Editorial

Creative Writing and Art Cultures of Climate

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In a chapter of *Europe (In Theory)*, Roberto Dainotto explores how Montesquieu updated the Aristotelian identification of climate as the natural cause that divides progressive nations from backward ones according to a north/south dichotomy meant to detect the negative Other of European identity within Europe itself (63-64). In reporting a famous passage of *De l'esprit des lois* [1784] in which Montesquieu establishes a connection between the effect of heat and cold on a sheep's tongue and the socio-cultural identity of Southern European countries, Dainotto comments upon how climate in the eighteenth century became a crucial element in determining "a metatheory of the law" in which "the relationship between physical realities and political formations was not a casual but a necessary one" (57). Whether the story of Montesquieu directly dissecting the sheep is credible or not, what the French philosopher found in the animal's tongue was visible, physical evidence capable of materializing the connection between two entities that would otherwise have been as difficult to pinpoint as both climate and cultural identity. Today the anatomical part of the dead sheep tells instead a story of a double historical violence inflicted upon both a nonhuman creature and Mediterranean people in the name of modern science and climatology.

The trajectory of this story, involving one of the most influential political thinkers of modernity, climate, and a sheep's tongue, illustrates with remarkable precision one of the underlying concerns of this issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to "Cultures of Climate. On Bodies and Atmospheres in Modern Fiction." Moving from the dead body of the animal to the scientific paradigm of climatology, then returning to the body politics and cultural identities of allegedly primitive nations, Montesquieu's narrative unwittingly outlines how there is no truth in the "prevailing concept of the climate" as one in which "bodies and actions, cultures and societies play no significant role" (as stated by Nitzke and Horn, the two guest editors, in their CFP). Instead, the story of the sheep's tongue invites us to consider how the history of climate often coexists with a slow violence that otherwise would likely remain unrepresented. Paraphrasing Rob Nixon, we may say that, when read against the grain of its own theoretical ambitions, Montesquieu's account becomes one of those "arresting stories, images, and symbols" adequate to the representational challenge of conceptualizing the relationships between socio-cultural violence and climate (3).

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As evidenced not least by the Montesquieu anecdote, climate has often been used as "a discursive vehicle capable of naturalizing matter of social concerns into matters of natural fact" (Fleming and Jankovic 10). To hide this ideologically charged process, climate is conversely described in contemporary discourses as an index, i.e. as a quantitative but abstract set of patterns. Yet, we encounter the climate and its agency not in abstraction but first and foremost in the noosphere, the layer of air within two meters of the ground that is as "intimately close as our next breath" (4). Ironically, this layer has never been and will likely be never adequately explored, because it remains "contaminated" by our very presence and therefore useless for modern science and its attempts of objectivity on a global scale. This also means that the very proximity of the noosphere to our embodied existences and concerns is what makes it invisible, out of sight, reducing our encounter with climate into "an abstract three-dimensional geophysical *system*, rather than an intimate ground-level *experience*" (4, emphasis in the original).

What the arts' engagement with the climate can do, however, is bring back a sense of experiencing this atmospheric layer that is so close to us by rendering it visible. Such engagement is not meant to summarily reject or ignore science, technology, and contemporary climatology. Rather, it means to draw focus to the absence of abrupt thresholds "between the human phenomenological experience and machinic agents" (Randerson, Salmond, and Manford 18) and to create assemblages of art and meteorological science capable of repositioning "the atmosphere system as [a] political [entity] rather than a passive receptacle upon which humans act" (18). In an age like ours in which we are no longer dealing with information scarcity, contemporary art can in fact help us understand climate and our connection with the atmosphere by "articulating the hopes, polemics, anxieties and antagonisms that emerge from a crisis that often seems beyond representation" (23). In this way, representing climate becomes more a matter of affectivities than data, more an issue of manifesting the relational embodiment of both beings and airs than one of naturalization and abstraction.

As exemplified by the cover image, the work of the first artist in the Creative Writing and Arts section of this issue of *Ecozon@* is all about rendering visible (a specific) atmosphere through a machinic agent, a photo camera in this case. Berndnaut Smilde is a Dutch artist whose work consists of installations, sculptures and photography. As he states in his biography, Smilde explores the physical de-construction and re-construction of materials, light, space, atmosphere and experience in relation to architectural environments. The *Nimbus* series represented in this issue of *Ecozon@* was recognized by *TIME* Magazine as one of the "Top Ten Inventions of 2012," and it is surely the result of a prodigious scientific manipulation. The marvelous images in this series offer transitory moments of climate presence in a specific location: the clouds are there only for a few second before they disintegrate. Yet, they surprise us with their appearance indoors, their ephemerality makes visible what is instead the invisible permanence of air. Smilde's clouds are thus truly numinous, as they exist at the edge between different but contiguous

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worlds, indicating the presence of a new sense of the Pan-like[1] immanence of the atmosphere. And just as humans were only permitted to enjoy the physical presence of the gods for a mere moment, so the photograph functions as the crucial document of an embodied encounter between ourselves and the air we breathe, an encounter that has become visible in a specific location and now returned to its realm of constant but out-of-sight existence. In a sense, Smilde's *nimbi* leave us with a double environmental awareness: they draw attention to the airspace we share with other elements as much as they remind us of the agency and life of the elements themselves.

Science and the rarely-visible elements that both surround and produce the matter of our trans-corporeal existence are also protagonists of the second contribution in our section. Alex Dreppec is a German author and poet with hundreds of publications in German journals, school books and anthologies. Notably, in the late 2000s he started the so-called *Science Slams*, performative events in which scientists are challenged to compete, presenting their research on a stage in front of an audience. Dreppec's contribution for this issue of *Ecozon@* is a short series of eco-poems (three in English and one in German) entitled *Periodic Poetry*. The reference becomes clear at first sight: Dreppec's poems use the chemical symbols of the periodic table of elements as syllables capable, when poetically combined, of producing a text. Unsurprisingly, the elements describe an atmospheric experience characterized by pollution and atmospheric degradation: Dreppec, who was awarded the "Wilhelm Busch" Prize for humorous poetry in 2004, experiments with abstraction such as scientific symbols to give ironic visibility to a material world in which climate change is not an accident but rather the result of nations negating their own socio-political responsibility while promoting "more waste" (as in "Negation Nations," the second poem anthologized here).

A contrasting sense of unironic connectivity and quasi-numinous embodiment is at the core of Karen Poppy's poetic message. Poppy, an American poet whose work has been published in *The American Journal of Poetry and The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, introduces us to what she describes in an interview as "a layered world that provides so much richness, so much opportunity to create."* Both poems anthologized here portray a cosmos of immanence and sensuous presences, in which our existence relates to everything else, a feeling that is meant to make us reflect upon "how little we matter, and how much" ("Love Song of Existence"). For instance, in her second poem for *Ecozon@*, entitled "Pollination," Poppy takes the perspective of a bee to display how each creature is constantly made and surrounded by a vibrant energy: the poem sadly concludes with the sobering reality that no one knows "what will happen / when we bees all die, are gone."

An almost surreal and dreadful feeling of not knowing what will happen also characterizes the moment in which I am writing this editorial. In these final days of March 2020, I am self-isolating at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and I am surrounded by a general cultural climate of fear toward embodied exchanges and atmospheric contagion. Let me therefore render visible what is usually concealed in scholarly writings—namely

[1] 'Pan', the name of the pastoral god of Arcadia, reflects his embodiment of the whole of nature.

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my own personal fears and hopes—and conclude the Creative Writing and Arts section of this Spring issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to "Cultures of Climate" with a text full of optimism about how things eventually work out and the combinatory power of nonhuman environments and arts. "More Virulent than Disease" is a chapter of Stephanie Gage's fictionalized biography of neuroanatomist Santiago Ramon y Cajal (1852-1934), who won the Nobel Prize in 1906 in Physiology of Medicine. In the excerpt anthologized in *Ecozon@*, Gage—who is also a molecular biologist—writes in Cajal's voice at a pivotal moment of the neuroanatomist's life where, while recovering from tuberculosis, he realizes that his path will lead him to scientific investigation. As the title of the chapter suggests, Cajal overcomes the disease and the suffocating atmosphere of the sanatorium in which he is living with a daily combination of "walks about this beautiful mountain" and "drawings and photography." My hope is that Cajal's fictional example may provide some solace and restore with at least some hope and joy our own "current state of existence, with its anxieties and struggles too."

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