
Marie-Hélène Laforest
Irlin François

Gendered Use of Violence in the Caribbean

No matter who dies, the antecedent is often a history of repeated male violence, not of repeated female violence. This is a common pattern known in the United States since the 1950's and one that continues today.
(R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash, *Women, Violence and Social Change*)

This special issue of *Anglistica* on female narrations and contemporary forms of violence explores the way in which women writers, artists, poets, historians, and literary scholars narrate physical, psychic, and symbolic violence both in our pasts and in our present. It draws attention to the way violence lingers in the memory of women and the innovative ways they have found to tell those stories.

The title of the issue “Violence in Paradise: The Caribbean” takes its cue from Michelle Cliff’s keynote lecture at a 2007 conference organized by the center “Archivio delle donne” and the Department of American, Cultural and Linguistic Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, Italy. In her talk Cliff reconfigured the Caribbean as a site of abuse and violence. She pursued a broad set of emphases which we have taken in, but also extended, and which include the Caribbean’s historical past, the legacy of slavery, colonialism, U.S. imperialism, as well as the anxieties and traumas of the repetitive and disordering forces of violation, rupture, dislocation, and displacement.

Caribbean women are re-telling the stories of violence they have experienced or witnessed and are also creating them in fictional forms. Still the myriad configurations of violence are not always depicted as major catastrophes as they have often insidiously entered our lives and are enmeshed in them. The writers explore how brutality flourishes in economically deprived areas, how it is normalized in the media, and how narrations help re-create a sense of self.

It is disconcerting that a decade into the twenty-first century, we still feel the need to address gender-directed violence with such a sense of urgency. Yet here we are proposing a series of rich and complex reflections on the “many-headed demon of oppression”, on the many forms of domination which plague our lives.¹ This issue of *Anglistica* opens with Fatimeh Vahdat’s powerful images which cut across cultural barriers to denounce the dismaying forms of violence against women worldwide. These visual reminders are immediately followed by the essay “A Theatre

¹ Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Boston: Kitchen Table - Women of Color Press, 1983), 195.

of Violence Behind a Curtain of Paradise”, as an homage to Michelle Cliff who denounced the class, color, race, gender, and sexual hierarchies of her native Jamaica back in 1982, in her famous essay “If I Could write This in Fire I Would Write This in Fire”. This is another invitation to take a behind-the-scene look at the many faces of violence in the Caribbean basin. As Cliff candidly and poetically enters her personal history to trace wherein the source of her narrative energy, her writings, like that of other female writers included here, express the trauma of living in “a world that doesn’t love women, a world that doesn’t like women”.²

A world which is not only patriarchal but misogynistic at its very core cannot but constantly violate the female body, and if this world also functions thanks to engrained asymmetrical race and class relations, it cannot but keep women of color, third world and multiracial women engaged in a continuous process of recreation, of reinvention of self to overcome disparagement, denigration and abuse. As Patricia Powell ponders in regard to this process in *The Fullness of Everything*, “What was the source of violence for the characters, what was it in them, in the environment, that made them want to lash out? What is it we are truly, desperately seeking but can’t seem to find? What is the source of our unfulfillment, our frustration, and if we can locate it, and fill ourselves, will that stop us from lashing out at ourselves and each other?”.³

To counteract the violence of History and that of gender roles, the violence of language, which has crystallized them as subalterns, and that of identitarian politics which is essentially exclusionary, women have reclaimed a voice “as historical subjects” and have become “agents of an oppositional discourse”.⁴ As Foucault elaborates, “agency is always on circumstances. At each point of power there is resistance, but that this resistance cannot exist or be viewed as exterior to the relations of power within which it is produced”.⁵ Focusing on the psychic and material violence which has shaped their subjectivities, taking a stand against the unitary category of woman and refusing to see gender as the preponderant source of oppression, Caribbean women have tried to recuperate alternative modes of knowledge and produce novel epistemologies. For instance, M. Jacqui Alexander has proposed to shift the ground of experience – “a category of great epistemic import to feminism” – from the Secular to the Sacred to counteract their antithetical relation;⁶ Eudine Barriteau has sounded the alarm over the erasure of women’s contribution to epistemology. She has pointed out that the use of ‘gender’ as an analytical category, ambiguous as it may be, is no longer recognized as having been generated by feminist thought.⁷

Women are challenged on many fronts. Thus their work, as Chandra Mohanty has asserted, must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes”.⁸ If systemic violence has to be

² Dionne Brand, *No Language is Neutral*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 38.

³ Quoted in Irlene François, “Unchaining the Unconscious. An Interview with Patricia Powell”, included in this volume, 124.

⁴ Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse”, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 98.

⁶ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 295.

⁷ Eudine Barriteau, “Theorizing the Shift from ‘Woman’ to ‘Gender’ in Caribbean Feminist Discourse”, in Eudine Barriteau, ed., *Confronting Power; Theorizing Gender. Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean* (Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 33.

⁸ Chandra Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles”, *Signs*, 28.2 (Winter 2003), 501.

⁹ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 9.

addressed, dimorphism must be re-conceptualized, the many layers of selfhood recognized, and the very mechanisms of power dismantled. The concurrence of power and violence is central in the analyses proposed here: the brutality of political and state power, as much as the everyday acts of cruelty. As Veena Das has written, “violence attaches itself into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary”.⁹

In her essay, Michelle Cliff sees the everyday practices of humiliation as the wellspring of violence in Jamaica, the island which is transformed into a stage which the characters must exit in order to survive. This “paradise [is] drenched with blood”, this Caribbean inferno, is also the setting of her collection of short stories described here, in Claudia Buonaiuto’s review. Two other contributions in this issue examine the construction of island space as paradise: the book review by Enrica Picarelli and Yi-Peng Lai’s essay which analyzes the “agrarian trauma inflicted by history”. Taking her insight from eco-criticism, which has opened new productive avenues for research and new ways to investigate connections to the land, Lai points out how writers like Cliff have had to “work through their geo-historical wounds” in order to reclaim their connections with the land. Environmental devastation is also discussed by Franca Bernabei through Dionne Brand’s long poem *Inventory*. There, Brand grieves for our “ravaged world” and for the loss of lives as a result of concerted or spontaneous violence. Patricia Powell’s comments on this regard are illuminating: “I think too of the land ravaged by so many years of bloodshed and violence, starting first with the decimation of the Indians, and then the brutality of slavery that lasted all those years, then indentureship. I think about the land locked now in poverty and hard life, the land still carrying all that grief, all that anguish, the dead still in shock, the dead grieving still. I think about our lives inextricably bound up with that land and I often find myself wondering – if the land is still in pain, wouldn’t we too be in pain, since we live on that land, we eat off the land, the land is in us”.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Patricia Powell’s incisive personal essay “Violence and Its Unmaking” included in this volume, 115.

The horror of these legacies, compounded with the acquired familiarity with gruesome details of deaths and dismemberments in contemporary culture, produce what Franca Bernabei describes as “horrorism”. The term borrowed from Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero refers to forms of violence in a world in which, as Hannah Arendt suggested, “speechless horror at what humans are capable of, not beauty or pleasure, marks the contemporary experience of wonder”.¹¹ But as women scholars involved in the investigation of gendered lives, we must also study “how women may have taken these noxious signs of violation and reoccupied them through the work of domestication, ritualization, and re-narration”.¹²

¹¹ Franca Bernabei, “Ravaged Bodies, Ravaged World”, included in this volume, 91.

¹² Das, *Life and Words*, 59.

It is the question Laura Sarnelli’s essay addresses. Her approach to the counter-memories of violence in the Caribbean female novel traces a genealogy of queer writing which, beginning with Audre Lorde, posits the

erotic as power. Foucault lurks in the background of this paper in which traumas inscribed on the body are overcome in heterotopic spaces which, in Shani Mootoo's novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, bear the name of Paradise. However, specific social relations organize the sex/gender system in different ways and require adequate answers. Writing conveyed as an avenue for the recovery of self is demonstrated as eminently western and male in Myriam Warner-Vyiera's novel *Juletane*. As Irlene François and Jennifer Bess point out, in the African context, writing becomes a tool which undermines Juletane's quest and actually reinforces her sense of loss. Whereas collective wisdom is the form of knowledge which can empower women and query the assumptions of Eurocentric feminisms.

Betrayal of a privileged heritage, as Adrienne Rich indicated in her suggestive title "Disloyal to Civilization", is what Cliff's character undertakes in her first novel *Abeng* tackled here by H. Adlai Murdoch.¹³ In his analysis, Murdoch weaves his way through the ambivalences of the novel to valorize women's contributions to the development of postcolonial communities and identities. He indeed fleshes out the "metaphors of pluralistic ethnic and cultural practices" which "lead to new configurations of the Jamaican nation". Two of the episodes he discusses (the hog hunt and Clare's dream) are analyzed from a fresh perspective. His unorthodox reading of Clare's dream goes back to the stone throwing episode in *Wide Sargasso Sea* which still provokes new responses today, like the one Nourbese Philip has written for this issue of *Anglistica*. As Nourbese Philip states, her poem is an answer to the debate between E. Kamau Brathwaite and Peter Hulme over the relationship between Antoinette the white urban Creole and Tia the poor, black peasant girl. For Brathwaite the link between the two was emblematic of the incomplete creolization of the Caribbean inasmuch as the two girls' friendship "could never become future".

These relationships based on the class and race divide are further enacted through Claire and Zoe in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*. Thus creative and critical texts resonate with one another and with Nourbese Philip's poem and are finally echoed in Simone James Alexander's essay on *The Farming of Bones*. Despite the intimate relationship between the Haitian servant Amabelle and Señora Pico, a friendship between the two could never develop, for as Danticat succinctly puts it through Amabelle's words, "All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends" (300). The reference to Cliff's Harry/Harriett in Mootoo's text and Cliff's own citation of Nourbese Philip in her essay is further evidence of the intertextual quality of Caribbean women's work, thus of the dialogue between writers of the region.

A significant and timely contribution comes from artist Fahimeh Vahdat who fled Iran in the wake of the regime's persecution of the Bahá'í religious minority. The subaltern position of women in Iran adds another dimension

¹³ Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia", in Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (London: Virago, 1980).

to the politically and religiously inspired violence against opponents of the theocratic state Iran became with the return from France of Ayatollah Khomeini. France has a tradition of receiving refugees but also former dictators: Khomeini at the time he opposed the Shah, as well as Baby Doc Duvalier who had ransacked Haiti.

Female revulsion for the crimes committed against innocent women in Iran and against Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic is condemned through words and images in the same outcry against military abuse. The language of loss, pain, and suffering which emerges in *The Farming of Bones* is insightfully played out by Simone James Alexander, the violence of language which is used to create belonging and consequently becomes a tool of discrimination. According to Elaine Scarry, pain defies communication through language, yet it is through words which testify to her ordeal that Amabelle is able to survive and tell her story to those who will listen. As Audre Lorde reminded us, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own”.¹⁴ Gender norms are performing violence on women every day. But every day women are resisting and countering them – Caribbean women no less than others as they theorize their culture through their aesthetically valid work. This has given us an exciting opportunity to edit an issue replete with insightful readings of texts, narratives and theoretical thoughts.

¹⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”, in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 133.