

Ethico-onto-epistemology

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues for a transversal posthumanities-based pedagogy, rooted in an attentive ethico-onto-epistemology, by reading the schizoanalytical praxes of Deleuzoguattarian theory alongside the work of various feminist new materialist scholars.

KEY WORDS: schizoanalysis, transversal posthumanities, ethics of immanence

Continental feminist new materialist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz, building on the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, insist on a posthumanist, immanent ethics of joy that confounds mutually exclusive/exhaustive binarizations (such as mind/body, human/animal, reason/passion, ideal/material, white/black, and male/female). Such an ethics, they insist, is uncanny: “Reconfigured outside of and beyond theories of good, moral laws or ethical obligations,” it refuses the normative and familiar, resisting being conflated with standards and “universal principles of thought and action” (Grosz 2017: 132). Immanent thinkers and pedagogues work with such a binary-distorting outlook—an outlook that could also be called “diffractive” in the Baradian sense of the word as it considers cognitive and pre-cognitive, material and immaterial processes while highlighting the importance of the inseparability between the knowing “subject,” the to-be-known or known “object,” the processes of learning and knowing, and consequentially, the relationality between “teacher” and “student.” Such a perspective does not depart from a-priori-drawn subject/object distinctions or “cuts” but instead highlights the ever-evolving intra-active relationality between these phenomena (see Barad 2007).

In this essay, we wish to pay close attention to the potentially productive overlaps between Deleuzoguattarian praxis and feminist new materialist thought (which, because of its crisscrossing transdisciplinary and transcontinental roots, comes in many forms). By diffracting these approaches, as Braidotti and Grosz do

in their own transversal praxes, we intend to highlight some of the ontological, epistemological, and ethical matterings revealed in the (re)distribution of paths.

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In the networked media-drenched world of semiological, chemical, and neuro-affective capitalism “attention has become the most highly prized commodity,” writes Steve Goodman (2010: 194), reiterating the Deleuzoguattarian call to work towards seizing back imagination and affect from destructive systems of capitalist modeling. The schizophrenic double-pull of capitalist relations ensures that while it frees or deterritorializes us, it simultaneously reterritorializes us in a culture of “machinic enslavement” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 457). In higher education systems around the world, machinic enslavement takes the form of a neoliberal profit-based logic (which has dealt particularly heavy blows to the Humanities and Liberal Arts-related academic disciplines—see, for example, Fisher 2009; Braidotti 2013). This neoliberal logic or rationality has resulted in an instrumentalist industry-driven pedagogical praxis in which students are passively and uncritically spoon-fed easily-digestible materials to further promote what critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer label “blindly pragmatized thought” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: xiii). Instead of focusing on the person behind the student and her/his environmental entanglements, such a model, with its clear-cut goal-oriented outcomes, perpetuates the pure profit-orientated logic of capital (whereby the only reforms possible are those instigated along rigid market lines).

In conjunction with this, neoliberal, extraction-based capitalism’s reterritorialization of affective relations has redirected affect away from ecological and social assemblages into the mediated “space of flows.” Deathly affects—apathy, cynicism, and mental agitation—have come to characterize capitalism’s “ahistorical, anti-mnemonic blip culture,” writes Mark Fisher (2009: 25). Where educators still strive to make critical interventions, he continues, they are often faced with a generation of “post-lexical” students who “process capital’s image dense data very effectively without the need to read” or even think (*ibid.*). By reframing students in economic terms—as both the passive consumers of services and the recipients of narrowly-defined market-orientated “outcomes”—educational banking systems perpetuate this post-lexical attitude along with the psychic brutalities of the marketplace. Students, in Fisher’s dire estimation, frequently play possum when faced with the “no long term / no future” situation of economic precarity and the specters of environmental, social, and institutional collapse. Fisher furthermore describes a “combination of market imperatives with bureaucratically-defined ‘targets’” as providing a toxic symbiosis with the “soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion” of capitalist ennui (*ibid.*: 21). “What we are facing here,” he continues,

“isn't time-honored teenage torpor, but the mismatch between a post-literate 'new flesh' that is too wired to concentrate and the confining, concentrational logics of decaying [educational] systems” (ibid.: 24).

In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti similarly argues that disciplines of learning, including Humanism itself, cannot but be affected and transformed by the current climate of capitalist crisis. While we cannot escape our own humanity, there is a pressing need to redefine it; to venture beyond the narrow confines of how the exclusivist ideality and materiality of our being-human has been thought and taught. Urging us to rethink the now-necessarily-decentered human in relation to other forms of life and non-life, Braidotti's new materialist model for a “posthuman Humanities” (2013: 162) rejects both outdated, nostalgic forms of liberal Humanities education and educational models focused on mere absorption in favor of transdisciplinarity, situatedness, accountability, and an immanent ethics. One of Braidotti's main concerns is moving away from “monolithic and static models” which “fail to provide adequate answers” to the broader, more inclusive and open-ended contexts of contemporary embodiment (2013: 140). Or as fellow new materialist scholar Alexis Shotwell observes, “climate change, water pollution, the rapid disappearance of growing numbers of species . . . a desperate shortage of clean water for many people, enormous disparities between rich and poor,” are only some of the crises of entangled human/non-human embodiments arising from “capitalist modernisation” (2016: 111). These are crises, in her opinion, that urgently call for radical onto-ethical reworkings of existing pedagogical and epistemological systems.

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Shotwell and Braidotti, along with other new materialist and Deleuzoguattarian thinkers thus reconceptualize the crisis of capitalism as containing the potential seeds of new beginnings. At stake for these thinkers are modes of attention. New materialist thinker and feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway (1997), for instance, inspired by Trinh Minh-ha's thought-provoking notion of non-separational difference, sees diffraction, plus thinking diffractively, as a critical form of consciousness appropriate to these times of crisis; a consciousness that, in contrast to the modern tool and optics of reflection, is attentive to how differences are produced in the world and leave concrete, material marks on bodies, things, and environments. Philosopher-physicist Karen Barad's provocative feminist new materialist concepts of agential literacy and diffraction build on this Harawayan sense of diffraction. Like Braidotti's posthuman Humanities, Barad's conception of diffraction suggests that we (as knowledge-producing and knowledge-receiving agents) are always already part of the world and hence are ethically responsible for our intra-actions with it and each other. Diffraction points at entanglements

between the material-discursive, suggesting an open-ended heuristic of reading, thinking, and interpretation. As Barad (2007: 136) explains, being present in the world from a new materialist perspective means fostering a type of transversal thinking that takes “issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures.”

Playfully diffracting both Haraway’s and Barad’s perspectives for a moment, one could state that both seek to acknowledge a non-innocent, immanent location and positionality in the world. For Haraway, this means that scientific knowledge production is always an embodied, situated, and unfinished process, and that our “objects” of inquiry should no longer be seen as a “a screen or a ground or a resource,” but as “actor[s] and agent[s]” of their own in relation to the knower (Haraway 1988: 592). This kind of critical intervention calls for what Haraway terms “epistemological electroshock therapy” (ibid.: 578); a position that Barad seeks to materialize in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). In Barad’s self-labeled agential realist philosophy that is central to the aforementioned book, the idea that the knower, the-world-that-is-to-be-known, and knowledge producing processes are all entangled, is spotlighted. Thinking transcendently about the world is no longer a possibility, or as Barad (2007: 828) puts it: “‘We’ are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity.” These onto-epistemological reflections have consequences for how Haraway, Barad, and other immanent new materialist thinkers understand processes of interpretative reading and critique: instead of repeating what has been said before, or critiquing foregoing philosophical traditions and ideas in a negative manner—an educational-institutional praxis that is often founded upon flat-out rejection—the foresaid thinkers try to think-with and diffractively (and thus non-destructively) build on what has come before.

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Feminist new materialist and Deleuzoguattarian thinkers also seek to construct an ethics (for knowledge production) that is immanent to the world of matter and energy; one that acknowledges that we, as materially-constituted “subjects,” are part of this world, and hence implicated in its processes. Nor, do they speculate, is our ideality or thinking about this world “innocent” or “at one remove” from its processes; instead, they propose a situation of radical entanglement. They are united in this endeavor by a collective desire to escape the Hegelian “god-trick” (namely, the conceptual sleight of hand by which we, as “privileged” beings, may step out of the world and its relations in order to reflect upon them transcendently, at one remove). Braidotti, for example, is highly critical of such anthropocentric and purist moves. Taking up Deleuze and Guattari’s call for a

“vitalist ethics of mutual trans-species interdependence,” Braidotti argues for an “eco-sophy, which aims at crossing transversally the multiple layers of the subject, from interiority to exteriority and everything in between” (Braidotti 2013: 92). Supported by the foregoing perspectives and thoughts, and considering the current climate of environmental, economic, and pedagogical crisis, we feel that a methodology that diffracts between the various immanent strategies proposed by new materialist thinkers—which is also an interpretative, thinking, and affective methodology—would allow these different yet analogous perspectives and points of view to be made productive and fruitful to one another. Diffraction does not foreground rejection and denial, as stated earlier, but focuses on stimulating dialogue between divergent and convergent points of view. Barad, Haraway, Shotwell, Braidotti, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as many other new materialists, seemingly share a common desire to construct an ethics that is immanent to the world of matter and energy; one that acknowledges that we, as thinking “subjects,” are part of this world, and hence implicated in its processes. Tentatively diffracting these and other new materialist thinkers, we can identify a common theme or urgency: namely, a desire to “stay with the trouble,” to put it in a Harawayan manner.

This ethico-political call materializes itself in a variety of philosophical and pedagogical ways: while Braidotti tackles the ways in which Western philosophy has negatively and pejoratively defined alterity and difference, both Haraway and Barad seek to rework exclusivist anthropomorphic science narratives. Working across and through variegated disciplines of knowledge production, Deleuze and Guattari, along with feminist new materialists such as Grosz, add the perspective of art and minor literature, while, in the case of Deleuze and Guattari, constructing elaborate conceptual and material strategies for surmounting the problematic of poisoned capitalist relations and their attendant mental disorders.

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Even though their full philosophical compatibility might be contested, feminist new materialists such as Haraway, Braidotti, Grosz, and Barad in our view have more in common than first expected. Nor can parallels between Harawayan, Baradian, and Deleuzoguattarian praxes be overlooked. As Braidotti (2006: 1) herself explains, “mutual inter-dependences and productive mergers of forces” define new materialist and Deleuzoguattarian notions of “creative becomings,” which collectively express an onto-ethical appreciation of the “intra-personal intensive resonances between the multiple levels of inter-connections that make living beings tick.” From the immanent perspectives advocated by such approaches, knowledge production finds itself in a situation of radical entanglement. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, promote a “schizoanalytical”

perspective for grafting together new knowledge practices that not only range across multiple disciplines of learning, but also transect multiple durations and orders of being; one that “transpierce[s]” obstacles “instead of scaling them . . . [and] bore[s] holes in [conceptual] space instead of keeping it smooth” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 413). Primarily concerned, as Braidotti (2006: 1) points out, with processes of nomadic becomings, Deleuze and Guattari’s “transformative ethics” of “qualitative differences and multiplicities” shows “clear resonances” with the “non-anthropocentric epistemologies” of scholars like Haraway. We would posit that, by the same token, there are also clear overlaps with the work feminist new materialists like Barad. As onto-ethical explorers concerned with a kind of anti-essentialist neo-vitalism centered on bodies and affects, Barad, Haraway, as well as Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with grafting conceptual and ethical means for responding well to the dense tangle of aesthetic and affective human and non-human relationalities involved in our being in and of the world. Being of the world, we are co-constituted with it in a process that Barad (2007) refers to as “intra-action”; a situation of inseparability between self and world, subject and object. Ethics, knowing, and being can therefore be productively entwined, as she suggests, in an “ethico-onto-epistemology” which recognizes that as beings we are “becoming with the world” and that “the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter” (Barad 2007, 185). Building on this praxis, Shotwell in a similar manner suggests that “relationality does not imply relativism, but instead practices of responsibility [because] multispecies human and nonhuman ways of living and dying” are at stake in our every practice—from using a cellphone, climbing on a bus, or eating a meal (2016: 114–15). Fictions of purity, innocence, and separability prevent us, therefore, from forming ethical responses that are adequate to the complex bodily entanglements and material assemblages we are co-constituted with in relation to multiple others, both human and not. We need to consider, as Shotwell observes, “forms of noninnocent entanglement that are also always relations of suffering” (2016: 121).

Coming to terms with a world-in-becoming entails, in Deleuzoguattarian praxis, paying attention to discomforting as well as joyous affective and material relations. The task of ethics, ontology, and epistemology, following their praxis, is to aid in the generation of new sensorial, affective domains of possibility—which will mean paying attention to (and not turning away from) “sad” passions (such as paranoia, depression, schizophrenia, etc.); these may, after all, yet serve as “the potential bearers of new constellations of universes of values or reference,” writes Guattari (1995: 18). Working with and through uncomfortable relations of suffering might help us recognize and reconfigure the “systems of [negative] modeling in which we are entangled, and which are in the process of completely polluting us, head and heart” (Guattari 1996: 132). Advocating the crafting of “popular, minority, mutant [desiring] machines” to counter the “world war machine” of capitalism,

Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 422) suggest the construction of new conceptual and material frameworks that access both imagination and matter as sources of vitality. In recognizing the immanence between ideality and materiality, such a project, as Grosz (2017: 257) writes, hopes that “as living beings” we might yet come to perform onto-ethical acts that “liberate and transform [the] material processes” in which we are entangled through a “reframing of [the] systems of knowledge and representation” with which we conceive of the world and our relations to it. The systems by which knowledges are produced, thought, and taught, therefore, need to become more fully cognizant of and accountable for “the concepts, affects and sensations they produce” (ibid.).

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Naturally, the Humanities, along with other disciplines of learning in the Arts and Sciences cannot help but be affected by the current neoliberal über-capitalist climate we are living in. Instead of denouncing our current-day condition as an unresolvable condition of apocalyptic and aporetic crisis, Braidotti takes on the challenge of re-visioning the Humanities through an affirmative, posthuman lens that acknowledges that the days of the Vitruvian Man are indeed long gone. The Western false universalist conceptualization of Man—and the Human—are now “un-moored and un-supported” (Braidotti 2013: 145). This provides us with an opportunity to rethink the now-decentered Human in relation to the non-human in all of its forms, i.e., the digital, the bio-genetic, the environmental, the formerly-dehumanized, etc. Braidotti’s project of the posthuman Humanities represents a reinvigorated model for knowledge production, guided by principles such as accountability of the knower’s geopolitical location and critiques of power locations and relations, transdisciplinarity, a focus on human/non-human entanglements, creativity, non-linearity, and a strong connection between ethics, science, and social/environmental justice. While an affirmative feminist new materialist pedagogy, such as the one advocated by Braidotti, need not negate the usefulness of more reflective methodologies (see, for example, Bozalek and Zembylas 2017 for the combination of diffractive and reflective methodologies), it will have to take diffractive processes seriously; what Grosz (2017: 260) refers to as “the processes of becoming, the processes of individuation, that underlie and complicate how being can be understood.”

Along with Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Barad, Grosz proposes that all fields of knowledge production (politics, ethics, literature, politics, theology, pedagogy, science, etc.) can be radically extended via an immanent ethics that considers the human to be but one fold within a non-human continuum; a fold that enfolds multiple elements and features of the world and which, in turn, folds out into the world through new connections and relations. Thinking about and with the

world's multiple connections and relations involves a type of becoming-with or co-constitution. As Anna Tsing (2015) reminds us, times of crisis demand that we reconceptualize how we situate ourselves as human subjects. To this end, she writes, we need to urgently concern ourselves with processes of symbiosis between humans and multiple non-human others. Aside from acknowledging our mutual vulnerability in these times of "trouble without end" (Tsing 2015: 2), concepts of justice or equality of participation need to push beyond the merely human; to admit critical dependency "on more-than-human processes," to allow that we humans "can't fix anything, even what we have broken, by ourselves" (ibid.: 257). Guattari (1995) suggests the crafting of a new ethico-aesthetic eco-socialist paradigm of co-constitution with multiple non-human others, both physical and incorporeal. Mixing together insights from multiple disciplines of learning and variant cultural ways of looking, in a kind of free-form conceptualization, Guattari considers animals, objects, energies, and even haecceities (constellations or transports of affect) as important "potential bearers of new constellations of universes of values or reference" that speak to questions of knowledge construction in these times of crisis (Guattari 1995: 18). As Barad (2007: 185) writes, a recognition of our entanglement with a multitude of non-human others (as beings, as forces, and as idealities) produces a situation of radical immanence in which "each intra-action" counts, in which each intra-action suggests "possibilities for what the world may become." To be co-constituted with the world means formulating an aesthetico-ethical paradigm that celebrates "life, materiality and their excesses" (Grosz 2017: 261).

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Scientific, technological, artistic, and philosophical knowledge production systems are not things that humans "make for themselves out of nothing" but rather processes co-constituted with all matter and life; "contingent, contested elaborations of the world's qualities and processes" that are already "immanent in the prehuman and nonhuman world" (Grosz 2017: 258–59). Barad's agential realism, like Grosz's and Braidotti's insistence on radical immanence, is critical of metaphysical individualism. Grosz suggests that by directing our efforts away from the reductive world of discreet individuality "to the prehuman, the inhuman, the organic and organic," we will discover new "human ways to invent, to create ourselves and what comes beyond us" (2017: 259). By placing emphasis on the ethics of intra-active encounters, Barad similarly underlines the need for more critical, dialogical, and relational explorations of human/non-human networks and assemblages. As human beings, she suggests (2007: 185), we are constantly in touch with the universe and all of its beings, "part of the world in its differential becoming." A Barad-inspired diffractive model requires "agential literacy," or an explicitly feminist rethinking of what counts as "literacy." Following Barad's

agential realist framework that forefronts relationality, we come to understand that we are already part of the world itself, and hence have to engage in learning about and with the world and science in an accountable and responsible manner. Literacy in this context is not about becoming a receptacle for knowledge in hierarchical settings that uphold the status quo. Rather, it should be thought of as something that equips us with the tools to think and rethink things, and to reflect upon the consequences of our engagement with the world in a critical and responsible manner. As Barad observes, “[e]thicality is part of the fabric of the world” (Barad 2007: 182). This altered understanding of an immanently ethical literacy, according to Barad (2000: 241) examines:

The way different disciplinary cultures define what counts as ‘nature’ and what counts as ‘culture.’ Furthermore it . . . seeks to understand the relationship between material and discursive constraints and conditions. In this way, the role of (human and nonhuman) agency in the production of objective knowledge can be appreciated and [we] can begin to see the importance of [our] own participation in doing responsible [knowledge production]: of learning how to intra-act responsibly within the world.

There are many contemporary issues, some of which we have only touched on so far, that require us to foster responsible ethico-onto-epistemological practices. We live in a world in which our every action finds itself embroiled in networks of planetary harm. To critically engage our effects and impacts “without obscuring the decisions about what will count as salient harm, worth attending to, we need to make agential cuts that allow us to generate different narratives and different nodes of attention,” as Shotwell also puts it (2016: 106). Along with other new materialists, Shotwell argues for ethical ontologies and epistemologies that pay due and delicate attention to the nature of our intra-actions in and with the world. We might do *better* pedagogy, *better* science, *better* knowledge production—in other words, “attend better—if we have better narratives, grounded in arts of noticing that open to and allow for [more nuanced] noticing in contexts that are already disturbed, already impure” (ibid.: 105). Shotwell’s point, as is Deleuze’s and Guattari’s in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is that we are inextricably and messily entangled in a non-human context of bacteria, plants, chemicals, radioactive isotopes, animals and meteorological systems that are apparatuses as Barad describes them, as capable as we humans are for making agential cuts. These apparatuses, as Barad would have it, are “specific material configurings of the world that do not merely emerge in time but iteratively reconfigure space-timematter as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming” (2007: 142). To take the example of chemical agents, the pesticides and fertilizers we humans use to “disrupt photosynthesis in undesired plants then disrupt the formation of human bodies” via birth defects (Shotwell 2016: 105). In this geologically human age of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, there are innumerable other toxic matterings

that count too. We also need to bear in mind that “the attribution of a name to a new geological era is not sufficient” to account for the crisis that is now playing out (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017: 287). In addressing this crisis, we cannot expect “salvation from scientists” or intellectuals alone, but also need to pay careful attention to the “struggles and initiatives of other Earthlings,” human and non-human (ibid.: 287). Narratives of progress, “advancing the modern human conceit, [has] conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered and conjoined projects that make up worlds,” explains Tsing (2015: 22).

As progress falters, thinking diffractively with the immanent onto-ethical and epistemological systems of Deleuzoguattarian and feminist new materialists might enable us to recognize and implement new narratives that were previously masked by anthropocentric conceits and haughty Enlightenment-based notions of supposedly all-encompassing progress and linear progression. When we learn to look beyond such limiting fictions we might see the potential for new human/non-human symbioses as well as recognize existing partnerships in which we are already enmeshed. By, as Barad would have it, redefining what counts as “nature” and what counts as “culture,” new assemblages will present themselves; multiple intersecting temporalities, the gatherings and makings of joint lifeways, shared indeterminacies, shifting and collaborative attempts at survival emergent from the ashen dysbiosis of poisoned capitalist relations.

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