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## Vitality and affirmative difference

Vitalidad y diferencia afirmativa

Vitalitat i diferència afirmativa

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“Your effort to remain what you are is what limits you” (Ghost in the Shell, 1995)

Unpredictable, mutative difference is the fundamental and ongoing condition of life. Thinking with Henri Bergson through Gilles Deleuze (1966) and Elizabeth Grosz (2004), the vitality of life is the tendency of living matter to move towards greater complexity. Put another way, living matter moves counter to entropy, towards maximizing pure difference. Pure difference is both an ontological and an ethical concept.

Vitality is entangled with other aspects of relational differing such as emergence and sympoiesis (Donna Haraway, 2016). The properties of life cannot be fully described in terms of the properties of the associated material constituents. Nor can life be reduced to mechanistic processes. New Materialist vitalism does not construct a special kind of substance which is added to matter to produce life. Rather, vitality emerges from within and between matter. There is nothing outside the world that makes the world. The world worlds itself.

Grosz develops Darwin's “account of the real that is an open and generative force of self-organization and growing complexity. A dynamic real that has features of its own which, rather than simply exhibit stasis, [...] are more readily understood as active vectors of change” (2004, p. 19). In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti describes matter as intelligent in addition to self-organizing. Emphasizing the self-organizing vitality of all living systems decenters the Anthropos without collapsing difference, replacing species hierarchy with decentralized immanence (2013).

Feminist New Materialisms traverse the dualisms of modernity, which are structured by a negative relation between terms. We are

learning how to think difference structured through an affirmative relation. A difference structured by affirmation does not work with predefined categories, for example between mind and body or nature and culture, nor does it involve a hierarchy between terms. Affirmative difference does not presuppose that the original ontological difference is between that which is and that which is not. Life, in an affirmative sense, does not proceed by lack but by mobilization of positive difference along internal lines of divergence where all categories are such by virtue of their relating, not negating.

This way of thinking difference invites attention to previously sterilized category deviants. Vitality is queer. As Claire Colebrook states, “The task of thinking is not to see bodies in their general recognizable form, as this or that ongoing and unified entity, but to approach the world as the unfolding of events” (2009, p. 83). Or as Grosz writes, “biology dictates that to the degree that sexually dimorphic beings emerge, their sexual differences diverge more over time” (2004, p. 259). However, thinking with the rhizome, biology may be even queerer than that. There could come a time of sexual convergence as well, who knows what cyborg sexuality will look like, for example? It can be analytically useful to define fixed categories and essential characteristics, our ‘nomological machines’ excel at this (Cartwright, 1998), but these seemingly durable constructs can easily deceive – change is constant. Failing to remember this is to confuse the map with the territory.

If differences ceased unfolding in the material configuration of the universe, would time still exist? What could we mean by ‘time standing still’ other than an absence of change? Does time somehow make difference? The causal relationship, if there is one, is unclear yet we can observe material differing directly, which is more than we can say of time. Differing moves in the direction of increased complexity not only between what is now but also between what was, is and will be. Thus, even if most of earth's life supporting systems collapse and there are only a few forms of life left, the simplicity of that arrangement adds to the complexity of the whole.

Differing also occurs between things that can be, the latent possibilities that Grosz (2004) calls virtual reality: Consciousness and intelligence open up the material world to the play of virtuality" (p.212). That is, vitality encompasses more than what is actually, currently living. This allows for a commitment to justice that accounts for future generations. As Grosz urges, we must learn to think about what will have been possible; a skill that nourishes radical, progressive politics (2004). Braidotti codes the vital force of Life as Zoe, that which imbues all living matter impersonally. She insists: "Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric critical turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism" (2013, p. 22).

Vitality is what is hidden when life is reduced to 'biodiversity', or worse, 'ecosystem services'; a pool of fungible resources to be controlled and exploited. While Braidotti cautions against the contemporary 'white man lament' (2019), she encourages engaging with trauma and suffering through affirmative ethics. Similarly, affirmative difference is a way for critical thinking to grow beyond condemnation and oppositional dialectics. Thinking with process ontologies, re-worked through feminist and postcolonial theories, we change the frame of reference. This entails processing the pain of loss by seeking understandings across difference that can forge new possibilities, new ways of living and dying together.

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A primal scream emanates from a cave,

wherein the smell of sweat, tears, blood, shit,

animal and genesis hang heavy in the air.

Minerals become tooth and claw

shells begin growing on the inside.

Later, the smell of death, decay, decomposition

and later still soil and new growth;

reaching out to turn solar energy into material order

for a time

Synonyms: Zoe, sympoiesis, life force, forces of composition

Antonyms: entropy, divinity, reductionism, automata (Descartes), discrete entities

Hypernyms: magic, defiance, joy, desire, animate

Haraway, Donna. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

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