

**Nina Lykke**

*Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning*  
Bloomsbury Academics 2021

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Nina Lykke's critical, post-humanist and queer examination of death and bereavement is a unique and compelling text that makes theory comprehensible through her own personal narratives of loss. The book's three thematic sections are spliced by poetic interludes, where Lykke exemplifies how her experiences have led to her analyses, in a rich process of auto-phenomenography. Building upon post-humanist, de-colonial, and queer feminist philosophers including but not limited to Jane Bennet, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre-Félix Guattari, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Gloria Anzaldúa and Baruch de Spinoza, she offers an insightful account of "the becoming" of the dead body, its posthumous agency, and the ontology of the mourning "I". The title, *Vibrant Matter* nodding to Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, takes the work of these scholars further by touching upon the topic (death) that so many consciously or unconsciously avoid.

Lykke reflects upon the brief moment Bennet herself talks about the vibrant "thing-power" of the corpse, referencing

Bennett's rumination over a dead rat she sees on the street and the affective agency of the rat's decaying materiality. She laments that more was not said about the rat in Bennett's text – the liminality between aliveness and deadness or its "abjectness" to passersby. Lykke fills in this gap left by other post-humanist scholars on the subject of death, describing at length the dynamic relationality between her and her partner's corpse on the day of her death and beyond. In her words, she offers readers "alternative ways to think-feel-imagine death, dying, afterlife and the life/death threshold" (200). She elaborates on the liminality of the life-death threshold – in the immanence philosophical tradition – and insists upon death as a "continuum" where the dead body in concert with living bodies are in a constant state of becoming. In Barad's words, she narrates how the corpse "kicks back" – that far from being inert matter, the corpse of her beloved, through her smells, sounds and process of decay, incites reactions upon the living world. As well as through its absence, she articulates loss as a kind of amputation wound, where her living life is molded around her partner's non-being.

In a story recounting the first anniversary of her partner's death, Lykke narrates her intense indecision in whether or not to convene with friends at the scattering

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site of her ashes, or in their home where they shared so many cherished memories. Where was she most likely to be “visited by the spectre of her beloved?”, she contemplates. In the juxtaposition of memory and materiality – mind and body – in her posthumous encounters with her partner, Lykke dissects and critiques the dualisms that lead Western subjects to objectify (and abjectify) dead bodies and therein encourages a “spiritual-material reconnection” (158) in alliance with a-modern and indigenous post-human spiritualities. She visits the seaside where the ashes of her partner were scattered and contemplates the extension of her beloved into the oysters, foam and sea-creatures of the ecosystem. In a later passage, she describes how in a “miraculous” assemblage of human and non-human “co-becoming actants”, her beloved returned to her at the dinner table, in the form of two pearls discovered inside an oyster her son brought back from that same seaside (159).

Lykke begins and ends with a reading of Orpheus and Eurydice in context of her own mourning, and the pathologization of the “excessive mourner”. In the myth, Orpheus journeys to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice and bring her back to life, thematized as “love-death” – the desire towards death and back into the arms of the beloved. Using this thematic framing, Lykke rebukes standardized notions of “normal grieving” which perscribes a relinquishment of attachment. She rebels against the restrictive template for mourning handed to her by the medical establishment with a queer counter-narrative of “aionic” grief. This grief, against the chromonormative

paradigm, describes the diverse temporalities which abound in bereavement, where grief happens at a multiplicity of speeds, and in all directions, such as the Deleuzian rhizome. Therein, the mourning ‘I’ continually co-becomes with the lost beloved, and can commune with their “spectral returns” in the form of – in Lykke’s story – two oyster pearls. Far from being pathology, she describes the “love-death” undertones of her queer-femme mourning to be rooted in a process of re-connection with the changing human and inhuman beloved.

In total, *Vibrant Death* is a triumphant addition to post-human and queer-feminist literature that has significance not just in these theoretical traditions but also in interdisciplinary fields such as bereavement studies. She contributes, namely, to the growing field of queer death studies and extending the theoretical tools of the post-human tradition to the topical matter of end-of-life. While death has always been a fundamental question across fields, the complexity of death and mourning in the present day merits more transdisciplinary exploration, drawing upon the ontological threads Lykke pulls out in *Vibrant Death*. Although this book is aimed for academic audiences, it could have interesting use in more practical fields which engage end-of-life issues in a hands-on manner. It would be interesting to see Lykke’s queering of bereavement operationalized in care and community settings, for example. While much of her writing is abstract, the practical significance of her conclusions are noteworthy. Decentering normative and medicalized notions of bereavement could have therapeutic significance for bereaved

and dying persons, as well as locating new and meaningful avenues to memorialize, both individually and collectively.

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