Treachery and Torture: Female Warriors and the Weaknesses of Western Culture

An Encounter with:
Kelly Oliver. *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*.
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What is more dangerous than a natural body is a body that won't stay put, a body that moves between nature and culture, a body become a political statement. (131)

This quotation from *Women as Weapons of War* encapsulates the book's main topic of analysis, its specific questions that ultimately lead Kelly Oliver to a more general question of why we are so willing to see violence as constitutive of humanity. Much of her discussion is focused on how we figure women as weapons, how we conceive of female sexuality as dangerous, and how Western culture defines women's freedom too narrowly as a sexual freedom that is subject to market forces—a freedom that she quite wittily terms “the right to bare arms” (5). But these questions of meaning and interpretation are not treated as discrete puzzles; instead they are carefully traced back to our cultural understanding of violence. Indeed, this concern is cited in the book's preface as a motivation for its writing. Oliver writes of wanting “to try to figure out why ‘normal’ American kids engage in deadly violence” and also wanting to examine the “symptoms of a culture of violence, which is the result of having limited options for articulating emotions, especially violent ones” (xii). She is particularly interested in challenging what has become a fairly standard gloss on the question of how we (should) recognize and

respond to each other's humanity: that the process of recognition so crucial to each individual's self-esteem is a struggle. "[W]hy," she asks, "do we continue to imagine humanity as a struggle, a fight, a war? How can we get beyond violence if the best hope we have for overcoming it is violence itself, the so-called struggle for recognition?" (156).

Oliver's fundamental philosophical assertion is that what defines us as human is not violence, but the ability to move beyond it to forgiveness (159, 137). In the process of articulating a new way of casting the need for accountability and engagement, she identifies two key concepts, responsibility and witnessing. Linking these concepts requires a redefinition of responsibility as *response-ability*, "the ability to respond" (163). This ties the ethical concept of responsibility (accountability) to the political concept of witnessing the life of the other (engagement). Witnessing is defined as "a process of perpetual questioning and interpretation rather than a dogmatic closure" and is presented as having two senses: "being eyewitness to historical facts" and "bearing witness to what cannot be seen" (103). Its point is to "bring together the ethical and political dimensions of life" through shifts in both our ethical and political thinking (160). The ethical shift is a commitment to "owning-up rather than owning" and the political shift moves us to "a politics of response," which, for example, would obligate us all to address food insecurity crises in developing nations and make sure all human beings have adequate access to resources (163). "[W]itnessing ethics challenges any sharp separation between ethics and politics insofar as ethical response must consider subject positions, which is to say political circumstances," explains Oliver (164).

The importance of the concept of witnessing in Oliver's analysis is its capacity to counter a way of looking that she labels 'pornographic looking'. Witnessing, in charging us with the responsibility for publicizing and corroborating the testimony of others, neutralizes the power

that the pornographic way of looking holds within Western society, a power that Oliver argues is particularly evident in the cultural logic of photographs (10, 68-69). Citing photographs taken in British-occupied India, lynching photos, and the notorious photos that came out of Abu Ghraib, Oliver describes a concept of framing that asserts the occupier's claim to the position of subjects and relegates the people being photographed to the status of objects (68-69). These photos, she claims, serve as both trophies and proof of the superiority of the photo-taking subject over the photographed object. "Insofar as the colonial impulse involves making colonized people and locales into exotic or barbaric objects-to-be-looked-at, it engages in a pornographic way of viewing," she observes (74).

In contrast, witnessing—especially in the second sense of testifying to that which cannot be seen—requires us to interpret that which is "outside the frame of the photographs ... the invisible ideologies at work" in our lives (105). Because it requires us to rigorously question what we see and what it means (106), witnessing is a destabilizing, discomforting interrogation of the cultural discourse that casts 'us' as heroes and 'them' as villains, a responsible adulthood instead of the perpetual infancy that in the eyes of many, including Oliver, characterizes American society. Oliver's analysis of American cultural values and expectations highlights the importance accorded to 'innocence': "Innocence associated with childhood is not only valorized within American culture but seemingly definitive of it.... [and] to be innocent is to be invulnerable and without guilt" (116). For her, innocence explains why it was so easy for many Americans to accept the defence of the young, undertrained soldiers at Abu Ghraib that they did not know their sexually suggestive photos of detainees violated Muslim beliefs; innocence effectively inoculated the soldiers against any responsibility, not just for their violations of

Geneva Conventions but for any need to have knowledge of other cultures (116). This suggests that the way out of perpetual frustration (having to deal with the complex) or perpetual guilt (having to deal with the consequences) is to become a perpetual child. But in the context of the *response-ability* Oliver is urging, it is precisely the willingness to confront complexity and guilt that marks us as ethical subjects. “[O]nly when we engage in this continual self-interrogation is there hope that we can become an ethical society,” she claims; “only then is there hope for anything approximating justice” (107).

Oliver defines ethics as “the acknowledgement that we live and flourish only by virtue of our relations with others, many of whom we have never met” and contends that it is these relations that constitute our lives as meaningful (12). Her view of humanity is informed by an existential point of view on human freedom, and the deep-seated human hunger for meaning (10), and much of this book’s emphasis on constructive ways of expressing our humanity is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Ethics of Ambiguity*. The ‘big picture’ here is a morally sensitive, politically engaged, sweeping analysis which intends no less than to theorize a way of life that can reveal responsible citizenship within a global politics (12, 66). Oliver is fully aware that this will require a rethinking of humanity (and of American power), imagining it not in terms of the power to wound each other but the power to heal (137). Although she doesn’t draw this point out as explicitly as she might, a self-concept that is based on healing instead of wounding is crucial to both a renunciation of violence and an acceptance of difference. When we focus on all of the ways in which we can be wounded, we are tempted to erect barriers between ourselves and the perceived threats to our safety in a futile belief that we can shield ourselves, and we easily resort to violence when those barriers come under attack. However, with life experience and a modicum of reflection upon that experience, many of us come to see that being

wounded is not a tragic final chapter to be delayed or avoided at all costs. Indeed, having been wounded and subsequently healed can breed a sense of resilience and self-trust that can lead us to a new, more mature way of being in the world, a willingness to take the risk of being open to strange new situations precisely because we are secure in our capacity to heal ourselves.

This new way of being in the world, however, demands the more critical, reflective, and engaged orientation that Oliver both endorses and exemplifies in her case study of the United States's war against Iraq. Her intention in working through this case study is to reveal the ethical and political implications of the way we conceive of our commitments to ourselves and the others we engage (11). Of the forces that she analyzes as being at work in the Iraq War, the most culturally illuminating is the discourse about different 'kinds' of women: American soldiers, female suicide bombers, and passive victims in need of liberation from foreign fundamentalists. These first two groups, Oliver notes, "were repeatedly and consistently referred to [in the media] as *weapons* – not soldiers *with* weapons or extremists *with* bombs. Rather, the female body itself, its presence, its very being, was being referred to as a weapon" (xi). What tames these dangerous bodies, in society's eyes, is femininity, says Oliver, noting that this 'civilizing' process of feminizing the female transforms 'bombs' into 'bombshells' (45). Glossing the freedom of women as sexual freedom (the 'right to bare arms' mentioned earlier) acts within the framework of femininity in a way that "conceals women's oppression here at home" (47). Oliver charges that, "[s]eeing Muslim women as victims of 'backward' traditions helps to construct women's oppression as a thing of the past for the West and cover over the ways in which women continue to be disadvantaged within the United States and other so-called Western cultures" (55). This distorted notion of freedom is not just a freedom to commodify oneself as a sexual product but

also a freedom to consume, which suggests a disturbing segregation within American society: the male American is figured as ‘the citizen’ and the female is figured as ‘the consumer’ (51).

It is because popular culture maintains these distinct gender stereotypes that we can encounter the conceptual puzzle that Oliver so fruitfully deploys as a way in to her ‘big picture’ discussion of ethical and political transformation. The puzzle is this: why is violence by women more shocking than violence against women? (2) Oliver speculates that the shock felt on seeing pictures of smiling female soldiers posing for trophy photos with tortured Iraqi prisoners stems from a cultural unwillingness to grant the possibility that women could act in a way expected of men. The social perception of women is that we are extinguishable, but not culpable, we can be targets but not agents (2). One response to this puzzle is to dismiss these violations of Geneva Conventions as “pranks,” suggesting that anything women participate in is to be seen as less politically serious than if it had been enacted solely by men (63). Another response is to scapegoat feminism for militarism’s faults: Oliver cites as an example the assertion by a columnist for the *American Spectator* that it is feminist culture that nurtures barbaric tendencies in today’s female soldiers (23). Lest one think that this distortion of feminism comes solely from the right, Oliver provides further examples in which feminist commentators themselves have accepted and echoed this indictment that feminism creates violent, vengeful women (24).

Here, in my view, is the greatest contribution of *Women as Weapons of War*: it reveals the normative thinness of the definitions of feminism our culture licenses. Even more than for her own implicit definition – for women to be equal requires that they have “the same rights and duties as men” (38)—Oliver deserves credit for having made absolutely clear in this book the work that feminism has yet to do in popular culture. In many ways, the continuing struggle for genuine, substantive gender equality has had little effect on the ways in which women are spoken

of and the views of themselves and their possibilities that young women continue to form. One of the telling examples of this phenomenon in Oliver's book is her discussion of Jessica Lynch, the "female Rambo" rescued by fellow American soldiers from an Iraqi hospital (41). Lynch, an American soldier trained to serve in a theatre of war, is nonetheless deeply committed to enacting the femininity she was socialized into, complaining to her biographer about her military-issue eyeglasses that "[a]in't no guy gonna come anywhere near you as long as you are wearing a pair of those glasses" (62). This continuing willingness to use the language and the stereotypes of a bygone era is a sobering reality check for all of us who work in feminist theory. We can point with justifiable pride (or satisfaction—or perhaps just relief) to the great advances that have been made in the rights and status of women over the last half-century but it is clear that feminism still has much work ahead of it in changing societal discourse and expectations.

It may be tempting to dismiss this sexist, commodifying, and dismissive view of women as a defect specific to American culture, and read this book as an anthropological investigation of a foreign set of social relations. Indeed, that was my temptation. But, as luck would have it, the salacious Bernier-Couillard political sex scandal erupted as I was reading this book and I was treated to a Canadian version of the anti-feminist rhetoric that Oliver describes with respect to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Those of you who think as I do, that the only thing more engrossing than a sex scandal is a political scandal, may recall that Conservative Member of Parliament Maxime Bernier had been hobbled by his own incompetence since being sworn in to Stephen Harper's cabinet as foreign affairs minister. The final straw and catalyst for his resignation in May 2008 was the revelation that, back in April, he had left confidential government documents at the house of his then-girlfriend Julie Couillard. Bernier claimed that he

didn't remember having left the documents, briefing notes for a NATO summit in Bucharest, at Couillard's house and had never noticed that they were missing.¹ While these facts clearly speak to Bernier's inability to adequately perform the duties of his office, the bulk of the media speculation focused on Couillard's delay in notifying the government that she was in possession of these documents and on her possible motives for bringing down a cabinet minister. Political commentator Don Newman presented an interview on his television show with a security expert Michel Juneau-Katsuya in which Juneau-Katsuya described Couillard as entrapping Bernier through use of her "natural abilities."² And the *Globe and Mail* used the front page of its June 6 edition to advertise an 'exclusive' interview with Couillard's ex-husband, biker and police informant Stéphane Sirois, who professed sympathy for Bernier as a fellow man brought down by the same treacherous woman.³

Couillard was presented as dangerous, just as Oliver notes of women who are 'weapons of war', because of the power of nature, represented by women, to crush culture, represented by men (34). Sex (and, in the case of women, sexual predation) is seen as a "natural instinct" and therefore beyond culture (122). Oliver explains that "bodies are imagined as part of nature and therefore never completely assimilated into culture, while politics is imagined as the most organized form of culture, which removes us from the realm of nature altogether" (130). Bodies are weapons that destabilize politics in both cases: Julie Couillard's body is depicted as having brought down a pillar of government just as surely as female suicide bombers destroy Western attempts to impose 'peace' and democracy (5). "The characterization of women as naturally dangerous and naturally sexual takes deadly violence out of the context of war and puts it into the context of bodies, female bodies, linked with nature," Oliver concludes (154-155). Because we all 'know' that we can't fight nature, casting both women and violence as natural makes it

possible to see Abu Ghraib as an unfortunate accident and Bernier as a tragic figure. Ironically, the move to deny that bodies are political and to attribute to women a natural power to destroy political cultures is undercut by the ease with which bodies—whether veiled, clad in army fatigues, or paraded in handkerchief dresses—become political statements (131). As we who work in feminist theory take on the challenge of changing the regressive and distorting popular discourse that Oliver identifies, her book should be read for the compelling case it makes concerning the need to think about the language we use, and the framing assumptions of our discourses as they relate to women, sex, and representations of violence (17).

Notes

¹ “Country’s reputation tarnished over Bernier document loss: report,” CBC News, August 1, 2008.

² Michel Juneau-Katsuya, “Don Newman’s *Politics*,” CBC Newsworld, May 27, 2008.

³ Stéphane Sirois, “Couillard’s Ex: ‘Stay away from her’,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 6, 2008, A1, 10-11.