter—with oneself, with the world, with alterity, and with finitude—under conditions of openness or vulnerability. Even when it appears to be an individual process, breathing implicates a milieu and its human and nonhuman organisms; hence, *we don’t breathe alone*.

The aesthetics of breathing I investigate emerge at a historical moment when the resources necessary for the reproduction of life, notably breathable air, are endangered, unequally distributed, monetized, and weaponized. Breathing aesthetics are bound up in the history of social movements such as environmentalism, which especially since the 1960s and 1970s have denounced structures of oppression and exploitation and speculated more livable worlds. Contemporary writers and filmmakers mobilize breathing to capture the experience of literal and figurative toxicities (e.g. atmospheric pollution or ambient racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism) and from there to

reimagine life in common. I tackle the sociopolitical and environmental shaping of embodiment and experience using a critical grammar indebted to gender studies, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race studies, disability studies, environmental studies, science studies, and medical theory.

The archive I assemble spans traditions, movements, and trends in Anglophone, North American writing (prose and verse) and film that derive sociopolitical force from an aesthetic engagement with breathing. I frame the literature and cinema on which I center as experimental to highlight the way their authors, while rejecting scientific positivism, experiment with form, genre, and point of view as they develop protocols to address problems of contemporary living.

“We Don’t Breathe Alone” examines the aesthetics of embodiment and experience in light of environmental concerns. My project has an affinity with ecocriticism at the same time as it complicates the criterion that a novel, poem, or film’s worth hinges on its capacity to raise the reader or viewer’s awareness of environmental degradation. The objects I explore compel us to consider the social and political worlds generated through breathing while emphasizing the forces that compromise the fantasy of a liberal individual capable of taking action or speaking out. Recognizing respiration as a social and political process thus expands beyond visual and aural registers the study of minor political aesthetics and its concepts of minimal affirmative, noncathartic emotion, and dissatisfaction.

The introduction surveys the historical transformations that now keep individuals and groups from taking breathing for granted, from biological warfare to the rise of respiratory afflictions like asthma, allergies, and multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), to the popularization of the phrase “I can’t breathe” as an expression of racial injury, to the marketization of commodities for monitoring breathing and encapsulating pure air, to mediated hoaxes around the breatharian lifestyle. I then I enact and explain a turn to experimental aesthetics with readings of Theresa Hak

Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* (1982) and Fred Wah's *Breathin' my Name with a Sigh* (1981).

Each subsequent chapter is organized around a kind or scale of encounter. Chapter 1 theorizes and models aesthetic self-medication, a process through which writers and performance artists consciously repeat breathing until it affords a structure that organizes life within crisis. New Age- or Pagan-inspired queer life writing that Dodie Bellamy, CA Conrad, and Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose composed between the 1970s and the 2010s showcases efforts to stage self-encounters in a therapeutic register.

The second chapter argues that there is such a thing as feminist breathing and tracks its key transformations after the Second Wave, when feminists encountered the world outside of organized politics as hostile. Moving between Toni Cade Bambara's black feminist novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Linda Hogan's Chickasaw ecofeminist poetry (1978–2014), and Solange Knowles' black feminist album *A Seat at the Table* (2016), I propose that political breathing outside of the canonical spaces of the Second Wave (e.g. the consciousness-raising meeting, the festival, the classroom) consists in coordinating a literal breathing necessary to survival with a figurative breath that carries political vitality in spite of the foreclosure of feminist presents and futures.

Chapter 3 looks at encounters with alterity in two works of speculative fiction by African American queer writers: Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) and Renee Gladman's Ravicka series (2010–2017). As a symptom that points to an environmental crisis without making the terms of this crisis explicit, breathing here organizes social and ethical relations premised on the opacity or incommensurability of certain modes of experience impacted by, but not isometric with, rubrics of race, gender, class, disability, and nationality.

Chapter 4, this dissertation's B-side of sorts, explores the fantasies of self-presence and intention with which individuals and groups imbue scenes of vulnerability and finitude. The chapter

zooms in on encounters with nonviolent last breaths in *Near Death* (1989) and *Dying at Grace* (2003), two deathbed documentaries by, respectively, Frederick Wiseman and Allan King. A “good death,” under modern medicine and palliative care, is one where a patient slowly drifts toward unconsciousness, often with the help of analgesic and narcotic drugs like morphine. I show that paradoxically, the discourse concerning the last breath, in particular the declaration that the dead “has left peacefully,” retroactively conjures up a conscious subject in order for that subject to withdraw intentionally from the world.

In the conclusion, two multimedia projects, David Buuck’s *Site Cite City* (2015) and Samson Young’s *Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour* (2017), reframe the aesthetics of breathing as a set of pragmatic tactics that might offer temporary relief from, but are ultimately hampered by, local and planetary disasters and the official national and global response they have incited.

## Introduction

### I. We Don't Breathe Alone

Early in *DICTEE*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's influential work of avant-garde literature, a vignette titled “DISEUSE,” for fortuneteller or psychic, features an account of the facial and skeletal minutiae of breathing.<sup>1</sup> A female character—perhaps Cha, perhaps the disease, perhaps an individual to whom the disease is attuned—seeks to make an utterance from a position of gender, racial, and colonial oppression. Born in South Korea during the Korean War, Cha, along with her family, migrated, first to Hawaii and then to San Francisco, in the 1960s. *DICTEE*'s unnamed character is unable to speak. She resorts to mimicking the process, letting out “bared noise, groan, bits torn from words” along the way.<sup>2</sup> These breathy noises are what Cha, in an artist's statement, refers to as the “roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue.”<sup>3</sup> Free-indirect discourse in *DICTEE* reveals a character trying to estimate her pitch, her reach: “She hesitates to measure the accuracy. … The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away.”<sup>4</sup> Should the breath not fall away, the character might be able to convert the air she takes in “rapidly,” “in gulfs,” into a momentum that would counter “the pain of speech the pain to say.”<sup>5</sup> She “gasps from [the] pressure” of not-quite-speaking, “its contracting motion.”<sup>6</sup> When she cannot contort her breath any further, and we, the

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<sup>1</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1982] 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

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

<sup>4</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3–4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4.

readers, cannot hold our breaths any longer, the speech act happens, at last: “Uttering. Hers now. Hers bare. The utter.”<sup>7</sup> That utterance is *DICTEE*, all of it. Before anything resembling speech or action takes place in Cha’s book, breathing intimates structures for encountering oneself, others, and the world that are infused with social and political meaning.

“We Don’t Breathe Alone: Forms of Encounter in Anglophone North America since the 1970s” tracks and interrogates these structures. This dissertation argues that breathing constitutes the master trope for contemporary life in North American literature and film from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>8</sup> Across avant-garde and minoritarian aesthetics, breathing configures multiple kinds and scales of encounter—with oneself, with the world, with alterity, and with finitude—under conditions of openness or vulnerability. Breathing and the air are omnipresent in contemporary literature and film, be it through engagements with ambiance, atmosphere, aura, ether, inspiration, influence, mood, and weather, or with coughing, gasping, sighing, smoking nervously, seductively, or with relief, being breathless, short of breath, or out of breath, breathing heavily or loudly, blowing out, having one’s breath taken away, and just breathing. And yet breathing and the air have yielded only minimal attention in literary and film criticism. It is easy to write off scenes of breathing as clichés, platitudes, or fillers, but doing so means ignoring the possibilities of a self- and world-making that cannot be defined through speech or action. Breathing and the air function both as milieus for the articulation of subjectivity and alterity, and as media for transactions between the literal and the figurative. The aesthetics of breathing has emerged as a tool for figuring (out) the full scale and sociopolitical significance of encounters.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>8</sup> In the absence of a consensus on the beginning and end of “whatever comes after modernism,” I follow Amy Hungerford’s invitation, in “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” *American Literary History* 20, nos. 1–2 (2008), to label the “cultural artifacts of the last six of seven decades”—here, specifically those of the last five decades—as contemporary (410, 418).

In a script for a video performance titled “Perte Loss,” Cha dramatizes the possible repercussions of variations in the intensity of breathing:

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Change breath      | sequence to begin when the past is going to become present—        |
| change wind        | it begins to move also. the wind begins to move—alchemical process |
| North              |  |
| East               |  |
| West               |  |
| South <sup>9</sup> |  |

The “it” that begins to move designates both the present (or the past made present) and the wind. Breath sets time and wind into motion. Breath and wind are also related synecdochically, or per the script “alchemically.” The script’s two directions—it can be read from left to right or from top to bottom—insinuate breath’s movement across spaces and scales.

Breathing returns throughout *DICTEE*, where it comes to figure a range of encounters that might entail, but aren’t conflatable with, speech and action. The imperative, “void the / words the silences,” is followed by an anatomical diagram that mixes and matches speech and respiratory organs.<sup>10</sup> Another instruction, this one to “release the excess air,” renders exhalation as the impulse that connects the “I” of “LYRIC POETRY,” the section’s title, to its “you.”<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, the titular activity of “CHORAL DANCE” is said to enable an individual to be “restored in breath.”<sup>12</sup> And the “ASTRONOMY” section scales up the indistinguishability of breath from the speech it can enable, in as much as this indistinguishability illustrates the interconnection of all elements in the universe:

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<sup>9</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “Perte Loss,” 1979, Cha Collection, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, <http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf38700290/?order=2&brand=oac4>.

<sup>10</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

Not possible to distinguish the speech  
Exhaled. Affirmed in exhalation.  
Exclaimed in inhalation.  
To distinguish no more the rain from dreams  
or from breaths.<sup>13</sup>

Even when it appears to be an individual process, breathing implicates a milieu and its human and nonhuman organisms. The opening of *DICTEE* spotlights a single character, but by breathing this character encounters her own urge to speak as uncanny and negotiates an encounter with a world in which she isn't at home. She doesn't breathe alone. A breather is a transduction or epiphenomenon of breathing's ongoing individuation.<sup>14</sup>

## II. Breathing Now

This dissertation contends that the aesthetics of breathing is a contemporary artifact. To situate in the 1970s onward the rise of breathing and the air as sociopolitical concepts and aesthetics might come across, in more ways than one, as counterintuitive. From one standpoint, the politicization of breathing spans at least the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Sloterdijk argues that in that period, the proliferation of gas warfare made environments, rather than bodies, primary military targets.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow from the metaphysics of individuation in Gilbert Simondon, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Paris: Millon, [1964] 1995), 21–23; Gilbert Simondon, “The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis,” trans. Gregory Flanders, *Parrhesia* 7 (2009): 5.

Erin Manning, in *Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), calculates the “ecological” valence of individuations in what she calls William Forsythe’s choreographic “transindividuations” (76). These transindividuations aestheticize the notion that bodies are aftereffects of relational milieus (75). See also Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Waltz with Manning,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 103–106; Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 14.

Simplistically, Sloterdijk casts bodies and environments into an either-or situation. If biological weapons—from the phosgene, chlorine, and mustard gas of World War I to the nuclear bombs and missiles of World War II, to the anthrax of the Cold War and the aftermath of September 11, 2001—have targeted environments, it has been to attack bodies more efficiently. The weaponization of the atmosphere has turned both respiratory systems and the air into preys. Protocols and agreements have enforced the regulation or elimination of biological weapons. Signed in 1972 by a contingent of countries led by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation, the Biological Weapons Convention, an update on the Geneva Protocol of 1925, banned biological agents and toxins as well as the devices designed to use these for hostile purposes.<sup>16</sup> The objectives of the convention were “the general improvement of the international atmosphere,” a formulation that merges de-escalation with purification, and the avoidance of acts, namely mass killings, which “would be repugnant to the conscience of [human]mankind.”<sup>17</sup> Signed in 1992, the complementary Chemical Weapons Convention forbade the use of riot control agents as a method of warfare.<sup>18</sup> The Convention still allowed such agents for domestic law enforcement in “types and quantities” consistent with such [a purpose].<sup>19</sup> “Less-lethal” weapons such as tear gas, developed in the context

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<sup>16</sup> *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction*, London, Moscow, and Washington, D.C., April 10, 1972, United Nations Treaty Series, No. 14860, [http://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XXII-1&chapter=22&lang=en](http://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXII-1&chapter=22&lang=en); *Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare*, Geneva, June 17, 1925, United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. XCIV, No. 2138: 66, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%2094/v94.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction*.

<sup>18</sup> General Assembly Resolution 47/39, *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction*, A/RES/47/39, November 30, 1992, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/47/a47r039.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Crowley, “Drawing the Line: Regulation of ‘Wide Area’ Riot Control Agent Delivery Mechanisms Under the Chemical Weapons Convention,” Omega Research Foundation, 2013,

of World War I and popularized through coordinated lobbying efforts, are widely employed by police to ensure environmental control and crowd compliance through mass injury.<sup>20</sup> These technologies have become fixtures of the repression of political struggles.

In *Campus Sex, Campus Security*, Jennifer Doyle anatomizes a memorable but in no way exceptional use of pepper spray. The incident took place on the University of California, Davis campus on November 18, 2011, at the height of the Occupy Movement.<sup>21</sup> UCPD Lieutenant John Pike,

in an oddly theatrical gesture, ... held his can of First Defense MK-9 aloft so that the crowd could see it. He brought the can back down to hip-level, he stepped toward and then over the demonstrators so that he could spray them in the face. People screamed. He sprayed more. Another police officer sprayed. The screaming got louder. Some students were dragged away. Some crawled.

With the students incapacitated and the crowd both stunned and also worked up, the police must have considered their goal met. The path was cleared.<sup>22</sup>

Doyle's matter-of-fact description only accentuates the disproportionate amount of violence deployed to achieve the goal of clearing the path. Not that there's such a thing as a proportionate amount of violence. No types and quantities of biological weapons are consistent with the purpose

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[https://omegaresearchfoundation.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Publications/BNLWRP%20ORF%20RCA%20Munitions%20Report%20April%202013\\_0.pdf](https://omegaresearchfoundation.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Publications/BNLWRP%20ORF%20RCA%20Munitions%20Report%20April%202013_0.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Anna Feigenbaum recounts in *Tear Gas: From the Battlefields of World War I to the Streets of Today* (London: Verso, 2017) that the U.S. government worked in tandem with tear gas manufacturers to develop a weapons-grade aerosol pepper spray. Amory Starr, Luis Fernandez, and Christian Scholl, in *Shutting Down the Streets: Political Violence and Social Control in the Global Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), narrate the introduction of “less-lethal” weapons in police departments as one element of the militarization of policing that began in the 1970s (44).

<sup>21</sup> See also Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Campus Sex, Campus Security* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 91–92.

of law enforcement, in so far as the rubric of law enforcement is used to justify extralegal acts.<sup>23</sup>

What's more, as Anna Feigenbaum notes, tear gas is often used as a "force multiplier:" the disorientation, debilitation, and panic it induces increase the effectiveness of other kinds of force, including baton beatings and birdshots.<sup>24</sup>

Social media users picked up on the mix of nonchalance and hysterical excess of Pike's attack on breathing and sight by turning the "Pepper Spraying Cop" into a meme.<sup>25</sup> Users pasted Pike's image onto artworks like Georges Seurat's pointillist masterpiece, *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (see Figure 1). At the cost of erasing the political content of the demonstration—passive resistance here appears analogous to a Sunday afternoon in the park—this particular iteration of the meme posited that use of force by police, although it is very much at home on university campuses, shouldn't be.<sup>26</sup> The meme resurfaced in 2016, when reports revealed that UC Davis had paid communications firms \$175,000 to conceal negative press coverage of Pike's action.<sup>27</sup> Communications firms were tasked to erase a university-sanctioned attack on its students, one that recapitulated more than a century of international and eventually domestic debilitation through respiration.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Crowley, "Drawing the Line."

<sup>24</sup> Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Maura Judkis, "Pepper-Spray Cop Works His Way Through Art History," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/pepper-spray-cop-works-his-way-through-art-history/2011/11/21/gIQA4XBmhN\\_blog.html?utm\\_term=.6c84ec6de43f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/pepper-spray-cop-works-his-way-through-art-history/2011/11/21/gIQA4XBmhN_blog.html?utm_term=.6c84ec6de43f).

<sup>26</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson, in *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), tells the story of how U.S. campuses, since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have served as testing grounds for police forces' large-scale repression of political actions.

<sup>27</sup> Anita Chabria, "Pepper-Sprayed Students Outraged As UC Davis Tried To Scrub Incident from Web," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/14/university-of-california-davis-paid-consultants-2011-protests>.

<sup>28</sup> My use of debilitation here echoes Jasbir K. Puar's definition of the term, in *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), as "the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled" (xiii–xiv). Puar claims that the Gaza Strip



Figure 1: Pepper Spraying Cop in *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (2011)

The weaponization of breathing and the air since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only tells part of the story of how, as Steven Connor phrases it, human beings “have taken to the air.”<sup>29</sup> Throughout the scientific modernity, human beings, often assembled as corporations and nations, have occupied the air through air travel, steam engines, electromagnetic signals, radioactive energy and weapons, and space exploration.<sup>30</sup> Intellectual communities have concurrently turned to the air as an object of philosophical concern. Philosophers and theorists have extended a tradition, rooted in the Greek Antiquity, which approaches respiratory and aerial matters as expressive of an

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checkpoints double as “choke points,” in so far as they obstruct the course of the workday and “[slow down] … Palestinian life” (135–136). Although she states that “the capacity to asphyxiate is not a metaphor,” Puar employs choking in a figurative sense to move from one form of slowed-down life (the hindered capacity to make a living) to another (a reduction in animation or life force).

<sup>29</sup> Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 9.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., “Critical Air Studies,” a special issue of *Criticism* 54, no. 2 (2015). The title of the issue, edited by Christopher Schaberg, is deceptively broad, for the volume concerns itself exclusively with a cultural studies of airports and air transportation.

existential condition.<sup>31</sup> While for the Stoics *pneuma* designated a universal breath of life or life force that in its highest form constituted the *psyche* or soul, the conditions associated with breath and air came to be understood, in modernity, as historically and geographically located.<sup>32</sup> Tobias Menely deciphers Anthropocene thinking, or human beings' consciousness of their status as a geological force, in the atmospheric figures crafted by Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno.<sup>33</sup> These (proto-)Anthropocene thinkers, for whom resources no longer anchor a fantasy of unlimited replenishment, formulate “the [ecological] catastrophe of the present” as an “accretion of the past, a thickening of the air.”<sup>34</sup> In his recent spherology trilogy, of which *Terror from the Air* is only a excerpt, Sloterdijk uses spheres, globes, and foams to map out shapes and scales of intimacy, relationality, and recognition proper to human history.<sup>35</sup>

Philosophers from Hobbes to Sloterdijk have answered, in some cases proleptically, the call for a “*physiologie aérienne*” (aerial physiology) that Gaston Bachelard formulated in 1943.<sup>36</sup> Such a heuristic, Bachelard hypothesized, might produce a realistic account of the relation between human beings and the universe, between the breath of organisms and the “*douceur et violence, pureté et délice*”

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<sup>31</sup> Connor, *The Matter of Air*, 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> Dirk Baltzly, “Stoic Pantheism,” *Sophia* 42, no. 2 (2003): 11.

<sup>33</sup> Tobias Menely, “Anthropocene Air,” *the minnesota review* 83 (2014): 100. Kate Marshall calls the Anthropocene “a newly self-aware geological epoch” in “What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time,” *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 524.

<sup>34</sup> Menely, “Anthropocene Air.” Models of breathing as an accumulation of the past can be found in Sam Keane, *Caesar’s Last Breath: Decoding the Secrets of the Air Around Us* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), esp. 6–7, 50, 230; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), esp. ix, 162.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres Volume 1: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), esp. 89; Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres Volume 2: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e): 2014); Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres Volume III: Plural Spherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L’air et les songes: Essai sur l’imagination du mouvement* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1943), 269.

(softness and violence, purity and madness) of the wind.<sup>37</sup> Each extreme of Bachelard's dichotomies is on display in Elizabeth Povinelli's "Breathing In, Breathing Out," a hybrid of poetry, documentary theater, and Socratic dialogue. Hippocrates' rumination on the nourishing wind that composes breath and air inspires Povinelli's attention to fracking and a contemporary asphyxia that disproportionately affects indigenous populations living on or in proximity to toxic sites.<sup>38</sup> Aerial physiologies open onto a long present where residues of the past, recent and distant, shape future conditions of embodiment and experience. As we breathe in the Anthropocene, we encounter deformed, partial traces of our selves, traces that announce our impending demise. Human subjectivity in the Anthropocene, summarizes Catherine Malabou, "has become structurally alien, by want of reflexivity, to its own apocalypse."<sup>39</sup>

Respiratory and aerial philosophies, it should be clear by now, bear long histories. What the decades since the 1970s have witnessed is the intensification of an experimental sensibility that accentuates the subjective, social, and political implications of breathing and the air when those can no longer be taken for granted. This intensification has coincided with, but as we will see isn't strictly tied to, the modern ecological movement.<sup>40</sup> Studies such as Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*, on the damaging effects of pesticide on the environment, and Mary Douglas' 1966 *Purity and Danger*,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 256, 265, 269.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Hippocrates' Breaths: Breathing In, Breathing Out," in *Textures of the Anthropocene: Grain, Vapor, Ray*, vol. 2, eds. Katrin Klingan, Ashkan Sepahvand, Christoph Rosol and Bernd M. Scherer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 32, 34–35. Povinelli continues her exploration of a "breathing, drinking, and perspiring public that is left out of the online chemistry lesson but is now an increasingly unavoidable factor in global life" in *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 42–43.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Malabou, "The Brain of History, or, The Mentality of the Anthropocene," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 1 (2017): 41.

<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), begins with Henry David Thoreau's 1854 *Walden* to track the long history of the U.S. environmental imagination, of which ecological consciousness as we know it is only the most recent stage.

on the management of dirt in ritual and religion, are widely regarded as catalysts for ecological politics.<sup>41</sup> In her preface to the re-edition of *Purity and Danger*, Douglas posits that the air's increased scrutiny in the decades following the publication of her book marked a shift away from "the passionate moral principles of the 1960s" and toward a critique of endangering, "monstrous technological developments."<sup>42</sup> In Douglas' view, the idealism of the 1960s critique of the military-industrial complex gave way to a critique of industrial and postindustrial capitalism motivated by the urgency of countering environmental destruction. Although no one phrase encapsulates what we are conscious of when we are ecologically conscious, some key principles stand out from the interdisciplinary literature on the topic. First, human beings and their environments are interdependent. Second, major environmental wreckage has ordinary consequences.<sup>43</sup> And third, the earth and its atmosphere are finite, in size and resources. This last lesson stems from industrial pollution, legally addressed in the U.S. with the Air Pollution Control Act of 1955 and the better-known Clean Air Act of 1963—and also from space exploration.<sup>44</sup>

Another sign that breathing now cannot be taken for granted is its unprecedented measurement and monetization. Practices like yoga, as I detail in the next chapter, promote the therapeutic value of respiratory askesis. In a formal and tonal throwback to the New Journalism that,

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<sup>41</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge Classics, [1966] 2004); Eliza Griswold, "How *Silent Spring* Ignited the Environmental Movement," *New York Times*, September 23, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/magazine/how-silent-spring-ignited-the-environmental-movement.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, xix.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Masco, in *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), assigns the term "nuclear uncanny" to these consequences (28). The term refers to the skewing of everyday reality caused by a nuclear toxicity both airborne and air-born.

<sup>44</sup> *Public Law 1959*, Washington, D.C., July 14, 1955, Statute 69, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-69/pdf/STATUTE-69-Pg322.pdf>; *Public Law 88-206*, Washington, D.C., December 17, 1963, Statute 77, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-77/pdf/STATUTE-77-Pg392.pdf>.

like New Age, was popularized in the 1960s and 1970s, Kelly Conaboy relates in the first person her incursion into 21<sup>st</sup>-century “capitalistic respiration.”<sup>45</sup> After sampling, as part of her study of the “business of breathing,” an array of high-end breathing sessions in New York City, Conaboy comes to the inevitable conclusion that meditation is mostly helpful, mostly beneficial, but that its association with luxury feels discordant. “I don’t see breathing’s rise in popularity as a bad thing,” she clarifies, “though that is admittedly an odd sentence to have to write.”<sup>46</sup> Tech gadgets such as the near-mystical Spire Stone claim to supply an “objective” measure of bad breathing.<sup>47</sup> The stone, a sleek pager of sorts, converts the “realtime bio-signals” of “respiratory sensing” into “useful and actionable” data.<sup>48</sup> Whereas in the opening of *DICTEE* variations in the intensity of breathing constitute the traces of largely unrealized speech and action, data, according to Spire Stone, draws a reliable vector between breath and action. The Canadian startup Vitality Air differently extracts and abstracts life force from breath and air. The company bottles fresh air from the resort town of Banff, Alberta, which it then ships to Chinese, Indian, Korean, and now North American customers. Its sales pitch assigns each breath monetary value (“We pack the air pretty tight into these little cans. Through compression, we get you more breaths of air and oxygen for your money”); renders the freshness of the air as a quality that can expire, such that breaths of recently bottled air have higher value (“We all go outside for ‘fresh’ air, so how fresh is canned air? With our products, we stamp every one with the exact bottling date”); and, in a high-speed metonymic slide, casts (air) quality as a

<sup>45</sup> Kelly Conaboy, “The Business of Breathing,” *Damn Joan*, 2018, <https://damnjoan.com/business-breathing>. Key New Journalism texts on New Age cultures include Joan Didion, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 67–97; Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York*, August 23, 1976, <http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>.

<sup>46</sup> Conaboy, “The Business of Breathing.”

<sup>47</sup> On breath apps and wearables, see Mikki Kressbach, “Breath Work: Mediating Health Through Breathing Apps and Wearable Technologies,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 2 (2018): 185–207.

<sup>48</sup> “About Us,” Spire, 2017, <https://spire.io/pages/about>.

distinctly Canadian natural-resource-cum-civic-virtue to be exported (“Our values of quality, service and innovation are all grounded in our roots as Canadians looking to be leaders in our market”).<sup>49</sup> Vitality Air, the company’s motto promises, “enhances vitality one breath at the time.”<sup>50</sup> The good news is that we can now buy our *élan vital*; the bad news is that we must now buy our *élan vital*.

Conceptual art satires the monetization of breathing by taking at its word a startup rhetoric already verging on self-parody. In the 2017 piece “Breath (BRH),” the artist Max Dovey uses spirometry, or the measurement of human beings’ lung capacity, to mine crypto currencies.<sup>51</sup> Proof-of-work method, the most common algorithm for mining crypto currencies, entails solving encrypted mathematical puzzles that verify transactions, and receiving financial rewards for being the first to do so.<sup>52</sup> The rewards, of course, are minimal. In four weeks, Dovey’s machine mined £0.02p.

The absurdity of speculating wildly on the value of breathing, or overestimating the productivity of autopoiesis, is also at stake in a 2017 media stunt orchestrated by Camilla Castello

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<sup>49</sup> “About Our Products,” Vitality Air, 2017, <https://vitalityair.com/about-our-products/>.

<sup>50</sup> Katie Hunt, “Canadian Start-Up Sells Bottled Air to China, Says Sales Booming,” CNN, December 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/15/asia/china-canadian-company-selling-clean-air/>.

Another startup, Breather, mobilizes breathing and the air as symbols for diffusing the privatization it carries out. Using a stylized tree as its logo, the company invites corporations and independent contractors to rent out “breathing rooms,” understood as “professional, private workplaces.” The mission statement equates ecology with economy, interconnection with networking: “When we started Breather, we thought of trees as the lungs of the world, helping people breathe easy and be comfortable. As we grow, we like to think of ourselves as building a new kind of ecosystem, one that lets you breathe and connect and climb as high as you need to.” “Try Breather,” *Breather*, 2017, <https://try.breather.com/>; “What’s with the Tree,” *Breather*, 2017, <https://breather.com/culture>.

<sup>51</sup> Régine Debatty, “Using Respiration to Mine Crypto-Currencies,” *We Make Money Not Art*, December 5, 2017, <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/using-respiration-to-mine-crypto-currencies/>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

and Akahi Ricardo.<sup>53</sup> The U.S.-based couple claimed to have adopted a strictly breatharian lifestyle, feeding off “the universe’s energy.”<sup>54</sup> Castello even alleged that she had undergone a breatharian pregnancy. The viral circulation of the hoax testifies to a fascination with breathing and the air as resources. As the cost of life rises, as we must pay to breathe, what if we paid *by breathing*, too? What if breathing granted more than the most basic conditions for our preservation? What if the secret to a rich life, in an existential and a financial sense, were hidden in plain sight: in our surroundings, our most mundane activities?

Literal economism notwithstanding, questions regarding what more or else we might do with our breath pervade the archive I assemble in this dissertation. The aesthetics of breathing configures encounters at a historical moment when the resources necessary for the reproduction of life are endangered, likely beyond the point of salvageability. When the air cannot be presumed available or affordable to all, breathing infiltrates various avant-gardes and minoritarian aesthetics concerned with representing, in a manner fit for the present, the ways subjects interact with each other and the world.

### III. Breathing Inequalities

The spread of permanent or temporary respiratory afflictions that put breathing at risk or articulate breathing as risk constitutes a token of modern and contemporary embodiment and experience. These afflictions include tuberculosis (TB), an infectious disease; cystic fibrosis (CF), a hereditary disorder; asthma, a condition; multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), a syndrome; allergies,

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<sup>53</sup> “How an Obviously Fake Story About a Couple Who Never Eat Went Viral,” *Digg*, June 21, 2017, <http://digg.com/2017/breatharian-couple-hoax>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

an immune response; and pneumonia, bronchitis, and laryngitis, which are inflammations.<sup>55</sup> Pathologies (the typical behavior of a disease), etiologies (the causes of a disease), and epidemiologies (the incidence, distribution, and possible means of control of a disease) of such afflictions cast coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, and breathing through the mouth as indicators of crises in transactions between individuals and milieus.

Urban pollution has given rise to the (bad) breather as an anthropological subject. The denomination “breathers,” which Tim Choy derives from environmental economics, designates those who accrue the unaccounted-for costs of production and consumption, including the injuries or wearing out issuing from climate change and ecological degradation.<sup>56</sup> The breather, as a scaled-down condensation of what Choy calls “air’s poesis, [or] the coproductive engagements between people and air,” registers the material costs of an economic system in a specific location.<sup>57</sup> Breathing, as it configures encounters and relations, doesn’t operate as some “great equalizer” that ensures the parity of all organic beings by virtue of their sharing the air. The distinction between those who do and those who do not have the privilege not to mind their breathing reflects and reinforces present-day inequalities along axes of race, gender, disability, class, and age. This dissertation addresses medical and environmental dimensions of breathing in conjunction with these inequalities.

The epidemiology of asthma, which reveals a higher concentration of cases among children and in areas affected by urban pollution, divides up populations between two camps: those who can and those who cannot afford to dismiss breathing as trivial. Asthma is tied to both internal or bodily

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<sup>55</sup> See Mark Jackson, *Asthma: The Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10–11; Sebastian L. Johnston, “Preface,” in *An Atlas of Investigation and Management: Asthma*, ed. Sebastian L. Johnston (Oxford: Clinical Publishing, 2007), ix; Sarah Aldington and Richard Beasley, “Definition and Diagnosis,” in *An Atlas of Investigation and Management: Asthma*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Tim Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 145–146.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 157.

factors, including genetics and age, and environmental factors, such as the hyperconcentration of toxins.<sup>58</sup> The historian of science Gregg Mitman explains that vulnerability to toxins can be manufactured, or at least intensified, on a large scale. The rise of allergies and asthma, as he recounts it, is a story about environmental and population management, one that encompasses such projects and policies as weed eradication, an urban planning initiative stemming from the implicit categorization of pollen as poison, and racial and class segregation, recognized since the 1960s as a key factor in the high rates of respiratory afflictions among people of color and poor people.<sup>59</sup>

Breathing constitutes a dominant trope in Black Study and African American poetry, where it traffics between experiences of oppression and political feelings and actions.<sup>60</sup> Ashon Crawley's study of breath and blackness, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, opens with the

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<sup>58</sup> A. J. Chauhan, “Is Air Pollution Important in Asthma?”, in *Asthma: Critical Debates*, eds. Sebastian L. Johnston and Stephen T. Holgate (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 2002), 46–66. The 2014 report of the Global Asthma Network, available at <http://www.globalasthmareport.org/index.php>, estimates that asthma affects 334 million people of all ages in all parts of the world. The report focuses not only on the concentration of asthma, but also on its burden. Asthma imposes an acute burden in low- and middle-income areas whose occupants are less able to afford the costs of treatment.

<sup>59</sup> Gregg Mitman, *Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xi, 65, 145. The Office of Minority Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states in “Asthma and African Americans,” available at <http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=15>, that in 2014 African American women were 20 percent likelier to have asthma than non-Hispanic whites. In 2013, African Americans were three times likelier to die from asthma-related causes than the white population. The Illinois branch of the American Lung Association reveals in a 2013 brief titled “Socioeconomic and Racial Disparities in Asthma,” available at <http://www.lung.org/local-content/illinois/documents/socioeconomic-asthma-disparities.pdf>, that “families that make less than 100 percent of the federal poverty line have rates of childhood asthma at 12.2 percent versus 9.9 percent for families whose income is 200 percent of the federal poverty line and 8.2 percent in families above 200 percent of the federal poverty line.”

<sup>60</sup> Ashon Crawley, in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), defines Black Study as “the force of belief that blackness is but one critical and urgently necessary disruption to the epistemology, the theology-philosophy, that produces a world, a set of protocols, wherein black flesh cannot easily breathe” (3).

statement, “I can’t breathe.”<sup>61</sup> How could it not? “I can’t breathe” were the last words uttered by Eric Garner, an African American resident of Staten Island who, on July 17, 2014, was put in a deathly chokehold by plainclothes officer Daniel Pantaleo. Garner suffered from asthma. His illness, Matt Taibbi writes, “was such an ever-present part of his life that after his passing, his mother, Gwen, would line a living-room memorial to her son with asthma inhalers.”<sup>62</sup> At the end of 2017, Garner’s own daughter, Erica, who after her father’s death staged die-ins and became a prominent critic of police brutality, would die of complications due to a heart attack triggered by an asthma attack.<sup>63</sup> Garner’s words turned into a rallying cry in December of 2014, when a grand jury decided not to bring criminal charges against Pantaleo, a white man.<sup>64</sup> Garner, like many others before and after him, was killed for “being black and breathing,” a phrase that Tony Medina used prophetically in his 2003 poetry collection, *Committed to Breathing*.<sup>65</sup> “I can’t breathe” has become a striking expression of the devaluation of black lives in the United States today. It has become an expression of the asphyxiating atmosphere in which individuals and groups declare that black lives matter.

After Garner’s death and Pantaleo’s nonindictment, African American organizers and protesters developed a repertoire of breathing practices as an antidote to the racial injury typified by asphyxia. Released by Black Lives Matter, the pamphlet “Healing in Action: A Toolkit for Black

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<sup>61</sup> The following paragraph is adapted from Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Black and Breathing: On Blackpentecostal Breath,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 19, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/being-black-and-breathing-on-blackpentecostal-breath/>.

<sup>62</sup> Matt Taibbi, *I Can’t Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2017), 74.

<sup>63</sup> Laurel Wamsley, “Erica Garner, Who Became an Activist After Her Father’s Death, Dies,” NPR, December 30, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/30/574514217/erica-garner-who-became-an-activist-after-her-fathers-death-dies>.

<sup>64</sup> Oliver Laughland, Jessica Glenza, Steven Trasher, and Paul Lewis, “‘We Can’t Breathe’: Eric Garner’s Last Words Become Protesters’ Rallying Cry,” *The Guardian*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/04/we-cant-breathe-eric-garner-protesters-chant-last-words>.

<sup>65</sup> Tony Medina, *Committed to Breathing* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2003), 20. Fred Moten, in *The Little Edges* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), also lists “breathing and black” are sources of preoccupation (4).

“Lives Matter Healing Justice and Direct Action” prescribes breathwork exercises as preparation for direct actions.<sup>66</sup> An exercise called “box breath,” for instance, instructs, “Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, release for 4 counts, and hold at the bottom for 4 counts. Repeat several times. Notice if your shoulders are able to drop, notice how thoughts and moods shift.”<sup>67</sup> “Taking the time to center and ground, even if it is just breathing together or sitting in silence,” the toolkit spells out, “is critical for becoming aware of ourselves, our bodies and how we are showing up in the moment.”<sup>68</sup> Before Crawley, Medina, and Black Lives Matter, Frantz Fanon had focused on breathing to map out the shaping of a black unconscious under colonial domination and imagine a collective release from enslavement.<sup>69</sup> In his 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon famously writes, “It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his [sic] own that he [sic] is in revolt. It is because ‘quite simply’ it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him [sic] to breathe.”<sup>70</sup> In late 2014, Fanon’s claim was widely shared on social media as an extended version of “I can’t breathe.” By then, the subject of the claim had switched from the Indo-Chinese to a more general “we:” “When we revolt it’s not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.” By insisting on debilitating and galvanizing aspects of breathing, Fanon and his successors have sought to rehearse and reroute a history of respiratory racialization that pathologizes black individuals as less alive or vital than their white oppressors.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “Healing in Action: A Toolkit for Black Lives Matter Healing Justice and Direct Action,” Black Lives Matter, 2017, [https://blacklivesmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BLM\\_HealinginAction-1-1.pdf](https://blacklivesmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BLM_HealinginAction-1-1.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>69</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 226–227.

<sup>71</sup> On the colonial history of the spirometer, see Lundy Braun, *Breathing Race Into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Under settler colonialism, the “we” of indigenous politics, for its part, negotiates occupied atmospheres. Echoing decades of Native American phenomenologies of uranium mining and nuclear tests, rendered notably in Leslie Marmon Silko’s canonical novel *Ceremony*, Kristen Simmons recounts that she and the water protectors she joined at Standing Rock in 2016 experienced “settler atmospherics.”<sup>72</sup> “The imbrications of U.S. militarism, industrialism, and capitalism,” Simmons explains, “have always been palpably felt on indigenous lands and through indigenous bodies, from extraction to experimentation.”<sup>73</sup> The U.S. settler colonial project puts indigenous nations and bodies “into suspension,” uprooting and immobilizing them in order for capitalism, militarism, racism, and colonialism to proceed.<sup>74</sup> Moving, as does the African American tradition outlined above, between debilitation and the politics of vulnerability that addresses it, Simmons writes that “those in suspension,” managed through riot control agents like tear gas and pepper spray, “arc toward one another—becoming-open in an atmosphere of violence.”<sup>75</sup> Water protectors, Simmons’ account goes, had to turn to each other as they cried or choked in the cold.

Whereas epidemiologies of asthma and allergy accentuate inequalities pertaining to race, age, and class, and phenomenologies of bad breathing at Standing Rock somatize colonial violence, multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) stresses gender difference. MCS, also called idiopathic environmental intolerances (IEI), gained traction as a diagnosis in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Studies say that between 70 and 80 percent of persons with MCS are women—an asymmetry that toxicological

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<sup>72</sup> Kristen Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics,” *Cultural Anthropology*, November 20, 2017, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1221-settler-atmospherics>; Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Press, [1977] 2009); Sarah Alisabeth Fox, *A People’s History of the Nuclear West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); Doug Brugge, Esther Yazzie-Lewis, and Timothy H. Benally Sr., eds., *The Navajo People and Uranium Mining* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Masco, *The Nuclear Borderlands*.

<sup>73</sup> Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

reports pin on a host of biological and social factors that comprise the constitution of women's immune systems; their generally higher proportion of body fat, which tends to retain chemicals; their lower percentage of alcohol dehydrogenase, an enzyme that breaks down toxins; and their traditionally higher exposure to household chemicals.<sup>76</sup> We should take these figures with a grain of salt: the variability of MCS symptoms, the uneven recognition of the syndrome by medical experts, and the reliance on self-diagnosis in MCS communities complicate the production of statistical data about this syndrome. But if makeshift diagnostic tactics are necessary in the first place, it is precisely because MCS is trivialized as a women's invention.<sup>77</sup> MCS victims have to double as experts, amassing and smuggling unofficial knowledge about their responses to environmental conditions.

Consider the self-diagnosis questionnaire that opens Dodie Bellamy's "When the Sick Rule the World," included in the 2015 essay collection of the same name.<sup>78</sup> The questionnaire systematically tackles a syndrome whose causes are atmospheric and particulate.<sup>79</sup> The questionnaire aims to draw connections between a symptom like shortness of breath and such potential causes as exposure to chemicals and toxic metals, low air quality and strong smells in the workplace, mold in the home, and overdue maintenance work on air filters and ducts. I use punctuation, but Bellamy

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<sup>76</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 117.

<sup>77</sup> A report by the Environmental Health Clinic of Toronto's Women's College Hospital represents a rare comprehensive document on the health and advocacy challenges met by persons with MCS. "Environmental Sensitivities—Multiple Chemical Sensitivities Status Report," Women's Health Matters, 2011,

<http://www.womenshealthmatters.ca/assets/legacy/wch/pdfs/ESMCSSStatusReportJune22011.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 25–36. See also Jean-Thomas Tremblay, "Mortality Will Be Sexy," *Review31*, 2016, <http://review31.co.uk/article/view/367/mortality-will-be-sexy>.

<sup>79</sup> The historian of science Michelle Murphy, in *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), argues that sick building syndrome, a derivative of MCS prevalent in 1980s workplaces, presents a problem postmodern in form, in so far as it lacks an essence (6). I propose instead that MCS has an essence that is particulate or gaseous. The matter of MCS is in the air, in the water, out there.

does not. Only a question mark concludes the three-page questionnaire: “...have you ever smoked if so for how long have you ever lived with others that smoked if so for how long and how old were you how often do you eat fish what types of fish do you eat?” Reading “When the Sick Rule the World,” like dealing with MCS, is an exercise in breathlessness. It is an exercise in seeking order and stability amidst a crisis of breathing whose contours are up in the air.

Breath, at the same time as it offers evidence of women’s state of injury, operates as a resource for feminist politics and ethics. Breath as a figure for and a physical manifestation of *ekstasis* infuses French-language, European feminist theory. Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, for instance, write in their *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* that lesbians feel “[bouffées] d’amour” (deep breaths or bursts of love) in their throats and brachial plexuses. Breath is nowhere more present than in Luce Irigaray’s philosophy.<sup>80</sup> The title of Irigaray’s *L’oubli de l’air chez Martin Heidegger* refers to Heidegger’s repression of the air-filled “*ouvert*” (open) that makes possible the presence on which Western metaphysics is based.<sup>81</sup> In scholarship she has published since the 1980s, Irigaray regularly swaps the “interval,” or the transcendental force of life irreducible to the two or more individuals who keep it alive, for the “*souffle*” (breath). Both rupture and impulse, breath eliminates all traces of stagnancy in the interval by highlighting its creative potential. Breath heralds the emergence of new forms of life as it fosters potentialities that are embodied but never possessed—what Irigaray describes as “neither body nor language simply, but incarnation between us: the [verb] made flesh and the flesh [verb].”<sup>82</sup> Cultivating the breath amounts to cultivating a fluid world in which “words

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<sup>80</sup> Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1976), 43.

<sup>81</sup> Luce Irigaray, *L’oubli de l’air chez Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 9.

<sup>82</sup> I trade “word,” as featured in Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc’s translation of *To Be Two* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12, for “verb” to reflect the thrust of the French “*verbe*,” as Irigaray employs it in *Être deux* (Paris: Grasset, 1997), 28.

are ethereal[/aerial]” and “the sensible remains sweet and carnal: living, pulsating.”<sup>83</sup> Air, in and of the breath, is a “fluid density which leaves space for every growth[,] matter that, not yet divided in itself, permits sharing.”<sup>84</sup> Air and breath are indivisible because, for Irigaray, they constitute difference—the principle that allows people who enter in relation to be transformed.<sup>85</sup>

Irigaray casts breath as the matter of a social poetics—an idea explicit in the poems or prayers compiled in the bilingual *Prières quotidiennes/Everyday Prayers*. A poem dated May 10, 1998 aptly summarizes her philosophy. Wind is life, the speaker indicates; and breath maintains a difference enabling of conditions of rebirth otherwise imperiled by a masculine “one.”

The wind

Where life is.

Elsewhere the sun burns.

The city becomes a desert,

When vegetation is missing

Under a ruined sky.

With two will it be created again

Vivified by our breaths

That preserves the difference?

Between us might be born again

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<sup>83</sup> Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 11. I add “aerial” to “ethereal” to convey the literal and figurative senses of “aérienne,” Irigaray’s term of choice in *Être deux*, 26.

<sup>84</sup> Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Irigaray focuses on sexual or sexuate difference, but as I argue in “An Aesthetics and Ethics of Emergence, or Thinking with Luce Irigaray’s Interval of Difference,” *Criticism* 59, no. 2 (2018): 279–299, the sexual operates in her work as a segue into a broader ecosystem of differences.

What the one has destroyed?<sup>86</sup>

Irigaray's didactic poems or prayers highlight a tendency in her otherwise quasi-mystical writing to abandon, when breath is involved, all secular pretense. Grace, says the female speaker of a poem dated August 31, 1997, illuminates breath, causing this speaker to be "transmuted in divine reality."<sup>87</sup> "Breathing itself," Irigaray writes elsewhere, "incites to an awakening, and the divine knowledge is within me."<sup>88</sup> And in a publication by the Action Catholique Générale Féminine, Irigaray recasts the encounter between West and East that she claim breath stages as a union between Catholic and Buddhist or Hindu spiritualities.<sup>89</sup>

Breathing and the air are political matters, at once deployed in the operation of racism, sexism, and ableism, and mobilized in antiracist, indigenous, and feminist imagining and organizing. These trajectories of politicization show the relevance, in a study of breathing like this dissertation, of the analytic rubrics often regrouped under the banners of identity politics and identity knowledges.<sup>90</sup> Breathing calls for, and "We Don't Breathe Alone" seeks to perform, an analysis of embodiment and experience that expresses the social justice commitments of identity work but doesn't presume "the body" as the stable container for individuals and their identities.<sup>91</sup> Without

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<sup>86</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Prières quotidiennes/Everyday Prayers*, trans. Luce Irigaray with Timothy Mathews (Paris and Nottingham: Maisonneuve & Larose and University of Nottingham, 2004), 123.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>88</sup> Luce Irigaray, "The Age of Breath," trans. Katja van de Rakt, Staci Boeckman, and Luce Irigaray, in *Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2004), 165.

<sup>89</sup> Luce Irigaray, ed. *Le souffle des femmes* (Paris: Action Catholique Générale Féminine, 1996), 9, 20.

The importance of breath in Irigaray's work has only grown over the past decades, in as much as it now animates her micro- and macropolitics. In *Entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Grasset, 1999), for example, Irigaray seeks, through breathing, to educate bodies to sense and counter globalization's structure of exploitation.

<sup>90</sup> Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>91</sup> The *Mental Disorders: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1952) locates "breath holding" within the category of "supplementary terms of the body as a whole (including supplementary terms of the psyche and of the body generally) and those not affecting a particular system exclusively" (120). This convoluted formulation more or less means

reproducing the ideology of endless movement and flow that Claire Colebrook associates with a prescriptive Deleuzianism in strands of affect theory, new materialisms, and other posthumanisms, this dissertation partakes in the relocation of gender, critical race, and disability studies in the interplay between bodies and their environments.<sup>92</sup>

#### IV. The Aesthetics of Breathing

If breathing is inevitably a locus of sociopolitical tensions, what can we learn from studying it specifically as an aesthetics? If breathing is everywhere, if we are always breathing, how can there be such a thing as an aesthetics of breathing in the first place? It is commonplace in aesthetic theory to envision works as breathed into, or breathed out by, artists. Inspiration has been at the center of debates on the position of the subject as it pertains to genius and imagination. As Margareta Ingrid Christian observes, in Aby Warburg's dissertation on Sandro Botticelli, literal and figurative uses of

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that the symptom of breath holding neither points to a local bodily event nor belongs to the symptomatology of a specific mental disorder. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—DSM-IV* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000) lists breathing-related sleep disorders like sleep apnea or central alveolar hypoventilation as a subcategory of sleep disorders (556, 566–570). In “Breathing-Related Sleep Disorders,” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—DSM-5* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013) <http://dsm.psychiatryonline.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm12#x81207.2330509>, breathing-related sleep disorders appear as a subcategory of sleep-wake disorders. Strikingly, although breathing-related sleep disorders fall under sleep disorders, which are considered mental disorders, the *DSM-IV* entry indicates that in order to count as breathing-related, a “disruption must not be better accounted for by a mental disorder” (567). While the idea that no clean break exists between body and mind has become somewhat of a truism in contemporary theory, the floating respiratory symptom codified in the *DSM* and the “non-mental, mental” respiratory disorder codified in the *DSM-IV* and *V* suggest that breathing dissolves *with particular efficacy* divisions within the category of the psychosomatic, or what Elizabeth Wilson, in *Psychosomatic Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), calls the neurological body (3–6).

<sup>92</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on Sex and Extinction*, vol. 2 (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2014), exp. 23, 27–28. Feminist iterations of posthumanism include Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 24–27; Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Katherine Behar, ed., *Object Oriented Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

the air pivot on the notion of inspiration, from the Latin *inspiratio*, to breathe in. Warburg believed that the reigning spirituality and mentality of Botticelli's surroundings (i.e. what was figuratively in the air) inspired or materialized into depictions of actual air in motion in his paintings (e.g. Venus' flowing hair in the *Nascita di Venere*).<sup>93</sup> The object of inspiration has evolved from a divine alterity that overtakes the subject (for Plato, in his musings on the Greek *enthousiasmos*), to an external force that kindles a potential already located in the subject (for Percy Bysshe Shelley), to a vector that moves poets, as mystics or prophets, beyond their historical conditions (for Allen Ginsberg, whose transcendentalism was inflected by New Age beliefs).<sup>94</sup> Entire artistic traditions, from the program speculated by Black Mountain poet Charles Olson in his much-cited 1950 manifesto "Projective Verse" to confessional poetry, have defined themselves or been defined by the breath that animates them.<sup>95</sup> While all aesthetic works can be understood as inspired in some sense, the aesthetics of breathing, of which Botticelli might a forebear, presents itself as both *formed by* and *about* breathing.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Margareta Ingrid Christian, "Aer, Aurae, Venti: Philology and Physiology in Aby Warburg's Dissertation on Botticelli," *PMLA* 129, no. 3 (2014): 405.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Ursell, "Inspiration," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. Roland Greene, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, and Paul Rouzer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/prpoetry/inspiration/0>.

<sup>95</sup> In "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Charles Olson seeks to foreground the "possibilities of breath, of the breathing of the man [sic] who writes as well as of his [sic] listenings," in order for verse to "catch up to the present (239). I return to Olsen in chapter 1.

Christopher Grobe, in "The Breath of the Poem: Confessional Print/Performance circa 1959," *PMLA* 127, no. 2 (2012), argues that confessional poetry readings contributed to poetry's transformation into a performance genre by "[yoking] the lyric I to its living, breathing referent" (215–216).

<sup>96</sup> A genealogy that intersects with the trajectory of inspiration suggests that each breath carries a creative force that can be invested in productive or destructive ways. Richard Klein's *Cigarettes Are Sublimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) documents the romance between writers and cigarettes at the same time as it unfolds as a breakup tale. The figure of the writer-as-smoker—call them Baudelaire, Brecht, Byron, Camus, Cocteau, Colette, de Beauvoir, Dostoevsky, Duras, Eliot, Keats, Milton, Sartre, Schiller, or Wilde—often mashes up European flair with neurosis. Even the most renowned literary asthmatic, Marcel Proust, smoked. Cigarettes, as Mark Jackson explains in "'Divine Stramonium': The Rise and Fall of Smoking for Asthma," *Medical History* 54, no. 2 (2010),

In a number of recent projects in and beyond the realm of poetry, breathing and the breath function as concerns at once formal and thematic. S. A. Stepanek's *Three, Breathing* is a book-length poem mainly composed of three-line stanzas, such that its title supplies guidelines for reading: we read three lines, then take a breath.<sup>97</sup> Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* employs a sustained breath to figure the local, national, international, and planetary repercussions of 9/11.<sup>98</sup> In *Blert*, Jordan Scott crafts poems attuned to stuttering, a disfluency that, similarly to incorrect tonic accents or stilted aspirated h's, is parasitic on speech.<sup>99</sup> And in Marcus McCann's *Shut Up Slow Down Let Go Breathe*, the breathless imperative to breathe kindles an aesthetics of anxiety and overstimulation.<sup>100</sup>

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were widely regarded as medication for asthma attacks in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (171). The sublimity mentioned in the title of Klein's book refers to a "darkly beautiful, inevitably painful pleasure that arises from some intimation of eternity," a "taste of infinity" that "resides precisely in the 'bad' taste the smoker quickly learns to love" (2). Klein describes smoking as an aesthetic experience and the cigarette as an aesthetic object. The cigarette, he writes, is "a volume, a book or scroll that unfolds its multiple, heterogeneous, disparate associations around the central, governing line of a generally murderous intrigue" (26–27). Smoking "is permanently linked to the idea of suspending the passage of ordinary time and instituting some other, more penetrating one, in conditions of luxuriating indifference and resignation toward which a poetic sensibility feels irresistible attraction" (8). Smoking is, at one point in Klein's book, a ballet that encourages a poetic sensibility and "whose charm depends on qualities of poise, harmony, elegance, rapidity, and confidence of gesture" (42). Elsewhere, smoking is a tango: "the smoker enacts an unconscious tango with the body of the cigarette, whose beauty makes the smoker beautiful and whose power she (he?) absorbs" (8–9). Isometric with smoking, writing is here an ideal rebound for the ex-smoker who "[laments a] loss" and "[grieves] the passing of a star" (3).

The isometry of writing and smoking is also on display in Richard Beard's *X20: A Novel of (Not) Smoking* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997). The narrator of the novel, Gregory Simpson, sets out to write a journal entry every time he craves a cigarette. *Cigarettes Are Sublime* and *X20* both constitute aesthetic strategies for releasing nervous energy. My use of the term "nervous energy" refers to the Museum of Nervous Energy (MoNE), 2016, <http://www.haiknafo.com/mone-1/>, for which Hai Knafo "replaced [his smoking] habit with fiddling with things."

<sup>97</sup> S. A. Stepanek, *Three, Breathing* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2006).

<sup>98</sup> Juliana Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>99</sup> Jordan Scott, *Blert* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Marcus McCann, *Shut Up Slow Down Let Go Breathe* (Halifax: Invisible Publishing, 2017).

Variations on breathing are featured in the titles of countless poetry collections, where they signify sometimes the fragility of life in a biographical sense, and sometimes ecological or

Two recent English-language anthologies, *Toward. Some. Air.*, edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath, and *The Sweet Breathing of Plants: Women Writing on the Green World*, edited by Linda Hogan and Brenda Peterson, draw on breathing and air as thematic and periodizing notions.<sup>101</sup> *Toward. Some. Air.*, which strikingly builds two opportunities for breathing into its very title, is an anthology of poetics, a term that encompasses, in this case, mostly experimental writing oscillating between poetry, prose poetry, and creative and critical writing on poetics. *The Sweet Breathing of Plants*, whose title decentralizes human beings from the process of breathing, collects ecofeminist writing, both poetry and prose, which dwells on a posited transhistorical connection between women and the “green world.”

The aesthetics of breathing, whether it appears in poetry, prose, or audiovisual media, is generally experimental. Experimentation here designates a literature and, in the last chapter, a genre of documentary cinema enacting practices that evoke the life sciences (e.g. empirical observation and description, categorization and taxonomization, the elaboration of protocols made general by their repeatability) and logic (e.g. questions about causality and evidence), but reject scientific positivism

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transspecies connection. See, e.g., David Austin, *The Breathing Earth* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2014); John Burnside, *All One Breath* (London: Cape Poetry, 2014); Ellen Phethean, *Breath* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Flambard Press, 2009).

Breathing has also become ubiquitous on movie theater marquees. Take the horror blockbuster *Don't Breathe*, dir. Fede Álvarez (Screen Gems, 2016), in which burglars must silence even their breathing when the resident of the house they had set out to rob, a man whose sight is impaired, holds them hostage. The 2017 tearjerker *Breathe*, dir. Andy Sirkis (Bleecker Street, 2017), for its part, tells the story of Robin Cavendish, who, as the movie would have us believe, “transcended” paralysis caused by polio. Casting aside the numerous disabilities tied to respiratory dysfunctions, the movie posits ongoing breathing as an expression of overcome limitations. Together, *Don't Breathe* and *Breathe* cover two out of the “body genres”—horror and melodrama, pornography being the third—which, Linda Williams observes in “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991), generate a bodily excess and invite mimetic responses from viewers (2–13). I address the generic taxonomies of breathing in Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Breath: Image and Sound, an Introduction,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 2 (2018): 93–97.

<sup>101</sup> Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath, eds., *Toward. Some. Air.* (Banff: The Banff Centre, 2015); Linda Hogan and Brenda Peterson, eds., *The Sweet Breathing of Plants: Women Writing on the Green World* (New York: North Point Press, 2001).

(i.e. the idea that the validity of all knowledge can be verified through logical proof, and the idea that validated knowledge provides the rational foundation for future knowledge). Anne Alin Cheng, for instance, reads *DICTEE* as “a critique of the desire for documentation”—a “dissection of classification,” a “genealogy of genealogy” that “hardly elucidates an origin but weaves a layering of spatial and temporal relations.”<sup>102</sup> Rather than aiming to produce truths about subjects or the world, the aesthetics of breathing supplies ephemeral and milieu-specific paradigms, per Donna Haraway’s nomenclature, for making sense of embodiment and experience.<sup>103</sup> The aesthetics of breathing, that is, generates protocols and coordinates for experiencing environments out of the entanglements constitutive of the non-dyadic individual-milieu couple. The projects that populate this dissertation translate the structures of breathing into an aesthetics that organizes living with others, keeping living, or living in the wake of an injury.

Fred Wah’s 1981 poetry collection, *Breathin’ my Name with a Sigh*, exemplifies an experimental aesthetics that mobilizes breathing to toy with scientific concerns. Wah’s objective, as he writes in the preface, is to “clarify what the language carries for [him], the ontogeny.”<sup>104</sup> “One of my teachers told me ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,’” he adds, “and that makes more sense to me now.”<sup>105</sup> The configuration of ontogeny, or the development of an individual organism, in relation to phylogeny, or the development of a species, was articulated in these terms by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German biologist and zoologist Ernst Haeckel and has been the project of the life sciences from

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<sup>102</sup> Anne Alin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race; Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 142, 151.

<sup>103</sup> Donna Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors of Organicism in Twentieth-Century Biology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 9.

<sup>104</sup> Fred Wah, *Breathin’ my Name with a Sigh* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981); Fred Wah, *Scree: The Collected Earlier Poems, 1962–1991*, ed. Jeff Derksen (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2015).

<sup>105</sup> Wah, *Scree*, 439.

Charles Darwin onward.<sup>106</sup> One untitled poem culminates with a formalization of Wah's practice of breathin' his name with a sigh:

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

h            h  
wah , wah<sup>107</sup>

The ending can be read as two lines ("h h / wah wah"), or, more cogently, as one line, on two levels ("wah↑h, wah↑h"). The elevation of the two added h's suggests the elevation of the shoulders that accompanies sighing. This elevation also recalls superscripts or mathematic exponents. In this sense, each sigh is multiplied and prolonged. When the notation is repeated a few pages further, Wah's name has effectively turned into the sigh that previously accompanied or followed it:

h  
wuh<sup>108</sup>

In breathin' (an open-ended variant of breathing) his name, the speaker is not alone. To say one's

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<sup>106</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. Jim Endersby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1859] 2009); Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1872] 1965), esp. 28–29.

<sup>107</sup> Wah, *Scree*, 455.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 459.

family name is to position oneself within a lineage. To *breathe* one's name is to conjure up long genealogies of experiences stored in bodies and environments. Wah's gesture recapitulates, among other things, the vectors of transnational migration that brought Wah's ancestors, hailing from China, Ireland, Scotland, and Scandinavian countries, to Saskatchewan, Canada, where he was born. The recapitulation of ontogeny as phylogeny here has to do less with species being than with a "poetics of ethnicity" or "betweenness" that mediates embodied histories of movement and displacement.<sup>109</sup> Now, to breathe one's name *with a sigh* is to complicate the affective valence of genealogical recapitulation. A sigh can signal exhaustion, exasperation, relief, or mourning. Even as it hints at an expansive network of agents and forces that converge in his name, the speaker's practice of breathin' his name with a sigh thematically and formally mobilizes an affectively ambivalent exhalation to deflate the determination of his uttering his name. The notation, "wah↑h," marks an instance where the representation of breathin' one's name with a sigh is just short of becoming the very practice it represents. Rather than using a scientific theory of evolution merely to frame his poetic experimentation, Wah works toward a notation of breathing that renders aesthetics inseparable from the organic, geographical, and technological forces it arranges into patterns and rhythms. The authors discussed in this dissertation do not all employ an explicitly scientific vocabulary comparable to Wah's, but like him they attend to the structures afforded by breathing as a means to gather a body of evidence regarding the relation between individuals, groups, and their environments while mediating the function and mood of that evidence.

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<sup>109</sup> Fred Wah, "A Poetics of Ethnicity," in *Twenty Years of Multiculturalism: Successes and Failures*, ed. Stella Hryniuk (Winnipeg: St. John's College Press, 1992), 108; Fred Wah, "Is a Door a Word?", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 37, no. 4 (2004): 39.

## V. Breathing Criticism

This dissertation has an affinity with ecocriticism at the same time as it complicates the criterion that a novel, poem, or film's worth hinges on its capacity to raise the reader or viewer's awareness of environmental degradation. Ecological consciousness became a significant force in academic literary criticism—under the banners of environmental literary studies and ecocriticism—some two decades after the publication of popular books of social theory like *Silent Spring* and *Purity and Danger*. The 1996 *Ecocriticism Reader* and 2000 *Green Studies Reader*, two landmark anthologies of ecocritical scholarship, attribute the birth of the field to, respectively, collaborative work across disciplines during the 1980s and a pragmatic response to poststructuralism and the linguistic turn of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>110</sup>

Ecocriticism mediates between individual, local, and planetary scales. Ecocritics generally interpret world entities as interconnected across scales (a heuristic project), while at times, and paradoxically, targeting the individual reader as the locus of political and ethical responsibility qua awareness and care (an activist project).<sup>111</sup> Margaret Rhonda argues that ecopoetics enacts a temporal catachresis by compiling, after “nature’s end,” the factors that have led to environmental destruction.<sup>112</sup> One of Rhonda’s cases, Juliana Spahr’s elegy “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache,” reveals nature’s absence as the heartache governing the poem’s melancholic structure:

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<sup>110</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xvii; Laurence Coupe, “General Introduction,” in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

<sup>111</sup> Ecocriticism specifically informed by the elements can be found in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, eds., *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> Margaret Ronda, “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene,” *Post45 Peer-Reviewed* (2013): <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2013/06/mourning-and-melancholia-in-the-anthropocene/>. See also Margaret Ronda, “Anthropogenic Poetics,” *the minnesota review* 83 (2014): 102–111.

“What is no longer available to the elegy as form is precisely its conventional dependence on nature as the figurative resource that regulates the mourning process.”<sup>113</sup> For Scott Knickerbocker, a feat like Spahr’s is not merely representational or formal. The work of ecocriticism, as he sees it, is to accentuate a “relationship between ethics and aesthetics” already available in ecopoetics.<sup>114</sup> The ecocritics studying fiction, too, have dwelled on this relationship. According to Heather Houser, narratives that showcase the “interdependence of earth and soma through affect” can “promote environmental care” by fostering readers’ sense of ethical “obligation” to a “more-than-human world.”<sup>115</sup> Ursula K. Heise and Lawrence Buell ponder how actors and communities project a social justice agenda onto a planetary canvas, or alternatively how they become aware of large-scale ecological developments, such as climate change, soil erosion, and shrinking biodiversity.<sup>116</sup> For Knickerbocker, Houser, and Heise in particular, the value of aesthetic texts relies on their ability to inspire individual readers to adopt ecologically sound behavior.<sup>117</sup>

“We Don’t Breathe Alone” interrogates the liberal-individualist assumptions of such ecocritical projects by emphasizing the debilitating factors that hinder the type of political and ethical action that some ecocriticism expects of readers. Terry Eagleton argues that liberal humanism overstates the transformative power of literature.<sup>118</sup> Likewise, ecocriticism sets high expectations for the kind of response that should ensue from the reader’s acquaintance with ecological connection

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<sup>113</sup> Ronda, “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene;” Juliana Spahr, “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache,” *Tarpaulin Sky* 3, no. 2 (2005):

[http://www.tarpaulinsky.com/Summer05/Spahr/Juliana\\_Spahr.html](http://www.tarpaulinsky.com/Summer05/Spahr/Juliana_Spahr.html).

<sup>114</sup> Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>115</sup> Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 2–3, 12, 28, 89, 106, 209.

<sup>116</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 117; Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

<sup>117</sup> Buell, *Future*, 30.

<sup>118</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 180.

and embeddedness. Breathers, complicit with their own annihilation and emblematic of injury, cannot simply be stirred into speech or action. Neither can persons affected by respiratory conditions such as asthma. In this sense, studying breathing expands beyond visual and aural registers the minor political aesthetics theorized in scholarship on minimal affirmatives, noncathartic emotions, and dissatisfaction—all of which exist in the crevasses of liberal subjectivity.<sup>119</sup> Although this dissertation never strays too far away from ecological paradigms, breathing raises issues, such as the interrogation of the subject of speech and action, which do not neatly fit ecocriticism's activist imagination.

The interpretation and critique developed in this dissertation also skirt around dogmatic ecocriticism by refraining from conflating the contemporary mobilization of breathing with ecological consciousness or environmental politics. Let us consider, as an example of a discussion of breathing that is not inflected by ecological consciousness, Michael Balint's psychoanalytic theory of the emergence of primary objects (by which he means cathexis toward caregivers) in the child's development, from *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression*. Balint gives this phase of emergence many names: "undifferentiated environment," "primary substances," and "interpenetrating mix-up."<sup>120</sup> In this phase, infants' relation to the world approximates the relation that we, as adults, have to the air that surrounds us:

We use the air, in fact we cannot live without it; we inhale it in order to take parts out of it and use them as we want; then, after putting substances into it that we want to get rid of, we

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<sup>119</sup> See Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>120</sup> Michael Balint, *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1968), 136–137.

exhale it—without paying the slightest attention to it. In fact, the air must be there for us, and as long as it is there in sufficient supply and quality, we do not take any notice of it. This kind of environment must simply be there, and as long as it is there—for instance, if we get enough air—we take its existence for granted, we do not consider it as an object, that is, separate from us; we just use it.<sup>121</sup>

At first glance, Balint appears to argue, against Steven Connor's thesis, that the air is not an object for human inquiry. But such an interpretation conflates a psychoanalytic view of the object as a target of desire with a scientific one as a target of interest. Balint performs Connor's hypothesis that the air expresses a human condition by turning to the air to figure the economy of human attention and perception that supports libidinal investments. Balint emblematises the habit of taking to the air, while at the same time operating outside the purview of ecological consciousness and its concern with environmental degradation across scales.<sup>122</sup>

Strands of philosophy and ethics comparably attend to breath without displaying properly ecological commitments. Irigaray's political theology of breath charts, in addition to the vitality and divinity broached earlier in this introduction, styles of relation that bypass facial recognition or identification.<sup>123</sup> Irigaray's foe, here, is Emmanuel Lévinas. But while he is primarily known for his

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 66–67.

<sup>122</sup> Nonecological models of breathing are featured in French psychoanalysis from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Didier Anzieu's concept of “*moi-peau*” (skin-ego), in *Le moi-peau*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: DUNOD, 1995), centers a skin that “*respire et perspire*” (respires and perspires) in the child's development (37–61). The sensations we experience on the surface of our skin create the environment in which we represent ourselves to ourselves. Another French psychoanalyst, Jean-Louis Tristani, draws on Wilhelm Reich in *Le stade du respir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1978) to hypothesize an “*érogénéité respiratoire*” (respiratory erogeneity). Revisiting Freud's writings on Dora's hysterical coughing, Tristani claims that breathing is one of the ego's drives, along with nutrition (7, 56). Inhalation is analogous to oral ingestion; and exhalation, though similarly oral, is analogous to anal expulsion (159). Hysteria interferes with “free” respiration, thereby expanding to the entire body an erogenous zone typically limited to nasal and buccal intake and outtake (134–135).

<sup>123</sup> See Irigaray, *Être deux*.

ethics of the face-to-face encounter, Lévinas' theory of “pneumatism” posits breathing, and in particular the instant of suspension between inhalation and exhalation, as a temporal antecedent of sorts to the interval that Irigaray would figure in spatial terms.<sup>124</sup> In the breathlessness that both unites and separates breathing in and out, Lévinas' pneumatism goes, we project ourselves toward the Other, and as such find ourselves in the realms of ethics.<sup>125</sup> Following Lévinas, Lenard Skof advocates an “ethics of otherness, the ethics of breath/life that will open up new grounds for future exchanges of *mild* gestures, such as compassion, patience and care.”<sup>126</sup> Skof's philosophy of “mesocosmic breath,” or “the element or principle of all ethical pneumatology,” extrapolates ethical relations from minor gestures: nondramatic, quieter than speech or action, and general enough so as not to necessitate, at least not always, simultaneous translation.<sup>127</sup> This dissertation proceeds from the principle that in order to identify accurately the ecological resonance of *some* iterations of the aesthetics of breathing, we should not presume this resonance. We should not, that is, assume that the aesthetics of breathing is a subcategory of ecological aesthetics.

## VI. Chapter Overview

Each of the following chapters is organized around a kind or scale of encounter. Chapter 1 theorizes and models aesthetic self-medication, a process through which writers and performance artists consciously repeat breathing until it affords a structure that organizes life within crisis. New

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<sup>124</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 9.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Marder, “Breathing ‘to’ the Other: Lévinas and Ethical Breathlessness,” *Lévinas Studies* 4 (2009): 98; Emmanuel Lévinas, “Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 101. See also Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 31; Étienne Feron, “Respiration et action chez Lévinas,” *Phénoménologie et Poétique* 3, nos. 5–6 (1987): 203.

<sup>126</sup> Lenart Skof, *Breath of Proximity: Intersubjectivity, Ethics and Peace* (New York: Springer, 2015), 1, 5–6, *italics* in the original.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

Age- or Pagan-inspired queer life writing that Dodie Bellamy, CA Conrad, and Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose composed between the 1970s and the 2010s showcases efforts to stage self-encounters in a therapeutic register.

The second chapter argues that there is such a thing as feminist breathing and tracks its key transformations after second-wave feminism, when feminists encountered the world outside of organized politics as hostile. Moving between Toni Cade Bambara's black feminist novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Linda Hogan's Chickasaw ecofeminist poetry (1978–2014), and Solange Knowles' black feminist album *A Seat at the Table* (2016), I propose that political breathing outside of the canonical spaces of the Second Wave (e.g. the consciousness-raising meeting, the festival, the classroom) consists in coordinating a literal breathing necessary to survival with a figurative breath that carries political vitality in spite of the foreclosure of feminist presents and futures.

Chapter 3 looks at encounters with alterity in two works of speculative fiction by African American queer writers: Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) and Renee Gladman's Ravicka series (2010–2017). As a symptom that points to an environmental crisis without making the terms of this crisis explicit, breathing here anchors social and ethical relations premised on the opacity or incommensurability of certain modes of experience impacted by, but not isometric with, rubrics of race, gender, class, disability, and nationality.

Chapter 4, this dissertation's negative image of sorts, looks at the fantasies of intention and self-presence with which individuals imbue the last breath in order to deal with existential vulnerability. The chapter zooms in on encounters with nonviolent last breaths in *Near Death* (1989) and *Dying at Grace* (2003), two deathbed documentaries by, respectively, Frederick Wiseman and Allan King. A “good death,” under modern medicine and palliative care, is one where a patient slowly drifts toward unconsciousness, often with the help of analgesic and narcotic drugs like

morphine. I show that paradoxically, the discourse concerning the last breath, in particular the declaration that the dead “has left peacefully,” retroactively conjures up a conscious subject in order for that subject to withdraw intentionally from the world.

In the conclusion, I turn to two multimedia, performance-based projects that reframe the aesthetics of breathing as an alternative to and critique of national and global institutions and circuits of political intervention. David Buuck’s *Site Cite City* (2015) and Samson Young’s *Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour* (2017) present the aesthetics of breathing as a set of makeshift tactics that might offer temporary relief from, but are ultimately hampered by, local and planetary disasters and the capitalist response they incite.

Chapter 1  
Encountering Oneself:  
Conscious Breathing as Aesthetic Self-Medication in Queer Life Writing

## I. Writing Breathing

Although respiration is fundamental to organic life and its reproduction, we don't necessarily notice breathing, let alone think about its life-giving and life-sustaining functions. Breathing is often implicit. Not minding our breathing has its benefits. In so far as it goes unnoticed, breathing supports a tacit structure of experience that equips us with a sense of ownership over our sensations, thoughts, and actions; this is what Jacques Derrida and others call "autoaffection."<sup>128</sup> When breathing draws attention to itself and becomes explicit, we're compelled to learn about it and ponder the purchase of this knowledge. The problem of conscious breathing—a problem that pertains to how breathing impacts psychic and somatic life when it takes center stage in experience instead of serving strictly as its silent and hidden engine—serves as the impetus behind this chapter.

Breathing's entry into the realm of consciousness can register as both a disorganizing event and an occasion for self-management. In health-related or environmental crises, or in situations of exertion or shock, becoming conscious of our breathing confronts us with the possibly panic-

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<sup>128</sup> As an exchange between bodies and milieus that enables experience but stays muted or hidden, such that our sensations, thoughts, and actions feel like ours, nonconscious breathing is an even better example of autoaffection (or auto-hetero-affection, as some critics call it) than Jacques Derrida's analogs of choice: hearing ourselves and (via Jean-Luc Nancy) touching ourselves. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 221; Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 205; Catherine Malabou, "How Is Subjectivity Undergoing Deconstruction Today? Philosophy, Auto-Hetero-Affection, and Neurobiological Emotion," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 113; Patricia Ticineto Clough, *Autoaffection: Unconscious Thought in the Age of Teletechnology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 17–18.

Anzieu, in *Le moi-peau*, also argues that nonconscious respiration (more precisely, the nonconscious respiration and perspiration of our skin) guarantees our somatic and psychic integrity or "holds" us. In Anzieu's use of holding, D. W. Winnicott's term for the mother's provision of a comfortable and sound environment for the baby, each breathing subject does double duty as mother and baby, holder and held (36–37, 121).

inducing fact that respiration has already been going on, indifferent to our awareness of it. As breathers, we take in particles that are nourishing *and* toxic—often beyond discernment.<sup>129</sup> When being conscious of our breathing implies being conscious of our vulnerability or exposure to risk, we must perform breathing as a gesture that no longer feels natural. It seems forced, off-pitch, wrong. Meditation, however, encourages a consciousness of breathing. Mindful breathing cultivates a sensibility to surrounding energy in hopes of producing an alignment between self, body, and milieu.<sup>130</sup> Mindful breathing capitalizes on the fact that breathing, as L. O. Aranye Fradenburg puts it, “tells us that we are and are not captains of our fate.”<sup>131</sup> As an outcome of crises across scales or in mindfulness exercises, conscious breathing brings up the question of how to secure agency, or the sense that we are in control of ourselves and able to intervene in our environments, despite our openness or through our receptivity.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> I’m indebted to Michael Eigen’s notions of “toxic nourishment” and “negative refueling” (i.e. toxic nourishment that is repeated over time) in a theory of emotions that relies on an organic metaphor. To illustrate these notions, Eigen, in *Toxic Nourishment* (London: Karnac Books, 1999), tells an anecdote about breathing:

I think of a wonderful philosophy teacher who had emphysema. In his first semester of retirement, he decided to teach in Switzerland, after years in New York. He died soon after arriving in Switzerland. I imagined his lungs could not take fresh air, after years of adaptation to toxins. (3)

See also Michael Eigen, *Damaged Bonds* (London: Karnac Books, 2011), 1; Michael Eigen, *Feeling Matters: From the Yosemite God to the Annihilated Self* (London: Karnac Books, 2007), 2.

<sup>130</sup> Swami Gitananda’s highly circulated *Pranayama: The Science of Vital Control* (Pondicherry: Sridaran Printer, 1972) lists no less than 120 breathing techniques that we can combine to produce this alignment. Yoga breathing guides and video tutorials allow us to model our breathing on that of expert breathers, professional or amateur.

<sup>131</sup> L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, “Breathing with Lacan’s Seminar X: Expression and Emergence,” in *Staying Alive: A Survival Manual for the Liberal Arts*, ed. Eileen A. Joy (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 164.

<sup>132</sup> The dynamic between agency and openness or receptivity is of foremost concern in critical theory. It shows up as the capacity to affect and be affected in affect theory, as the interplay between self-organizing systems and emergent processes in phenomenology, and as the double meaning of plasticity as giving and taking form in humanities explorations of neurobiology. See Brian Massumi, “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements,” in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of

This chapter centers on experimental and avant-garde life writing from the 1990s to the 2010s that stems from the conscious and in some cases deliberate repetition of breathing. The writers and artists I consider—Dodie Bellamy, CA Conrad, and Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose—use breathing to register and mediate crises that pertain to various meanings of the term “life:” life as biography, life as an organic (though socially and technologically mediated) phenomenon, and life as an existential or historical condition. Bellamy, in *The TV Sutras*, faces “a crisis of urban bombardment.”<sup>133</sup> In *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon: New (Soma)tics and Ecoderviance: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness*, Conrad writes in reaction to a crisis with existential, artistic, and ecological dimensions.<sup>134</sup> And Flanagan and Rose, in his own *Pain Journal* and in their other solo and collaborative works, write and perform through—and in her case in the wake of—a prolonged state of crisis linked to his chronic illness.<sup>135</sup> All of them engage in a process that, I argue, mobilizes the dynamic between agency and openness or receptivity of conscious breathing for therapeutic purposes. I call this process “aesthetic self-medication.” By inducing breathing as an aesthetic form, or by consciously repeating breathing until its pattern or rhythm becomes manifest, Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose aspire to minimally coherent self-encounters amidst uncertainty.

The life writing I look at in this chapter extends beyond autobiography to include prose and poetry that offer nonfictional (meaning rooted in lived reality, not necessarily truthful) accounts of

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Minnesota Press, 1987), xvi; Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of the Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), ix, 37, 44; Catherine Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains* (Paris: Bayard, 2007), 48–49.

<sup>133</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *The TV Sutras* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014), 13.

<sup>134</sup> CA Conrad, *Ecoderviance: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2014), xi; CA Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon: New (Soma)tics* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2012).

<sup>135</sup> Bob Flanagan, *The Pain Journal* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) and Smart Art Press, 2000). Most scholarship wrongly attributes Flanagan and Rose’s collaborative work to Flanagan alone. As Dominic Johnson puts it in *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), Flanagan’s “signature goofball style” drew more attention to itself than did “Rose’s deadpan” (107). Unless I refer to work authored by Flanagan on his own or produced by Rose after Flanagan’s death, I insist on their status as co-creators.

experience. These accounts take various shapes, from commentaries on daily meditations to poems based on peculiar rituals, to comically pathetic journals. Life writing that casts breathing as a symptom of and an antidote to crises is perhaps best described as a genre that combines the two meanings of Michel Foucault's "*souci de soi*:" first, care of the self, which is how the title of the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* is officially translated; and second, anxiety about the self. Foucault's *souci de soi* designates a medical perception of the world that blossomed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We exhibit this *souci* by viewing elements of our milieus as either beneficial or detrimental to our health.<sup>136</sup> But breathing isn't an either-or situation. We as breathers dwell in environments that at once heal and injure us, and from which we can never entirely abstract ourselves. We don't breathe alone. When we say that life writing isn't just personal, we typically mean that some memoirs owe their wide appeal to the universality of the experience they communicate. By framing the self as a source of anxiety *and* a beneficiary of care—in short, an entity whose integrity cannot be taken for granted—breathing accentuates the relational dimension of subjectivity and authorship and thereby destabilizes the category of the personal without necessarily appealing to a criterion of universality.<sup>137</sup>

I focus on experimental and avant-garde life writing because it provides more—or at least more obvious—examples of aesthetic self-medication than, say, popular memoirs about breathing in crisis. Tim Brookes' *Catching My Breath: An Asthmatic Explores His Illness*, among other such popular memoirs, surely contains the germ of an experimental sensibility. In an attempt to discover the causes of his asthma, Brookes elaborates a whodunit. He designates “possible culprits” in both his

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<sup>136</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 3: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 123.

<sup>137</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), define life writing, capacious, as “writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject” (4).

body and his milieu as well as flags “unanswered questions.”<sup>138</sup> *Breathing for a Living*, Laura Rothenberg’s memoir about living with cystic fibrosis (CF), similarly plays with styles and genres. In email exchanges peppered through the book and in a chapter devoted to “What Others Wrote About [Rothenberg’s Lung] Transplant,” friends, relatives, medical professionals, and educators contribute narratives and poems about Rothenberg’s medical condition, particularly her labored breathing.<sup>139</sup> Paul Kalanithi’s phenomenally popular cancer memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, also presents breathing as a site where multiple voices meet. In the epilogue, Lucy Kalanithi recounts that the day her husband died, his “breaths became faltering and irregular” until he “released one last, deep, final breath.”<sup>140</sup> Variations in styles and genres (in Brookes and Rothenberg’s books) and shifts of points of view (in Rothenberg and Kalanithi’s books) mobilize the relational character of breathing in an effort to distribute formally the weight of health crises. While Brookes, Rothenberg, and Kalanithi lay out narratively compelling life stories punctuated by instances of experimentation, Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose repeat and chronicle breathing until it generates forms potent enough to organize their relation to themselves and their environments. In their entirety rather than in a limited number of passages, Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose’s works constitute as much as they represent efforts to thrive in crises.

In foregrounding breathing both to show and to intervene in crises, Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose, although they come from different artistic scenes and movements, all operate

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<sup>138</sup> Tim Brookes, *Catching My Breath: An Asthmatic Explores His Illness* (New York: Random House, 1994), 17.

<sup>139</sup> Laura Rothenberg, *Breathing for a Living* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 171–233.

<sup>140</sup> Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016), 213–214. I return to the last breath in the final chapter of this dissertation.

somewhere between the poetics of breath and breathing-driven performance and ritual.<sup>141</sup> The poetics of breath refers to a tradition whose ground zero in contemporary Anglophone, North American writing is widely assumed to be—to the point where this assumption has become a truism—Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse.”<sup>142</sup> Olson’s 1950 manifesto, Nathaniel Mackey explains, appeared around the development of poetry as a performing art and opened creative doors for such Black Mountain and Beat poets as Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg. “Projective Verse” calls for a poetry that magnifies the “possibilities of breath, of the breathing of the man [sic] who writes as well as of his [sic] listenings,” in order for verse to “catch up to the present.”<sup>143</sup> Poems in Olson’s model are formal extensions of the energy that animates poets. More than a rhythmic pattern of end-stopped lines, enjambments, and caesuras, poetic breath conveys vitality.<sup>144</sup> Variations of the intensity of breathing offer poets tools for communicating a vitality in jeopardy. Mackey proposes, for example, that Creeley’s audible breath and spasmodic and hesitant delivery in his public readings expressed trauma in the wake of World War II. Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose, too, focus on breath to express the somatic repercussions of crises across scales. But this expression doesn’t always take the form of a poetics in the strict sense. The life writing of these figures spans poetry, prose, and hybrid forms.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Bellamy has been associated with the San Francisco-based New Narrative, Conrad with ecopoetics and Philadelphia’s poetry scene, and Flanagan and Rose with Southern California’s sexual subcultures and poetry and performance circles.

<sup>142</sup> Olson, “Projective Verse.”

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 239; Nathaniel Mackey, “Breath and Precarity,” lecture at Northwestern University, May 11, 2016. See also Stefanie Heine, “Ebb and Flow. Breath-Writing from Ancient Rhetoric to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg” (May 2017 draft).

<sup>144</sup> See Charles Bernstein, “Introduction,” in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed World*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4, 13.

<sup>145</sup> Of the writers and artists I study in this chapter, Conrad most clearly belongs to the genealogy of breath poetics traced by Mackey. In an email dated February 24, 2016, Conrad tells an anecdote in which they touch on their interest in Olson’s experiential poetics:

When I was working with Jonathan Williams on *The Book of Frank* I would bug him with

Moreover, Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose's writing *is* performance-driven, but not necessarily or only because it is best read out loud. Performance here describes conditions of production: these figures learn to live and write with a consciousness of breathing as a type of performance technique. Performance, a formation closely linked to 1960s radicalism, stages corporeal positions and gestures, such that patterns of stillness and movement become techniques.<sup>146</sup>

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questions about Olson.

He finally was caught in a mood where he didn't mind the question after decades of people hammering him (hammering is another kind of sequential breath) about Olson.

He told me that one day after Olson played (I can't remember the composer) music as loud as he could on the record player, Olson told everyone to LEAVE the building at once, to RUN across the field of flowers and to write on the other side of the field AND AS THEY WERE LEAVING THE BUILDING HE SAID that the sunlight and flowers would be there in the poems AND I KNEW THE MOMENT I HEARD THIS that Olson meant the essence.

Not documentary poetics.

The experiential poetics instead.

<sup>146</sup> Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique As Knowledge, Practice as Research* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

Performance, as defined by Richard Schechner in *Performance Theory*, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), encompasses disparate aesthetic practices: from theater, dance, and music; to rites and ceremonies; to everyday greetings, displays of emotion, and professional roles (xvii). According to RoseLee Goldberg's genealogy in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), performance art takes its cues from the Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically from their prioritization of creative process over outcomes. Although performance (the set of practices) and performance art (the art form) have long, variegated prehistories, Goldberg, Diana Taylor, in *Performance*, trans. Abigail Levine (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), and Mike Sell, in *Avant-Garde Performance & the Limits of Criticism: Approaching Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), all situate the coalescence of these rubrics in the 1960s and 1970s. More precisely, Goldberg views the rise of performance art as a corollary of the antiestablishment protests that the year 1968 has come to emblemize (152). Performance art, Taylor explains, aims to "challenge regimes of power and social norms" by "placing ... FRONT AND CENTER" bodies that are "no longer the [objects] depicted in paintings, or sculpture, or film, or photography but the living flesh *and breath* of the act itself" (1, 41, italics added).

Enacted in minoritarian and transnational settings, performance techniques generate embodied knowledge about racialized, émigré, sexually non-normative, or disabled subjectivities. See E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. Judith Hamera & D. Soyini Madison (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 446–447; Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, eds., *Black Performance Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera,

Performers regularly use breathing techniques to amplify the interplay between abandonment and control, or between their exposure to risk or receptivity to stimuli in a live setting and their agency as initiators of an artistic act.<sup>147</sup> While only Flanagan and Rose are primarily known as performance artists, Bellamy and Conrad, in their meditation- and ritual-based writing practices, also toy with the codes of performance, specifically athleticism, duration, and endurance.<sup>148</sup> Athleticism, as Jennifer Doyle uses the term, refers to artistic, recreational, and sport-related practices of the self that constitute physical exploits.<sup>149</sup> When such exploits necessitate stamina and sustained focus, performances tend to be durational, meaning that their form and signification hinge on their (long) duration.<sup>150</sup> Performances, whether or not they are durational, count as endurance art when, as Martin O'Brien writes, they chart “a way of persisting through an experience of sufferance or difficulty.”<sup>151</sup> Performance and ritual, although they refer to different traditions, are entwined.<sup>152</sup> Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose highlight ritualistic dimensions of performance: the way

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eds., *Blacktino Queer Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>147</sup> In a 1977 piece titled “Breathing In/Breathing Out (Death Itself),” Marina Abramovic, the patron-saint-slash-bad-mother of performance art, and her then-partner Ulay connected their mouths and breathed in a “closed circuit” (though there is no absolutely closed circuit when it comes to breathing: air can travel through the pores, for instance) for almost 20 minutes. A reflection on aggression in artistic collaboration, the piece also shows the depletion of bodies isolated from a nourishing milieu. Abramovic and Ulay’s sustained exchange of toxic air, which relies on a combination of control and abandonment, renders breathing not as something we all do, but as a perfectible technique for pushing bodies to their limits—limits beyond which lies “Death Itself.” “Marina Abramovic & Ulay,” Pomeranz Collection, 2017, <http://pomeranz-collection.com/?q=node/39>.

<sup>148</sup> Bellamy employs the language of performance and endurance to describe *the buddhist* (San Francisco: Allone Co. Editions, 2012), a project that began as a blog (84, 89).

<sup>149</sup> Jennifer Doyle, “Introduction. Dirt Off Her Shoulders,” *GLQ* 19, no. 4 (2013): 423.

<sup>150</sup> Martin O’Brien, “Performing Chronic: Chronic Illness and Endurance Art,” *Performance Research* 19, no. 4 (2014): 55.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> “Rituals,” Richard Schechner writes in “Ritual and Performance,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, ed. Tim Ingold (New York: Routledge, 1994), “are performative: they are acts done; and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions” (613).

repeated gestures and movements create structures. They also highlight performative dimensions of rituals: the way rituals transform individuals, groups, and milieus. In Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose's works, text isn't the antithesis of performance or ritual, but a process that emerges from deliberate techniques or improvised gestures.

In the sections that follow, I attend to Bellamy, Conrad, and Flanagan and Rose's aesthetic self-medication efforts—in this order—to move toward an improvisational mode of breathing and writing. In this movement we see that structures for coping with crises elaborated through breathing remain potent even as we shift from a consciousness of breathing that is intentional to one that is inevitable.

## II. Dodie Bellamy's Banal Sutras

Dodie Bellamy's (b. 1951) *TV Sutras* is a diptych. The first portion contains 78 sutras. These are television-generated sound bites of self-help that are “inspired” in the spiritual sense, meaning [that they are] dictated or revealed.”<sup>153</sup> The second portion is a lengthy essay that offers an unsystematic map to the sutras. Part poetry-ish and part prose, *The TV Sutras* as a whole might best be labeled a project, given that Bellamy names her intentions from the start.<sup>154</sup> In “The Source of the Transmission,” which opens the book, Bellamy establishes conditions for receptivity and intuition

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<sup>153</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 13.

<sup>154</sup> Dorothea Lasky, in *Poetry Is Not a Project* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), <http://www.uglyducklingpresse.org/catalog/browse/item/?pubID=98>, denounces the classification of poems and oeuvres as projects, a term inherited from business, science, and visual art. “I think that if you really are a poet, you don’t think this is how poetry works,” Lasky opines. She adds that poetry ought to be “intuited,” instead of conceptually devised first and executed second: “Naming your intentions is great for some things, but not for poetry.” Even if we accept the tenets of Lasky’s argument—Bellamy herself is sympathetic to them, as she mentions in a 2014 interview with David Buuck published in *BOMB* 126, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/7463/dodie-bellamy>—*The TV Sutras*, with its stated intentions and emphasis on process, still qualifies as a project.

amidst a “crisis of urban bombardment.”<sup>155</sup> We’re introduced to this crisis via the “loud insistent EEEHHH EEEHHH EEEHHH EEEHHH EEEHHH” of a car alarm that Bellamy hears from her apartment.<sup>156</sup> “There’s no escaping it,” she acknowledges, “I either have to meditate through it or give up” (13).

She chooses meditation:

In receiving the *TV Sutras*, I attuned myself to messages that are broadcast into the living room of my San Francisco apartment. My method: I do a half-hour yoga set while watching the DVD *Peaceful Weight Loss through Yoga*. Then I turn off the DVD player and TV, sit cross-legged on the floor, facing the television, and meditate for twenty minutes. I breathe in, wait, breathe out, wait, breathe in, wait... try to accept whatever arises, internally or externally. I do not close my eyes because closed eyes equal duality, I’ve been told, while open eyes equal oneness. When my mind wanders, I say to myself “thinking,” and refocus on my breath. When I finish meditating, I crawl off my cushion and turn the TV back on. Words and images emerge. There’s a flash of recognition and my hand scribbles furiously: I transcribe the first words that strike me, then briefly I describe the scene from which the TV sutra arose. I take a breath, scoot against the wall and quickly write my commentary. Sometimes my interpretation surprises me. Sometimes I disagree with it. But I write down whatever comes. I do not attempt irony, cleverness or perfection—or art. The *TV Sutras* are totally in-the-moment sincere, even if that sincerity makes me cringe afterwards.<sup>157</sup>

Bellamy’s meditation protocol toys with the codes of New Age self-help manuals and how-to guides. The practices and beliefs known as New Age are linked to a personalization of religion within

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<sup>155</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 13.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 14.

Western spirituality catalyzed by the countercultural movements of the 1960s.<sup>158</sup> Although only Bellamy sports her New Age affiliation, the writers and artists to whom I attend in this chapter all borrow from New Age's repertoire of breathing practices: Bellamy adopts yoga and meditation, Conrad pagan rituals, and Flanagan and Rose bodywork.<sup>159</sup> Bellamy claims in her protocol that she "[does] not attempt ... art;" she does not purport to elevate New Age speak to the rank of Serious Literature. Yet *The TV Sutras* is an artistic gesture. The sutras and their accompanying essay are packaged as a book displaying the seal of approval of the esteemed avant-garde publisher Ugly Duckling Presse. Bellamy here revises, but doesn't give up, her avant-garde habits and aspirations. In this section I chart the tensions that animate *The TV Sutras*—tensions between New Age's in-the-

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<sup>158</sup> The 1960s witnessed the birth of both New Age and contemporary Western Paganism. As Michael York explains in his *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), the former "[redesigned] the global polity to reflect a transcendental hegemony," while the latter "[restructured] the world in line with environmental and ecological holistics" (3–4). Sixties psychedelic experiments, for which Aldous Huxley's 1954 *The Doors of Perception* functioned as a reference document, precipitated the synthesis of mysticism, contemplation, and makeshift spirituality of New Age. Yet, the roots of New Age extend further into the past, specifically in Western occult-metaphysical traditions, Eastern spirituality, and the rise of psychology. Specific influences include, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American spiritualism, New Thought, Theosophy, and transcendentalism; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflexology, Scientology, Gestalt therapy, transpersonal psychology, and Reichian therapy; and within a broader historical frame, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and the holistic perspective. Matthew E. Archibald, *The Evolution of Self-Help* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9; Nevill Drury, *The New Age: The History of a Movement* (New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004), 39, 76; Richard Kyle, *The New Age Movement in American Culture* (New York: University Press of America, 1995), 13; York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements*, xix–xxvi, 17–18, 30, 38.

<sup>159</sup> Some versions of New Age are considered extreme precisely due to the breathing regimen they impose. Take rebirthing, developed in 1974 by Leonard Orr. A derivative of prana yoga, rebirthing brings together conscious inhalation and exhalation, hyperventilation, and occasionally controlled suffocation via aquatic immersion. Rebirthing aims to sustain the experience of an "Eternal Spirit" to release emotional, mental, and physical toxins. York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements*, 152–153.

The Japanese cult movement Aum Shinrikyo, whose members practice yoga, turned breathing into a medium of mass violence when in 1995 it released in the Tokyo subway sarin, a chemical weapon that induces suffocation through muscle lung paralysis. Haruki Murakami, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum and Phillip Gabriel (New York: Vintage International, 2001).

moment sincerity and the book's avant-garde sophistication, and between Bellamy's receptivity to revelations and agency as a project instigator with set intentions. These are the tensions that make Bellamy's process of composing with breathing an engine of aesthetic self-medication.

Bellamy's sutras reflect the definition of the form offered in the Hindu Vayu Purana: "Of minimal syllabary, unambiguous, pithy, comprehensive, non-redundant, and without flaw."<sup>160</sup> Mindful breathing—breathing in and out, focusing on the breath, and taking a breath—is one ingredient, alongside procedures for television watching and of course writing, of Bellamy's embodied aesthetic practice. The sutras require focus—on breath and the television—but register stimuli indiscriminately. In Sutra 25, Bellamy's indiscriminate reception of stimuli results in a scene of which it's difficult to extract a mental map:

*Put good in, put good out.*

Orange juice commercial.

#### COMMENTARY

Be aware of your influences, of what you can take in. We consume on all levels of our being.

Be conscious in your choices. We are never alone in this, but a beat in a much larger pattern.

Inhalation/exhalation. Stay with the breath. We are a conduit of exits as well as entrances.<sup>161</sup>

The last sentence of Bellamy's commentary recalls a fortune cookie maxim that got lost in translation. The commentary declares not that we are at once exits and entrances—for the air we breathe or the energy we host—but that we are *a conduit of exits and entrances*. Catachrestically, exits and entrances, instead of delimiting a conduit, circulate through it. The phrase, "Put good in, put good out," functions simultaneously as a slogan in an orange juice commercial and a mantra for

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<sup>160</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 105.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 41, italics in the original.

“Inhalation/exhalation.” In the haze of meditation—Bellamy is “still high” when she picks up her journal—breathing and television watching contaminate each other.<sup>162</sup>

Bellamy’s impressionistic phenomenology, in which inside and outside turn into one another, recalls her definition of New Narrative as a movement that “[problematizes] and [confuses] the division between intra- and extra-diegetic.”<sup>163</sup> New Narrative, which sprang from Robert Glück and Bruce Boone’s workshops and reading group meetings at San Francisco’s Small Press Traffic in the late 1970s and early 1980s, has been Bellamy’s primary artistic affiliation. While the *TV Sutras* essay showcases New Narrative’s blend of autobiography, fantasies, and fiction, the actual sutras clash with the movement’s prioritization of long-form prose—a prose, as Kaplan Page Harris points out, intended to “forge connections across disjunctive or paratactic units of meaning.”<sup>164</sup> Still, the *spirit* of New Narrative resonates throughout the sutras. Even as Bellamy enacts a meditative practice, her output retains some of the core qualities of her more conventionally “New Narrative” sex writing: an embodied composition process, a willingness to be in relation, an openness to external stimuli, and a commitment to explicitness.<sup>165</sup> If sex writing, broadly conceived, tracks what happens to us and our bodies when we are open, enter relations, encounter others, and negotiate the borders between pleasure and pain and healing and injury, then *The TV Sutras* fits the bill. The sutras

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<sup>162</sup> Buuck and Bellamy, “Dodie Bellamy by David Buuck.”

<sup>163</sup> Bellamy, *the buddhist*, 75.

<sup>164</sup> Kaplan Page Harris, “New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry,” *American Literature* 81, no. 4 (2009): 808. See also Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw, “‘A Generosity of Response’: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice,” in *From Our Hearts To Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*, eds. Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw (Oakland: ON Contemporary Practice, 2017), 7–11.

<sup>165</sup> As Kevin Killian writes in “Sex Writing and the New Narrative,” in *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977–1997*, eds. Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian (New York: Nightboat Books, 2017), “‘Sex writing’ … differs from other forms of representation in that it has some kind of chemical effect on the reader. I get hard, I can’t contain myself. A fugue results, between the closed system of language and the complex system of molecules that holds my body together a real communication begins” (293).

might be, and purposely so, Bellamy's least hot work of sex writing.

Bellamy's partner Kevin Killian, she reports, posits that New Narrative reclaimed what was considered vulgar in poetry.<sup>166</sup> For New Narrative, what was considered vulgar in poetry more or less meant what the Language poets deemed vulgar: first prose that refers to a materiality located beyond the text, and second authors who present themselves as the speakers of their texts.<sup>167</sup> New Narrative now refers less to a Bay Area-bound dogma than to a loose set of principles and techniques—and what Harris calls a “characteristic New Narrative abjection” is clearly on display in *The TV Sutras*.<sup>168</sup> *The TV Sutras* extends New Narrative's project of writing with abjection, but gives the abject a new name: New Age. Bellamy ponders, “New Narrative Dodie versus New Age Dodie. Can one ever stop embarrassing the other? Dare I reclaim what's considered vulgar in spirituality?”,<sup>169</sup>

In a passage punctuated by the inhalations and exhalations of her meditative practice, Bellamy reveals the crux of New Age's vulgarity: “*In breath out breath* I have always wanted to write the best book ever *in breath* as if there were shame in being plain and just getting the ideas out

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<sup>166</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 106.

<sup>167</sup> In “Long Note on New Narrative,” *Narrativity* 1 (2004), [https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue\\_one/gluck.html](https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_one/gluck.html), Robert Glück specifies that New Narrative was never an outright repudiation of the Language school. The Language poets, he recalls, reinvigorated a dormant San Francisco writing scene. They had the audacity to propose a poetics of their own, and therefore made it possible for authors to position themselves in relation to this proposition. Glück: “Suddenly people took sides, though at times these confrontations resembled a pastiche of the embattled positions of earlier avant-guards [sic]. Language Poetry seemed very ‘straight male’—though what didn’t?” See also Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Spaces in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 55–56; Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, “Introduction,” in *Writers Who Love Too Much*, i–xx.

<sup>168</sup> Kaplan Page Harris, “Avant-Garde Interrupted: A New Narrative After AIDS,” *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 4 (2011): 634–635, 655.

<sup>169</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 106. Unlike vomit for Jacques Derrida or the abject for Julia Kristeva, the vulgar in Bellamy's project shatters neither representation nor being. Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” in *Mimesis des articulations*, ed. Sylviane Agacinski (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1975), 90; Julia Kristeva, *Les pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 9.

there *out breath* do I still need to be part of an avant-garde *in breath out breath* no longer am I sure what is surface, what is depth.”<sup>170</sup> Being plain, for Bellamy, means taking seriously the usefulness of breathing in and out to reaching a state of harmony. It means accepting that there might be no enlightenment possible beyond the illumination conveyed by a statement such as “Counting breaths will lead you to accomplishing your goals.”<sup>171</sup> It means foregoing irony and abstaining from disarming New Age-like flights of fancy with meta-analysis or pop culture references.<sup>172</sup> Bellamy:

If Kevin were doing the *TV Sutras* he’d include the names of the movies or TV shows, and the stars who are speaking. He’d reveal that Chevy Chase spoke Sutra 73, Woody Allen spoke Sutra 78, silent Sutra 6 is mimed by Winona Ryder, Cary Grant is the dad in Sutra 15, Farrah Fawcett wears the prison dress in Sutra 58, the obnoxious wife in Sutra 29 is Cameron Diaz, Rock Hudson is the disillusioned soldier in Sutra 41. Most of the details I’ve

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<sup>170</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 190, italics in the original.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 33. Bellamy’s turn to New Age is in fact a return: she joined a religious cult in the early 1970s, before becoming a member of New Narrative, a different kind of cult. “With New Narrative,” she tells Buuck in their *BOMB* interview, “I was getting out of one cult and leaping into another.” At a reading held on December 8, 2016 at Northeastern Illinois University, Bellamy explained that *The TV Sutras* itself becomes a cult that indoctrinates readers. Bellamy’s exploration of cults of all kinds, from spiritual communities to corporations, continues in *When the Sick Rule the World*.

<sup>172</sup> In contrast to more self-serious New Age works, such as Pauline Oliveros’ 1974 meditation score, *Teaching Yourself to Fly*, the sutras are funny, but not I’m-smarter-than-you funny. I’m nodding here to Bellamy’s own parodic motto for New Narrative “at its worst:” “I have sex and I’m smarter than you.” An updated motto for the plain sutras could be, “I meditate and I’m not smarter than you.” Dodie Bellamy, *Academonia* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2006), 15.

A contemporary aesthetic current that *does* derive cachet from pop culture references is post-conceptual poetry. Felix Bernstein writes in *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* (Los Angeles: Insert Blanc Press, 2015),

The Post-conceptual poet cliché: Make frivolous mention of social media, celebrities, art world institutions, or offer a jargonized feminist/queer theory critique of those institutions, and hope to get validation merely from the use of buzzwords. Or, in a slightly more self-critical variation on the theme: Make fun of yourself for being limited by these buzzwords and discourses but refuse to take a stab at doing anything else. (39–40)

forgotten.<sup>173</sup>

That Winona Ryder is the ghost behind Sutra 6, which instructs us to “take in the glory of each breath, its preciousness,” makes for amusing trivia.<sup>174</sup> But because Bellamy didn’t write the way Killian would have, we, as readers, aren’t aware of such information as we encounter most of the sutras, which feature figures simply introduced as “Woman,” “Man,” “Girl,” or “Boy.”

Whereas New Narrative has traditionally focused on an exclusive literary scene—“in the heyday of New Narrative, everyone wanted to be written about,” says Bellamy—the sutras aim for accessibility and banality.<sup>175</sup> “Banal,” Bellamy reports, is how Killian describes the sutras.<sup>176</sup> She agrees with Killian’s diagnosis, but insists that the banality of the sutras represents their greatest asset. Banality for her designates embodied meaning that is relatable and transferable: “Behind all those rainbows, unicorns, feel-good slogans, deprivations and rituals, behind the closed doors of the temple, there’s a meaning machine in libidinal overdrive.”<sup>177</sup> She speculates, “Perhaps it’s not the trappings but meaning itself that’s banal … In both English and French, banal comes from this idea of the commons. Isn’t that the promise—or the hope of the *TV Sutras*, that meaning is a sort of commons, available to everyone?”<sup>178</sup> In Bellamy’s view, New Age is vulgar in the sense that it’s an apparatus of vulgarization. It generates nuggets of wisdom that are easily understood, memorized, and applied. Even the crisis that Bellamy traverses is relatively banal, especially contrasted with the crises on which she touches in her other works, from AIDS to the spread of multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), to the acute homelessness caused by San Francisco’s latest tech boom.<sup>179</sup> The

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<sup>173</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 103.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>175</sup> Buuck and Bellamy, “Dodie Bellamy by David Buuck.”

<sup>176</sup> Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 102.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World*, 25–44, 185–243; Dodie Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*

crisis of urban bombardment in *The TV Sutras* works as a canvas onto which readers can, to a certain extent, project their own life crises.

The sutras say as much about Bellamy as they do about the stimuli she receives in her apartment and the realm of banal meaning that New Age both fosters and taps. Bellamy tells David Buuck that “with a bit of knowledge anybody can write some fucking book that Shambhala will publish.”<sup>180</sup> Bellamy’s admittedly cynical commentary still points to a crucial aspect of her composition process: the cultivation of an impersonal disposition that turns her into a “receptor” or “wisdom-generating machine” that “anyone can become.”<sup>181</sup> The reception of stimuli in the context of meditation recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Over-soul*, a type of inspiration that, Sharon Cameron says, is impersonal given that the individual it saturates can have no propriety relation to it.<sup>182</sup> Cameron notes that personality and impersonality don’t stand in binary relation, such that the rubric of impersonality enables us to reencounter persons and personalities without presuming that there exists something fundamentally distinct about them.<sup>183</sup> The Over-soul, in Emerson’s description, is an agent that breathes forces into individuals, who then become agentive thinkers and actors: the Over-soul amounts to genius “when it breathes through [an individual’s] intellect,” virtue “when it breathes through his [sic] will,” and love “when it flows through his [sic] affection.”<sup>184</sup> Bellamy’s objective isn’t to ignite her genius, a notion at odds with her commitment to plainness. But combining writing with intentional breathing allows Bellamy to write a book that bears her personal signature, her very own brand of New Narrative.

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(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

<sup>180</sup> Shambhala is an international network of mindfulness meditation centers.

<sup>181</sup> Buuck and Bellamy, “Dodie Bellamy by David Buuck,” Bellamy, *The TV Sutras*, 186.

<sup>182</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 86.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, viii–ix.

<sup>184</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 212.

In typical New Age fashion, then, *The TV Sutras* catalyzes the indissociability of personality and impersonality. On the one hand, New Age posits an impersonal subject that emerges as an epiphenomenon of a milieu's individuations. On the other, New Age fetishizes personality, as evidenced by empowering mantras and aphorisms that urge us to "find ourselves" and "access our true nature."<sup>185</sup> *The TV Sutras* and New Age more generally also blur the line between receptivity and agency. New Age distinguishes between openness and porosity, which are conditions of existence, and receptivity, which requires us to opt in.<sup>186</sup> In New Age and for Bellamy, receptivity is both a sign and a product of intention. Bellamy's aesthetic self-medication, which begins with the formal project of writing sutras attuned to meditative breathing and results in banal meaning that operates as a kind of commons, unfolds as a Möbius strip through which personality and impersonality as well as agency and receptivity turn into one another. As she navigates these rubrics, Bellamy reencounters herself as someone who isn't necessarily disorganized by stimuli. She can use stimuli as, in more than one sense, inspiration.

### III. CA Conrad's Ecodeviant Rituals and Poems

CA Conrad (b. 1956) takes the breathing practices that nourish their experimental life writing out of an urban apartment like Bellamy's and into a variety of private and public sites.<sup>187</sup> Conrad's

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<sup>185</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in "Pedagogy of Buddhism," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), notes the proximity of New Age to atomistic corporate ideology: "The stigmatizing rubrics of 'self-help,' 'New Age,' and 'therapy-like' have suggested a [less than] respectable market-niche specification for [non-Western] teachings aimed at non-Asian consumers" (155–156).

<sup>186</sup> Jean-Christophe Bailly writes that breathing produces "living, ... until the end, as a porosity" in "The Slightest Breath (On Living)," trans. Matthew H. Anderson, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10, no. 3 (2011): 5.

<sup>187</sup> Conrad's objective, as they write in *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, is the elaboration of a collaborative or experiential poetics that channels the human and nonhuman entities and forces to which they are exposed: "There are no poets writing in quiet caves because every poet is a human

awareness of the risks of living on a planet saturated by pollution and violence rushes them into a consciousness of breathing. Instead of abstracting themself from these risks, they work out, in the pagan idiom of “ecodeviance,” ways of extracting therapeutic benefits from vertigo, danger, and even a proximity to death. Conrad’s breathing rituals induce therapeutic self-encounters at the same time as they actively perverse the very idea of a self. Their rituals transgress distinctions between poet and world, usable matter and waste, and living and dead. As such, Conrad enables us to consider the agency sought in conscious breathing not as coterminous with a receptivity to external stimuli, but as a product of confrontations with alterity.

Together, two of Conrad’s books, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon: New (Soma)tics* and *Ecodeviance: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness*, contain more than fifty (soma)tic rituals, each of which is followed by a varying number of poems, themselves of varying form and length.<sup>188</sup> Conrad’s rituals are performances that, via riffs on meditation, intensify embodied experience. In rituals, Conrad writes, “the many facets of what is around me wherever I am can come together through a sharper lens.”<sup>189</sup> What is around Conrad includes interoceptive data (i.e. data linked to stimuli coming from inside their body), exteroceptive data (i.e. data linked to stimuli coming from outside their body) and proprioceptive data (i.e. data linked to the relative position and movement of their body parts, meaning data linked to the mediation of inside and outside).<sup>190</sup> Conrad details their rituals in protocols, some of which are in the imperative mode, while others, closer to reports but nevertheless replicable, are in the declarative mode. Conrad’s rituals are just as inventive and in many

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being as misshapen as any other human being” (2).

<sup>188</sup> I center here on Conrad’s first two major collections of (soma)tics, but the patterns I track extend to their other (admittedly iterative) collections and chapbooks.

<sup>189</sup> Conrad, *Ecodeviance*, xi.

<sup>190</sup> Scott C. Richmond, *Cinema’s Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating, and Hallucinating* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7; Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

cases just as moving as their poems. Reading the poems in light of the rituals encourages an impossible recognition game. We initially look for traces of the rituals in the poems, only to realize that these traces are rarely literal. For instance, the title notwithstanding, there's nothing explicitly yellow about the poem "we're on the brink of UTTER befuddlement yellow hankie style," which Conrad wrote "after eating only yellow foods for a day while under the influence of a yellow condom tucked into [their] left sock."<sup>191</sup>

Conrad's (soma)tic books mark a practical shift in their bibliography. After visiting the industrial Pennsylvania town where they had grown up, Conrad realized that they had been treating their own poetry like a one-worker factory.<sup>192</sup> They imagined (soma)tic rituals as an anti-assembly line that would remedy "the worst [problem] with the factory:" "lack of being present."<sup>193</sup> The phenomenological presence and temporal "extreme present" to which Conrad's praxis aspires synthesize transcendence and immanence: their spelling of (soma)tic protects between two parentheses the *soma*, Indo-Persian for the divine, in *somatic*, Greek for tissue or nervous system.<sup>194</sup> While Bellamy, in *The TV Sutras*, wants to "become a machine," Conrad tries to sidestep mechanicity by never writing more than a few poems before moving on to a new ritual.<sup>195</sup> Conrad explains, "I cannot stress enough how much this mechanistic world, as it becomes more and more efficient, resulting in ever increasing brutality, has required me to FIND MY BODY to FIND MY PLANET in order to find my poetry."<sup>196</sup> Note the absence of commas after "body" and "planet." Coordinates that might help Conrad find their body might also help them find their planet and their poetry—all in one breath.

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<sup>191</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 36.

<sup>192</sup> Conrad, *Ecoderiance*, xi.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 1; Conrad, *Ecoderiance*, xi.

<sup>195</sup> Buuck and Bellamy, "Dodie Bellamy by David Buuck."

<sup>196</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 1.

Conrad's rituals defy factory logic, but they don't help them escape the world's brutality. They consider themself to be, at all times, an "extension" of "the beauty of a patch of unspoiled sand, all that croaks from the mud," but also of "garbage, shit, pesticides, bombed and smoldering cities, microchips, cyber, astral and biological pollution."<sup>197</sup> Conrad is an extension of a planet that, while sustaining them, harbors violence by normalizing transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism. In (SOMA)TIC 8, "DOUBLE-shelter," and "I LOVED EARTH YEARS AGO," Conrad elaborates rituals in memory of their partner Mark, who went by the name Earth.<sup>198</sup> Although the Tennessee police ruled as a suicide the death of Earth, an environmental and AIDS activist, Conrad maintains that their partner was gay-bashed and set on fire.<sup>199</sup> In Belinda Schmid and David Cranstoun Welch's documentary on this event, one of Earth's brothers suggests that he died from either the burns or the fumes.<sup>200</sup> Whether Earth's porous skin was burned or his airways were obstructed, his breathing killed him.

Deep breaths, a conscious practice that dramatizes the openness and porosity of bodies, induce in (SOMA)TIC 26, "POETRY is DIRT as DEATH is DIRT," a momentum for capturing brutalities of all kinds:

Go to your local graveyard, spend some time searching for a spot to sit. Be where no one will bother you, you're busy, you're here to write poetry, not to be pestered with small talk! When you have found your place sit on the ground. Take time to look closely at ALL OBJECTS at your feet, in the trees, etc. Find 3 objects, one of them on the ground, or at least

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 56; Conrad, *Ecoderviance*, 109.

<sup>199</sup> Christopher Soto and CA Conrad, "CA Conrad: On the Film *The Book of Conrad* and His Life in Poetry," LAMBDA Literary, September 10, 2015, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/features/09/10/ca-conrad-on-the-film-the-book-of-conrad-and-his-life-in-poetry/>.

<sup>200</sup> *The Book of Conrad*, dirs. Belinda Schmid and David Cranstoun Welch (Delinquent Films, 2015).

touching the ground: your feet, a grave marker, tree trunk or roots, etc. The other 2 off the ground in a tree, a building, but make them things that are stationary so you can stay focused on them. Draw a triangle connecting these 3 objects. Focus hard on the contents of your triangle, keeping in mind that the ground object you have chosen connects to the dead.

Imagine your triangle in different forms of light, weather, and seasons. Imagine someone you love in the triangle dying. Imagine yourself inside it dying. Gather notes in this process, take notes, as many notes as you can about how you feel and what you feel. Then PAUSE from these notes to focus again on your triangle, THEN write QUICKLY AND WITHOUT THINKING for as much as you can manage. Often it's these spontaneous notes that dislodge important information for us. DO NOT HESITATE to write the most brutal things that come to mind, HESITATE at nothing for that matter. *Take some deep breaths* and think about death by murder, war, cancer, suicide, accidents, knives, fire, *drowning*, crushing, decapitation, torture, plagues, animal attacks, dehydration, guns, stones, tanks, bombs, genocide, strokes, explosions, electrocutions, guillotine, firing squads, parasites, *suffocation*, flash floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, cyanide, poison, capital punishment, falling, stampedes, *strangulation*, freezing, baseball bats, overdose, plane crashes, fist fights, *choking*, etc., imagine every possible form of death. Take notes on your feelings for death at this point, DO NOT HESITATE.<sup>201</sup>

Deep breaths only appear once in this ritual, but they fulfill a pivotal role. They help structure a meditation in which an attunement to a particular milieu—a graveyard—turns into a confrontation with “every possible form of death,” including mass extinction. Forms of death like drowning,

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<sup>201</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 149, italics added.

suffocation, strangulation, and choking imply the inability to breathe. As the ritual shifts from the measured pace of observing and drawing to the fast pace of note taking, and finally to the “extreme present” of deep breathing, breathing remains on Conrad’s mind and infects their speculation about forms of death.<sup>202</sup>

Poetic insight into the function of breathing in (SOMA)TIC 26 shows up not in “I’m TOO Lazy for this World,” the poem that follows the ritual, but in “QUALM CUTTING AND ASSEMBLAGE,” a poem that precedes this ritual. The lengthy poem concludes,

our bones

our muscles

get rising

to one

and

two

breaths

the common

lung this

world a

mouth into

a mouth

---

<sup>202</sup> According to Conrad, only the poems included in their third major collection of (soma)tics, *While Standing in Line for Death* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2017), enabled them “to overcome [their] depression from [their] boyfriend Earth’s murder” (1). The rituals and poems included in this collection are more straightforward than the ones in *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon* or *Ecosickness*. The rituals and poems they designed to help them get over Earth’s death are in a clear way *about* Earth’s murder. One untitled poem begins, “the men who killed you / justify your abbreviated breath” (8). Another one goes, “your rapists were the last / to taste you in this world / their breath and / terror down / your neck / keeps me / up at night” (12).

breathing

back

and

forth

so

then

so

then

mouth

sings to

mouth

so then

mouth

sings to

mouth

so then

all night

so then

a day

then a

day so<sup>203</sup>

The staccato is unmistakable. The number of feet in each brief line is irregular. So is the pattern of

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<sup>203</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 147–148.

accents in each foot. The poem ends mid-breath, with an incomplete causal conditional. Breathing, which in this poem looks a lot like the mouth-to-mouth of kissing or cardiopulmonary resuscitation, is a heuristic of incompleteness. It's an embodied "what else?" that takes Conrad to further stages and greater scales of the interconnection of organisms within the world's common lung. Conrad's figure of the common lung recalls Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, which crafts, as Lauren Berlant puts it, "a holding environment that articulates the commons in common but reshapes it too: ... verses move across mesosphere, stratosphere, islands, cities, rooms, hands, cells."<sup>204</sup> Neither Conrad nor Spahr's holding environment is antithetical to vulnerability and risk. Breathing and the air inevitably constitute hazardous holding environments. They are easily invaded, spoiled, or weaponized. Similarly to Spahr, who surveys repercussions of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the wars that followed, Conrad produces breathing aesthetically in an effort to channel the brutality of life on earth.

Yet, many of Conrad's (soma)tic rituals and poems are amusing, even outright funny. Rituals present opportunities for ecodeviance, a queer practice of finding excitement and pleasure in what gets rejected from the categories of the normal and the civilized. At once deviant and defiant, Conrad takes pleasure in recycling waste products such as bodily discharge for creative purposes. Should you wish to replicate (SOMA)TIC 3, "WHITE HELIUM," a relaxation protocol that takes place over the course of four days, you'll need a balloon, gum, and "snot or blood or semen or pussy juice or earwax or piss or vomit or shit or spit or sweat or whatever excretion you have available."<sup>205</sup> Conrad's ecodeviance is aligned with uses of breathing that expand erogeneity beyond genitalia, and sometimes beyond bodies as well. These uses range from Aristotle's view of *pneuma* as the life-giving

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<sup>204</sup> Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 405; Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*.

<sup>205</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 12.

heat of semen in its contact with menses to Wilhelm Reich's orgone therapy, a precursor of New Age, developed in the 1930s, which toyed with respiration as a means to induce an emotional release comparable to the orgasm.<sup>206</sup> Ellen Willis contends that Reich's notion of a basic erotic unity shattered by genital repression not only explains neurosis, but also justifies sexual liberation as a project that undoes the submissive attitudes demanded by patriarchal civilization.<sup>207</sup> This project reverberates in the civilizational and normative unlearning that Conrad seeks in their (soma)tic rituals.

Conrad uses breathing not only to eroticize their milieu, but also to reencounter themself and their gender identity under new terms.<sup>208</sup> In "GENDER CONTINUUM," they pair reflexology and

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<sup>206</sup> Dirk Baltzly, "Stoic Pantheism," 11; Gad Freudenthal, *Aristotle's Theory of Material Substance: Heat and Pneuma, Form and Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 106–107; Wilhelm Reich, *Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 164, 241. The common use of *pneuma* as the breath of life constitutive of the soul or spirit of sentient creatures comes from the Stoics. Reich defines the orgone as a "biological function of tension and charge" (189). A source of energy and a life force, the orgone approximates the Stoics' version of *pneuma*—although, as its name reveals, the orgone is linked to the orgasm. Reich's psychoanalytic theory, similarly to Olson's vision for poetry, posits that cosmic, natural, and biological processes extend into subjectivity (525). On Reich and breathing, see also Tristani, *Le stade du respir*, 56, 59.

<sup>207</sup> Ellen Willis, *The Essential Ellen Willis*, ed. Nona Willis Aronowitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 105, 186–187, 500, 504. Willis' feminist recuperation of Reich clashes with the feminist critique of Reich, which posits, by and large, that Reich's model hinges on biological determinism and figures emotional release in terms that are both phallocentric and specific to male ejaculation.

<sup>208</sup> Gender ambivalence is a recurring theme in Conrad's writing. As they put it in *WRITING IN ALL CAPS IS THE BREATH MINT OF THE SOUL: PROSE POEMS OR SOMETHING* (Portland: Bone Tax Press, 2014),

90% of strangers continue to assume i'm a woman  
Miss, Ma'am, She, Her, ...  
i'm not exactly male or female and i don't care to be one or  
the other  
i like both fluctuating through this very third space within/  
without my body (18)

In "M.I.A. ESCALATOR," in *Ecodeviance*, Conrad searches for a female self who "died" when at birth they were identified as a boy. They show a photograph of themself at either end of one of their favorite escalators in Philadelphia and ask strangers, "EXCUSE ME, have you seen this person?" Sometimes there [is] confusion, 'ISN'T THAT YOU?'" Conrad responds, "No, many people think I

craniosacral treatments that they and their friend Elizabeth Kirwin give each other with a meditation during which they mull over “seven possible genders for [their body], intersex intersecting day to day.”<sup>209</sup> In a ritual designed for a (soma)tic poetry workshop held in New York City in 2008, deep breaths of fresh air and the smell of rosemary generate conditions for imagining embodiment otherwise:

Before sniffing the rosemary take some notes about your gender, or write about your feelings and ideas about gender in general. Take those initial notes to break open space in yourself for gender. Then take a few deep breaths of fresh air, then squeeze the leaves of the rosemary to release the oils and take a nice DEEP BREATH. Now, imagine yourself a different gender. What do you feel when you imagine this? What are your hands like? Your feet? How are you walking as this Other? What name would you like to have as this Other? Take another DEEP breath of your rosemary and say that name out loud to yourself. Really let INSIDE this Other you.<sup>210</sup>

In this ritual, breathing catalyzes a confrontation with gender alterity. Breathing yields an embodied transgression of particular physical conditions that brings about pleasure, surprise, and excitement.<sup>211</sup>

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look like HER, but have you seen HER?” They walk us through the reasoning that inspired the ritual: I feel very fortunate to have been born BEFORE the ultrasound machine. My generation was the last generation to have a male and female name waiting at the other end of the birth canal. My generation is the last to have our mothers touch their bellies talking to us as male and female. Pink or blue? Both pink and blue, “Have you seen this person?” (1)

Conrad’s *Book of Frank* (Tucson: Chax Press, 2009), a cross between long poem and twisted folktale, also extracts abrasive humor from gender misrecognition. After Frank’s father sees the newborn, he asks, “but where’s my daughter’s cunt?” When told that his child is a boy, he carries on, “why doesn’t my son have a cunt?” (11)

<sup>209</sup> Conrad, *Ecoderviance*, 114.

<sup>210</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 183.

<sup>211</sup> Conrad similarly inhales herbs and other substances in “You Don’t Have What It Takes to Be My Nemesis,” from *While Standing in Line for Death*. They use photos of their nemeses as rolling paper for cigarettes containing “fennel seeds, pine needles, rose petals, mugwort, basil, white sage, / red sandalwood powder, perique tobacco, and marijuana” (33). They instruct,

Queer theory's forays into ecology and wildness, too, stage a tension between the morbid and invigorating facets of an intimacy with what civilization rejects or damages. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands identifies affinities between practices of grieving the ungrivable in the context of AIDS and in the context of ecological degradation—affinities that, in *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon* and *Ecoderiance*, are exemplified by Conrad's mourning of both Earth and *the earth*.<sup>212</sup> Mortimer-Sandilands resists the idea that “gay men and lesbians have some unrivalled access to a language in which to remark or remake ungrivable environmental losses by virtue of an intersecting experience of queer melancholia,” but posits that queer and ecological orientations are united by a common ethical melancholy—an imperative to “[preserve a] life … already gone.”<sup>213</sup> In a dissonant affective register, one that emphasizes the feral quality of nature above environmental degradation, Jack Halberstam advocates the relevance of the wild. A mirror image of José Esteban Muñoz's idea of queerness, the wild signals “the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>214</sup> In Halberstam's model, the wild sparks “unpredictability, breakdown, disorder, and shifting forms of signification.”<sup>215</sup> Conrad makes a claim comparable to Halberstam's: poetry can help us return to the “seismic levels of wildness” of a world that precedes “the hypnotic beep of machines, of war, … the banal need for power, and things.”<sup>216</sup> At the cost of reproducing the colonial fantasy that supports the ontologization of nature's queerness and its

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Roll it up, keep track of which enemy you are smoking, but smoke them all, SMOKE THEM ALL, sucking their faces into your lungs while writing notes for the poem, notes about the ones who didn't have what it takes to beat you down, the ones who never deserved your friendship in the first place. Exhaling their faces on a braid of smoke is more satisfying than the usual form of forgiveness. (33)

<sup>212</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 342.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>214</sup> Jack Halberstam, “Go Gaga: Anarchy, Chaos, and the Wild,” *Social Text* 31, no. 3 (2013): 126.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>216</sup> Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 2.

location in a pre-industrial past, Conrad holds on to wildness to express a desire for ways of relating to themself and others that are bold and experimental.<sup>217</sup>

Similarly to Bellamy, Conrad self-medicates amidst a crisis by cultivating impersonality. In Conrad's case, impersonality takes the shape of a radical confrontation with productive *and* destructive aspects of the milieus they inhabit. Also reminiscent of *The TV Sutras* is Conrad's ritualization of breathing, which becomes the basis for notes and later poems made available to readers as art. Conrad, however, shies away neither from art as a qualifier nor from the agency that making it affords them. In their view, poetry *saves*; and thankfully, they affirm, "anyone can be a poet."<sup>218</sup> Where Conrad most strikingly deviates from Bellamy is in the higher degree of improvisation and risk-taking demanded by Conrad's continuously renewed repertoire of rituals. Facing the challenge of breathing in a context where it means metabolizing a dying earth and commemorating Earth's death, Conrad repeats breathing in a manner that confronts them with alterity and compels them constantly to adjust to new conditions of embodiment and experience.

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<sup>217</sup> The trouble with wildness as an ideal is twofold. First, it locates a fantasy of the untamable within a past that never actually happened. Second, it downplays the role of colonialism and imperialism in shaping this fantasy. In "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), William Cronon argues that "we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world" (70). Designated wilderness areas such as national parks preserve the (gendered) frontier experience of the rugged individual (78). The figuration of wilderness areas as "'virgin,' uninhabited [lands]" is premised on the erasure of indigenous populations traditionally occupying these areas (80). Peter Coviello makes a complementary point in "The Wild Not Less Than the Good: Thoreau, Sex, Biopower," *GLQ* 23, no. 4 (2017), where he argues that Thoreau's treatment of the wild in *Walden*—a "carnal delightedness ... not separable from sex ... but neither ... reducible to it"—foreshadows sexuality's entry into a regime of biopower (510). Though sympathetic to Halberstam's fantasy of "the wild beyond," Tavia Nyong'o claims, in "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *GLQ* 21, nos. 2–3 (2015), that "the [Beasts of the Southern Wild] filmmakers' dream of a rewilded, ecological cinema is indeed alluring," but that achieving it requires "tapping into the primitive vitality of a native terrain and its mongrel denizens" and therefore failing to answer challenges posed by black and indigenous studies (250, 266).

<sup>218</sup> CA Conrad, "(Soma)tic Poetry," workshop at the University of Chicago, January 25, 2017.

Ecodeviant, Conrad approaches violence and death not as phenomena that can be avoided or that we only encounter once, at the end of our lives, but as everyday experiences for dwellers in wounded ecologies.

#### IV. Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose's Sick Journals and Performances

The aesthetic production of breathing we've looked at so far—in Bellamy's protocol for breathing, watching, and writing, and in Conrad's (soma)tic rituals—has remained in the vicinity of meditation. Although brutality makes it impossible for Conrad to ignore their breathing, the way they structure their breathing in performance-like rituals is what yields their poetics. The evolution of Bob Flanagan (1952–1996) and Sheree Rose's (b. 1941) life and art provides a way into the question of what happens when breathing exceeds intentional efforts of regularization and ritualization and thereby imposes its own rhythms and patterns on living and writing.

Breathing is seldom the first thing critics and art enthusiasts mention when they discuss Flanagan and Rose. Statements with and about shock value are more common. Statements like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's oft-cited descriptor for Flanagan: the artist "famous for pounding a nail through his penis in one of his performances."<sup>219</sup> Flanagan was a masochist. He and Rose met in 1980 at a Halloween party. She was dressed as Jayne Mansfield, he as a character from *Night of the Living Dead*—two dead figures. Shortly after, Flanagan and Rose began to live in a full-time slave/mistress relationship. He submitted to her by cooking, cleaning the house, running errands, and forfeiting all forms of dominance over their sex life. For Rose, who before meeting Flanagan had transitioned from stay-at-home wife and mother to icon of Los Angeles' 1970s underground

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<sup>219</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," in *The New Disability History*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 358.

punk scene, the BDSM lifestyle offered a feminist riff on heterosexual domesticity; it showed “that women could find fulfillment with a truly submissive man—outside the bedroom as well as in it.”<sup>220</sup> Flanagan idealized himself as Supermasochist, an ironic superhero who bore pain better than phonies “who [could] take anything *they* [told] you to do,” as he quipped in his song, “Smart-Ass Masochist.”<sup>221</sup>

“Masochist” was not the only label Flanagan claimed; “sick” was equally important. Flanagan lived with and died of CF. CF is marked by an abnormal production of mucus that clogs the lungs. The lack of oxygen causes depletion in the blood and the brain, such that people who suffer from this hereditary disorder ultimately drown in their secretion. Flanagan and Rose titled one of their shows “Bob Flanagan’s Sick.” Kirby Dick later borrowed the term for the 1997 documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, which heavily relies on footage shot by Rose. “Sick” suggests physical illness as well as deviance and perversion.<sup>222</sup> “Visiting Hours,” a museum piece presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992 and at the New Museum in New York City in 1994, explicitly conflated CF and SM. The piece included a room modeled on a medical clinic and a wall made of 1,400 alphabet blocks spelling “B-O-B,” “S-M,” and “C-F.” Through a system of ropes and pulleys, Rose sporadically lifted Flanagan, his ankles strapped into a harness, above the hospital bed where he otherwise stayed all day.<sup>223</sup> The act gave Flanagan a spatially but not affectively

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<sup>220</sup> Jennifer Doyle, “Sheree Rose: A Legend of Los Angeles Performance Art,” *KCET*, June 20, 2013, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/sheree-rose-a-legend-of-los-angeles-performance-art>; Martin O’Brien and Sheree Rose, “Dialogue with Sheree Rose,” Martin O’Brien, Performance Artist, date unknown, <http://martinobrienperformance.weebly.com/dialogue-with-sheree-rose.html>; Johnson, *The Art of Living*, 115.

<sup>221</sup> *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, dir. Kirby Dick (Lions Gate, 1997).

<sup>222</sup> Andrea Juno and V. Vale, eds., *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (New York: Re/Search People Series, 2000), 27.

<sup>223</sup> Ralph Rugoff, “Bob Flanagan, ‘Visiting Hours,’ in collaboration with Sheree Rose,” *Grand Street* 53 (1995): 65.

uplifting break from his stasis.<sup>224</sup> The convoluted scene both amplified his suffering and foregrounded the strength and dedication of Rose's support. The elevation in "Visiting Hours," like Flanagan and Rose's BDSM endurance performances, required controlled breathing on the part of both artists. Controlled breathing was how, in between breathless instants of pleasure and discomfort, he let her know that he could bear more pain; and it was how she let him know that her actions were calculated. It was how he conveyed a receptivity that turned him into the agentive Supermasochist; and it was how she conveyed an agency that turned her into a kind of hyper-attuned magician's assistant.<sup>225</sup>

Scholars in performance and disability studies have written extensively about Flanagan and Rose's slave/mistress relationship and extreme performance practice.<sup>226</sup> Less attention has been

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<sup>224</sup> Bob Flanagan and unknown interviewer, "Interview on Gross," *Ben Is Dead* 16–17 (December–January 1991–1992), 26.

<sup>225</sup> As Amelia Jones notes in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), contractual submission and domination quickly turn into one another (233). Flanagan: "I am ultimately (this is what every masochist hates to hear, or admit) in full control." See Juno and Vale, *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist*, 32.

<sup>226</sup> Renate Lorenz, in *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson (Verlag; Transcript, 2012), and Petra Kuppers, in *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), observe that Flanagan and Rose publicize the pain in SM and the pain of sickness in ways that render them interconnected, but not interchangeable (78–79; 78–79). Dwelling on the convergence of disability and erotic fantasy in Flanagan's debilitation, Robert McRuer, in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), argues that Flanagan and Rose's work is transgressive precisely because it flirts with the "co-optation" of disability (193–194). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in "Staring Back: Self-Representations of Disabled Performance Artists," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2000), explains that Flanagan and Rose's performances exemplify "disability autobiography," a genre of visual and narrative self-presentation that intervenes in "the social construction of disability identity" (335, 338n4). And for Linda S. Kauffman, in *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Flanagan and Rose's didactic, step-by-step exposition of the reorganization of human senses by technology in pieces like "The Visible Man" (1992) and "Autopsy" (1994) makes him a "live model for the posthuman" (21). If we bracket Kauffman, who provides a technogenetic account of embodiment, the scholars above are interested in how Flanagan resignifies and reclaims his disabled body. While this scholarship calls attention to important aspects of Flanagan and Rose's work, it tends to flatten the messiness of Flanagan and Rose's life and work by making torture and suffering politically straightforward and thus less

paid, however, to Flanagan and Rose's work and life—and to their breathing—once the positions of Supermasochist and Mistress Rose became unsustainable. Their later work is best understood as the result of a shift in respiratory aesthetics: a shift away from the mix of controlled breathing and ecstatic breathlessness of BDSM performance, and toward the labored breathing of CF in lived experience and its memorialization. Flanagan's solo journals, published and unpublished, telegraph first his coming of age as a masochistic performer and then his coming to terms with a diminished ability to control his breathing.<sup>227</sup> One massive journal, undated but likely from 1979, just before Flanagan met Rose, shows us a pre-Supermasochist Flanagan who hadn't yet developed techniques of controlled breathing through performance.<sup>228</sup> Another project, undertaken in 1985, is an epistolary journal: a series of dated letters addressed to Rose that catalog the temporary relief from shallow breathing offered by medical treatments and by a tattooing session that feels like inhaling “pure oxygen.”<sup>229</sup> Like all volumes published by Hanuman Books, Flanagan's first published journal, the *Fuck Journal*, comes in the shape of a tiny prayer manual.<sup>230</sup> The journal records, in all caps, Flanagan and Rose's sex life throughout the year 1986. Entries weave tales of erotic asphyxiation with Flanagan's realization that he is otherwise increasingly “NOT BREATHING WELL” and

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threatening to spectators. It also tends to ignore Rose's feminist politics by casting Flanagan's body as the only body to be reclaimed.

<sup>227</sup> Flanagan's solo bibliography also includes three collections of poems: *The Kid Is the Man* (Hermosa Beach: Bombshelter Press, 1978), *The Wedding of Everything* (Los Angeles: Sherwood Press, 1983), and *Slave Sonnets* (Los Angeles: Cold Calm Press, 1986). Unpublished journals, incomplete and in fragments, are held by Flanagan and Rose's archival collections at the Ohio State University and at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, housed by the University of Southern California.

<sup>228</sup> Bob Flanagan, journal, late 1970s, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles. In his incomplete manuscript of the “Book of Medicines,” in *Writers Who Love Too Much*, Flanagan mentions a journal he wrote, at least in part, in 1979. I believe that this is the undated and partial journal I consulted in the archive.

<sup>229</sup> Bob Flanagan, journal, 1985, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>230</sup> Bob Flanagan, *Fuck Journal* (New York: Hanuman Books, 1987).

decreasingly willing to submit to Rose.<sup>231</sup> Another unpublished journal written in 1986 constitutes a depressive counterpart to the high-octane *Fuck Journal*.<sup>232</sup> Daily entries are formatted like poems, but are closer to prose. The April 7 entry, which is representative of the journal as a whole, reads, “I’m still here / And I wish I wasn’t. Sick of this life. / Everyday is another kind of loss.”

It is of course the loss of masochism—a loss that he starts to register in the 1970s, but that becomes helplessly disorganizing in the 1990s—which Flanagan reports in his journals. In a piece titled “S,” published in the magazine *Frame/Work* along with photos by Rose, Flanagan tracks the minutiae of his breathing to narrate this loss:

You’ll notice I have the letter “S” carved into the right side of my chest. It might seem strange and kind of silly for a grown man to risk infection and permanent scarring (not to mention the pain) and allow someone to carve an “S” into his flesh like this, but I’m serious about it. I have an “S” on my chest and I feel sentimental about it. It was put there by Sheree, my soul mate, sex partner, and sidekick for the past twelve years. It’s her signature. “S” for SHEREE, and mine too: “S” for SLAVE; which is what I am, or what I have always aspired to be, except that now I’m not so sure.

This “S,” which used to be the symbol of STRENGTH and STAMINA, has started fading. . . .

There’s an “S” on my chest and that’s what it stands for: SICK. . . .

These days, when we have sex, or when I have sex by myself—or forget sex—when I’m just climbing up the stairs, or doing anything that produces a physical strain of some sort, I get severely short of breath and have to stop everything, gasping like a fish, while I suck air through my nose and then exhale slowly through clenched teeth, making this swooshing

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 40, 53, 56–57, 65, 90, 93.

<sup>232</sup> Bob Flanagan, journal, 1986, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles.

sound with my mouth, like I'm telling everyone to—"Shhhh"—be quiet, but I'm just trying to save my breath.<sup>233</sup>

Flanagan's labored breathing speaks for him. Breathing here opposes physical exertion, including the exertion of *actual* speech, in the absence of strength and stamina. "Underdog," a 1995 piece that isn't attached to any specific project, amplifies the function of breathing in expressing debilitation: "No' is the first word out of my mouth, it's part of my breathing now, no... no... no..."<sup>234</sup>

*The Pain Journal*, Flanagan's second published journal and last work, is his most explicit and substantial postscript on his and Rose's BDSM life and work. Flanagan wrote *The Pain Journal* between December 27, 1994 and December 16, 1995. The entries chronicle the everydayness of a pain that no longer catalyzes pleasure and gratification. Intentional, episodic pain is substituted by unintentional, chronic pain. Flanagan never had the luxury of nonconscious breathing. In his performances with Rose, he didn't try to become aware of his breathing—as Bellamy does by meditating, for example. He tried instead to cultivate a different kind of awareness of breathing than the one tied to CF. This cultivation isn't possible in *The Pain Journal*, where CF determines the terms by which he is made aware of his breathing. At that point, Flanagan starts "[hating his and Rose's performance] work," finds it "pathetic," is "embarrassed" by it.<sup>235</sup> The spectacular shock of the couple's BDSM performances dissipates; only what Jennifer Doyle calls the difficulty of an art that combines intimacy, exposure, and explicitness remains.<sup>236</sup>

In his March 19, 1995 entry, Flanagan situates his masochistic identity in the past:  
Thought I'd escape writing tonight, but found myself mulling over why it is I don't like

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<sup>233</sup> Bob Flanagan, "S," *Frame/Work: The Journal of Images and Culture* 5, nos. 2–3 (1992), 24–30.

<sup>234</sup> Bob Flanagan, "Underdog," undated, box 16, Bob Flanagan Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

<sup>235</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 24.

<sup>236</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Performance Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 15–16.

pain anymore. I have this performance to do on April 1<sup>st</sup>, and I'm shying away from doing or having SM stuff done to me because pain and the thought of pain mostly just irritates and annoys me rather than turns me on. But I miss my masochistic self. I hate this person I've become. And what about my reputation?<sup>237</sup>

Further into the *Journal*, on November 8, 1995, Flanagan describes the fading of masochism as a betrayal, a stratagem that did not operate as long as needed. "I set it up so that pain was *supposed* to be so good, something to endure and to conquer," he deplores. "Anything short of that feels like failure."<sup>238</sup> According to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CFF), the median predicted survival age for people living with CF is now around 40.<sup>239</sup> When Flanagan wrote the *Journal*, the average lifespan was closer to 29 or 30 years old. "At 42 I'm one of the anomalies," he observes.<sup>240</sup> For Flanagan, surviving feels like failure because it means outliving masochism and hence falling short of deriving a sense of agency from the experience of pain.<sup>241</sup>

Although Flanagan feels alienated from his and Rose's BDSM performance work in *The Pain Journal*, the book itself unfolds as an endurance performance of sorts. Before meeting Flanagan, Rose had studied psychology at California State University, Northridge, where she had become familiar with therapeutic techniques that flirted with New Age. In a personal journal from the fall of

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<sup>237</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 34. I've kept all *Journal* excerpts intact, without correcting syntactical, grammatical, or typographical errors.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 156–157, *italics added*.

<sup>239</sup> "About Cystic Fibrosis," Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, 2016, <https://www.cff.org/What-is-CF/About-Cystic-Fibrosis/>.

<sup>240</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 125.

<sup>241</sup> When Flanagan wrote *The Pain Journal*, he could no longer afford to live. He and Rose had accumulated credit card debt and had been struggling to obtain adequate financial compensation for their performances and installations (28, 40, 61). Flanagan: "Life is my full-time job, and the pay stinks" (142). In footage of "Visiting Hours," Flanagan tells a visitor that Medi-Cal does not cover lung transplants, and that doctors at the Stanford Medical Center consider his lungs too scarred for experimental treatment. "Visiting Hours," dir. Jeff Stoll, undated, box 22, Bob Flanagan Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

1977, she details her discovery of hypnosis and self-hypnosis, which she deems “a valuable learning tool.”<sup>242</sup> She recalls serving as a subject in a demonstration of neo-Reichian techniques.<sup>243</sup> Around the same time, Rose became involved with Radix, a body therapy collective.<sup>244</sup> When Rose and Flanagan met in the early 1980s, she introduced him to bodywork, while he introduced her to BDSM play. The therapeutic and theatrical techniques they taught one another influenced *The Pain Journal*. In order to pursue his project despite suffering, Flanagan had to remain disciplined, follow “the rules,” and “[be] a good boy.”<sup>245</sup> Whereas Flanagan and Rose’s BDSM performances employed knives, nails, and ball gags, his own journal writing was contingent on such aids as oxygen masks, respirators, and oxygen pumps.<sup>246</sup>

Flanagan’s writing in *The Pain Journal* is loopy and ongoing.<sup>247</sup> His inability to catch his breath translates into lengthy sentences like this one:

Excuse me while I put ear plugs in cause Sheree’s asleep and breathing heavy and that really bugs me cause I want her up and talking to me and watching tv with me now that it’s one in the mornning and I’m awake and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is on tv after she came down

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<sup>242</sup> Bob Flanagan, journal, 1977, box 3, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Sheree Rose, personal interview, May 3, 2016.

<sup>245</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 152.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 55, 67, 140–141.

<sup>247</sup> This loopy writing sharply contrasts with the didacticism of Flanagan’s earlier writing, evident in “Why,” a 1985 piece whose title is a shorthand for the psychological question that Flanagan’s life and art have raised: Why does he seek pain, given that he is already sick? These are the first few items on Flanagan’s list, as they appear in Juno and Vale’s *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist*:

Why? Because it feels good; because it gives me an erection; because it makes me come; because I’m sick; because there was so much sickness; because I say FUCK THE SICKNESS; because I like the attention; because I was alone a lot; because I was different; because kids beat me up on the way to school; because I was humiliated by nuns; because of Christ and the crucifixion. (64–65)

Flanagan recites “Why” in a steady, percussive manner in Dick’s documentary. He doesn’t breathe between each clause, but the semicolons at least mark occasions for breathing.

and woke me up after I left her upstairs sleeping on the couch after her long day long drive home from Irvine—but never mind that—I was pissed that she wasn’t watching a tv show about murder in our own Rampart district and then some dumb movie about a terminator substitute teacher blowing kids away while she snored away and I had a bunch of things I wanted to tell her but it wasn’t only that she was asleep, I was depressed and out of breath and could barely talk anyway, but I stormed away with my stupid fashion pack drug pump sling over my shoulder like a huffy bitch, short of breath and with a headache and with a headache like a penned up rodeo horse trying to kick its way out of my head—everyone who’s critical of my nastiness: put a plastic bag on your head all day and every couple of hours slam your head into the coffee table and press you thumbs into your eye sockets until your eyeballs squish like bloody grapes and then tell me what a great mood you’re in.<sup>248</sup>

The sequence of conjunctions—“and … and … and”—offers no respite. Flanagan doesn’t hierarchize his claims. His long sentence is filled with digressions, some of which we are retroactively asked to disregard. “Morning” is misspelled, but Flanagan doesn’t pause or backtrack to make corrections. Rose’s noisy breathing, addressed at the beginning of the sentence, is only a distant memory by the time we get to the end, at which point Flanagan’s own difficult breathing has taken over. He’s short of breath, out of breath, and a huffy bitch. Here and throughout *The Pain Journal*, Flanagan’s writing succumbs to the respiratory repertoire of CF—to wheezing, coughing, being out of breath, and breathing in a way that feels like drowning.

While vulnerability and risk are framed as desirable in Flanagan and Rose’s BDSM performances, they appear as undesirable reminders of his illness in the *Journal*. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that documenting difficult breathing endows Flanagan with the kind of agency that Bellamy

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<sup>248</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 142.

and Conrad enjoy as a result of their aesthetic and artistic practices. But Flanagan's practice of writing with difficult breathing at least bears proxy libidinal structures, including boredom and humor, which make his defenselessness less disorganizing in the absence of masochism.

Bored is how Flanagan feels as he translates into journal entries the humdrum of not breathing, yet not dying.<sup>249</sup> Across the entries, Flanagan repeats that his "chest hurts," that he "can't breathe," and that he's "wheezing" and "coughing."<sup>250</sup> He's "not depressed, but not happy. Just alive. Just living. Barely breathing." "Again," he sums up, "I'm boring myself" (59). Nowhere is Flanagan's weariness of his recursive symptomatology clearer than in his July 21, 1995 entry:

I don't even know what to write in here anymore. The same old story every night. Headache  
blah blah blah hospital blah blah blah can't breathe blah blah blah dying blah blah blah  
tv blah blah blah Sheree blah blah blah Mom and Dad blah Tim blah stupid brother John  
blah blah letters to write blah blah blah camp blah my penis blah blah list keeping and blah  
blahs a poor substitute for real writing blah blah blah blah not enough pain killers blah  
blah but if the breathing's bad enough on Monday Riker might up the pain meds because  
what have we got to lose blah blah blah blood in my phlegm blah blah vital signs not  
so blah blah vital no change no up no down blah blah lost in the blah blah and the pain med

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<sup>249</sup> In *The Pain Journal*, this humdrum coexists with television programs—Letterman, the O. J. trial, late-night movies, and other late-20<sup>th</sup>-century artifacts—which provide background noise more than they constitute a source of inspiration, as they do in *The TV Sutras*. Flanagan addresses the confluence of TV watching and difficult breathing in an unpublished poem, "Dead Air" (undated, box 18, Bob Flanagan Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University, Columbus):

That's all that's there  
but what do you care?  
I'm wasting my breath  
waiting for death  
choking on my own phlegm,  
saving it all for them  
the audience and you.

<sup>250</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 12, 120, henceforth cited in parentheses.

but the pain's still here and there's no rush anymore blah blah blah whah whah why won't this nurse clean out my phlegm basin huh blah huh this is so awful I don't deserve to live blah. (89)

Onomatopoeias substitute for markers of relation and punctuation. “Whah” evokes an infantile cry, and “huh” sighing or wheezing. Generic sound words that perform difficult breathing convey Flanagan’s boredom in the face of recalcitrant symptoms.

In his July 14, 1995 entry, Flanagan casts himself as a boring type: “[Sheree and I are] supposed to be fucking, but she’s snoring and I’m boring. Snoring and Boring. Thank you, Ladies and Germs” (85). Flanagan and Rose were *supposed* to remain Mistress Rose and Supermasochist, but now they’re Snoring and Boring. A nonconscious habit and an affective state here congeal as types that bring to mind clowns or characters on a children’s TV show. Fashioning himself as a type, not unlike Bellamy and Conrad’s therapeutic cultivation of impersonality, organizes Flanagan; it sets expectations about gestures and behaviors. By calling himself Boring, rather than simply boring, Flanagan is in a sense saying, “My shtick is that I complain a lot about not being able to breathe.” Perhaps Flanagan “can’t stand the boredom,” but boredom coextends with a set of expectations that structure his continuity as a subject (52).

The boring repetition—with little difference—of Flanagan’s labored breathing doesn’t lead anywhere, but it holds the mood. I derive this formulation from Adam Phillips’ notion of boredom as “that state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.”<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on Unexamined Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68. Elizabeth S. Goodstein, in *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), calls Phillips’ essay “an intriguing reading of boredom from an object relations perspective” (2n2). Goodstein’s definition of boredom as an “experience without qualities” isn’t so different from Phillips’ model, in so far as

Boredom, for Phillips, makes tolerable the experience of waiting for something without knowing what it could be.<sup>252</sup> As a “blank condensation of psychic life,” boredom “[holds] the mood,” keeping alive, at one remove, the possibility of desire.<sup>253</sup> Phillips’ allusion to holding refers to Winnicott’s “holding environment,” which fosters the child’s development.<sup>254</sup> Boredom is not an end in itself. It’s a transitional “prehesitation,” a stage that comes before the mental conflict or “asthma” of letting feelings develop.<sup>255</sup> Flanagan’s boredom defers an asthma-like experience of psychic disorganization by holding (on to) CF’s respiratory patterns and rhythms.<sup>256</sup> Boredom recasts crisis as a new normal, a new business as usual that ironically turns chronic pain into the matter of self-medication by postponing a loss of personal identity. In the manuscript of his ambitious “Book of Medicines,” Flanagan recalls writing in 1979, as he was new to slave-mistress relationships, “I’m excited again just thinking about it. But I have to slow down now. I’ve got to stretch this out for a

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both authors gesture toward a dissatisfying lack (1). Lars Svendsen similarly describes boredom, in *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), as “a lack of personal meaning” amidst “objects and actions [that] come to us fully coded” (31).

<sup>252</sup> Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, 77.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 78, 70, 76.

<sup>254</sup> Leslie Caldwell and Angela Joyce, eds., *Reading Winnicott* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 41–43.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 74–75.

<sup>256</sup> A particular structure of desire, not age, defines the subject of Phillips’ essay on boredom, the child. Flanagan’s boredom picks up where his masochism left off: in the realm of infantile desire. Flanagan was candid about the impact of the care and attention he received as a sick child on his development as a masochist. In an undated performance of the “Death Monologue” (box 7, Bob Flanagan Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University, Columbus), Flanagan revisits the origin tale: “I have to go to the CF clinic, which is still in a pediatrician’s office. I sit in these little chairs, and stuff. That’s where I get a lot of new inspiration for my work.” Another undated performance, “Bob Flanagan at the Movies” (box 22, Bob Flanagan Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University, Columbus), includes a montage of movie scenes to which Flanagan and Rose were erotically attached, from a Looney Tunes cartoon to *Cinderfella*, a 1960 retelling of the Cinderella tale starring Jerry Lewis as a boy (read: Flanagan) at the mercy of his controlling stepmother (read: Rose). And in the May 1, 1995 entry of *The Pain Journal*, Flanagan attributes a brief resurgence of his “SM frame of mind” to Sheree’s travels: “I think it’s like being kid again, with the parents out” (47).

long time. I'm going to make it a life-style, and not just a mood.”<sup>257</sup> A mood, boredom, returns when excitement as lifestyle becomes too onerous. The drawn-out temporality of sustained cathexis makes way for the dragged-out temporality of deferred cathexes.

While writing *The Pain Journal* feels boring to Flanagan, I wouldn't categorize the experience of reading his jittery prose as boring. When I read I alternate between the boredom of going over the symptomatology of CF for the nth time and the shock of witnessing incredible suffering. I also alternate between the desire to rush to the end of the book and the impulse to slow down in a pathetic bid to postpone Flanagan's inevitable death. These contradictory feelings amount to what Sianne Ngai calls stuplimity, an affective structure that begins with the dysphoria of shock and boredom and “[culminates] in something like the ‘open feeling’ of ‘resisting being’—an indeterminate affective state that lacks the punctuating ‘point’ of an individuated emotion.”<sup>258</sup> To chart stuplimity, Ngai considers, among other (modernist) works, Samuel Beckett's “*Stirrings Still*.” Her account of Beckett's final prose work resonates uncannily with *The Pain Journal*:

The theme of survival and endurance in the wake of a traumatic loss is conveyed here through a drastic slowdown of language, a theatrical enactment of its fatigue—in which the duration of relatively simple actions is uncomfortably prolonged through a proliferation of precise inexactitudes.<sup>259</sup>

We encounter Flanagan's painful breathing through the repetition of precise inexactitudes: onomatopoeias, erratic syntax. The more Flanagan's language collapses into labored breathing, the more indistinguishable the breathing and writing components of his last performance appear. Whereas in *The TV Sutras* this indistinguishability ensues from a deliberate composition technique,

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<sup>257</sup> Flanagan, “Book of Medicines,” 439.

<sup>258</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 284.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 256.

in *The Pain Journal* it points to Flanagan's inability, at a certain point, to write prose that isn't taken over by his labored breathing.

As hinted by a phrase like "Thank you, Ladies and Germs" that plays with the idiom of standup comedy, boredom doesn't cancel out the vibrant humor that typifies Flanagan's work alone and with Rose. Flanagan borrows the phrase "Ladies and Germs" from the late comedian Milton Berle, who would tell his audience, "Good evening, ladies and germs. I mean ladies and gentlemen. I call you ladies and gentlemen, but you know what you really are."<sup>260</sup> Flanagan's comedy relies on musicality. Even if the *Journal* doesn't contain actual songs, Flanagan pays close attention to moments where prose turns into a melody.<sup>261</sup> For instance, in the June 1, 1995 entry, symptoms turn into air—labored breathing—at the same time as they turn into *an air*—a melody—from *The Sound of Music*: "Feel awful. Neck ache. Headache. Sore eyes. Chest pain. Difficulty breathing. These are a few of my favorite things."<sup>262</sup> In musical theater, transitions from colloquial speech to conventional musical numbers mark moments of dramatic tension or exacerbated emotion. Think of the "I want" song, which early in a show clarifies the protagonist's motivations, or the "eleven o'clock" number,

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<sup>260</sup> Tim Goodman, "Milton Berle 1908–2002," *SF Gate*, March 28, 2002, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/MILTON-BERLE-1908-2002-Mr-Television-dies-at-2861231.php>. Thanks to Lauren Berlant for pointing to the origin of the phrase.

<sup>261</sup> Dick's documentary features some of Flanagan's comedic songs. In the aforementioned "Smart-Ass Masochist," on diet masochism, Flanagan regularly interrupts the chorus—"Anything you want me to do / I'll do it just for you"—with slapstick performances of discomfort: "No, no, wait, wait!" At a camp for kids with CF where he serves as a counselor, he introduces a love song by crooning, "I called her Ivy, not 'cause her name was Ivy—'cause she was *on IV*." He prefacing another piece, which borrows the tune of "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" from *Mary Poppins*, with a warning: "I know that any Disney people here, they'll probably tell me to cease and desist, and believe me, I will... but not yet. In my own time." Coughing intermittently, he then intones, "Supermasochist Bob has cystic fibrosis / He should've died young, but he was too precocious / How much longer he will live is anyone's prognosis / Supermasochist Bob is cystic fibrosis / I'm dili-dili, I'm gonna die / I'm dili-dili, I'm gonna die."

<sup>262</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 62.

which just before the finale raises the stakes of the play.<sup>263</sup> By contrast, musical structure in *The Pain Journal* diffuses tension. It distracts. It allows the masochism evacuated from a pain that plainly hurts to reemerge.

Leo Bersani teaches us in his theory of sexuality as structurally masochistic that interpretation is key: sex acquires the form of sexuality when we “interpretively [remember]” the self-dissolution we experience in sex as a sign and a promise of something potentially pleasurable.<sup>264</sup> Similarly, when Flanagan no longer extracts pleasure from pain alone, he finds himself adrenalized by the “magical writing,” “clever writing,” or “goofiness” that he deciphers in his manuscript on

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<sup>263</sup> Paul R. Laird, “Musical Styles and Song Conventions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, eds. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>264</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 64. By proposing that masochism reemerges as aesthetic form in *The Pain Journal* and that the formalism of sexuality hinges on the interpretation of pain as something potentially pleasurable, I mix and match aspects of Bersani’s two formal theories of sexuality. The first, found in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), posits that the psychoanalytic validity of Freud’s theory of sexuality hinges on the collapse of representational discourse (3). Any theory of sexuality, by seeking to contain or repress the destabilizing force of the sexual, constitutes a normalizing and “de-phallicizing” enterprise (15). A theory of sexuality can only be accurate in an aesthetic sense: if, as a function of its development, it gives in to the perturbations of the sexual (3, 112). In his work from the 1990s and 2000s, Bersani overhauls this model. Rather than viewing the sexual as a disturbance of structure, he tracks the structuring of the sexual. Proposing what is now known as the antisocial thesis in queer theory, Bersani claims in *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) that “homoness,” or the desire for sameness, propels sex (7). The narcissism of homoness can produce a hyperbolizing image of the self, but also initiate the subject into seductive self-dissolution, shattering, or “nonsuicidal disappearance,” thereby causing this subject to extend into and reappear in the external world (99, italics removed). In Bersani’s first model, the formalization of the sexual becomes legible through the erosion of mechanisms of expository writing. In his second model, the formalism of sexuality orchestrates the masochistic management and interpretation of libidinal investments. See also Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 85.

Although I’m indebted to Bersani’s formal approach to embodiment and relationality, I agree with Amber Jamilla Musser’s criticism of what she aptly identifies in *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014) as the “exceptional” status of gay male sexuality in Bersani’s work (14).

pain.<sup>265</sup> Whether they are boring or comedic, Flanagan's therapeutic self-encounters fundamentally depend on his artistic production. He stopped writing only three weeks before he died, on January 4, 1996.

Ever since Flanagan's death, Rose has been aware of her breathing in intentionally and unintentionally triggered situations of exertion that have doubled as occasions for memorialization. Rose recounts a hiking trip to the Himalayas, where at a high altitude she "felt so close to [Flanagan] because of the physical thing [she] was feeling with the breathing."<sup>266</sup> She adds, "And that, of course, made me cry all the more because I never realized how difficult it was for him."<sup>267</sup> It's hard to imagine that Rose had never realized how difficult it was for Flanagan to breathe. She had to be sharply attuned to his symptoms in order for the pair to engage in BDSM play. But Rose's encounters with breathing following Flanagan's passing have likely intensified her empathy for his condition. She has sought to preserve this empathy in everyday and artistic performances. Yoga, which she has been practicing in Los Angeles and with the Satchidananda Ashram in Yogaville, Virginia, has given her occasions to meditate on "the breath of life, and the idea that you are only allowed so many breaths."<sup>268</sup> She says, "I think about Bob a lot during yoga because he could never deep breathe. He never had a comfortable breath."<sup>269</sup> In an outtake from the interview just quoted, Rose adds that even watching her granddaughter breathe reminds her "that Bob could never take a

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<sup>265</sup> Flanagan, *The Pain Journal*, 111, 110, 27.

<sup>266</sup> Sheree Rose and unknown interviewer, interview, 1998, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Tina Takemoto and Sheree Rose, "Life Is Still Possible in this Junky World: Conversation with Sheree Rose About Her Life with Bob Flanagan," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 19, no. 1 (2009): 108.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

decent breath.”<sup>270</sup> In “Corpse Pose” and “Gurney of Nails,” two staged performances, she occupies the position of the fakir that would have been Flanagan’s in their BDSM performances. She lies on a table or a bed of nails and remains stoic for approximately 45 minutes as collaborators paint her body or pour hot wax onto her. For these performances, she “consciously [tries] to make [her] breath as narrow, as skinny as [she] can, and barely breathe at all.”<sup>271</sup> Rose’s aesthetic production of breathing, in yoga and in performances, puts her in a position that parallels Conrad’s. Through breathing, Rose prompts encounters with finitude and death to reencounter herself in proximity to Bob, or as Bob.

As it is also the case for Conrad, breathing for Rose doesn’t have to be depressing just because it coincides with mourning. What better way to remember Flanagan than with some twisted humor? In 1996, shortly after Flanagan died, Rose was invited to Tokyo to present relics of some of the couple’s collaborations. She decided instead to create a new installation: “Boballoon,” a 20-foot inflatable depiction of Flanagan, complete with erect penis, piercings, ball gag, and straitjacket. Rose’s choice to memorialize with an inflatable structure a person whose lungs were filled with phlegm is not as ironic as it appears. With “Boballoon,” Rose inflated Flanagan in the most literal sense, but even as she immortalized him, she made sure not to subtract one of his defining characteristics: his inability to breathe well. If “Boballoon” breathed properly, if it let out the air it lets in, it would deflate.

With Flanagan’s *Pain Journal* and Rose’s performance of her late partner’s labored breathing, we arrive at breathing-induced self-encounters that afford something like coherence even if breathing is sometimes, in reality or in art, incoherent. Rose can, up to a point, exercise the kind of

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<sup>270</sup> Tina Takemoto and Sheree Rose, interview draft, undated, box 3, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>271</sup> Tremblay and Rose, personal interview, May 3, 2016.

controlled breathing that mindfulness and New Age discourses encourage. Difficult breathing, however, becomes an autonomous force in Flanagan's work. Breathing, even of the disorganizing variety, tends toward a structure. Fortifying this structure, as the authors and artists surveyed in this chapter do by repeating breathing live and in experimental life writing, fulfills a therapeutic function. Aesthetic self-medication doesn't simply designate the acquisition of agency through the mobilization of conscious breathing. Aesthetic self-medication organizes psychic and somatic life by feeding and feeding off tensions between, on the one hand, an agency that is limited, incomplete, and perpetually amended and, on the other, an openness that ranges from deliberate receptivity to forced exposure.

Chapter 2  
Encountering the World:  
Feminist Breathing After the Loss of Political Momentum

### I. In and Out of Feminist Breathing Rooms

The previous chapter theorized aesthetic self-medication, a process through which writers and artists consciously repeat breathing until it affords a structure that organizes life within crisis. Moving across cases of experimental life writing, the chapter documented aesthetic and artistic efforts to stage self-encounters in a therapeutic register. The current chapter concentrates on writing that seeks, through breathing, to generate a milieu for political organizing. Here, breathing constitutes a phenomenon through which individuals encounter the world and, in reaction to the challenges posed by this world, negotiate the alliances that keep them going, from contingent collectivities to formal communities, to coalitions bridging identities and interests. Breathing animates a political kinetics that spotlights the interplay between individuals and groups as these entities acclimate to and intervene in atmospheres. I turn to an Anglophone, North American feminist archive to study how feminists sustained and adjusted their political breathing when, outside of feminism's canonical sites—the meeting room, the classroom, the festival—and in the wake of second-wave feminism—a period of activity that stretched from the early 1960s to the early 1980s but reached its apex between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s—they encountered a world literally and figuratively toxic.

This chapter makes the claim that there is such a thing as feminist breathing and tracks its key transformations after the Second Wave. Feminist breathing designates women-led practices that channel toward political ends the affective and social potency of varieties of breathing. Feminist breathing also entails the creation of discursive contexts, such as political cosmologies and theologies, which make breathing meaningful, which make it matter. I pair two main cases to track

the dynamics of political breathing in the shadow of Peak Feminism: Toni Cade Bambara's (1939–1995) novel *The Salt Eaters*, associated with black feminism, and Linda Hogan's (b. 1947) poetry, associated with Chickasaw ecofeminism.<sup>272</sup> Then, in a coda, I amplify contemporary echoes of a feminist breathing attuned to weariness and exhaustion in the music of Solange Knowles.<sup>273</sup> Bambara and Hogan mobilize breathing in such somatic practices as a healing and a ceremony to deal with conditions of attrition.<sup>274</sup> These writers portray a world made debilitating by factors that include the waning of 1960s militant effervescence, ongoing patriarchal oppression and colonial violence, and accelerating ecological degradation. The world according to Bambara and Hogan isn't an accommodating capacity into which feminist praxis can be extended. Nor is it an arena that, by

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<sup>272</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980); Linda Hogan, *Dark. Sweet. New & Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2014).

These cases exceed “white feminism,” a formation still prioritized in many accounts of the Second Wave and its aftermath. As I posit in “Room for Critique: The Spaces of Disillusionment of 1970s U.S. Feminist Fiction,” in *Post45: Peer-Reviewed* (2016): <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/10/room-for-critique-the-spaces-of-institutional-disillusionment-of-1970s-u-s-feminist-fiction/>, “white feminism … is an accusation, not an identity that authors, theorists, or critics claim for themselves. The most influential defense of the literary criticism … labeled as white feminist is probably Susan Gubar’s ‘What Ails Feminist Criticism?’ *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 878–902. Gubar fears that by rejecting 1960s and 1970s feminism en bloc on the basis of its presumed universalism and essentialism, feminists abandon the aspiration to produce a coherent political subject (886, 900–902). But Gubar’s essay is not only a defense; it is also an attack. If her piece has been so contentious in feminist scholarship, it is because it blames the dismissal of white feminism on feminists of color and poststructuralists (886). Wiegman responds to Gubar in ‘What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion,’ *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 362–379. Wiegman says that Gubar’s argument reiterates the marked identity formation of injured whiteness that is dominant in contemporary U.S. culture (377)” (n8). In this chapter I’m particularly interested in modes of breathing unaccounted for in the spaces designed by and for white feminists.

<sup>273</sup> *A Seat at the Table*, performed by Solange Knowles and executive-produced by Solange Knowles and Raphael Saadiq, Saint Records and Columbia Records, 2016.

<sup>274</sup> I designate the practices I survey as somatic to refer to matters of embodiment, broadly conceived, without assuming the existence of the paradigmatic body, as well as to evoke therapeutic and spiritual traditions in which bodily choreography archives and enacts natural-social transformations. See Amanda Williamson, Glenna Batson, and Sarah Whatley, “Introduction,” in *Dance, Somatics and Spiritualities: Contemporary Sacred Narratives*, eds. Amanda Williamson, Glenna Batson, Sarah Whatley, and Rebecca Weber (Chicago: Intellect, 2014), xxv–xxix.

transforming itself, even gradually, keeps alive the promise of a large-scale, feminist societal shift.

Under conditions where breathing implies encountering, over and over, an asphyxiating world, feminist breathing, I argue, consists in coordinating two kinds of breathing: first a literal breathing necessary to survival, and second a figurative breath that carries political vitality in spite of the foreclosure of feminist presents and futures.

I'm not the first to posit a privileged link between feminism and breathing. Working with Karen Barad's agential realism, Magdalena Górska develops a "breathable feminist politics through engagements with breathing enacted in different kinds of vulnerable lives."<sup>275</sup> I propose that what Górska prescribes—the politicization, in an explicitly feminist register, of an ontology of breathing that emphasizes vulnerabilities—is already at play, and is articulated aesthetically, across recent feminist histories.

Before stepping out of feminism's conventional sites, let's take a look at whose and what types of breathing they've made possible. Consider first the consciousness-raising (CR) meeting, especially popular from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Kathie Sarachild, who at the First National Women's Liberation Conference in 1968 laid out an agenda for CR, called it "one of the prime educational, organizing programs of the women's liberation movement."<sup>276</sup> The CR meeting, Pamela

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<sup>275</sup> Magdalena Górska, *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability* (Linköping: TEMA—Department of Thematic Studies, 2016), 23.

<sup>276</sup> Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978), 144, 147. Sarachild's wasn't the only program for CR. Numerous organizations and publications, including in 1972 *Ms. Magazine*, came up with their own blueprints. Reprinted in Mary C. Lynn's edited collection, *Women's Liberation in the Twentieth Century* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975), "Ms. Magazine's Guide to Consciousness-Raising" lists guidelines for "organizing women to perceive their own oppression and take steps to free themselves" (111). Among these guidelines are that the group be totally women, that there be no leader, and that after each testimony women discuss the common elements in their experiences without judging or advising each other (112, 115, 117–118).

Anita Shreve, in *Women Together, Women Alone: The Legacy of the Consciousness-Raising Movement* (New York: Viking, 1989), reminds us that CR and the Women's Movement shouldn't be conflated:

Allen held in her treatise on this form of activism, transformed the host's domestic space into "Free Space." Free Space proceeded from the mutual trust that women developed as they shared personal experiences and demonstrated honesty.<sup>277</sup> In the CR meeting, feminists gave themselves the means not only to develop their political voices, as Drucilla Cornell recalls, but also to accommodate particular kinds of breathing.<sup>278</sup> Women otherwise in their day-to-day lives were, as Terry McMillan has put it, "waiting to exhale."<sup>279</sup> They were kept from breathing freely by what Mary Daly has called "man-made obstacles."<sup>280</sup> They handled more than their fair share of mouth breathers. Thanks to CR, they could at last take a breath of fresh air. In Luce Guilbeault, Nicole Brossard, and Margaret Wescott's documentary *Some American Feminists*, shot between 1975 and 1976, Kate Millett performs the gratifying breath that, she suggests, emblematises women's liberation.<sup>281</sup> Millett describes the late 1960s to the mid 1970s as a "tremendously euphoric time" during which women have been "discovering [themselves], expressing [themselves]." Dressed in loose white clothes and sitting in a lotus-like position, as if she were meditating—though, funnily, a lit cigarette is resting on nearby ashtray—Millett amplifies inhalation and exhalation by raising (see Figure 2) and lowering (see Figure 3) her chest and arms. She then declares, "This is a whole class of people oppressed for millennia suddenly, you know, breathing air!" A beatific smile appears on her face (see Figure 4).

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"Although most members of the Women's Movement did at one time or another try CR (and although many CR groups were composed of committed feminists), some women who joined CR groups never considered themselves part of the Women's Movement at all" (5–6).

<sup>277</sup> Pamela Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation* (New York: Times Change Press, 1970), 17–18.

<sup>278</sup> Drucilla Cornell, "Las Greñudas: Recollections on Consciousness-Raising," *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1033.

<sup>279</sup> Terry McMillan's *Waiting To Exhale* (New York: Viking, 1992), which was turned into a film in 1995, ultimately presents heterosexual coupledom as the condition for true, lasting exhalation.

<sup>280</sup> Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 17.

<sup>281</sup> *Some American Feminists*, dir. Luce Guilbeault, Nicole Brossard, and Margaret Wescott (National Film Board of Canada, 1977).



*Figures 2, 3, and, 4: Kate Millett inhales, exhales, and smiles in Some American Feminists (1977), directed by Luce Guilbeault, Nicole Brossard, and Margaret Wescott*

The ecstatic breathlessness of individual and collective breakthroughs cohabited with the delightful inhalation and exhalation of self-recognition and mutual support. An alignment between the personal and the political undergirded CR: sharing experiences, proponents of CR believed, would allow women to pick up knowledge about and fight against the patriarchal system of domination.<sup>282</sup> In Sarachild's words, the CR meeting was meant to spill into "a mass movement of women [and] put an end to the barriers of segregation and discrimination based on sex."<sup>283</sup> *Ms. Magazine*, as well, highlighted the union of the personal and the political in the optimistic conclusion to its "Guide to Consciousness-Raising:" "After the group has grown and changed together, the individual will have grown and changed, too. We will never be quite the same again. And neither will the world."<sup>284</sup> Yet, what Alix Kates Shulman remembered from CR by the 1990s had to do less with the knowledge she had acquired or the societal changes she had advocated than with the vitality of Free Space—"the passion, excitement, and high energy," and the "rapturous feelings of discovery, newness, awakening, even rebirth."<sup>285</sup> Shulman's lexicon expresses affective and phenomenological ecstasy. In Free Space, women were beside themselves. They could be reborn into matriarchy rather than patriarchy. Nora Ephron similarly wrote in 1973 that CR, when she first tried it, "[set] off a kind of emotional rush, almost a high;" "there were tears, there were what [seemed] like flashes of

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<sup>282</sup> Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," in *Feminist Revolution*, 204–205; bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: On Passionate Politics* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 7–8.

Deborah B. Gould, in *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), frames another kind of political meeting, the AIDS activism meeting of the 1980s and 1990s, as a site where various aspects of activists' experiences and commitments converged: "Many participants look back on their years in the movement as a period when multiple aspects of their lives were integrated, with ACT UP as the unifying force" (184).

<sup>283</sup> Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising," 144, italics removed.

<sup>284</sup> "Guide to Consciousness-Raising," 118.

<sup>285</sup> Alix Kates Shulman, Catharine R. Stimson, and Kate Millett, "Sexual Politics: Twenty Years Later," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 19, nos. 3–4 (1991): 32–33.

insight.”<sup>286</sup> Estelle B. Freedman aimed to capture precisely the thrill of CR when in the late 1980s she applied the model to her feminist studies course.<sup>287</sup> A student’s comment cited by Freedman—“I now understand why feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s were so effective in generating women’s energies”—posits the transmission of vitality as the most accurate metric for CR’s pedagogical value.<sup>288</sup> In breathing rooms like the CR meeting and the CR-inspired classroom, individuals, pushed beyond themselves, could find their excitement and rage stimulating instead of alienating.

Until they couldn’t. Ephron deplored that her group had given up its potential to bring about political change when participants had started ignoring the rulebook—“no judgments, no confrontations, no challenges to another woman’s experience”—and turned meetings into therapy sessions.<sup>289</sup> But CR’s non-confrontational ethos, guided by the principle that women’s experiences were for the most part similar to one another, itself presented shortcomings. CR supplied few, if any, tools for addressing factors, like race, that made the women occupying feminist spaces breathless in different ways, or more or less likely to let out a sigh of relief. Writing in 1980, Cherrie Moraga, a Chicana author and activist, described “another meeting” where matters of race and racism unsettled CR’s official breathing script:

I watch the white women shrink before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, “race,” the word, “color.” The pauses keeping the voice breathless, the bodies taut, erect—unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in

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<sup>286</sup> Nora Ephron, “On Consciousness-Raising,” in *Crazy Salad: Some Things About Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 71.

<sup>287</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 67–68. Janet L. Freedman argues in *Reclaiming the Feminist Vision: Consciousness-Raising and Small Group Practice* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014) that the women’s studies class, in its goals and methods, is a descendent of the CR meeting (104, 109).

<sup>288</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics*, 82.

<sup>289</sup> Ephron, “On Consciousness-Raising,” 73–74.

despair, to cry in regret. I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used.<sup>290</sup>

The bodies of all women present in this scene—those of white women and those of women of color—are presumably “taut, erect,” but for different reasons. The white women’s shrinking concurs with the felt awkwardness of formulating feminism as a struggle that encompasses the distinct realities of women of color. On the other hand, Moraga’s own body feels tense because, as hinted by the title of the anthology she edited with Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, women of color act as bridges as they carry the weight of a world in which white women can recognize themselves without being confronted with alterity. White women lose their composure and eloquence when they can no longer task women of color with producing continuity in a feminist project that doesn’t acknowledge the singularity of their experiences. As Moraga makes clear, the ability to experience cathartic breathing—to breathe deeply and to laugh, moan, and cry, all of which compress and/or extend the airways—was a matter of privilege among CR participants, one that was often contingent on the concealment of the breathing needs of women of color.<sup>291</sup>

In “This Bridge Called My Back,” an endurance performance presented at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2017, Madelyne Beckles literalized Moraga and Anzaldúa’s analogy between back and bridge, offering her breathing as evidence of the bodily strain of feminist-of-color advocacy.<sup>292</sup> On a pedestal placed in the center of a spacious gallery, Beckles, a black woman, made of her body a bridge, her palms and knees acting as pillars, her legs and feet as stabilizing cables. She was naked.

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<sup>290</sup> Cherrie Moraga, “Preface,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), xv.

<sup>291</sup> See Mario Filippelli, Riccardo Pellegrino, Iacopo Iandelli, Gianni Misuri, Joseph R. Rodarte, Roberto Duranti, Vito Brusasco, Giorgio Scano, “Respiratory Dynamics during Laughter,” *Journal of Applied Physiology* 90, no. 4 (2001): 1441–1446.

<sup>292</sup> Madelyne Beckles, “This Bridge Called My Back,” performance at the Art Gallery of Ontario, May 4, 2017.

The soundtrack was a looped recording on which Beckles, with a deep, raspy voice, read excerpts from Moraga and Anzaldúa’s collection. Between each reading segment played Dionne Warwick’s 1963 song “Don’t Make Me Over,” whose chorus goes, “Accept me for what I am / Accept me for the things that I do / Accept me for what I am / Accept me for the things that I do.” Over two hours, Beckles tried to hold her pose, but her body got shakier. She adjusted the angle of her shoulders, the position of her knees. Her body, just like a bridge meant to bear climatological fluctuations, wasn’t inert but supple, adaptable. Beckles occasionally resorted to what in yoga is colloquially called child’s pose—but even then, she could be walked over. In between Beckles’ postural adjustments, her breathing was especially noticeable. Her lower belly went up and down with decreasing regularity and increasing theatricality. Beckles’ breathing magnified just how hard it had been for someone like Moraga to remain focused in racially stratified feminist spaces.

In the Second Wave, debates over not only hierarchies within but also access to feminist spaces played out in the open air, in festivals that took place beyond the primarily urban and suburban settings of CR meetings. Take the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which ran from 1976 to 2015. Some accounts of this festival emphasize the erotic force it unleashed. “Festies” and “crew members” generated and felt this erotic force as they performed manual labor, cooked together, sang and danced among other (naked) bodies, and had sex with each other or found themselves in proximity to other women experiencing sexual pleasure.<sup>293</sup> At Michfest, feminists sought to accommodate the kind of breath celebrated by European feminist philosophers working in French—the “*bouffée d’amour*” (deep breath or burst of love) that, according to Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, lesbians feel in their throats and brachial plexuses; or the “fluid density” that, for Luce Irigaray, “leaves space for every growth,” a “matter that, not yet divided in itself, permits

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<sup>293</sup> See Ann Cvetkovich and Selena Wahng, “Don’t Stop the Music: Roundtable Discussion with Workers from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival,” *GLQ* 7, no. 1 (2001): 131–151.

sharing.”<sup>294</sup> Still, not everyone could share the air of Michfest. As open letters published in the feminist periodical *Off Our Backs* testify, Michfest, under the guise of allotting a space in which women could let loose, reinforced racist, transphobic, ableist, and sexually normative (e.g. anti-BDSM) policies.<sup>295</sup> Until the festival’s demise, organizers responded to criticism by insisting that the role of Michfest was neither to fix a racist, transphobic, ableist, and sexually normative world nor to provide an alternative world to *all* those who were oppressed.<sup>296</sup> The role of the festival, organizers believed, was to build a community to which “womyn-born womyn” could return annually.<sup>297</sup>

In light of Michfest, the speech that Bernice Johnson Reagon, an African American composer and scholar, delivered at the 1980 West Coast Women’s Music Festival reads as a prescient critique of the policing of feminist breathing rooms. According to Reagon, a festival could technically, better than CR, enable women to perform coalitional work, for such work “is not done

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<sup>294</sup> Wittig and Zeig, *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*, 43; Irigaray, *L’oubli de l’air chez Martin Heidegger*, 9–16; Irigaray, *Être deux*, 11; Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 2.

<sup>295</sup> See Jad Keres, “Open Letter to Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival,” *Off Our Backs* 23, no. 9 (1993): 33; Pat Groves and Patricia Murphy, “Disability and Nudity: Can All Womyn Find Comfort at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival?”, *Off Our Backs* 32, nos. 11–12 (2002): 36–38.

<sup>296</sup> Trudy Ring, “This Year’s Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival Will Be the Last,” *Advocate*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.advocate.com/michfest/2015/04/21/years-michigan-womyns-music-festival-will-be-last>.

<sup>297</sup> “Festival Reaffirms Commitment to Womyn-Born Womyn: A Statement from Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival,” *Off Our Backs* 29, no. 9 (1999): 8.

L. A. Kauffman, in *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2017), views Michfest as part of a group of counter-institutions developed since the mid-to-late 1970s. Around that time, she writes,

the sense of hunkering down for the long haul prompted many [radicals] to turn their energies building alternative, community-based, and counter-institutions, acting to create change at a more modest scale in their immediate surroundings. Environmentalists opened local ecology centers, set up recycling projects, and organized food cooperatives, some of which still exist to this day, such as the Park Slope Food Coop (founded in 1973). Feminists, and especially lesbian-feminists, built a nation-wide network of cultural institutions including women’s cafes and bookstores and events like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which ran from 1976 to 2015; they also created battered women’s shelters, feminist health clinics, and self-defense classes with a feminist bent. The period from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s could be called the age of progressive institution-building. (41)

in your home. ... And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do.”<sup>298</sup> Building coalitions pushed women beyond the limits of their bodies, but this ecstasy differed from the excitement of rebirth within Free Space. Coalitional work made women feel a heightened sense of risk, as if they were about to die.<sup>299</sup> As such, Reagon formulated coalitional work in terms of showing up for difficult breathing rather than individual and collective catharsis. In doing so, Reagon drew on a tradition, well represented in the chants featured in feminist anthologies, which generates collectivities by working through breathing asymmetries.<sup>300</sup> California’s Yosemite National Forest, where Reagon spoke, literalized the extreme discomfort from which coalitions arose. The site’s high altitude made breathing hard, especially so for the uninitiated:

There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can’t get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they’re going to do when they can’t think properly. I’m serious about that. There are probably some people here who can breathe, because you were born in high altitudes and you have big lung cavities. But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain—and the group of people who are feeling fine are trying to figure out why you’re

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<sup>298</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 359.

<sup>299</sup> Cricket Keating reads Reagon’s address as a critique of CR in “Building Coalitional Consciousness,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 93–94.

<sup>300</sup> See Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1970); Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back*; Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls*; Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar, eds., “Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives,” special issue, *Feminist Review* 17 (1984).

More recently, Alexis Pauline Gumbs has drawn on evocative phrases by African American female figures—“We are the ones we’ve been waiting for” (June Jordan); “My people are free” (Harriet Tubman)—to compose the meditation scores of her hybrid, online-offline Black Feminist Breathing Chorus. Gumbs’ project attests to the significance of breathing even in the virtual spaces of feminism. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “About,” Black Feminist Breathing Chorus, 2014, <http://blackfeministbreathing.tumblr.com/about>.

staggering around, and that's what this workshop is about this morning.<sup>301</sup>

Breathing, as Reagon here politicizes it, registers with unusual intensity the vital and dangerous or frustrating aspects of being in relation that coalitional feminism keeps entwined.<sup>302</sup> Reagon distinguishes between two camps based on the smoothness or strenuousness of their breathing. Women of color appear to compose one of these camps, and white women the other. And yet it's hard to know for sure which group can breathe well and which group cannot. Either women of color, who through coalitional work have been conditioned to breathe limited air, are the more skillful breathers, confused by the staggering of their white counterparts; or, as Moraga might instead say, white women have an easier time breathing because, unlike women of color, they haven't already been exhausted by coalitional work. Perhaps Reagon isn't being so figurative. Racial segregation has been recognized since the 1960s as a key factor in the higher rates of respiratory afflictions like asthma among people of color; and white people have historically had more access to sites of leisure away from urban toxicity.<sup>303</sup> Whichever interpretation best captures the nuances of Reagon's example, her point seems to be that all people within radically inclusive feminist spaces

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<sup>301</sup> Reagon, "Coalition Politics," 356.

<sup>302</sup> Reagon belongs to a critical genealogy that doesn't articulate feminism as ideological consensus building. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek claims in *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) that feminism can only contest the persistence of white male solipsism in so far as its investment in sexuality and embodiment comes with a refusal to flatten sexual and racial difference—that is, in so far as this investment is formulated in coalitional rather than universal terms (1, 2, 52, 183). Other scholars, such as Nancy K. Miller in "Jason Dreams, Victoria Works Out," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, eds. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), insist that aggression, antagonism, and alienation are of value to feminism (170). Sianne Ngai similarly claims in *Ugly Feelings* that when "our sense of ourselves as a collective is actively produced by its various bad and good embodiments, rather than preestablished as a quality for us to passively mold ourselves after or secondarily reflect, the concept becomes more plastic and viable for transformation—though indeed more unstable" (163).

<sup>303</sup> See Andrea Lopez, Alison Cohen, Ami Zota, Rachel Morello-Frosch, "Richmond Health Survey Report," 2009, <http://www.cbecal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Richmond-Health-Survey1.pdf>.

should make efforts in order for anti-hierarchical breathing to become second nature. Effective feminist spaces, as Reagon imagines them, should use as the ground zero for politics what Stacy Alaimo, in her ecological theory of feminism, calls “the uneven distribution of risk”—specifically here the risk of being open and vulnerable to others and the world that comes with breathing, but that certain bodies disproportionately absorb.<sup>304</sup>

Despite efforts like Reagon’s to reconfigure and reinvigorate feminist spaces, many of the women who had access to these spaces found them, by the mid 1970s, increasingly and unrewardingly difficult to inhabit. Alluding to the internal disputes and general political losses of 1975, Betty Friedan argued in her “Open Letter to the Women’s Movement” that the “diversion into in-fighting and dead ends [had in fact] been a by-product of the opposition economic equality … [faced] from big business, church and state.”<sup>305</sup> Although or maybe because drawbacks were partly out of feminists’ control, activism no longer appeared, to women like Shulamith Firestone, worth the trouble. As she became unable to sustain the fiery, radical activism for which she had been known in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Firestone encountered the world as a series of “airless spaces.”<sup>306</sup> The title of her autobiographical short story collection, *Airless Spaces*, refers to the sites,

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<sup>304</sup> Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” in *Material Feminisms*, 261.

<sup>305</sup> Betty Friedan, “An Open Letter to the Women’s Movement—1976,” in *It Changed my Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement* (New York: Random House, 1976), 472. Internal disputes and political losses included a leadership crisis within the National Organization for Women (NOW) and a failed attempt to get the progressive states of New York and New Jersey to ratify the Equal Rights Amendments (ERA).

<sup>306</sup> Much of Firestone’s activism took place under the banner of the New York Radical Women, of whom she was a founding member. See Shulamith Firestone, “The Women’s Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View,” in *Notes from the First Year*, Redstockings Archives for Action, 1968, <http://www.redstockings.org/index.php/adp-catalog/notes-from-the-first-year>.

*Airless Spaces* tells a particularly brutal version of the decline of second-wave feminism. Alluding to Vivian Gornick’s writings, Jane Elliott proposes somewhat less dramatically, in “The Currency of Feminist Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006), that feminism waned when it “stopped being exciting and came to feel boring and repetitive instead” (1697).

including the mental hospitals, where she ended up after the publication of her only other monograph, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*.<sup>307</sup> Holding *Airless Spaces*, Sianne Ngai writes, feels “like holding a representation of the lost history … of a feminist activist and intellectual.”<sup>308</sup> Throughout *Airless Spaces*, Firestone appears to be, in Kathi Weeks’ words, “no longer an agent, or by this point even a subject, of feminist history.”<sup>309</sup> “So crushed by the burdens of the present,” she cannot bear the label of feminist, let alone imagine feminist futurity.<sup>310</sup> For Firestone, the airlessness of life beyond feminism isn’t strictly a metaphor. In the story “I Remember Valerie,” for instance, Firestone foregrounds respiratory dysfunctions like “larynx trouble” and “bronchial pneumonia” to describe Valerie Solanas, another figure relegated to the margins of feminism after the publication of a groundbreaking text—the *SCUM Manifesto*, in her case.<sup>311</sup> Firestone and Solanas had a hard time putting up with organized feminism, but the airlessness they experienced outside of its confines proved even more debilitating.

The cases I tackle in the remainder of this chapter offer counter-narratives or alternative poetics to Firestone’s morbid worldly orientation and fatalism with regards to airlessness.<sup>312</sup> Feminists had to adjust but not necessarily disavow political breathing when feminist breathing rooms, as refuges from the world and tools for changing it, underwent radical mutations or became even more exclusive. A debilitating world has made necessary the production of new physical and

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<sup>307</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *Airless Spaces* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1998); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

<sup>308</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Shulamith Firestone’s *Airless Spaces*,” *Arcade*, August 31, 2012, <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/shulamith-firestone%28%99s-airless-spaces>.

<sup>309</sup> Kathi Weeks, “The Vanishing Dialectic: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (2015): 745.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 746.

<sup>311</sup> Firestone, *Airless Spaces*, 131–132; Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, [1967] 2013); Jennifer Latson, “This Is Why a Radical Playwright Shot Andy Warhol,” *Time*, June 3, 2015, <http://time.com/3901488/andy-warhol-valerie-solanas/>.

<sup>312</sup> The last cluster of stories in *Airless Spaces* is titled “Suicides I Have Known,” a phrase that reduces individuals to their deaths.

discursive contexts, often in the periphery of traditional feminist spaces, in order for political breathing to make sense again.

## II. “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?”: Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*

“I’m available to any and every adventure of the human breath,” says Minnie Ransom, Claybourne, Georgia’s fabled healer in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*.<sup>313</sup> *An adventure of the breath*: this phrase serves as an ideal descriptor for a novel that zooms in on breathing to convey the bodily and psychic labor of living through the inflation and deflation of social and political movements. *The Salt Eaters* indeed concerns itself with conditions of debilitation tied to the decline of the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>314</sup> In the preface to her 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*, Bambara famously proposed that “what [characterized] the [1960s] movement ... [was] a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other.”<sup>315</sup> Thirteen years later, Claudia Tate questioned Bambara on the status of the “revolutionary fervor of the [1960s].”<sup>316</sup> Bambara was quick to diagnose, in the 1970s and early 1980s, a general decline in political ardor.<sup>317</sup> But instead of blaming this decline on the “refocusing on the self” that followed the 1960s, she

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<sup>313</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 56.

<sup>314</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyway,” galley proof, 1979, box 7, Toni Cade Bambara Collection, Part I, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta.

Scholars have recognized Bambara’s dexterity in capturing the ethos of the late 1970s and early 1980s, specifically with regards to matters of race. Susan Willis, in *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), notes that *The Salt Eaters* compellingly explores the legacy of 1960s activism. Gloria T. Hull goes further in “What It Is I Think She’s Doing Anyhow: A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*,” in *Home Girls*. She argues that *The Salt Eaters* “accomplishes even better for the 1980s what *Native Son* did for the 1940s, *Invisible Man* for the 1950s, or *Song of Solomon* for the 1970s: it fixes our present and challenges the way to the future” (124).

<sup>315</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, “Preface,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (Middlesex: A Mentor Book, 1970), 7.

<sup>316</sup> Toni Cade Bambara and Claudia Tate, “Interview,” in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (London: Continuum, 1983), 13.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

maintained that this self had been in need of care, for it is, “after all, the main instrument for self, group, and social transformation.”<sup>318</sup> Ideally, as we learn in *The Salt Eaters*, the 1970s would have dealt with the damages of the thunderous 1960s. The 1970s would have “[drained] the poison, [repaired] damaged tissues, [retrained] the heartworks, [and realigned] the spine.”<sup>319</sup> But they didn’t: the “heart/brain/gut muscles atrophied anyhow” (258).

In *The Salt Eaters*, Velma Henry, a feminist and Civil Rights activist, feels weary as a result of an ever-deferred revolution and of the casual and not-so-casual sexism she has experienced in her romantic relationship with Obie and as a patient of Dr. Julius Meadows. Velma isn’t quite asphyxiated, as was Firestone around that time, but her breathing outside of the activist spaces to which she had acclimated is disorganized: “Wasn’t sure whether it was time to breathe in or breathe out. Everything was off, out of whack, the relentless logic she’d lived by sprung.”<sup>320</sup> Velma becomes lost when the sequence of quick-paced actions and events of radical activism no longer holds. Velma, who has just survived a suicide attempt, wonders how to keep breathing and how to frame her life in political terms now that her activism has burned her out but hasn’t, in her view, sufficiently impacted the world. *The Salt Eaters* serves as our starting point for investigating the reorganization of political breathing in a context that feels disorienting not because it introduces individuals to an entirely new reality, but quite the contrary because it confronts them with a world that hasn’t been significantly transformed by the radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s.

*The Salt Eaters* takes place in a meeting room of the Southwest Community Infirmary. No planning or organizing meeting is happening in this room. No policies or politics are being

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid. Polemics that, against Bambara’s reasoning, frame the turn to the self of the 1970s as a foreclosure of politics include Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19–27; Jessa Crispin, *Why I Am Not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2017).

<sup>319</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 258.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 5.

discussed. The novel recounts a ritual: Velma's healing.<sup>321</sup> Minnie conducts the ritual, aided by twelve auxiliary healers called the Master's Mind. The healing, which spans the entire novel despite being a relatively brief event, is punctuated by spun-out, impressionistic flashbacks and interludes that showcase the viewpoints of Claybourne's inhabitants and visitors. According to Bambara, her novel formalizes the community we encounter through Velma's healing.<sup>322</sup> Gail Wilentz illustrates this phenomenon with a spatial metaphor: "Two hours of a traditional healing at a community hospital extend out into concentric circles of the lifeblood of an African American community."<sup>323</sup> Before the 1980s, Bambara was mainly known as the editor of the anthology *The Black Woman* and the author of short story collections like *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*.<sup>324</sup> She adopted the novel form of *The Salt Eaters* "out of a problem solving impulse—what would it take to bridge

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<sup>321</sup> I look at rituals, as they pertain to *The Salt Eaters*, through the lens of Beverly J. Robinson's work on Afro diasporic theater practices. In "The Sense of Self in Ritualizing New Performance Spaces for Survival," in *Black Theater: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paula Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), Robinson defines ritual as

a recurring pattern of action that represents the desire to begin life anew, and the need to find some way of expressing that desire. If a sense of self based on identity and heritage could endure the Atlantic crossing from Africa to the Americas and Caribbean shores, then the memories of home of every African bound for slave labor over the age of ten would be the rituals. These rituals, sacred and secular, would include knowing the names of your gods, your ancestors, and yourself, and knowing your community and clan affiliation. You would also know your native language and the social prerequisites that prevailed in your home community; and you would understand your place in a culture where oral tradition prevailed over written ones. (332)

<sup>322</sup> Margot Anne Kelley, in "Damballah Is the First Law of the Thermodynamics": Modes of Access to Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," in *African American Review* 27, no. 3 (1993), notices that "most of the characters privilege relationships and relational ways of knowing," and that Velma "is created for us relationally—through the images offered by other characters and through her own reveries, clairvoyant dreams, and presentiments" (485).

<sup>323</sup> Gail Wilentz, *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>324</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *Gorilla, My Love* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive: Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1977).

the gap, to merge those ... frames of reference, to fuse ... camps.”<sup>325</sup> Minnie as well as a racially heterogeneous “traveling troupe of seven women known as Sister of the Yam, Sister of the Plantain, Sister of the Rice, Sister of the Corn,” and so on helped Bambara, who identified as a “Pan-Africanist-socialist-feminist,” “argue the bridging of several camps: artists and activists, materialists and spiritualists, old and young, and of course the communities of color.”<sup>326</sup> While “the short story is a piece of work,” Bambara surmised, “the novel is a way of life.”<sup>327</sup> The novel emerges as Bambara’s answer to the problem of lives being lived in isolation from one another in a context where the viability of activist spaces is being interrogated. The novel of healing functions as an alternative or meta-breathing room, a feminist capacity that brings together individuals across races, faiths, and generations, even the politically alienated.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Bambara and Tate, “Interview,” 16.

<sup>326</sup> Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyway.”

Interviewed by Beverly Guy-Sheftall in “Toni Cade Bambara, Black Feminist Foremother,” in *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*, eds. Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), Bambara refutes the idea that being “both a feminist and a warrior of the race struggle” might constitute a dilemma:

I’m not aware of what the problem is for people who consider it a dilemma. I don’t know what they’re thinking because it’s not as if you’re a black *or* a woman. I don’t find any basic contradiction of any tension between being a feminist, being a pan-Africanist, being a black nationalist, being an internationalist, being a socialist, and being a woman in North America. (125, italics in the original)

<sup>327</sup> Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyway.”

<sup>328</sup> Elliott Butler-Evans, in *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), argues that scholarship on *The Salt Eaters* has prioritized the novel’s cultural and historical references to African American culture over its feminist content (171). I agree. Still, relevant feminist readings of *The Salt Eaters* include Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Toni Cade Bambara. Free To Be Anywhere in the Universe,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 229–231; Carmen Rose Marshall, *Black Professional Women in Recent American Fiction* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), esp. 107; Venetria K. Patton, “Othermothers as Elders and Culture Bearers in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Salt Eaters*,” in *The Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women’s Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 31–50.

Although *The Salt Eaters* is meant to be radically inclusive, its calculated intricacy might alienate some readers. In Valerie Boyd’s “‘She was just outrageously brilliant’: Toni Morrison Remembers Toni Cade Bambara,” in *Savoring the Salt*, Toni Morrison (Bambara’s editor) notes,

Bambara, as Derek Alwes aptly points out, codes isolation as deadly.<sup>329</sup> The fantasy that prevails in Velma's early suicide attempt scene indeed pertains to being "sealed—sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in"—and to being "unavailable at last, sealed in and the noise of the world, the garbage, locked out."<sup>330</sup> Yet, Alwes' assertion that the healing envisaged as an antidote to isolation entails scrapping "personal ... liberty" and appropriating a ready-made collective identity misses the full scale of the ritual's effects.<sup>331</sup> Not only is Velma transformed by the healing, but so is her community. For example, the healing alters the breathing of Nadeen, a patient of the infirmary who finds herself unable to witness the ritual passively. Absorbed by the healing, she "[breathes] shallowly," "oblivious to the sharp intake of breath, the gasps, the stirrings around her as others [begin] to take notice."<sup>332</sup> This experience, Nadeen deduces, confirms that she's witnessing "the real thing," as opposed to something like "revival healing," which "[is] just not it" (111-112).

When it comes to Velma in particular, the healing accomplishes first and foremost crisis management: it enables her to relearn how to breathe. Velma at first "[inhales] in gasps, and [exhales] shudderingly" (6). She then starts "breathing in and out in almost regular rhythm," but remains distracted, "wondering if it [is] worth submitting herself to this ordeal" (7). Her distracted musings eventually give in to a kind of hypnosis kick-started by her attunement to breathing:

Rumor was these sessions never lasted more than ten or fifteen minutes anyway. It wouldn't kill her to go along with the thing. Wouldn't kill her. She almost laughed. She might have

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*The Salt Eaters* ... was the third book I did. It was very, very hard to edit that book—meaning make suggestions—because she's so tight... You can't take anything out without the whole thing collapsing, you know. She's very, very intricate, and almost cunning, in her structure. I used to complain a lot because I said she never waited for the lame and the halt, the reader. If they weren't with her, she left them behind. (90)

<sup>329</sup> Derek Alwes, "The Burden of Liberty: Choice in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," *African American Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 454–455.

<sup>330</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 19.

<sup>331</sup> Alwes, "The Burden of Liberty," 454–455.

<sup>332</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 111, henceforth cited in parentheses.

died. *I might have died.* It was an incredible thought now. She sat there holding on to *that* thought, waiting for Minnie Ransom to quit playing to the gallery and get on with it. Sat there, every cell flooded with the light of that idea, with the rhythm of her own breathing, with the sensation of having not died at all at any time, not on the attic stairs, not at the kitchen drawer, not in the ambulance, not on the operating table, not in that other place where the mud mothers were painting the walls of the cave and calling to her, not in the sheets she trashed out in strangling her legs, her rib cage, fighting off the woman with snakes in her hair, the crowds that moved in and out of each other around the bed trying to tell her about the difference between snakes and serpents, the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent. (7–8, italics in the original)

Velma, in this instance of free-indirect speech, holds on to a thought and feels impatient—until she properly concentrates on the rhythmicity of her breathing. At that point, she experiences a sensory overload that runs through almost every one of the novel’s subsequent pages. Being “in the zone” or having reached a “flow state,” Velma is at once acutely open and vulnerable *and* optimally able to marshal the energy supplied by Minnie and the auxiliary healers.<sup>333</sup> The healing makes potent the bodily cost of political activism and events past and future at the same time as it works to alleviate injuries.<sup>334</sup> Strikingly, as Velma settles into a breathing pattern regular enough to induce flow, the

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<sup>333</sup> On flow and the zone, see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 2008); Paul Stenner, “Being in the Zone and Vital Subjectivity: On the Liminal Sources of Sport and Art,” in *Culture, Identity and Intense Performativity: Being in the Zone*, eds. Tim Jordan, Brigid McClure, and Kath Woodward (New York: Routledge, 2017), 10–31.

<sup>334</sup> In her notes (“What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyway”), Bambara considers “In the Last Quarter” as a potential title for her novel: “[This title] is to remind myself of the period I’m ‘reading,’ to remind myself to script flashforwards as well as flashbacks, to remind myself that powerful events of the 1980s and 1990s (nuclear explosions, comet splashdowns, asteroid collisions) resonate in the

novel's prose becomes hazy, hasty. The lengthy sentence that concludes the excerpt above hoards clauses without first identifying Velma as the subject who is feeling, thinking, and acting. As shown in the previous chapter of this dissertation, writing with or about regular breathing doesn't necessarily stabilize prose or poetry. At the beginning of *The Salt Eaters*, the regularization of breathing sets the healing in motion; the healing in turn produces an affective, cognitive, and bodily confusion reflected in Bambara's prose.

The healing reaches its pinnacle in a passage that mirrors the beginning of the ritual. This new passage, too, is set in motion by Velma's heightened attention to breathing—in this case to the sensation of Velma's warm breath. And this passage also conveys sensory overload:

Day of Restoration, Velma muttered, feeling the warm breath of Minnie Ransom on her, lending her something to work the bellows of her lungs with. To keep on dancing like the sassy singer said. Dancing on toward the busy streets alive with winti, coyote and cunnie rabbit and turtle and caribou as if heading to the Ark in the new tidal wave, racing in the direction of resurrection as you should be and she had a choice running running in the streets naming things—cunnie rabbit called impala called little deer called trickster called brother called change—naming things amidst the rush and dash of tires, feet, damp dresses swishing by, the Spirits of Blessing way outrunning disaster, outrunning jinns, shetnoi, soubaka, succubi, innocuii, incubi, nefarii, the demons midwifed, suckled and fathered by the one in ten Mama warned about who come to earth for the express purpose of making trouble for the other nine. Demons running the streets defying Earth Mother and Heavenly Father and defiling the universe in a stampede rush, rending, tearing creature ideas jumping through billboards and screw-thy-neighbor paperbacks, the modern grimoires of the

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present." Past and future pull the present in different directions, thereby curtailing or expanding the possibilities offered by this present.

passing age.<sup>335</sup>

The feeling of Minnie's breath on Velma enables the latter to imagine performing various actions: dancing, racing, running (or in fact “running running”), rushing, rending, and naming. The beliefs, Afro diasporic or otherwise, that undergird the healing make appearances throughout this mix of creolized and nonreferential languages.<sup>336</sup> “Jinns” is a term for intelligent spirits in Arabian and Muslim mythologies. “Innocuii” and “nefarii,” stylized versions of *innocuous* and *nefarious*, aren’t connected to any particular set of practices or beliefs, but they evoke the healing’s status as a double-edged sword—a status to which I return later in this section. The largely phatic language on display here—a series of words that convey, if not always decipherable meaning, a cadence—recalls the Pentecostal practice of speaking in tongues, which, as Ashon Crawley notes, mobilizes breath to perform an “incomprehensible blackness” and orient black people, together, toward life.<sup>337</sup> This being said, this excerpt is a far cry from a straightforward summary of the healing. It’s unclear what a straightforward summary of the healing would even look like. At every turn, *The Salt Eaters* eschews teleological narrative, in as much as the “Day of Restoration” to which Velma alludes cannot be grasped in eschatological terms. Nor can Restoration be understood as a paradigm that promises bodily and spiritual integrity and that, in Mary Daly’s words, “[conceals] the real nature of the

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<sup>335</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 263–264.

<sup>336</sup> See Ann Folwell Stanford, “Mechanisms of Disease: African American Women Writers, Social Pathologies, and the Limits of Medicine,” *NWSA Journal* 6, no. 1 (1994): 33. In *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Rememberances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nkwankwo explain that Afro-Atlantic communities engage in rituals that rely on the “abstract expressiveness” of dancing bodies and on “nonverbal, communicative procedure”—features that are all on display in Minnie and Velma’s breathing-driven ritual (80–81).

Anne Wicke, in “Translating the Salt,” in *Savoring the Salt*, speaks to the challenges of translating a novel that produces its own language and that weaves together a multiplicity of voices (81).

<sup>337</sup> Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 202, 207, 219–220.

breakdown it pretends to mend.”<sup>338</sup> Practices of breathing reorganize Velma and foster connections with the individuals who surround her. And breathing, as a material for mending, for quilting, crafts or repairs vectors of (self-)relation that remain fleeting and fragile.

To be reeducated into politics, Velma needs to do more than relearn how to breathe, on her own and with others, outside of the activist circles on which she relied in the 1960s and early 1970s. The adjusted political breathing in which Velma takes part also consists in enacting a figurative breath, or adopting an orientation toward political futurity despite the world’s indifference to her actions. The distinction “between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt,” mentioned at the beginning of the healing, indexes the imperative to affirm a political present and future after the heyday of second-wave feminism and the Civil Rights movement. Turning into salt refers to what happens to Lot’s wife, a figure first mentioned in Genesis 19, when, instead of fleeing the city of Sodom as God is about to destroy it, she looks back. Lot’s wife is calcified for defying a prohibition against longing for a doomed way of life. Martin Harries argues that her defiance anchors 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century models of destructive spectatorship—models that stress “the potentially self-destructive nature of retrospection, as if looking backward posed dangers to the self, as if to look backward were in itself a form of masochism.”<sup>339</sup> Velma, perhaps indeed masochistically, has a hard time letting go of the bad feelings brought about by political shortcomings. Although Bambara doesn’t caution against taking the time to feel the impact of political losses, she explains in her writing notes that “without a belief in the capacity for transformation one can become ossified.”<sup>340</sup>

Now, eating salt alludes, among other things, to the novel’s communal project. Velma’s

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<sup>338</sup> Daly, *Pure Lust*, 130, 136.

<sup>339</sup> Martin Harries, *Forgetting Lot’s Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 15–16.

<sup>340</sup> Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyway.”

godmother, Sophie Heywood (nicknamed M'Dear), posits that “you never really know a person until you’ve eaten salt together.”<sup>341</sup> *The Salt Eaters* underscores not only the sweetness of being in relation—what Avery F. Gordon calls the “sensuality” of life inside and outside of social movements—but also the bitterness, the sourness, the more or less savory aspects of it all.<sup>342</sup> Applying salt, for its part, points to a remedy, a method for decontaminating wounds, though not without pain. Salt can be found in every pantry, but it doesn’t come with a posology. And as Daddy Dolphy, Sophie’s partner, explains, salt “helps neutralize the venom;” “to neutralize the serpent’s another matter.”<sup>343</sup> It’s one thing to keep breathing in a toxic world—a world plagued by ambient sexism and racism, spoiled by the threat of a nuclear disaster and the reality of chemical spills.<sup>344</sup> It’s another thing to infuse the world with feminist vitality, such that it might become more livable, more hospitable.<sup>345</sup>

“Cure,” Eli Clare argues, is “slippery:” “cure saves lives; cure manipulates lives; cure prioritizes some lives over others; cure makes profits; cure justifies violence; cure promises

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<sup>341</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 147.

<sup>342</sup> Avery F. Gordon, “Something More Powerful Than Skepticism,” in *Savoring the Salt*, 187.

<sup>343</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 258.

<sup>344</sup> The novel was published one year after the Three Mile Island partial nuclear meltdown, in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania.

<sup>345</sup> On this matter, Stanford writes in “Mechanisms of Disease” that

*The Salt Eaters* rests on the assumption that the world is sick and that in order to survive, human beings must be about the business of healing it through social, political, cultural, and spiritual channels. There is an ecology at stake, however. On the one hand, when individuals ignore their own health—be that spiritual, physical, or emotional—they cannot fully engage in working toward a more healthy world. On the other hand, the notion of a privatized, individual health divorced from community is an illusion. (32)

See also Susan B. Thistlethwaite, “God and Her Survival in a Nuclear Age,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 1 (1988): 87.

The idea that politics consists in making the world more livable and hospitable resonates with Jasbir K. Puar’s argument, in “Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 19, no. 2 (2009), that conviviality as an ethical orientation allows bodies to “come together and dissipate through intensification and vulnerabilities” (169). Intrinsic to Puar’s argument is the notion that politics, rather than negating vulnerability, must accommodate our being vulnerable together.

resolution to body-mind loss.”<sup>346</sup> The healing in *The Salt Eaters* constitutes a precarious and hazardous cure against political impotence. The novel opens with Minnie Ransom’s question to Velma Henry: “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?”<sup>347</sup> Minnie’s question recurs, slightly tweaked, throughout the novel—“Can you afford to be whole?” Minnie, for instance, asks Velma (106). “As I said,” Minnie clarifies, “folks come in here moaning and carrying on and *say* they want to be healed. But like the wisdom warns, ‘Doan letcha mouf gitcha in what ya backbone caint stand’” (9, italics in the original). She further warns, “Just so’s you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well” (10). Minnie goes back to the interrogative mode toward the end of the novel: “Choose your cure, sweetheart. Decide what you want to do with wholeness. … What will you do when you are well?” (220) A healer’s cautiousness about being well and being whole might appear counterintuitive. It’s not. Staying unwell, however masochistic it might be, would in a way exempt Velma from active political struggle and its dangers. If being well and being whole imply not just having relearned how to breathe but also having to breathe feminist vitality into the world, then the success of the healing exposes Velma to the risk of getting hurt and being disappointed once again.

Susan Willis criticizes *The Salt Eaters* on the basis that “for all its yearning and insight, the novel fails to culminate in revolution, fails even to suggest how social change might be produced.”<sup>348</sup> This is true, to a point. Narratively speaking, *The Salt Eaters* doesn’t lead to a revolution. But the novel, which as we’ve seen emerged out of a desire to address the problem of isolation in the wake of 1960s and early-1970s radical activism, does convey a vision for reestablishing conditions in which activists can once again bear the thought of revolution. As Ann Folwell Stanford says of

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<sup>346</sup> Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xvi.

<sup>347</sup> Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 3, henceforth cited in parentheses.

<sup>348</sup> Willis, *Specifying*, 129.

Velma's healing (and the same could be said of the novel), it "[prepares] ... for the difficult world-healing work ahead."<sup>349</sup> Feminist breathing after the Second Wave, as it unfolds in *The Salt Eaters*, encompasses both a communally orchestrated retraining of breathing, which serves as a prep course for a return to activism, and the expression of a vital breath or revolutionary impulse that, in the name of making the world ultimately more breathable, destabilizes the provisional wellness and wholeness afforded by the healing. The sacrifice, Bambara insists, is worth it: feminists *ought to* try to reencounter the world as something breathtaking or elating, rather than something that sucks the air out of them.

### III. "Who will make houses of air with their words?": Linda Hogan's Poetry

Chickasaw, ecofeminist poet, novelist, and memoirist Linda Hogan, who has influenced and been influenced by feminist-of-color writers like Bambara, has also mapped out, in poetry and prose dating from the late 1970s to the 2010s, dynamics of political breathing under conditions of attrition.<sup>350</sup> Hogan, however, has focused not on the exhaustion resulting from the collapse of the activist spaces of the 1960s and early 1970s, but on the uprootedness and displacement tied to a longer colonial history that began at first contact and has continued, notably via oil extraction and transportation, uranium mining and nuclear tests, with the occupation and pollution of tribal lands.<sup>351</sup> Inflected by an indigenous worldview, Hogan's writing provides us with a model of feminist breathing that mixes concrete and symbolic kinds of breathing to the point where they are not just

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<sup>349</sup> Stanford, "Mechanisms of Disease," 35.

<sup>350</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), explains that Native American Literature has informed many U.S. writers, including feminists like Adrienne Rich and Toni Cade Bambara (4). In her interview with Tate, Bambara cites Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon Ortiz as influences (30).

<sup>351</sup> In a Native context, colonial violence and ecological degradation collide throughout histories of nuclear exploitation. See Fox, *A People's History of the Nuclear West*; Masco, *The Nuclear Borderlands*; Brugge, Yazzie-Lewis, and Benally Sr., eds., *The Navajo People and Uranium Mining*.

linked, as they are in *The Salt Eaters*, but indistinguishable. In this context, political breathing consists in occupying a grey zone, crafted through free verse, between the literal and the figurative, between various meanings of form, and between multiple scales in order to register the world's brokenness and potentially repair it.

Included in Hogan's colossal, career-spanning anthology *Dark. Sweet.: New and Selected Poetry*, the poem "V. Who Will Speak?" asks, "Who will make houses of air / with their words?"<sup>352</sup> The question is rhetorical: if anyone's words will make the world more breathable or at least generate breathing rooms within a toxic world, it will be the words of women, or more accurately feminists. Refusing to treat writing as any more abstract than other forms of activism, Hogan explains in *Dwellings* that her "spiritual history of the living world" is "the first part of a ceremony, [her] part in it."<sup>353</sup> A ceremony is a healing ritual enacted by many indigenous communities, peoples, and nations, one that has memorably been rendered in N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko's respective novels, *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*.<sup>354</sup> Ceremonies recapitulate histories across scales. They contain, in Hogan's words, "not just our own prayers and stories of what brought us to it, but also ... the unspoken records of history, the mythic past, and all the other lives connected to ours, our families, nations, and other creatures."<sup>355</sup> Epitomizing Hogan's assertion that "for Native peoples there is no difference between [the spiritual and the political]," ceremonies combine practices like chanting, drumming, dancing, and incantation into a "formal structure as holistic as the universe it

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<sup>352</sup> Hogan, *Dark. Sweet.*, 55.

<sup>353</sup> Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 37. "The purpose of traditional American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression," Allen writes in *The Sacred Hoop*; "ceremonial literature serves to redirect private emotion and integrate the energy generated by emotion within a cosmic framework" (55).

<sup>354</sup> N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Perennial Classics, [1968] 1999); Silko, *Ceremony*.

<sup>355</sup> Hogan, *Dwellings*, 37.

purports to reflect and respond to.”<sup>356</sup> For Hogan, ecofeminist writing and the ceremony it incepts make an intervention both somatic and atmospheric: they fashion houses of air amidst the expanding ruins of the European-American colonial project.

As they breathe, individuals encounter a scarred land and planet.<sup>357</sup> The poem “Morning’s Dance” presents respiration in a “land of heartbeats / land breathing” as a collective process that involves “the trees” and their “leaves” and is impacted by “sweet pollution.”<sup>358</sup> In another poem, “The Other Side,” the contaminated “air” and the “radiating soft new leaves” of tree branches that “[go] on breathing” tell “a story about the other side of creation:” a planetary destruction accelerated by inaction on the environmental politics front.<sup>359</sup> As the phrase “sweet pollution” and the use of contaminated matter as a storytelling device suggest, Hogan doesn’t uphold the fantasy of pristine, unadulterated land or nature. Betty Louise Bell observes that Hogan grasps “ordinary lives, the lives of Native Americans, [as] fragmented and forever [affected] by extraordinary losses;” accordingly, the survival of tribal peoples lies in “adaptations to loss that discover continuity and affirm life.”<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Barbara J. Cook, “From the Center of Tradition: An Interview with Linda Hogan,” in *From the Center of Tradition: Critical Perspectives on Linda Hogan*, ed. Barbara J. Cook (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003), 11; Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 62, 64; Katherine R. Chandler, “Terrestrial Spirituality,” in *From the Center of Tradition*, 24.

<sup>357</sup> In Hogan’s poetry, breathing and breath unmake boundaries between individuals and the world. *The human* and *the body* appear as prosthetic concepts whose undoing takes us to the land and the planet. Take the poem “Gentling the Human,” in *Dark. Sweet.* The speaker’s declaration that “a human is breath / current and tide” ratifies a process, initiated in the previous stanzas, through which “the human” becomes synonymous with atmosphere or vitality; it is equated with “clouds,” “lung,” “mist,” “heart,” “pulse,” and “spirit” (196–197). In another poem, “The Creation of Water and Light,” the “moment between breaths” represents an occasion for dilating or aerating—liquid and aerial imageries mingle—“the body,” which becomes linked, in a series of metaphors and metonymies, to mitosis, waves, the tide, and the thrust of sex (228–229).

<sup>358</sup> Hogan, *Dark. Sweet.*, 59.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>360</sup> Betty Louise Bell, “Introduction: Linda Hogan’s Lessons in Making Do,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 6, no. 3 (1994), 3.

In her novels, Hogan presents Native identity not as an immutable fact, but as the product of an adjustment to ever-changing circumstances. See Linda Hogan, *Mean Spirit* (New York:

By framing breathing today as an inevitable encounter with a toxicity with which people and peoples must compose, Hogan locates a politics of breathing in opposition to the purism that Alexis Shotwell describes as a “de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair.”<sup>361</sup> “To be against purity,” Shotwell insists, “is … not to be for pollution, harm, sickness, or premature death. It is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled and homogenous.”<sup>362</sup> If, as the poem “Dark. Sweet. The Full Eclipse.” suggests, “planetary breathing” is “splendid,” it is nonetheless increasingly labored, erratic—a fact that no politics can ignore or bypass.<sup>363</sup>

Among breathing beings, Native women, according to Hogan, are especially sensitive to the world’s brokenness. She recounts in her “native memoir,” *The Woman Who Watches Over The World*, that after spending years learning from, speaking with, befriending, and seeking out medicines for, the pain that had taken up residence in her body, she adopted earth, water, light and air as her doctors.<sup>364</sup> “It wasn’t healing I found or a life free of pain,” she specifies, “but a kind of love and kinship with a similarly broken world” (16). Hogan was inspired by a clay figurine of a *bryja* (Spanish for woman healer, soothsayer, or witch) she once bought and had shipped (17). When the clay woman arrived, “she wasn’t whole:” her legs were broken (18). Soon “she began to fall apart in other ways:” her nose fell off, then one of her hands (18). “The woman who watches the world,” Hogan concludes, “was broken” (18). How could she not be? This woman made of clay, of earth, is an all-too-potent figure for the ruptured link between “the flesh people” and the land (18).

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Antheneum, 1990); Linda Hogan, *Solar Storm* (New York: Scribner, 1995); Linda Hogan, *Power* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

<sup>361</sup> Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>363</sup> Hogan, *Dark. Sweet.*, 362.

<sup>364</sup> Linda Hogan, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 16, henceforth cited in parentheses.

While it signals a particular sensibility to brokenness, Native femaleness also constitutes, for Hogan, a creative force in an aesthetic and a metaphysical sense. Like Paula Gunn Allen, a writer and critic of Laguna, Sioux, and Lebanese decent, Hogan argues a privileged link between women and ceremonies. Allen, in her account of the “sacred hoop,” a paradigm wherein “life is a circle, and everything has its place in it,” indicates that tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not, and that they position “Woman” as “creatix and shaper of existence.”<sup>365</sup> Hogan, for her part, stresses her standpoint as an “Indian woman” as she brings up her responsibility in “the taking care of the future and to the other species who share our journeys.”<sup>366</sup> Surviving and thriving in the midst of destruction necessitate the persistent recapitulation and amendment of creation stories—a project halfway between indigenous oral traditions and the feminist practice of crafting gynocentric or matriarchal creation myths to counter a patriarchal symbolic order.<sup>367</sup> As she weaves new myths into poetry and prose that in turn incept ceremonies, Hogan aims to use her creative capacity to “restore breath to the world,” or engender a “durable breath” preventing her own as well as her peers’ alienation from the deteriorating land and planet.<sup>368</sup> Hogan hence articulates through her breathing as a Native woman a contest between divergent meanings of plasticity.<sup>369</sup> By breathing, she espouses the form of the world. Because this world is broken, she becomes an emblem of the explosion of form. And still, she believes in her capacity to give the world a form, to impact or imbue it with her

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<sup>365</sup> Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 1, 3, 30.

<sup>366</sup> Hogan, *Dwellings*, 11.

<sup>367</sup> On feminist creation myths, see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1975); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 81–84, 149–154; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l’autre femme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), 301–304.

<sup>368</sup> Hogan, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*, 206. The formulation “durable breath” is a nod to John E. Smelcer and D. L. Birchfield’s edited collection, *Durable Breath: Contemporary Native American Poetry* (Anchorage: Salmon Run Press, 1994). See, esp., Duane Niatum’s introduction, “Pulling Back from the Margin, Transforming the Ruins: Voices Finding the Way Home,” i.

<sup>369</sup> Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés*, 48–49.

creativity.

As such, in the two-part free-verse poem “Old Ocean, She,” Hogan figures the vital, creative breath—“the great breath / long-lived, / here before the human / breath”—in female terms: “she breathes.”<sup>370</sup> Throughout the first five stanzas of the poem, this great breath then circulates across entities and elements on multiple scales.<sup>371</sup> The second stanza of the poem reveals, “So many lives here / breathe at this place of serpent dreaming.”<sup>372</sup> In the third stanza:

This continent remembers  
the membrane  
between worlds is so thin  
it breathes  
and the invisible ones are here  
as we cross times, this line  
we cross into a new song  
breathing  
like tides coming and going. (385)

In this stanza, it’s the membrane between worlds that breathes—until a new subject, an unspecified, singing “we,” takes over the breathing, recalling the back and forth of the tides. The fourth stanza takes us back to a familiar trope in Hogan’s writing, that of a “breathing land” (386). And the beginning of the fifth stanza, which borrows as much from the codes of storytelling as from the

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<sup>370</sup> Hogan, *Dark. Sweet.*, 385.

<sup>371</sup> In *Power*, as well, Hogan casts the vital breath as a subject of action, a force that animates elements and entities: “And then a breeze of fresh air, an alive wind, swept through, searching for something to breathe its life into and all it could do was move the water in waves and tides, and water didn’t stand up, although it spoke” (84). Crises erupt when moving air (as breath or wind) fails to enliven these elements and entities: “The wind of it is troubled, looking for its water, its home, looking for the fish and animals it breathed into existence” (234).

<sup>372</sup> Hogan, *Dark. Sweet.*, 385, henceforth cited in parentheses.

structure of lyric address, corroborates the proximity between song and breath:

Remember, it was all laid down

at the very beginning

the first song,

the breath.

It's the way they say we were stars

passed through time,

slid between the walls of a universe

to be born as a human child taking

her first breath

and still, many years later,

breathing. (386)

This stanza concludes with a reference to a child's first breath and the ongoing breathing that

ensues.<sup>373</sup> As we reach the end of the poem's first part, we've traveled from one scale of breathing to another: from a vital breath that suffuses all life to a child's breathing made possible by the fact that the mother, throughout childbearing, breathes for two.

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<sup>373</sup> Hogan often describes intergenerational kinship in aerial terms. In "The Grandmother's Song," in *Dark. Sweet.*, "the woman smell of birth"—an airborne quality—carries the grandmothers' songs (172). The speaker says of the grandmothers:

From a floating sleep  
they made a shape around me,  
a grandmother's embrace,  
the shawl of family blood  
that was their song of kinship. (172)

Versions of this embrace qua breath or song show up in *Dwellings*, where Hogan indicates that her desire to ease her granddaughter's entry into "the world of air" motivates the ceremony initiated in the book (17), and in *Indios* (republished in part in *Dark. Sweet.*), a retelling of the story of Medea in which the speaker recounts her daughter's nontraumatic first breath: "she was smiling, the girl," "not shocked by a sudden life in air / or hit into breathing" (278).

We'd be wrong to regard the breathing of human beings and animals as literal and all other kinds of breathing—plants', the land's, the ocean's, the planet's—as figurative. That the earth breathes is true synecdochically: the organisms that inhabit it breathe. But through the circulation of air and the transformation of gas, for instance, the planet *as a whole* also partakes in breathing. Similarly, we would miss the force of Hogan's poetics if we considered a mother's breathing literal and a female "great breath" figurative. Breathing in Hogan's writing opens onto an ecology of figurations. Various modalities and scales of breathing, in addition to natural phenomena like the tide and aesthetic objects like songs, get so entangled that it becomes impossible to distinguish between figures and their referents. Hogan's figures amalgamate organic form (i.e. respiration as an engine of autopoiesis, or self-extension in time and space, for all living organisms) and aesthetic form (i.e. aesthetic renderings of an attunement to, as Kathleen Stewart puts it, the "qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements" of atmospheres) to create political forms: houses of air made of words meant to make people feel at home in a toxic world.<sup>374</sup>

In Hogan's version of feminist breathing, Native women aware of their exceptional power of attunement and transformation mobilize a blurred distinction between scales, meanings of plasticity, and kinds of form to feel out and fill in for a debilitating world. Breathing in Bambara's fiction and breathing in Hogan's poetry and the memoirs that provide a context for it are both world-building, but in different ways: the former opens onto a network of interconnected characters, while the latter produces an ontological slippage between human beings, other animate or inanimate beings, and the world. The model of feminist breathing that comes out of Hogan's work departs from Moraga and Reagon's, according to which we should distribute more democratically the labor of ensuring other people's nontraumatic encounters with the world and the risk or injury of our vulnerability to a toxic

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<sup>374</sup> Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (2011): 445.

world. Tragically but not only so, Native women for Hogan are endowed with the sensitivity to uprootedness and displacement and the creative force necessary to hold other living beings in literal-metaphorical breaths.

#### IV. Coda: “And do you belong? I do”: Solange Knowles’ *A Seat at the Table*

Fast-forward to 2016, the year Solange Knowles, an African American musician, released her album *A Seat at the Table*. In many of her songs’ post-choruses and outros, Knowles creates harmonies and riffs out of breathy moans or cries. In doing so, she and her collaborators evoke a tradition prevalent in the popular music of the African diaspora that mobilizes a call-and-response structure, as Samuel A. Floyd explains, to “create continuity and generate propulsive force.”<sup>375</sup> In Knowles’ “Cranes in the Sky,” breath is particularly audible in the singer’s expression of dysphoria. The song, which lists unsuccessful tactics for moving beyond depression, ends with the repetition of the sound “hee.” Knowles’ delivery is delicate, as if she were singing herself to sleep. The higher Knowles sings, the more “hees” turn into “hhhs” that amplify the grain of uneasy exhalations involving only her throat, rather than her entire upper body. Throughout *A Seat at the Table*, listeners are instructed to feel out and live with their exhaustion and alienation. In the album opener, “Rise,” for instance, a choir directs,

Fall in your ways, so you can crumble

Fall in your ways, so you can sleep at night

Fall in your ways, so you can wake up and rise

Only in the verse’s fourth iteration does the first line change: “Walk in your ways, so you won’t

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<sup>375</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 113, 276. See also Ingrid Monson, “Riffs, Repetition, and Theories of Globalization,” *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (1999): 31.

crumble.” Knowles invites her addressees to crumble, and more than once, before speculating alternatives.

Another song, “Weary,” concludes with a nonlinguistic expression of weariness: a long “woah” sung at a higher pitch than the rest of the song. As Knowles’ voice is superimposed onto itself, this “woah” becomes a web of “woahs” that, in their noncoincidence, appear in conversation with one another. In a late-night talk show performance, Knowles amplified this breathing in the plural.<sup>376</sup> She and two backup singers and dancers, also African American women, wore one large, intricate red garment reminiscent of the lilac-blue one featured in the music video for “Cranes in the Sky” (See Figure 5).<sup>377</sup> Connected through pieces of fabric draped over their chests, as if part of a single organism, the three performers breathed with their entire bodies. As they let out the “woahs,” they opened their legs and lowered their chests (See Figure 6). Supporting each other, the performers then slowly stood up straight (See Figure 7).



Figure 5: Solange Knowles and her dancers in the video for “Cranes in the Sky” (2016), directed by Solange Knowles and Alan Ferguson

<sup>376</sup> “Solange,” dir. Dave Diomedi, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, NBC, December 15, 2016.

<sup>377</sup> “Cranes in the Sky,” dir. Alan Ferguson and Solange Knowles, Saint Records and Columbia Records, 2016.



Figures 6 and 7: Solange Knowles and her backup singers and dancers amplify breathing in a performance of “Weary” on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon (2016)

Some critics would no doubt call Knowles’ goddess aesthetics antifeminist. This might be the case of bell hooks, who argues that the art of Solange’s sister, Beyoncé, represents “the business of capitalist money making at its best;” and of Laura Mulvey and Naomi Wolf, for whom the abolition of a type beauty legible to men, particularly for Wolf its association with fertility, is

necessary to women's emancipation.<sup>378</sup> Yet Knowles aligns herself with Bambara and Hogan by mobilizing phatic bodily practices to register an experience of brokenness and weariness and interrupt it with varying degrees of spontaneity. Riffs and choreographies make audible and visible the kind of healing ritual that *The Salt Eaters* reports. Like Bambara and Hogan, Knowles seeks to create a context, particularly a religious atmosphere, for the performance of breathing to feel socially and politically generative. The religious tone of Knowles' art comes across in the titles of multiple reviews of "An Ode To," a 2017 performance, which state that the artist turned New York City's Guggenheim Museum into "a church," "a sanctuary," and "a temple."<sup>379</sup>

Knowles belongs to a genealogy of African American female musicians who, in the words of Ashon Crawley, "perform multiplicity even through rehearsing scenes of violence and violation."<sup>380</sup> Similarly to Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, Crawley's figures of choice, Knowles enacts "a fugitive inhalation of oxygen plus more and fugitive exhalation of carbon dioxide plus more" that situate "the capacity for undoing any scene of subjection ... within the scene itself."<sup>381</sup> Knowles' plaintive breathing in *A Seat at the Table* signals an encounter with a world that is, more than inhospitable, a source of injury. Knowles is singing at a historical moment when the phrase "I can't breathe" has become a potent declaration about the devaluation of black lives in the United States. The

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<sup>378</sup> bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain," bell hooks Institute, May 9, 2016, <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, [1975] 1999), 835; Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: HarperCollins, [1991] 2002), 12.

<sup>379</sup> Ashley Weatherford, "Solange Turned the Guggenheim Into a Church Last Night," *New York*, May 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/05/solange-knowles-guggenheim-concert.html>; Siobhan Burke, "Review: Solange Turns the Guggenheim Into a Sanctuary for Dance," *New York Times*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/arts/dance/review-solange-knowles-guggenheim.html>; Yohana Desta, "Solange Makes the Guggenheim a Temple for Black Women," *Vanity Fair*, May 19, 2017, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/solange-guggenheim-performance>.

<sup>380</sup> Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 65.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 63, 65.

declarative aspect of Knowles' project is worth insisting on: breathing here delineates a site of racial trauma while also functioning as an instrument in what Feminista Jones identifies as feminist "protest music" and in what Ashley Elizabeth calls "the journey of a spirit seeking peace."<sup>382</sup> The collective breathing that Knowles and her acolytes perform structures lives lived in defiance of anti-blackness and misogyny. Knowles operates from a sense that she's not welcome in political spaces and other publics.<sup>383</sup> Her album, as its title makes clear, is her attempt to claim a seat at the table and generate spaces to which she and others can state, as she eventually does in "Weary," that they belong:

But you know that a king is only a man  
With flesh and bones, he bleeds just like you do  
He said, "Where does that leave you?"  
And, "Do you belong?"  
I do.

To respond to the weariness she associates with being a woman of color in today's United States, Knowles could have returned, for inspiration, to the height of the Civil Rights movement or second-wave feminism. But *A Seat at the Table* doesn't come across as a 1960s or early-1970s

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<sup>382</sup> Ashley Elizabeth, "A Seat at the Table Is a Perfect Album for the Black Lives Matter Generation," *For Harriet*, October 2016, <http://www.forharriet.com/2016/10/a-seat-at-table-is-perfect-album-for.html#ixzz4aVafnQTf>; Feminista Jones, "This Is How Solange Beautifully Captures the Black Liberation Struggle in *A Seat at the Table*," *Essence*, October 4, 2016, <http://www.essence.com/culture/solange-a-seat-at-the-table-black-liberation-review>. See also Shonitria Anthony, "Solange's *A Seat at the Table* is a Bold, Pro-Black Masterpiece," *Huffington Post*, October 3, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/solanges-a-seat-at-the-table-is-a-bold-pro-black-masterpiece\\_us\\_57eea4dde4b082aad9bb16f7](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/solanges-a-seat-at-the-table-is-a-bold-pro-black-masterpiece_us_57eea4dde4b082aad9bb16f7); Lauren Barber, Mankaprr Conteh, Alex Dean, Erica Jordan, Ann Nguyen, "A Seat at the Table Syllabus," *Elle*, February 8, 2017, <https://issuu.com/ajcwfu/docs/seatatthetablefinal>.

<sup>383</sup> In her personal essay "And Do You Belong? I Do," on Saint Heron, September 11, 2016, <http://saintheron.com/featured/and-do-you-belong-i-do/>, Knowles recounts a much-mediatized episode of racist aggression at a concert venue.

throwback. Knowles doesn't seek resources in an idealized past wherein personal and political lives could be aligned, and productively so. To articulate breathing practices fit for the present, Knowles turns to the kind of fatigue punctured by tentative elation that Bambara depicts in *The Salt Eaters*. As *A Seat at the Table* suggests, tactics for navigating contemporary asphyxia can arise not only from genealogies of exhilarating, unalienated breathing, but also from genealogies of breathing while debilitated and fragile.

Chapter 3  
Encountering Alterity:  
Symptomatic Breathing and Racial Opacity in Speculative Fiction

### I. Diffuse Race

In an alternative present or near future, a city is filled with smoke due to a crisis whose nature no one can spell out. Characters, as they move through this city—take it in, if you will—come to ponder breathing, their own and others'. Thus unfold two works by African American queer authors: Samuel R. Delany's (b. 1942) *Dhalgren* and Renee Gladman's (b. 1971) Ravicka series, whose four published volumes as of the completion of this dissertation are *Event Factory*, *The Ravickians*, *Ana Patora Crosses a Bridge*, and *Houses of Ravicka*.<sup>384</sup> Breathing here constitutes a site where characters of various backgrounds and affiliations differently confront and negotiate phenomena that come into play in embodiment and experience: socioecological crises occurring in the Midwestern metropolis of Bellona (in Delany's novel) and the city-state of Ravicka (in Gladman's series), but also personal and impersonal intimacies, such as situations of contact, sex, or care, which are fostered in crisis times. Through breathing, characters apprehend bodies, environments, and their respective limits as bizarre objects of speculation: always slightly offbeat, never quite as expected.

While the Ravicka series has yet to attract much scholarly attention, many critics have categorized *Dhalgren* as science fiction.<sup>385</sup> These works, however, might more accurately be labeled

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<sup>384</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren* (New York: Vintage, [1975] 2001); Renee Gladman, *Event Factory* (Urbana: Dorothy Project, 2010); Renee Gladman, *The Ravickians* (Urbana: Dorothy Project, 2011); Renee Gladman, *Ana Patora Crosses a Bridge* (Urbana: Dorothy Project, 2013); Renee Gladman, *Houses of Ravicka* (St. Louis: Dorothy Project, 2017).

<sup>385</sup> By categorizing *Dhalgren* as sci-fi, some critics have aimed to tie the book to Delany's significant contribution to the genre—he had already won four Nebula awards and one Hugo award, the foremost distinctions in science fiction, by the time *Dhalgren* was published—and to situate it in relation to his abundant critical writing on the topic. See, e.g., Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, revised ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, [1984] 2012); Samuel R. Delany, *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover:

speculative fiction, a genre that, as Jewelle Gomez puts it, “[eschews] the space age settings and scientific jargon” of sci-fi while staging present trends in, or else restaging the present as, “a time and circumstance as yet unknown.”<sup>386</sup> Now, whether these texts amount, beyond the identity of their authors, to *African American and queer* speculative fiction is trickier. While Delany and Gladman explore social and political dimensions of sexuality, eroticism, and nonfamilial kinship, their relation to African American identity and experience is more oblique. For scholars like Emerson Littlefield and Jeffery Allen Tucker, Delany’s engagement with African American culture has to do primarily with forms and motifs that point to genealogies in African American aesthetic production—for example, mythology as a tool for narrating U.S. power dynamics, or repetition with difference as a structure that mimics the subversion of generic expectations in jazz.<sup>387</sup> Despite these formal shout-outs—shout-outs which, in the case of mythology and repetition, could just as well be directed to modernism—Greg Tate famously claims that “the race of [Delany’s] characters is not at the core of their of their cultural identity.”<sup>388</sup> Neither *Dhalgren* nor the Ravicka series counts as Afrofuturism, a

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Wesleyan University Press, 1999). Other critics, like Peter S. Alterman in “The Surreal Translations of Samuel R. Delany,” *Science Fiction Studies* 4, no. 1 (1977), present *Dhalgren*’s formal attributes as evidence of its status as sci-fi. For Alterman, *Dhalgren*’s nonlinearity and shifts in narrative viewpoints “[give it] the unmistakable flavor of science fiction” (26–27). Other critics, finally, classify *Dhalgren* as sci-fi not to locate it in a genealogy but to devalue it. For example, Harlan Ellison writes, in “Breakdown of a Breakthrough Novel,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1975, box 25, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Goetlib Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, that although *Dhalgren* aims to “merge SF with the mainstream,” it is ultimately *just sci-fi*: it “goes nowhere, says nothing, and is sunk to its binding in mythological symbolism that is both flagrant and embarrassing.”

<sup>386</sup> Jewelle Gomez, “Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians,” *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 949. See also André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>387</sup> Emerson Littlefield, “The Mythologies of Race and Science in Samuel Delany’s *The Einstein Intersection and Nova*,” *Extrapolation* 23, no. 3 (1982): 235; Jeffery Allen Tucker, *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>388</sup> “Which used to bug me out like a mug because what I expected from our one black science fiction writer was SF which envisioned the future of black culture as I’d defined it, from a more or less nationalist stance,” Greg Tate further states in “Ghetto in the Sky: Samuel Delany’s Black

movement that tackles the emergence of a black identity framework in conjunction with technocultural innovations.<sup>389</sup> In their lo-fi universes, Delany and Gladman indeed refrain from either projecting black identity as an enduring force in the future or marshaling it as a resource for living through present catastrophes.

*Dhalgren* and the Ravicka series can be grasped as, among other things, meditations on concepts of blackness and brownness that never stabilize as identities. According to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, blackness, in its proximity to “impropriety,” “has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization) vitality.”<sup>390</sup> Sarah Jane Cervenak similarly notes that “blackness is said to endanger air’s mythic purity,

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Hole,” in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Fireside, 1992), 166. Tate concedes that “while [Delany’s] black characters don’t wear their negritude on their sleeves, they’re not exactly upstanding members of the black bourgeoisie either” (166). See also Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberspace*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 189–190; Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine*, 14; Samuel R. Delany, “Racism in Science Fiction,” *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 120 (1998): <http://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html>.

<sup>389</sup> Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, “Introduction,” in *Astro-Blackness*, eds. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), vii–viii. Mark Dery coined the term “Afrofuturism” in “Black to the Future,” 182. See also Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 71, vol. 20, no. 2 (2002): 1–15; Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 126.

<sup>390</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 50; Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177.

On the instrumentalization of black being, see also Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67; Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 8–9. Saidiya V. Hartman, in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, in “Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative,” *Qui Parle* 25, nos. 1–2 (2016), separately argue that the unintelligibility of black women’s pain and pleasure in a racist regime is used against them. And according to J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak, in “Black Ether,” *CR: The Centennial Review* 16, no. 2 (2016), “the ether of blackness” is “the condition of possibility of this world, the mythic ground that intoxicates and fortifies whiteness” (205).

threatening a set of enclosures ranging from white fences to white heterosexual families.<sup>391</sup> Moten, Harney, and Cervenak's theorizations reverberate in Mel Y. Chen's claim that poisonous, inanimate substances like lead are racialized—a sociolinguistic process through which Asianness is rendered as less or improperly alive in relation to white bodies.<sup>392</sup> Blackness and brownness, these theorists insist, exceed the racist practices and discourses that mobilize them to negotiate the perimeter of (im)propriety: individuals and groups also activate the force of blackness and brownness in fugitive and coalitional politics. Under conditions never dissociable from slavery and the Middle Passage, blackness, Moten indeed argues, signals the “movement of escape” of “stolen life.”<sup>393</sup> And as Nydia A. Swaby and Naomi Pabst separately observe, blackness derives its political force from its coalitional nature: blackness configures sociopolitical emancipation that transcends national and regional boundaries.<sup>394</sup> In novels that are rarely clear about race but *clearly never not* about race, Delany and Gladman allegorize a tension in blackness and brownness between lives lived improperly or out of place and a politics that accommodates alterity.

In *Dhalgren* and the Ravicka series, race, racialization, and racism are diffuse or “particulate matters.”<sup>395</sup> Breathing and breathlessness have long been weaponized against individuals marked as black and brown. Lundy Braun shows that the popularization of the spirometer, a device for measuring lung capacity qua “vital capacity,” is tied to the management of black and brown lives on

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<sup>391</sup> Sarah Jane Cervenak, “‘Black Night Is Falling’: The Airy Poetics of Some Performance,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (2018): 167.

<sup>392</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 11, 160.

<sup>393</sup> Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 179.

<sup>394</sup> Nydia A. Swaby, “‘disparate in voice, sympathetic in direction’: gendered political blackness and the politics of solidarity,” *feminist review* 108 (2014): 11–25; Naomi Pabst, “An Unexpected Blackness,” *Transition* 100 (2008): 112–132.

<sup>395</sup> Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze, “Police Power and Particulate Matters: Environmental Justice and the Spatialities of In/Securities in U.S. Cities,” *English Language Notes* 54, no. 2 (2016): 13–23.

U.S. plantations and in colonial India.<sup>396</sup> Breathing has operated as an agent in the management of urban space along racial lines. From at least the 1960s onward, segregation has increased rates of asthma, allergies, and other respiratory afflictions among black people.<sup>397</sup> The mere fact of breathing while black, as Ashon Crawley notes, makes one a target of violence in a police state.<sup>398</sup> In *Dhalgren* and the Ravicka series, racial difference circulates aerially and is apprehended primarily through breathing. As it affixes itself to individual characters, or goes from particulate to particular, racial difference—always, in these novels, on the verge of turning into *any* alterity—creates an epistemic confusion that invites a political and ethical repositioning.

The concept I submit here, which I call “symptomatic breathing” after Gladman’s use of the term “symptom” in *Event Factory*, describes encounters with a shifting yet incommensurable limit to what is identifiable and knowable about bodies and environments. As they mediate between individual and milieu, experience and expression, and the psychic and the somatic, respiratory symptoms, I argue, stress *as ethically and politically relevant* the very fact that there are limitations and an essential instability to the knowledge that they help individuals gain about themselves, others, and the world. Symptomatic breathing teaches individuals and groups that they are opaque to themselves and to each other.

Inspired by the Martinican writer, poet, and philosopher Édouard Glissant, Shaka McGlotten, Zach Blas, and Christina A. León separately propose that opacity, in turning the colonial trope of darkness against the colonizers, constitutes a tactic of resistance within racist and

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<sup>396</sup> Braun, *Breathing Race Into the Machine*, 3–4, 8–13, 42.

<sup>397</sup> Mitman, *Breathing Space*, xi, 65, 145; Heidi B. Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (New York: Beacon Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>398</sup> Ashon Crawley, “Do It for the Vine,” *Avidly*, August 14, 2014, <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2014/08/14/do-it-for-the-vine/>.

homophobic regimes of surveillance.<sup>399</sup> Blas further argues that opacity, “an alterity that is unquantifiable, a diversity that exceeds categories of identifiable difference,” “must be defended in order for any radically democratic project to succeed.”<sup>400</sup> And León explains that the staging of opacity constitutes a resistance to a gaze that desires mastery, simplicity, and knowability—a gaze motivated by sexist and colonial desires.<sup>401</sup> According to McGlotten, Blas, and León, opacity, though it is only fully actualized in collectivities, begins as an intentional performance by individual subjects. By contrast, Delany and Gladman model self-encounters and encounters with others that are *premised on* something like opacity—an opacity not only visual but also tactile and olfactory, a density of the air that moves in and out of bodies. In this context, ethics and politics have to do in part with whether the incommensurable opacity of embodiment and experience is acknowledged or disavowed.

The phrase “symptomatic breathing” riffs on symptomatic reading, “a ‘way’ of interpreting” that Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best identify as dominant in literary criticism from the 1970s onward.<sup>402</sup> Associated with Marxist (e.g. Louis Althusser) and psychoanalytic (e.g. Carlo Ginzburg) traditions, symptomatic reading, according to Marcus and Best’s gloss, takes “meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter.”<sup>403</sup> My objective here isn’t to intervene in debates on symptomatic versus nonsymptomatic reading, or as they have been reframed since the publication of Marcus and Best’s polemical essay, debates on critical versus

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<sup>399</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); Shaka McGlotten, “Black Data,” video and transcript of a lecture at the University of Toronto, February 13, 2014, <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/shaka-mcglossen-black-data/>; Zach Blas, “Opacities: An Introduction,” *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 2 (2016): 149–153.

<sup>400</sup> Blas, “Opacities,” 149.

<sup>401</sup> Christina A. León, “Forms of Opacity: Roaches, Blood, and Being Stuck in Xandra Ibarra’s Corpus,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 378.

<sup>402</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 4–5.

postcritical modes.<sup>404</sup> Still, it's worth noting that breathing invites a model of symptomaticity that complicates symptomatic interpretation as Marcus and Best imagine or caricature it. As expert or amateur interpreters of breathing, Delany and Gladman's characters (poets, novelists, an ethnographer and linguist, a comptroller in a city where houses themselves breathe) don't necessarily presume that attending to, say, respiratory disorders leads to the accurate diagnostic of an individual disposition or environmental crisis. Attending to breathing is a way to learn and relearn the limits of meaning-making and interpretation—the impossibility of what we could call, by tweaking Fredric Jameson's famous concept, the *psychosomatic* mapping of bodily and environmental crises in their totality.<sup>405</sup>

And really, there's no reason to tie symptomaticity to epistemological totalization or stability. If it has been typecast in literary criticism, the symptom appears, throughout the long history of medicine, less as an arrow pointing to a reliable diagnosis than as a marker of self-difference. "Given how fuzzy the line between the symptom and the feeling of a self can be," Brooke Holmes writes, symptoms—our own and those we observe in others—compel us to consider "an inhuman otherness within the self," or the fact that we always, and at times despite ourselves, "[incorporate] much of [an] unseen world."<sup>406</sup> Autoimmune disorders, like the variations in respiratory intensity that often accompany them, dramatize, in the register of the ordinary or the event, the internalization of otherness. As Ed Cohen explains, in autoimmunity, immunity's "self-destructive"

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<sup>404</sup> See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, Stephen Best, eds., "Description Across Disciplines," special issue, *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016); Julie Orlemanski and Dalglish Chew, eds., "We. Reading. Now.", colloquium, *Arcade* (2015–2016), <http://arcade.stanford.edu/colloquies/we-reading-now>.

<sup>405</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 54. See also Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>406</sup> Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 46–47, 276.

corollary,” “the self … appears to itself as both self and not-self. … If immunity constitutes an immune reaction to tissues of ‘the self’ itself, then it constitutes a real—and hence a vital—contradiction.”<sup>407</sup> Similarly, encountering breathing and breathers as symptoms confronts us, over and over again, with a vital contradiction: we, like all the organisms around us, are both ourselves and not-ourselves. We are what we breathe. Or, put differently, breathing keeps us from being entirely ourselves.

What does it look, sound, and feel like, then, to breathe as a symptom and to breathe among other symptoms? Moving from *Dhalgren* to the Ravicka series, I build toward a conceptualization of the stakes of breathing together with limited knowledge of oneself, others, and the world.

## II. Respiratory Tourism: Samuel Delany’s *Dhalgren*

Samuel Delany’s *Dhalgren* begins—in the middle of a sentence that started, or will start, at the end of the novel, *Finnegans Wake*-style—as the protagonist “[howls] for the world to give him a name.”<sup>408</sup> “The in-dark [answers him] with wind,” and for a whole minute he “[listens] to his breath sound tumble down.”<sup>409</sup> An Asian American woman (the novel identifies her as “Oriental”) arrives, “[whispering] something that [is] all breath, and the wind [comes] for the words and [dusts] away the

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<sup>407</sup> Ed Cohen, “Self, Not-Self, Not Not-Self But Not Self, or The Knotty Paradoxes of ‘Autoimmunity’: A Genealogical Ruminations,” *Parallax* 23 (2017): 29. See also Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), esp. 258–262; Michelle Jamieson, “Allergy and Autoimmunity: Rethinking the Normal and the Pathological,” *Parallax* 23 (2017): 22.

<sup>408</sup> Delany, *Dhalgren*, 1. In his drafts of the novel’s front matter, Delany refers to the plot as a “mobius band” (journal 49, October 1972–May 1973, box 15, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Goelb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston) and elsewhere as a “Mobius strip” (file 1, undated, box 28, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Goelb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston).

<sup>409</sup> Delany, *Dhalgren*, 1.

meaning.”<sup>410</sup> After the pair have sex and “[make] a warm place with their mingled breath,” she leads him to a cave where he finds a chain of prisms, mirrors, and lenses as well as a weapon called an orchid. Witnessing his new companion turn into a tree, our protagonist hops on a truck and is dropped off at the end of a bridge leading to Bellona. Resuming his journey despite the intensity of the encounter—“breath [quivers] about him” when the Asian American woman turns into a tree—the protagonist demonstrates what Anne Alin Cheng, in her theorization of racial melancholy, describes as a denial of loss as loss that maintains the fiction of possession.<sup>411</sup>

Communication has so far been, and throughout the mega-novel remains, not just airborne but largely air- or breath-*made*. The transmission of information and its elusive meaning are here breathing matters. What’s more, neither here nor anywhere else in *Dhalgren* are subjectivity and identity containable in bodies. The protagonist’s interlocutor leaves behind her human form almost as soon as she’s identified as an Asian American woman. She doesn’t disappear into the ether, strikingly, but instead turns into a plant that, through photosynthesis, makes the world more breathable for animal beings. This section charts *Dhalgren*’s partial model of symptomatic breathing. In Delany’s novel, breathing stresses the limits of self-knowledge and knowledge of the Other—until, that is, alterity is instrumentalized and thus disarmed to enable the protagonist’s uninterrupted movement from one encounter to the next.

Kid, or Kidd, or the kid, as the protagonist is eventually called, sets foot in Bellona in the wake of an unspecified cataclysm. As a draft of the novel’s front matter indicates, what “only months ago … was a great city” has turned into a “disaster zone,” “a haven for the lost, the

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 6; Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 9.

degenerate, the insane.”<sup>412</sup> Riots erupt either because “a house collapsed,” “or “somebody got killed,” or “a plane crashed”—“nobody knows which one happened for sure.”<sup>413</sup> Technology is out. Chronology is arbitrary; the local newspaper jumps from July 14, 2022 to July 7, 1987, though, in some Orwellian twist of fate, “a couple [weeks] back,” says Tak Loufer, an engineer whom Kid befriends, “every other issue was 1984” (45). Buildings burn down, build themselves back up, and burn down again. And most strikingly, the air is saturated with smoke: “The smoke hides the sky’s variety, stains consciousness, covers the holocaust with something safe and insubstantial. It protects from greater flame. It indicates fire, but obscures the source. This is not a useful city. Very little here approaches any eidolon of the beautiful” (75). Kid comes to know Bellona through a thick smoke that preserves the city’s opacity. The smoke, which both indicates and distracts from its source, a more destructive or greater flame, imposes itself as a symptom of the crisis that has made Bellona useless.

So, too, breathing amidst the smoke and Kid himself as a breather emerge as symptoms of Bellona’s socioecological crisis. Kid must breathe vigorously to perceive something beyond the ambient crisis to which he rapidly acclimates: “No lights in any near buildings; but down those waterfront streets, beyond the veils of smoke—was that fire? Already used to the smell, he had to breathe deeply to notice it” (15). Kid’s incorporation of a smoke whose specific source and content he ignores dramatizes the enigmatic status of his identity. Mary Kay Bray argues that while Kid isn’t black, as are many members of the Scorpions, the gang whose leader he becomes, his “doubleness” as a half-Native American, half-white individual recalls what W. E. B. Du Bois describes as “double consciousness:” an internal conflict or sense of fractured identity mediated by a world that looks at

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<sup>412</sup> Samuel R. Delany, journal 49, October 1972–May 1973, box 15, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Goetlib Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>413</sup> Delany, *Dhalgren*, 72, henceforth cited in parentheses.

members of subordinated groups, particularly black folks for Du Bois, with contempt and pity.<sup>414</sup>

*Dhalgren* hints at Bellona's racism; and critics like Jeffery Allen Tucker and Mark Chia-Yon Jerng suggest that the smoke that saturates the city should be understood in relation to the race riots, particularly the 1965 Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles.<sup>415</sup> But the extent to which racism affects Kid, to whom Delany devotes the most attention, is unclear. It's unclear what being half-Native means to Kid, how much, if at all, he has to code-switch. Amidst the smoke and around limited sources of light, he most often passes. What does characterize him is his status as a stranger. Given that when he arrives in Bellona he suffers from memory loss, he comes to know himself as fundamentally estranged. Kid wonders not exactly who he is, but how it is that he can know anything about himself. The novel in general asks, per Stephanie A. Smith's paraphrasis, "What is knowledge? What do you really know? How do you know it? How is meaning made?"<sup>416</sup> We might add: How do breath and wind carry meaning, but also, when it comes to Bellona's crisis and Kid's position within it, carry it away?

*Dhalgren* frames Kid's attempt to make sense of himself and his environment as a problem of language: "The common problem," Kid surmises, "is to have more to say than vocabulary and syntax can bear" (75). The novel unfolds as a reflection on writing and being a writer.<sup>417</sup> Kid, like Ernest Newboy, a notable writer and his eventual companion, composes poetry. And the novel's

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<sup>414</sup> Mary Kay Bray, "Rites of Reversal: Double Consciousness in Delany's *Dhalgren*," *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no. 2 (1984): 57–58. See also Sandra Y. Govan, "The Insistent Presence of Black Folk in the Novels of Samuel R. Delany," *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no. 2 (1984), 47.

<sup>415</sup> Tucker, *A Sense of Wonder*, 79; Mark Chia-Yon Jerng, "A World of Difference: Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* and the Protocols of Racial Reading," *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (2011), 259. See also Todd A. Comer, "Playing at Birth: Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 25, no. 2 (2005): 173.

<sup>416</sup> Stephanie A. Smith, "A Most Ambiguous Citizen: Samuel R. 'Chip' Delany," *American Literary History* 19, no. 2 (2007): 566.

<sup>417</sup> *Dhalgren* momentarily turns into a novel of ideas or an exposé about art when Ernest Newboy expounds on the "two concepts of the artist:" the first type "gives all to his [sic] work;" the second "dedicates himself [sic] to living" (351–352).

concluding chapter, “The Anathēmata: *a plague journal*,” includes snippets from Kid’s personal notes that mimic the very genesis of *Dhalgren*, written over the course of a decade or so as a series of fragments in Delany’s notebooks.<sup>418</sup> Yet, language here isn’t a given. Words don’t count as units, building blocks, or raw materials with which Kid and Newboy compose. Language, as hinted by my earlier rehearsal of the novel’s opening, is further divisible into breaths and sounds that either *aid* or *harm* meaning.

In one version of this operation, breath holds together, if precariously, a situation of communication by deferring meaning. Consider an account of Kid’s flirtation with Mildred, a minor character who disappears before the novel’s halfway point. As in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE*, addressed in the introduction to this dissertation, linguistic communication in this scene issues from a guttural and facial gymnastics. In an n+1 scheme, breathing sustains the terms of the exchange.<sup>419</sup> Mildred speaks first. And the narrator, whose voice moves in and out of Kid’s multiple

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<sup>418</sup> Delany started working seriously on *Dhalgren* around 1967, but his archival collection contains traces of the novel that go as far back as 1964. See journal 22, 1964, box 22, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Goetlib Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston. As Tucker explains in *A Sense of Wonder*, what we now know as *Dhalgren* was initially supposed to span many novels:

The “initial idea,” Delany explains, “was to write a series of political novels—five, in fact—in which factors of modern life I’d seen burgeoning throughout the previous decade—in the counter-culture of the sixties—eventually worked to bring down five very different kinds of governments: one, an even more extreme form of North American-style consumer-industrial capitalism than we actually have; another, a highly repressive collectivism; one was a classical parliamentary monarchy; another was a regular fascist dictatorship; still another was a corrupt bureaucracy than ran on bribes and payoffs...” Revisiting his drafts in San Francisco in early 1969, Delany decided to write a single volume set in the present as opposed to the far-off future settings of many of his previous fictions. (56)

Even as he settled to make *Dhalgren* a single volume, Delany mulled over many titles (he still used “Brodecky” less than a year prior to the book’s publication), frequently reordered the chapters, and even shuffled around substantial portions of text within these chapters. See manuscripts, *Dhalgren/Brodecky*, 1–200, undated, box 73, folder 9, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Goetlib Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>419</sup> Research on synthetic, or artificially produced, speech substantiates the importance of breaths—not only pauses, but pauses with a thrust—in processing and remembering information. See D. H.

personae throughout the novel, here refers to the protagonist in the third person:

“What do you like, Kidd? Someone saying your name?”

He knew it was innocent; and was annoyed anyway. His lips began a *Well*, but only breath came.

“Silence?”

Breath became a hiss; the hiss became, “...sometimes.”<sup>420</sup>

A silent breath infuses the exchange with a coyness that maintains some proximity between Kid(d) and Mildred until this breath turns into a hiss and then into the word “sometimes.” In this excerpt, Kid(d)’s breath fulfills a syntactic role. Without relaying some determined content, it prevents a situation of communication, its semantic structure, from dissipating.

Elsewhere, however, breathing is endowed with a meaning of its own. Take an account of Kid’s sexual encounter with Lanya, one of his more regular partners. The encounter starts the way so many do in *Dhalgren*, with Kid acquiring, through his breathing, a vague sense of the smoke-filled atmosphere in which he’s immersed: “[Kid] stepped outside and breathed deep in the thick smoke. He couldn’t smell it, but he felt his heart in his ears in a moment, very quick and steady” (100–101). Synesthetically, Kid apprehends the smoke not as smell or density but as rhythm. Or perhaps what Kid apprehends is the rhythmicity of his own breathing, so contaminated that it acts as a metonym for the smoke. The account then shifts from a kind of breathing that suggests Kid’s sense of being lost to one that channels lust. Kid and Lanya are drawn closer to each other. A sequence of deep breaths and breathless instants provides the score to a temporary suspension of, though not an abstraction from, their experience of ambient toxicity. Lanya’s “breath warmed in the hair on [Kid’s]

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Whalen, Charles E. Hoequist, Sonya M. Sheffert, “The Effects of Breath Sounds on the Perception of Synthetic Speech,” *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 97, no. 5 (1995): 3147–3153.

<sup>420</sup> Delany, *Dhalgren*, 30, italics in the original, henceforth cited in parentheses.

back,” recounts the narrator (101). Slightly further: “She moved, and held her breath for half a minute, gasped, held it again; gasped” (105). Finally, Lanya’s breathing, as Kid grasps it, authorizes his orgasm: “The realization, from her movement (her breaths were loud, long, and wet beside him, the underside of her tongue between his knuckles hot), that it was what she had wanted, made him, perhaps forty seconds after her, come” (105).<sup>421</sup> At the beginning of the scene, Kid approaches his quick breathing as a symptom of Bellona’s environmental crisis, a heuristic of unknowing that takes him nowhere beyond this crisis’ opacity. In the scene’s conclusion, however, he treats the qualities of Lanya’s breaths—their loudness, length, wetness, warmth—as if they offered him privileged access to her inner life.

A scene like this one suggests, among other things, that gasps and other forms of breathlessness cannot be ruled out as undesirable. Breathlessness isn’t simply an obstacle to some individual-milieu symbiosis. In another contemporary study of erotic subjectivity, Andy Sinclair’s novel *Breathing Lessons*, the character of Henry Moss recounts the quiet thrill of playing dead during lifeguard training, for he’d be given the mouth-to-mouth treatment, sometimes by “hunky Jeff from Montreal.”<sup>422</sup> Henry also describes the high of inhaling the marijuana smoke that Jeff would blow into his mouth as they sat around a campfire—a respiratory practice colloquially referred to as a “shotgun kiss.”<sup>423</sup> In *Breathing Lessons*, breathless moments in sexual or more generically erotic practices punctuate Henry’s abandonment to an exciting unknown. Kid, too, is thrilled by the

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<sup>421</sup> *Dhalgren* probably counts as an erotic novel. *Hogg* (New York: Black Ice Books, 1995), which Delany wrote around the same time but published much later, is pornographic and has been at the center of many debates and controversies due to its gruesome depiction of sexual violence. See Delany, *Shorter Views*, 300; Michael Hemmingson, “The Trouble with Samuel R. Delany’s Pornography,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 2 (2011), 377; Samuel R. Delany, journal 44, March–September 1971, box 15, Samuel R. Delany Collection, Howard Gotlib Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>422</sup> Andy Sinclair, *Breathing Lessons* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 13.

variations in the intensity of breathing that concur with his and Lanya's intimacy. But if we are to trust the novel's free-indirect speech, he doesn't register his experience as a confrontation with something beyond his reach. As such, breathing in *Dhalgren* doesn't exactly, at least not consistently, operate symptomatically. Whereas by breathing Bellona's characteristic smoke Kid deals with an alterity that, as it enters his body, amplifies his self-estrangement, he doesn't approach breathing by or with his sexual partners with the same interpretive humility. Extracting from Lanya's breathing a statement of intent, Kid enacts paranoid interpretation in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's sense of the term: he takes Lanya's breathing to be *about him*.<sup>424</sup>

Queer theorists and Delany himself have argued that cities constitute foremost sites for confronting otherness.<sup>425</sup> Cruising produces intimacies where the object of cathexis isn't any

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<sup>424</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling*, writes that paranoia and its literary-critical paragon, what Paul Ricoeur terms the "hermeneutics of suspicion," constitute self-fueling modes; the paranoids "can never be paranoid enough," Sedgwick writes, citing D. A. Miller (130). In their quest for diagnosis and pathologization, paranoids "[put their] faith in exposure" (126, 130–143). See also Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (2010): 235–241; Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture* 15, no. 1 (2012): <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431>; Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, "Afterword," *Representations* 108 (2009): 145.

<sup>425</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 66, 113; Junot Díaz and Samuel R. Delany, "Radicalism Begins in the Body," *Boston Review*, May 10, 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/literature-culture/junot-d%C3%A1z-samuel-r-delany-radicalism-begins-body>.

Cities, Carl Abbott observes in a discussion of Delany's work included in *Imagining Urban Futures: Cities in Science Fiction and What We Might Learn from Them* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), "are big, long lasting, densely developed, and full of difference—different types of people, jobs, neighborhoods, and economic activities. They are also points of exchange that influence people outside their boundaries" (3, italics removed).

Dissatisfied with "geophobia" or "metronormativity"—epitomized by Michael Warner's oft-cited assertion, in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), that "the sexual culture of New York City serves people around the world, even if only as the distant reference point of queer kids going up in North Carolina or Idaho, who know that *somewhere* things are different" (191, italics in the original)—some queer theorists have mapped out sexual subcultures and cultures of intimacy outside of metropolises and in the margins

individual in a personal sense, but, as Michael Warner puts it, the very publicness of sexual culture.<sup>426</sup>

For Leo Bersani, cruising, which stages an “intimacy with an unknown body,” epitomizes the formalism of sexuality: as we seek to see ourselves in the world, we extend beyond ourselves and encounter otherness.<sup>427</sup> Having transgressed our limits, we reencounter ourselves as non-self-identical. As breathers, we never are self-identical, comfortably within our limits—and this is especially obvious for Kid, whose mysterious identity is partially clarified only via interactions. Accordingly, breathing induces less shattering than an intensification of what Elizabeth Freeman calls “an inhabitation by and of the Other”—or, as we might more specifically label it, an *inhalation* by and of the Other.<sup>428</sup> This amendment aside, *Dhalgren* shares with theories of cruising a fantasy of interrupted flow, a penchant for encounters that destabilize a protagonist, but do not slow him down.

*Dhalgren* models respiratory tourism. Kid moves across Bellona, breathes its air, encounters alterity. He sometimes recognizes this alterity as such, and sometimes compresses it into unequivocal meaning. *Dhalgren* makes race unrecognizable, but keeps intact the expectation that otherness might

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of discourses of idealized urban sociality or mobility that are indissociable from gentrification. See Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 13–14; Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 203–204; Marin F. Manalansan IV, Chantal Nadeau, Richard T. Rodríguez, and Sioban B. Somerville, eds, “Queering the Middle: Race, Region, and Queer Midwest,” special issue, *GLQ* 20, nos. 1–2 (2014). Without outright refuting these scholars’ arguments, Christina B. Hanhardt insists in *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) that “a critical analysis of a politics of the city not only goes out of town; it also asks to whom the city belongs” (10).

<sup>426</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 179.

Extrapolating from Jane Jacobs, Delany, in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, promotes contact, a pleasant and rewarding type of encounter that stems from improvisation across urban public sites, specifically those of New York City (121, 123–128). See also Chisholm, *Queer Constellations*, 1–3.

<sup>427</sup> Bersani, *Is The Rectum a Grave?*, 61; Bersani, *Homos*, 99.

<sup>428</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, “Sacra/mentality in Djuana Barnes’s *Nightwood*” *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (2014): 744.

be possessed. Breathing confronts Kid with alterity in himself, others, and the world, but as a relatively privileged character—a man, a gang leader, and a poet, a title that in crisis-stricken Bellona comes with surprising gravitas—he is able, consciously or not, to disavow or incorporate into a narcissistic structure certain manifestations of alterity. Just like the Asian American character who in the novel’s opening pages turns into a tree, Lanya breathes *for* Kid. In the loop that is *Dhalgren*, Kid stabilizes Lanya’s desire in order to keep moving, eternally and out of time.

### III. Breathing Architectures: Renee Gladman’s Ravicka Series

The Ravicka series, as this section shows, picks up where *Dhalgren* leaves off: Gladman’s novels explore the ethical and political field that opens up when the alterity encountered through breathing isn’t disavowed—when the expectation to possess or instrumentalize the Other’s alterity is irremediably contorted. At the same time as she deforms the readers’ expectation of what a discourse on race, blackness, or brownness encompasses, Gladman creates a world that demands to be apprehended in light of questions inextricable from contemporary issues of racial subordination and segregation. Questions like: To whom does a city belong? How does the management of populations induce distinct phenomenologies, or fuel such afflictions as asthma or allergies? Who absorbs the cost of crisis, be it political, economic, or environmental? Gladman’s model of symptomatic breathing accumulates and entangles idioms peripheral to race—ethnicity, translation, architecture—to illustrate the limits of what can be known about oneself and others in situations of encounter. Before I sort through these idioms, which necessitates jumping back and forth between the volumes, an overview of the series is in order.

Just like *Dhalgren*, *Event Factory*, the first installment in Gladman’s series, begins with an unnamed figure, this one a linguist and ethnographer, apprehending through the opaque air an

unfamiliar city plagued by an ambiguous crisis. “From the sky there was no sign of Ravicka,” the narrator and protagonist observes; “Yet, I arrived; I met many people. The city was large, yellow, and tender.”<sup>429</sup> At first, she describes the air as filled with smoke, though later she amends this observation: “Honestly, there was no smoke. I meant ‘silence,’ but silence is not something that moves visibly from one place to another.”<sup>430</sup> The word “smoke” fills in for a crisis silent about its nature. As a symptom, smoke stands for, but says nothing definitive about, a crisis that, we learn only in the second book of the series, might have to do with “structures becoming ash” in the wake of a large fire, an “attack from above.”<sup>431</sup> This second book is titled *The Ravickians*. In it, Luswage Amini, the great Ravickian novelist and our new narrator, is en route to a reading by an old friend, Zàoter Limici. The novel has three acts: the first unfolds as a day in Amini’s life; the second features Limici’s speech; and the third gathers, under the title “Grand Horizontals,” impressionistic fragments of conversations between Amini, Limici, and others. The third volume, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, is for its part narrated by the title character, a friend of Amini. Amini says of Patova that “she [is] not exactly Ravickian,” a vague assessment that locates Patova, not unlike Kid, in a liminal category, between the foreign expert who narrates *Event Factory* and the prominent local figure who narrates part of *The Ravickians*.<sup>432</sup> In a mise en abyme of sorts, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge* contains prose poems “authored” by Patova under the title “Enclosures.” From a Marxist standpoint, an enclosure refers to the transformation, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, of common land into large farmland owned by a single individual.<sup>433</sup> In her enclosures, Gladman, via Patova, feels out and tries to write her way through alienation. Inducing a “crisis within the crisis of our crisis,” enclosures of prose

<sup>429</sup> Gladman, *Event Factory*, 11.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 69–70.

<sup>431</sup> Gladman, *The Ravickians*, 156.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>433</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1: *The Process of Capitalist Production*, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1915), 797–799.

poetry formalize efforts to “to do things with … breath.”<sup>434</sup> The series’ entire fourth volume, *Houses of Ravicka*, performs a back and forth between the outside and the inside of an architecture made of breath. In the first half, our new narrator is Jakobi, head of the Office of the Comptroller for the city-country of Ravicka and author of the amusingly titled *Regulating the Book of Regulations*. Jakobi, whose gender identity wavers, travels across Ravicka to take “geoscogs”—“measurements that keep track of a building’s subtle changes and movement over time”—of two elusive, breathing houses, no. 32 and no. 96.<sup>435</sup> The novel’s second act features an account of life inside one of the houses.<sup>436</sup>

Gladman sets up, again and again, scenes where characters, by encountering their breathing, come to view themselves as symptoms, both self-estranged and vulnerable to their milieus. For instance, in a passage from *The Ravickians* that brings to mind Kid’s flirtation with Mildred in *Dhalgren*, Amini details the phenomenology of public speaking in part as a respiratory sequence:

It is dramatic and wonderful and isolating to present your work before an audience. You have got to hide your sweat and pretend your back fat does not bother you. Whatever shirt you are wearing, it must fit comfortably over your breasts yet let a little cleavage show.

Dramatic, because you must connect with the piece you are reading, even if at present you do not. Wonderful, because you remember to breathe in from your navel region, but isolating when you forget to blow out, when you are breathing twice as hard as you would were you using normal breaths. Dramatic, remembering your nose and breasts.<sup>437</sup>

Amini charts the work of connecting to and communicating a text of her own (the impersonal “you”

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<sup>434</sup> Gladman, *Ana Patora Crosses a Bridge*, 60

<sup>435</sup> Gladman, *Houses of Ravicka*, 144.

<sup>436</sup> Gladman originally envisioned *Houses of Ravicka* as a sequel to *The Ravickians*. She writes cryptically that she had to set aside *Houses of Ravicka* for a few years because she couldn’t “discover the location” of house no. 96 (149). While putting the finishing touches on the manuscript, in January 2017, she realized that the house was located “where I am, where many of us probably feel that we are: somewhere where the boundary between places has broken” (149–150).

<sup>437</sup> Gladman, *The Ravickians*, 35.

includes, but isn't limited to, Amini) as an oscillation between dramatic, wonderful, and isolating registers. An amplified inhalation, for which she sucks in her navel, marks an instant of grace. But, when caught up in breathing, she fails to follow up with a prolonged exhalation, she suddenly feels separated from her audience. As she moves in and out of her body and gains an awareness of the people surrounding her, of their smell, she finally reencounters her body as uncanny.<sup>438</sup>

Now, to encounter other characters' breathing in the Ravicka series is to encounter experience and embodiment in translation. Consider the impossible quest, undertaken by the narrator of *Event Factory*, to uncover the true nature of the Ravickian crisis. Whereas Jussi Parikka argues that we should understand urban smog as a chemical screen media, and as such as a primarily visual phenomenon, the Ravicka series presents *breathing* as the motor of the aesthetic experience of opaque air.<sup>439</sup> The narrator at one point meets the Esaleyons. Once Ravickians, the Esaleyons became a faction with a language of their own, Esaléye, following a rebellion. Our narrator is fluent in Ravic but unfamiliar with Esaléye. She understands the Esaleyons to be “[speaking] in gaps and air”—or, as Gladman puts it in a correspondence, in “gasps of the intelligible, a kind of embodied absence or unknown, a way of giving the unknown a shape.”<sup>440</sup> Note the inversion of gap and gasp. Gladman and her narrator tie gaps to air and gasps to (un)intelligibility, when the opposite—gasps of air, gaps in meaning—would be more intuitive. The inversion renders communication (or its

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<sup>438</sup> Gladman also writes at the limit of breathing in *Calamities* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016):

I stopped. I breathed. I wrote, “For pushing heavy door open. No sooner falling over threshold with effort thereof.” My heart hurt, I pulled my arm back, laid it across my chest. A few moments passed. I resumed, “When butch bouncer slamming it closed behind. Waving us down worn plush stairs. Entering red-and-white crescent-shaped room. Several lesbians dancing.” My breath had grown jagged, and I couldn’t repair it. These were the shortest sentences I’d ever seen; yet they were not the kind of sentences that allowed you to rest when you reached the end of them. They pointed always to the one up ahead. (45)

<sup>439</sup> Jussi Parikka, “The Sensed Smog: Smart Ubiquitous Cities and the Sensorial Body,” *The Fibreculture Journal* 29 (2017): <http://twentynine.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-219-the-sensed-smog-smart-ubiquitous-cities-and-the-sensorial-body/>.

<sup>440</sup> Gladman, *Event Factory*, 61; Gladman, personal email exchange, May 30, 2016.

failure) and breathing inextricable. Glitches in one double as glitches in the other. From the narrator's standpoint, the breathing of the Esaleyons, a faction not racially but certainly ethnically distinct, is lost in translation, and their language lost in breathing. Were she to account for their communication, she would need, as she puts it, a symbol "to represent air."<sup>441</sup> Translation doesn't devisceralize experience and embodiment.<sup>442</sup> Early in *The Ravickians*, Amini introduces what we're reading in English as though it had originally been written in Ravic. The expression of a Ravickian's experience in any language other than Ravic, she says, amounts to an expression of hunger: "To say you have been born in Ravicka in another language than Ravic is to say you have been hungry."<sup>443</sup> We, the readers, apprehend Amini's experience as a lack, a want. Gladman invents languages, Esaléye and Ravic, to highlight the translational character of all confrontations with others' experiences, as well as to posit translation as a locus of viscerality.

An episode starring Ulchi, a Ravickian whom the narrator of *Event Factory* befriends, shows breathing's operation as a symptom that, through some visceral translation, at once reveals and obscures the source of a crisis. Ulchi starts coughing with increased frequency and intensity. This new compulsion prompts him to frame his bad breathing, and by extension himself, as a symptom of Ravicka's crisis. "Something is not right in Ravicka," he says in a voice barely audible.<sup>444</sup> "Something has not been right for a long time now," the narrator amends, "so the situation must be

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<sup>441</sup> Gladman, *Event Factory*, 61.

<sup>442</sup> I am indebted to Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins' claim, in "Introduction: On the Visceral," *GLQ* 20, no. 4 (2014), that the phenomenology of viscerality registers racial, colonial, and national dynamics:

We see viscerality as a phenomenological index for the logics of desire, consumption, disgust, health, disease, belonging, and displacement that are implicit in colonial and postcolonial relations. Emerging from the language of (colonial) excess, viscerality registers those systems of meaning that have lodged in the gut, signifying to the incursion of violent intentionality into the rhythms of everyday life. (395)

<sup>443</sup> Gladman, *The Ravickians*, 7.

<sup>444</sup> Gladman, *Event Factory*, 75, henceforth cited in parentheses.

escalating. But why was it affecting him physically?" (75) To answer this question, she first proceeds comparatively, trying to "register [her] own health" (75). But this focus conduces to sensory overload: "The signals from my body were scattered and despondent. I decided to ignore this information entirely" (75). So, the narrator turns to Ulchi, who, she says, "had just one symptom: he could not breathe" (75). His breathing, she notices, has reached a critical point:

Ulchi's brown had turned a deepening purple and his body appeared gripped against an oncoming seizure; he reached for me. He wanted something. One hand was opening and closing repeatedly. I managed to make out the word "*tirim*," which in Ravic means pen. It was the pen in my hand he wanted. I gave it to him. He used it to make a mark on his stomach that resembled an "*o*." He said, "*Ha meyeni*." Push me. I did. I pushed fastly. With all my weight, I settled on that point, pressed as if a door might open. He let out a belch and beautiful yellow began to flow into his lungs.

"What happened," I asked once he had recovered.

"I don't know, but this wasn't the first time."

"You've lost your breath before?"

"Earlier."

"When?"

"Not long ago, but..." And in high Ravickian form he began to gesticulate dramatically, to "hide the story in the dance," as they say there. I did not take his subversion personally. This was Ravicka. Though, whatever had stopped his breathing then re-started it was symptomatic of the bigger problem with this city. "Ulchi, where do people go here to find the truth?" I got the question out, but figured it would be difficult for him to answer. Ravickians prefer not to share this kind of information: it belongs to the community. If you

do not know it, this is because you are not supposed to. (76–77, italics in the original)

“Ulchi’s brown” likely refers to the color of his skin. His identification as brown immediately brings about a crisis of meaning. For one, we don’t know if his skin acquires a purple tint, or if it outright goes from brown to purple. It’s also unclear whether the narrator perforates Ulchi’s body to let air in or puts pressure on the “o” as a means to catalyze breathing processes that involve the nose, mouth, pharynx, larynx, trachea, bronchi, lungs, and diaphragm. Nonetheless, the narrator assesses that “whatever had stopped [Ulchi’s] breathing and then re-started it was symptomatic of the bigger problem with this city” (77). Per her deduction, the referent of Ulchi’s symptom *is* the crisis playing out in Ravicka, but she lacks a language for articulating the interplay between symptom and referent.

Ulchi’s lost breath both affords the narrator evidence of the crisis and stresses the limitedness of the information she might collect. Like a Lacanian symptom or sinthome, Ulchi’s labored and erratic breathing marks a node in the exchange of signifiers where meaning undoes itself.<sup>445</sup> While in *Dhalgren* Kid can always press the reset button and move from one encounter to the next, there is in the Ravicka series something to lose in being in relation: a sense of control, a sense of ownership over the situation. Encountering Ulchi and his breathing as symptoms teaches the narrator that the Ravickian crisis, though it affects her, is ultimately beyond her reach: “The crisis ravaging Ravicka’s population still had not become *my* crisis; the Ravickians would not allow it. The architecture said no” (109, italics in the original).

How does architecture say no? Let’s turn to *Houses of Ravicka*. As mentioned earlier, the

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<sup>445</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: Livre 23, Le sinthome* (Paris: Seuil, 2005). Lee Edelman explains in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) that “though it functions as the necessary condition of the subject’s engagement of Symbolic reality, the sinthome refuses the Symbolic logic that determines the exchange of signifiers; it admits no translation of its singularity and therefore carries nothing of meaning” (35). The sinthome structures *jouissance*, a painful excess or waste that transcends a pleasure principle communicable through language, or containable within the Symbolic.

novel's second act contains a first-person account of life inside an enigmatic house. In so far as the house expands, recedes, and migrates along with bodily movements and shifts in environmental conditions, the accounts appear at times to have been authored by the house itself. An unknown speaker describes life inside the house as writing, and writing as a product of breathing:

Living was like writing a long, immersive essay: inside something fluid and labyrinthine, where light shined in at odd angles, even during the new moon. Sleeping was a terrifying pause in writing. Walking was writing. Each room held an essay you wrote as you breathed and the subject of the essay usually had nothing to do with the function of the room, but maybe the room's architecture, for that day, was shaped by the quality of your thinking. First, I breathed the steps to my house, and then I descended them.<sup>446</sup>

Gladman's brand of alchemy is unmistakable. Breathing yields essays that are also rooms and whose interior is fluid. Architecture is repeatedly sublimated and desublimated, wavering between gaseous and solid. Even though houses breathe in Gladman's universe, their fluidity isn't necessarily recognizable from the outside. In the first section of *Houses of Ravicka*, Jakobi says of house no. 32, "Not only did it fail to present a door, there also appeared to be no windows. It was one solid, unbroken, cascade of wall."<sup>447</sup> "The material," he adds, "was stone or stucco, I couldn't tell."<sup>448</sup> Descriptions of interiors register as speculative fiction; descriptions of exteriors are, by contrast, eerily realist. The paranormal intricacies of a breathing architecture don't translate.

In and beyond the Ravicka series, Gladman and the narrators who serve as her proxies mobilize breathing architecture to devise structures for living subject to bodily and environmental fluctuations. "Things architecture other things," says Patova, stressing architecture's function as a

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<sup>446</sup> Gladman, *Houses of Ravicka*, 139–140.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 62.

reproductive process.<sup>449</sup> “My thinking of architecture,” she adds, “resulted from my thinking of the line, how the line made narrative regardless of whatever else I was making, and narrative presented enclosures for your questions about living, and living, for the most part, required space.”<sup>450</sup> This line Patova mentions has many referents. It’s a line in a text—a line that produces narrative in so far as narrative is linear, even if it pauses, turns around, or takes a detour. It’s the continuous line of cursive writing, which creates shapes, delimits surfaces. It’s also the invisible line we could trace between our respiratory and vocal organs and those of the individuals with whom we breathe, speak, or sing. In *Houses of Ravicka*, the occupant of one of the mysterious houses describes this last type of line as such: “I wanted lines to extend from my throat, the back end of a long-held note, multiple lines escaping me, and moving outward, along circuits of people’s spent breath.”<sup>451</sup> By breathing, talking, and writing, then, we make lines; and these lines hold questions about living. Architecture, Patova affirms, “contained fictions but it breathed and remembered us and held out the possibility of future architecture, where, even though our buildings were in motion and the terrain was constantly reshaping itself, we were part of a conversation.”<sup>452</sup> Slaloming across contrastive locutions and across Ravicka’s paradoxes, Gladman’s prose builds a breathing architecture that archives past experiences while keeping open the possibility of future ones.<sup>453</sup>

In an interview with Drew Zeiba, Gladman speaks to the simultaneous presence and elusiveness of identity categories in her literary and artistic riffs on architecture:

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<sup>449</sup> Gladman, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, 14.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>451</sup> Gladman, *Houses of Ravicka*, 125.

<sup>452</sup> Gladman, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, 92–93.

<sup>453</sup> Renee Gladman’s architectural drawings are collected in *Prose Architectures* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2017). *Prose Architectures* assembles more or less abstract urban plans drawn without perspectival technique. Produced in the negative space between two books of the Ravicka series, the drawings themselves concern themselves with liminal, in-between spaces: circulation lanes, parks, air and water systems.

That's where body questions get interesting to me. I know that a lot of people do work on the body and they're talking about this body that might be injured or might be disabled or might be queer or might be marked in these particular ways and I think that that stuff is in there, but I don't know how aware or how I'm engaged with that at this moment.

We all seem to have a kind of breath of us and I like to think about how buildings breathe in relation to how human beings breathe.<sup>454</sup>

“That stuff is in there,” says Gladman, but it’s out of focus. It’s in the air, the architecture. It’s part of breathing.

The symptom, like breathing architecture, gives the alterity encountered through breathing minimal shape. The symptom allows Gladman and her characters to treat breathing as an object of knowledge without determining its content. Breathing isn’t necessarily clarified in its becoming-symptom—idioms like ethnicity, language, and architecture dramatize the opacity of embodiment and experience—but it becomes something to work with and around. Ana Patova recounts,

I held my breath often, I did not breathe, my throat resisted the air. I moved down the street, failing. I could not breathe. My body wanted to be rid of me. I didn’t have the words for the buildings and their turned-in windows, folded into their evacuated state. I had lost architecture. I went on trying to be funny. You wanted the not-breathing to say something about the buildings that breathing failed to say. Zàoter and I sat at table with our breath in our hands, while Luswage and Bello urged us to return to breathing. I wanted someone to laugh; on most days, that was all I wanted.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> Drew Zeiba, “City Writer: Interview with Visual Poet Renee Gladman,” *Pin-Up*, 2017, <http://pinupmagazine.org/articles/pinup-renee-gladman-interview#12>.

<sup>455</sup> Gladman, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, 62–63.

Patova and her peers shift between breathing and not-breathing, displaying various degrees of agency. They hope that one form of breathing will be more eloquent than the others, that it will say something about the environment that the others might fail to say. They hope that it will bring about some relief, some joy even, in the seemingly endless quest for meaning in a crisis. Patova and her peers do not ever demystify their breath, but they come to hold it in their hands as a shared opacity—a shared alterity that can't be possessed by any one individual.<sup>456</sup>

To feel out and deal with opacity, one's own and others', without presuming the ability to possess alterity: this is the work of symptomatic breathing as the Ravicka series exemplifies it. Let's return to Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation amidst opacity, to which I've so far only briefly alluded via Shaka McGlotten, Zach Blas, and Christina A. León. Glissant states that

“Being is relation:” but Relation is safe from the idea of Being.

The idea of relation does not limit Relation, nor does it fit outside of it.

The idea of relation does not preexist (Relation).

Someone who thinks Relation thinks by means of it, just as does someone who thinks he is safe from it.

Relation contaminates, sweetens, as a principle, or as flower dust.

Relation enferrals, lying in wait for equivalence.

That which would preexist (Relation) is vacuity of Being-as-Being.

Being-as-Being is not opaque but self-important [*suffisant*].

Relation struggles and states itself in opacity. It defers [*differer*] self-importance.<sup>457</sup>

Against a concept of Being-as-Being that is self-sufficient or self-identical, Glissant posits relation as

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<sup>456</sup> On a nonpossessive relation to shared alterity, see Irigaray, *Être deux*, 11.

<sup>457</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, 199–200; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 185–186.

that which “enferals,” or in the realm of opacity defers or induces difference in (the French “*diffère*” suggests both) Being-as-Being. The smoke that in *Dhalgren* and the Ravicka series won’t dissipate and reveal what, if anything at all, it is hiding makes milieus and the bodies that populate them opaque. No one is unsusceptible to opacity and relation, Glissant insists. Those who think they can abstract themselves from such conditions think by way of them in the first place. Glissant explains that “to feel in solidarity with [the Other] or build with him [sic] or to like what he [sic] does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him [sic].”<sup>458</sup> Betsy Wing’s decision to translate the French “*comprendre*” as “grasp” rather than “understand” emphasizes the act of “*prendre*” (to take, to steal, to make one’s own) inherent in “*comprendre*.<sup>459</sup> Opacity, for Glissant, isn’t so much an intentional performance, then, as a condition of social relations that must be acknowledged as such. Gladman’s characters recognize that what they share is their finitude, or, as Kaja Silverman puts it, “the point where we end and others begin, spatially and temporally,” the point where we “[make] room for [others].”<sup>460</sup>

Per Emmanuel Lévinas’ “pneumatism,” in the instant of suspension between inhalation and exhalation, a breathlessness inseparable from the structure of breathing, we turn to the Other, and as such find ourselves in the realm of ethics and politics.<sup>461</sup> To inhabit this realm of ethics, where no individual is subordinated to the Other or to the ontology of the pair, is in Jean-Luc Nancy’s words “to be singular plural.” Being singular plural points to a mode of being wherein individual essence is contingent on coexistence.<sup>462</sup> In John Paul Ricco’s riff on Nancy, being singular plural rests on the idea that individuals share their very separation: “If separation is the spacing of existence and if existence is always relational and shared, then sharing in separation is the praxis of coexistence—of

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<sup>458</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 26; Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, 39.

<sup>460</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of my Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>461</sup> See Marder, “Breathing ‘to’ the Other;” Lévinas, “Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony;” Feron, “Respiration et action chez Lévinas.”

<sup>462</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), 48–50.

being together.”<sup>463</sup> The “groundless ground”—I’d say the air—on or in which individuals share their separation is a space of decision, understood as a practice of intrusion that brings to mind Elizabeth Freeman’s aforementioned “inhabitation by and of the Other.”<sup>464</sup> Breathing induces the conditions for the emergence of an “us” that Ricco writes is “a name for our mutually shared intrusion, and the fact that nothing lies between us—nothing but intrusion as the non-antagonistic (neutral) infinite complicity and partaking in the infinite task of decision.”<sup>465</sup> Recognizing breathing as an encounter with alterity in the world and within ourselves configures embodiment and experience, and as such thought and action, as processes that require us to move in and out of our own and of others’ bodies.

#### IV. Alterity and Singularity

How are we, then, to acknowledge singularly racialized, gendered, or disabled aspects of embodiment and experience if in breathing we are fundamentally opaque to ourselves and to others, and if we are always moving in and out of our own and others’ bodies? *Dhalgren* and the Ravicka series mobilize breathing in toxic, smoke-filled atmospheres to decontextualize and defamiliarize individuals and environments to a point where no totalizing statements can be formulated about either. Yet, breathing beyond these speculative novels carries histories of oppression that can’t realistically be ignored. At demonstrations and rallies held after the killing of Eric Garner, the slogan “I can’t breathe,” a statement about the challenges of black survival in a country that relentlessly

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<sup>463</sup> John Paul Ricco, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 4, 61.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 65.

stages and spectacularizes black death, morphed into “We can’t breathe.”<sup>466</sup> “We can’t breathe” wasn’t chanted exclusively by black people. And interestingly, repeating “We can’t breathe” makes it performatively true; it potentially induces suffocation among all demonstrators. Solidarity might emerge from such a collective performance. But the white protesters’ performance of breathlessness in solidarity with black protesters for whom not being able to breathe is a condition of life in the U.S. doesn’t grant the former access to the latter’s experience. This distinction between shared breath and seized or possessed breath is what this chapter has sought to problematize.

The concept of symptomatic breathing, once it travels beyond the confines of *Dhalgren* and the Ravicka series, shows that the emergence of a pneumatic “us,” where identity might seem to be departicularized into an atmosphere, brings along with it a protection of particularity in the form of a visceral opacity that must be recognized as the site of ethical and political relation. In this essay I’ve added an asterisk to the previous chapters’ claim that individuals and groups, especially since the 1970s, have reacted to crises across scales (in the case of queer writers and artists) and political uprootedness (in the case of African American and Native American feminist writers) by designing forms of breathing meant to generate more coherent milieus and worlds. Whereas the milieus and worlds imagined in the previous chapters were circumstantially tentative, fragile, and provisional, here the ethics and politics of breathing necessitate an active surrendering to the limits of coherence. Shifting away from written accounts of breathing practices to cinematic renditions of discourses of the breath, the next chapter, this dissertation’s B-side, tracks the fantasies of intention and self-presence with which individuals imbue the last breath to speculate what it is like to encounter vulnerability and finitude on their own terms.

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<sup>466</sup> See Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

Chapter 4  
Encountering Finitude:  
The Last Breath in End-of-Life Documentaries

### I. Death in the Form of Life

This chapter tracks the last breath in two long-form observational documentaries or specimens of cinema-vérité produced between the late 1980s and the early 2000s: Frederick Wiseman's (b. 1930) *Near Death* and Allan King's (1930–2009) *Dying at Grace*.<sup>467</sup> Shot in black and white, Wiseman's six-hour marathon follows the medical professionals taking care of terminally ill patients in Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. King's two-and-a-half-hour film profiles five patients from their admission in Toronto's Grace Health Center until their demise. Wiseman and King portray the sociality of the last breath. They show the interactions that create a context for one last breath to take place, be observed, and be interpreted. Veena Das and Stanley Cavell, inspired by Wittgenstein, name such a context of interpretation a "form of life." "A form of life," Das and Clara Han explain, "rests on nothing more than that we agree ... on the way that we size things up, or respond to what we encounter."<sup>468</sup> Spiritual, cosmological, political, and ethical contexts of the kind detailed in this dissertation organize breathing until the very end. Within the form of life that structures the

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<sup>467</sup> *Near Death*, dir. Frederick Wiseman (Zaporah Films, 1989); *Dying at Grace*, dir. Allan King (Janus Films, 2003). Wiseman and King's documentaries display the characteristics of cinema-vérité listed by William Rothman in *The "I" of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Cinema-vérité dispenses with the screenplay; and filmmakers generally stay behind the camera, withdrawn from the world they portray (282, 289–290). King referred to his own films as "actuality dramas." See Dennis Lim, "A Second Look: Allan King's 'Actuality Dramas' Get a New Audience," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/19/entertainment/la-ca-second-look-20100919>.

<sup>468</sup> Clara Han and Veena Das, "Introduction: A Concept Note," in *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*, eds. Clara Han and Veena Das (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 25. See also Clara Han, "On Feelings and Finiteness in Everyday Life," in *Wording the World: Veena Das and Scenes of Inheritance*, ed. Roma Chatterji (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 193; Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1989] 2009), 308.

witnessing of a nonviolent death, the living attribute meaning to the last breath, a simplification or reduction of processes that imply a multiplicity of respiring organisms and gas flows with distinct lifespans and temporalities.

As I move from the anticipation of the last breath to its postmortem assessment, I chart a paradox. A “good death” under the life support technologies and palliative care practices of modern medicine is one where the patient is partially or entirely unconscious, often due to analgesic and narcotic drugs like morphine. Unresponsive, the patient appears stripped of a personality. At the same time, the frequent declaration by the living that through the last breath one “has left peacefully” retroactively conjures up a recognizable subject in order for that subject to withdraw intentionally from the world. The fictions about life, death, and subjectivity that converge in the last breath come into sharp relief in empirical documentaries. The last breath carries the fantasy not only that life and death are distinct, but also that under optimal conditions, the transition from the former to the latter is intentional without being suicidal. Through the last breath, the living can imagine the dying as encountering finitude on their own terms.

The criteria for a good death are historically and culturally contingent. Simone de Beauvoir’s account of the end of her mother’s life, published in 1964, represents a touchstone inquiry into what constitutes a good death in postwar Western societies. A good death, she shows, isn’t good because it in any way feels good to those who are privy to it:

Maman had almost lost consciousness. Suddenly she cried, “I can’t breathe!” Her mouth opened, her eyes stared wide, huge in that wasted, ravaged face: with a spasm she entered into coma.

“Go and telephone,” said Mademoiselle Cournot.

Poupette rang me up: I did not answer. The operator went on ringing for half an hour

before I woke. Meanwhile Poupette went back to Maman: already she was no longer there—her heart was beating and she breathed, sitting there with glassy eyes that saw nothing. And then it was over. “The doctors said she would go out like a candle: it wasn’t like that, it wasn’t like that at all,” said my sister, sobbing.

“But, Madame,” replied the nurse, “I assure you it was a very easy death.”<sup>469</sup>

Beauvoir’s account stresses indicators of struggle: her mother’s inability to breathe, a spasm that announces a coma. The quick succession of hyperventilation and apnea episodes with which the account opens has been recognized, at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a sign of impending death.<sup>470</sup> If Maman, as her daughters call her, did go out like a candle, it was abruptly blown. It suddenly lacked oxygen. Yet the nurse claims that Beauvoir’s mother had “a very easy death”—well, not exactly easy, in the account’s original French, but “*douce*”: quiet, smooth, sweet.<sup>471</sup> How could this be? For one, even as Maman was “sitting there,” she was “no longer there.” She went MIA on the scene of her own death. Beauvoir holds that Maman had “an upper-class death” (“*une mort de privilégiée*”).<sup>472</sup> When the privileged die, they don’t suffer. They’re generally no longer around for suffering. Death may be sudden, but it entails no gore. It is managed, contained, clean.

The contemporary good death typically relocates the tubercular death ameliorated by opium of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—a death that entailed, in John Anthony Tercier’s narration, “the family gathered

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<sup>469</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 88.

<sup>470</sup> See Alexander Fletcher and Dominic Moor, “The Lives and Works of John Cheyne (1777–1836) and William Stokes (1804–1878),” *Journal of the Intensive Care Society* 18, no. 4 (2017): 323–325; John L. Powell, “John Cheyne and William Stokes Periodic Respirations,” *Journal of Pelvic Surgery* 7, no. 1 (2001): 37–38; George L. Sterbach, “John Cheyne and William Stokes: Periodic Respiration,” *The Journal of Emergency Medicine* 3, no. 3 (1985): 233–236.

<sup>471</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Une mort très douce* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 137.

<sup>472</sup> Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, 95; Beauvoir, *Une Mort Très Douce*, 147. See also Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 53.

around the bedside, a few murmured farewells, and then an exit ‘gentle into the good night.’”<sup>473</sup>

Good deaths under modern Western medicine don’t take place in public. They might take place at home, if the dying can afford individualized care, but most often happen in a hospital or hospice room, “a borrowed space of transition rather than belonging,” as Bruce Buchan, Margaret Gibson, and David Ellison put it.<sup>474</sup> Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, hospitals provided care mostly to travelers, the destitute, the orphaned, and the poor.<sup>475</sup> While the World Wars made the hospital the nucleus of caregiving, palliative care practices, which were still nascent when in the early 1960s Beauvoir wrote *Une mort très douce*, once more transformed the hospital, this time into a place where one goes to die.<sup>476</sup> In what amounted to a massive shift in the organization of medicine and the management of life and death, dying left the terrain of everyday life and rituals to become a bureaucratic matter: rationalized, depersonalized, and handled by experts.<sup>477</sup> Throughout its rise from the 1960s to the 1980s, palliative care fundamentally amended the purpose of medicine. In addition to its curative function, medicine started to operate as a technology for producing a good death.<sup>478</sup> Doctors were tasked with reducing the suffering of patients while helping them and their close ones to accept the inevitability of death.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> John Anthony Tercier, *The Contemporary Deathbed Documentary: The Ultimate Rush* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

<sup>474</sup> Bruce Buchan, Margaret Gibson, and David Ellison, “Reflections on the Death Scene,” *Cultural Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2010): 5.

<sup>475</sup> Glennys Howarth, *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Malden: Polity, 2007), 116.

<sup>476</sup> Michel Castra, *Bien mourir: Sociologie des soins palliatifs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 3, 5.

<sup>477</sup> David Wendell Moller, *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, and Human Mortality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24.

Robert Desjarlais, in “A Good Death, Recorded,” in *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World*, points to the cultural variability of the good death. For the Yolmo people, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people, a good death entails weeks of funerary rites that help the living let go of the dead and the dead achieve rebirth (648–661).

<sup>478</sup> Castra, *Bien mourir*, 5, 57.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 210; Jennifer Lorna Hockey, *Experiences of Death: An Anthropological Account* (Edinburgh:

The medicalization of death has yielded legal and existential interrogations as to what constitutes life, death, and the capacity to determine one's fate. Kristen Savell makes the ambitious claim that artificial ventilation and other life-sustaining technologies have brought about an entirely new type of decision: the decision not to endure treatment, to be made by a competent patient, or alternatively by a guardian or relative.<sup>480</sup> A series of legal fictions streamline this otherwise fraught decision: one, a competent patient can refuse treatment even if it leads to death; two, a doctor's removal of life-supporting technology doesn't entail responsibility; and three, such a death is a natural death.<sup>481</sup> To respond to changing conditions of dying, Robert Kastenbaum developed in the 1960s a new taxonomy of deaths.<sup>482</sup> Phenomenological death, for instance, occurs when "so-called heroic measures" maintain feeble indices of life even as "the person inside the body"—note the Cartesian split—"gives absolutely no indication of his [sic] continued existence."<sup>483</sup> Social death happens when the living behave toward the dying as they would toward a dead person.<sup>484</sup> The temporality of death in the era of palliative care and life-sustaining technologies is pluralized. A patient can be phenomenologically dead or brain dead or clinically dead minutes, hours, or even days before being pronounced legally dead.

Amidst these noncoinciding temporalities, the last breath emerges as a valuable tool for

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Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 57; Elliott J. Rosen, *Families Facing Death: Family Dynamics of Terminal Illness* (Lexington: Lexington Books).

<sup>480</sup> Kristen Savell, "A Jurisprudence of Ambivalence: Three Legal Fictions Concerning Death and Dying," *Cultural Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2011): 53.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 53–53; Jane Elizabeth Seymour, "Revisiting Medicalisation and 'Natural' Death," *Social Science & Medicine* 49 (1999): esp. 693.

<sup>482</sup> Robert Kastenbaum, "Psychological Death," in *Death and Dying: Current Issues in the Treatment of the Dying Person*, ed. Leonard Pearson (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969).

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 9, italics removed. On personhood as legal fiction, see "Note: What We Talk about When We Talk about Persons: The Language of a Legal Fiction," *Harvard Law Review* 114, no. 6 (2001): esp. 1762.

<sup>484</sup> Kastenbaum, "Psychological Death," 15, italics removed. See also Robert Kastenbaum, *The Psychology of Death*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Springer, 2000); Robert Kastenbaum, *On Our Way: The Final Passage Through Life and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

making sense of dying. The last breath is in fact so valuable that, as the neurosurgeon Thomas B. Freeman argues in an account of his nephew's death, it is worth faking.<sup>485</sup> Freeman's nephew suffered a closed head injury. Following an unsuccessful surgery, he was quickly declared brain dead. In order to be donated, functional organs must be extracted at this stage. As such, the relatives of an organ donor generally don't witness the donor's last breath or heartbeat. Freeman recounts that his niece couldn't process that her brother was practically dead: "she felt that he was somehow still alive, since he was breathing on a ventilator and his heart was breathing."<sup>486</sup> So, Freeman made a suggestion:

I asked her if she would want to be with her brother when the ventilator was temporarily disconnected. My niece understood that in this way she could be present for her brother's final breath, and participate in his death by being at his side when he stopped breathing. I let her know that the alarms would be turned off, there would be a quiet and reverent atmosphere in the room, and the family would be with her for support as well as to say good-bye. In other words, I offered her the opportunity to be present at her brother's death, focusing on his breathing.<sup>487</sup>

The family followed through with Freeman's plan to simulate a good death. His niece saw her brother's "last breath" and left the room before his oxygen saturations began to fall and the ventilator had to be reconnected. Similarly to the gimmick as Sianne Ngai theorizes it, the staging of the last breath here betrays its inner workings, as though it tried at once too hard and not hard enough to provide closure.<sup>488</sup> The last breath is a narrative device that contorts a body neither quite

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<sup>485</sup> Thomas B. Freeman, "Death Perception: How Temporary Ventilator Disconnection Helped my Family Accept Brain Death and Donate Organs," *Narrative Inquiry in Bioethics* 5, no. 1 (2015): 9–12.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>488</sup> Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 466.

dead nor alive into a simple transition from life to death. As breathers, we internalize, along with oxygen, potentially threatening toxins, therefore making our bodies zones of relative indistinction between life and death. But the last breath overwrites the imbrication of life and death that characterizes all breathing.<sup>489</sup> The last breath, to people like Freeman and his niece, constitutes a threshold. All that precedes it gets reduced to life. All that succeeds it gets reduced to death.

The last breath has been especially important in producing dying as a narrative and death as an event across screen cultures, which shift the barrier between life and death.<sup>490</sup> Louis-Georges Schwartz recounts that the invention of cinematography, as that of other reproductive technologies like photography and gramophony, carried the promise of preserving the image of the dead.<sup>491</sup> Schwartz belongs to a critical genealogy that ontologizes cinema as a ghost story. André Bazin, a key figure in this genealogy, famously argues that the screen, contra the photographic frame, functions as a mask: characters “survive” even as they walk out of the camera’s field of vision.<sup>492</sup> As such, cinema personifies a possible absence. Its image, says Gilberto Perez, constitutes a “true hallucination” or “material ghost.”<sup>493</sup> Mobilizing a Lacanian nomenclature, Christian Metz explains that “*le propre du cinéma*” (cinema’s being or essence) resides in a signifier that exists even if it doesn’t reach, at least not entirely, the realm of representation or the Imaginary.<sup>494</sup> Cinema’s Imaginary, then, combines presence and absence. *Near Death* and *Dying at Grace* showcase narratives of the passage from life to death whose teleology is contested by the cinematic contamination between alive and

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<sup>489</sup> See Katrina Jaworski, “The Breath of Life and Death,” *Cultural Critique* 86 (2014): 83.

<sup>490</sup> See David Scott Diffrient, “Dead, But Still Breathing: The Problem of Postmortem Movement in Horror Films,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 2 (2018): 98–122.

<sup>491</sup> Louis-Georges Schwartz, “Cinema and the Meaning of ‘Life,’” *Discourse* 28, nos. 2–3 (2006): 27.

<sup>492</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: caboose, 2009), 193.

<sup>493</sup> Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>494</sup> Christian Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire: Psychanalyse et cinéma* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1977), 64.

dead, present and absent. Impossibly, Wiseman and King depict the production of teleological biographical narratives in a medium that resists the compartmentalization of life and death.<sup>495</sup> With the last breath as their focus, Wiseman and King come closest to making documentaries *about cinema*.

Capturing the last breath on the screen is an onerous enterprise. Healthcare professionals and relatives might choose when to unplug an artificial respirator, but the exact moment of someone's last inhalation and exhalation is hard to predict. The last breath can only be recognized as such in retrospect: when no additional breaths follow, when a dying person, now dead, stares silently.<sup>496</sup> Microphones increase the likelihood of recording a last breath that might not catch the eye. As Jennifer Malkowski explains, filming the last breath requires audiovisual equipment that can fit in compact hospital rooms and record for hours at a low cost.<sup>497</sup> *Near Death* is the rare deathbed documentary shot on celluloid—a fact that, for Malkowski, speaks to Wiseman's pedigree as an established filmmaker.<sup>498</sup> *Dying at Grace*, by contrast, was shot using handheld SD video cameras. King, too, was a celebrated director, but video afforded him some flexibility. He was able to film longer and within shorter notice if a patient's state quickly deteriorated. The last breath is a topic of conversation and chatter in *Near Death*, but it isn't shown, as in *Dying at Grace*. While this exclusion might point to an editorial decision on Wiseman's part, it also speaks to the difficulty of being present for, and able to record, the last breath.

Capturing the last breath remains a challenge even with the proper equipment, as conceptual and installation artist Sophie Calle shows in *Pas pu saisir la mort* (couldn't seize death). What would

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<sup>495</sup> Brenda Smaill, in *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), explains that documentaries borrow the codes of science, education, and social responsibility (3). See also Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>496</sup> Jaworski, "The Breath of Life and Death," 83.

<sup>497</sup> Jennifer Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 88. See also Michele Aaron, *Moving Image: Ideology, Iconography, and I* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 157–177.

become an installation at the Italian Pavilion of the 2007 Venice Biennale began as a project to record the last three months of life of Calle's mother, Monique Sindler. Calle installed a camera at Sindler's bedside because, the artist recounts, "I wanted to make sure to be there to hear her last words, to see her last smile, her last moment."<sup>499</sup> Filming her mother's dying process allowed Calle to displace her anxiety. Rather than worrying about the days, hours, or minutes Sindler had left to live, Calle concerned herself with having to replace or rewind the tape. Calle was by her mother's side when the latter died. And yet:

Something strange happened, which was that I couldn't figure out when the last breath had taken place. I knew the last book she had read. I knew the last words she had said. I knew the last person she had met. But this... She had asked me that when she was about to die I put on a piece by Mozart, but I didn't know when to press "play." There were tiny breaths and then, for eleven minutes, there was this moment between life and death when I didn't know if she was alive or dead. I couldn't put my finger on the last breath and on death itself. There was this no man's land between life and death where I couldn't catch death.<sup>500</sup>

Calle's account detaches breathing from her mother. A generic "there" indicates the location first of tiny breaths, and then of a grey zone between life and death. Calle tells a frontier narrative: Sindler enters a "no man's land" where Calle, disoriented, cannot "catch death."<sup>501</sup> Those eleven minutes of liminality are what Calle eventually showed at the Biennale. *Pas pu saisir la mort* invites spectators to

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<sup>499</sup> Sophie Calle, lecture at the California College of the Arts, March 30, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMraLWWMvNw>.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Calle's inability to decipher her mother's last breath should be distinguished from such an inability in cases that don't count as good deaths. For example, Joan Didion, in her bestselling memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 2003), recalls not knowing what to answer when, after her husband John Gregory Dunne had had a heart attack, the 911 dispatcher asked her if he was still breathing (11). Dunne's sudden death, combined with Didion's panic, prevented a last breath from being seen or heard.

identify Sindler's last breath, to extract a narrative from what looks, stubbornly, like a non-event. As she crowdsources the labor of capturing the last breath, Calle interrogates who determines and how one measures the temporality of death and dying. These questions animate the interactions between healthcare professionals, patients, and relatives in Wiseman's *Near Death*.

## II. Producing the Last Breath: Frederick Wiseman's *Near Death*

The world of *Near Death* is a world of machines. We, as viewers, see and hear ventilators "breathe" before we see and hear the mechanically induced breathing of the patients hooked onto them. Wiseman's treatment of his subjects is somewhat impersonal. Granted, his camera is intransigent, even invasive. But most of the patients and healthcare professionals remain unnamed until the closing credits.<sup>502</sup> In keeping with his body of work, Wiseman tells individual stories in the service of an institutional portrait. We join conversations in media res and exit them abruptly. Murmurs and mumbles aren't close-captioned. Through Wiseman's lens, medicine consists in the management of breathing and the discourses it incepts. *Near Death* documents countless exchanges between healthcare professionals, patients, and their close ones about the conditions that make possible the occurrence of one last breath. A behind-the-scenes look at the production of the last breath, the film resembles an extended version of Thomas B. Freedman's account of his nephew's brain death. In Wiseman's film, however, the last breath isn't faked.<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> I use "healthcare professional" as a generic title when a worker's position as a doctor, a nurse, or something else entirely is unclear.

<sup>503</sup> *Near Death* also bears a liking to the durational and endurance performances explored, via Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose's work, in the first chapter of this dissertation. Endurance performances tend to be taxing for both artists and audiences. Variations of the intensity of breathing on- and offstage, or in the present case on- and offscreen, supply evidence of accumulated strain, in addition to signaling a shared experience. Watching *Near Death*, a film more than three times the length of a typical documentary, approximates an endurance performance that no patient in the actual film survives.

A stark affective imbalance marks breathing-related conversations between healthcare professionals and patients in *Near Death*. The healthcare professionals, who are trying to get the patients to grasp their situation and accordingly approve or opt out of treatment, are emphatic, at times even aggressively enthusiastic. The patients, often intubated, on painkillers, and visibly overwhelmed by the stakes of the decision they are asked to make, are for the most part quiet. Consider an early scene, in which a female worker loudly tells a male patient, “On a scale of one to ten—of your lungs—ten being good and one being bad, you’re a one. You have really poor, poor breathing.” The aim of this performance assessment is to get the patient to decide whether he wants to be intubated again should his state further deteriorate. “Do you understand what intubation means?” the worker almost screams (see Figure 8). The patient nods. He ventures, “Freeze you off.” His words are barely audible. He’s shot in profile. A breathing mask covers the lower half of his face. She corrects him,

No, that’s not what it means. Intubation means—it’s an act of putting a tube in your mouth and into your lungs, and we attach it to a machine through tubes, and we help you breathe. Ok? And we wait for your lungs to get better, and then we take you off the machine. As you get better, you’re allowed, you’re able to breathe better on your own, and the machine does less and less work. Unfortunately, your lungs aren’t going to get better. So the act of putting you on the machine is almost a futile effort. The machine is there to help you, and then when you get better, we can take the machine away gradually. What’s going to happen if we put you on the machine is, is that you’re not going to get better. This is you. It’s sad, and it’s frustrating, and it’s anger provoking. But your lungs are about as bad as they can get, you know. Your breathing test tells us. You know, the breathing test? Not the little aerosol thing but the breathing test on the big machine. That tells us what you’re like. And your body is

telling us is that your lungs don't have much left.

I've preserved, here and elsewhere, the colloquialisms and tentative structure of the dialogue.

Repetitions and amendments define a terrain where the patient, the state of his lungs, and the quality of his breathing are one and the same: the breathing test "tells us what you're like;" "you're a one;" "this is you." The healthcare professional tries to guide the patient toward the realization that intubation isn't worth pursuing in case of relapse because he, his lungs, and his breathing are near death. She wants him to confirm what his body, through something like "organ speech," is already saying: that when breathing can no longer be successfully rebooted, it is best to let go.<sup>504</sup>



Figure 8: A healthcare worker asks, "Do you understand what intubation means?" in *Near Death* (1989), directed by Frederick Wiseman

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<sup>504</sup> Drawing on Karl Abraham and Sigmund Freud, Elizabeth A. Wilson, in *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), defines organ speech as a "biological performative" that, similarly to J. L. Austin's concept of performative utterance, "enacts the events it appears only to be symbolizing" (76). See also Jean-Thomas Tremblay, "Gut Feminism by Elizabeth A. Wilson," *MAKE Magazine*, January 8, 2016, <http://makemag.com/gut-feminism-by-elizabeth-a-wilson-2/>.

Scenes like this one, where a doctor asks a patient to voice a decision in a lose-lose situation, recur throughout *Near Death*. One conversation between a male doctor and a female patient revolves around the value of a tracheostomy, a surgical procedure in which a breathing tube passes through an incision in the neck. A tracheostomy can temporarily aid breathing, but it ultimately damages the airways. The doctor breaks down the state of affairs for the patient: “If you want to go on, if you want to live, then tracheostomy is your option.” He asks her whether she’s afraid to die. She isn’t. He asks instead if she’s afraid that her husband will react negatively to her turning down the surgery. She is. The doctor abruptly tells his interlocutor that her husband might very well have a heart attack if she decided to forego the intervention and likely died quicker, though more comfortably. She raises her hand ever so slightly, in a horizontal position, as if to say, “Shut it” (see Figure 9). The same doctor reappears toward the end of the film for one last perplexing intervention. Arched over a bed on which an unidentifiable patient is lying, the doctor exclaims, “Today is the day! We’re going to get that tube out today! Big day today!” The patient’s immobility clashes with the doctor’s abrasive enthusiasm. Intubated and likely under partial anesthesia, the patient remains unresponsive (see Figure 10). Most patients in *Near Death* do not or cannot give healthcare professionals the sound bite they’re hoping for about renouncing breathing aids.



Figure 9: A patient orders, "Shut it," in *Near Death* (1989), directed by Frederick Wiseman



Figure 10: A doctor exclaims, "Big day, today!" in *Near Death* (1989), directed by Frederick Wiseman

Bill Nichols lists indirect address (i.e. the absence of commentary and diegetic music or sound effects), the reliance on social actors (i.e. individuals acting in their regular social roles), and the absence of staged or reenacted events as elemental to Wiseman's brand of cinema-vérité.<sup>505</sup> Wiseman's withdrawal draws attention to the ethics of the camera's position and the editing.<sup>506</sup> He showcases situations where patients are made powerless not only by illness or old age, but also by the inconvenience of medical intervention beyond palliative care. Wiseman's decision not to cut invites us to ponder the parallel between assertive medical attention and the unflinching cinematic gaze.

In between conversations involving workers and patients, healthcare professionals debate amongst themselves the stakes of the actions, such as turning off life support, which *they* ultimately have to perform. No matter their years of training and experience, the healthcare professionals featured in *Near Death* posit such actions as uncanny. One of them tells a colleague, regarding a patient, "So if he stops breathing, we just let him stop breathing?" The colleague nods: "Uh, uh." "That's *so weird*," the former responds. The weirdness of (not) toying with breathing comes through in discussions that enmesh the medical, legal, and spiritual implications of both inducing a patient's breathing and letting it stop. Healthcare professionals wonder whether life support is a "political question or an ethical one," and whether artificial respiration amounts to life or to something like purgatory. Ventilation, someone suggests, might be adjusted not so patients are more comfortable, but so their suffering is less obvious: "I think it's a little disconcerting for the family to come in here and see him struggling like that ... [and] breathing so hard." Healthcare professionals lament that

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<sup>505</sup> Bill Nichols, "Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure," *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1978): 16–17.

<sup>506</sup> On the formal attributes of Wiseman's films, see Peter Keough, "Fredrick Wiseman's *Near Death* Experience," *Boston Globe*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2017/04/06/frederick-wiseman-near-death-experience/69MsbWfCtqB3GanYmB576M/story.html>.

there's no blood test for terminality or litmus test for competence. And when relatives or guardians must make decisions for patients who don't appear competent to make them, "emotions get in the way." One especially exasperated worker deplores that life support produces an illusion of aliveness:

When we say, "brain dead," what we should say is, "Your family member has passed away, and the only reason you see a heartbeat is because we're artificially keeping the body, essentially, alive—or going, keeping the heart rate going because of the oxygen." Because the longer we procrastinate, in that particular instance, the longer we keep the heart going, the more confused the family is going to become.

Life support appears here as an obstacle to clarity and a deferral of the inevitable.

What the worker calls an "illusion of aliveness" in the above excerpt can be parsed as life without evidence of the feeling of being alive. Phenomenologists like Thomas Fuchs argue that bodies are not accidental carriers of brains as information-processing machines productive of consciousness.<sup>507</sup> Mind and body are entangled in a structure that produces "the conscious manifestations of life itself."<sup>508</sup> Similarly, Evan Thompson's enactive approach stipulates that the human mind emerges from self-organizing processes that interconnect body, brain, and environment at multiple levels.<sup>509</sup> The feeling of being alive, for these theorists, arises in the threshold of life and experience, or what Fuchs calls "the turning point between the vital process of an organism's self-preservation in its continuous exchange with the environment and the psychic processes of sentience and agency based on the organism's sensorimotor interaction with its

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<sup>507</sup> Thomas Fuchs, "The Feeling of Being Alive: Organic Foundations of Self-Awareness," in *Feelings of Being Alive*, eds. Joerg Fingerhut and Sabine Marienberg (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 163.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 37.

surroundings.”<sup>510</sup> Aliveness comes across as an illusion when subjects display no signs of autoaffection, or an awareness of themselves as partly distinct from their environments. In such situations, body and mind no longer seem co-constituted—hence the Cartesian split in Kastenbaum’s claim that phenomenological death has occurred when “the person inside the body” shows no more indices of life. Patients “[watch] life erode”—Janet Maslin’s formulation in her review of *Near Death*—until they no longer can and relatives, doctors, and the film’s viewers take over.<sup>511</sup>

Although some healthcare professionals in *Near Death* plan deaths and propose that patients shouldn’t be kept alive under false pretense, the constant chatter reminds us that we aren’t watching a snuff film.<sup>512</sup> For one, good deaths entail no gore. And healthcare professionals maintain a discursive context so that unplugging a respirator doesn’t look or feel like murder for any party involved. Declining breathing aids imposes itself as the rational choice when the chances a patient’s state will stabilize or improve are practically nonexistent. But in practice, this rational choice is not quite a choice, meaning that it is merely a confirmation of a “decision” a body has made. Or, in cases where patients are not just debilitated but entirely unconscious, this choice is made by proxy. Whereas giving up respiratory support under extreme debilitation must, but cannot *actually*, be chosen, the event of the last breath, as King’s *Near Death* shows, marks the reappearance of a subject of intention.

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<sup>510</sup> Fuchs, “The Feeling of Being Alive,” 150, *italics removed*.

<sup>511</sup> Janet Maslin, “Fredrick Wiseman’s *Near Death*,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/07/movies/frederick-wiseman-s-near-death.html>.

<sup>512</sup> See Neil Jackson, Shaun Kimber, Johnny Walker, and Thomas Joseph Watson, eds., *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

### III. Leaving Peacefully: Allan King's *Dying at Grace*

*Near Death* stays, well, near death. The sterile documentary only shows corpses that are sealed off in body bags. Wiseman denies his viewer the cathartic witnessing of the last breath. By contrast, *Dying at Grace*, like Calle's *Pas pu saisir la mort*, asks of its viewers to confront dying, its images and sounds. King's film is more graphic than Wiseman's, but also tenderer and more meditative. The title cards that open *Dying at Grace* read, "This film is about the experience of dying," "Five patients in a palliative care ward for the terminally ill agreed to share their experience in the hope that it will be useful for the living." Whereas Wiseman tends to film patients from the torso up, King zooms in on their faces. Wrinkles and thin, white hair serve as evidence of the past experiences that the core members of the cast unpack for us. These individuals are clearly identified. We follow Carmela Nardone, Joyce Bone, Richard Pollard, Lloyd Greenway, and Eda Simac from life to death. In an interview, King recounts that the absence of a relationship between the characters posed a structural problem: "At one point I thought it should be five short films."<sup>513</sup> Characters might not know each other or even stay in Grace Health Center around the same time, but *Dying at Grace* is remarkably cohesive. The arcs present five lives as they reach the point where they must be formulated in the past tense. The last breath in *Dying at Grace* marks the limit of the biographical. Immediately or shortly after an individual in King's film breathes one last breath, that storyline concludes. The last breath also constitutes the last hurrah of a biographical subject who, due to extreme debilitation or unconsciousness, has otherwise dissipated. Discourses of the last breath, as they play out in *Dying at Grace*, project onto the dying the ability to pose one last action: leaving peacefully.

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<sup>513</sup> Marc Glassman and Allan King, "The POV Interview: Allan King, the King of Vérité," *POV: Point of View Magazine*, February 1, 2007, <http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/the-pov-interview-allan-king>.

*Dying at Grace*, like *Near Death*, mainly takes place in hospital rooms, but King emphasizes less the circuit of machines of which breath is part than the function of breath as a vehicle for affect and emotion.<sup>514</sup> Breath, as Davina Quinlivan argues, relays between visceral experiences on the screen and the spectators' responses.<sup>515</sup> Ross Gibson and Hollis W. Hurston have separately theorized acting as a manipulation of breath meant to induce an affective reaction.<sup>516</sup> Theories of acting that accentuate breathing owe a debt to Antonin Artaud, according to whom the (stage) actor marshals “*le souffle qui rallume la vie*” (the breath that reignites life) to push embodiment and action to their limit, where representation becomes an organic function or second nature.<sup>517</sup> In screen media, as Liz Greene observes, the artistry of controlled breathing is the work not only of actors, but also of editors, directors of photography, and sound designers.<sup>518</sup> In a documentary film like *Dying at Grace*, individuals do not deliberately control their breathing for the purpose of acting. The work of the crew, however, renders breath as a conduit for the sensations and feelings of the cast.

Carmela, the first patient we meet, is diabetic. In one scene, the resident chaplain Phyllis

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<sup>514</sup> On the mobilization of visible and audible respiration in screen cultures, see Kevin L. Ferguson, “Painting in the Dark: The Ambivalence of Air in Cinema,” *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 2 (2011): 33.

<sup>515</sup> Davina Quinlivan, *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3, 168. We may grasp the cinematic operation of breathing in Quinlivan’s study as one dimension of what Scott C. Richmond in *Cinema’s Bodily Illusions* terms cinema’s “proprioceptive aesthetics:” the “perceptual processes whereby we orient ourselves in and coordinate ourselves with the world” (6). We may also grasp this operation as the emergence of what Vivian Sobchack, in “Embodying Transcendence: On the Literal, the Material, and the Filmic Sublime,” *Material Religion* 5, no. 2 (2008), terms the “cinesthetic subject:” an impersonal subject that emerges through mediated exchanges between bodies on- and offscreen (196).

<sup>516</sup> Ross Gibson, “Breathing Looking Thinking Acting,” *Humanities Australia* 4 (2013): 17–24; Hollis W. Huston, “The Gest of Breath,” *Theater Journal* 36, no. 2 (1984): esp. 204–205.

<sup>517</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double, suivi de Le théâtre de Séraphin* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1964), 130, 139, 200. See Christina Grammatikopoulou, “Theatre Minus Representation: Breath, Body and Emotion in Antonin Artaud,” *Interartive*, 2016, <http://interartive.org/2016/02/theatre-minus-representation-breath-body-and-emotion-in-antonin-artaud-christina-grammatikopoulou/>; Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), esp. 61, 63–65, 85, 91, 103.

<sup>518</sup> Liz Greene, “The Labour of Breath: Performing and Designing Breath in Cinema,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 10, no. 2 (2016): 112–113.

makes an attempt at interpreting Carmela's signals. Does she or does she not want to be given the last rites? Would an Italian-speaking priest be preferable? In another scene, Carmela's state has deteriorated. Phyllis and a woman, probably Carmela's daughter, discuss palliative care, an option that all parties involved have already agreed is optimal given the circumstances:

PHYLLIS: We don't have a choice.

WOMAN: There's no choice. As long as she's not in pain...

PHYLLIS: And when she does leave us she will leave in peace.

WOMAN: She will leave in peace because, you know, she's a good woman.

As the two women are talking, Carmela's eyes are wide open. She doesn't seem to be looking at anything in particular (see Figure 11). An oxygen tube connects her nostrils to a ventilator. Carmela's congestion worsens; and her breaths get wetter. The sound of the air not so successfully making its way through the mucus gets louder. Carmela tries to let air in by opening her mouth wide (see Figure 12). Her breaths are further and further apart. When two nurses enter the room, Carmela has already died. One of them pulls out a stethoscope and waits for a heartbeat. The two nurses remain for the most part silent. They nod or whisper only when needed. Theirs is the breathing now audible. Out of the room, one of the nurses makes a phone call: "Carmela passed away within the past 20 minutes—very peacefully, quietly, just the way you had left her."



*Figure 11: Carmela stares blankly in Dying at Grace (2003), directed by Allan King*



*Figure 12: Carmela gasps for air in Dying at Grace (2003), directed by Allan King*

King's second subject, Joyce, thinks that she's "not handling [her cancer diagnosis] very well." She's "letting it get to" her. If she had her way, she'd move into a corner, cross her legs, and wait until she died. "Is that because you feel weak?" Phyllis offers. "No," says Joyce, whose two sons were killed and whose husband committed suicide; "I just feel—finished." In a later scene, a nurse

comes in to count the seconds between each breath. King cuts to a Toronto sunrise, trading the confined space of the hospital room for an image of the sublime. We hear a nurse dictate her report: 6:04, bed two, Joyce Bone. When we first came on she had indicated that she wanted something for pain and shortness of breath. She was able to verbalize that. Her congestion and respiratory difficulty were obvious at that point. And Joyce's respiration ceased at 9:35. In the end it was a rapid decline with respiratory distress, and then a peaceful last breath. Halfway through the report, the film cuts away from the immensity of the sunrise. The physical reality of death with which we are confronted—Joyce, dead, with her eyes and mouth wide open, as in Edvard Munch's *Scream* (see Figure 13)—deflates the sentimentality of the sunrise and its rebirth symbolism. The afterimage of discomfort and restlessness that King shows us as the nurse concludes her report also clashes with the latter's statement that Joyce's last breath was peaceful.



Figure 13: Joyce's scream in *Dying at Grace* (2003), directed by Allan King

A nurse formulates a comparable statement about Richard, who at the time he's introduced suffers from lung cancer and hepatitis C linked to smoking and heavy drug use. During the film,

Richard becomes delusional, going as far as to threaten the medical staff. As he breathes—an evidently painful process—he alternates between laughing and crying. A female voice announces, off frame, “He looks like a Renaissance painting... the agony of Rick.” And yet immediately after he dies, a health care practitioner declares, “He did struggle, but in the end he went peacefully.”

Two last breaths are explicitly shown in *Dying at Grace*. The first one is Lloyd’s. By the time he joins the cast, Lloyd communicates in a manner only legible to his brother Norm. The two are tight-knit. Lloyd’s breaths eventually turn into grunts. He has difficulty inhaling and swallowing, in as much as two nurses must work in collaboration to shut his mouth once they’ve sprayed medication into it (see Figure 14). Lloyd, who cannot breathe without the help of a ventilator, is living in overtime. His breaths are wet. Hugging and kissing him, his relatives encourage him to “let go.” After many hours, he has a little spasm. Speculation ensues. Will another breath follow, or will this have been Lloyd’s last breath? The latter proves accurate. “He went so peacefully,” a relative affirms, emphasizing his short last breath over the weeks of labored breathing that preceded it. “He did, he did,” everyone agrees.



Figure 14: Two nurses administer Lloyd medication in *Dying at Grace* (2003), directed by Allan King

Eda, King's last subject, has a less linear journey. Introduced early in the film, she leaves the hospital when her cancer symptoms wane. But her sojourn out of the palliative care unit is brief. She is forced to return, visibly enfeebled. As Phyllis prays for Eda, the latter's breathing competes in loudness with the former's voice. Eda has a series of short spasms followed by a more significant one. Then: stillness. The film closes as Eda, who died just a moment before, uncannily appears to be looking into the camera with her right eye (see Figure 15). It's up to us to intone the refrain: she left peacefully.



*Figure 15: Eda after her last breath in Dying at Grace (2003), directed by Allan King*

We've seen, via Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce*, that good deaths, however monitored and sanitized, might entail struggle. Likewise, framings of the last breath as a peaceful departure seem impervious to evidence of strain. The point in calling a death good or a departure peaceful is partly that *consciousness* of struggle or strain on the part of the dying be reduced or eliminated. Jennifer Malkowski notes that "Eda's loss of self is a consequence of modern dying and ... especially of hospice and palliative care, whose mission to provide comfort and suppress pain

requires medications that inhibit alertness and eventual consciousness.”<sup>519</sup> Now, the retroactive assessment that through the last breath one has left peacefully temporarily reimbues the dying with consciousness. Paradoxically, the dying are thought to be deciding to leave when, as Phyllis and her interlocutor assess, “there’s no choice.” The discourse of the last breath mobilizes what Mel Y. Chen describes as the “alchemical magic of language” that endows with liveliness a body that cannot remain animate on its own.<sup>520</sup>

Leo Bersani, in “Sociality and Sexuality,” imagines an origin myth of sociality: being, in narcissistically extending itself into the world, breaks the ego boundary and finds itself in relation.<sup>521</sup> The last breath hosts something like a concluding myth of sociality that reintroduces a consciously embodied subject in order for that subject, a split second later, to withdraw from the world. As breathers, we never entirely abstract ourselves from sociality or relationality: we don’t breathe alone. Like Bersani’s own myth, the discourse of the last breath, as it plays out in *Near Death*, is less a representation of reality than a thought experiment and fantasy about sovereign personhood. The trope of leaving peacefully casts the last breath as a satisfying conclusion to a subject’s biographical arc. The assertion that Carmela “will leave in peace because … she’s a good woman” equates the peaceful departure with proof of a life lived morally.

Above anything else, the peaceful departure trope signals a desire on the part of the living to deal with the nonrelation of the dying or the dead. Barely or no longer responsive, the dying exemplify Catherine Malabou’s notion of destructive plasticity: a shattered identity that has no biographical precedent, an identity that doesn’t recognize itself and is unrecognizable to others.<sup>522</sup> In the idiom of a physician like Georges Canguilhem, what Malabou calls destructive plasticity might

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<sup>519</sup> Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail*, 105.

<sup>520</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 2–3, 30.

<sup>521</sup> Leo Bersani, “Sociality and Sexuality,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (2000): 656.

<sup>522</sup> Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés*, 113.

correspond to a pathology that has strayed so far from an anomaly that it calls into question the dynamic polarity of life.<sup>523</sup> Destructive plasticity designates an accident that yields existential improvisation.<sup>524</sup> All plasticity, including the destructive kind, is ultimately productive according to Malabou, in so far as it makes room for a new identity. But in deathbed documentaries, the dying, once they have reached advanced debilitation and are sedated, do not reliably express new, unrecognizable identities; they might fail to express anything at all recognizable as an identity. Relatives and healthcare professionals conjure up, in the emptiness of the last breath, an old self who returns to better depart. The momentary endowment of the dying with the capacity to make a decision, even if this decision has to do with leaving the world of the living, makes the dying relatable again. In hinting at a speech act—"I leave peacefully"—in the absence of a speaking subject, the last breath concretizes the "impersonal enunciation" that Christian Metz argues all cinema allegorizes.<sup>525</sup> The addresser in the I-you structure of a film, says Metz, is not an actual individual, but an interrogation as to what a nonsubject might be.

To leave peacefully, as far as the trope goes, isn't to commit suicide. Documentaries about medical help in dying like Peter Richardson's *How to Die in Oregon* follow individuals who face chronic pain or incurable diseases and choose to die, generally at home, through lethal overdose of a prescribed substance.<sup>526</sup> Wiseman and King's films take place outside of the U.S. states of Oregon and Washington, where some version of the Death with Dignity Act has been in effect since, respectively, 1994 and 2008.<sup>527</sup> Individuals in *Near Death* and *Dying at Grace* do not kill themselves by ingesting a legal substance; they leave peacefully in the last iteration of something they've done their

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<sup>523</sup> Georges Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Quadrige/Puf, 1966), 77, 85, 155.

<sup>524</sup> Catherine Malabou, *Ontologie de l'accident: Essai sur la plasticité destructrice* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2009), 9, 24, 39.

<sup>525</sup> Christian Metz, *L'énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridien Klincksieck, 1991), 11.

<sup>526</sup> *How to Die in Oregon*, dir. Peter Richardson (Clearcut Productions, 2011).

<sup>527</sup> *Oregon Ballot Measure 16 1994* (ORS 127.800–995); *Initiative 1000 2008* (RCW 70.245).

entire lives—breathing.

Age-old debates on suicide interrogate the rationality of this action. From a Humean standpoint, suicide is justified if one judges one's life to conflict with public interest.<sup>528</sup> Human life, for Hume, isn't fundamentally worthier of preservation than the life of any other organism. From a Kantian standpoint, however, in killing oneself one transgresses one's duty by treating oneself as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.<sup>529</sup> Suicide for Kant is irrational, as it is specifically the duty of self-preservation that makes human beings rational agents.<sup>530</sup> Critical of both Hume and Kant, Christopher Cowley argues that suicide is neither rational nor irrational: these clear-cut rubrics fail to account for the complicated feelings—the unease, and at times the acrid relief—that suicide might engender.<sup>531</sup> The discourse of the last breath maintains an attachment to the idea that one's death is intentional while streamlining the complicated feelings that accompany anything recognizable as a suicide. In the last breath, intentional death is departicularized. It appears not as the product of an exceptional gesture, but as something that all individuals lucky enough to experience a good death will go through. At the same time, the idea of a peaceful departure coinciding with the last breath enables one last instant of imagined intimacy and reciprocity between the dying and the witnesses. To borrow Anne-Lise François's wording, we might say that discourses of the last breath “make an open secret of fulfilled experience.”<sup>532</sup> They make an open secret of the idea that *the living* are meant to be appeased by evidence of the dying's sudden consciousness and

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<sup>528</sup> David Hume, “Of Suicide,” The Royal Society of Edinburgh, (1755) 2001, <http://www.davidhume.org/texts/suis.html>.

<sup>529</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1785] 2002), 47.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.; Michael J. Cholbi, “Kant and the Irrationality of Suicide,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2000): 159–160, 169; David M. Clarke, “Autonomy, Rationality and the Wish to Die,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 25, no. 6 (1999): 457–462.

<sup>531</sup> Christopher Cowley, “Suicide Is Neither Rational Nor Irrational,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9, no. 5 (2006): 495–504.

<sup>532</sup> François, *Open Secrets*, xvi.

intention. The declaration that one has left peacefully comes with a silent amendment: deriving a sense of closure from life or death is an implausible enterprise. Survival entails a sense of loss.

John Anthony Tercier decries the impulse to tie up death, grief, and mourning at the moment of the last breath as “a denial of loss:” “The eternity of extinction for the victim and loss for the survivor becomes marked by an attempt to remove death from time, to make it an instantaneous event.”<sup>533</sup> He goes on, “The paradigms of the death-with-dignity and the hi-tech death are, in the end, idealized fantasies. They are tropes, the former nostalgic and the latter heroic, used by those unexposed to the realities of the deathbed.”<sup>534</sup> Tercier presumes that witnesses of the last breath attach to the fantasy of a peaceful departure because they don’t know any better. Witnesses, he believes, should instead face “the realities of the deathbed.” Tercier’s is a cynical and moralistic account of fantasy, one that disregards the function of fantasy in organizing attachments.<sup>535</sup> Contemporary subjects repeatedly encounter breathing as a morbid experience—a phenomenon exacerbated in areas of high pollution, among individuals with respiratory illnesses and afflictions, and among marginalized and oppressed populations. Subjects, that is, constantly register breathing as a sign of vulnerability, injury, and death. Discourses of the last breath do not deny reality so much as they frame it within a form of life. Discourses of the last breath as they show up in *Dying at Grace* are the stories we tell ourselves in order to keep breathing.

#### IV. Coda: Television and the Comic Last Breath

Looking back on the making of *Dying at Grace*, King reported, “It was very difficult to find a place to film. Everybody wanted to watch over us to make sure we didn’t injure somebody. The

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<sup>533</sup> Tercier, *The Contemporary Deathbed Documentary*, 20.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>535</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 13, 122.

level of paranoia, the fear of filmmakers that has developed since I began is huge and almost crippling.”<sup>536</sup> King points to the difficulty and the legal and ethical liability of acting as a fly on the wall. A jarring disability metaphor concludes his reflection: he casts himself as crippled by the paranoia surrounding his filming actually dying individuals. King’s statement ignores the distinctly male prerogative of being present in scenes of death without being expected to provide or express care. Television comedies from the 2010s, by contrast, populate scenes of the last breath with mothers and daughters who cannot withdraw from the camera’s field of vision and claim an objective position. As daughters must make decisions for mothers who cannot speak, the last breath presents a mirror image of the first breath. The first breath heralds one’s entry into the world, and the last breath one’s exit. Both are narrated by their witnesses.

Consider Tig Notaro and Diablo Cody’s dramedy *One Mississippi*.<sup>537</sup> In the pilot, Tig (Notaro), along with her stepfather Bill (John Rotman) and her brother Remy (Noah Harpster), is at her mother Caroline’s bedside. Inert and on life support, Caroline, Tig suggests, isn’t fully herself—an observation that Bill, in an unsubtle display of slow-wittedness, takes literally:

TIG: It’s just not her.

BILL: It most certainly is her, Tig. Look at the ID on the bed.

TIG: I know it’s her. It’s just... Never mind.

DOCTOR: So, the nurse is going to go ahead and disconnect the respirator. Any questions?

TIG: About death?

DOCTOR: About the process.

REMY: Is she going to die right away?

DOCTOR: Possibly. But it could take hours, even days. Are we ready?

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<sup>536</sup> Glassman and King, “The POV Interview.”

<sup>537</sup> “Pilot,” dir. Nicole Holofcener, *One Mississippi* (Amazon, 2015).

TIG: Yeah, she wouldn't want to be like this.

After the respirator is unplugged, Caroline inhales laboriously and coughs. Bill and Remy, who go out to feed the cat, leave Tig alone with her mother. What ensues is a call-and-response game between Tig and Nurse Mellie (Lorrie Chilcoat). In between jump cuts that vaguely indicate the passage of time, Tig, suspecting that her mother is about to die or perhaps has already died, requests assistance. At one point, Tig wonders, "My mother stops breathing for ten seconds, and I keep thinking it's going to be her last breath. Is that going to happen... soon?" Later, she requests, "Could you do that thing again where you clear out her throat or her lungs or something? She can't breathe." Nurse Mellie responds, pragmatically but tenderly, "That's kind of the point, hon." Caroline's breaths become further apart. Uninterrupted silence eventually extracts Tig from her reverie. She presses the call button one last time. The mood quickly shifts from subdued to hysterical.

TIG: I think, I think my mother...

NURSE MELLIE: Yes, I'm sorry, she's gone.

TIG: What happens now? Do I just leave?

NURSE MELLIE [*bursts out laughing*]: Do you just leave! No! [*They both laugh uncontrollably*.] You can't just leave your mother! Oh my gosh, that would be straight-up nuts!

TIG [*still laughing*]: I'm realizing that now!

Laughter, Norbert Elias observes, breaks the rhythm of breathing through "rhythmical jerks and jolts[:] we expel more air than we inhale until, in the end of the hearty laugh, we are out of breath."<sup>538</sup> Tig and Nurse Mellie's breathlessness offers a nonfatal counterpoint to Caroline's understated last breath. Tig expects her mother's last breath to constitute the kind of event that, for

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<sup>538</sup> Norbert Elias, "Essay on Laughter," ed. Anca Parvulescu, *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 283.

Alain Badiou, determines all thought and action in its wake.<sup>539</sup> But Caroline's last breath is just that: one last breath. The awkwardness of not knowing how to react, paired with the relief that nothing worse can happen (Caroline is dead), causes the tension accumulated during the anticipation of the last breath to spill over as laughter.<sup>540</sup> Still, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai note, comedy doesn't simply dispel anxiety.<sup>541</sup> Tig and Nurse Mellie's laughter also visceralizes the reality of Caroline's death.

Two cringe comedies—the political satire *Veep* and the workplace sitcom *Getting On*—derive comedic value either from the failure of characters to recognize the meaningfulness of the last breath or from their clumsiness in doing so. In an episode of *Veep* titled “Mother,” U.S. President Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) is encouraged by the promise of a higher favorability rate to expedite her mother’s death.<sup>542</sup> Selina unplugs the artificial respirator onto which her mother is hooked. A version of *One Mississippi*’s is-she-going-to-die-right-away talk occurs, with the cynicism turned up, between Selina and Dr. Mirpuri (Sarayu Blue).

SELINA: So in your experience, how long does that sort of thing...?

DR. MIRPURI: Usually minutes. I've seen hours. Days are very rare.

SELINA [*cringes*]: Well, that's not going to work because... for me... with my... schedule—life.

Selina’s mother dies within a few seconds—so quickly, in fact, that the president asks to “have a moment.” This moment is cut short by good news regarding political maneuverings. “Oh! My prayer worked!” Selina shouts. She and her aides rejoice, next to a corpse and despite the ire of Selina’s

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<sup>539</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13, 14, 17.

<sup>540</sup> According to Sigmund Freud, in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Bartleby ([1905] 2005), <http://www.bartleby.com/279/1.html>, wit-formation is an expression of the unconscious.

<sup>541</sup> Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233.

<sup>542</sup> “Mother,” dir. Dale Stern, *Veep* (HBO, 2016).

daughter Catherine (Sarah Sutherland), who wished to be present for her grandmother's last breath.

The cruelty of being denied access to a relative's last breath is also at the heart of "The Concert," an episode of *Getting On*. In it, characters gauchely restage the liminality of the last breath after someone has been declared dead.<sup>543</sup> The episode's opening act is a vaudeville of sorts. Due to Dr. Jenna James' (Laurie Metcalf) contradictory medical advice, Phyllis Marmatan (Molly Shannon) repeatedly exits and re-enters the palliative care unit where her mother is staying. Phyllis ends up missing her mother's last breath due to a hallway argument precisely about this senseless back and forth. Once in the room where Phyllis' mother died, Dr. James states the obvious before partially taking it back, realizing that she deprived Phyllis of an intimacy she desired.

DR. JAMES: She's gone... She's *barely* gone. Sit. She's *almost here*.

PHYLLIS: Can she still hear me?

DR. JAMES: Ummmm...?

Dr. James roughly nods before leaving the room to avoid owning up to the paranormal direction of the conversation.<sup>544</sup>

Habits of media consumption, such as streaming and bingewatching, which have solidified

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<sup>543</sup> "The Concert," dir. Howard Deutch, *Getting On* (HBO, 2013).

<sup>544</sup> In an interview with Elvis Mitchell on "The Treatment," KCRW, October 5, 2016, <https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/the-treatment>, Molly Shannon tells the anecdote of her father's last breath, which, unlike her character in *Getting On*, she witnessed. As her father was drifting away on morphine, he reminded her one last time that he thought small acting parts mattered:

He would take a breath of oxygen and then speak—I had just done a part in a movie called *Analyze This*, and he thought that was very good, with Billie Crystal, and he liked that. So he took a breath of oxygen giving me his last bit of advice and he said, "Uhhhh, Small parts." And then my sister and I went, "Yes, small parts." And then he took another breath of oxygen and he was like, "Uhhhh, in movies." And we were like, "In movies..." [laughs] And he took another breath, "Uhhhh, like *Analyze This*." And we were like, "like *Analyze This*...." And then he died!

The last breath is here bittersweet. The anticipation that builds up in the dialogue between father and daughters leads not to some dramatic revelation, but to a well-meaning observation that enables a moment of reciprocity, however brief.

in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have rendered the units of TV storytelling—beat, episode, arc—especially leaky.<sup>545</sup> In a naturalistic dramedy like *One Mississippi*, which purports, as cinéma-vérité differently does, to represent the normal course of life, the last breath provides recognizable cues for dramatic and comedic tension. *One Mississippi*, *Veep*, and *Getting On* complicate Bruce Buchan, Margaret Gibson, and David Ellison’s assertion that “the death scene is inherently dramatic.”<sup>546</sup> What is humorous here but isn’t bound to a comic register is that characters show up in death scenes with clashing inclinations: Tig’s maladroitness, Selina’s crudeness, Philly’s frustration.<sup>547</sup>

These comedies break apart and expose the mechanics of the scene of the nonviolent last breath as it plays out in Wiseman and King’s austere documentaries, particularly the dynamic through which the living, as they both await and assess someone’s last breath, make it an event. The last breath, after being intensely speculated about, here proves anti-climatic, occasioning a comedown, and with it a reassessment of the way someone’s last inhalation and exhalation ought to be acknowledged. Television comedies from the 2010s take for granted the innovations in life support technology and palliative care with which *Near Death* and, to a reduced extent, *Dying at Grace* grapple. The form of life that Wiseman and King’s documentaries negotiate has become second nature, in as much as comedies now play with, or test the elasticity of, the context in which the last breath makes sense. The open secret of the last breath has become joking matter.

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<sup>545</sup> On the units of TV storytelling, see Michael Z. Newman, “From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 16–28.

<sup>546</sup> Buchan, Gibson, and Ellison, “Reflections on the Death Scene,” 4.

<sup>547</sup> On comedy as form of life, see Berlant and Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” 233–249.

## Conclusion Disaster Relief

“We Don’t Breathe Alone: Forms of Encounter in Anglophone North America since the 1970s” has argued that an aesthetics of breathing recapitulating long histories of philosophical, scientific, and medical fascination for respiration and the air has intensified since the 1970s, as it has become clear that breathing cannot, ever again, be taken for granted. Increasingly weaponized, endangered, monetized, and unequally distributed, breathing and the air have made themselves felt in avant-garde and minoritarian aesthetics concerned with representing the ways subjects encounter themselves, each other, and the world. An experimental sensibility spanning prose, poetry, audiovisual media, and the performing arts has captured experiences of literal and figurative toxicities, including atmospheric pollution as well as ambient racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and ableism. The analytical mode and mood of this dissertation have accentuated the ways different genres and media espouse, channel, and render breathing. The previous chapters have circulated across scales of encounter—with oneself, with the world, with alterity, and with finitude—to chart aesthetic expressions of the subjective, social, and political implications of breathing.

Even when it grabs our attention, even when we perform it consciously, breathing often remains below the level of speech and action. Studying breathing keeps us from presuming the liberal subject frequently taken for granted in ecological literary criticism. Ecocritics tend to assume that readers, once made aware of environmental degradation, will then enter a properly political arena by posing everyday actions or speaking out against destructive systems and policies.<sup>548</sup> In an operation that respects tenets of aesthetic education from Friedrich Schiller to Martha Nussbaum,

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<sup>548</sup> See section V of the introduction, “Breathing Criticism.”

reading, in ecocriticism, awakes an environmental citizen.<sup>549</sup> My point is that we cannot have our entanglement cake and eat it, too. The aesthetics of breathing teaches readers and viewers that they are entangled in atmospheres at once nourishing and toxic, often beyond discernment. As such, we cannot expect readers and viewers, in their responses to the aesthetic experience of breathing, to disentangle themselves from these forces in a way that would preserve the integrity of their ability to speak and act. The air's increasing toxicity and decreasing affordability compromise, or at least impose limits on, efforts to mobilize breathing for emancipatory purposes. The contemporary aesthetics of breathing isn't straightforwardly liberating. It doesn't solely uplift, or subvert, or resist. Despite its incursions into New Age territory and highly figurative language, the aesthetics of breathing reveals a pragmatic approach to the political reach of literature, film, and the performing arts.

For a dissertation on contemporary challenges to the reproduction of life, "We Don't Breathe Alone" assembles an archive that starkly deviates from national and global institutions and circuits of sociopolitical intervention. To end this study I discuss two performance-based projects that explicitly interrogate the effectiveness of these institutions and circuits. These projects reveal the aesthetics of breathing as a set of makeshift tactics that might afford some relief from, but are ultimately hampered by, local and planetary disasters and the official responses they have occasioned. The first project is David Buuck's *Site Cite City*, a compilation of performance protocols, scores, and transcripts created for the Bay Area Research Group in Enviro-aesthetics (BARGE), which he founded.<sup>550</sup> Published in 2015, *Site Cite City*, the book, is only one node in a sprawling

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<sup>549</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), esp. 111–120; Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters to Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>550</sup> David Buuck, *Site Cite City* (New York: Futurepoem Books, 2015). Buuck is associated with the legacy of New Narrative: he frequently crosses paths with figures like Dodie Bellamy and has

transmedia project that also includes maps, mp3 files, and other tour guide ephemera assembled on Buuck's website.<sup>551</sup> Many of the documents amassed by Buuck outline performances that have taken place, or might in a near or distant future take place, on Treasure Island. An artificial island, Treasure Island has notably housed the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition and, from the 1940s to the 1990s, a military base. Now highly toxic, Treasure Island operates in Buuck's work as a mythical microcosm of San Francisco—on the fringe, but paradigmatic of both the city's cosmopolitanism and the destruction of its social and ecological fabrics by pollution, gentrification, and the tech industry. A military base where weapons were stored and tested, Treasure Island served as “a rehearsal site for its own destruction, whether by quake or rising sea levels, fire or ecological disaster.”<sup>552</sup> San Francisco's future annihilation is part of a past presently stored in Treasure Island's ground and atmosphere.

Buuck approaches writing as a venue for working through the problem of historical confluence in Treasure Island's toxicity. The book's inaugural section, “PARANOID AGENTS,” for instance, proceeds as a countdown, from ten to zero, of partial “narrative theories” about the various chemical agents populating the air and soil (3). These narrative theories are one version of a mode of performance research that Buuck terms “respiracy” (55). Breathing physicalizes a method of engaging history that doesn't isolate resources from weakening agents. The treasure and fever that in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* might but do not necessarily coexist—“I don't know about treasure ... but I'll stake my wig there's fever here” (33)—become in *Site Cite City* irremediably entangled—“If we are to take in the treasures, we must likewise taste of the fever” (34–35).

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situated his own work as well as Renee Gladman's in a genealogy of city writing aligned with this movement. See David Buuck, “A Walking Measure: Renee Gladman and City Writing,” in *From Our Hearts to Yours*, 137–152.

<sup>551</sup> “Buried Treasure Island,” David Buuck, 2008, <http://davidbuuck.com/barge/bti/index.html>.

<sup>552</sup> Buuck, *Site Cite City*, 51, henceforth cited in parentheses.

Respiracy, Buuck explains, is “a term that will have to have been concocted to somehow capture the vernacular practice of ‘respiratory piracy,’ by which air quality and environmental inequality are confronted head-on by those affected populations and their partisans” (55). Although the buccaneerish flavor of the term is especially at home on Treasure Island, “respiracy,” as Buuck defines it, might just as well designate CA Conrad’s breathing rituals, through which they confront a dying earth and the death of their partner Earth, or Linda Hogan’s respiratory poetics, through which she addresses Native people’s alienation from the earth amidst settler atmospherics.<sup>553</sup> Buuck’s use of the passive voice and future perfect is striking. Buuck overlays *his* proposed terminology with the claim that a term “will have to have been concocted”—by whom? And when, if not now? The future perfect returns in Buuck’s prediction regarding the necessity of an expanded respiratory in the face of disaster:

In the converging crises, when the contradictions work themselves out through the post-disaster, post-oil ecologies to come, the survivors will have had to make use of every site for spectral nourishment, every nook for plant life, producing oxygen for the new lungs, fever and ferment for the new species-dreaming. (53)

Respiracy is at once needed and not enough. That is to say that respiratory will have to encompass a wider range of practices and interventions than the ones with which Buuck has come up. Buuck’s speculation regarding “new lungs” and “new species-dreaming” suggests that human beings in general, not just he, are unlikely to be the thriving “respirates” of the future.

Some of the artifacts collected by Buuck are postdated. For instance, the sea shanty “New Pacifica,” which ends with the ostensibly hopeful declaration that “one day this rotten world / will breathe again,” is attributed to the year 2026 (46–47). The declaration is *ostensibly* hopeful because

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<sup>553</sup> See section III of chapter 1, “CA Conrad’s Ecodeviant Rituals and Poems,” and section III of chapter 2, “Who will make houses of air with their words?: Linda Hogan’s Poetry.”

the piece's recorded performance approximates a complaint. Buuck's voice comes from the future to let us know that a human being's declaration that "one day this rotten world / will breathe again" will sound more and more off key as years go by. The persistence of a past that contains the traces of future annihilation characterizes an aesthetics of breathing that human beings can only imagine as viable if it exceeds the terms by which they define it.

More cynical than tragic, the Hong Kong-based musical composer and interdisciplinary artist Samson Young (b. 1979) also mobilizes breath to interrogate hopeful stances toward disaster. Rather than the longue durée of environmental destruction that accumulates in every breath, Young focuses on the breaths taken during charity singles that clock at eight minutes or less. Young came to prominence as an artist with pieces remixing everyday and military soundscapes. In *Canon* (2016), for instance, Young uses a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), a sonic weapon that neutralizes protesters and controls crowds, to imitate birdcalls.<sup>554</sup> In an installation from *Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour* that riffs on his previous *Muted Situations* (2014–), Young mutes the loud noises that characterize his early work, drawing the spectators' attention to breath.<sup>555</sup> The installation in question is a video piece that features a choir dressed in formal attire and breathing out, without the glimmer of a smile, the kitsch classic "We Are the World."

Young put together the ambitious *Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour* for the Hong Kong pavilion of the 2017 Venice Biennale. The charity singles that served as the show's impetus are artifacts of the 1980s that assembled big names in popular music—historic gatherings, if you will,

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<sup>554</sup> "Canon," Samson Young, 2016, <http://thismusicisfalse.com/Canon>. In another performance, "Nocturne," Samson Young, 2015, <http://thismusicisfalse.com/Nocturne>, Young employs household objects to recreate, in real time, the sounds of explosions, gunshots, and debris in video footage of night bombings.

<sup>555</sup> "Muted Situation #2: Muted Lion Dance," Samson Young, 2014, <http://thismusicisfalse.com/Muted-Situations>, for example, reveals the "intense breathing of the performers, the verbal communication and cues between the Lion Dancers, ... the stomping of the feet" otherwise buried by traditional music.

that raised awareness and funds for disasters of historical significance. The popularity of charity singles coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and the global popular music industry.<sup>556</sup> Released in 1984 and 1985 in response to the Ethiopian famine, “Do They Know It’s Christmas” and “We Are the World,” the genre’s urtexts, inspired the curiosities found in the show’s maze, from artificial flowers and declassée lamps to black velvet curtains embroidered with the kind of naïve slogans that would be at home in Dodie Bellamy’s book of sutras: “Tears are not enough;” “We should try;” “Let the light banish the shade.”<sup>557</sup>

In spite of the kitsch maximalism of the entire exhibition, we, the spectators, had little doubt, upon seeing the breathing choir, that we had reached the show’s culmination. Choir members didn’t exactly whisper “We Are the World;” they exhaled it. Without the melody to hold on to, we relied on lyrical cues to identify the song. The choir’s breathing, which unlike the feminist catharsis discussed in the second chapter was so forced as to be unsettling, dramatized the absurdity of celebrity-endorsed responses to problems of environmental depletion and uneven distribution of resources.<sup>558</sup> Ideally, both the charity single and the practice of breathing in sync would induce a communal feeling, some sense that “we’re all in this together,” that “connection strengthens us.” But here the conflation of the two is forced. It’s pathetic. Young designates celebrity goodwill efforts that invariably and quickly fade from public consciousness as “failed aspirations.”<sup>559</sup> The earworms stay, but their political thrust abates. The choir’s performance also showcases failed aspirations in a physical sense: inhalations followed by exhalations that amount to little more than a performance of exertion. The aesthetics of breathing performed by an anonymous choir deflates the

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<sup>556</sup> Samson Young: *Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour*, Hong Kong in Venice, 2017, <http://2017.venicebiennale.hk/#hk-exhibition>.

<sup>557</sup> See section II of chapter 1, “Dodie Bellamy’s Banal Sutras.”

<sup>558</sup> See section I of chapter 2, “In and Out of Feminist Breathing Rooms.”

<sup>559</sup> Samson Young: *Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour*.

exuberance of the charity single, where each celebrity comes in full force for a swift solo. Young's piece reminds us that even as we hum a charity single and feel as though we were partaking in global disaster relief efforts, every breath we take is entangled, even complicit, with environmental degradation and the unequal distribution of resources.

We don't breathe alone: it's a blessing and a curse.

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