

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 16.3 (Winter 2020)

---

## Clearing the Air: Emotional Labor and Environmental Denial in *North and South*

By Janice Schroeder, Carleton University

*Why do a vast proportion of the inhabitants of London, and other dense towns, die of diseases of the lungs? Why does the spruce linen that starts pure and spotless every day from Camberwell, Camden Town, and other suburbs, reach the City and public offices smudged and grimy? . . . Why are foreigners made to believe that our oldest public edifices are built of coal, and our statues carved in ebony? Why do flowering shrubs and young children transplanted from the country to within the bills of mortality, sicken and die? Why do the sheep in the parks wear the livery of woe and appear in perpetual half mourning? Why is a smoky house placed first in the list of domestic tortures; even before a scolding wife? . . . Why? Because the eight hundred thousand domestic chimneys, and the uncounted factory chimneys of London are not made to consume their own smoke, in spite of Lord Palmerston.*

– “Smoke or No Smoke” (*Household Words*, July 1854)

<1>“Smoke or No Smoke” appeared in the same year as Elizabeth Gaskell was writing *North and South*, set in the fictional industrial city of Milton-Northern, and modelled on Manchester. The writer unites seemingly unconnected objects and phenomena with a single answer. Everything from smudged household linens to soot-stained public buildings to sick and dying children results from dirty air produced by coal-burning, a problem that even Lord Palmerston’s 1853 smoke abatement legislation<sup>1</sup> cannot solve. As sobering as this list is, it’s the reference to the housewife’s scold that most interests me here. In what follows, I ask what the domestic woman’s hectoring has to do with the many legislative attempts to regulate outdoor smoke emissions generated by both industry and private homes. What does emotional regulation, in other words, have to do with environmental regulation?

<2>Air quality and its effect on women’s health is a running source of anxiety in *North and South*. The effects of industrial pollution bear most heavily on the female characters, something few critics of the novel have observed. Yet many critics have asserted that *North and South* does not offer enough of a thoroughgoing critique of industrial capital, the factory system, the exploitation of labor, and, most recently, the environmental and human costs they exact.<sup>2</sup> The novel seems to introduce problems, such as Bessy Higgins’s industrial disease, or Milton’s “smoke nuisance,” only to minimize or bracket them in favour of Margaret’s upward mobility and cross-class dialogue as solutions. This essay posits that the avoidance of the problem of air quality is contingent upon the emotional labor of the domestic female, whose primary task is to absorb the novel’s considerable grief, much of it directly connected to Milton’s contaminated air. That is, Gaskell repeatedly links Margaret’s acts of indoor emotional (and physical) household labor to outdoor air quality. Key to our understanding of this linkage is the structure of emotional

labor itself, wherein the laborer helps produce desired feelings in another while suppressing her own, a process that, in *North and South*, results in the appearance of denial of an environmental threat. However, by approaching the novel's humming environmental anxiety through the lens of female emotional labor, I argue that the novel is more than simply denialist, but that it reveals how acts of gendered care work are indexical to the pains and losses of the Anthropocene.

<3>In *Living in Denial*, sociologist Kari Norgaard examines the “social organization of denial,” thereby decoupling denial from individual psychology or personal failure, and instead situating it within shared social norms and political-economic contexts. In her Introduction, “Boundaries and Moral Order,” Norgaard observes: “in every community there are social rules for focusing attention, including rules of etiquette that involve tact-related ethical obligations to ‘look the other way’ and ignore things we most likely would have noticed” (6). “Tact-related ethical obligation” is a useful term for the substance of Margaret’s emotional labor in *North and South*. It is not so much that Margaret denies or minimizes the problem of air quality in some kind of absolute sense, as that she engages in something like “soft denial”—a divided mental state in which one accepts the truth of an ongoing crisis but continues to function as though it is not happening (Klein 3).<sup>3</sup> In the face of mounting anxiety that the women of her community are becoming sick and dying from effluents caused by Milton’s booming cotton industry, Margaret’s response is to listen, to soothe, to change the subject if necessary. While this might look like denial, such a response is also entirely consistent with the social rules of Margaret’s milieu and her role as emotional caregiver.

<4>As domestic manager, Margaret’s task is to capture and suppress the emotional dust in the room, clearing the air, so to speak, as she has been socialized to do by class and gender norms. Other characters’ fears about environmental pollutants caused by industrial production are displaced by Margaret’s acts of emotional management and the novel’s greater focus on the domestic interior. For some critics, the novel’s domestic turn weakens its incipient environmental critique. For example, Mary Debrabant argues that Gaskell introduces the threat of environmental pollution only to downplay its importance in favor of personal relationships and Margaret’s emotional and economic progress. No one is ultimately held accountable for Bessy’s death, and complaints about the smoke and dirt of Milton are “presented as *perceived* unpleasantness” on the part of uppity southerners rather than as preventable dangers to public health (Debrabant, par. 16). Similarly, Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer argue that *North and South*’s focus on the personal and the intimate ultimately becomes a kind of apologetic for the coal economy that helped foster the industrial novel in the first place. Here I want to build on these critics’ observations by examining more closely the emotional dynamics of denial and the importance of the production of feeling to the novel’s relationship to fossil capitalism. The goal is not to recuperate the novel for the proper environmental critique we might want it to make, but to ask a larger question here about how “women’s work” and women’s labor have been harnessed to the needs of capital to ignore or soft-pedal the ecological damage wrought by the carbon economy in the anthropogenic age. In the words of Renee Lertzman, “the question is not about a lack of care but rather where does the care or concern go? How is it channelled and expressed?” (Lertzman 5). In *North and South*, care about environmental air quality is funnelled into the domestic woman’s emotionally costly forms of caregiving for her community. In asking that Gaskell’s novel and its heroine *care more* and *do something* about the environmental catastrophes it both introduces and anticipates, we construct a “gap between affect and

environmental action” (Lertzman 3), one that allows us to not see what Margaret—and Gaskell’s novel—is already doing: offering a document of women’s witness to the environmental and human toll of coal combustion.

<5>Put simply, we need a more robust criticism on the work of gender and the place of women in the Victorian Anthropocene. In Gaskell’s novel, the problem of air quality reveals the problem of emotional labor, while women’s emotional labor, in turn, makes visible the novel’s questions about the problem of industrial air. That both air and emotion work are largely invisible to the naked eye—until they aren’t—is crucial to Gaskell’s exposure of women’s daily work and life expectancy within a coal-powered industrial city. If air is something difficult to theorize because it is both everywhere and nowhere (Menely 96), so too is emotional labor, which is very often the work we don’t see because it is not deemed as work in the first place, but simply the way things are, as natural as breathing.<sup>4</sup> Gaskell’s linking of Margaret’s emotional labor with references to air quality and the difficulty of drawing breath in Milton demonstrates a connection between these terms that might not seem obvious until we notice the number of times that characters’ breathing and acts of emotional management appear in the same frame.

<6>In several key scenes of the novel, Margaret’s acts of emotional labor on behalf of the Hales, Dixon, and Bessy Higgins *filter* stated concerns about air quality and its effects on women’s health and domestic labor. The pattern of these scenes begins with a complaint or fear about air quality expressed by another character, followed by Margaret’s attempts to soothe them: a mundane act of emotional care that we hardly think twice about, since this is the naturalized response of the domestic woman. But one of the achievements of Gaskell’s novel is its demonstration of the *work* of such forms of care and the toll they take on women. Milton’s industrial air is visibly dirty—literal matter that coats linen and hands and lungs. It appears as both daily nuisance and mortal menace. Margaret’s task is to transform the material threat posed by polluted air produced outside the home by clearing the air inside it—soothing feelings, maintaining calm, responding politely: work that is both psychologically and physically costly for her. The female domestic manager functions as an emotional filtration system, regulating and producing family sociability inside a home situated in one of the global epicentres of the coal economy at a moment when knowledge of the environmental and health impacts of industrial coal combustion was dawning.

<7>Clearing the air in *North and South* is an ongoing project that takes place in several interrelated sites: in the physical atmosphere enveloping the industrial city, in the unevenly-regulated air produced inside the factory, and in the physical and emotional atmosphere of the home. The failure to suppress “unparliamentary” smoke” (Gaskell 59) emissions and cotton fluff, and the violent attempts to quell labor unrest are not so much ignored in the novel as they are filtered through largely female labor forms of emotion work and housework. While industrialists like John Thornton either comply with or ignore parliamentary regulations to cut smoke stack emissions or reduce the amount of particulate matter in their carding rooms, it is left to women, especially working-class women such as Bessy Higgins, to bear the brunt of the effects of the coal economy and industrial factory production, and, in Margaret’s case, to take on the burden of emotional labor required in one of the economic miracles of British industrial production. *North and South* thus pairs the labor to draw breath in a polluted city with the breathless pace of the domestic female’s emotion work on behalf of her family and community.

<8>In *The Managed Heart* Arlie Russell Hochschild defines emotional labor as that which requires the laborer “to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (8). When this production of feeling is sold for a wage, the worker can become self-alienated—a process Hochschild researched in her fieldwork with female flight attendants. Via Marx’s citation of the 1863 Children’s Employment Commission in *Capital*, Hochschild opens *The Managed Heart* by invoking the figure of the child worker in a wallpaper factory as an emblem of the instrumentalization of labor. Hochschild then tracks the replacement of the physical forms of factory labor with the “symbolic prominence” of emotional labor in the US service economy of the 1970s and 80s. The product is no longer the bolt of wallpaper but the immaterial and intangible—a “state of mind” or a desired feeling in the customer or client. Moreover, the “emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself” (Hochschild 5-8). The juvenile factory worker’s feelings about wallpaper are irrelevant, while the service worker’s supposed love for the job manifested in her smile and other bodily and facial gestures—her emotional labor, in other words—is integral to the product or service being sold.

<9>Hochschild only briefly addresses parliamentary investigations into nineteenth-century industrial labor conditions, but the reference nevertheless invites a consideration of other prominent cultural forms produced alongside the governmental inquiry. *North and South* and other middle-class industrial novels did what employment commissions could not—reveal the emotional lives of workers who had become “instruments of labor” (Marx qtd in Hochschild 3). But *North and South* also anticipates Hochschild’s theory, making visible the emotional labor of the middle-class domestic woman, although it would have been called something else—sympathy, duty, or women’s mission, for example.<sup>5</sup> Margaret’s unpaid emotional labor for her extended family, which includes the Higginses, (Hochschild refers to such unpaid emotional labor as emotion work), indirectly helps manage the threat of smoky, dust-clogged air from coal-burning factories.

<10>In what follows, I focus on three key exchanges in the novel in which air quality is invoked in relation to women’s health and daily work: in Margaret’s bedside conversation with Bessy in one of the early Milton chapters and in two later exchanges with Mrs. Hale. Both Bessy and Mrs. Hale are linked by their respiratory illness (stated or implied), by Margaret’s emotional labor for them, and the denial, chiefly Mr. Hale’s and Thornton’s, that there is anything wrong with his wife or anything much to be done for his workers, human death being one of the costs of doing business. These three scenes all turn on the tangible presence of contaminated air, its threat to human health, and Margaret’s management of the other women’s fear. Margaret’s “tact-related ethical obligation to look the other way” in these scenes—what appears as her denial of the problem—is the emotional care work that is unsupplied by Mr. Hale or Thornton.

### **A Soft Breeze**

<11>In Chapter Five of the first volume of *North and South*, Margaret is tasked with informing her fragile mother that the Hale family will soon be moving to Milton-Northern, an industrial manufacturing centre, and leaving the bucolic splendor of the agricultural south. Grasping for some kind of silver lining, Margaret remarks, “I almost hoped you might have been glad to leave Helstone, mamma, . . . You have never been well in this air, you know” (45). But if the “soft”

Helstone air is unhealthy and enervating, Mrs. Hale also knows how much worse the air of Milton will be: “You can’t think the smoky air of a manufacturing town, all chimneys and dirt like Milton-Northern, would be better than this air, which is pure and sweet, if it is too soft and relaxing” (45).

<12>As this passage indicates, the references to air quality appear even before the Hales move to Milton. Mrs. Hale’s complaints about Helstone’s air are easy enough to dismiss in the early chapters as the grievances of an aging, high maintenance woman. But Mrs. Hale’s steadily deteriorating health in Milton, together with Bessy Higgins’s death from byssinosis, also known as brown lung disease, significantly raise the stakes of the novel’s treatment of air quality and its effects on women’s bodies and labor. As Jessie Reeder has observed, it is never quite asserted that industrial air pollution causes Mrs. Hale’s death: “the exact nature of [Mrs. Hale’s] disease is kept secret, leaving an empty place in the narrative” (Reeder, par. 11). The novel knows and does not know why Mrs. Hale is dying. On the other hand, “Bessy’s fatal illness is not mysterious or speculative” (Reeder, par. 11); her lungs are slowly being strangled from the effects of inhaling cotton dust or “fluff” in the carding process,<sup>6</sup> a fact she explains to Margaret in Chapter 13, entitled, ironically, “A Soft Breeze in a Sultry Place.”

<13>The title of Chapter 13 refers not to Milton’s air but to the memory of the “soft and relaxing” air of Helstone, which Margaret describes with loving fondness to Bessy at her bedside. Of course, the “soft breeze” also refers to Margaret herself, who arrives at Bessy’s bedside—the “sultry place”—to breathe fresh air into the room. This chapter marks the first time Margaret has spoken of her birthplace in any detail since her arrival in Milton nearly a year prior. But if it serves as a potent, soothing memory for Margaret, “Helstone” is also meant to function primarily as a tonic for Bessy. Allowing herself the luxury of nostalgic reminiscence, Margaret paints a soft-focus word picture of Helstone’s abundant shade trees, velvety turf, tinkling brook, billowy ferns, and golden sunlight (100). It is “the country *in* the city” (Schroeder and Leckie 31), landscape porn that temporarily distracts Bessy from her suffering but also reminds her of the comparative poverty of her surroundings, described in the language of lowliness. That is, Margaret’s description of Helstone’s “wide commons, high up” prompts this response from Bessy: “I felt smothered like down below. When I have gone for an out, I always wanted to get high up and see far away, and take a deep breath o’ fulness in that air. I get smothered enough in Milton, . . . I thirst to death for one long deep breath o’ the clear air yo’ speak on” (100-101).

<14>Margaret absorbs the information about the nature and cause of Bessy’s illness and the suffering and starvation of other workers with little commentary. Her questions prompt further revelations from Bessy—the sensational detail about some factory workers actually preferring to swallow cotton fluff to stave off hunger, for example. Bessy delivers a litany of the injustices that have marked her life in a long speech punctuated by Gaskell’s dashes, which symbolize the speaker’s struggle to draw breath (101). Her speech ends in a conjecture that there might be no God, that she may be nothing more than an instrument of labor, and that Margaret, not the factory system and the lack of industrial safety standards, is to blame: “I could go mad and kill yo’, I could” (101). Margaret redirects Bessy’s class anger with calm reassurance that “we have a Father in Heaven:” a standard response to Bessy’s suffering that comes straight out of the Helstone playbook for cottage visitors. Yet later in this same scene, Margaret, learning that she and Bessy are both nineteen years of age, reflects silently on her own privilege—the privilege of

health, beauty, leisure, education, and wealth all signified by the “South” and “Helstone” in this chapter—and then “could not speak for a moment or two for the emotion she was trying to keep down” (103). The entire scene is a remarkable orchestration of an emotional encounter produced by and within the exigencies of capital.

<15>The contrast between the physical environments of Helstone and Milton and the class dichotomies it signifies is obvious enough, but I want to draw attention to the reference to Margaret’s suppression of her emotion. Margaret’s containment of her feelings in key moments such as this one is a classic form of emotional labor: she suppresses her own feelings (regret; sadness; guilt; anger) in order to produce a desired or appropriate feeling in someone else (calmness; relief; distraction).<sup>7</sup> The two characters for whom Margaret performs the greatest emotional labor in the novel are Bessy and her mother, characters who are linked by their deaths from (possibly) similar causes. Indeed, it is in Chapter 13, the same day that Bessy tells Margaret about the source of her illness, that the narrator announces: “From that day forwards Mrs. Hale became more and more of a suffering invalid” (103) as if to suggest that there is a link between the cause of their deaths. More importantly, however, Chapter 13 stages Margaret’s growing knowledge of the human costs of industrial factory production and her increasing awareness of her mother’s fatal illness—a fact Mr. Hale repeatedly refuses to acknowledge until the signs are too obvious to ignore.

<16>Toxic air quality, cotton fluff, and soot accumulation from steam and coal-powered factories touch the lives of all of the major female characters in the novel: Bessy and (possibly) Mrs. Hale die from inhaling it; Dixon and Margaret scrub away its physical and emotional residues; Mrs. Thornton locates her sense of self-worth in it; Edith and Mrs. Shaw sneer at it; Margaret eventually inherits it. Air quality unites the physical and emotional labor of the women in *North and South*: air and women’s domestic lives filter each other, make sense of each other, even within the same sentence: “The life in Milton was so different from what Mrs. Hale had been accustomed to live in Helstone, in and out perpetually into the fresh and open air; the air itself was so different, deprived of all revivifying principle as it seemed to be here; the domestic worries pressed so very closely, and in so new and solid a form, upon all the women in the family” (88). Particulate matter in the air—the fluff and dust of the cotton mills—are the solids that strangle Bessy’s lungs, while intangible, immaterial domestic worries also seem to “thicken”—to take on a solid form for Margaret.<sup>8</sup> The novel materializes the immaterial—emotional and psychological pain—through its repeated references to the materiality of air and physical acts of drawing breath.<sup>9</sup>

<17>Visibly dirty air is the first thing Margaret observes as she approaches Milton, the narrator’s description a kind of set piece of environmental writing resembling other contemporary non-fiction accounts of Manchester by writers like Alexis de Toqueville, Hippolyte Taine, and Friedrich Engels, as Debrabant outlines (par. 8). Hilary Schor’s commentary on this scene emphasizes Margaret’s misreading of the black cloud as a sign of rain (126-127), while Debrabant argues that the lack of “menace” in the narrator’s language is an early sign of the novel’s ultimate dismissal of air pollution as a matter of “perception” (Debrabant, pars. 8 and 15). Hensley and Steer claim that the “totalizing fact of coal-life registers only slightly in Gaskell’s novel; once Margaret is immersed in this milieu, coal is barely mentioned, and references to the city’s smoky air fade to insignificance” (71). Yet references to Milton’s smoky

air are “insignificant” only if one overlooks the impact of air pollution on women’s daily lives. In fact, references to smoke, air, soot, and the direction of the wind that brings the soot with it appear with some frequency in the novel. Most of these references centre on the real world effects of smoke on women’s work and health, rather than on parliamentary debates about smoke abatement legislation. Gaskell’s novel does what Victorian novels tend to do: “address the banal, often indoor trials of everyday life,” (Oak Taylor 68), but frequently these indoor trials reveal the porous, permeable boundary between the indoor and the outdoor, the private and the public. For example, following Thornton’s explanation of the term “unparliamentary smoke” (illegal emissions from coal-fired industrial plants by non-compliant factory owners), Mrs. Hale responds: “I only know it is impossible to keep the muslin blinds clean here above a week together; . . . And as for hands—Margaret, how many times did you say you had washed your hands this morning before twelve o’clock?” (82). The women of the novel know that the mere direction of the wind will have a significant impact on their day, because the wind brings with it the soot from unparliamentary smoke and other effluents that accumulate on linens, household surfaces, bodies, nostrils, and eventually lungs. Gaskell’s novel reveals how the gendered production of household cleanliness in Victorian towns and cities was bound up in the all-encompassing reality of coal;<sup>10</sup> it fell to women—working-class but also genteel women like Margaret—to repeatedly scrub away the visible residues of a coal-powered economy. Furthermore, if smoke was unparliamentary, so too were women themselves. Lacking full citizenship, women had little ability to contribute to the shaping of environmental legislation that would have an impact on women’s labor and life expectancy.

### “East or West Wind, I Suppose This Man Comes”

<18>In a brief but revealing exchange, wind direction, household dirt, and Margaret’s household labor converge, revealing the class and gender dynamics of both physical and emotional labor in the coal economy. In Chapter 9 of Volume 1, “Dressing for Tea,” Mr. Hale nervously announces that he has invited Mr. Thornton for a visit, without first consulting Mrs. Hale or Margaret. This news prompts a predictable complaint from Mrs. Hale:

‘What in the world does the man want to come here for? And Dixon is washing my muslins and laces, and there is no soft water with these horrid east winds, which I suppose we shall have all the year round in Milton.’

‘The wind is veering round, my dear,’ said Mr. Hale, looking out at the smoke, which drifted right from the east, only he did not yet understand the points of the compass, and rather arranged them ad libitum, according to the circumstances. (75)

The daily struggle of maintaining standards of household cleanliness in Milton, contingent on something as uncontrollable as the direction of the wind and the whims of an abstracted master, does not occur to Mr. Hale, who is not even oriented in space because he doesn’t have to be. Impervious to the elements and oblivious to the labor that will fall to his female family members, Mr. Hale can spontaneously invite a man for tea—a man whose livelihood associates him with the *source* of the dirt that must be scrubbed away before he arrives. Indeed, as Mrs. Hale wryly puts it, “east or west wind, I suppose this man comes,” as if to suggest an analogy between Thornton—“a tradesman”—and the dirt and smoke he helps generate and tramps into the house. Thornton is no “soft breeze” blowing from the south. Observing this exchange between her parents, Margaret cheerily swoops in, offering to “go and help Dixon. I’m getting to be a famous clear-starcher” (75). A few lines down we learn that her plans to write a letter, read Dante, and

visit the Higgins family, have been interrupted by this unexpected bit of housework and social obligation.

<19>Soot and wind direction, one a byproduct of humans' burning of fossil fuels, the other a phenomenon of the natural world that humans can harness but not control, combine forces to alter the shape of one woman's work day, while potentially shortening the life of another's: attuned to the direction of the wind, Margaret understands that its direction will affect Bessy's physical well-being, since smoke inhalation only exacerbates her already damaged lungs: "Well, Bessy, how are you?" Margaret asks in the street. "Better, I hope, now the wind has changed" (89).<sup>11</sup> Yet for all Margaret's sympathy, and awareness of Bessy's deteriorating condition, Margaret's health is strangely immune to the effects of the coal dust she too breathes in along with everyone else. The illness Margaret suffers in the text is more mental than physical, stemming from displacement, exhaustion, and grief.

<20>Referring to London's air but just as applicable to Manchester's, a writer for the *Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor* emphasized air's disregard for social and physical boundaries:

To state this matter plainly, and without mincing words, there is not at this moment in London, however scrupulously cleanly, nor a woman, however sensitively delicate, whose skin, and clothes, and nostrils are not of necessity more or less loaded with a compound of granite, soot, and a still more nauseous substance" [likely referring to fecal dust from dried horse dung]. "The particles which today fly in clouds before the scavenger's broom, fly in clouds before the parlour-maid's brush, and the next day darken the water in our toilet-basins, or are wrung by the laundress from our calico and cambric. (Qtd in Mitchell 116)

As this passage suggests, air is a great social leveler, an inescapable fact. "Because we breathe, being is shared," writes Oak Taylor (68). However, because Margaret does not succumb to respiratory illness, Debrabant argues that "industrialization meant that disparate though interdependent social groups were breathing different air" (Debrabant, par. 17). Even air itself could be indexed to a class system.

<21>Indeed, the affront to Margaret's class status prompted by the episode in "Dressing for Tea" leads to a conversation with Mrs. Hale in which Margaret proudly re-asserts her claim to the category of the lady, "even though it comes to scouring a floor, or washing dishes" (76). Like the hands of the factory "hands" on whose labor Thornton relies, Margaret's hands are also dirty, both from airborne pollutants and from her physical domestic work alongside Dixon. Part of the reason Margaret must perform this work, as we learn shortly after the Hales' arrival in Milton, is that factory employment generally pays better than service and offers "greater independence" (70). In the absence of a suitable under-servant to help Dixon, Margaret fills in, leading to a kind of status incongruence that is part of the novel's general critique of the way industrialization upends "normal" relations among families, and between owners and workers, parents and children, masters and servants.<sup>12</sup>

<22>If Margaret gets her hands dirty in Milton, she also does a significant amount of emotional labor in this and other scenes like it, where Margaret manages Mrs. Hale's and Dixon's feelings about the daily grind of housework, Mrs. Hale's failing health, and her father's emotional absence. Margaret suppresses her own emotions in order to soothe theirs and create harmony—to



clear the emotional dust from the room. Less visible than scrubbing and ironing, the work of managing feeling is contingent on Margaret's containment or swallowing of her own emotions, as though removing one emotional "effluent" from the household atmosphere will create a healthier environment for all. She is an emotional shock absorber whose unpaid labor is carefully documented by Gaskell's narrator. This work, as I have been asserting, often appears in conjunction with the "tangible intangibility" (Menely 93) of Milton's air.

### **Delicious Climate**

<23>A scene that is structurally similar to the ones described above appears in Chapter 4 of Volume 2, "A Ray of Sunshine," in which Margaret receives a letter from her rich cousin Edith (the referent of the chapter's title). Indeed, Edith's letter practically glows with news of the sunny blue skies and "delicious climate" of Corfu where she is stationed with her husband and infant son (235). Edith's letter prompts feelings of jealousy in Margaret, who yearns for Edith's "cheerful home, her sunny skies," recalling Margaret's description of Helstone to Bessy, who longed for the climate of England's south. Expressing concern for Mrs. Hale's health, Edith advises Margaret to tell the doctor that "it's the smoke of Milton that does her harm. I have no doubt it is that, really" (235). Distracted from the letter by Mrs. Hale's appearance, who "seemed more than usually feeble" (236), Margaret reads it out loud to her mother, who concurs with Edith's diagnosis: "'I don't like this Milton,' said Mrs. Hale. 'Edith is right enough in saying that it's the smoke that has made me so ill.'"

<24>This is one of the clearest statements in the novel regarding Mrs. Hale's health, but it comes from Edith, who is one of its least trustworthy characters. Whether Edith and Mrs. Hale are correct or not, it is Margaret's response I want to focus on here, for just as Mrs. Hale makes her pronouncement, Mr. Hale enters the room. Margaret "started up" (238). Once again she springs into action, trying to drown her mother out in order to protect her father from feelings of guilt for moving the family to a polluted city. Hot on his heels is Mr. Thornton, unbeknownst to Margaret, who hurriedly tries to change the subject, speaking of Milton and "vulgarity" in the same breath. Thornton's overhearing of the conversation causes further embarrassment for Margaret.

<25>As the narrator observes, Margaret "was most anxious that the faint impression she had seen on [Mr. Hale's] mind that the Milton air had injured her mother's health, should not be deepened,--*should not receive any confirmation*" (238, emphasis mine). In my reading of *North and South*, this is a key moment: Margaret's almost automatic act of emotional labor for her father (the protection of his pride) is predicated on the suppression of her own and her mother's feelings *and*, here, the metaphorical suppression of smoke and its potentially deadly effects. Earlier in the novel Mr. Hale admits he is "haunted by the fear that our coming to Milton has killed her," a concern that Margaret dismisses as "imagination," in a section of the text that also includes the terms "trifles," and "fancy" (110). More crucial than probing the possibility that air quality might have something to do with Mrs. Hale's illness is the maintenance of emotional atmosphere, as though clearing the air in the household by scrubbing away women's trifling "complaints" is somehow enough to keep other forces at bay. Lacking clear evidence that smoke is responsible for Mrs. Hale's illness, Margaret's response is not so much to deny that there is a link, but to change the conversation, to look the other way, in order to avoid causing emotional distress to another. Continuing the conversation would constitute a breach of family decorum and a failure of the "feeling rules" (Hochschild 56-75) that govern familial sociability.

<26>As befits the “moral order” of the patriarchal household, Margaret’s priority is to shield her father’s feelings and shore up his pride, rather than to seek clear answers about her mother’s health. By literally changing the subject of the conversation, Margaret diverts attention in the scene from her mother, from Milton’s toxic air quality, and from any hint of blame against her father, or, indeed, Thornton and other factory owners. One possible outcome of Mrs. Hale’s pronouncement of the link between smoke and her health would be to take it seriously enough that the family would decide to leave Milton, or join the anti-smoke activist lobby. That is not the action taken, of course; the drive of the novel is to learn how to live in Milton, how to accommodate and adapt to its thick smoke, “vulgar” vocabularies, and social norms. The action Margaret takes is to talk over Mrs. Hale, drowning out her complaints and safeguarding her father’s feelings. The question of the cause of her death is left unanswered and unresolved.

<27>Norgaard writes that information deficit cannot explain the reasons for climate change denial, as previous climate change researchers have claimed. In fact, there is evidence to show that those who are most informed about climate change are often the least likely to feel concern or to take action (Norgaard 2). Victorians were well aware of the effects of airborne pollutants on human health. Researchers began to study the etiology of respiratory diseases in urban-industrial areas using statistical data, leading one physician to conclude in 1881 that “Manchester suffers more from diseases of respiratory organs than any town or city in England” (qtd in Mosley 61). But because of the often slow and invisible onset of respiratory disorders (Mosley 58), as opposed to the spectacle of suffering and rapid death toll of the urban cholera epidemics, for example, respiratory illnesses did not ignite the same sense of public health crisis as other outbreaks of disease.<sup>13</sup> Quoting Ellen Ross, Stephen Mosley highlights “the success of an entire culture’ in ‘not seeing’ chronic illnesses that brought considerable pain and discomfort, but which were not thought to be immediately life threatening” (Mosley 59). Nevertheless, an anti-smoke lobby developed in the 1830s and 40s. The Manchester Association for the Prevention of Smoke was established in 1842, the same year that Edwin Chadwick’s *Sanitary Report* was published, which linked environmental conditions with disease onset. The Town Improvement Causes Act of 1847 included a clause on smoke abatement, although compliance was minimal and enforcement difficult.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as Mosley demonstrates, cultural attitudes towards the “smoke nuisance” in Manchester were ambivalent at best. Despite growing evidence of the environmental damage and human health impacts of coal pollution, the production of smoke was popularly linked with steady employment, wealth creation, and a stable standard of living. For example, an 1862 poem “The Smokeless Chimney” by “A Lancashire Lady” (E.J. Bellasis) warned: “Ah! To them each smokeless chimney / Is a signal of despair. / They see hunger, sickness, ruin, / Written in that pure, bright air.” We see similar examples of the association between pollution and prosperity in *North and South*: as Fanny Thornton informs Margaret, her mother, Mrs. Thornton, is “very proud of Milton; dirty, smoky place as I feel it to be. I believe she admires it the more for those very qualities” (97). Then as now, the claims of “the environment” and “the economy” were situated as though at odds with each other, often by those with the greatest financial stake in the mining, drilling, and combustion of fossil fuels. In the face of contradictory claims<sup>15</sup> about the meanings and effects of smoke, “modern urban life tacitly evolved to accommodate the smoke of urban-industrial development” (Mosley 67). This evolution included the intensification of household cleaning and sanitation practices; the marketing and ingestion of throat lozenges; the trend in household furnishings to dark types of wood, such as mahogany, so that soot would be less visible; and the emotionally laborious task

of avoiding and accommodating overwhelming evidence of the pernicious effects of smoke exposure on human health.<sup>16</sup>

<28>Margaret's act of avoidance is but one small moment in a single Victorian novel. Yet it presents an opportunity to ponder the history of emotional life and labor, together with the history of the Anthropocene. Scholars such as Jesse Oak Taylor, Elizabeth Miller, Allen MacDuffie, Nathan Hensley, and others have all begun to probe the links between the coal economy and the cultural forms that came of age along with it, such as the novel. Yet few scholars have addressed the connection between the environment and one of the most important types of cultural work performed by the Victorian novel: the education of the emotions. Did the domestic novel—Gaskell's and others—teach us to “look the other way” in order to save appearances and protect each other's feelings? What part did the novel play in the cultural conditioning that is necessary to the production of emotional ambivalence about climate change in which, like Margaret “we know that our lives” [and the lives of our loved ones] “can end at any moment, yet we live as though we do not know this” (Norgaard 4). What kinds of emotional labor, a form of labor most often performed by women, were harnessed to erase or cover over the many human and environmental costs of global industrialization? What cultural and literary forms helped train readers for such work?

### Conclusion

<29>Critics of *North and South* who express disappointment with the novel for its interest in the intimate relations of private life overlook the social shaping of emotions and its impact on the novel's critique. Debrabant finds fault with Gaskell, who sidesteps the environmental issues her novel raises: “Gaskell plays down the issue of contaminated air and responsibility. . . . As far as environmental policies are concerned, one corollary of authorial hedging is that Milton manufacturers are not explicitly held accountable for industrial waste” (Debrabant, pars. 7 and 10). In this reading, Gaskell is the proto-climate change denier. Critics have always wanted a more activist Gaskell. But instead of upbraiding the novel or its author for avoiding an issue whose effects were visible then and have accumulated into a full blown crisis now, I suggest here that *North and South* presents an opportunity to ask a different set of questions about “the role of emotion in preventing action” as Norgaard puts it. Rather than pathologizing the novel as denialist for its *lack* of concern about coal smoke, we might instead look to the emotional labor of the heroine as the *presence* of feelings that alert us to the novel's deep concern for the environmental impacts of industrialization. Emotions and the work of managing them are not so much a distraction or a luxury that must be overcome in order to arrive at a pure form of activist engagement, but are instead indices of the pains of daily life that make action seem possible, difficult, or pointless.

<30>In making two intangible, immaterial forms visible by way of each other—air and emotion—*North and South* also opens up a space for making connections between seemingly unconnected phenomena, a habit of observation born of metaphorical thinking crucial to our ability to address climate change. If *North and South* “fails” to advance a thoroughgoing critique of fossil capitalism or to point the way towards solutions beyond the door prize of enlightened cross-class dialogue between men, it is because it is just as interested in the environmental knowledge and emotion stemming from the daily work of socially disempowered women who bear the greatest brunt of environmental hazards caused by factory emissions.<sup>17</sup> If the emotional

responses of women to smoky air seem irrelevant or minor—as little more than a housewife’s scold—the novel also reminds us that official knowledge about its effects, and attempts to mitigate it, were similarly ineffective in enforcing some of the world’s first carbon policies. Had they worked in Gaskell’s lifetime, they might have helped mitigate the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the acceleration of the climate crisis.

<31>*North and South* is a book about loss. As Terence Wright has eloquently written, “*North and South* is a book full of pain—not the pangs of hunger, as in *Mary Barton*, but the pain of stress and disturbance, of pangs of conscience and sexual torment. It is also the pain of loss, particularly for the heroine” (105). The novel’s focus on interior states of mind and feeling would seem to mitigate against a thoroughgoing critique of fossil capitalism and environmental devastation. Feelings get in the way of what might have been a more hard-hitting analysis; they are obstacles to action. But what if we instead viewed things like grief, loss and the pangs of conscience as, in Lertzman’s words, “psychosocial achievements not to be avoided but integrated for more authentic modes of engagement with a dynamic, uncertain world” (4).

<32>We are trained to think that emotions only hinder our chances of contriving effective policies and technologies that would deliver us from the threat of the climate crisis. In some senses, *North and South* makes just such an argument: by focusing its heroine’s attention on the regulation and management of familial emotion, the novel curtails uncomfortable questions and legitimate hypotheses about industrial air and its effects on human health. But read another way, we also see Gaskell giving significant “air time” to disempowered women’s witnessing of the real world effects of the coal economy. Margaret is the human filter for the “toxic” emotions of other female characters struggling against contaminated air in one way or another. In its harnessing of women’s everyday emotions and labors to the environmental problem of air quality and human health, *North and South* documents the everyday effects of fossil capitalism and the feelings it produces, as well as the emotion work it required from the female domestic manager in its early phase.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> On Palmerston’s well-meaning but ineffective legislation, see Whited et al., 113; and Flick, 34-37.

<sup>2</sup> Early critics of the novel including Raymond Williams viewed Gaskell as a novelist who repeatedly subordinated the social to the private and the personal. According to Barbara Hardy, Gaskell is a “propagandist for sympathy” who “diverts attention from a narrative of class conflict” (qtd. in Harman, 52-53). See Harman’s overview of the early trends in Gaskell criticism.

<sup>3</sup> See MacDuffie for a discussion of climate denial in Victorian literature.

<sup>4</sup> On the invisibility of emotional labour, see Hochschild, 167.

<sup>5</sup> See Schroeder for a discussion of the intersections between Victorian notions of sympathy and Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor.

<sup>6</sup> Respiratory illness among cotton mill workers, sometimes referred to as “card-room asthma,” now known as byssinosis, had been identified in the first few decades of the century and was

---

described with greater specificity by chief medical officer Edward Headlam Greenhow by the early 1860s. See Schilling, 52. See also Neuville, 283.

<sup>7</sup> See Hochschild. For another discussion of emotional labor in nineteenth-century British fiction, see Schaffer. On Margaret's suppression of feeling, see Wright; Betensky.

<sup>8</sup> See Menely on the "thickening of the air," and historical crisis as accretion rather than disruption, 100. In *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew comments on the "evils" of smoke, noting that "It is the poor who must reside . . . and with a literality not often applicable to popular phrases, 'in the thick of it,' and consequently there must either be increased washing or increased dirt" (342).

<sup>9</sup> Late in the novel we also hear that Mr. Hale "had occasionally experienced a difficulty in breathing this spring" (344) but that Margaret was unconcerned. However, she convinces her father to accept Mr. Bell's invitation to join him in the rarefied air of Oxford and it is there that Mr. Hale dies. Although the cause of Mr. Hale's death is later identified vaguely as a heart ailment, his "difficulty in breathing" also links him to his wife's and to Bessy's complaints. See Reeder for a slightly different take on the cause of Mr. Hale's death.

<sup>10</sup> See Kelley, 75-77 for a discussion of household cleanliness and coal burning in factories and household hearths. See also Mosley, 54-58. Mosley writes, "The 'smoke nuisance' . . . touched every aspect of domestic life, powerfully influencing a multitude of common everyday decisions and activities. Air pollution greatly increased the burden of washing and housework for women, stimulated a taste for comfort and ornamental decoration, and encouraged people to spend far more time indoors" (58). See also Oak Taylor.

<sup>11</sup> Mosley notes how Manchester's industrial pollution was exacerbated by its geographical features: "Manchester's burgeoning smoke cloud, in combination with its damp climate, prevailing south-west winds, and flat physical setting, affected every aspect of urban life" (67).

<sup>12</sup> See Betensky, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Nixon explains that the social violence wrought by environmental and ecological damage is a "slow violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2).

<sup>14</sup> See Flick on smoke abatement activism, legislation, and technology in nineteenth-century Manchester and other British industrial centres. See also Mosley, 117-180.

<sup>15</sup> Theories about smoke as a disinfectant and an agent of disease prevention were in circulation. See Mosley, 80-82.

<sup>16</sup> See Mosley, 78-84 and Kelley, 74-79.

<sup>17</sup> Nixon prompts a consideration of "who counts as a witness" to forms of violence not necessarily regarded as such by "dominant structures of apprehension" (16).

#### Works Cited

-----, "Smoke or No Smoke." *Household Words*, vol. 9, 1 July 1854, pp. 464-466.

Bellasis, E. J. "The Smokeless Chimney. Stanza, Composed by A Lancashire Lady, In Aid of Relief Fund." *Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine*. University of Exeter. Accessed November 26, 2019. [http://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt\\_1862-06-21\\_ejb](http://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt_1862-06-21_ejb)

---

Betensky, Carolyn. *Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel*. University of Virginia P, 2010.

Debrabant, Mary. "Smoke or No Smoke? Questions of Perspective in *North and South*." *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, vol 71, 2010, pp. 75-88. <https://journals.openedition.org/cve/2828>

Flick, Carlos. "The Movement for Smoke Abatement in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain." *Technology and Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1980, pp. 29-50.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Harman, Barbara Leah. *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*. U of Virginia P, 1998.

Hensley, Nathan K., and Philip Steer. "Signatures of the Carboniferous: The Literary Forms of Coal." *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*, edited by Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, Fordham UP, 2019, pp. 63-82.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. U of California P, 1983.

Kelley, Victoria. *Soap and Water: Cleanliness, Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain*. I. B. Tauris, 2010.

Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. Simon and Schuster, 2015.

Lertzman, Renee. *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*. Routledge, 2015.

MacDuffie, Allen. "Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2018, pp. 543-564.

Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor*. Vol. 2. Dover, 1968.

Menely, Tobias. "Anthropocene Air." *Minnesota Review*, vol. 83, 2014, pp. 93-101.

Mitchell, Sally. *Daily Life in Victorian England*. Greenwood, 1996.

Mosley, Stephen. *The Chimney of the World: A History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester*. Routledge, 2008.

Neuville, Elodie. "Women, Cloth, Fluff and Dust in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*." *Textile*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2010, 274-284.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

---

Norgaard, Kari Marie. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. MIT P, 2011.

Reeder, Jessie. "Broken Bodies, Permeable Subjects." *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2013. <http://ncgsjournal.com/issue93/reeder.htm>.

Schaffer, Talia. "Why Lucy Doesn't Care: Migration and Emotional Labor in *Villette*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2019, pp. 84-106.

Schilling, R. S. F. "Byssinosis in the British Cotton Textile Industry." *British Medical Bulletin*, vol. 7, no. 1-2, 1950, pp. 52-56.

Schor, Hilary. *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*. Oxford UP, 1992.

Schroeder, Janice, and Barbara Leckie. Introduction to *London Labour and the London Poor*. By Henry Mayhew. Edited by Janice Schroeder and Barbara Leckie. Broadview P, 2020, pp. 11-35.

Schroeder, Janice. "'A Thousand Petty Troubles': Margaret Hale's Emotional Labour in *North and South*." *Women's Writing*, vol 27, no. 4, October 2020.

Taylor, Jesse Oak. *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*. U of Virginia P, 2016.

Whited, Tamara L. et al. *Northern Europe: An Environmental History*. ABC-Clio, 2005.

Wright, Terence. *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We Are Not Angels'*. Macmillan, 1995.