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Moving beyond (id)entities, toward emergent becomings of the world and its mattering

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Abstract

In the last 30 years we have increasingly, as humans, been individualised and set in competition with each other in the quest for ever increasing productivity. Neoliberalism has exacerbated those very liberal humanist features that feminist poststructuralist theory set out to dismantle with its critique of binary thought and the ascendance of white, male, elite, western consciousness. While transferring the responsibility for individual survival to the individual, away from the social, it weakened our responsibility, our response-ability, to each other and to the earth and our earth others. In this paper I tease my way, through stories, and through new materialist concepts, to a sense of self as emergent, as process rather than (id)entity, as response-able and responsible in the mattering of the world.

Keywords: (id)entity; neoliberalism; responsibility; new materialism

The ‘self’ is “always already multiply dispersed and diffracted throughout spacetime(mattering) . . . in its ongoing being-becoming” (Barad, 2014: 181–182).

Virginia Woolf wrote a childhood memory of the sound of waves and the wind, that she described as her earliest and most important memory:

It was of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. (written 1939, published 1978: 75)

An early memory of my own involves trees and wind. I was 5 or 6 years old:

Walking home from school one hot summer’s afternoon, I stopped to gaze at a tree whose green leaves were glinting red and gold. Shafts of sunlight had pierced the looming, grey-violet rainclouds. I stood there, transfixed. Suddenly, all the leaves of the tree fluttered, and a moment later, a cool breeze caressed my face.

I was astonished. I had discovered how wind was made by the fluttering of leaves! But how, I wondered, do all the leaves know to flutter at the same time? How do they communicate with each other?



Wind and clouds. Sydney Botanic Garden. Photo by Davies 2021.

In each of these childhood memories of wind, each child knows her life-fulness through connection with forces outside herself. Woolf describes her memory as “feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive” (1978: 75). For me, in this moment of being, I had an exquisite sense of being alive; the connection I had discovered between me and the leaves, and my wonder about the simultaneity of their fluttering, was as much part of the aliveness as the light, the wind, the leaves, the tree and the cool breeze on my face in the hot afternoon.

The leaves did not, as far as I know, communicate to each other, deciding “we will all flutter now together”. They, like me, are part of a cosmic, differentiating whole. The movements of the earth, the clouds, the rain, the ocean, the wind, the girl walking home on a hot summer’s afternoon, together generate wonder, and a possibility of movement outside the already known.

The intense specificity of being that each child experienced had nothing to do with identity—with being an entity, being this or that kind of person, pinned down in a category that separates her from others, or joins her to others who are similarly categorised. It was, rather, a specificity that knows itself in relation, in Karen Barad’s terms, in *intra-action*. In each of these moments of being, the child is moved, she is becoming other than she was, not separate from the world, but *of* it, sensing it, wondering about it, emergent in the particularity of that space-time.

Barad’s concept of *intra-action* takes us beyond thinking in terms of *interactions* between separate entities that remain the same, toward a focus on the movement in-between one emergent phenomena and another. In-between a listening child, the sound of waves, the wind and an acorn gently dragged across the floor, or in-between a child, the leaves, the light, the clouds and the wind. Barad’s turn from thinking of interaction to *intra-action*, is inspired by quantum physics, and in particular the work of Niels Bohr:

According to Bohr, the primary epistemological unit does not consist of independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties. Rather such units should be seen as phenomena—and, notably, phenomena of such a character that do not follow the rules of common classical physics regarding behaviour. (Christensen and Hauge, 2012: 5)

So we are in for a conceptual ride, here—an onto-epistemological line of flight.

In my next small story I return to the question of simultaneity, not this time of leaves, but of ants. The leafcutter ants in the Amazon rainforest simultaneously take flight, not only in *intra-action* with each other, but also with the rain, the time of day and their predators. There are a few minutes, Eduardo Kohn (2013) tells us, in which all the leafcutter ants in widespread colonies in the Amazon rainforest leave their terrestrial dwellings, and take flight. The moment of their departure is carefully timed, linked to meteorological patterns, but also to more immediate



Flying ants, Domain parkland. Photo by Davies 2020.

intra-actions. They wait for the heavy rains to have fallen. In the rainforest the humans, the frogs, the snakes, the small cats all watch closely for the moment of flight in anticipation of the feast they will have. Kohn tells us:

It is no accident that the ants take flight just before daybreak (at exactly 5:10, when I've been able to time it). When they are in their nests the aggressive guards of the colony protect them from snakes, frogs and other predators. Once they take flight, however, they are on their own, and they can fall prey to the lingering fruit-eating bats still out at twilight who attack them in mid-flight by biting off their greatly enlarged, fat-filled abdomens.

How bats see the world matters vitally to the flying ants. It is no accident the ants take flight at the time they do. Although some lingering bats are still out, by this time they will only be active for twenty or thirty minutes longer. When the birds come out (not long after six o'clock sunrise) most of the ants will already have dispersed, and some of the females will have already copulated and fallen to the ground to establish new colonies. The precise timing of the ant flight is an outcome of a semiotically structured ecology. The ants emerge at twilight—that blurry zone between night and day—when nocturnal and diurnal predators are least likely to notice them. (Kohn, 2013: 80)

Quite by chance, at the end of March in the second year of the pandemic, I came across such a moment when walking in Sydney's Domain parkland. The memory of it haunts me, perhaps because it is just once in a lifetime, I might catch that risky moment when terrestrial colonies simultaneously become air-borne.

How do they know to take flight, all at the same time? Like the leaves of my childhood tree, they do not sign to each other "we will fly out at 5.10 am" or "we will flutter just as the girl walks by". Like us, and like the trees and the wind, they intra-act with multiple forces—and in this case, not all of them benign.¹

My fourth story comes in the form of a poem I wrote to my son Dan when I visited him after twelve months of pandemic isolation. A tree in his garden, where he spends much of his life these pandemic days, was laden with orange-gold cumquats.



Inside/outside. View from my window. Photo by Davies 2021.

Poem for my son Dan

We picked orange kumquats
from your tree
'Put it in your cheek'
you said, 'skin and all'
The shock of juice
spiriting, sensation exploding
We laughed together
at my astonishment.
Later we visited
the pine trees
I had planted 45
years ago
They were vast
and old and glorious
I hadn't seen them
since they were seedlings.
They hid the old
cherry orchard, long gone
the house we built
They stood majestic,
and we were silent
Communing
in awe and wonder.

Making an Account of Oneself

When asked by Juelskjaer and Schwennesen (2012: 11) to make an account of herself, Barad turned their question around, asking what was, for her, a more interesting question: "what material forces were contributing to the reiterative materialization of the 'I'?" Not wanting to describe



Diffraction. Pond in Sydney Botanic Garden. Photo by Davies 2021.

herself as an entity separate from, or independent of, those reiterative processes contributing to the materialization of an identifiable self, she asked: “Which political forces and texts that I was reading helped constitute ‘me’?”

In this paper I explore that problem of habituated identifications of self and other that Barad is challenging, not just human selves and other human selves, but more-than-human selves like wind, and trees and forests and kumquats.

Suzanne Simard discovered through her study of mycorrhizal networks that trees do not live alone but in generous and intricate networks of care. So too humans do not live as individual selves, or even as individual communities. Humans, like forests, like leaf-cutter ants, are “part of much larger cycles, the building of soil and migration of species and circulation of oceans. The source of clean air and pure water and good food. There is a necessary wisdom in the give-and-take of nature—its quiet agreements and search for balance.//There is an extraordinary generosity” (Simard, 2021:3). In the best of all possible worlds humans can learn from trees and forests—becoming integral to them. We can, if we listen to them, share in their wisdom, where listening is to be “at the same time out side and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other” (Nancy, 2007: 14).

Categorisation and Individual (Id)entity

What I am carefully, cautiously working against here is the construction and maintenance of individual (id)entities. Their accomplishment *as* entities works largely through categorisation and through repetition. We ask what ethnicity, what colour, what place of birth, what religion, what job, what sex, what sexual preference will I call on to define my “self”, and define the “selves” I encounter? We ask, how are we the same and how different? Those acts of categorisation serve to limit thought, based as they are on repetitions that are so habituated that they rarely require much thought at all. The categories contain and constrain us. Identity categories work in binaries, where one category is ascendant, and deemed to be what will count as normal, while its binary other is dependent and subordinate—often treated as other to normal, and less than fully human.

Henri Bergson, writing in the early 1900s, was scathing about this habituated dependence on categories, since it both depends on and affirms what we imagine ourselves to know already. Even when reason, he says,

confesses that it does not know the object presented to it, it believes that its ignorance consists only in not knowing which one of its time-honoured categories suits the new object. In what drawer, ready to open, shall we put it? In what garment, already cut out, shall we clothe it? Is it this, or that, or the other thing? And “this,” and “that,” and “the other thing” are always something already conceived, already known. (Bergson, 1998 [1911]: 48)

Thought that limits itself through this habituated practice of sorting things, including ourselves, into such ready-made categories, he defines as a line of *descent*—like a stretched spring that snaps back into shape instantaneously, requiring no effort.

Openness to the unknown, in contrast, gives rise to lines of *ascent*, through which we might come to know the rich and infinite variability of life—listening to the rhythm of the ocean, feeling the breeze on one’s face, tasting kumquats for the first time, encountering trees, and each other. Lines of ascent involve opening ourselves to being surprised by the encounters that take place with others—both human and more than human. It is through such openness to the not-yet-known, Bergson argues, that the universe endures:

The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new . . . [I]n the universe itself two opposite movements are to be distinguished . . . The first [descent] only unwinds a roll ready prepared. In principle, it might be accomplished almost instantaneously, like releasing a spring. But the ascending movement, which corresponds to an inner work of ripening or creating, *endures* essentially, and imposes its rhythm on the first, which is inseparable from it. (Bergson, 1998 [1911]: 11)

It is significant that he is not creating a new binary here. These lines of force are not one *or* the other, with one dominant and the other subordinate. They are inter-dependent. There is an intra-active relationship between the predictable (the movement of descent) and the new (the movement of ascent). They depend on each other.

This shift in thinking, moving away from entities that can be named and categorized, is also a movement away from understanding our task, as students of life, to be one of representing an order that exists independent of our analytic gaze. Barad draws on the metaphor of diffraction to further open this new way of thinking about what we see, with all our senses:

The phenomenon of diffraction does not merely signify the disruption of representationalism and its metaphors of reflection in the endless play of images and its anxieties about copy and original and displacements of the Same elsewhere. Diffraction is an ethico-onto-epistemological matter. We are not merely differently situated in the world; ‘each of us’ is part of the intra-active ongoing articulation of the world in its differential mattering. Diffraction is a material-discursive phenomenon that challenges the presumed inherent separability of subject and object, nature and culture, fact and value, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, epistemology and ontology, and material and discursive. (Barad, 2008: 332–333)

The challenge that the concepts of diffraction and intra-action pose for us, is not to be limited by, or take too seriously, the categories that represent us. The chances are they do more harm than good, making us unable to appreciate difference, oblivious to a life in its diffractive, emergent, relational immanence, in its intra-active becoming. Moving beyond binary categorizations,



Diffraction. Pond in Botanic Garden 2. Photo by Davies 2021.

beyond the multiplication of categories, and beyond the shifting between categories, is to think of the ‘self’ as “always already multiply dispersed and diffracted through spacetime(mattering) . . . in its ongoing being-becoming” (Barad, 2014: 181–182). Each ‘individual’ is not independent but infinitely indebted to all others “where indebtedness is not a debt that follows or results from a transaction but, rather, a debt that is the condition of possibility of giving/receiving” (Barad, 2015: 160).

At the same time it is also true that we depend on the safety that repetition and familiarity bring—the safety of knowing there will be clean air and water, a warm, dry bed to sleep in each night, and wholesome food to eat. We depend on regulations that give us transport systems, energy supply, and sewage disposal. We depend on social systems that provide education and ensure that the vulnerable will be taken care of. In a well-functioning world we can depend on the regularities and repetitions that make these things possible. Many, of course, like refugees coming to Australia, do not have such a dependable world to live in—either before they set out on their leaky boats, or after they arrive.

Our capacity to endure also depends on creation and invention—the lines of ascent, which Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 276) were later to call lines of flight—the risky movement outside the already known, the dream space where the improbable can be imagined, where literature and art and science take us outside the predictable repetitions, in unexpected, sometimes even foolish and dangerous directions. Lines of ascent and descent are not either/or, but always and and and: they work in “a dynamic play of in/determinacy” (Barad, 2015: 160).

The advent of neoliberalism, in the last three decades has intensified the forces that drive us away from creativity. In the name of productivity we are driven toward individualism and competition. The rules that govern those individuals have multiplied, while social support has been weakened, and in some cases, removed altogether. As Barad observes, we cannot ignore the forces that pin us down: “the notion of an individual needs to be taken seriously—very seriously these days, because, for one thing, it is a very potent notion at the center of the action of neoliberal forces” (Barad in Juelskjaer and Schwennesen, 2012: 11).

Neoliberal forces have consistently shifted responsibility from the social to the individual—each individual made responsible for its own capacity to endure. We are not so much like the forests anymore, which are capable of collectively sustaining themselves. We are more like solitary

isolated trees. In neoliberal discourse individuals who falter in the task of self-promotion and survival are pathologised, and through that pathologisation pressed, in competition with others, into ever greater efforts to produce increasingly “excellent” forms of life and productivity. Neoliberalism produces humans as individual measurable entities, severing us from the social/geological/historical forces that make the world we are part of. Neoliberalism sets us against each other, separating us from the earth others with whom we are intimately enfolded.

What new materialism asks of us, in contrast, is to shift from a too narrow focus and dependence on individual *entities* and sameness, toward an understanding and embrace of life as intra-active and mobile. All life, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, is made out of movement. Anthony Doerr (2005: 24) describes how even a snowflake is mobile. An ice crystal, which looks rigid and frozen in place is actually in motion: “in reality, on an extremely tiny level, smaller than a couple of nanometers, as it freezes it vibrates like crazy, all the billion billion molecules that make it up shaking invisibly, practically burning up. . . . [and] tiny instabilities in those vibrations give snowflakes their individual shapes”.

Movement, then, is everywhere, even where we imagine there is none (Davies, 2021: 2, emphasis in original). In quantum physics it is understood that it is not only waves that enter into diffractive intra-actions with each other, affecting each other, being moved by each other, but also particles. In Barad’s (2007) book she elaborates the significant two-slit experiment which demonstrates how particles enter into diffractive relations with each other. She shows how the shift to quantum physics is a shift in understanding that matter actively, and intra-actively, matters. In my paper with Thomson, for example (Thomson and Davies, 2019: 406, citing Nancy, 2007: 3) we explored the way more than human matter is not inert but lively—intra-acting and resonating between us, and between each of us and the paintings of John Russell:

Through our lively entanglement with the matter, mattering, and *desire* of the two artworks, the movement that our approach made possible was a Deleuzian line of flight *into* resonance with the artworks, becoming-with the pictures within the gallery assemblage . . . We opened ourselves to an other, listening “in different registers, in completely different tonalities, and first of all in the ontological tonality . . . in listening, listening with all [our] . . . being”.

The implication of this movement in-between is that each moment of any encounter matters; the ethics of it cannot be pre-defined or managed solely by rules and regulations. Our responsiveness to others is what matters.

Our openness to difference depends on sympathy, on the ability to respond, to be responsible. Sympathetic resonance occurs when a sound wave strikes a surface capable of vibrating or resonating at the same frequency. A singer can sing to a piano string which vibrates with the same resonance. The same can happen between one tuning fork and another, or one piano and another. Similarly, particles of different bodies can sympathetically resonate with each other and affect each other. As researchers, we “are part of, and encounter, already entangled matter and meaning that affect us and that we affect in an ongoing, always changing set of movements [that] affects not just what is possible to see but what is possible to be and do” (Davies, 2014: 735).

In thinking about this relationship between response-ability and sympathy I recently wrote:

We are moved when accounts that evoke the detailed specificity of the world transport us elsewhere. In that moment of movement we are lifted out of our lives into that other space-time. That experience can be euphoric—or very funny, or at the very least, absorbing. Even when we know that the spacetime we are transported to is fictional, we seek it out for the particular pleasure of that movement outside what we think of as ourselves. We go to the movies, onto social media, we read novels, we fall in love [and we take recreational drugs]—allowing ourselves to be transported elsewhere—an elsewhere that may be more intensely real than the ordinariness and repetitions of our everyday lives. Autopoiesis and

sympoiesis—the singular and collective creative acts through which lives are made—and the sympathy on which response-ability depends, require this capacity to move and be moved from one realm to another. Sympathy reaches through intuition toward a reality outside itself. (Davies, 2021: 7–8)

In asking ourselves, how might the universe endure, it is toward sympathetic intra-activity that we might turn—to the movements in between that affect and effect the earth's conditions of possibility—sympathy that works in very different ways from the moral imperatives of categorisation.

The Moral Imperatives of Categorisation

The moral imperatives of categorization work against sympathy, and against lines of flight, obliging us to belong in those categories to which we have been assigned. We learn to think within our assigned categories and to behave appropriately, as if we have a moral obligation to become “who we are” as defined by those categories, shoring up the categories themselves in the process. Although the trans rebellion loosens the power of the category one has been assigned to, at the same time it faces the risk of affirming the power of the categories themselves, through the trajectory of abandoning one category and seeking its binary opposite.

Even while new materialism offers this critique of categorization, it has to admit that identities are used sometimes to distinct advantage, and it can become impractical to give them up. People identified as disabled, for example, can claim financial support for necessary items such as wheelchairs or physiotherapy. The price, however, is considerable, often generating a vision of the one who is categorised as other to the abled, as less than human (De Schauwer et al, 2020). Religious or ethnic categories, too, for example, can be used to gain entry to forms of recognition. Muslim artists “sometimes embrace certain identity markers in order to gain opportunities and promote forms of visibility and debate” at the cost of being assailed by negative judgements for not having “met the normative and moral expectations of their cultural and religious communities” (Ralph and Gibson, 2021).

Gender identities can be, similarly, both advantageous and oppressive. You are a “boy” so you mustn't behave like a “girl”, or think like a “girl”, or feel emotions like a “girl”, or be submissive like a “girl” (that is, like a “girl” is supposed to be), the girl is other to you—the object of your desire, the desire that will define you as a ‘man’—and as ‘straight’. As gendered subjects we become, as Deleuze and Guattari write, the “subject of enunciations that oppose masculine to feminine in the great dualism machines . . .”:

Stop behaving like that, you're not a little girl anymore, you're not a tomboy, etc. The girl's becoming is stolen first, in order to impose a history, or prehistory, upon her. They boy's turn comes next, but it is by using the girl as an example, by pointing to the girl as the object of his desire, that an opposed organism, a dominant history is fabricated for him too. The girl is the first victim, but she must also serve as an example and a trap. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 276)

A young man in a collective biography workshop I ran, in which we told our earliest memories of being gendered, offered a stark example of the dynamic that Deleuze and Guattari sketch out here. It demonstrates what power a dominant category offers along with its entrapment in “the great dualism machines.” His story reveals the work a small boy does when he joins in the “dominant history that is fabricated for him,” and by him.

My fifth story, then, took place in a Korean bathhouse. The boy was three or four years old and at the bathhouse with his mother. He became aroused at the sight of naked women, and believed this to be when he “truly discovered what it was to be male”. He wrote “I kept imagining myself as

having intercourse with one or more of the ladies . . . [and] I realized—I think it was more on a subconscious level—that my reaction to the nude women was my way of expressing my masculinity or maleness”. His image of having sex with the women was overlaid with a memory of fighting with a boy at preschool and winning the battle when he was on top of the other boy and pinning him down. After several attempts at rewriting his story, he concluded it thus:

My arousal caused a particular anatomical organ to distend profusely. As a result I quickly looked around for the nearest cold water bath and proceeded to jump in it as quickly as convention allowed. Though I was embarrassed about the whole ordeal, since I knew instinctively that I wasn’t supposed to be excited by the presence of nude women at that age, I nonetheless felt that I had expressed my superlative masculinity. (Davies, 1994: 90–91)

Drawing on readily available cultural imagery of physical and sexual domination, the boy had a physiological reaction, a tiny erect penis, which he interpreted through readily available cultural tropes as a sign of which category he was in, and what the status of that category was. In accomplishing his category membership, he had established himself in his imagination not only as an individual (id)entity, but an entity dependent on the domination and subordination of female others. He knew in the moment of his erection, he told us, that he was “male incarnate”. He not only affirmed his belonging in the category male, but took up, in his imagination, a god-like sense of self through that membership. In what Bergson would call a line of descent, he instantaneously accomplished the sense of himself as a recognisable entity, through linking together his physiology and the cultural imagery of women as objects of desire who are there to be dominated by him—for now, perhaps, only in his imagination and desire.

This dynamic of binary categorization plays itself out in all human endeavour. Within the constraints of binary thought, if you think like a girl, for example, it’s unlikely you’ll be recognized as a great scientist. Suzanne Simard thought like a girl. She set out on scientific expeditions to find out where the forestry industry had gone so wrong with their practices of clear-felling, and of single species plantations. She set out, she writes, to

unlock the mysteries of why the land mended itself when left to its own devices—as I’d seen happen when my ancestors logged with a lighter touch. Along the way it became uncanny, almost eerie, the way my work unfolded in lockstep with my personal life, entwined as intimately as the parts of the ecosystem I was studying. (Simard, 2021: 4)

Simard asked unusual questions and at first was dismissed as doing “girly science”. Jabr (2021) writes, following an interview with her:

For her doctoral thesis, Simard decided to investigate fungal links between Douglas fir and paper birch in the forests of British Columbia. Apart from her supervisor, she didn’t receive much encouragement from her mostly male peers. “The old foresters were like, Why don’t you just study growth and yield?” Simard told me. “I was more interested in how these plants interact. They thought it was all very girlie.”

Simard writes of her research, that it

was tapping into messages that the trees were relaying back and forth through a cryptic underground fungal network . . . [The forest] has similarities with our own human brains. In it, the old and young are perceiving, communicating, and responding to one another by emitting chemical signals. *Chemicals identical to our own neurotransmitters. Signals created by ions cascading across fungal membranes.* (Simard, 2021: 5, emphasis in original)



Linking hands beneath the soil. Angophora Costatas, Domain Parkland Sydney. Photo by Davies 2021.

Simard's research took flight from existing forestry knowledge; her research forged lines of ascent, finding entirely new ways to understand trees, not as solitary, but in their intra-activity as members of multi-species communities. Foresters have thought of trees as rivals to each other, and further, they have thought, difference is not to be tolerated. All trees, other than the single species to be logged for profit, are weeds to be eradicated.

Simard has found that far from being rivals, different kinds of trees link hands under the soil, and the established ones feed the weaker ones across what we think of as categorical differences. Birches support and intra-act with firs, for example. The more a large tree shades the smaller tree, and seedlings, the more it feeds them via the mycorrhizal network.

The forest is not the competitive, hierarchical world men have thought, but an interlinked social system that thrives on difference, engaging in support of the smaller trees and the mutual exchange between different tree species. The movement in between the trees happens rapidly in this mutually sustaining system.

The older trees gain from the mycorrhizal interchange. There are materials they get from the soil via the fungi that they could not get for themselves. The positive fungi, moreover, fight off the fungi that might otherwise kill the trees, old and young.

Deleuze and Guattari figure such conceptual lines of flight as Simard engaged in, metaphorically, *as* girl, as slipping in-between categories and disrupting binary clichés:

... The girl ... is defined by a relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness, by a combination of atoms, an emission of particles: haecceity ... She is an abstract line or a line of flight ... The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the *intermezzo*—that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all of her work, never ceasing to become. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 276–277)

They could have written the same of Suzanne Simard and her research on forests.

Lines of flight take us beyond the already-known. Categories have their own lines of force and entangle themselves in the work that simultaneously sets us free of them. Being boy or girl, comes with a set of internally and externally driven compulsions. Barad says: “I find it a real mind buzz to



Mycorrhizal networks, Sydney Domain Garden. Photo by Davies 2021.

contemplate how quantum physics calls into question not only particular binaries but the very notion of a binary” (Barad in Juelskjaer & Schwennesen, 2012: 19).

But humans love categories—and dressing things in ready-made clothing. Even when there are proliferating gender categories (such as the fifty-eight gender options that Facebook provides), the debates for and against this multiplication have a depressing tendency to “congeal into new rigid norms and allow for a decontextualized culture of policing that actually creates limiting environments . . . [and creates] a proliferation also of boundaries” (Nicholas, 2021: 7). Just as when there were only two (or sometimes three) gender categories those boundaries create a moral order that restricts us to what the categories claim we “really are”. But what we really are, are not entities that can be fitted into ready-made drawers or clothing. We are emergent processes that are infinitely variable, constantly differentiating—becoming.

As I wrote in *Listening to Children* (Davies, 2014: 28–29, quoting Bergson, 1998: 193)²:

Roffe describes the Deleuzian space of *differentiation*, or intra-active becoming, as first, “a moment of de-individualization, an escape to some degree from the limits of the individual” and second, “the constitution of new ways of being in the world, new ways of thinking and feeling, new ways of being a subject” (Roffe, 2007: 43). Differentiation does not fix subjects or objects in place, or tie them to static, individualistic, or binary identities—in which someone is always this *or* that, never *and*. It opens up a space where creative energies are mobilized through ongoing relations within the spaces that are generated. Differentiation is not based on a rejection of the already-known, but on an assertion, rooted in philosophy, science and art, that life generates and is generated through movement and invention; it both draws on the already known, and it generates something new.

Differentiation is not unlike when the body first plunges into deep water. It must rapidly acquire new skills that are appropriate to the new space, while still carrying knowledge from the old. The new can be dangerous otherwise:

He who throws himself into the water, having known only the resistance of the solid earth, will immediately be drowned if he does not struggle against the fluidity of the new environment: he must perforce still cling to that solidity, so to speak, which even water presents. Only on this condition can he get used to the fluid’s fluidity. So of our thought, when it has decided to make the leap.



Wasp and Camelia, Sydney Botanic Garden. Photo by Davies 2021.

This insight is of vital importance in understanding our encounters with the earth.

In Barad's terms, differentiation is an encounter with "*the infinite alterity of the self. Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is.* [. . .] in an important sense, the self is dispersed/diffracted through time and being" (Barad, 2015: 158–159, emphasis in original).

Picking up on Barad's concept of involution, Dionne writes: "Creative involution foregrounds a necessary entanglement between the projects that animate the arts and the sciences to produce knowledge and worlds" (Dionne 2020: 11). Taking the example of the wasps and the orchids that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write about, or bees and orchids in Dionne's story, Dionne argues that their relation is not evolutionary; such a reading sees the orchids as tricking the bees into pollinating them. An involutory reading, rather, sees insect and flower as

mutually engaging in playful endeavours *together*, desiring the un/doing, sensation and unknown that emerge through their vivid contact, their playful desire for superfluosity, vulnerability and the unknown, thus revealing at the heart of matter/nature/life *desiring* practices, to do and undo and redo together. (Dionne 2020: 11)

Response-Ability and Creative Relationality

In *Entanglement in the World's Becoming* (Davies, 2021: 88–89) I explore three interconnected components of recognition:

The first, recognition as possession, rises out of, and confirms, the normative social order. It possesses and is possessed by the normative order. *The second component is recognition as dispossession/disrecognition*. This also affirms the normative order through the simultaneous acts of self-possession and dispossession of another. The dispossessed other is used to create the safe borders of the normative social order. *The third component, recognition as creative-relationality*, celebrates a break from normative assemblages through encounters in which the unexpected and the new becomes recognisable and worthy of being valued. Deleuze

observes of such encounters that we have not sufficiently valued them, having “preferred the facility of recognitions” (Deleuze, 2000: 27) by which he means, I think, recognition as possession.

In new materialist thought, we are each more-than-human subjects-in-relation who emerge, not as separate or complete entities *in* the world, but as entangled becomings *of* the world: “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (Barad, 2007: ix). Recognising the specificity, the singularity, of another’s emergence in that entangled becoming, is not a simple matter of acknowledging someone who is already formed. Recognition enables the possibility of one another’s existence in the world’s emergent becoming: “We become-with each other or not at all” wrote Haraway (2016: 4). Individual and world are co-constitutive and co-emergent.

In this paper the recognition of another’s humanity, as well as the recognition of ourselves as more than human, involves thinking of ourselves as not just individuals *in* the world, but beings in motion. We are continuously unfolding and folding ourselves as intricately embedded creatures *of* the world (producing and produced by the world). That shift from entity to process is developed as central to our capacity to be response-able in our encounters with others—human others, non-human others, earth others. As Barad says:

responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses, but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. That is, responsibility is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness. (Barad, in Kleinman, 2012: 81)

We are not alone, any of us. Just as there is no such thing as a mind without a body (putting the lie to the current obsession with so-called ‘mental health’) nor is there a body without the landscape it is of.³

Anjali Sharma is someone who makes us weep with the collective courage she and her classmates have gathered together, supported by 86 year old Sister Arthur, their litigation guardian, to responsibly oppose the neoliberal government in this country, which condones the destruction of the earth we depend on.

Anjali Sharma was a member of the group of students who took Australia’s Environment minister, Sussan Ley, to the Federal court, their lawyers arguing that she “Owed us eight litigants—and all young people around the world—a duty of care, not to cause us harm by her immanent approval of the Vickery Coal Mine Extension Project in New South Wales. They argued the project’s emissions would worsen climate change, harming the world we will be left with” (Sharma, 2021: 6). Sharma wrote about their court battle:

It’s easier to put climate change out of sight and out of mind. But even having this option reveals massive privilege, because the ability to be able to opt out of conversation about world issues means that you, yourself, are in a position of safety and security while millions are not . . .

Already in parts of India, temperatures can reach 45 degrees Celsius by 9am on spring mornings. Flash floods, fires, extreme heatwaves and cyclones ravage the country regularly . . .

School taught me about the importance of recycling and planting trees, but it was watching YouTube videos about climate change from channels such as the National Geographic, Al Jazeera and AsapScience at the age of 14, that helped me connect the dots and realise the

seriousness of the situation my generation faces. It was the information that inspired me to get involved with organizing school strikes . . .

The thing that struck me most from these videos was the concept of climate justice. The people who have done the least to cause the climate crisis, largely those in developing countries, will be worst affected by it, and will be the least equipped to deal with it. This includes my family in India, along with all people of colour across the world and First Nations communities . . .

On May 21 this year, I emceed the School Strike 4 Climate in Melbourne. At one point, I yelled to the crowd of 20,000 people, “Who’s with me?” I’ll never forget the cheer they responded with; it brought tears to my eyes . . .

Seven out of ten Australians want the government to take more action on climate change, according to the Lowy Institute’s survey. Each year around the world, 150,000 people die because of climate change . . .

This year’s federal budget outlined an additional \$58.6 million of public money to coal, oil and gas projects. There were zero dollars of direct funding for renewable energy. Then just two weeks ago, the government announced it would spend \$600 million of public money on a gas-fired power station in the Hunter Valley.

These are consecutive slaps in the face to all young and vulnerable people around the world . . .

When announcing his judgement, the Federal Court’s Justice Bromberg said:

‘It is difficult to characterize in a single phrase the devastation that the plausible evidence presented in this proceeding forecasts for the Children . . . Australia will be lost and the World as we know it will be gone as well. The physical environment will be harsher, far more extreme, and devastatingly brutal . . . Lives will be cut short . . . It will largely be inflicted by the inaction of this generation of adults, in what might fairly be described as the greatest intergenerational injustice ever inflicted by one generation of humans upon the next.’

Although Justice Bromberg did not grant an injunction to prevent the Environment minister approving the expansion, he did find the minister has a duty to take reasonable care to not make decisions that will adversely affect our futures . . .

. . . the court is now welcoming further submissions from us on what the duty means for the minister and the mine. The fight is not over. (Sharma, 2021: 6)

As Barad points out, “Phenomena . . . come to matter through this process of ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2007: 336). Or in this case, they come to matter differently. The relationship between the young protestors and the government that condones the destruction of the children’s future is never a simple one of dominance and subordination. They are ideally more like the wasp and the orchid who collectively emerge in relation to each other in a process of creative involution.

In agential realism’s reconceptualization of materiality, matter is agentive and intra-active. Matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still . . . Matter’s dynamism is generative . . . in the sense of bringing forth new worlds, of engaging in an ongoing reconfiguring of the world. (Barad, 2007: 170)

My argument here in this paper, and through Sharma’s story in particular, makes evident that ethics is no longer about individuals and such notions as informed consent: “The ethical question can’t simply be about informed consent, a notion that is rooted in a metaphysics of

individualism . . . [Ethics is about] an understanding of how values matter and get materialized, and the interconnectedness of ethics, ontology, and epistemology” (Barad in Juelskjaer & Schwennesen, 2012: 15). And as Pender observes, companies and governments in Australia are not interested in such ethical questions; they know the harm their policies and practices do to the environment and to children’s futures, yet they choose to continue, and are now undeniably liable for doing so: “Such arguments have been super-charged by *Sharma*” (Pender, 2021: 14).

Inconclusion

Humans have been increasingly individualised and set in competition with each other in the neoliberal quest for ever increasing productivity—productivity that fattens the rich and privileged, at the expense of those who have little power to withstand the pressures to become that productive, competitive, survivable (id)entity. Neoliberalism has served to exacerbate the liberal humanist features that feminist poststructuralist theory set out to dismantle with its critique of binary thought and the ascendance of white, male, elite, western consciousness. For the last three decades, at least, this has weakened our capacity to be responsible, and response-able, in relation to each other, and to the earth, and our earth others. In this paper I have teased my way, through stories, and through new materialist thought, to a sense of self as emergent process; process that matters, that through literature and art and science, and through new materialist philosophy, can become, and go on becoming response-able in relation to the mattering of the world. As Barad pointed out: “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: 182). And further, “The point is not to simply put the observer or knower back in the world (as if the world were a container and we needed merely to acknowledge our situatedness in it) but to understand and take account of the fact that we too are a part of the world’s differential becoming” (Barad, 2007: 91).

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Endnotes

1 Such simultaneity is everywhere once you start to look for it. Butterflies, for example, are known to simultaneously migrate thousands of miles to their breeding grounds, the memory of the journey’s purpose and destiny being passed from one generation to the next along the way. Or humans engage in a line of flight, coming up with a new idea, and the same idea emerges simultaneously elsewhere, sometimes migrating across binaries, like east/west, or philosophy/religion (see for example Davies, 2011).

2 The spelling of differentiation and differentiatation tend to be used interchangeably. In 2014 I opted for the latter conventional spelling. Here, I have changed it to what is now my preferred spelling, differentiatation, reserving the latter, differentiatation for the practice of making categorical differences.

3 Without considering the risks, the term mental health is bandied about these days, as a ready-made line of descent. It has become almost fashionable to admit to having “mental health issues”. That the source of the stress/exhaustion/depression etc clearly lies outside the individual mind (such as protracted lockdowns during the pandemic) barely features in these admissions. This fashion has taken hold even while some are still being locked away for having “mental health issues.” This is particularly the case for the elderly, when they are suffering some form of dementia, or when their anger and frustration at their own powerlessness leads to overt expressions of rage. The pathologisation of individuals who are not coping with the system’s requirements is a common feature of neoliberal managerialism, and I find it troubling how eagerly individuals have, during the pandemic, embraced their own pathologisation. “Mental health issues” can also be used against women as the grounds for ignoring their legitimate complaints about sexist practices. Julia Banks (2021), former member of the Australian Parliament, illustrates for example, how her own legitimate rage was turned against her by the Prime Minister who minimised her credibility by saying he was concerned for her sanity and wellbeing.

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