



'Ambience'

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Ambience

Sarah Chambré, Sarah Edwards, Will Fleming and Miriam Helmers

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.

Wallace Stevens, 'The House Was Quiet and The World Was Calm'¹

Ambience, a feeling or mood evoked by an individual's experience of a place at a set time, can frame our experiences of literary texts. As Virginia Woolf suggests, a reader's immediate surroundings can frame their reading of a literary text when, for instance, light falls 'over shoulder' and onto 'the page' (57).² Developing Woolf's sentiment in *Literary Translation and The Rediscovery of Reading* (2012), Clive Scott adds, 'The world outside [Woolf's] window becomes the atmospheric envelope of the reading experience, and, in return, is [...] transformed and absorbed by the book' (57).³

Both Woolf and Scott remind us that the reading experience is not only place-based but also temporally based: the light falling across Woolf's page is transient while Scott's evocation of an atmospheric envelope connotes letters with postal stamps that are sent through time but have their origins rooted in a particular moment or series of moments. For both Scott and Woolf, 'there is no doubt that the act of reading in time requires a corresponding act of reading in place, and the relationship between the two acts is inextricable' (151).⁴ Nevertheless, the ambience of a literary text need not only be prescribed by the world outside of the text but can also be shaped by texts themselves which can immerse the reader in a world apart from theirs.

Exploring whether these two experiences of literary ambience can be separated, this issue of *Moveable Type* analyses moments in which the world outside the text *becomes* the text and those moments in which a text provides readers with an ambient experience that exceeds

¹ Poetry Foundation, 'The House Was Quiet and The World Was Calm by Wallace Stevens', *Poetry Foundation* (Poetry Foundation, 2021), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57607/the-house-was-quiet-and-the-world-was-calm>> [accessed 7 October 2021].

² Clive Scott, *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2012) p.57

³ Ibid., p.57.

⁴ Ibid., p.151.

the world around them in some way. It contends that neither of these ambient experiences can exist in the absence of the other; there will inevitably be contact points as one brushes against the other, demonstrating how thin the veil is that hangs between them. Even in texts and literary experiences that encourage readers to suspend their disbelief, there will be moments that will drop readers back into their embodied reality. These moments, which may be engineered by the text or sporadically imposed on unsuspecting readers by the world around them, illustrate how world and text are always in negotiation with one another.

This quality of ambience is demonstrated in this collection by Rowland Bagnall's 'A Vast Hour: After Genevieve Taggard', a poem which overlays an individual's experiences of different moments and interlaces them with intertextual references which demonstrate how literary mantras have been similarly preoccupied with the relationship between textual ideas and tangible objects. This doubleness can also be found in K.V.K Kvas's 'Alien Investigations of Octopus Philosophies', a text that draws readers into an all-engulfing and humorous exposition of the self-consciousness of textuality in which language itself becomes an immersive environment. While it may seem that Kvas's work hardly enters into negotiation with the outside world, he investigates a sometimes all-too-familiar world of hyperbolic academic verbiage, dissecting the anxieties that underlie a hyper-awareness of language and its effects.

While the feeling of ambience is not new, the concept of ambience is being reconsidered in light of new technologies that alter our place-based experiences and transform them alongside digital networks. This transformation of our literary experiences by digital technologies is evidenced, for example, by Tan Lin who 'describes his work as a form of ambient literature' that is 'interwoven with elements from Twitter, news feeds, google search results, and blog posts', and is therefore 'porous to the networks of textuality that enmesh us (Sanders 2010)'.⁵ Similarly, J.R. Carpenter's *This is a Picture of Wind* (2018) is ambient because of how it used live weather reports to respond to the British storms of 2014.

The production of literary works in an increasingly networked age was at the core of the 2016-2018 Ambient Literature project, a collaboration between UWE Bristol, Bath Spa, and the University of Birmingham, a project that explored 'the locational and technological future of the book'.⁶ Focussing on 'emergent forms of literature that make use of novel technologies and social practices in order to create robust and evocative experiences for readers', the Ambient Literature project commissioned the creation of literary projects by authors such as Kate

⁵ Jonathan Dovey, Tom Abba, and Kate Pullinger, *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practices* (Springer Nature, 2020), p.4.

⁶ 'About the Project – Ambient Literature' <<https://research.ambientlit.com/index.php/2016/06/10/about-the-project/>> [accessed 7 October 2021].

Pullinger.⁷ Echoing the words of Wallace Stevens, the Ambient Literature project hoped ‘the visual, sonic, social and historic resources of place [would] become the elements of a live and emergent scenography for storytelling’ that was tailored and responsive to an individual reader’s location at a particular point in time.⁸

Pullinger’s *Breathe*, for instance, is a ghost story about a young girl, with the ability to speak to ghosts, who attempts to communicate with her deceased mother. Designed to be viewed on a phone screen, the story uses three application programming interfaces--weather, time and location--to gather data on the reader and tailor the story to them ‘according to the temperature, the season, and the place’ in which a reader is situated.⁹ Moreover, as Matt Hayler explains, Pullinger’s story requires readers to interact with their phone screen, transforming every touch, swipe or tap within the story into a literary movement.¹⁰ Other ambient literature projects include *These Pages Fall Like Ash*, which requires readers to take the book to different locations, guiding them around a city and delivering stories at each new place, and *It Must Have Been Dark By Then*, which requires readers to listen to sound recordings, confer with a book and, follow a map as they walk through a city.

While many of us may consider digital devices as tools that distract individuals from the world around them, the ambient literature project sought to create literary works that ‘connect’ readers ‘to place, to manipulate time and presence in order to have us attend to the world around us with greater, rather than reduced, intensity’.¹¹ These projects prompted a wave of interest in ambient literature. *Breathe* was shortlisted for the New Media Writing Prize in 2018, while another ambient literature project--James Attlee’s *The Cartographer’s Confession*--was awarded the prize in 2017. Moreover, ambient literature was described as a ‘buzz word’ in the summer of 2018 and featured on the new word blog at Cambridge Online Dictionary in 2019.¹²

With this issue of *Moveable Type*, we hope to set in motion a new wave of interest in ambient literature, seeking new insight into the patterns and thematics of ambient writing and bringing to light discussions left unresolved by various critiques of ambience. Our issue theme of *Ambience* presents a conversation between a group of scholars, writers and reviewers who locate

⁷ ‘About the Project – Ambient Literature’

<<https://research.ambientlit.com/index.php/about-the-project/>> [accessed 7 October 2021].

⁸ Jonathan Dovey, Tom Abba, and Kate Pullinger, *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practices* (Springer Nature, 2020), p.1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁰ ‘Breathe by Kate Pullinger – Ambient Literature’ <<https://research.ambientlit.com/breathe>> [accessed 7 October 2021].

¹¹ Jonathan Dovey, Tom Abba, and Kate Pullinger, *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practices* (Springer Nature, 2020), p.5.

¹² ‘Definition of Ambient Literature, BuzzWord from Macmillan Dictionary’

<<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/buzzword/entries/ambient-literature.html>> [accessed 7 October 2021].

ambient literatures beyond apps and web browsers, identify new research trajectories, and challenge definitions of ambient literature, countering its contemporariness and reliance on technology by foregrounding precursors to ambient literature. We suggest that these developments be considered beyond a distraction or aberrant offshoot of book history; as contiguous with historic reader response practice; and that they may come to be an important component or even central element of composition and reception.

In this issue both David Prescott-Steed and Sebastian Rolley are preoccupied with situated literary experiences. Prescott-Steed's poem 'Grave Reading' places us in front of our own mortality, capturing the fragility of human existence by depicting a journey and a grave visitation. Rolley's article provides a close-reading and theoretical discussion of Duncan Speakman's ambient 'It Must Have Been Dark By Then', a book and audio experience which guides readers on a walk around different locations. While Prescott-Steed mimetically depicts a walk that presents us as mortal beings, Rolley walks in the shoes of Speakman's readers, tracing their steps, analysing their testimonies, and ultimately arguing that ambient literature can 'attune' us not only to our mortality but also to the fragile nature of everything around us (12). By placing Timothy Morton's ecological Marxism in conversation with the ambient poetics of Speakman's work, Rolley presents an argument for a radical, ecological, and ontological reading of *It Must Have Been Dark By Then* which builds upon the ideas explored by Matt Hayler and Jon Dovey in *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practices* (2020). For Rolley, *It Must Have Been Dark By Then* cultivates in readers/users a sense of ambient attention.

Countering Rolley's sympathetic reading of *Ambient Literature*, Chunlin Men's review of the book tackles the question of how reading has changed in the digital age, a question which it suggests the critics in *Ambient Literature* successfully raise but do not yet adequately answer. Recognising that the 2020 book presents a departure point for future research, Men urges us to consider what exactly 'are the new strategies, sensitivities and forms of awareness that attention to situated reading and writing can bring to literary humanities in general' (92).

As if in response to Men's question, Sadie Barker's review of Don DeLillo's paperback *The Silence* (2020) presents anticipatory literature as a subgenre of ambient literature, suggesting that ambient literature need not necessarily mark a departure from the book. Anticipatory literature, Barker suggests, is rooted in a time and place and yet fixes its gaze firmly on a future reorientation, alteration or transformation of it. Presenting DeLillo's novel alongside other apocalyptic texts of the moment, such as Jenny O'fill's *Weather* (2020) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), Barker suggests that 'the event of COVID-19, in its particularity and

suddenness, bears opportunity to consider literary modes of anticipation, premonition and reflection, up close', but has also attuned us to 'the ways in which the everyday bears signs of the precarity, disorientation, and chaos to come' (95-96).

While Barker considers the temporal complexities of ambient attention, Flora Sagers suggests that Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020), along with the other three books in her seasonal quartet, evidences truly ambient literature because it 'holds the reader in their own socio-historical moment by responding to and reflecting on the most significant events of British contemporary history' (102). This particular quality of ambience is enabled by the drastically truncated production time of this quartet so that it can respond to events--such as Brexit in 2016 and Covid-19 in 2020--as they happen. While this approach is enticing, Sagers' review goes beyond the simplicity of this ostensibly ambient quality of Smith's work to discuss a characteristic of the novel that is seemingly out of sync with popular conceptions of ambient literature. While some may perceive ambient literature to be as temporally anchored as it is place-based, Sagers demonstrates that even though Smith's work is situated in place because its narratives and publication timeline aligns with real-time and real-world events, her novel is also temporally open and reparatively so in order to create a space in which readers can look to the future with hope, rather than with dread as in DeLillo's novel.

Rhonda Mayne's review of Zadie Smith's 2020 essay collection *Intimations*, another book released during the pandemic, discusses Smith's essays as ambient texts 'immersed in the "here and now"' (107). However, Mayne's review also invites us to consider how the ambient quality of a literary text might be a transient one by comparing Smith's essays alongside those of Virginia Woolf. Mayne prompts us to consider how ambient texts such as *Intimations* and *Summer* while retaining their ability to speak about the events of this time to future readers, lose their ability to speak from within those events to readers who have witnessed and experienced those events.

Speaking to Mayne's concerns, Sarah Chambré's extended review of Olivia Laing's essay collection *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (2020) studies how art writing, rooted in the moment of its publication and in the moment of viewing, ages and changes over time. Illustrating how ambient qualities are not simply lost, Chambré identifies the qualities of Laing's writing that provide readers with the sense that they are experiencing an 'ambient gallery visit' within the pages of a book and shows how 'the polyphonic, stereoscopic' and 'dialogic quality' of Laing's essays maintains their ambient atmosphere, firmly grounding them in 'specific [moments] and [locations] with detailed reference to artist biography and to wider socio-cultural frameworks' (123-124). By viewing Laing's collection through the work of Rita

Felski and Michael Marcinowski, Chambré demonstrates how Laing ‘miniaturises the wider processes by which a cultural form is uniquely defined by its socio-historical moment’ (125).

Zoe Rucker’s review of Sophie Seita’s *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* (2019) similarly discusses how we can excavate the ambience of earlier works. Rucker iterates Seita’s necessary attentiveness to the “provisional materiality” of avant-garde magazines and the ‘provisional, fluid identity of the communities that publish them’; yet, Rucker also suggests Seita’s concluding conceptual framework of little magazine as a ‘vivarium’ is useful when investigating the ambience of an earlier work (131). By comparing the ambient-insight of little magazines to vivariums, it enables us to view a literary work or a historic magazine as a small and porous ecosystem which interacts with surrounding communities, magazines and coteries. Rather than providing us with a snapshot of a moment, close study of how little magazines interact with one another, with their historical moment and with writers, is another way in which we can reveal the miniaturisation of a socio-historical moment.

While Rucker responds to this issue’s theme of ambience by studying the materiality of little magazines in the work of Seita, Urvi Shah’s review of *Ambient Literature* directs our focus to the technological materialities of ambient literature. For Shah, ambient literature--as it is defined by the Ambient Literature project--‘calls into question the very definition of a book’ (118). While praising *Ambient Literature* for its role ‘as a preliminary companion to a new field of digital literature’, Shah calls for ‘more discussions and deliberations’ about ambient literature ‘and whether it is a threat to the book as an object or a continuation of it’ (118).

Similarly concerned by the technological emphasis in recent discussions of ambient literature, Laura Day’s article presents a thematic discussion of Norman Nicholson’s poem ‘Hard of Hearing’ which reasserts the importance of defining ambience as a place-based experience that is emotional and sensory, rather than technologically driven. Day’s article contributes to the scholarship of this understudied poet, but also raises pertinent questions for the study and creation of Ambient Literature. In response to ambient literature projects that rely on readers being able, for instance, to listen to sound clips, Day presents a reading of Nicholson’s ‘Hard of Hearing’ that challenges the assumptions people may make ‘about the form ambient literature takes, its relationship with the senses, and its accessibility to readers with disabilities’ (36). By exploring how a sense of self and place can be constructed in the absence of sound, Day challenges the centrality of sound to ambient projects.

Further exploration of the role of the five senses within ambient-inspired literature can be found in the creative submissions of Elisa Sabbadin and Scott Stevens. Sabbadin’s ‘Being

Home' celebrates the five bodily senses with an intensity of imagery-input; but this is balanced by the bitter-sweet experience of a dislocation between immediate impressions and a lasting sense of belonging. Stevens's 'Crystal Springs Reservoir' also revels in visual delight both in terms of the scene being painted and the interweaving of visual and emotional texture.

Expanding upon Day's concerns about the contemporariness that is assumed when we presuppose technology as central to ambient literature, Miriam Helmers' article offers a reading of medieval mystery plays that overturns the apparent monopoly of digital technologies on ambient literature. She presents the medieval pageant wagons--mobile theatrical stages that moved through the city--as early ambient technologies. Moreover, by borrowing the critical terminology of present-day discussions of ambient literature, Helmers also describes passion play actors as collecting data on their audiences.

As this editorial has sought to demonstrate, among the pleasures to be found within and across the material published in this year's issue are the tentative echoes of call-and-response between seemingly disparate artistic media, genres, critics, and periods—something surely advocated by the Ambient Literature project to which this year's theme is indebted. Read Catherine Dent's article on Virginia Woolf's 'ancestral mountains,' in tandem with Maria Sledmere's provocative manifesto for cloud writing as a form of hyper critique, and you discover a historical trajectory based upon kindred literary phenomena (59). The immediate common denominator is manifest: literary treatments of ecologies / architectures / atmospherics / spaces—mountains & clouds. Delve deeper still, and you find snapshots of lyric and novelistic subjectivity, rooted in ecological and epistemological 'hermeneutic knots', each one a product of a distinct period in modern history yet somehow outliving and lurching outwards from it (59).

In Dent's piece, we discover Leslie Stephen, Woolf's mountaineering father, meditating in an 1873 essay on "a model for a biocentric mode of thinking which rejects 'the man-in-the-environment image in favour of *the relational, total-field image*'" (67). Out of this, Dent suggests, comes Woolf's attempt in her 1941 short story 'The Symbol' to decenter the subject of anthropological humanism, in turn anticipating "Aldo Leopold's notion of 'thinking like a mountain' (65), which, as Timothy Clark explains, 'highlights the finite scope of human thought, its limitation, for instance, to stretches of time that would seem miniscule to a mountain'" (66). Deftly employing the new materialist theories of Stacy Alaimo, Dent unearths through the elegant link of these ancestral mountains a developing prototype of the Ambient Project: a genealogy of questions about subjectivity and literary vantage which open onto considerations of reading technologies, instrumental literatures, and the evergreen quandary of how texts interact with forms of social, political, and economic life.

This is in many ways the baton that Sledmere's article 'I, Cloud' takes up. One of the hallmarks of Dent's article is its assertion that Woolf's 'inability to pin down the symbolism of the mountain need not be read as a defeat, but rather as an openness to a plurality of meanings, or even to the possibility of a meaning that exists beyond human understanding' (66); so too Sledmere, in theorising a contemporary, combative anthropocene lyric, 'refuses to transform cloud into reified metaphor, inviting instead a more ambient sense of agency' (49). Filtering a plethora of artistic works as diverse as Stephen Rodefer's *Four Lectures* and John Constable's "painterly cloud" through a hyper-contemporary prism (46), Sledmere proposes a wholesale repurposing of lyric's ambient potential—spatial, temporal, proprioceptive—which pushes towards 'reading atmosphere-as-commons' (51). If Dent's inspired archival take on Woolf's mountains highlights a kind of diagnosis reached in 1941, Sledmere's theory of anthropocene-lyric-cum-hypercritique surely offers a cure to a similar malady: "Cloud writing happens at the risk of abstraction—deferring 'pure meaning' to metaphor or empty gesture—but its lyric weathering can help us think expansively in condensed form the fertile blind spots, obscurities, clearings and illuminations of an affective, ecological poetics which acknowledges historical and ongoing inequalities" (55).

This year, we are happy to have included creative submissions in *Moveable Type*. Without formally taking a position on ambient literature, the creative expression of these pieces shows the anxieties raised by our interactions with our material and less tangible surroundings. The reviews within this issue reveal a lively interest in ambient literature and literary ambience which suggests technological ambience, though it may at first appear to be a blip, could in fact be seen as a trend in contemporary literature. The reviews invest significant time and energy proposing ambient genres, affects, narrative structures, and critical approaches. The articles, on the other hand, draw links with historical reader response theories and usefully widen the scope of a niche movement and raise questions about this affective genre. Among those questions we are left with upon reaching the end of this issue are: is technology, if not modern technology, central to the idea of ambient literature? How is our interaction with space and time documented as such in ambient literature without becoming fixed in a moment? Can 'ambient literature' and its terminology be used with flexibility by literary criticism in general or is 'ambient literature' a specific subgenre in itself, also belonging to a particular moment in time?