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The Color of Violence Against Women

By Angela Davis

We must learn how to oppose the racist fixation on people of color as the primary perpetrators of violence yet fiercely challenge the real violence that men of color inflict on women. I feel extremely honored to have been invited to deliver this keynote address. This conference deserves to be called "historic" on many accounts. It is the first of its kind, and this is precisely the right intellectual season for such a gathering. The breadth and complexity of its concerns show the contradictions and possibilities of this historical moment. And just such a gathering can help us to imagine ways of attending to the ubiquitous violence in the lives of women of color that also radically subvert the institutions and discourses within which we are compelled by necessity to think and work.

I predict that this conference will be remembered as a milestone for feminist scholars and activists, marking a new moment in the history of anti-violence scholarship and organizing.

Many years ago when I was a student in San Diego, I was driving down the freeway with a friend when we encountered a black woman wandering along the shoulder. Her story was extremely disturbing. Despite her uncontrollable weeping, we were able to surmise that she had been raped and dumped along the side of the road. After a while, she was able to wave down a police car, thinking that they would help her. However, when the white policeman picked her up, he did not comfort her, but rather seized upon the opportunity to rape her once more.

I relate this story not for its sensational value, but for its metaphorical power.

Given the racist and patriarchal patterns of the state, it is difficult to envision the state as the holder of solutions to the problem of violence against women of color. However, as the anti-violence movement has been institutionalized and professionalized, the state plays an increasingly dominant role in how we conceptualize and create strategies to minimize violence against women. One of the major tasks of this conference, and of the anti-violence movement as a whole, is to address this contradiction, especially as it presents itself to poor communities of color.

The Advent of "Domestic Violence"

Violence is one of those words that is a powerful ideological conductor, one whose meaning constantly mutates. Before we do anything else, we need to pay tribute to the activists and scholars whose ideological critiques made it possible to apply the category of domestic violence to those concealed layers of aggression systematically directed at women. These acts were for so long relegated to secrecy or, worse, considered normal.

Many of us now take for granted that misogynist violence is a legitimate political issue, but let us remember that a little more than two decades ago, most people considered "domestic violence" to be a private concern and thus not a proper subject of public discourse or political intervention. Only one generation separates us from that era of silence. The first speak-out against rape occurred in the early 1970s, and the first national organization against domestic violence was founded toward the end of that decade.

We have since come to recognize the epidemic proportions of violence within intimate relationships and the pervasiveness of date and acquaintance rape, as well as violence within and against same-sex intimacy. But we must also learn how to oppose the racist fixation on people of color as the primary perpetrators of violence, including domestic and sexual violence, and at the same time to fiercely challenge the real violence that men of color inflict on women. These are precisely the men who are already reviled as the major purveyors of violence in our

society: the gang members, the drug-dealers, the drive-by shooters, the burglars, and assailants. In short, the criminal is figured as a black or Latino man who must be locked into prison.

One of the major questions facing this conference is how to develop an analysis that furthers neither the conservative project of sequestering millions of men of color in accordance with the contemporary dictates of globalized capital and its prison industrial complex, nor the equally conservative project of abandoning poor women of color to a continuum of violence that extends from the sweatshops through the prisons, to shelters, and into bedrooms at home.

How do we develop analyses and organizing strategies against violence against women that acknowledge the race of gender and the gender of race?

Women of Color on the Frontlines

Women of color have been active in the anti-violence movement since its beginnings. The first national organization addressing domestic violence was founded in 1978 when the United States Civil Rights Commission Consultation on Battered Women led to the founding of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. In 1980, the Washington, D.C. Rape Crisis Center sponsored the First National Conference on Third World Women and Violence. The following year a Women of Color Task Force was created within the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. To make some historical connections, it is significant that the U.S. Third World Women's Caucus formed that same year within the National Women Studies Association, and the groundbreaking book *This Bridge Called My Back* was first published.

Many of these activists have helped to develop a more complex understanding about the overlapping, cross-cutting, and often contradictory relationships among race, class, gender, and sexuality that militate against a simplistic theory of privatized violence in women's lives. Clearly, the powerful slogan first initiated by the feminist movement--"the personal is political"--is far more complicated than it initially appeared to be.

The early feminist argument that violence against women is not inherently a private matter, but has been privatized by the sexist structures of the state, the economy, and the family has had a powerful impact on public consciousness.

Yet, the effort to incorporate an analysis that does not reify gender has not been so successful. The argument that sexual and domestic violence is the structural foundation of male dominance sometimes leads to a hierarchical notion that genital mutilation in Africa and *sati*, or wife-burning, in India are the most dreadful and extreme forms of the same violence against women which can be discovered in less appalling manifestations in Western cultures.

Other analyses emphasize a greater incidence of misogynist violence in poor communities and communities of color, without necessarily acknowledging the greater extent of police surveillance in these communities--directly and through social service agencies. In other words, precisely because the primary strategies for addressing violence against women rely on the state and on constructing gendered assaults on women as "crimes," the criminalization process further bolsters the racism of the courts and prisons. Those institutions, in turn, further contribute to violence against women.

On the one hand, we should applaud the courageous efforts of the many activists who are responsible for a new popular consciousness of violence against women, for a range of legal remedies, and for a network of shelters, crisis centers, and other sites where survivors are able to find support. But on the other hand, uncritical reliance on the government has resulted in serious problems. I suggest that we focus our thinking on this contradiction: Can a state that is thoroughly infused with racism, male dominance, class-bias, and homophobia and that constructs itself in and through violence act to minimize violence in the lives of women? Should we rely on the state as the answer to the problem of violence against women?

The soon-to-be-released video by Nicole Cusino (assisted by Ruth Gilmore) on

California prison expansion and its economic impact on rural and urban communities includes a poignant scene in which Vanessa Gomez describes how the deployment of police and court anti-violence strategies put her husband away under the Three Strikes law. She describes a verbal altercation between herself and her husband, who was angry with her for not cutting up liver for their dog's meal, since, she said, it was her turn to cut the liver.

According to her account, she insisted that she would prepare the dog's food, but he said no, he was already doing it. She says that she grabbed him and, in trying to take the knife away from him, seriously cut her fingers. In the hospital, the incident was reported to the police. Despite the fact that Ms. Gomez contested the prosecutor's version of the events, her husband was convicted of assault. Because of two previous convictions as a juvenile, he received a sentence under California's Three Strikes law of 25 years to life, which he is currently serving.

I relate this incident because it so plainly shows the facility with which the state can assimilate our opposition to gender domination into projects of racial--which also means gender--domination.

Militarized Violence

Gina Dent has observed that one of the most important accomplishments of this conference is to foreground Native American women within the category "women of color." As Kimberle Crenshaw's germinal study on violence against women suggests, the situation of Native American women shows that we must also include within our analytical framework the persisting colonial domination of indigenous nations and national formations within and outside the presumed territorial boundaries of the U.S. The U.S. colonial state's racist, sexist, and homophobic brutality in dealing with Native Americans once again shows the futility of relying upon the juridical or legislative processes of the state to resolve these problems.

How then can one expect the state to solve the problem of violence against women, when it constantly recapitulates its own history of colonialism, racism,

and war? How can we ask the state to intervene when, in fact, its armed forces have always practiced rape and battery against "enemy" women? In fact, sexual and intimate violence against women has been a central military tactic of war and domination.

Yet the approach of the neoliberal state is to incorporate women into these agencies of violence--to integrate the armed forces and the police.

How do we deal with the police killing of Amadou Diallo, whose wallet was putatively misapprehended as a gun--or Tanya Haggerty in Chicago, whose cell phone was the potential weapon that allowed police to justify her killing? By hiring more women as police officers? Does the argument that women are victimized by violence render them inefficient agents of violence? Does giving women greater access to official violence help to minimize informal violence? Even if this were the case, would we want to embrace this as a solution? Are women essentially immune from the forms of adaptation to violence that are so foundational to police and military culture?

Carol Burke, a civilian teaching in the U.S. Naval Academy, argues that "sodomasochistic cadence calls have increased since women entered the brigade of midshipmen in 1976." She quotes military songs that are so cruelly pornographic that I would feel uncomfortable quoting them in public, but let me give one comparatively less offensive example:

*The ugliest girl I ever did see
Was beatin' her face against a tree
I picked her up; I punched her twice.
She said, "Oh Middy, you're much too nice.*

If we concede that something about the training structures and the operations they are expected to carry out makes the men (and perhaps also women) in these institutions more likely to engage in violence within their intimate relationships, why then is it so difficult to develop an analysis of violence against women that takes the violence of the state into account?

The major strategy relied on by the women's anti-violence movement of criminalizing violence against women will not put an end to violence against women--just as imprisonment has not put an end to "crime" in general.

I should say that this is one of the most vexing issues confronting feminists today. On the one hand, it is necessary to create legal remedies for women who are survivors of violence. But on the other hand, when the remedies rely on punishment within institutions that further promote violence--against women and men, how do we work with this contradiction?

How do we avoid the assumption that previously "private" modes of violence can only be rendered public within the context of the state's apparatus of violence?

The Crime Bill

It is significant that the 1994 Violence Against Women Act was passed by Congress as Title IV of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994--the Crime Bill. This bill attempted to address violence against women within domestic contexts, but at the same time it facilitated the incarceration of more women--through Three Strikes and other provisions. The growth of police forces provided for by the Crime Bill will certainly increase the numbers of people subject to the brutality of police violence.

Prisons are violent institutions. Like the military, they render women vulnerable in an even more systematic way to the forms of violence they may have experienced in their homes and in their communities. Women's prison experiences point to a continuum of violence at the intersection of racism, patriarchy, and state power.

A Human Rights Watch report entitled "All Too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. Prisons" says: "Our findings indicate that being a woman prisoner in U.S. state prisons can be a terrifying experience. If you are sexually abused, you cannot escape from your abuser. Grievance or investigatory procedures, where

they exist, are often ineffectual, and correctional employees continue to engage in abuse because they believe they will rarely be held accountable, administratively or criminally. Few people outside the prison walls know what is going on or care if they do know. Fewer still do anything to address the problem."

Recently, 31 women filed a class action law suit against the Michigan Department of Corrections, charging that the department failed to prevent sexual violence and abuse by guards and civilian staff. These women have been subjected to serious retaliations, including being raped again!

At Valley State Prison in California, the chief medical officer told Ted Koppel on national television that he and his staff routinely subjected women to pelvic examinations, even if they just had colds. He explained that these women have been imprisoned for a long time and have no male contact, and so they actually enjoy these pelvic examinations. Koppel sent the tape of this interview to the prison and he was eventually dismissed. According to the Department of Corrections, he will never be allowed to have contact with patients again. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. The fact that he felt able to say this on national television gives you a sense of the horrendous conditions in women's prisons.

There are no easy solutions to all the issues I have raised and that so many of you are working on. But what is clear is that we need to come together to work toward a far more nuanced framework and strategy than the anti-violence movement has ever yet been able to elaborate.

We want to continue to contest the neglect of domestic violence against women, the tendency to dismiss it as a private matter. We need to develop an approach that relies on political mobilization rather than legal remedies or social service delivery. We need to fight for temporary and long-term solutions to violence and simultaneously think about and link global capitalism, global colonialism, racism, and patriarchy--all the forces that shape violence against women of color. Can we, for example, link a strong demand for remedies for women of color who are targets of rape and domestic violence with a strategy that calls for the abolition of

the prison system?

I conclude by asking you to support the new organization initiated by Andrea Smith, the organizer of this conference. Such an organization contesting violence against women of color is especially needed to connect, advance, and organize our analytic and organizing efforts. Hopefully this organization will act as a catalyst to keep us thinking and moving together in the future. 

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