Respiration, a mundane yet essential act, often occurs unconsciously as we inhale and exhale throughout the day. However, when are we truly aware of our breath? Perhaps when nasal congestion requires mouth breathing during periods of illness or when the air quality index is low, prompting the use masks when going outside. Sometimes, in structured settings like yoga classes, instructors may guide participants to focus on their breath. Breathing involves a series of repetitive and paradoxical movements, where gases enter and exit the body. For instance, when someone says “hold your breath,” they actually initiate exhalation to be able to utter this command, which illustrates the complexity of respiratory mechanics.

In *Breathing Aesthetics*, Jean-Thomas Tremblay explores the role of breathing in literature, screen, and performance cultures as a response to contemporary environmental crises. Breathing, as a fundamental aspect of human existence, functions as a conduit for the exercise and experience of political dynamics between life and death. In this book, the author explores the concept of breathing subjectivity and its biopolitical and necropolitical dimensions. This involves examining how and why individuals are able or unable to breathe and how power operates, moving from the individual to the population level through the lens of breathing. Simply put, throughout the book, the author sticks to their stance that “all breathing beings are not of the same kind,” which shows the uneven distribution of breathing experience (p. 93). Tremblay performs their knowledge from the field they dialogue with and the material they analyze. The author engages in conversation with diverse fields, including environmental studies, disability studies, queer theories, and Black feminism, to decipher the link between body and milieu in the contemporary environmental risky situation. Tremblay also collects poems, films, and performances as their analytical objects, for which they believe that no art form or medium is inherently more or less respiratory than others.[1] Methodologically, situating their work in the trends of en-
environmental humanities, Tremblay conducts the book with ecocriticism to close reading and close looking at creative practices.

This book contains five chapters, along with the introduction and coda, carefully structured as follows: chapters 1 and 2 primarily delve into the condition of the breathing subject, while chapters 3 and 4 pivot from individual perspectives to the analysis of breathing as a collective political event. Chapter 5 explores the last breath, the state of breathing that is closest to death. The entire book covers both the receptive aspect, which addresses how audiences perceive and empathize with artists’ representations, and the productive aspect, which explores artists’ intentions in creating modes of breathing through their creations.

Before delving into the analysis of artworks, Tremblay sets the stage by discussing the intensified “monetization” and “weaponization” of breath in the introduction. These two concepts effectively connect the book to current critical issues surrounding respiration. First, to understand how breath becomes priceless, it is noteworthy that the publication of this book coincided with the year 2022, the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, global attention had been focused on adapting to a new lifestyle and safeguarding air quality. While concerns about PM2.5 pollution particles persist, there is now an added emphasis on preventing airborne viruses and pathogens. Reflecting on the pandemic, one may recall the urgency of acquiring masks and the deliberation over purchasing air purifiers. The emergence of COVID-19 has underscored disparate access to clean air and socioeconomic factors influencing respiratory health. The pandemic brought to light the precarious nature of breathing in emergency situations. It prompts us to question who has access to clean air and resources to maintain a healthy respiratory system. The longing for free breathing has shattered the notion that respiration has been taken for granted.

In addition to the profound implications of how breathing is influenced by market logic and social status revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, another recent historical event further emphasizes the timeliness of this critical exploration of respiration, particularly the weaponization of breath. In 2020, the widely circulated footage of George Floyd pleading for breath while in police custody sparked outrage and led to a national outcry. Floyd’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” highlighted the systemic oppression faced by marginalized communities. This pivotal moment not only emphasizes the inherently capitalist nature of breathing but also intertwines with broader issues of race and gender. The phrase “Freedom is like air, only noticed when suffocating” resonates deeply in this context. For those who experience racism, the ability to breathe represents physical freedom and the essence of liberation. Breathing, or the lack of breathing, becomes a symbol of the sharp contrast between a life of social freedom and a life of oppression. While historical discussions of the weaponization of air have centered on its use as a biological agent, such as tear gas, the concept goes beyond mere physical toxins. The weaponization of air can take the form of poisonous gases or persistent racial discrimination, and it can cause “breathing [to be] inevitably morbid,” as the author repeatedly reminds us (p. 162).

In chapter 1, Tremblay examines the films of Ana Mendieta and Amy Greenfield, employing the term “postpastoral” to characterize their works. Despite incorporating pastoral imagery, their pieces diverge from the conventional pastoral tranquility associated with untouched purity, instead evoking a sense of unease. Mendieta’s work, for instance, confronts sanitized portrayals of oppression within the pastoral context, reflecting her experiences as a Cuban American woman. Mendieta’s film portrays the struggles of marginalized communities to find their breath under the weight of time and history. This invites viewers to empathize with these challenges and invokes a pause in their own breathing. This viewing experience
may cause discomfort and prompt audiences to reconsider their breathing patterns, and it also encourages a reevaluation of the political, economic, and historical contexts that underpin pastoral landscapes.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed analysis of the writings and performances of Dodie Bellamy, CACconrad, Bob Flanagan, and Sheree Rose. Tremblay describes their work as a form of “queer life writing,” highlighting the presence of breathing elements, particularly for therapeutic purposes, within their depictions of queer life. However, Tremblay argues that these textual representations of breathing symbols only offer provisional healing and fail to achieve a lasting therapeutic effect. For example, Flanagan, who struggled with illness for an extended period of time, repeatedly included certain words in his journal as a form of self-condemnation or self-relief to cope with his gradually deteriorating physical condition and feelings of loss. His descriptions of breathing provided him with temporary relief, serving as a means of self-medication to temporarily alleviate his discomfort. In this context, Tremblay introduces the concept of “aesthetic self-medication,” emphasizing the influence of breathing as a component of the artist that coexists with their writing.

Chapter 3 shifts from individual healing to collective ritual healing, specifically exploring therapeutic interventions aimed at the remediation of marginalized populations. Tremblay examines the consciousness raising (CR) feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, questioning the distribution of voice and the exclusionary tendencies within white feminism. Tremblay highlights the voices marginalized within feminist discourse to point out how these minority perspectives have paved the way for healing in post-1970s Indigenous and Black feminist literature. For instance, drawing on therapeutic approaches to respiration, the literary works of Linda Hogan and Toni Cade Bambara depict rituals that illustrate how breathing serves to navigate through political loss, rather than to revive the vitality of bodies, as observed with Flanagan in the previous chapter. This healing process does not necessarily lead to a sense of well-being; rather, it enables individuals to confront political circumstances that may further violate them. Tremblay stresses that the essence of reparative breathing is “not political triumph, but the capacity to endure political failure” (p. 104).

Chapter 4 diverges slightly from the previous three chapters by shifting its focus away from the breather and more toward the external environment that the breather encounters. In the section titled “Sensing Smog,” Tremblay examines the representation of yellow smog in Renee Gladman’s work as a strategy of resistance within Black communities. In Gladman’s Ravicka series, which evokes urban landscapes, such as San Francisco and New York, the smog resulting from air pollution emerges as a resource that reshapes human perceptions of urban spaces. The smog generates opacity, creating an environment of reduced visibility in which the body is forced to function as a sensor, interpreting the environment through acts of inhaling, exhaling, smelling, and choking. This opacity produced by smog serves as “a tactic of resistance within racist and homophobic regimes of surveillance” (p. 135).

Continuing with the main theme of the book, namely, the enmeshment of respiration with life and death, chapter 5 describes the scenario of the last breath. In this chapter, the last breath represents a “good death,” facilitated by advanced technologies, in contrast to the “violent last breath” suppressed by race and inequalities described in previous chapters. Through the intervention of life-sustaining technologies, the dying person, along with their relatives and medical staff in hospitals, can control life and death through breath. This level of control is a privilege afforded to the wealthy who have access to well-equipped medical institutions. In a geriatric ward, the ability to peacefully, negotiably, and gradually decide when
to unplug the artificial breathing machine showcases the dramatic contrast in the experience of the last breath between oppressed and affluent groups. By showing the discrepancy in the management of temporality in the final moments of life, the author exemplifies the intricate dynamic of the last breath.

As the beginning of this book review indicates, *Breathing Aesthetics* cleverly aligns with the urgent need to discuss breathing in our current time. Beyond considering the book's publication year, how can we further contextualize the author's claims within a broader historical framework as we examine the role of breath amid contemporary crises, particularly in relation to racial inequality and capitalism? The racial aspect of breathing can be traced back to the era of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. The racial differences in access to air aboard slave ships were strikingly evident. The confined and poorly aired conditions forced enslaved people to endure inhospitable breathing environments, leading to outbreaks of scurvy. While the loss of enslaved lives was profound, colonists seized the opportunity to study infectious diseases, advancing medical knowledge in the process.[2] This historical case underscores the deeply rooted nature of unequal air distribution and its lasting impact on social inequality.

Similarly, the historical quest for “good breathing” and the commodification of air reveal enduring patterns. In the late nineteenth century, such regions as New Mexico attracted lungers seeking relief from respiratory ailments, capitalizing on the perception that the dry climate and high elevation were conducive to respiratory health.[3] Moreover, if breathing is a medium that connects the inside and the outside, the human body and the environment, then perhaps we need to know what our understanding of the environment and the body was in the 1960s and 1970s. While germ theory initially dominated disease discourse after the late nineteenth century, after World War II, environmental scientists, such as Aldo Leopold, advocated a holistic understanding of disease as a counter to a single cause, the germs. This shift led to ecological perspectives that emphasized interactions between human health and the environment and fueled the environmental movement in the United States in the 1960s.[4]

These historical narratives deepen our understanding of the political dimensions of breathing and underscore its complex interplay with socioeconomic factors. Breathing, far from being merely a physiological necessity, is intertwined with power dynamics, emphasizing the contemporary urgency of addressing breathing-related issues as seen in the works examined in this book.

In the coda, the author introduces the concept of “benign respiratory variations” as a framework to foster mutual care and consent among individuals, ensuring a pleasurable breathing experience for all, regardless of regular breathing patterns or moments of breathlessness. This reminder emphasizes the timely importance of this book for anyone interested in environmental issues, health disparities, and related matters in contemporary circumstances, urging a shift toward collective mutual care over politicized agendas, like advocating for “the right to clean air” to sustain respiratory well-being.

Notes


[3]. Nancy Owen Lewis and Joan M. Jensen, *Chasing the Cure in New Mexico: Tuberculosis and the Quest for Health* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016).

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