

Vibrant Death and Queer Mourning: Lykke's Posthuman Journey of Co-Becoming with her Dead Beloved

Nina Lykke:

Vibrant Death: A posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning

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"Like Orpheus, I was unable to return my beloved to life, but the journey brought me to understand the life/death threshold differently, and to see death as vibrancy rather than nothingness. Queerfeminist, posthuman, immanence philosophy, along with Spinoza's notion of conatus, the striving of all matter, dead or alive, to persevere, helped me in this process. With Vibrant Death, I offer you my travelogue." (p.2)

Nina Lykke's *Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning* is a book about death and mourning. Methodologically, *Vibrant Death* transgresses academic convention and the compartmentalization of theory and art/literature, by blending poetry, narrative, dialogue and philosophy. The book emerges from Lykke's experience of the loss of her lesbian life-partner and her journey of ongoing "spiritual-materialist mourning practices" that ensued, creating new assemblages and companionship with her beloved's corpse and the fjord and algae where her beloved's ashes are spread.

Lykke positions her affective-philosophical intervention within posthuman feminist debates, in particular through Spinoza- and Deleuze-inspired feminist immanence philosophy. The notion of "vibrant death" is an extension of Jane Bennet's Spinozist argument for the "vibrancy" and striving (*conatus*) of matter to dead bodies. Through this vibrancy, Lykke guides the readers on an affective, spiritual-materialist and theoretically rewarding journey of unlearning Western dichotomies of life/death and (chrono)normative models of "healthy mourning": a personal and political journey of erotic "co-becoming" with her dead beloved.

Throughout the book, Lykke's resistance to Western modern paradigms refers to (i) "Christian" ontology, which posits the transcendence and immortality of the soul; (ii) "Cartesian" (*qua* mechanistic-secular) ontologies, which define death as nothingness; and (iii) the normative power of psychology and psychiatry, which has a long history –from Sigmund Freud to the *DSM 5*– of pathologizing mourning. The figure of the "mourning I" or the "excessive mourner" is a commitment

to a situated queerfeminist theorizing: Against the pathologizing of the mourner and the sovereign subject of philosophy, Lykke argues that it is precisely through her mourning practices that she was able to unlearn Western presuppositions around life/death binaries, and embark on an existential and philosophical journey of re-ontologizing and affectively attuning to death as vibrant.

Lykke begins the re-ontologizing of death through a phenomenological and auto-phenomenographic account of encountering her beloved as corpse. The corpse has famously been described by Julia Kristeva as "abject". Lykke is interested in culturally situating this experience: The abject effects and affects of the corpse, Lykke suggests, are a consequence of a humanistic aim to conserve an image of personhood or subjecthood that belonged to the living body, avoiding the confrontation with the corpse's decaying matter and the disintegration of the human subject. Here, Lykke's posthuman queering of mourning begins, embracing the materiality of the corpse and its decay as part of her material-spiritual process of co-becoming with and learning from her beloved's corpse. This account prepares us for one of the key conceptual pairs that Lykke introduces: Building on Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the molar and the molecular, Lykke describes her journey as a transition from "molar mourning" to "molecular mourning": "Molar mourning" refers to the humanistic approach aimed at remembering and preserving the image of how the person/subject used to be. "Molecular mourning", on the other hand, embraces "the process of inhumanization (...) which is taking place as the beloved becomes-imperceptible/one-with-zoe" (p.127). In molecular mourning, the excessive mourner is co-becoming with the ongoing (conative) striving of dead matter in its immanent molecularization. In the final chapters, Lykke takes a speculative and spiritual turn: From her desire for "spectral embraces," she broaches the existential and philosophical question of the possibility of miracles and whether this can be theorized in immanent posthuman terms, outside of mechanistic-secularist and transcendental-anthropocentric frames. Lykke speculatively defines miracles as "immanent (...)

a transcorporeal assemblage of multiple human and non-human actants coalescing to produce an intensely affective event involving a multitude of immanent co-becomings" (p. 158).

From a posthuman perspective, one might object that this re-ontologizing of death still privileges a human-all-too-human perspective. Lykke responds to this by following Astrida Neimanis' argument that phenomenology is a productive framework for posthuman theorizing and that "in a paradoxical sense, my personal entrance point helps me in my endeavours to avoid a re-exceptionalizing of (Western) concepts of the human" (p.8). Lykke's methodology allows for a challenging of humanism as a queerfeminist situated knowledge, which does not overstep her own perspective in a re-ontologizing that would repeat what Haraway calls science's "god-trick". The unlearning of Western and humanistic ontologies of death is further done through an engagement with Gloria Anzaldúa's work, read as a material-spiritual philosophy and praxis. Attempting to create "decolonial pluriversal conversations," she positions herself as an "apprentice", aiming to humbly and relationally unlearn and relearn.

In many ways, Lykke's work is an invitation: By guiding the reader on her journey of mourning and re-ontologizing of death, Lykke encourages a plural and pluriversal situated philosophizing, creating a space for theoretical, methodological and political resonances and coalitions across disciplines, methodologies and fields. She challenges the relation between art and theory, poetry and philosophy, arguing that philosophy emerged not from cognitive critique but from situated, vulnerable and compassionate co-becoming. *Vibrant Death* is a book that performs bridge-work: not only between the poetic and the philosophical, artistic and/as theoretical work, but also between posthuman and decolonial approaches, opening many possible dialogues and affective links between them. It also invites further dialogues with, and transformations of, more "humanistic" ethical traditions based on Levinasian and Butlerian themes of vulnerability, grievability and mourning.

Lykke's firm grounding of philosophy in her own Orphic journey, also welcomes the reader

who is not initiated in the posthuman nomenclature. Even when aspects might be unrelatable to some (e.g. the middle-class mourning rituals that Lykke challenges might not resonate with precarious lives who fall outside of the humanistic frames of grievable lives), Lykke's queerfeminist voice avoids normativizing her own experience or philosophical positions. These reflections are not mine but emerged from a small reading group with two PhD colleagues/friends Theo Ilichenko and Caroline Ektander, all of us entering the texts from very different experiential and theoretical positions. Just as Lykke develops her own eclectic "sounding board", her work became part of our sounding board, generating many different conversations that aided making sense of and rhizomatically connecting our own journeys, theoretical and otherwise.

How can the figuration of "vibrant death" speak to questions of ecological justice, co-habitation with nonhumans, and an ethics and politics

beyond the human and beyond the binary opposition of life and death? Lykke's figuration of vibrant death opens a horizon for a non-humanistic ethical and political community based not on a critique of necropolitical violence in the name of "life", but, affirmatively and affectively, on death's reconfiguration as materially and spiritually with us in the very elements that surround us. The excessive mourning practices do not isolate the individual facing her loss, but attune to immanent relations to human and nonhuman elements with which they are co-becoming. The affirmative basis for an ethical and political community then becomes a striving for each and every critter's vibrancy in life and death: "what if every critter's death was vibrant?" (p.252). With this question, Lykke ends her book, and opens many possibilities of queer, posthuman and decolonial bridge-work for a planetary ethics of vibrant companionship with the living and the dead.