

Introduction: Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction (II)

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When we wrote the introduction to the first part of our double issue on “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction,” published as issue 80 (2021), there were signs everywhere of political and social developments that were putting increasing pressure on women, gender-non-conforming folks, and queer people. Scholarly discourses in Europe and the United States, that is those discourses we are most familiar with, registered these developments and scholars alongside activists on both sides of the Atlantic began their efforts to historicize, contextualize, and explain them. At the same time, many researchers gradually had to come to terms with the fact that cultural critique and theory do not necessarily impact the world outside the academy. Despite having seen the warning signs of strengthening anti-feminist, anti-queer, anti-gender, and anti-trans agitations for many years and being intellectually aware of the need to critique Western narratives of progress, many of “us”—if we may evoke such a tenuous collectivity for a moment—had been too naive in our stubborn hope for a future marked by less violence and discrimination (whether institutionalized or not), more equality before the law, and more opportunities for marginalized individuals and groups to see their concerns represented and have their grievances heard and addressed. These hopes have not been confirmed, or at least, they have not been confirmed evenly.

Many obvious advances were made in Europe and the United States in the past decades in terms of a more wide-spread public acknowledgement of, critical engagement with, and willingness to address sexism, homophobia, and other forms of gender- and sexuality-based violence. There were also obvious advances in terms of a codification of changing popular opinions about gender and LGBTQIA*

issues in the form of anti-discrimination laws, policies, and regulations, whether on the level of state institutions, in the private sector, or in civil society. At the same time, severe backlashes to these changes have affected narratives surrounding and policies addressing these populations. The extent of these backlashes and the resulting precarity of social advances become painfully obvious when we consider how quickly a change of government can lead to the reversal of laws protecting reproductive rights. Two such prominent examples of the past two years are the controversial 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling further restricting the already limited access to abortion in Poland and the 2022 Supreme Court decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. It is been terrifyingly alarming to witness how readily states abandon institutions, systems, and actions put in place to protect marginalized groups from harm for the sake of “public good” in times of crisis, as has been seen in many countries’ neglect of at-risk populations, children, and parents of young children during the COVID pandemic, to see just how fragile such political advances can be. The last few months have proven as much.

Between the war in Ukraine, the food, energy, and refugee crises it has produced in Europe in addition to multiple other, already existing food, energy, and refugee crises in the world, escalating climate catastrophe, the global health emergencies and economic strife resulting from the ongoing COVID pandemic, the world looks different now than it did a year ago when our contributors submitted their first drafts of the articles included in this special issue of *gender forum*, or even five month ago, when they submitted their first round of revisions. From our specific perspective as European scholars of American Studies, the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States and the impact this U.S. Supreme Court decision may have on other laws in the country, including legislation that guarantees the availability of contraceptives, science-based sex education, marriage equality, or trans people’s access to medical care, felt like another major shift. Reconsidering the submissions we invited for this issue so many month ago now, it really seems as if some of the dystopian visions discussed by the authors in this issue have moved, as the popular meme suggests, from the fantasy and science fiction sections in the bookstores and libraries of the West to the current events section. Acknowledging the losses and challenges that the events of the last year have caused, especially for populations made vulnerable to crisis by systems of oppression and exploitation, we cannot help but notice that some of the analyses offered in this issue resonate differently now than when they were first conceptualized and submitted, just as the context in which they are being read continues to change as current events and crises are unfolding.

Michaela Keck's article, "Women's Complicity, Resistance, and Moral Agency: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*," examines women's complicity and the limits of agency under oppression described in Atwood's two novels. Keck points to the contradictory and contingent nature of acts of resistance and complicity under patriarchy, and suggests a move away from prescriptive notions of how victims of oppression should react to their dehumanization. Whereas Keck addresses female subjects' relationship with a violent state, Sladja Blazan's analysis of hyperempathy in her article "'Something Beyond Pain': Race, Gender, and Hyperempathy in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*" discusses the extent to which a heightened form of empathy troubles the very notion of subjectivity in a dystopian landscape where state violence has been replaced with a day-to-day struggle for survival in the absence of a recognizable state. This rethinking of empathy by way of feminism and critical race approaches, Blazan suggests, enables a broader reconsideration of the "violence of liberal conceptions of the human under racial capitalism" (34).

The two 1990s cyberpunk novels analyzed by Tram Nguyen in "Feminist Memorializations in Marge Piercy and Rafael Carter" examine the complicity of technology in gender oppression and state violence by way of (constructed) collective memory and (selective) memorialization. Nguyen shows how both Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* and Rafael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* recast private memory practices, as opposed to state-funded memorialization, as means of resisting corporate and patriarchal oppression. Finally, Stina Novak and Corina Wieser-Cox's examination of a recent *Netflix* adaptation of a science fantasy comic book series in "'This is the World We Made': Queer Allegory, Neo-Colonial Militarization and Scientific Ethics in *The Old Guard* (2020)" argues that the movie replaces the "bury-your-gays" trope with a plot of queer immortality and revenge as a means of challenging conventional representations of queerness in mainstream action cinema and in order to offer a queer feminist critique of neocolonialism, militarism, and scientific ethics. As Novak and Wieser-Cox indicate, this critique is complicated by the movie's genre-typical depiction and justification of extreme violence.

Three of the articles featured in this issue (those by Keck, Blazan, and Nguyen) offer a new reading of dystopian texts first published in the 1980s and 1990s. In some way, this points to a rekindled academic interest in works produced during the last two decades of the twentieth century reflective of a recent popular turn toward the 1980s and early 1990s, visible in fashion and music (see bucket hats, chokers, and oversized jeans, as well as the 1990s dance revival of Beyoncé's latest "Break my Soul" or the Dua Lipa and Elton John collab on "Cold Heart")

as well as in nostalgic TV and film returns to content and visualities associated with these decades (see TV series such as *Glow*, *Stranger Things*, and *Bel-Air*, or movies such as *Top Gun*, *Mid90s*, and *Wonder Woman 1984*). The feminist cultural output of those years, including its dystopic visions, has been as influential as it has been contested, which is why we are glad to feature articles that provide new perspectives on some of the key texts of feminist speculative fiction at a moment when these texts seem to speak to us in new ways. This being said, we are equally grateful for the one contribution in this issue that—rather than re-reading a work that has been discussed by scholars for over two decades—analyses a recent movie that revises a genre that became increasingly popular during the 1980s and 1990s: the Hollywood action film.

Before we conclude by suggesting a few ways in which the essays collected in this special issue resonate for us with this current historical and cultural moment, we would like to take a moment to consider the relationship between violence and the state. Western thought has long operated under the assumption that political rule is closely linked to the power to use or threaten violence, whether the violence in question is considered legitimate or not. Indeed, the modern state is often conceived, as Max Weber famously writes in response to thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, as “that human community [*gemeinschaft* in the sense of social and political association] which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory” (310-11; emphasis in original). Alongside Weber, political thinkers/collectives such as Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, The Combahee River Collective, Zygmund Bauman, or Judith Butler have produced different accounts of situations and constellations in which the state’s use of physical violence against its citizens or against non-citizens must be considered illegitimate or at least highly questionable. Alternatively, political thinkers such as John Locke, Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir, Angela Davis, Michael Walzer, or more recently Andreas Malm have also discussed situations and constellations in which people’s violent resistance against an oppressive state and its institutions might be viewed as justified. Relatedly, scholars interested in (state) violence have commented on the social, political, and cultural processes by which certain kinds of violence are made (to appear) legitimate in general or justified when enacted against certain kinds of people, while also reflecting on the limitations imposed on debates about legitimate (state) violence, when non-physical forms of violence are excluded from the discussion.

One theory of violence that may be relevant in this context is Johan Galtung’s systematic of violence, proposed in his influential essay

“Cultural Violence” (1990). Not only does Galtung’s systematic offer pertinent cues for the discussion of representation of violence in literature and other media, it also speaks to debates about the role of literature and media in relation to (state) violence more broadly, not least because it was also formulated and developed during the 1980s and 1990s when television changed the ways in which we experience real-life violence (cf. Baudrillard’s critique of the news coverage on the first Gulf War). Coming from the field of peace studies, Galtung sought to define peace in more complex terms than as the absence of war and violence in more complex terms than as the type of physical injury inflicted against bodies. Framing violence as “avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to *life*” (292, emphasis in original), Galtung distinguishes “act[s] of direct violence” such as killing, maiming, desocialization, detention, or expulsion, from “fact[s] of structural violence” (292) such as exploitation, social segmentation or fragmentation, and marginalization. Exploring what he describes as “invariant[s]” or “permanence[s]” of “cultural violence” (294), he pointed towards “those aspects of culture [...] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” by making them “look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong” (291). Of course, invariability and permanence are relative here. The permanences of cultural violence can change, have changed, and continue to change as cultures change over time. They can also change rapidly as a result of extreme events or crises. In the current historical moment, we see a mixture of both types of cultural change: the gradual, almost imperceptible shifts that continually stretch the boundaries of what is viewed as acceptable or defensible violence, and the rapid, shocking shifts (narrated for example as a turning point in history, a “*Zeitenwende*”¹) that split societies between those who quickly embrace the new “normal,” those who take some time to adjust, and those who continue to actively resist it. The materials discussed by our authors in this issue also address these different types of cultural change, as they examine representations of (dystopian) societies in which disturbing forms of direct violence and pervasive forms of structural violence have become normalized, but in which some acts and structures—often through some extreme event, a gradual learning process, or an otherwise induced change of awareness on the part of the protagonist(s)—suddenly become recognizable again as violent and/or illegitimate.

In ways that resonate with more recent theorizations of violence from the field of gender and queer studies, broadly defined, Galtung suggests that cultural violence operates in and through six cultural domains:

¹ Term used by German chancellor Olaf Scholz in a speech on February 27, 2022, in which he announced the German military reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, and formal science. Cultural violence works, he notes, by “changing the moral color of an act” or by “making reality opaque” (292). Feminist thinkers and scholars of gender and queer studies, too, have theorized such processes of moralization and obfuscation. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, or Sara Ahmed, for instance, explain how ways of knowing and feeling are employed to turn certain behaviors or ways of being into alleged “transgressions” that are supposedly “deserving” of punishment, while at the same time obscuring the violence of everyday acts of gender policing and straightening by presenting them either as necessary for maintaining the “natural” order of things, or by hiding the fact that such violent mechanisms of control exist in the first place. As Sanna Karhu notes, Judith Butler herself describes her theory of gender as one that should be thought of “explicitly in terms of the questions of violence” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 207; qtd. in Karhu 827), by which Butler means “the violence performed by gender norms, that is, the forceful division of bodies as either male or female within the discourse of normative heterosexuality” (Karhu 827). While states do not always actively engage in the enforcement of a binary sex-gender-system and heteronormativity through acts of direct violence, they often do so indirectly through laws and institutions, or by supporting certain religious practices, ideologies, forms of language, types of art, kinds of science, and, one might add, economic systems, rather than others. Or to borrow from Judith Butler’s more recent work on gender and non-/violence, states frequently engage in acts of “normative violence” (Butler, “Preface” xx) that can be considered acts of “gender violence” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 6), or cast acts of resistance against such violence as violent (cf. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*). The analyses collected in this issue as well as the previous one take note of such normative acts of gender violence as well as of violent acts of (gendered) resistance against the cultural norms these normative acts of gender violence seek to establish.

It is interesting to note how often works of speculative fiction have been invoked in recent years in various arenas of political engagement, likely because of the sometimes facile analogies they offer to people everywhere on the political spectrum who see rights rescinded or threatened that they considered irrevocable. Protesters in the United States have been wearing dresses reminiscent of the uniforms worn by the handmaids in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* during court hearings for example. Simultaneously, internet users have been debating, whether Atwood’s reproductive dystopia and its popular TV adaptation are in fact the best cultural texts to evoke in connection to the political struggle for reproductive justice in the United States. Some of these critics of the *Handmaid* references suggest that Octavia Butler’s works

may be better suited to explain the current political and cultural moment because they engage class-based and racist violence more explicitly than Atwood's works. In this context, white feminists in particular may find it productive to consider Michaela Keck's discussion of the ways in which privileged women can become implicated in and complicity with patriarchal structures that empower men and certain women to enact direct and symbolic violence against other women. Alternatively, some readers may find it useful to engage with Sladja Blazan's discussion of the radical notion of empathy proposed by Octavia Butler, which—if understood as an ethics and as a practice—points to possible models of relating to others in times of crisis, models that encourage us to think critically about the potential benefits as well as the risks of being in close proximity to each other, whether physically or emotionally. For other readers, revisiting Marge Piercy and Rafael Carter's imagined worlds may offer the opportunity to think about the ways in which contested collective memories of the past are deployed in military conflicts and subsequent projects of social reconstruction in order to justify acts of direct and structural violence. Nguyen's article may also be of interest to those thinking about the important role that the media and communication technologies more generally can come to play in such state-sanctioned processes of memorialization. Lastly, a queer reading of a movie such as *The Old Guard* may point to some of the gender scripts as well as to some of the gendered scripts of violence and citizenship that are activated in military conflicts and neocolonial projects backed by corporatized science, scripts that can be both harmful and emancipatory for disenfranchised groups.

Taken together, the analyses featured in the articles of this issue, along with the ones featured in part one of the double issue, highlight some of the conceptual and ethical complexities that arise when one considers issues of gender and sexuality in relation to violent states, violent institutions, violent communities, and violent individuals, or—alternatively—in relation to states, institutions, communities, and individuals that remain nonviolent in the face of violence, conflict, or crisis. The essays collected here can only begin to explore these complexities. Still, what they show is that cultural violence studies and gender and queer studies have much to say to one another, as do cultural violence studies and the study of gender and sexuality in speculative fiction. There is an obvious fascination in the Western popular imagination with speculative depictions of state violence as well as with speculative depictions of violent societies in the absence of state control, whether the violence enacted is gender violence, racist violence, neocolonial violence, ecological violence, or other kinds of violence. There is also an obvious fascination with speculative representations of struggles of resistance

against oppressive systems, whether these representations take the form of narratives of heroic individualism or narratives of collective action. The resulting works challenge idealized notions of modern nation states as nonviolent political formations and about the legitimacy of state violence, drawing attention to the naturalized forms of direct, structural, and cultural violence states employ to maintain order as well as to the violence they employ to maintain a social order marked by inequality and injustice. It is this uneasy wavering between representations of imaginary forms of (state) violence and representations of current or historical realities of (state) violence in fictionalized form that makes speculative fiction across media both timeless and always potentially timely. We hope that this special issue can speak to some of the very timely questions surrounding matters of gender, violence, and the state and in doing so join a conversation that must be ongoing.

We hope that both issues of *gender forum* dedicated to “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction” offer not just new insights into the field, but are in productive conversation with one another. Our readers will be the judges of that and we thank each and every one of you for your intellectual engagement with and critique of the ideas and theories presented here. We are also very grateful to all the authors, blind peer-reviewers, and members of the editorial team of *gender forum* who have made this double issue happen during a period that was and to many continues to be very difficult. As many of us involved in finalizing the issue now embark on our summer break, we wish all of us and our readers the time and mental space to take a break and, if this issue has sparked your interest, to engage with and enjoy more works of speculative fiction in more forms and from many more time periods and places than could be covered here. There is so much more out there to be explored. We hope you are in a place to do so.

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