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Disappearing Acts: The State and Violence against Women in the Twentieth Century

Michelle Fine
CUNY Graduate Center

Lois Weis
SUNY University at Buffalo

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Disappearing Acts: The State and Violence against Women in the Twentieth Century

As children we held our breath, our senses filled with the musty smells of elephants, the staccato flashes of twirling plastic flashlights, the terrors of trapeze. With mystery, moustache, and elegance, the magician waved a wand, invited a woman, usually White, seemingly working class, into a box. She disappeared or was cut in half. Applause. Our early introduction to the notion of the sponsored disappearing act.

So, too, at the end of the twentieth century, we witness poor and working-class women shoved into spaces too small for human form, no elegance, no wand. And they too disappear. Disappearing from welfare rolls, from universities, being swept off the streets. Dumped out of mental institutions and poured into prisons. We write to map the State-sponsored disappearing acts of the late twentieth century, the loss of welfare rights, higher education, and public spaces for women, as a conscience point for us to re-imagine what could be, what must be, for girls and women — poor and working class — in the twenty-first century.

A tale of research

In 1992, as we embarked on interviews for *The Unknown City* (Fine and Weis 1998), we thought we were collecting 150 oral histories of the economic, educational, and activist lives of poor and working-class men and women growing up in urban America during the 1980s and 1990s. From literacy programs, Headstart centers, church basements, and GED classes, we heard stories of physical and sexual abuse from these poor and working-class girls and women — White, African-American, and Latina, ages 23 to 35. Women reported painfully high levels of violence across groups, and yet they also narrated culturally distinct patterns of going public (or not) and seeking assistance from kin, neighbors, or the State (or not).

A full 92 percent of the White women we interviewed described experience with childhood and/or adult abuse. Almost without exception, these

women reported that they had never told anyone, never sought refuge in a shelter, never sought an order of protection, never called the police. Sixty-eight percent of the African-American women we spoke with reported experiences of domestic violence, but these women were far more likely to have told others about the abuse, fled their homes for shelter, or thrown out their abusers. They were also more likely, despite their mistrust of the police, to secure orders of protection and called the police as needed (see Richie 1996 for important analysis of these issues). While 85 percent of the Latinas reported experiences of domestic abuse, many, if not most, chose to leave their men quietly late in the evening, trying to find a safe space for themselves and their children (see Hurtado 1996; Gordon 1997; Espin 1999).

No class or cultural group of women is exempt from domestic violence. Sixty percent of women killed in the United States were killed by a husband or boyfriend; 25 percent of female psychiatric patients who attempt suicide are victims of domestic violence, and between 40 percent (Del Tufo 1995) and 63 percent (Browne 1987) of New York's homeless families include women fleeing abuse at home. Over 70 percent of women entering the New York State prison system have had a history of physical and/or sexual abuse (New York State Department of Correctional Services 1996).

The "why doesn't she just leave?" question has finally been answered: Because she is as likely, if not more likely, to endure violence or homicide should she leave. Evidence from the U.S. Department of Justice suggests that a woman may be in even greater life-threatening jeopardy once she leaves or separates from an abusive man. Cecilia Castelano reports that "almost 25 percent of the women killed by male partners were separated and divorced from the men who killed them; another 29 percent were attempting to end the relationship when they were killed" (1996, 11), and Lenore Walker reports that "in one U.S. study, 70 percent of the reported injuries from domestic violence occurred after the separation of the couple" (1999, 24).

We exit this century and enter another with violence against women smarting, bound to another form of violence. That is, State-sponsored violence by which the public sphere, the State-sponsored safety net (always frayed and inadequate), has rapidly been dismantled, first by right-wing Republicans and soon thereafter by "moderate" Democrats, as poor and working-class women and their children fall through the huge holes in the webbing. And yet today, with no public accountability, working-class and poor women (and men) have been tossed from our collective moral community, in particular by severe curtailments in their access to welfare, shelter, and higher education. These very well traveled exit ramps from domes-

tic abuse are under intensive and deliberate destruction. These are among the most devastating State-sponsored disappearing acts of the twentieth century.

Disappearing act I: Access to welfare and higher education

With the draconian disappearance of a social safety net for women—not that a very good one ever existed—we witness a twinning of State and domestic violence against women (see Gordon's [1997] analysis of women's complex relations to the State). Women's access to sustained welfare and public higher education have narrowed to a choke. These two social projects, as we (and many others) have learned, have been, quietly and profoundly, the primary strategies by which poor and working-class women have been able to interrupt what has been perversely called the "cycle of violence."

Synchronous with the dismantling of the welfare system has been the assault on public higher education, rendering it increasingly out of reach for many poor and working-class youth and adults. This has happened at precisely the time when poor and working-class women began to enroll in public higher education at unprecedented rates, in the 1980s and 1990s. The U.S. Department of Education has documented well a substantial gender discrepancy (many higher ed policy makers are worried—where are the men?), especially within public institutions among part-time students, older students, and African-American students (*New York Times* 1998a). (When there are too many men, how many policy makers worry about where the women are?) While the percentage of White male high school graduates enrolled in college dropped from 61 percent in 1970 to 55 percent in 1986, rates for females in the same period rose from 47 to 55 percent for White women and 39 to 50 percent for African-American women. Women across racial and ethnic groups are today pursuing formal education to a far greater extent than are men (see Fine and Weis 1998).¹ And today, public university tuition has risen, financial aid has dropped, and affirmative action has been struck down in the University of California and Texas systems (with Michigan in the wings), as remediation is threatened in the City University of New York system. Workfare demands that

¹ And yet, as the *New York Times* reports, "The welfare law is too tilted toward short term work activity. . . . The current law . . . sets a cap on the percentage of the welfare population that can be enrolled in educational or vocational training at any one time. By 2000, all teen age parents pursuing high school diplomas would be counted under the educational cap, thus reducing the number of adults who can enroll in training and still receive benefits" (1998b, A18).

women work, not go to school.² Thus, cuts to public higher education, retreats from affirmative action, restrictions on using welfare benefits to pursue higher education, and the withdrawal of remediation services has disproportionately hit young and older women returning to college.

We are arguing that these cuts to welfare and public higher education produce, in effect, women's increased reliance on the family, compelling them to remain in violent homes, to exit or delay entry into college, and to move off welfare after only a short period of time. With a retreat in the public sphere comes not only the privatization of the economy, health care, and education but also an increasing privatization of the family.

What poor and working-class women get instead

Upon reflection, it is inaccurate to claim that the public sphere has been dismantled. It may be more appropriate to point to the fact that public commitments and expenditures have been realigned to support elite and White interests and, consequently, contain poor and working-class, and often racially oppressed, children and families in underfunded schools and neighborhoods, thereby locking most out of the academy and the "booming" economy. The swell in the public sector is in prison construction. And here, the poor and working class, men and women of color, are the primary "recipients."

If we use New York State as a case, we find troubling patterns of shifting state expenditures. From 1988 to 1998, New York State cut support for public higher education in the same proportion as it increased funding for prisons (Gangi, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg 1999). Nationally, from 1977 to 1995, the average state increased correctional funding by two times more than funding for public colleges,³ supporting "the prison-industrial complex" (Schlosser 1998). Since 1991, the nation's violent crime rate has decreased by 20 percent, but the number of people in prison or jail has

² A recent survey by the U.S. General Accounting Office finds a sharp drop in the percentage of welfare recipients assigned to education and training programs. In Connecticut, for instance, while 85 percent of welfare-work participants were enrolled in education/training in 1994, this figure dropped to 31.7 percent in 1997; in Maryland the figures moved from 65.1 percent to 10.5 percent; and in Wisconsin from 60.4 percent to 12.5 percent. The "welfare reform" act "allows education or vocational training to count as a work activity for only 12 months, after which the student must work 20 hours a week to continue getting benefits. For many recipients," concludes the *New York Times*, "that requirement means dropping out of school" (1998b, A18).

³ In Texas the ratio is six to one.

risen by 50 percent. In New York State, from 1971 to 1995, the inmate population has increased almost fivefold.

In 1988 New York's public university funding was double that of the prison system. Over the past decade, New York reduced public higher education spending by 29 percent, while state corrections enjoyed a 76 percent increase. During this time period, the governor raised State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) tuition. The SUNY schools saw a drop of 10,000 in the number of enrolled students. Current SUNY annual tuition costs an average of 25 percent of White families' income and 42 percent for Black or Latino families (Gangi, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg 1999).

As for the related growth in prison expenditures, while women constitute only a small fraction of the entire prison population, they are the fastest growing subpopulation. From 1982 to 1995, the number of women in prison in New York State increased more than 300 percent. In 1997, 65 percent of New York State's women inmates had been sentenced for possession or sale of drugs, compared to 40 percent in 1994 and 12.5 percent in 1968 ("The Mentality between Prisons and Schools" 1999; *College Bound Programs* 1997). When we recognize that most of these women are undereducated, have been exposed to domestic violence, and are mothers whose children are often assigned to foster care, this public sector realignment seems profoundly mean-spirited, shortsighted, fiscally expensive, and morally bankrupt.

Disappearing act II: Spaces to support poor and working-class girls and women

We hear from women, mostly mothers, about yet another disappearing act in poor and working-class communities that is deeply related to the retreat of the State from community life. Evaporating are the spaces—in communities and schools—for poor and working-class girls and women to come together, share stories, educate, and organize. Local library branches are shutting down; streets and parks seem increasingly unsafe or are locked; public gardens are being sold off; young women report fear about neighbors "getting into my business"; calling the cops is too risky. Even social services, child-care agencies, and local programs—once upon a time, places and people to whom a girl/woman could sometimes turn for help, assistance, guidance, advice—are now viewed by most as "untrustworthy." The women with whom we spoke explain that these agencies have been transformed from (sometimes) activist/contradictory sites into explicit (often

contracted) arms of the State obliged to report abuse and neglect, requiring women to give the social security numbers of the fathers of their babies, provide documentation of citizenship, and cover up any evidence of child-rearing difficulties lest they be read as neglect (Fine and Weis 1998). With the realignment of the commitments of the State with the elite, in the name of accountability public sites of help have been appropriated into sites of surveillance.

As the State retreats in public policy and practice, we worry that social responsibilities and violence are being thrust on the bodies and souls of girls and women. As German social theorist Frigga Haug (1992) has argued, when the State withdraws from social projects of economy, community, education, and family, women are assumed to have, and often take on, responsibility for social and “personal” relations. And women live, consequently, with guilt and judgment. We witness, and have been taught by the women we interviewed, that in poor and working-class communities women have no choice but to accept responsibilities that are, at base, impossible to satisfy. They are often raising two or three generations, with little material support and much surveillance. To add to the burden, African-American and Latina women confront the daily razors of racism. All of these women live with the threat of loss of their children ever dangling, and more often than we were ready to hear, under the fist of violence at home. Stuffed into spaces of danger and threat, the women see few exits, except for spirituality.

We imagine, with great respect for and in the shadows of those women who have paid the greatest price, a restored feminist public sphere that recognizes the ravaged and intimate connections among the economy, public support for education, violence against women, and a restored welfare state. In addition to the obvious need for organizing around reproductive freedoms, health care, housing, and child care, those women remind us that a restructured economy, with strong engagement of labor, must be linked with struggles for adequate funding for urban education, re-engagement of affirmative action, and remediation in public and higher education struggles. We see that economics and education cannot be separated from struggles against violence. While crime and violence are central concerns for poor and working-class women, building more and more prisons accelerates the undermining of poor and working-class communities, imprisons women, and disrupts the lives of children who are then exported through the foster care system. Finally, welfare rights must be central to a feminist project, so that resources are available for women to provide financial respite, time out, and a violence-free zone.

Domestic violence will accompany us in the twenty-first century, as will

the violence done to and within communities and the violence perpetrated on working-class and poor girls and women by the State. Here and globally. Organizing for a restored public sphere—with accessible public education, available welfare and jobs, quality child care, and Affirmative Action—must be at the heart of our next generation of feminist work. Little girls are watching and waiting.

Graduate Center

City University of New York (Fine)

Graduate School of Education

State University of New York, Buffalo (Weis)

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