

# **DIFFRACTIVE LINES AND BORDERLINES: A RESPONSE TO IRIS VAN DER TUIN'S "ON RESEARCH 'WORTHY OF THE PRESENT'"**

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AISHA RAVINDRAN

*Simon Fraser University*

## **Diffraction Lines and Borderlines: Response to Iris van der Tuin's "On Research 'Worthy of the Present'"**

Iris van der Tuin concludes her article with a provocative question: "Is there a need to draw the line?" I begin my response with this thought-provoking query, infused as it is with the ambiguity of language and the ontological paradox that undergirds her article. What does the line bring to theoretical contexts if we are to engage in a diffractive reading of the line? Does the line divide as a borderline, or trace the mirroring and replication of existing structures, patterns, or arborescent hierarchies? Is the line the flattened rhizomatic movement of networked horizontal connections and links, or is it the line of flight that ruptures, disconnects, and connects once again in iterative deterritorializations and reterritorializations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)? Do we draw the line between these lines, or is the line a word imbued with all of these diverse permutations and ramifications, an assemblage of dynamic and contingent meanings, at once a speculative imaginary that is empowering in its immanent possibility, and a degenerating enterprise in the desperation of the unattainable? In the context of the entanglement of data, machine, media, and the varied forms of the human and the non-human, drawing or not drawing a line has implications that are concomitantly constraining and liberatory.

In the current environment where the omnipresence of data generating and data storing machines and processes are conjoined with human lives, speed and change are foregrounded. Research 3.0 allows access to data and genealogical onto-epistemological progressions, but also allows the creation of dynamic cartographies. Cartographies open up the possibility of reading diffractively, finding new connections, and dismantling others. A cartography is not the exact replication of the original but a speculative and adaptable configuration of elements, an assemblage that is "coextensive with the whole social field" (Deleuze, 1999, p. 30). The diffractive quality of the map is its relationality, interferences (Barad, 2007), heterogeneity (Haraway, 1997), transversality (Van der Tuin, 2018), and the potential to connect through differences, such as between the institutionalized enclaves of the Humanities and the Sciences, to dismantle intransigent and restrictive epistemological borderlines. As Van der Tuin (2019) states, "the cartographical approach is one of the most...critical and creative responses to the neoliberal

corporatization of academia” (p. 10). How is this to be achieved or even speculated as we envisage the university as a “multiversity” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 179)? The cartographical approach also dismantles structured, striated, and gated communities of knowledge that are separated by their ideological, conceptual, epistemological, or theoretical incommensurability with each other in an either/or and a for/against rhetoric or binary, and bear the vestiges of the humanist pivot. This approach is embedded in the reconceptualization of literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where “quantum literacy” illuminates traditional notions through the entanglement of technology, data-production-storage-application machines, and informatics that configure the “algorithmic human condition” (Bühlmann, Colman, & Van der Tuin, 2017, p. 55). Within this transdisciplinary context, De Freitas (2018) envisages a new way of doing empirical research and theorizing across the disciplines through biosocial research and data garnered through “sensory technology” (p. 293), a pathway through “the more-than-human *so as to imagine* a future for the human” (p. 304, emphasis in original), in order to grapple with its challenges. What is the nature of the relationship between the structured, digitized and data-driven, and stratified entity that is the university, and the research generated from it? What changes and impact are effectuated within the world, from these theoretical reconceptualizations of the world that flow from the research contexts within academia? How do these “thinkings-in-the-act” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. viii) diffuse and disseminate meaning diffractively? Van der Tuin (2019) suggests that the response-ability of researchers is to bring the world into academia through the choice of appropriate research topics and theoretical drivers to enable change and “make a difference [in] our work” (p. 17). The process also requires mutuality and recursiveness, as academia has to connect with and move within the world, enabling and motivating change with a greater sense of responsibility and collaboration in the socio-cultural, environmental, and political realms, or change remains ineffectually hypothetical, enclosed, and separated from the world. Change, however, embeds both what was, and what could be in the present moment.

Braidotti (2013) argues that to be “worthy of the present” and being embodied and embedded within the conditions and spaces that are becoming *with* us in the present, a valid research pathway is to be grounded in “posthuman thought [that] inscribes the contemporary subject in its own historicity” (p.189). Here, Barad’s (2011, 2014) concept of *spacetime mattering* is an important illumination of human subjectivity as an assemblage that embodies all three elements as constant flow and affect. We see how Van der Tuin (2019) introduces some of the sources she cites not as static individuals but as becoming-subjects-assemblages: Braidotti is “Italy-born, Australia-raised, France-trained, and Netherlands-based;” Mbembe is “Cameroon-born and South Africa-based;” Wekker is the “Suriname-born Dutch feminist;” and Diawara, “Mali-born and New York-based.” Van der Tuin’s conceptualization of posthuman subjectivity is that of a nomadic, multiplicitous, and rhizomatic assemblage.

My subjectivity unfolds a diffractive reading of Van der Tuin (2019) that allows epistemological pathways to proliferate rhizomatically through its *suddenness* (Van der Tuin, 2017), the interferences and patterns emerging through Mazzei’s (2014) theoretical intertextuality, Miller’s (1977) relationship between critic and host/guest and host, Derridean

(1978) epistemological coalescence of *différence* and deferral, a Gadamerian (1997) fusion of horizons, and Barad's (2007) coalescing intra-activity. Miller (1997) writes about the paradoxical relationship between host and guest that "is always a chain, ... in which there is always something earlier or something later to which any part of the chain ... refers .... [in] that strange opposition which is of intimate kinship and at the same time of enmity" (p. 444). How does historicity become a pathway to a transformatory world when the histories of the oppressor and the oppressed remain intertwined cartographies? Deleuze and Guattari (1987) state, while identifying differences between the tracing and the map that cartographies are not static reproductions like tracings, but possess protean versatility. However, they also state that "It is a question of method: *the tracing should always be put back on the map* (p.13, emphasis in original), as one form is imbued with traces of the other, thus dismantling the dualism and discreteness that may be inferred in the definition of the two terms.

Mbembe's (2017) explication of paradoxical difference and similarity in the human condition and the movement towards renewal and regeneration is akin to indigenous scholar Tuck's (2009) call for a "moratorium on damage-centred research" that represents indigenous communities as "*only* damaged, as *only* broken" (p. 422, emphasis in original). She seeks, as in "standpoint theory 3.0" (Van der Tuin, 2019, p. 12), researcher acknowledgment of *survivance*, a term that suggests empowered resistance and renewal that is "simultaneously an acknowledgment of historic pain and taking action against that pain in order to reframe that history" (Tuck, 2009, p. 424). The relational ontology of new materialism connects and links concepts, time past and future in the present, location, and narratives and discourses of oppression and freedom, with both oppressor and oppressed entwined in a common history and impacted in the cartographies they continuously co-create virtually and speculatively. History implicates the actions of the oppressor, but when communities are liberated from being interpellated or adjectified in difference or deficiency *by* the discourses of the oppressor, there is movement towards, as Van der Tuin interprets Mbembe, an investment in "universal community" and "a common consciousness of the world" that is onto-epistemologically posthuman (as cited in Van der Tuin, 2019, p. 14). Similarly, there is an intrinsic reciprocity and co-response of entangled relationship between an academia that is global and dispersed, yet connected, and the technology that makes its work accessible through a proliferating network of relationality that delimits and multiplies. It is dislocated and borderless, and paradoxically, also located spatially within the virtual world. This extends the margins of research impact to a broader community, and increases the responsibility of the researcher as Van der Tuin asserts, beyond disciplinary borders.

Asberg and Braidotti (2018) state that the "post" in posthumanities "signals both critical and creative framework for performative and generative accounts of technoscientific or other naturecultural practices across disciplines and categories"(p. 18). Van der Tuin (2019) endorses a similar responsibility in identifying and speculating the possibilities that the entanglement of academic and research responsibility, cartography, and technology can generate through an ecological "double becoming" (Massumi, 2015, p. 124) where there is reciprocal and

concomitant affect on both the individual and the environment. In his vision of a borderless world, Mbembe (2018) writes about the border as an invention of the western world. In contrast, in the African context, it was movement and intensities that linked places, and “what mattered the most was the extent to which flows and their intensities intersected and interacted with other flows.... These were more important than points, lines, and surfaces” (p. 3). However, Mbembe (2019) also warns us about the manifold dangers of the liaison with technology, where “technological intelligence” has become entangled with every aspect of life, and the human element has been relegated to one of apparent powerlessness and cooptation through “technological escalation.” Braidotti (2018) bids us to think about the critical reconfiguration of the human through posthumanism:

If a cartography is the record of *both* what we are ceasing to be and what we are in the process of becoming, then critical thinking is about the creation of new concepts, or navigational tools to help us through the complexities of the *present...of actualizing* the virtual. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

The Penticton-born, indigenous scholar from the Okanagan Nation, Jeannette Armstrong (2001), in attempting a translation of the Okanagan Sylix term for the “thinking-intellectual self” into English finds the closest linguistic approximation to be “the spark that ignites” (p. 464). She also cautions that, paradoxically, the spark can also kindle the destructive force of a fire. Is this not akin to Braidotti’s encouragement for a reconceptualization of our subjectivities, when these experiential and conceptual paradoxes, the situatedness and the assemblages of individual subjectivities, and the diffractive flow of intra-acting concepts from varied contexts are embedded within the cartographies that are being created within the present moment? Van der Tuin (2019) explicates our responsibility as academicians and researchers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to enable us to meet these contingent demands of current times. If we are to draw lines, then let it be the diffractive borderless flowing lines of flexible cartographies, and not volatile and divisive borderlines.

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