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An Unapologetic Feminist Response¹

Bidisha Banerjee and Mindy Blaise

Abstract

In the spirit of reformulating notions of critique, this response builds on the creative research experimentation that the authors enacted to consider air differently. The authors continue to be lured by generosity, curiosity, surprise, and wonder and suggest two feminist responses that relate to and generate knowledge in alternative ways. Two experimentations (collective experimental story writing and erasure poetry) are offered to readers with the aim of activating new thinkings, doings, and relations with air.

Keywords

Air, critique, experimentation, feminist response

In a clarion call for “the resurgence of original speculative metaphysics,” the Series Editors of *New Metaphysics*, Graham Harman and Bruno Latour (quoted in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012) invoke the spirit of “the intellectual gambler.” Intellectual risk takers are not new in academia. For instance, Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler’s ideas about ‘truth’ and knowledge were considered revolutionary at the time and our own scholarship has benefited from the gambles they took. The field of new materialism is a new metaphysics populated by such gamblers who have, since the late 1990s, been attempting to dismantle canonical and canonized notions of materialisms. Scholars like Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad have attempted to chart the cartography of new materialisms through a posthuman, post-anthropocentric and post-secular lens. In 2013, a special issue of *Cultural Studies* ⇔ *Critical Methodologies*, guest edited by Mirka Koro-Ljungberg and Maggie Maclure, attempts to question the postpositivist, empirical grand narratives of data. In responding to their invitation for “provocative contributions”, we took a gamble by enacting posthuman and performative research practices to consider air differently. Overall, it was a creative experimentation that required a relinquishing of control and a different kind of attentiveness to and with ‘data’. Karen Barad describes practitioners of feminist science studies as “being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings” (Barad, 2007). She continues, “Doing theory requires being open to the world’s aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise and wonder” (2007). This is part of a larger project to rethink human/man centred inquiries and we were driven by these impulses in rethinking air as data.

Along with the turn to new materialisms and alternative approaches to studying them, there has also been a call to reformulate notions of critique, to move away from models of debunking based on hierarchical binaries and judgment, towards critiques that are “productive, collaborative and careful” (Maclure, 2015). Carefulness implies taking notice, reading widely, and studying. Critics like Karen Barad (2012),

¹ We would like to acknowledge that we stumbled upon this ‘unapologetic’ phrase while examining Nicole Land’s recently defended thesis, *Fat(s), Muscle(s), Movement(s), and Physiologies in Early Childhood Education*, and admired the way in which it ‘jolts’.

Brian Massumi (2010) and Bruno Latour (2004) have been particularly instrumental in positing critiques that are affirmative and eventful.

As feminist scholars, we are interested in paying attention to the affirmative, visionary, and transversal approaches that feminists, such as Donna Haraway (1988; 2008), Karen Barad (2007), Iris van der Tuin (2015) and others take up in their scholarship and are inspired by the ways in which they engage with theory, conduct research, and provoke us to do more. We pay careful attention to how they work with embodied knowledges, simultaneously prioritize the discursive and the material, advance ‘encounters’ or ‘events’ rather than trying to ‘pin down’ facts, and how they are open to and with the world. We also notice their citational practices, not just who they reference, but how they generously make explicit that knowledge production is done with a whole host of others. Relationality, connectivity, partiality, and response-ability are concepts they are putting to work.

By paying careful attention to these scholarly acts, we realize that a feminist response is one that prioritizes “difference, entanglement and undecidability” (Maclure, 95), is generative and may well be imperfect. Rather than engaging with oppositional arguments, our feminist response relates and refers to knowledge differently. It wonders what might become possible if we make room for air to entangle readers in different and unknowable ways. How might we activate new human-air relations? To generate such relations demands experimentation. Sometimes it is necessary to do things that might not immediately (or ever) make sense or seem relevant.

In the spirit of activating new thinkings, doings, and connections with air, we offer two experimentations. The first is in the form of a Mad Libs® story, *There’s Something in the Air*. Mad Libs® was invented by American writers Leonard Stern and Roger Price in 1958. They are short stories that have key words missing and replaced with blanks. Beneath each blank is a lexical or other category, such as ‘noun’, ‘adjective’, or ‘a type of tool’. One player asks another player to contribute a word for each blank. Although this might be reminiscent of completing reading comprehension tests in grade school, which are anything but ‘open’, this is not the point. Instead, when the story is read out loud, it is usually comical, absurd, and eventful. Our aim with this collective experimental story writing and telling is to give up control about air. In doing so, we hope these newfangled stories about air might activate different kinds of relations with air.

The second experimentation is a piece of erasure poetry. Erasure poetry is a form of found poetry also called blackout or redaction poetry. It is created from an existing text by obscuring many of the words or parts of words, in order to reveal a new arrangement of words which creates a very different kind of meaning. To craft our erasure poem, we began with a textbook-like excerpt entitled “Air” listing some ‘fun facts’ about air (Kidsbuilder.com, 2007; see Appendix 1). The chosen excerpt is a perfect example of the positivist, empiricist approach to matter that conceptualizes it as “known, familiar and inert” (Koro-Ljungberg and Maclure, 2013). In reworking this piece of writing and creating erasure poetry out of it, we have attempted to rethink air as something more complex and creative, even agentic. We hope the poem rising out of the ashes of representing air as static and passive, enables us and readers to encounter air very differently.

Our responses are a gamble. There is a chance they will not be useful. But there is also a possibility they will make room for something more to emerge; comingling, entangling, and becoming-with relations with air. Regardless what happens, these responses are non-innocent, partial, serious, playful, imperfect, and unapologetically feminist.

Experimentation 1:

There's Something in the Air

It was a hot, _____ afternoon when Bidisha and Mindy decided to set
(name of season)

out on the crowded _____ of Hong Kong to do what all girls like to do...
(plural noun)

(gerund)

Stepping out of her _____, Mindy immediately felt as though she would_____.
(noun) (verb)

Within seconds, sweat was _____ dripping down her _____
(adverb) (name of body part)

causing her blouse to stick to her_____. While keeping count of the
(name of a body part)

_____ concrete steps she had to walk down, she caught a glimpse of herself in
(number)

the reflection on the store _____. Her hair was _____, reminding her how much
(noun) (adjective)

she _____ the humidity in the summer air which played havoc with her
(verb, ending with s)

hair. The air was _____, forcing her to slow down, while trying not to _____ into
(adjective) (verb)

the people on the crowded _____. It was a Sunday and the open spaces were
(plural noun)

already being occupied by foreign domestic workers _____ their day off. They
(gerund)

often huddled in _____ areas with the hope of a slight breeze. Mindy marveled
(adjective)

at the transformation of the _____ downtown district on Sundays into a quasi
(adjective)

domestic space for foreign bodies. The air that transported _____ attired men and
(adverb)

women into the comfort of their airconditioned offices during the weekdays, now

chose to _____ still and heavy on the tired bodies of these women emerging from the
(verb)

homes they helped keep _____ all week.
(adjective)

Bidisha and Mindy met at the ferry terminal, where they stepped onto the historical Star Ferry,

which _____ them across Victoria Harbour. Standing on the upper deck,
(verb, past tense)

the wind blew their _____ and brushed across their bodies. With a _____ look,
(noun) (adjective)

Bidisha _____ her nose, before _____ her hand over her mouth and
(verb, past tense) (gerund)

nose, while screaming, "Eewwwwh, what is that smell? Something _____." Filling her
(verb)

lungs with air, she cautiously took a _____, _____ breath in. The air smelled
(adjective) (adjective)

of a mixture of rotten _____, _____ and _____. She could
(noun), (type of spice) (chemical compound).

taste the air on her _____. At the same time, her eyes felt scratchy, and
(muscular organ)

they started watering. She couldn't stop blinking and it was hard to keep from

_____ her eyes. The taste of the _____ air, made her feel sick. Was she going
(gerund) (adjective)

to vomit? Quickly, she grabbed Mindy's _____, headed into the
 (name of a body part)

airconditioned cabin and immediately felt relief from the hot, polluted, and humid
 Hong Kong _____. Had Hong Kong air always been this _____? What about the
 (noun) (adjective)

early days of the Star Ferry when the ride was much longer and land reclamation
 hadn't swallowed large swathes of the _____? Founded by an Indian merchant in
 (noun)

1888, it was the only means of crossing the _____ for many years. The breathtaking
 (noun)

view of the Hong Kong _____, which still gave Bidisha a _____ in her throat, and
 (noun) (noun)

the gentle morning _____, were always mentioned as the highlights of a ferry
 (plural noun)

trip across the harbor. "The best way to get your night breeze" screams a Tripadvisor
 review. But on days like this, Bidisha really wondered if this was the best place to
 _____ a breeze. "It *literally* took my breath away" she thought as she finally _____.
 (verb) (verb)

Experimentation 2:

What is air?

Air is a mixture of gases, including oxygen and nitrogen. It is essential for life and is found everywhere.

Air is a living organism that is constantly absorbing and releasing energy. It is a dynamic system that is always changing.

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Appendix 1

What is air?

Air is a mixture of different gases that covers the Earth in a layer over 400 miles high. This layer is called the atmosphere. It contains roughly 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, and smaller amounts of argon, hydrogen, carbon dioxide, and others.

Why is air so important?

Air is needed by almost all the living things living on Earth. Most plants and animals take in air, use the oxygen in it and give out another gas, carbon dioxide. This process is called respiration. Air also protects life on Earth by absorbing harmful ultraviolet solar radiation and reducing temperature extremes between day and night.

What are greenhouse gases?

Gases such as carbon dioxide, water vapour and methane that allow incoming sunlight to pass through but absorb heat radiated back from the Earth's surface are called greenhouse gases. If the atmosphere contains more of these gases, it traps more heat and warms up. This is known as global warming.

What is air pollution?

Air pollution is the contamination of air by the discharge of harmful substances. One type of air pollution is the release of particles into the air from burning fuel for energy. Natural phenomena such as the eruption of a volcano also causes air pollution.

Why is air pollution such a serious problem?

Air pollution can cause many health problems such as burning eyes, cancer, birth defects, brain damage, or even death. Air pollution can also damage the environment and property such as trees, lakes and buildings.

How can we reduce air pollution?

There are many ways to reduce air pollution. A simple way is by using less electricity. Another way to reduce air pollution is to make fewer journeys by car. Walk, cycle or use public transport whenever possible.

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