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JOYFUL
INSURRECTION
AS FEMINIST
METHODOLOGY; OR
THE JOYS OF BEING A
FEMINIST KILLJOY

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Abstract || Drawing on Benedict de Spinoza's vitalist philosophy, together with Sara Ahmed's feminist anti-racist theories, this essay proposes an examination of the affect of joy as an ethics of dissent in relation to feminist practice. How could we devise an ethics of joyful insurrection; of passionate disobedience; of pleasurable dissent? Mapping the potential transversal connections and diffractions (Barad, 2007) between these seemingly contradictory terms can provide us with some interesting tools for the development of new feminist methodologies. In the second part of this paper, I look at KC Adams' photo series *Perception* (2014) as a complex affective space that can allow us to think about a political and ethical version of joyful dissent that is decolonial and feminist.

Keywords || Joy | Dissent | Feminism | Ethics | KC Adams

1. Feminism as Joyful Insurrection

In a guest lecture given at the Institute for Cultural Enquiry in Berlin in 2014, philosopher Rosi Braidotti was asked to discuss the meaning of feminism. In her usual display of passion and wit, Braidotti forcefully exclaimed: “Feminism is the joyful affirmation of powerful alternatives. [...] Feminism is joyful insurrection” (2014: n.p.). In this essay, I want to think carefully about the implications of theorizing the affect of joy as an ethics of dissent in relation to feminist practice.¹ Devising potential transversal connections between these seemingly contradictory terms may provide us with some interesting tools for the development of new feminist methodologies. What are the implications of thinking about an ethics of joyful insurrection; of passionate disobedience; of pleasurable dissent? In his examination of Benedict de Spinoza’s theory of the affects, Gilles Deleuze discusses the intertwined nature of the passions and the actions in connection to the relationality of bodies:

when we encounter a body that agrees with our nature, one whose relation compounds with ours, we may say that its power is added to ours; the passions that affect us are those of joy, and our power of acting is increased or enhanced. (1988: 27-28)

It is this increase of action that interests me for a discussion of the potential of joyful insurrections as vehicles for feminist intervention. Simultaneously, this joyful dissent can, perhaps paradoxically, be aligned to the figure of the feminist killjoy. Critical-race theorist Sara Ahmed explains how the feminist killjoy spoils the happiness of others

because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness. In the thick sociality of everyday spaces, feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling, as the ones who ruin the atmosphere, which is how the atmosphere might be imagined (retrospectively) as shared. (2010a: 581-2)

In my understanding, the act of being a feminist killjoy means becoming an obstacle or an interruption to episodes of sexist exchange, racial discrimination, and compulsory heteronormativity. These moments disrupt the system momentarily, thus becoming instances of dissent and disorientation²: you are not following the right path; you are breaking the flow. I here propose to consider these moments of dissent precisely as moments of joyful insurrection. By being a killjoy you are actually enacting and enabling the possibility of a form of joyful insurrection to emerge. At the end of her analysis of the history of happiness in relation to feminism, Ahmed concedes “there can be joy in killing joy” (2010a: 592). I want to consider the ways in which this mode of joyful insurrection can be articulated. We could consider the potential effect that your words as a feminist killjoy may inflict upon those who listen, or are somehow forced to

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2 | In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed discusses how emotions involve affective forms of orientation towards other bodies and spaces. These entanglements systematically shape bodily, spatial, and social boundaries. I am interested in looking at the ways in which feminist literary and cultural production can question and contest the naturalized orientation of bodies towards hegemonic structures of power and dominance. Simultaneously, I propose to explore how the “failed orientations” of those bodies that refuse to be pulled by economic neoliberalism, compulsory heterosexuality, or racial imperialism can become vehicles of joyful insurrection.

listen. What if that moment were not just one of rupture but one of joy being only temporarily suspended, and then reoriented, to become something else, maybe a mode of action? This relational, and potentially irreverent joy becomes entangled with an ethical and political position, hence affecting the way we conduct ourselves with others; the way we affect and are affected by others.

2. Spinoza's Joyful Affects

In the third part of the *Ethics*, "Of the Origin and Nature of the Affects," Spinoza discusses *joy* (*laetitia*) as one of the primary affects; "that *passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection*" (1996: 77). This affect of joy, which in Spinoza is always related to mind and body at once, is connected to *pleasure* or *cheerfulness*. However, these are only species of joy as they are chiefly related to the body. What interests me here in terms of the political dimension of the affect of *joy* is Spinoza's connection between passion and action: "Joy and sadness are passions by which each one's power [...] is increased or diminished, aided or restrained" (1996: 101). As Deleuze explains, this power of acting, through joy, is "what opens the capacity for being affected to the greatest number of things" (1988: 71). I will then follow a Spinozist approach to joy as it relates to the capacity for action. Reading Spinoza's work certainly reminds us of how bodies and minds bear the traces of past affects, which I interpret as a vehicle for joy and not an obstacle. In other words, if we think about historical violences, injustices, and failures in relation to doing feminism today, we might fear that these traces can become an obstacle to the practice of feminism as joy. However, I believe that these slow violences, following Robert Nixon's conceptualization of the term (2011), can signal the way for a firm and sustained shift from hope and fear into joy. Spinoza claims that "Hope is an inconstant joy [...]. Fear is an inconstant sadness, born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt» (1996: 106). If doubt is removed, hope becomes *confidence*. Following Spinoza, I would like to advocate a shift from hope into a full embrace of joy as a mode of action for feminism. Striving to work past doubt can then become an alternative step for the production of feminist scholarship, activism, and art. Sad passions such as hate or fear, Deleuze explains, represent "the moment when we are most separated from our power of acting, when we are most alienated, delivered over to the phantoms of superstition, to the mystifications of the tyrant" (1988: 28). I would add that moving beyond these inconstant joys would also show us the way to conduct our passions, instead of being solely governed by them. This idea of self-government can become an act of disobedience, which prompts me to incorporate Michel Foucault's work in this essay, particularly his insights around counter-conduct as a vehicle for an ethics of dissent.

3. Conducting Joyful Dissent

In the lectures delivered at the Collège de France in 1977 and 1978 on *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault discusses the object of power and governmentality in terms of the conduct of human beings. Moving between the borders of the ethical and the political, conduct stands, on the one hand, as an act of directing others according to different mechanisms of coercion. Conduct, on the other hand, is also a way of behaving. As Foucault argues, the exercise of power consists then in *conducting conduct*. What are the implications of conducting yourself joyfully? How can we articulate a joyful conduct of disobedience that is sustainable and feminist? These modes of political and ethical joy resist the alleged privileged postfeminist joyful liberation that is sustained precisely by the erasure of earlier feminisms³ (Gamble 1998). Simultaneously, my articulation of a feminist methodology of joyful dissent challenges apolitical versions of affect that glorify uncritical modes of happiness as the ultimate goal of human life.⁴ Posing a critique of discourses around the concept of happiness as being co-opted to reinforce sexist oppression, Ahmed convincingly explains how,

The claim that women are happy and that this happiness is behind the work they do functions to justify gendered forms of labor not as products of nature, law, or duty, but as expressions of a collective wish and desire. (2010a: 573)

Happiness has thus been functioning as a trap that far from freeing women, traps them into multiple forms of exploitation within an increasingly capitalist system. In connection to this concern, when thinking about the implications of being joyful doing academic work, one of the first dangers that come to mind is how to do so without submitting to the compliance of the corporate neoliberal university that demands happy labourers. In my view, these pernicious forms of affective labour are radically different from what Braidotti has in mind with her phrase *feminism is joyful insurrection*. This affirmative mode of joy, which is always embodied and relational, involves modes of political and ethical counter-conduct (Foucault 2009).

In the discussion of what he terms *the care for self*, Foucault explains how this ethos involves, among other things, knowing what you are capable of, the meaning of being a citizen in a city, distinguishing between what to and what not to fear, and determining what should be indifferent to you. Caring for self is then a vehicle to care for others, so it already includes a form of collective ethic. This form of ethical knowledge thus involves the potential for the self to become other; to transform; to multiply. Significantly, Foucault explains how in order to become other than what we are requires an ethics and politics of counter-conduct understood as the moment when,

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3 | For Sarah Gamble the term *postfeminism* itself “originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement” (1988: 44). I want to thank Andrea Ruthven (University of Vigo) for this reference.

4 | Happiness constitutes an integral part of Aristotle’s conceptualization of the good life in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Recent social and cultural theorists convincingly argue that happiness is becoming “an object of knowledge, a performance indicator and a form of governance” (Moore 2011, 25). From the fields of queer and affect studies, see Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010b) for a critique of today’s imperative to be happy.

breaking all the bonds of obedience, the population will really have the right, not in juridical terms, but in terms of essential and fundamental rights, to break any bonds of obedience it has with the state [...], rising up against it. (2009: 356)

Articulating sustainable modes of joyful insurrection or counter-conduct would therefore imply that initially disperse affective forces, intensities, and relations can productively realign to form new modes of resistance and intervention. I propose to think about those entanglements in relation to what material feminist theorists refer to as *diffraction* (Haraway, 1992; Barad, 2003).

4. Joyful Diffractions: KC Adams' *Perception* (2014)

Prioritizing the ethical, material feminist theorists such as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman stress the need to rethink the interactions (or intra-actions) between “culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the ‘environment,’ without privileging any one of these elements” (2008: 7) in an attempt to articulate alternative, and often unexpected, political coalitions and alliances. Feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad proposes a material ethics that draws and expands Donna Haraway’s pioneering work on diffraction, understood “as a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction” (1992: 300). Instead of a mirroring effect, diffractive reading proposes patterns of difference that make a difference through resonances and dissonances. Drawing on quantum mechanics, Barad formulates a diffractive methodology understood as

a method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 50)

Barad’s ethics are thus not just a matter of interference but of affective entanglement, as she insists, which allows for the articulation of alternative, and often unexpected, political coalitions and alliances.

As a case study of what I call *joyful dissent*, I propose to consider the photography of Winnipeg-based visual artist KC Adams. Working within Aboriginal new media art traditions, and building on Donna Haraway’s feminist theories, KC Adams’ work, as illustrated in photo series and installations such as *Cyborg Hybrids* and *Cyborg Living Space* (2003), investigates “the dynamic relationship between nature and technology” (Loft, 2005b: 98), while simultaneously challenging stereotyped representations of indigeneity in a genre dominated by a “colonialist, patriarchal hegemony” (Loft, 2005a: 66). In the

recent photo series *Perception* (2014), which was turned into an installation across Winnipeg's public spaces,⁵ Adams challenges viewers' preconceptions of First Nation, Inuit and Metis men and women, focusing particularly on issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. As Adams explains in her website, the models were asked to think about racist remarks they or their family had experienced. The affective responses were recorded in the first photograph. Then, the models were asked to think about a family member or a happy moment in their life and write their own self-identifying title. Their next set of responses was then portrayed in the second photograph (See <http://urbanshaman.org/perception>).

The photographs do not mirror each other but propose instead patterns of difference through a combination of resonances and dissonances; conflict and pleasure; anger and happiness; paradoxical entanglements that propose anti-racist ethical and political configurations. The viewer thus follows the same sequence process being invited to look twice and thus encounter and engage in an exercise of repetition with a difference. With the caption "Look Again," Adams generates a moment of diffraction that unsettles the viewer, while simultaneously activating her curiosity through a radical change in affect. The common denominator are the expressions of seriousness and anger in the images on the left, and the expressions of cheerfulness and happiness in the photos on the right. One without the other cannot exist; both affective responses are entangled, giving way to a mode of joyful diffraction.

The photos are shot in black and white, a decision that conveys the politics of the affective transformation portrayed, which immediately contrasts with the colourful and sanitized images of what official multiculturalism and diversity often looks like. Writing within the context of the UK, Ahmed explains how "The arrival of people of color into organizations of whiteness [...] involves a happiness duty: we have to embody their commitment to diversity by smiling in their brochures" (2010a: 591). These glossy publications, which capitalize forms of complacent joy, radically clash with Adams' photographs in *Perception* (see Figure 1).

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5 | As an initiative to raise public awareness, the Winnipeg-gallery Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art successfully launched an anti-racist campaign in the spring of 2015, which consisted in covering the streets of Winnipeg (Manitoba) with large posters, billboards, ads, and video screens of KC Adams' photo series *Perception*. For further information about the project and the campaign see <http://urbanshaman.org/perception/about>.



Fig. 1. *Study Magazine*. “BMO Honours 3 Canadian Universities for Diversity in the Workplace.” Friday, March 9, 2012.

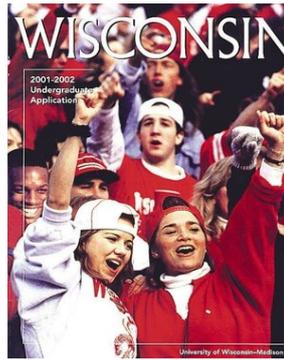


Fig. 2. University of Wisconsin, Application Booklet, 2000

The fake quality of such endeavors becomes utterly transparent in cases of inflated diversity, as illustrated in Figure 2. The University of Wisconsin, in a poor attempt to “sell diversity,” added the face of a black student, Diallo Shabazz, to a file photo for the cover of the school’s application booklet. These forms of racial capitalism, as Nancy Leong explains, capitalize nonwhiteness as a recruitment tool (2013: 38-39).⁶ In contrast, KC Adams’ work enables decolonial modes of action through an interrogation of the poetics and politics of affect and its ethical repercussions. Thus, as illustrated in *Perception*, Adams’ vitalist modes of affect, with their paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions, can be read as assemblages of joyful insurrection.

What would be the implications of conducting differences and contradictions as potential sites of joyful insurrection? How can we devise sustainable ways to conduct ourselves joyfully as a way to activate action between communities that are often kept apart from each other? What kind of diffractive methodologies could we articulate to keep building an archive of sustainable feminist affects? KC Adams’ work resonates with Haraway’s and Barad’s in that passion without resistance is not enough to understand affective processes of subject transformation in a time of increasing anti-racist and feminist backlash, both inside and outside the walls of the current academic industrial complex, as indigenous feminist activist Andrea Smith calls it (2007). The key question is how to work with these passions and tensions, or what I call joyful diffractions, so that they can be conducive to dialogue and change.

5. Final Thoughts

With sorrow, joy is described by Antonio Damasio as one of the emblems of our affective life (2003: 137). As other emotions, joy formally works like a virus, spreading throughout the brain and the

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6 | The “I, Too, Am Harvard” (<http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/>) and “I, Too, Am Oxford” (<http://itooamoxford.tumblr.com/>) campaigns are recent examples of how students of colour themselves can provide alternative visions to what diversity really means within institutions where racism pervades. In Canada, see the “How would YOU React” (2015) campaign initiated by a student at Dalhousie University (<http://howwouldyoureact.tumblr.com/>). I am grateful to Malinda S. Smith (University of Alberta) and Erin Wunker (Dalhousie University) for these references.

body, forming distinctive patterns. I want to consider this reference to the porosity of joy and the ethical implications of a potential contagion. What if joyful dissent were contagious? What if higher education institutions were to be infected by myriad modes of joyful insurrection that could transform how we envision academia? How would this look like? I want to conclude with a personal anecdote that somehow follows these lines. A good colleague of mine, who is an active feminist, told me to be careful about the number of times I used the word “feminist” in an academic job application. Admittedly, the “F” word permeated my cover letter; it had indeed stuck. Reflecting on the implications of deleting this word produced feelings of pain, shame, and guilt that paralyzed me. What to do? Then I realized that practicing feminist research was for me a pleasurable activity that had given me endless moments of joy both as an individual writer and through collaboration with other colleagues. In contrast, it was the pressures I felt from an increasingly neoliberal university what was producing these ugly feelings, leading me into moments of despair and frustration. The late feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan encourages us to resist those wells of negative affect and live instead in the energy of life (2004: 163). I often wonder about how exactly we can learn to navigate and avoid being soaked in those wells in a moment of strong feminist backlash. And yet, I believe this is precisely why we need to keep formulating positive passions, not only as a mode of survival, but also as an act of disobedience. I am still struggling to come to terms with this battle of the affects but I have decided to stick to the F word. I am not sure where this act of joyful insurrection will lead me and yet, finding critical and creative practices of joy in what we do might be a possible step to live and not drown in these precarious times for feminism.

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