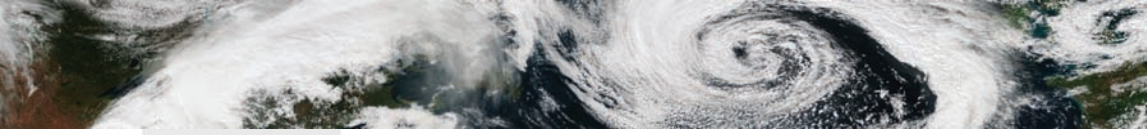


Openings and Retrospectives



LIFE ABOVE EARTH: An Introduction

CYMENE HOWE
Rice University

This began as a wondering about wind, how it mattered, how it materialized across lives, and how it seemed to refuse to be represented—only becoming visible through its effects on other beings and other things: branch, bird, cloud, kite, sail, smoke. Wind finds itself with no terrestrial home, no borders to maintain, no ownership to be claimed.¹ Its pressured and oscillating gases are the kinetic energy of the sky. Wondering into the wind leads us upward. It is an invitation to lose one's footing. The curatorial force behind this first Openings and Retrospectives is to release our discipline from the earthly domains it has historically occupied, to float us to new ethnographic spheres and spaces untethered to worldly surfaces. If [Eduardo Viveiros de Castro \(2014\)](#) has called for a “decolonization of thought,” this collection is meant as a deterritorialization of thought. Life Above Earth is an exploration of vitalities, materials, and movements that are skyward, spacey, and atmospheric.

We are air-born. From our infant inhale, throughout our respiratory lives, and to our last gasp. Life above earth has us thinking in the atmosphere and being

in its midst, its volume turned up around us.² Multiple themes are afloat here. In theorizing human engagements and explorations of space and off-planet life, we find ourselves at the intersecting extremes of technology that bears life and the possibilities of being in-atmosphere. To occupy non-earthly places means to encounter the unencountered and to be pushed toward the edges of the imagined non-life beyond the bounds of our technologies and biospheres (Battaglia, Valentine, and Olson 2015). The life of airborne materials, particulates, and the attunements of breathers delivers atmospheric forms—ways of being suspended and captivated by modes of thought that see through clouds and sky, while also looking to bodily interiors that channel, contain, and filter air and the things it holds (Choy and Zee 2015). Our discipline has long been alive with birds,³ and more recently insect intensities have animated anthropological thought (Raffles 2011), flying us closer to analytics that account for multispecies attachments. Struck by birds, pathogens, and vectors that flutter, drift, and dive, we are compelled to ask how wild and tamed creatures, as well as our coeval diseases, create complex relationships between freedom and care, and between humans and animals (Keck 2015). And if weather was once a conversational topic on which it was safe to linger, that holds true no more. As we have altered flows of energy from sun to surface and destabilized conditions through our collective (if differentially distributed) actions, it becomes increasingly hard to ignore the climate. Unrelenting fossil-fuel hunters and international negotiations appear as protracted exercises in failure, and climate now conjures vortexes and superstorms, refugees and the melt of ages. What are the sky's prospects, and should we consider prospecting it? If we humans have long farmed the earth and ocean, what might it mean to cast our cultivational selves up and to think of "atmospheric cultivation" (Hulme 2015) as the next domain for life above earth?

These theoretical cartographies of space, sky, atmosphere, and air are moved by anthropology's ongoing turn toward posthumanisms, ontologies, things, mattering, and new materialisms. They are an attempt to take seriously, but not without question, the suggestion that material contingencies are "as much wind as thing" and that in such effluences we may find unintended trajectories (Bennett 2010, 119). As we contemplate life above earth, however, we also recognize that our discipline has long been shaped by the human desire to document interpretations of the ineffable aboves and out-theres around the globe. The anthropological record is founded on cosmologies and religious evocations of the sky, heavens, and spaces beyond human reach; they designate venerable and mysterious places inhabited by gods and forces and powers that both capture and exceed

human imagination. Turning attentions upward, often in wonder and sometimes in woe, has been a universal preoccupation. But this is a different call to arms, asking how a new generation of anthropological work might see old habits in novel domains, find habitats where we thought none existed, and mesh, entangle, and infuse our theorizing with intraconnective potential (Barad 2007; Morton 2012). Where atmospheres and climate, birds and other airborne things, wind, weather, and off-planet potential come together, we see this as a test launch for meta-atmospheric perspectives.

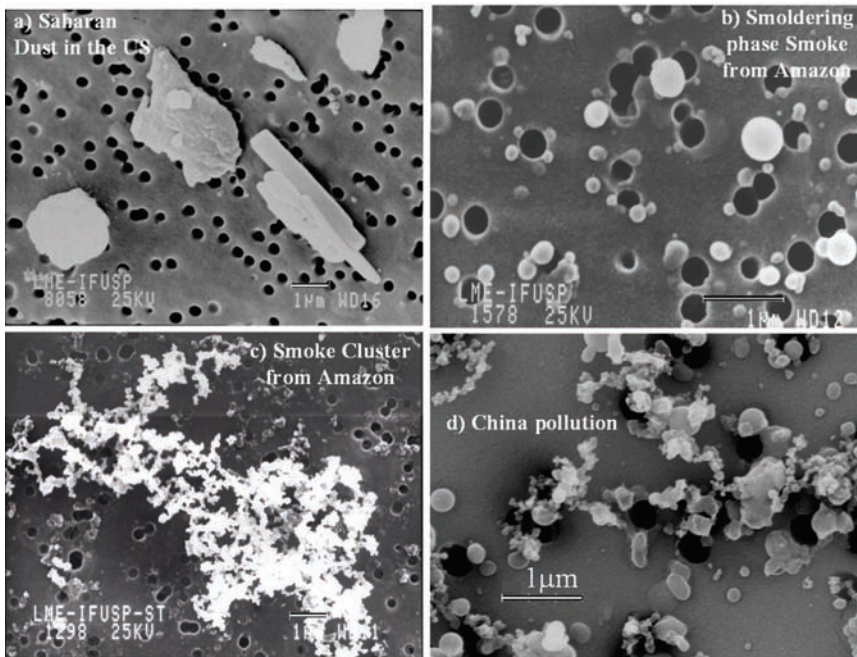


Figure 1. Aerosol particles analyzed under a scanning electron microscope, from "What Is in the Air?" *U.S Air Quality: The Smog Blog*, June 5, 2005. <http://alg.umbc.edu/usaq/archives/001044.html>.

We are air-born, but we are also dense beings. We float only through our buoyancy in water or, for a few, when a gravity suit permits us to inhabit extra-terrestrial space. Likewise, our theoretical work has remained largely earthbound. Inasmuch as we aspire to experience life above earth, our access is limited to vehicles such as jet flights or climate models. We are dependent on technological prosthetics to extrapolate extraplanetary potential. And yet there are intimate forms of gaseous interactions. Beijing's airpocalypses and other toxications pre-

occupy us with the recognition that we are never fully separate from our poisons and their affective impact (Chen 2012). Loads of chemical and particulate matter thus become an anticipatory apparatus. Atmospheric deviations appear to work as predictive signs for skyborne disasters such as hurricanes and superstorms (Choi 2015). If climate and air feel increasingly perilous, this is surely the doppelgänger to our securitized skies as biopolitical zones or clouds (Lowe 2010) that brim with mechanisms of surveillance and signal. Airspace itself represents the upper reaches of weaponized modernity, a domain of atmosterrorism. Or, as Peter Sloterdijk (2009, 63) would have it, the sky should remind us that we humans are truly “dwelling in gas.”

Histories of surveillance, security, politics, poisons, and particulates demonstrate how life on earth has consequences above it, now and in the future. But to analytically inhabit life above earth requires that we move beyond simply charting the space above us and instead seek out gaseous and spacey constellations of liveliness and forms of porous mutuality. Sometimes these are questions of phenomenological dwelling, being in weather-worlds (Ingold 2007), or being attuned to atmospheric movements not as inert context but as a force field affectively shaping human life (Stewart 2011, 452). Life Above Earth cannot simply suggest air, sky, and space as new ethnographic opportunities; it must instead indicate how lives and materialities in these suspensions represent specific forms of human and non-human being. It is to see these spaces—their pneuma and their *prāna*—as constitutive, not simply as contextual.

Ultimately, and last on the horizon, is the fact that Life Above Earth is seeded by the Anthropocene—a time of unprecedented human imprint on the planet’s bio-, litho-, cryo-, aqua-, and atmosphere. The detritus of our carbonized practices bind sky and earth life together, opening us up to a redrafting of the future. Thus, Life Above Earth draws our attention to life *on* earth.

We live in the reformation: displacements and realignments of matter with consequences of uncertain degree and scale. While climate change is a relatively new charge for anthropologists, our work has been concerned with the role of climate, seasonality, weather, and environmental conditions for a long time. Earlier thinkers—such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Marcel Mauss, or Julian Steward⁴—were attentive to how ecology, seasons, and weather shaped cultural life. Now the polarity is reversed. It is human habits and social life that dramatically, perhaps irreversibly, affect climate, seasons, and weather. Human-generated deviations from our climatological norms require a different game than that played by our anthropological ancestors. If the Anthropocene is auspicious of anything, it is to

cast our concerns and our conceptualizing skyward. Anthropocenic times demand an ascendant orientation as we become conscious climate inhabitants living within weather-weathered political economies. The Anthropocene—however unsettled, and unsettling, the term may be—trains us to look to our climatological commons and our off-world lives just as we dig deep to conceive of what comes next.

ABSTRACT

Life Above Earth is a deterritorialization of anthropological thought. It is an introductory exploration of vitalities, materials, and movements that are skyward, spacey, and atmospheric, asking how a new generation of anthropological work might see old habits in novel domains, find habitats where we thought there were none, and entangle our theorizing with intraconnective potential. Anthropocenic times demand an ascendant orientation as we become conscious climate inhabitants living within weather-weathered political economies. To analytically inhabit life above earth means moving beyond simply charting the space above us and instead seeking out forms of porous mutuality.

NOTES

1. A collaborative research project on wind energy in Oaxaca, Mexico, is one important impetus for my thinking about wind and power. See [Howe and Boyer forthcoming](#); [Howe 2014](#).
2. Or, as Luce Irigaray has written, any philosophy of Being ought to begin with a philosophy of breathing. If Heidegger prioritized logos and earth over the philosophical value of breath and air, [Irigaray's \(1999, 315\)](#) corrective questions whether “we can live anywhere else but in air?”
3. Think of the needle-case designs that enthralled [Franz Boas \(1908\)](#), or [Lévi-Strauss's \(1966\)](#) homology between bird and human socialities and the mythical hierarchy of birds in *The Savage Mind*, as well as [Steven Feld's \(2012\)](#) pathbreaking, pre-posthumanist work on bird songs and sentiment.
4. [E. E. Evans-Pritchard \(1940\)](#) was concerned with Nuer seasonality and cattle, resources, and social structure, while [Marcel Mauss and Henri Beuchat \(1979\)](#) looked to seasonal conditions among Inuit peoples and non-human populations as indicative of larger processes. Let us not forget that [Julian Steward \(1955\)](#) hoped to demonstrate that social adaptation to environments led to different cultural outcomes.

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