**Atmospheric Pressures: On Race and Affect**

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**Abstract**

In this paper I place Frantz Fanon’s brief comments on atmosphere in conversation with more recent efforts to theorize affect through the ephemeral, mutable, and material impress of atmosphere. In so doing, I initiate a close reading of Fanon’s essay, “Racism and Culture” alongside his better known and more widely read *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here, I consider Fanon’s reflections on the psycho-affective traumas of colonialism, racism, and colonial violence through *affective* registers rather than the more conventional and established *psychic* ones. In so doing, my objective is not to recuperate an authentic Fanonian voice. Nor is it to dispute the phenomenological and psychoanalytic readings of Fanon that have been so influential in postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and beyond. Rather, my goal is to consider how Fanon’s brief remarks on atmosphere might be reworked and expanded toward an *affective* and *nonanthropocentric* account of race.

**Introduction**

Since the late 1990s, affect has emerged as a central concern in critical and cultural theory. Responding to the perceived limits of poststructuralism and to the shortfalls of social constructivism, the “affective turn” has prompted a necessary rethinking of the body and its mediated place in social life.[[1]](#endnote-1) Although affect has been used in various ways to capture embodiment, sensation, and feeling, the turn to affect has ultimately been a (re)turn to matter.[[2]](#endnote-2) This move towards the material and the nonrepresentational has generated important insights into bodily encounter, inter-subjectivity, sociality, and the political.[[3]](#endnote-3) The now burgeoning literature on affect – including the more recent engagements with atmosphere - has been enormously helpful in drawing attention to matter’s dynamic force, the significance of temporality as the momentary, fragmented, and fleeting, and to the incompleteness and endless becoming of subjectivity and social life. More importantly, it has introduced a host of new methodological concerns regarding how to rethink human subjectivity, agency, collectivity, and politics. One of the most challenging aspects of the affective turn might well be its emphasis on mobility, movement, and ceaseless change. Affective rhythms and circulations, some have argued, are often constrained and even obscured through the imposition of broad theoretical concepts including racism, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Attending to affect directs attention to micro-scales, to the something that is becoming, “a something both animated and inhabitable,” a something that escapes and exceeds dominant conceptual paradigms.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As exciting as these interventions have been in challenging established conventions of thinking and writing, what has been notably absent is how the colonial and the racial, not solely as *the past* but as an *ongoing living present*, configures the uneven transmission and circulation of affect. In attending to the emergent, affect studies has not sufficiently addressed how rhythmic patterns and traces of the past might constrain and/ or proliferate the transmission of affect. What is the historical role of European colonialism and imperialism in etching specific itineraries and perceptions of affective transmission? How might the visceral sedimentations and contemporary renewals of (post)colonial and global violence limit and propel the circulation of affect and the constellation of racial meanings, if at all? Put differently, is the capacity to affect and to be affected a racially mediated process?

For race critical theorists, race does affect affect in a myriad of ways. While some argue that race is central to the production of nonwhite bodies as affectable, others claim that affect and emotions “*do* things.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Their circulation “align[s] communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Still for others, racial affects “are institutionalized in entire ecologies,” aggregating bodies into racial formations.[[7]](#endnote-7) Despite their distinct orientations, what remains common to all three approaches is that race and affect remain at the level of the body - the *human body* – whether individuated or aggregated. But if race accrues its meaning and force through interrelations between humans, nonhumans, and things, as I am proposing here, then what sorts of methodological insights might we draw from the affective turn to rethink race as an all-encompassing, dynamic, and self-organizing force? How might we develop an account of racial affect and affective race as *a racially charged field* that is not contained in the individual body or population, but which exceeds human corporeality by joining humans, nonhumans, and things? While the literature on affect and atmosphere – particularly in terms of its methodological challenges - may open new ways of breathing life into race critical theories, it requires its own racial redirection and reorientation.

To begin delineating an affective and nonanthropocentric account of race, I turn to Frantz Fanon’s compelling insights on racism, colonialism and affect. Although these themes recur with various intensities throughout his work, Fanon’s attention to affect has most often been read in *Black Skin White Masks*.[[8]](#endnote-8) Yet, it is in his earlier essay, “Racism and Culture” I claim, that Fanon offers a fascinating analysis of race and affect through his fragmentary remarks on the racial atmosphere.[[9]](#endnote-9) How might we read and expand Fanon’s observations on the atmosphere to reconceptualize race as a dynamic, mutable, and charged field that permeates and entangles humans, nonhumans, and things? How does the racial atmosphere, with all its pressures, produce constellations of meanings, intensities of violence, and openings for political change? Where might such an approach lead, conceptually, ethically, and politically? In reading Fanon affectively and materially, and in posing questions about nonhumans and things, my objective is not to recuperate an authentic Fanonian voice. Nor is it to dispute the phenomenological and psychoanalytic readings of Fanon that have been so influential in postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and beyond. Rather, my goal is to consider how Fanon’s brief remarks on atmosphere might be reworked and expanded in ways that generate formulations of race and racism that might better illuminate the contemporary “postracial” condition.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Before I turn to address these questions, a point of clarification is in order. I approach race not as biology, corporeality, or ideology, not as a thing that inheres in bodies. Rather, I view race as a regime of power that works ontologically and epistemologically, a regime of subjection and subjectification that extends beyond the human, shaping, contouring, and organizing social relations and social life. This paper is part of an ongoing project to rethink race through affect and affect through race as a way to augment formulations of race that continue to privilege language, the symbolic, and the representational.[[11]](#endnote-11) Placing recent writings on atmosphere in conversation with Fanon, I suggest, invites interesting ways of retheorizing race as an affective movement, a force rather than a thing, a *current* that reconstitutes and reassembles itself in response to its own internal rhythms and to changing social and political conditions. Situating Fanon’s insights on atmosphere within the growing literature on affect and atmosphere, I contend, can attend to the troubled global present in two ways. First, by foregrounding the contradictory and disorderly properties of race: the ephemerality/ palpability, visibility/ invisibility, and presence/ absence that have led many American observers to describe the contemporary moment as postracial.[[12]](#endnote-12) Second, by rethinking race and racism in ways that are no longer anthropocentric.[[13]](#endnote-13) The atmosphere, I argue, forges an expansive, limitless, and mobile field. It is a force that is not visible or even palpable but one that remains vital and necessary to biological and social existence. Like the air we breathe, the racial atmosphere provides the very conditions of life and death. In Fanon’s account, the racial atmosphere may be weighted, but its shifting properties open spontaneous possibilities for resistance and change.[[14]](#endnote-14) Elaborating his argument, I suggest that the dynamic and ever-changing properties of racial atmospheres are always generating novelty, newness, and the emergence of “a something” else, including opportunities to initiate other modes of being and living. But first, what is an affective atmosphere?

**Atmosphere and Affect**

In the past several years, as an effect of the affective turn, atmosphere has been evoked as a productive analytic concept in critical and cultural theory. Its capaciousness provides a useful way of tracing the ephemerality, movement, and transmission of affect in social and political life. “Atmospheres are a kind of indeterminate affective ‘excess’ through which intensive space-times can be created,” Ben Anderson claims.[[15]](#endnote-15) For others, affective atmospheres, are thought to “capture the emotional life of place, as well as the stove of action-potential, the dispositions and agencies, potentially enactable in that space.”[[16]](#endnote-16) However, the atmosphere, Kathleen Stewart cautions, is not an “inert context.” It is not reducible to space-time. Nor is it “an effect of other forces.” The atmosphere is a “force field in which people find themselves….a capacity to affect and be affected that pushes a present into composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event.”[[17]](#endnote-17) The atmosphere, we might conclude from these accounts, is affective becoming.

Despite this renewed interest in atmosphere the term itself has a long and varied history. Atmosphere has been deployed materially and metaphorically, scientifically and philosophically, to explain a variety of natural and social phenomena all at the brink of emergence. Atmosphere was a recurring concept for the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius. The term emerges frequently in his masterful didactic poem, *De Rerum Natura*. In his efforts to develop a materialist philosophy that moved away from divine providence towards an Epicurean physics that emphasized the unity and interrelationality of all matter, Lucretius noted the material impress of the atmosphere and its effects on human and animal life. Whereas air itself was a necessary and vital condition of life, its changing qualities, he argued, could always lead to illness and death. Whether “we go into climates that are unfavorable to us and change the atmosphere around us *ourselves*,” Lucretius wrote, “or whether nature, of her own accord, brings to us corrupt air or any other *affection* which we are not accustomed to experience, and which, at its first approach, may infect us with *disease*,” the changing atmosphere could potentially exert a negative force on human and nonhuman health.[[18]](#endnote-18) Significantly, these atmospheric vicissitudes and their damaging effects, he claimed, were initiated as much by humans and things as they were by the forces of nature. Here, Lucretius evoked atmosphere to account for the tumultuous changes in the air. These changes, which were not visually apparent, could be felt through other senses and registered through their effects on weather and wellbeing.

By the mid-nineteenth century we see another evocation of atmosphere, one that retains some materialist elements from Lucretius while following a distinctly metaphorical path. In an 1856 speech, Marx recalled the atmosphere as an invisible force on social and political life. The “atmosphere in which we live,” he told a London audience “weighs upon everyone with a 20,000-pound force, but do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides.”[[19]](#endnote-19) For Marx, as for Lucretius, the atmosphere played on other sensory experiences and revealed something nascent. More recently, the turn to atmosphere has retained Marx’s metaphorical-material approach to convey that something is there, something is happening, even if this something is not always seen. Drawing explicitly from Marx, Ben Anderson views atmosphere to be a useful analytic concept, one that holds opposing forces in tension. It “is the very ambiguity of affective atmospheres – between presence and absence, between subject and object/ subject and between the definite and indefinite – that enables us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity,” he explains.[[20]](#endnote-20) Similarly, for Kathleen Stewart, the critical value of atmosphere is its ability to encompass disproportionate and opposing forces. “Attending to atmospheric attunements,” she writes, means, “chronicling how incommensurate elements hang together in a scene that bodies labor to be in or to get through.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Marx acknowledged these ambiguous and uncertain qualities of the atmosphere. Only then could a “20,000-pound force” press upon individuals and remain potentially impalpable.

From this brief account of the recent interest in atmosphere, it is tempting to conclude that atmospheres simply exist. They are free-floating, in flux, and emergent. Although Stewart writes of “pressure points” and describes the present to be “weighted,” the atmosphere in her account, as in others, is in a continual state of emergence: no habitual or familiar fault lines, no sediments and residues of previous struggles and conflicts, no turbulence, no history. It is precisely the diffuse, ephemeral, and effervescent qualities of atmosphere – as signaling something always on the brink of emergence – that renders this to be a useful concept through which to rethink social and political life affectively. Atmosphere and affect share similar properties. Like atmospheres, affects are also diffuse, nonrepresentational, and constantly becoming. Thus, atmospheres, we might say, attend to the movements and motility of affects. Yet, if we return to the climatological arguments foreshadowed by Lucretius, it is clear that atmospheres do not simply exist. Nor are they the sole domains of nature. Atmospheres are produced and reoriented as much through human intervention as they are through natural forces. Atmospheres in Lucretius’ account are not even or smooth but tumultuous. Atmospheres respond to internal and external pressures, most notably changes in air pressure that produce heat, spontaneity, and turbulence. Atmospheres, we might say, affect and are affected.

Lucretius’ materialist philosophy opens one very interesting way to think of the atmosphere as an unstable force of ceaseless-change that is produced by and productive of turbulence, that impresses upon humans, nonhumans, and things. His extraordinary speculations suggest that the atmosphere may be in flux, however, it bears the imprint of induced change, whether that change comes from the natural or human world, or both. However, the uneven pressures of the atmosphere, its tumultuous qualities, are not only manifest in the law of atmospheres and its changing interior dynamics. Read materially and metaphorically, turbulent atmospheres are equally affected through social and political pressures. For Marx, one pressure was revolution. Another is law.

The city, writes Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, is “so thick with law that, just like air, the law is not perceived. It becomes invisible.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Atmosphere, he urges, is a productive concept through which to think of “affective occurrences as collective, spatial, and elemental.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Like Anderson and Stewart, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos views atmospheres as all-encompassing, as a “force of attraction,” as “affect transmitted as well as affect directed.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Atmosphere, as he describes it, is “air, breath, exhalation, ozone earth. It is room, city, book, music, soup, face, memory, storm, death.”[[25]](#endnote-25) In short, it is the law’s ability to materialize and maintain incommensurable forces. It is the legally organized relations between humans, nonhumans, and things.

What is useful in Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos’ account is the attention he pays to the legal production and asymmetry of the atmosphere. “Even immersed into atmospheres,” he contends, “one cannot fail to notice that they are also legally determined.”[[26]](#endnote-26) The city is a lawscape where “every surface, smell, color, taste is regulated by some form of law,” Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos argues, “be this intellectual property, planning law, environmental law, health and safety regulations, and so on.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Like air, law “becomes an atmosphere – there but not there, imperceptible yet all-determining.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Law, we might say, creates the conditions for some affective occurrences and not others. Law governs encounters and the affects they generate. Law limits and shapes the field of sensory experience. Thus, something does not just emerge in the atmosphere. Its emergence is orchestrated and made possible by a variety of pressures, including the forces of law.[[29]](#endnote-29)

In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart very persuasively argues that “the terms neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization,” terms commonly used in critical and cultural theory to explain the present, “do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we [Americans] find ourselves in.”[[30]](#endnote-30) To address this irreconcilability between theory and lived experience, she turns to the everydayness of affect. “Ordinary Affects,” she writes, “are an animate circuit that conducts and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures. They are a kind of contact zone where the overdeterminations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place.”[[31]](#endnote-31) I am sympathetic to Stewart’s project, and agree with central aspects of her argument, that affect must be placed at the center of social and cultural inquiry, for example. However, the contact zones that interest her - quotidian sites of poverty, places of working class and interracial encounter - we must remember, are spaces that have been historically produced through colonial, racial, and legal orders that continue to resound and reverberate in the contemporary moment. In other words, law, violence, and coercion produce spaces of encounter. One need only look to the long history of racial enclosure created through European and American colonization for clear evidence and numerous examples. “The colonial world is a world divided into compartments,” Fanon famously argued.[[32]](#endnote-32) This compartmentalized colonial world, “this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Through the production of racial spaces – including the white town, the reserve, the Kasbah, and the ghetto - law has forcefully governed encounters between bodies and species. The geographies of race that emerged from the colonial encounter only to be institutionalized in changing forms that continue to exist today, have shaped the possibilities of contacts and contact zones and the affects and sensations they produce.[[34]](#endnote-34) By attending to the forces that create the atmosphere – whether these include colonial history and/ or contemporary atmospheres of law - we begin to see that atmospheres themselves are striated, produced through their own internal rhythms and in response to social and political agitation and change. Read thus, the “charged atmospheres of everyday life,” to which Stewart so compellingly draws our attention, we might say, are always already *racially charged*.[[35]](#endnote-35) But to make this point is to echo and elaborate Fanon. It is to his remarks on the racial atmosphere that I now turn.

**Fanon on Atmosphere**

Readings of Fanon, as varied as they are, have emphasized some of his political and conceptual insights and contributions over others. In *The Location of Culture*, for instance, Homi Bhabha describes the corpus of Fanon’s work as splitting “between a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, a phenomenological affirmation of Self and Other and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the unconscious.”[[36]](#endnote-36) In Fanon’s “desperate, doomed search for a dialectic of deliverance,” he continues, “Fanon explores the edge of these modes of thought: his Hegelianism restores hope to history; his existential evocation of the ‘I’ restores the presence of the marginalized; his psychoanalytic framework illuminates the madness of racism, the pleasure of pain, the agnostic fantasy of political power.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Here, Bhabha’s characterization of Fanon’s work is refracted through his close reading of *Black Skin, White Masks*. In his Foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*, published almost ten years later, Bhabha introduces and orients readers to Fanon through a very different optic. His emphasis is not Fanon’s Hegelianism or phenomenology but his *psycho-affectivity*. It is Fanon’s “great contributions to our understanding of ethical judgment and political experience,” Bhabha writes, “to insistently frame his reflections on violence, decolonization, national consciousness, and humanism in terms of the *psycho-affective* realm.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Despite Bhabha’s efforts, it is fair to say that both conventional and unconventional readings of Fanon have continued to privilege the psychic *over* the affective. Even in Bhabha’s own account it is “dreams, psychic inversions and displacements, phantasmic political identifications” that draw his attention. He says little of the sensory and affective experiences produced through the colonial-racial encounter, which Fanon describes so viscerally in *The Wretched of the Earth*. But if “[r]emembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation,” what kinds of discovery and disorientation might an affective reading and remembering generate?[[39]](#endnote-39)

Recent rereadings of Fanon have innovatively questioned how race and racism surface on the body, producing particular emotive and corporeal responses while generating specific affective attachments.[[40]](#endnote-40) Here, the Fanon that is most often reread is the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Yet, his essay, “Racism and Culture,” which has garnered significantly less critical attention than either *Black Skin, White Masks* or *The Wretched of the Earth*, offers important openings and opportunities to reformulate accounts of race and racism via affect. Written between the publication of Fanon’s two widely read and circulated books, delivered as a brief address to the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, and eventually published posthumously in *Toward the African Revolution*, it is here that Fanon provocatively evokes the term “atmosphere.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Curiously, those scholars currently engaged with affect and atmosphere, whose work I discuss in the previous section, have overlooked Fanon’s compelling formulations. Here, I consider Fanon’s brief but critical remarks on atmosphere both in “Racism and Culture” and in *The Wretched of the Earth*. But before doing so, let me first say that I am not alone in drawing inspiration from this remarkable essay. Importantly, “Racism and Culture” has also figured in the work of several other critical theorists who are engaged in a shared project of rethinking and reconceptualizing race beyond social construction.[[42]](#endnote-42) In his formulation of race as governance, for instance, Barnor Hesse reads Fanon’s essay as exposing the double bind of racism. For Hesse, Fanon’s characterization of racism as Eurocentric and de/colonial exposes the “protracted conflict between the conceptuality of ideology and governance in which they are respectively and socially embedded.”[[43]](#endnote-43) It is in this brief but dense essay, I argue, that Fanon introduces a novel formulation of race and racism. This is not race as governance, I would argue, but race as an onto-epistemological force that is mutable, all-encompassing, and atmospheric.

Fanon’s remarks on atmosphere are few. He mentions it only once in “Racism and Culture.” Despite its infrequency however, I read his evocation to be an important development, and perhaps even central to, his insights on the mutability of colonial racism. What is most significant in “Racism and Culture” is that Fanon explicitly characterizes racism to be a pervasive, self-organizing, and changing force. In so doing, he unequivocally rejects the now familiar argument that racism has receded or diminished, or that humanity has somehow progressed beyond it. Instead, Fanon urges his listeners and readers to trace and retrace its self-organizing qualities. “For a time it looked as though racism had disappeared,” he observes. However, this “soul-soothing unreal impression” is “simply the consequence of the evolution of forms of exploitation.”[[44]](#endnote-44) The mutability and malleability of racism that suggests its disappearance, Fanon argues, is most evident in the expressive shift from biology to culture. “The vulgar, primitive, over simple racism purported to find in biology,” the “rational, individual, genotypically and phenotypically determined, becomes transformed into cultural racism.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Racism does not harden or calcify. “It has had to renew itself, to adapt itself, to change its appearance. It has had to undergo the fate of the cultural whole that informed it.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Racism is always changing, Fanon argues, taking on unfamiliar and unrecognizable forms. “It is therefore not a result of the evolution of people’s minds that racism loses its virulence. No inner revolution can explain the necessity for racism to seek more subtle forms to evolve.”[[47]](#endnote-47) It is precisely these changing properties of racism that lead to declarations of its putative demise.

Expressions and manifestations of racism, Fanon contends, are deeply affected by wider geopolitical shifts including anti-colonial struggle and resistance. “The morphological equation, to be sure, has not totally disappeared,” he writes, “but events of the past thirty years have shaken the most solidly anchored convictions, upset the checkerboard, restructured a great number of relationships.”[[48]](#endnote-48) These events include memories of Nazism, slavery, “the apparition of ‘European colonies,’ in other words the institution of a colonial system in the very heart of Europe,” as well as “the growing awareness of workers in the colonizing and racist countries.”[[49]](#endnote-49) Each of these has “deeply modified the problem [of racism] and the manner of approaching it,” he contends (173). Crucially, Fanon’s argument is not solely that race and racism manifest a polyvalent mobility, as others have argued.[[50]](#endnote-50) In the move from biology to culture, he argues, both the properties of race and the objectives of racism continue to undergo profound shifts: “The object of racism is no longer the [corporeality of the] individual man but a certain form of existing.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

Racism, as Fanon presents it here, is a totalizing and structural force. It is not a “mental quirk” or “psychological flaw.”[[52]](#endnote-52) It is produced through and in turn produces an entire architecture of domination. “It is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through,” he argues. Racism “is only the emotional, affective, sometimes intellectual explanation of this inferiorization.”[[53]](#endnote-53) For Fanon, the totalizing effects of racism are devastating. It not only obliterates the oppressed and the colonized. It also destroys the promoters of racism, individually, collectively, and culturally. Whereas racism “bloats and disfigures the face of the culture that practices it,” Fanon contends, it renders the “culture of the enslaved people as dying.”[[54]](#endnote-54) As such, social and cultural life is “deeply modified by the existence of racism.”[[55]](#endnote-55) Its persistence crushes the cultural values, psyches, and ways of life of both oppressed and oppressor. It is within this context that Fanon’s brief remarks on atmosphere must be situated. Atmosphere may be one way to capture the paradoxical, penetrating, and enduring qualities of racism as presence/ absence, familiar/ unfamiliar, and totalizing/ fleeting that he sought to address. In “Racism and Culture,” Fanon describes the “racist world” to be “passion charged.”[[56]](#endnote-56) The oppressed, he argues, “perceives that the racist atmosphere impregnates all the elements of the social life.”[[57]](#endnote-57)

Given that Fanon evokes atmosphere only once in this essay, it may seem incidental and even insignificant to his argument. However, atmosphere emerges again, and with more frequency, in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here, the atmosphere is no longer a negative force that impresses upon and destroys social and cultural life. Instead, Fanon reconceives it to be generative, producing opportunities for anti-colonial resistance and change. He writes:

In spite of all that colonialism can do, its frontiers remain open to new ideas and echoes from the world outside. It discovers that violence is in the atmosphere, that it here and there bursts out, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime – that same violence which fulfills for the native a role that is not simply informatory, but also operative…This encompassing violence does not work upon the colonized people only; it modifies the attitude of the colonists.[[58]](#endnote-58)

The atmosphere of violence produced by French occupation in Algeria, Fanon tells us, is an embodied violence; it is “violence which is just under the skin.” How does one “pass from the atmosphere of violence to violence in action” he asks?[[59]](#endnote-59) The atmosphere of colonial violence, he responds, “becomes dramatic, and everyone wishes to show that he is ready for anything.”[[60]](#endnote-60) The racial atmosphere may be a dynamic site of constant change, however, it maintains its durability. Even after independence, Fanon cautions, the potentialities of spontaneous violence persist. “The atmosphere of violence, after having colored all the colonial phase, continues to dominate national life.”[[61]](#endnote-61)

Read affectively and materially, Fanon’s evocation of atmosphere points to race as fleeting, new, and totalizing, to racism as simultaneously present and absent, and to the mutability, mutation, and persistence of both. What is crucial in Fanon’s account – and an important rejoinder to the more recent interest in atmosphere - is that he conceptualizes the atmosphere to be a material product of the colonial encounter, one that continues to linger in familiar and unfamiliar ways. Although the atmosphere of racial violence persists, often with devastating consequences, its changing qualities afford and nurture potentialities of anti-colonialism. In other words, the racial atmosphere shaped by the colonial past remains open to continual change. How might we harness Fanon’s provocative but fleeting remarks on the atmosphere - as an all-encompassing and dynamic force field that distributes life and death unevenly - to develop an affective and nonathropocentric account of race? How might we move from a conception of race as something that inheres representationally in bodies and objects to conceive it instead as a *potent current* that passes through humans, nonhumans, and things, that generates meaning in its constant movements, and that is always in a process of becoming something else? How would conceptions of race and strategies of anti-racism change if we attended to the interactions between humans, nonhumans, and things, if we foregrounded movement and thought carefully about spontaneity, without forsaking the rhythms and habits of history? By way of conclusion, the final section turns to consider these questions.

**On Race, Atmosphere, and Affect**

For Patricia Clough, one of the most provocative and enduring contributions of the affective turn has been the pressing realization that dynamism is immanent to matter and that matter always carries the potential to self-organize.[[62]](#endnote-62) The turn to affect, she argues, has invited a necessary methodological shift in how we think of bodies, not as entities to be represented, but as material forces that hold the capacity to affect and be affected.[[63]](#endnote-63) Engagements with atmosphere have only deepened these conceptual challenges, demanding new ways of capturing movement, change, and emergence. Attending to matter and movement demands “writing and theorizing that tries to stick with something becoming atmospheric, to itself resonate or tweak the force of material-sensory somethings forming up.” This requires a paradigm shift, “a clearing – a space in which to clear the opposition between representation and reality, or the mind-numbing summary evaluations of objects as essentially good or bad, or the effort to pin something to a social construction as if this were an end in itself.”[[64]](#endnote-64) If the turn to affect and atmosphere have posed such significant conceptual challenges to critical and cultural theory, how might its arch be widened to breathe life into critical theories of race? In turn, how might race augment the affective turn?

Although affect studies has not been sufficiently attentive to racism and colonialism, the affective turn has drawn important attention to the inter-subjectivity of race, the ways in which race produces aggregations and formations that are felt but not easily represented.[[65]](#endnote-65) In a provocative essay, “Reontologising Race,” Arun Saldanha invites a return to biology and other life sciences as a way to analyze the materiality of race that has largely been occluded in critical race studies, a field in which language and representation have remained prevalent and persistent, he argues. [[66]](#endnote-66)The most enduring approach to analyzing race in the social sciences and humanities, Saldanha contends, continues to center on social construction. Despite the proliferation of approaches toward the social construction of race, “the precise nature of ‘construct’ is not sufficiently considered,” he argues. For Saldanha, social construction, cannot adequately answer the question “What *is* race.”[[67]](#endnote-67) To begin doing so, he formulates race as event. Here, race is not solely a modality of repression, exclusion, or representation. It is a generative force that can be harnessed to serve anti-racist politics. “What is needed is an affirmation of race’s creativity and virtuality: what race *can be*. Race need not be about order and oppression, it can be wild, far-from-equilibrium, liberatory.”[[68]](#endnote-68) The body might be a crucial surface through which race and racism operate, but it is the reciprocal exchange between bodies that matters. Thus, “racial difference (like all social relations),” Saldanha claims, “is a reality involving the interactions, imaginations, and biologies of human bodies.”[[69]](#endnote-69)

For Saldanha and others, it is the stickiness of human bodies that remains of critical import. But if we define affect as materiality, then affect always exceeds the human body and remains critical to life itself.[[70]](#endnote-70) This is where Fanon’s insights on atmosphere become helpful. Building on Fanon, the racial atmosphere might be viewed as an immanent field where things collide, attach, and combust, producing forces that draw humans, nonhumans, and things together, and generating conditions of life that are always uneven and ever-changing. To be sure, the troubled present demands new formulations of race that are more attuned to its mobility and transformation and to the ways it congeals sentient and non-sentient life.

The election of President Obama in 2008 and his re-election in 2012 has led many to claim that the US has entered a new and unprecedented historical epoch marked as postracial. What is most significant about these assertions is that the contemporary US is broached as a moment that breaks from history, that departs from the legacies of trans-Atlantic slavery, native American dispossession, and the long histories of violence directed at immigrants of color. For some, Obama’s election and re-election is a sure sign of racial progress, one that signals “the evaporation of race as a basis for social ordering in the United States.”[[71]](#endnote-71) Yet, one can recount numerous instances of increasing levels of racial violence post-Obama, in the US and in American involvements abroad. The post-Obama era, critics have insisted, has not improved conditions of social life for the racially marginal and oppressed.

While many have hailed the seeming disappearance of race in the present historical moment as clear evidence of a new era, it is important to remember that such claims have a much longer history. Since the Enlightenment, David Eng writes, “race has always appeared as disappearing.”[[72]](#endnote-72) To better understand the presence-absence of race, which has long been a concern for race critical theorists, Eng invites us to consider its affective qualities. It remains “important to emphasize how race functions beyond the realm of the visible and the protocols of the empirical,” he urges.[[73]](#endnote-73) Race is “more than an epiphenomenon of Euro-American capitalism’s differentiation, division, and management of Asian and African bodies in New World modernity.”[[74]](#endnote-74) But what exactly is this “more than”? In “Racism and Culture,” recall that Fanon highlighted the dynamic qualities of racism, its materiality/ immateriality and presence/ absence.[[75]](#endnote-75) Rejecting teleological arguments that race was diminishing, Fanon urged his audience to consider the mutability of race and racism, their ability to endure in changing forms and in ways were not always familiar or easily identifiable. Read through the affective turn we might say that change and movement is immanent to race and racism. They are not fixed or inert. They are not dead weight. Rather, race is a lively current that exists in matter, passing through and connecting humans, nonhumans, and things. Its ever-changing qualities allows race to be present and absent, to appear receding, to seem no longer relevant or significant. Rather than see the “evaporation of race” as an exception, aberration, or even as newness, we might view it as a *property of race*, as Fanon suggested, an attribute of its ever-changing force.[[76]](#endnote-76)

One of the limits of race critical theories has been the reluctance to engage with the nonhuman and the thing. Scholars have long referenced Fanon’s discussion of racial nature and animality – the settler’s use of “zoological terms” - to account for the logics and effects of colonial dehumanization.[[77]](#endnote-77) However, Fanon’s evocation of nature might be approached not through representation but materially and nonrepresentationally, as part of a force field through which racial currents pass, collide, and congeal. “The Algerians, the veiled women, the palm trees and the camels” that make up the landscape. The hostility of nature, “obstinate and fundamentally rebellious” might be harnessed atmospherically as a way to signal their interrelationality in the production of racial meanings and effects.[[78]](#endnote-78) Although many scholars have noted, through social constructivist approaches, that human, animal, and animate species are often afforded racial characteristics – colored bodies, cockroaches, dogs - there remains much to be gained by thinking the racial interactions, interrelations, and divisions between human/ nonhuman and sentient/ non-sentient. If Fanon stretches Marx to account for the colonial, Fanon might be productively stretched beyond an anthropocentric humanism to elaborate the all-encompassing impress of the racial atmosphere.

Claims to the postracial are also augmented by the growing interface of humans, nonhumans, and things. Although there are numerous examples that one could draw to illuminate these blurred demarcations, one place where the entanglements between sentient and nonsentient life are especially pronounced is in current conditions of US warfare. The US Military has become increasingly reliant on insects and insect prototypes to expand their repertoires of war.[[79]](#endnote-79) While bees are being trained to replace dogs on the frontlines, cockroaches have been newly invented as technologies of surveillance. Prototypes such as drones and nanos are being developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to advance new weapons that can be used at a distance, that no longer require American soldiers on the frontlines, that can kill the enemy with precision and without compromising American life.[[80]](#endnote-80) These changing conditions of war - manifest in the human-insect assemblage - have generated novel configurations of racial power that cannot be sufficiently explained through social constructivist or representational formulations of race. The cockroach, once a racial enemy has newly emerged as a defender of American (ways of) life.

Atmosphere might offer one way to decenter the human as the sole agent of history. Lucretius viewed the atmosphere as embracing all forms of human and nonhuman life. All matter is composed of the same primary substance, atoms. All matter is interrelated. For Lucretius, even the air could be regenerated from bodies and things.[[81]](#endnote-81) Others have noted that atmospheric thinking can connect human and nonhuman within a wider cosmology and a common ontology. “Atmospheres generate the times and spaces that appear to both the humans and non-humans within them.”[[82]](#endnote-82) Thinking atmosphere *racially* moves us beyond racial representations towards racial constellations. It directs attention to the ways in which racial meanings are produced through specific and momentary affective collisions and coagulations of bodies and objects. If affect permeates all matter, then the atmosphere, we might say is the sphere in which material energies and relationalities are emergent and becoming. The racial atmosphere does not undo human/ nonhuman/ object distinctions but draws attention to the affective power of their simultaneous differentiation and interconnection. Everything is drawn into the racial atmosphere. All matter is produced by it. Nothing escapes or is beyond it. With the (racial) atmosphere, one thing is certain: it is always changing, metamorphizing, becoming, mutating into something other than it is. Its ceaseless change, as Fanon reminds us, creates a viable albeit unpredictable plane for racial politics.

**Notes**

1. Patricia T. Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies,” *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2008, 25(1): 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Throughout, I am using affect as a form of materialism, rather than a feeling or emotion, which is how it is often deployed. Affect inheres in all matter and becomes active, lively or intensified through interaction and engagement. I am drawing here from Jane Bennett who argues that affect is materiality. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for example, Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Patricia T. Clough & Jean Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Clough, ibid; Nigel Thrift, *Nonrepresentational Theory: Space/ Politics/ Affect* (London: Routledge, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press), 1. See Kathleen Stewart, “*Atmospheric Attunements*,” *Environment and Planning D*, 29, 2011, 445-453. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. On race and the “affectable I” see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). The quote is taken from Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text*, 22(2), 2004, 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119, emphasis in original. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arun Saldanha, ‘Skin, Affect, Aggregation: Guattarian Visions on Fanon,’ *Environment and Planning A*, 42, 2010, 2426. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I am referring specifically to Ahmed, “Affective Economies” and Saldanha, “Skin, Affect, Aggregation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Frantz Fanon, Fanon, Frantz, “Racism and Culture,” in Fred Lee Hord (Mzee Lasana Okpara) & Jonathan Scott Lee (eds.), *I am Because we Are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 172 - 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Barnor Hesse. ‘Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Postracial Horizon,’ *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 110(1), 2011, 155-178. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Renisa Mawani, ‘Racial Violence and the Cosmopolitan City,’ *Environment and Planning D*, 30(6), 1083-1102; Renisa Mawani, “Insects, War, Plastic Life,” in Brenna Bhandar & Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (eds.), *Plastic Materialities* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For critiques of the postracial see David L. Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” *PMLA*, 2008, 123(5), 1479-1493; Hesse. ‘Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Some interesting work is being done in this regard. See Mel Chen, *Animacies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). See also a recent issue of *Social Text*, “Interspecies,” edited by Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 71. Note, all my references to *The Wretched of the Earth* are to this version, unless otherwise specified. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space, and Society*, 2, 2009, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Cameron Duff, “On the Role of Affect and Practice in the Production of Place,” *Environment and Planning D*, 2010, 28, 882. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” 452. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*. Translated by Rev. John Selby Watson (London: Henry Bohn, 1870), 293, emphasis in original. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This quote is cited in Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” 452. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law: Senses, Affects, Landscapes,” *Emotion, Space, and Society*, 2013, 7:36. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 36 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On this point, see Mawani, “Racial Violence.” [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects,* 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Fanon, *Wretched*, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. David Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Malden: Blackwell), especially chapter 8. See also Renisa Mawani, *Colonial Proximities: Crossracial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871-1921* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009); Mawani, “Racial Violence.” [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements” 2011, 445. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Homi Bhabha, “Foreword: Framing Fanon,” in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xix, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. See Ahmed, “Affective Economies”; Arun Saldanha, “Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D*, 24, 2006, 9-24; Saldanha, “Skin, Affect, Aggregation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Fanon, Frantz, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. See for example Barnor Hesse, “Im/Plausible Deniability: Racism’s Conceptual Double Bind,” *Social Identities*, 2004, 10(1): 9-29; Saldanha, “Skin, Affect, Aggregation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Hesse, “Im/Plausible Deniability,” 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 172-173. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Drawing from Foucault, both David Goldberg and Ann Stoler make this argument about the polyvalent qualities of race. See Goldberg, Racist Culture; Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Fanon, *Wretched*, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Fanon, *Wretched*, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Fanon, *Wretched*, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Fanon, *Wretched*, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Clough, “The Affective Turn,” 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Patricia T. Clough, “Afterword: The Future of Affective Studies,” *Body and Society*, 2010, 16, 229. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” 452. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. See Ahmed, “Affective Economies;” Saldanha, “Skin, Affect, Aggregation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Saldanha, “Reontologizing Race.” [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Saldanha, “Reontologizing Race,” 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Saldanha, “Reontologizing Race,” 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Saldanha, “Skin, Affect, Aggregation,” 2412. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii. See also Keith Woodward, “Affective Life,” in Vincent J. Del Casino Jr, Mary E. Thomas, Paul Cloke & Ruth Panelli, *A Companion to Social Geography* (Malden: Blackwell-Wiley, 2011), 332. My reference to life itself is a nonanthropocentric one. See Mawani, “Insects, War, Plastic Life.” [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Ian Haney Lopez, “Postracial Racialism: Racial Stratification and Mass Incarceration in the Age of Obama,” California Law Review, 2010, 1024. Online at <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract-id=1418212> (accessed September 15, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” 1480. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” 1486. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” 1486. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Fanon, “Racism and Culture.” [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. The “evaporation of race” comes from David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden: Blackwell-Wiley, 2009), 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. See Mawani, “Insects, War, Plastic Life.” [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. For an important account of bees and war see Jake Kosek, “Ecologies of Empire: On the new uses of the Honeybee,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(4), 2010, 650-678. See also Hugh Raffles *Insectopedia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 203-204. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. James Ash, “Rethinking Affective Atmospheres,” *Geoforum*, 2013, 49, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)