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Escaping/Transgressing the Feminine: Bodies, Prisons and Weapons of Proximity

María Xosé Agra Romero*

Abstract: »Weiblichkeit überwinden/überschreiten: Körper, Gefängnisse und die Waffen der Nähe«. Assuming that gender relationships are essential to any analysis of terrorism and political violence, I shall examine how the sex-gender stereotypes work, as well as their transgressions. The female military protagonists in the Abu Ghraib media scandal and the women prisoners of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the *dirty protest* in Armagh (1980) are used as a framework in which issues of visibility/invisibility, independence/dependence, invulnerability/vulnerability of women will be addressed. The paper pays particular attention to both the violence against the body and also to the use of the body as a political weapon. From this perspective I analyse both the differences and similarities of menstrual blood as a weapon of proximity in both contexts. The two cases have in common the fact that they occurred in prisons and that women embodied non-traditional roles: soldiers, women political prisoners, allowing for reflection from feminist perspectives on the female inclusion in the citizenship, on participation in political violence and terrorism and on agency and autonomy.

Keywords: Gender, terrorism, citizenship, vulnerability, menstrual blood, dirty protest, Armagh, Abu Ghraib.

1. Introduction. Exceptions and Exceptionalities¹

In *Reflections on Violence* (1996), John Keane noted the paradoxically scarce interest among political theorists in the ethical-political causes, effects and consequences of violence in the twentieth century, a long century of violences. At the same time, Keane drew attention to female political theorists, particularly Hannah Arendt, as the “surprising exceptions” to the tendency. Keane found this “very interesting” in a professional sphere “virtually dominated by men” (Keane 1996, 6). Indeed, this remarkable observation raises questions regarding “exceptions” in political theory. The exceptionality of Arendt in her concern

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with violence and terror merits attention, as she herself points out: “History teaches us that terror as a means of terrorizing men can appear in an extraordinary multiplicity of forms.” In light of this, she states that political science “must not content itself with the simple establishment of the fact that terror intimidates human beings” (Arendt 2005, 359). Political science must also concern itself with investigating the various functions of terror and the differences among *terror regimes*. Though Arendt does not introduce feminist or sex-gender considerations in her studies of violence and terror, her thinking has been fundamental to political thinking and has inspired a good number of female political philosophers and theorists concerned with the ethical, political and even gender consequences of violence and terror (Cavarero 2009; Young 2007). In any case, it is for us to heed her exhortation and address the need to examine the specificities and functions of terror, incorporating sex-gender relations as an essential lens through which to understand new and older forms of violence/s. This will bring clarity to what we mean by exceptions, exceptionalities and their implications in political science, political theory, political philosophy and beyond.

We begin by admitting that the problem of violence has always been a challenge for philosophy and political theory, and acknowledging the urgent need to theoretically examine new forms of violence. In recent years academic and political interest in violence and terror, and in revising old theoretical models and classical philosophies regarding violence has increased (Navet and Vermeren 2003). However, systematic, philosophical and political reflection in this sphere has yet to overcome the persisting reluctance to incorporate sex-gender relations and examine violence *against* and *by* women. The challenge reaches much deeper than revision, adaptation or problematization of concepts, categories, and theories. It involves the recognition and understanding of our own human vulnerability, of ourselves as vulnerable beings and of induced differential vulnerabilities. Such high stakes compel us to reflect on their historical and political links to violence and terror (Cavarero 2009; Oliver 2007; Butler 2004, 2009). This will be the general framework for our study.

Here, we shall explore two contexts and scenarios, looking for that which is human/inhuman in political violence. We will work within the assumption of *terrorism* as a “contested concept” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2011, 11) that must be historically defined and applied using the lenses of gender (Schraut 2014, Schraut and Weinbauer 2014, in this HSR Special Issue). This cannot be limited to violence and terror in the arena of international relations or global politics; nor can it be constrained by problems of national sovereignty and security. By problematizing the exceptions and exceptionality of violence by women, understanding of violence and citizenship in an unequal world can be developed. The intent here is to question the neutrality of gender and the *natural* pacifism of women; an assumption that permeates studies of political violence, cruelty, terrorism, counter-terrorism and war. It stands in sharp contrast to

traditional, persistent perceptions of violence as a virile quality and of war and weapons as the *exclusive* domain of male citizens/soldiers. Such attributes are normally linked to, and constitutive of, full citizenship. Citizenship is itself a contested concept with a sex-gender template that compromises its neutrality. Within this general framework and intent, we shall examine two cases that occurred in very different contexts. The first concerns the twentieth century and the participation of female IRA prisoners in the *Dirty Protest* of 1980; the other pertains to a newer scenario of violence and female torturers at Abu Ghraib during the Iraq conflict. These incidents may shed greater light on the contexts, meanings, persistence and variability of gender stereotypes. Both cases develop in spaces that have traditionally been seen as masculine: prisons and the military.

Though often hidden or displaced to a secondary plane, female prisoners do exist and some have perpetrated political violence. Since the end of the last century, in many countries the numbers of women in the military have also been increasing gradually. Their access to the so-called legitimate sphere of violence is seen as a marker of women having gained full citizenship rights. At the core of both scenarios we find armed women who perpetrated violence: some as combatants² and prisoners, others as soldiers and jailers. One group enjoyed full rights as citizens, the others had restrictions on those rights; but both were supposedly operating from a position of respect for human rights. In both cases, the body is at the centre: either as a weapon or as subjugated by weapons. In none of these cases was the violence intended for killing (war), dying (hunger strike) or dying killing (suicide bomber). In both cases, we find the vulnerability of women and men subjected to humiliation and shame, along with physical and moral cruelty. Both cases had media and political repercussions that mobilised emotions and public sentiment. An examination of these cases, with their differences and similarities, will reveal how sex-gender stereotypes operate and are reproduced, as well as how traditional perceptions arise in *states of terror* or *scenes of horror*. It will also uncover changes in meaning and possibilities of escaping or transgressing the feminine.

2. Escaping/Transgressing the Feminine

Acritically ascribing natural pacifist virtues to women and warrior virtues to men can lead to the victimization of women and a lack of recognition of their capacity for political action and responsibility. In her memoirs, Rossana Rossanda points out how, in a moment of decision-making urgency regarding a demonstration, she discovered that she could not “escape the feminine”:

² Here my use of the term *combatants* follows that of Miranda H. Alison (2009, 3).

and not in the realm of feelings, where all women carry millennia of desires and frustrations, but in the rational and public realm where I thought there should be no difference between a man and a woman. This was not so. That impulse to flee in the face of making a decision to have or not have the illegal demonstration was a warning that has not impeded me from drastic decisions, but repeats itself each time I am not the only one concerned in the matter. I am faced with a detour, a moment of hesitation, a desire to retreat. I don't think this would happen to a man, deciding for others forms part of their DNA. Since then, when I am faced with serious choices in the public sphere, I recognize the impulse to take a step back. I don't think this is a pacifist virtue, but rather a reflection of those who, for centuries, have been outside history. The matter of which I am made has that consistency. I am combative, but as a second recourse. I do not decide in the first or last instance (Rossanda 2005, 221).

The main line of historical and theoretical politics is indeed located in the sphere of the rational and the public. It seeks to expel emotions and sentiments, maintaining both the fictitious separation of public and private spheres, and the idea that violence is irrational and unpredictable. This conception, which Rossanda's life experience so aptly illustrates, is considered gender neutral, or free from sex-gender differences. However, differences surface continually that demonstrate the difficulties in *escaping the feminine*. Such a view of politics holds that the feminine is identified with what is devalued or negative, with vulnerability and dependence, with whatever should be expunged from the body politic. This recurring metaphor of a political body seeks to build upon reason and tends to reject the reality of bodies, which remains non-political (Cavarero 1995). Negative corporal attributes are associated with female bodies: femininity, vulnerability, dependence, lack of agency and its unfounded linkage to becoming a victim (Alison 2009, 2), along with vulnerability and its unfounded connection to being a victim (Shklar 1984). In contrast with this is the masculine *self* with a complete and self-sufficient body: rational, autonomous, sovereign, capable of deciding for self and others, that is, invulnerable.

The question then arises, what happens when women become combatants, actively participate in wars, or commit political violence? Are they escaping the feminine? Are they exceptional? Are they transgressing sex-gender norms and stereotypes? Are they second-recourse combatants, who do not decide in the first or last instance? Do they lack capacity for political and military action? Are their motives personal and private? Are they only moved by emotions and sentiments? Are there differences between men and women?

There are at present sufficient examples and a growing body of research on the participation and implication of women in wars, guerrilla warfare and liberation movements, especially in the twentieth century. However, popular and academic perceptions of women as non-combatants resist revision; the violence of women is still seen as shocking, inconceivable, or astounding. If Arendt would inform our thinking here, we find that if it is necessary to think about violence and terror, then it is also necessary to think about the violence of

women. Here, feminist historiography and the history of women become central. Cécile Dauphin and Arlette Farge recognised the difficulties of addressing the violence of women, given the dimensions and manifestations of violence against women in modern-day societies, wars and armed conflicts. In the introduction of their pioneering text *De la violence et des femmes*, they proposed to “initiate a reflection on the diverse ways in which, both historically and today, societies live, think, and imagine female violence at the same time as they practice violence against women” (Dauphin and Farge 1997, 11). Following this approach, Joan Dejean refers to a long and venerable history of commentaries, “almost solely by men,” that acknowledge and even celebrate violent women. Only recently have studies of women’s history begun to question the exceptionality of violent women; asking why at certain historical junctures, “women were able to reposition in radical fashion the limits that otherwise have defined what is considered an acceptable level of female violence” (Dejean 2003, 118).

Lack of awareness and historical de-contextualization favour the reproduction and reinforcement of gender stereotypes, following extensive and deeply-rooted lines of tradition. These ignore, hide, celebrate or omit from history, and thus stigmatize the violence/s of women.³ Given the lower rates of female criminality and incarceration, hardly a footnote can be found to question the common argument that women are less violent or more peaceful. Such an interpretation is debatable, but will not be addressed at this point.⁴ However, for women involved in political violence, the problem cannot be reduced to a dis-

³ This historical revision and contextualization should be extended to medical and clinical practices and discourse, and to social control institutions, so that what is *normal* may be problematized epistemologically and politically. There is now a sufficiently important and well-known body of research and literature that goes from the works of Foucault and Goffman to current feminist theory.

⁴ Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost (2011) offer a different view. The dossier *Champ pénal/ Penal field* on the social control of violent women includes a clarifying catalogue of typical cases of violence by women and attempts to keep it hidden. Focussing on France, they analyse the gendered dimension of social control of violence, and legal institutions – not just penal ones – that function as institutions that recognize or hide feminine violence. See also by Cardi and Pruvost, *Penser la violence des femmes* (2012). Another theme that cannot be covered here due to space limitations are the different types of violent criminal women, that could be compared with those who commit political violence, especially in regards to the matter of women in the Mafia context. Ombretta Imgrasci (2008, 157) highlights how “to emphasize the lack of emancipation of women in the mafia, judges compare them to women guilty of terrorist crimes”, citing one of these comparisons: [...] “Regarding their ideology, mentality and customs, ‘women of the mafia have little in common with female’ ‘terrorists’ that are actively participating in armed groups [...] *The cultural and ideological foundation is different, as is their contribution to the criminal organisation both through their participation and their personal convictions. Female terrorists have often been on the front lines, or in any case have autonomously chosen clandestinity and participation in subversive groups*” (Siebert, 1994. 184-6; author’s cursive).

cussion of numbers that justify silencing female combatants by assuming their exceptionality. Women are almost never portrayed as prisoners, but as mothers, wives, daughters or sisters of prisoners. Their centrality in activities and associations related to families of prisoners is accentuated. This raises the question, can women be spoken of as *secondary* or second-class prisoners?

Further on, the discussion on equality and citizenship will be resumed. For now, it is important to clarify that escaping the feminine and/or transgressing the socio-political order of sex-gender cannot be identified beforehand. It must be historically contextualized in relation to the different meanings, registers and possibilities for action. Thinking about violence, thinking about the violence of women and violence against women (Dauphin and Farge 1997; Cardi and Pruvost 2012), particularly those who are members of the military or armed groups, must include reflection on vulnerability, vulnerabilities and violence/s, involving the body and bodies.

3. Bodies and Weapons of Proximity

Since 11 September 2001, much media, political and academic attention has been given to the phenomenon of suicide bombings and to the even greater impact created by female “body bombs”, as Cavarero calls them. The shockwaves created by the photographs of tortures in the Abu Ghraib prison were exacerbated by the fact that some of the torturers were women. In the first instance, use of the body as a weapon adopted the most brutal form of dying in order to kill; to massacre large numbers of defenceless innocents and create media impact. However, use of the body as a weapon is not limited to suicide bombings and may take other forms of political action or *peaceful* resistance that involve *suicide* or *self-inflicted* deaths, such as hunger strikes. Here, we will examine other less common or well-known forms in which the body is used as a defensive or offensive weapon. Protests of this kind do not involve death, nor do they seek it, but may lead to serious health, physical or psychological problems and can mobilise individual or collective emotions. However, the sex-gender component is intrinsic to violence and the body becomes a weapon, what I will refer to as a *weapon of proximity*. The first case concerns the 1980 *no wash* or *Dirty Protest* carried out by female Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland. These combatants were scarcely visible as females; as female prisoners they became virtually invisible.⁵ The second case examines abuses and tortures carried out by women in the Abu Ghraib prison of Iraq in 2004.

⁵ This female invisibility is even manifest among male members of these same organisations; Vincenzo Ruggiero offers the example of an ex-member of the *Red Brigades* who told how they were to meet and establish contact at the Milan central station with three members of the German Red Army Faction, that would be identified due to the fact that they would

3.1 Neither Men nor Completely Women: the Protest of Female Republican Prisoners at Armagh

In 1980, within the greater struggle of Republican prisoners against being criminalised, thirty-two female IRA prisoners at the Armagh jail decided to begin a *no wash or Dirty Protest*, joining that of Republican male prisoners at the Long Kesh prison. In this protest, bodily excretions were used as weapons of resistance. We will rely on the observations of anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga, an expert on Basque and Northern Irish ethno-nationalist conflicts. She states that this was “by any standard of political culture, and certainly by that of Ireland, an unusual political action” (Aretxaga 1995, 61). Media sources referred to the Armagh protest as self-inflicted degradation. Such actions were incomprehensible to the public in general, to prison authorities and the Catholic community, who did not support it. Even Republican leaders felt it detracted from the conflict.⁶ This unusual protest “provoked an inexpressible horror and a rising spiral of violence inside and outside the jails” (Aretxaga 1995, 62).

In March 1976, the British government moved to declassify the Republican political prisoners. Republican inmates would thus be required to wear a prison uniform and carry out labour. They would also be denied rights of association, internal organisation and use of time. In March 1977, male Republican prisoners at Long Kesh refused to wear the inmate uniform and instead covered themselves with blankets. Prison authorities implemented a series of disciplinary measures and a year later inmates were prohibited use of blankets outside their cells; so they came out naked. This reaction to what they felt was harassment and humiliation escalated into the 1978 *Dirty Protest*.⁷

Female inmates at Armagh prison joined the protest two years later. According to Aretxaga, they did not see their protest as different from that of the men, and sought the same political recognition. In fact, they sought to dissolve all differences and gain political visibility. Since female prisoners in Britain were

have a certain Italian newspaper visible. The contact did not take place because “we were unable to recognize anyone [...] We were then informed that the Red Army comrades were disappointed that we did not show up at the meeting point, and we found out then that the ‘comrades’ were three women. At the station we were only watching for men” (Ruggiero 2009, 181).

⁶ The political violence and armed conflict in Northern Ireland can be seen to originate in prior centuries, but was prominent throughout the entire twentieth century, and is marked by key events and political conditions. There is extensive agreement in seeing the Civil Rights Campaign of 1969 as the beginning of what is known as *The Troubles*.

⁷ Aretxaga describes it thus: “In a coordinated action, prisoners refused to leave their cells except to go to Mass and visits. At first, they emptied the chamber pots through windows and the peepholes of the doors. When the guards boarded them up, prisoners began to dispose the faeces by leaving them in a corner of their cells. This, however, allowed the guards to mess the mattresses and blankets of prisoners with the faeces during cell searches. Finally, prisoners began to smear their excreta on the walls of their cells” (Aretxaga 1995, 60).

not required to wear a prison uniform, attention was focused strictly on the males. The men had rejected the prison uniform to assert their political identity; so the women improvised IRA uniforms in a similar metonymical movement (Aretxaga 1995, 60). Unlike their male counterparts, however, it was not humiliation that led female prisoners to protest but rather an assault by male prison officials, followed by two days of cell confinement while attempts were made to locate the “subversive garments”:

In search of those small pieces of apparel, trivial in themselves yet deeply significant in the encoded world of prison regime, in full riot gear military men, kicking and punching, entered the cells of IRA prisoners in Armagh on Thursday, February 7, 1980. For the women prisoners the events of that day sparked their “protest of dirt.” For more than one year thirty-two women, the majority of whom were under twenty-four years age, lived in tiny cells without washing themselves, amid their own menstrual blood and bodily waste. Infections were rampant, and skin, sight, digestive, and hearing problems were common. Like their male comrades in Long Kesh, the women in Armagh were protesting against the British attempt to criminalize them (Aretxaga 1997, 122).

According to the ethnographer’s informal conversations with women inmates who related their encounters with prison security forces, sexual harassment had been habitual for twenty years. The assault that provoked the *Dirty Protest* was seen as a political act of discipline involving punishment and “as a humiliating assertion of male dominance” (Aretxaga 1995, 61). Though cells were searched by women when the prisoners were not present, male officials brought from the Long Kesh jail also participated and responded with violence when female prisoners objected. This last fact was the detonating factor that led the women, in their own words, to be “forced to protest”. For women involved in armed struggle, gender neutrality was implicit to political membership. Sexual difference was not consciously used at the beginning of the *Dirty Protest* and was “completely accidental to its meaning.” Such a protest by male prisoners created horror, rejection and incomprehension; but by females it “was unthinkable, generating in many men, even among the ranks of supporting Republicans, reactions of denial” (Aretxaga 1995, 62).

Aretxaga asks why these prisoners chose this form of violent protest and not another, such as the hunger strike they would later engage in. This anthropologist refers to the Freudian interpretation of the importance of the sphincter period in infancy and of faeces as “a primordial symbol of revulsion as well as a primary mechanism for aggression and the assertion of will to power.” Applied to this case, it would correspond to the deliberate discipline and punishment intended to socialize prisoners,

in the new social order of the prison. To that end, the identity of the prisoner as a political militant had to be destroyed. The random beatings, scarce diet, constant visibility, body searches, and denial of control over their excretory functions were directed at defeating the will of autonomous individuals and

transforming them into dependent infantilized subjects through physical pain and humiliating practices (Aretxaga 1995, 62).

The only thing left to the prisoners was their bodies, “at once a weapon and symbol”, as a form of resistance to prison socialization and “the accompanying moral system that legitimized [it].” In contrast with interpretations suggesting that excretory functions were useful by merit of being a “detached weapon”, Aretxaga suggests that what characterised the *Dirty Protest* was the extremely pathetic psychological and physical process of “deep personal involvement” (Aretxaga 1995, 63). The stories of the ex-prisoners expressed a vulnerability and powerlessness akin to infancy. Aretxaga argues that this form of resistance is more convincingly analysed in Freudian terms as a symptom, and the specific nature of it “had conscious meaning and political intentionality for the prisoners.” They knew exactly what they were doing and for how long they would do it. It represented a struggle for existential, political and social recognition by Great Britain, elaborated in the Republican language of resistance as part of Northern Ireland’s nationalist culture, which defined the lives and shared social experience of working class Catholics (Aretxaga 1995, 64). In the context of the *Dirty Protest*, faeces adopted a new political meaning and signified a violent attempt to force recognition.

Several attempts have been made to establish the similarity between the protests of the male and female prisoners, suggesting that the female protest was mimetic of, or supplementary to, the male protest, and that any specific gender differences should be minimised. The larger number of male Republican prisoners, the longer duration of their protest and the brutality of their prison conditions, along with the scarce public interest in the female prisoners prior to 1979 all contributed to this interpretation.⁸ It is true that the two protests shared the same nationalist culture, the same socialization, the same organisation and similar political vision, objectives and beliefs. However, Aretxaga suggests that the female Armagh prison protest did introduce gender differences that “cannot be separated from its inextricable connection with the play of gender and sexual difference in the production and deployment of power” (Aretxaga 1997, 126-7). The participation of male officials can be seen as a gendered form of pun-

⁸ Regarding the reception of the women’s *Dirty Protest*, Aretxaga states that this protest “has been treated by commentators as an appendix to the struggle of male prisoners, receiving a brief remark, sometimes in parenthesis, in accounts of the prison-protest (Beresford 1987, 73-4; Feldman 1991, 174) or at best, a short chapter (Coogan 1980b)” (Aretxaga 1997, 126). In relation to *mimesis*, see also the section “Mimesis or the power of transgression: the feminist debate” (Aretxaga 1995, 72-3). In connection with this, it might be necessary to review later literature subsequent to that mentioned by Aretxaga. In more recent studies as in Miranda H. Alison’s reference is made to, as she calls it, the *no-wash* protest (2009, 73-4) but the women’s *no-wash* protest is not analyzed in particular. The reason seems to be that none of the women she interviewed had taken part in that protest (Alison 2009, 192-3).

ishment applied in order to subject prisoners as such, but also as women. Thus it became a form of violence specifically against women.

Though it went virtually un-noticed, this was not the only difference; nor did it provoke the greatest degree of incomprehension and rejection in the public, the media and Republican or nationalist circles. According to Aretxaga, differences between the male and female protests involved cultural and personal levels of meaning. “Such difference was encapsulated in the menstrual blood as both a symbol of the protest and a signifier of a reality jettisoned from public discourse” (Aretxaga 1997, 126-7).

From her examination of the discourse, media representation, testimonies and experiences of female ex-prisoners and participants in the protest, Aretxaga notes how Republican men avoided mentioning menstruation but attempted to dissuade the women from this form of protest with the limited arguments that it was not appropriate for women to do this because they were women. Political journalist Tim P. Coogan was more explicit at the beginning of his short chapter on Armagh:

The Dirty Protest is bad enough to contemplate when men are on it. But it becomes even worse when it is embarked on by women, who apart from the psychological and hygienic pressures which this type of protest generates, also have the effects of the menstrual cycle to contend with (Coogan 1980b, 114, cited in Aretxaga 1997, 127).

After his visit to the prison, he later described how he found “clots of blood – obviously the detritus of menstruation”, and how it affected him. “I found the smell in the girls” cells far worse than at Long Kesh, and several times found myself having to control feelings of nausea” (Coogan 1980b, 215-6, cited in Aretxaga 1997, 137). Aretxaga astutely points out that the presence of menstrual blood in the political sphere, in public representation, violated the prohibition against demonstrating marks of sexual difference in public. Such a transgression challenged cultural and social representations of femininity which, according to Kristeva (1982) separate sex and maternity, establishing the prohibition on the very substance that links the two (Kristeva 1982, 127). Here we encounter the difference, the exception, the mark of corporal, social and political differential vulnerability. And the exceptionality, the transgression.

The transgression is the result of complex processes of personal and cultural transformation set in motion by the fact that the subjects were always seen “as girls. Their cultural space was in this sense liminal. Neither men nor completely women, they were perceived at a general social level as gender neutral” (Aretxaga 1995, 69). Aretxaga and others found that for female Republican prisoners, the time in prison was a “turning point” that led them to fight for equality (Alison 2009, 144, 192-6). Space does not allow for an examination of how these complex processes were articulated through class, colonialism, history, and the specificity of Catholicism in Northern Ireland. However, it is helpful to remember that this analysis and argument rests on a combination of

Foucault's interpretation regarding bodily disciplinary techniques, which list the body among mechanisms of power and rationality, particularly when dealing with penitentiary institutions; and the interpretation of emotions and affect (pain, disgust, grief, anger, humiliation, mourning) as powerful components of the social order that conform or define subjectivity and political subjectivity.

Through these lenses, the intrinsic links between violence and the sex-gender system are easily identified. To escape the control of the normalised feminine, it becomes necessary to commandeer the corporal and its fluids, subvert them and transform them into a weapon of resistance. Aretxaga indicates, however, that the violence did not ultimately close in on itself with the women prisoners; in contrast with the male prisoners, who carried it on into the hunger strikes that ended the lives of ten IRA prisoners in 1981 (of which the most well-known was Bobby Sands). Subversion at this level changed how the protest itself developed, while also affecting the prison and the world beyond its walls.⁹

So, the body can also be configured as a weapon of proximity. When menstrual blood becomes visible and nameable, it breaks the linguistic and visual taboos regarding bodies and fluids. It subverts gender neutrality, evoking complex emotions and even physical reactions, such as the horror described by Coogan on visiting Armagh and the nausea it triggered. Menstrual blood on prison walls names, displays and brings into the political and public arena that which contaminates and is abject. Indispensable references in this area are the notions of Mary Douglas regarding purity and impurity, and particularly the distinction between savagery and civilization, along with Kristeva's (1982) description of two types of pollution: "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.). Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference" (Kristeva 1982, 71). The body as a weapon of proximity implies contamination, abjection, repugnance, feelings of vulnerability and embarrassment. It leads to an encounter with the fears and anxieties, the terrors and horrors linked to a body that defies the constructed, invulnerable self: the closed, complete, clean, sure, public and rational political body that expels the corporal and the emotional, that hides and

⁹ Though we have no space to examine it here, the analysis of the female Republican prisoners' protest at Armagh that Aretxaga offers includes a presentation of connections of the gendered nation with the suffering of women as mothers, and with nationalist and Republican discourse, practices and images of *Mother Ireland*; with the extremely important and also invisible active participation of women in the daily occurrences of these conflicts; with the equally important violence against women, and in the debates that took place within feminism, particularly regarding its conjunction with nationalism. The problems of female invisibility are also evident in the peace processes. On this see (Alison 2009; Porter 1998).

refuses to recognise the human.¹⁰ We will return to this further on; let us examine the second case. In relatively recent events, such as the context of the *war on terror*, we find an entirely new scenario. Unlike the *Dirty Protest*, where the actions of the female IRA prisoners went virtually unnoticed, the domestic and international impact and repercussions of the Abu Ghraib tortures were colossal; aided and abetted as they were by new technologies.

3.2 Pure Cruelty: One of the Guys and *Dirty Girls* in Abu Ghraib

On 28 April 2004, the news programme *60 Minutes II* shocked the world with photos of abuse and torture by US military personnel in the Abu Ghraib prison. The story appeared a few days later in the *New Yorker*. Extensive media coverage and internet diffusion created immediate scandal, with immense repercussions and debate that reached the US Senate. Horrifying photos circled the globe, showing US soldiers *abusing*, torturing or humiliating Arab Iraqi prisoners in diverse manners: piled up in pyramids, left hanging, heads covered, naked on the floor, threatened by whips and dogs and electric wires, covered with faeces and menstrual blood. An avalanche of literature ensued, with serious debate on torture, its uses in war, its limits, human rights, spectacle making, the role of media in the broadcasting of violence and, of course, the role and mission of female soldiers in the military.

The presence of three women soldiers, Private Lyndie England (23), Specialist Sabine Harman (28) and Specialist Megan Ambuhl (31), who posed *thumbs up* and smiling for the cameras while perpetrating such violence provoked amazement, outrage, fascination and extensive commentary, even by feminists. In the words of Barbara Ehrenreich: “Even those people we might have thought were impervious to shame, like the Secretary of Defense, admit that the photos of abuse in Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison turned their stomachs.” She then adds, “as a feminist: they broke my heart” (Ehrenreich 2007, 1), referring to the fact that three of the seven soldiers processed for “sickening forms of abuse” were women. This raises the question: is there any novelty in female torturers? Are they different from male torturers?

This prison was a scenario for corporal subjection, physical and moral cruelty, extreme or absolute violence. Unlike open displays of public torture (as referring to Foucault’s *supplice*), this was a “special art” hidden from public view (Cavarero 2009, 60). Torture, and our visceral reaction against it, is nothing new. Even so, Shklar warns: “[p]hilosophers rarely talk about cruelty”. They do not place it first among ordinary vices because they assume that every-

¹⁰ In this sense, it may be pertinent to examine and contrast the analysis on human vulnerability and emotions carried out by Martha Nussbaum in *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Nussbaum 2004). She applies this to law, but it is also relevant for our two cases. Specifically, she highlights the long-term misogyny associated with disgust.

thing said about it is obvious and because it constitutes “too deep a threat to reason [...]. Very few people have chosen to run the emotional and social risk of putting cruelty first” (Shklar 1984, 8). Shklar assumes the risk and faces the bewilderment it produces, which seems to escape all rationality. She dedicates part of her analysis to the complex matter of thinking about the victims. Sofsky states that “[t]orture is pure cruelty,” and wonders who the victims are. Torture is “a technique to combat the other, an instrument of social segregation and of exclusion” that draws a

line defining friends, enemies and foreigners, between citizens and barbarians, between the civilised and the savages, between believers and infidels. It separates men from non-men. Only those who enjoy the dignities of citizenship are considered valuable members of the human community, and are almost always excluded from torture, at least while power relies on their loyalty.

The history of torture is “tightly linked to the social history of the lower classes, the marginalised and excluded,” who would be “the victims” (Sofsky 2006, 87).

These reflections lead to some questions that cannot be set aside. First, are cruelty and torture gendered? Are the victims or torturers gendered? Second, given that women were historically excluded or only partially and differentially included in the dignities of citizenship, should they be listed among the victims of cruelty and torture, as non-valuable members of the human community? If they are citizens, do women also access the dignities of citizenship, including military perpetration of violence, torture or cruelty towards enemies; or are women second-class combatants and soldiers? Does the incorporation of women into the military introduce any differences? What is new or different about the Abu Ghraib scenario?

Much debate continues regarding citizenship, female military personnel and the equality of women: whether their inclusion in the military is a sign of progress and equality and if scenes such as those of Abu Ghraib are the price to pay. Nira Yuval-Davis, a scholar who has focussed on citizenship, comments in a chapter entitled “Gendered Militaries, Gendered Wars” (Yuval-Davis 1997) that although the gendered division of labour in the military has been more formal and rigid than in the civil sphere, the military cannot be considered an exclusively male zone. Women have always been involved and many have even been vital, though “usually not on an equal, undifferentiated basis to that of the men.” She emphasizes this differentiation of positions and the non-homogeneous character of groups of men and women, both in institutional or regulated military spheres and in “informal liberation struggles.” Yuval-Davis argues that the incorporation of women into the military and the labour market changes the context of sexual divisions of labour and power “but has not erased them.” With this she questions whether female military involvement is a precondition for achieving full citizenship, with the inherent and ultimate duty of sacrificing one’s life for one’s country. She also questions attempts to naturalize sex-gender divisions, or what it means to be a woman or a man with respect

to armed conflict and war. Such endeavours tend to retrospectively justify these divisions as a-temporal or as divisions that have always existed, helping to acritically reproduce stereotypes and to seek justification even in the power of menstrual blood.¹¹

Leaving the debate on citizenship aside, our interest in the Abu Ghraib case centres on the use of menstrual blood in scenarios of abuse, torture and interrogation, the use of the body as a weapon of proximity, and any similarities or differences it presents with respect to the female *Dirty Protest* case. More than a few similarities can be identified between the two cases, and the initial assumption of gender neutrality in the military is a good starting point. It rests on the same plane in which female soldiers are treated as *girls*: provincial or working class girls who are neither men nor completely women.

However, a significant difference appears concerning the use of women's bodies and menstrual blood as a weapon. In this prison scenario (just as in Guantanamo), menstrual blood was used to humiliate and degrade Muslim males. Rather than defensive use as a weapon of proximity or a means of resistance, it became an offensive weapon of proximity: a "top secret" interrogation technique (Oliver 2007, 27) to *soften up* or *break* prisoners. Even if not authentic, menstrual blood was used literally and symbolically by white women to exercise violence against *brown* men. Here, fears, taboos, and tactics operate according to traditional sex-gender stereotypes, the inversion or subversion of which only reinforce them. Some journalists have indicated that using women as *lethal weapons* against Iraqi prisoners was much more humiliating. "Because of their 'sex' and its seemingly 'natural effect' on men, women become the means to compound not only sexual and physical abuse but also abuse of religions and cultural beliefs" (Oliver 2007, 25). Oliver agrees with Angela Davis in calling these forms of abuse, which were specifically designed to violate the cultural taboos of the prisoners, racist and indicative of a trivial perception of culture. "Why is it assumed that a non-Muslim man approached by a female interrogator dressed as a dominatrix, attempting to smear menstrual blood on him, would react any differently from a Muslim man?" (Oliver 2007, 27). One wonders if this reaction was so very different from that in the Northern Irish case. Was not the enemy's dirtiness operating there also: the savage versus the civilised and clean?

The *dirty girls* of Armagh transgressed Catholic taboos on sexuality, modesty, purity and innocence, as well as images of women as Mothers and Mother Ireland herself. In Abu Ghraib, the *dirty girls* transgressed images of purity and innocence, but in this case, following the stereotypes, were portrayed mainly as

¹¹ Some even stated that "men have bonded together and developed their roles as hunters and fighters to empower themselves with the brotherhood of blood as a defence against women's magical powers in their menstrual blood!" The author is Chris Knight (1991), the quote and final exclamation mark are from Yuval-Davis (1997, 93).

bad girls or whores:¹² a result of the enduring interconnectedness of violence, sex and power. In Armagh, menstrual blood and sexuality marked the social vulnerability of women; in Abu Ghraib, it marked the vulnerability of men. In the first case, the female body became a defensive weapon of proximity; while in the second sexuality was used offensively. Oliver (2007, 28) asserts that “sexualized interrogation tactics become metonymical substitutes for all of female sexuality.” This variant increases the arsenal of bodily weapons: the weapon of seduction in its most powerful, perverse and pornographic form. In sharp contrast with the Northern Ireland case, it became a spectacle and the fascination was broadcast globally. Abundant literature is available on this topic (see Oliver 2007; Eisenstein 2007; McKelvey 2007; Butler 2009).

In both cases, menstrual blood marks the exception. Ilene Feinman argues that the military paradigm is hierarchical, masculinist and racist: able to absorb women “of all colours” and men “of colour.” It can use bodies as sexualized, racialized weapons; yet she states: “[s]exualized torture entails women MPs, interpreters, clerks engaging in activities (*perhaps with exception of smearing fake menstrual blood*) that would stereotypically sexually arouse their heteronormative American soldier comrades (see the panoply of pornographic tropes for evidence of parallels); but in this context, against Arab men, the behaviour is designed to shame” (Feinman 2007, 69, italics added). Shame, humiliation, distress, triggered by gendered and sexual tactics, by the power of white women over Arab male prisoners, by the presence and contact with women – smearing (fake) menstrual blood-, by sexually explicit behaviour which creates strong feelings and stir up beliefs regarding sex and its boundaries, violating their cultural, religious and physical integrity.

Exceptionality surfaces and again history is overlooked, as is the existence of female torturers,¹³ genocidal women and violent women; this reinforces their *novelty* and thus revives the traditional view. The presence and representation of female military personnel in the torture and abuse scenarios at Abu Ghraib reinforce stereotypes and question the agency of women (who are presented as pawns, decoys). To make the torture more digestible to the US public, it was redefined as “abuse”, “misconduct”, “perversion”, and “whorehouse behav-

¹² These do not imply that the other two narratives are absent: that of mother and monster, following Sjöberg and Gentry (2007, 81).

¹³ Analyzing the representation of mortal women in the reliefs of the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, Sheila Dillon dedicates her Postscript to *The Torture Scene on The column of Trajan*: “This strange and anomalous scene shows five heavily draped women beating and burning three bound and naked men”. And she states: “That women were the ones carrying out the torture would surely have served to intensify the humiliation and degradation of the captive male prisoners, as the recent photographs of female members of the American military participating in the torture of Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison vividly demonstrate” (2006, 263, 267). I am indebted to David Álvarez García since he was the first to call my attention to this text.

our”; in the same way the liberation of Afghan women by US forces was intended to make the invasion of Afghanistan more palatable (Oliver 2007, 26). Attempts were also made to introduce variants of the “banality of evil”, or the excuse of simply following orders (Cavarero 2009, 178). Others touted it as evidence of the weakness of female command; given that the commanding general of Abu Ghraib at that time was a woman, Janis Karpinski.

In the context of that conflict, again we find the difficulty of escaping the feminine or the weakness of femininity. Although her story was later shown to be false, Jessica Lynch represented the *good girl* ideal, the hero, the woman who suffered (Oliver 2007, 41),

a woman who could make it as a man, but [...]. Her vulnerability to sexual torture and rape was emphasized in almost every official or unofficial story during her captivity. Even though the military trained Jessica Lynch and gave her a gun, they emphasized the remarkable singularity of a woman who fought; [...] she needed soldiers to save her (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 85).

Lynch provides us with the ideal of militarized femininity.¹⁴ But transgression was not absent. Sjoberg and Gentry observe a triple transgression in the military narrative regarding the female torturers: “[t]he crime that they are accused of, the transgression against traditional notions of femininity, and the transgression against the new militarized femininity, and its role supporting the existing gendered structure of the United States military” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2011, 87). Within that structure, female prisoners were to be hidden: their existence in Iraqi jails, the humiliations, rapes, or the violence they suffered was not to be spoken of.

In this case the abject also becomes political and public, with old/new dimensions that transcend prison walls (Philipose 2007). Oliver asks why menstrual blood acquired a role in war as a top-secret interrogation technique. Returning to Kristeva’s concept of abject, Oliver observes that: “[e]ven within Western cultures that consider themselves ‘liberated’, menstrual blood is not commonly considered an appropriate topic for art or conversation. The blood is shocking, and popular culture typically avoids it altogether” (Oliver 2007, 27). In her book *On Female Body Experience* (2005), Iris M. Young dedicates a chapter to “Menstrual Meditations”. Young corroborates a persistent silence associated with menstruation in the cases she examined in the US and Britain. She considers this a form of social oppression, a dually manifest injustice imposed upon women’s bodies that enforces hiddenness and creates dissonance between women and public spaces. The discord is particularly evident in schools and workplaces. Young insists on the emotional significance of this

¹⁴ It is worthwhile to note the contrast with the *logic of masculinist protection* and subordinated citizenship, according to Iris M. Young (2007); also relevant is the contrast between *armed masculinity* and *citizenship of civic practices* developed by R. Claire Snyder (1999).

process for many women and underscores the absence of philosophical and feminist reflection on menstruation.

Young points to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) as one of the few texts to have addressed this topic, from the lived experiences of women and their ontological dimensions. Young approaches the matter phenomenologically and sets it as an ontological-existential problem. She refers to Kristeva and the abject, and other authors who in turn refer to Mary Douglas, to insist on the vulnerability and cultural construction that privileges a notion of the body, of identity as a "clean and proper body coded as male" (Young 2005, 111). In societies claiming to respect women as equals, Young acknowledges that women are better off than in Beauvoir's times, but observes a lingering contradiction since the late twentieth century. On the one hand women are told that there is nothing in their nature to impede them from achieving whatever they set out to do; but there is still the imperative to conceal menstrual processes. For Young the contradiction is apparent, and the message is coherent.

The message that a menstruating woman is perfectly normal *entails* that she hide the signs of her menstruation. The normal body, the default body, the body that everybody is assumed to be, is a body not bleeding from the vagina. Thus to *be* normal and to be taken as normal, the menstruating woman must not speak about her bleeding and must conceal evidence of it (Young 2007, 107).¹⁵

It is imperative to investigate the foundations of this vulnerability, its links to animality, how it is understood and how it represents what is human and inhuman; but there is not space for that here. What we are contending with is the perception of an invulnerable body with closed frontiers that entail fear of contamination and fluidity. In our reflections on violence, we cannot separate the vulnerability of bodies socially and politically induced vulnerabilities from our shared vulnerability, or from its connections with the security and vulnerability of the body politic. We cannot help thinking about its ethical and political consequences. We cannot help confronting the reality of cruelty, pure cruelty.

4. Final Reflections

I will conclude by emphasizing the need to consider how the sex-gender system operates in different historical, political and cultural contexts and locations: in

¹⁵ In "Mucho más que un signo de impureza: el sexo que sangra en clave antropológica", Lourdes Méndez (forthcoming, 2014), referring to the context of modern western societies, refers to how menstruation is expressed in feminist art, in the 1970s wave involving Judith Chicago's *Reg Flag* (1971), and in today's art: the performance *Una mujer de rojo* by Lina Pardo Ibarra (August 2012). Examining the reactions of "revulsion, disgust, morbidity or surprise," as well as the transgression of menstruating in public, she finds that it can be seen as a political and empowering act. It shows the persistence of old taboos.

regimes, states or scenarios of terror and horror. This will help us avoid essentializing or naturalizing complex relations, or establishing easy and unfounded generalizations and polarizations. It will help us avoid reproducing and reinforcing stereotypes or acritically assuming the permanence of social or cultural constructions and hierarchies without addressing changing imbalances of power between men and women. Paradoxes and contradictions need to be uncovered and pause given to examine possibilities for change and socio-political transformation. Much reflection is needed regarding how societies think, live, feel or imagine violence/s, the violence of women and violence against women, past and present. The process should equip us to discern when exceptions and exceptionalities are real, when they are anomaly, subversion or transgression and when they perpetuate inequalities by simply reinforcing traditions, traditional perceptions and stereotypes. Without adequate frameworks for such contemplation, socio-cultural reinforcement of sex-gender relations will continue, to the detriment of understanding and recognising our shared vulnerability.

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