Violence, Vulnerability & Embodiment

GENDER AND HISTORY

EDITED BY
SHANI D'CRUZE AND ANUPAMA RAO

Blackwell Publishing

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Solitude

In my solitude.

In my solitude I am neither man nor woman. If I were in loneliness I would be sharp and angular as one of the two. Sifting things through a sieve, choosing a few elements, rejecting others. In solitude I pass beyond choices. The privilege of solitude is to be undefinable, very precisely human.

Sharmistha Mohanty

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Visibilities

Possibilities

1 Violence and the Vulnerabilities of Gender

Shani D'Cruze and Anupama Rao

In her poetic exploration, Sharmistha Mohanty locates a condition of solitude outside the social and outside gender, where vulnerability is transfigured into plenitude. For her, the domain of precise humanity constitutes a horizon of possibility outside history and away from violence. We hold open the possibility of imagining full humanity as the pleasurable and plentiful experience of gendered vulnerability. However, it is in the domain of imprecise humanity that we locate our efforts, as editors and contributors, to seek meaningful ways to discuss the urgent and proximate questions that bring together violence with both gender and history.

Violence has been a central object of feminist analysis and theorisation, precisely because it has been the unifying ground for much feminist activism. Whether it is domestic abuse, the use of rape as a weapon of war or forms of culturally sanctioned violence such as sati, footbinding, genital mutilation, honour killings – a list which actively obscures the culturally sanctioned violences of the West-from which 'brown' women are to be 'saved' by their liberal Western counterparts, violence bears an inverse relationship to ideas of full humanity and sexed personhood.[1] Ubiquitous yet invisible, violence is an enabling condition or the ground upon which sexed vulnerabilities are staged *and* it is that which must be named, defined and categorised – as abuse and violation – in order to be exorcised from the domain of social life. Indeed, this collection includes work that explores the ambiguous status of violence as a form of gendered embodiment across chronology and location.

Contributors to this volume take a broad range of perspectives to inquire into the histories of violence as well as the place of violence in the historiography of gender. Why, they ask, are some forms of violence valorised, permitted or rendered invisible, while others are stigmatised,

policed or criminalised? What are the strategies of governance and the conditions of visibility that link acts of daily discipline with moments of crisis, when spectacular acts of violence are used to inflict humiliation and punishment upon dangerous or unruly subjects? Arguably, 'modern' subjectivities are marked by a distinctive aversion to physical pain, while certain locales, particularly colonial ones, have seen brutal, spectacular punishment in the name of law and discipline. If violence has been critical to the cultural and sexual 'othering' of colonial bodies, can we trace genealogies of how raced and gendered bodies served to both deflect and 'deserve' the systematic administration of pain? Can we examine ideas of public sympathy and empathetic identification as they developed in tandem with colonial encounters?

That we ask such questions is in no small measure because of a growing theorisation of masculinity and of the body, where feminist analyses are in conversation with postcolonial studies as well as work on the history of sexuality. This complex theoretical terrain speaks to the twenty-first century moment of its emergence. It is also part of a set of global movements and exchanges: between historical events and people, in representations and narratives, but also in and across the academy. Some of the contributions in this Special Issue are the outcome of such exchanges and translations between medievalists or early modernists and editorial approaches shaped in part by our own perspectives as modern historians; between a Russian author and her Canadian translator; as well as the intellectual stances of academics living and working in the West whose backgrounds or antecedents and whose subjects of inquiry are in South Asia, China, Latin America or Africa.

It seems particularly apposite to be addressing issues of violence, vulnerability and gendered embodiment at this historical conjuncture. As we write this (in May 2004), the recent exposé of torture in Iraqi prisons has brought scandalous visibility to the imperial ambitions of the United States in Iraq. The photographic images of sexual violence and humiliation attest to the routine banality of torture perpetrated by young men and women in militarised contexts, now rendered spectacular and iconic through their pervasive public circulation. However, such violence and its visualisation are neither historically unprecedented nor academically unexamined. Many of our contributors are concerned with the domain of the visual, and query the uncertain and contradictory work of images, as well as their unique efficacy in provoking a fascination with violence. Posters, photographs and other visual media may document the emergence of new forms of public sentiment and humanitarian concern, but they are also mechanisms of verification. For instance, their apparent transparency heightens their forensic value as incontrovertible proof of physical violence and allows us to forget the forms of mediation – intended

and unexpected, social as well as technological – that enable this visual regime.[2] It is the image of Lynnddie England, of a female soldier as torturer, that momentarily focused popular (and populist) outrage on what was, after all, a routine practice within the Abu Ghraib prison. Particularly if these photographs were posed on orders, it seems that the semiotics of gender were not lost on those who orchestrated them.[3] In these representations, gender difference both underlined and displaced other oppositions such as those of race, culture or religion. The overlapping categorisations of Lynndie England as woman, soldier and *American* can change their prioritisation when viewed from different global perspectives. In the UK, apparently false photographs of male British soldiers abusing prisoners have distracted public interest from better-documented cases of violent abuse, though this suggested masquerade itself raises interesting questions about the performativity of violent masculinities.

Dominant voices have sought to narrate soldiers' violence against Iraqi prisoners as a story of exceptionality. In that context, an unequivocably violent woman may indeed appear as its overdetermined instance. There is also an element of indecipherability here, of course, as we encounter the complicated politics of the gendered victim as coloniser and racist perpetrator. Growing public consternation about the extent to which the abuse of authority can be excused away as either aberrant or exceptional has been fuelled by fragmented and diversely positioned reminiscences about the recurrent scandals of unofficial or unauthorised violence during warfare. Accounts of military brutality by French soldiers in Algeria, the United States military in Vietnam and the routine use of torture and inhuman treatment by the military-security apparatus in Northern Ireland, Israel and South Africa all point to the prevalence of illicit or extra-legal technologies of violence during conditions of domestic and international warfare, and to the perverse intimacy that attaches to such forms of brutality.[4] The prevalent historical exclusion of women from front-line fighting last century means that such recollections tend to be by men, of course, even though an academic project to gender the history of warfare and conflict has recently been taken up by a number of scholars, including contributors to this collection.[5] Yet the symbolic re-enactment of fantasies of (sexual) pleasure and violation ought to be lost on no one. Journalistic reports have noted the carnivalesque atmosphere that pervaded the cells in Abu Ghraib as hooded bodies were degraded and subjected to sexual violence. The circulation of postcards commemorating the vigilante 'justice' of white mobs who lynched African American men in the name of protecting white womanhood, suggest a perverse pleasure in the spectacle of thoroughly degraded and brutalised black bodies. South Africa's security forces oftentimes indulged in

collective barbecues and heavy drinking after torturing ANC activists to death. Whether articulated as the maintenance of white supremacy, a necessary if unpalatable part of 'doing the job,' or as a worrying aspect of military life, such testaments to the multilayered confluence of different kinds of violence and their institutionalised masculinity troubles the broader distinctions between excessive and normalised violence in significant ways.

Many of our contributors address the abnormal normalcy of daily life in the aftermath of major political transitions such as those inaugurated by decolonisation or state-socialism. From these embedded perspectives, they analyse the often-unavailable distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence and argue that the visible infrastructure of state control is haunted by the ephemeral microtechnologies of fear and terror. As Walter Benjamin significantly argued, the founding violence of the state, what he referred to as law-making violence, was indistinguishable from the legitimate exercise of state violence, or law-preserving violence. Attempts to distinguish – and thereby legitimise – 'acceptable' violence reveal how some forms of violence are rendered invisible once they became associated with governing entities.[6] The contributors to this issue address forms of governance and regulation that cut across the imprecise and unhelpful borders of public and private. They examine the social reach of familial obligation far outside the domain of privatised domesticity even as they explore the intimate and visceral strategies of gendered control through which political power is exercised.[7] In so doing, this Special Issue suggests that gender can be profitably explored as a specific form of vulnerability that is often socially and politically embedded within masculine forms of power even though the potentialities of gender are not fully exhausted by such a framework. In fact capacious conceptions of 'the human' have often allowed women to seek redress from their gendered vulnerability.[8]

Especially after the experiences of World War II and the Holocaust, human rights has functioned as a politically ineffective though ideologically powerful global discourse for addressing the many forms of violence that threaten the experience of selfhood.[9] From a presentist perspective, then, violence itself appears to be without history, similar across time and place in how it is experienced. Because violence is only legible in certain contexts, and because it is often an expressive site for anxieties about governance and regulation, however, we believe that violence is incapable of being understood outside the specificity of its historical location. It is only in this way that we can read violence both as a diagnostic for deeper, more complex historical forms of sociality, and as a performative act that can be read symptomatically. A recent major UK research project on violence directly refused to formulate a specific

definition.[10] Historians of domestic or sexual violence, when confronted with subjects who do not testify to violence, have walked a fine line between attentiveness to historical specificities and awareness that silences are often unlikely to be empty. It is by no means straightforward to recover the situated meaning of Mary Agnes Grubb, for instance, who said of her husband:

> He never struck me, Billy did not. He never struck me. Only when I deserved it ... When I said something to him and then he might slap me, but he never punched me at all.[11]

If this statement was informed by the practices of domestic power relations in the highly congested tenements of 1919 New York, it is also a rhetorically generous gesture by a woman who precariously, if routinely, negotiated physically insistent sexual advances from several men in an economy of cheaply procured pleasures, who was herself marked by the discourses of bourgeois respectability as a woman who did not count for much. One of the achievements of feminist analysis over the last three decades has been to recognise the ways that domination silences and hides the coercive and violent outcomes of power. Although witnessing violence can be presented as an ethical act, how far are experiences of violence actually communicable and how may gendered forms of enunciation and narration enable or compromise such testimonies?[12] One might read many aspects of Mary Grubb's life as marked, even structured, by violence and social suffering, but it is also of analytical significance that the record we have of her speech did not make such claims. Hence, do feminist insights about the silences and inarticulate speech produced by power permit us to identify violence and specify its meanings where the sources (and the actors) do not?

Defining and interpreting violence is a difficult task. Nevertheless, it is a more profitable and necessary one than the attempts to evade evidence of its multiple manifestations. Feminist scholars have been particularly vigilant about efforts to limit the definition of violence, of course. Feminists have ironically noted that violence often constitutes the conditions of possibility for making gendered subjectivity legible even as it enables the production of sexed vulnerability. Recent feminist debates on pornography have explicated the representational violence that involved and complicated both moralist-repressive and liberal views of sex.[13] Women's history has investigated and recuperated the historical experience of women and children in what a decade or so ago was confidently analysed as the 'private sphere' and named the violence it recognised there.[14] Contemporary, interview-based studies demonstrated how hegemonic language curtailed the ability to name one's

experience as abusive and delineated the interconnectedness of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic violence.[15] Practices such as domestic abuse or sexual violation are marked by forms of intimacy that render states of suffering and survival often unavailable to direct verbal expression, requiring other modes of addressing traumatic memory and distress. If theorizing violence is a project that crosses disciplines, historians of gender have contributed with a wariness of too easy generalisation about how we define and categorise violence.

If these are difficult questions for the early twentieth century, how much more problematic when we encounter acts of violence and evidence of gendered vulnerability in other places, across vast spans of time, when the source material is that much more scarce and highly mediated. Thus we find that many of our contributors have turned to legal transcripts, court cases and to highly publicised scandals as potential sites where violence becomes visible even while it is framed by the definitional dilemmas and bureaucratic inaction of the state. Medicine, like law, is expert knowledge in the service of the state, but because these are also understood to be sites of compensation and redress, violated subjects appear to testify willingly to acts of brutal dispossession, or provide physical evidence of violence by revealing wounds and physical deformity. The evidentiary regimes of law and medicine thus function as technologies for exposing the unseen and the invisible. The extent to which such witness amounts to agency or resistance can be explored only through painstaking and detailed analysis.

Historicizing Gendered Violence

It is a truism to argue that gender is neither trans-historical nor immediately legible across time and space.[16] In aristocratic societies of the early modern period for instance, manliness was inseparable from the performance and display of honour and status. Making a similar argument about early modern England, Garthine Walker points out that violent social exchanges were meant to calibrate honour and social status. The affront of physical violence between men was firstly to social status rather than physical harm. Because the boundaries of the body took in more than flesh, injuries to clothing and hats and invasions of personal space were all read as violent challenges to manhood. On the same principle of contiguity between a man and his household, an invasion of domestic space, or injury to any household member, was understood to be a sign of violence against a man's body.[17] Scholars working outside the geographical boundaries of Europe and North America have been interested in the *imperial* conditions that produced Western discourses of bourgeois respectability, racial purity and female