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# MONSOON ASSEMBLAGES FORUM

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## Introduction: Thinking with the Monsoon

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This GeoHumanities forum arose out of three symposia convened by the European Research Council funded project, Monsoon Assemblages over a three-year period: Monsoon [+ other] Airs, held in April 2017, Monsoon [+ other] Waters in April 2018, and Monsoon [+ other] Grounds in March 2019. The ambitions of the symposia were to develop new intersectional understandings of monsoonal esthetics, agencies, epistemologies and ontologies, and to engender monsoonal ways of thinking. The papers in this Forum are an outcome of these gatherings, whose full proceedings are available on the Monsoon Assemblages website: <http://monass.org/outputs/>.

**Key Word: Monsoon Assemblages forum.**

The South Asian monsoon is more than an annual meteorological event. It is what Anna Tsing (2019) called an “open-ended gathering”: an assemblage of human and nonhuman ways of being, knowing and intra-acting across difference, forming an emergent multiplicity whose story humans are part of, but by no means author. It is an atmospheric principle that seeps into almost every aspects of life in the regions it envelopes—agriculture, culture, economics, infrastructure, politics and religion. It inundates lived environments every year, connecting land with sea and sky. It defies the logics of subdivision that underpin the modern political constitution—land as solid, stable, sub-divisible and the basis of human habitation, sea as fluid, indivisible and hostile to human settlement and air as gaseous, invisible and indispensable to human life. The monsoon cuts across these divisions. It is a material, spatial-temporal practice, or what Karen Barad (2007, 179) called a “spacetime mattering” that reorganizes air, water, land, settlements, cities, buildings and bodies through heat, wind, rain, seepage, flow and flood. It unites science with politics and policy with affect. It is a restless, material multiplicity intra-acting with itself and the human and nonhuman bodies and practices that respond to and shape it from within in countless divergent ways. Today, as climate change disrupts its cycles and explosive economic growth and rapid urbanization increase the capriciousness of its ways, the papers in this forum seek to better understand and theorize its modes of being and ongoing transformative power by thinking with its agential materiality in various ways.

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The first of the symposia, Monsoon [+ other] Airs invited contributions about monsoonal atmospheres, depressions, winds, cyclones, clouds, onsets, temporalities and forecasts; about birds, seed dispersal, dust, aerosols and fragrances; about monsoon sounds and music; about monsoon driven trading systems; about monsoons on the air and in the media; about the many systems and technologies through which knowledge of monsoon air is produced—religious, cultural, political, scientific, everyday. It also invited attention to urban monsoon airs—heat islands, the micro-politics of life performed by air, bodily airs, air-conditioning, air-pollution, air-ports and air architecture. The second, Monsoon [+ other] Waters followed Mathur and da Cunha (2017) to explore ideas of monsoon as wetness, of wet monsoonal cultures and ways of visualizing wetness; of oceans and tidal zones, deltas and wetlands, cyclones and storm surges; of what we called late-modern monsoon waters, meaning the ways-of-being-monsoon-water that neoliberal policies have produced, such as flood waters, toxic waters, beautified waters, bottled waters and so on, and the new or invigorated social movements these waters might have inspired. The third symposium, Monsoon [+ other] Grounds approached the monsoon as a seasonal designer of the earth, its soils, its terrestrial ecosystems and its politics. It was interested in how the monsoon scours river banks and fertilizes valleys as it carries vast quantities of sediment from the mountains to the sea; in how the pulse of life is linked to annual monsoonal cycles of hot dry summers, bursting rains and retreating winds; in the ways in which meteorology and atmospheric science inform cropping patterns and farming practices and the human rituals that observe monsoonal rhythms; in how the alteration of the chemistry of monsoon grounds by fertilizers and pesticides has triggered political and economic disputes and given rise to fortunes and failures; in how monsoonal terrain has been converted into real estate, undoing intricate relations between grounds and their waters and unraveling human relations with them; in how the metallurgical alchemies of the construction industry have transformed clay, silt, sand and sediment into the building blocks of everyday life.

The papers in this forum were all first presented at one or other of the Monsoon Assemblages symposia and speak to a number of the questions they raised. Common to many of them is the ambition to think *with* rather than *about* modes of aerial, oceanic and earthly becoming and the epistemological and political consequences of doing so. This unsettles binaries, material and conceptual, and pushes thought into more relational, intra-active modes. Existing categories of relational thought, such as ecotone in Cane and Denning or terraqueous in Bremner are invoked, or new categories of thought, such as stickiness in Bhat or leaking in Powis, developed. Ethnography, a relational, emergent intra-active mode of knowledge production is used in Cullen's, Simonsen Puri's and Arenes' contributions. Guibert

experiments with the epistolary form as a way of engaging ecosystems as sentient beings, while Geros links the emergence of landscape as a practice to the exploitation of resources.

Harshavardhan Bhat's, "Becoming the monsoon forest—emergence in the breakdown of categories," addresses the breakdown of binary categories directly. He thinks the monsoon relationally with the *vilyati kikar* (*Prosopis juliflora*), a so-called invasive species in India that has taken over native monsoon forests and arid ecologies. He undertakes a historiography of the species and its contemporary status in India. He questions attempts to eradicate it as an outsider by exploring its embodiment in and with the monsoon and in relation to a native species, the *khejri* (*Prosopis cineria*). The paper ends by developing the concept of stickiness, which the author defines as a "relational blurriness of monsoonal becoming," and uses as a conceptual apparatus to make sense of his *kikar* stories. Anthony Powis's "The Relational Materiality of Groundwater" takes the Chennai Metro Rail construction project as a way to unpack concepts of strata, porosity and pressure as ways of understanding how experts measure and materially intervene in groundwater. Instead of these categories he argues for a more relational theory of groundwater's materiality, taking leaking, cracking, sinking and swelling as ways in which groundwater acts to trouble boundaries and knowledge. He casts groundwater as ludic infrastructure that takes away authority from all perspectives, which are shown to be partial, and points out that matter is nothing but change. Lindsay Bremner's, "Sedimentary Ways" extends the idea of matter as nothing but change by examining the becomings and political lives of sediment, an emergent, intra-active, terra-aqueous substance formed by the weathering of the Earth's surfaces by the atmosphere. Thinking with sediment provides her with a way of understanding the intersectionality of the Earth's hydrological and geological cycles and of the Earth's surface as mobile, emergent and forceful, troubling ideas of territory as fixed, bounded or grounded.

Continuing the theme of the trans-corporeality of matter, Jonathan Cane's "Concrete Oceans: The *Dolos*, Apartheid Engineering and the Intertidal Zone," joins scholars in critical oceanic humanities in the global south in responding to Peters and Steinberg's (2019) call for a more-than-wet-ontology of the ocean. The paper focuses on the *dolos*, a concrete prototype invented by the South African state in 1964 as a form of coastal armor. Cane offers an extended analysis of the *dolos* through the historiography of the Great Trek, interpreting it as a form of racialized domination of the ocean that constructed gendered and militaristic conceptions of oceanic relationality. He then undertakes an alternative trans-corporeal reading of the *dolos*, drawing on Neimanis's (2012) eco-feminist idea of ecotone as a liminal space where two or more complex systems meet. This brings his paper into conversation with Laura Denning's "Ecotone as methodology" in the Practices and Curations section of the forum. Denning's contribution focuses on a six-week program she ran at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore to develop an understanding of the water tanks of Bangalore as ecotones and to reimagine them as sites of community activism. The paper suggests that the concept of ecotone offers new ways of understanding place and sensation and offers a non-hierarchical, relational methodology for personal and collective ways of engaging with issues and telling new stories.

In Beth Cullen, Stine Simonsen Puri and Alexandra Arenes' contributions to the forum, ethnography emerges as an intra-active, emergent way of thinking with the monsoon and bio-geo-chemical processes. Beth Cullen's "Intuiting a monsoonal ethnography" in the Practices and Curations section is an assemblage of visual material and field notes that convey the process of intuiting a monsoonal ethnography in cities in South and Southeast Asia. Attentive to the co-

constitutive role of the monsoon in the production of urban habitats, the paper is structured around Cullen's observations of human practices, infrastructures and nonhuman species. She argues that learning to consider weather patterns such as the monsoon as vital actors in urban worlds is an urgent necessity in the light of increasingly uncertain climatic futures. Stine Simonsen Puri's, "Gambling on the Monsoon in the Indian Desert," extends this by examining the centuries-old practice of betting money on the rain during the monsoon season in Rajasthan in northwest India. Rain betting highlights localized monsoon patterns, especially sudden shifts in cloud direction and speed and foregrounds a creativity around weather uncertainties that, like weather derivatives trading, is about pursuit of profit through active ongoing engagement with weather risks. The paper shows that people are not just victims of the unpredictability of the monsoon, and that elements of agency, playfulness, and speculation co-exist in rain-dependent economic systems.

Alexandra Arenes's "Inside the Critical Zone," in the Practices and Curations section of the forum discusses her efforts to find a way of visualizing the work of Critical Zone scientists, a global network of geoscientists working to understanding the complexity of anthropogenic biogeo-chemical changes within the Critical Zone of the earth system. Through ethnographic observations of scientists at work for four years, Arenes proposes a new visual tool halfway between science and landscape to trace the times and depths of the Anthropocene, a form of gaia-graphy (Arenes, Latour, and Gaillardet 2018) for Critical Zone practice. This resonates with Christina Geros's paper, "Drinking the Winds: Monsoon as Atmospheric Spring," which, while arguing for the inclusion of meteorological and atmospheric material and dynamics within the space of landscape practice, cautions against linking this to the exploitation of resources. The paper focuses on current experiments to mine atmospheric water above the Tibetan Plateau by relocating the watershed of the south Asian monsoon to the Plateau, and the visual media through which this project is portrayed as natural and right. She argues for the possibility of landscape as a more inclusive project of knowledge building rather than resource extraction. Finally, Eric Guibert's paper in the Practices and Curations section, "On the usefulness of modern animism: Co-creating architecture with soils as ontological practice," takes the form of a nonrepresentational epistolary conversation between the author and the soils he has designed with. Guibert uses this format as a way of nurturing empathy and care for ecosystems and as a research method to work with soils relationally. In the letters that contribute to the paper, Guibert explores the idea of architectural animism as an ethical position to live by and an embodied practice to co-create with more-than-human agency. The anthropomorphic quality of his letters, while projective, forces writer and reader to become aware of living ecosystems as sentient beings.

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