

Article

Reading Storylines of Religious Motherhood with Ethics of Joy

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Abstract: In this article the storylines of a religious mother are read with Rosi Braidotti's formulation of joyful and affirmative ethics. This ethics sets these storylines in motion and illuminates the changes that occur concerning devotion, resistance, and resilience in the face of the expectations of religious motherhood. This diffractive reading makes explicit the changing affects functioning in non-normative narratives and the compound and polyvocal ethics of becoming concerning (religious) motherhood, reproduction, and sustenance in these troubling times—times which compel us to live within compassionate ethics. The ethics of joy brings forward affective elements by allowing also the negative affects entangled in pain and trauma to be recognised as resistance. Besides assisting in reading the storylines for possible breaks, turns, and changes, diffractive reading makes often-neglected tacit elements matter. The forces fuelling the movement in the storylines bring forth equally symmetries, disparities, and changes, and the complex but also complementary relation of resilience and resistance as a part of feminist genealogies of affect.

Keywords: religious motherhood; storylines; ethics of joy; diffractive reading; posthumanist ethics

1. Introduction

Joy augments our power of acting (Deleuze [1970] 1988, p. 100).

The ethics of joy is about power—the ability to affect and to be affected. The ability to affect and to be affected is in the ethics of the event and in our becoming worth(y) of that event. The ability to be affected relates to the power of acting and to the experience of joyful passions, which vary within the limits of this ability (Deleuze [1970] 1988). In the ethics of joy, the joy is desire, Spinozian conatus, an affirmative, non-intentional intensity, which cannot be possessed:

It is neither a 'want' nor 'lack' but the effort of an individual entity to persevere in its own existence. Provided that we do not separate essence from action, a conatus can be understood as the essence of an entity or its degree of power. Actions themselves constitute a person's affirmation of life and his will to exist. (Boundas 2010, p. 266)

Also, Rosi Braidotti writes (Braidotti 2018) on joyful ethics within posthuman critical theory: 'An affirmative stance proposes an ethical coding that distinguishes power relations that are empowering—affirmative or active—from those that are entrapping—disempowering or reactive' and she maintains to clarify: 'The ethics of joy does not deny the reality of pain, trauma and violence'; rather, in order to endure and survive, it requires transforming 'negative passions into affirmative ones . . . to identify points of resistance' (pp. 221–22). Therefore, here, the ethics of joy expresses the resistance that interrupts and interferes with the reactive and disempowering relations and forces in the storylines. Joy interrupts storylines—sad and troubled figurations of passing moments—to turn negativity and hopelessness into positive strength and resistance.

In this paper, these joyful (affirmative) posthuman ethics are used in reading the storylines of a mother who belongs to a religious minority movement. Here, reading the storylines with the ethics of joy requires that the reader takes a qualitative leap, disrupting the present storylines with alternative and affirmative ethics to enable the affective elements in the lines to become recognised.

The storylines of religious motherhood offer insights into understanding the ethics of joy at play—in negotiating the commitment to the expectations imposed upon women by conservative religious doctrine, in the women's resistance to the demands made by the community, and in the desires and dreams the women attach to motherhood. The demands that religious movements impose on women to promote excessive procreation, while at the same time presenting motherhood as women's only purpose in life, will undoubtedly affect the women's wishes, dreams, and desires concerning motherhood. Moreover, the alarming absence of the protection of reproductive freedom and rights as basic human rights for women within religious conservative movements around the world compels us to examine the religious women's desires, especially the ways in which resistance appears in their narratives.

This article builds on research material produced collaboratively with Laestadian women (Rantala 2017, 2018, 2019). The processuality of the written material allows for the identification of the bodily and the affective elements in the narratives without separating the material and discursive aspects of them. On the contrary, the bodily expressions and sensations highlight the significance of the mattering affects in examining the individual experience. Understanding the power of affect and the complexities of resistance and resilience requires denoting affect as a relation that is able to materialize and represent (see Blackman 2015; Dolphijn and Tuin 2012; Massumi 2008). This could seem to work against the idea of affect being vibrational, pre-linguistic, and only there to be sensed not perceived. However, affect does not function solely at the level of sensation since as a relational force it has a potential to enact and make change possible on various levels, not just on sensory level but also at material-discursive levels; for instance, affect materialises through enunciations and act(ion)s as movements, politics, and societies (Massumi 2015).

The research materials excerpted in this article draw from a set of autobiographical and collaborative writings and recorded memory work produced with women belonging to the Conservative Laestadian revival movement, part of the 100,000-member Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The Laestadian women's writings are part of my doctoral study and were produced during a three-and-a-half-year period, from 2012–2016. The events, encounters, and storylines shared with the Laestadian women during the research has strongly affected my perception and approach to research. The encounters with the women have brought me to follow the affects and movement in their storylines, and to form a sensitive but creative relation to analysis in line with feminist posthumanist ethics and methodology.

Due to the strong procreational ethos of the Laestadian movement, and its disapproval of the use of contraceptives, the women within the movement undergo consecutive pregnancies and labour, often risking their health in the process. Since the movement's negative attitude towards the use of birth control is viewed as a human rights issue, the last decade has seen the Laestadian women at the centre of Finnish media discussions. This likely explains, at least in part, why a large number of members have left the movement which, since the Laestadian movement forms the largest revival movement in Finland, can be seen as a national trauma (Valkila 2013).

Motherhood itself has a special significance to the Laestadian movement: a young, unmarried Laestadian woman moves from being a sister to being the mother of a large family. As Laestadinism refers to women as either 'mothers' or 'sisters', maternal identity is thus the only officially recognized identity for a Laestadian woman (Alasuutari 1992). Since the movement views contraceptives as interfering with women's duty and 'the natural attitude' towards childbearing, many Laestadian women avoid the use of contraceptives. The natural attitude is part of the Laestadian procreational ethos, in which motherhood forms the sacred core enabling salvation of the member and the community through reproduction. Laestadian women's worth as members is dependent on their ability to

constantly produce new members to the community. Resisting the norm is risky, as it can result in exclusion from the community and separation from family and friends.

The dispute concerning Laestadian women's reproductive rights and freedom is closely connected to feminist debates regarding women's status and agency in conservative religious movements in general (see, e.g., [Mahmood 2012](#); [Avishai 2008](#)). In this context the storylines of a Laestadian mother form a significant basis for understanding the Laestadian women's desire to mother and belong to patriarchal conservative movement, even though the laws of their patriarchal religious community aim to limit the women's use of contraception and therefore their control of their own bodies and reproductive lives (see [Roberts 2015](#)). However, these limitations set by the religious movement further complexify the discussion on reproductive rights and freedoms of religious female subjects in the Western world, since the Laestadian women are also members of Finnish society with equal rights and access to its reproductive services.

In my close reading of the storylines of a Laestadian mother-of-three I follow Rosi Braidotti's formulation of joyful ethics. The purpose of reading with joyful ethics is twofold: to clarify the complexity of feelings of sadness and joy and the simultaneous existence of resilience and resistance in the women's narratives as they battle with these interdependent functions. Reading the storylines through the ethics of joy also offers an alternative approach to understanding how one becomes an ethical subject and how one is responsible for the event of that becoming ([Haraway 2016](#)). We could ask like [Foucault \(1984\)](#) how we become particular kinds of subjects with particular kinds of knowledge of the world: 'How we are constituted as subjects of our own knowledge; how we are subjects who exercise or submit to power relations; how we are moral subjects of our own actions' (p. 49). Feminist posthumanist thinking enables ethics that do not reside within the discourse of single knowledgeable subjects, attempting instead to make possible the emergence of new kinds of decentred subjects, dispersed and multiple, reconstituted subjectivities and bodies.

The ethics of joy reflects feminist posthumanist thought and feminist genealogy and its practices of critique in questioning the boundaries between knowledge, rationality, and truth/reality. Deconstructing binary thinking allows us to open space for alternative thinking, questioning, and resistance, and to become aware of the fluid and changing nature of social formations (e.g., societies, laws, and religious doctrines). For Donna [Haraway \(1997\)](#), this deconstruction of knowledgeable subject and truth occurs through 'diffraction', a tool she devised for feminist inquiry into the material-semiotic reality of technoscience and past-present-future relationality to affirm how 'interference patterns can make a difference in how meanings are made and lived' (p. 14). As an example, diffraction assists in interfering with and questioning the one-sided image of female bodies as described by Iris [van der Tuin \(2014\)](#):

A diffractive reading of [female] bodies no longer renders them as successfully administered by patriarchy, where the powerful male figure is a mental origin that oppresses woman through sexist imagery and puts her up as a physical origin that gives birth to and arouses men. Reading diffractively, the body incorporates images of patriarchy, reproduction and male lust, of feminism, generativity and female desire as constantly changing. (p. 234)

Diffractive reading with joyful ethics manages to further problematize the idea of female corporeality and its inbuilt inclusiveness and plasticity while authorizing its resistance to any kind of reification. Also, whilst the diffractive approach offers possibilities for re-narrating past-present-future beyond a linear timeline, it endorses rethinking female corporeality and its posthuman inhabitants as agential, multiple, diverse, and changing within the various momentary contexts of reading ([Hinton and van der Tuin 2014](#)). In feminist thought, resistance is often connected to the politics of resisting inequalities, which often necessarily builds on oppositional and binary thinking. Reading resistance within joyful ethics diffractively presents an opportunity to approach oppositional thinking from the perspective of posthuman relationality and sustainable ethics. This posthuman relationality puts emphasis on the affect within resistance that works as a force for the sustenance of the (human or non-human) being and generates connections rather than oppositions. Thus, the affect in resistance allows the process itself, and the changes in the process of resistance, to push toward qualitative shift

and situated ethics, and therefore, toward an understanding of the connections between the potentially oppositionally positioned subjects, politics and spheres in feminist analysis practice.

2. Identifying Points of Resistance

What does it mean in practice to read experience with the ethics of joy? We first need to situate the narrated experience. Secondly, to interfere with sadness and to form an understanding of the ethics of joy as resistance, we need to perceive the narrative through the conditions within which the ethics of joy makes resistance possible. Thirdly, we need to identify in the storylines the points of resistance, desire for change, and diffractive movement. For this reading I selected storylines of a traumatic experience of young mother called Ella. Her storylines are read with Rosi Braidotti's (2018) formulation of the ethics of joy to illuminate the complexity of sadness and joy and to see how the simultaneity of resilience and resistance function together in the narrative. Ella's storylines work here as a point of reference:

Ella: [my own belief] comes from my experience ... well ... we had the first child, then the second one died, then we had two miscarriages ... I gave birth to a dead foetus ... I remember I was in shock, because I had always wished for a big family ... but I prayed that I could be content with the things I have ... and at the end ... I was content. In a way, the contentment ... is the trust that everything will turn well in the end ... even though things didn't go as I had wanted. (Autobiographical writings 2012–2013)

In reading the storylines with the ethics of joy, the affirmative and positive interventions push the lines toward differentiation, difference within. This means that the narrative differentiates within itself, within single enunciations, forming multiple assemblages of the enunciations within the event ([van der Tuin 2019](#)). Ella's palpable and coinciding expressions of hope, fear and despair led me as a researcher to concentrate more in detail on this one passage of the many possible (see [MacLure 2013](#)). The irregular rhythm of Ella's breathing pulled into the moment with her, but also to the moment within our memory work group in which she, for the first time, shared the experience. These affects and sensory memories that act upon us also require us to re-live them within the ethics and intensities of the re-searched event.

Here, in Ella's material-discursive enunciations, her body functions as the resistance. It resists the given rule of procreation and continuous pregnancies and labour despite the pressure of trying to get pregnant. There is joy of being content with the losses and failing body, and joy of the body that takes of itself and fights the harmful norm. The body seems to have the power to decide whether the pregnancy will endure—whether the foetus will be given the chance to develop and be born. Within the ethics of joy, power is understood (to function) as a 'complex intentional situation that humans constantly inhabit' ([Braidotti 2018](#), p. 221). In Ella's storylines, the power is in the event in which the different degrees of negativity and positivity and activity and reactivity are constantly present and negotiated, and in which they encounter each other as the body resists outside powers.

These intervening disruptions, which cut off the material-discursive formations, are to be seen as forkings, diverging formative interruptions, interferences ([van der Tuin 2019](#); [Foucault \[1969\] 1972](#); [Deleuze \[1986\] 1999](#)). According to Karen [Barad \(2007, p. 93\)](#), they are 'boundary-drawing practices, the constitutive exclusions that are enacted, and questions of accountability and responsibility for the reconfigurings of which we are a part.' Being attentive to the desired material-discursive outcomes of these diffractive events is being attentive to the process of individuation, which occurs through the affirmative intervention into these lines, which mark the changes within. Diffraction signals these realized and formative changes as theoretical possibilities that are available but have not yet been grasped ([van der Tuin 2019](#)). In other words, Ella simultaneously resists and yields to the various expectations as she negotiates between her body functions, feelings, desires, and actions, and within the past-present-future while pre-living the possible ethical outcomes of her actions.

The conditions which the ethics of joy require to function exist here also as affirmative and reactive affects outside the psychological and individual states of mind, as “affirmative/positive” and “reactive/negative” affects are not to be taken as emotional states in a psychological frame that assumes the liberal individual as point of reference’ (Braidotti 2018, p. 221). Thinking within a posthumanist framework, Ella’s feelings are ‘affects which are rather to be understood as transversal, non-human forces that need to be assessed in terms of their impact on subjects and on the world’ (Braidotti 2018, p. 221). In her reflection, the need to be content seems to work in favour of her struggles to accept the loss of her fetuses, her babies, and her chances of getting pregnant and becoming a mother again. Ella’s lines work toward contentment—toward letting go of her wish to get pregnant and toward accepting her situation. This activates and increases her potential and relational capacities; in other words, the ethics of joy diminishes the unethical limits of what impedes her potential. This is to suggest that Ella, as an ethical subject, desires to state her power—to express the freedom and force of that power through this balancing movement between the body’s resistance and its adjustment to the traumatic situation. Braidotti (2018, p. 222) continues that ‘humans—like all living entities—are drawn to perpetuate and structurally gravitate around positivity’, and added that, ‘on a larger spectrum, negative affects diminish the capacity to express the high levels of interdependence, the vital reliance on others, that constitute the key to an affirmative or joyful ethics’. In this event, while Ella expressed an urgent need to obey the rule of procreation—as she desired to belong to the community as a pious member and to gain membership through constant pregnancies—she also aimed for the peace and joy that could result from being content with her situation; through not desiring, she simultaneously resisted and struggled to survive through the affective movement created by these emotions.

‘The ability to affect and to be affected is necessarily realized in every case’; therefore, ‘even illness’, powerlessness, and incapability ‘are fulfilment in this sense . . . even when one assumes the capacity for being affected to be constant, some of our power diminishes or is restrained by affections of sadness, increases or is enhanced by affections of joy’ (Deleuze [1970] 1988, p. 101). These negative affects refer to the effects of traumatic experience—the results of a shock or a violent act—rather than to the normative value of passion or (re)action. Even if negative passions can be seen to diminish the self’s capacity to act, as they limit the self’s ability to relate to others and thus decrease one’s relationship to the world (Braidotti 2018, p. 222), the negative passions are here read as resistance to an impossible and oppressive situation. Therefore, even the women’s tendency to adapt to a harmful situation and oppressive doctrine—which compels them to ‘procreate’ and to desire consecutive pregnancies—can be perceived as affirmative since the women’s bodies are able to resist the dogma by not getting pregnant, thus impeding their obedience to the rule of reproduction. Furthermore, the women’s adopted practices of faith can keep them connected and interrelated with the community despite their inability to reproduce. This is also because sadness and grief interfere with the ethics of joy; resistance, which is inert to the effects of negativity and powerlessness, is empowered. In other words, Ella’s body turns the traumatic experience and oppressive situation into affirmative resistance. Here, joyful ethics redefines the negative passions and relations based on their effects and results, not on their normative value. Joyful ethics does not deny the reality of pain, trauma, and violence, but rather proposes a different approach to them. The ethics of joy advocates difference within and recognition of difference as an inevitable part of the motion of life. Through interference, diffractive reading and affirmative ethics aim to convert seemingly disempowering relations, affects, or experiences into an affirmative mode and towards sustenance (Braidotti 2018). In concrete, by interfering the seemingly disempowering experiences and affects with joyful ethics brings forth the points of resistance whilst demonstrating the significance of diffractive reading to affirmative ethics. That is, every affect, and every negative event, feeling, action, or inaction enacted has power, regardless of its weakness or negativity. Similarly, a situation—no matter how oppressive or deprived—still possesses affirmative forces that are active and can be activated.

3. The Ethics of Joy as a Genealogy of Affect

The ethics of joy proposes a different way of dealing with pain, trauma, and violence without disregarding their reality but by requiring instead 'an active practice of collective transformation of negative passions into affirmative ones' (Braidotti 2018, p. 222). To accomplish this requires producing a 'qualitative leap that breaks productively with the present' (Braidotti 2018, p. 223). This quest involves producing knowledge from the traumatic and painful experience by mapping the conditions of oppression to form an understanding of power as a complex and multi-layered situation inhabited by the subject.

According to Braidotti (2018, p. 223), 'The ethics of joy is engendered by the collective construction of ethical subjects who actively desire otherwise'. Its aim is to resist established codes, powers, norms, and values—the *doxa*—by introducing alternative ethical flows, and in this way to mobilize the subject's desire, its vital *potentia*. This is 'to live out the shared capacity to affect and to be affected' as a relational posthumanist subject. As a means of acceptance and survival Ella's narrative expresses her attempt to adapt to the rules of the community by trying to get pregnant. Therefore, she shows a desire to belong by praying for contentment, an act, which could ensure her inclusion in the community despite her inability to get continually pregnant. Within the collective rules, praying for contentment is an ethical act that helps her to sustain without ruining her health. Since she manages to show her commitment by desiring motherhood despite her sadness and grief, she is able to survive even though her body can no longer obey the orders of the community. However, her resistance occurs through her reluctant body, which enables her to live within the community's norms. Because of her willingness to remain under the command of the collective, her life as a generative force has lost its full capacity and freedom to explore; her personal power has been diminished (Braidotti 2018).

Interrupting Ella's narrative with the ethics of joy shows how the idea of the Laestadian female subject differs from the posthumanist non-normative and processual vision of a subject who is ethical and who has the capacity to create new potential and sustainable ways of being (Braidotti 2018, pp. 223–24). The joyful ethics understands power as distributive, but also as a process that produces sustenance and possibilities for the diffracted becoming of the (post)human subject that 'do not comply with the dominant norms' (Braidotti 2018, p. 223). This means that even the subject who experiences oppression is capable of living within the ethics of joy if s/he is ready to resign from the social and normative obligations that hover above every human. The ethics of joy also requires acknowledgment of the existence of other-than-human materialities, which inevitably places these storylines and the struggles with the unnegotiable law that threatens to suppress the individuation of the subject into posthumanist framework. From the posthumanist perspective, the individual struggles and socially constituted laws are perceived as open-ended and multi-layered processes, which, therefore, are always subjects to change.

With this article I propose that interrupting the storylines of religious motherhood with joyful ethics forms a significant threshold for understanding the complexity of both the women's manifold ethics of belonging and the possibilities that affirmative posthumanist ethics offer to understand decentred non-normative narratives and ethics. The reading of the women's storylines expresses simultaneously devotion and resistance to the religious, transgenerational-imposed obligation for women to become mothers and raises important questions concerning religious procreation and reproductive rights and freedoms among religious female subjects in the Western world in the times of the Anthropocene. This poses a question of how to produce knowledge from trauma and pain to form an 'understanding of power as a complex and multi-layered situation subjects are caught in', which, according to Rosi Braidotti, could be seen as 'the beginning of ethical wisdom' (Braidotti 2018, p. 223).

For me, adapting Braidotti's formulation of ethics of joy to Haraway's diffractive approach explicitly justifies the need for a feminist genealogical practice of prefiguration as these readings enable examination of past-present-future relationality as a means to make sense of and reconfigure the present through constantly changing lived and experienced events. Put into practice, the reading of the storylines of a minority woman and a mother with the ethics of joy allows the already materialized but

re-figured events to re-materialize through the cracks, disruptions, and disparities in these storylines. In this process, the diffractive method makes the diverging storylines matter, allowing us to inhabit the stories of difference rather than to deny them (Haraway 2004; Minh-Ha 1988). Therefore, inhabiting these feminist genealogies of affect functions as a force that pushes us away from thinking of difference (in experience) only through binaries and separation, or through opposition to sameness, but rather as affirmative and constitutive ethics—an ethics of inhabited, lived resistance.

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