

Responding: Spacetimeunconscious[ing] both heavy and light

Anna J. Secor 
Durham University, UK

Responsibility entails an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other, here and there, now and then. (Barad, 2007: 394)

Nobody said it would be easy

For one thing, there were other things needed from me. I wasn't just *not responding*. I was responding *all the time* to the 'lively relationalities' (Barad, 2007: 393) that embroil me. It was just the *Dialogues in Human Geography* editor to whom I wasn't responding. It was the commentaries on my article 'Spacetimeunconscious' (Secor, 2023) that I had left hanging. I was grateful, of course, to be there at all, to be mixed up in this, to 'be' in fact nothing other than this mixing-up. This creation of mine had been read and engaged by some of the very people whose creativity, imagination, and insight had inspired me. But somehow, all I wanted to do in response to this generosity was to turn myself into sand and slip through everyone's fingers.

In fact, an initial reviewer of the article had noticed this tendency. They questioned whether the author (me, presumably) really wanted a 'dialogue' at all. The reviewer had found the first draft difficult to grasp hold of, resistant to the usual modes of academic engagement. I was struck by the truth of this, to the degree that the text's slipperiness was a defence, a manifestation of ambivalence. But I *did* want dialogue/*Dialogues*. I would take the recalcitrant manuscript in hand, crack it open

like a mollusc. This breaching was rewarded, and 'Spacetimeunconscious' (Secor, 2023) appears now in *Dialogues in Human Geography* with four brilliant and provocative commentaries (Barad, 2024; Landau-Donnelly, 2023; Nassar, 2024a; Pohl, 2023). But then when it came time to respond to these responses, to make good on the promise of dialogue(s), my first instinct was to turn to dust. Anyhow it was already happening: flakes of my skin danced and whirled in the shaft of morning light, macroscopically indistinguishable from bits of fibre, pollen, smoke, insect parts. I could just lie there and watch.

It was not something I wanted to do, to glue my skin back on and tamp it all down by having 'the final word'. The invitation to perform closure and mastery needed to be returned unopened. But wasn't it also important to *take responsibility*? To make myself accountable for what I had put into the world, even without fully 'knowing' what that was? Such responsibility need not be premised on my own authority. After all, I may be the least authority on my text, having written it and *therefore* not knowing what it says (or doesn't say). Friederike Landau-Donnelly (2023) asks in her commentary, 'how does anyone come to know' unconscious knowledge? The ethical response to this question,

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–5

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20438206251316015

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Corresponding author:

Anna J. Secor, Department of Geography, Durham University,
Lower Mountjoy, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK.

Email: anna.j.secor@durham.ac.uk

I thought, would be to dissolve the myth that (any) one knows – and here I sensed a path opening for my response more generally. Beginning from Landau-Donnelly's question, I was able to envision a mode of response, one that would try to displace (any)one from their knowingness by feeling around (self-touching would be encouraged).

The first thing I felt, as I groped around, was the newly sore spot where the 'ing' of spacetime-mattering wasn't. I had not intended to arrest the becoming of spacetime-mattering and its unconscious supplement – but there went spacetime-unconscious, in the world, ing-less. Karen Barad (2024) is right that there is something telling about the -ing's absence, especially since it was not a conscious decision on my part. And I had not only done it to my own concept, but, inexcusably, to theirs! This truncation was both thoughtless and consequential, a 'Freudian clip' as Barad puts it. We were playing with the language of castration (who has it and who doesn't), and this was a minor pleasure, but limited. There were other more exciting possibilities. Perhaps to maim the signifier is not to produce dichotomous difference, but to multiply the possibilities of speaking, monsterring, making difference (as in Preciado, 2021). I can't help wondering if the -ing's aggravating absence was the act of transgression that created the possibility for me to speak in this peculiar voice at all.

There are other ways to respond than speaking (even Lacan lost language). There are other ways to fail to respond (or to correspond) to what is called for, to miss connections. Lucas Pohl asserts that psychoanalysis 'relies' on the 'distinctive features of human beings': in particular, what he refers to as 'the radical dimension of lack in human subjectivity' (Pohl, 2023). If so, then whatever I have done here has clearly crossed the line, because indeed it happens without respect for this dichotomy (non-human/human, whole/lacking). The wager of 'Spacetimeunconscious' is that the creative forces of misalignment, unknowing, and (mis)interpretation are not uniquely human. Wherever signals are emitted and received, they also go awry, exceed and fall short of their aim. There is not a world where everything that happens corresponds to itself (spatially, temporally,

and materially) and seamlessly or mechanically unfolds without variance (or 'failure') – and then outside of this, the human, where things uniquely run aground.

In the speculative zone between psychoanalysis and new materialism, this text (I dare not call it mine) has no snug home, having 'resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions' (Deleuze, 1995: 6). An offspring, yet monstrous, destined to be expelled, to wander. Perhaps it would be best if we chalk this whole thing up to a phantom pregnancy. As Anna O. writhes and clutches her abdomen, the dashing Dr B. takes up his hat and rushes from the house. By the end of their commentary, Barad seems to be saying that there was no need, really, to bring up 'unconsciousing', since whatever dynamic this is, it was always already unfolding with spacetime-mattering. But that's what got me going (set me off) in the first place, this always-already-thereness of something with the potential to provoke a post-human rethinking of 'the unconscious'! A strange loop, but for all its phantasmatic displacement, perhaps not without some capacity for transformation. After all, most likely there was no abdomen clutching, no hat grabbing between Bertha Pappenheim (Anna's real name) and Dr Josef Breuer. There are reasons to suspect that Pappenheim was not only not pregnant, but also wasn't not-pregnant – that none of this happened (Borch-Jacobsen, 1996). The phantom-event of the phantom-pregnancy both births and dissolves its own interpretation (psychoanalysis). Perhaps the misbegotten concept of spacetimeunconscious[ing] might also find the agency to lick itself, break open its own birth-sac, unrealise its origins.

Anyhow I had no choice, I was already responding, mutating. I couldn't help it. Pohl says that the unconscious for me is a substance. Barad says that for me, it's epistemic. Clearly whatever I had put into the world was no one thing. According to Barad, I had deleted mattering altogether and imagined messages arriving from outside the world. How would this work?

Neither of us knows. Had I conjured up a mobius twist without a mobius surface, a smile without a cat, a wave without a medium? I can assure you,

if so, that this apparition arrived unbidden. For the record, I had meant to invite an idea of spacetimeunconscious[ing] that is part of the mattering of the world. While Barad reads the text to imply that the ‘outside’ nucleator is not also always inside, this was not at all intended: water’s best nucleator is a snowflake, a speck of dust is a floating part of the world, the unchained word too is enigmatic in relation to other words, the ‘sense’ from which it has broken away. It was also never my intention to suggest the presence of an ‘unconscious substance’ or essence. I would sooner say, with Thomas Ogden, ‘The unconscious does not exist!’, and, with Paul Eluard, reconceptualising Freud’s unconscious: ‘There is another world, but it is in this one’ (Ogden, 2024: 282). There is not a thing, ‘the unconscious’, that can be pulled from a body like a cheesecloth. What can I do but emit an excited ‘Yes precisely, beautiful!’ when Barad writes towards the end of their commentary that ‘unconsciousing is an originary impurity’ – yet I think Barad means this as a refutation of something I never meant to conjure.

Matters do go awry. Maybe I was just too clumsy to pull off something so delicate: a dialogue between radically different forms, the entanglement of what should not be understood together. I stumbled. I wasn’t where or when I thought I was. I put on a new ‘-ing’, liked the look of it, but worried it wasn’t ‘me’, felt like an imposter. My double recognised herself despite all the talk and fled the scene, took up charitable works, lived productively (see Kimball, 2000). Left behind in the indeterminate room, I stroked the smooth wall and watched the light change.

‘The surface of the world is always breaking’, writes Aya Nassar (2024a). In her commentary, it is summer, it is spring, it is autumn. The seasons pass and the time of wreckage folds in on itself, compresses to a dense point. At the same time, each new horror launches violent trajectories in every direction, a spray of mostly unbearable futures. Dust turns to dust in the ‘the slow and fast breakdown of the surfaces of the present’ (Nassar, 2024a). The disintegrated world gets in your eyes, your nose and lungs. ‘[B]reathing the ground surrounding us is nothing but political’ (Nassar 2024a). Today in

northern Gaza, ‘[t]he smell of death is everywhere as bodies are left lying in the roads or under rubble’ (UN News, 2024). Choking on dust and decay, those who witness and survive lob words and images at the smooth dream-surface of an impassive world.

When Nassar writes about lingering in the gaps, it is not to recommend the deathly rubble where no dwelling is possible, but instead to call forth the ‘unstable breaks in the surface of the world’ that might (co)respond, or become responsive, to this calamitous, shattered space. ‘The knot holds within it the aftermath. Nothing remains, nothing goes away. It is up to us to see in that a threat or a promise’ (Nassar, 2024b: 2). Nassar writes these words in the context of an installation by artist Emma McNally, in which a giant graphite map that once was housed in the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment crumples and folds with the earth, a bubbled and wavy surface entangling atomic plans with their toxic materiality and their aftermath (McNally calls it ‘*The River that Flows Nowhere Like the Sea*’). Nassar’s essay, ‘Graphite geography’ accompanies McNally’s solo exhibition, *The Earth is Knot Flat* (London, 2 October–15 December 2024) and appears in the text *Etymologies of Foam and Dust* (McNally, 2024).¹ The essay is broken apart, dispersed amongst images, poetics, and an intermittent glossary (e.g. ‘fall’, ‘whirl’, ‘inseparability’; McNally, 2024: 13). Nassar picks through the ruins of a blasted lexicon, a shaken world, this being what remains possible and necessary: ‘In the brokenness of words, perhaps something else will emerge; so, a record of brokenness must be written’ (Nassar, 2024b: 3).

When I myself was shattered, the ground seemed to pitch from side-to-side and I felt unable to walk (across the scorching pavement to the dark maw of the subway entrance, through the automatic doors and the blast of cold air to the reception desk, down the hospital corridor to the room where my loved one lay). I said I was unmoored, and I knew as I said it that the word was entangled with the world, my body the medium of this becoming. There had always been a tiny gap (a distance impossible to close, Barad, 2012), but now it felt

like a vast, unnavigable sea (or a river going nowhere). My body was the map. The map had no bounds. It contained the aftermath in its first measured line, in its elemental (de)composition.

A ghost drifts footless down the stairs. The stairs twist, go up and down at the same time, dissolve. The ghost lands with the weight of a body, the weight of ashes in a box. ‘The nucleator-text weighs in on you and at the same time sucks you out of your shoes into a space just above the ground’, writes Landau-Donnelly (2023). She asks: ‘Did you feel the same way? Or Anna? Which Anna?’ (I have been responding to this question all along). What is it to feel the non-correspondence between a body and its place of insertion? There are multiple valences: to slip out of one’s shoes is one thing, to be ejected is another. To be weighted down may be comforting or smothering. Perhaps one needs to hone a sense for the contingency of all (dis)placings (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, 2023). Estranged from the ground, the hysteric arches, levitates from the bed – only to fall back with unfathomable heaviness, like a foot plunging through the ‘phantasm of a step’ (Nabokov, 2000: 57). The impact reverberates through the dream-house, sounding brokenness and possibility.

‘Spacetimeunconscious’, the text, monsters about, uncaged, paws outstretched (retractable claws). But while the text may make a show of itself, spacetimeunconscious[ing] does not appear, only operates. Despite the missing ‘-ing’, spacetimeunconscious is not an entity but an interpretation of what happens – in particular, how space, time, and matter are enfolded with questions of (un) knowing that do not stop at the edges of human experience (this is indeed intended to be an ‘ontoe-pistemological’ proposition; Barad, 2007). The text enacts cutting as a method of interpretation, snipping together and apart the crumbling dreamworld of psychoanalysis with the elemental geographies that sense desire in the (de)composition of world. At the end of their commentary, Barad writes, ‘unconsciousing’ is ‘integral to mattering’, a ‘dynamism of indeterminacy’. Yes! Are we not touching? There is no one who knows, but I will keep feeling, groping towards *some posthuman concept of [the] unconscious[ing]*. Thrilling and aching in this wild

and challenging opening, I know I have not dispensed with my responsibility. But I hope what I have written contributes to the ongoing happening of responsiveness – in these pages of *Dialogues* and well beyond.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Anna J. Secor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1506-4552>

Note

1. Citations in text are to the online publication of the essay (Nassar, 2024b).

References

- Barad K (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barad K (2012) On touching – the inhuman that therefore I am. *differences* 23(3): 206–223.
- Barad K (2024) Matter(‘)s (of) unconscious(ing): Re-membering/reconfiguring(,) the logics/structure of supplementarity. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, This issue.
- Borch-Jacobsen M (1996) *Remembering Anna O.: A Century of Mystification*. New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze G (1995) *Negotiations: 1972–1990*. Translated by M Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kimball MM (2000) From ‘Anna O.’ to Bertha Pappenheim: Transforming private pain into public action. *History of Psychology* 3(1): 20–43.
- Landau-Donnelly F (2023) Water that will (never) forget itself: Tracing the knowledge politics of the spacetimeunconscious. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, This issue.
- Landau-Donnelly F and Pohl L (2023) Towards a post-foundational geography: Spaces of negativity, contingency, and antagonism. *Progress in Human Geography* 47(4): 481–499.

- McNally E (2024) *Etymologies of Foam and Dust*. London: Drawing Room.
- Nabokov V (2000) *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Nassar A (2024a) To be called forth by a speck of dust. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, This issue.
- Nassar A (2024b) *Graphite Geography*. London: Drawing Room. Accessed: <https://drawingroom.org.uk/read-listen-watch/graphite-geography-by-aya-nassar/>.
- Ogden TH (2024) Rethinking the concepts of the unconscious and analytic time. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 105(3): 279–291.
- Pohl L (2023) What's the matter with the unconscious? *Dialogues in Human Geography*, This issue.
- Preciado P (2021) *Can the Monster Speak? [F Wynne, Trans.]*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Secor AJ (2023) Spacetimeunconscious. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206231191763.
- UN News (2024) 'The smell of death is everywhere' in northern Gaza, UNRWA chief says. United Nations News: Global Perspectives Human Stories. 23 October 2024. Accessed: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155971>.