

## Queer theory and violence against women.

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Intro: I want to talk about how queer and 'postmodern' theory has affected the ability of feminists and lesbians to organise against, or even to recognise violence against women. In queer and postmodern theory, based on liberal individualism, important forms of violence are renamed 'transgression', 'choice' or 'agency'.

I shall concentrate on 3 forms of violence here, men's prostitution abuse of women, the violence of transsexual operations, and the violence of the 'body modification' industry.

My starting point is that old but now little understood, feminist slogan, 'Our Bodies, Ourselves'. In relation to violence, I suggest, this has two important meanings:

1/ The objectification of women in which our bodies are treated as objects for others to use, irrespective of our will or personhood, as in rape, child rape, prostitution, are damaging to ourselves. What is done to our bodies affects us. To survive the violent or assaultive use of our bodies we have to learn to dissociate to survive. In relation to prostitution the understanding 'our bodies, ourselves' enables us to recognise the harm of the dissociation that prostituted women have to use in order to survive the violation of the self that is constituted by commercial sexual violence.

2/ The slogan 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' also means that our bodies are not the problem. This was the understanding that underlay the consciousness raising groups that enabled so many women to accept the shape of their bodies and to give up makeup and other disguises. The problems that women and men may have with body shape, or genital configuration, are politically constructed out of a male supremacist society in which women, and some men, are sexually and physically violated by men, in which constructions of gender and the perfect body are used to enforce social control and the creation of male dominance and female subordination. Discontent with our bodies which arises from these political conditions is a political problem, and the mutilation of bodies is an attempt to cut up the bodies to fit them into an abusive political system instead of seeking to change the system to fit the bodies which people actually have.

A basic feminist value is the creation of a sexuality of equality in which we can stay in our bodies and celebrate them as they are.

In conditions of oppression none of these things were easy. In the 1980s there was a backlash against these fundamental understandings of feminism. Feminist work on pornography, on sexual harassment, on makeup, high heeled shoes and other harmful beauty practices were labelled: political correctness; puritanism; anti-sex.

The forces that fuelled this backlash:

1/ Liberalism: - The standpoint of liberal feminism which restricts its understanding of politics to the public world, has gained in status in the 80s and 90s. The point of view of liberal American feminists like Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf, and British journalist Natasha Walters, so beloved of publishers and the media, that women are quite empowered enough to deal with all the hassles of their private lives, sexual harassment, date rape, battering, having to do all the housework, actually turns out to be just like the liberalism that underpins queer and postmodern politics.

Women must be 'power feminists' says Wolf. We are free to wear makeup but it is surprising surely that it is still women choosing this form of empowerment. Apparently there is a level playing field but men are not flocking to pluck their eyebrows, wear lipstick, crippling shoes and short tight skirts.

Practices of violence are justified under the rubric of consent. Sadomasochism, prostitution and cosmetic surgery are not understood as practices of oppression created out of the unequal power

relationships of male supremacy. They are portrayed as female inventions for women's enjoyment rather than harmful traditional practices.

The fetishising of choice and consent that Wolf and her set apply to date rape, is applied zealously by postmodern and queer theorists who promote sadomasochism and prostitution, transsexualism and body modification as the ultimate in self-fulfillment and empowerment.

2/ Postmodernism: A set of ideas created by mainly gay and almost unintelligible French male intellectuals has been adopted by with apparent enthusiasm by many feminist academics and 'queer' theorists in the 80's and 90's. These ideas have been adopted I suggest because some women and gay men wanted academic careers which are very hard to sustain if you maintain a radical feminist perspective. Only the ideas of men respected by other men will get you very far in the academy. So feminists and gay men cloaked themselves in the ideas of the sadomasochist Michel Foucault, for instance. He became more popular than Marx was in the 1960s amongst trendies and progressives. In many departments such as cultural studies he was and is compulsory.

What did these ideas contribute to feminism and the understanding of violence? The idea that there is no such thing as 'woman'. That it is essentialising and unacceptable to speak of women's experience or women's oppression because women are all utterly different individuals. Moreover oppression does not exist because power just floats around with no direction just constantly recreating itself out of the interaction of well meaning people in communication. There is no such thing as 'truth' which conveniently allows for a moral relativism in which it is very unfashionable to protest against any behaviour or condition of oppression.

This is a theory spectacularly unsuited to analysing violence and thus, thankfully, not many postmodern feminists try. They are mostly interested in media, representation and fantasy, not real behaviour or material circumstances. When they approach violence the results are bizarre. Sharon Marcus on rape tells us that rape happens because women have got the script wrong. If only women were more assertive and were able to change the script then men would not rape them. This places the blame for rape back on women again, something which feminists had been trying to change. Shannon Bell tells us there is no 'inherent meaning' to prostitution. If it were the case that prostitution had no meaning in terms of power relations, then men would be lining the streets to picked up by women in motor cars who wanted to stick things in their bottoms. It is really hard to entirely overlook the power relations of prostitution but postmodernists can do that.

Postmodern feminists tell us that the body is a text. Not really real but a text that can be profitably reinscribed. Thus postmodern feminists are used to justify body modification. The body modification ezine has justificatory articles which quote 'feminist' theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler to legitimise the practices advertised on the website such as page after page of advertisements for different piercing and cutting studios all over the western world with photos of their wares. The photos show parts of mostly women's bodies lacerated, backs flayed open, calf muscles with huge and bloody designs cut into them, stomachs simply slashed in no particular design. The webpages often carry rainbow flags and the slogan 'out and proud'. These young lesbians are just reinscribing we are told.

### 3/ Queer theory:

Queer theory adapts the ideas of postmodernism to the interests of some gay men. They are used to rename various forms of violence such as sadomasochism and transsexualism as 'transgression'. Queer theory is big on the importance of 'transgressing' the body's boundaries which turns out to mean carrying out forms of violence upon it. The enthusiasm for 'transgenderism' often said to be different from transsexualism also requires major reshaping of the offending body with chemical substances if not actual surgery. In queer theory prostituted women are transformed into a sexual minority, or a 'movement of affirmation' along with other practitioners or victims of violence such as sadomasochists, pedophiles, transsexuals and seen as rebels creating a new sexual future. In fact, of course, prostituted women are having to dissociate to survive, not being sexually liberated. They are serving the sexual liberation of their colonisers, men.

In fact the practices of violence that are celebrated in queer theory can all be seen as resulting from oppression. But queer theory being based in liberal individualism does not recognise politics as being concerned with the private realm. Sex is private and beyond analysis though queer politics demands that gay men be empowered to claim large areas of public space in which to practice their 'private' sex. These areas in which women are made to feel uncomfortable or which seem too dangerous for women to venture into, because of the delicious sense of fear and foreboding gay men create in cruising grounds by silence and lurking about, are now being officially designated as 'public sex environments' in for instance HIV policy in Scottish cities. Thus gay men have appropriated large chunks of parks, waterfronts, streets as their own possession.

Queer politics in the form of groups such as Sex Panic in US and Outrage in UK, stands for the rights of liberal gay male individuals to injure others in sadomasochism for their enjoyment, to use boys in prostitution and pornography, to acquire public space for their practices. A man has just been convicted of manslaughter in Melbourne for strangling another man in the sadomasochistic practice of asphyxiation. This man, prominent in gay sadomasochism in Melbourne, an SM entrepreneur associated with running of SM clubs for profit, stole the dead man's credit cards and car and fled north to Queensland. It is good that he got 5 years. My perspective on all these practices of violence including self-mutilation by proxy in which women, lesbians and gay men ask or pay others to practice violence upon them such as transsexualism, sadomasochism and cutting is that the perpetrators are always wrong. No matter how much anyone asks to be abused it is still wrong to comply and it is particularly shocking to make a profit out of it.

What liberalism and its most fashionable forms in postmodernism and queer theory have done, is to disappear the oppressor. All practices of violence are seen as 'chosen' by self-willed agents, even as politically progressive and transgressive.

Harmful traditional practices:

I want to look in more detail at where these practices of violence come from and suggest that they should in fact be recognised as harmful traditional practices. In 1995 the United Nations published a factsheet on 'Harmful Traditional Practices and their effect of the health of women and children'. The practices described in the factsheet are almost all non-western. They include female genital mutilation, child marriage, son preference, forced feeding. The only practice listed which clearly covers western cultures as well is violence against women and in this practice is included prostitution.

I think this is a very useful way of understanding prostitution as well as the other practices of violence I have been discussing here. Prostitution fits very well into the criteria for recognising a harmful traditional practice as defined by the UN.

1/ Harmful to the health of women and children: It is certainly harmful to the health of women and children through damage to self-esteem, suicide attempts and self-mutilation, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, damage to reproductive systems, unwanted childbearing, drug use to endure the violation and to lock women and children into pimps and brothels.

2/ Arises from subordination of women: prostitution clearly arises from the subordination of women. It is a practice in which the victims are overwhelmingly women and children and the perpetrators are almost entirely men throughout history and transculturally. It is a practice which exploits the powerlessness of women and children, economically, physically and in relations of adult male dominance and the submission of women and children.

3/ Supported by the weight of tradition: prostitution is often described by apologists as 'the oldest profession' which, far from being a justification, in fact should be seen as a particular indictment of present western societies which acclaim themselves as progressive and committed to equality whilst maintaining centuries old forms of slavery in relation to women and children.

4/ Take on an aura of morality: though this is easier to see in relation to such practices as female genital mutilation since women's involvement in prostitution has traditionally led to punishment and social isolation, it is possible to see prostitution gaining an aura of morality now with its legalisation in many

countries including Victoria in Australia where I live. When the ILO report from last year on prostitution called 'The Sex Sector' called for the recognition of the usefulness of prostitution to the economies of South East Asia then the status of prostitution as an industry if not of prostituted women themselves, is changing fast. Certainly prostitution if not always seen as moral is seen as inevitable in most countries of the world and this shows the deep rooted nature of its acceptance, its embeddedness in male dominant cultures.

5/ Chosen and inflicted upon women by themselves: though this is not in the criteria offered by the UN of harmful traditional practices I think it is an important element of most of them, excluding recognisable male violence as in child rape and domestic violence. In most of the practices through which women and female children are prepared for marriage and sexual slavery, fgm, forced feeding etc. women are the torturers of other young females as Mary Daly pointed out in her analysis of sado-rituals which accords very well with what the UN now calls harmful traditional practices. Men are far removed from the picture and their responsibility difficult to recognise. In some practices, such as widow burning in Rajasthan, women are seen as willingly embracing death on their husbands' funeral pyre. The cultures in which these practices are carried out create social pressures so forceful that refusal seems impossible and 'choice' is unimaginable. In western cultures women are seen as freely choosing prostitution whilst the male abusers are invisible. It can almost seem as if women go into rooms and do prostitution all by themselves. The men need to remain invisible if the social harm of their prostitution behaviour to the women they have relationships with is to be hidden. In Victoria now we are hearing more and more stories from women whose marriage of 25 years or more have been destroyed by their husband's prostitution behaviour, behaviour he sees as justifiable in a state in which prostitution is a state licensed, regulated and taxed industry which exhibits its wares in the state exhibition centre. Women's pain at discovering, for instance, photos of naked young women the same age as their daughters integrated with the family holiday snaps and going through the agony of being blamed by relatives for not giving it to him enough, losing the loyalty of children who side with the abusive father. All this is damage on a massive scale which is institutionalised through the legalising of prostitution.

6/ Justified in men's ideologies: Mary Daly too, talks of how sado-rituals are justified and celebrated in men's ideologies and their academies. This is where the ideologies I have been looking at here, the ideologies which conceal or legitimise practices of violence, liberalism, postmodern and queer theory fit in.

The west has a culture in which practices of violence and oppression are being hidden, blamed on the victims through liberal 'choice' ideas or celebrated. I would like to add lesbians and gays to the oppressed constituencies which are the victims of harmful traditional practices. The oppressed status of lesbians and gay men, combined with the experience of sexual violence from men in childhood, is constructing them as constituencies for the industries of transsexualism and body modification in which painful histories are literally cut into the victims' bodies for profit. Transsexualism has a long history. Many cultures have chosen to construct a carefully regulated male dominance and female subordination by casting into a third category those male children who did not fit in or were wanted for other males to use in prostitution. It is not an illustrious history but a story of oppression, which we need to end.

Cutting, piercing and tattooing is unfortunately not just a fashion. For many victims of sexual violence and lesbian and gay oppression cutting has become an obsession, a way of having carried out on them with the cloak of acceptability the self-mutilation they would otherwise guiltily perform in their own rooms. Penectomies, the piercing of tongues, swords pierced straight through bodies, facial tattoos, have repercussions. They are potentially fatal, affect employment prospects, can lead to loss of the power of speech, HIV infection and many more health hazards. Cutting takes us a long way away from the original feminist insight that Our Bodies are Ourselves, that they are good and fine and do not deserve violence, constriction, to be hidden with makeup or veils, cut up in cosmetic surgery or transsexual operations. The practices of violence I have looked at here, prostitution, transsexualism, cutting, suggest the brutality of the oppression of women, children, lesbians and gay men in western cultures in which the oppressed have to dissociate or cut up to survive. But those liberals who want us to believe that we live in the best of all possible worlds, blessed with a level playing field of equal opportunities, must blame these practices on the victims through ideas of choice, or distort their meaning or celebrate them through postmodern or queer ideologies. In Canada today, as in Australia

harmful traditional practices of violence are alive and well and we need to be able to identify them clearly and oppose, always, any attempts to justify them or to build profitable industries upon them. Cutting studios, brothels, should be as unthinkable as the idea of building industries out of female genital mutilation (though of course body modification magazines do use photos of mutilated girls and women for men's kicks).