

Ross Exo Adams

On Breath



Migrant farmers in Oregon pick cucumbers under cell phone light amidst the wildfires, 10 September 2020, from TV JAM, Oregon

How do we start from breath?

Worlds are crushed and born in the space of a breath. Seldom has this been more evident than it is now. We live in a time in which the struggles that matter most are those illuminated by breath and its absence.

Breath has existed as little more than a subconscious fact of life, a mute background of being human, a biological baseline. When it appears, we see breath as affect, often an incidental dimension of capital briefly appearing in the exhaust vapours of labour power or the affirmative celebratory gasps that mark the act of consumption.

Where it does pronounce itself, breath tends to exist as a cinematic figure – an affect to discipline mass emotional responses. Used mainly in the affirmative tone, it trades on its innocence – love, endearment, commitment, overcoming all odds.

Taking one's breath away has rarely had the connotations it does today. The commonsense in which breath has dwelt for at least a century has suddenly begun to collapse. Such a palliative reading today sits awkwardly in the context of the pandemic and its stealing of breath in the millions. Becoming aware of breathing is more than anything to become aware of death. We sense breath as such when confronted with images and maps of the mass death and illness, and are reminded of this in the resistance of breathing through masks. In the nagging possibility of its absence, breath has become a prominent figure in knowing our collective vulnerability.

But breath reaches many dimensions of our collective present, well beyond the pandemic. To be aware of the weight of breath is to illuminate the fact that, for many, breathing has indeed never been a given. The lack of cultural visibility or significance that has been afforded to breath has also kept largely invisible certain modes of existence and structures of violence in which breath has long been the site and signifier of a sinister necropolitics – one that undergirds and makes possible the banality of capitalist breath-as-affirmation. From the uneven exposure of certain bodies to environmental and biological violence to the class violence of 'essential work'; from the withholding of breath for those without access to private medical care to the relentless increase in parts-per-million slowly reshaping how we will breathe in the future, breath reveals much about a capitalist world that has long been predicated on death.

Breath is the most prevalent target of state violence. It is the primary site on which the state suppresses its people. The weight of one human body concentrated on another's neck, the casual terror in which two seemingly incidental phenomena meet: gravity extinguishes breath. While this act is a haunting reminder of the murderous origins of police in the US, breath is also the site of a more indiscriminate form of oppression. Expired gas clouding city streets with banned chemical munitions, again, takes aim at breath. In this sadistic circle, we are made undeniably aware of the presences of breath itself as we bear witness to the power of the state to take it away.

But in all this, breath offers an incredible power to connect us immediately to shared, collective worlds long suppressed under the cold war of capitalist realism – a kind of ‘counter-platform’, perhaps. In attending to breath, we can no longer ignore the environmental violence of climate catastrophe when breathing under the weight of blood red skies whose ashes travel thousands of miles: in breath, we sense forests and witness their burning; we see breath as a continental figure. We can no longer look away from the racial and class violence that makes breath in certain neighbourhoods, districts and cities a toxic activity: breath is an urban condition. Nor does an attention to breath allow us to separate this invisible, atmospheric violence from the systemic brutality of another white cop stealing the breath from another black body: breath is the object of social terror. Yet it was also breath that was pronounced in the lightness of air that appeared in the April skies around the world as the collective consumption of fossil fuels dropped to record lows. Breathing, here, became an act of time travel, allowing us to visit atmospheres long since past while illuminating those that had not yet been born.

In this sense, breath is a planetary figure. Learning to sense breath as such is to become sensitive to how it makes visible other worlds: those suppressed, transparent worlds that nonetheless have persisted for centuries amidst the asphyxiation of life under capital.

What possibilities reside in breath as a figure of world making?

On breath: epistemologies of breath and the urbanisation of the body

Of course, the connection of breath to questions of platform urbanism is indirect. I’ve argued elsewhere that the object of platform urbanism is the urbanisation of the body. What I mean by this is really only an extension of a logic that cohered in the nineteenth century and generalised spatial technologies and techniques to organise bodies in space – a logic that is, in part, the product of a larger, contemporaneous reconceptualisation of the human body that coincided with a new understanding of space from within the emerging centres of global power. The name of this political technology is *urbanisation* (or *urbanización*, as it was first articulated).¹ What platform urbanism technologies offer is a kind of improvement of this, providing a host of far more intimate, invisible means by which to constantly access the body as an expansive site of extraction – a vessel which immediately converts its physical, psychic, biological and environmental relations to space and time into capital – and to entangle it as a subject of coercion and control.

But this is only a part of the story. Just as platform urbanism isn’t the product of Silicon Valley, urbanisation isn’t, of course, the product of nineteenth century modernism. It emerged over centuries prior to this, and its roots are far more grounded in archives and epistemologies of the body, as well as the reverberations between territorial technologies and those of colonial spaces, than in some industrial, modernising, western European spirit.²

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For more on this, see Ross E. Adams, *Circulation and Urbanization* (London: Sage, 2019).

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See chapter 7 of *ibid.*

I'd like to explain this by way of a personal aside: I've always been slightly allergic to some of the methodological rigor of architectural history. I feel it can be a crutch that precludes so many questions about the world that can be asked of architecture other than those we all too often find ourselves posing – questions which only now are suddenly deemed acceptable, even urgent. One of the risks we run when we restrict histories of space to periods, regions, figures or cultural markers (e.g. 'modernism') is that we sacrifice analyses of structures of power in the process. And, indeed, architectural history has never been a site from which trenchant studies of power have reliably emerged. When our focus is on the homogeneity and alignment of the material contained in certain historical archives – even (and perhaps especially) when we look to their fringes – we obscure reading how power is often constituted *across the heterogeneity* of these archives.

Such is the case with urbanisation. As I've written, architectural history has consistently made illegible something like urbanisation, as a spatio-political technology, precisely in the way it frames its analysis of the city: at best, it makes claims about the status of architecture, landscape and infrastructure, as products of an external power structure. This is because its allegiance is to other categories imposed onto, and thus constitutive of, archives of architectural history which have always rendered power as an externality to the aesthetic, technical production of space.

Working *with and across* the heterogeneity of archives, it becomes easier to detach the appearance of urbanisation in nineteenth century cities from the sway of 'modernism' and to instead read it as, to borrow Césaire's notion, the 'boomerang effect' of colonial spatial technologies back into the metropolises.³ Here, a certain nexus between the spatial ordering of infrastructure and domesticity and a reanimated form of administrative governance becomes legible as a form of power in itself, and the biopolitics of managing population that urban space enables found its first expression in the colonial spaces of plantations.⁴ This is particularly clear in the writings of urbanists whose practices heralded a familiar civilising promise, this time as a liberal counterforce to the 'barbaric' excesses of the absolutist state, whose vestigial condition already assured the success of this new spatio-political technology. In the writings of Cerdá, for example, a scientific universalism, as well as the cold, administrative rationality found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century colonial settlements, together inspire the unbounded imperialism he advocates for the urban, its terms replaying those of improvement and cultivation that authorised colonisation 1.0.

And perhaps most ironically, it was colonial settlements, reinterpreted through nineteenth century hygienic knowledge, that served as templates by which to reorganise European city spaces in order to avert the spread of airborne disease that the very same settlements had helped to unleash upon colonised indigenous people centuries prior. Here, the immunisation of breath for certain bodies is predicated on the technologies responsible for the

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Aimé Césaire,
*Discourse on
Colonialism* (New York:
Monthly Review Press,
2000).

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See, for instance:
Jack Taylor, "Slavery
and Biopolitics:
Douglass's My Bondage
and My Freedom as
Biopolitical Theory,"
*Interdisciplinary
Literary Studies*
20, no. 1 (2018):
79-102. <https://doi.org/10.5325/intelitestud.20.1.0079>.

historical poisoning of breath of countless *other* bodies: breath becomes a silent reminder of the biological dimensions of colonial violence and the genocidal histories it obscures.

Where breath becomes invisibilised for many, it conceals a site of violence that continues to occupy the breath of others. Breath maps out a topography of colonial power that has come to reveal itself in the rupture of our present. In a way, it isn't surprising to trace the colonial history of breath – it is, after all, our most direct connection to and experience of a common we rarely recognise. Our breath is a component of a reciprocal circulation that makes us inseparable from the lifeworlds of the earth, which is precisely why we must attend to the ways in which breath may be enclosed, withdrawn and, who knows, even accumulated.



Timed Vitalometer, from W. E. Collins Inc., "A Catalog of Pulmonary Function Equipment and Accessories," 1966. The spirometer: a machine that measures human vitality through breath. Like all magical devices, it is both a product and projection of a cultural imaginary of the human body; its truth serves to reproduce an evolutionary understanding that biological differences naturally predispose the human to a social order whose differences are rendered environmental, thus, in turn, acting on breath itself.

On breath: breathing in the cloud

*All these wars on life begin by taking away breath.*⁵

(Achille Mbembe)

There are many ways in which breath has already become a figure of platform epistemology. From the broad monitoring of air quality across cities to personalised IoT devices that measure interior air quality to digitised smart spirometry devices, breath, like many other biological markers, will no doubt help restructure how we see ourselves in a platformised world. Of course, there are plenty of indications that the algorithms governing platforms not only reproduce but amplify structural forms of violence, for which they are entirely impervious; the temporality of the platform, fixated on the present, renders history an invisible category and sociological configurations a set of correlated data. What is perhaps more alarming, however, is not so much how breath transfigures itself into data, but rather how the drive to reorganise the world through digital infrastructures will inevitably threaten breath itself.

Mbembe's recent essay, 'The Universal Right to Breathe', is a testimony to the collective disavowal of life at the heart of the capitalist world. He sees this historical disposition as something both reflected in the mass death caused by the pandemic, and as a tendency that will only intensify itself in its wake. In the promises of a post-COVID world, the pandemic is already reanimating a longstanding colonial imaginary of domination, this time over the plunder of rare earth metals and the establishment of a new geopolitics of global computing infrastructures. For him, modernity has been a continuous and 'interminable war on life', whose contemporary scale of destitution now threatens life itself. The apartheid unfurling across the world is a kind of mirror image of the heightened wave of enclosures, extraction and destruction that will only deepen across regions of Africa and the Global South. The irony for Mbembe is that, driven by a renewed desire to digitally isolate ourselves from the world, the very response to a respiratory pandemic will eventually result in the extinguishing of the conditions in which we may breathe freely.

Mbembe's text dialogues with the writings of Fanon and Césaire, both of whom saw breath as a site of colonial violence and a figure in excess of enclosure, of conquest. For Fanon, breath was at once a marker of epistemological occupation – 'an observed, an occupied breathing' that formed part of the 'dependency complex' that justified colonisation⁶ – and the cause of revolt against it. 'It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because "quite simply" it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe.'⁷ Césaire, in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, offered breath as a figure in his expounding of negritude, a mark that opens hopefully beyond the destitution of colonial conquest:

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Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe," trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. S2 (Winter 2021): 61. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711437>.

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Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 55.

7

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 226.

[...]

*but yield, captivated, to the essence of all things
ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things
indifferent to conquering, but playing the game of the world
truly the eldest sons of the world
porous to all the breathing of the world
fraternal locus for all the breathing of the world
drainless channel for all the water of the world
spark of the sacred fire of the world
flesh of the world's flesh pulsating with
the very motion of the world!
Tepid dawn of ancestral virtues⁸*

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Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette J. Smith (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

In both readings, we see a kind of mirror image of our present world: Fanon's words speaking to the brutality of state violence against the marginalised, rebellious bodies, the systematic suffocation of those who seek to rise up and thus the cause of an increasingly global movement of revolt; and Césaire's that invite us to see breath as a planetary figure, to incite us to imagine our worlds otherwise. Mbembe's text seems to sit somewhere between these two spaces, offering breath as a lens to see the intertwined histories that cut across the crises spurred on by the pandemic, and as an opening toward a radical new imaginary – a 'giant rupture' necessary to bring to an end these longstanding structures of violence.

In effect, breath provides the framework for an epistemology to come. It offers a figure around which a way of being-in-common can emerge from an oppressive condition of death and destruction common (though unequally experienced) to us all. In breath, we see the casualties of capitalism in which bodies and ecologies are laid to waste; yet we also see the reciprocal cycles through which we are all inextricably inseparable from the world we have learned only to destroy. Breath teaches us to see the world anew.

Under capitalism, breath became nearly invisible, witnessed only in its absence. The simplicity with which we have come to comprehend life is the requisite for its constant instrumentalisation and the basis for a much broader 'dependency complex' that continues to reaffirm capitalism as our most natural way of being. In the violence we reject with the utterance 'I can't breathe', we might begin to unlearn this way of being. We might begin with breath as a way to see across epistemological divisions that have conditioned our commonsense for centuries, opening beyond the narrow temporality of capital to grasp the multiple, generative temporalities of the planetary. An attention to breath immediately reveals modes of being in common that do not negate the scientific lens, but transform it into a world-making source of knowledge.

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