

Anna J. Secor (Durham University)

(Re)birthing the maternal

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to explore the political and ethical potential of (re)birthing through Barad's conceptualisation of transmateriality. This article puts Barad's thought on entanglement, emergence, and responsibility into conversation with other work in feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis that has grappled with questions of the maternal, birthing, and ethics. On the one hand, this encounter suggests that there are other ways of posing questions of separation, responsibility, and power through the maternal that might challenge aspects of Barad's telling. But at the same time, by bringing Barad's thought into these conversations, I show how Barad's transpositions of (re)birthing have the potential to radically re-open and trans*figure feminist ethics and politics via a more dispersed, immoderate, and ultimately queer perspective on how the ethics that inheres in the coming into (non)being of the world.

Keywords: maternal, ethics, Barad, feminist theory, trans

1. Experimenting

How does Karen Barad's thought help us to trans*figure questions of power and ethics as they pertain to *the creation of life*? Themes of birthing and rebirthing, of generativity and capacities to create life or to make life flourish, play across the surface of Barad's patchwork text, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings."¹ In the blur of science and magic, a lightning strike creates the conditions for ocean life, an electrical current revives the dead, and bioelectric fields stimulate the blinking to life of 'monsters' in a lab. Barad's article draws to a crescendo with the story of electrons that self-generate and dissolve on the knife's edge of (non)being – and finally 'speak' themselves within the transformed text of Susan Stryker's powerful poem on transgender rebirth-

1 Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 387–422.

ing.² The entanglement of wombs, voids, and raging nothingness in Barad's article is intoxicating, but what are the ethics and politics of these transpositions of the capacity for (re)birthing?

The text of "Transmaterialities" is a bit of a monster, "a patchwork," "made of disparate parts."³ But as Barad also points out, the idea of the patchwork carries with it a misleading notion of original wholeness followed by severing and stitching. Rather than seeing the parts of their article as cut from the fabric of their origin, Barad envisions the text as reconfiguring both the past and the future of its 'parts,' re-situating them within a field that transects and reorders their connections and bringing to light how they were always already communicating across the time and space of their emergence. The article, as Barad describes it, is a phenomenon that holds together in the field of its differentiations and entanglements.

What pattern is enfolded in this "patchwork"? "Transmaterialities" flashes with imagery, questions, and phenomenon of birthing. Frogs are made to twitch, serve as human pregnancy tests, regenerate limbs, and grow eyes on their backs. Susan Stryker's birthing of transgender rage converges with a queer reading of Genesis, in which "nature emerges from a self-birthing womb fashioned out of raging nothingness."⁴ Embryos flash with their anticipated faces and the sky trembles with "electrical sketches scribbled with liquid light."⁵ Lightning bolts are born of the "charged yearnings" communicated between earth and sky as they exchange gestures and signals, testing possible paths until one bursts into being.⁶ Electricity crackles across Barad's text, speculatively creating conditions for life on earth ("shocking primordial ooze to life") and phantasmatically reanimating the dead (or more accurately, parts of the dead, via the eighteenth-century science of Galvanism and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), before finding grace in the twentieth-century invention of defibrillation.⁷

Birthing, as it plays through Barad's text, is transmaterial. Balanced on the knife's edge between animate and inanimate, being and nonbeing, matter itself is

2 Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1994): 237–54.

3 Barad, "Transmaterialities," 406. Parts from: Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity (the authorized version)," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning / Women, Gender, and Research* 1–2 (2012): 25–53; Karen Barad, "What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice / Was ist das Maß des Nichts? Unendlichkeit, Virtualität, Gerechtigkeit," *DOCUMENTA* (13): 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken | Book No 099, English and German edition (2012); Karen Barad, "On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," *differences* 22, no. 3 (2012): 206–23.

4 Stryker, "My words"; Barad, "Transmaterialities," 393.

5 Barad, "Transmaterialities," 387.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 389.

born and dies (though not necessarily in that order) according to the principles of quantum field theory. As Barad explains, the quantum principle of ontological indeterminacy means that whatever might be empty also might be full, and in fact can only be understood to fluctuate between the many possible states of matter and nothingness. The quantum void is in this sense “a womb that births existence” in its deviations from nothingness.⁸ Moreover, what is birthed of this “frothy virtual soup of indeterminacy that we ironically think of as a state of pure emptiness,” is itself void – that is, not an isolated existence but inseparable from its milieu of indeterminacy. Barad takes the electron as an example: a simple point particle, a bit of matter devoid of structure, the electron is always already intra-acting with the void in every possible way. Electrons rebirth and regenerate themselves, blipping in and out of (non)existence. In a process that Barad describes as self-touching or “self-energy intra-action,” an electron might emit a photon and then reabsorb its own ephemeral creation. In one dramatic scenario (amongst an infinite set of possibilities), the virtual photon itself transforms “into a virtual electron-positron pair, that subsequently annihilate each other and morph back into a single virtual photon before it is reabsorbed by the electron.”⁹ For the quantum void, there is no singular origin but rather a perpetual and provisional rebirthing of possibilities for (non)being.

(Re)birthing, (re)animation, and re(generation) thus light up the surface of the text, but not in a singular pattern. While lightning, transgender rage, and electrons may be sharing the same “anarchic womb,” it is hard not to notice that the electrical spark of life seems to come from outside and bear no responsibility for its creation. It is applied, it strikes, and seems better at reanimating than creating (though to be fair, experimentation on the origins of life has not concluded).¹⁰ Luigi Galvani with his frogs’ legs and his nephew Giovanni Aldini with his twitching corpses trace a genealogy of “fantasists of ectogenetic progeny, like Frankenstein, who have dreamed of a birth unsullied by a womb.”¹¹

In fact, the refusal of maternal origins threads through Western culture, thought, and society – from the purely masculine parentage of Athena to the technological fantasies of today that promise to make the mother obsolete. For Luce Irigaray, it is Plato’s parable of the cave/womb that most overtly works to negate the maternal body at the same time as structuring femininity as the unacknowledged support of philosophy.¹² Feminist philosopher Michelle Boulden Walker calls this the psychotic structure of masculinity. The “mother’s procreative ability” is foreclosed and repudiated – a negation that not only lays

8 Ibid., 394.

9 Ibid., 339.

10 Stryker, “My Words,” 241, quoted in Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 392.

11 Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now* (London: Verso, 2019), 163.

12 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

the groundwork for the murderous denial of the mother's body but "returns as a psychotic hallucination of one's own ability to give birth to oneself."¹³ Peter Sloterdijk, in the sweeping scope of *Spheres I: Bubbles*, argues that historically ontologies of maternal immanence gave way through the continuation of Aristotelian thought in Christianity, with its "attraction to the paternal womb" and "severe anti-reproductive affect," through to "the neo-European life sciences," with their cultivated capacity to "stand fast before the once so magical female and maternal portal in an objectifying, and thus emancipating, certainty of distance."¹⁴ Arguably, the widescale, historic, material, and symbolic displacement of maternal power has chiselled deep ruts, channels through which all that could be extracted from the maternal – flesh and blood, labour, language, and love – has been leached out and made to flow into and feed a patriarchal and phallogocentric order.

But what has this lineage of extraction "from the maternal womb to the masculinist head and body" to do with the queer self-birthing of "Trans-materialities"?¹⁵ Does the void as self-birthing womb finally establish the self-reliance and autonomy of the creative subject? When electrons (re)birth themselves, or give birth to photons and perform any number of other creative acts through self-touching, is this *autopoiesis* in the real? Barad's answer is that no, it is not. This is because, as Barad explains, "electrons (re)birth themselves in their engagement with all others, not as an act of self-birthing, but in an ongoing re-creating that is an un/doing of itself."¹⁶ Far from an autonomous act, the *queer* self-birthing that reverberates across the parts of Barad's text arises as part of an enmeshed and intra-active milieu where the "the self is an other" in the sense of being both an alterity to itself and perpetually entangled with what both surrounds and fills it.¹⁷

This concept of (re)birthing that Barad spins out from lightning, frogs, galvanism, transgender rage, the void, and virtual particles is thus both fecund and slippery. How do we hold it open in a such a way that avoids a collapse into negation and loss? That is, what allows this queer self-birthing to (a)void the repetition of maternal repudiation? Barad brings the reader to the argument's navel – the potential for queer regenerative politics to be born of "opening up

13 Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55.

14 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres I: Bubbles* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 276, 619, 283.

15 Heidi Nast, "Queering the Maternal?: Unhinging Supremacist Geographies of the Machine, Markets, and Recreational Pleasure", *Society & Space Online*, 16 (2017), <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/queering-the-maternal-unhinging-supremacist-geographies-of-the-machine-markets-and-recreational-pleasure>.

16 Barad, "Transmaterialities," 401.

17 Arthur Rimbaud, "je est un autre," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 62.

science from the inside and serving as midwife to its always already deconstructive nature” – and then sends them out the slick exit ramp of a poem.¹⁸ The poem is Stryker’s poem from her performance piece/essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” “diffractively intercut” with Barad’s “words of an electron [...] speaking contrapunctually of its own personal (re)birthing.”¹⁹ The sheer creative absurdity of this calls forth a certain tenderness. What does it mean to make a speaking being of an electron? Is the electron now alienated from the void? Perhaps this is not something to overthink.

But what is striking – and what brings to a crisis the question of the maternal and the void – is what has disappeared and what has appeared in the sampling of Stryker’s poem. Although Barad situates the poem as Stryker’s telling of “her transgender (re)birthing in a manner that echoes the literal passage of birthed body from the liquid darkness of the womb,” the *liquid* and the *womb* disappear when the electron’s speech is grafted on.²⁰ Water is excised from the poem. Stryker’s “Inside and out I am surrounded by it” appears without its referent; instead of being undifferentiated from water, now the ‘it’ implies *the void* that is the electron’s immersive, constituting milieu. The line “I am one with the darkness...” replaces Stryker’s “I am one with the darkness and the wet.” “I am not the water –” becomes “I am not the [void]”; “Rage/punches a hole in water” becomes “Rage/punches a hole in [void].” In the intercutting of words, void and water haven’t merged or grafted or come together to make a third thing. Instead, the electron’s void has replaced (contained?) the watery birth-world of Stryker’s poem.

These transformations are part of what it means to experiment. The re-spooling of the poem is thought-provoking, exciting, even beautiful. But it comes at a price: the excision of the water-world. Perhaps the amniotic imagery seemed too particular, too limited to a certain domain of births (turtles, lizards, birds, dinosaurs, mammals). Perhaps the void of quantum field theory (as “the scene of wild activities” and “the virtual exploration of all possible trans*formations”) seemed the more universal concept, capable of over-writing water without loss.²¹ But how is this replacement or absorption (void over water) not a re-enactment of the “ever-failing attempt to void the mother” by emptying the sea: the compulsion ‘*vider la mèr(e)*’ that feminist psychoanalytic thinkers (and others) have tried to subvert?²² And what if, in fact, what has disappeared (water) is the more generative concept? In *Full Surrogacy Now*, Sophie Lewis, for example, goes the

18 Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 412.

19 Ibid., 414; Stryker, “My Words.”

20 Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 414.

21 Ibid., 212.

22 Michelle-Helen Brousse, *The Feminine: A Mode of Jouissance*, transl. Janet Rachel (New York, NY: Lacanian Press, 2021), 13, 11.

other direction (water over void) and calls for “amniotechnics” for all. Amniotechnics is techno-social, watery and cyborg: a generalised practice “of holding and caring even while being ripped into, at the same time as being held” that is available to mothers, nonmothers, and “single fathers” (electrons?) alike.²³ So given that it is not *necessary* to void the amnion to conceptualise birthing beyond sex-essentialism (as Lewis’ work proves), what are the implications of the void replacing water in this diffracted poem?

Asking difficult questions about what happens when the speaking electron becomes entangled with the poetic (re)birthing of transgender rage feels ungenerous; after all, this encounter is playful, experimental. And it also seems unimaginative to return the self-birthing electron to a fantasy of autopoiesis, trapping its queer becoming within an endlessly recycled meta-narrative of masculinist autonomy and negated maternal functions. Perhaps these probes are misdirected. Yet what are experiments for but testing the ground, seeking response? I am reaching up to Barad’s text, compelled but not committed. There is yearning in the air. We are both invested; I too long for “new political imaginaries and new understandings of imagining in its materiality.”²⁴ In an experimental mode, there is no need to avoid questions or jump at shadows. Let’s just see what happens if we keep trying, spinning out problems and solutions until something responds.

2. Responding

In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of responses, of response-ability.²⁵

Why does the trans*materiality of (re)birthing matter? One way to access the stakes of this argument is to bring questions of ethics, or responsibility, to the fore. Throughout their work, Barad argues for the fundamental inseparability of ontology, epistemology, and ethics in our encounter with “the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world.”²⁶ In light of the entanglement of matter and meaning, Barad dislodges the Levinasian premise of ethics as a relation of responsibility to the (human face of the) other from its humanism to instead encompass re-

23 Lewis, *Surrogacy*, 163.

24 Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 388.

25 *Ibid.*, 401.

26 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 37.

sponsiveness across the full spectrum of alterity. Further, this other is not separate from the subject but ontologically entangled. “Ethics,” Barad writes, “is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.”²⁷ The question of responsibility, or the capacity to respond to the other, thus inheres in relationality itself.

What matters, then, is how these experiments, technologies, and fantasies of (re)birthing and (re)generation that flicker across the page condense the response-abilities of what has elsewhere (though not in Barad’s text) been called ‘the maternal’ and what exceeds this concept. I use this term (as above) to access and connect with other fields of feminist, philosophical, and psychoanalytic thought – though my hope is that through this essay the maternal will also become dislodged from its conventional limits. But to begin with, ‘maternal ethics’ ushers us forward via a critique of Western, masculinist models of ethics as the question of responsibility to the Other. For Cynthia Willett, these dominant ideas of ethics reflect a Hegelian inheritance, in which the master-slave relation is the ‘first’ human contract, in which language is the medium of relation, and in which the heroic masculinist subject – free of history, culture, or the social force of the mother – appears as though created *ex nihilo* in the “airy nothing of patriarchal mythology.”²⁸

When the maternal does appear in Western ethics, it is disembodied and cleansed of any associations with (inter)dependency. Levinas, for example, in his later work, replaces the trope of paternal fecundity, which he had noted was biological in origin, with the maternal – and at the same time disavows the biological dimension.²⁹ Feminist philosopher Stella Sandford, in her extended study of the feminine and the maternal in Levinas’ work, argues that this is because for Levinas, to turn the maternal into a model for responsibility requires this desubstantiation. In her words, “To say that nothing of the biological must remain in the maternal *parente* is to say that its specifically feminine content – connoting particularity, peculiarity – must be excised.”³⁰ In other words, a Levinasian maternal ethics is possible only on the condition that the materiality of birthing is excised from it, for it is only with this negation of the maternal body itself that the universal can be born.

After all, ‘universal’ is not something that bodies are. Bodies are unavoidably particular, enmeshed sets of capacities and incapacities. And what we learn from

27 *Ibid.*, 393.

28 Cynthia Willett, *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* (London: Routledge, 1995), 78.

29 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or beyond Essence* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 1981).

30 Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (New Brunswick: The Athlon Press, 2000), 82–3.

the body-space of the maternal concerns nothing of universality; instead we learn of bodies' biological contingencies, their vast capacity for radical change, their shifting interdependencies, their incompleteness of form that allows for bodies continually to become something else.³¹ Beyond but including their gestational capacities, considering the enmeshing of (microbial and other) organisms moving in, on and through them, "bodies are always leaky, parasited, and non-unitary."³² It is therefore not far-fetched to look to bodies as sites of the other-in-the-same, of unchosen responsibility, and even of sovereign power over life and death. This latter dimension of power is most overtly present in the capacity, responsibility, and choice to nurture (or not), to nourish the other with one's own body, to make live or let die what is both of and other to the self.³³

What remains of the dream of autonomy once what Sloterdijk calls the "topological surrealism" of the body is surfaced?³⁴ Distinct from the masculinist notion of universal ethics, the embodied real of the maternal opens onto an alternative ethics, an ethics constituted otherwise. If the maternal body is not a universalizable principle but a real, immediate, irregular body; if we don't birth ourselves and then release ourselves into the open air of individuality; if we don't consent to appropriation and silencing of the power and responsibility of the maternal, how are we then born into ethical relationality differently? Such questions have spurred the development of 'maternal ethics' at the nexus of feminist philosophy, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. In Christine Battersby's words,

[W]hat would have to change were we to take seriously the notion that a 'person' could normally, at least always potentially, become two. What would happen if we thought identity in terms that did not make it always spatially and temporally oppositional to other entities? Could we retain a notion of self-identity if we did not privilege that which is self-contained and self-directed?³⁵

In response to this imperative for thinking anew, maternal ethics has been conceptualised in multiple ways, with approaches ranging from those that find inspiration and grounding in Levinas's ideas of responsibility to the Other to those that engage in a vigorous critique of Levinasian faciality, verticality, and

31 Irigaray, *Speculum*.

32 Lewis, *Surrogacy*, 162.

33 Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2000).

34 Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, 90.

35 Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

paternal fecundity.³⁶ Across this differentiated field, what appears is an ethical relation that is at once intimate and strange. For example, for Lisa Baraitser, maternal ethics calls forth the bizarre, disabled, encumbered, coming-undone figure of the mother for whom time, space, and subjectivity stretch, bend, and compress. The maternal is thus called upon in its capacity to short-circuit dominant modes of doing, thinking, and becoming.³⁷

And yet, there are risks to this recovery of the maternal in the guise of the non-autonomous, the un-masterful, the unintelligible. How can we be assured that this un-representability is not reabsorbed into the myth of the maternal as that which must be evacuated for any (even provisionally coherent or agential) subject to emerge? Imaginaries of maternal ethics risk reinscribing the regulatory sex-gender matrix in which woman-mother-gestation appears as a unity. Even when proponents of maternal ethics attempt to break new ground, the problem tends to resurface. For example, Lisa Guenther makes Levinas's phrase "like a maternal body" the touchstone of her strategy to "destabilise any strict correlation between women and mothers, or between motherhood and responsibility."³⁸ Guenther argues that this command to become "like a maternal body" for the Other "opens up a gap between maternity as biological fact and as an ethical response" that makes maternal ethics available to all.³⁹ And yet, this metaphorization of the maternal confusingly assumes something essential and even archetypal about this body that one is commanded to approach in likeness. Guenther demonstrates the limits of the metaphor of the maternal body with her assertion that, "While anyone, male or female, may become 'like' a maternal body, only a woman can become pregnant."⁴⁰ Becoming "like a maternal body" thus takes us nowhere new.

How then can we conceptualise a 'maternal ethics' that would take us beyond the regulatory fiction of the (seamless, original) biological-woman-mother *without* negating or abjecting that which births? While bodies and biological interdependencies may be (indeed are) important sites of ethics, an ethics based in the entangled capacities of (human and non-human) bodies does not require or justify the re-inscription of dominant gender ideology equating a specific gestational apparatus (womb) and a specifically feminine mode of being/becoming (woman). Not all maternal subjects are mothers, not all mothers are gestators, and neither motherhood nor gestation automatically lines up with

36 Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and Politics of Reproduction* (Albany: Suny Press, 2006); Kelly Oliver, *Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018); Sanford, *Metaphysics*; Willett, *Maternal Ethics*.

37 Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2009).

38 Levinas, *Otherwise*, 67; Guenther, *Gift*, 7.

39 Guenther, *Gift*, 7.

40 *Ibid.*, 141.

being a woman.⁴¹ Nothing can be assumed as universal about the content of ‘mothering’ since attachment itself is culturally, historically, socially, and individually contingent (and regularly exceeds the human).⁴² In short, the (human) maternal, if it refers to anything, refers to an unevenly distributed, differentially embodied capacity for entanglement and separation.

3. (Un)severing

The lightning bolt, the photon, transgender rage: what emerges does so as a “response to difference.”⁴³ There is always a differentiation, a ‘cut’ of some kind, involved in the question of birthing and ethics. Separation – as a trauma or an achievement – has therefore been at the heart of what the maternal calls forth in relation to the (Western, masculinist) subject. In the register of ethics, this separation or ‘birthing’ (even if it originates in paternal fecundity) is what gives rise to the possibility of an Other of ethical responsibility.⁴⁴ From a psychoanalytical perspective, the cut from the maternal is the originary trauma whose failures and incompletions are held to account for structures of psychosis, neurosis, and perversion.⁴⁵ This cut comes from without (the application of the ‘paternal metaphor’) and initiates the speaking subject as one who is alienated within the symbolic order and separated from its environs. In a broad sense, the maternal has thus been cast as that which “must to some degree be left, or more forcefully abjected or killed off, in order that ‘the subject’ [...] can emerge unscathed.”⁴⁶

“Transmaterialities” subverts this binary of separation in which the subject is either pathologically (ecstatically) absorbed into the maternal, or triumphantly (tragically) cut free. Taking the place of this traumatic separation is a “discontinuity that emerges in the midst of continuity,” what Julia Kristeva locates as

41 See for example: S. Brook Corfman, “Melting Muscles: Cassils’s Tiresias at the Intersection of Affect and Gendered Embodiment,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2020): 5–19; Miles Feroli, “Feeling Transparent: Trans Parenthood and the American Family System” (PhD Diss., University of Kentucky, 2022); Patricio Simonetto and Johanna Kunin, “Mariela Muñoz: Citizenship, Motherhood, and Transsexual Politics in Argentina (1943–2017),” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2021): 516–31.

42 See for example: Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

43 Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 398.

44 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other (And Other Essays)* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

45 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 671–702; Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the letter: Reading Écrits closely* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

46 Baraitser, *Encounters*, 5.

the possibility of ethics.⁴⁷ This “continuous separation” initiates both the possibility of the other and the ambiguity of its distinction.⁴⁸ Across the various (re)birthings of “Transmaterialities,” what comes into (non)being is at once distinguished from its field of emergence (the electromagnetic field, the void) and constituted by this field. Barad writes, “Virtual particles are not *in* the void but *of* the void.”⁴⁹ In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad describes the fetus as likewise inclusive of its gestational milieu:

From the perspective of agential realism, the fetus is not a preexisting object of investigation with inherent properties. Rather, the fetus is a phenomenon that is constituted and reconstituted out of historically and culturally specific iterative intra-actions of material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production. The fetus as a phenomenon ‘includes’ the apparatuses or phenomena out of which it is constituted: in particular, it includes the pregnant woman (her uterus, placenta, amniotic fluid, hormones, blood supply, nutrients, emotions, etc., as well as her ‘surroundings’ and her intra-actions with/in them) and much more.⁵⁰

Entangled with the phenomena of its production, the fetus is resolved, semantically and ontologically, by a cut. That is to say, the fetus is both a part of the gestational apparatus and apart from it: “constituted and threaded through with the entanglements of part-ing” in the same modality as the ‘patchwork’ text of “Transmaterialities.”⁵¹ Cutting “(things) together and apart (one move),” what Barad calls the “agential cut” produces determinate boundaries and properties of entities, distinguishing them (however ephemerally) from the indeterminacy of their apparatus (gestational, void) without creating an exteriority to the phenomenon.⁵²

The cut births, but what? It does not birth an individual: “What is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us – agential separability is not individuation.”⁵³ The cut does not separate out an independent or autonomous entity; what is ‘on the other side’ remains entangled within an intra-action of mutual constitution. As Barad puts it, “[D]istinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to

47 Guenther, *Gift*, 117; referencing Ewa Ziarek, “At the Limits of Discourse: Heterogeneity, Alterity and the Maternal Body in Kristeva’s thought,” in *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy and Language*, eds. Christina Hendricks and Kelly Oliver (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 323–47; and Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1–2 (1987): 133–52.

48 Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 254.

49 Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 396, emphasis added.

50 Barad, *Meeting*, 217.

51 Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 406.

52 *Ibid.*, 406; see also Barad, *Meeting*.

53 Barad, *Meeting*, 393.

their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements."⁵⁴ In this sense, the 'self-birthing' electron is a far cry from the self-birthing of the autonomous masculinist subject because there is no individuality and no exteriority – let alone autonomy – in the relation between 'subject' and 'object' as materialised in the cut. What is cut is "permanently non-severed" from what sustains it.⁵⁵ "There is only degenerative and regenerative co-production," and in this sense, "We are all, at root, responsible."⁵⁶

In "Transmaterialities," that which is born – a lightning bolt, an electron, a photon, transgender rage – is born of experimentation, self-touching, and "raging nothingness." The queer self-birthing of transmaterialities offers a "matrix for generative nonheterosexual-reproductive birthing," in which the cut, connection, and response-ability emerge at once.⁵⁷ (Re)birthing is thus an event of differentiation and relation with an inherent ethical content. a new potentiality of 'maternal ethics' comes into view, one that is not reducible to the mother-woman-gestator grid but rather names the intimate entwining of bodies and entities whose cuts and connections are not external to them. This is compatible with Bracha Ettinger's idea of the matrixial as a space of partial attachments conjoining differentiated but contiguous entities.⁵⁸ The maternal releases itself from the phallogocentric order to enter a space that is *not the same* as what has been lost, foreclosed, and negated as the basis for that order. This other space is neither a realm of spherical wholeness nor the pathogenic ground of too much and too little from which the subject must be severed. Entangled, connected, fused, stretched, grafted, juxtaposed, broken and parted: all that blips in and out of being is embroiled in a multiplicity of (queer) relations with(in) the field of its emergence.

4. Trans*materializing

For Irigaray and other feminist critics of Western metaphysics, the maternal has been dammed (damned) within a logos that forecloses radical feminist futures. As long as the maternal is cast as the site of a lost oneness from which the paternal

54 *Ibid.*, 33.

55 Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 180.

56 Lewis, *Surrogacy*, 19; referring to Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

57 Barad, "Transmaterialities," 393.

58 Bracha Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 218–22; Shelia Cavanagh, "Tiresias and psychoanalysis with/out Oedipus," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* [2016], accessed December 23, 2022, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/tiresias-and-psychoanalysis-without-oedipus/>; Trish Salah, "What Does Tiresias Want?," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3–4 (2017): 632–38.

function has – of necessity, traumatically – separated us, there is no release from this capture. It is therefore not a matter of breaking the dam or releasing the damned. Rather, what is called for is an ethics that resituates and redistributes what might (*but need not*) be called the ‘maternal’ – that is, the capacity for (re)generation of the self and others – against gender binaries, beyond biological essentialism, and without prejudice to the nonhuman. Does Barad’s queer trans*maternal (re)birthing accomplish this feat, or does it steer too perilously close to autopoiesis?

The trajectory of this essay has been to argue that Barad’s “Trans-materialities,” in its relation of severed continuity with their work more broadly, provides the basis for a new ethics of entanglement, separation, and responsibility that relies neither on the evacuation of the maternal nor on essentialist retrenchment. In the Stryker-Barad transgender rage/electron self-birthing poem that closes the article, the ascendancy of void over water might suggest the negation of fleshy particularity. But it is only by misnaming the void as vacant that it becomes enrolled in the family drama of ‘voiding the mother.’ For the void of quantum field theory is far from ‘empty’ or immaterial; instead, it is “the scene of wild activities,” a “virtual exploration of all manner of possible trans*/formations.”⁵⁹ At once distinct and unsevered from its (dis)appearing contents, this void is not ‘other’ to the squishy materiality of the amniotic sac. Alterity is its capacity, it is the capacity of all things, and in this capacity resides the potential and responsibility of trans*materialisation.

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⁵⁹ Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 212.

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