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THE INFLUENCE OF BARAD'S "TRANSMATERIALITIES" ON QUEER THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Stephanie Anne Shelton

"Transmaterialities: Trans/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings,"* by Karen Barad. *GLQ* 21.2–3 (2015).

There was a storm within the pages of *GLQ* in 2015. Karen Barad's "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings" (2015) begins with metaphorical lightning zigzagging across the sky, illuminating—for just seconds of flash—the "charged yearnings and the sparking of new imaginaries" that she argues are inherent in the politicizations and explorations of origins, imaginings, and matter (387). Seizing on the role of galvanization in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Barad pulls from queer theory's past of monsters and the grotesque (e.g., Cohen 1995; Crowder 2007) to move into an intra-active past/present/future with seemingly impossible origins/promise stemming from "queer self-birthing" and "monstrous re/generations" (Barad 2015: 388).

Distilled from actual and fictional scientific efforts that attempted to unfold and re-create the origins of life itself, Barad recounts numerous desperate endeavors to harness lightning, and in "shocking brute matter to life," control the spark of life that is presumably all living matter's origin (ibid.: 389). The issue with such attempts for Barad is that there is no reason to "think that matter is lifeless to begin with," and that by employing lightning as the key to understanding, these explorers have "always danced on the razor's edge between science and imagina-

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tion" (ibid.). Barad pushes the exploration of origins just past that edge to examine the implications of this Frankenstein-esque lifegiving in relation to queer, particularly trans*, empowerment.

Given queer theory's importance in responding to moments such as the 1980s AIDS epidemic, decades of anti-queer political legislation, and related efforts, queer theory has often situated itself as "a theory of extinctions" (Ahuja 2015: 365), with emphases on topics such as (self-)annihilation producing a "tradition of queer negativity" (ibid.: 366). Barad honors this heritage of fear and rage, while building on and moving beyond it. In her consideration of others' efforts to galvanize flesh to life, she notes that these historical efforts at reanimation parallel the queer "monster," whose "presence of impurities" and "destruction of boundaries" make this queer creature truly grotesque to the general populace (Jack Halberstam, quoted in Barad 2015: 391). Specifically, Barad notes that the electricity, serving as a metaphor for efforts to arrest queerness, "can serve to demonize, dehumanize, and demoralize" (ibid.: 392). However, she notes, that a jolt of electricity "is also capable of bringing a heart back from a state of lifelessness. . . . It can also be a source of political agency. It can power and radicalize" (ibid.: 302). She argues that the would-be monster has agency and might harness its rage and despair to work toward empowerment.

To galvanize this agency, she considers society's positioning of some "bodies as natural against the monstrosity of trans embodiment" (ibid.: 392) and shifts to the notion of origin stories to explore the "normal" and the "monstrous." She notes the tradition of understanding creation as derived from a divine origin; a Creator breathed life into those forms. In contrast, she argues, monstrous/grotesque bodies are assemblages resulting from or/and requiring scientific interventions, for example, Frankenstein's stitched-together creature. To illuminate such monstrous origins, Barad turns to birth. She explores "natural" birthing in comparison/contrast with/to self-birthing through Susan Stryker's account of her partner giving birth. As Stryker stands in the delivery room, torn between the joy and the pain of the moment, she is "painfully aware that the physicality of birthing a being from her own womb is denied to her by the specificity of her constructed enfleshment" (Barad 2015: 393). Here Barad emphasizes that what might be only loss/sorrow is galvanized into a moment of self-actualization. Stryker's sense of pain is entangled with the joy of both the emerging baby and a powerful sense that through a "radically queer configuring of spacetime-mattering," Stryker simultaneously witnesses their child's birth and her own. She emerges from "a self-birthing womb" that re/generates from what initially seemed a void, a nothingness. These two lives/bodies/selves coming into being through opposite/same originations shifts notions

of what counts as creation/Creator, electrifying an "atmosphere silently cracking with thunderous possibilities" (Barad 2015: 393).

Barad's 2015 essay has had a profound influence on scholarship in the fields of education, health sciences, technology, and research methods. Indeed, "Transmaterialities" has reshaped queer theory and queered disciplines, through "Lightning Strikes."

Lightning Strike One: The Body

Given the ways that Barad's discussion borrows from both her scientific background and the fictionalized/actual attempts to bring the dead to life, it is unsurprising that her concepts have informed health sciences research and other forms of embodied inquiry. Annette-Carina van der Zaag's 2017 paper published in *Science & Technology Studies*, "Imaginations of Empowerment and the Biomedical Production of Bodies: The Story of Nonoxynol-9," considers the political implications of an HIV treatment drug on vaginal microbes. The paper acknowledges that queer theory in its more traditional sense is useful, in that this research also "foregrounds the performativity of sex(uality) and gender" (Barad 2015: 46), but that Barad's 2015 discussion propels the discussion in productive new directions, as her galvanized Franken-birthing "not only celebrates human-nonhuman hybridization, but also pays heed to the process through which the human comes into being." Van der Zaag uses this element of humanity and agency to theorize the role of empowerment in women's understandings of and interactions with the microbicide Nonoxynol-9.

Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman's (2017: 27) paper in *Body & Society* adopts a similar usage of queer theory that emphasizes Barad's amalgamations of (self-)creation, (re)generation, and animation in their "bodily methodologies." As with van der Zaag, the application here acknowledges a heritage of queer theoretical work that works to disrupt norms and shape research participants' discomfort into findings. In one part of the study, "participants listen to audio compositions that connect laundry detergent to fish, to capitalism and menstrual blood" (Springgay and Truman 2017: 46). The power of Barad's work in advancing these queer applications of sound, space, and body is in researchers and participants working to understand themselves, others, and matter as operating agentially through simultaneous "radical undoing of 'self'" (Barad 2015: 411) and regenerations (Springgay and Truman 2017). In both this and van der Zaag's work, Barad's acknowledgment of the origins of and shifts from queer theory matter a great deal, in that those origins are the basis of new understandings and (self-)creations.

Lightning Strike Two: Research Methodologies

Coming soon after the publication of Barad's article, Vickie Hargraves's (2016) discussion of researcher entanglements in the international journal *La Investigación Como El Enmarañamiento* relies heavily on Deleuzean and queer theorizing of assemblages and identity construction to explore the interactions between researchers and data. Barad's trans*materialities article is key to extending Hargraves's efforts in creative and playful new directions. Hargraves reflects that while long-standing methodological discussions examine the interplays between researcher, researched, and data, Barad's notion of self-birth and self-determinacy effect "different potentialities for [spacetime-matterings] actualization" that electrify the "dynamic dance" that is research—pushing data analysis into new realms and possibilities (Hargraves 2016: 547). The notion of birth from a self/void "always holds potential" and emphasizes the alterity and possibilities found in research methods (ibid.).

Agency is similarly key to Janet Miller's 2017 postqualitative reflection on participatory action research (PAR), in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. In Barad's "reconfiguring [of] the apparatuses of bodily reproduction" (Miller 2017: 496), the notion of self-production becomes a powerful concept in participant-led research. Such a shifting of material and discursive norms, Miller argues, necessarily shifts notions of subjectivity. Informed by Barad's discussion, Miller theorizes on "the limits to [a subject's] knowing—its opacities—and thus . . . the limits of its capacities to give an account" of self to others (ibid.: 496). Ultimately, Barad's notion of identity as entangled, intra-active, and potentially self-originating queers PAR in ways that necessitate reconsiderations of participants' agency—including their abilities to challenge research's norms and push "the limits of our knowing" (ibid.). Much like in the other instances, there is an electrification of a field that builds on more established concepts of queer scholarship to emphasize possibility and hope for empowerment and action.

Drawing on new materialist and Deleuzean notions of virtuality and reality, Springgay and Truman's 2018 *Qualitative Inquiry* article "On the Need for Methods beyond Proceduralism" draws from Barad's work to counter growing arguments for postdata qualitative research. Springgay and Truman (2018: 208) argue researchers' need to "let go of agendas" and instead embrace "the speculative middle" in an effort to queer research approaches in ways that are flexible, speculative, and playful. Barad's (2015: 396) notion of a "void [that] is flush with yearning" and potential helps the authors to push both Deleuze's discussion of

virtuality and a queering of qualitative research into spaces that originate from “nothingness,” yet advance “ongoing thought” on the “dynamism between the virtual actual” (Springgay and Truman 2018: 208). These efforts to challenge both traditional and postqualitative methodologies offer new insights and possibilities across disciplines, as Barad’s concepts influence research methods.

The Zigzagging Pathways of Lightning: A Conclusion

In her discussion of births and origins, Barad (2015: 408) imagines “the potential face of lightning yet to be born” and the “different possible pathways” that it might take as it zigzags downward to shatter the darkness. In doing so, Barad notes that the “path that lightning takes not only is not predictable but does not make its way according to some continuous unidirectional path” (ibid.: 398). Her own galvanizations of queer thought similarly storm, hiss, and pop across innumerable scholarly landscapes. An article only a few years old has shaped understandings in a range of fields, and in doing so has extended theoretical concepts and methodological applications. The many possibilities that Barad’s article have sparked are “electrifying the atmosphere silently crackling with thunderous possibilities” (ibid.: 393). Given that every year since its publication “Transmaterialities” has informed queer theory and a range of scholarship, the booming of that thunderous potential will be deafening, and the continued illuminations of those lightning strikes will be undoubtedly blinding.

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