

Pedagogies of Attending and Mourning Posthumanism, Death, and Affirmative Ethics

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Death and Curriculum

IN HIS CHAPTER, “CRIES AND WHISPERS,” William F. Pinar (1992) called for conversations around death to become normative in education. Stemming from the Reconceptualist Movement’s phenomenological foundations, Pinar drew on Heidegger’s philosophical work on the idea of being to suggest that meditation on death might call life into sharper focus. Since then, Pinar has remained a formative presence in the complicated conversation of curriculum theory, as have the Reconceptualist Movement’s roots in phenomenology, feminism, psychoanalysis, and autobiography (Pinar & Grumet, 2015). Pinar’s call to discuss death in curriculum theory and education, however, has gone more or less unanswered. There are a few exceptions to this trend. For example, a recent article on gothic novels (Janicki, 2019), a response to the SARS epidemic (Moore, 2005), a poetic meditation (Leggo, 2017), and a personal reflection (Daspit, 1999) on loss all engage death in some way. Additionally, an article recently published in *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* argued for the importance of interdisciplinarity in teaching about death (Lerum, 2021). The general rule, however, stays true: curriculum theory is more focused on life than death.

There are, of course, those who do think about death in relation to education. A whole literature has emerged around death education in the field of thanatology (e.g., Wass, 2004). That literature, however, suffers the same fate as much educational research—it is too lodged within the paradigms of Western, empirical developmental psychology to recognize its own limitations (Wu, 2022; see also Wittkowski et al., 2015). A survey of 1550 studies published between 1990 and 2010 in the two top thanatology journals recognized death education as a focus in only 3% of the total articles. The same survey suggested that theoretical engagements with death were steadily on the decrease in favor of empirical and qualitative research projects (Wittkowski et al., 2015). In curriculum theory, the Reconceptualist Movement reacted to this same trend in educational research; it carved out space for the personal, the literary, the poetic, and the theoretical in a landscape that was quickly becoming dominated by the empirical. Just as few in curriculum theory have considered death, then, few who study death have considered curriculum theory.

Pinar’s call to engage in complicated curricular conversation around death takes on new meaning and urgency today amid the COVID-19 pandemic and more broadly in the current socio-political and environmental moment. After posthumanist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti (2013, 2019, 2022), upon whose work I draw extensively in this paper, I think of this moment as the posthuman convergence. This convergence is of two factors: on one hand, the Anthropocene, a name given to this time marked by the human effect on the natural world (also called the Sixth Extinction Event), and on the other hand the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2015), a name given to the alacrity of technological change experienced today, which is both facilitated and driven by advanced capitalism. Environmentally, the effects of climate change are more apparent each year in the form of forest fires, draughts, heat waves, floods, and pandemics. Technologically, each new year brings faster and more capable machines that demand we¹ keep pace. Indeed, far from being a panacea pedagogically or socially, technological change often elicits an affective response of exhaustion and anxiety (Braidotti, 2019). Importantly, we do not all experience the effects of these converging forces in the same way. Indeed, Braidotti has become known for the statement “we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 52). While the effects of the posthuman convergence pervade the planet, those effects do not erase social difference nor marginalization, and those most adversely affected are routinely BIPOC folks, LGBTQ+ folks, folks with disabilities, and those living in poverty, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown. One extension offered by posthumanism is to include non-human others (e.g., plants, animals, the earth, rivers) in this cartography of marginalization. Death is everywhere today—not just human deaths, though those are certainly prevalent, but also those more-than-human and other-than-human fatalities that often go unseen or unnoticed. Thinking, teaching, and learning death becomes an imperative amid such circumstance; such is the project of this paper.

In this article, I reengage with Pinar’s call to bring death into curricular conversations. Where Pinar (1992) and many philosophers have studied death from phenomenological perspectives (Barry, 2007; Fairfield, 2015), my engagement is through a posthumanist lens—specifically, though not exclusively, Braidotti’s (2013, 2019, 2022) critical posthumanism. Structurally, I begin by discussing the fragility of life and the necessity of death as a way of introducing the topic and posthumanism. I then apply that posthuman lens to the posthumous—the corpse. My attention to the corpse as a site of inquiry leads to a wider discussion of waste, societal engagement with it, and an emergent environmental ethic. Next, I share two intra-related pedagogical concepts—mourning and attending. I conclude this paper by offering an evocation of Braidotti’s affirmative ethics as a way of moving forward in the current moment of imminent socio-environmental collapse.

Fragility, Necessity, and Posthumanism

Life is fragile, and death is necessary. The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown our global society the former with frightening clarity. The latter, however, is still a question for many. The Silicon Valley transhumanists, those blindly optimistic about the potential of the digital age who propose that the limitations of the human form can be overcome through technology, seem particularly critical of the necessity of death (Braidotti, 2013). Their attempts to conceptually overcome the temporal limits of human life, however, should be understood as a manifestation of a wider societal aversion to death—the often-cited death-denying ethos of Western society (Becker, 1973; see also Barry, 2007; Northcott & Wilson, 2017). This death-denying ethos can be

thought of as “the common tendency for people to try to live their lives as if they are immortal, to push death and dying largely out of the picture” (Cox & Thompson, 2021, p. 31) and a general reluctance of some folks to have conversations about death (Kortes-Miller, 2018). Recently, this death-denying culture has been dismantled with more frequency. Kortes-Miller (2014) and Durant (2018), for example, have highlighted the affective significance of talking about death with both the dying and the grieving.

The surge of human population coupled with the species extinctions of the Anthropocene have also led to discussions of human death from an ecological perspective. Although some deep ecologists were perhaps the most radical of this spectrum in their calls for humans to die so that the Earth could live (Bookchin & Foreman, 1991),² many others are also aware of the necessity of human death to sustainability (Haraway, 2016). Under the surface of these grim and uncomfortable conversations, however, is an ecological view of death, where life more broadly defined than the human but encompassing of it—*zoe* (Braidotti, 2019)—cannot be without the limiting force of death (Braidotti, 2013; Rose, 2012). From this ecological view, “death is a necessary partner” (Rose, 2012, p. 127) in life.

Recent theorizing of the ecological has taken many forms, but much has happened under the moniker of “new materialism”—“new” to differentiate it from Marxist feminism, and “materialism” to highlight the emphasis on physical reality. While there is a plurality of new materialisms, the general thrust of the literature asserts that matter is agentive (Barad, 2007) and/or alive (Bennet, 2010). Braidotti’s (2013, 2019, 2022) critical posthumanism draws on these new materialisms in combination with the deconstructive tools of postmodernism and the Spinozian logics of monism to move beyond the human in myriad ways—beyond anthropocentrism or the centering of the human, beyond the Cartesian separation of body and mind, and beyond enlightenment liberal humanism, all of which have permeated Western thought as a whole. Unlike some posthumanists who see this dismantling of “the human” as an opportunity to ignore social distinctions and marginalizations by focusing on the object to the exclusion of the subject, Braidotti (2013, 2019) centers the subject in her inquiry, naming it as a transversal assemblage. The subject is an assemblage of geological, technological, and biological entities, which are acted upon by psychological forces from below and social forces from above (Braidotti, 2019). In other words, “we” are not the unitary but fragmented consciousness of transcendental reason, but rather a collection of actors co-present in the network of the subject being acted upon by the psychological and the social.

Stepping back to the ecological for a moment, there is a clear critique of anthropocentrism here: if all matter is alive, the matter that makes up the human is no different from the matter that comprises non-humans; there can be no certainty of where the human ends and where the non-human begins. As a counter to the elevation of the human, Braidotti (2013) centers *zoe* rather than *bios*. *Zoe* is a notion of life expanded beyond the human, or *bios* (Braidotti, 2013). Under the logic of vital materialism, *zoe* extends to all matter, and while it may be an easy conceptual leap to see the life of plants and animals, Braidotti’s posthumanism, vital materialism, and *zoe* extend the notion of life to technology as well (see also Bennett, 2010). The computer on which I write this essay has a life of its own that is deeply interconnected with my own life both on the level of our subject-assemblage and my sub-subjective psychic space (see also Downey, 2021).

Braidotti (2013) takes this one step further through the idea of ontological pacifism—that because everything is alive, we should act in such a way as to minimize interference with and harm to other beings. Judith Butler’s (2020) recent book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, also engages this notion through the idea that we cannot harm anything else without also harming ourselves; we are

all interconnected. Ontological pacifism, like much emergent from “new” materialisms, is nothing new; Indigenous folks the world over have held these views for millennia (Gerrard et al., 2017; Murriss, 2018; Todd, 2016). Indeed, contemporary Indigenous scholarship also emerges from a pervasive notion of life and life’s inherent interrelatedness (e.g., Wilson, 2008). Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018), for example, iterates the essential essence of what Braidotti calls ontological pacifism with reference to an Indigenous relationship with Ancestors: “giving proper respect to the Ancestors isn’t just good manners, it’s also good sense for the course of one’s own life, as any harm introduced into the network of relationships will affect every participant, living and dead alike” (p. 124).³

The fragility of human life (*bios*) and the necessity of death present a compelling reason to study death. Understanding and coming to terms with our own mortality is one thing, but living-with the imminence of that mortality is another—one that can perhaps help move us beyond understandings of human existence as somehow special or unique (i.e., beyond anthropocentrism). Indeed, life’s fragility is not something to be raged against—Dylan Thomas poems aside—but rather something to be appreciated in complex, localized, specific, and nuanced ways, both in terms of the human and in terms of the non-human others who co-habit the agentive assemblages that form our subjectivity in life and in death. This “living-with” mortality, non-human and more-than-human others, and the mortality of those others, requires active attention—attending and mourning, as suggested later in this paper.

While posthuman death remains a necessary condition for the survival of *bios* (lest we fall victim to the megalomania of the transhumanists discussed above), posthuman life is anything but fragile. *Zoe* is an unstoppable force second to no other (Braidotti, 2013). Even the seemingly inexhaustible technologies of the third millennium, whose blunt thinking power vastly exceeds our own, whose energy seems boundless, and whose presence seems relentless, fall short in comparison to the power of *zoe* (Braidotti, 2013). Though *bios* is rightfully limited temporally and spatially, *zoe* is boundless. Even in death, *zoe* shows relentless continuance through generational renewal (Rose, 2012) and the agency of the assemblage that forms the corpse (Edwards, 2018)—a signifier of *bios*’ absence replete with *zoe*.

The Corpse

The notion of *zoe* suggests that, when humans die, life continues; “death ... is not final, as *zoe* carries on, relentlessly” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 130). As noted above, the potential of *zoe* vastly exceeds the human and its co-present biological, geological, and technological others. In that, *zoe* carries the potential to do harm—“*zoe* is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that constitutes single subjects” (p. 130)—and we can only try to catch a ride on the boundless cosmic energy of *zoe*. Death is the posthuman subject’s transition to becoming-corpse (Edwards, 2018), a vital corpse (Braidotti, 2013) replete with *zoe*. Remembering that the posthuman subject is not the unitary, fragmented subject of psychoanalysis (and much of curriculum theory for that matter), but rather an agentic assemblage, it becomes possible to imagine the ways our interconnections with other living matter might continue after death. In the specific material instance of the human corpse, life continues through the human microbiome and particularly gut bacteria, which proliferate after death and contribute to the body’s decomposition and, ultimately, the liquification of flesh, organs, and other soft tissues (DeBruyn & Hauther, 2017). While anthropocentric bias does not often allow for understanding human bodies in this

way, the function of bodily decomposition to the wider ecological world suggests that the remains of animals and insects serve as valuable sources of nutrients for plant life (Metcalf et al., 2016)—so too does the human corpse (Deloria, 1994). In this way, the relentlessness of *zoe* can harm through its demand for death, but again, this is not something that can be raged against, as death is written into the core of us as genetically mortal beings.

Ego haunts this conversation of death. Surely, I—the author, the teacher, the human—am more important than life of an eggplant! Braidotti (2013) responds through the Deleuzian distinction between personal death as an arresting of the ego (the end of “I”) and impersonal death as a temporal threshold to the capacity to become. The former is obviously a marker of anthropocentric visions of life—that “I” am somehow unique or special, and my death is significant. The latter, however, is a vision of death more in tune with posthumanism via the acknowledgement that our perceptual end is not an end at all, but rather a transition to different forms of life. Indeed, with playfulness, Braidotti (2013) suggests that life itself is a gift, not a right or something to which we are entitled: “Life is passing and we do not own it; *we just inhabit it*, not unlike a timeshare location” (p. 133, emphasis added). Posthumanism, then, acknowledges the impersonal nature of death not as a sacred call for the death of the ego as alleviation of suffering (see Kumar & Downey, 2018), but as a manifestation of the ontologically immanent relationship between the posthuman subject and vital matter more broadly (Braidotti, 2013). This does not mean that death is a return to the body’s natural state, but rather an overflowing of potential becoming:

Death is the becoming-imperceptible of the posthuman subject and as such it is part of the cycles of becoming, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces. The impersonal is life and death as *bios/zoe* in us—the ultimate outside as the frontier of the incorporeal: becoming-imperceptible. (Braidotti, 2013, p. 137)

Posthumanism’s impersonal death is a becoming-imperceptible (Braidotti, 2006, 2013)—a material and affective blending of our human body into the humus of life (Haraway, 2016). All things will eventually give way to the power of *zoe*; all things will eventually become indistinguishable from *zoe*. We will eventually cross this threshold of becoming. The cosmic roar of life will eventually bring us into new being (and subsequently new becoming), and we are only along for the ride.

This inexhaustible quality of life, the inevitability of it overrunning our human form, and the continuation of life through our corpse offer an appreciation of the simultaneous significance and insignificance of our material remains. The corpse, historically speaking, has been—when deemed human—treated with the utmost respect and reverence (significance), despite being materially indistinct from that which we deem waste (insignificant). This is, I think, because of the liminal status of the corpse as having been human. Kristeva (1982) said the liminality of the corpse brings about discomfort and uncertainty around it, but a socio-historical reading such as Laqueur’s (2015), for example, supports the notion that the corpse’s liminality acts as a sort of corpse-power, compelling the living to attend to it with care and reverence. The corpse is treated as waste, but as a special waste that was once alive—once “ourselves”. When this reading is introduced to the logic of vital materialism, which decenters the human, as well as ontological pacifism (Braidotti, 2013), which encourages us to do no damage to any life (see also Butler, 2020; Justice, 2018), care and

reverence for the corpse is intuitively extended to waste more broadly, not just to that which is considered *human* remains.

Indeed, troubling the category of the human in this particular way opens up the possibility of pervasive grievability (Butler, 2020). Grievability is the capacity for a loss to be marked as a loss, and access to that grievability is socially unequal. Not all humans experience death in the same ways; some losses cannot be felt, and those losses are routinely from communities marginalized for their gender, sexuality, or race. Examples abound: unmarked graves, lost cemeteries, and desecrated bodies. To be ungrieved in the way described by Butler (2020) is a form of dehumanization, and it answers the question, “What happens when a corpse isn’t seen as human?” As above, however, when the category of the human is disrupted, grievability becomes pervasive. We can begin to mark losses not previously felt, human and otherwise.

Here my focus is on the otherwise. In this frame, the human corpse and our socio-historical attention to it offers a precise model of an environmental ethic—a model of attending to waste. Simply put, our historical attention to and attending of the “human” corpse shows us how we ought to engage with waste. In the subsequent section, I will elaborate this environmental ethic and the practice of attending to waste.

Attending to Waste and an Environmental Ethic

One definition of dirt is the idea that it is “matter out of place” (Douglas, 2013, p. 44; Liboiron, 2019, para. 1). In my reading, this notion opens up the possibility of a non-judgmental understanding of dirt. In the doxa of Western society, if something is dirty, it is read in a negative context—dirt ought to be cleaned or gotten rid of. But to me, the notion of dirt as matter out of place invites a consideration of dirt as simply, and non-judgmentally, something where it ought not to be. It would be all too easy to say that waste can also be thought of as matter out of place, that the corpse is a waste matter that we have an ethical duty to put in its place, and that we ought to follow the same logic with *all* our waste. But waste is not matter out of place—at least not uncomplicatedly so.

Liboiron (2019) identifies three different uses of the phrase “matter out of place” within the emerging literature of discard studies: uses related to the spatial, the material, and social power. A consideration of social power calls to mind the waste-making function of advanced capitalism (Bauman, 2007); “where there is a system of power, there are necessarily rejected elements (or dirt)” (Liboiron 2019, para. 13). The material usage is complicated by social power through society’s normalization and legalization of particular “dirty” practices: “Things that appear merely technical, procedural, or material may be either dirt or anti-dirt, depending on their relations to existing power structures” (Liboiron, 2019, para. 22). Pollution serves as a clear example of something that can be alternatively viewed as “dirty” or “clean” based on individual perspectives; ironically, the same could be said for the material facts of an environmental protest. Here, it is necessary to state that capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and other power structures have a consumptive and appropriative quality, where that which is originally intended to be subversive can be brought into the fold of the system under less threatening guises. The capitalist commodification of punk culture evident through the emergence of *Hot Topic* and related brands is one noted example (Hanks, 2018); the institutionalization and instrumentalization of anti-racist, Indigenous, and critical pedagogies is another (i.e., Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). In the context of the material usage of “matter out of place,” waste can be seen as an anti-dirt; a form of

dirt the system deems acceptable in order to keep itself in power. To quote Liboiron (2019) again: “environmental pollution and other forms of uneven material distribution are not an accidental by-product of capitalism, colonialism, and other power structures, but central to maintaining them as the systems that they are: the creators of anti-dirt” (para. 24). Likewise, the spatial use of “matter out of place” can also serve the interests of the systems that hold oppression in place. Litter, for example, seems by definition to be matter out of place, yet as Liboiron points out, litter is a spatial category for waste that gives it a place—a place that takes focus away from the issue of industrial production of non-biodegradable disposable goods. For Liboiron, waste is not matter out of place—at least not when it is given a place within systems of domination.

With this critique sustained, I think waste can still be seen as matter out of place, provided the systems of oppression that hold space for waste in order to sustain themselves are defamiliarized (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). By this I mean that if the spatial and material categories into which waste can be placed are made to feel odd by deconstructing the contexts and systems that legitimize them, all waste is out of place. This becomes particularly clear given a vital materialist understanding of matter—which Liboiron denounces in passing. Under vital materialism, all matter, including waste matter, is alive and, given the relationality and ontological pacifism forwarded by Braidotti (2013, 2019), we, the complex assemblage of vital matter that comprises the posthuman subject, have a relational obligation to the matter of our waste. Indeed, this relational ethic begs us not to see it as waste at all, but rather as matter out of place meant in my original, non-judgemental sense—as something that demands our attention, our understanding, and action on our part. We must carry our waste to its place—not in the neglectful doxa of Western society, where we flush or dump away our waste into what we experience phenomenologically as a sort of ecological netherworld (see also Žižek, 2006), but rather in a relationally accountable sense, where the life of our waste is respected and where we attend to its various stages of becoming. We should observe, be compelled by, and be affected by its compost-ing, to borrow Haraway’s (2016) terminology. We ought to be becoming-*with* waste rather than simply becoming it.

Furthermore, I would suggest that, just as the corpse has a sort of political and affective corpse-power that works on the human world, waste has a similar sort of power—waste-power—which has been diminished by way of its perceived inanimacy, just as the corpse-power of those (wrongfully) deemed inhuman is diminished. In my thinking, the current movement toward ontological pacifism (Braidotti, 2013; see also Butler, 2020; Justice, 2018) is a call to acknowledge waste-power—to attend to it and to be compelled by it. As above, waste-power can teach us all sorts of things about our unconscious habits and biases through a sort of defamiliarization of our discard practices. This attention to waste-power, then, offers a direction to environmental curricula—and an environmental direction to curricula as well. As above, a close socio-historical reading of our treatment of the corpse (e.g., Laqueur, 2015) can form a model of how we ought to engage with our waste—in blanket terms: with relationality, respect, and reverence.

I recognize that this is rather impractical—or at least profoundly uncomfortable—but it is significant precisely for that reason. This moment demands a project of curricular futurity in the face of imminent precarity. What is needed today is creative response-ability, dreaming, and the envisionment of new curricular possibilities. We need creative, speculative theorizing. The above discussion of attending to the corpse and attending to waste, then, is just that: a materialization through language of a dreamed curricular future—far beyond the present reality, but intimately responsive to it.

Having now gestured toward the environmental ethic emergent from posthuman attention to the corpse, as well as elaborated what I call waste-power and encouraged a deep attention to our discard practices, I now turn toward the curriculum of change. At this point, my discussion has been rather abstract and rooted in theory outside of curriculum. Toward engaging more directly in curriculum theory, I discuss two intra-related pedagogical ideas emergent from the preceding discussion: mourning and attending.

Mourning and Attending

When I began working with undergraduate students, I was often asked if attendance at a particular class or event was mandatory. What was not said in the question spoke louder than what was. With the experience of having taught a few courses, I began to address the issue of attendance before being asked. Attendance is mandatory, I told them. But more than that, attendance is a privilege, and it comes with responsibilities. Attendance does not mean showing up. That is just the first step. Attendance demands active attention—attention as an ongoing verb: attending. Attending, in my usage, implies an active engagement with the generative and transformative possibilities of a conversation, a moment, an event, a person, a relationship, or a phenomenon. Carl Leggo and Rita Irwin (2018), in one of the last pieces published before Carl's death, "Ways of Attending: Art and Poetry," demonstrate this notion of attending through ekphrastic conversation. Carl poetically attended to Rita's photography; Rita photographically attended to Carl's poetry. They were moved and changed by what they saw in the other, but this could only happen because of the trust, reciprocity, and openness of their relationship. I think of this as a relational aesthetic⁴—the beauty held in the space of relationship, beauty that can only exist within that intimacy—and this is what I offer to, and ask of, the students with whom I work.

Others engage this idea of attending from their own perspectives. Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) encourage educators to be attentive to various intra-actions and particularly those on a smaller scale; teachers ought not to attend solely to the very big interactions of humans, but also to the small, microbial ones. Attending asks for the *active* capacity and willingness to be changed by what we encounter; it is an openness to the intra-actions of life manifest both internally and externally. What I call "attending," Haraway (2012, 2016) might name our capacity to "stay" with those negative feelings of uncertainty and call it a form of response-ability—the capacity for care and response. Indeed, the notion of response-ability is helpful as well, in that it reminds educators to be open, vulnerable, and capable of responding to what is in front of us not with answers, but with curiosity and care.

This active attending is modeled in our socio-historical engagement with the corpse through burial practices. Think of the Western funeral as an example: The recently departed is venerated, elevated, and exposed through a viewing; the living are invited to speak of the departed and share memories; those who remain are expected to "say goodbye." These rituals have profound affective power for the living; they are transformative moments of reflection on what has been and what will be. At their best, funerals are charged moments of honest vulnerability—moments of extreme intra-activity (Barad, 2007). They change us. These are the moments that attending seeks—moments of openness to being affected and affecting others (Davies, 2014). Personal change is at the heart of curriculum theory (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), and many have acknowledged the potential violence associated with such change (e.g., Biesta, 2006; Boler, 1999; Christou &

Wearing, 2015; Nellis, 2018). Indeed, as Nellis (2018) notes, in change there is loss; loss demands mourning.

Robert Nellis (2009) states that “meaningful learning becomes a process of aporetic mourning” (p. 124). Nellis’ characterization of mourning as aporia, an unresolvable logical tension, moves mourning outside fixed temporality into the Derridean realm of existence and non-existence, where neither is true, both are true, and each is haunted by the other. Mourning is impossible “in the sense that we bear the ghosts of our mourning with us forever, just as our mournings bear us with them” (p. 130), but in as much as it is impossible, it is haunted by possibility, even inevitability: “Change calls for impossible mourning, and such mourning calls for patience” (p. 130). If attending asks us to open ourselves up to the possibilities of being changed, mourning reminds us that such changes are painful and that that to which we say goodbye in change never really leaves us. Like trauma, the specters of old selves recur in unpredictable moments, and Nellis advises that “one response is to learn to live with [our] ghosts” (p. 130). The language of haunting and the language of mourning have taken on negative connotations, but there is nothing inherently negative about either experience. These hauntings are not the ghost stories of youth, but the excitement of new possibilities and ways of being with/in the world. Our mournings are markers of the capacity for radical hope (Lear, 2006)—the capacity to find meaning after all that one knows as possible has ceased to exist. The new will always be haunted by the old, but this is no reason to become stuck in nostalgia. Mourning is moving forward but doing so in a way that honours that which we carry with us.

Attending, then, is an active seeking of change, and mourning is its haunting other that demands we say goodbye to the old when embracing the new.⁵ The two work together in moments of change, and I think we forget that. Learning is often seen as a positive. Whether through progressive education, developmentalism, or even emancipatory education, there is always an expectation that learning will yield desirable results. Nellis (2018), however, reminds us that “if I am to open my mind, heart, and arms to new possibilities, I am called upon to change, to say hello to new selves and goodbye to old. This is a loss, and loss calls for mourning” (p. 55). There can be no change without loss. There can be no learning without loss. Attending, through its closeness to mourning, sees this inevitability and seeks change anyway. Attending is a becoming-imperceptible and a seeking of authentic relationship with the non-human others co-present within the subject. It is stepping into the cosmic force of *zoe*, watching “I” melt away in favour of an embodied, embedded, and entangled “we”. It is terrifying, yet we must continue. In this way, it is something of an affirmative pedagogy. In order to capture that, I will conclude this paper by discussing Braidotti’s (2019) notion of affirmative ethics.

Affirmative Ethics

I began this article by highlighting the fragility of human life, and the necessity of death to the ecological world but also to the continuity of human life as we know it. I have also suggested that the force of *zoe* is exponentially greater than the human capacity to experience life and that we are only able to catch a brief ride on its inexhaustible flow (Braidotti, 2013). I have discussed the precarity of human existence in the current socio-environmental moment and the affective exhaustion caused by accelerating technological change. This all may paint a rather bleak picture of contemporary life and, by extension, may beg the haunting question of how we can continue to teach—how we can carry on—in these precarious times.

While we all have personal responses to the above and my own change frequently, the one I forward here is inspired by, but not necessarily beholden to, Braidotti's (2013, 2019) notion of affirmative ethics. Spinoza's formation of monism was initially a response to Cartesian duality and was later revived by poststructuralists as a way of escaping the binaries and dialectic of Hegel and Marx, whose work formed something of a doxa within the intellectual trends of the moment (Braidotti, 2013). Braidotti (2013, 2019), in my reading, picks up on this philosophical positioning of monism with regard to ethics and, from that position, escapes the duality between negativity and positivity by way of the affirmative.

I think negativity has its place as a part of the affirmative. If we attend actively to it, negativity drives an understanding of the state of things as they are, particularly social processes of marginalization. Negativity, however, need not dominate our perspective, even as critical theorists. That which is generally perceived as negative can be reframed in the affirmative as a part of the reality to which we must respond. We need not judge the negative, but rather acknowledge it as it is and "get on with it," where "it" is the work of building something better. There is a resilience or endurance embedded in this notion, but affirmative ethics is relational in nature and driven by creativity, collaboration, and humility as well. Where the phrase "ontological pacifism" used above may suggest a sort of neutrality and inaction, affirmative ethics is an active and collaborative envisioning of something beyond, but responsive to, what is; it is a form of response-ability marked by attending to and modulating negativity.

This notion of affirmative ethics is particularly clear in discussions of the conditions of advanced capitalism. While there are many sound critiques of capitalism, in the context of curriculum theory, neoliberal ideological intrusion into schooling is particularly problematic:

Neoliberalism is one of the most insidious incarnations of capitalist logic which informs social, economic, and educational policies in most parts of the contemporary world. With its emphasis on prescriptive and scripted curricula, standardized testing, and corporatization of public education, it has proven itself extremely deleterious to a rich and meaningful educational experience for students and their teachers. (Kumar, 2019, p. 235)

While Kumar and many others are completely dismissive of Western neoliberal capitalism with good reason, the affirmative, in my reading, asks us to be *both* highly critical of and willing to work with (to move beyond) the constraints of advanced capitalism; the affirmative aims to be both realistic and hopeful, critical *and* creative. Here, I read Braidotti's acknowledgement of the problems with the posthuman convergence alongside her seemingly relentless willingness to continue in the face of those problems, rather than becoming resigned to their conditions, as a definitive example of the affirmative ethics she envisions.

I suspect teachers will find this affirmative ethic inviting because it offers agency regarding social issues often seen as insurmountable. I also worry that in endorsing it widely, the profession will take it up as a blindness to critical issues endemic to the fabric of Western society and as a justification for continuing with the status quo. As noted earlier, social structures (e.g., capitalism, patriarchy, settler colonialism) can consume subversive ideologies, acts, or cultures making certain versions of them acceptable. This happens continuously in education, where theories meant to critique the system are taken up by it in ways that work only to sustain the system itself (see Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). In my view, this has been the trap into which both the social reconceptualization of curriculum theory and the related field of critical pedagogy have fallen and is perhaps a source of the theory fatigue manifest in Western society broadly (Braidotti, 2019) and

education specifically. To me, affirmative ethics does not mean we are not critical, nor that we continue with the status quo—indeed, the exact opposite is true. It means we understand and spend time with (attend to) the messy, sticky, complex problems of injustice, oppression, and inequality and remain willing to work with them. It is not a turning away from issues, but rather a turning toward them with a persistent willingness to envision something better.

Amid the changing world of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the fragility of human life is on full display, we are faced with the uncomfortably imminent possibility of death. The inequality endemic to Western society fueled by advanced capitalism as a global organizing structure comes into sharp relief in examining the possibility of death. Those deemed as waste, those considered or made superfluous to the mechanisms of global production, are by far the most likely to die (Bauman, 2007). We, as a collectivity of transversal subject assemblages (Braidotti, 2013), are called upon to respond through our teaching, our theorizing, and our living.

Our responses must be affirmative. We cannot afford to become immobilized by fear, exhaustion, anxiety, and anger. We cannot become so critical as to slip into cynical nihilism or apathy. The students with whom we work cannot afford it either. The affirmative asks us to “[stay] with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016, title) of our times and turn toward our collective social discomfort *together*, in solidarity: attending our differences and mourning each other lost. We are not here for a long time, but we are here—a life. We can acknowledge the reality of our death and work within that limit to envision new realities—new forms of living-with and becoming-with the life all around us.

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Notes

1. My usage of “we” is not meant to erase or minimize the multiple differences experienced by human beings. In this paper, “we” denotes variously comprised heterogeneous assemblages inclusive of the multiplicity of posthuman subjectivity. It aims toward “... a collective subject as the ‘we’ who are not one and the same, [but who] are in *this* posthuman predicament together” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 13).
2. Not all deep ecologists were so bold. Many simply respected nature on its own terms, not through the lens of the human. Furthermore, some of the more radical deep ecologists were blatantly racist in their assertions of who should die (Bookchin & Foreman, 1991).
3. The critique of new materialisms, that they offer a Western appropriation of Indigenous thought without paying due respect (Todd, 2016), has also been levied at curriculum theory (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Sabzalian, 2018). Despite the emphasis Braidotti (2022) gives to Indigenous feminisms in her recent work, this critique remains a sticking point for me in my alignment with both posthumanism and curriculum theory, with which I have attempted to wrestle in other writing (see Downey, 2022b).
4. My usage of this term is not directly related, but is in some ways responsive, to the term “relational aesthetics” put forward by French curator Nicholas Bourriaud in the 1990s. Bourriaud defines his use of the term as such: “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113). My characterization above seems less rigid, to me.
5. For related discussions of mourning, see my other writing on the subject (Downey, 2020, 2022a).

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