RESPONSE ARTICLE: CONCEPTS AND IN/EXPRESS-ABILITY IN POSTHUMAN SCHOLARSHIP: A SHARED RESPONSE-ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This response article is an attempt to theorise together and become ethically in touch with posthumanism and the posthuman text/s and author/s in the article, "A posthumanist re-reading of teacher agency in times of curriculum reform" written by Wedsha Appadoo-Ramsamy. The ability to respond (response-ability) through theorising entails a radical openness to think otherwise, and for thinking thinking otherwise. Such thinking matters and thinking along the concepts we use and the limits of expressibility when thinking otherwise, matters a great deal. The becoming of Wedsha Appadoo-Ramsamy's article revealed some insights into the ticklish nature of (posthuman, philosophical) concepts and the difficulty and limitations of expression in frontier debates. This article will, firstly, respond to the production and workings of posthuman concepts, and secondly, comment on the limits of expressibility when writing about frontier debates such as those concerning posthumanism and related feminist materialism/s.

Keywords: posthuman scholarship, in/express-ability, response-ability

INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism encourages asking "the prior question of what differentially constitutes the human – and for whom", rather than suggesting some move *beyond* the human (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). In this sense, posthumanism is about questioning, theorising and analysing the cut – human/non-human – itself (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). This "response article" is an example of a *shared response-ability* to ethically respond to and intra-act with posthuman scholarship through questioning, theorising and analysing (cuts). Barad (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 24) state that "*(r)esponse-ability*, being in touch, is about being ethically in touch with the other, as opposed to pretending to theorize from the outside [...] – which is a form of violence – and realizing that observers and theorizers are an integral part of it". Theorising in posthumanism is very different from humanist, conceptual definitions of theory (as something out there and abstract) because it is used as a verb (a doing that we inhabit and that inhabits us) that enables us to theorise from the inside (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). In addition, theorising

is always becoming; a "working hypothesis about the kind of subjects that we are becoming" (Braidotti 2019, 2). This response article is an attempt to theorise together and become ethically in touch with posthumanism and the posthuman text/s and author/s in Wedsha Appadoo-Ramsamy's article, "A posthumanist re-reading of teacher agency in times of curriculum reform".

The idea of this response came about during the review and editing process of Appadoo-Ramsamy's article. Many critical lessons were learnt about/in/for posthumanism, by the author, editor/s and reviewer/s. This article and the rejoinder to follow, invites the reader to *join in* on tracing some of these lessons and debates that offer a "glimpse into" the "inner-workings" of posthumanism as this intra-action revealed. Its intent is affirmative and transformative; and is to further "open up" the potential of posthumanism. In the light of this, we considered it worthwhile to publish Appadoo-Ramsamy's experiment, with this response and the rejoinder to follow, to help us to think further, to look around us and not just ahead, in our sense-making practices. The ability to respond – our response-ability – through theorising entails a radical openness to think otherwise, and for thinking thinking otherwise (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). Such thinking matters[1] and thinking along the concepts we use and the limits of expressibility when thinking otherwise, matters a great deal.

In her article, Appadoo-Ramsamy (2023, 100–111 experiments with posthumanism to push both theory and data to its limits. She explains her decision to appropriate "a posthumanist lens to re-read teacher agency in times of curriculum reform" and contextualises this decision when saying: "instead of aiming for research purity, this article is showing how what initially started as a humanist qualitative methodology, finally gave shape to a posthumanist reading of agency as a product of messy intra-actions between teachers and their material conditions during the implementation of a new curriculum". However, some readers might be left with several (unanswered) questions and contradictions to work through.

One question, or area of contradiction, concerns the topic that was chosen to experiment with, i.e., teacher agency. Is teacher agency not in itself a humanist construct? Are some manifestations of posthumanism not negating (human and object-oriented) agency? Such questions and similar ones might come natural to many feminist materialists, who intra-act with Karen Barad's agential realism, for example. Agency in an agential realist account is "cut loose from its traditional human orbit" as agency in this account is no longer aligned with human intentionality (as was the case with phenomenology) or with subjectivity (as was the case with poststructuralism). For Barad (2007, 178) agency is not something someone or something has, like a possession: "Agency is "doing" and "being" in its intra-activity". Agency, through intra-action, entails the enactment of iterative changes and reconfigurings of spacetimematter

relations. Possibilities for intra-action always exist and changing possibilities signals "an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad 2007, 178).

The second concerns the question as to the humanist design and execution of the research, and the way it was "re-read" along posthuman lines. Each reader can evaluate the success and effectiveness of this "re-reading" for themselves. However, posthumanism is not yet another abstract, discursively framed theory, to be appropriated to augment data. Posthumanism signifies an ontological re/turn and is an "assemblage of thought experiments in the form of new realism/s, new vitalism/s, new feminist materialism/s, matter realism/s, speculative realism/s, object-oriented ontologies, and non-representational theories" (Du Preez, Le Grange, and Simmonds 2022, 5).

The becoming of Wedsha Appadoo-Ramsamy's article also revealed some insights into the ticklish nature of (posthuman, philosophical) concepts and the difficulty and limitations of expression in frontier debates. In what follows, I shall, firstly, respond to the production and workings of posthuman concepts, and secondly, comment on the limits of expressibility when writing about frontier debates such as those concerning posthumanism and related feminist materialism/s.

(THE TICKLISH NATURE OF) POSTHUMAN CONCEPTS

The emergence of any (new) research paradigm or philosophical tradition, at least from a Western perspective, comes along with the re/configuration of familiar concepts and the re/configuration of a wealth of (new) concepts. Ontological, epistemological, ethical and methodological differences between paradigms and/or traditions are a major contributor in the need to re/configure and re/invoke concepts at times, in the same way that they could also be the reason for the stagnation of concepts.

When considering hegemonic Western and humanist research paradigms such as positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory, and philosophical traditions such as poststructuralism, neo-communism, it is clear how concepts are configured and reconfigured based on the shape that the paradigm/tradition gives to the concept, but also how the concept might push and shift the boundary of that very paradigm/tradition. In this sense, concepts are the flow of energy that gives, takes and annihilates form. For example, traditional positivists use language (through writing and speech) and (philosophical) concepts to uphold philosophical assumptions associated with empiricism, objectivism, value free science, instrumentalism and technicism. In a similar way, interpretivists have appropriated language and concepts to illustrate ideas about meaning-making, understanding and interpretation in

varying sociocultural contexts. Critical theory too comes with its own unique nomenclature of agential emancipation and transformation from hegemonic power structures and ideologies. Poststructuralism focusses on how language/discourse mis/re/present reality and aims to move beyond dualism such as agency and structure. Its language and concepts are thus deconstructivist and geared toward unravelling (discursive) power relations. These paradigms/traditions (re)configure concepts to produce space, time and matter in different ways.

Posthumanism too "has its own language" or assemblage of concepts unique to it (for example intra-action, diffraction, agential realism, etc); and all of us intra-acting, writing and thinking about posthumanism contribute to the becoming of "this language" and its related concepts. For Barad (Barad and Gandorfer 2021), concepts are not descriptive and not just an idea detached from the world and usable as a tool to describe and capture the world. Concepts are material-discursive configurations and themselves a field of spacetimemattering[2] and are solidified through practices of reiterative intra-activity (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). Concepts are thus performative and are "*specific material doings or enactments of the world*, concepts are *of* the world" (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 26 [italics in original]). In this sense, the concepts we use are never innocent, apolitical, or value-free. Conceptual "cuts" have exclusionary ontological and ethical affects/effects.

Let us turn to the example of "reflection" to illustrate some of these points as this was one of the concepts that Appadoo-Ramsamy had to grapple with during the review process. Reflection is an example of a concept that has its origin in classical optics and that has widely been (mis)appropriated in socio-political theories (such as critical theory). Reflection, Barad (2007, 72) explains, is about mirroring and sameness; "the methodology of reflexivity mirrors the geometrical optics of reflection, and that for all the recent emphasis on reflexivity as a critical method of self-positioning it remains caught up in geometries of sameness". Related concepts employing geometrical optical metaphors, such as "lens", "reflect", "refract", etc, are equally limited because they remain caught up in sameness. Appadoo-Ramsamy's use of "theoretical lens" was another aspect that prompted reconfiguration, as the question that was asked were whether posthumanism can in fact be seen as a (theoretical) lens? In posthumanist terms, one might say that reflection, like other related geometrical optical metaphors such as "lens", are representationalist. Barad (2007) explains that representationalism is problematic because it takes separation as its foundation, and atomistic metaphysics and individually determinate entities, as its starting place. Barad (2007) critiques representationalism as it was advocated by traditional realists and social constructivists who believe in the power of words to represent pre-existing things and in so doing always privileges discourse. Rather, what is

argued for is a performative understanding of discursive practices where the material comes into play through our engagement with the world and the more-than-human-world (Barad 2007). Material-discursive performances requires different concepts. In the light of this, another (prior) question (that was alluded to above also) is: Is there a place for reflection (to represent predetermined things) in posthumanism?

Many concepts in posthumanism derive from thinking quantum physics and socio-political theories together through diffractively reading nature-culture concepts (Barad 2007). Contra to reflection, Barad (2007) introduces diffraction (as one such example). Diffraction is not only a phenomenon in classical physics but "is a quantum phenomenon that makes the downfall of classical metaphysics explicit" (Barad 2007, 72). Although both are optical phenomena, reflection (as mentioned) is about mirroring and sameness, whereas "diffraction is marked by patterns of difference" (Barad 2007, 71). Diffractions are about "differences that our knowledge-making practices make and the effect they have on the world" (Barad 2007, 72). Diffraction attends to the relational nature of difference because it maps where the effects of differences appear (Barad 2007). The point here is not to merely replace concepts such as reflection and diffraction, but to understand how and what (differences) these differing concepts perform (ontologically, epistemologically, ethically and methodologically) and to whom. As Gandorfer (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 26) reminds us, "we should ask how to express not only the difference between one use of the term and another, but also how that difference does not speak to the substitution of one fixed meaning with another, but rather to a whole different dynamic of differentiating that underlies it". This reveals some of the ontological and ethical affects/effects of conceptual cuts. It also shows that concepts are never innocent, apolitical, or value-free. Concepts have energy and flow. And, concepts yearn for expression ...

(THE LIMITS OF) EXPRESSIBILITY

My wanderings/wonderings "together with" posthumanist modes of theorising and the lessons learned from Appadoo-Ramsamy's review process, quickly exposed the limits of expressibility. This might be because we lack sufficient concepts to work with and give meaning, but also because it asks of us to find alternate ways to intra-act with the world through our linguistic expressions that differs from traditional modes of re/presenting theory and research. Barad (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 18) says that we have an unending desire to express ("desiring for expressibility") and, as such, expression as sense-making is always iterative, but im/possible to capture in the same way that representationalism captures by mapping concept to object (theory mapping), for example.

Questions related to the difficulty of expressibility is not new to scholars, which is evident

when Niels Bohr commented on the material limits of language and the difficulty to express quantum mechanics in Indo-European languages (Barad 2007). Barad (Barad and Gandorfer 2021) added that when it comes to quantum field theory, the limits of expressivity and language are even more pronounced. Barad (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 42) states: "The challenges of express-ability [...] in relation to being in touch are the kinds of things I was saying earlier about theory. It is not that I am trying to represent the theory in language per se; rather, I am trying to be in touch with the theory in the way it inhabits me and that I am inhabiting it […]". Being in touch with theory is therefore not about thinking, criticising and writing about anything except from inside it; it is about inhabiting the theory one wishes to put into question (Snaza and Weaver 2015). Expressibility will be discussed next as it relates to the ability to (a) give expression to new modes of theorising in curriculum and (b) how it relates to (educational) research. These were the two areas where Appadoo-Ramsamy came to terms with the limits of expressibility.

Express-ability and curriculum

In commenting on theory-fatigue after the great explosion of theoretical creativity in the 1970s and 1980s, Braidotti (2013, 5) states that "we had entered a zombified landscape of repetition without difference and lingering melancholia". Posthumanism is ripe with potential and alternate perspectives to such zombified landscapes of repetition, as articles in this Special Issue suggest. New modes of theorising should go along with questions of (ethically) expressing differently, so that pre-supposed ontological and epistemological assumptions are not reproduced (repeated) uncritically (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). Put differently, frontier debates and new modes of theorising concerns the development of (new) concepts (with material-discursive flow) and the re/configuration of old ones to parry the uncritical use of concepts associated with earlier paradigms/traditions. Concepts yearn for expression, as an integral part of iterative sense- and meaning-making. The need to re/configure and re/invoke existing curriculum concepts has received attention in recent scholarship (Du Preez, Le Grange, and Simmonds 2022) as well as the need to create (new) concepts (Le Grange and Du Preez 2023). This is not a rhetorical exercise to add more theory to an already zombified landscape of endless repetition without difference in many curriculum work, but an ongoing experimentation with the becoming-of-curriculum. The problem is that expression in new modes of theorising is difficult and requires approaches that are not representationalist or based on predetermined ideas. In the light of this, one should be critical about the very concepts in curriculum that are so often taken for granted or accepted at face-value. For example, should we retain (and entertain) concepts like curriculum development, implementation and evaluation, that has

strong roots in Tyler's rationale, uncritically? Can we theorise something like teacher agency in curriculum work in a productive way if agency is not "cut loose from its traditional human orbit" that makes it (agency) a human attribute rather than a doing and becoming in intra-action? (Barad 2007, 178).

Express-ability and (education) research

Posthumanism as a mode of theorising challenges the ontological privilege that humans have ascribed to themselves in hegemonic Western and humanist philosophies. Posthumanist subjectivity (what it means to be a human in the posthuman condition) puts into question predetermine subject-object binaries that is common in most interpretevist, humanist research. In this regard, Snaza and Weaver (2015, 7) comment on the "tedious, instrumental, and boring" culmination of research framed by presumptions of a "human researcher capable of objectively knowing the students, teachers, schools and curricula s/he observes, measures, and seeks to understand". Such research is methodocentric and often geared towards proving (abstract) theory by collecting (concrete) empirical evidence in a methodical manner. Critiques of methodocentrism as a result of the humanist framing of Appadoo-Ramsamy's initial work were also levelled and something she had to intra-act with.

Methodocentrism is one form of what Barad (Barad and Gandorfer 2021) calls epistemological violence. Epistemological violence could escalate should we ignore or fail to be critical about the entanglement of (a) what is researched (taught), (b) who researches (teaches) it, and (c) who are researched (taught). One way in which earlier feminist scholars have attempted to reduce such epistemological violence done to marginalised groups when they are (mis/)re/presented through research, was to opt for researcher positionality (explicitly stating one's situatedness in terms of identity). Positionality contextualises the researcher's identity in relation to who and what is under investigation, as well as to assist readers to understand "where" the researcher writes from (their situatedness) and from what departure-point the researched voices are being re/presented. Posthumanism is *not* favourable of positionality because it rests on predetermined ontological and epistemological assumptions about humans (researcher and researched) and their situatedness. Devoid of any liberal conception of the human subject, posthumanist research does not make any clear cuts between what is researched, who researches it, and who are researched. To make any such clear cuts would presuppose an individual researcher who choosees where to make a cut (in terms of selecting a topic and identifying research participants), as opposed to research as an ongoing intra-action where there exists no distance between the world and researchers. The researcher and researched (topic and participants) are deeply entangled and cannot be methodologically

cut/ separated. This entanglement and the affects/effects it produces are what matters in posthumanist scholarship.

SUMMARY AND FINAL THOUGHT

This response article was meant to invite (posthuman) scholars to "join in" and theorise together to become ethically more in touch with posthumanism. The ability to respond (response-ability) through theorising entails a radical openness to think otherwise, and for thinking thinking otherwise (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). Such thinking matters and thinking along the concepts we use and the limits of expressibility when thinking otherwise, matters a great deal. The becoming of Wedsha Appadoo-Ramsamy's article revealed some insights into the ticklish nature of (posthuman, philosophical) concepts and the difficulty and limitations of expression in frontier debates. This article aimed to respond to the production and workings of posthuman concepts, and to comment on the limits of expressibility when writing about frontier debates such as those concerning posthumanism and related feminist materialism/s.

Posthumanism is not an empty, anthropocentric theory, nor a discourse. Posthumanism is a materialdiscursive entanglement that invites us to "join in" – to intra-act – in ways that can further open up the potential of posthumanism. *Posthumanism is energy and flow; it has a "bodily pulse" that rhythmically sustains (materialdiscursive) becoming/s (of all sorts) ...*

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NOTES

1. Matter (substance) and meaning/significant (mattering) are not separate elements but mutually implicated in an agential realist account (Barad 2007).

2. Spacetimematter/ing is a neologism that Barad introduces to fuse space, time, and matter. Barad (2007, 17) states: "Matter doesn't move in time. Matter doesn't evolve in time. Matter does time. Matter materializes and enfolds in different temporalities". And further, "*The past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold; the "past" and the "future" are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetimemattering ... all are one phenomenon ....* Space and time are phenomenal, that is, they are intra-actively configured and reconfigured in the ongoing materialization of phenomena. Neither space nor time exist as determine givens, as universals, outside of matter. Matter does not reside in space and move through time. Space and time are matter's agential performances" (Barad 2007, 28, *emphasis in original*).

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