"We Are In The Midst Of….."
Michelle V. Rowley
Reflections Prepared for "Feminist Research Seminar,"
University of Michigan,
October 19-22, 2017

How will we build a politic around harm? The complex and unfinished histories of the civil rights movement, feminist movements, transnational women's organizing present important antecedents, yet there may be an urgency within this contemporary moment that requires us to think again about the intensification of violence and harm nationally and globally. While I intend to draw on non-US examples where appropriate and to reflect on the prompts as broadly as possible, I am also cognizant that I write from a place, and in the spirit of transnational feminism will work to think in a way that has value to multiple spaces while tending to the specificity of place and location. That said, the US media's overuse of the term "unprecedented" as a descriptor for a state- and civic-harm does little to inform and merely lays bare the media's struggle to articulate, to describe, to understand what for many feels like a new era. But, if the present era in anyway feels new, we would do well to remember that this "new" face and body politic stands on long legs of state sponsored violence, institutionalized discrimination and at best instrumentalized and objectified regard for non-whites, queer and immigrant bodies. How then (as scholar-teachers) will we build a politic around harm?

This is a question with which I struggle constantly. Particularly so, when social anesthetization is the coping mechanism of choice in the face of new/not new violence. An anesthetization that we induce by a practice of unseeing, and by choosing to be "not present," the latter I awkwardly frame to avoid the passivity of "absent." We choose to be "not present," we choose to "unsee." How then will my students learn to build a politic around harm? I begin here because I am often troubled by the extent to which the use of the term "backlash" is offered as a term to describe the meta of institutions, state, ideology, without commensurate attention to the interpersonal, to the actors and agents through which the "backlash" is vivified and its effect felt (Faludi 1991). What are the interpersonal, affective and social elements of enacting a backlash, the lived social dynamics that give a backlash its coercive force (Mansbridge and Shames 2008)? What then, are the personal harms that sit in the articulation "We are in the midst of a ____backlash?" Who then is our "we?"

I want to distinguish (as distinct from separate) the seemingly abstract sociopolitical "we" from the "we" of the specific, those who are immediately harmed, physically and epistemically from the quotidian realities of any given backlash. I think it is important to tease out these connections because "learning to see" is an act of resistance. In this sense, learning to see the quotidian of harms associated with any backlash is key to building a politic around it.
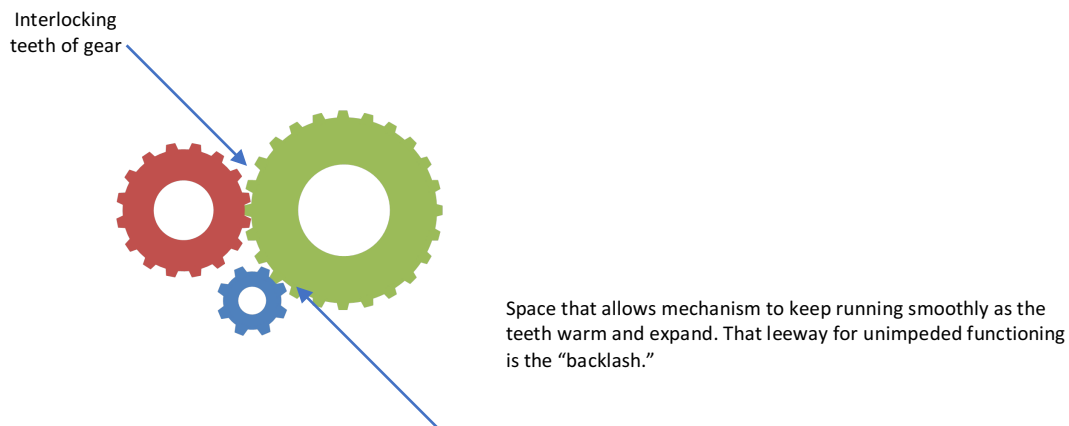
If we miss the epistemic violence of quotidian harms associated with a backlash then only the violence that rises to the scale of spectacle will matter. I am, of course, in conversation here with Wendy Hersford's *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* which takes the idea of the spectacle, any spectacle, but in her case that of human rights, to be a form of "public persuasion." The spectacle may be co-opted but equally, it holds to the potential to persuade individuals to act. My concern is that the stakes for this level of recognition are woefully high understanding that spectacular violence is woven together by intersecting microscapes of harm. I am interested in thinking then about these embodied microscapes of a backlash's effects. It is only by traversing these embodied microscapes that we can account for acts of state violence that are often not visible as violence (e.g. lack of access to potable water, public transportation to certain locations, gutting of public education). The contraction of the commons, public social goods and the increasing privatization of these goods has made life in many communities little else but a long backlash…to think only at the level of the meta and the spectacle, may cause us to miss the ways in which "we are always in the midst of" a ----backlash, as a daily exercise of the state's coercive force on everyday life.

I recognize that my appeal to an embodied visuality analysis of a backlash's effects is subject to a somewhat problematic assumption. That we, upon seeing, will be inclined to care. Here we must traverse through Saidiya Hartman's understanding of empathy as a limited political force given its tendency to prioritize the subjectivity and personhood of the person viewing harm and violence rather than the individual experiencing the trauma ("if that were me I would…"). However, if, at this present moment, we can only reach the other through the self, then empathy may be precarious, but it is not useless. It is, I continue to believe, still necessary toward building a politic around harm. How then do we build bridges to each other's harm? My thinking here is mindful of Anzaldua's poetic voice that we build new ways of knowing, a "conocimiento" that

"motivates you [us] to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean – to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing." (Anzaldua, "now let us shift").[1]

To set us en route to think about this question I want to consider two understandings of a backlash, the first is in its etymology and the second is in the implied metaphor of lashing.

The idea of a backlash has its origins in mechanical engineering. All mechanical gears have one thing in common, they fit into each other by a series of teeth that grind against each other in order to move the mechanism along (see image below). When these teeth run continuously, the heat generated will cause them to expand – the "play" or space within the gear is called the backlash. In other words, a backlash is a self-protective mechanism that is already built into the system, allowing the piece of machinery to run as it was intended, to run "smoothly."

Interlocking teeth of gear

Space that allows mechanism to keep running smoothly as the teeth warm and expand. That leeway for unimpeded functioning is the "backlash."

The second idea mines the metaphoric, the sense of a backlash as a backhanded slap, as Mansbridge and Shames note "a backlash lashes back at something another has done" (627). I want to think about these two conceptual framings as we parse through the "we" of "We are in the midst of a -----backlash."

---

[1] See A.L. Keating for an expanded discussion of spiritual activism, which she notes "begins at the level of the individual, it does not result in egocentrism, self-glorification, or other types of possessive individualism. Rather, spiritual activists combine self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change." (Keating, 2006:12)

I find the concept's etymology to be helpful if only for one important reminder – that a "backlash" is not external to or foreign to a system. Deluze and Guattari remind us that

> It is always from the depths of its impotence that each power center draws its power,
>
> hence their extreme maliciousness, and vanity (226).

In other words, systems of power (the gear) never fully expunge their enforcers (the backlash - spaces out of which harm is asserted and deployed). The system's ability to function, its capacity to reassert itself comes from all of the spaces that exist *as the machinery continues to work*, spaces that are at the ready to be called when the system needs to "right" itself (as in, reassert through harm), to run more smoothly. Thinking through the possibilities for jamming the gears is therefore an anticipatory practice – one that thinks of the social (establishments that refuse service?), political (community re-zoning practices?), legislative (repeals? zero-sum logics?), institutional spaces that sit in wait or actively work to keep the machinery working smoothly. In the context of our discussion of a backlash, activism may be an anticipatory practice of jamming. A form of thinking ahead of the embodied consequences for those who are stuck in the gear; the "we" of the second implied meaning of lashing back.

Notably, drawing again on our gear etymology, a backlash emerges out of the same organic matter of the system or machinery that *we inhabit and use* – our potential complicities in this regard brings a different meaning to the idea that "*we* are in the midst of a ---backlash." The discourse that normalizes the work that occurs in these spaces is often shaped by a logic of "use-value" to the system itself (e.g. threat to security, the best person for the job). In this vein, I want to point my own pre-occupation with one of the most successful, ongoing backlashes I have ever witnessed, stunning for its longevity, expansion, and undermining capacity – the ongoing push back against gender justice in the English-speaking Caribbean.

Alongside the formation of feminist organizations such as CAFRA, Red Thread etc. was the somewhat immediate push back of an encroachment of men's rights. In the Caribbean, this was most formally consolidated under the "male marginalization thesis," an argument that gained popularity in the early 1990s. Originating in the field of education, the perspective argued that the prevalence of women in the education system and in the larger labor force occurred at a great

disadvantage to masculinity. Boys were deemed to underperform educationally as a result of this female instructional presence, and female dominance was lamented as a negative disruption to the expected order of things, which its primary advocate, Errol Miller, described as:

> …boys' declining participation and performance in the education system,…the and the decrease in men's earning power relative to women's, especially in white-collar occupations.[2]

This thesis gave language to the pre-existing sociopolitical sentiment, language which gained further credibility given its academic circulation. With an eye to its expansion and longevity, this "smoothening out of the system' facilitated and morphed into a number of things:

- It placed boys and men in a zero-sum, antagonistic relationship with girls and women (we must deal with boys, with scarce resources we may have to limit resources to investment in our failing boys).
- It subsequently masked the ways in which both young boys and girls may have been (differently) caught within the gears of the (failing) educational system. For example, while recently looking at educational attrition data for St. Lucia I was struck by the gender differentials of attrition. There was a consistently higher enrollment of and performance by girls within the education system, but looking at data for 1999-2012 there was a higher attrition number for boys, but this tended to occur closer to their exams, whereas the attrition rate for girls this number spiked between forms 3-4 (on average, ages 15-16). One of the successes of a backlash is that it obscures our capacity to think about multiple harms simultaneously. Therefore, what concern for masculinity masks in this instance where there is attrition boys maintain a great mean, but alongside this is the possibility that attrition for girls may be due to pregnancy, which holds long term ramifications for self-care, employment etc.

By far this particular backlash's greatest success has been the extent to which it has been used to justify the re-centering of the state's attention to shoring up masculinity – as evidenced by the swath of formerly women's affairs bureaus that have now decided that it was time to turn our

---

[2] *Men at Risk*. Errol Miller. (1991). Kingston: Jamaica Publishing House. 91.

attention to the region's men. I provide an excerpt of some of the language used by a few of the region's ministers with responsibility for gender (equity):

- In 2010, Guyana established a unit of "Men's Affairs." At the launch of this unit, the then President of Guyana, Bharat Jagdeo, noted that such a unit would mitigate against the "effeminisation of men." This 2010 Men's Bureau was, in 2016, merged with the Women's Bureau to facilitate the creation of a "Gender Affairs Bureau."

- Saint Kitts and Nevis' decision in 2000 to change the name of its Women's Affairs Department to that of Gender Affairs so that the unit's work "would more accurately represent the goals of gender and development with *women and men* as decision makers."[i]

- In 2009, Dominica added to the growing number, becoming a Bureau of Gender Affairs in order to, among other things, give increased attention to "male gender gaps" in the society" (Caribbean Development Bank 2014A, 61).

So, while "gender" is used in the US to open up institutional spaces in ways that consider trans-subjectivities, in the Caribbean it is often successfully and ironically deployed to exclude women and efface queerness, in other words to reassert what Jacqui Alexander has framed as the "right of primogeniture."

But I want to turn again, for a minute, to the "collective we" that reverberates within the refrain "We are in the midst of a --- backlash" in order to track/think about the affective terrain through which backlashes travel– namely through what I see to be structured modes of antipathy, complicity and animosity. In other words, a backlash may express ire but it is enabled by indifference. In this sense, I am interested in thinking about how these elements work institutionally and interpersonally.

This "collective we" of whichever backlash we are putatively in the midst of can run dangerously close to narrating an innocence of ally-ship; a sense of being in it together. For those

already caught in the gear, the explosion of animus into the broader social and line of vision of the "collective we" marks geography, not time. In other words, the spheres of operation may have broadened, but the logic of its animus has history to which the "collective we" may have only recently arrived. The discursive terrain through which animus comes to rest on certain bodies may require us to think with some detail about what Melissa Wright deploys as "socially useful lies." Wright draws on this concept to think about how women in the global South emerge through narratives about her own disposability. By example, I am interested in the way that ire, hate, self-interest are converted into or come to inhabit concepts of social good – this conversion remains key to the successful workings of any supposed backlash; the injury it inflicts becomes arguably necessary – what Wright offers as the linking of "chaos to social threat." But this is the end of the matter, the anger that erupts when complicity and antipathy are no longer enough. Feminism (nor those who are caught in the gear for that matter) is not immune from participating in the construction of various modes of a backlash. I am not interested in setting up new binaries here, but rather I see this encounter as an opportunity for us to talk with each other about the ways in which our own transdisciplinary encounters might do what Ahmed refers to as "noticing as a form of political labor" (32). Ahmed goes on to note that "The experience of being feminist is often an experience of being out of tune with others." This may in some cases be true, but we are not all similarly caught …so might we find a time to think about how we can continue to build a feminist politic around harm? And lest we fetishsize the contemporary pull to resist, our gear analogy would suggest that to resist requires that we stand in the gap; there is a cost. That said, in our discussions today, how might we forge institutional coalitions that can in some way "jam" the backlash that we are in the midst of in our respective locations?

---

[i] "Concluding Comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Again Women: Saint Kitts and Nevis" Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Twenty-Seventh Session. 3-21 June, 2002. Excerpt Supplement No. 38 (A/57/38). P.1