

Breathing

Aesthetics

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2022

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Portrait by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tremblay, Jean-Thomas, author.

Title: Breathing aesthetics / Jean-Thomas Tremblay.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021058321 (print)

LCCN 2021058322 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478016229 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018865 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478023494 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Ecocriticism. | Environment (Aesthetics) |

Respiration—Political aspects. | Respiration in literature. |

Respiration in art. | Feminism and the arts. | Arts and

society. | Queer theory. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITICISM /

Semiotics & Theory | NATURE / Environmental Conservation

& Protection

Classification: LCC PN98.E36 T74 2022 (print) |

LCC PN98.E36 (ebook) | DDC 700.1—dc23/eng/20220621

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021058321>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021058322>

Cover art: © Henrik Sorensen. Courtesy Getty Images.

For Sam, who reminds me that
function follows form



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Acknowledgments

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

For their early mentorship, and for regarding me as a person with ideas when I had few, I thank Sophie Bourgault, Dalie Giroux, Susie O'Brien, and Mary O'Connor.

What would become *Breathing Aesthetics* began—through many false starts, then some less so—in the University of Chicago's Department of English Language and Literature and Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality. Lauren Berlant, chair of my dissertation committee, has taught me the value of scholarship that opens its objects up instead of containing them, even if there might

not yet exist a world to welcome it. Near Lauren, I've experienced the thrill of unlearning my defenses against curiosity. (Revisiting these statements after Lauren's passing, I struggle to convert the present perfect into the absolute past proper to the eulogy. The learning is ongoing.) On my committee also sat Patrick Jagoda, the fiercest ally there is, and Jennifer Scappettone, whom it would be etymologically accurate to call a coconspirator. Pre- and postgraduation, I've benefited from the sharp, Chicago-style insights of such faculty members as Maud Ellmann, Rachel Galvin, Elaine Hadley, Tim Harrison, Alison James, Joseph Masco, Jo McDonagh, Debbie Nelson, and Ken Warren. Very, very special thanks to Adrienne Brown, Sianne Ngai, Julie Orlemanski, Kristen Schilt, and Jennifer Wild. For long, absorbing conversations and the more than occasional gossip session, I thank Michael Dango, Annie Heffernan, Lauren Jackson, Rivky Mondal, and Katie Nolan. Members of the staff in English (Racquel Asante, Angeline Dimambro, and Hannah Stark) and at CSGS (Gina Olson and Sarah Tuohey) provided invaluable resources and fostered academic communities to which it felt good to belong. Lex Nalley and Tate Brazas became, more than coworkers, dear comrades.

I wrote and rewrote most of this book in my first, whirlwind years as a junior faculty member in New Mexico State University's English Department. Thanks to Brittany Chavez, Rose Conley, Ryan Cull, Ruth Garcia, Meg Goehring, Harriet Linkin, Tracey Miller-Tomlinson, Rabiatur Balaraba Mohammed, Brian Rourke, Liz Schirmer, Tyson Stolte, and, most of all, Susan Enger.

Exchanges with theorists of the ventilatory—Aleesa Cohene, Ashon Crawley, Brad Harmon, Stefanie Heine, Jack R. Leff, Arthur Rose, Clint Wilson III, and especially Hsuan L. Hsu—have been nothing short of vivifying. It is a privilege to think and work alongside a cohort of interlocutors that far exceeds institutional limits; among them are Kadji Amin, Benjamin Bateman, Tyler Bradway, James Cahill, Alberto Fernández Carbajal, Will Clark, Jorge Cotte, Ranjodh Singh Dhaliwal, Rachele Dini, Sarah Dowling, Adam Fales, Joey Gamble, Brian Glavey, David Hollingshead, Annabel Kim, Travis Chi Wing Lau, Christina León, Paul Nadal, Matthew J. Phillips, Jordan Stein, Ricky Varghese, and Christopher Walker. Coediting and cocurating with Rebekah Sheldon, Drew Strombeck, and Michelle Velasquez-Potts have made me enjoy collaboration to an extent that would stupefy my younger self—*growth!* And in Steven Swarbrick, fellow Scorpio, I have found a dream cowriter; his influence is palpable across this book. Portions of this monograph have been presented in various venues. Thanks to Nan Z. Da for inviting me to share my research with the University of Notre Dame's Americanist Seminar, and to Ricky Varghese for including me on the "Sex and the Pandemic" line-up.

Dodie Bellamy, CAConrad, Renee Gladman, Kevin Killian, and Sheree Rose, whose works are discussed in this book, have been kind enough to correspond or chat with me. They needed openness and patience to watch me stumble toward an idea about their work, and they had them. Thanks to the archivists at the University of Southern California's ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection), the Ohio State University's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (Bob Flanagan Collection), and the Spelman College Archives (Toni Cade Bambara Collection).

That *Breathing Aesthetics* has landed at Duke University Press continues to inspire in me both incredulity and gratitude. Early conversations with the visionary Ken Wissoker laid the book's foundations and structured its argument. Joshua Gutterman Tranen has guided me from a partial, haphazard manuscript to a completed book with verve, flair, precision, and a healthy dose of humor. Josh is taking the publishing industry by storm, and we're all the better for it. Lucid, detailed reports by Nicole Seymour and Sarah Jane Cervenak enabled a meaningful revision of the manuscript. I hope that these meticulous readers will notice their positive impact on the book. Thanks to Liz Smith, Karen Fisher, Emily Lawrence, Courtney Leigh Richardson, and, for the index, Matthew J. Phillips. Beyond Duke, I wish to thank Elspeth Brown, Rebecca Colesworthy, and Dani Kasprzak for judicious advice on the publishing process.

Thanks to my family—especially Renelle, Pierre, Amy, and Michael—for conjuring optimism and bestowing strength. Katie Hendricks, Omie Hsu, Chase Joynt, Eva Pensis, Miranda Steege, and André-Luc Tessier are dear friends. Despite the distance separating some of us, I have felt and relied on their presence throughout the writing of this book. A handful of fellow travelers have been not only trusted confidantes but also trusted readers, and their willingness to revisit problems and rethread arguments in my company has made everything lighter. Dan Guadagnolo's savvy and sagacity have proven miraculous. Hannah Manshel, thank you for remaining my fellow traveler. Ari Meyer Brostoff models "being a writer" with (comedic) rigor. Rachel Kyne lives as she reads: tenderly and thoughtfully. And Jules Gill-Peterson, my kin: the life and career worth fighting for are with her.

My ultimate thanks are to Sam Creely. Sam, my co-navigator and my North Star (my mixed metaphor), has made their way, and helped me find mine, through the following pages more times than I can count. To long hikes, long reads, and, hopefully, a long life together.

PORTIONS OF CHAPTER 2 are derived from Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Aesthetic Self-Medication: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose’s Structures of Breathing,” *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 28, no. 3 (2018): 221–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2018.1524621>. An early version of chapter 3 appeared as Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Feminist Breathing,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 30, no. 3 (2019): 92–117. Thanks to those journals’ editors and readers.

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Introduction. Ecologies of the Particular

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Breathing in Crisis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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