Studies in Feminist Philosophy

Sovereign Masculinity

GENDER LESSONS FROM THE WAR ON TERROR

Bonnie Mann

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For Erin

after nineteen years

{ PREFACE }

> They were trying to humiliate us, break our pride. We are men. It's OK if they beat me. Beatings don't hurt us, it's just a blow. But no one would want their manhood to be shattered. . . . They wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman.
>
> —DHIA AL-SHWEIRI

In the spring of 2004, shortly after photographs of the torture of Iraqi citizens at Abu Ghraib prison became public, Scheherezade Faramarzi, reporting for the Associated Press, made public an interview she had conducted with a young Iraqi man, Dhia al-Shweiri who had been detained by US forces in Iraq. Al-Shweiri explained his decision to commit himself to the armed struggle against the US occupation of Iraq as, in part, a result of his experience of torture and humiliation at the hands of US operatives at Abu Ghraib prison. Having suffered extreme forms of physical torture while imprisoned by Saddam Hussein for his resistance against that regime, including electroshock and strappado,[1] al-Shweiri claimed that his treatment by US forces had been far more damaging. Describing an incident in which he and other prisoners were forced to strip and then bend over with their hands on a wall in front of them, while Americans looked on, Shweiri claimed that the effort to "shatter" his manhood and make him "feel like a woman" was the worst form of torture imaginable (Faramarzi 2004).

Indeed, the use of such strategies was premised on the belief that Muslim men would see things in just this way. The military had availed itself of, among other things, Raphael Patai's book *The Arab Mind*, in which sexual honor and dishonor are the central themes (1973). While Patai's writing had long since been discredited as the quintessential example of "orientalism" by scholars, this didn't stop the US military from teaching the text to soldiers wanting to understand the "enemy" they were about to face. It might seem that the discredited text found its vindication in al-Shweiri's words, and that the distinctively "Arab mind" *is* distinctively prone to sexual shame.

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[1] A form of torture in which the victim is suspended by the wrists, which are tied together behind the back.

From a feminist perspective it is tempting to react against this racist presumption, as some feminists have,[2] with the claim that such statements are evidence of a deep and cross-culturally *shared* misogyny. The "American mind" and the "Arab mind"[3] both fear this kind of sexual shaming because their belief systems are structured around a profound contempt for women. This is not untrue. Neither the acts of sexual humiliation perpetrated against him nor al-Shweiri's complaint would be possible in the form that they take without the taken-for-grantedness of women's abjection. But this is a strange response to the testimony of a man who has just been tortured. Al-Shweiri does not set out, through this interview, to share his *beliefs* with us. He sets out to give testimony about *an event that has occurred*, about *acts that have been committed.* He is testifying to the meaning of the event and giving evidence about the consequences of the acts. As citizens of the nation that is accused, and as feminists, it is important that we hear al-Shweiri's words *as* testimony.

What al-Shweiri testifies to is this: manhood is the kind of thing that can be shattered, and our military and our government have been staging events, committing acts, with the intention of shattering it.

[2] One example appears in Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*, where in a passage that I otherwise find very insightful, she notes that "misogyny is perhaps the one concept most easily understood by both captor and captive," then proceeds to cite the passage from the al-Shweiri interview that I've cited here as evidence for this claim (Puar 2007, 89). To be clear, it isn't the truth of such statements that I find problematic, but the choice to use testimony of torture in this way, which results in an implicit dismissal or minimization of the claim to harm.

[3] If the reader will allow these terms to stand in for culturally dominant modes of normativity, that is.

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Introduction: Strange Cousins

Once we take seriously the testimonial nature of al-Shweiri's statement, we find ourselves contending with what I call here the "ontological weight" of gender. We understand immediately that gender is not just a floating signifier, nor is it an infinitely plastic or voluntaristic undertaking, as the most problematic postmodern accounts would have it. One cannot simply take it or leave it, as in some cheapened and popularized social constructionist notions of gender. Gender is substantive in the sense that, at least for some of us, it constitutes such a core structure of the self, and of the self-world relation—its undoing is the self's undoing. When gender is shattered, al-Shweiri tells us, the person is broken, a world is lost. If this is the case, then gender has *ontological weight* in the sense that it anchors one's existence, it anchors one's sense of belonging to a community and to a world, and one is unmoored if it is undone. This man may be *lost to himself* if it is shattered. He fights to find his way back to his community, to his world, after such an event.

My claim here is, in a primary sense, phenomenological: gender has "ontological weight" in the lived experience of the subject, and any feminist account must contend with this reality. This is different from claiming that gender is a fixed biological thing that can be objectively verified, or a psychological structure that is there lying before us to be studied, or even that it is a fixed social thing that can be empirically pinned down once and for all. It is, in the first instance, a lived *reality*. One discovers it in experience or testimony. One understands it through the thickness of the event. It is not "fixed" in the sense that it can never be changed, nor taken up and lived differently. But it is "heavy" in the sense that such change is not likely to be easy, and if it comes violently, or in the form of cruelty, it is often utterly devastating. This is not to say that, for some of us, perhaps many of us, gender cannot be an arena of play or fantasy or experimentation sometimes. Perhaps gender simply has less weight for some of us, at certain moments or in certain contexts, and perhaps

this lightness of gender is something to aspire to. What is certain is that an unchosen context of shame, humiliation, or violence makes gender very heavy indeed. Even absent these conditions, gender is often heavy, sometimes in the more neutral sense of *really there, really significant,* and sometimes in the less neutral sense of *a burden.*

This does not only become obvious to us in extreme situations like that of sexualized torture. When I read al-Shweiri's account, I was immediately reminded of the words of another man who had apparently experienced something similar, albeit much less severe and under vastly different circumstances. The words came to me through an important feminist essay on war written by Carol Cohn just after the first Gulf War. In Cohn's study of the speech of American foot soldiers, drill sergeants, and defense intellectuals, she records the words of a white male physicist engaged in the work of planning for war:

> Several colleagues and I were working on modeling counterforce attacks, trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities that would result from different deployments. At one point, we remodeled a particular attack, using slightly different assumptions, and found that instead of there being thirty-six million immediate fatalities, there would only be thirty million. And everybody was sitting around nodding, saying, "Oh yeah, that's great, only thirty million," when all of a sudden, I heard what we were saying. And I blurted out, "Wait, I've just heard how we're talking—only thirty million! Only thirty million human beings killed instantly?" Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn't even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman. (Cohn 1993, 227)

After that, the physicist admits, he was much more careful.

What is striking about both testimonies is that the men who speak have experienced an internal, deeply personal event that is, at the same time, entangled with the political life of a nation. The physicist does not say, "I realized I sounded to these sexist scientists like a weak-willed woman," nor "I was given to understand that the others thought my outburst was inappropriately feminine," but "I *felt* like a woman." Al-Shweiri does not say that the US soldiers or interrogators wanted to use or objectify him like a woman, perhaps for their own sadistic pleasure, but that they wanted him to *feel* like a woman. In both cases, the narrator finds himself sliding unwillingly into a certain subject position. The external situation is such that an internal reality gives way, and another threatens to take hold at the very heart of the self. There is a falling into womanhood. "Shoot me here," Al-Shweiri told Faramarzi, pointing to the spot between his eyes, "but don't do this to us" (2004).

If those held captive by our nation's military and those tasked with building its weapons systems both fear "feeling like a woman," perhaps we ought to be asking what kind of fear this is, and what it is doing in the life of the nation.

What are the mechanisms of its production? What is being shattered when one's manhood is shattered? What does it mean to "feel like a woman" and why is the desire to avoid such an event so passionate that it can be effectively mobilized in war and torture? How is it that "gender" can name the structure of an individual identity that experiences its own undoing, and at the same time describe certain practices of a nation engaged in international military operations, occupation, and torture?

The deeply lived reality of gender that is threatened with dissolution in these examples, the visceral and urgent sense of belonging that is so personal, appears again and again in the company of its strange cousin: the life of gender in the nation. It seems that, as a number of feminist theorists have pointed out,[1] not only individuals but also nations prefer to imagine themselves as manly.

Another way of saying the same thing is that nations prefer to imagine themselves as *sovereign*. Indeed, "national manhood" and "national sovereignty" point to the same phenomenon, though one would not know this by reading contemporary political philosophy (outside of a few specific feminist accounts).[2] Most discussions of national sovereignty ignore the question of gender altogether; they entertain the problem of sovereignty as if it were untethered from gender. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent work on what they call "empire" is a perfect example (2001; 2004). Their brilliant exposés of the postmodern condition and sovereign power's adaptation to it, especially in the United States, proceed as if our contemporary lifeworld and contemporary politics had no stake in gender. While Hardt and Negri's work is important to my own in this text, and while I am influenced by and draw on their account of US sovereignty in its postmodern form, their repression of the gendered nature of sovereignty is an astonishing accomplishment when one simply opens one's eyes to the evidence at hand.

My use of the term "sovereign manhood," and its partner term "sovereign masculinity," is meant to undo this determined repression. If we want to understand the United States' vision of empire, we have to understand its culture and practices of gender, and if we want to understand gender as it is lived in the United States today, we need to understand sovereignty as it is imagined and practiced by the nation. The notion of "sovereign masculinity" reminds us of this relation. My use of the term emerges through my engagement with the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, and Judith Butler. For all of them, sovereignty is a key preoccupation. Butler describes the sovereign subject as one that builds itself on the conceit of its own inviolability: "Such a sovereign position not only denies its own constitutive injurability but tries

[1] We are familiar with the notion of "national manhood" from Dana Nelson's 1998 book of the same title, Cynthia Enloe's explorations of militarization and masculinity (2000; 2003; 2007), and, going further back, Virginia Woolf's brilliant anti-war treatise *Three Guineas* (1938).

[2] See for example Debra Bergoffen (2012).

to relocate injurability in the other" (2009, 278). While a full understanding of what is at stake in "national manhood" will be developed much more fully over the course of this inquiry, we can understand it in a preliminary way as the aspiration to sovereignty in Butler's sense of the term.

Taking the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States as a point of entry, the first thing we recognize is that narratives of gender and national sovereignty in the United States were, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, completely fused. Feminist commentators noted that the Bush administration had embarked on an urgent project of "manning up," on a quest for national invulnerability identified with what seemed at first to be the revival of a 1950s version of "cowboy masculinity" (Ferguson 2011). The attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center were followed by presidential assurances of the "quiet, unyielding anger" of the nation. "Our country is strong," Bush promised, "our military is powerful and prepared . . . our financial institutions remain strong." (2001). Christian Science Monitor staff writer Liz Marlantes commented on Bush's "John Wayne Rhetoric" in July of 2003. "American culture may be awash in action heroes from the Hulk to the Terminator," she wrote, "but increasingly, it seems the summer's biggest display of testosterone is coming not from Hollywood—but from Washington" (2003). Bush's use of rhetorical flourishes like "We'll smoke 'em out!", his vow to bring the terrorists in "dead or alive," and his taunting reply to the fear of guerilla attacks on US troops in Iraq, "Bring 'em on!", harkened back to an era when male heroes in America were arrogant, simpleminded, and infallible; the confident bluster aimed to restore a sense of inviolability to a nation which had just had its absolute confidence in its own sovereignty challenged by nineteen men with box cutters.

Faludi noted that the underside of the post-9/11 project of national manhood was "the suspicion that the nation and its men had gone soft" (2007, 8). It seemed that the nation was "feeling like a woman" too. Consider the images that played and replayed after 9/11. Two erect towers are penetrated over and over again by aircraft used as weapons. As the obsessive repetition of the images removed them further and further from their first showing (when we were gripped as viewers by the events depicted and the suffering caused), it embedded them deeper and deeper into the collective national imaginary, where their significance was translated into the language of the symbolic. The destruction of the towers came to stand in for the violent destruction of the American phallus, their collapse for an embarrassing detumescence. Carla Freccero asked us to notice how they called up "the spectacle of the pierced and porous male body, a male body riddled with holes." (2002, 453). Consider as well the political cartoons that circulated after 9/11, many of which turned on themes of penetration, such as images of Osama bin Laden sodomized by a US bomb, or the caption "bend over Saddam." Freccero asks, "What does it mean that a certain US cultural imaginary associates this attack with being sodomized and sodomizing in return?" (454). We come to understand that this

imaginary reads the attack on the twin towers as a closely sequenced double act of penetration/rape (the planes fly into the buildings again and again) and castration (the scene climaxes and ends with the two towers collapsing) when we attend to the subsequent fantasies of revenge: cartoon drawings of missiles poised to anally penetrate Saddam Hussein, the slogan "USA: Up Saddam's Ass," a photo of soldiers spray painting a missile with the words "High Jack This Fags."[3] A symbolic effort to redeem national sovereignty is articulated as a restoration of the power of the American phallus. If anyone doubted the manly resolve of the nation, Bush offered his reassurance that though "these attacks shattered steel, they cannot dent the steel of American resolve" (2001).

Yet the steel of American resolve was already dented. The Vietnam War had long taken its place in our social imaginary as a story of the unmanning of America and as an embarrassment to American visions of global sovereignty. This new/old national manhood was tasked not only with waging a global War on Terror, but with finally redeeming the United States from the feminizing loss of the Vietnam war (Jeffords 1990; Boose 1993).

Lynda Boose claims that two separate gender-marked antiwar narratives circulated and consolidated themselves in the post-Vietnam period. One narrative concluded that the war was a bad war because we lost, and called on America to "man up." The second concluded that it was a bad war because it was wrong, and promoted a different sort of masculinity altogether. The second narrative emerged in the seventies, along with "an ethic outside of the claims of patriotic nationalism" (1993, 70). This antiwar position relied on the promotion of values that were not traditionally masculinist. "It was a set of ethics that, by the very nature of its self-reflexivity, its internalization of guilt, and its antimilitarist, antiviolence ethos, had asserted—and for a time successfully promoted—an identifiably 'feminized' structure of values" (70). Yet these values were promoted as values for men, and were at the very heart of the emergence of an alternative masculine aesthetic, as well as ethic, at the time. "While the long hair, flowers, and flowing robes disappeared from post-Vietnam male popular culture, what did not so readily disappear was the potential for an ethically reconstituted masculinity," Boose claims (70). We could say that this alternative figure of masculinity was one that was uncoupled from the project of national sovereignty.

The other antiwar narrative, which understood the war to be bad because we lost, rejected this more complex and self-reflective masculinity in favor of a fantasy of absolute certainty, indomitable will, and total invulnerability tied to a hypermasculine and nationalist aesthetic. Here, "reconceived at a safe distance from images of either napalmed Vietnamese children or returning American body bags, the problem of Vietnam was no longer the excessive deployment

[3] "'High Jack This Fags' Bomb Graffitti" by Art for a Change, August 24, 2001. Los Angeles Indymedia: Activist News. Accessed August 2, 2013. http://la.indymedia.org/news/2001/10/12221.php

of militarized values but the failure to deploy them strongly enough" (Boose 1993, 72). This narrative produced the language of a war fought "with one hand tied behind our backs," a war lost because of politicians "kowtowing to liberals" (72). It produced "an obsession with a manhood imagined as having been abandoned by US 'withdrawal' (a term that connotes masculine shame)" (75). The nation staked its interests in the restoration of an earlier, simpler manhood, and a vision of restored national sovereignty: absolute, unyielding, impenetrable.

We had, throughout the Reagan era, the cultural reassertion of American masculinity in its invulnerable form, the emergence of the pumped-up masculine body in children's action figures, film, and fitness centers (Boose 74; Katz 2002. Boose argues that America's shame, and reassertion of masculinity, expresses itself most explicitly in film. In other words, it gets worked on aesthetically through the cinematic action figure, the "symbol-laden depiction of the male body" (76). *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (in particular) mythologized the return to an indomitable and manly America, with Stallone's "fortress-like" body and single-handed dominance of an enemy who had defeated, and thus feminized, the entire US military and consequently the nation itself. The film places the blame for the defeat on the politicians who would not let our boys win and mythologizes *American will* as the vehicle for restoring the sovereignty of the nation. As Susan Faludi points out, "Winning—that first principle of manhood in the American Century—would be reaffirmed and encapsulated in a famous exchange. . . . Rambo demands of his commanding officer, Colonel Sam Trautman, who has ordered the hero back to Vietnam, 'Sir, do we get to win this time?' 'This time,' Trautman assures him, 'it is up to you.'" (Faludi 2007, 364). The will to win this time penetrates the enemy's defenses; houses, villages, and bodies are pierced, burned, torn apart. Spectacular acts of violence are *redemptive*, thus required for the restoration of an aggrieved or wounded masculinity to sovereignty.

When the twin towers were penetrated and collapsed, then, the social imaginary that demanded a reading of the events as homoerotic, feminizing violence was already set up. The gender-fundamentalist blogger "Elder George" was surprised that within a few weeks of 9/11/2001 he was told by a number of people that "the phallic symbol of America has been cut off." His surprise quickly gave way to affirmation. "The phallic symbol of America had been cut off," he writes, "and at its base was a large smoldering vagina, the true symbol of the American culture, for it is the western culture that represents the feminine materialist principle, and it is at its extreme in America." This "principle" is that of insatiable consumerism, brought on by things being out of natural balance when it comes to gender. "The smoldering vagina is unsatisfied, it wants more cars, more clothes, more food, more drink, more money, more stuff (2001a)." It seems that this blogger, whose ideas about gender might have seemed merely comical before 9/11, suddenly found himself with his

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