

Apparitions and Atmospheres: an introduction to the special issue “On gases, clouds, fogs and mists”

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Atmospheres are always all around us; but they are also routinely overlooked and ignored. When they become visible, are felt or otherwise noticed they can be experienced as an unusual interruption. Whether a storm cloud or a roadside flare, they mark a change. We also know from Gothic literature and horror films that fogs and mists roll in and change the mood of a scene turning innocent bucolic landscapes into sinister reminders of dangers, real or imagined, that may be lurking in the dark. Unseen invisible gases can impact us too, making spaces unpleasant and even uninhabitable.

Of course, it is not all just doom and gloom. Atmospheres are also full of the particulate that makes neon glow and nightclubs create otherworldly spaces. They create moods and affects, aesthetic experiences to be desired, bought and sold. Atmospheres are the stuff of fairy dust, Sci-Fi special effects and divine halation. They can be seen at a distance causing optical effects like mirages and we can also find ourselves right in the middle of them like humidity stuck to the skin. Architectures define atmospheres. Tourists seek atmospheres.

New writing and research on atmospheres has brought about what has been called an “atmospheric turn” (Griffero 2019, Sobecka 2018). What unites this recent research across the sciences, cultural studies and comparative literature is a concern with the particular qualities of atmospheres and how they have historically been interpreted, controlled and experienced across cultures and communities. In theorizing what he calls ‘affective atmospheres’ Anderson reminds us that “Atmospheres are perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another. They are never finished, static or at rest” (2009, 79). Thinking about atmospheres involves thinking about an always changing relationship between subjects and their environment.

The significance of atmospheres as a global phenomenon is also increasingly understood in terms of the very real impacts of climate change, with nearly every discipline from the Humanities to the Sciences trying to contribute to a greater understanding of its effects on communities and multispecies relationships (Bastian, M., & Bayliss Hawitt, R. 2022). From pollution to sea level change, the risks

of climate change are global but their impact is disproportionately felt by disadvantaged communities; from the precarity of island communities to the poor air quality of urban centres, atmospheres foretell such looming threats.

This special edition of *Coolabah*, ‘On gases, clouds, fogs and mists,’ collects articles and creative writing on the theme of atmospheres. While set in a variety of geographic regions and spanning different historical time periods, a through line in these works is their concern for the embodied experience of atmospheres. They are also full of ghosts, monsters and unexplained apparitions, gaseous forms that demand our attention. These apparitions are not just figments of one’s imagination or mere frightened projections, they are made of real atmospheric effects that exist outside of human perception or narration of them.

Apparitions are unexpected appearances, things glimpsed out of the corner of the eye or seen on the horizon. They have physical and optical explanation but also an affective punch. Their physical composition can be studied and understood but their uncanny first appearance can be their most lasting significance. Freud’s famous account of the uncanny or the *unheimlich* as he phrases it in the original German is more a catalogue than a precise definition. He lists things that are at once both familiar and strange. In this accounting he highlights the “The unheimlich mist called hill-fog” (2003, 3). This low-lying cloud cover can be seen in traditional Chinese paintings and in Gothic literature, highlighting from the beginning that responses to atmospheres are culturally and historically specific. To this list, it would be easy to add any number of other atmospheres that evoke more than just the weather.

In addition to moisture and particulate matter, atmospheres can also carry memories and unresolved histories. The authors in this special issue use atmospheres to engage with legacies of resource extractivism, settler colonialism and other anthropogenic effects of human development. The atmospheres and spaces they address are at times haunting and uncanny. Confronting them by tracing their underlying physical properties and cultural histories does not make them any less impactful or even, at times, frightening.

In the collection “Exploring Atmospheres Ethnographically”, Schroer and Schmitt highlight work that considers atmospheres set amidst the quotidian smells, sounds and rhythms of daily life (2018). The particular contribution of this current *Coolabah* special issue collection of writing is a situated approach that considers atmospheres and optical anomalies in historical and cultural context. Folklore, fables and ghost stories can be mined to make sense of the physical worlds around us.

Amidst the intermingling of styles and subject matter in this special issue, there is also a shared concern with more-than-human ecologies. These authors are not only engaged with human precarity in the face of climate change and natural forces, they are also concerned with diverse environments themselves, how mountains, seas and fungal spores persist and persevere. This aligns with the multi-species concerns of what has been termed the ‘ecoGothic.’ In their collection *EcoGothic* (2013) Smith and Hughes anticipate a growing body of scholarship that seeks to link ecological thinking about environments with the affects and emotions familiar to us from Gothic literature. The ominous and foreboding 18th and 19th century moors, bogs and locks so common to this literary tradition from Northern Europe can teach us a few things about how to link emotions and affects to a place.

Philip Hayward’s “Extraordinarily Hazardous’ Fog, water, ice and human precarity in the aquapelagic assemblage of the Grand Banks (northwest Atlantic)” introduces the reader to a unique marine region with a particularly high occurrence of fog and abundance of sea life. Hayward situates us in the confusion of this dangerous marine environment and thereby gives the reader a feel for an atmospheric precarity that predates more recent concerns about climate change. Through historical examples from

paintings to literature, he shows how ‘aquapelagos (integrated terrestrial and marine systems)’ can be dangerous zones where the atmosphere itself puts human life on edge.

In “Nessie and Noctilucent Clouds: A Meteorological Explanation for Some Loch Ness Monster Sightings” Oliver D. Smith draws attention to atmospheric effects and their ability to inspire mythologies and speculative theories about the Loch Ness monster, one of the most infamous subjects of speculation and folklore. This work shows how atmospheric imaginaries are influenced by and subsequently inform people’s optical experience of the material world. Atmospheres are not just symbolic repositories, they are physical phenomena that exist outside of interpretation.

The Gothic has also been applied to new geographic regions and cultural legacies as in the case of the *Tropical Gothic* (Edwards & Vasconcelos, 2016). In this current special issue three works address Australian spaces, both real and imagined. In these works, the ghosts and figments of monumental mountains and architectures loom over the Australian landscape demanding attention to colonial histories and possible environmental futures.

In ‘Consumed in the fog: A metropolitan revenge fantasy’ Erin Malley’s daily walk along the Sydney waterfront turns into a fantasy about consuming the architectures of capital that have arisen along the shore. She adopts a confessional tone that is at the same time unapologetic and not covered by the sheer size of the anthropogenic changes transforming the landscape. Her imagined ‘revenge fantasy,’ a swarm of building devouring drones, comes across as an empowering force, a technological cloud of agency in the face of large scale urban development.

And in Simone Lazaroo’s ‘Mother’s Ghosts’, family and diasporic histories are set against suburban development and precolonial aboriginal histories. Lazaroo tells a very personal story that is at once linked to larger narratives about immigration and displacement. Her attunement to haunted spaces and histories raises questions about what history is seen and what history is ignored. Writing about apparitions and atmospheres grants us access to these questions and can give form to otherwise elusive memories.

In Marea Mitchell’s ‘Effects of Atmosphere in Andrew McGahan’s *The Rich Man’s House* (2019)’, a fictitious island off the coast of Australia is the site of a murder. Mitchell draws us into the intricate interiors of this house and leads us to question the significance of its elaborate design. This island escape relies on surrounding atmospheres to hide its truth from the rest of the world. Andrew McGahan’s final novel resonates with South Seas fiction that considers the island as a recurrent place of secrecy and fantasy. The island in this tradition is also frequently a dream of abundance and insulation from the troubles of the rest of the world. The recent special issue of *Coolabah*, No. 31 (2021): *Mythical and Fictional Islands* (Special Issue on Island Studies), offers further examples of the signification islands play in such literary and folkloric traditions.

Inspired in part by an ecological approach, a number of authors in this current special issue attend to more-than-human relationships in familiar environs. Donna Haraway brought back to scholarly attention the speculative fiction of Ursula LeGuin and her *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (LeGuin & Haraway 2019). LeGuin’s method involves decentring the prototypical male hero of Joseph Campbell outlined in the *Man with a Thousand Faces* (2012). In contrast to Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’ narrative, LeGuin brings to the fore the mundane material world as key elements of effective worldbuilding and storytelling.

Christian Dymond adopts a similarly decentred, non-humancentric approach to cinema in his contribution ‘Weather as cinema: Exploring fungal and weatherly creativity in film.’ Dymond shows how weather itself is generative and capable of both affecting the cinematic image and working directly

as an agent on filmic medium. Dymond explores the history of weather in early cinema and introduces the work of two artists who use fungal spores and other particulate matter driven by weather to create cinematic images. The interviews he shares with these artists further help readers to understand the relationship between a decentred creative practice and the weather.

The anxieties manifest in Gothic literature have also taken on a new form in what Morton has called the ‘dark ecology’ or a critical self-awareness of anthropocenic effects on climate futures (Morton 2016). In this theory of the anthropocene, atmospheres and apparitions can be felt as an ecological threat. Along a similar vein of thinking a “gothic ecocritical lens illuminates the fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervades those relationships: it orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies” (Keetley and Sivils 2017, 1). There is a kind of precarity when people are faced with atmospheres and environments beyond their control.

In their article, ‘Mistification: the Dreadful Side of Cloud Computing’ authors Vicente Bicudo de Castro, Heitor Coelho and Danilo Bantim Frambach apply a gothic reading of cloud computing in line with James Bridle’s *Dark New Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (2018). They propose ‘mistification’ as a new more appropriate metaphor for the obscurity of cloud based computing. The authors draw an original parallel with the *Ravenloft* campaign setting of *Dungeons & Dragons* exploring how the horror and fear of this roleplaying game might evoke the confusion and anxieties of cloud computing users unaware of the mechanism behind the technology.

My own contribution, ‘Future Clouds: diatoms, speculation and weather modification’ is a speculative reflection on the role algae play in the formation of clouds. In a continuation of a method developed in my work on the mythology behind mirages, I explore links between speculation in science, folklore and science fiction (Hodges, 2022). Microalgae such as diatoms were discovered to play an important role in cloud formation as cloud condensation nuclei. This discovery provides a chance to reflect on the experimental history of cloud seeding projects as an attunement to dynamic relationships between the sea, sky and weather.

The very diversity of subjects and approaches in this special issue suggest that there is a place for more scholarly and creative work centred on atmospheres and the imaginaries they engender. More than just triggers for fantasy or scientific speculation, atmospheres might offer a model in themselves in how to think seemingly disparate materials at the same time, like particulate suspended together in air. Particulate matter from diatoms to anthropogenic aerosols populate the atmosphere. They can form an oppressive haze as in the Great Smog of 1952 that engulfed London or in the wildfires that have more recently blanketed the skies of California (Corton, 2015). They can also give shape, even if just for a moment, to fleeting images of past tragedies and unresolved histories.

For all these diverse forms of atmospheres the focus of this collection is to look for ways in which cultural understandings and misunderstandings of atmospheres might offer new ways of thinking about a complicated now and a perhaps even more complicated near future. Folklore, popular culture and speculative fiction can provide new ways of understanding the atmospheres around us and what impact we have on them as well as they have on us.

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