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The Medical Anthropology of Political Violence: A Cultural and Feminist Agenda

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COMMENTARY

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The Medical Anthropology of Political Violence: A Cultural and Feminist Agenda

As this volume of *MAQ* attests, the study of political violence and warfare has become an active site for theoretical and empirical exchanges in medical anthropology.¹ The reasons for this development can be articulated in global and specific terms. Globally, the unprecedented making and unmaking of violent conflicts in the twentieth century provokes the anthropological question of what it is to be human. This question is pressing whether it is formulated by grieving relatives at mass grave sites in Bosnia-Herzegovina, attending physicians who judge “when to say ‘when’ ” during torture sessions in El Salvador, or scholars, regardless of whether they consider violence to be a natural tendency or a socialized construction. Indeed, warfare and political violence invariably tap into the deepest existential currents of life and death, good and evil, and sickness and health. The making and unmaking of violence must also be set forth specifically in terms of issues that are central to medical anthropology: (1) the cultural structuring and personal, embodied experience of violence; (2) the aftermath of violence and warfare manifest as damage, distress, and disease on the one hand, and resilience, resistance, and healing on the other; and (3) the gender, class, and ethnic dimensions of violence as enacted or endured. The foregoing articles address these issues either implicitly or explicitly with varying degrees of clarity. Before considering the individual contributions, however, I begin by setting forth an analytic summary of cultural issues in theorizing violence.

Cultural Studies of Violence

There are currently two intersecting lines of thinking about the nature of violence and the nature of culture that define a useful space for thinking about their interrelations. On the one hand, insofar as cultures have been typically conceived as

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patterned, integrated wholes, violence can be understood as a specifically cultural problem that is structured by a set of ideologies and practices. Thus some anthropologists have referred to "cultures of violence," "a grammar of terror," "terror as usual," or "cultures of fear" (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Suarez-Orozco 1990; Taussig 1987; Warren 1993). In my own work I have analyzed socioculturally constituted sentiment pertaining to social domains of power in situations of warfare as a collective "political ethos" (Jenkins 1991). On the other hand, recent work has also come to allow theoretical breathing space for conceiving culture as fragmented, contested, and temporal (Behar and Gordon 1995; Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Taussig 1987). The creative tension between these approaches has created propitious circumstances for cultural studies of violence both in terms of its possibility and in terms of the recognition of its urgency. The current state of affairs can be summarized as follows: violence is indeed culturally organized, but culture is perhaps less internally consistent than previously presumed.

Violence is also a cultural problem insofar as it can be conceptualized as a form of human deviance. In this regard, Robert Edgerton's (1978) assertion of the everydayness of deviance (in multiple forms, including violence) is critical. To take but one example that might be regarded as extreme, consider torture: studies reveal that torture of others is not carried out by atypical individuals but rather by ordinary persons who are socialized into both the legitimacy and specificity of techniques requisite to their task (Allodi 1988; Argueta 1983). The legitimization of torturing an other consists as a matter of course in demonizing that person. Indeed, as Carole Nagengast observes, demonization of the other under conditions of war is critical:

Not only must the torturer and his apologist assign the status of Other to the condemned, the specification of the kind of differentness the tortured symbolizes must conform to dominant representations of the vile and worthless, a vileness that has mythical status as something to be found lurking everywhere, a constant threat to the accepted order. It is largely underclass status that makes certain people(s) susceptible to violent abuses and it is their ambiguity—as both less-than-human brutes and super-humans capable of undermining the accepted order of society—that allows elites to crystallize the myths about the evil they represent, hence, justifying the violence perpetrated against them. [1994:122]

However, focusing on deviance or on the means used to justify deviance does not fully capture the interactive ambiance of a political ethos understood as a cultural organization of feeling and sentiment pertaining to social domains of power and interest (Jenkins 1991:140). An essential step for fleshing out a political ethos of violence is to provide a situated account not only of how it is created but also of how it is responded to. We cannot be satisfied with the unreflective knowledge that the perpetrators are the creators of violence and the victims respond to it, for a political ethos is brought about in the conflictual interaction of both parties, and responded to—if only by denial—by both parties.

Let us note before going further that violence has the methodologically dangerous potential to be one of those hungry concepts that gobbles up whatever theoretical substance is placed before it. (The text metaphor for culture is such a hungry concept that in some circles culture exists only as read and rewritten in one form or

another “inscribed.”) Like Foucault’s notion of power, violence is everywhere and nowhere. Like misogyny it can be invisible because it is pervasive yet systematically denied. The heteroglossia of discourse on violence makes clear that the construct resists simple or essentialist definition (Degenaar 1990). Instantly we are beset with a host of epistemological and ethical problems: (1) the privileging, consistent with the intellectual habit of dichotomizing mind and body, of physical forms of violence over psychological, symbolic, and structural violence; (2) the potential voraciousness, as mentioned above, of a construct of violence that can include virtually any human invective; and (3) the question of intentionality (conscious and unconscious) in the inflicting and experiencing of injury or harm from particularized standpoints.

Since the notion of violence is both much contested and multiplex in form, I will assume that the analytic task includes identifying the shifting and indeterminate nexus of psychic, cultural, and state violence grounded in bodily experience. Feminist theory with respect to situated knowledge is critical here to avoid what Donna Haraway (1991) has termed the “god trick,” that is, invocation of constructs and theories characterized by the curious quality of at once being located everywhere and nowhere. Embued with the paradoxical power of unmarked categories, the shadowy existence of such constructs and theories is both deeply presumed and vehemently denied. In the present instance, if violence itself is a god trick, in that it has to do with what Elaine Scarry (1985) refers to as the making and unmaking of the world, the theoretical construct of violence should not be similarly arrogant. Our interest must then lie in the political and psychological specification of violence with respect to self and other, power and repression, and resilience and resistance.

Consider the notion of terror as a form of psychopolitical violence. The systematic deployment of terror as a means of coercion defies distinction between actual violence and the threat of immanent violence. Is not the display of mutilated bodies more than the result of violence or the threat of violence, but a form of violence itself? Likewise, carefully executed duplicity and subjugation in interpersonal relations, racism, misogyny, and witchcraft, along with the overt and hidden injuries of poverty and ecological pollution, are arguably as much a form of violence as are repeated blows to the cranium.

Since discourse on violence cannot then be restricted to physical acts of violence such as assassination, torture, and assault, other forms of violence, whether psychological or structural-symbolic in nature, must also be considered. Carole Nagengast (1994:111) cites feminist scholarship to support the claim that symbolic violence is important in the structuring and ordering of relations of domination and subordination. Kay Warren (1993:2–3) and colleagues “argue against conceptions of violence that privilege physical harm and fail to question the ways in which cultural and political practices mediate the experience of violence” (Scarry 1985). Carolyn Nordstrom and Joann Martin observe that “the term violence, like terrorism, is very much a political designation: both are avoided by perpetrators and the state while being employed by victims who have suffered their consequences” (1992:7). Citing Mark Thee (1980), they identify a structural violence that is embedded in the socioeconomic structure of society. Citing Pierre Bourdieu, they recognize “symbolic violence,” which is maintained in socioeconomic relations cast in less than conscious hegemonic constraints. This is Pierre Bourdieu’s

“unrecognizable, socially recognized violence” (1977:191). Such consideration quickly reveals the problems inherent in an essentialist notion of violence.

Warren (1993:8) notes that cultural anthropology is explicitly concerned with problems of experience, representation, and interpretation in particular communities. Implying a distinction between the expression and the experience of violence, Nordstrom and Martin conclude that “Expanded definitions of violence have been useful in giving a voice to systems of violence no less powerful by virtue of their intangibility. They clearly demonstrate that violence enacted is but a small part of violence lived” (1992:8). A resurgence of anthropological interest in culture and experience (Good 1994; Kleinman and Kleinman 1995) provides the scholarly occasion for an examination of the experiential question of how conflict is “lived” by the people caught in its throes (Jenkins and Valiente 1996; Nordstrom and Martin 1992:3; Warren 1993). As Nagengast notes, “(t)o date, anthropology has not been in the forefront of the study of collective violence, terrorism, and especially violence in state societies. . .” (1994:112). Warren’s edited collection of essays on cultural approaches to civil warfare takes a step in this direction by advancing the anthropologist’s interpretive task of

making central what is often muted: people’s varying experiences of dislocation, repression, and dissent and their struggle to make sense of their own violence as well as the violence of those in power. How are these experiences lived in different cultural worlds? How do individuals refashion their cultures to deal with the uncertainty and paradoxes of their situations? How do people find ways to represent the inarticulable, fragmenting, disorienting, and dominating nature of terror and simultaneously find routes to resist or perhaps succumb to its pressures? [1993:9]

The contribution that anthropology can make to studies of violence and conflict is considerable since “(p)erhaps the major weakness, or even fallacy, in conflict studies by social scientists outside anthropology has been the often glaring omission of any substantive consideration of the subjective, experiential, meaningful, or ‘cultural’ dimension” (Sluka 1992:20).

I am convinced that there are several research questions that can benefit from a cultural approach to violence. First, culture plays a central role in understanding what Kay Warren has described as “social cleavages within the society—and the terms of their selective recognition, erasure, or resurgence—as integral to state politics, to movements seeking the transformation of civil society and its authorities, and to local communities attempting to navigate the crosscurrents of change” (1993:1). Second, the cultural specificity of violent conflicts requires attention to the details of the meaning and enactment of violence in particular contexts and with particular shadings of religion, ethnicity, and ideology (Desjarlais et al. 1995; Fry and Kjorkqvist 1997; Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995; Nordstrom and Martin 1992; Tambiah 1986; Warren 1993). Third, the “lived experience” of violence and warfare must be understood in terms of specifically elaborated practices in which “trauma is used systematically to silence people through suffering” (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995:175, see also p. 187) and in which the capacity for trust is severely compromised (Daniel and Knudsen 1995). Fourth, an anthropological approach to violence can contribute to understandings of processes of illness and resilience through an integrated approach to the social, cultural, and psychological conse-

quences of political and domestic violence (Herman 1992; Jenkins 1991, 1996; Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995).

A final critical issue in this respect is the place of emotional discourse in the face of violence. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good and colleagues have called attention to "the role of the state and other political, religious, and economic institutions in legitimizing, organizing, and promoting particular discourses on emotions" (1988:4). In an ethnographic study of the role of the current Iranian Islamic state in authorizing and sustaining discourses on "sadness," they show how a traditional religious discourse on grieving, martyrdom, and the tragic was redefined as part of the official ideology defining ideal, morally upstanding affective comportment. This approach raises at least two important questions relevant to articles in this volume: the relation between such official discourse and the way it is received or resisted by persons subject to it, and the relation between such official discourse conceived as a kind of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1977) and the overt violence of warfare and torture. These must be addressed by taking into account both public, cultural narratives (prominently including those propagated by the state) and personal narratives that may be at the same time constructed by, articulated against, or juxtaposed to them. This approach can provide the background for an appreciation of how societal representations of violence are embodied and reproduced in family settings.

The Embodiment of Violence: Case Studies from Mozambique, Palestine, Tibet, Nicaragua, and Bosnia-Herzegovina

In the following comments I want to emphasize a concern with the gendered nature of violence, and no less with the gendered nature of the study of violence, where, as with the present collection of papers, a predominance of authors are women. Without directly addressing the latter issue, and without wishing to imply that men's experience of violence is less "gendered" than that of women, I will organize my commentary around the image of a particular woman in each of the papers whose experience is highlighted. In so doing my intent is to address both the experiences of women and the manner in which they are textually deployed in these papers.

In her discussion of the "terror-warfare" of the Mozambican civil war, Carolyn Nordstrom offers the heroic image of a nurse who maintained her service to her community in the face of the Renamo and South African policy of targeting infrastructure such as health clinics and personnel. Refusing to flee, she buried medical supplies in the bush, went underground, and held clinic sessions in different locations so as not to be discovered. The story serves Nordstrom's purpose of demonstrating the creativity of resistance and efforts to rebuild lives that contradict the notion that morals and society break down in the brutal chaos of war. This stance in turn provides her answer to the fundamental anthropological question of what it means to be human in the face of a situation experienced as a reduction to inhumanity and animality. Nordstrom's argument has the merit of directing attention to an indigenous conceptualization of violence as a fluid cultural construct, almost a kind of entity that is crafted, made, and learned. Though she seems to flirt with adopting this indigenous notion in her own argument, and with a somewhat rosy notion of the indomitability of resistant humanity, she is thereby able to intimate

the existential importance of comments such as “we eat suffering for dinner” (p. 107). Even more vivid is the local understanding of violence as a pathology that needs to be cured like any other illness or misfortune. This is evidenced by physicians’ attempts to “treat the war” as well as its wounds and in traditional healers’ efforts to “take the violence out of a person” (p. 113).

Quite another kind of heroic image is presented in Linda Pitcher’s account of Maha Hamdi, the first female martyr of the Palestinian Intifada. Though indeed most of the Palestinian youth killed in the uprising were boys, Pitcher begins and ends her account by invoking the image of this young woman. Outraged by Israeli treatment of her family members, she became active as a stone collector and water bearer for her male comrades. Her death came in an incident in which she confronted and resisted soldiers who were harassing the boys outside a mosque following prayers. They shot her dead, and later stole her dead body from her house for an autopsy, returning it two days later demanding that she be buried without anyone else seeing her body. Pitcher understands martyrdom as a kind of ritual of the body, predicated on the notions that the Palestinian body is inscribed by conflict, that it is a collectivized body encoded with social meaning, that blood is a potent symbol uniting the Palestinian body to the land, and that, in general, under military occupation the body is the locus of displacement. This focus on the body allows her to make her primary contribution, which is to link the collective meaning of martyrdom, generated in narrative performance by surviving kin, with the subjective meaning to those who embrace the martyr’s role, the demand of which is “to prepare oneself as a sacrificial body, a symbol of life and perseverance in death” (p. 28).

It can hardly pass unnoticed that the heroism of both women is cast in terms of gender-stereotypic themes of nurturance and self-sacrifice (the Palestinian woman’s martyrdom itself occurring in the act of covering the escape of the boys who threw stones). Quite a different image is presented in Vincanne Adams’s account of political domination by China in Tibet. Among the patients interviewed in the hospital where Adams worked is Lhamo, diagnosed with a humoral wind (rlung) condition after admission for falling down stairs and a pelvic inflammation. A principal contributing factor was her work environment in a hotel that was excessively crowded and noisy because it was heavily used for political meetings of party cadres. Adams returns to this case late in her discussion to ask what might be the best way to engage in a politics on her behalf. The implication that the issue is Chinese domination expressed through exposure to political meetings can be understood in terms of the testimonies of Buddhist nuns presented earlier, who because of their overt religious/political resistance report suffering imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Chinese. The two groups are textually juxtaposed; among the nuns we see not an activist heroism but a spiritualized and afflicted one, while among the hospital patients we see a parallel medicalized form of oppression. Indeed, the latter view is one that appears quite compatible with expatriate Tibetans’ larger rhetorical aim of securing support from Westerners for political autonomy from China.

The woman in James Quesada’s discussion of post-Sandinista Nicaragua is the central character’s mother, and my shift in emphasis from son to mother is strategic. Maria del Carmen is one of the “historic combatants” of the Sandinista revolution who has fallen on hard times since the Sandinistas were electorally defeated

in 1990 and was unemployed and living in a squatter settlement with her two sons. She was an active, purposeful, and witty contributor to the building of Sandinista society, but had recently become troubled by severe headaches, fatigue, and sudden emotional outbursts. Nevertheless, she continued to look for work and struggle for survival in an atmosphere of apparent love and cooperation with her sons. Here is an image quite different from the heroism of the Mozambican nurse, showing a strong woman's personal vulnerability in the face of political and social retrenchment. Placing the woman at the center rather than her son allows us to see more clearly the absent male father figure who began to drink consistently and moved away to stay with his own mother, suggesting that Quesada may be undertheorizing the gendering of tenacity, survival, and effort in the Nicaraguan case. With regard to Daniel's narrative performance of suffering and hardship, in which he is forced to adopt what in other situations is a female stance of self-sacrifice, one must also point to the highly elaborated state of testimony in this country that embraces a self-image as a nation of poets. Just as among Tibetan nuns, testimony gains much force from the genre convention of rhetorical interplay and slippage between the spiritual and political, so among Nicaraguans, testimony gains force in the interplay between interpersonal manipulation in the service of survival and ideological appeal to the political cause.

Maria Olujic's account of Bosnian culture in peace and war goes beyond gendered violence in the sense I have been elaborating to treat overt sexual violence against women—specifically the politicization of sexual violence and the sexualization of political violence. The image I take as paradigmatic here is that of Sanela, a 19-year-old Muslim woman tortured and raped by four Serbian soldiers. Her testimony recounts how they also shaved and plucked her pubic hairs to brutally impose an anachronistic mark of Muslim female identity, cut her, forced her into obscene poses, and threatened to kill her. Pregnant after surviving the ordeal, she had an abortion and made her way to a refugee camp. In analyzing the verbal component of this torture, Olujic brings out the polysemy of "shaving" as a literal act, as a term for male sexual imposition, and as a term used to spray the enemy with bullets. She also shows how the rapists' reference to the penis of Muslim males as "peeled" rather than "circumcised" is an indirect act of domination not only of male over female, but also of male over male (her circumcised fiancée is implicated as not a real man), and of one ethnic group over another. Olujic is conscious of the deep-seated cultural roots of sexual violence expressed in popular speech, songs, and jokes that facilitate a transition between customs of marriage by capture and military rape, and between brothels and "rape camps." Less explicitly she brings out the power of embodied metaphors, both in the appeal to the flow of menstrual blood, which was virtually the only way a woman could save herself from rape, and in the forced impregnation and imprisonment beyond the acceptable time for an abortion that imposed Serbian "blood" in Muslim bodies and populations. In all, Olujic's account is a compelling elaboration of the cultural meanings behind the notorious mass rapes that puzzled and shocked the world through media reports during the early 1990s.

I have tried to show thus far how each of the authors represented here deploys images of violence for particular textual ends. Because of the doubly charged nature of the subject—both politically compelling and tragically immediate—each also in some sense takes sides. Given a pull toward being engaged, activist intellec-

tuals rather than aloof, ivory-tower academics, both author and reader must address the question of whether ethnographic writing is an act of studying or of taking part. It is quite different to frame the study of violence in terms of two sides in conflict over their respective interests or in terms of a struggle between oppressed and oppressor—with the latter choice one must, by the conventions of middle class bourgeois academics, take the side of the oppressed. This is hardly a problem as long as, minimally, two issues are taken into account. First, the author's positioning in the discursive field—including position with respect to gender—is as critical as the methodological apparatus mobilized to study violence. Second, a substantive concern with the manner in which a cultural field may be permeated and even constituted by violence must be tempered by awareness of the actors' skills in deployment of the rhetoric of violence. This is the case with respect to not only indigenous oral genres of political testimony, but also to increasing sophistication of access to mass communication media, networking with other political groups and nongovernmental organizations, and even in some cases (e.g., the Mexican Zapatistas) presence on the Internet.

In conclusion, cultural studies of violence are a creative flashpoint for trafficking in theories of what could arguably be said to be the most creative and the most destructive of human responses. These studies reveal not only the light and the dark forces of humankind but also the cultural and gendered shadings of such forces.

NOTES

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