

Tehomic Theology and Agential Realism: A Diffractive Reading

"I concentrated attention on the bodies themselves and gave a more critical examination to the mutability by which they cease to be what they were and begin to be what they were not. I suspected that this passing from form to form took place by means of something that had no form, yet was not absolutely nothing. I wanted to know, not to suspect. If my voice and pen were to confess to you all that you disentangled for me in examining this question, no reader would have the patience to follow the argument."

wow, well found.

-St. Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 248-9

In Book XII of the *Confessions*, meditating on creation, Augustine determines that God must have formed the world not *ex nihilo* (from nothing), but from some formless, primal "matter." Reflecting on this word, which he had "heard... before but did not understand," Augustine promptly notices the futility of looking for an *unformed* matter in any of the corporeal forms he can conjure up in his mind. Instead, he locates this elusive material in the transitions between the forms, in their "mutability." "For a moment," writes Catherine Keller, "in the space of this nothing full of something, a counter-ontology seems to emerge... But after tantalizing us with this tehomic voyeurism (after long exhibitionism), Augustine leaves us in its dark. His 'heart' retreats into a 'hymn of praise for those things which it cannot dictate.' He refuses to publish *this* dark—and apparently shame-free—secret" (Keller, p. 75). And, within a few sentences, Augustine reverts to the *ex nihilo* doctrine he seems to have just ruled out: "In the beginning, that is from yourself, in your wisdom which is begotten of your substance, you made something and made it out of nothing" (Augustine, p. 249).

isn't it remarkable?

What is it about thinking God's agency as inextricably linked to a space of transition—material yet formless, existent yet un-representable—that is so dangerous that Augustine feels the need to hastily retreat from giving a more thorough account of this space? And might there be something in the risk of such a space that nevertheless opens

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up a domain of profound—and material—import for thinking? These two questions guide Catherine Keller's work of (de)/constructive theology, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*.

nice way to put it —

In what follows, I explore the material space of transition Keller calls *tehom* (echoing Verse 2 of Genesis) both conceptually and methodologically by putting her text into dialogue with Karen Barad's seminal work of philosophy-physics, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Barad offers an account of agency, materiality, and relationality that has a great deal of common ground with Keller's theology. Although these commonalities appear in the contexts of seemingly disparate projects ((de)/constructive theology and experimental/philosophical metaphysics, respectively), a close look at *how* these projects differ and *why* these differences matter will prove fruitful in illuminating the potentials of both texts.

My approach to reading these two texts with critical attention to their significant differences will employ what Barad refers to as a diffractive methodology. The physical phenomenon of diffraction (the patterns produced when waves of different amplitudes interfere with one another) provides the inspiration for Barad's technique of putting insights from different disciplines into productive dialogue with one another and for her more far-reaching understanding of the world as the never finished play of significant differences. A diffractive methodology is one that attends to the relational nature of difference and marks not just "where differences appear but where the effects of differences appear" (Haraway, quoted in Barad, p. 72). My reading will focus on the effects of the differences between Keller and Barad's respective conceptions of materiality and alterity.

I. The Erasure of *Tehom* and Keller's Reinstatement of Depth

Keller traces a tradition of biblical hermeneutics that replaced the Genesis account of God creating the universe from some primal matter with a version in which God creates from nothing (*ex nihilo*), as a result of the threat that the former tradition was seen as posing to God's omnipotence. Tertullian, one of the proponents of the *ex nihilo* account, insisted on "the rule that what is eternal and unborn does not admit of any diminution and humiliation" by a primal Other whose existence would have to be coeternal with that of God (Keller, p. 48). But, as the opponents of the *ex nihilo* pointed out, insistence on God's omnipotence severely restricted an account of his benevolence, since "a God who creates everything from nothing is responsible for evil" (Keller, p. 48). Attempting to maintain a theodicean account of creation, Hermogenes thus suggested that God created the world not from nothing but from some preexistent matter. Hermogenes, like Augustine, thought that this matter had to be a "third genus" that was neither corporeal nor incorporeal, neither good nor evil. His contemporaries, however, had no tolerance for the subtlety of this binary-effacing logic—matter had to be either absolutely good or absolutely evil, and God either omnipotent or completely powerless—and so these early Church fathers established the *ex nihilo* doctrine as the mainstream interpretation of Genesis for the next several centuries of Western Christians.

Keller offers a theological account of creation and creativity more broadly that aims to restore the significance of *tehom* ("the deep" of Genesis 2) as co-constitutive of God's agency. This account replaces the emphasis on origin at the heart of Western onto-

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theology with a *topos* of “beginnings.” Beginnings are decisive (*de-cisere*—cut from), cutting away from their constitutive exclusions at the same time that they recognize their inextricable connection to these exclusions. “A cloud of missed possibilities envelops every beginning: it is always *this* beginning, *this* universe and *not* some other. Decision lacks innocence. Around its narrations gather histories of grievance: what possibilities were excluded?” (Keller, p. 160). The fact that decision is never innocent also means that beginnings are never final—Keller points out that the notion of an absolute future (*telos*) is a product of the same logic of unmediated intentionality that underlies the notion of an absolute origin (*arche*) (Keller, p. 20).

Attempting to balance her critique of both originality and finality with her commitment to a *topos* of depth in theological discourse, Keller carefully reads and reworks a poststructuralist trope of surface and depth. A number of thinkers in recent decades, notably Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, have problematized the notion of depth as the antithesis of the surface of a text—as a putative originary intent that would mark the end of the play of interpretation. For Derrida, “There is no maintaining, and no depth to, [the] bottomless chessboard upon which Being is put into play” (quoted in Keller, p. 164). Keller, by contrast, thinks depth not in terms of an interpretation’s mimetic relation to a foundational meaning, but as a space of potentiality that both capacitates and resists hermeneutical closure.

Keller’s tehomitic appropriation of deconstruction shows up simplistic caricatures of the method as anti-materialist. While Keller does indeed want to call into question the innate reference of interpretation to a matter outside the text, this disruption is capacitated by and enacted in the name of the preservation of another “matter”—a space of

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indeterminacy that provides the groundless ground for all possible interpretations at the same time that it effaces them:

“For a tehomitic theology... the deconstruction of the absolute Logos of the *ex nihilo* yields an otherness of cosmos bottomlessly preceding and exceeding human language. That we cannot grasp that otherness without caricaturing it... does not render it insignificant. The excess and deficiency of significance marks itself as a chaos *vis-à-vis* any totality; it gathers its dimensions here under the sign of the tehom. Biblically it precedes any *logos* and so any cosmos—*bereshit*, God has not yet spoken” (Keller, p. 165).

II. Matter and Agency in Barad’s Onto-Ethics

Like Keller, Barad avoids thinking “matter” as the passive referent of language or thought—as the foundational, originary outside of interpretation. “Matter,” she writes, “is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity. Phenomena come to matter through this process of ongoing intra-activity. That is, *matter refers to the materiality and materialization of phenomena*, not to an assumed, inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects” (Barad, p. 210). What is at stake in thinking matter as iterative and agential—that is, as *materialization*—becomes clear in a passage in which Barad offers an alternative to Judith Butler’s view that different discursive practices produce different kinds of materialities:

“Agential realism circumvents the problem of different materialities: there is no need to postulate different materialities (i.e., materialities that are inherently of different kinds), and so there is no mystery about how the materiality of language could ever possibly affect the materiality of the body. According to agential realism, there aren’t separate kinds of materiality and so the linkage between discursive practices and their materializing effects on bodies is not at all mysterious; discursive practices are materially efficacious, to the extent that they are, because there is a *causal* linkage between them, which is to be understood in terms of the causality of intra-actions” (Barad, p. 211).

Because Barad defines matter as materialization—as the *iterative intra-activity* of the world—it makes no sense in her terms to talk about different kinds of materialities, since “matter” already refers to the process of things materializing differently, according to the iterative production of agential cuts in phenomena (more on this below). Matter in this sense is not any particular materialization of the world but rather the process of the world materializing in different ways—a conception that evokes Augustine’s notion of matter as the medium for the “passing from one form to the next”.

Barad’s definition of matter as dynamic substance frames an account of agency —

that goes beyond the circumscriptive alternatives of either absolute determinism or unmediated freedom—a project she shares with Keller and Hermogenes, among others.

Matter for Barad is simultaneously (and non-contradictorily) the condition of both the ongoing stability of particular patterns of phenomena and of their radical potential for destabilization. Thinking matter as “iterative intra-activity” means that the materialization

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of phenomena is continually re-iterated from one moment to the next. Patterns are stable only insofar as they are re-iterated with the same agential cuts, the same exclusions, and the same materially instantiated concepts. Stability is thus best described not in terms of an originary node of intentionality but rather in terms of ongoing beginnings *in medias res*. But if the dynamism of matter—its capacity to be iteratively configured with the same cuts—is the condition for the reproducibility and stability of phenomena, it also radically exposes them to potential destabilization. The fact that agential separability is by definition *enacted* means that ontological indeterminacy is never resolved once and for all. The very iterability that conditions the stability of patterns of phenomena is characterized by a radical indeterminacy that allows phenomena to be iterated in new ways, with new cuts, new exclusions, and new materially embedded concepts. ✓✓

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Agency and accountability for Barad are bound up with this indeterminacy. We are accountable to the indeterminacy of the agential cuts that determine what show up as “subjects” (agencies of observation) and “objects” in particular phenomena, as well as to the indeterminacy of the “back boundary” of phenomena that determines which bodies show up as excluded, as not mattering or as unintelligible within a particular configuration. Barad locates agency in this space of indeterminacy, in the non-final nature of all exclusions: “Agency is the space of possibilities opened up by the indeterminacies entailed in exclusions” (Barad, p. 182). Agency on this account cannot be a quality possessed by the human subject, since agency is tied to a space of indeterminacy that disrupts any claim to the discrete identity of the subject. Rather, Barad provocatively suggests an understanding of agency as coterminous with *matter itself*:

“Matter is an agential factor in its iterative materialization” (Barad, p. 178).

Great. |

III. Apophaticism and Alterity: Mapping the Effects of Difference

✓✓ So what are the differences between Barad's approach to philosophy-physics and Keller's approach to (de)/constructive theology, and more importantly, what are the effects of these differences—why do they matter (if they do)? One point of contact as well as significant difference lies in the precise nature of the spaces that Keller and Barad call "tehom" and "matter," respectively, and particularly of the simultaneously stabilizing and destabilizing character of these spaces. An already cited passage from Keller's *Face of the Deep* gets to the heart of the difference between her understanding of matter and Barad's:

"For a tehomic theology... the deconstruction of the absolute Logos of the *ex nihilo* yields an otherness of cosmos bottomlessly preceding and exceeding human language. That we cannot grasp that otherness without caricaturing it... does not render it insignificant" (Keller, p. 165).

As we have seen, Barad frames accountability not in terms of a bottomless otherness of "the world" but rather in terms of the space of exclusion opened by particular material configurations of the world. Barad locates agency in this space of indeterminacy, in the non-final nature of all exclusions. This means that in her ethico-ontology, what we are accountable to is not "the world" outside of our grasp but possibilities for the ongoing materialization of the world that are contingently excluded by our current practices—we

are accountable to a world that is radically inseparable from our grasp, including the constitutive exclusions this world necessarily entails.

At the same time, Barad's conception of matter as a dynamic *substance* raises the question of whether her account might contain the seed of some notion of accountability not just to particular exclusions, but to the indeterminacy of matter *as such*. In order to get a sense of what such a speculative notion of accountability might look like, consider the following passage from an essay by Pheng Cheah on the role of materiality in Derrida's thought. This passage explores the difference and relationship between two notions of alterity in Derrida:

"It would not be inappropriate to speak of deconstruction as a materialism of the other, or more precisely, as the thought of the materiality of the reference or relation to the other. This relation to alterity is more material than matter as substance or presence because it is more fundamental or "infrastructural," so to speak, since it constitutes matter as such. Simply put, Derrida's argument is that the very presence of matter—its persistence, endurance, or being in time—is premised on there being such a thing as a true gift of time, or, which is the same thing, a pure event. As finite beings, we cannot give ourselves time. Under conditions of radical finitude, where we cannot refer to an infinite presence that can give us time, time can only be thought as the gift of an absolute other that is unrepresentable but that leaves a trace in the order of presence even as the phenomenalization, appearance, or presentation of the other is also its violation (Cheah, "Nondialectical Materialism," p. 146)."

Our existence in time, for Derrida, is conditioned by a relation to an absolute Other that we, by definition, never encounter in experience; this Other leaves its trace in the face of the other we do encounter. Barad, by contrast, does not think accountability outside of the space of exclusion enacted by particular practices—there is no quasi-apophatic accountability to the absolute Other of which the face of the other we do encounter is the trace for agential realism, as there is for Derrida and Keller.

What might be the comparative effects of these different figurations of alterity? For Derrida, what is at stake in thinking radical alterity as the condition for our material being in time is no less than an ethical imperative of the impossible:

“[The im-possible] announces itself; it precedes me, swoops down upon and seizes me here and now in a non-virtualizable way, in actuality and not potentiality.

It comes upon me from on high, in the form of an injunction that does not simply wait on the horizon, that I do not see coming, that never leaves me in peace and never lets me put it off until later. *Such an urgency cannot be idealized any more than the other as other can. The im-possible is thus not a (regulative) idea or ideal. It is what is most undeniably real. And sensible. Like the other. Like the irreducible and inappropriable différance of the other*” (Derrida, quoted in Cheah, p. 149; emphasis added).

Thinking the sensible other as the trace of an absolute, un-encounterable Other matters insofar as the absolute Other is what gives us time, and therefore what gives the other in

time as "undeniably real... inappropriate *différance*." So perhaps the risk of a non-apophatic account of alterity, such as Barad's, is that it might lead us to believe that accountability is possible, that it is something we can do, rather than an impossible gift of the absolute Other. On the other hand, Barad locates agency not in the subject but in the space of radical indeterminacy opened by the iterability of matter. Barad manages to decentralize agency in a way that gives us a relationship to the other as *différance*, while avoiding language that might suggest that we are accountable to anyone or anything besides the face of the other we actually encounter. We do not distort or caricature this face by encountering it, because while this encounter is indeed the gift of a tenuous space of sorts, we are ultimately accountable only to this face and not to its source.

Zachary -

A brave and very compelling paper. The big issue for me here is simply that Keller drops out of the mix; the essay ends up being more about Barad/Derrida than Barad/Keller. By heading to JD via Cheah, the essay misses the account of materialization in Keller, which is to say complication/explicitation/implication. Delving into those processes would have allowed for a more detailed analysis of the apophatic difference here. That said, I very much appreciate and enjoy what you've been able to do here.

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