

5-“Infamy in the Air”: Toxic Climate, Racial Atmospherics, and the Politics of Contagion in the Literature of the Nineteenth-Century United States

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This essay asks what crisis does to critique, but also how critique can help theorize, and orient ourselves in, crisis, by thinking about breathing and race in the literature of the nineteenth-century United States “in the wake” of the pandemic of COVID-19. Drawing on Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*, as well as on studies of the atmospherics of power in the field of cultural anthropology, health humanities, environmental humanities and literary studies, I seek to elaborate a critical vocabulary for thinking about the specific crisis produced by a contagious disease travelling in the very air we share and breathe and, by extension, for thinking about the power dynamics of the airy yet material atmosphere that surrounds us. Moving from “suspension” to “distribution,” from “breathlessness” and “asphyxiation” to “aspiration” and “conspiration,” I reflect on the politics of contagion, on the risk and the promise of contamination.