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Book Review: Air: Nature and Culture by Peter Adey

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Cover Page Footnote

This is a review of Peter Adey's *Air: Nature and Culture*

RICHMOND EUSTIS

Air: Nature and Culture by Peter Adey. London: Reaktion, 2014. Pp. 224, 70 color plates, 30 halftones. \$24.95, paper.

On 2 April 1935, Hugh Hammond Bennett, director of the newly created United States Soil Erosion Service, testified before Congress about the importance of passing the Soil Conservation Act. At the time, the United States was suffering the effects of the Dust Bowl, which blasted the dry and depleted soil of the West across the nation in ferocious storms that buried farms, prompted mass migration, and resulted in countless efforts to understand, represent, and manage it. To illustrate the critical need for the legislation, Bennett interrupted his testimony to ask legislators to look outside. There, they saw an enormous black cloud descending on the capitol from the exhausted farms of Texas and Oklahoma. The legislation passed. State management and subsidies resulted in improved farming practices, and, with some assistance from wetter weather, the Dust Bowl gradually came to an end.

I mention this moment in US history because the confluence of air, soil, politics, history, and narrative is the kind of incident examined so adroitly in Peter Adey's most recent work, *Air: Nature and Culture*. In his study of the way people have tried to understand, harness, discipline, and deploy the air, Adey also manages to convey a pervading sense of aerial menace—a sense of past and impending disaster. Along with the promise of a bright future “life in the air”

(60) comes the threat of an air filled with radioactive particles, air as the realm of machines of destruction and death, air as a warming atmosphere that promises vast disruption of social, economic, and environmental structures.

Like plowing the sea or sweeping the beach, apprehending the air is a traditional metaphor for futility. However, Adey is skilled in multidisciplinary analysis and chooses his subjects carefully. In doing so, he follows in the footsteps of many of the people he studies: he renders air visible, thinkable; he exposes it to the possibility of study. As Adey suggests, air is the site of respiration as well as aspiration: the medium we must inhabit and the repository of hope and dreams. Engaging with Foucauldian biopolitics and recent work in affect theory, Adey displays the air as a cloud of elements, of dynamic forces: of wind and politics, earth and capital, water and history. In other hands, the theoretical eclecticism and sheer breadth of subject might result in a rather unwieldy study. In Adey's case, however, the approach never feels contrived.

In many ways, *Air* is a companion piece to Adey's work *Aerial Life: Mobilities, Spaces, Affects* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), which examines the way that control of the air affects the behavior of those subject to such regimes. When control of the skies enables communication, travel, trade, surveillance,

and threat, all life becomes *aerial*. Had Adey not already published a book by that title, it might have served equally well for this present volume because it considers not only the aerial life of humans, who depend on air and are conditioned by it, but also the life of air itself as a concept and as a set of dynamic physical and representational relationships.

At the center of Adey's study of air is its relation to the human body: the effort to understand the effect of air on life and then to manipulate and deploy the air to good or ill effect. He begins with the breath: the 500 mL tidal volume that the average set of human lungs displaces in a single inspiration or exhalation. For Anaximenes, as Adey notes, the air was a mixture of spirit and matter, "a combination of the pneuma (spirit) and aer (material substance)" (14). However, air is no pure substance. For centuries, part of the difficulty of apprehending air was its "lack of uniformity" (71), and not until the work of Joseph Priestly and Antoine Lavoisier in the eighteenth century did people begin to understand properly that it wasn't generalized "air" that enabled animal life, but the 21 percent oxygen load each of our breaths provides. Respiration in plants enables respiration in humans and vice versa. A person, in this sense, is a "walking air filter" (7). It is not much of a stretch to contend that civilization

depends on mutual sharing of air, as well as on the primordial deposits of carbon from photosynthesis that are burned to fuel industrial power. Adey's work on Priestly and Lavoisier, Robert Boyle, Evangelista Torricelli, and John Haldane is a short but comprehensive summary of scientific efforts to discern the composition of air.

Adey's treatment of Mary Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide in 1795 highlights this intersection of early concepts of air both as *pneuma* and as an aggregate of elements delineated scientifically. Wollstonecraft tried to drown herself by leaping off the Putney Bridge in a storm. She failed because witnesses fished her out of the river and resuscitated her by employing techniques promoted by the Royal Humane Society (which derived them from the earlier Society for Affording Immediate Relief to Persons Apparently Dead from Drowning). In that society's view, death was "but a providential suspension of life, apt to be restored by breathing air back into the body" (180). These techniques were effective—the forerunners of the cardiopulmonary resuscitation practices employed today. However, at the time, Adey writes, the scientific understanding of "restoring breath" to the body took many years to take hold. Well into the nineteenth century, "artificial resuscitation was considered strange and ghoulish" (185).¹

Air's connection to life and health is entangled with efforts to discipline and condition it. Adey's Foucauldian heritage is on full display in his excellent treatment of the regulation of air as a clinical technique. In a revealing discussion of Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880), Adey remarks that the alpine air of the mountain ranges of southern Europe can restore one's "health and spirit; it is even something prescribed by the doctor" (94). The idea that the air is better in the mountains led to the founding of such sites as the Swiss resort in Davos (now better known for celebrity meetings of financial titans than for tubercular patients). The mountains became no longer sites of terror and foreboding, but resorts where fresh air and sunshine contributed to a curative, pastoral ease (96). At the same time, the sanatorium as a means of combating tuberculosis derived from the change in the role of hospital from site of quarantine to site of treatment and cure. (Adey discusses Paris's Hôtel Dieu as an example.) In this new clinical environment, air came to be seen not as the vital essence of life but as "the object of a medicalized focus" subject to regulation and discipline (104). This conditioning of environmental air marks a transition from visiting particular sites to "take" the good air (usually cool, dry, alpine air) to generating such "good air" conditions on site in any number of locations. With

the proper discipline of air around the body, “[g]ood air could be made anywhere” (107).

The possibility of manufacturing good air is essential to contemporary understanding of air as atmosphere and environment. Adey traces the concept of bad air from the miasmatic theories expounded in the fourteenth century by Italian and Muslim scholars, who blamed infection on the breath and on the air itself. Certain kinds of air suggested—and continue to suggest—an unhealthy environment: “Ultimately, stench, ‘sex and soot’ were the markers of a polluted city and the polluting degeneracy of the populace” (73). This view of air has a colonial element, as well. The air of the tropics, with its high humidity and warm temperature, was thought to cause laziness and licentiousness: “Air is expressed as fever and stagnation, merging burgeoning scientific discourse over the spread of disease, social attitudes towards morality, sexuality and gender and a fearful colonial rule mulling over governmental techniques to treat the health, hygiene and disorder of public life” (81). This focus on aerial hygiene as a means of regulation and discipline continues in new manifestations; among them, the design and construction of self-contained environments to filter out the damaging air from the outside world. Adey includes an arch commentary on Biosphere 2, whose climate and

atmosphere failed so catastrophically that oxygen had to be pumped into the system continuously. He also mentions the Yes Men’s parodic *Survivaball* infomercial (2009), whose personal prophylactic biosphere occupies “the ridiculous end of what we might call ‘dome’ or ‘insulating cultures’ set against large-scale global atmospheric events” (132). Despite humanity’s best efforts, Adey notes, air has a startling ability to self-determine and go off script. Efforts to insulate oneself from bad air frequently result in the bad air’s vengeful return.

Implicit in the Adey’s treatment of human efforts to understand, represent, and manage air is the idea that some air is to be avoided and some to be cultivated or pursued. The promise of good air develops in tandem with the threat of the bad. His study opens several lines of thought worth pursuing: the continuing, contemporary miasmatic understanding of air laden with contagion—both biological and political, for example—or the forcing of air through horns to create music. Questions of purity and pollution dominate discussions of the air as humanity grapples with the way it has shaped the atmosphere: the strontium 90 present nearly everywhere since the nuclear bomb tests of the 1950s, the increased load of carbon in the atmosphere, and its implications for the future of life on earth.

Adey has much in common with one of his subjects: French scientist Jules Etienne Marey, who used smoke and water vapor to make air visible as objects (planes, balloons) moved through it. His work resulted in stunning photographic prints. Adey has done with text (and one hundred superb, startling illustrations) what Marey did with smoke: he has produced results not only useful but beautiful, written in a language with the agility and grace to match his subject's complexity.

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Fulbright Scholar teaching at the University of Jordan in Amman.

NOTE

1. It is perhaps worth noting that in 2008 the American Heart Association jettisoned the use of rescue breathing by nonprofessional first responders, in favor of a compressions-only CPR. Air, the "breath of life," it seems, is no longer necessary in many cases. See Michael R. Sayre, Robert A. Berg, Diana M. Cave, Richard L. Page, Jerald Potts, and Roger D. White, "Hands-Only (Compression-Only) Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation: A Call to Action for Bystander Response to Adults Who Experience Out-of-Hospital Sudden Cardiac Arrest: A Science Advisory for the Public From the American Heart Association Emergency Cardiovascular Care Committee," *Circulation* 117, no. 16 (2008): 2162–67.