Breathing Otherwise: The Coloniality of Air and Indigenous Air Conditioning

Raquel Figueira

We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.
(Fanon, 1986) [1]

Stolen children. Lost bonds. The burden of loss hangs in the air and mingles with the scent of sweetgrass.
(Kimmerer, 2013, p.265)

Introduction

Colonisation is often thought of in terms of *terraforming* – in simple terms, the transformation of land. From the plantation system to the appropriation of Indigenous territories, colonial histories are inscribed in spatial configurations that continue manifesting themselves today. The commodification and categorisation of people, land and natural resources have long been portrayed in colonial traditions of visuality (Mirzoeff, 2011), making colonisation intelligible in visual terms. But how to approach the less tangible, less visible *stuff* of colonisation? This challenge has led me to consider the coloniality of air – how air, with its seemingly fleeting, borderless nature, might hold colonial dispositions in its mist.

The question this essay aims to answer, albeit partially and within limited scope, is how to think about air through postcolonial theory. Partially, because the possibilities are plural – and pluralistic – and this essay is necessarily selective. Air is conceptual, material, cultural, racialised and gendered; it is abstract and figurative, fluid and stale, human and non-human. Air flows between these binaries, and it is also non-binary: it queers and it is queer. Air is both a subject and a means of colonisation, it sustains life and it lets die – it is biopolitical. For these reasons and more, air invites a transdisciplinary effort. It is thanks to the porosity between postcolonial, Black, queer and feminist studies that thinking of and with air in relation to social justice has been in motion [2]. Similarly, air can be apprehended, mobilised, portrayed and constituted by cross-pollinating practices such as art, architecture, engineering and urban planning. In this sense, air is *praxis* – it fuses thinking and making.

The section that follows aims to address the challenge that air poses in a postcolonial context – in particular, in relation to the 'double-fracture' (Ferdinand, 2021) of postcolonial and environmental studies. For air problems are breathing problems, and they demand attuning to social and ecological concerns as part of the same struggle. As life-giving as breathing is, it is not a universal given – struggles to breathe disproportionally affect the populations who are most vulnerable both to the oppressive forces of racial capitalism and to the environmental crisis. Those on the receiving end are the same: people of colour, Indigenous communities, and low-income populations, particularly women. I take as a starting point Frantz Fanon's (1994) notion of 'combat breathing' and go on to describe how air pollution became a postcolonial concern with the help of Jennifer Wenzel (2015), Rob Nixon (2005), and Françoise Vergès (2017). Nixon's (2011) concept of 'slow violence' will help address the implications of air's apparent invisibility – because the forms of violence carried out through air's intoxication, appropriation and manipulation are often non-spectacular and unfold over long periods of time.

The second section proposes that the slow violence of air is perpetuated by particular traditions and practices that can be identified in spatial, temporal and cultural terms. In particular, it looks at practices of 'air conditioning' – a term coined by Peter Sloterdijk (2016) to address techniques of air modification that shape both physical and social atmospheres. Following Hsuan L. Hsu (2020), I borrow this term to explore how the coloniality of air can be understood by looking at colonial traditions in medicine, geography and architecture that persist over time and keep the slow violence of air unchecked. D. Asher Ghertner's (2021) study 'Postcolonial Atmospheres' makes this perceptible through the study of three atmospheres in the context of India's air pollution crisis: the exoticised 'Indian Lung', the colonial hill station, and the privatised air offered by air purifiers and pollution masks. Paying close attention to these atmospheres, it is possible to trace the ways in which long-lasting colonial dispositions shape how air is experienced today.

Attuning to the ways in which slow violence is perpetuated will inevitably raise questions around how to resist, how to activate the decolonial potential of air. If air conditioning represents the colonisation of atmospheres, what sort of practices could become meaningful decolonising forces? From citizen sensing projects (Gabrys, 2022) to community wind farms (Howe & Boyer, 2016), grassroots projects are proliferating across multiple geographies, generating forms of 'air conditioning from below' (Hsu, 2020, p.194). From Standing Rock to Fukushima, transnational alliances between Indigenous peoples, NGOs and activist groups are carrying out occupations, developing DIY infrastructures, and creating alternative media platforms that make publicly visible otherwise unseen violence [3].

But there is strength, too, in the resistance of the subtlest aesthetic practices. Practices that, like Nixon's (2011, p.2) slow violence, are 'neither spectacular nor instantaneous', perhaps not usually seen as aesthetic at all. And yet they might transform colonial airscapes and reactivate sensorial knowledges – knowledges that Hsu (2020) says have been suffocated by a tradition of deodorisation. How do they enable possibilities for breathing otherwise? The last section addresses this question by paying attention to Indigenous practices, such as *smudging*, proposing they can be seen as forms of Indigenous air conditioning. These practices resist colonial smellscapes; they abolish the colonial boundaries between human and non-human worlds, allowing Indigenous cosmologies to breathe. The section will start with Hsu's (2020) notion of deodorisation, contextualizing how olfactory experiences and knowledges have been impoverished. Then it will centre the work of Indigenous scholars Vanessa Watts (Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee), Warren Cariou (Métis), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi), focusing particularly on smudging as an attempt to glimpse at airs that resist – airs that deserve a lot more space than I am able to give in this experiment.

I – Postcolonial Ecologies of Air

> *There is no occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.*
> (Fanon, 1959, p.65)

Writing in the context of colonial occupation in Algeria, Frantz Fanon (1959) argues that colonialism is not solely an occupation of territory, but that it includes a country's 'daily pulsation'. The oppressive force of the coloniser penetrates every aspect of everyday life: it dictates its rhythm, its essence. Within such a suffocating atmosphere, he presents 'combat breathing' as a mode of respiration that contests its own occupation – a mode of survival, but also one that fights for different relations and exchanges. As Jennifer Gabrys (2022, p.13) puts it, 'fighting for breath in this way involves fighting for worlds'. Instead of a universal or biological understanding of breath, Fanon's combat breathing represents a struggle to transform the colonised atmospheres of everyday life and to foster possibilities for breathing otherwise.
In 'In the Wake', Christina Sharpe (2020, p.111) talks about 'the weather' of unbreathability in which Black people live. She explicates Fanon affirming that 'it is not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of environments in which we struggle, the machines in which we live'. Such an approach requires an understanding of air and the atmospheres in which people breathe as formative and expressive of social and political injustices – as well as ecological. As Jennifer Wenzel (2015) retrospectively makes clear, Fanon's vision of liberation implicates not only a liberation of bodies but also of natural resources: 'For a colonised people the most essential value, because

the most concrete, is first and foremost the land', says Fanon in 'The Wretched of the Earth' (1961, p.44). Wenzel (2015, p.191) acknowledges that Fanon's political ecology of colonialism 'is not very ecological, in the sense of a non-anthropocentric understanding of ecosystems that views humans as one species-actor among many forms of nonhuman nature'. However, her reading of Fanon through an ecological lens helps affirm that looking at air from a postcolonial perspective demands a consideration of the entangled forms of injustice that give shape to climates of unbreathability.

In his seminal 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism' essay, Rob Nixon (2005, p.233-235) comments on the 'reciprocal indifference' that had hitherto prevailed between environmental and postcolonial studies. He attributes this to their seemingly opposing approaches: while postcolonial studies had tended to foreground hybridity, displacement and transnationality, ecocriticism had traditionally pursued discourses of purity, place, and a national American framework. Most significantly, postcolonial scholars had devoted 'considerable attention to excavating or reimagining the marginalised past: history from below and border histories, often along transnational axes of migrant memory' (2005, p.235). This was irreconcilable with the American traditions of environmental literature, which had erased the history of colonised peoples through the myths of wilderness and empty lands.

This colonial and environmental 'double fracture', as Malcolm Ferdinand (2021) puts it, is significant for studies on air and breathing because the ideologies that sustained notions of land as empty (*terra nullius*) similarly gave shape to perceptions of air as a vacant and uninhabited domain – *aer nullius*, 'ready to receive settler culture's atmospheric embellishments and externalities' (Hsu, 2020, p.155). Modernity's infrastructures of industrialisation – releasing pollution into the air as though it is a space available for taking – can then be seen as afterlives of colonialism, disproportionally affecting the lives and health of racialised and lower-income communities. For instance, in the 1970s, predominantly Black neighbourhoods situated close to industrial facilities in the United States displayed higher rates of asthma, respiratory illnesses and cancer, demonstrating the interconnections between environmental degradation and social injustice. It wasn't until 1990 that Robert Bullard published 'Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality', one of the first comprehensive studies making palpable the links between race, poverty and environmental risk in America. His seminal work, alongside other studies majorly led by scholars from the Global South (Vergès, 2017), marked a pivotal moment in confronting this previously neglected entanglement, fuelling a burgeoning wave of environmental justice movements that reverberated globally. But this recognition has not meant that patterns of social inequality and racial injustice have ceased to manifest, both through the effects of environmental degradation and through direct forms of aggression. The killing of Eric Garner, who suffered from asthma, by a police officer performing a chokehold tragically attests to the multifaceted forms of violence Black people continue to endure. 'I can't breathe', said Garner 11 times, his last words encapsulating the struggles made visible by the Black Lives Matter movement.

With the foundational efforts of environmental justice movements well documented, Françoise Vergès (2017) questions why later studies on the Anthropocene have failed to properly address the racial inequalities that are embedded in the making of the environmental crisis. She contends that 'global warming and its consequences for the peoples of the South is a political question and must be understood outside of the limits of "climate change" and in the context of the inequalities produced by racial capital' (2017, p.7). Therefore, she affirms, narratives surrounding the Anthropocene and its threats to humanity as a whole actively occlude the histories of asymmetrical power and violence inscribed in racial capitalism. Vergès (2017, p.8) says of Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2009) 'The Climate of History: Four Theses':

> *By focusing on the immediacy of climate change as a crisis, Chakrabarty framed the Anthropocene as a current transformation. This presentism ignored a deeper history and created the illusion of an organic and undifferentiated universal humanity. (…) Chakrabarty defends a notion of the Anthropocene that, according to Aaron Vansintjan (2016), infers a 'blanket humanity, a blanket history, a blanket geological record' which relies on 'apolitical and colonialist assumptions' and 'highlights the danger of using one framework (geology and climatology) to make universal claims about the world.'*

She points to Jason Moore's (2016, cited in Vergès, 2017) notion of a Capitalocene to bring back to light capitalism's reliance on exploiting a cheap, racialised, and gendered workforce, alongside the appropriation of nature as an equally cheap resource, readily available for the accumulation of profit. However she affirms the need to remember that the success of capitalism's operations cannot be separated from the history of racism and particularly of the transatlantic slave trade ¬– 'it is human praxis as labour and the global use of a colour line in the division of labour that must be studied' (Vergès, 2017, p.10) – hence Racial Capitalocene.

As well as the deportation of people, plants, animals and goods across oceans, the slave trade also encompassed the transference of techniques and engineering technologies from Europe to colonised territories. Eyal Weizman (2015, p.12) points out how 'the climate has always been a project for colonial powers, which have continuously acted to engineer it'. He contends:

> *Colonial projects from North America through Africa, the Middle East, India, and Australia sought to re-engineer the climate. Colonisers did not only seek to overcome unfamiliar and harsh climatic conditions, but rather to transform them* (2015, p. 36).

The challenge is that the modification of climates and atmospheres unfolds in ways that tend to go unnoticed. As Rob Nixon (2011, p.1-2) highlights in 'Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor', these strategies served not only the purpose of making conditions more palatable for colonisers, but they also evolved to 'poison-redistribution ethics' enabling rich Western nations to dump their 'aesthetically unsightly' waste in 'out-of-sight' locations of the Global South. Nixon (2011, p.2) affirms the need to urgently rethink what he terms 'slow violence':

> *By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.*

We see with Nixon that addressing the hidden impact of slow violence requires grappling with the representational obstacles it poses. With this in mind, air problems become particularly challenging. Beyond its material invisibility – as it literally cannot be perceived by unaided human sight – authors like Luce Irigaray (1999) and Nerea Calvillo (2023) point to how air has also been made invisible, particularly in the history of Western thought, which traditionally privileged solid, stable, measurable phenomena. Calvillo (2023, p.19) says:

> *This in-visibility – or tension between material and cultural forms of visibility and amnesia – has real, embodied consequences. It shapes what we think is natural, is urban, is human. And excludes all the things that are not: the in-betweens, the grays, the fluids, the forgotten.*

It is with a focus on this tension between 'material and cultural forms of visibility and amnesia' that the following section proposes looking at the imbrication of slow violence with the particular colonial practices and dispositions that perpetuate its invisibility.

III – Air conditioning

Peter Sloterdijk's (2016) concept of 'air conditioning' identifies the techniques of air manipulation deployed at various scales – from filter masks to air-conditioned buildings and to gas warfare – resulting in the compartmentalisation and stratification of populations. Extending beyond the literal control of air through technological means, air conditioning encompasses also the broader strategies through which humans engineer their surroundings to create and maintain specific physical and social atmospheres.

Taking Sloterdijk's concept as a point of departure, Hsuan L Hsu (2020) points out how techniques of air conditioning maintain comfortable atmospheres for privileged groups while disproportionally debilitating the most vulnerable populations. Significantly, those who most benefit from air conditioning are also those who have the most influence on environmental policies, therefore becoming desensitised from the urgency of more sustainable practices of production and consumption. This section proposes that paying attention to techniques of air conditioning can shine a light on how forms of slow violence are perpetuated and remain unaddressed.

D. Asher Ghertner's (2021) study 'Postcolonial Atmospheres' focuses on India's air pollution crisis, popularly known as "airpocalypse", to examine how contemporary governmental responses draw from colonial principles of enclosure. Ghertner (2021) exposes these legacies through the study of three atmospheres: the exoticised 'Indian lung', the colonial hill station, and the privatised air offered by pollution masks and purifiers.

The 'Indian lung', of much interest to pulmonary medicine since the late nineteenth century, is a scientific claim widely accepted in media, health and judicial discourses that declares Indian lung capacity as deficient in comparison to the "average" European lung. Ghertner (2021) contends that this form of pathologization, which has historically supported colonial policies of segregation, is nowadays providing a justification for Indian political leaders to ignore the effects of air pollution on public health. More specifically, Ghertner (2021, p.1485) says, colonial theories of tropical difference are being invoked today suggesting that, due to its smaller volume, the Indian lung is especially adapted to India's dusty, tropical environment. Not only this colonial rhetoric portrays Indians' lower vital capacity as a sign of resilience instead of a vulnerability, but it also reinforces the idea of Indian air as inherently and "naturally" polluted – preventing national initiatives to produce air otherwise. Consequently, social divisions are, too, seen as "natural", and exposure to polluted air perceived as a kind of ethno-racial inheritance that does not need to be reconfigured. Needless to say, India's policy makers opting into this rhetoric are also those most likely to be protected from the harmful effects of air pollution compared to the vast majority of the population, as they navigate air-conditioned enclosures – from home to car, to embassy building and meeting room – that ensure their daily access to filtered and purified air.

The hill station – a type of settlement originally constructed in British India for colonial officers and their families to escape the tropical urban airs of Indian cities – is the second atmosphere examined by Ghertner (2021). He contends that the colonial legacy of hill stations can be traced to present-day middle-class discourses of lung-cleansing holidays and nostalgic notions of mountain purity, showing how the vulnerabilities of tropical urban air are imagined as unavoidable, and escape or sequestration seen as the only possible solution (2021, p.1485). By the late nineteenth century,

Ghertner (2021, p.1490) says, perceptions of hill stations in the lower Himalayas as restorative escapes for the British were so widely proliferated in medicine and urban geography that they appeared in popular songs and stories evoking the magical powers of mountain air:

> *When you feel, below, dead-beat,*
> *Overpowered by trying heat,*
> *Worn by day, at night no rest;*
> *Then, 'tis surely manifest,*
> *That you should at once take train;*
> *Come above, and health regain!*

The lines above, by British poet J.A. Keble (1908, cited in Ghertner, 2021, p.1490), capture the sanitary escapism brought about by the colonial model of the hill station, where the British (and upper class Indians) could remove themselves from overcrowded cities and recuperate from their depleting tropical airs. But this was not a case of pursuing some notion of outside purity, as would have been the case in historical ontologies of air in temperate, Northern climates. Instead, the hill station provided a shield from the outside, with the colonial bungalow representing the ultimate armour against external threats with its internal courtyards, indoor pools and glass-paned conservatories.

The repercussions of this geographical and architectural tradition of enclosure have recently reemerged in the context of India's contemporary "airpocalypse", with the country's wealthier classes readopting the notion of the hill station as a restorative holiday destination through popular terms like "pollucation" and the social media hashtag #smogescape. This phenomenon perpetuates the belief that Indian cities and working class populations are intrinsically unclean and that privileged bodies need to physically remove themselves in order to sustain good health. Once again, the return to a colonial disposition poses a challenge to any potential efforts to tackle air pollution sources – as Ghertner (2021, p.1493) points out, 'why invest in cleaning up Indian cities when, so it is assumed, they are irredeemably contaminated'?

Ghertner (2021, p.1494) demonstrates how the growing popularity of the "pollucation" is also extending to the proliferation of new air-filtering technologies, such as air purifiers and sophisticated air pollution masks, largely adopted by metropolitan India's wealthier classes. Promoted as high-tech consumer products based on aerosol science, they similarly perpetuate notions of the outside as a risky territory from which there ought to be a separation, promising pollution-free luxury through privatised air. Luxury residences and international private schools equipped with technologies like anti-smog canons and real-time air monitors become 'atmospheric islands', providing exclusive protection. While privileging the wealthier classes, these segregated atmospheres additionally weaken the possibilities of breathable public air with their energy-intensive and emission-generating infrastructures, directly affecting those who are excluded from these privatised pollution-free bubbles. These trends proceed both at collective and individual scales, with personal air pollution masks and car-based air purifiers performing a boundary not only between environments but also between bodies, marking the superiority of the masked body over the unprotected, exposed breather (Ghertner, 2021, p.1494-1495).

As Ghertner (2021) makes visible, these approaches focus on enclosing privileged bodies in protected atmospheres instead of tackling emission sources – taking us back to Hsu's (2020) point that exclusive breathable atmospheres pose an obstacle to the urgency of structural action. The logic of segregation between good and bad air ultimately represents a boundary between the self and an inherently polluted "other", reflecting colonial logics that once established a European–native divide and that continue enforcing social and environmental inequalities today (Ghertner, 2021; Hsu, 2020). While Ghertner does not use this term, one could see the forms of atmospheric segregation described in his study as techniques of colonial air conditioning. They keep the slow violence of India's "airpocalypse" unaddressed – ignored as something that is "natural" and can simply be escaped from. Nixon (2011, p.7) says that:

> *Attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements – temporal, geographical, rhetorical and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs.*

We see in Ghertner (2021) that a colonial logic of displacement sustains the imaginary of air pollution as something "out there" that some can separate themselves from through practices of enclosure, keeping the sources of the problem invisible along with those that are most vulnerable and for whom escape is not an option.

Interlude: A Pause to Breathe

rainswept banana groves
under a burdened sky

refreshed by smells
of seawind, blowing

clouds to breadfruit islands,
my tribal spirit
dreaming flight,
from Ka'a 'awa
to Rarotonga

'From Ka'a'awa to Rarotonga'
by Haunani-Kay Trask
(2002, cited in Hsu, 2020, p.181)

IV – Indigenous Air Conditioning

A path scented with sweetgrass leads to a landscape of forgiveness and healing for all who need it. She doesn't give her gift only to some.
(Kimmerer, 2013, p.212)

In 'The Smell of Risk', Hsuan L Hsu (2020) examines how atmospheric manipulations, like those highlighted by Ghertner (2021), are deeply entangled with an enduring Western tradition of deodorisation that since the late nineteenth century has come to conflate the absence of smell with notions of health and modernity. Miasma theory, attributing disease to polluted air, made olfactory regulation a central goal for urban planners and public health officials in the industrialising cities of Europe and the United States (Hsu, 2020, p.14). But instead of reducing atmospheric risks, efforts to deodorise private and public spaces were largely cosmetic, leaving the most vulnerable communities – including industrial and agricultural labourers along with racialised and Indigenous communities – exposed to the toxic airs generated by industrialisation. Moreover, as Hsu (2020, p.14) points out, this process also began to shape public discourses associating notions of health with pure (thus scentless) air. This stigmatised the victims of atmospheric violence, portraying them as environmentally impure, careless, or disengaged.

Hence, processes of deodorisation proliferated both atmospheric disparities and discriminatory modes of education. For instance, additionally to the disproportionate exposure of Indigenous peoples to toxic airs, colonial education strived to suppress Indigenous olfactory practices that have traditionally embodied vital modes of knowledge and relationality with nonhuman worlds. Some examples include Native American smudging (which will be discussed in more detail below), the aromatic healing practices of Amazonian shamans and *perfumeros*, the use of olfactory knowledge in traditional Oceanic seafaring, and the cosmology of the Ongee people of Andaman Islands, for whom all living beings are composed of smell (Hsu, 2020, pp.154-157). The poem in the short interlude that precedes this section is an example where Haunani-Kay Trask (Hawai'i) evokes these relations by deploying smell to convey sensual connections with land and atmosphere (Hsu, 2020, p.181) [4]. By denigrating olfaction and supressing such practices, colonisers eroded Indigenous smellscapes and the spiritual life, environmental knowledge and kin relations that stemmed from them.

Despite the devastating effects of deodorisation, Hsu (2020, p.182) reminds us, it is important to point out that Indigenous people have kept rich traditions of atmospheric modification since long before Western modernity's techniques of air conditioning first emerged. For example, smudging – a traditional ceremony with pre-Columbian origins involving the burning of sacred or medicinal herbs in order to cleanse or purify – indicates that Indigenous communities across multiple geographic territories have long employed their own forms of air conditioning with sensory, material and spiritual dimensions. As an Indigenous practice of atmospheric modification, smudging decolonises air both by valuing olfaction as an embodied, sensory form of knowledge and by modifying settler atmospheres in ways supportive of Indigenous sovereignty (Hsu, 2020, p.183). Vanessa Watts (Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee) says in her article 'Smudge This: Assimilation, State-Favoured Communities and the Denial of Indigenous Spiritual Lives' (2016, p.151):

> *In the smudging ceremony, which involves the burning of sage as a purification cleansing ritual so as to cleanse the person's mind, spirit, body, and emotions of negative energy, we are asking the spirit world and the spirit of the sage itself to aid in our emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental cleansing. (…) This shared affectual relationship is both accommodated by place and embodied in place – the basis of which is reciprocity.*

Watts (2016) describes smudging as a reciprocal relationship where human and nonhuman bodies and spirits manifest deep connections through air and land – connections that are not shared in colonial modes of knowledge. As opposed to the segregation and stratification we have seen in colonial forms of air conditioning such as India's hill stations and air purifiers (Ghertner, 2021) and Western traditions of deodorisation (Hsu, 2020), smudging demonstrates Indigenous air cosmologies as based on interconnection, interchange, and intimate bonds to local ecologies.

In 'Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land', Métis scholar Warren Cariou (2018, p.342) highlights the scent of sweetgrass as 'its most direct mode of physical communication with human beings, bringing them knowledge that has bodily, spiritual, and psychological effects and meanings' (2018, p.342). He points out the plant's scent has a powerful capacity to stimulate memory, both on a personal and collective level, portraying ceremonial practices such as smudging as vehicles to ancestral knowledge – 'as if the land's own memory is speaking through the scent of the sweetgrass' (2018, p.342).

In 'Braiding Sweetgrass' (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) also points to reciprocity as key in the relations and ethics eminent in Indigenous rituals, including smudging. In a scene where her and a group of descendants of various Indigenous nations gather in a ceremony of remembrance for their predecessors in Carlisle, she writes:

> *Drums sounded in the rain-washed air. The scent of burning sage and sweetgrass wrapped the small crowd in prayer. Sweetgrass is a healing medicine, a smudge that invokes kindness and compassion, coming as it does from our first Mother. The sacred words of healing rose up around us.* (2013, p.265)

Cariou (2018, p.348) suggests that Kimmerer's portrayals of sweetgrass are 'essentially connected to love'.

Similarly, Hsu (2020, p.189) sees her references to its fragrance as 'evoking compassion even at [a] site of immeasurable atrocities'. Ultimately the sensorial atmospheres brought about by the collective harvesting, weaving, and stewardship of sweetgrass come to culminate in the smudging ceremony, where notions of healing, solidarity, and kinship commingle in reciprocal airs.

We see with Watts (2016), Cariou (2018) and Kimmerer (2013) that smudging liberates the idea of health and well-being from its colonial association with capitalist ideals – such as self-sufficiency and productivity – to foster, instead, relationships of reciprocity. Unlike the colonial traditions we have looked at earlier which prioritise individual defence against atmospheric risk, smudging manifests a form of decolonial air conditioning by affirming the mutual bonds between humans, nonhumans, atmospheres and environments. As Hsu (2020, p.191) states, 'the unit of health is not the individual but the world they inhabit and are inhabited by'.

Moreover, Indigenous forms of air conditioning rely not on logics of segregation and stratification but in principles of *transcorporeality* – as Stacy Alaimo (2010) defined it, the 'material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world'. Air quality is not something to be managed and taking place "out there", but indeed embodies an interchange with entangled material, affective, and atmospheric dimensions. The process of breathing is, then, one of bodily porosity, where atmosphere continuously enters the body and intermingles with tissues, lungs, blood and brain in a life-sustaining cycle. It is enriched not by filtering out but by welcoming in sensory experience, ancestral knowledges, plural forms of life and intercultural alliances.

It is not, however, without caution that such practices are foregrounded. The relentless operations of Western capitalism do not cease to extract, appropriate and exploit. Practices like smudging have seen Indigenous peoples through thousands of years of traumatic histories – they have helped communities resist generations of genocide and colonialism. The mass commodification of smudging in the West removes the practice from its context of struggle, spirituality and connection to land while also resulting in the overharvesting of sacred herbs for the mainstream market, depleting the ecosystems where they grow and which Indigenous peoples rely on.

Conclusion

Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. We are still undrowning. And by we, I don't only mean people like myself whose ancestors specifically survived the middle passage, because the scale of our breathing is planetary, at the very least. (Gumbs, 2020, p.4)

We have seen that thinking about air from a postcolonial perspective requires attending to the 'double-fracture' of environmental and social injustices. The ways in which air becomes contaminated are deeply enmeshed with colonial histories of segregation, manipulation and dispossession, where a colour line drawn between coloniser and colonised operates alongside the separation between human and non-human. Air, with its ungraspable form, is both materially invisible – seen as a domain that is available to be taken and dumped in – and *made* invisible – through occlusion from Western thought and through perpetuating practices that keep air's slow violence unchecked.

Focusing on the endurance of colonial dispositions, like we see in Ghertner's (2021) study of India's atmospheres, does not mean that the responsibility for the current pollution crisis should be displaced from contemporary actors onto a past, unreachable reality. Instead, the point is to make visible the coloniality of current atmospheric politics as inherited from particular colonial practices and imaginaries. In today's era of ecological devastation, when knowledge systems remain haunted by colonial logics, postcolonial justice demands more than an approach to air as a fleeting, ethereal realm (Ghertner, 2021, p.1497). 'Air is not fixed', says Calvillo (2023, p.21) in 'Aeropolis'. But the relationality of bodies entangled through air can be traced from concrete conventions in architecture, medicine, geography – or more broadly the aesthetics of the body, as we've seen with Hsu's (2020) focus on olfaction.

Looking at smudging as an Indigenous form of air conditioning allows a glimpse at airs that resist colonisation and sustain communities through generations and generations of violence and oppression. It is important to note, however, that Indigenous peoples across different geographies and affiliations each have their own specific forms of smudging – as well as other burning rituals – where connection with a particular territory, ecosystem and ancestral tradition is of utmost importance. Therefore a more thorough study would be one that attends to the deeply meaningful specificities of each community and their practices along with the long historical struggles they've endured – and here I have to acknowledge the limitations of my brief analysis. On a similar vain, making visible the subtle but enduring resilience of smudging rituals does not mean that they are available for taking. The point is to protect, to fight for, and to recognise the agency of airs that leak through the cracks of colonialism and racial capitalism. To affirm that there are possibilities for breathing otherwise.

Notes

1. This widely popular quote is a simplified version of Fanon's original words which can be found in Fanon (1986, p.226).

2. See, for example, Ashon Crawley (2016), Fred Moten (2017), Jean-Thomas Tremblay (2022) and Nerea Calvillo (2023).

3. For detailed examples, see TJ Demos (2017).

4. For a detailed analysis of smell in the work of Haunani-Kay Trask, see Hsu (2020, pp.169-182).

_

With thanks to Tessel Janse, Lecturer of Postcolonial Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London. This essay was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA Sociology (Cultural Analysis) at Goldsmiths and has not been peer-reviewed.

Raquel Figueira (she/her) is an artist, designer and writer based in London. With a background in creative practice and cultural theory, her research focuses on the intersections between politics and aesthetics, ecological relations and sensory experience. She is a graduate of Goldsmiths (University of London) and Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London), and is currently a Lecturer in Visual Culture at LABASAD (Barcelona School of Arts and Design).

References

Alaimo, S. (2010) *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Bullard, R.D. (1990) *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Third edition. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000.

Calvillo, N. (2023) *Aeropolis: Queering Air in Toxicpolluted Worlds.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Cariou, W. (2018) 'Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5(3), pp. 338–352. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2018.10.

Crawley, A. (2016) *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Demos, T.J. (2017) *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today.* Berlin: Sternberg Press.

Fanon, F. (1959) *A Dying Colonialism*. Reprint. New York: Grove Press, 1994.

Fanon, F. (1961) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Reprint. New York: Grove Press, 2005.

Fanon, F. (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks.* London: Pluto Press.

Ferdinand, M. (2021) *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking From the Caribbean World.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gabrys, J. (2022) 'Atmospheric Citizens: How to Make Breathable Worlds', in *Citizens of Worlds*. United States: University of Minnesota Press.

Ghertner, D. A. (2021) 'Postcolonial Atmospheres: Air's Coloniality and the Climate of Enclosure', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111:5, 1483-1502, DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2020.1823201

Gumbs, A.P. (2021) *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Edinburgh: AK Press.

Howe, C. & Boyer, D. (2016) 'Aeolian Extractivism and Community Wind in Southern Mexico', *Public Culture*, 28(2 79), pp. 215–235. Available at: http://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-3427427

Hsu, H. (2020) *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics*. New York: NYU Press.

Irigaray, L. (1999) *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Kimmerer, R.W. (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants.* 1st edition. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions.

Mirzoeff, N. (2011) *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Moten, F. (2017) *Black and Blur.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Nixon, R. (2005) 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Ed. Loomba A. et al. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 233–51.

Nixon, R. (2011) *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Sharpe, C. (2020) 'The Weather', in *In the Wake*. New York, USA: Duke University Press, pp. 102–134. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373452-005.

Sloterdijk, P. (2016) *Foams: Spheres III*. Translated by Hoban W. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Stewart, K. (2011) 'Atmospheric Attunements', *Environment and Planning. D, Society & Space*, 29(3), pp. 445–453. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109.

Tremblay, J. (2022) *Breathing Aesthetics.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Vergès, F. (2017) 'Racial Capitalocene', in Johnson, G.T. and Lubin, A. (Eds.) *Futures of Black Radicalism*. London: Verso.

Watts, V. (2016) 'Smudge This: Assimilation, State-Favoured Communities and the Denial of Indigenous Spiritual Lives', *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*. 7(1), pp. 148–170. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs.71201615676.

Wenzel, J. (2015) 'Reading Fanon Reading Nature', in Bernard, A., Elmarsafy, Z., & Murray, S. (Eds.) *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say*. New York: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203796740