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'The Calculus of Pain': Violence, Anthropological Ethics, and the Category Transgender

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ABSTRACT *In addressing Nancy Scheper-Hughes's (1995) call for 'the primacy of the ethical' in anthropological research, this paper complicates anthropologists' ethical position by exploring a range of practices seen as harmful or violent by transgender-identified people. I argue that an ethical stance on the violence experienced by one's study participants is deeply complicated by what comes to count for participants as harm and violence. By investigating a range of social contexts and practices – political activism, social service support groups, and ethnographic practices – I argue that detailed ethnography which queries the ontological assumptions of those who claim to have experienced violence is the most effective route to acting ethically.*

KEYWORDS *Gender, sexuality, grassroots activism, politics, ethnographic practice*

The last time I saw Vianna-Faye alive was on a Saturday night – early Sunday, really – in November 1997. She saw me from her car and jumped out waving. We cruised the cool, dangerous streets of the so-called Meat Market on the far west side of Manhattan in her car, talking as she kept one eye on the cars crawling past, alert for the possibility of a date – code word on these streets for someone who will pay for sex. This car was paid for by sex work, and the money she had saved by working these streets would pay for her sex reassignment surgery (srs). Like most of the African American and Latina fem queens (an 'indigenous' category to which I will return) who work the Meat Market, Vianna-Faye is what many Americans have come to recognize as a 'transgender person.'

Since the early 1990s, 'transgender' has emerged rapidly in the United States in a variety of contexts – from legislative and academic settings, to social service provision, popular representations, and journalism – to describe someone assigned to one gender who, in one respect or another, does not perform

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or identify as that gender, and has taken some steps – temporary or permanent – to present in another gender. My eighteen months of ethnographic research focused on the emergence of this category in a variety of contexts, from the streets of the Meat Market to the U.S. Congress. In these settings, ‘transgender’ is variously defined but is most frequently used as a *collective* term¹ to incorporate a variety of social and medical identities – including, but not limited to, transexual,² transvestite, cross-dresser, drag queen, drag king, and even intersex³ people – which had previously been seen as separate. Like many other grassroots movements in the 1990s, the establishment of something called a transgender community was facilitated by the explosion of Internet technologies. However, the activism around ‘transgender’ in particular has most recently been mobilized around violence experienced by transgender-identified⁴ people. My argument here is that violence – both its visceral experience and the stories people tell about it – has been increasingly central to the establishment of the category ‘transgender,’ especially since the late 1990s. This conjuncture – of violence, narrative, and category formation – is the nexus through which I want to approach the question of the relationships among violence, anthropology, and ethics.

Despite the fact that Vianna-Faye fit the above description as a transgender person, she did not use the term ‘transgender’ to talk about herself. If I pushed her, she would say she was a woman, or sometimes, a fem queen. But she certainly fit the definition: that evening, Vianna-Faye told me she had a date – not a trick, but rather for an appointment for SRS – on January 14, 1998, in Montreal. She planned to kick sex work and get a job. Despite her skills (both as a bank teller and as a trained phlebotomist), she had been unable to find legitimate work, a common story in the Meat Market and among other transgender-identified people. After transition she said she would be able to move on, get a real job, and stop being ‘Felicia’ (her ‘street’ name) forever. This life was almost over.

But she never made that appointment. On Christmas Eve, the day I officially ended my fieldwork, she was murdered in her apartment in Jersey City, apparently by a twelve-year-old boy who was a neighbor. She was found in her nightgown, with multiple stab wounds to her back, neck and chest. I found out about her death almost by accident. A few weeks later, now that fieldwork was over, I could return to the Meat Market in another guise, a civilian again, going to a bar on 13th Street. Walking over with my friend Raeph, we bumped into Alexis, another Meat Market regular: ‘Did you hear Felicia was killed?’ she asked, lighting a cigarette. It took me several seconds to register.

'Vianna-Faye?' I asked in disbelief. Yeah, said Alexis, and proceeded to give me the details. And, she continued, she used to be Vianna-Faye's roommate, and she still had a key, and the cops said she could have her stuff and wasn't that cool?

I didn't know whether to cry, to yell at her, or to dispute the ludicrous idea that the police would give her such *carte blanche* with a murder victim's belongings. Instead, I said goodbye and walked on in daze. It was while I was clutching my beer in the bar, not much company for Raeph, that I realized with a dual sense of horror and certainty that I had an ethnographic story to tell about violence against transgender people.

The Uses of Violence

As 'transgender' has become a useful category for talking about gender variance, violence is a useful category for activism and moral argumentation: What could be more self-evident as an embodied experience? And who can tell the anthropologist to get off his high horse when he talks about a friend, murdered?

In a 1995 article in *Current Anthropology*, Nancy Scheper Hughes argues for the 'primacy of the ethical' in anthropological practice, that is, the moral imperative for anthropologists to act on the suffering and violence they witness in the course of their research. She describes her intervention in the community-led rough justice meted out against three young men accused of theft in a South African squatter camp near Cape Town. Flouting the wishes of some community leaders, she arranged medical attention for the youngest offender whose flogging had brought him close to death. Scheper-Hughes argues that her ethical responsibilities – as an anthropologist and as a human being – meant ignoring the demands that she not intervene. She writes:

To speak of the 'primacy of the ethical' is to suggest certain transcendent, transparent and essential, if not 'pre-cultural' first principles.... I will tentatively and hesitantly suggest that responsibility, accountability, answerability to 'the other' – the ethical as I would define it – is pre-cultural to the extent that our human existence as social beings presupposes the presence of the other (1995:419).

Scheper-Hughes calls for a 'barefoot anthropology,' which eschews the view of an 'imagined postmodern, borderless world' (1995:417). In Scheper-Hughes's account, a focus on the transnational, the borderless nature of cultural and financial flows, and postmodernist concerns with the diffuse and complex nature of power has distracted anthropologists from the local and specific,

ETHNOS, VOL. 68:1, 2003 (PP. 27-48)

and the evidence of profound suffering. As an alternative, Scheper-Hughes calls for a

new cadre of 'barefoot anthropologists' [who] must become alarmists and shock troopers – the producers of politically complicated and morally demanding texts and images capable of sinking through the layers of acceptance, complicity, and bad faith that allow the suffering and the deaths to continue... (1995:417).

In many ways, I find Scheper-Hughes's call for an ethically-oriented 'barefoot anthropology' to be galvanizing. Since Vianna-Faye's death, several more of my study participants have been murdered; more have been subject to verbal and physical harassment. These stories are not uncommon: a recent survey by the advocacy and lobbying group Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC) found that almost 60 percent of transgender-identified people surveyed had experienced some form of harassment or abuse, directed at them because of their non-normative expression of gender (GenderPAC 1997). In recent years, transgender-identified activists and advocates have begun to use these stories to appeal to state bodies, demanding legislative action to address such violence (a process in which I have participated, as I discuss below).

Yet, at the same time, I want to take issue with Scheper-Hughes's claim for 'pre-cultural' ethical stances on such facts of violence for, as scholars such as Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1996) and Allen Feldman (1991) have shown, violence, suffering, and pain are not simple or self-evident categories of experience. These scholars argue that violence must be understood as a complex cultural category, drawing in both the visceral reality of murder, but also a set of representations, discourses, and stories *about* such social realities (Axel 2001; Feldman 1991; Kleinman & Kleinman 1996).

Moreover, others (Krohn-Hansen 1994; Riches 1986) have pointed out that 'violence' itself is notoriously hard to define. These authors themselves find it difficult to define what violence is: on the one hand it is sensual and obvious; on the other, it depends on its definition and narration by its victims to become real *as* violence. Daniel – who argues that violence is the counterpoint to the 'omnibus' (1996:195) concept of culture anthropologists work with – captures this dynamic best:

The point is this. Violence is an event in which there is a certain excess: an excess of passion, an excess of evil. The very attempt to label this excess (as indeed I have done) is condemned to fail... Everything can be narrated, but what is narrated is no longer what happened (1996:208).

ETHNOS, VOL. 68:1, 2003 (PP. 27–48)

Yet, for violence to be comprehensible, for such acts to be conceived of as constituting a social problem, the production of a discourse about violence *is* required. In his ethnography of violence and political terror in Northern Ireland, Feldman argues that violence is not understandable simply as an event or a practice, but must be seen as being constituted through the narration and representation of those events or practices (see also Axel 2001; Knox 1998). Writing of how paramilitaries in Belfast speak of interrogation, he notes:

the oral history of interrogation recounted by paramilitaries is a cultural tool kit, an empowering apparatus that paramilitaries take into the theater of interrogation in order to mediate, and possibly invert, the interrogator's scenario of violence (Feldman 1991:14).

Feldman's 'tool kit' maps onto the ways in which many transgender-identified activists draw on violence in constructing meaningful stories about themselves, about their survival, about the experiences of others, and how such narratives are used in appeals to the state (see Butler 1997; Fraser 1997).

However, while these scholars point to the centrality of narration, sense-making, and representation in considering violence, they tend to focus on moments of violence that seem to resist analysis or that seem to be – surely must be – understandable cross-culturally as quite evidently violent: beatings, murders, massacres, torture. I have started this paper with a similar kind of horrifying story. But I want to consider how 'violence' is capable of drawing a range of practices and experiences into its purview, to show how violence – as Daniel argues for 'culture' – also has an omnibus character.

The category of violence is complicated by the ways in which all and any practices by others may come to be understood as violent in and of themselves, in the context of lives where simply walking down the street can be a terrifying experience. Indeed, 'violence' can come to incorporate not only physical abuse and murder, but all practices that may be perceived as impacting negatively upon a life, including the practices of anthropology itself. The violence of representation and of physical harm, of emotional and physical scarring, are hard to consider apart precisely because they can be experienced and narrated simultaneously.

Moreover, this conjuncture – of practices and representations, social realities and their narration – produces for transgender-identified activists a way of presenting stories of lives constantly in danger of harm, a possibility all too readily supported by statistics, personal experiences, and others' narratives. In this way, in activist and personal narratives, 'transgender' becomes

a repository not only of non-normative gender and of bravery in the face of adversity, but of adversity itself: of stories of violence and violation, narratives of pain and hurdles, of denials and unreasonable demands of others.

These violences, large and small, have been increasingly part of the process whereby the idea of transgender has been constituted in the U.S. This is not to say that transgender identities are formed, or transgender activism conducted, exclusively in relation to violence. Moreover, my claims here should not be read as arguing that transgender-identified people necessarily experience violence more than other groups or individuals. However, as Moran and Sharpe (2002) write, in discussing community-based surveys of violence against transgender-identified people,

[t]he sites and techniques of mapping violence, the methods of reportage deployed by activists and the police practices of recording violence are... all process [sic] through which transgender identities and politics take shape (2002:270).

My use of 'violence' in this paper is thus uncomfortably situated: I am using it in its most evident, least theorized sense, to refer to the mind-numbing, monthly reports I receive of another decomposed body unearched, another informant or friend dead, another story of a thrown bottle or a cat-call – the sense that Daniel, Schepher-Hughes, Riches and others implicitly invoke. I am also using it to refer to the ways that transgender-identified people recognize certain discourses and representations to be linked to practices of physical violence; and again, by including cat-calls and murder in the category of 'violence,' I am also doing some of this work. I also think about 'violence' as a series of discourses which are being used, precisely, to help constitute the category of transgender, to make it something that people should care about, write books about, legislate about. But finally, to return to Vianna-Faye's story, I want to look at how 'transgender' as the vehicle for activist practices, as I am arguing for 'violence,' posits coherent and readily identifiable experiences and states of identity to the exclusion of other social identities and other ways of conceptualizing gender and sexual identity. As such, I will argue, these activist practices and discourses perform *another* set of exclusions – a form of unintended representational violence.

Like Schepher-Hughes, I am impassioned by the evidence of violence to write about it, and my analysis here does not aim to draw attention away from the facts of murdered friends, abused bodies, and shattered lives – indeed, quite the opposite. But, like Feldman, I am compelled to write against these events precisely because I believe – contra Schepher-Hughes – that such

a focus is *necessary* for effective and politically engaged work by anthropologists. My analysis of violence therefore lies uncomfortably in the territory between representation and physical violence – *discourse as violence* – and how such facts are mounted to make a series of claims – *violence as discourse*. This complicates Scheper-Hughes's call for a 'barefoot anthropology' since ethical action in this context becomes enmeshed in different claims about what is moral and what is not, and about what does or does not constitute violence and harm. Only an investigation of these complexities – and the diffuse nature of power, the ambiguity of social practices, the flows of discourse and symbolic capital – can provide the context for effective action.

Violence as Discourse: Gender Lobby Day

On a morning in early May, 1997, I was in front of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. with about sixty, mostly white, activists. Those present included transexual men and women, crossdressers, and others who refuse gendered identities. The occasion was the Second National Gender Lobbying Day, an event sponsored by the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC), a group devoted to 'gender, affectional, and racial equality.' Our goal was to highlight issues faced by transgender and gender variant people for Members of Congress. With us were a couple of staffers from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest national political and lobbying group for lesbian and gay rights, who were there to offer their expertise and advice about lobbying.

GenderPAC and its members had wanted to focus their lobbying efforts on amending the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) to include transgender people as a protected class. ENDA, if passed, would criminalize employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, but does not include a provision for discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression. However, HRC had persuaded officers in GenderPAC that a more productive way of introducing transgender issues on the Hill would be to lobby for the inclusion of gender variant people as a protected category in the Hate Crimes Statistics Act (see Valentine 2002). A focus on hate crimes had been an initial strategy of gay and lesbian lobbyists, and it had opened the way for work on more complex legislative concerns around gay/lesbian issues. More to the point, HRC did not want to see ENDA derailed, something they feared would happen if language protecting transgender-identified people was introduced in the bill. While HRC's position angered many of the activists gathered in front of the Capitol this morning, GenderPAC officers had recognized the poli-

ETHNOS, VOL. 68:I, 2003 (PP. 27-48)

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tical realities at hand, and most of those present had agreed that a focus on hate crimes would be the official theme of Lobby Day.

Here, I want to focus on the way that, in the past few years, 'hate crimes' have become a focus for GenderPAC and other organizations whose constituency includes transgender-identified people. Since the previous Lobby Day, GenderPAC had produced *The First National Study on Transviolence* (GenderPAC 1997) which, with 402 respondents, is the most extensive study that has been done on violence against transgender-identified and gender variant people (see also Moran & Sharpe 2002). The task before us this morning was to use this report to get Congress Members to sign onto a letter to the Department of Justice, requesting that the D.O.J. hold a meeting with GenderPAC representatives. At the pre-lobby conference the night before Riki Anne Wilchins, GenderPAC's Executive Director, had told the assembled group: 'Violence is a perfect issue, like motherhood. No-one can be against motherhood and no-one can be for violence.'

Nervously, we split up into small groups and set off to call on the offices of our Congressional Representatives. Riki, Rosalyn Blumenstein, the Director of the Gender Identity Project in New York, and I went off by ourselves to visit New York Representatives. Some time later that morning, we were seated in the offices of Jerold Nadler, a House of Representatives Democrat, and a vocal supporter of the gay and lesbian community. As his legislative assistant flipped through the GenderPAC report, we told stories of murders that we knew all too well and whose stories – in short paragraph form – were included at the end of the report: Deborah Forte ('Ms. Forte suffered three stab wounds to the chest – each half a foot deep, and in addition a number of slash wounds across her chest, a smashed nose, multiple severe blows to her head and face, and signs on her throat of partial strangulation'); Chanell Pickett ('strangled to death in Watertown, MA early on the morning of November 20, 1995'); Brandon Teena ('On Christmas day 1993, Brandon Teena was raped and assaulted at a Christmas party by two men...'); and a host of others.

'Now this is something we can work with,' the assistant said, nodding. Indeed, he had personally suggested during the previous Lobby Day that some sort of study be conducted in order for GenderPAC activists to have some impact on the Hill. By the end of the day, sitting in the cafeteria in the Rayburn Office Building, we were all somewhat dazed: twelve Congress Members had signed the letter. None of us had anticipated this level of success. 'We're two years ahead of schedule,' Riki kept saying, shaking his⁵ head in wonder.

GenderPAC got its meeting with the D.O.J. (a very productive one); in short

order, it was also invited to join the Hate Crimes Coalition, a group made up of black, Jewish, gay and lesbian, and other groups. Through the work of the Coalition, the Hate Crimes Prevention Act was introduced in 1999, defining as a crime the willful bodily injury of any person 'because of the actual or perceived religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability' (106th Congress 1999) of that person.⁶ This means that the provisions of the bill could potentially cover transgender-identified people.

I want to back up from this progress narrative for a moment, though, to note some of the complexities of these politics. The comments of Nadler's assistant, and the willingness of the twelve Members to sign onto the letter indicates how, in a representative liberal democracy, the path to *being* represented is to form oneself as a constituency. There is nothing new about this kind of politics, and as Fraser (1997) points out, such a 'politics of recognition' has become central to social movements in the United States (and elsewhere in the West). The common critique of such politics is that the lives of people such as Brandon or Vianna-Faye become evened out, represented as 'transgender people' without attention to the complexity of their lives, their social identifications, their capacity for agency, or the circumstances of their murder. Indeed, it is not clear that the twelve-year-old boy accused of Vianna-Faye's murder was motivated by her gender expression, but her death is, nonetheless, narrated as a hate crime against a transgender-identified person.

This critique of identity politics, though, requires a further complication in this case. While GenderPAC was founded primarily by transgender-identified people, its policy (directed by Riki Anne Wilchins) has been to attempt to straddle the divide between a 'politics of recognition' and a broader politics of gender. GenderPAC resists being labeled a 'transgender' organization precisely because its Executive Director, staffers, and members hold that such an appellation works against the deeper observation that *all* people are potentially subject to violence and discrimination because of variant expressions of gender. This position is formed, at least in part, by precisely the recognition that Vianna-Faye, Brandon, and many others may have had social identities which could not be accounted for by 'transgender.' Indeed, during our visits to the offices of Congress Members that morning, we took care to speak of 'gender variant people' rather than 'transgender people,' attempting to include within that framework anyone who is attacked on the basis of a perceived non-normative gender presentation.

These choices, though, have their own complexities. As GenderPAC has, since 1997, increasingly eschewed the use of 'transgender' to describe the

focus of its work, it has been perceived by other activists as abandoning transgender-identified people. For many, GenderPAC's national predominance, and the way it has come to be the *de facto* voice for transgender politics, is infuriating because of GenderPAC's unwillingness to focus specifically on transgender-identified people. Critics of GenderPAC range from those who propound the theory that GenderPAC has been 'bought off' by HRC to protect ENDA's chances of passage; to more sophisticated analyses which recognize that while a broad vision of gender-based violence is necessary, political realities require a simultaneous engagement with identity categories (Cartwright 2001). Other critics make a direct link between GenderPAC's politics, its use of murder narratives such as those discussed above, and what these critics see as the implicit violation of transgender-identified people by GenderPAC:

Is it morally right for Genderpac to use [the stories of] Transgender and Intersex victims to raise the bulk of their funds, yet only use a tiny portion of those funds to work for issues that affects those same individuals? Would this not make our dead brothers and sisters victims a second time? (Helms 2000).

In other words, the very terms by which people understand and engage in their politics – even the primary organizing categories used in activism and advocacy – complicate an easy ethical stance on the facts of violence. Moreover, for the activists I discuss here, the use of alternative forms of political organizing and theorizations of gender can themselves be seen as an exercise in representational violence.

In short, engaging in carefully positioned and effective advocacy is intimately connected to a range of complex understandings of violence and suffering – and what that violence constitutes. The anecdotes above raise a host of questions: If legislative advocacy reproduces sufferers as simply victims, is it a valid and ethical exercise? How does one 'take sides' in disputes between different groups with divergent, if valid, analyses of what action is required? What does it mean to reduce the complexity of lived experiences into narratives and statistics, when some of those stories are about people who do not identify as transgender? Or is this simply postmodernist theorizing? Shouldn't an anthropologist simply, act? However, as I will discuss next, anthropological practices, even those motivated by good intentions, can themselves be seen as violent.

Discourse as Violence I: Working for the FBI

December 1996: There were already about 25 members of the Gender Identity Project (GIP) transgender support group in the room when I came in, regrettably late. I had initially been invited by Melissa, a group facilitator, in October to give a presentation about my work. In that group, it was immediately apparent that while Melissa vouched for me, my presence was not altogether welcome. As a support group this venue was supposed to be a safe space for transgender-identified people, and as I am not transgender-identified I did not strictly have the right to be there. After some discussion, the group had agreed that I was welcome to take notes but that I could not tape-record the session.

Tonight was the final meeting of the group before the Christmas break, and everyone was taking turns saying what they had found beneficial about being in the group. There were several people present whom I had not met in the October meeting but as the group had already started, I simply sat down next to Nick, the other group facilitator, and – in retrospect, without consideration of the ethical issues – pulled out my notebook. When my turn came, I identified myself as a non-transgender gay man and as an anthropologist working with the GIP. I thanked the group for the opportunity to listen and learn from their experiences. I finished, and the next person began to talk, but as I dutifully wrote down her reactions, one of the people I hadn't met previously – Jillian – suddenly burst out: 'Would you mind not taking notes in a confidential meeting!'

All hell broke loose, in a kind of controlled way. Nick asked her to rephrase the request in a more polite manner. Melissa jumped to my defense. I apologized, explaining that I had received permission from the group on a prior occasion to take notes, that everything was confidential, that she could see my notes, and that I would stop writing. Jillian was not mollified, however. She said that she would rather pay 'my two dollars' than have me in the room, drawing a connection between the free services of the group and 'government funding' which, she argued, made my presence possible.⁷ Later, after the group had ended, she told me that 'people from the FBI' wanted to take notes on groups such as this, and I was suspected as part of this process. She was tired, she told me, of having notes taken down about what she says and who she is. After some 15 minutes of explaining my project and convincing her I was not an FBI agent, we parted, if not friends at least not enemies.

Jillian's was not the only negative reaction I encountered during my fieldwork. The perception of anthropology as simply another arm of the social

sciences which has sought to pathologize, exoticize, and objectify gender variance is understandable in a field of discursive relations and practices which has always placed gender variance as the thing to be explained. Jillian's reaction speaks to the fact that practices of ethnography, and more broadly of representation, can be seen as harmful in and of themselves.

Transgender-identified people's experience of social scientific investigation into their lives puts Jillian's reaction into perspective. The origin of 'transsexuality' as a medical term, and its current incarnation as 'Gender Identity Disorder' in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (APA 1994), indicates the extent to which discourses about gender variance have been located in psychiatric models of pathology.⁸ Writing of such academic and clinical investigations, Wilchins argues:

Academics, shrinks, and feminist theorists have traveled through our lives and problems like tourists on a junket. Picnicking on our identities like flies at a free lunch, they have selected the tastiest tidbits with which to illustrate a theory or push a book. The fact that we are a community under fire, a people at risk, is irrelevant to them. They pursue Science and Theory, and what they produce by mining our lives is neither addressed to us nor recycled within our community... Our performance of gender is invariably a site of contest, a problem which – if we could but bring enough hi-octane academic power to bear – might be 'solved' (Wilchins 1997:22).

Here, Wilchins targets the way that scholarly discussions of transpeople implicitly mark the analyst as gender normative, and, as s/he argues, the way such analyses generally ignore the very facts of violence that I invoke here.⁹ Indeed, s/he posits a link between these two dynamics, the same link Jillian implicitly makes between my practices of note taking and the power of the state in the person of an FBI agent: that representations are or can be inherently violent.

The linkage of representations and violence is even more complex, though, when one considers the work of some feminist theorists who see the mere existence of transsexual women or crossdressers (though less often transsexual men) themselves as a form of violence against a self-evident, essentialized category of women (Raymond 1994[1979]; Orobio de Castro 1993; Woodhouse 1989; Jeffreys 1996; McNeill 1982). In this view, propounded most famously by Janice Raymond, transsexuality is an outcome of a patriarchally enforced gender binary which violently oppresses women and dupes transsexuals into undergoing SRS.

These discourses are in turn the very ones that Wilchins and others see as intrinsically harmful. In a heated, unplanned debate between Raymond and Wilchins at a book signing for Raymond's new book on reproductive technologies in New York in 1994, each accused the other of a form of violence. Raymond saw Wilchins as evidence of patriarchy's attempts to 'rape women's space.' For Wilchins, Raymond's insistence on an essentialized category of 'woman' violated his own attempts to construct meanings about his body not constrained by binary gender (see Wilchins 1997:59–62). In both cases discussed above, representation in and of itself is linked to social power and the certainty of power's effects in the form of violence.

Clearly, there is a relationship between representation and violence, and I do not seek to deny this. Further, regarding Wilchins's, Raymond's, and Jillian's competing claims as to what constitutes violence, choosing to have sex reassignment surgery, taking notes in a meeting, or writing a book are clearly qualitatively different than murdering someone. But all three of these people draw on a similar epistemology and causality: that representations or ideologies have effects in and of themselves; that representations are linked in a causal way to institutions of power beyond the control of the individual; that individuals are willing automatons, bound to enact the demands of hegemonic representations; and that those who are acted on are victims.

What complicates this relationship between representation and violence even further, however, is the way that such analyses bend back on themselves and work against one other. For if Wilchins sees his own being as constrained by identity labels, such a view is not always seen as liberatory to others. As I have noted above, GenderPAC's shift away from an identity-based politics under Wilchins's leadership has resulted in denunciations. But even Wilchins's analyses of his personal embodiment and identity are sometimes seen as personally threatening to the very people s/he argues for in his activism.

Discourse as Violence II: Foucault from a Faucet

Cindy, along with Riki, is one of the people I am most indebted to in my fieldwork. We first met in the support group I mentioned above in October 1996, and quickly became firm friends and email buddies. At the time I met her, Cindy was just beginning to transition, was still married (with two children), and was deeply depressed by her situation even as claiming her identity as a woman was liberating for her. Her history – of child abuse, rape, drug addiction, alcoholism, suppression of feelings – is one that is all too common. Her stories abound with images of life held on to against enormous

ETHNOS, VOL. 68:1, 2003 (PP. 27–48)

odds. I was immediately impressed by Cindy's courage and conviction, sometimes exhausted by the intensity of her experiences filtered through emails and conversations, and always ready to learn something new from her.

Shortly after the support group meeting I describe above, I promised to email Cindy a paper I co-authored with Riki, a version of which was published in the journal *Social Text* a year later (Valentine & Wilchins 1997).¹⁰ Part of the motive for sending this paper to her was because she had asked to see it; another part was because, as I had said to her, her courage and drive reminded me of Riki's and I wanted the two of them to be friends.

The title of this paper, *One Percent on the Burn Chart*, refers to the percentage of the body's surface area represented by the genitals in assessing burns in a trauma unit, and is intended to draw attention to the fact that, for such a small piece of the body, it carries an enormous amount of cultural weight. In the paper, Riki and I drew on Butler's (1990) famous observations that all gender identities and performances are enactments of unrealizable, hyperbolic gender. The point we were making was that the theoretical focus on gender or sexual variance – be it transexuality, crossdressing, or intersexuality – draws attention away from precisely this observation. In the article, we discussed a workshop that Riki does called 'Our cunts are not the same: transsexual sexuality and sex-change surgery.' Here, I quote from the published version:

During a practical session in this workshop, s/he [Riki] invites the people present to don latex gloves and examine hir vagina. Despite requesting participants to think of hir genitals as they are, and not as they are in relation to something else, the comment s/he gets most often is: 'it's just like mine!' Riki remarks that this comment illustrates, above all, the need these participants have to integrate that 'one percent on the burn chart' into a coherent idea about sexed and gendered bodies. The alternative, which forms the backbone of hir gender activism, is to seek an entirely different ordering of sex, gender, and genitals, for instance, 'just your average, straight white guy with a cunt who really digs lezzie chicks like me,' as s/he signs hir email (Valentine & Wilchins 1997:218).

I sent this off to Cindy on Christmas Eve – a year to the day before Vianna-Faye would be murdered – via email. Later that evening I got email from Cindy, from which I quote the following with her permission:¹¹

To me, my life has been a horror show. It maybe cute for a middle class punk like Riki Anne Wilchins to fuck with a speculum in front of geeks and gawkers. She can always go back to making a wonderful living with her computer talents if she

doesn't sell enough tickets. My emotional reaction is that I'm deeply offended if I'm at all considered to be like Riki. Maybe I could have done more to help others but things were never quite as cushy for me. I haven't existed for twenty years. I don't earn very much money. I couldn't tell Foucault from a faucet. But now I am back and this is supposed to be the best that people who are supposed to be like me have to offer?... It makes me cry... I feel so disappointed, so angry. [...] I don't know David, but I've been attacked by someone who calls herself a male lesbian [...] I've been attacked by someone who ultimately says, through public discourse and self-definition, I, Cindy [...] am a man. This occurs because of her position in 'the community.' If she defines the terms of the debate, then I want no part in the arguments.

In that way, Riki's words, Riki's definitions rape me because they undermine the credibility of my take on myself and Wilchins has 'power over' me. (Wilchins has obtained a higher level of credibility by virtue of curriculum vitae, past actions. Wilchins words count more than mine because Riki has a standing. Anything I do or say as an unknown individual would be measured against Wilchins ideas plus credibility. Wilchins will be quoted, I will never be.) And if Wilchins can rape me by having power over me, then Wilchins is indeed, very much a man. Assertions can be violent and debilitating in that they always make one size fit all.

Needless to say, a flurry of email correspondence followed this. I assured Cindy that my intention – and, I assured her, Riki's – was not to deny her her rights to identify as a woman, to undergo surgery, and to claim the gender and the life she desired (as she subsequently has). Cindy was angered by our analysis because she perceived it as an attack on her desire to live as a woman – and that such a transition would be re-read, re-represented, as nothing more than a falsity. In this way, Cindy's analysis mirrors those critics of deconstructive methods and theory which see the outcome of deconstruction as a world without meaning or distinction.

But most important for my purposes here – the analysis notwithstanding – is to note how both Riki and I (implicitly) are implicated as rapists and how our paper is seen as an exercise in violence. Our representations, Riki's perceived power in shaping the politics of transgender activism, and my position as an anthropologist, are all perceived by Cindy as evidence of violence against her desire to transition, to claim the identity of woman, and to live a full life. Like Raymond's analysis of transexual women – and Riki's critique of Raymond's book, or Jillian's demand that I stop taking notes – Cindy's interpretation of our paper posits a direct relationship between ideology and representation on the one hand, and violence and power on the other. That this interpretation was made of a paper which, at its heart, aims to critique

the ways that systems of gender are implicated in the enactment of all kinds of violence, is all the more ironic.

Cindy was angered by this paper precisely because she saw it as part of a broader discourse about the invalidity of transexual desires. She sees Riki's interrogation of the meanings attached to particular body parts (that is, genitals) as an implicit statement that she can never become a woman. Riki's point (I believe) is that *all* gender and *all* genitals are equally produced through discourses about gender and sexuality. Yet Cindy points out the complex political and personal effects of such an argument; and how even well-intentioned, ethically and morally carefully-considered positions can be read as exercises in violence, even rape.

The density of this story, the ways that representations and experiences of violence double back on themselves, highlights the central point that I am trying to draw out here: in making claims about how gender variant people experience violence, 'violence' is neither an easy nor a self-evident category, and the ability of the anthropologist – barefoot or otherwise – to counter such violence is deeply complicated by the interpretation of what counts *as* violence.

Narrating the Self to the State

Like Jillian's reaction to my presence in the support group, Cindy's reaction to this article does not exist in a vacuum. A vast range of experiences – the violence done against oneself in the past, being subject to the constraints of a binary gender system, having to jump through the hoops set up by medical professionals, social scientific representations, antithetical political positions – all these have potential to become part of a 'tool kit' to make claims against those practices, positions, and representations. Violence, then, is not only a fact of life, but also can be used to narrate one's past in order to explain the present, to characterize the actions of others who should be your allies as no better than the rapists, muggers, doctors, and hecklers who have made your life a horror. That is, in the constitution of 'transgender' as an identity category and a category of political action, the experience of violence becomes available as a theory of the self, where it is assumed that one's attempts to claim a non-ascribed gender are met, almost perforce, by violent opposition. In this way, all harm or potential harm – whatever its origin or manifestation – can be reread through a framework of violence.

I am not suggesting that violence is the sole or even the central feature of all lives encapsulated by the category 'transgender.' It must be noted, after all, that the GenderPAC study cited above shows, conversely, that 40 percent of

transgender-identified people surveyed reported *not* experiencing harassment, violence, or abuse. The point I am making here, rather, is that whatever the statistics, in contemporary political activism, violence has become a central 'tool kit' in drawing the attention of the state to the lives of gender variant people. Even when political activism is focused on other issues, violence is rhetorically and narratively brought into play. For example, in early 2002, the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy (NYAGRA), of which I was a board member at the time, successfully led a campaign to introduce and pass a bill in the New York City Council which would include 'gender identity and expression' (and therefore, transgender-identified people) as a protected category in the city's Human Rights Ordinance. While much of the focus of the campaign was on discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations, these concerns were linked to practices of violence both in NYAGRA's own data collection (through our survey which gathered information on 'discrimination and violence'), and the narratives of transgender-identified people who gave testimony at the two public hearings preceding the bill's passage. Indeed, the context of this bill's passage gave individuals – sex workers, activists, homeless people, professionals – the ability to draw on that 'tool kit' which brings together transgender experience and the experience of violence, representations and practices, agencies of the state with individual histories. The point here is not to reduce transgender identity to violence, but rather to show how, through all of these stories, 'transgender' is institutionally, narratively, and biographically linked to the experience of violence with complicated, often painful, results. To use one of Cindy's phrases, this is the calculus of pain.

Conclusion: The Barefoot Anthropologist

As such, then, the desire to act ethically is not as simple as Scheper-Hughes suggests it might be. While she recognizes the ambiguity of competing claims, what ethical 'first principles' could be established which would enable the anthropologist (or anyone else) to act in a responsible, ethically-grounded, and morally defensible way? I have argued here that violence, pain, and suffering are neither simple nor pre-cultural facts – they are produced through and drawn into the complex calculus of quotidian experience, given meaning, talked about, mounted as claims, and deeply felt.

In discussing 'violence as discourse' and 'discourse as violence,' I have attempted to show how the meaning of violence lies as much in narration and representation as it does in the brutal moment of a murder. For violence to

ETHNOS, VOL. 68:I, 2003 (PP. 27-48)

be understood *as* violence, a story must be told about it, the horror relived with each telling. Conversely, other discourses – be they gossip, psychiatric diagnoses, books, or ethnographic fieldnotes – can be seen equally as stories to be retold and contested. And as they are told and retold, they enter a social field where the shadow of violence can be felt and new claims of violence can be made. Consequently, the possibilities for ethical and effective action are deeply fraught: it is a complex calculus indeed.

As an anthropologist who continues to work on issues of violence and discrimination in the community in which I conducted fieldwork, I am, moreover, conflicted by the ways in which my own data and conclusions put me in a difficult relationship to the advocacy work I engage in. Here I must return to Vianna-Faye and the Meat Market fem queens who introduced this paper. As I noted in the introduction, most of the Meat Market girls do not consider themselves ‘transgender’ – indeed, it is a category that many of them have never heard of. The idea of a transgender community – in which fem queens, cross-dressers and transexuals are understood as full members by activists and social service providers – has arisen out of the contexts of activism and social service provision which I have described above, in order to create a coherent polity as the basis for political recognition and the achievement of social justice. But the collective mode of ‘transgender’ is only intelligible as a ‘community’ in terms of these activists’ conceptions of a shared identity and community based on gender-variance to the exclusion of other intersecting social differences: race, class, age, etc.

Those putative members of a New York transgender community – including the Meat Market sex workers, such as Vianna-Faye – who have few links to formalized contexts of community such as community centers or social service agencies, derive identities from organizations of gender and sexuality at odds with academic and activist understandings. In brief, it is often young people of color, with few links to activist and academic institutions, and who identify as ‘gay’ or as ‘fem queens’ rather than as ‘transgender,’ whose conceptions of self are at odds with the ontological assumptions underpinning the idea of a transgender identity and community. ‘Transgender’ is formed on an implicitly white, implicitly middle-class model of identity-based claims that conceptually – and therefore effectively – excludes the people most at risk for violence (see Valentine 2002).

As Moran and Sharpe (2002) point out, the implication of the surveys they study is that transgender-identified people experience violence in structurally equivalent ways, without attention to other factors which can produce

moments of violence – poverty, ethnicity, racial identification, age – and thereby elide the complexity of the lives represented by them. I would add that the use of 'transgender' in this activism further produces and magnifies those elisions. Moreover, the fem queens who are driven to sex work to survive – and whose lives and identities are often organized in quite different ways from the activists who represent them – are the ones most likely to find their way into the list of murdered 'transgender' victims, their lives narrativized and evened out through stories told about them *as* transgender people in the halls of Congress.

Ironically then, this analysis of 'transgender' enables me as an anthropologist to make my own claim about violence: that the unquestioned inclusion of people like Vianna-Faye or even Brandon Teena (whose personal identification is not known) into the encompassing category of 'transgender' produces a representational colonization of those lives. Given the above analysis, the ways that representation can be seen as violent, I could even write *representational violence*, but again, the slipperiness of 'violence' – and the implications for my own and my colleagues' advocacy work – makes this hard to write; indeed, I anticipate that this argument itself may be seen as a form of representational violence, another anthropological mischaracterization of transgender experience.

I agree with Scheper-Hughes – and indeed, who wouldn't? – that anthropologists are ethically responsible to the people with whom they are privileged to work. But such an ethical responsibility is undercut by attempting to find simple answers. I would argue, contra Scheper-Hughes, that to be an effective advocate and activist, as well as an anthropologist, one must engage in precisely the kinds of deconstructive methodologies she is dismissive of. That is, in order to understand and act upon local manifestations of violence, all those features of contemporary social analysis she critiques under the umbrella of 'postmodernism' – the focus on multiple, shifting identities; the borderless nature of political discourses and practices; the investigation of what power is – are vital to committed, careful, and effective advocacy. Indeed, for the anthropologist who maintains a long-term commitment to a group with whom she or he works, an engagement with such complexity, rather than a denial of it in the face of brutality and horror, must underpin action if that action is to be effective. Violence, pain, and suffering, like all other arenas of social life, are messy, cut through with ambiguity and contradiction. Violence is not only murder or beatings; it can be identified in a text or a political position. To be truly a barefoot anthropologist requires one to attend to such

complexities, and try and sort them out – in context, sometimes thinking very fast on bare feet – in order to act in a way that you can live with. I would like to think that I would have the courage to stop a murder or deflect a thrown bottle. But ‘violence’ is often less easily identified and more nebulous than such terrible acts.

In response to critiques of anthropological representation, Scheper-Hughes suggests that settling for “‘good enough’ ethnography’ (1995:418) is a compromise, a necessary one which will allow anthropologists to act even as they recognize the complexities of their roles and work. I would argue just the opposite: that we want excellent, reflexive, and critical ethnography but will probably have to settle for ‘good enough’ ethics. In complex social worlds, a final, primary, ethical stance is always complicated by good ethnography – and not just its critique, as Scheper-Hughes implies. In order to be ethical – and to try and act consciously, effectively, and with passion – we need to pay attention to the differences, complexities, and contradictions exposed by critically-informed ethnography, our most powerful tool as anthropologists concerned with violence and suffering.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Though not always. I do not have space to discuss this here, but ‘transgender’ has also come to signify, for some, transexuality in particular.
2. I spell ‘transexual’ with one ‘s’ in line with certain practices within activist communities in which I conducted this study. The one ‘s’ spelling is a textual tactic used by some transgender activists in order to mark a difference – and an implicit opposition – to medical meanings of the term, meanings which imply mental disorder and illness. I follow this usage throughout my text, using ‘transsexual’ with two ‘s’s only in direct quotations (see Wilchins 1997:15).
3. ‘Intersex’ is the term increasingly favored by those individuals previously labeled ‘hermaphrodites’ in medical literature.
4. I use the construction ‘transgender-identified’ to mark the ways in which people both take on the category transgender as something meaningful about themselves; as well as the sense of being identified by others to fall into a category. This is a useful way of dealing with the conceptual mismatches I will be talking about in

- this paper, but it also speaks to the ways that self-identity and identification by others of the self are not separate but complexly related phenomena (cf. West & Zimmerman 1987).
5. This unexpected pronoun is one Wilchins prefers, a non-gendered neologism not uncommon among gender variant or transgender-identified activists and scholars. Likewise, Wilchins prefers 's/he' to 'she' or 'he' in both writing and speech. 'Hir' is usually pronounced 'here,' while 's/he' can be rendered in speech as 'shuh-he.'
 6. The bill was reintroduced in March 2001 as the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act.
 7. I assume that Jillian was referring to the (minimal) funding that the GIP receives from various state and local health agencies, primarily from HIV/AIDS funds.
 8. Indeed, even the process by which transsexual identities originated as medical criteria can be perceived as a violent act, as the following comment by activist Dallas Denny makes clear: 'Transsexualism is rather like a country that has been colonized... and the flag is the caduceus, the medical staff. Physicians claimed the land of transsexualism about forty years ago, and have owned it ever since... Transsexual is a slave name, and we conspired in it' (Denny 1999).
 9. Much contemporary ethnography of groups identified as 'transgender' or as gender variant has shown much more sensitivity to these issues. Kulick (1998) stresses the contexts of violence and negative social representations of Brazilian *travesti* sex workers as a central element of their lives. Johnson (1997) argues that ideas about *gays/bantut* in the Southern Philippines are formed as much through a discourse about violence as they are through a framework of gender (though his work addresses less the *gays/bantut* experience of violence). See also Klein (1998).
 10. The co-authorship of this paper was itself intended to respond to Wilchins's critiques in the quotation above.
 11. I have made editorial changes to spelling and punctuation. The ellipses in square brackets are mine; those in the text are Cindy's.

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