(UN)GENDERING VULNERABILITY: RE-SCRIPTING THE MEANING OF MALE-MALE RAPE

Debra Bergoffen (George Mason University/American University)

The testimonies of men raped by men in Uganda indicate that the meaning of rape as an aggression that enforces the gendering of women as vulnerable and therefore dependent on men's protection needs to be reformulated to account for the fact that being raped transforms a man into a woman. In describing their humiliation, these men reveal that gendered masculinity is grounded in a flight from vulnerability that depends on the presence of vulnerable/rapeable victim bodies. Their words teach us that as long as men's illicit identity as autonomous and invulnerable is illegitimately secured by stigmatizing vulnerability, heterosexual and male-male rape will be used to denigrate women and men alike. They indicate that the antidote to the scourge of rape lies in delegitimizing gender systems that victimize vulnerability and in creating cultural norms that recognize vulnerability as inherent in the interdependence and dignity of the human condition.

“There are certain things you just do not believe can happen to a man.”
— An Ugandan male rape victim

The genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing/genocide in the former Yugoslavia put a new face on heterosexual war time rape and sexual violence. Though women have been categorized among those objects considered spoils of war as long as war has existed, and though like property they have been claimed and appropriated by conquering armies, in the genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia armies did not wait to win a war to seize enemy women as a display of their power. Soldiers violently assaulted women to achieve military advantage. Heterosexual rape, sexually enslaving and, in some cases, forcibly impregnating women emerged as a distinct military strategy.

The advent of this strategy was not an accident. It did not appear out of nowhere. It is one manifestation among others of what Michel
Foucault and Giorgio Agamben describe as the politics of biopower. Both Foucault and Agamben identify biopolitics as central to modernity. Though Foucault sees this politics as a break with the past and Agamben sees it as rooted in the past, referring to Aristotle’s Politics to support his point, their descriptions of this politics dovetail. Foucault tells us that biopolitical mechanisms deployed to enhance the life forces of a people are also invoked to enable the taking of life when that is deemed necessary to secure the health of the social body.\(^1\) This modern mode of politics changes the character of war. It is now, Foucault writes, “waged on behalf of the existence of everyone, entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have been committed.… [G]enocide is indeed the dream of modern powers.”\(^2\) Thus, “modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being into question.”\(^3\)

Detailing the realities of biopower, Agamben finds that one of its essential features is the constant need to discriminate between those lives that are included within the political and ethical domain, authentic life, from lives that are devoid of ethical and political value.\(^4\) Thus biopolitics becomes thanopolitics, a politics where caring for a nation’s biopolitical body entails decisions identifying life that may be killed.

Both Foucault and Agamben use the concept of biopolitics to decipher the genocidal Third Reich and in this way direct us to view the ethnic cleansing/genocide in the former Yugoslavia through a biopolitical lens. Though Foucault alerts us to the relationship between sexual politics and biopolitical imperatives by placing his discussion of biopolitics at the end of the first volume of his History of Sexuality, Agamben links biopolitics to sexual violence in his attention to the rape camps in the wars in the former Yugoslavia. He reads these camps as transforming the birthing body endowed with the power to inscribe a child into the political and ethical life of a nation into a raped body that creates bare life—a life without ethical or political value.\(^5\)

---


\(^2\) *Ibid.*, 137.

\(^3\) *Ibid.*, 143.


Sifting the phrase ethnic cleansing, the term the Bosnian Serbs used to describe their political objectives and military strategies, through the category biopolitics, I find that though the term ethnic cleansing is objectionable insofar as it dissimulates the genocidal realities of the Bosnian-Serb campaign, it is revelatory insofar as it exposes the operational link between seemingly benign biopolitical practices (AIDS campaigns for example) justified in terms of securing the health and welfare of a people and biopolitical aggressions aimed at securing sectarian nationalist interests. Further, when ethnic cleansing strategies are pursued through sexual terrorist tactics the gendered nature of biopower operations become apparent. Now the violence of the benign face of gender codes that symbolize men as invulnerable protectors of weak/vulnerable women is unmasked. As the ideology of health can be used to justify life-preserving measures as well as to legitimate destroying the lives of those said to be contaminated/contaminating, the ideology of gender protector-protected codes can be manipulated to transform the power to protect into the right to refuse protection and the license to exercise unrestrained power. As biopolitics can become thanopolitics, the masculine-feminine protector-protected alliance can become a Sadean tyrant-victim couple where virility is equated with the license to rape.

Foucault and Agamben make it clear that the imperatives of biopower would invite genocidal warfare whether or not protector gender codes prevailed. Though Agamben believes that genocides inevitably lead to rape camps, I do not think that the imperatives of biopower would produce heterosexual rape campaigns absent the power of protector-protected gender ideologies, for the effectiveness of this particular genocidal strategy relies on a sinister exploitation of these gendered identities.

The violence at the heart of the protector-protected, man-woman, gender codes—the ways in which these codes structure a gendered order of domination and submission is carefully dissimulated as a benign domestic arrangement. It is justified in terms of the natural strength of men and natural weakness of women; as necessitated by the authority of men over women mandated by God, or as a reflection of the natural desire of a man to shelter a woman and of the complimentary desire of a woman to seek shelter in a man. So long as women toe the line, the relationship between protection and domination is hidden. If, however, a woman acts in ways that are perceived as forfeiting her right to protection, she discovers that the power to protect is also a power to destroy. When this power is invoked domestically, she is blamed for the ensuing violence (she
was in the wrong place at the wrong time, she dressed provocatively, she asked for it) and the gender order remains intact. His masculinity and her femininity are affirmed in the judgment that her security depends on her accepting the conditions of his protection. As the one who obeys his law she is safe. As the one who does not, she is a victim.

This changes in war. Now her security and that of her children is not dependent on her adhering to the codes of femininity but on his masculine status, his power and authority to be and enforce the law. It depends on the ability of the men of her community to protect her from enemy men. It depends on the ability of her men to be men. Insofar as the communal cohesion of a people relies on men and women validating their symbolic identities, destabilizing these identities will threaten, if not destroy, the social fabric.

In devising its ethnic cleansing rape strategy the Bosnian-Serb command deployed the protector-protected gender codes to their advantage. They identified Bosnian-Muslim women as key to their community’s life and cohesion. Destroying the Muslim women would destroy the Muslim community. To destroy the women, however, the Bosnian-Serb military would have to go through the Muslim men. Because the Bosnian-Serbs insisted that they were engaged in an ethnic cleansing, not a genocide, the men had to be destroyed in ways that kept the lie alive. A sexual terrorist campaign designed to destroy men without necessarily murdering them ensued. This is not to say that the men were not murdered when there was no concern for perpetuating the myth of ethnic cleansing; evidence of murder and massacres abound.  

A raped woman is part of a ménage à trois. She validates her rapists’ masculinity and emasculates the men of her community. Her rape is evidence of the fact that “her” men were not “man enough” to protect her. A man who cannot protect a woman is not a man. As his symbolic identity and authority are ruined, his community’s women are rendered homeless. They now belong to the enemy’s compounds and camps. In the transference of the authority to protect to enemy men who fail/refuse to protect, the violence of the protector gender code is exposed. Only the one with the power to destroy has the power to protect. How this power is used, whether or not women will be raped, will be determined by the particulars of the situation.

The rape convictions handed down by the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal

---

for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) challenged the hold of these gender protector codes. The raped women refused their gendered status as passive recipients of men’s protection. They took up their own cause and spoke in their own voices. The courts, by convicting the rapists of crimes against humanity, not of abusing their masculine duty to protect women, and by finding the soldiers guilty of violating the women’s right to sexual self-determination, invalidated the protector-protected gender codes. Their verdict signaled the complicity of these codes in the heterosexual rape strategy.

Recently publicized accounts of war time male-male rape suggest, however, that the trials and judgments of the ICTR and ICTY in giving women room to move outside of their feminized protected-by-men status has not liberated men from the protector code of masculinity. These reports of war time male-male sexual assaults suggest that the gendering of men as virile protectors of weak women where women risk becoming victims of masculine power if they do not abide by the laws of the protector is still in force. They suggest that the ICTY and ICTR judgments, in giving women a way out of this gender ideology, have not succeeded in eviscerating its grip on men.

The heterosexual genocidal rape strategy and the war zone male-male rape practice share this—they make it clear that one’s place in the gendered protector-protected regime is established in terms of material sexual vulnerability not biology. A man who is raped is emasculated and feminized. The raped and rapeable body, the body vulnerable to sexual assault, is a woman’s body, whatever its genitals may indicate. A man is not merely the one with a penis. A man is the one who can use his penis as a weapon, who can rape.

My attention was drawn to the phenomenon of male-male wartime rape by a July 17, 2011 article in the Observer, “The Rape of Men” by Will Storr. In this article Storr describes his interviews with Ugandan male rape victims and his discussions with the counselors who treat them. He also details the responses to reports of male-male rape by UN agencies, NGOs, and women’s organizations. The men’s testimonies challenge certain understandings of masculine gendered subjectivity, for the fact that they were raped destroys the myth of sexualized masculine invulnerability. In recounting their experience of being raped and its effects on their sense of self, however, the raped men bow to this mark of masculine gendering.

---

The raped men speak of being ruined as men. Were they real men, they say, they would not have been raped. The international community’s refusal to acknowledge these rapes, in contributing to the silence surrounding them, secures the power of the gendered protector-protected ideology. So long as these rapes are ignored and remain invisible, the idea that only women are vulnerable to being raped will prevail. Ironically, in recognizing the global reach of heterosexual rape this ideology is reinforced.

War time heterosexual rape is no longer dismissed as non-existent or irrelevant. It is now widely recognized, analyzed, and criminalized. Male-male war time rape, however, is still a well-guarded secret. Though we now insist that the testimonies of raped women be heard and legitimated, we have yet to listen to and acknowledge the testimonies of raped men. Knowing that their words will condemn them, not their rapists, these men cover their scars in public as they live their wounded private lives. Their shame, their behavior in responding to this shame, and the international community’s refusal to hold their assailants accountable repeat the history of heterosexual war time rape. The meaning of this unfolding history, however, is different from that earlier history and ongoing story.

Rescripting the meaning of war time heterosexual rape is a history of legitimating women’s epistemic authority, of establishing a woman’s right to name and establish the meaning of her experience—it is an account of recognizing rape as something defined in terms of what happens to a woman’s body, not as something defined by a man’s intentions or by a man’s understanding of a woman’s desire. In short, it is a story of women establishing their right to be recognized as subjects. The silence surrounding male-male war time rape speaks to a different agenda. It is about sustaining the myth of the man as the invulnerable, absolute subject—the one whose subjectivity anchors that of a woman. If a raped man sees himself and is seen by others as a woman, if rape transforms a man, the sovereign subject, into a woman, the questionable subject/the one whose subjectivity is in question, then men cannot claim that their subjectivity is inalienable. More dramatically, if a man becomes a woman by being raped, women can be created out of men.

This revision of the myth of creation of woman suggests that feminists, in their critique of gender ideologies, have also been taken in by these ideologies, for noting the power of rape to establish men as men and to create women out of men tests the prevalent feminist assumption that patriarchy operates by positioning woman as the Other of man such that her subjectivity is derived from his. It sug-
gests that within patriarchy it is feminine subjectivity that anchors the male subject and that his identity is derived from hers. Without her to protect, to sexually dominate, he cannot exist. Once we see that a man raped by a man sees himself and is seen by others as a woman, we need to read Beauvoir’s “One is not born but becomes a woman” as applying to those born with male as well as to those born with female bodies. We need to read it in a way that recognizes that one can become a woman by being raped or being identified as rapeable—that divested of the power to protect himself or others from rape a man cannot claim to be a man.

Monique Wittig cited Beauvoir’s “One is not born but becomes a woman” to anchor her argument that females who reject heterosexual arrangements and thus their reliance on men are not women. Her point was that lesbians, in rejecting their dependency on men, are in the best position to expose the lie of the myth of woman. Her analysis, however, still linked those who did/could become women to those who are biologically sexed female. The phenomenon of male-male military rape (and male-male prison rape) suggests that there is no relationship between becoming a woman and being sexed female. Paralleling Witting’s claim that masters exist only so long as there are slaves, I see the experience, effects, and motivations of male-male rape indicating that it is not his subjectivity that anchors hers, but hers that stabilizes his. His identity as a man depends on her accepting her dependency on him. More than freeing herself from subordination by refusing her gendered dependent status, a woman who rejects the idea that she needs to be protected by a man destroys a man’s status as the absolute subject. Patriarchal masculinity, a system of male power and privilege, relies on him establishing that he is not a her and then translating (t)his “not” into an unassailable identity that confers life and meaning on her. He does not need to be protected. He can protector her. He cannot be raped. He can rape her. The power of the negative as sexual politics.

Listening to male rape victims suggests that the two Biblical accounts of the creation of the two sexes needs to be read as the difference between the sexual difference before and after “the Fall.” Before the “Fall” the two sexes lived together as companions, hence the “they were created as equals” account. After the fall, however, as punishment for eating the forbidden fruit, the sexual difference becomes a difference where Adam is assigned the task of providing for and protecting Eve, and Eve is charged with birthing the next

---

generation. At this point the “rib story” account emerges as marking her subordination to him. The testimonies of the raped men, in other words, suggest that though male and female existed in Eden man and woman did not. They suggest that Adam did not become a man until he became Eve’s protector. Understanding these creation stories through the voices of raped men shows us why, though male dominated societies may now be willing to confront the ubiquity of heterosexual rape, they are not yet ready to deal with the realities of male-male rape. Heterosexual rape can be prosecuted and criminalized without necessarily threatening traditional gendered identities or established hierarchies of power. Male-male rape cannot. Whether or not a heterosexual rapist is convicted, his manhood remains secure. A woman who testifies against her rapist testifies to her femininity and her rapists’ masculinity. It was as a woman that she was raped and it was as a man that her rapist assaulted her. He is convicted because he expressed his aggressivity outside of the defined structures of the masculinity protection racket. Because rape is so closely associated with passivity, weakness, and victimhood, a raped man cannot claim that he was raped because he is a man. Neither can he insist, after admitting that he was raped, that he is a man.

The idea that rape is a male prerogative was, until recently, encoded in the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) definition of rape. In December 2011, under pressure from local law enforcement agencies and women’s groups, the FBI changed its definition of rape from the “carnal knowledge of a female forcibly against her will” to the “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part of object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” Until December 2011, the FBI did not consider forced anal or oral sex, penetration with an object, penetration of one man by other rape. This definition and the acts it excluded made it clear: Men can rape. Women cannot. Women can be raped. Men cannot.

Ironically Storr’s article confirms the earlier FBI definition of rape. It suggests that the recent legal change has not changed the street concept of rape. Though the cases of male-male war time rape seem to falsify the previous FBI criteria, the men who speak of being raped in terms of becoming women confirm them. The shame these men bear is different from the shame described by raped women. Both the men and the women are undone but not in the same way. A raped woman is stripped of her existential dignity but not of her symbolic identity. A raped man is robbed of his symbolic value as well as of his existential integrity. He is no longer a man. Were he a man he would not have been raped. This is what the men tell Storr.
Legally, a man can be raped. Existentially and symbolically, he cannot.

Storr places his interviews with Ugandan raped men within the context of Lara Stemple’s study, *Male Rape and Human Rights*, and the work of the Makerere University Refugee Law Project (RLP). He finds two forces at work in preserving the secret of war time male-male rape. The first emanates from victims being too ashamed to speak. The second concerns the politics of rape. Stemple’s research shows that while male-male sexual violence is prevalent in wars worldwide, of the 4,076 NGOs that address sexual violence only 3% mention men’s experience. Of those that do, it is only noted as a passing reference. The successful Feminist Majority Campaign “Rape is Rape,” directed at changing the FBI definition of rape so that by more accurately capturing the realities of rape it would establish more reasonable criteria for reporting and prosecuting rape, follows this pattern. It was silent on the realities of male-male rape. In reaching out to women’s organizations its petition was signed “For Women’s Lives.” In reflecting the fact that women are most vulnerable to being raped it ignored the fact that men are also victimized by rape. Fitting this mold, Chris Dolan of RLP reports that when RLP screened its documentary “Gender Against Men,” people in well-known international agencies tried to shut it down. He attributes this and the international attitude in general to the zero sum game of international aid. He believes that women’s groups and NGOs fear that providing resources for raped men will siphon off resources now available for women and will undo the feminist work of the last several decades by again pushing the issue of heterosexual rape off international and domestic agendas.

Some of the online responses to Storr’s article indicate that these fears are not necessarily unfounded. They remind us that the backlash is alive and well, and that feminist “victories” are far from secure. Most of the readers’ comments applaud Storr for exposing the reality of male-male rape, for describing the toll it takes on the men, their families and their communities, and for identifying the conditions that enable it. They see this abuse of men as part of the larger problem of war time violence gone amuck and condemn it. Some respondents, however, see the silence surrounding male war time rapes as evidence of the feminist war against men. They accuse the NGOs of reflecting the misandrist attitudes of their cultures. When

---

one reader [Requisitename] asks, “Why the hostility toward femi-
nists...?,” another [Urbjokingright]) answers,

Feminists are indeed not responsible for male rape. They have
however significantly contributed to the mindset that men can
only be perpetrators never victims.... [They] were deeply hostile
to the notion that men or women in lesbian relationship could be
victims of DV—presumably because it...[detracted] from the no-
tion that women are the natural holders of the high moral ground.

Another reader [Daddycool] responds to United States Secretary of
State Hillary Clinton’s observation that women have always been the
primary victims of war with the following: “This bullshit always
annoys me.... Your husband and son were tortured and killed and
you're the primary victim. Maybe if there had been better protection
for your husband and son you wouldn’t be a victim at all. Totally self
serving (but short sighted) agenda.” (Emphasis in original)

Freespechoneeach reacts to the article by pledging that he will draw
attention to “every overt instance of misandry in all media and other
public discourse” and “protect, nurture and grow awareness of my
own subjugation within misandric contemporary culture.”

I do not think we can ignore this misogyny, and given the number
of posts that were rejected for not meeting the web site’s standards
of civility, I suspect that it is more prevalent than the accepted posts
suggest. If, however, we allow our fear of this misogyny to inform
our gender politics we will betray our feminist principles. We do
better to listen to the respondent [Murehwa] when he writes: “I
think we, as men, were never conditioned for being victims of rape....
So when victimhood that is supposed to be suffered exclusively by
women happens to a man, it is hard to imagine what society will do
to that man. That is why we have no protection for these men.” In
agreeing with Murehwa, I would also add that we have no protection
for men because by definition, men do not need to be protected. It is
interesting to note here that Murehwa and Urbjokingright identify the
same obstacle to recognizing the scourge of male-male rape—the
idea that men cannot be victims. The difference between them lies in
their account of the source of this idea—feminists or prevailing
codes of masculinity. Stemple, speaking of the power of this idea in
terms of social conditioning (another way of identifying the power of
gender codes), notes the double effect of this conditioning when she
tells Storr:

Ignoring male rape not only neglects men, it also harms women
by reinforcing a viewpoint that equated “female” with “victim”
thus hampering our ability to see women as strong and empowered. In the same way, silence about male victims reinforces unhealthy expectations about men and their supposed invulnerability.10

The Ugandan men who have been raped describe the price they are paying for these unhealthy expectations. One tells an RPL counselor: “I am in pain.” He shows her the pus-covered pad he wears. Then he adds: “There are certain things you just do not believe can happen to a man.” Another rape victim tells Storr that if his brother finds out he was raped he will no longer see him as a man. Wives leave their raped husbands asking: “If he can be raped who is protecting me?” In an RLP officer’s words: “In Africa no man is allowed to be vulnerable.” I do not think this attitude limited to Africa.

As I read these testimonies I find that their accounts of humiliated masculinity are as much evidence of men’s flight from vulnerability and of women’s complicity in this flight, as evidence for the fact that without women to protect or rape, as in some war camps (and in prisons), men cannot be men. If women are not available to establish men’s masculinity they will be created. Given some of the posted responses to Storr’s article I need to be clear. I am not accusing all men of being rapists. I am not claiming that men but not women are aggressive and/or violent. I am not suggesting that women are morally superior to men. I am saying that patriarchal gender codes identify masculinity with invulnerability and translate this abstract concept into the seemingly benign power to protect and the abusive criminal power to rape.

Men schooled in the myth of masculinity are raised to believe that vulnerability is a mark of feminine weakness not human dignity. So long as this myth is in place raping a man will unman him. The power of this myth is evidenced in the fact that the men who are willing to talk are only willing to speak secretly. They believe that they will be humiliated for not being men if their rape becomes public. Given the power of this belief and the ways that it is confirmed by their experiences, these men need to be supported not only in medical and psychological ways but in ways that are attentive to gender norms and that contest these norms by affirming the dignity of our shared human vulnerability. We must say to these men and to their communities and ours that being vulnerable is human, that you are no less a man for being vulnerable, and that your identity as a man is illegitimate so long as it is secured by the vulnerability of women. More

10 Cited in Storr, “The rape of men.”
radically maybe, we must tell them that if being vulnerable means being a woman, then it is time to be proud to be a woman.

Critical as it is to detail the discrimination, oppression, and violence against women normalized and justified in protector-protected gendered societies, the ways in which these societies harm men need to be more forcefully noted. Feminists have argued this as a matter of principle. The victims of male-male rape materialize the argument in ways that are difficult for both men and women to ignore. The testimonies of these men suggest that the issue of rape needs to be reformulated. It needs to be framed in terms of the ways it disciplines, terrorizes, and creates women. Considered in this way, that is, as an atrocity that distorts and demeans the meaning of our sexuality and vulnerability, the phenomenon of male-male rape emerges as a site where theory and practice intersect. Once we see the ways in which the practice of male-male rape, under current gender configurations, transforms men into women, once we understand that this is the point of the rapes, and once we identify these rapes as occurring in the exclusive male domains of military units (and prisons), we also see that men can only be men in the presence of rapeable women. If women are not biologically present, they will be created. From this perspective, the culprit is not some sort of inherent masculine aggressivity but a gender system that identifies the power to sexually subjugate and rape with masculine subjectivity. Seeing this is to see that war time heterosexual and male-male rape will be with us until we delegitimate the protector-protected gender system that couples the idea of vulnerability with the figure of the victim, and recognize the desire to protect and the vulnerability that needs protection as marks of the dignity and integrity of the human condition.

dbergoff@gmu.edu