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## Microaggressions as New Political Material for Feminist Scholars and Activists: Perspectives from Continental Philosophy, the New Materialisms, and Popular Culture

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses microaggressions as new political material for feminist scholars and activists. The article asks how the new materialisms may contribute to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of microaggressions. After all, and taking them at face value, the ontological status of microaggressions and their modes of operation are fascinating: what are these allegedly infinitesimal hostilities? How do they reach their target and, once they have arrived there, how do they take effect? What assumptions about the constituents of the world do scholars and activists make when, through language they imply that microaggressions are indeed ‘out there’ and therefore researchable? Case studies around micropsychological dynamics that have come to my attention through National Public Radio’s podcast *Invisibilia* as well as the French philosophical work of Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941) will help to unfold my argument. *Invisibilia* is here taken to be an instance of new materialist popular culture, and whilst Ravaissonian philosophy has influenced the philosophical work of Bergson, the work of both men contributes to the continental philosophical impetus of the new materialisms.

A new term, ‘microaggressions’, is currently circulating in feminist settings such as the classroom and the blog. Feminist, anti-racist, non-heteronormative, and trans students, teachers, and blogger-activists agree that women, blacks, queers, and trans people are microaggressively approached on a daily basis. Their arguments are exemplified by lists of ‘21 Racial Microaggressions You Hear On A Daily Basis’ (almost 3.5 million views on Buzz-Feed) and ‘15 Microaggressions Women Face On A Daily Basis, Because They All Add Up To An Unequal Society’ (a popular 2015 item on *bustle.com*). Such microaggressions pertain to overhearing people talk about ‘mankind’ instead of ‘humankind’, being asked ‘where you are from’ as a mixed-race person of colour, or – as I have often done myself, and seen colleagues do – addressing a group of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies students as ‘girls’ or ‘women’. Ever since first encountering the term I have grown increasingly intrigued as to how microaggressions differ from explicitly discriminatory language and/or acts especially given that the way in which microaggressions are usually described entails

a subject, predicate, and object. Can someone *be* a microaggressor? How does one become conscious of the microaggressions inflicted on them? Is the ‘micro-’ of microaggressions justified? Posited as empirical phenomena, how exactly do microaggressions intersectionally impact upon gendered situations, and what is the analytico-political work that is expected of microaggressions as a conceptual tool?

This article discusses microaggressions as potential new political material for feminist scholars and activists. Specifically, the article asks how the new materialisms may contribute to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of microaggressions.<sup>1</sup> After all, and taking them at face value, the ontological status of microaggressions and their modes of operation are fascinating: what are these allegedly infinitesimal hostilities? How do they reach their target and, once they have arrived there, how do they take effect? What assumptions about the constituents of the world do scholars and activists make when through language they imply that microaggressions are indeed ‘out there’ and therefore researchable? Case studies around micropsychological dynamics that have come to my attention through National Public Radio’s podcast *Invisibilia* as well as the French philosophical work of Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941) will help to unfold my argument. For clarity, *Invisibilia* is here taken to be an instance of new materialist popular culture, and whilst Ravaissonian philosophy has influenced the philosophical work of Bergson (see Bergson [1904] 2007) the work of both men contributes to the continental philosophical impetus of the new materialisms (see, e.g. Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2011; Grosz 2013).

### A generation war?

In feminist contexts today, together with, for example: ‘trigger warnings’, ‘call-outs’, and ‘safe spaces’, microaggressions are suggested as innovative ways of addressing, in particular, heteronormativity and cissexism in a range of settings: feminist, academic, as well as the more mundane and everyday. All of this ties in with the so-called feminist ‘generation wars’ in neoliberal times.<sup>2</sup> This term – generation wars – is Julia Serano’s 2014 neologism that extends beyond post-feminism, and addresses a schism in contemporary feminist, queer, and trans academic and activist communities: the schism between the sturdy, robust feminists of the 1990s – queers, and trans people – that allegedly accuse the 2010s feminists, queers, and trans people of a soft me, myself, and I-ism. Serrano’s position is that

There have always been activists who only want to focus on, and talk about, their own issues, concerns, pain, perspectives, etc. – they exist in every generation. What is new (or at least new-ish) about many contemporary activist settings is that people are starting to take other people’s concerns seriously (or at least, arguably, more seriously than they used to). (n.p.)<sup>3</sup>

I wonder what would happen to this schismic understanding of contemporary feminism if I were to implement the generative approach to generational feminisms which I have developed in conversation with the new materialisms (see Van der Tuin 2015).

For starters, as a feminist epistemologist I am puzzled by Serano’s statement: isn’t feminist knowledge production per se built upon the recognition of other people’s concerns? After all, the epistemic twist in second wave feminist movements pertained to the jump from individual problems to social facts: the moment individually experienced problems

appeared to be shared by many other women they were no longer isolated problems but acquired a shared fact status. Serano's position also points to what I see as the quite paradoxical co-existence of call-outs (explicit rejections of certain people's uttered views or, as will become clear when I mention scent later on, non-verbal bodily modalities) and trigger warnings in safe-space discourse (the tiptoeing verbalisation of anticipated discomfort). What is important here is the shared assumption of feminism or gendered and sexualised oppression being a conscious process or a process that is easily cognisable. Are either feminism or oppression fixed ideas? Are we always conscious of what is going on around, and within, us? In other words, how do we know what – in a movie, a novel, a social interaction – is a case of explicit or implicit sexism, heterosexism, or cissexism, and what impacts these forces have on another person or ourselves? The same assumptions seem to be at work in microaggressions research, which is characterised by a built-in 'you versus me', that is, the Shannon and Weaver model of communication and by a clear unawareness of psychoanalysis in the widest sense of the term or, more precisely, psychological theories that are not determinist or associationist (Bergson [1889] 1913).<sup>4</sup> After all, although they are presumably microscopically small, microaggressions are seen as being consciously experienced on a daily basis, and they add up to an unequal society (i.e. the macro-scale of hierarchical human interaction).

In order to instigate a productive engagement with microaggressions I will reshuffle the cards and assume that microaggressions have the potential for scholars and activists to invest in the purported dynamic and knotted micro-level of experience, one that is onto-epistemologically prior to entities (the entities that we are ourselves). Of course, this assumption is neither new, nor unproblematic. When I listen to the debates that surround the new political materials of contemporary feminism I am reminded of 'everyday racism', the important theory of among others Philomena Essed (1984, 1991). The affirmed evanescence of everyday racism ensured that the theory was likely to receive criticism (see Wekker 2016), but here I ask if microaggressions research in a new materialist key can contribute to making the processes not only of everyday racism but also sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism researchable. The first step is, I will argue, an innovative operationalisation of microaggressions themselves; a process that is neither going to be easy or straightforward. Think of Leys's (2011) critique of affect theory, a theory attempting to work both in a new materialist vein and with the infinitesimal. Leys writes that affect theory as well as those incarnations of continental philosophy and neuroscience with which it works with are structured by 'the belief that affect is independent of signification and meaning [...] affect is a matter of autonomic responses that are held to occur below the threshold of consciousness and cognition and to be rooted in the body' (443). This situation is in need of clarification indeed, because here we have an argument pertaining to pre-consciousness and embodiment without cognition, whereas earlier I pointed at assumptions of conscious awareness and the straightforwardly cognitive in contemporary feminist communities. We may have stumbled upon what Lynn Hankinson Nelson has termed 'unreal dichotomies' and 'non-exhaustive oppositions' (1993).

### *Invisibilia*

What are the prominent operationalisations of the microaggressions concept and how to view its researchability from a new materialist perspective? The recent introduction of

microaggressions into feminist contexts stands, only seemingly, in sharp contrast to some contemporary theoretical innovations such as affect. Therefore, one may ask if research into microaggressions analyses its materials following a retrograde movement ‘[f]rom [which] emerges an error which vitiates our conception of the past, as well as our pretension to anticipate the future for every occasion’ (Bergson [1934] 2007, 11; translation adjusted by Gregg Lambert). Has microaggressions research forgotten to take into account its own objects of knowledge as intricate ‘material-semiotic generative nodes’ (Haraway 1988, 595), the coming-into-being of which as an abstract idea demand to be studied? In this article, I hope to reach ‘the simple act which has set [this] analysis in motion and which hides behind analysis’, a faculty able to reach ‘a sounding of which one feels that it has more or less reached the bottom of a same ocean, even though it brings each time to the surface very different materials’ (Bergson [1934] 2007, 168). That is, I will try to undo the retrograde movement that seems to have informed the easy adoption of microaggressions in both feminist research and feminist activism in order to hopefully reach a conclusion about what microaggressions can possibly do as productive political material that stands for a precise conceptualisation of what it means to act freely (or not) in the world.

Having phrased my questions such as I just did suggests that I will talk about the nature of microaggressions per se as well as about their introduction to feminist contexts. Part of this terrain I have covered above by arguing that the Bergsonian intuitive faculty has not yet been able to play any role in the generation war as a result of its overcoding by conscious cognition and linear modelling of communication. What I will do in the bulk of this text is to briefly engage with existing operationalisations of microaggressions, but most of all I will engage with the ‘How to Become Batman’ (23 January 2015) and ‘Entanglement’ episodes (30 January 2015) of Lulu Miller’s and Alix Spiegel’s podcast *Invisibilia* of NPR<sup>5</sup> and with what the research presented in this popular science podcast suggests for the quandary around the ‘micro-’ of microaggressions that I am ultimately interested in. Let me first explain how *Invisibilia* became such an important line of flight for my new materialist engagement with microaggressions.

The word podcast is a composite of pod- (‘iPod’) and ‘broadcast’, and podcasts usually come in a series around a specific topic or a particular producer and/or host(s). The website of NPR introduces the podcast *Invisibilia* with the following mission statement: ‘*Invisibilia* (Latin for all the invisible things) is about the invisible forces that control human behavior – ideas, beliefs, assumptions and emotions’ (n.p.).<sup>6</sup> So, firstly, as *Invisibilia* defines things as forces and as this podcast’s project is to study the effects of the immaterial, I see the podcast as an explicit instance of new materialism in popular culture. Secondly, the podcast ties in with the problematic of the generation wars as highlighted by Serano, who gives the following example of a call-out in her 2014 blog-post: ‘when activists today ask people not to wear scented products to events’ (n.p.). What is the problem with scented products? Well, scent is an invisible force that affects (controls?) human behaviour. Lastly, and more importantly, the podcast *Invisibilia* provides food for thought with regard to microaggressions. *Invisibilia*’s conceptual nourishment appears un-entangled in the unreal dichotomy between the activist and the academic both of which seem to be structured by a bias of the ‘mind in a container’ either explicitly endorsed in the activist context or as affirmed by negation in some corners of academia (the corner of affect theory, which is a relevant corner in relation to microaggressions).

What concepts does *Invisibilia* have to offer and how is this conceptual offering different from the operationalisations of microaggressions that are currently available in the academy and in activist circles alike?

### Microaggressions research review

Basing myself on the literature review done by Laura Baams<sup>7</sup> and on an NPR podcast from the *Around the Nation* series dealing with microaggressions,<sup>8</sup> the most common definition of microaggressions comes from the U.S. professor of psychology Derald Wing Sue. In his 2010 monograph *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* Sue defines microaggressions as 'operating below the level of conscious awareness, and continuing to oppress in unseen ways' (2010, 8). More extensively put in relation to racism:

Racial microaggressions are most similar to aversive racism in that they generally occur below the level of awareness of well-intentioned people [...] but researchers of microaggressions focus primarily on describing the dynamic interplay between perpetrator and recipient, classifying everyday manifestations, deconstructing hidden messages, and exploring internal (psychological) and external (disparities in education, employment, and health care) consequences. (9)

Apart from the fact that the assumptions of *intention* and intending *well* are captured in the phrase 'well-intentioned people',<sup>9</sup> which are assumptions that a wide range of pre- and post-May 1968 continental philosophies would have problems with, what we find here is a conceptualisation very similar to the feminist one with which I started this paper: microaggressions are little messages that travel a straight line between sender and receiver. Karen Barad would argue that such a conceptualisation is structured by 'thingification', the result of the implementation of an atomistic metaphysics which she ascribes to a plethora of (liberal) social theories and scientific theories (2003, 813). By way of an alternative, and in order to reach Donna Haraway's material-semiotic generative nodes, Barad's agential realism proposes the alternative of a 'relational ontology'. She argues:

I present a relational ontology that rejects the metaphysics of *relata*, of 'words' and 'things.' On an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role 'we' play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (812)

Interestingly, a review of current microaggressions research literature demonstrates that microaggressions are generally seen as disappointing looks and/or tedious questions, happening between a sender and a receiver, and having an effect on the receiver. This conceptualisation shows, first, that the research buys into atomist logic of *relata* while affirming a relational context, but also that the hierarchy of the senses is accepted, a construct which privileges sight over the other faculties (cf. Keller and Grontowski 1983). Additionally, speech is given a prominent place. Sue argues, for example, that whereas his research started with racial microaggressions,

[...] we discovered that almost any marginalized group in our society can be the object of microaggressions whether it be gender microaggression, sexual orientation microaggression,

or disability microaggression. Microaggressions have similar psychological dynamics but they differ in terms of the themes that are going on. For example women are more likely to get themes of sexual objectification. LGBTQ individuals are likely to experience themes of sinfulness. And these are underlying messages [...]. (NPR's *Around the Nation*, 3 April 2014)

This fragment operationalises microaggressions on a thematic basis not only by classifying the aggressions along the lines of concrete content of sentences, but also by prioritising language and selecting the effects of linguistic utterances as a privileged site for research. Importantly, it is precisely in the article 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' that Barad discusses how her agential realism – which is one amongst several new materialisms – is interested not only in how discourse comes to matter, but also in how *matter* comes to matter:

If Foucault, in queering Marx, positions the body as the locus of productive forces, the site where the large-scale organization of power links up with local practices, then it would seem that any robust theory of the materialization of bodies would necessarily take account of *how the body's materiality* – for example, its anatomy and physiology – *and other material forces actively matter to the processes of materialization*. (2003, 809; emphasis in original)

This calls for very precise research into material-discursivity and I would like to suggest that microaggressions are a perfect case study for such research. This necessity does not at all invalidate Sue's research, but rather focusses the research with greater precision, thus potentially fuelling the feminist investment in microaggressions. It was Foucault ([1969] 1972, 49; emphasis in original) who argued that

Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this "more" that we must reveal and describe,

an insight summarised by Deleuze ([1986] 1999, 43) as 'the primacy of the statement will be valuable only in this way, to the extent that it brings itself to bear on something irreducible'. In sum, attending to the direction suggested by new materialist research and how it diverts from psychological microaggressions research and activist implementations in feminism suggests the need to take a detour; a detour realised through *Invisibilia*.

### On the irreducibility of micropsychology

So, what are the 'nature' of microaggressions? Or more precisely, how do we approach a conceptualisation of microaggressions in such a way that we make the most of them, whilst not allowing ourselves to forestall the irreducibility that the concept suggests by buying into atomist metaphysics? And, methodologically speaking, if we manage to achieve such a conceptualisation of microaggressions, how do we reach this irreducibility in research? (Given that the linguistic element 'micro-' translates loosely as 'extremely small'.) Can we say that we encountered the extremely small in the foregoing discussion? I content that in the context of microaggressions we did not; we encountered fully fledged actualisations of cognitive states, phrases, modelled communication, relations between persons, and so on. Reaching out to a wider context of the new materialisms and continental philosophy I showed that an investment in the purported micro-level of experience which is onto-epistemologically prior to individual entities (thinking bodies, sentences)

has not yet led to satisfying operationalisations of microaggressions. So let us use microaggressions as a test case for experimentation and run with *Invisibilia*.

I first encountered the irreducibility of micropsychological processes and a methodological procedure that would allow one to reach them in the episode ‘How to Become Batman’ of the podcast *Invisibilia*. Is this a case of forcing theory onto reality? *Invisibilia*’s episode ‘How to Become Batman’ opens with a discussion of an experiment with rats. In maze experiments, if a team of lab workers are told that some random, average rats are ‘smart’ and others ‘dumb’, the allegedly smart ones end up performing better than the dumb ones.<sup>10</sup> Podcast hosts Miller and Spiegel introduce this finding, after explaining that they had in fact confronted some colleagues with a living rat in their office:

Do you think that the thoughts that you have in your head – OK? – the private thoughts that you have in your head could influence how that rat moves through space? [...] People did not believe that their personal thoughts about the rat would have any effect on the rat at all. [...] Now, maybe this is your belief as well. And if it is, you’re wrong.<sup>11</sup>

It is not just the smart/dumb rat experiment of Prof. Bob Rosenthal that got Miller and Spiegel convinced that one human’s personal thoughts have an effect on those around them. They also discuss work on the so-called expectation effect conducted by Prof. Carol Dweck whose scholarship proves that the unformulated expectations one person has about another person have measurable effects (for instance, student success is influenced by the unformulated expectations of a teacher that materialise in modalities like posture). So, the atomism lingering in the opening sequence of ‘How to Become Batman’ – ‘the private thoughts that you have in your head’ influencing something ‘out there’ – is immediately complexified. The assumption of an encounter between two different individuals is still at work, but the privilege of speech or (de-)codable messages of ‘looks’ is no longer in the mix. I would suggest that research into the expectation effect is fascinating stuff in the light of the attempt to formulate microaggressions along new materialist lines,<sup>12</sup> especially in the light of the need to come closer to what microaggressions actually are, how they reach their target, and how the threshold of taking on, or even becoming conscious of, these microaggressions is reached. The podcast suggests the following with regard to the expectation effect: ‘Think about that. As you go through the world, the expectations of other people are constantly acting on you, literally making you stronger or weaker, smarter or dumber, faster or slower.’<sup>13</sup> Miller and Spiegel want to know how far this expectation effect goes (What is it that can be influenced? Can a blind person get to see, they ask?), and they find that Dweck argues that scholarly knowledge about where to draw the line is currently moving: insight in psychological processes and their effects is currently in a productive motion, and new research seems to lay bare the unimaginable. Unimaginable expectation effects are interesting as they may speak to the assumptions of microaggressions research: atomist logic of *relata* preexisting the relating (cf. Haraway 2003), the hierarchy of the senses, and the privilege of speech.

‘How to Become Batman’ continues with a story about a blind man – Daniel Kish – using echolocation techniques (the use of reflected sound) for locating objects in order to independently move around at school, in the neighbourhood, in the world at large. His independence is presented as an *effect* of using echolocation, which gets us closer to micropsychological dynamism and Barad’s relational ontology especially because the podcast affirms that ‘[...] most blind kids will intuitively start clicking or snapping or



stamping to test out their environment with sound, but they are so often discouraged [...] “It’s not socially acceptable is what they would say [...]”.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, the unfolding story about this blind person’s technique abandons both the conventional biology of blindness (blindness is no longer an [un]natural loss of sight as echolocation produces a sight-effect) and blindness as a social construct for identity politics on the part of the blind themselves not least because of the workings of the expectation effect on the part of bystanders who think the blind need help. Echolocation, that is, the work with sounds, clicks, and interference gives way to the science of defining images as constructed *behind* the eye and to asking what it is that is constructed in the brains of sighted people and blind people alike? Neuroscience now argues that sight, and sound, and touch all result in a lighting up of the visual cortex. This is a transversal conception of what it means to ‘see’. Working with either biology as a determinism or social constructivism as a narrow linguisticism is presented as a means to create ‘slaves to others’ thinking [...] Slaves to others’ perception’<sup>15</sup> and in a new materialist vein the argument is that the blind man Daniel ‘held in his tongue (clicking) a way out’.<sup>16</sup>

I want to pause here to ask: why do I put so much trust into the podcast *Invisibilia* for finding an alternative conceptualisation and operationalisation of microaggressions? Well, because it seems like the science of ‘invisibilia’ is generally overcoded. A quick scan of the research on echolocation defines the ‘interference’ occurring (a.k.a. the ‘diffraction patterns’ that happen) during the clicking as a negative impacting. That is, interference is here seen as disturbance and the physics employed is classical as there are preexisting entities that can only be in different places at the same time. With Barad, we must conclude that this interference does *not* bring us closer to a relational ontology. After all, and as I summarised in an earlier article (Van der Tuin 2013), ‘From the perspective of classical physics, diffraction patterns are simply the result of differences in (the relative phase and amplitudes of) overlapping waves’ (Barad 2007, 80) and particles do not produce them. Quantum physics has, with the help of the famous two-slit experiment, been developed on the basis of the research finding that, under certain circumstances, particles, even *single* particles, can produce diffraction patterns. This does not cancel out the possibilities of particles not producing diffractions or light (classically a wave) behaving like a particle (83). In spite of the commonsensical hierarchy between lab science and science journalism (in podcasts) I argue that Miller’s and Spiegel’s conceptualisations of – among others – echolocation are more eloquent than those I encounter on *Google Scholar*. This is an encouragement to continue on the podcast’s journey.

### Quantum entanglement

Having opened up to the promise of the ‘micro-’ of microaggressions via *Invisibilia*, that is, through the podcasted knowledge production unconstrained by scholarly retrograde movements and allowing for techniques such as echolocation to come to full fruition, *Invisibilia*’s ‘Entanglement’ episode turns out to be even more interesting. As we will see, interference is again key in my argument. The episode starts with an explanation of quantum entanglement (suggesting that two seemingly different entities can be at the same place at the same time, which implies that a change in one is *immediately* a change in the other, so the entity logic is truly subverted; atomist metaphysics does not structure quantum physics), and goes on discussing ‘mirror-touch synesthesia’,<sup>17</sup> ‘emotional contagion’,<sup>18</sup>

and ‘microexpressions’ (see Ekman 2009). These case studies are presented as entanglements happening with people (just like they happen with atoms). I wish to note that a fascinating quote from the podcast is that ‘as has now been well documented – one of the ways that emotions are produced is from the outside, in [...]’<sup>19</sup> which forms the bridge between the episode on the expectation effect and the one we are about to engage with. The quote is relevant with regard to microaggressions research and activism although not fully accurate in the light of quantum entanglement: quantum physics has subverted predictable linear logic and boundary-speak by suggesting an entangled inside/outside relation (cf. Barad’s ‘exteriority within’).<sup>20</sup> And, indeed, Miller and Spiegel refer later on to the interviewed synaesthete saying: ‘I do believe our thoughts are matter. [...] Our thoughts are actual matter, just like our skin and this couch. And I think our thoughts have a ripple effect.’<sup>21</sup> This *ripple effect* points directly at interference or diffraction. Interestingly, however, while my reconstruction of the thread from mirror-touch synaesthesia, to emotional contagion, and finally to microexpressions led eventually to the ‘interference theory’ in psychology,<sup>22</sup> it became immediately clear to me that interference in this scholarship is, again, a *disruptive* phenomenon. Generally, textbook knowledge around interference theory is about forgetting or memory loss, and two types of interference are here defined: proactive interference (interference by previous memories) and retroactive interference (interference by later learning). This implies an atomist metaphysics and not a true quantum entanglement, that is, the suggestion of all these psychological effects being the result of a quantum entanglement is left unexplored, whereas *Invisibilia*’s ‘Entanglement’ episode comes to conclusions on the basis of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons refer to the process described by neuroscientist Michael Banissy from Goldsmiths, University of London as ‘we do kind of automatically slip into the shoes of other people, even if we’re not consciously aware of that’.<sup>23</sup> This means that seeing something in another person implies feeling it yourself. The ‘Entanglement’ episode then says that

[...] the result of this realization [...] is that even though you walk around thinking of yourself as an individual. [...] That we’re each individual entities who live in our own universe and control our own universe, I think that’s a delusion. [...] It’s like without quite being aware of it, we are all one organism, a heaving, swirling organism contracting the feelings and thoughts of the people around us [...].<sup>24</sup>

How would new materialist knowledge about mirror-touch synaesthesia, emotional contagion, and microexpressions look?

Two ways of testing for mirror-touch synaesthesia exist. One of those tests is through ‘sensory interference’. Such a test gives way to a definition of mirror-touch synaesthesia – the latter term comes from the Ancient Greek *syn*, ‘together’, and *aisthēsis*, ‘sensation’ – that informs a true quantum entanglement: ‘Watching another person being touched activates a similar neural circuit to actual touch and, for some people with “mirror-touch” synesthesia, can produce a felt tactile sensation on their own body’ (see Banissy and Ward 2007). Entangled here are, at least, sight and touch, as well as the two ‘relata’, that is, two persons, and furthermore the felt touch is – in Barad’s language from 2010 – ‘hauntological’ as those who test positively for mirror-touch synaesthesia do not differentiate between actual and synesthetic touch in the laboratory setting. Such feelings of synesthetic touch are also called ‘ghost feelings’. The other way of testing for mirror-touch synaesthesia involves fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging). There now

follows the outcome of an important study in this context, a study that engaged with an individual (henceforth known as 'C') who reports of experiencing mirror-touch synaesthesia, and a test group:

In most people, it is possible that the somatosensory mirror system, which matches observed and felt touch, is involved in understanding the effect of tactile stimulation on others. This system is normally active below a certain threshold such that *no conscious perception* of tactile stimulation is experienced. One possibility is that this system is activated above that perceptual threshold in C whenever she observes touch to another person. In this case, rather than simply allowing C to understand the tactile stimulation she is observing, C perceives it as if she were the receiver of it. [...] This idea of *a threshold for conscious perception* is supported by several studies showing that consciousness of visual stimuli is associated with greater activity in ventral visual cortex, but that unconscious processing also activates the same region [...] One possible region that mediates the conscious perception of touch on oneself during the observation of touch is the anterior insula. This region was bilaterally activated in C during the observation of touch, but was not activated during the same condition in the non-synaesthetic group. [...] Given its role in attribution to the self, it is possible that the anterior insula activity found in C in our study, along with overactivation of the touch mirror system, accounts for why she perceives herself as the direct target of the observed touch. (See Blakemore et al. 2005)

Again, this study reports C experiencing sight and touch entanglement, relating instead of *relata*, and a certain form of ghostliness given that the actual touching of two entities and two senses interacting are experienced synaesthetically. Interestingly, the laboratory setting defines the actuality of entity logic (I am touching you on body part x), whereas the conclusion demonstrates that subject C does not at all live atomistically! Furthermore, besides the threshold principle, the conclusion given above also argues that the somatosensory mirror system is active anyway in *both* synaesthetes like C and non-synaesthetes *alike*. In my reading, this suggests indeed that atomist metaphysics emerges from laboratory settings and in real life, and I would suggest that the use of the term 'mediation' in the above quotation for the apparent work that the anterior insula does is correct as priority must be given to the dynamic somatosensory mirror system. I will soon discuss how all of this medical case material is relevant for my discussion of microaggressions.

The second condition discussed by the two hosts Miller and Spiegel in the podcast from which I take my cues is emotional contagion, a phenomenon that can be traced back to the work of Adam Smith.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, again, conscious and non-conscious perception is key here:

People seem to be fully aware that conscious assessments can provide a great deal of information about others. They seem to be less aware that they can gain even more information by focusing-in now and then on *their own* emotional reactions during those social encounters. As people non-consciously and automatically mimic their companions' fleeting expressions of emotion, they often come to *feel* pale reflections of their partners' feelings. By attending to this stream of tiny moment-to-moment reactions, people can and do 'feel themselves into' the emotional landscapes inhabited by their partners.<sup>26</sup>

Although the psychologists – Profs. Elaine Hatfield and Richard L. Rapson – affirm the usefulness of a conscious attending to the feelings aroused by non-conscious and automatic mimicking, it is clear that this is not so for our discussion of microaggressions. Non-conscious and automatic mimicking is the onto-epistemologically prior process at work in emotional contagion, which is to say that the previous quotation – in spite of what its

authors claim – points towards the *emergence* of two entities (person and partner) as the attention must go to *one's own* emotions which are a priori entangled with the emotions of the partner. The research highlighted by Hatfield and Rapson does everything to disentangle the two persons by speaking of a feedback loop between the conscious and the non-conscious in one person, and the causally linear 'catching' of emotions in interpersonal communication (as if entities exist on their own right; and indeed even 'emotional components' are used as a technical term). However, in spite of such logics of bodies *becoming* entrained, and emotion and expression being different from one another (questions are raised as to how the two are linked), evidence of entrainment as primary, and of separate bodies as emergent can be found not only in statements such as 'Those who try consciously to mirror others are doomed to look phony', but also and especially in the conclusion of the research which acknowledges (along the lines of my alternative reading provided earlier in this paragraph) that the researchers 'confront a paradox'.<sup>27</sup> This paradox is an artefact of the decisions made in the research process (incl. the phases of conceptualisation and interpretation). After all, the podcast argues, 'they calculate that [emotional contagion is] so fast that you couldn't possibly do it consciously'.<sup>28</sup> As we will shortly see, I argue that the process must be conceptualised as *intuitive*, in Bergson's terms, or as an *immediate intelligence* according to Ravaisson. Both notions are relevant for thinking about microaggressions.

Lastly, the case of microexpressions in the research of Paul Ekman springs both from a combined attempt at separating two human beings talking and at detecting the boundary between truth and falsity (lying). This is done both conceptually and by the interacting persons themselves (how to detect a lie from demeanour?). Again, studying Ekman's work from a new materialist perspective, the research setting appears to have in-built, all kinds of assumptions following atomism (including the hierarchy of the senses), although it should be noted that the assumed gap between lab and life had been closed more or less successfully by working with lies that in fact mattered to the research participants and by including actual punishment to the setting (such in[ter]ventions are referred to as the 'ecological validity' of a psychological study). Still, Ekman's research concludes that lie detection needs to be learned, that this proves to be incredibly difficult if this learning is realised through attempts to detect lies directly from demeanour, and that lie detection is not epigenetically (my deployment of the term) present in human beings or taught to kids (even by consistently lying parents). So, what has been researched here? That the research setting has actualised anomalies!<sup>29</sup> The research concludes that subjects desire truthfulness, and whether this conclusion is sustainable or not, the interesting observation for this article on microaggressions is that the conclusion tampers significantly with the research itself and that serious questions about the parameters of the research are justifiable. Although it can be given that microexpressions seem extremely useful for the project of this article on microaggressions, Ekman's work poses too many problems for it to productively contribute beyond this point.

### **Conclusion: microaggressions on a dynamic playing field**

So in summation, what, if anything at all, have we learned about microaggressions? The research lines I stumbled upon via the podcast *Invisibilia* as an example of a new materialism rooted in popular culture suggest that atomistic logics of entities (individual persons,

words as mediators, hierarchical classification of sensory experience) emerge from a priori entanglement of overcoded/overcoding persons with dynamic psychologies and knotted senses. These persons all live with 'sticky signs', to use Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of signs that stick to certain bodies and of histories that stick to signifiers.<sup>30</sup> My initial question was what would happen if microaggressions research took into account its own objects of knowledge as intricate 'material-semiotic generative nodes' – following Haraway – and I was hoping to address – following Bergson ([1934] 2007, 168) – 'the simple act which has set [this] analysis in motion and which hides behind analysis', a faculty able to reach 'a sounding of which one feels that it has more or less reached the bottom of a same ocean, even though it brings each time to the surface very different materials'. I managed to confirm on my journey through psychological and medical research that microaggressions are indeed (political) *materials* that have come to the surface in research and in activism, but also that '[s]omething here dominates the diversity of systems' (Bergson [1934] 2007, 168). None of the research projects stumbled upon here had come about in a simple act (they were all reverse projections onto the real) and it was only in a second instance that Bergson's 'sounding' of non-classical ontology could be reached (by turning the research inside out and demonstrating how a quantum physics is always already folded into a classical physics; how entanglement is not produced, but rather, how discursive, psychical, and material entities come into being on entangled terrain). In a previous text – 'The Untimeliness of Bergson's Metaphysics: Reading Diffractively' (2013) – I argued that Bergson's famous circles of memory must be read as an interference pattern. Here it suffices to say, perhaps, that Bergson presents an important argument about dynamism and mechanism in which he argues that any mechanistic psychology (associationism is also a mechanism) is an actualisation – a coming into being – of dynamism, albeit that this actualisation is not necessary. In *Time and Free Will* he says that while 'Dynamism starts from the idea of voluntary activity, given by consciousness, and comes to represent inertia by gradually emptying this idea [...]' (Bergson [1889]1913, 140), 'Mechanism follows the opposite course' (Bergson [1889]1913, 140). He argues that mechanism will never reach the impetus of voluntary activity, while dynamism may also arrive at cases of inertness. With this article I hope to have demonstrated that microaggressions as the new political material of feminism is founded upon mechanistic assumptions (in activism as well as research). However, by following the curious questioning of Lulu Miller and Alix Spiegel as podcasted by NPR, I also showed it is possible to run with research based on both the atomist assumption of conceptualising two persons, and the entanglements of feeling/emotion/expectation and expression at the same time.

By way of a final conclusion let me try to summarise the above multi-layeredness by providing a Ravaissonian interpretation of microaggressions. Similar to Bergson, it is a dynamic playing field upon which Ravaisson based his 1838 *Of Habit*. Importantly he intervened – *avant la lettre* – in the feminist debates around the unreal oppositions between biological determinism and social constructivism, and between fully conscious and wholly non-conscious processes by arguing that '[b]oth physical and rationalist theories are lacking [...] The law of habit can be explained only by the development of a Spontaneity that is at once active and passive, equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom' (55). In other words, when I run with the spontaneity as defined by Ravaisson (in the above text this micropsychological dynamic actualised as, among others, each person's somatosensory mirror system) I *traverse* the poles of the many (unreal)

oppositions found in research. This traversing of habit demonstrates a logic of non-disturbance, albeit that as we move and act in the world, actualisations along the lines of subject, predicate, and object are also at work (otherwise there would not be the need to see spontaneity as both acting and being acted on, or immediate intelligence as gradually developing). Ravaisson argues that 'The obscure intelligence that through habit comes to replace reflection, this immediate intelligence where subject and object are con-founded, is a *real* intuition, in which the real and the ideal, being and thought are fused together' (55; emphasis in original). Reaching this obscurely immediate intelligence, this intuitive, transversal force that Ravaisson calls a 'spiralling' is onto-epistemologically prior to the entities and (Meso? Macro?) levels that are cut across as the spiralling is both 'the disposition of which habit consists, and the principle engendering it' (77). So, in final summation, suggesting that microaggressions occur in a primordial mirroring system means that there is *both* something in this world that may be mirrored (an androcentric, heterosexist, cissexist, racist phrase or posture that circulates in a formulated [or unformulated] way, that has [or has not yet] hit a target or a verbal [or non-verbal] means of communication employed by a person such as a fellow feminist or a teacher) *and* that a dynamic system is in place for that mirroring to actually happen. Throughout this article I have described the latter as onto-epistemologically prior given its generative capacity. Generativity is needed in order for the generated to come into being. Infinitesimal hostilities are precisely such generations. They traverse the virtual and the actual (Bergson), and the molecular and the molar (Deleuze).

## Notes

1. I remember having a conversation with Prof. Katie King (University of Maryland) in June 2014 in which we envisioned research on the intersection of microaggressions and the new materialisms in order both to 'apply' new materialisms and make microaggressions precise.
2. See <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/09/generational-warfare-is-this-what-young-australians-have-to-look-forward-to> (last accessed 12 March 2015) in order to connect the feminist generation wars to the way in which the generational problematic in the wider context of the current 'interregnum' (Bauman 2012) is also phrased in terms of war.
3. See [juliaserano.blogspot.nl/2014/07/regarding-generation-wars-some.html](http://juliaserano.blogspot.nl/2014/07/regarding-generation-wars-some.html) (last accessed: 20 September 2014).
4. Bergson's notion of associationism appears in *Time and Free Will* as the psychology that 'reduces the self to an aggregate of conscious states: sensations, feelings, and ideas' ([1889] 1913, 165). The school 'represents the self as a collection of psychic states, the strongest of which exerts a prevailing influence and carries others with it' ([1889] 1913, 158–159). For a determinism to be accepted 'we should first have to prove that a strictly determined psychic state corresponds to a definite cerebral state, and the proof of this is still to be given'. Neither of the two reach the whole soul or inner dynamism, that is, they are both mechanistic and have the same effect.
5. See <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia> (last accessed 12 March 2015).
6. See <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia> (last accessed 12 March 2015).
7. This review was presented on 5 March 2015 during *Teaching Differently: A Seminar on Gendered Classrooms and Feminist Pedagogy* at Utrecht University. This seminar was organised by a Ph.D. candidate in gender studies, Aggeliki Sifaki.
8. On 3 April 2014, NPR's *Around the Nation* broadcasted an episode on microaggressions and interviewed Derald Wing Sue. See <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/03/298736678/microaggressions-be-careful-what-you-say> (last accessed 12 March 2015).
9. In his research Sue does acknowledge unintentional microaggressions too.

10. [...] the expectation subtly changed the way that the experimenters touched the rats and then, in turn, the way that the rats behaved. So when the experimenters thought that the rats were really smart, they felt more warmly towards the rats and touched them more carefully. (See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/23/379134306/batman-pt-1>; last accessed 15 March 2015)
11. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/23/379134306/batman-pt-1> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
12. This was confirmed in the January 2015 project team meeting of 'When Being Different Becomes the Norm'.
13. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/23/379134306/batman-pt-1> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
14. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/23/379134306/batman-pt-1> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
15. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/23/379134306/batman-pt-1> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
16. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/23/379134306/batman-pt-1> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
17. Most studies on mirror touch synesthesia verify the existence of the condition through a variety of methods. One way is through a sensory interference task. In these tasks, participants are touched on their left cheek, right cheek, or not at all, and asked to observe an assistant being touched. In congruent studies, the assistant is touched at the same location that the participant is touched. In incongruent studies, the participants are touched in areas different from those of the assistant. Subjects are then asked to report where they feel the sensation. For some participants, if the observed touch occurs on the right cheek, they feel a synesthetic touch on their left cheek, and this is called specular correspondence. If the synesthetic touch is felt on their right cheek, it is called anatomical correspondence. Most instances of mirror touch synesthesia include specular correspondence. The rate of errors is calculated, and it is expected that a higher rate of error should occur in synesthetic subjects in comparison to non-synesthetic subjects. (See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror-touch\\_synesthesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror-touch_synesthesia); last accessed 12 March 2015)
18. This pertains to the psychological studies of Elaine Hatfield and Richard Rapson.  
  
As people non-consciously and automatically mimic their companions' fleeting expressions of emotion, they often come to *feel* pale reflections of their partners' feelings. By attending to this stream of tiny moment-to-moment reactions, people can and do 'feel themselves into' the emotional landscapes inhabited by their partners (Emphasis in origin, see <http://www.elainehatfield.com/ch50.pdf>; last accessed 12 March 2015)
19. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/30/382455221/contagion-maria-bamford> (last accessed 15 March 2015). See also the 'Outside In' episode of the second season of *Invisibilia*: <http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/485606589/outside-in> (last accessed 2 August 2016).
20. Moving away from the representationalist trap of geometrical optics, I shift the focus to physical optics, to questions of diffraction rather than reflection. Diffractively reading the insights of feminist and queer theory and science studies approaches through one another entails thinking the 'social' and the 'scientific' together in an illuminating way. What often appears as separate entities (and separate sets of concerns) with sharp edges does not actually entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all. Like the diffraction patterns illuminating the indefinite nature of boundaries – displaying shadows

in 'light' regions and bright spots in 'dark' regions – the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of 'exteriority within.' This is not a static relationality but a doing – the enactment of boundaries – that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability. (Barad 2003, 803)

21. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/30/382455221/contagion-maria-bamford> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
22. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interference\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interference_theory) (last accessed 12 March 2015).
23. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/30/382453493/mirror-touch> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
24. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/30/382455221/contagion-maria-bamford> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
25. Hatfield quotes from a 1759 text by Smith saying

Though our brother is upon the rack [...] by the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (See <http://www.elainehatfield.com/ch50.pdf>; last accessed 12 March 2015)

26. See <http://www.elainehatfield.com/ch50.pdf> (last accessed 12 March 2015).
27. See <http://www.elainehatfield.com/ch50.pdf> (last accessed 12 March 2015).
28. See for the transcript <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/30/382455221/contagion-maria-bamford> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
29. Quite shockingly, two of the case studies here discussed – emotional contagion and microexpression – use Adolf Hitler as their final example.
30. The sign is a 'sticky sign' as an effect of a history of articulation, which allows the sign to accumulate value. This stickiness of the sign is also about the relation or contact between signs. The association between words that generates meanings is concealed: *it is this concealment of such associations that allows such signs to accumulate value.* I am describing this accumulation of affective value as a form of stickiness, or as 'sticky signs'. (Ahmed 2004, 92; emphasis in original)

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