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## **Being haunted by—and reorienting toward—what ‘matters’ in times of (the COVID-19) crisis: A critical pedagogical cartography of response-ability**

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### **Abstract**

Recent new materialist and posthumanist research in curriculum and pedagogy studies is focusing more and more on the intertwining between social justice, fairness, and accountability, and how to put these ideals to use to create inclusive, consciousness-raising canons, curricula, and pedagogies that take the dehumanized and the more-than-human into account. Especially pedagogical responsibility, often rephrased as ‘response-ability’ to accentuate the entanglements that this notion engenders versus forgotten or forcefully eradicated knowledges, and between teacher and student as intra-active learners, is highlighted in this ethico-political turn. In this chapter, a critical pedagogical cartography of response-ability is sketched out to philosophically expand on—and also better anchor—the above turn. This critical cartography is put together at the backdrop of critical new materialist reflections with regards to the COVID-19 crisis; a crisis demanding a pedagogical but also ethico-political reorientation toward the hauntological powers of past-present-future injustices, the thick material present, and a more response-able engagement with the world.

### **Keywords**

Hauntology, the critical pedagogical (and new materialist and posthumanist approaches of), COVID-19, cartography of response-ability, Barad, Derrida, Haraway

In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation. [...] When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have.

—Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

Writing a chapter on the hauntological<sup>1</sup>, the critical pedagogical, and the ethico-political has never felt so *timely* and yet so *out of place*... or, should I, hinting at the queer(ing) philosophies of deconstructivist Jacques Derrida, feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway, philosopher-physicist Karen Barad, and feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, rather say: *out of joint*?

Penned down right after a state of in-betweenness due to an unexpected entanglement between pre-existing autoimmunity issues and suspected COVID-19 complications, this out-of-jointness not only manifested itself while thinking the above notions, plus the idea of a global crisis, together, but was also physically felt, as my body—always so skillfully ignored by my modern Cartesian mind—was caught up in between long-stretched states of ‘semi-healthy’, ‘ill’, and ‘semi-recovering’. These fluctuations, together with the feverish past-present-future-blurring dreams that constituted my fragmented reality while sick, pushed me to reflect upon my own positionality as a—paradoxically—new materialisms-inspired philosopher interested in all things material, critical pedagogue, and, now, also, a quite vulnerable, bodily being. But what did this set of debilitating moments linked to the COVID-19 crisis teach me, and what could such a mass-scaled disorienting event tell us about our current condition on a pedagogical and ethico-political level? What is it that reveals itself as

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Hauntology’ is Derrida’s (1994) play on the French pronunciation of ‘ontology’ and is connected to his critique of difference-erasing (phal)logocentric philosophy. The notion additionally refers to the specters of injustice and the ongoing relevance of Marx’ critical legacy, as also addressed later in this piece and edited volume (see Carstens, 2020).

haunting us, if we start *thinking-with* (Haraway, 2016) the formerly ‘unthought’ and injecting the billions of made-to-not-matter-that-much bodies (Butler, 1993; Wynter, 2003; Chen, 2012; Braidotti, 2013), whether dehumanized, made inhuman, or already seen as non-human, into our critical discourse, and pedagogical and political practices? And how is the latter crisis impacting our ideas about justice, accountability, and responsibility?

In what follows, I provide the reader with some reflections on the foregoing by creating a dialogue between critical pedagogy, critical theory, and contemporary new materialist and posthumanist philosophy. I will do so by mapping out—or, said in more Braidottian (2011) terms: constructing a *critical cartography* of—response-ability in the works of Haraway and Barad. This critical cartographical methodology is a necessity here, as a Foucauldian genealogical overview of response-ability would not fully capture the conceptual shifts the notion has undergone while traveling through the oeuvres of alterity philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida, Haraway, and Barad. I have moreover decided to go with the Braidottian version of cartography that, because of its roots in the Deleuzoguattarian critique of tracing in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005), poststructuralist Michel Foucault’s power/knowledge axiom (1990), and Haraway’s project of situated knowledges (1988), places a power-critical way of thinking-with at the center. Such a methodology—described by Braidotti as “a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present” (2011, p. 4)—suits the examination of ethico-political notions from within the context of an inequalities-increasing global pandemic quite well.

### **(Un)timely musings & musings on the (un)timely: Crisis & the past-present-future**

Man-made revolutions, global crisis moments, and other large-scale disorienting have always been etched in our socio-cultural imagination as exceptional—and at once *timely* and *untimely*—historic events. Although experienced differently around the world, it is because of

that attributed exceptionality that various crisis events can be interpreted as still wandering around in our imaginaries, imageries, and even lives, today.

And something similar appears to be going on with the earlier referred to COVID-19 crisis—a novel zoonotic disease provoked by SARS-CoV-2 that is suspected to have first been transmitted via non-human hosts in the fall of 2019, and that, with the assistance of extractive capitalism’s infrastructural grasp, rapidly turned into a full-blown pandemic. The heavily mediatized COVID-19 outbreak, plus the devastating patchwork of catastrophes it has caused since then, has confronted the world with an overwhelming “experience of disorientation,” to echo Ahmed’s words from *Queer Phenomenology* (2006, p. 5). This feeling of disorientation has materialized itself as feeling lost in *space*—as orientating oneself often includes taking up a place in space—and in *time*—a directions-providing temporal framework that is usually only revealed to us when everything shockingly comes to a halt.

How to rethink this “phenomenality of space” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 6), how certain bodies occupy certain spaces, and which embodied subjects receive the privilege of building a space *of* and *for* their own, are major questions that are sharpened during times of crisis, yet, in this chapter, I have decided to primarily focus on temporal reconfigurations in crisis moments in relation to the critical pedagogical, the dehumanized, and the more-than-human. I am doing so, as such moments are regularly expressed in temporal terms of urgency, and the above-mentioned set of thinkers have all studied past-present-future configurations, and specifically so in relation to conceptualizations of justice, accountability, and responsibility.

### ***Time, temporality, and the marking of crisis moments***

As a detailed analysis of how COVID-19 is imprinting itself into our imaginaries is not available yet, I decided to address another mark-making event, namely, the 2001 Twin Towers attack. 9/11 in fact perfectly illustrates the temporal marking mechanism that goes along with

the uniqueness of crisis events: Exactly because of its ungraspable character—it's untimeliness; out-of-placeness—the attack that transpired on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001 became “a date in history” (Derrida in Borradori, 2003, p. 86), thereby turning into “an event that truly marks, that truly makes its mark, a singular and, as they say here, ‘unprecedented’ event” (p. 86). This marking process, seen through the queer(ing) perspectives of Derrida, Barad, and Ahmed—thinkers that are interested in the workings of *time* (i.e., defined as the personally experienced flows of time as successive moments) and *temporality* (i.e., the more general passage of time identified as past, present, and future)—comes into play when something so disruptive happens, that the only way to effectively manage such an incident, is by timestamping it. This eagerness to locate crises into time, and particularly *spacetime*—as such an event from then on occupies a temporal space-in-place—gives us a reference point to intellectually-affectively capture that what cannot be wholly grasped.

But does this marking mechanism fully undo the temporal moments' evanescence? The boundaries between the past, present, and future have incontestably always been more porous than presumed. Think of a déjà-vu experience, for instance: an affect-laden moment that yanks one out of one's bodily being, to forcibly travel back to the past, and back to the present again, and that all in a blink of an eye. As noted by Derrida (Derrida in Borradori, 2003), the citationality of a temporally-marked event-turned-into-spectacle such as 9/11—a repetitive spacetime-anchoring process—underscores the spacetime-queering nature of crises even more. Through receiving a citational value, the timespace linked to 9/11 is constantly transported to the here and now, blurring past-present-future. Forever linked to a past date, the more 9/11 gets cited as *9/11*, the stronger its reference and thus renewed presence-through-absence becomes. There is thus something extraordinarily haunting about 9/11, to anticipate on Derrida's absence-presence-queering pun in *Specters of Marx* (1994): 9/11 completely destabilized our normal ways of being and living. The constant reciting of 9/11-as-9/11 brings that powerful

interruption back to life with every reiteration.

Disorienting crisis moments thus push the traditional past-present-future configurations to the brink, forcing us to rethink how we relate to the existential life sphere and each other. But what is there to do, pedagogically and politically, when the crisis experienced is so disruptive in nature that the future in which we are supposed to recall exceptional catastrophic events, becomes almost impossible to imagine?

### **Rematerializing the critical pedagogical in a more-than-human crisis**

While the whole world is being haunted by moments of complete disorientation caused by COVID-19—or, differently phrased, the collapsing of our onto-epistemological frames of existential sense-making, leading ‘us,’ humans, to question our presumed unrivaled place (with)in an-always-already-more-than-human spacetime, and, hopefully, reorient ourselves—the (in)direct encounters between this tiny uncanny virus and its potential hosts, have been felt far less equally. The question that comes to mind here is what we could learn from this global pandemic if we were to connect this event to the critical pedagogical and ethico-political.

### ***Thinking-with the (dehumanized) ‘unthought’***

It is not that the coronavirus pandemic has all of the sudden *created* inequality and injustice: it rather is worsening pre-existing systemic socioeconomic, racial, and other interlinked disparities. This makes this pandemic event already strikingly different from 9/11: Although COVID-19 also immediately received a timestamp to turn it into a more citable, containable phenomenon, SARS-CoV-2’s own materiality, relationality, and, especially, temporality, could be best described as *queer(ing)*.

The queered materiality aspect speaks for itself: Even though the virus is described in racialized, war-like terms as an invisible (absent) threat—as bio-/necropower-infused invasion

metaphors are frequently used in biomedicine, politics, and popular culture (see e.g. Haraway, 1991 and Chen, 2012)—it is *there* (present), *rematerializing* itself via numerous hosts, thereby turning the common presence-absence plot on its head. The virus’s material survival is furthermore linked to its need to engage with potential hosts, and benefits from the current exploitative, commodification-focused relations between humans, animals, and the environment. COVID-19 thus harshly throws us back into the reality of what new materialist Stacy Alaimo has called “trans-corporeality” (2016, p. 7) or the idea that all beings within this material world are, willingly or not, interconnected and transformed by one another through their embodiedness. And this is exactly one of the terrains where posthumanist and new materialist higher education pedagogies can make a real difference: Having previously experimented with diffractive classroom strategies that encouraged students to regard themselves as accountable co-producers of knowledge, undermining the presupposed distance between student/teacher (see Geerts, 2019), I am currently working on a modern political philosophy syllabus that starts from the posthumanist decentering of the human subject and that takes the trans-corporeal reality we have always been living in, seriously. So, instead of only including Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1968) when addressing concepts such as power, the state, and the Western modern social contract, countercanonical, bio-/necropolitics-aware texts (see e.g. Cooper, 2008; Ferreira da Silva, 2009; Chen, 2012; Gabardi, 2017) that question the racialized-gendered, dehumanizing premises of said contract and criticize its made-less-than-human and more-than-human blind spots, are explicitly added to the syllabus.

The potential eternal return, or, more strongly put, the literal human *incorporation*, of the virus, further queering our conceptualization of the self-contained ‘human’, as for example practiced in the just-mentioned syllabus strategy, encourages us to consider its connection to the temporal, too. As noted earlier, the act of recalling 9/11 through recitation, unsettles the

past-present-future. Something similar holds true for COVID-19<sup>2</sup>: We are by now accustomed to the flow of daily infection and death rates briefings. But these numbers represent the virus trying to find its way into the present *via* the past: These statistics do not only symbolize the virus' jumping around—something that could have taken place more than two weeks before the briefing moment—but also includes the time between the start of the infection and the actual testing. And since the severity, and probably also longevity, of the disease itself is based upon still unknown factors, one, upon having been notified of being infected, is instantly thrown into an unknown future. And then we are not even talking about those asymptomatic carriers that are potentially disabling the arrival of the future for others...

Combining the above aspects, it becomes clear that the COVID-19 epidemic is a multilayered more-than-human crisis that requires a holistic, but non-totalizing, approach. Such an approach would need to take all of the pandemic's actors and their intricate entanglements within a global extractive capitalist world into account—and this pushes us toward a Harawayan trans-corporeal thinking-with the formerly 'unthought', or those embodied beings whose lives have been made to matter less, to the point of not even mattering at all. This social justice-driven leitmotiv, which is also meant to be a posthumanist, multi-species one, is central to contemporary new materialist and posthumanist critiques of today's hypermarketized capitalist society in which most, if not all, beings, and the environment they are inhabiting, are valued on the basis of their given capital. This commodification process and, as new materialist Alexis Shotwell also describes it, the eco-economic "disturbance regime" (2016, p. 9) that it rests upon, has far-reaching consequences: if every being—and usually the bodies of those beings that were constructed not to matter first—were to be commodified, every single piece of matter could ultimately become disposable surplus value (also see Cooper, 2008 and Braidotti, 2013). And with these critical new materialist reflections, queer theorist and

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<sup>2</sup> This disrupting of past-present-future in case of COVID-19 has also been noted in van der Tuin, 2020.



philosopher Judith Butler's mattering question, which is closely connected to the idea of being granted the opportunity to live a livable life, becomes spotlighted again (see e.g. Butler, 1993 and 2006).

Discussing the pandemic mainly from within her own American situated perspective—a framework in which ruthless capitalism, xenophobic sovereignty, and closed-off borders are hot topics—Butler's commentary on the virus as border-crossing is worth mentioning:

By the way it moves and strikes, the virus demonstrates that the global human community is equally precarious. At the same time, however, the failure of some states or regions to prepare in advance [...], the bolstering of national policies and the closing of borders (often accompanied by panicked xenophobia), and the arrival of entrepreneurs eager to capitalize on global suffering, all testify to the rapidity with which radical inequality, nationalism, and capitalist exploitation find ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves within the pandemic zones (Butler, 2020, n. p.)

Criticizing the Trumpian cost-benefit approach versus COVID-19, in which the exploitation-extraction mechanism knows no apparent limit, Butler deconstructs the often-heard platitude that 'the virus does not discriminate' by noting how the interplay between the virus and institutionalized oppression in fact *does* further marginalize those who were already suffering. By warning against the creation of a global community in which "some human creatures assert their rights to live at the expense of others" (2020, n. p.), Butler keeps the call for an equal opportunity to live a "livable life" (2006, p. xv) alive. And doing so, Butler conceptualizes the virus as trans-corporeal; or as Shotwell, building onto Butler's matter(ing) question, also noted in a recent opinion piece, as something that impacts people depending on "webs of social relations [and] the history of oppression carried in their bodies" (2020, n. p.).

It is the above materialist emphasis on the ethico-political engendered by a milieu of multiple crisscrossing injustices that is driving critical and new materialist, posthumanist philosophies and pedagogies.

### ***The ethico-political in critical and new materialist pedagogies***

Instead of only focusing on the anthropocentrism-destabilizing aspects of the new materialist and posthumanist turns within curriculum and pedagogy studies, as demonstrated by the earlier-mentioned political philosophical syllabus example, one could argue that another turn within these turns is unfolding itself. Concentrating on the intricate intertwinement between justice, accountability, and responsibility (Snaza et al., 2016; Braidotti et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2018; Todd & Wane, 2018), and how to put these ideals to use in order to create inclusive, consciousness-raising canons, curricula, and pedagogies with a more-than-human touch, thinkers working within these fields are letting themselves be guided by a myriad of pressing ethico-political considerations and concepts.

The above-described attentivity to the ethico-political within pedagogy and curriculum studies is not new, of course—the ethico-political has long been central to the critical pedagogical movement, which includes thinkers such as Paulo Freire (2006) and Henry Giroux (1988), but also Angela Davis (1990) and bell hooks (1994). Although Davis and hooks have put extra emphasis on reflecting upon the racialized-gendered-classed embodied and even erotic conditions of teaching, all of these thinkers' philosophies are grounded in the Frankfurt School-rooted idea that education could be transformed from an oppressive tool to a liberating one. The critical pedagogical tradition thus has an anti-capitalist ethico-political mission, that is, reforming the educational apparatus so that it would enable consciousness-raising, status quo-subversion and, eventually, the liberation of students and teachers.

This critical pedagogical accentuation of transformation, I would like to argue, is

essential to new materialist and posthumanist takes on pedagogy and curriculum design as well: Accountability, for example, as a situated ethico-political ideal and praxis of seeing oneself as a situated researcher/pedagogue within the world whose actions impact others and the world itself, has long been cultivated within the transdisciplinary enterprises of feminist, queer, and de/postcolonial science studies (see e.g. Haraway, 1988 and 2016; Barad, 2007; Cipolla et al., 2017; Subramaniam et al., 2017) that have had a strong impact on new materialisms and posthumanism, and the same thing could be said about its conceptual counterpart, responsibility. Although often used interchangeably in the just quoted traditions, I understand accountability as cultivating self-awareness about one's positionality and one's research, while responsibility is more of an intersubjective type of accountability that pays attention to the relationalities that arise between knower, research phenomenon, and knowledge produced. Responsibility has, predominantly in its finetuned form of socially just 'responding-to', as we will soon discover, been taken up in critical, new materialist, and posthumanist research in pedagogy and curriculum studies to denote the obligations-laden entanglements between teacher and student as self-reflexive co-learners, and between thinkers and forgotten, or, more commonly, forcefully eradicated, knowledges (see e.g. Bozalek et al., 2018 and Braidotti et al., 2018). To anticipate on said mapping of response-ability while providing a concrete critical pedagogical classroom strategy: When teaching on the topic of feminist science studies, I always assign my entanglements essay exercise, with which I try to encourage students to think about how research phenomena cannot be properly traced and examined without also attentively responding-to their ethico-political entanglements. Asking students to select a Latourian (i.e., *Dingpolitik*) (2005) or Baradian (i.e., intra-action-focused) (2007) science studies approach, they then have to follow their chosen research phenomenon (an HP-designed laptop; the school-to-prison pipeline; OncoMouse; global warming; ...) and trace its entanglements with the world and themselves. This not only tends to lead to interesting trans-

corporeal questions about, for example, OncoMouse's apparent unquestioned killability versus the glorification of human survival, but also shows the students that the presupposed distancing separation between knower/object-to-be-known/knowledge produced isn't that stable at all—we are in the end all situated within praxes of knowledge-making, and this posthumanist critical pedagogical exercise materializes this situated response-ability.

To round up this chapter, I will end with an unpacking of the thick present that shapes these response-able entanglements. Before doing so, however, I will revisit this chapter's temporality and crisis leitmotifs.

### **Cartographically reorienting toward what 'matters': Crisis time(s), temporality, and response-ability**

History-disrupting crisis moments spontaneously provoke temporal contemplations by violently throwing us into what Haraway would call the “thick present” (2016, p. 1).<sup>3</sup> This being-thrown-into-the-present becomes even more apparent when dealing with events with apocalyptic undertones. Derrida, Haraway, and Barad have reflected upon the force(fulness) of the apocalyptic, how it undoes past-present-future configurations, and what lessons could be drawn from it. In what follows, the critical cartography drawn so far, turns into an even more lively assemblage, with new conceptual nodes and interconnections, as Haraway and Barad think-with Derrida-through-Levinas.

#### ***Apocalyptic crisis times and the (messianic) future-to-come***

Whereas Haraway (1985 and 2016) and Barad (2007 and 2019) mostly think about the apocalyptic in connection to, respectively, the non-apocalyptic cyborg (as the cyborgian

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<sup>3</sup> The “thick present” (2016, p. 1) is Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*'s leitmotiv, which, as the title suggests, urges us to stay present with unfolding—and already unfolded—crisis events, such as the ongoing climate crisis. Also see Shotwell (2016) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) for similar takes on living with(in) the material.

subject-as-situated-knower lives “outside of salvation history” (Haraway 1985, p. 67) and ecological ruin, and the nuclear bomb’s invention, Derrida employs the apocalyptic as a trope to deconstruct the ways in which we think about what constitutes ‘the end’ and the limits of philosophical thinking *tout court*. This becomes apparent in “Of an Apocalyptic Tone” (Derrida and Leavey, 1984a), “No Apocalypse, Not Now” (Derrida, Porter & Lewis, 1984b), and *Specters of Marx* (1994).

The first-mentioned essay consists of a deconstructivist reading of Bible passages, Kantian theory, and Hegelian-Marxist eschatology, and ends with Derrida twisting our—as Haraway would put it, teleological—understanding of the apocalypse as ‘the end of all ends’. An apocalyptic discourse for Derrida paradoxically is one of continuity, as the ‘end of all ends’ always has to remain out of reach—*yet-to-come*—for the apocalyptic to even function. The apocalyptic can only *exist* through its absence. Or as Derrida writes: “The end approaches, but the apocalypse is long-lived” (Derrida and Leavey, 1984a, p. 29). Respectively dealing with the Cold War-fueled nuclear potentiality of total destruction and a critique of political theorist Francis Fukuyama’s Hegelian-inspired “gospel” (Derrida, 1994, p. 70) of the end of history, “No Apocalypse, Not Now” and *Specters* reveal related reflections: The nuclear regime is one of the absolute limit-that-is-yet-to-unveil-itself; the apocalypse-to-come is an ever-elusive signifier, only upheld by the powerful rhetoric and mediatized utterances it is connected with. Linking this back to *Specter*’s investigation of Marxist hauntings, a similar deferral mechanism is highlighted, but then within a different context: that of justice and the ongoing sufferings brought by unjust actions.

And it is this ethico-political framework in which Derrida’s idea of the hauntological fully comes into play: Criticizing Heidegger’s metaphysics of presence, Derrida in *Specters* (1994) creates a space between presence and absence; between the strict delineations of past, present, and future by means of the queer(ing) specter. The specter—who or that what we are

haunted by—can be read as the Levinasian Other whose call has not been answered or, even worse, *violently silenced*. Acknowledging these lingering, haunting specters and their calls is what is just. Justice does not only bypass law and needs to be gifted instead of legally forced onto us, but is also always still-to-be-attained. In this sense, Derridean justice acts as a transcendent, regulative ideal, being connected to the “future-to-come” (1994, p. xix) and demanding responsibility that goes “beyond the living present” (p. xix).

A queering of linear past-present-future reveals itself here, as justice-to-come revolves around corrections of present wrongdoings and involves accountability for one’s (and society’s) past actions. It is all about learning to live “*with ghosts*” (Derrida, 1994, p. xvii–xviii), as well as with present and future behavior. This temporal queering does not fully undo the messianic touch that Derrida’s justice-to-come carries, however. *Specters*—together with his other more ethico-political works—reveals a peculiar deconstructed version of messianism, or as Derrida notes it, a “messianism without religion” (p. 74), i.e. without the theological eschatological touches. In this Derridean queer messianism both the future and the past are seen as always already connected. The ghosts of the past, together with their material markings—or, in a lot of cases, *missing* markings of those subjects who weren’t even allowed to live livable lives—upon the present and the what-is-to-come, thus need to be continuously tracked.

This queered past-present-future reconfiguration is picked up by Barad and Haraway—who, as critical science studies scholars are invested in making scientific praxes more just—but Derrida’s ethico-politics of temporality that drives his conceptualization of justice still differs vastly from theirs. Especially Barad (2019) is critical of Derrida’s take on the nuclear apocalyptic, and both Barad (2007) and Haraway (2016) wish to bring Derrida’s rather transcendent justice-to-come back to the material world by sketching out a more immanent ethico-politics of temporality, and consequently, response-ability and justice. Barad’s (2019)

critique illustrates this: Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now" does not engage with how scientific and epistemological praxes take place within a power dynamics-packed world. Although Derrida's justice-to-come is not fully picked apart by Barad—as also demonstrated by her 2010 piece in which she affirmatively thinks-with a Levinasian-Derridean conceptualization of alterity and justice—Derrida's blindness to the facticity of nuclear violence, or "the exploding of more than 2000 nuclear weapons and nuclear colonialism, violence largely perpetuated upon indigenous lives and habitats" (Barad, 2019, p. 536), is critiqued. And rightfully so. Barad's commentary is supported by her agential realist understanding of time and temporality: Time is "not a succession of evenly spaced individual moments" (2007, p. 180), but rather relates to dynamic, co-constituting interactions between entangled phenomena situated and engaging with(in) a world that is also constantly in becoming, or as Barad puts it, "intra-actions" (p. 180). And these intra-actions "matter to the making/marking of space and time" (p. 180). Time and temporality (plus space) are thus regarded as vibrant. Or as described in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

Temporality is produced through the iterative enfolding of phenomena marking the sedimenting historicity of differential patterns of mattering. As the rings of trees mark the sedimented history of their intra-actions within and as part of the world, so matter carries within itself the sedimented historicities of the practices through which it is produced as part of its ongoing becoming [...]. Time has a history. (Barad, 2007, p. 182)

So, the wounds of injustice are all around us—and in that sense, the past can be revisited through the present. This usually happens through an affective event, a case of witnessing, or a concrete remembrance of past unjust acts whose aftereffects are still hauntingly felt today—and these events and acts for Barad queer spacetime as the past is then shown to always

have existed in the here and now.

And this is where Derrida becomes haunted by his own ghosts of ignorance: By figuratively connecting the apocalyptic to the (non-religious) messianic yet-to-come—something that a lot of us in more privileged positions during the COVID-19 pandemic are guilty of, still able to push the arrival of impending financial, or physical, or other types of ‘doom’ further and further away—Derrida becomes “complicit in regimes of erasure” (Barad, 2019, p. 538). Barad thus follows Derrida in his past-present-future queerings, but then with a reorientation toward the thick material present, where the “radical possibilities for living-being otherwise” (p. 540) could come into being. And the latter leads us to yet another part of the cartographical sketch of Harawayan-Baradian response-ability, that is, the ethico-politics of the troubling present it is built upon.

### *A temporal ethico-politics of the thick present...*

Tying the strands of queering time, temporality, and the COVID-19 crisis together with the critical pedagogical attentivity to justice, accountability, and responsibility/response-ability, one could argue that Haraway’s ecophilosophy is not only relevant in this regard because of its highlighting of the unavoidable entanglements between the human, non-human, and the environmental at large, allowing us to closely examine the tangled human-non-human origins of said pandemics. A Harawayan lens also provides us with the opportunity to trans-corporeally think-with the present, and that without deferring our responsibility to the distant future—a feature she shares with many of the contemporary new materialist and posthumanist thinkers she has inspired over the years, including Barad. Or, as Haraway herself underlines this necessity of thinking-with(in) the current conditions:



These times called the Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time [...]. (Haraway, 2016, p. 35)

By accentuating the present, Haraway guides us away from temporal linearity as employed in Western salvation history, modern science's progress narrative, and future-oriented advanced capitalism. By focusing on the 'thickness' of the present, or that "environmental, multi-species, multiracial, multi-kinded reproductive and environmental justice" (Haraway in Paulson and Haraway, 2019, n. p.) must be cultivated to even have a the future, Haraway instructs us to *sympoietically* live (with)in, make-with, and think-with the "Chthulucene" (2016, p. 2). We are thus instructed to get our hands dirty and start reshaping this post-Anthropocene, Chthulucenic world in a more situated, attentive, and relational/trans-corporeal manner.

This thinking-with the present's thickness implies an ethico-politics of queered temporalities, in which the present gets expanded to include (non-) markings of the past, plus the next multi-species generations inhabiting this planet, while requiring a reconfiguration of responsibility, as the universe in which intra-actions between beings constantly arise—to put in Baradian terms—is viewed through a posthumanist, agency-expanding lens. The scale of such an ethico-politics is thus widened, ensuring that the intersubjective arena between beings also becomes larger. And this is where Haraway's—but also Barad's—posthumanist reconceptualization of responsibility-as-response-ability and the critical cartography of the latter notion manifest themselves: Interestingly, Barad's rearticulation of responsibility is rooted in Derrida's philosophy and that of Haraway, while Haraway's take on responsibility

also is linked to Derrida-diffracted-through-Levinas. Derrida's specter is never that far away...

*...and a pedagogical ethico-politics of response-ability in the here and now*

In *When Species Meet* (2008, p. 88 f. f.), Haraway refers to response-ability while engaging with Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)". This piece from 2002 touches upon the animal's suffering in relation to the human, and how life and death decisions regarding animals have been made by human subjects, setting the stage for critical animal studies—without, however, explicitly mentioning the notion of response-ability. But while discussing the (in)famous scene in which Derrida finds himself standing completely naked in front of his cat, pondering how his cat gazing back at him disturbs the standard objectification-loaded human-animal rapport, he brings up the following:

If I began by saying, "the wholly other they *call* the 'animal,' and for example a 'cat,'" if I underlined the call [*appel*] and added quotation marks, it was to do more than announce a problem that will henceforth never leave us, that of appellation-and of the *response* to a call. (Derrida, 2002, p. 383)

Linking the human-animal relationship to Levinasian alterity, Derrida argues that responsibility (here articulated as *responding-to* a call) has never really been an element of such a relationship, precisely because of the absence of human speech on the animal's side. Theorizing the animal as 'wholly Other' then, steers us toward Levinas' ideas of radical Otherness and responding-to in *Totality and Infinity* (2015).

Briefly summarized, Levinasian philosophy is all about the encounter between the subject and "the face of the Other" (Levinas, 2015, p. 24), which consequently confronts the subject with the Other's transcendence. Thinking of the Other as the subject's "master" (p.

72)—and thus turning Hegel’s master-slave dialectics on its head—Levinas points at the transformative character of accepting the Other’s call to submit to her/him and help out. Recognizing the Other as wholly Other in her/his “singularity” (p. 246) while not demanding anything back after having responded to a call, is where an authentic ethics of the encounter and also justice can blossom. And this kind of justice can only be given in response-to and can never be merely legally enforced—something Derrida agrees with. Looked at from a pedagogical perspective, then, one could argue that this non-assimilationist take on alterity is exactly what is theoretically operating at the background of many contemporary critical, and especially, new materialist and posthumanist, pedagogical praxes: Instead of regarding ‘the student’ as an extension of ‘the teacher’—thereby emphasizing a mono-directional, authority-laden knowledge transfer—this Levinasian-Derridean conceptualization of alterity supports the idea that both parties are to be seen as subjects that are constantly having to respond-to one another in a mutual quest for co-learning.

The relational exchange aspect thus is what ties the critical pedagogical and these alterity-focused philosophies together, and Haraway builds on the foregoing in *When Species Meet* (2008) by starting of her analysis through the unraveling of various systems of killability that have made it impossible for various relational exchanges to even arise. The interweaving of her ethico-politics of the present and her rewriting of responsibility via Levinas-diffracted-through-Derrida becomes extra visible when Haraway brings in the idea of responding-to, connecting it to a posthumanist, multi-species-focused principle of accountability and the more intersubjective idea of responsibility—now literally described as revolving around “relationships of response” (p. 83). When the call for attentivity and help from another being arises, an immediate response is warranted to assure what Haraway names “companion-species worldliness” (p. 88). Ignoring such a call or suspending one’s responding-to to future times: that is when more harm and injustice are created. And this is affirmed by Barad, whose

reconceptualization of justice, accountability, and responsibility follows similar lines, but combines both Derridean—again diffracted through Levinas—and Harawayan influences.

Seen through Barad’s agential realist, new materialist perspective, the world unfolds its ethical potential from within:

Questions of responsibility and accountability present themselves with every possibility; each moment is alive with different possibilities for the world’s becoming and different reconfigurings of what may yet be possible. (Barad, 2007, p. 182)

Being accountable for one’s actions, together with the ideas of complicity and response-ability, are written into the world’s fabric, meaning that relations of ethical obligation are inescapable—unless, of course, actively refused. Barad explores this agential realist “ethics of entanglement” (2011, p. 150)—that combines the temporalities-queering powers of justice and response-ability with a Levinasian ethico-political model of the encounter with the Other—in her later work that could be read as a turn toward the ethico-political (see e.g. 2010, 2011, and 2019). For Barad, and many other new materialist, posthumanist thinkers, response-ability has an automatic multispecies outlook; one that in Barad’s but also Haraway’s case actually predates agential cutting and subjectivity schemes, and highlights beings’ trans-corporeal interdependence instead of regarding them as ‘objects-to-be-exploited’ versus ‘subjects-in-power’. We in the end are all “bound to the other” (Barad, 2010, p. 265) through intra-acting with each other and with(in) the world, meaning there is “no getting away from ethics on this account of mattering” (p. 265), and especially so in times of urgency and global crisis.

Seen through this Harawayan-Baradian, but also very much Levinasian-diffracted-through-Derridean viewpoint, it becomes clear that we are in dire need of a pedagogical ethico-politics of response-ability that teaches us that we are all in this together, entangled with one

another as we are all co-learning and sharing this world with one another—even if our situated positionalities and responsibility levels differ enormously. In addition to trans-corporeality—or, put in more critical pedagogical terms, the acceptance of constant relational exchanges—and the importance of letting go of the hubris-laden idea that the world is by and for humans only, there is another critical pedagogical lesson that the current pandemic is teaching us, namely, that we need to take the queering temporal, material, and relational characteristics of the virus, together with how it is latching itself onto systems of institutionalized disparities and injustices, seriously, so that we could put an adequate ethico-politics of response-ability into practice. This would allow us to reorient ourselves as humans in a more-than-human, trans-corporeal world, and make the dream of “multispecies flourishing” (Haraway, 2008, p. 90) more attainable.

Not all the nodes of such a critical cartography of response-ability have been drawn here, however: as a critical cartography is meant to be a lively, situated set of crisscrossing assemblages-in-becoming, it is up to this chapter’s reader to keep adding fine-woven layers onto the latter, and that especially through the creation of critical pedagogical spaces and praxes. Coming up with syllabi that bring the dehumanized and more-than-human together, and letting students-as-co-learners experiment with how every possible research phenomenon is trans-corporeally anchored and hence is part of a larger set of ethico-political issues, are but two examples of such situated, response-able new materialist and posthumanist interventions that could eventually propel changes in higher educational environments. It is only through thinking-with, responding-to, and teaching-with particular, concrete challenges and haunting multi-species calls that we will end up with a well-positioned pedagogical, ethico-political cartography that transcends the dangers of a totalizing, differences-erasing perspective and ideals of justice-to-come that are so far up in the air that only air castles could be built upon their vaporous foundations.

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