

Re-thinking and un/entangling non-violence with response-ability

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INTRODUCTION

This article offers an account of non-violence as an always-relational social-material entanglement and prompts for a re-thinking of responsibilities in our much-needed efforts towards sustainable, non-violent and just worlds.

Violence in close relationships is a pressing challenge to human rights that affects individual lives, communities and societies in manifold ways as suffering, fear and sense of non-belonging, limiting person's possibilities and capabilities of being and becoming (e.g. Huuki & Juutilainen, 2016). As a feminist ethico-political challenge, violence has been an object of inquiries, theorisation and activism embedded in the imaginaries and practices of feminist living, and a shared goal deeply entwined into the visions of human rights, equal and just societies and lives. In-depth analysis of violence has unfolded the intricacies of psycho-social and socio-cultural dynamics of violence (Hird, 2002; Husso, Virkki, Notko, Hirvonen & Eilola, 2017; Kappeler, 1995; Sunnari, Kangasvuo & Heikkinen, 2003), and more recently scholars have begun to explore the ways violence figures as flows of forces in manifold material-discursive entanglements of places, objects, histories and affects (Huuki & Juutilainen, 2016; Huuki & Renold, 2016). These understandings of violence have proved crucial in efforts to support cultures and environments free from violence, and in fostering more just and equal relationships. On the other hand, while violence has been the foci of studies in multiple ways, non-violence has been less so. When having been an object of interest, non-violence in close relationships has been approached from the perspective of a trajectory of change; as a moral virtue and or individual practice (Clements, 2015; Kappeler, 1995; Soudien, 2015), or, on the other hand, a quality of relations fostered and negotiated for example by feminist scholars as care, love and compassion (Gilligan, 1982, 2002; Huuki & Sunnari, 2015; Nussbaum, 2013).

Regardless of all the efforts, violence as an unsustainability persists. Therefore, it is crucial to continue to ask *how else we could think about non-violence and responsibilities thereof*. In this paper, we contribute to this question by attending to the ways *non-violence comes*

to matter in the life stories of one woman. We do this by opening up violence and non-violence to the more-than-human, more-than-individual and more-than-present assemblages from which relations emerge, in order to move towards a more entangled account of ethics and responsibilities for more livable futures. Thinking with the feminist (new) materialist works on ethics and responsibility – particularly *response-ability* as discussed by Karen Barad (2007) and Donna Haraway (2008) – enables us to unfold non-violence as an intra-acting entanglement of multiple times, spaces and matters (Barad, 2007). What this paper proposes is that by rethinking this motion of mattering, *we can arrive at shedding light on non-violence beyond individual agency without losing sight of the ways ‘we’ are/become responsible.*

ON THE WAYS OF RE-THINKING NON-VIOLENCE WITH AND THROUGH LENA'S LIFE STORIES

In this article, we engage with the stories of Lena, a woman in her forties. Lena is a victim and a survivor of severe intimate partner violence and a person actively involved in supporting others facing violence. Over the past ten years, we – the authors – have been engaged with Lena in different ways. One of us was first engaged with her through mutual involvements in work against violence, then two of us as educators and coordinators of an European e-learning study programme on violence and violence prevention (see e.g. Heikkinen, Pihkala, & Sunnari, 2012) in which Lena participated in 2007 and 2008. During that time, Lena wrote as part of the study assignments fifty pages of study journals where she discussed her history with violence from childhood to adulthood, recovery and the challenges thereof, her relationship with violence and non-violence, as well as her plans and aspirations for the future. We re-engaged with Lena in interviews held in a set of two sessions (within one week) first in 2011 and then again in 2015. In these interviews, we were interested in learning more about Lena's aspirations in relation to non-violence and violence prevention. Over these engagements, we were inspired by Lena's motivation and commitment to co-construct political and practical vision for non-violence, and later, as we learned more about her life through interviews, about the complex and intricate ways violence and non-violence traversed her life.

For our analytical approach, our engagement with Lena's life stories could be described as 'thinking with theory', following Jackson & Mazzei's (2012, 2017) diffractive analytical approach of plugging in theories and concepts; working and re-working "to see what newness might be incited" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012: viii). This means that we maintain analysis as a co-constituency of conceptual companions; moves and move-abilities recrafted in our joint engagement with Lena's stories over the years. Moreover, in order to amplify the ethico-political tone and tenor entailed in generating new knowledge (in general and in relation to sensitive topics such as violence in particular), we suggest to 'think with theory with care', which is our way of articulating our commitment, through our research endeavours, to generate differences that matter (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2008; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

In our efforts to make sense of the conflicting pulls and pushes of non-violence that began to draw our attention in Lena's stories, we came to partner our thinking with the material-discursive figuration of 'response-ability' that we will elaborate shortly in the following.

THINKING WITH RESPONSE-ABILITY

Our starting point in this paper is non-violence in the everyday. With this, we align ourselves less with the particularities of for example policy, education or coordinated action and more with the mundane and the seemingly insignificant maintaining that non-violence hardly takes place anywhere else than in 'multiple ordinaries of different kinds'. With this alignment, we foreground relationalities and entangled-ness, which works – together with the feminist (new) materialist twist on ethics (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2008) – as our central approach for grounding and weaving together non-violence and responsibility.

In particular, our thinking is influenced by the ethico-onto-epistemology proposed by feminist theorist Karen Barad. At the heart of Barad's (2007: 376) thinking, "*the world is an intra-active engagement and bodies are among the differential performances of the worlds dynamic intra-activity, in an endless reconfiguring of boundaries and properties.*" For Barad (2007), the world is in motion of reiterative reconfiguring where neither space, time or matter ever gains definite coordinates but rather come to matter in specific agential intra-acting entanglements; the particular practices of spacetime-mattering.

In 'On Touching', Barad (2014b) unfolds this motion of mattering as touching, reminding that touching is what matter is, "*in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is*" (161). Moreover, Barad (2014: 161) goes on to elaborate that this sensing, touching, is a "*matter of response*" continuing how "[e]ach of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other." To think the motion of mattering with touching becomes thus a generative think-practice for the *ethics of entanglements and mattering*. Barad's suggestion is to, together with agency, decenter ethics and responsibilities from 'us' humans and resituate it into touch as a site of intra-action, touching *as* intra-action, as *response-ability* (Barad, 2014; 2007). Response-ability, as Barad (2007: 392) discusses it, becomes an "*incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness.*" It is not, as she proclaims, "*about right response to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part*" (Barad, 2007: 393). Considered this way, responsibilities and ethics become a matter of inheritance, not an obligation. As an inheritance, response-abilities are reconfigured in the topographic planes of sedimented historicities and lines of flights where response is invited, enabled and obliged. In these planes, to lend from Haraway (2012), we are all responsible, but not in the same way, the differences matter. In the following, we bring this thinking of response-ability in touch with non-violence in Lena's life stories. Our interest is to explore response-abilities with non-violence beyond individual agency and to evoke further thought on how 'we' (could) become (more) response-able.

UN/ENTANGLEMENTS OF VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE BECOMING

Lena's life – as any life – could be captured in manifold ways. She is a woman, a mother, a daughter, a victim, a survivor, a volunteer, a friend, a student, a healthcare professional. Our way of capturing Lena's life for this paper wraps around violence and non-violence. To generate the thinking for this paper, we have focused on the ways Lena tells about violence through re-memberings¹. She talks, among others, about the violence she experienced as a child at home by family members and other relatives, and about bullying at school. The most dominant figure in her stories is the abuse she experienced in her marriage, perpetrated by her husband-at-the-time and prolonged for years also after the marriage. This is violence affecting Lena's health and wellbeing in severe and long-lasting manner, lingering, haunting still (Dragojlovic, 2015).

In addition to telling about violence, Lena talks about non-violence. In her stories, the times of abuse and all the entanglements with violence unfold as conflicting pushes and pulls that recraft possibilities and impossibilities of becoming. In the mix of violence and abuse, we encounter non-violence emergent through mundane doings of care, and through choices that both keep her 'trapped' in the cycles of violence, as well as moments of hope and ones where lines of flight open up. On the other hand, Lena's stories entail non-violence manifesting in increasing involvements to act against violence; to support those affected by it; to learn about the phenomenon of violence; and as re-articulations of violence as an object of concern. In the frames of this short paper, we want to propose, speculate, be response-able, with these stories and tell them in the hopes that perhaps telling them in their complexities might incite something new.

Therefore, we will generate a care-fully speculative reading of non-violence becoming – which also entails non-violence not-becoming (Barad, 2014a: 183) – and will do so through two analytical entry points. The first of them focuses on non-violence reconfiguring with more-than-human and more-than-present entanglements. This is a story of non-violence imploded and unfolded. Here our focus is on the material-discursive conditions of becoming, while in the second story we shed light on the ways non-violence settles – and unsettles – as an object of concern and commitment.

“I THOUGHT IF I HAVE CHILDREN OF MY OWN I WILL NOT BE LIKE MY MUM IS – VIOLENT”

“[I thought] if I have children of my own I will not want to be like my mum is or like my parents in general, be violent ... then you realised, at least when I started to have symptoms, when I was tired, you easily got angry, sometimes pulled hair, you got scared like, what am I doing, how come I am doing something I said I would never ever do.”

1 Lena's stories of violence and non-violence in her life could be understood as violence re-membered (Barad in Juelskjaer & Schwennesen, 2012). Here, thinking with Barad, we maintain that while the past or the marks on the body cannot be erased, violence remains open to being reiteratively reconfigured. Re-memberings as an object of analysis, hold thus to a sense of indeterminacy and entangled-ness, and challenges to rethink how these reiterations are not only captured in the data, but inseparable from what the data is and becomes; and how we, too, are in the data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017).

This is an extract from a part of an interview in 2011 where the interviewer asks Lena about her own relationship to violence in the context of non-violence. In her response, Lena re-members a promise she had once made to the “future-mother-Lena” not to be violent like her parents were, the presence of the violence experienced by the “child-Lena” firmly present in this commitment. This bit of world in its becoming could be read in multiple ways. For one, this extract could be considered as an illustration on conditions so harsh that one’s commitments to care for one’s children well (see e.g. Tronto, 1993), without violence, become frail and, ultimately, fail. However, we want to propose to engage with this story as an entry point into the indeterminate possibility of non-violence, that is, the open-endedness in mattering. Then, what we encounter is a “future-mother-Lena” who makes a promise not to be violent. This commitment, we might speculate, reconfigures the history of violence she experienced in her childhood; the knowledge she had gained about violence and its unacceptability, and the consequent reconfiguration of *violence to object* – “*I will not want to be like my mum is, be violent*”. On the other hand, we also see this commitment becoming entangled with her history with violence, bodily states and mind bearing the marks of abuse – “*when I started to have symptoms*” – and the materialities of the everyday living. In this story of non-violence, she acknowledges violence in herself: “[*I*] *pulled hair*”. At the same time, this story captures matter swerving in a way that non-violence comes to matter with violence as an invitation for response; an ethico-affective touch – “*you got scared, how come I am doing something I said I would never ever do*”. Non-violence in-becoming. Thinking with and through this little bit of life prompts to engage with this event of ‘pulling hair’ on the one hand as a touch of multiple histories, multiple futures, multiple meanings, matters, spaces, fluctuating states of body and mind... imploded. However, while shedding light on this multiplicity, it also affords to un/entangle the reiterative cycles and discontinuities through which non-violence reconfigures.

“THAT NON-VIOLENT LIFE...”

“...that non-violent life, in the end, it’s surprisingly difficult – it’s not as easy as one might think...”

Engaging with the stories Lena told to us during our interviews and in her writings, prompts us to rethink the conditions of possibility for the becomings of non-violence, but also the conditions of possibilities that enable the visions of non-violence to be enacted. The promise of a “future-mother-Lena” captures one such object of intimate concern in a nuanced manner. A commitment ‘to not’; a commitment to be something else; a commitment to rupture the cycle of violence. It may be frail, but it nonetheless exists.

In her efforts of recovery and re-building of her life, Lena seeks and comes to know otherwise, to learn – and unlearn – about violence and non-violence. Through involvements as a volunteer, in academic studies, through therapy, she engages with the concepts, theories and articulations of violence. At the same time, she wants to “take her experiences into use” by way of participating in enacting a universal goal – “*We can together make this place, this country, this world a non-violent place to live for everybody*”, as she writes in her study

journals from 2007. Non-violence figures as a clarity of vision wrapped around discursively secured matters of fact – violence against women, domestic violence, narratives of recovery. This should not be unfamiliar to us. This is what we too teach in our study programme (i.e. Heikkinen et al., 2012).

We interviewed Lena for the final time in a set of two interviews in 2015. These interviews differed in tone from our earlier engagements with her in that during them, Lena had been intensely involved in more or less systematic ways with violence prevention and non-violence. At the time of our final interviews, to us Lena seemed more caught up in ordinary everyday things. While talking about non-violence in her life, she slows down with the life she is living, a new marriage, a rebuilt life, ordinary matters, and says: “*that non-violent life, in the end, it’s surprisingly difficult – it’s not as easy as one might think*”. In our reading, what Lena unsettles here is not (only) her own abilities to act non-violently, but (also) the very object, issue and practices that she maintains we should object or work towards. Violence is not a distant matter we (should) know to object; non-violence is not a moral obligation we should commit to. Rather, non/violence – the re-articulation gesturing the unsettling inseparability of violence and non-violence (Pihkala, forthcoming; Pihkala, Huuki, Heikkinen, & Sunnari, forthcoming) – comes to matter as a trouble to stay with. To question what it is we should engage with in order to make a difference, brings the world and our responsibilities with it under our skins. Violence as an object or matter of concern in our efforts towards non-violence becomes something that is not to be objected or addressed by constructing a distance to a bound and settled matter of fact, but by *response-ably engaging with its situated reconfigurings* – staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2012; 2016) – in order to become (more) response-able for (more) livable futures.

ON RESPONSE-ABILITIES

The two analytical entries above shed light on non-violence in its multiplicity; non-violence not-becoming, non-violence in-becoming, non-violence mattering. The two stories may lure to be read for a trajectory of change, from violence to non-violence, but this has not been our interest, nor do we think that finding or re-generating a narrative of recovery or one of an individual journey towards non-violence would be possible through these stories as such. Instead, our interest was to evoke new modes of thinking about responsibilities for non-violence by un/entangling non-violence in its becomings.

What about non-violence then? What about the responsibilities thereof? Thinking with and through Lena’s stories, we came to consider the ways non-violence comes to matter as a form of *commitment* (such as that of the “future-mother-Lena”), then swerving to think non-violence in its *becomings and not-becomings* by attuning to the intricacies in the motion of mattering (as, for example, with ‘pulling hair’). In the end, rather than maintaining these different modes of thinking-engaging with non-violence as distinct or opposite to one another, we propose to think them as entangled with one another: commitments become part of the world in its becoming; the sense of the ethico-affective touches entangle in the motion of mattering; both conditioned by the conditions of possibilities of *becoming-for* livable futures.

The possibilities of non-violence becoming are not maintained on an even surface; a plane of innocent beginnings and infinite possibilities – they *become-with* (Haraway, 2008). They become with perpetrators, fears, children, hopes, promises, affects. Nor are the possibilities of non-violence becoming-with maintained for no/any thing, they are/*become for* some things. For non-violence, to become in a manner that makes a difference requires response-abilities that extend beyond our immediate encounters.

Haraway's emphasis of *becoming-with* (2008; 2016), in line with Barad (2007), works to remind of intra-actions inheriting pasts, presents *and futures* in all their material-discursive constituencies. For Haraway (2016: 4), "*we become with each other or not at all*". This, in its rich simplicity, is a statement beyond celebration of crowd and more importantly a testament to our responsibilities to "*render each other capable of worlding and reworlding for flourishing*" (Haraway, 2016: 96).

Making visible how non-violence reconfigures in times as a form of 'spacetime-matter-ing', as well as over spaces and times through cycles of reiterations, care and commitment (Pihkala et al., forthcoming) enables – and challenges – to account for the ways non-violence never comes alone; it is always bound to the material-discursive entanglements of becoming-with. Therefore, in addition to engaging with these stories as entanglements of non-violence becoming, we want to propose to engage with these stories as un/entanglements in order to recraft accountabilities and responsibilities for sustainable non-violence. What we find are entangled response-abilities, which invite attention to and accountability for the conditions of possibilities of response that weaves us all accountable *beyond ourselves*. It is about *enabling response-abilities with* violence and non-violence rather than insisting on taking *responsibilities for* non-violence (only). In the end, though, accounting for both the 'with what' and 'for what' matters.

CONCLUDING NOTE

With Lena, we learned about response-abilities. About how being response able matters; being rendered capable of response matters; the conditions of possibilities matter. In engaging with the violence and unsustainabilities in our relationships through Lena's stories, with the unsustainabilities that persistently cause suffering, we are reminded that how we think about responsibilities matter; and how it also matters that we rethink, rearticulate – that we tell these stories. Haraway (2012: 312) writes: "*Each time a story helps me remember what I thought I knew, or introduces me to new knowledge, a muscle critical for caring about flourishing gets some aerobic exercise*". In the character of this propositional paper and in the spirit of care-fully speculative mode of thinking, we propose to un/entangle non-violence further – and bring it closer. Then we remember the interview wherein Lena tells this story to us, and the site and space of our pedagogical and research engagements as an entanglement of non-violence becoming. Then we re-member that telling these stories here, in this paper, matters, too ethico-onto-epistemologically (Barad, 2007; Fricker, 2007). There is no one point of origin for responsibilities – they are/were-already. The tentacles of non-violence, too, slither in surprising directions; reconfiguring our responsibilities beyond ourselves.

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