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Book Review: Jane Bennett's *influx & efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman*

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Book Review

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“The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems,” writes Audre Lorde, “carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (1985, 36). Lorde’s familiar late twentieth-century dictum on the power of witness and the political efficacy afforded by poetry and poetics finds new alliance in Jane Bennett’s slim, powerful *influx & efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman* (2020), where rocks and cobblers are entangled in new and unusual assemblages across the external horizons of Walt Whitman’s late nineteenth-century political atmosphere, as well as our own. In many ways serving as an appendix to the political philosophies explored in her previous book, *Vibrant Matter* (2009), Bennett eschews broader overarching discussions of vitalist materiality for a rigorous and astute focus on practices and processes of coming-into-being, a rhythmic attention to the influxes and effluxes of subject transformation. Notably, Bennett finds in poetry and poetics the tempos by which one might best inhabit and even linger in these intertidal currents between being and becoming, reminding us, in the words of Whitman’s predecessor Thoreau, that “poetry puts an interval between the impression and the expression” (1993, 126). Anchored in an archivally rich reading of Whitman that responsibly locates, but also creatively expands, the poet’s work beyond the historical moment from which it arose, Bennett (2020) finds unexpected and politically-potent affinities between the nineteenth-century American writer and “a tradition of process philosophy for which metamorphosis, and not only its entities or congealments, is a topic of great interest” (xi).

Unlike *Vibrant Matter* (2009), which scaled out across a wide genealogy of vitalist thinking to offer fertile space for a broad array of theoretical projects, *influx & efflux* anchors Bennett’s work in attentive readings of Whitman’s canon, though the political

implications, along with the theoretical and methodological possibilities afforded by these readings, will surely be of interest to scholars and activists outside the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies. Far from an irresponsible presentism, Bennett, in the phrasing of Dickinson scholar Jed Deppman, “tries to think with” Walt Whitman, “integrat[ing] into thought the defiantly non-thetic structures and textures of lyric processes” (2008, 13). Bennett reads across an archive that not only includes the various iterations of *Leaves of Grass*, but also many of Whitman’s lesser known editorial writings and reviews, so as to better envision a poet with whom we can try to think in our fraught and fragile political moment, a poet whose lyric textures and non-thetic structures absorb and nourish a host of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophies aimed at challenging the presumed integrity and solidity of the subject, opting instead for more fluid and symbiotic practices of enmeshed ontological assemblages. Fans of Bennett’s wildly creative associations in *Vibrant Matter*—from energy grid blackouts to amino acids to stem cell research—will delight in like modes of eccentric entangling, as Bennett connects Whitman’s poetic process to the twentieth-century surrealist stories of Roger Caillois, Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, and even modern hoarders.

Bennett initiates this series of unexpected associations with a reading of Whitman’s writings about, what he refers to as, “phiz” (1) or the relation between physiognomy and physique that Bennett sees as integral to the poet’s espousals of democratic pluralism. Aligning various bodily postures to states of political attention and receptivity, Bennett reads Whitman’s celebration of the body lounging and loafing, leaning and dilating, affectionately stepping, as instantiating a multi-species democratic polity not only comprised of open minds, but also bodies, welcoming the various permeations and expressions of their many ecological co-constituents. Bennett further complicates this discussion of extra-embodied democracy by disentangling Whitman’s vision of sympathy from dominant strands of thinking in nineteenth-century moral philosophy, opting instead for the uncomfortable ambiguity of an ethical judgement which, as Whitman (2002) suggests, “judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a help-/less thing” (lines 148–49). What Bennett refers to as Whitman’s solar judgement, or “the intriguing possibility of a democratic ethos that operates *without* ‘the application of morals’” (45), invokes an ethical temporality mirroring atmospheric and geological movements such as gravity or solar rotations.

Upon envisioning the democratically postured subject, attuned to the amoral ethicality of gravitational pulls and atmospheric currents, Bennett quickly places this subject in transformative motion, reading Whitman’s “I” across a historically expansive canon of process philosophy, hovering at the intervals between influx and efflux. From Roger Caillois’ 1934 surrealist study of the praying mantis’ uncanny ability to fully

enmesh itself within an environment through “lyric force,” to the “sensitive cuticles” (74–81) of hoarders who refuse to distinguish their own subjectivities from the collected objects of which they are also a part, Bennett meditates on the anxieties and possibilities surrounding the enveloped subject, acknowledging and advocating for a deeper consideration of our constantly metamorphizing, porous selves, without irresponsibly celebrating such metamorphoses as inherently progressive.

Indeed, while *influx & efflux* shares in the political promise enlivening her earlier work, Bennett is far more careful to qualify the implications of her philosophical inquiries. Whereas *Vibrant Matter* was sometimes criticized for its failure to address the problematic applications of vitalist thinking in nineteenth- and twentieth-century political practice,¹ Bennett cautiously distinguishes Whitman’s writings on physiognomy, for instance, from racist nineteenth-century pseudoscientific studies in phrenology; discussions of vitalist entanglements are likewise rigorously distanced from celebrations of the radically receptive self as automatically democratic, noting the ways in which an uncritical porosity, an unfiltered opening out into the world, can also lead to nefarious, anti-democratic political configurations. Rather than assume a particular telos endowed by vital materialist assemblages, Bennett advocates for lingering and loafing at the intervals between impression and expression, a cultivation of and an attention to the processes of transformation and metamorphosis without assumptions about the progenitors or inheritors of such processes, as essential to democratic plurality.

Bennett takes pains to evoke atmospheric undercurrents connecting Whitman’s own political moment—where the lingering tensions of a nation in the midst of civil war spilled into all facets of interpersonal life—to the United States of this current twenty-first century—where, from my kitchen table in Northern California, I type up this review on the eve of a presidential election that has likely generated more anxiety and division than almost any other in American history. Among her archive of speculative associations, Bennett considers the Institute for Precarious Consciousness, which emerged in response to Britain’s neoliberal austerity measures of 2009, and whose manifesto, “Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It Is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It” (62), holds increasing relevance for our own understanding of the dangerous consequences of unfiltered affectivity in contemporary political life. As Bennett notes, our own contemporary attention economy of technocapitalism relies on frighteningly similar processes of affective envelopment as those espoused in Whitman’s vitalism. These days, one doesn’t need to look far to see the ways in which networks of virtual affecting have constructed a range of anti-democratic subject positions, from the disorientingly exhausted to those dangerously amenable to new forms of fascism. According to Bennett, it is precisely *because* of these nefarious

affectivities of late capitalism that we need to disrupt and destabilize the presumed containment of subjectivity and better cultivate the multifaceted influxes and effluxes of our being, which do not confront head on, but rather bubble and seep, softly through the pores of our being. Bennett refers to such a practice as “Whitman’s poetics as a *political* strategy—one aimed at enlivening the will to keep going during dark times and exploring the ways in which *indirect* responses to social evil can supplement the tactic of head-on opposition” (71).

As with *Vibrant Matter*, it was disappointing to note, among such a vast archive of critical thought, philosophical inquiry, and political praxis, the omission of de-colonial and Black studies scholars engaging in like-questions of porosity, permeation, and vital onto-entanglement—from the radical re-imaginings of thinkers like Fanon, Césaire, Glissant, and Wynter, to recent work by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Alexander Weheliye, Katherine McKittrick, and Tiffany King. While Bennett certainly does not suggest her work as comprehensive by any means, we are nevertheless left to wonder how the “absorbent and creative” (116) subjectivity outlined in *influx & efflux*, as well as Whitman studies more generally, might be inflected, challenged, overturned, or creatively reimagined when placed in conversation with the de-colonial posthumanisms of these absented Black studies scholars.

Despite being incomplete, and also perhaps because it is so, *influx & efflux* will undoubtedly remain generative for scholars working across myriad disciplines, concerned with the political ecologies of our entangled enmeshments within human and nonhuman worlds. Bennett’s final two chapters on Thoreau and the poetic language of the “processual self” (109), for instance, both serve as field-altering interventions into ongoing dialogues across the environmental humanities. Bennett’s fine-tuned and exacting readings of a Thoreau who confronts, embraces, and is radically destabilized by an “affectivity that is not only profound but also apersonal and not *predisposed first and foremost toward humans*” (108), convincingly reorients the nineteenth-century author away from his continued entrenchment in transcendentalist providentialism. Bennett’s final discussion of “process-oriented verbs,” middle-voiced verbs which do not “subscribe to the usual distinction between an unwilling ‘operativity’ of a structure and the bona fide ‘action’ of an intentional author,” but rather allow us to inhabit the intervals, where “one might discern the presence of the non-self and even the nonhuman efforts in the milieu” (113), inspires a profound attention to the power of eco-poetic language in enlivening our relations to the world. Bennett refers to this attention as a *writing up with*, “that is to say, to lift up a few degrees the sorts of positive influences that can in turn lift us” (118).

At a time when the intersecting crises of anthropogenic climate change, structural racism, and neo-nationalist xenophobia are so dire and manifold, the quiet promise of Bennett's "writing up" may seem fledgling and uncertain, extraneous or even luxurious. But as Lorde reminds us, "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (1985, 2). The Whitmanian "I" that alights in Bennett's reading, its absorbent creativity, will continue to offer sustenance, nourishment, and care, that quality of light so necessary for tangible action in the myriad worlds of our own continued becomings.

Notes

¹ Christian Abrahamsson (2011), in his review of *Vibrant Matter*, notes the ways in which nineteenth-century vitalist thinking was often coopted by political projects in geographic determinacy and racist eugenics, a problematic history which he sees as being often elided in Bennett's speculative thinking. See p. 399.

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