

INTRODUCTION TO THE INFINITESIMAL AND THE MOBILE
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Weather: The condition of the atmosphere (at a given place and time) with respect to heat or cold, quantity of sunshine, presence or absence of rain, hail, snow, thunder, fog, etc., violence or gentleness of the winds. Also, the condition of the atmosphere regarded as subject to vicissitudes. fig. and in figurative context; spec. (lit.), applied to an intellectual climate, state of mind, etc.
– OED online

Christina Sharpe, 2016¹

There's a people because there's matter slipping away ...You'll see smoke and it's a people dancing

Olivier Marboeuf, 2019²

total climate is a three-part exhibition reflecting upon the relationship between colonial history and ecology. Exploring the links between social inequality, structural racism and environmental deterioration, *total climate* presents the work of artists whose research and practices conjure, aesthetically and/or discursively, the interwovenness of natural and historical processes, exposing the way in which natural exploitation, cultural domination and territorial possession are often part of the same imperial gesture.

Elaborated by a research group composed of artist Gaëlle Choisne, NiCOLETTi's director Camille Houzé, and curator and researcher Estelle Marois, this project stems from research into contemporary discourses and practices that cast a sociological lens to the environmental crisis while expanding beyond the Anthropocene framework.³ Such is the case, for instance, of Martinican thinker Malcolm Ferdinand who, in his book *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (2019), establishes a parallel between colonialism and environmental destruction, arguing that the fundamental problem of ecology is rooted in a colonial way of inhabiting the Earth.

Schematically, this 'colonial habitation' consists of an appropriation and subordination of *both* land and people, by and to the benefit of the few. Overlooking the intertwining of the two fractures of ecology and colonisation is, in this sense, not only inaccurate but harmful. It prevents any astute understanding of situations and contexts that are the direct legacy of colonial habitation such as, for example, the chlordecone pollution in Martinique and Guadeloupe, or the displacement of Indigenous populations in

¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 102

² This quote is taken from 'Luke et Fwanswa', a lecture-performance delivered by Olivier Marboeuf on the opening night of the symposium *Geontopower: Cartographie de la scène européenne de la critique du libéralisme tardif* [Geontopower: Mapping the European Scene of Late Liberalism Criticism] at Columbia Global Centers, Paris, on 10 April 2019. Retrieved and translated from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaolllgGdmA>: 'Il y a un peuple car il y a une matière qui s'échappe... Vous verrez une fumée qui est un peuple qui danse'.

³ Although crucial to grasp the extent of humanity's impact on the environment, the term Anthropocene seems limited in its capacity to break through the Nature/Culture dialectic, as it etymologically implies the all-encompassing power of humanity over its surrounding while eschewing the unequal distribution of responsibilities among human groups, i.e. it suggests that all humans are all equally accountable for an environmental crisis that is crucially based on the exploitation of some human groups by other human groups.

the Bikini Atoll due to radiation sickness provoked by the United States' nuclear tests in 1946–58, which both perpetuate colonial injustice through environmental deterioration. Countless similar examples across the globe force a complete reshaping of the methodologies that hitherto tended to address questions related to ecology and colonialism separately, demonstrating the urgency in readjusting our gaze to simultaneously consider both sides of the binary.

UNTIL AT LAST

*Someone would rise
and ask the old, old question
to remind us of things
we do not yet see clearly enough to remember*

“TELL ME NOW MY BROTHERS
TELL ME NOW MY SISTERS
WHO SPEAKS FOR WOLF?”

Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) tale, as told by Paula Underwood⁴

One of the tactics to achieve such readjustment implies a redistribution of the regimes of perception that compartmentalise the physical environment into discrete beings and things. The questioning of the great divide between Nature and Culture inherited from the European Enlightenment leads, in this sense, to a more general disregard for categories produced by Western scientific discourses: categories that divide, through a genealogical methodology, the real into species, subspecies, particles and atoms, in a vertiginous arborescence going from macro to micro. Seeking, instead, a material approach to the environment that undoes binaries of human/non-human, living/non-living, material/immaterial, this series of exhibitions begins with a focus on processes occurring at a molecular level, examining how the most tenuous and volatile elements condition and allow for a reconsideration of reality as we experience it.

The current context provides a first-hand experience of such processes, reminding us that an imperceptible virus can affect society in its globality. Furthermore, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observe, contagion contradicts the categorical vision of the environment as it involves ‘terms that are entirely heterogeneous’, stimulating inter-species exchange of genetic information that radically depart from the models of filiative production or hereditary reproduction. ‘That is the only way Nature operates —against itself’, Deleuze and Guattari argue, i.e. against the very concept of Nature that places everything non-human in a position of radical exteriority *vis-à-vis* the human.⁵ Another way to think about the virus as a figure subverting such binary is, as critical theorist and filmmaker Elizabeth Povinelli puts it, that ‘the virus uses and ignores the division for the purpose of diverting its energies in order to extend itself.’⁶

⁴ Paula Underwood, ‘Who Speaks for Wolf’, available here: <https://wolfbook.org/2013/10/01/who-speaks-for-wolf-2/>

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 242.

⁶ E. Povinelli, M. Coleman, and K. Yusoff, ‘An Interview with Elizabeth Povinelli: Geontopower, Biopolitics and the Anthropocene’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 34, No. 2-3, May 2017, p. 173. Specifically, the division Elizabeth Povinelli refers to is that of life vs nonlife, whose establishment and governance defines geontopower.

*By these shores I was born: sound of the sea came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then
with the strength of that turbulent soil.*

Kamau Brathwaite, *South*

This material approach to the real, which sees the environment as a series of molecular assemblages constantly composing, decomposing and recomposing, is at the heart of our first chapter, *the infinitesimal and the mobile*, which aims to revise our understanding of matter and its plasticity through a decolonial and postcolonial framework. This revision is an essential gesture that has been used to shed new light on both the treatment and emancipation of 'subaltern' bodies, particularly enslaved bodies in Black Studies.⁷ In 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' (1987), for instance, Hortense J. Spillers sees the distinction between flesh and body 'as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions'. 'Before the "body" there is the "flesh"', Spillers explains, 'that zero degree of social conceptualization'⁸. Suggesting that only with a narrative attached to it flesh can become body, Spillers also observes that the captive in the Middle Passage, not knowing 'where s/he was, were culturally "unmade"⁹, not only metaphorically but physically – the dividing of the flesh being extended through the 'atomizing'¹⁰ of the captive body (e.g. for medical purposes).

To drink the air from the depths, to eat the water from the sky, and its fish!

Édouard Glissant, *The Indies*

Thinking about matter also involves thinking beyond the solid dimension of beings and things, as the analysis of the liquid, gaseous and sonic qualities provides alternative perspectives on the successive processes of mattering and un-mattering of bodies, especially in relation to subjected bodies. Indeed, if the atomising described by Spiller took place in Transatlantic spaces (and on maritime routes followed by today's refugees), it was not only through 'the crushing of the tides'¹¹ but also through molecular dissolving. This is something that Christina Sharpe observes when she writes that 'those Africans who were in the holds [...] did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorus, and iron; in sodium and chlorine.'¹²

⁷ We are here intentionally referring to the concept of the 'subaltern' as developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, including in 'Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow-sacrifice', *Wedge*, No. 7–8, Winter/Spring 1985, pp. 120–130.

⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2: 'Culture and Counter-memory: The "American" Connection', Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, Summer 1987, p. 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹¹ 'Crushing of the tide' is a phrase that we borrow from T. M. McDougall, "'The Water is Waiting': Water '11 Tidalectics, and Materiality', in *Liquid Blackness*, Vol. 3, No. 6: 'Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness', Durham, Duke University Press, December 2016, p. 60.

¹² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 19.

*something in my mouth like feathers . blue like bubbles carrying signals & planets & the sliding curve of
the world like a water picture in a raindrop when the pressure. drop*

Kamau Brathwaite, *Elegguas*

These observations lead to an understanding of matter as an entanglement. Inspired by quantum physics, Karen Barad explains, for instance, that 'to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. ... Time and space, like matter and meaning, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.'¹³

In *total climate part 1*, the intra-actions of matter and meaning, both taken in a constant centrifugal movement, is reflected in the work of Argentinian artist Mercedes Azpilicueta, who presents a series of sculptures taking the form of fantastical creatures inspired by proto-scientific books on botanical plants and imaginary animals. Throughout this series of work, entitled *Bestiario de Lengüitas (Bestiary of Tonguelets, 2017–21)*, Azpilicueta weaves multiples histories within the very fabric of her sculptures: reused materials, such as leather, cotton, or coffee, are infused with narratives related to the circulation of goods, often marked by centuries of colonial and environmental exploitation.

Forming a neo-baroque, grotesque theatre, Azpilicueta's characters are also evoking the idea of symbiosis, their ambivalent shapes and expressions seemingly emerging from alliances between humans, animals and microbes. Here, acts of contamination and intoxication are envisaged as positive, protective mechanisms, conveying ideas expressed by, for instance, biochemist Margaret McFall-Ngai, who explains that 'the intertwining of animal and bacterial genomes is not just historical: by coopting the vastly more diverse genetic repertoire present in its bacterial partners a host can rapidly expand its metabolic potential, thereby extending both its ecological versatility and responsiveness to environmental change.'¹⁴

Whether concerning the symbiosis between physical bodies or the fusion of matter and meaning, the notion of entanglement pinpoints the limits of a purely spectral understanding of trauma when accounting for the effects of the past in the present. Exploring the body as both an archive and a territory, the series of work that Paul Maheke presents in *total climate* evokes the way in which forgotten knowledges, marginalised identities and stigmatised collectives can re-emerge within one's body like ghosts. In *Letter to a Barn Owl (2018)*, a sound piece based on a psychic reading the artist was given by playwright Asher Hartman during a residency in the Dominican Republic in 2017, Maheke alludes to a body expanding beyond its physical form, turning into a vehicle of intertwining forces, both material and psychical. In the exhibition, these ideas are correlated in three sculptures combining texts, mirrors and plates showing barn owls – otherwise called 'ghost owl' –, a bird which, in many cultures, is considered as

¹³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, 2006, p. ix.

¹⁴ Margaret McFall-Ngai et alii, 'Animals in a bacterial world, a new imperative for the life sciences' in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, Washington, National Academy of Science, January 2013, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1218525110> accessed 19 May 2022.

a bearer of truth and buried tales. Displayed on a blue carpet that suggests the surface of water, Maheke's installation activates tensions between centre and periphery, the physical and the spectral.

The perception of the body as an archive is, in this sense, not only metaphorical but literal. Indeed, as seen with Sharpe when she explains that slaves are still alive in hydrogen and oxygen, particles carrying the residues of past affects and trauma inflect the climate while deeply penetrating the skin and the respiratory system, shaping, contaminating and/or healing both our bodies and our minds. Frantz Fanon corroborates this process when, articulating a psychoanalytic reflection on the impacts of racism and colonisation on subjectivity, he writes about 'the internalisation, or better, the epidermalization of [this] inferiority'.¹⁵

By extension, Sharpe invites us to recognise racism not only as an ideology or a set of actions but as a 'total climate'.¹⁶ This project's title reflects this expansion of the field of inquiry to consider colonisation and racism as a form of climate or weather, implying that it contaminates the entirety of the environment down to particles and electrons, flowing through the wind and sea, stratifying in rocks and soil.

I had been thinking for a while about how racism can be understood as weather

Anjalika Sagar, 2020¹⁷

As a reverse implication, it is at a molecular level that resistance can operate. This is suggested, for instance, in Josèfa Ntjam's photomontages, *Davis' Wedding* and *Bacteria Water* (both 2022), which conjure an opulent universe in which documentations of riots and portraits of political dissidents merge with an array of abstract cellular shapes and aquatic elements. Made of archival photographs and 3D scans of organic materials, Ntjam's works juxtapose images of plants, corals and particles with African statues, photographs of her uncle's wedding in Cameroon, documentation of the Black Panther's public demonstrations in the 1960s, as well as figures such as the American political activist Angela Davis (b. 1944). This non-linear perception of history and geography is reinforced by the conflation of historical events with images of microorganisms, whereby Ntjam establishes a parallel between molecular processes of division, coagulation, proliferation – e.g. the human blood coagulation system –, and the micro-organisations that spread within disparate cells of society to infiltrate and contaminate dominant political bodies.

Other examples of molecular resistance can be found, for instance, in Fanon's notion of 'combat breathing'¹⁸, which opposes the somatic penetration of colonial state violence. In *Exhale, Inhale twice minimum otherwise I can't breath* (2021), a laser-engraved duvet found in a garage, French-Haitian artist Gaëlle Choisine refers to breathing as both a mode of survival and a stigma of oppression, notably by

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. C. L. Markmann, London, Pluto Press, 1995, p. 13. Aimé Césaire establishes a similar conclusion when reflecting upon the bodily injection of both physical and symbolic violence, see 'Discours sur le colonialisme', quoted by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Anjalika Sagar, in 'Conversation: John Akomfrah and the Otolith Group's Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar', *frieze*, no. 214, October 2020, p. 71.

¹⁸ In *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon describes 'combat breathing' as the consequence of the occupation of both territory and people: '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.' In Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, tr. Haakon Chevalier, New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. 65.

alluding to the murder by suffocation of Georges Floyd (1973–2020) by a police officer in Minneapolis. While Choisne's choice of material also suggests a reflection on housing crisis and the precarious conditions of survival for homeless people, the use of laser engraving, literally burning the duvet, refers to the iron branding of slaves in the Middle Passage.

Choisne's work resonates with *Undercurrent 528* (2021), a film in which London-based, Nigerian artist Evan Ifekoya refers to American cinema director Stephen Dwoskin's complex relationship with care, desire and everyday rituals. Exploring the reparative dimension of sound, Ifekoya's film documents encounters with their extended Black, queer and trans community, who were invited for a gathering around breath and breathing. Throughout the film, the artist is holding space for what originates from beyond the gallery's premises: these travelling energetic forces, encapsulated in infinitesimal waves but ignoring concrete walls. Here, we are called into a realm whose composition is fundamentally vibratory and sonic – a communal space where, not unlike Choisne's banner, breathing practices are presented as tactics for subjected bodies to regroup energies, affirm and expand.

The molecular as a site of confrontation between oppression and resistance is also explored in Daniela Ortiz's video-performance *Jus Sanguinis* (2016), whose title refers to the Spanish legal system granting people citizenship provided that their body contains Spanish blood. Four months pregnant at the moment of shooting her performance, Ortiz, who was born in Peru, receives a blood transfusion from a Spanish citizen. Her work thus provides a literal translation of the notion of birthright, making tangible the tight interlacing between cellular and national scales. Here, the political inhabits single cells, and their very compositions within existing bodies can be monitored by state apparatuses to tighten border control. This entanglement becomes all the more tangible as the artist is engaging her own body and the one of her child, making the future already contained in, and constituted by, the past.

All of this indicates also why the elaboration of a decolonial form of ecology (and vice-versa) is porous to other alternative discourses, including gender and class theories. In addition, it implies a type of reasoning that considers affects as an integral part of the equation, undoing thereby the distinctions between body and mind, between the objective and the subjective, the concrete and the fictional. Indeed, as the artists presented in *total climate* suggest, focusing on 'matter' does not vengefully exclude 'spirit'. This would be falling back in the very trap that paved the way to the Culture/Nature dichotomy. On the contrary, founding stories of Indigenous people, such as the Guajajara or the Maxakali in Brazil, present the forest and its magical beings and spirits as integral to each other, in configurations where the realms of the real and the imaginary are fundamentally interlinked. By putting forward the theoretical tools of molecularity and volatility, *total climate part 1* intends to analyse how subjectivities, to paraphrase Ben Spatz, 'appear, emerge, intersect, collide, shatter, coagulate, transform and vanish from one moment to another.'¹⁹ The acknowledgement of this permanent movement, the constant mutability of minds and bodies, is a first step, we believe, towards the formation of new chimeras and concepts that have the potential to instill change at a macro level.

The macroscopic, constantly affected and reshaped by the infinitesimal, will be further examined in the following two chapters of *total climate*. Taking place in 2023, the second part, *knowledge, practices and sensibilities* (working title), will focus on knowledge production, political construction and the notion of erasure, calling for a reflection on ways of seeing, on practices of learning and unlearning, as well as on

¹⁹ Ben Spatz, 'Molecular Identities: Digital archives and decolonial Judaism in a laboratory of song', in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 4, No. 1: 'On Song', April 2019, p. 70.

the notion of objectivity. Here, we will aim to explore the impacts of knowledge-making on human and non-human beings, from top-down processes of extraction and plantation, to horizontal figures of kinships and 'unnatural' assemblages (be them community practices or law-making).

In 2024, the third chapter, *worldviews: the map and the territory* (working title), will seek to extend the scope of our research by studying and proposing a variety of worldviews. It will question ways of inhabiting the Earth, the potential dislocation of centre/periphery hierarchies, and the dis-enclosing of the world through alternative ways of crossing and mapping.

Throughout this project, we are hoping to open conversation with artists and present works that evoke or invent transversal relationships between beings and things; practices inhabiting interstitial spaces at the confluence of the visible and the invisible; situations drawing our gaze to what we have not yet learned to see.

These new logics travel between commonly-received categories and give birth to monstrous assemblages; they evolve between the central and the repelled by tracing not only routes but abrupt shortcuts. To think together the two main fractures of modernity, to acknowledge the subtleties of their ties, it is from and towards the liminal, the transitional and the multiple that we ambition to operate – a speculative terrain where strategies of counter-visibility can strive, a heterogeneous space where the complexity of the real is not only acknowledged but embraced.

*The main thing is the courage that it takes on our part to embrace the unthought
– a courage that is not acknowledged enough*

John Akomfrah, 2020²⁰

Gaëlle Choisne, Camille Houzé & Estelle Marois

²⁰ John Akomfrah, in 'Conversation: John Akomfrah and the Otolith Group's Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar', ²⁰ *frieze*, no. 214, October 2020, p. 67.