

Towards an Intra-Active Ethics

A preface: I'm at the beginning of the dissertation process having just finished the proposal [which you just heard the pitch], so I want to say from the outset that this is very much work in progress. I'm interested in the possibilities and consequences of rethinking subjectivity in and through new materialism, so what I'm going to offer is an intervention in posthumanism more generally with a reading of Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* that pushes a little on her use of Levinas at the tail end of that text. It's necessarily generalized and generalizable; it's the beginning of what I'd like to be the central chapter in the dissertation, but time will tell. So.]

My recent work revolves around the nonhuman turn in the humanities especially as it emerges from our contemporary moment. Increasingly, poststructuralism's lessons about performativity and the inadequacy of the liberal human subject have emerged less as counter-intuitive or theoretical claims, than as statements about reality. From a cultural perspective, the crisis facing the human comes into focus as performative frameworks become explicit (Facebook and Twitter configure the subject as networked, while LinkedIn emphasizes neoliberalism's self-branding imperative) and technological extensions of the self become increasingly ubiquitous (smart phones are hard to ignore, and then there's the more insidious surveillance networks we traverse by googling directions to the nearest restaurant; they know where you live). From a social and political perspective, Richard Grusin reminds us, "[A]lmost every problem of note that we face in the twenty-first century entails engagement with nonhumans—from climate change, drought, and famine; to biotechnology, intellectual property, and privacy; to genocide, terrorism, and war—there seems no time like the present to turn our future attention, resources, and energy toward the nonhuman broadly understood" (vii). Our present moment forces us to

confront these multitudinous forces—human and nonhuman—imbricated with(in) what we’ve mistakenly assumed was an autonomous human subject. This felt incongruity between embodiment and subjectivity—between autonomous body and dispersed subject traversing a mass of entangled networks—gestures towards a reckoning within popular imagination that critical theory and philosophy had decades ago. But I think this presents an opportunity for rethinking the present and future with renewed ambition intensifying the tools critical theory provides.

An entangled problem: how we understand the present affects how we theorize and imagine the future. As long as human subjectivity remains *the* central figure in our descriptions of the present, “tomorrow” will be narrowly conceptualized as a self-same present, different in degree rather than kind. Claire Colebrook reminds us that futurity remains grounded in a kind of anthropomorphic hubris so long as we couple sustainability to a model of ecological resource management, avoiding the problem of “theory” beyond site specific practices in the present. In a slightly more affirmative register, Rosi Braidotti links shared responsibility in the present to the very possibility *of* futurity: “A present that endures is a sustainable model of the future” (226). Although these critics diverge, I see them united in an effort to think futurity beyond an anthropomorphic frame, which entails reconfiguring subjectivity and ethics in the present by recognizing the nonhuman presence imbricated with(in) the systems and structures that shape subjectivity. A posthuman ethics might reorient attention to these [inhuman] forces without entirely reinscribing them within the human itself.

Theorists working in and through posthumanism and new materialism take this reorientation as a central task for the present, recognizing reality’s complexity and humanity’s place within it. But humanity remains a sticking point in nearly all posthuman theory—a site to

reinvest the complex networks these frameworks elucidate in order to make way for a different mode of human relationality. In the introduction to their collection *New Materialisms*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost position new materialism as “creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter’s immanent vitality” (8). However, these “new concepts and images” are nearly always reincorporated back into the [very human] social order—Sarah Ahmed’s objects affecting human orientation in and towards the world; Elizabeth Grosz’s notion of “freedom” as “immanent in the relations that the living has with the material world” gets reintegrated into feminist politics and theory. Let me emphasize, I do not think this is a *bad* thing: sticking with the human is vital for this tumultuous political and social moment. At the same time, we cannot continue imagining a future for human subjectivity without reorienting ourselves to reality’s inhuman dynamism, on the one hand, and the species’ eventual end, on the other.

In a way, I’m interested in what feels like an unresolvable tension between present and future. Rather than exchange one for the other, I’m trying to work through ethical practices and models of intra-activity [more in a minute] to reconfigure the possibility of a different future from our situatedness in the present—to expand the horizon of possibilities from what feels like stasis. Towards this end, we might think beyond our immediate relation to other humans and nonhumans by attending to our imbrication with and within a larger and longer ecology which we both (co)inhabit and (co)produce—deep time, to an extent. I’m asking us to think about complicity alongside [rather than beyond] the kind of face to fact ethical encounters which with me might be familiar by seeking the impersonal lurking in all matter(s) human or otherwise. [it’s not about abandoning current ethical projects, but recognizing and multiply the vantage from which we attend to those projects.

Phrased as a question: What would it mean to jettison the human from our theories of futurity, refusing to invest in a model of managerial sustainability, and instead locating an impersonal life tied to our own?

One way to begin articulating an alternative conception of our relation to the world that might better account for our imbrication with and within the (non)human is Karen Barad's recent work on intra-activity and performative matter. Barad complicates our conceptions of reality by leveraging quantum physics' insistence that observation determines phenomena, that the inseparability of observing and measuring either the speed or location of a particular electron necessitates reconceptualizing the frameworks we use to describe the world and our relation to it. Barad argues, "For Bohr, what is at issue is *not* that we cannot *know* both the position and momentum of a particle simultaneously...but rather that particles do not *have* determinate values of position and momentum simultaneously...Bohr is making a point about the nature of reality, not merely our knowledge of it" (19). Reality isn't something we can stand outside of or observe from an objective distance, but rather a process in which we are intimately entangled. This shifts us from a representational model of reality, in which humans re-present the ontologically separate entities found in the world [in language or art more generally], to a performative model in which humans are tightly interwoven into the ongoing becoming and enactment of reality. Barad describes this as an "agential realism," emphasizing the often unattended reciprocity inherent in our material relationship to phenomena; we're not merely "reflexive" of our positionality, but rather our positionality is bound up in our observations. While Barad follows suit with much posthumanism and new materialism in identifying agency among nonhumans bodies, it's her insight that reality is performative all the way down—not objective phenomena, but a series of "*ontological inseparability/entanglement[s] of intra-acting 'agencies'*"—that

distinguishes her from other posthuman thinkers (139). The major upshot of Barad's work is how it reframes ethics as an ongoing and intra-active process taking place at the level of materiality. Ethics isn't the purview of an agentic human subjects alone, but an intra-active process working itself out everywhere and all the time. Barad's understanding of intra-active matter(ing)—matter not as inert stuff, but as emergent phenomena of intra-active processes that produce reality—moves us away from humanist notions of embodiment and subjectivity toward something far more impersonal. By attending to matter as it comes to matter, rather than focusing exclusively on human embodiment, Barad's work shifts us to an impersonal ethics.

Barad insists, "Pressing questions of the nature of embodiment, subjectivity, agency, and futurity hang in the balance. What is at stake is nothing less than the possibilities for change" (46). This relationship between embodiment, subjectivity, agency, and futurity seems vital to me, especially as we come to realize that agency isn't all it's cracked up to be, or that it's been largely overdetermined as a litmus for ethical treatment. Barad's "Agential Realism" reconfigures agency's locus in specific material enactments—agency is "an enactment, not something that someone or something has" (214). Of course, it's an enactment not of a singular body, but an intra-active assemblage, closely attending to the co-constituted nature of subjectivity and the dynamic enactment of reality. But with Barad we can perhaps takes this a step further—because agency is always intra-active, because it's not actually located with or within a singular actant, activity and passivity begin to look suspiciously alike. Agency crosses over into passivity inasmuch as we can only account for agency by mapping it after the fact. Barad argues, "agency is about the possibilities and *accountability* entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices" (218). Agency and passivity aren't binary

opposites here, nor two diametric poles on a continuum in which we need to find a happy medium. Instead, they pass into one another as we begin to take seriously the nonhuman interwoven into the discursive frameworks that determine subjectivity. Agency isn't something that's actualized in Barad's work, but rather identified after the fact, connected with accountability and responsibility [more later]. This is where subjectivity and agency meet with futurity and ethics: without a thick descriptive practice the future remains wedded to our outmoded notions of subjectivity, an autonomous human subject, and a present far less complicated than the one we actually reside in. Barad's intervention in ethics resides largely in this attention to materiality, shifting us from habituated modes of interpersonal relationships to focus on reality's intra-active becoming.

In the final pages of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad turns to Emmanuel Levinas as another thinker of radical passivity in order to flesh out the ethics she's been working towards. Barad finds affinities with Levinas in his emphasis on responsibility as the capacity to respond rather than a specific commitment—responsibility not as something we choose, but something we're thrown into. But it's curious how she ends: “Intra-acting responsibly as part of the world means taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world's vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us flourish” (396). The language here, “responsive,” “us,” “flourish,” should give us pause—does this language adequately describe a shared susceptibility, or does it reinscribe a human agent at the center of an ethical universe? Who is the “us” that is “flourish[ing]” at the end of Barad's book? Barad takes us to the edge of impersonal agency—a liminal space where ethics, agency, and responsibility pass over into their antipodes—but in the last instance returns us to the human. Again, we're in this space of

simultaneous agency and passivity, but I gravitate towards this because it's not a choice but a *recognition* of our mutual entanglement with reality and matter.

Levinas also operates in this space, positioning subjectivity as entirely inter-subjective, wrapped up in the responsibility for the other that precedes us. The subject does not choose the time, place, or language it inhabits, but in its arrival, in its very being, a response is solicited from beyond the subject. Levinas reminds us, “The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a ‘prior to every memory,’ an ‘ulterior to every accomplishment,’ from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence” (10). We do not choose responsibility nor what we respond to; rather, our being called to respond is figured as the passive ground for subjectivity. Because I cannot account for myself inasmuch as what constitutes my subjectivity (my environment, language, and others) precedes me, all relationships bear a “trace” of our responsibility to the other (12). This trace indexes a relationship prior to consciousness—an encounter before I choose accountability or responsibility—that accounts for the “unlimited responsibility” the subject finds itself thrown into. In this way, Levinasian ethics are less about the subject itself than the relationship to alterity that constitutes subjectivity, and the inescapability of responsibility. This rejection of consciousness and intentionality as subjectivity’s foundation reorients ethics towards physical proximity and vulnerability. Levinas argues, “[T]he oneself is a singularity, prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal. It is, if one likes, a relationship, but one where there is no disjunction between the terms held in relationship” (108). Subjectivity is imbricated in and emerges from this continuously shifting relationship with alterity, grounding

our very being and ability to respond and be responsible. Ethics and responsibility are thus primary to subjectivity rather than secondary deployments of agency.

A slightly perverse reading of Levinas [I'm hedging my bets here for more expert readers of Levinas; I'm merely an amateur] paired with Barad might enable us to reconfigure ethics as a kind of complicity, showing us how mutual vulnerability, susceptibility, and finitude are entailed not just in the trace of the other that precedes us, but the very intra-active materiality that constitutes reality. Levinas's insistence that "matter is the very locus of the for-the-other" resonates with Barad's intra-active agential realism, positioning the face-to-face encounter as a material entanglement rather than a social engagement (77). Levinas further argues, "The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signaled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized. Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, 'against all logic'" (87). Reconfiguring the "neighbor" as part of our material, intra-active entanglement with the world perfectly encapsulates the quantum lessons that come to bear on Barad's arguments: "We (but not only 'we humans') are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails" (393). Being responsible is not a choice but the perpetual participation with(in) the impersonal and intra-active becomings in which "I" am entangled; that co-constitute "me." An intra-active ethics affirms our imbrication with materiality's porosity and vulnerability—not just the constant changes materiality undergoes, but the breakdown, the becoming-sediment of bodies and assemblages. To pretend the human body, itself intra-active and epiphenomenal, is immune or exempt belies a shared finitude with the material world we

inhabit and (co)constitute. I'm thus attempting to trace a posthuman ethics that would emphasize embodiment as a shared vulnerability and finitude with all matter, while highlighting responsibility as a continuous and passive intra-action rather than a deployment of (human) agency. This version of ethics would keep us tied to the present, identifying and re(con)figuring the environments, ecosystems, and networks we inhabit in an effort to better articulate and understand the embeddedness of our subjectivity, vulnerability, and finitude.

What might this look like? And I want to ask this in terms of the ecology we inhabit—not an ecology *for* humanity, but the general ecology humanity happens to be part of. There's nothing like ecological catastrophe to emphasize humanity's simultaneous capacity and incapacity to affect change. Human conceptions of time inadequately stake out temporal territory anthropomorphically, neglecting the long-term ramifications of environmental accords and ecological managerialism. In spite of transforming the ecology into a commodity that can be rationed as needed, these models of sustainability myopically ignore the finitude of environmental resources for present gain. These models *stall* us in an eternal present—or, more recently, attempt to return us to an idyllic *past*—rather than confront the eventual future devoid of human life. A thicker description of the present might disrupt these self-preservation tactics by forcing us to confront the multitudinous forces that cut across us, emphasizing not just the necessity of this ecology for survival but also the way we co-constitute the environment. We need to theorize impersonally, attending not just to our entanglement with(in) nonhuman forces in the present, but also confronting the eventual end of humanity—a world without us in it. The point is not to anthropocentrically leave the planet better for the next generation, or somehow restore the ecology to a pure state [an impossibility], but to take seriously humanity as an intra-active part of the ecology. Barad and Levinas enable us to shift from the personal to the

impersonal stakes of intra-acting within this particular ecology by configuring subjectivity as radically impersonal, (co)constituted by forces beyond control, perception, and consciousness. As we begin to understand subjectivity as an epiphenomenal byproduct of reality rather than the mediator between reality and consciousness, we quickly become aware of our simultaneous power and impotence in the face of this uncertain future. Because subjectivity is predicated on the trace of what comes before it, our lives are not our own, and we must consider ourselves as ethical hostages to the past, present, and future traces cutting across, emerging from, and constituting subjectivity. To theorize from this perspective is not to carry an ambivalence about humanity, but to recognize the [ephemerality] of humanity as a species and human subjectivity as a passing fad. I'm in agreement with Colebrook on this point: "There would no longer be man (historically and socially determined and determining) but a species tied to rhythms that were geological and beyond historical and familial imagination" (56).

I want to end insisting that I'm not trying to shortchange the very real problems faced by dehumanized subjectivities in the present in favor of an abstract futurity; a futurity that will not involve you, me, us, or the species we're part of. Instead, I'm trying to work out how ethics might attend to the future by better articulating subjectivity in the present—a remapping that foregrounds the necessity of affirmative and responsible intra-active becomings. This entails more attentive intra-action in the present inasmuch as futurity is simultaneously present and absent; the future lies in wait as a virtuality in the present; what we do now determines the possibilities open in the future and the future itself. An impersonal ethics does not ignore this fact, nor the fact of ethical, political, social, and ecological atrocities in the present, but instead foregrounds these present crises. Intra-activity implores us to come to terms with how reality resonates with and within us; that we cannot stand outside or observe from an "objective"

distance; that we are ultimately entangled. This is necessarily *not* directly causal, and I don't think any one of us, or even large groups of us, can modulate the system enough to enact directly causal effects. Rather, by shifting the frameworks and groundworks that we theorize from, we open new terrain—new horizons of possibility—for a different kind of future.

Thanks

[There's a scene in the movie *Arrival* (2016) where the protagonist learns that the reason aliens came to teach humans a new language—one unencumbered by temporality that allows the speakers to see non-linearly—is because the aliens would need humanity's help is “3000 years.” Human exceptionalism at it's finest. And my partner and I left the theatre assuming this was a joke, or the suggestion that without radical intervention that humanity has no future. Teaching the film this Spring, my students (sophomores and juniors mostly) ironically couldn't imagine the end of humanity, even without this unthinkable interruption. I'm not sure what that says exactly, but.]

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