

INTERMEDIA GENRES: BREATHING LESSONS IN CHANGING CLIMATES

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I. Once upon a Time: Breathing

Once upon a time carried us away, way back when: *once upon a time*, when the voice of a storyteller spun a spell that kept us listening with bated breath for what came next. Part of the lure came from listening to the voice and its pace, unspooling the larger story that seemed to emerge from thin air as a filament of silk. The silk started to web. Breath upon breath, line upon line, the voice conjured landscapes vast as kingdoms or palm-sized wonders, delicate as opal hummingbirds winging into blur. Storms swept in. Our senses soared. We saw a light in a window, heard distant thunder, smelled the sweet decay of grass and oncoming rain, opened our mouths to taste falling water, droplets covering our flesh and melting as a shedding skin, as we ran for shelter to a flood of warmth, and light, and...

Then.

Years sped ahead.

We heard more stories and different ways of telling, lived our lives not as straight paths but divergent directions, as alternate lives presented themselves through shifting combinations of choice and chance. Our lives enacted different shapes of narrative, even as we tried to fit things neatly into *Once upon a time*. As we listened to others' stories, more ways of telling arose. We heard different points of view as different forms embodied different contents. Some engaged dialogue or description, veered toward lyric poetics, forked into different tongues, juxtaposing images or sounds or senses, combining and webbing our hearts and minds with the world. It became a quest of questions. As we made the leap between living and storytelling (gaining words like "plot," "character," "point of view," "setting," and other descriptors of craft), at the interstice of these attentions were links so obvious as to be often overlooked: sentences.¹

A sentence carries the breath of the body in a book. It sets up pacing. A comma invites a quick intake of breath, where a semi-colon is more of a gasp; a period outright pauses. The break of a paragraph inhales and exhales. It forces a reader to do the same. The rhythm ideally casts a spell, where the reader forgets that she's reading or writing, pulling the mind or quickening the heart, depending on what kind of story is being told. There is a spell inherent in spelling, the alchemy of the alphabet, placing letter beside letter until a word conjures a concept that we recognize in the world. The project-

ed story reanimates what we see, hear, feel, taste, touch—and the sentence is where the action happens. The breaths make the story come alive. They spin the music. Inhalations and exhalations transfer to a reader: as nerve and pulse. The exchange can be intimate as a kiss. In poetry, breathing frequently gets attention—through rhythm, rhyme, line—but these possibilities often pass in prose. Breath by breath, sentence by sentence: the affect grows. Even when stories unfold more chronologically than lyrically, sentences deserve attention, or they plod rather than pulse the pace of the overall piece.

At the base of this *essay*—as in, *assaying*—I have been testing sentences but more: the spaces between them. The breaths, as gaps between letters and lines, yield absences amid presences: pressed to the edges. These are spaces that intermedia genres press into: the edges of our knowledges and perceptions. As a word, “breath” derives from Old English and means “an odour, smell, exhalation,” as “of anything cooking or burning,” as in “heat, steam, reek” and “heated air expired from the lungs.” From Old English *bræþ* comes the n. /brɛθ/ and starts to v. /bri:θ/.²

Why begin an essay on “Innovating Visions of the End and After” with sentences that boil down to breathing?³ To write (or speak, sign, think), nerves first must fire, blood pulses, muscles constrict and relax; the diaphragm expands and forces air to circulate and wedge open the throat. Inhalation, exhalation. In our digitally driven age, the multisensory dimensions of writing sometimes get pressed to the edges of the visual, to the point that we hold our breath. We sometimes forget “the eyes of the skin,” to borrow a phrase of Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, where all parts of us breathe, which becomes the basis of what we perceive and don’t, of what we make and what we don’t. He describes the deficits of “focused vision” that push us out of space into the role of disembodied spectators, while “peripheral vision” integrates us into space, aware of our environment and each other.⁴ To think back to paintings in caves, they are not only about ancient handprints or bison, but the warmth of fire on skin, the touch of dirt, reek of breath, taste of song on the tongue, and shadows where senses blur. Perhaps in a cyclical sweep, genres may be expanding in three dimensions: to put the logic of the mind back inside the body.

As we become disembodied in the digital age amid climate change, I have been thinking of “essays spread out in space,” to borrow Edward Rothstein’s description of “exhibitions,” and “intermedia genres” as ways to sound the gaps.⁵ This is only one fumbling place to start. 🛎⁶

II. Chorus of We: Sounding the Gaps



[Start at 11:05]

CASSANDRA: "What happens when the sound breaks down to the hum of my blood, the beat of my heart?"

CHORUS: "Would you know my voice? Would you know my voice?" (repeats)

ATHENA: "A pall appears, appealing—Would you know my voice? How to cipher tensions articulate as moans?"

[Turn down music, which plays silently while text is read.]⁷

To read Part II, visit *Notre Dame Review's* [print issue](#).



III. Intermedia Genres: A Micro-Genealogy

In the history of communication, there's a long debate about whether song or speech or gesture came first in human exchange. As genres have evolved across oral and written forms, intermediality occurs in ever-new ways. G.E. Lessing's eighteenth-century treatise on the *Laocoon* wrestled with the limits of poetry and painting, where ekphrasis could reach too far toward a painting to become one, or a painting to a poem, rather than inhabiting the border between. This border welcomes intermedia genres, as a point where exhale turns inhale, not static but kinetic, setting up relations almost like the work of metaphor, or dialogue, or collaboration, or what William Burroughs and Brion Gysin called "a third mind."⁸ From this basic corporeal rhythm arguably arises any genre, particularly those that seem hard to classify.

In 1965 Dick Higgins coined the term "intermedia" amid Fluxus happenings, cinema, performance, dance theatre, concrete poetry, and conceptual art as "a useful way to approach some new work" to ask: "what that I know does this work lie between?"⁹ He borrowed the word from Coleridge who used the term in 1812 "to define works which fall conceptually between media that are already known." Higgins traced the concept to ancient times, with the Renaissance separating media into categories alongside social divisions, and framed intermediality less as a singular artistic movement and

more as a recurring potential, almost “an irreversible historical innovation, more comparable, for example, to the development of instrumental music, than...the development of romanticism.” Intermedia works often set up conditions for their experience, not by themselves but in relation, moving to “break down the boundaries to life” beyond an initial “rupture, gap, or dissonance” toward “interaction, intertwining, encounter.” “To experience art in the age of (inter)media,” writes critic Katerina Kritilova, “no longer means to stand in front of a picture or a sculpture, ‘interpret’ works of art as ‘works of art’,” but rather “crosses the line,” “taking up different perspectives,” where the medium becomes “dissolved into material conditions, sensations, practices, spaces, forms of signification.”¹⁰

Intermedia genres, then, set up relations while suspended between different media, inhabiting a present between past and future. That suspended state carries with it our suspended expectations, unmoored because we don’t necessarily recognize an “intermedia” work as an “essay” or “novel” or “poem” on the surface, but witness it so-labeled, as we both gain and lose vocabularies to talk about it, removed from our comfortable vantage of inherited classifications. Intermedia genres press to the edges of what they are not—aiming toward a painting without becoming one, or a textile beyond a text, a performance that is not, cinema or some other media, where an essay (as this) emerges as it oscillates on the line. Its “intermedia” state may require additional reading strategies. Or, maybe this process is inherently characteristic of an essay—the genre of assaying, of testing—that reaches out of itself to test its own edges as it comes into being. 🛎

IV. Exhale to Inhale: End as Beginning

Because we hear repeated narratives of climate change, it is hard to innovate forms beyond apocalypse, prophecy, elegy, or tugs-of-war between progress and loss. Shapes of stories recur to mark the edges of our fears, so our tellings fall into predictable patterns. Separating ourselves from the animals that we are, humans are slow to see our contributions to ecological destruction that can’t be neatly predicted, veering increasingly from past patterns into new uncertainties.¹¹ Even as we face abounding facts, collective denial has grown to frame humans as passive victims rather than active agents. Most stories arise from fear of death rather than awe of life—its aliveness, volatility, mortality—more aptly navigated through indigenous tribalographies, trickster narratives, and aboriginal songlines.¹² Rather than adapt teleological narratives to accommodate the unexpected, we often fall back on human-centered stories that want for control and reinforce the individual over the communal, the human over the nonhuman, and thus

cannot cope with metamorphosis—especially when natural forces raise their voices and howl.

At the beginning of this year, I moved to Salt Lake City to teach at the University of Utah, a city that I quickly grew to love for its paradoxes. There, I increasingly thought about breathing. Over the valley, the smog “inversion” hovers like a toxic lid, aggravating health conditions like asthma, strokes, heart attacks, and pregnancy, leading people to wear masks in an attempt to keep toxins out of the bloodstream. Decades after nuclear fallout from the Nevada Test Site, carbon emissions grow as the population swells. Tech companies are transplanting to “Small Lake City” as a satellite of Silicon Valley. Legislation to manage decreasing water and increasing pollution hasn’t kept up with the region’s growth. Utah prizes its pristine peaks with renowned ski slopes and coppery swells and canyons, but loosened environmental protections are leaving archaeologically rich red rock vulnerable to drilling and development.¹³

The night before the semester began at Utah, right after the new year, here in South Bend my father-in-law died. I flew from Salt Lake City here for his funeral. For the almost two decades that I knew him, he had Parkinson’s (a disease now estimated at over 10 million and growing, attributed to not only genetic but also environmental factors), but at his life’s end, pneumonia slowly cut off his breathing.¹⁴ In my father-in-law’s final week here, a few miles away, my husband and his siblings sat around his bed and, with the support of nurses and hospice, stayed with him, sang to him, held him, and watched as their father slowly choked to death.

Against my backdrop this year of Salt Lake City’s inversions and my father-in-law’s pneumonia in South Bend, I have thought a lot about breathing. The Great Salt Lake is often likened to a “dead sea,” but after spending months talking with scientists who love the Lake, my perception has shifted to see this “dead sea” as deeply alive—no longer viewing it through human eyes only but also through pelican eyes at the convergence of two of the four major migratory bird flyways of North America. Or imagine: being in the lake as a brine shrimp or microbial halophile (literally “salt-loving”). The process is like trying to see a garden through butterfly eyes—and that may be the thought where I leave you today, without any answers about “innovating visions of the end and after,” only increasing questions. William McDonough, an architect who specializes in sustainable design, writes that “carbon is not the enemy,” and we have to redesign our relationship with carbon to reimagine “buildings like trees” and “cities like forests.”¹⁵ Isn’t that what innovating narratives do: asking *What if?* What dreams might yet be seeded through interconnected stories tangling together like the collective

roots of an aspen? The implications are many, not only in wilderness but wherever we are. As Jourdan Imani Keith (founder of the Urban Wilderness Project) recommends: “Desegregating the wilderness requires not only the laws that forbid discrimination but also the reintegration of nearby wilderness where people live.... [W]hat if wilderness zigzagged through areas where urban people live? Then accessing the wilderness in our daily lives could be more tangible than wild shadows cast by memory.”¹⁶

So, let me leave you with a prompt—as simple as what I asked my nephew¹⁷, what has been asked for thousands of years in different forms: “Tell us a story.”

And: listen.

Once upon a time is just one beginning. There are thousands of ways to tell a story but only a few types of stories ever told. Novels, essays, poems, and other genres have long and capacious histories. Genres arose because we are storytelling creatures, living and breathing humans whose imaginations are tethered to our bodies and connected with other bodies in a changing world. Our world is expanding, and new ways of storytelling and of listening emerge in the process. We’re only beginning to interpret ever-emerging intermedia genres since our brains are constantly rewiring our ability to understand what we’re living and making.

Even though there are many possible beginnings (always starting *in medias res*: in the middle of the action), there is only one “authentic” ending, as Margaret Atwood reminds us in “Happy Endings.” Whatever the plot, the ending is always the same: “*John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die....* That’s about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.” She concludes, “Now try How and Why.”¹⁸ In other words, what matters is what we do in the middle: how and why we breathe life into each sentence of the sentence that is our lives. 📖

NOTES

1. In simplified form, a *sentence* is: *n.* sequence of words capable of standing alone to express an assertion, question, command, wish, or exclamation; *v.* to pronounce a sentence upon.

2. For further etymological excavation, consult definitions for “breath” and “essay” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Evolving meanings charge our languages with subdefinitions, as in Spanish where “breath” animates multiple words, including *el aliento* and *el hálito*, trailing meanings from *courage* to a *gentle breeze*.

3. “Innovating Visions of the End and After” is the &NOW panel of which this is part, organized by Michael Mejia and including Noy Holland and Miranda Mellis, inspired by Amitov Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

4. See Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley & Sons, 2005); and David Abrams, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

5. Edward Rothstein, “Extreme Museum: The Rigors of Contemplation,” *New York Times* (October 21, 2011).

6. 🛎 = This symbol indicates when to ring a meditation bell in this essay. Bells conclude all four sections of this essay. For my talk at the &NOW Festival, I am using a meditation bell that belonged to my father-in-law.

7. Follow the QR code that leads to this link: <http://www.westernhumanitiesreview.com/media/>. Thanks to *Western Humanities Review* for publishing my full libretto of *Cassandra in the Temples* with my photographs from Greece (as “Cassandra in the Temples: Studies in Sea, Sky, and Stone,” 70/1, Spring 2016), along with recorded excerpts of the music (composed by Elena Ruehr, premiered in performance at MIT’s Kresge Auditorium by the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth, November 2014). Engaging climate change, this opera ecologically reinterprets the ancient myth of Cassandra. Further instructions for listening are included in *Notre Dame Review*’s print issue.

Earlier this year (March 2018) in Tampa, Florida, I concluded a talk at the annual AWP Conference on “Sounding the Gaps” with an exercise that asked the audience to voice different genre categories (listed on a handout, intermixed at different angles and in variedly sized fonts) to co-create a soundscape, to read the page as if it were a musical score for improvisation. As my opera libretto played in the background, people voiced the handout’s genre categories: out of order, varying volume, spoken or whispered, elongated or rhythmically punctuated, listening to others around them for cues to overlap, intermix, enjamb, harmonize or cacophonize, actively listening, to co-create new categories through juxtaposed associations. Over the years, I have made other word-lists to use with classes to consider potential soundscapes beneath written literatures. Here is a possible writing exercise for a reader of this essay: Make a list of genres and medias, write them individually on index cards, shuffle the cards, select a few, and try to create an intermedia piece from these cues and materials, intermarrying content and form. Some categories for starters (in no order): *speculative, ecologies, choreography, realism, associative, shadow, practice, poetics, archival, found, aesthetics, tectonic, intervention, cultural, excavation, tribalography, criticism, public arts, erasure, puppetry, lyric, report, philosophy, gesture, digital, fragment, letter, braided, inquiry, concrete poetry, hyperlinked, meditation, instructions, histories, breathing, vocal, essay, prose, text, flash, realities, fiction, exhibition, animation, field guide, scriptwriting, unstitched, History, difformité, scrapbooks, mise-en-scène, ekphrasis, reenactment, kinesthetics, opera, dreamscape, lost, journalism, theater, graphic, micro-genre, telepathy, sculpture, performance, sound, dance, manuals, painting, costume, unwriting, photogra-*

phy, song, nonfiction, myth, applied, haunting, book, weaving, performative, commonplaces, multi-media, libretto, documentary, quilting, music, embodiments, interactive, augmented, museuming, recipes, composition, design... fill in more blanks, blend and blur.

See also Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: Norton, 2018); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed, 2015); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013). Perhaps we should adapt Juhani Pallasmaa's framework beyond "focused vision" and "peripheral vision" to consider "focused hearing" and "peripheral hearing," among other sensory dimensions and extensions.

8. See Gothhold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984 [1766]); and William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978).

9. Dick Higgins, "Intermedia" (with an Appendix by Hannah Higgins), *Leonardo* 34/1 (2001): 49-54.

10. Katerina Kritlova, "Intermediality in Media Philosophy," in *Travels in Intermedia(lity): Reblurring the Boundaries*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), pp. 37-45.

11. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, eds., *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). See also Gretchen Henderson, *Ugliness: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2015), p. 164.

12. For starters, see LeAnne Howe, *Choctalking on Other Realities* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2013); and Robin Kundis Craig, "Learning to Live with the Trickster and the Value of Resilience Thinking," *Pace Environmental Law Review* 33/3 (2016): 351-396.

13. Utah is hardly alone as climate change affects the entire planet. Its characteristic and vulnerable natural features, like the Great Salt Lake, offer a place to visualize effects of climate change, not unlike Glacier National Park and Joshua Tree National Park are predicted to lose the features for which they are known. See Emily Holden, "Vanishing Joshua trees: climate change will ravage US national parks, study says," *The Guardian* (25 September 2018).

14. "Statistics," *Parkinson's Foundation*, www.parkinson.org.

15. William McDonough, "Carbon is Not the Enemy," *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science* 539/7629 (15 November 2016), www.nature.com.

16. Jourdan Imani Keith, "Desegregating Wilderness," *Orion* (September 10, 2014).

17. For this prompt, visit *Notre Dame Review's* print issue [HYPERLINK "print issue"].

18. Margaret Atwood, "Happy Endings," *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 50-56.