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New Materialism's Second Phase

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NEW
MATERIALISM'S
SECOND PHASE
Tobias Skiveren

Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman by Jane Bennett.
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. Pp. 224. \$25.95 cloth.

Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.

—Karen Barad,
“Posthumanist
Performativity,” 2003

Almost twenty years have passed since Karen Barad launched her now widely cited polemic against the dominance of textualism in critical theory. Since then, the slogan of materialism has resonated across the humanities and social sciences, leading ultimately to the emergence and consolidation of a new set of academic agendas. Today, objects matter, affects matter, intensities matter, cyborgs matter, and yes, even matter itself matters. And yet, there is an important sense in which this turn to matter has made other matters not matter that much anymore. As new interests take center stage and old ones fade to the background, it may be pertinent at this point to ask ourselves: Are we missing out on something?

That question is currently being raised by some of the very same scholars who initially incited the move beyond discourse, language, and culture. Within and around the field of new materialism, several key figures now return to topics that one would think were out of date in view of polemics like Barad's. In her latest book, Rosi Braidotti, for instance, explores

the development of “posthuman knowledge”; Elizabeth Grosz examines the ontology of “the incorporeal”; and N. Katherine Hayles similarly grapples with the so-called “cognitive nonconscious.”¹ For these thinkers, in other words, what matters now is not just matter but knowledge, immateriality, and consciousness. New materialism, it seems, has entered a second phase.

With Jane Bennett’s new book *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (2020), we can add another key scholar to that list. As the author of *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Bennett played an important role in making matter matter by laying out the workings of nonhuman assemblages, thing power, and materialist vitalism with charismatic wit and philosophical ingenuity. While her new work certainly extends these insights and interests, however, it also differs significantly by placing what appears to be an anthropocentric concept—subjectivity—at the center of its inquiry. Rather than explicating the liveliness of things, Bennett now asks: “How to bespeak an I alive in a world of vibrant matter? How to write up its efforts and endeavors?” (xii).

To explore these questions, Bennett turns to the writings of Walt Whitman, whose poetry in particular provides attitudes, sensibilities, and visions that fit the purpose of developing a new materialist model of subjectivity. In depicting the lyrical “I” as

a partaker of the constant fluctuations in his/her natural environment, Whitman helps Bennett to re-envision the subject, not as that which is subjected to discourse but as that which emerges in between the body’s impressions and its expressions, a kind of hovering in the midst of the influx and efflux of the world. Nevertheless, Bennett’s main concern with Whitman, I believe, is not just to develop an alternative ontology of the “I” but rather to explore a new materialist virtue ethics of sorts. At least, major parts of the book pivot on the question of *character*, as she investigates the kinds of subjective disposition we need to develop in order to advance a truly democratic and egalitarian world that recognizes the multitudes of life within as well as outside the human.

To be sure, Whitman provides Bennett with several provocative suggestions for that endeavor. In an anonymous newspaper scribbles, Bennett shows, he airs the idea that the right corporeal “posture” and “gait” can influence political and moral character in favorable ways (Chapter 1). He also leads Bennett to see the democratic sensibilities of the “I” as reflections of a larger “sympathy,” perceived here as a cosmological attitude manifest in the Earth’s acceptance of all its elements and inhabitants (Chapter 2). And he urges us in general, she argues, to postpone “judgment,” to suck in impressions and suspend

obstinate opinion making in favor of an open and complaisant kind of “hovering” (Chapter 3).

In a way, these insights can be perceived as a radicalization of Bennett’s earlier work, whose implicit purpose too was to cultivate the individual’s (i.e., the reader’s) ethical sensibilities. And yet, with this radicalization also follows an increased exposure to the usual critique of Bennett’s work. Many, I wager, will perceive *influx and efflux* as a naive individualization of political struggle, and frame its new materialist virtue ethics as a dubious relocation of political responsibility from societal structures to individual persons: all this talk of subjective dispositions and sensibilities obscures the real issues of history and power. And what about Capitalism?

Bennett herself would surely push back against such critiques by underscoring that her book, riffing on Deleuze, features only “dividuals,” not “individuals.” But in my view, these critiques are better dealt with by pointing out their implicit methodological dogmatism that takes Critique to be the only legitimate mode of analysis. Conversely, scholars like Bennett argue for cultivating a wide array of different methods and lines of thinking—affirmative as well as negative—that can exist side by side and supplement each other. The aim of her book, Bennett writes, is not to argue for abandoning

critical methodologies but to offer “a strangely apersonal figure of self and a nonagonistic set of practices to add to the democratic mix” (xx). And, besides, while its grand claims can make critical thinking appear less concerned with particularities, this kind of thinking too is, in fact, a type of virtue ethics: it cultivates critical dispositions² one character at a time, from book to teacher, from teacher to student, etc.

Even so, I agree that it may be unclear what to do with Bennett’s Whitmanian suggestions, not least compared to the tangible and stringent lines of thinking proposed by scholars of critique. As guidelines for new practices, they come across as suggestive at best. And yet, while I personally (and for that exact reason) prefer Bennett’s two former books, which offer more rigid philosophical analysis, the less linear style of *influx and efflux* (Chapters 4 and 5 on trans-corporeal horrors and Henry Thoreau certainly stick out) may inspire alternative types of scholarship and teaching to experiment with new ways of advancing new materialist sensibilities. Literary scholars, for instance, may be particularly attracted by its exploration of art’s ability to cultivate alternative dispositional traits.³

This is also the reason why we should encourage the recent new materialist re-inclusion of phenomena previously thought of as *passé*. As Eve K. Sedgwick reminds us, we are best off with a large gene

pool of possible modes of inquiry.⁴ In a world of neoliberal hegemony, rising populist ideologies, and an evermore urgent climate crisis, no one knows which ones will matter in the future.

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NOTES

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1. See Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity

Press, 2019); Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); and N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

2. I borrow this Bourdieusian neologism from Nicholas Holm, "Critical Capital: Cultural Studies, the Critical Disposition and Critical Reading as Elite Practice," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1 (2020): 143–66.
3. For a take on new materialism's attraction to fictional discourse, see Tobias Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," *Theory, Culture & Society* (onlineFirst 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420967408>).
4. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2002).