Introduction

Storytelling in Their Scars: An Introduction to Women Remembering Power and Violence

KC Barrientos

University of South Carolina

In 2023, a report by the United Nations expanding on the exigency of protecting and promulgating women's rights estimated that around the world, about 140 women and girls over the age of fifteen die every day due to acts of gender-based violence. The statistics translate to an even grimmer, more brutal truth: about one woman or girl perishes to partner, domestic, or hate-related violence every ten minutes (UNODC and UN Women 4). While it holds true that the peaks and troughs in these statistics worldwide vary with respect to nuanced cultural and historical factors, it bears recognizing that the physical, sexual, and mental harm suffered by women and girls—also known as gender-based violence (European Commission; WHO, "Violence Against Women") and, in fatal cases, femicide (Russell and Van de Ven 92, 104)—is a universal scourge upon the safety and wellbeing of female citizens of nearly every country, developed and urban or undeveloped and rural or otherwise (Kabylova 1). How broad is the spectrum of the types of violence that plague the safety of women in our contemporary world? From psychosocial, cultural, or even legal standpoints, how do we begin to trace the origins and causes of these specific acts of harm against half the global population? And more to the point: what can be done to preclude the invisibility of such crimes from our consciousness, and what role do the women victim-survivors play in this remembrance?

These questions are far-reaching to the point that no single issue of an academic journal can hope to address them all. These inquiries are, however, as urgent and imperative as ever for a journal such as *Postcolonial Text* to wrestle with in the context of the enduring legacy of colonialism and unequal power vantages in the life and survival of women both in fiction and in reality today. Consider, first, that cases of femicides and assaults against women have not decreased—as one would assume in a world ever developing in penal law and parameters—but instead have heightened in frequency and intensity in recent years. These increasing rates of reports of violence against women in the twenty-first century beg examination: in 2023, Africa ranked as the continent with the highest incidence of femicides, with around 21,700 female victims of homicide at the hands of intimate partners or family members (UNODC and UN Women 4); and close behind in 2023 and

2024 was Brazil, with 33.4% and subsequently 37.5% of all female respondents over the age of 16 admitting to having experienced non-fatal physical and sexual abuse at least once in their lives, respectively (Fórum Brasileiro 15). In Ciudad Juárez, a so-called border-crossing town that straddles the politically fraught space between Mexico and the United States and in doing so grapples with notoriously prevalent violence from organized crime, it is estimated that around 50,000 women over the last two and half decades have been murdered for gender-based prejudice, with over 95% of such reported cases passing into impunity and only 2% of the remainder ever terminating in a criminal sentence (Minard and Carmo). This brutalization of a vulnerable population in Ciudad Juárez has so arrested international attention as to have inspired feature films such as the 2007 production *Border Town* with Jennifer Lopez, independent dramas *Identifying Features* (2020) and *Prayers for the Stolen* (2021), and even the acclaimed 2020 Netflix documentary *The Three Deaths of Marisela Escobedo*. It should be noted that similarly popular cinematic movements have captured the plaintive individual tales of women and girl survivors of gender-based violence in other patriarchal countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq through internationally recognized features, such as *Osama* (2003), *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), *The Patience Stone* (2012), *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2023), and many more.

Pragmatically speaking, the causes of violence against women are manifold. Scholars have identified patriarchal structures in one's home culture as a major factor in the dehumanizing treatment of women and girls (Milazzo). In Latin America and the Caribbean specifically, this "exaggerated male pride" and its concomitant damaging behaviors of scorn toward women, manifested in wage inequality, inequitable domestic labor distribution, verbal and physical abuse, and sexual violence has been dubbed machismo (Garner). This Latin American experience of misogyny, while not unique in the global context, certainly bears in its exaggerated form the marks of colonial history by which Spanish patriarchal culture was imprinted on the Indigenous cultures it sought to annihilate during the Colonial Encounter (Hardin 1, 5). Other studies have pointed to poverty serving both as a trigger for scape-goating violence against women and girls, and a self-feeding social mechanism that entraps victims in these same circumstances of abuse (Niess-May). As attested in reports by the United Nations, the World Health Organization and the World Bank, poverty in the so-called Global South, beyond merely reflecting a universal fact of social inequality, reflects the scars of colonial plunder that have left former colonies of the West in Africa, South America, Southeast Asia and the Middle East now less self-sufficient before the international economy (UNDP; WHO, "Turning the Tide" 5; The World Bank, Prosperity 49, 55; Rodney 205-207).[1] Still other studies have identified generally low educational attainment as another cyclical factor in the harm levied

against women by men seeking to assert their masculinity and power in other ways than financial achievement (Fleming *et al.* 2, 12). Across diverse types of violence and the broad gamut of triggers for harm against women, one truth emerges: power—and the manipulation and transaction of it—lies at the heart of our understanding of women's survival.

In contrast with the layman's understanding of violence—an act of physical or mental harm against an individual or a country, which undermines their dignity and humanity—it may seem counterintuitive to further clarify a working definition of the term. Nevertheless, peace studies scholar Johan Galtung's definition of violence as the result of influence on people in such a way that their somatic and mental development falls below their actual potential is a most useful expansion that exceeds the mere bounds of beatings, kidnappings, war, and murder to include structural violence (Galtung 168) and law-making violence (Benjamin 286). Just as an enslaved African woman's violation at the hands of her master in the New World colonies can be attributed to the structural violence left by European invasion of her home continent and the systematic trade of bodies kidnapped across the Atlantic, so, too, can nearly any other instance of violence against a woman or girl in the works under scrutiny in this issue be traced back to a colonial legacy of uneven keels of power that persist up to this day. Power and violence, as the likes of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and philosophers Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault well understood, stand in inseparable relation to one another. Where power is not a finite source of authority that rests solely and eternally with one group over another, it also does not flow freely between those at the top and those below them: rather, power is transacted through violent means, whether in the discipline of bodies to quell their rebellion (Foucault 29), or in the forceful assertion of agency by the abused to so change their fate and place in society (Fanon 20-21). Wars and uprisings come to mind as the most evident illustrations of power shifting through violence to right the abuse of the past. Yet at a more subtle level with no less pervasive an effect, remembrance of violence through vivid storytelling and revision of lost histories is a key tool for women to survive the violence of their postcolonial world and pass on these strategies to future generations to come.

It is the potent consequence of this storytelling and revision that concerns this special issue, Women Remembering Power and Violence. From around the world, we at *Postcolonial Text* have invited scholars to carefully consider how women in postcolonial spaces, through short- and long-form prose, poetry, and cinema, have relayed stories of their victimhood and survival in their own voices. In so doing, these female protagonists have taken the first step toward wresting power away from the violent structures and corollary structural violence in place that demand their silence, and have simultaneously asserted

theory's own agency in the narrative(s). In an effort to bear witness to the global scale of postcolonial violence on women's bodies and memories, this special issue presents essays on works from Southeast Asia, North and West Africa, the Hispanic and English Caribbean, indigenous North America, and Northern Europe.

The opening essay of this issue, Soumitree Gupta's "Can the Third World Woman Speak? Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* and Decolonial Feminist Pedagogy," attentively studies the very role of memory and how it fails a woman's biographical voice in the wake of trauma. By comparing and contrasting the first and second editions of the titular autobiography, wherein Alexander first confides to the reader the instances of gendered and racial violence borne by her body and other women's throughout her life journey in India, Sudan, England and the US, Gupta underscores how these traumas were compounded by sexual abuse by a respected grandfather and yielded a total suppression of the remembrances of the latter, most profound suffering of violence through it all. Only in the second edition of *Fault Lines* does the autobiographer return to the space and consideration of these wounded memories and so reflect on the possibility of truth in the memoir where pain has already warped her perception of self and life. Throughout her analysis, Gupta is conscientious of the neo-orientalist industry of publishing women's traumatic testimonies—which can doubly generate a much needed awareness of gender-based violence and reduce women's speech from the Global South to that of a parrot of Western rescue narratives—and she uplifts Alexander's memoir as brutal and uncomfortable enough in its candidness to reject neat, neocolonial perspectives and engage the reader in valuable conversation on violence.

Similar work on the link between the somatic and the psychological defines Fuad Jadan's "Women's Identity through Memories of Physical Violence in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Jadan reads women's wounds, both physical and psychological, as identity 'museums' where the sense of self is buried under subalternity unless memories of violence and survival are inscribed. The types of gender-based violence unearthed in the remembrances of the protagonists of Djebar's and Morrison's novels center on infanticide, immolation, and imprisonment, three forms of inflicting harm on both body and spirit at the most vulnerable of moments. Jadan emphasizes the fact that the act of recording these brutalizations on paper in and of itself defies the forceful vow of silence of coloniality and enslavement upon women. Furthermore, Jadan urges more circumspect comparative analysis of these two novels, which have yet to be read side by side for their parallel scenes of black female subjection in nineteenth-century North Africa and the United States. Through a thoughtful dialogue between *Fantasia* and *Beloved*, Jadan purports to highlight the complexity of uncovering

traumatic memories and pitting them against the resistance to patriarchal, postcolonial subjugation of the collective black female voice.

Transitioning geographically from the African continent to its lost daughters in the Caribbean, my essay "'Love and (Dis)Possession: Transacting Power between White Man and Black Woman in Nancy Morejón's Poetry" examines the dynamic between sexual abuse and survival tactics in the character formation of the female narrator in the poems "Amo a mi amo (I Love My Master)" and "Mujer negra (Black Woman)" by Afro-Cuban writer Nancy Morejón. Recreating the voice of an enslaved black woman compelled by survival to dissemble consent when her white master rapes her, Morejón captures the plight of black womanhood under eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial plantation culture in the Caribbean. Feigning such desire for her master to avoid further violence, I argue, is another face of violence in itself, one akin to the discourse of seduction identified by Saidiya Hartman which dictated how enslaved black women in the Americas perceived the transaction of their bodies as a means to purchase trust and power and so serve their larger goal of escape, or marronage. My essay contributes a novel perspective with particular regard to "Amo a mi amo," which I read not as an elegy to a white man by a woman experiencing variants on of Stockholm syndrome, but as a subversive illustration of a future *cimarrona*—runaway—plotting her path to freedom through dissimulation.

The essays in this issue have thus far dealt with violence enacted by men upon the bodies of women and girls. Elisa Serna-Martínez addresses the much less discussed crisis of intrafemale violence as a legacy of colonial patriarchy in her article, "Flowing through the Wound: Radical Mothering in Opal Palmer Adisa's *It Begins with Tears.*" Serna-Martínez scrutinizes various female characters in the 1997 novel, set in Jamaica where syncretism and transculturation have birthed a unique amalgamation of African religious practice and English notions of purity for the women there. The analysis first contextualizes the Caribbean as a fraught space where white male tourism continually echoes the sexual exploitation of black female bodies in present times, and posits that those echoes leave lasting psychological scars such that antagonistic encounters between the female characters in the novel result in sexual violence and trauma at the hands of the women themselves. As she likewise considers the possibility of cure from these postcolonial acts of harm by women against women, Serna-Martínez looks to sacred waterways as referenced in the novel—rivers, sea, tears, and the like—as mechanisms of psychological healing from the decolonial perspectives of Kamau Brathwaite's natural realism and Orisha cosmologies from West Africa.

Though the Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta's 1979 novel *The Joys of Motherhood* has oft been studied for its similar critique of the colonial patriarchy that controls women's spaces and identities, Mahnoor Bano offers a fresh perspective in her essay, "'A Full Human Being': Rewriting Womanhood through the Body in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" by way of comparative analysis of modes of inscribing pain onto the physical bodies of the characters Nnu Ego and Adaku. She specifically flags the fourfold somatic experience of hunger, exhaustion, childbirth, and sexual agency as points of examination of colonial violence in the feminine body. Toward this end, Bano draws on the Foucaultian notion of biopower in her framing of African feminist thought and how the body functions as a site of suffering and resistance. On the one hand, Bano argues, Nnu Ego serves as an indictment of the powerful internalization of colonial womanhood as she agonizes in silence; but on the other hand, Adaku is both a verbal and physical resistance to reckon with, having harnessed agency over her body and identity by defying social norms of purity and respectability for a woman her age. In Bano's view, trauma stored in the body has the potential to regenerate power through pain once it has been remembered as evidenced in the characters in Emecheta's seminal oeuvre.

Female protagonists in literature do not merely function as sufferers of postcolonial violence in isolation or even opposition to one another; instead, as Nina De Bettin Padolin postulates in "Care as Resistance: Indigenous Feminist and Queer Survivance in *The Marrow Thieves*," women can subvert their victimhood through intergenerational care. De Bettin Padolin turns her attention to Cherie Demaline's 2017 dystopian young adult novel *The Marrow Thieves*, wherein bone marrow is systematically extracted from the living bodies of First Nations peoples in Canada to sustain the settlers in their land. Following an epistemological contextualization of Indigenous futurisms and land-based healing whereby intergenerational care drives the literal survival of Indigenous peoples today, De Bettin Padolin is especially concerned with the potential behind care as a non-violent form of resistance to violent ruin by colonialism. While subjugation of the Indigenous women and queer Elders in the novel is as inherently violent as it is structural, she writes, the choice to care for and heal one another based on the memory of ancestral practices and a loving culture is a potent rebellion against colonialism for its very nonviolent nature.

Finally, our special issue loops back to Europe where much of the discourse on postcoloniality is necessarily rooted for its part in the history of subjugating the Global South. In "'Yer Talkin' History. It Ends at Midnight': The Opened Wound of Trauma in Christina Reid's *Clowns*," Arthur Togores interacts with Frantz Fanon's prediction that bourgeois nationalist elite rule over a postcolonial country can only

result in further hegemonic masculine discourse that excludes working-class and female citizens from power. Similarly to how the foregoing essays have signaled the significance of feminine memory as an alternative to and rightful revision of masculine narratives, Togores also foregrounds Sandra's and Maureen's roles in *Clowns* as critical to complicating our understanding of once-exclusively masculine narratives of heroics and mourning in the wake of the ethno-nationalist conflict from the 1960s to 1980s in Northern Ireland involving the United Kingdom. Where audiences are made to understand that Sandra and Maureen were teenage friends prior to the opening of the play, tensions crest throughout the drama as it grows difficult to discern whether Maureen's haunting of Sandra is a supernatural occurrence or a symptom of Sandra's stumble into insanity from having witnessed Maureen's accidental shooting by the British army. Togores reads this pivotal component of the plot as a study in the trauma of war that lingers in the body of a young woman who—though she may not have fought with firearms during the conflict, as a soldier did—is yet scarred just as deeply in her somatic existence as her psychological one by the colonial violence of the sectarian war. Above all, Togores argues that Reid's close look at female subaltern protagonists is an act of remembrance, a recuperation of female voices previously erased from the Irish canon, and a feminist resistance to further hegemonic discourse.

The scars borne on the skin and in the minds of each female protagonist in the essays in this issue tell stories; and in the act of telling stories, they unsettle the blade of colonial violence that sought to sever their tongues and bury their bodies in the graves of masculine narratives. But whether the characters and poetic voices in these essays are soft-spoken or vociferous, or timorous or brash, they are not docile. They defy the single most damning demand of postcoloniality upon them: that they forget the violence visited upon them in the hopes that its relevance may expire. Instead, from the Algerian deserts to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and the various postcolonial loci in between, women resist violence by remembering; they remember by speaking and sharing; and in speaking and sharing, they exemplify what it is to reclaim the power of voice that was seized from them by the colonial scourge.

Notes

1. In regard to the inequitable economic relationship between Latin America and the West, particularly the US, see also the Latin American Dependency Theory, which posits Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries of South America and the Caribbean as existing on the 'periphery' of a circular core of wealthier Western states that deeply

influence and manipulate the machinations of the world economy (Prebisch 88-89).

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