

*The skin is the meeting, not just of the senses, but of world and body: 'through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border. Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin*

(Serres in Connor 2002)

*In general... one could say that all things are born from the earth by means of putrefaction.*

*For [it] is the highest step, and the first beginning of generation*

(Paracelsus, or von Bodenstein in Newman 1999 [1572/ 1537]: 326)

## Introduction

In the last few years we have been witness to a substantial rise in the number of writings on issues related to air and atmosphere. The return of academic interest to this most ephemeral of elements largely springs from two sources. The first of which is Irigaray's seminal *The forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger* ("L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger," 1999), a text which in the Anglosphere has received a modest amount of traction. Enthusiasm for the reception of the second source, German in its origins (especially Böhme 1993, 2000), has been somewhat less pronounced. Discussions ensuing from these two and also other sources (e.g. Stewart 2011, but also Sloterdijk 2009 and Connor 2010) have centred on a large, varied and growing range of themes and subject areas (e.g. Škof & Berndtson 2018, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2016). Many of the discussions that interest me, in the broader area of political geography, focus their attention on critiques of the longstanding historical weight attributed to ontologies of ground, earth and surface. One of the objectives, among others, of this smaller body of literature focuses on correcting this imbalance by focusing attention on historical, cultural and political relationships to the air (see, for instance, Adey 2014, 2015; McCormack 2017, Nieuwenhuis 2015, Engelmann 2015, Graham 2015 and others). The air unlike the earth is neither a solid nor a fixed element, but an ephemeral medium that is shared

constantly and continuously between animate and inanimate life. The breath in these discussions takes on a special position as it is the primary (albeit certainly not the only) practice through which humans connect with each other and the air.

This paper approaches relationships to the air somewhat differently, more corporally, by analysing the porous geography of flesh and skin *through which air travels*. One of the aims that I will pursue in this paper is to draw attention to the idea of the body's perforated skin. I will offer a critique of modern and contemporary myths of a self-sustaining, "tidy" body that exists independently and separate from its atmospheric surrounding(s) (cf. Anzieu 1989).

This move means that I follow in the footsteps of a generation of, especially feminist, works which, encouraged by Longhurst's (2001) writings and Shildrick's (1997) pivotal concept of a "leaky body," have created the opportunity to approach the geography of the body in a less solid and more fragmented manner. These writers, among a small group of others (e.g. Grosz 1994), have succeeded in (re)materialising the body whilst problematising controlled and controlling, yet illusory, inside/outside dichotomies. Holes and orifices appear in this literature as critical interventions to test, compare and analyse social attitudes on and emotional reactions to pregnant bodies (Longhurst 2001), defecating bodies (Crawford 1999, Lea 2001) and other stages of bodily fluidity that undermine the myth of corporal self-containment and fixity. "Indeed," as Caroline Rosenthal and Dirk Vanderbeke (2015: 2) write in the introduction to their edited volume on cultural discourses of the skin, the "[s]kin does not isolate us from our surroundings but rather immerses us in reciprocal relations." These, often very creative, pieces of work centre their focus on the materialities that seep, drip, and sweat in and out of bodies, compelling corporal geographies to account for the many travelling smells, sounds and other sensory affects and emotions that modern humans often tend to ignore or deliberately silence in the everyday of their bodies.

The work that I am presenting here attends to the “holey” body’s relationship to the air and the breathing practices that breach and blur distinctions of interior and exterior.

Ontologically, then, the argument follows that the human body functions similarly as an air filter through which material and affective atmospheres constantly travel. I can sense the wind blowing in my face, tears ensue whilst my skin weathers afresh. Ingold (2011: 115) describes this process perhaps better than I can: “To feel the air and walk on the ground is not to make external, tactile contact with our surroundings but to mingle with them”. The relationship to air and atmosphere is passive and active at the same time. I will not limit this study of the body’s atmospheric relationship by focusing exclusively, if at all, on the two respiratory orifices of nose and mouth, but rather will be analysing affects, imageries and imaginations of the pores, glands and cracks inside the body’s skin. Holes are central in my story as they allow for the seeping and leaking that propends affects and emotions, or what may be termed as “excess,” to flow from and in-between (sharing) bodies.

The skin touches and is touched. It constitutes selfhood and identifies otherhood. Anzieu (1989:53) described the skin as an interface that distinguishes “what belongs to me myself and what does not belong, between what comes from me and the desires, thoughts and affects of others, between a physical (the world) or biological (the body) reality outside the mind.” The skin, in this psychoanalytic interpretation, constitutes a naked and contained self that is physically and emotionally separate and independent from other skins. The concept of a “breathing skin,” a skin that respire through its porous holes, a skin that is always already open to exchange and share air with others, provides for a different reading of the location of feelings and emotions. In this paper, the skin channels, nurtures and even blurs the boundaries of the body with what (and who) resides outside of it. It challenges the myth of an impermeable *wholesome* body and questions the idea of a stable and singular self. The paper does this by means of accentuating the importance of the two to four million (Jablonski 2008)

“corrupting” pores<sup>1</sup> through which human bodies atmospherically dwell in-between an “outside” (only by name) and a (always already) permeable “inside”. They constitute an important part of the living geography of the skin. In this world of shared air, “purity” is a political lie as divisions between bodies are constantly trespassed atmospherically. Emotion and mood are, just as much as the environmental media, shared and atmospheric. What if it is not only the skin that feels and worlds, but also the air that weathers the skin and body? Indeed, as the biochemist Nick Lane (2016) reminds us, our bodies have evolved with and exist in air.

It might seem novel or, to some, maybe even radical, but the idea of a “breathing skin” is actually very old, as I will explain in the first sections of this paper. Today, however, this way of thinking about the porous skin feels somewhat left behind and forgotten. Literature on the “instruments of the breath” are conventionally limited to the mouth, lungs and nostrils. Attention to the skin itself, in contrast, has fared somewhat better. Written works on the geography of the skin are scattered across several disciplines. Key works in the social science and humanities literature, some of which I will draw on in this article, include Connor’s (2004) *The Book of Skin*, Ahmed and Stacey’s (2001) edited *Thinking Through the Skin*, Benthien’s (2002) *Skin: on the Cultural Border between Self and the World* and Jablonski’s (2008) *Skin: A Natural History*.<sup>2</sup> The last of these texts hints at the significance of pores perhaps most explicitly as they are described to “unite us with our surroundings” (Jablonski 2008: 1). Elaborations on the concept of a breathing skin, which absorbs and expels its atmospheric environing, are largely left underexplored in many of these publications. A “holey” skin is rather the sub-domain of what has been classified as “biophilosophy” (Ansell-

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<sup>1</sup> A “pore” is a laymen’s term for physiological “apertures from the surface of a tegument (animal, vegetal) that ensure the input or output of gases or fluid” (Flament et al. 2015: 85).

<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, a relatively large body of works on inscriptions on the skin. For an overview, see Schildkrout (2004) and Wohlrab et al. (2007).

Pearson 2012). This body of thought, drawing on Deleuzian assemblages, rhizomes, vitalism and “holey bodies,” calls for us to engage with a more “open biology” and, indeed, a more relational understanding of the body (see e.g. Woodard 2012, Negarestani 2003, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

I will draw inspiration from all these and other works to foreground the idea of a body that is always already atmospherically permeated, materially and affectively. The skin, as Adams-Hutcheson (2017: 107) explains, is “where the social, the psychological and the bodily become inseparable”. The idea of an “atmospheric body,” a term coined by Manning (2009: 15) but also central to artistic work (see e.g. Sinan 2019 and Hawkins’ 2019 contribution in this special issue), is rooted in early traditions of medical and metaphysical thinking. I (re)turn to some of these older debates to problematise contemporary myths of a sealed body that requires constant policing against “outside(r)” influences. A porous skin is in modern times deemed both dangerous and fragile at the same time. I aim to retrieve and advance a politically poetic and more open relationship between bodies and the air they share. Holes, therefore, are not in this article conceptualised as unfolding affective disasters or immaterial voids, but rather imagined as *essential, dynamic and constitutive* channels in the making and unmaking of new relations.

The first section of this paper explores the evolution of medical and philosophical debates on the subject of the porous skin. I will draw inspiration from Humorism (from Latin for “fluid” or “liquid”) and other traditions of speculative thought to analyse how travelling air was imagined to instil medical and moral powers. The air in these accounts channels both material and affective worlds as divisions between smell, emotion and disease are fused and imagined to flow atmospherically from one porous body to the next. The focus, as I will show, was not

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (2004) refer to the term “Holey Space” [*espace troue*], and contrast it with their more frequently discussed concept of smooth and striated space.

on the body, but on the oxygenous air that could nurture life but also spread death. I will discuss the latter in detail in the second section, which analyses the emergence of a politics surrounding contamination in the form of so-called “miasmatic theory.” Miasmas were imagined to originate outside the body, but believed to spread through its fragile and shared porousness. Good air could heal a body, whilst bad air could kill. “Atmospheric governance,” a governmentality that operated atmospherically, infiltrated and influenced all aspects of cultural and medical life. The third and final section is entitled “corruption,” which, as the name suggests, refers to both a physiological and a social “disease”. It cannot be reduced to the body alone, although it presently and commonly is understood to be an individual condition, but must be contextualised in a broader atmospheric politics of affective contamination. Corruption, decay and putrefaction, in other words, were not imagined as properties of a singular body, as is the case today, but rather concomitant to wider social, political and metaphysical realities. The idea of a vulnerable and affective porous body never fully withdrew with the onset of the “new anatomical body” (Wheeler 2010). What changed, however, is the policing of its border. I finish the paper by means of a brief exploration into the ways the porous body shapes racial politics today, and with an open invitation to entertain the possibility for imagining a leaky politics based, not on the fixity, but on the porosity of the skin.

### **Skin Breathing**

The skin has received relatively little attention in modern approaches to the human body. Its role seems often consigned to that of an encapsulating cloak that merely helps to contain its interior (Connor 2004). This has recently started to change with the body of literature I outlined in the introduction of this paper. Of greater interest for me now, however, is the more ancient idea of the permeability of the skin. The idea of a porous skin, making a return

in current medical science literature (e.g. Flament et al. 2015 and Shaiek et al. 2016), was up until and even in the decades after the introduction of germ theory in the mid-nineteenth century a popular topic in both medical and philosophical approaches to the body's relationship with the air. That is to say that there seemed to have existed much less of a boundary between the body and its environment when compared to today's imaginings of strict divisions between the corporal inside and the *environmental* outside.

To appreciate the worth of this older idea it should be remembered that neither the details of oxygen nor its working were known to the ancient Greeks or Romans. That means that it was unclear how or through which processes air (*pneuma*), a metaphysical as much as an environmental category, entered and affected the organs. Was breathing an exercising of the mouth, the nose or the porous skin? Neither was it clear if the mouth shared a different origins than other bodily orifices. Andrew Strathern (2004: 53) goes as far as to argue "that by the late fifth century B.C. in Greece... communication between outside and inside was thought predominantly to take place through *poroi* [pores]." Ancient Greeks speculated for a very long time that the mouth, in fact, had been shaped by the air. "But why," the later Galen (129-200 AD) (in Brain 1986: 3) asks, "if this is so, did it [ie. the mouth] not burst out of the top of the head, since it is characteristic of *pneuma* to rise to the highest point?"

The body-air relationship was imagined, rather differently than it is today, as a site worthy of philosophical speculation. Most of the attention was not centred on the recipient, the body, but rather on the air itself. The former was imagined to have been shaped by and through the act of respiration. The concept of a "breathing skin" played an essential role in defining the body's relationship to its "exterior" surroundings. Orifices and pores seem to have enjoyed equal footing in philosophical and physiological understandings of the body at least until the onset of modern anatomy. Pores, in other words, were imagined to function akin to channels or passageways between the interior and exterior of the body.

The porous skin was thought to serve a dual purpose: “it is at once a large structure for safeguarding the integrity of the body while simultaneously being a layer of exchange and interaction between body and environment” (Hennepe 2012: 524). Hippocrates is by Galen (in Renbourn 1960: 135, my emphasis) described as having been among the first to allude to the idea of a “breathable skin”:

As the veins by mouths placed on the skin pass out whatever is redundant of vapours and smoke, so do they receive by the same mouths no small quantity of the surrounding air; and this is what Hippocrates means *when he says the whole body breathes in and out*.

Ideas of the skin as a filtering respiratory layer, analogous to oral respiration, were also echoed in Galen’s anatomical theories on the body’s innate heat and cardiovascular circulation. He endorsed “a type of *skin breathing*, where arteries on the surface of the body draw in airy substance that surrounds us (during diastole), and eliminate smoky, vaporous residue derived from the burning up of the juices (during systole)” (Aird 2011: 122, my emphasis). Galen, whose medical theories formed the foundation of medieval medical approaches to the body, accepted the possibility of altering the body’s interior through skin pores; an idea which would contribute to the practice of bloodletting, which has remained popular in many parts of the modern world (Brain 1986).

The skin’s pluralistic purpose, therefore, should not be restricted to the contemporary idea of “respiration,” as the concept of the pneumatic breath cannot be reduced to the technical inhalation of oxygen alone (see also the contributions in Škof and Berndtson 2018). Pores and orifices provided the outwards conduit for bodily heat as much as they channelled emotions and moods. Skin pores played an important role in the evolution of Hippocratic ‘humoral pathology’ (see, for instance, Connor 2004). The holistic practise of respiration, in short, was meant to occur without obstruction or interference. A possible impediment of the



pores potentially could lead to an imbalance of the four humours (blood [*Sanguine*], phlegm [*Phlegmatic*], yellow bile [*Choleric*] and black bile [*Melancholic*]), which, in turn, could result in illness or, even worse, death (see also Loudon 1997: 35).

The skin's relationship to the air was imagined as pivotal for sustaining both health and well-being. Pores could transmit emotions, sense, disease, light and even souls, which meant that they were imagined to channel physiological, sensory and metaphysical forces. Air, as the medium that moves in and out of porous bodies, was considered heterogeneous, and pores could be "modified" in such ways as to absorb "good" airs and prevent "bad" ones from entering the body. For instance, an "impure" air, in Roman times rendered "miasma," was imagined to be the principle cause of both epidemic diseases and moral decay. Indeed, bad air did not result in pestilence, but rather was pestilence itself.

### **Contamination**

A person became infected when "miasmas invaded the body and disturbed its vital functions" (Karamanou et al. 2012: 58). The cause of polluted air matter, *miasmata*, had been a subject of speculation since, at least, the time of Hippocrates. Efforts to explain the roots of diseases and epidemics were not limited to medical reasoning alone, but included cosmic forces, witchery and demonic spirits<sup>4</sup>. The underlying foundation for such holistic views was the interrelationship assumed to exist between earth and organic life. "Since human beings are created from the same components as celestial bodies there is a belief that there are correspondences between [the microcosm] and the macrocosm" (Santer 2015: 60).

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<sup>4</sup> A famous example is the Swiss physician Paracelsus who attributed the cause of the plague to "a psychophysical interaction between man and the stars" and "sinful imaginations" (Chiu 2017: 60). The forgotten medieval thinker Albertus Magnus, later canonised as saint and teacher of Aquinas, argued that the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Mars was responsible for pestilence in the air (Santer 2015).

This radical and communicative openness helps to explain why the term miasma, invariably translated as “impure” or “degenerate” air, was in the Greek original a religious and moral, rather than a purely modern and independent medical category (Jouanna 2012). Despite progress in making matter scientifically knowable, through for instance, the microscopic inventions and discoveries of Anton Leeuwenhoek, the principles of “Miasmatic theory” remained stubbornly intact throughout and even long after the European Renaissance.

Growing urbanisation during the European Middle Ages and the spreading of Christianity led to a steady rise of the cultural significance attributed to putrid effluvia. The porous body’s relationship to the air was pivotal to medical discoveries, a person’s moral standing, changes in the built environment and atmospheric governance. In other words, it was not the body that was considered vital to health or even morality, but rather its relationship to the air.

Dugan (2011: 108) explains that “early modern epidemiology understood the body’s relationship to discrete, local environments to be a fundamental component of contagion.”

Borrowing from Hippocratic medical science, good health was defined through its relationship to water, soil but especially air. This old model inspired “Greek, Roman, and Islamic medicine” to accept the idea “that health [was] best preserved by breathing pure air, not polluted by vapours from marshes, pools, swamps or sewers” (Ten Have 1990: 22). It suggests that the porous body was not seen in control of itself but rather imagined to be dependent on and susceptible to the contingent and fluid forces of the “elements.”

Shildrick (1997: 20), following Foucault, notes that it was only during the enlightenment period that diseases and death started to be seen as “an inherent property of the pathological body.” Given fears of atmospheric contamination, the “leaky body” (Shildrick 1997) was imagined as both vulnerable and dangerous. There was an imagined need to protect the body from larger atmospheric forces of corruption and putrefaction. In fact, fear of contagious fluid bodies are still very much alive today. Today, however, it is no longer the air, but rather the

undividable and individual body that is made responsible to secure and control its own leakiness. This responsibility is not limited to the private sphere but refers also to the public realm. Sometimes it is easy to forget that the “order of the solid, visible body is only one way... in which one spatializes disease” (Foucault 2003: 3). Controlling the miasmatic atmosphere to securitise the fragile, permeable state of the body constituted an earlier regime of atmospheric governance that was characterised by a moral and medical urgency to prevent corporal atmospheric corruption. The emphasis on atmospheric health was not merely a private affair but a public necessity to avoid wider societal and corporal contamination.

Orifices and pores, as the only openings of the body to the exterior, operated as cultural, political and metaphysical border zones that affected and influenced the evolution of much larger societal discourses. Bodily holes necessitated a regime of atmospheric policing that comprehensively attempted to tune the body’s relationship with the air. An English court case from the seventeenth century, for instance, reveals that foul airs were considered a health threat and an actionable offense (Hubbub 2007: 213). Towns were planned to secure the healthy from the infected parts of the population and architects embraced ventilation as a spatial technique to dilute the concentration of bad airs. Physicians, in their turn, looked at olfaction to purify contaminated airs (see e.g. Corbin 1986), whilst priests used incense to disinfect pestilence. “Atmospheric governance,” a term I have used in another context to describe a particularly form of biopolitics (Nieuwenhuis 2018), was an integral component of the religious and political everyday. The human body, imagined porous from birth, always stood in direct contact with its “not-so-exterior” atmospheric surroundings. Corruption referred not to an individual responsibility, but rather was a consequence of much larger forces.

Contamination, from *contamen* (“pollution”, “impure” but also “touch”, “contact” and even “fusion”), was concurrently corporal and mental, physical and allegorical. Inhabitation of a better air could medically sanitise as well as improve someone’s moral and religious

standing. For instance, the burning of olibanum, used in both religious and medical ceremonies, was simultaneously a means to cleanse, sanctify and purify contaminated air (see further Dugan 2011 and Freedman 2008). Freedman (2008: 67), whilst providing accounts of the plural sensory geographies of the medieval spice trade, describes how grounded up crystal jet mixed with pomegranate juice was fumigated and used “to provoke menstruation... a test for virginity and an antidote to the effects of evil incantations”. Indeed, as Shildrick (2002) explains in her *Embodying the Monster*, the “fluid” “nature” of the female body was (and still is) perceived as exceptionally predisposed to corruption (of both the moral and physiological kind). “Vulnerability,” she (ibid. 72) writes, “is feared as a condition of both mind and body, an ontological as well as physical state.”

The danger and cultural significance of a vulnerable “open” skin, troubling the division of inside and outside, was at the time perhaps best exemplified by the experience of Europe’s so-called Black Plague (1347 to 1351). People were so afraid to expose their pores to this “moist” and “warm” disease that “Europe entered a [long and] pungent no-bath era, which lasted until... the mid-eighteenth century” (Cantor 2015: 23). The risk of falling victim to corrupt air had both medical and moral implications, which meant that an infected person suffered from a stench of both medical and sinful degeneration (see also Classen et al. 1994, Bayless 2012). The morally and medically infected, who also often were poor, were not only seen as victims, but also as enablers of the disease. Their deformed bodies were treated as “more-than-corporal” as they merged atmospherically with the disease (perhaps in a similar way that contemporary gay victims of AIDS continue to be held synonymous with the disease (e.g. Cadwell 1991)). That is to say that the disease was not only treated atmospherically, through strategies and techniques of fumigation, cologne and insulation, but also that it ate away (in both a real and figurative manner) at corporal fixity and solidity. Corruption was mental, physical and moral; affective and material at the same time. As their bodies

deformed, victims merged with the disease, their holey bodies considered (and remembered) as vulnerable and dangerous at the same time.

## Corruption

The widespread and lethal nature of the bubonic disease led to speculations about the origins of or culprits responsible for the pandemic. Different holed geographies were blamed: corporal, terrestrial and religious. Some argued that holes in the earth, generated by earthquakes, ignited poisonous vapours into the air, whilst others argued, albeit not against the former, that Jews and their sinful bodies were to be held responsible for the spreading of pestilence. As said, these explanations were not mutually exclusive but in complicated ways overlapped and interconnected. The underlying thought of the supposed intentional contamination of water and air by Jews, which resulted in a genocidal campaign against them, shares similarities with the rhetoric that incentivised the gas chambers of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> In both episodes, they were not simply portrayed and imagined as degenerate, decadent and leaking but also treated as and, more significantly, made synonymous themselves with vermin and pestilence<sup>6</sup>. The idea of a *judaeorum pestis*, or a “Jewish plague,” has a history that goes back a very long time (e.g. Cooke 2009). Their clinical removal from Nazi German society was, as Esposito (2011) explains, diagnosed and treated as a medical intervention to “immunise” or wall-off the German national body. Jews were considered to be the literal parasites that infected, corrupted, fed-off and threatened to *hollow out* the German body, endangering the preservation of its health and the solidity of its *wholesomeness*.

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, Hitler (in Confino 2014: 127) himself makes a direct reference to this similarity in *Mein Kampf* in which he writes that the “Jew is a ‘pestilence, a moral pestilence, with which the public was infected... worse than the [fourteenth-century medieval] Black Plague”.

<sup>6</sup> This is a trope which continues to haunt the contemporary migrant Other until the present day.

Fears and anxiety of decomposition, a pathogenic process of bodily holing, are not limited to imaginations and allegories of a “rotting” political or even a material body. It is important to take a step back to appreciate and recognise that holes and pores are experienced in affectively complicated ways. “Trypophobia” is a little studied, but widespread, psychological aversion to holes, which arouses emotional responses of strong disgust as well as physiological feelings of discomfort (e.g. itchiness, goose bumps and nausea). A recent study (Kupfer & An 2018: 731) suggests that individuals with trypophobia, a “fear-based condition” with evolutionary origins, “react as if they are threatened by infestation by ectoparasites [ie. organisms that live on the skin].” The body responds through “skin sensations like skin crawling and itching,” while poisonous-like feelings provoke “prototypical disgust responses like nausea and vomiting.” The skin’s affective reaction to the possibility of corruptible porosity is of such an “extent that even a stimulus like a cluster of holes in a wall can elicit disgust” (ibid. 739).

Organic holes elicit not only complicated feelings of fear and abhorrence, but are also known to arouse intrigue and even fascination. It is no coincidence that putrid foods, simultaneously nauseating and compelling, are a recurrent theme in modern and traditional aesthetic celebrations of ambiguity, transiency, movement and ephemerality (e.g. Elkins 2005: 70)<sup>7</sup>.

Holes and pores facilitate the channelling of affective and organic atmospheres whilst destabilising myth of stable and determinate forms, binary relations and trust in order, health and authority. They evoke embodied affects that undermine illusions of control and containment. Their appearances provoke reactions of despair, horror, fear, disgust but also, and concurrently, curiosity and bewilderment. The permeation and disintegration of a surface,

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most famous example is Caravaggio’s *Sick Bacchus*. The artist, whilst fleeing from the plague himself, depicted the Roman Dionysus in a black and intoxicated manner with rotting fruits in the foreground.

or the realisation of the possibility thereof, is in both senses of the word an “ungrounding” and “unworlding” or “disorienting” experience (see also Koerner 2019 in this special issue).

Part of the “allure,” then, seems to stem from the origins and nature of the forces that channel through the pores and holes of the body; gases, putrid odours, blood, urine, air and, indeed, also death. Holes do not play a passive role in this regard, but actively facilitate as much as challenge and make visible what happens when myths of inside/ outside binaries and closed systems disintegrate. By focusing attention on their creative and creating conduit morally, medically, culturally, religiously, we realise that they are opening spaces that allow for different relations and new meanings to emerge. Corruption is a destructive process as much as it is a productive force.

Disintegration is an act of (re)generation as it takes seemingly finished forms and reshapes them into something anew (*corruptio unius sit generatio alterius*)<sup>8</sup>. Such old alchemistic formulae help explain why putrefaction was a favourite subject among many of the Surrealists. They deployed its rotting characteristic as a subversive strategy against modernity’s principles of form, fixity and solidity. The author of “formlessness” (*Informe*), George Bataille, felt inspired by the Surrealists and wrote extensively on affective holes and corruption. Most famous, perhaps, is his fascination with decomposition in *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1986: 46-47):

The corpse will rot; this biological disorder, like the newly dead body a symbol of destiny, is threatening in itself. We no longer believe in contagious magic, but which of us could be sure of not quailing at the sight of a dead body crawling with maggots?

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<sup>8</sup> “The corruption of one thing is the birthing of another” — this Latin scholastic aphorism appears frequently, and in various ways and for different purposes, in the European and Arabic canon (e.g. Aristotle, Avicenna, Aquinas, Dante etc.).

The contemporary Iranian alchemist Reza Negarestani (2008:185), drawing his inspiration from similar sources, has attempted to capture the affective power of decaying holes for an alternative, subversive politics. He explains “[p]ower requires a ground in order to turn into a formative power (power of law, the State, religion, et cetera), and decay incapacitates the ground by which power is instrumentalised.” Holing, for Negarestani, constitutes a strategy that challenges the authority of grounded and solid ontologies. He shares in common with the aforementioned feminists a fascination with openness and holes as “ambiguous entities... within solid matrices, fundamentally corrupting the latter's consolidation and wholeness through perforations and terminal porosities” (ibid. 43). Pores are “ungrounding,” both affectively and materially, fragile and dangerous at the same time. They make aware the temporal immediacy and spatial proximity of an outside that never really was or truly is outside.

Although the “natural” state of the body is one of porousness and permeability, a state that facilitates and consolidates its own contagious animation (though birth, sustenance, breath and decay), a holey body is rarely every accepted socially or politically. It triggers emotions and feelings of discomfort, pain and revulsion, even though our body leaks all the time. “Indeed, the skin is not an impermeable boundary but a permeable zone of intermingling and admixture” (Ingold 2011: 87), or, if we would follow Negarestani (2003), to be open is to be contaminated with the ungrounding, epidemic “germinality” of life, which is fascinating, fragile and terrifying at the same. Putrefaction is the unholey mirror image of the breath.

Compared to the modern idea of skin subjectivity, famously explored in Didier Anzieu’s *Skin Ego*, in which “[t]he self,” as Prosser (2001: 53) explains, is believed to “[derive] from the skin, from those first touches in childhood that create a sense of ourselves as contained and social,” pores help facilitate alternative, more fluid relationships to self and other. Looking at



the skin as porous means that it is no longer an endpoint, fixed in time, containing something valuable in and of itself, nor does it individualise or fix bodies in the form of an insulated pathology. A porous skin is more akin to an always ongoing process shaped by weathering forces that travel through and blend inside and outside. Perhaps it is more unclear than I would like to admit where the “I” of my respiratory being (the “I am”) begins or ends.

## Porous Politics

Politically, a lot could be gained from challenging accepted wisdoms of a closed skin that encapsulates a supposedly finished and self-contained body. The idea that pores can be opened to air, according to the old Epicurean-inspired principle of “constriction and relaxation” (*strictum et laxum*), speaks to the originally holistic conceptualisation of the term “complexion” (from Latin *con*, “together” and *plectare*, “to plait or twine”). Complexion was, as Nancy Siraisi (in Wheeler 2010: 22) explains, “never an absolute but always a relative quality.” The interpretation of a readily receptive, malleable and fluid skin, which remained the norm deep into the European Renaissance, started from the premise that the body’s interior and exterior adapted atmospherically.<sup>9</sup> “Geo-humoralism,” a term coined by Floyd-Wilson (2003: 1) to refer to an early modern reinterpretation of the pre-Socratic idea that the humours were responsible for ethnological difference, was in England “the dominant mode of ethnic distinctions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.” Humoral thinking, she (2003: 3) argues, was so universally accepted that it is “fundamental to early modern English conceptions of how their own, more northern, bodies and minds were shaped and influenced by external forces.” It is through the prism of geo-humoral thinking that the English ethnic identity was able to transform, reinvent and “rectify” itself from the negative

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<sup>9</sup> As late as 1775, the German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (in Wheeler 2010: np, my emphasis) wrote that “colour, whatever be its cause, be it bile, or the influence of the sun, the air, or the climate, is, at all events, an adventitious and easily *changeable thing, and can never constitute a diversity of species.*”

Northern traits that historically were imposed upon it. Cultural inferiority, intemperate behaviour and savage barbarity, classical associations originally attributed to Northern bodies, were later subverted and inversely inscribed into the bodies that the Empire colonised. England, in contrast, became a climatological zone that produced moderate, temperate and civilised bodies.

Social meanings attributed to the relationship between ethnicity and skin were far more varied and fluid than they are today. Johann Nicolas Pechlin (1646–1706), a central figure in early anatomist thinking about skin colour, concluded that dark skin was “‘a superficial attribute, adhering in a thin web’, not a sign of any divinely ordained curse or permanent inferiority... [Skin colour] *means* very little” (Koslofsky 2018: 148, 153, original emphasis). It was too instable and contingent to be meaningful as a means to differentiate between people. Craig Koslofsky (2014: 797, own emphasis) explains that “[t]he *interior and exterior of a person were one*, visible through the temperament, hair and eye colour, personality, and skin: together they made up the “complexion” of the humoral person”. This also meant that explanations for differences in skin colour, emotions and moods were in similar ways connected to the body’s intimate relationship with the condition of the atmosphere and the texture of skin pores. In other words, central to identification of self and Other was the skin’s radical openness and not its statically fixed epidermal surface. The skin cannot be said to have had the same representational and deterministic value that it has today, but was, rather, conceived as fluid, malleable and relational in its mediation with the body’s interior and its exterior atmospheric surrounding(s).<sup>10</sup> Koslofsky (2014: 799) shows that the skin was not explained as a separator in “eighteenth century popular and learned conceptions,” but that the

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<sup>10</sup> Atmospheric relations did not only produce greater fluidity along ethnological lines, but also enjoyed powers that destabilised subjectivities of gender (see, for instance, Paster 1998). This meant that masculinity was accepted to be a fluid, changeable and plural category.

emphasis was on the “the porosity of the skin and its ability to admit all manner of influences and expel all manner of substances.”

This started to change, albeit very gradually and in very elastic ways, with the onset of the transatlantic slave trade and the arrival of the “‘new’ anatomical body of the seventeenth century... that eventually helped detach skin colour from the larger matrix of temperament in humoral theory” (Wheeler 2010: 2). The newly accepted meaning of the word “complexion” came to refer to someone’s “biological” colour of skin, which resulted in the gradual codification of the epidermis as an innate category to classify and differentiate people on the basis of “race”. Colonialism transformed blackness into a scientific question in and of itself. The “fact” of Blackness was in this long, but not inevitable, process reinvented from “a sign of... wisdom, spirituality and resolution... [to a symptom of] inferiority [that justified] a growing slave economy” (Floyd-Wilson 2003: 10, 11). The process that facilitated this change was a gradual thickening, deepening and closing off of the skin.

The gradual withdrawal of a breathing skin and holey body meant that fluidity, malleability and adaptability, all intrinsic properties of the original concept of complexion, were replaced by the deterministic principle of one’s skin colour. The “closing off” of the body also led the medium of air to withdraw from its original affective and relational potency. It lost its potency and significance as a cultural, affective, moral and physiological medium. The porous body, in short, was replaced by a political aesthetics that valued an autonomous, immutable and anatomical body that could be classified and identified on the basis of its skin colour. Consequentially, racial identification, as defined by a limited epidermal schema, became the primary category to produce, enact and differentiate self and Other. The schema shapes and divides political subjectivities and presents them as if materially perennial and terrestrially grounded rather than ephemeral and atmospherically porous. The myth of the supposed stability of skin colour, as an immutable phenotypic reflection of a deeper human

essence, is policed and reinforced in so-called ethnicity classifications, security surveillance apparatuses, popular culture and almost any other aspect of everyday corporal life.

Certainly, the political potency of an open, porous skin can still be witnessed in contemporary relations between the self and the other. However, since the onset of the new pathological body, the relationship to the atmosphere has been reversed as porous bodies themselves now are said to emit individual smells of their own. Kelvin Low's (2009: 85, 86) ethnographic account on ethnicity and smell in Singapore provides just one example that illustrates how "racial categorisation... transpires in relation to olfactory". One of his respondents explains: "People would always say... that... ethnic enclaves have a particular [smell], and you always justify that smell according to ethnic boundaries... [S]kin colour automatically confirms the fact that whatever you smell, is tested and proven upon." The skin in this and other everyday examples is accepted as constitutive in the making, fixing and policing of (the smell of) race. Race itself, however, cannot be (re)conditioned atmospherically as the skin is unchangeably determined by a supposedly fixed biological inside. Pores, instead, are imagined as flaws of purity while makeup is used to conceal them entirely.<sup>11</sup>

Since the onset of modernity, this new pathological body has come to be imagined as complete, "airtight" and without need for communicative holes. Human skin, in this disembodied framework, is interpreted as a border zone that requires protection to constitute and separate a fragile inside from a supposedly dangerous outside, the self from the Other.

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<sup>11</sup> Literature on skin pores is scarce even in the medical sciences. This has started to change as a result of increased societal attention to pores as an aesthetic ideal. Youtube alone contains hundreds of videos explaining how to clean pores but there is also an increasing amount on how to make them (appear) smaller. This sort of renewed interest in skin pores is one of the reasons, I speculate, that medical and dermatological research has started to look into the issue. One paper (Flament 2015) addresses the variety of pore sizes among women from different ethnic backgrounds. Another paper (Shaiek et al. 2017) looks at the impact of age and makeup on the size of pores. A lot of this literature is highly gendered.

Meanwhile, visions of a more atmospheric and relational mode of being-with are considered trivial or “airy”.

Recent medical discoveries in the field of molecular microbiology and metagenomics have started to challenge such historical attitudes to corporal insularity and singularity (e.g. O’Malley and Dupré 2007, Dupré and O’Malley 2007). Some of this research hints at the “atmopolitical” possibility to return to a more fluid, ephemeral and open understanding of the human body. Genomic research on skin microbiome (e.g. Grice and Segre 2013), for instance, reveals that the skin constitutes a geography that harbours a necessary, rich and diverse cosmos of microorganisms that interact and affect the “aggregate” human body in different ways. Others have started emphasising the “great challenge of contemporary microbiome research” in “addressing the ways microbial communities are shared” (Fortenberry 2013: 165). Focusing on this invisible, non-anthropocentric, assemblage of skin microbiota helps facilitate new and exciting ways of thinking about human ontology and biology. After all, why should scale (or even genetics) matter in determining what makes a human “human”? Pores play an essential part in constituting the vast microbiological geography, from which the body and, indeed, human differences take shape. Microbes not only influence the holey body’s materiality, including its physiological and medical wellbeing, but also have an immediate effect on our moods and emotions in ways that have yet to be explored fully (see e.g. Bagga 2018). This new strand of research has started to uncover how emotions do not reside inside the controlling body of the mind, but rather are fused with the no-so-external world that mingles and mediates with the porous skin’s complex and living ecosystem.

## **Conclusion**

The original transformative potential of the holey body's breathing skin, discussed throughout this paper, seems sometimes to have been "forgotten". Returning to an older method of thinking about the skin, one which approaches it as a permeable boundary, could not only help challenge racial subjectivities, making them more fluid and transient, but also rekindle a different kind of relationship with the air that always already is commonly shared. "After all, with every breath we take, we expose our lungs to the outside world, regardless of all the barriers we have erected between the environment and ourselves" (Irigaray and Marder 2014).

By emphasising the importance of bodily holes, whether glands or pores, I hope to contribute to a discussion on resituating the body externally and atmospherically in a larger web of environmental relations. From my investigations of older tradition of speculative thought on the relationship between air and body, emotions and affect cannot be said to be the passive internal receptors of events in the world. Instead, my argument is that body and world are materially and socially interrelated in the shaping and making of emotions and moods. If affect and emotions are embodied, as suggested by both traditional and modern phenomenological approaches to the skin, they are not simply of or even in the body but part of and located in the world. This makes holes intriguing, frightening, destabilising, but, ultimately also important and concrete categories in themselves as they air-condition the holey bodies that facilitate the seeping, floating, airing and leaking that propends affects and emotions, the atmospheric "excess," to flow from and in-between bodies and world.

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