



## REVIEW

**Dianna Taylor, *Sexual Violence and Humiliation: A Foucauldian-Feminist Perspective (Interdisciplinary Research in Gender)*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. 128. ISBN: 978-1-138-58143-2 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-429-50542-3 (e-book).**

The phenomenon of sexual violence poses an important problem for feminist theory. On the one hand, feminist discussions of sexual violence understandably have aimed to make this violence visible, to contest the attempts of patriarchal culture and society to normalize it by either hiding it, denying its existence, or blaming its victims. However, making this violence visible can potentially come at great cost for its survivors: trapping them within it, defining them through it, limiting them to being essentially and ontologically the (humiliated) survivors of sexual violence.

Dianna Taylor's book on sexual violence and sexual humiliation is one of the most innovative analyses of how feminist theory might deal with this challenge to have been published. While deep and philosophically rigorous, the book is fluidly readable, both engaging and exciting: it opens the reader's mind and motivates action, movement, and political change. It will be useful to feminist activists as well as to researchers and graduate and undergraduate students in a number of fields, including political theory, philosophy, and gender studies.

Taylor's six chapters (including the introduction and the conclusion, which are important chapters in themselves) offer an original solution to the feminist dilemma: to liberate victims of sexual violence and humiliation from being ontologically defined by that violence, we must abandon "the subject" as a stable, well-formed, constant, and self-contained concept while seeking other, less constrained ways of self-relation. This destabilization of subjectivity, performed mainly through subversive acts of truth-telling, is neither easy nor risk-free: "Constituting oneself in terms of unpopular truths entails the taking on of risk, including the risking of one's own intelligibility; it is therefore characterized by courage" (p. 6). "Loosening attachments to subjectivity" (p. 10) is non-trivial, especially for those who have historically been denied stable, unified, recognizable subjectivity and have required painful struggle to achieve it: namely women. For privileged subjects, the idea of detaching themselves from stable subjectivity might be unthreatening (sometimes even pleasurable), but how can we feminists ask women to seek alternative modes of self-relation, thereby risking our long-deferred achievement? Taylor shows this to be possible

and desirable: a risk worth taking. The main device with which Taylor builds this risky alternative—which nevertheless provides an empowering solution to the feminist dilemma of how to confront sexual violence and sexual humiliation without being reduced to its object, an “it”—is a deep, meticulous analysis of Foucault’s critique of “the subject.”

But to understand how Taylor constructs this solution, we must first understand the problem: what it means for the victim of sexual violence to be humiliated, and why a stable, self-contained subject might impede the victim in fighting against this humiliation. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the problem of sexual humiliation. Objectification, Taylor argues, is not the only harm of sexual violence. Sexual violence (and specifically rape) seeks to humiliate its victim, transforming her into a less-than-human or nonhuman being by truncating her possibility of freedom, of becoming something different than what she is now. This humiliation succeeds when the victim internalizes the dehumanization, perceiving herself as determined, unfree, detached from others: “Internalization entails being exposed and displayed before oneself as radically individuated: stigmatized, and therefore unworthy of freedom and inclusion in the human community” (p. 39). It might be appealing to attempt to counter humiliation by sticking to “the subject”: Taylor shows how often victims try to escape humiliation by trying to retain control, sometimes denying the sexually violation or humiliation—a defensive tactic. This tactic is mostly ineffective, however: because the untouched subject is preserved, so too is the possibility of it being ultimately defined by humiliation:

Constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself as a subject entails constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself in terms of the individuation and internalization that enable and characterize humiliation. Invoking subjectivity in order to counter the harm of sexual violence masks this interconnection and thereby reasserts its violation; when that harm in turn becomes constitutive of who one is, one attaches to oneself in terms of it. (p. 56)

What, then, are the forms of resistance that allow us to counter humiliation without remaining defined by it?

Foucault’s critique of the subject, Taylor argues, offers alternatives. Her first chapter discusses how Foucault (and Butler, following Foucault) proposes new forms of thinking about how to relate to ourselves; forms not bounded to subjectivity but opposing normalizing powers precisely by detaching from subjectivity, challenging “the subject” as the only and/or preferable form of self-relation. Chapters 3 and 4 exemplify this alternative through feminist forms of resistance, which Taylor sees as putting into practice the ancient exercise of *parrhēsia* or “truth-telling.” As Foucault writes, through speech acts or embodied performances, we estrange ourselves from ourselves, make ourselves others, disobediently detaching from subjectivity and contesting our ontological stability. These “ontologically risky practices,” Taylor argues,

that direct humiliation outward by means of publicly, assertively, or even aggressively confronting its source disrupt the internalization upon which humiliation hinges [...] [They] inhibit the formation of a self-renouncing, obedient and conformist self-relation

that views and experiences itself as unworthy of being otherwise. Crucially, risking one's ontological status disrupts the cycle of self-assertion and renunciation that threatens to produce a self-relation of domination unable to resist and counter normalizing power relations more broadly. (p. 66)

Thus, through risky speech acts and embodied performances, survivors of sexual violence, instead of turning inwards in self-abjection and self-attachment, can tell their truth by "turning sexual humiliation back against its source and then externalizing it in a way that reverberates outward rather than redoubling back toward them as speakers" (p. 72).

Chapter 4 looks at *parrhēsia* as performed bodily by the SlutWalk protesters and the performance "Mattress Performance/Carry that Weight" (MPCW). Taylor shows how these "militant bodies" are reminiscent of the Cynics' response to humiliation, turning it "back against its source" (p. 82) and actually risking their lives, i.e., what Foucault recognized as "ethical *parrhēsia*": "not a means of gaining knowledge about the nature of truth [but] . . . a way of practicing or manifesting the truth through one's overall mode of existence: one's relationship to oneself, and to others, and to the world more broadly" (p. 84). In this response to humiliation, embodiment is utterly present; a subversive embodiment that refuses to be enclosed in a stable, unchanging subjectivity and is defined, instead, by continuous transformation, detachment, risk: "Through publicly and corporeally expressing both precariousness and its exploitation, the protesters in question gain a different, counter stigmatizing (and therefore counter-humiliating), potentially empowering experience of their own embodied self-relation" (p. 94). The disruptive weapon against sexual humiliation that Taylor constructs throughout the book is to shamelessly turn humiliation outward, towards the humiliators, in an act of self-transformation and of ontological risk through "othering" ourselves.

There is, however, another, more insidious, way to throw humiliation back against its source, which remains untreated in Taylor's engaging analysis: revenge. Revenge as a response to sexual violence has been discussed in the context of rape-revenge narratives and films.<sup>1</sup> In my essay on Von Trier's *Dogville*,<sup>2</sup> I address the main character (Grace)'s sexual humiliation (which dovetails with Taylor's description of sexual humiliation: Grace is made non-human by *Dogville*'s inhabitants, violated and grotesquely chained to keep her from escaping) and her revenge: she murders the people of *Dogville* and demolishes the town. Revenge is not easy or unproblematic, but if we agree with Taylor on the redemptive possibility of throwing humiliation back against its source, we must discuss revenge. My analysis used Beauvoir's insights into what revenge has to offer in countering oppression. Beauvoir believes that the "freedom to oppress" is not "real freedom," and thus must be contested.<sup>3</sup> Revenge, she writes, is not a "useless passion" but a powerful, passionate, embodied response to evil—a legitimate response to oppression (and, we

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Cohen Shabot, "Dogville or the Ambiguity of Oppression—A Beauvoirian Reading," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26:3 (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948).

could add, to humiliation).<sup>4</sup> For Beauvoir, moreover, revenge restores the humanity of the oppressor, making them responsible for their deeds. With it, we stop patronizing the oppressor, demanding from them instead the accountability we demand from free agents. As I write in my essay:

According to *Dogville*, there are crimes and actions that cannot be forgiven and that must be punished, even at the price of turning ourselves into perpetrators. By punishing these kinds of crimes and actions, we are relating to their perpetrators and making them into true free agents. Not punishing them would be an act of arrogance, since it would mean that we consider ourselves owners of moral standards that others cannot be expected to live by. If we forgave them, we would be arrogantly treating these others as unfree agents who could not be expected to act morally. Beauvoir can help us make sense of this. This is the ambiguity of oppression, she argues: we will never be able to get rid of oppression by nonoppressive means, and that is all right, since the freedom of the oppressor is not a real freedom and must not be respected. It is only when we punish oppression that we restore free agency to the oppressors; it is only when we abolish oppression that we set not only the victims but also the oppressors free.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor concludes her book by discussing “gestures of solidarity,” the (embodied) ways in which we can stand in solidarity with survivors of sexual violence. In concordance with her proposals throughout the book, Taylor reminds us that such solidarity needs to flourish through relationships, through staying connected while we transform ourselves and others, through making space for freedom and through riskily detaching ourselves from subjectivity. These gestures do not consist in words, or not only in words, but, frequently, in embodied forms of “sympathetic outrage,” since “Sympathetic outrage doesn’t reduce what happened to me, to me or, therefore, reduce me to my own sexual humiliation; in that way, and consistent with gestures of solidarity, it constitutes a disclosive transformation with broader counter-normalizing/counter-humiliating implications” (p. 108). Can revenge count, too, as a “gesture of solidarity”? Can it function as a form of “sympathetic outrage”?

In her film *Promising Young Woman*, Emerald Fennell offers a fresh take, both beautiful and disturbing, on revenge as a gesture of solidarity in the story of Cassie, who attempts to avenge the rape of her late best friend. The film clearly turns humiliation back against its source. Moreover, the fact that the main character is not the victim of sexual violence herself, but the victim’s best friend, makes a powerful case for interconnection, solidarity, mutual transformation, and friendship as tools for counter-humiliation: Cassie’s deep connection to her deceased friend Nina almost forces her to avenge the sexual violence

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<sup>4</sup> For more on a Beauvoir-based “phenomenology of revenge,” see Kruks’s illuminating analysis of Beauvoir’s “eye for an eye” essay: Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (2012), 151–181.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen Shabot, “Dogville or the Ambiguity of Oppression,” 157. The complex question of when and which acts of revenge deserve to be avenged themselves requires further discussion. Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*, deals with Beauvoir’s ambiguous perspective on this; in my analysis of *Dogville*, I see it as a problem that leaves the movie ethically unresolved.

and humiliation that Nina suffered. This is what it means to be (bodily) bonded with others, intimately intertwined with the other's flesh:

The fact that we are situated subjects, constantly bonded with others through our flesh, makes us desire revenge not only for ourselves but also on behalf of others who have suffered; the more involved we feel with the bodies of others, the more we feel in our own bodies the atrocities committed against them.<sup>6</sup>

Taylor writes this book as a survivor of rape herself. Her discussions of the various forms of feminist political strategies to counter sexual violence and humiliation are already very rich, and I hope she will, in the future, also address revenge as another complex strategy for resisting sexual violence and humiliation. She fails, however, to describe one final strategy, one that constitutes a potent expression of solidarity and an important tool for counter-humiliation: the writing of a book like this, the reading of which moves us so strongly towards transformation and empowerment.

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<sup>6</sup> "Dogville or the Ambiguity of Oppression," 158.

for instance on Beauvoir's concept of freedom and the erotic body in *Feminist Theory* (2016); on the phenomenology of childbirth pain in the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2015); and on obstetric violence as gender violence in *Human Studies* (2016, 2021), *Hypatia* (2018), *Feminist Theory* (2020), and the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2020).