

Haunted Data, Post-Publication Peer-Review and Body Studies: An Interview with Lisa Blackman

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ABSTRACT

In this follow-up interview to her keynote lecture at the MeCCSA-PGN 2015 Conference in Coventry, Lisa Blackman discusses her work on affect and the body, as well as her new book *Haunted Data*, which explores the creative and critical challenges of computational cultures for theories of affect and mediation, and the potential of PPPR (post-publication peer-review) to provide a corpus of data that be re-moved (Rheinberger) and performed for its hauntological potential. Working with the concept of ‘haunted data’ to follow those traces, deferrals, absences, gaps and their movements within a particular corpus of data, and to re-move and keep alive what becomes submerged or hidden by particular regimes of visibility and remembering, Blackman illustrates how these movements are simultaneously technical, affective, historical, social, political and ethical.

KEY WORDS

Affect; Body Studies; Haunted Data; Mediation; Post-Publication Peer-Review

THE EDITORS: *Your talk was based upon two science controversies that recently evolved across social media. Could you begin by summarising those controversies, and by explaining what they tell us about ‘post-publication peer-review’ and ‘participative means of value’? And why did you choose examples from science, rather than social science or the humanities?*

LISA BLACKMAN: The two controversies are interesting because they move across cognitive science, anomalistic psychology, psychic research and intersect with current debates within the humanities; this includes the field of affect studies, debates on mediation and the topical question of whether and what kind of critical research is possible within computational cultures. The two controversies relate to haunted or ‘alien phenomenology’; that is the sense that we can be haunted or moved by someone or even something else, suggesting that we exist within discontinuous and disjointed space-time-matterings. The first is the ‘[John Bargh priming controversy](#)’, and the second and related controversy is Daryl Bem and what has come to be known as ‘[Feeling the Future](#)’.

The controversies both relate to journal articles, which have gained a reach and traction across social media and come to the attention of the broadcast media. The ‘John Bargh’ priming controversy relates to a classic study of priming carried out by Bargh in 1997, which is one of the classic and most highly cited studies in the field (to date it has been cited 3872 times). The study provides experimental evidence that subjects could be made to walk more slowly to an elevator after being exposed to words associated with ageing on a scrambled language task. There was an attempt to replicate the experiment in [2012](#) by a young Belgian post-doctoral researcher and team who changed the parameters of the experiment. They did not replicate it and found that subjects could only be primed if the experimenter knew the aims of the experiment. When they did not the results could not be replicated.

Replication is considered the cornerstone of scientific experimentation and allows scientists to make particular claims to truth, validity and reliability. What became controversial is not that Bargh’s original experiment could not be replicated (there are many such instances), but the conclusions the team drew. Using the idea of experimental effects (where subjects are biased towards reproducing what the experimenter wants), Doyen et al. concluded that the experimenter rather than the experimental subjects were biased, raising questions about the nature of priming and what exactly priming is, does and might do. Doyen et al. compared Bargh to the owner of [Hans the Horse, Mr von Osten](#), who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the subject of controversy. Hans was an equine celebrity who appeared to be able to solve complex multiplication puzzles and tell the time by stamping his hooves. However, it was later found that he could only do this if Mr von Osten knew the answers. The comparison with Mr von Osten incensed Bargh and he responded to this in 3 blog posts that he wrote for his then dormant blog for Psychology Today, [The Natural Unconscious](#). These posts became the subject of controversy and two were later redacted by Bargh, leaving a distributed hyper-linked corpus of ghostly data produced by scientists and other interested publics attempting to work out what happened to the posts, what was in them and why they had been redacted. I became one of the ghost-hunters!

The second controversy, Feeling the Future, also concerned a [journal article](#), which gained a reach and traction across social and digital media. This article, related to a series of experiments carried out by the Cornell scientist and already controversial figure, Daryl Bem. The experimental evidence supported Bem’s claims that it is possible for the future to retroactively reshape the past. Within the confines of statistical significance the experiments appeared to confirm a hypothesis which was inspired by Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the*

Looking Glass, and particularly the White Queen's view that memory works both ways (forwards and backwards). As with the Bargh priming controversy, there is a corpus of hyper-linked data particularly carried by blogs, tweets and google+ posts written by academics, scientists and other publics evaluating these claims post-publication. This data, what has come to be known as PPPR (post-publication peer-review), shows how in the context of digital practices journal articles are now no longer un-modifiable, static entities and can be changed post-publication through the assessments, evaluations, commentary and discourse (particularly uncivil and affective discourse), which some journal articles attract. PPPR is considered a potential that can be mined to help increase the impact of articles, as well as providing consternation and anxieties for some scientists who are worried as to how these practices will challenge and contest the integrity of science.

Given that the humanities often inherits the practices, methods and strategies of measuring impact from science, I was interested in exploring what following two highly cited articles in science that have gained impact might show us (also see [Blackman 2015](#)). Both controversies also connect to phenomena that exceed the rational, self-conscious, cognitive subject, exploring registers of experience that de-throne the autonomous, self-enclosed subject from its seat, and connect to the current humanities interest in affect, the post- and non-human, as well as the question of how we might understand what spreads across social media, how and why. Not easy questions! For all these reasons and more, the controversies became interesting source material to explore what critical research might be possible within computational cultures, and has led to a book length project, *Haunted Data: Social Media, Affect, Weird Science and Archives of the Future* currently under review with Duke University Press and hopefully out in 2016.

THE EDITORS: *Is there any evidence to suggest that authors or journals are using social media strategically to increase citations and improve the 'impact' or 'value' of their work? Is this indicative of a 'church and state' breakdown between authorial/editorial independence and marketing/corporate logic within academia? How widespread do you think this phenomenon is, and to what extent is it symptomatic of an ingrained neoliberal subjectivity among academics?*

LISA BLACKMAN: The quick and simple answer is yes, there is evidence that journals are using social media strategically to increase citations and improve the impact and value of published articles. There are metrics used by publishers, such as altmetrics, to attempt to measure the reach and traction of articles across social media. I have written about these tendencies in an article published on-line first in the journal [Theory, Culture & Society](#), if readers are interested. Canny academics are attempting to increase their own social media presence linking into already established networks of prestige, hierarchy and status, including blogs associated with particular journals, video-abstracts and other supplementary material designed to help increase the chances that journal articles will be read and cited. These are often in my view re-mediations of already established networks that through their citational histories have tended to exclude female and early career researchers, and publish classic figures in the field, often dead, white men sadly! Social media presence by its very nature is not a presence that can be established by academics working alone, and invites reciprocation that is often along the lines of already-established allegiances and power relations. This is a problem. Many people have written about what Ros Gill has termed the 'hidden injuries of class', and how academic practices and increasing measures of value are based on neoliberal conceptions of success and failure, which divert attention from inequalities and oppressions.

This is no more so than in the context of PPPR, and given current discussions of the importance of open access publishing to open academic work up to broader non-academic publics, one wonders exactly what ‘open’ means when publishing practices are re-situated within a complex array of asymmetrical advantages and disadvantages.

THE EDITORS: *Your forthcoming book is on ‘haunted data’ and ‘digital hauntology’. Could you explain what you mean by ‘hauntings’ and how this relates to social media and digital research methods?*

LISA BLACKMAN: Good question! The book is an attempt to develop a digital method, which takes ghost-data or submerged, displaced and disguised data as its subject matter. This haunted data exists as an absent-presence and often appears in dead-ends, detours, and as nonsensical, paradoxical traces of a story-yet-to-be-told. We don’t tend to associate storytelling either with science or computational culture, but haunted data is data that relates to the histories of excess of science’s and computational culture’s own storytelling. The method I develop in the book is a form of trans-medial story-telling indebted to the work of the post-colonial theorist Rey Chow, which approaches digital and social media as interesting platforms to re-move traces of what might have been, which have tended towards fossilization or displacement. The concept of re-removal is taken from the work of the science studies scholar Hans-Jorg Rheinberger, and explores what he calls the historicities of science, which haunt science and in my view can be attended to, amplified and extended using digital practices of mediated perception. My work might be viewed alongside emerging traditions of research in social media and digital research methods that work with the potential of the internet and social media to produce the possibility of new structures of feeling and affective publics (Papacharissi, for example). The method I have developed uses some digital methods, but also uses storytelling as an inventive practice for making a difference and intervening within controversies. I do not believe that metrics and data visualizations are all that can or should be done to measure impact, reach and traction.

THE EDITORS: *You’re more usually known for your work on the body, and on affect, in particular, than on data or social media. And how does your current research into haunted data relate to your wider interest in affect and body studies?*

LISA BLACKMAN: What I haven’t said is that both controversies came to my attention whilst I was researching what has come to be known as the ‘half second delay’ between affect and cognition, particularly associated with the seminal work of Brian Massumi in affect studies. Both controversies in different ways re-move and refract this statement and offer a rather queer reading of what Nikolas Rose and Abi-Rached in their book, *Neuro*, have called Libetism. Both controversies, when approached hauntologically, open up some rather interesting propositions about what it means to be embodied, an organism and human, as well as interesting speculative questions about the nature of communication. They broadly connect with my already existing interest in the body and affect although at first glance the project might be seen to be a departure. In fact the digital method I develop is very embodied and challenges the idea that data is disembodied. I see the work as a continuation of my interest in what might be possible at the intersection of the sciences and humanities. I ended up in debates that connect with some of the most challenging questions about life, the universe and matter that cross philosophy, science and humanities research.

THE EDITORS: *You're quite critical of psychologists. To what extent is contemporary psychology 'haunted' by earlier theories, such as 19th century spirituality, and what do you mean by the term 'future psychology' – does this involve a 'return to spirituality'? And how does your critical interest in psychology relate to your work for the Hearing Voices Network?*

LISA BLACKMAN: These are big questions and certainly relate to themes that connect my academic research interests. I am quite critical of psychology and of some of the theories, concepts and statements that have become rather black-boxed within psychology. We inherit many of them within media and cultural studies and I wrote about this back in 2001 in a book with Valerie Walkerdine, called *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies*. I have always been interested in what haunts psychology, and particularly in those theories, concepts and experimental practices that exist in psychology's pasts, which constituted psychological processes as indeterminate and contiguous with the material, symbolic, technical, historical and cultural, for example. I have worked with these traces of what psychology might have become if it had not blackboxed the psychological subject through a series of bifurcations between subject/object, individual/social, mind/body, human/non-human and so on. This is what I call a future-psychology, and it is one that does not simply exist in the past but haunts the present. I wrote about this in my book, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (Sage, 2012).

The Hearing Voices Network have always represented an example of a social movement and activist group that challenges the way psychology (particularly cognitive psychology) and psychiatry (particularly the biomedical model) work with the phenomenon of voice hearing. I learnt a lot from my collaborations with them and through their tenacity, stubbornness and desire to invent techniques of listening and coping practices that acknowledge that voices might have something to say, and they have started to have a significant impact on mental health research and practice internationally. I am part of a Wellcome funded project, [Hearing the Voice](#), which is bringing together scientists, humanities scholars and voice hearers (experts by experience) to further validate and explore their successes and efficacy, and I will be part of a sub-project, Voices Beyond the Self, starting in 2018, which will extend my research interests in new directions.

THE EDITORS: *Throughout much of your recent work, you refer to 'series of entanglements', 'lineage' and 'intergenerationality'. How does your approach differ methodologically from a standard Foucauldian-genealogical approach, and which theorists have influenced your own approach?*

LISA BLACKMAN: Where Foucault's genealogical research is more commonly associated with discontinuity I am increasingly interested in what continues, albeit in disguised or displaced form. I do not see hauntology as distinctly different to genealogy but rather as developing attention to what does not get sanctioned or archived in texts, practices, and statements, which achieve the status of discourse in a Foucauldian sense. The approach to hauntology I develop draws from Vikki Bell, Avery Gordon, Rey Chow, and queer and feminist approaches to hauntology, as well as approaches to hauntology found in critical race studies and associated art practices. I have a whole chapter on this in the book *Haunted Data*, as there is a lot of work in this area which I do not think has been brought together in the context of digital research methods.

THE EDITORS: *You're also the editor of two academic journals (Body & Society and Subjectivity). Do you have any advice for early career researchers who may be about to pursue their first publications? As an editor, what do you look for in an article? And should prospective authors consider the 'impact' of a journal when choosing among publication venues, or worry about the post-publication peer-review of their articles?*

LISA BLACKMAN: I think the main advice I can give early career researchers is to write the article for a particular journal. This means reading the journal, familiarising yourself with the aims and scope of the journal and the debates that have been staged. Do not simply send off an edited chapter, which has been modified into a journal format, but think about how your own research might intervene within a particular set of debates shaped within a particular journal. This will be encouraged by the peer-review process anyway, so you have a better chance of getting through the process, or even being sent for peer-review if you adopt this strategy to begin with. Also think about the readership of the journal and whether this is the readership you want to engage. Journal editors and publishers also want articles to be discoverable, which means populating your article with keywords and making links to key debates and topical issues which will help make your article relevant and readable. Try not to be cryptic both in titles of articles and in how they are written. We spend a lot of time as editors encouraging authors to write for broad interdisciplinary audiences and non-specialist readers. This is different to a PhD, which is generally written for a smaller readership (2 examiners and your supervisors) and has to fulfil certain criteria. Journal articles are their own special format or genre, and although there are many instances of how journal formats can be subverted or challenged, you need to know the genre quite well to be able to do this.

The impact of a journal is an issue as some publishers have more infrastructure and resources to help in bringing articles to reader's attention. However, my view has always been to write the articles you want and to make sure they are in a journal associated with a particular relevant readership. As you are probably aware, I think post-publication peer-review is a strategy which reproduces some of the worst inequalities associated with power, prestige and status, so rather than worrying about PPPR I think it is time to invent new strategies which do not end in 'business as usual'. If you read my work on John Bargh, you will see that despite the potential of PPPR to open up to something different, to archives of the future, ultimately Bargh sets the record straight and it is his version of events that achieves the number 1 spot on the google page rank. This is despite the controversy, challenges and potential for PPPR to allow new authors and early career researchers to set new paths and research agendas. This might be a slightly depressing conclusion to the interview, but in my view making these relations of prestige, status and hierarchy visible might stimulate early career researchers to create and invent strategies that are more democratic, participatory, communal and inclusive. I hope so!

Thank you for the interview questions. They have been very challenging and stimulating and I wish all PG MeCCSA affiliates and readers every success in their careers and in making a difference.

Lisa Blackman is a Professor in the Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. She works at the intersection of body studies and media and cultural theory. She is the editor of the journal *Body & Society* (Sage) and co-editor of *Subjectivity* (with Valerie Walkerdine, Palgrave). She has published four books: *Immaterial*

Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation (2012, Sage/TCS); *The Body: The Key Concepts* (2008, Berg); *Hearing Voices: Embodiment and Experience* (2001, Free Association Books); *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies* (with Valerie Walkerdine, 2001, Palgrave). She teaches courses which span critical media psychology, affect studies, embodiment and body studies, and experimentation in the context of art/science. She is particularly interested in phenomena which have puzzled scientists, artists, literary writers and the popular imagination for centuries, including automaticity, voice hearing, suggestion and telepathy. She is currently working on a new project, *Haunted Data: Social Media, Weird Science and Archives of the Future*.

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