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Technologies of violence and
vulnerability*Kelly Oliver*

Given that, immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, one of the most frequently used words was 'vulnerable', it is important to reflect on the meaning and effects of vulnerability in relation to violence, particularly since the word most closely following on its heels was 'war'. Recently, philosophers have embraced vulnerability as constitutive of our humanity. For example, Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva suggest that we need to accept, rather than deny, our own vulnerability, because disavowing vulnerability undermines democratic solidarity and leads to war. Certainly, fantasies that we are invincible and not vulnerable can lead to war. However, the notion of vulnerability already includes violence: 'vulnerable' means both wounding and wounded, and this means that avowing vulnerability would *also* undermine democracy and lead to war. Here, I explore that ambiguity in order to interrogate the putative difference between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, and between presumptions of innocence and culpability in relation to war. Moreover, I argue that the ambiguous position of the body in relation to technology within the Western imaginary makes it appear as both vulnerable and threatening. Traditionally, bodies have been excluded from what is considered properly political. I argue that this is why, when they literally explode back onto the scene of the political in the case of suicide bombers, they are so horrifying. In an important sense, our ambivalence about the body and bodies comes to bear on how we conceive of both violence and vulnerability, and suggests that an alternative to the politics of recognition is sorely needed.

From vulnerability to violence

Journalist Tom Engelhardt researched the newspaper coverage immediately following the attacks on the Twin Towers. He concludes, 'one of the most common words over those days in the [*New York Times*] and elsewhere was "vulnerable"'; the word that surfaced fastest on its heels was 'war' (2006: 17). The lightning move from vulnerability to war suggests that feelings of vulnerability can trigger fear, hatred and violence. Psychologically, it is true that violence towards others is often a defence against one's own sense of insecurity. Although it is undeniable that human beings are capable of violence, even 'unthinkable' violence, is it what makes us human? Or, on the contrary, is it the ability to forgive and to move beyond violence that makes us human? Is violence or forgiveness more uniquely human? (See Oliver, 2004.) Certainly, denying vulnerability and holding onto the illusion of invincibility and absolute security can lead to violent acts of war. We have seen how this happens when strength in the face of crisis is reduced to military might. Hatred and the urge for revenge can be seen as a manifestation of fear, fear of our own vulnerability. Victimization of others literally puts our own vulnerability onto others. We become the bully instead of the playground idiot. It is not surprising, then, that privates in the military, themselves subjected to hazing and humiliation as part of basic training, would act out these same rituals of humiliation and subordination on others in order to establish their own authority. But just because we can or do wound others when we are wounded, does not mean that we have to do so. While the denial of vulnerability may help explain human violence, this does not mean that being wounded or wounding is constitutive of humanity or definitive of being human. Indeed, in order to move beyond war and violence, it is necessary to be able to imagine humanity defined, not in terms of its power to wound, but in terms of its power to heal.

Adopting the former rather than the latter definition, Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life* (2004) that we have a primary vulnerability that comes with being human; more specifically, it comes with being born as an infant completely beholden to others for survival. She claims that this primary

vulnerability, associated with infants, is constitutive of humanity (2004: esp. xiv, 31). While it may be that recognizing our shared vulnerability will make us more accepting of each other, it is politically important to analyse critically the rhetoric of vulnerability immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Moreover, philosophically, it is crucial to question the notion that vulnerability is constitutive of humanity, because the very notion of vulnerability is inherently linked to violence. Specifically, the word 'vulnerable' comes from the Latin word *vulnerabilis*, which means *wounding*. The first definition of *vulnerable* in the Oxford English Dictionary is 'Having power to wound; wounding'; the second is, 'that may be wounded; susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury'. 'Vulnerability' means both the power to wound or wounding, and the capacity to receive wounds or be wounded. Thus Butler's understanding of what is constitutively 'human' deserves a second look.

Julia Kristeva also invokes vulnerability in her latest work, *Hate and Forgiveness* (2005). There, she associates the uncanny effect of others with vulnerability. She raises the question of 'how to inscribe in the conception of the human itself – and, consequently in philosophy and political practice – the constitutive part played by destructivity, vulnerability, disequilibrium which are integral to the identity of the human species and the singularity of the speaking subject' (2005: 115). She claims that, along with liberty, equality and fraternity, vulnerability is a fourth term that we inherit from Enlightenment humanism (Kristeva, 2005: 115). Speaking of the handicapped, and extending her analysis to racism, classism and religious persecution, she suggests a narcissistic wound that constitutes humanity is a scar that sutures being and meaning. It is our ambiguous position in-between nature and culture, animal and human, being and meaning, that makes us vulnerable, and also free. Precisely that which makes us human and opens up a world of meaning, in other words, also makes us vulnerable. As Kristeva describes it, however, this vulnerability is not primarily the result of being infants whose bodies can be wounded by others, or having bodies that can be wounded (*à la* Butler), but rather the result of occupying a place between being and meaning, between bodies and words. On

Kristeva's account, the gap between bodies and words, the ways in which words are never quite adequate to capture bodily experience, is figured as a wound. And it is this wound that is the seat of our vulnerability. We are wounding and wounded because we occupy the space between bodies and meanings. She suggests that the uncanny encounter with another puts us face to face with our own vulnerability 'with and for others'. And, it is the fear and denial of our own vulnerability that causes us to hate and exploit the vulnerability of others. She asks, then, how can we acknowledge that to be human is to be vulnerable? In other words, how can we accept our own vulnerability without violently projecting it onto others whom we oppress and torture or, alternatively, 'civilize' and 'protect'?

Legitimate and illegitimate violence

To answer this question, it is important to begin by noting that the rhetorical use of the term tends not only to occlude its ambiguous meaning, but in fact to oppose vulnerability directly against the possibility of violent threat. It is telling, for example, that along with the rhetoric of vulnerability, immediately following 9/11, news media conjured images of nuclear explosions. The clouds of smoke billowing from the Twin Towers recalled our detonation of nuclear bombs and rekindled fear of our own power and technologies. On the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, President Bush said that the war on terror is the 'calling of our generation', nothing less than 'a struggle for civilization' against 'radical dictators armed with nuclear weapons'.¹ And in a speech before the United Nations, criticizing Iran, Bush linked liberty to not pursuing nuclear weapons and terrorism to pursuing them, suggesting that only countries that fall in line behind the United States' nuclear weapons can be free. Bush said, 'The greatest obstacle to this future is that your rulers have chosen to deny you liberty and to use your nation's resources to fund terrorism, and fuel extremism, and pursue nuclear weapons.'² The easy slippage between liberty, terrorism and nuclear weapons is telling in a speech delivered by the 'leader of the free world' and the only superpower to have used nuclear weapons in

war. As President Bush's memorial speech five years after 9/11 suggests, we are afraid of imaginary dictators armed with nuclear weapons pointing right at the United States.

The immensity of the threat in Bush's rhetoric – the war for civilization and life as we know it – is overdetermined by the return of the repressed fear of our own nuclear power. September 11 reminded us of the possibility of nuclear devastation made possible by technologies, not only developed in the United States, but deployed by that country as well. At issue in the current 'war against terror', then, is the question of who is allowed to possess high-tech weaponry, or weapons of mass destruction, and who is not. The war in Iraq ostensibly began because US intelligence (mistakenly) reported that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Never mind that the United States and most other technologically developed countries have weapons of mass destruction. Never mind that the United States is the only country to have used nuclear weapons in war, which had a hugely horrific and deadly impact on Japanese populations. Increasingly the rhetoric surrounding US warfare and imperialist ventures centres on preventing rogue nations from developing nuclear weapons.³ The circular reasoning goes something like this: the US are on the side of right and goodness, so we should have nuclear weapons, while they are on the side of wrong and evil, so they should not have nuclear weapons. Of course, since the US does have nuclear weapons, it is in a position to define right and wrong, good and evil, in self-serving terms that legitimate its own use of violence while condemning violence when used by others.

The discussion over the possession of nuclear weapons perfectly exemplifies the way in which vulnerability is opposed to threat, and its ambiguous meaning is denied. Nuclear capacity is seen as legitimate for some countries but not for others, while the possession of nuclear weapons is never legitimate for individuals, only for nation states. In an important sense, the United States is going to war over the development and distribution of high-tech weaponry. Indeed, one significant fact among others that distinguishes 'terrorism' from 'war' or 'legitimate force' is the use of advanced technologies of war. As Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues, 'the political lexicon of the West, by distinguishing between war and terrorism, assumes that only

the violent (high-tech) performances of the Western Empire deserve the name of war. You can have a war on terrorism, as we are told, but not a war of terrorists' (2006). War is seen as legitimate violence, while terrorism is seen as illegitimate, and one reason for this, as Cavarero maintains, is that Americans idealize violence in relation to the advanced technologies that make it possible to kill without being killed – the so-called surgical air-strike, for example, that connotes the precision of a surgeon removing a cancerous tumour.

High-tech weaponry displaces bodies in combat in modern warfare. We imagine war like a video-game, where our troops handle remote controls that 'take-out' the enemy, seemingly without the blood and guts of older forms of war. Of course, this is an illusion created by technologies of war that remote-kill and by a visual culture in which fantasies of war in the movies are as close to bloody bodies as most of us (in post-industrial developed countries) ever get. The media coverage of the first Gulf War, fed to the television networks by the military, seemed to substantiate our sense of virtual, bloodless, disembodied warfare

War with real bodies fighting and killing each other seems like a thing of the past; it seems like a barbaric way to wage war. Deadly force is imagined as high-tech, precision violence that can be commanded with the push of a button. Deadly force that results from bodies rather than technology is not only illegitimate but also horrifying – we ask, for example, 'what kind of psychopaths would use their own bodies to blow up other people?'. We are especially appalled by suicide bombers who seem to value killing over their own lives. Indeed, our quest to protect life at all costs (some lives anyway) is part of what makes suicide bombers so horrifying within the Western imaginary. Suicide bombers make explicit the connection between the body and politics that has been denied within Western politics. They insist that the body is political and reinsert it into the realm of politics in a brutally violent way. They obviously value something other than mere survival or bare life, because they are willing to kill themselves for their cause. (In his study of suicide bombers, Christoph Reuter (2004) discovers that they are not crazed fanatics but well-educated young adults seeking to exact revenge on a more powerful enemy by using

their lives as weapons.) But this violent return of bodies to politics is all the more shocking because of Western assumptions about the opposition between natural bodies and cultural politics. These bodies bring ambiguity back into politics.

Thus, even while we honour our own dead as heroes sacrificed for the sake of higher values, we cannot imagine those other killers as sacrificing themselves for higher values; their bodies don't count as bodies that can be sacrificed. Rather, their bodies are seen as weapons, treacherous, illegitimate, cruel weapons that fall outside of the political sphere and into the realm of the monstrous and unnatural. How can a few guys with box-cutters cause so much destruction? If box-cutters can be weapons of mass destruction, what about nail clippers, tennis shoes, Gatorade bottles or baby formula . . . or maybe even the babies themselves? If the body can be a weapon, then we are surrounded by weapons; we cannot tell the difference between weapons and the things or people in our midst every day. Suddenly, everything and everyone become threatening. The idea that the body can be a weapon or that something as low-tech as a box-cutter can take down an airplane not only boggles the mind but also seems wrong – the use of everyday objects in this way is just plain evil . . . too sinister for words. This attitude suggests that *good* people use high-tech bombs to blow up people, preferably other soldiers who are manning military targets. It also suggests that we feel somehow threatened by bodies themselves; that bodies used as weapons are especially uncanny because they conjure a deeper ambivalence we feel about our own bodies as well as the bodies of others. Insofar as all bodies are mortal, they are in a sense ticking time bombs waiting to kill us. Insofar as, within the history of Western thought, bodies are figured as finite, inconsistent, even irrational, they have been conceived of as opposed to civilization and culture. Part of the subtext of the exclusion of the body from politics is its unpredictability, that it could 'go off' at any minute. This is one reason why suicide bombers, or 'body-bombers' as Cavarero calls them, are particularly uncanny. With body-bombers, the body literally explodes back into the realm of politics.

In contrast to the illegitimacy associated with suicide bombings, however, the treatment (no matter how extreme)

of designated 'terrorists' is deemed fully appropriate. For in recent rhetoric, more than identifying a particular form of political violence, the label 'terrorist' connotes horrific violence beyond the pale of human society, compassion, ethics or politics.⁴ To call an act, a person or an organization 'terrorist' is to expel them from the realm of the political into the realm of the pathological. There is 'normal', 'civilized' violence and then there is 'abnormal', 'sick' and 'barbaric' violence. But, as social scientist Ghassan Hage emphasizes, 'we need to question the way we are invited to uncritically think of a particular form of violence as "the worst possible kind of violence" merely by classifying it as "terrorist"' (Hage, 2003: 70–1). The ways in which the classification 'terrorist' is used normalize some forms of violence and pathologize others.

Specifically, the logic of exception seems to be the fundamental logic of the war against terror. For example, the abuse at Abu Ghraib or at Guantánamo Bay was said to be the result of *exceptional* individuals, the few bad apples. The prisoners held in Iraq and Cuba are not even called prisoners; rather they are called 'detainees', because, as we are told, these are *exceptional* times that require *exceptional* measures for these few *exceptionally* bad, even monstrous individuals. President Bush and Vice President Cheney argued that 'the terrorism threat requires that the president have wide power to decide who could be held and how they should be treated'; and former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld had his aides shred documents from officials who 'called for a return to the minimum standards of treatment in the Geneva Conventions and for eventually closing the detention centre at Guantánamo Bay Cuba' (see Golden, 2006: A1). They insist that the president must have discretionary powers to make decisions about terrorists outside national or international law. Terrorism is described as outside the realm of politics, as evil, and therefore our normal (good) means of war-making do not apply because terrorism is an exception. This is why the administration maintained that the Geneva Convention was outdated and did not apply to terrorism (former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales called the Geneva Convention 'quaint'). The very space of the military base in Cuba is exceptional: the US military runs a prison from the shores of one of its supposed enemies.⁵ We

use exceptional spaces to hold exceptionally evil enemies (we do not even call them criminals, since that would imply that they are within the law), so that we can exercise exceptional methods of interrogation and torture because we live in exceptional times.

Thus, 'terrorism' becomes an inflammatory term that not only describes a particular form of violence, but also legitimates other forms of violence, namely the high-tech warfare of Western militaries and the use of exceptional methods of interrogation that flaunt international law. Hage maintains that 'the struggle between states and opposing groups [is]: first, over the distribution of means of violence and second, and more importantly, over the classification of the forms of violence in the world, particularly over what constitutes legitimate violence' (2003: 71–2). The fight operates on the material level of the distribution of wealth, in particular regarding high-tech weaponry, and on the symbolic level in terms of who has the authority to define *legitimate* force. Legitimate means legal; recently we have seen how the world superpower redefines what constitutes legitimate force by redefining torture and international law. If it is simply a matter of the more powerful defining the terms of engagement, then it is merely a case of 'might makes right', and our righteous, virtuous stand is nothing more than posturing on the part of the powerful.

Ghassan Hage points out that what we call 'terrorist groups' never call themselves terrorists; rather they call themselves revolutionaries, rebels, martyrs, nationalists or freedom fighters etc. He also notes that terrorism is a 'violence of last resort' that in many cases stems from the will to resist colonial domination or foreign occupation in spite of a lack of resources or high-tech weaponry. As a Palestinian living in Australia said, 'Let the Americans give us the monopoly over nuclear power in the region and the strongest army there is, and we are happy to do "incursions" and hunt down wanted Israeli terrorists by demolishing their houses and "accidentally" killing civilians. Who would want to be a suicide bomber if such a luxurious mode of fighting is available to us?' (quoted in Hage, 2003: 73). Part of the struggle, then, is precisely over who will and will not have access to 'luxurious', high-tech weaponry. Those that do have access, the wealthy nations, have not only the military might

to physically force their case but also the symbolic capital to define the terms of the struggle on an ideological level. They are in the position of power in terms of both the weapons of war and the rhetoric of war. They control and distribute both the armaments of war and the ideology of war, using high-tech weaponry and high-tech media. This is to say, they not only have the power to execute deadly force but also to justify it with the rhetoric of saving civilization against barbarians, good versus evil, humane versus monstrous, and legitimate versus illegitimate violence.

Technology both produces and reproduces the material and intellectual terrain of the contemporary landscape. On the one hand, technology provides the instruments or vehicles through which we experience our world – almost all facets of our everyday lives are mediated by technology, from electric toothbrushes, breast-milk pumps and hair club for men, to televisions, aeroplanes and computers. On the other hand, the technological form of mediation gives rise to a way of looking at the world, a world-view associated with instrumental reason; everything in our world, including our own bodies, other people and other creatures, becomes nothing more than the raw material with which to make high-tech instruments. They are no longer seen as ends in themselves, but rather as valuable only insofar as they serve to advance our technologies. Technology becomes a value in itself.

Applying this line of thinking to contemporary warfare, Cavarero argues that technology aims at replacing, covering and neutralizing the traditional role of the fighting bodies; bare bodies, as she calls them, are excluded from what is considered legitimate warfare, while legitimate forms are defined by their use of high-tech weaponry (Cavarero, 2006). Bare bodies are excluded from the realm of the properly political and therefore from the realm of legitimate war, which is seen as an outgrowth of the political. Or, to put it simply, bodies are imagined as part of nature and therefore never completely assimilated into culture, while politics is imagined as the most organized form of culture that removes us from the realm of nature altogether. Yet, what is most remarkable about these bare bodies is that they are *not* bare; they are *not* natural; they are *not* innocent. Rather, they are armed and dangerous. In this regard, they are *more than* the

return of the repressed natural body within Western politics. What is more dangerous than a natural body is a body that won't stay put, a body that moves between nature and culture, a body that becomes a political statement. Indeed, suicide bombers unsettle Western politics by manifesting the way in which the body is always political; there is no bare body, no natural body. The greatest threat, then, is the *ambiguity of the body* as existing between nature and culture, between the physical and the technological.

In her analysis of the role of the body in metaphors of politics – e.g. the body politic – Cavarero shows how real flesh and blood bodies have been associated with women and excluded from the realm of the properly political, while properly political bodies are seen as male bodies abstracted from everyday existence. Western politics' valuation of abstract or virtual bodies over the messiness of real ones is part and parcel of the Western investment in advanced technologies. Our psychic and material financial investment in technology, in this case high-tech weapons with which to defend our body politic, both produces and reproduces the exclusion of real bodies from the realm of politics. This is one of the reasons the body appears as a threat to politics. What is disloyal and treacherous about these bodies-become-weapons, however, is not merely the fact that they are bare and non-technological – the exploding belt may be low-tech, but it is still technology. Rather, alongside the threat of physical violence comes the threat of the explosion of ambiguity onto the scene of meaning. The centrality of visual media to both the culture and effectiveness of suicide bombers indicates that these violent acts are intended for mass distribution via communication and information technologies. The video recordings that suicide bombers make beforehand are circulated both to honour the 'martyr' and to recruit more 'martyrs'. And the terror of these attacks, which actually do not kill as many people as high-tech weaponry, is spread through media reports, especially television and the Internet. Al Qaeda is notorious for delivering video recordings of its leaders condemning the United States and calling for Jihad. And Jihadists are increasingly using the Internet to recruit; they turn American technology against itself (Fattah, 2006: A6). So, while these 'body bombers', these young women and mothers who kill,

menace high-tech Western culture with the return of the repressed body to politics, they also rely on Western technology to deliver their message. Their homicidal acts become terrorism in part because they aim them at the realm of information exchange – the symbolic realm – as well as at material bodies. The body returns as political, and its ambiguous status between nature and culture – between life-giving mother and death-dealing bomber, between being and meaning – makes these acts not just violent but also abject.

Julia Kristeva's description of the abject is apt here. She maintains that the abject is not just what is disgusting or dirty but rather what calls into question the boundaries of the clean and proper. The abject is in-between, the double, that which cannot be neatly contained.⁶ It is 'a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you . . .' (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Certainly this description fits the perky girls engaged in abuse at Abu Ghraib and the pony-tailed girl suicide bombers blowing up themselves and others; their smiles dissemble; they are not what they seem.

While Cavarero diagnoses the idealization of a virtual technological (male) body over and against a real natural (female) body, she does not discuss the role of technology in creating this prejudice. The issue of the relation between technology and bodies is complex. Technology is often seen as one means to control and even discipline unruly or diseased bodies; for example, we develop ultra high-tech modes of surgery to treat diseases and illness. But technologies with which we cure bodies are condensed with those with which we destroy bodies, as the use of the metaphors of surgery for military strikes suggests. Technology is also used to monitor and manage criminals and even terrorists. The use of surveillance technology is widespread – from the cash-machine on the corner to the prison. As our world becomes more technological, we become more dependent on, and invested in, technology. Not only is our material world affected; our mental landscape changes as well. And this change in our ideas is more difficult to diagnose. We come to prefer technological or virtual bodies to real ones, to the point that we feel betrayed or threatened by flesh and blood. At the same time, we feel alienated from our bodies

in this technologically mediated world, and we crave more intense bodily sensations, which leads some people to sado-masochistic violence towards themselves or others. We become more limited in the ways we can imagine ourselves as human beings living together. We adopt a technological approach to life that is imagined at odds with what we still maintain as natural bodies excluded from the realm of politics. In this way, bodies and politics are seen as opposed. The consequences of this idea – or perhaps we should call it an assumption – are grave in terms of actual life-and-death struggles. For we feel threatened when the ambiguity of the relationship between bodies and politics is made manifest.

Innocence and vulnerability

The threat posed by ambiguity brings us back to the discussion of vulnerability. One of the most outrageous aspects of terrorist violence is that it is directed toward *innocent civilians*.⁷ Civilians are innocent because they are not armed warriors; they presumably cannot fight back, which is also what makes them vulnerable. The assumption is that civilians will be protected by the government and by the military. But perhaps we should examine the division of labour implied in the notion of military personnel whose job it is to protect, and the comfortable lives of civilians who, for their part, benefit from military operations and occupations undertaken elsewhere, especially in the case of military superpowers that exercise force throughout the world in order to maintain their economic superiority and 'way of life'. In a thought-provoking statement, Ghassan Hage challenges the distinction between soldiers and innocent civilians as it functions in violence between Israel and Palestine:

The PSBs (Palestinian Suicide Bombers) disrupt the ability of the colonizers to consolidate a 'normal peaceful life' inside the colonial settler state of Israel. As such they do not respect the Israeli colonizer's division of labor between the military who engage in protecting and facilitating the process of colonization and the civilian population who can peacefully enjoy the fruits of this process.

(Hage, 2003: 68–9)

The innocence of civilians can be associated with their vulnerability only insofar as the division of labour and the larger socio-political context in which it operates are overlooked. Moreover, from this perspective, children are especially innocent and vulnerable; it is heart-wrenching when children are the innocent victims of war or terrorism. Immediately after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, many news reports kept returning to the fact that children died in a day-care centre in the towers. Even if children are, or will be, the beneficiaries of imperialist violence and exploitation, they, more than others, have not (yet) chosen this way of life. But their innocence, it seems, is associated with their vulnerability even more than with their lack of choice. They are dependent upon others for their care and well-being and they are also vulnerable to others. And this innocence associated with childhood is not only valorized within American culture, but is seemingly definitive of it. Americans pride ourselves on our innocence, and we continue to feel menaced by corrupt forces that threaten it: Vietnam, 9/11, Abu-Chraib, Guantánamo. We talk about the loss of American innocence in relation to these events, even while we continue to insist on it. Paradoxically, this loss of innocence is thought to make us vulnerable. Think of rhetoric such as 'After 9/11, America will never be the same. America is now vulnerable.'

In sum, paradoxically, we are vulnerable both because we are innocent and because we have lost our innocence after the 9/11 attacks. The ambiguities inherent in our concept of vulnerability, not the least of which is the association with both wounding and being wounded, signal ambiguities in our conception of the body itself, particularly in relation to technology. The body is imagined as natural and therefore both innocent and outside culture. Thus, when the body explodes back onto the scene of politics, for example with suicide bombers using their bodies as weapons, the horror it evokes is linked to its ambiguity. In other words, bodies, especially human bodies, occupy ambiguous spaces between nature and culture, between the physical and the political. As Julia Kristeva argues, it is this ambiguity, this position in-between, which makes us vulnerable. And as such, it is this ambiguity that we must acknowledge in order to

acknowledge the role of vulnerability in human life. So, it is not just our embodiment that makes us vulnerable (or violent) but our status as beings on the cusp of being and meaning. For Kristeva, to recognize this is to recognize our humanity. But, what does it mean to recognize vulnerability in humanity, especially if we see the first as constitutive of the second?

Judith Butler concludes her reflections on violence in *Precarious Life* by insisting that 'the task at hand is to establish modes of public seeing and hearing that might well respond to the cry of the human within the sphere of appearance, a sphere in which the trace of the cry has become hyperbolically inflated to rationalize a gluttonous nationalism, or fully obliterated, where both alternatives turn out to be the same' (Butler, 2004: 107). Butler suggests that we see and hear 'the cry of the human' but, at the same time, we do not see and hear it because, as she maintains, we do not *recognize* it as human. Hage also asks 'what kind of social conditions must avail and what kind of history must a people have internalized to make them lose this capacity of seeing the other in his or her humanness?' (2003: 85). Hage too suggests that we do not see, because we do not *recognize*, the humanity of the other. What would it mean to see or hear the humanity or humanness within the images presented to us in the media? In the case of the photographs from Abu Ghraib or testimony of army insiders from Guantánamo, is it that we do not see or hear the victims – and the perpetrators – as human? Is it, as both Butler and Hage argue, that we do not *recognize* their humanity? Or is there, rather, something more at stake than recognition in explaining and overcoming violence? Is there something in these images, in these events, in our response to them – our responsibility for them – that takes us beyond recognition? We might formulate the question this way: what is the relationship between the recognition of another's vulnerability or humanity and the response to it? Are these one and the same? Or, on the contrary, is it rather that we do indeed recognize the other's vulnerability and humanity and that is precisely why we engage in insistent disavowals of our own violence as well as hyperbolic justifications for it?

Conclusion: beyond recognition

Both Butler and Hage, along with many other contemporary theorists, explain violence in terms of a struggle for recognition, a struggle to be recognized as part of humanity. More than this, they both suggest that reciprocal or mutual recognition is a necessary ideal for overcoming violence. Butler articulates this struggle in terms of the constitutive power of norms and describes recognition itself as a performance that enacts and confers, in this case, humanity (2004: 43–4). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Hage describes the struggle in terms of the distribution of recognition in terms of meaningfulness of life (2003: 78–9). He maintains that ‘society is characterized by a deep inequality in the distribution of meaningfulness’, which he associates with ‘the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition’ to humanity. Yet, in spite of their gloomy portrayals of the dreadful consequences of losing the struggle for recognition, both Butler and Hage continue to embrace the Hegelian ideal of reciprocal or mutual recognition. In spite of the fact that they catalogue in gory detail many of the casualties in this struggle, they continue to have faith in the ideal. Elsewhere, I have argued that, by doing so, they continue to promote an ideal that is not only unattainable but also and more politically suspect, because the struggle or need for recognition is a by-product of colonial violence in the first place (Oliver, 2001). Why do we continue to hold onto the ideal of mutual recognition in the name of democratic solidarity, even while we reject so many other nineteenth century ideals as part of the colonial enterprise? More to the point here, why do we continue to imagine humanity as a struggle, a fight, a war? How can we get beyond violence, if the best hope we have for overcoming it is violence itself, the so-called struggle for recognition?

When we look at the photographs from Abu Ghraib and hear about the abuses at Guantánamo, we may work to justify them, explain them away or redefine torture; we may see them as ‘just having fun’ or necessary or ‘legitimate force’. At the same time, however, we do recognize our own culpability, but we disavow this recognition; simultaneously, we know it is wrong but continue to insist on our innocence. The question, then, is not one of recognition – if only we

recognized (in either Hage's epistemological sense or Butler's political sense) these other people as humans or as vulnerable bodies, then we would treat them differently.⁸ We can recognize them as humans in both an epistemological and a political sense and still torture them and kill them. The question is how and why we deny what we recognize in order to justify torture and killing. The question is not just how and why we justify violence, but, moreover, how and why we seem to enjoy it! This question, of the meaning of violence in our cultural imaginary, demands that we pay attention to unconscious desires and fears.

Given the violence of humans against humans, it is not enough to recognize humanity if what that means is to fight the 'good fight' or keep up the struggle for recognition. If winning the war over recognition is the only way to end violence, then violence becomes the only means to peace. We are all too familiar with the deadly logic of 'peace-keeping forces' waging war. With recognition, the best we can hope for is that we will recognize there is something in our relationships with others that is always beyond the struggle, violence and war, something that requires recognizing the limits of recognition itself. Continually reassessing the limits of our own recognition compels us to continue to examine and question our own desires and fears in relation to others. It is precisely when we think that we understand others that we have stopped having a relationship with them and have started having a relationship only with our fantasies of them. This is not only true for relations with so-called 'enemies', but also with friends and loved ones.

The question, then, is not how to win the struggle for recognition or how to recognize the humanity or vulnerability of others. Rather, the question is what it means that we imagine human relations as a struggle in the first place. What does it mean that vulnerability denotes both wounding and being wounded? What are the implications for ethics and politics of seeing and describing human relations as fundamentally and inherently violent? While the struggle for recognition might help to explain war and violence, when it is taken as the norm for human relationships it also normalizes war and violence. War and violence exist, and human beings are capable of inflicting and suffering astounding violence, but it is not this violence or vulner-

ability that is definitive of humanity. Rather, it is the ability to move beyond violence and heal wounds that makes us human. We can commit violent acts, and we can wound and be wounded, but we can also interpret our violent impulses to prevent ourselves from acting on them, to prevent the repetition of the cycle of violence, to heal ourselves and others (a healing that is never complete, but always only provisional and part of an infinite process). Our first reaction when wounded might be to seek revenge. But the time of critical reflection and interpretation of our own stake in violence can be just enough time to stop that deadly reflex.

To rethink politics as beyond recognition, we must consider the psychic forces that operate behind the scene. As Hage argues, with the move from a welfare state to a penal state, we no longer value social explanations – and I would add psychological explanations – for understanding violence (2003: 86). For, if we did insist on explanations that include the historical context, the social, political, economic and psychological stakes, then we could no longer easily justify detaining people indefinitely or punishing, torturing or killing them. It is much easier to figure them as evil monsters or animals and dispose of them, than to analyse our own political and psychological investment in their disappearance or their exploitation or suffering. Reacting or acting-out without considering these complexities may seem easier, but in this case our obsession with speed and efficiency leads to death. Rather than trying to deny the complexities of life by seeing in black and white, good and evil, us and them, we must explore, not only the ways in which our lives depend on those ambiguities, but also the ways in which, without those ambiguities, life is empty and ultimately meaningless. Without examining our own ambivalence towards violence, freedom, justice and democracy become nothing but clichés, or worse, the justification for torture, killing, and war.

Notes

- 1 President George W. Bush's speech on September 11, 2006 in Shanksville, PA. As reported in *The Tennessean*, 'Bush vows to fight "to the end": War on terrorism is calling of our generation . . .' (Hunt, 2006).

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- 2 Reported in *The New York Times*, Wednesday, 20 September 2006. (Rutenberg and Cooper, 2006).
- 3 For a 'deconstruction' of the notion of rogue states in relation to Western notions of sovereignty, see Derrida (2005).
- 4 For recent discussion of how to define terrorism, see Coady and O'Keefe (2003).
- 5 For an insightful application of Agamben's (1998) logic of exception to Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay prisons, see Gregory (2006). Compare Judith Butler's use of Agamben's theory of exception and bare life in *Precarious Life* (2004).
- 6 Kristeva describes the abject: 'it is thus no lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1982: 232).
- 7 Notably, most discussions of 'just war' theory that focus on the issue of civilian deaths neither question the use of the word 'innocent' in this context, nor reflect on the relationship between soldiers and civilians as a division of labour. For a historical account of changing conceptions of civilians in relation to war, see Hartigan (1982).
- 8 Certainly it is not a matter of epistemological or cognitive recognition, but rather of political recognition. We do not respect their humanity even while we recognize them as humans. But even on the political level, we do recognize them as our enemies. We call them 'dogs' or 'beasts' in order to justify mistreating them (as if being an animal was justification enough for mistreatment); the US occupation of Iraq has seen many dogs, both metaphorical and literal. The 'Us versus Them' mentality that divides the world into kinds of people (friends and enemies, humans and dogs) both produces and justifies killing some but not others. It is not that others are not recognized as human, but rather that they are recognized as enemies, all too human enemies. Indeed, the very definition of identity as a struggle for recognition is part of the 'Us versus Them' logic that views all human relationships as fights to the death in which there are necessarily winners and losers. Even if violence and hatred can be *partially* explained in terms of recognition, as I argue elsewhere (2002; 2007), overcoming violence and hatred requires going beyond recognition and toward witnessing ethics.

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