White wars

Western feminisms and the 'War on Terror'

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Abstract The War on Terror is reconfiguring the practices that constitute whiteness through its definition of the West as endangered by the hatred and violence of its Islamist Other. Critical race and feminist theorists have long defined 'whiteness' as a form of subjectivity that is socially constructed, historically contextual, and inherently unstable. The equation of whiteness as a social identity with the socio-political category of the West has been seen as particularly problematic for its implication in colonial and imperialist projects. These theorists have also noted that the economic and political power of the West has enabled white subjects to exalt themselves even as they have sought to define the nature of the Other. This paper examines how three feminist texts engage with the hegemonic discourse of the War on Terror and its (re)constitution of whiteness.

keywords *feminism, race, war on terror, whiteness*

The War on Terror and configuring whiteness

The power of the United States was shaken as surely by the 9/11 attacks as was the ground upon which stood the Twin Towers. The attacks demonstrated that the US was not unassailable, and the transformation of the attack into a global media spectacle reiterated this message in no uncertain terms. As the Bush Administration (with the support of its allies, including Canada) launched the War on Terror to reassert its dominance, the battle to control the meaning of the attacks was no less intense than the one waged on the bodies of the Muslims named as the enemy. Defining the attacks as an epochal assault on the West and its civilizational values, the Bush Administration sought to extend its imperial reach (which relies in no small measure on its access to, and potential control of, the vast oil and natural gas reserves of the Middle East and Central Asia) (Rashid, 2001) even as it popularly presented its actions as a defence of Western values and their extension into the Islamic world. The War on Terror marks a significant shift in postcolonial articulations of whiteness. The Bush Administration has described Western societies as gravely threatened by the murderous violence of the Islamists, and in effect, whiteness has been

recast as vulnerable, endangered, innocent and the subject of the irrational hatred of this fanatic non-Western Other. Despite the unprecedented military power of the US, most Western elites have given credence to this discourse of vulnerability through their own deployments of it facilitating its extension beyond the borders of the US.

Among the most salient of the values said to distinguish the West from those of Islam is that of gender equality. The Bush Administration's identification of the 'liberation' of Afghan women as a key objective in its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan brought gender to the forefront of global politics. Feminists have historically had a complex relationship with the colonial and imperial projects that have furthered white racial supremacy internationally, and this tension has remained no less palpable in the postcolonial era (Amos and Parmar, 1984; Mohanty, 1991; Lewis and Mills, 2003). Aboriginal, third world, and postcolonial feminists have produced a substantive body of work addressing the relationships among race, gender, colonialism and imperialism. They have argued that the integration of white women into the institution of white supremacy was critical to the reproduction of colonial relations. Western feminists have contested their gendered inequalities with considerable success. Some have even sought to transform their relationship to 'whiteness' and the deep divisions this precipitates among women. The US-led War on Terror is giving rise to new forms of invasions and occupations, and it is of great consequence to examine how feminists are theorizing the War on Terror. In what ways are feminists applying the lessons learnt from prior such histories of conquest? How are they defining the relationships among race, gender and the War on Terror? What, if any, is the correlation between feminist theorizations and the 'new' imperial imaginary? What does feminist theory have to offer in terms of resistance to the contemporary reconfigurations of imperial relations?

This paper examines how three feminist texts, written about the War on Terror and the US Empire, are negotiating the volatile terrain of the West and its relation to the Muslim Other. The three texts are Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Phyllis Chesler's *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It* (2003) and Zillah Eisenstein's *Against Empire: Feminisms, Racisms, and the West* (2004). While Chesler's text lends outright support to the War on Terror, Butler and Eisenstein write from explicitly opposi-tional stances. These texts have been chosen for study as they are among the first such book-length treatments of the War on Terror, and have been produced by prominent US-based feminists.[1] As such, they provide a valuable opportunity for analysing the potential of various forms of femi-nisms to transcend the historical collusion of Western feminisms with colonialism and imperialism. All are written in the spirit of feminist activism and map out important parameters for opening up – or foreclosing – particular avenues for political solidarity among women. The texts, of course, cannot be read outside the context of the contemporary political deployment of the discourse on 'terror' which presents the current 'threat' as being of global proportions and bent on the destruction of the West. I

argue that although each text has its own particular relationship to the racial paranoia of imperial subjects, all three contribute, however inadvertently, to the re-centring of these subjects as innocent of their imperialist histories and present complicities. The texts thus buttress the privileged locations of white women within a rapidly changing imperial order and all three texts further – in different ways and to varying degrees – the practices that presently constitute whiteness as vulnerability.[2]

Along with critiques of masculinities and femininities, critical race and feminist theorists have produced significant critiques of the concept of the West and of whiteness. They have argued that the idea of the West emerged historically with the European colonization of 'non-Western' societies that came to be constituted as essentially and ontologically different. This concept was closely tied to the emergence of whiteness as a social identity, and the elevation of this subject position to dominance at the apex of the racial hierarchies instituted through colonial violence (Hall, 1996; Bessis, 2003; Fanon, 1986). David Roediger (1998), for example, argues that Black people, and especially Black women, well recognized that their survival depended upon their effective reading of – and negotiations with – whiteness, in order to minimize the violence that was so routinely inflicted upon them. The religious, scientific and political theories of Europe helped institute and legitimize a hierarchy of humanity among colonizing and colonized populations, and the idea of the superiority of the West was key to its civilizing mission. The unabashed claims of Western superiority and of the racial innocence of white subjects that characterized the colonial imaginary were profoundly destabilized, however, by the wave of political decolonization of the mid-20th century. The challenges to such claims by anti-colonial, anti-racist and civil rights movements drew attention not only to the violence that underpinned Western civilization, but also to the complicity of the overwhelming majority of white populations with their elites in furthering white and colonial domination. Moreover, the rise of fascism and the horrors of the Holocaust, which demonstrated the heights to which the Nazis took the scientific theories of racial supremacy in the heart of Europe itself, made the overt use of such theories politically untenable and morally indefensible in the post-war period. Processes of racialization consequently underwent some transformation, with the rise of a 'new' racism that posited immutable cultural differences, rather than inherent biological inequalities, among populations (Barker, 1981; Gilroy, 1991).

More recently, scholars of whiteness have demonstrated the persistence of these phenomena through the 'postcolonial' era, during which, as Alfred J. Lopez puts it, 'the cultural residues of whiteness linger' (2005: 1). They argue that inhabiting this social identity remains a 'passport to privilege' (Dyer, quoted in Lopez, 2005: 2), and that it 'continues to retain much of its status and desirability, if not its overt colonial-era power' (Lopez, 2005: 2). David T. Goldberg's analysis of race concurs with this position. He argues that race 'is not simply a set of ideas or understandings. The category represents, more broadly, a way (or a set of ways) of being in the world, of living, of meaning-making' (Goldberg, 2006: 334). In the case of white women, Ruth Frankenberg identifies three key dimensions of how

whiteness shapes their life experiences: first, it is 'a position of structural advantage'; second, it is a 'standpoint from which to look at oneself, others, and society'; and third, it is a 'set of cultural practices' (Frankenberg, 2004: 141). These critics and theorists have underscored the materiality of the privileges garnered by white subjects, and have also been concerned with the self-constituting practices of these subjects. Most have argued that the reproduction of whiteness relies on its constitution as an invisible 'raceless' identity, thereby equating white subjects and their specific cultural mores and values with the universality of the human.

Three Feminist Frames

Phyllis Chesler's *The New Anti-Semitism* defends the war by arguing that Israel and the United States together face a deadly enemy: Muslims, and the 'terrorist' politics they espouse. Both societies thus need to unite to fight off this threat. Anti-Semitism lies at the core of the global crisis, and she argues that America has become a target of 'Islamofascists' as the result of its support for Israel. Distinguishing the 'old' from the 'new' anti-Semitism, she claims:

> What's new about the new anti-Semitism is that acts of violence against Jews and anti-Semitic words and deeds are being uttered and performed by politically correct people in the name of anticolonialism, anti-imperialism, antiracism and pacifism . . . The new anti-Semite, cannot, by definition, be an anti-Semitic racist because she speaks out on behalf of oppressed people. (Chesler, 2003: 88)

She charges Western intellectuals, including some Jewish ones, with 'betrayal of the Jews' (p. 12), and castigates feminists, anti-globalization and anti-war activists for succumbing to political correctness, supporting Palestinians, and criticizing Israel. Chesler warns about the dangers of such dissension:

> First, these arguments at high decibel levels are taking place not only in Israel but all over the world, far from where the suicide bombers are exploding them-selves and civilians in the streets and squares of Tel Aviv, Haifa, Netanya, and Jerusalem. Second, as the Jews are fighting with each other, Muslim terrorists and their allies are burning down synagogues; attacking Jews on the street; burning Israeli and American flags; blowing up American embassies and ships . . . Third, much of the Western media and many of the Western intellectuals are loudly defending Palestinian rights and loudly condemning the Jewish state. (p. 13)

Chesler's apocalyptic view reproduces the paradigm of the 'Clash of Civilizations' promulgated by Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, which informs current US foreign policy (Huntington, 1993; Lewis, 2002). Among other strategies, she urges her readers that 'We Must Form Jewish-Christian Alliances' (Chesler, 2003: 213). Chesler's framing of the conflict as one between the civilized West and barbaric Islam is shared also by some non-white Muslim feminists who support the War on Terror.[3]

    By contrast, Judith Butler argues that the distinctions between Jews and Israel, between anti-Semitism and criticism of the Israeli state are vital to

preserve, especially given that the charge of anti-Semitism is being widely used in the US to silence dissent and critiques of Israeli state violence. Butler remains unequivocal throughout the text in her condemnation of anti-Semitism, as she does of the 9/11 attacks and the United States' decision to respond with violence. Her text explicates different aspects of the War, including the necessity to: (1) examine the root causes of the conflict and challenge the public anti-intellectualism and media censorship that seek to close down such examinations; (2) face 'our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows' and thereby find 'a basis for community in these conditions'; (3) address the dangers posed by the suspension of the law in the name of national security, as is the case at Guantánamo Bay; (4) confront both anti-Semitism and Israeli state violence; and, finally, (5) respond ethically and morally to the demand from the Other, which Butler explores by way of an engagement with Emmanuel Levinas' discussion of the 'face' in his reflections on the 'precariousness' of human life (Butler, 2004: 51). Butler is centrally concerned with the post-9/11 'heightened vulnerability and aggression' (p. xi), and she strongly advocates responses other than violence. She criticizes the Bush Administration for its resort to violence and its erosion of civil rights, as well as the media for its dehumanization of the Other, which makes their lives 'unknowable' and their deaths 'ungrievable'.

Eisenstein's aim in *Against Empire* is 'to uncover the relations and histories of power . . .' (2004: xv). She argues that the US has a long history of violence and exploitation, from the conquest of indigenous peoples to slavery through to the present. Cautioning against the uncritical adoption of the language of 'terror' propagated by the Bush Administration, she points out that a 'class war is being waged in the U.S. while all eyes look abroad' (p. xix): the government is engaged in a neo-liberal/neo-conservative assault on the gains of the civil rights and women's rights movements at home, as well as a dangerous remilitarization. This 'downsizing and corporate restructuring of the U.S. economy through the 1980s and 1990s has now been accompanied by a restructuring of the CIA, FBI, and Pentagon . . . This new security-state monitors and conducts surveillance in the name of democracy' (p. xix).

Eisenstein notes that the earlier Gulf War and the policies of several US Administrations are the context for the War on Terror. Discussing the violence that shaped the historical development of capitalism in the US, she ties this development to a history of racism and patriarchy. Eisenstein defines American masculinity as imperialist and the Taliban as misogynist as she argues that 'gender apartheid and sexual terrorism are crucial aspects of these political times' (2004: 152). Challenging the Bush Administration's claim that the War will 'free' Afghan women, she takes the Administration and its 'women helpmates' to task for 'appropriat[ing] the language of women's rights for a right-wing and neo-liberal imperial agenda' (p. 148). She points to the violence against women that exists in the US and argues that the 'choice between sexual exploitation (commodification) and sexual repression (denial) is no democratic choice at all'

(p. 155). This text relies on its theorization of a relationship between capitalism and patriarchy which gives rise to a shared experience of violence among women: white women are subjected to sexual terrorism by white men, and Muslim women are subjected to gender apartheid by Muslim men.

Chesler's enthusiastic endorsement of the War on Terror and her inflammatory rhetoric set her text apart. Butler and Eisenstein strongly reject such a perspective. They denounce racism and the rhetoric that demonizes Muslims. Nevertheless, all three share surprising convergences in their treatments of violence and in their representations of white imperial subjects and Muslim Others.

Theorizing the War on Terror

Chesler's text reproduces the fear-mongering and paranoid obsession with endangered national security that prevails within the US and Israel, as it removes the conflict from contemporary geo-political realities and situates it instead in a decontextualized eternal Oriental hatred of Jews and the West. It does not address the imbalance of power between Israel and Palestine, or the US and the Middle East and Central Asia, where the strongest populist Islamist movements that oppose the US have emerged. Chesler speaks strongly about what she perceives to be the dangers:

> It begins with the Jews, but if we do not stop them it will, soon enough – it already has – spread to Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, and to all Americans of all religions and races. Appeasement is no longer an option. If we do not stop them, Islamic jihadists will surely remove the precious jewels from our houses of worship and our museums, melt down the gold and the silver, and blow up our most beautiful churches and synagogues, or they will build mosques right over them. Muslims have been doing exactly this in the Islamic world for more than a thousand years, and they continue to do so today. (Chesler, 2003: 21)

Chesler's uncritical exaltation of the West lends feminist credence to the Bush Administration's rhetoric, and in the process, allows her to claim her own location as an equally exalted, albeit endangered, subject. For her, America and Israel are the West at its best, '[b]ecause both America and Israel symbolize and promise so much – equality, democracy, justice, modernity, and the right to pursue individual happiness – people are disappointed and embittered when the promise does not include *them*' (Chesler, 2003: 10, emphasis in original). Those excluded from the promise are enraged so that 'Western culture is under siege' (p. 205). Jews and Israel need to be most protected because 'Israel is also the heart of the Western world, its Holy Land, and what happens to Israel matters to people of faith everywhere. How Jews relate to Israel now will reflect on us forever. Actually, how non-Jews relate to Israel will reflect on us all forever' (p. 209). Where Chesler does acknowledge the violence committed by Israel, its occurrence is always defensive (p. 42). This is not a colonial or apartheid society, she reassures her readers. The people are 'sweet and soulful' (p. 211); checkpoints are like 'kindergarten' in comparison to Serb ones (p. 99); and 'the Israeli army is one of the most civilized (and civilian)

armies in the world' (p. 98), its soldiers behaving 'with more restraint than most professional armies would have under the circumstances' (p. 217).

Although Christians participated in the pogroms in Europe which culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust, Chesler argues that the Church has 'evolved' and 'begun to rethink and regret some of its earlier positions' (2003: 21). This allows her to claim a civilizational and cultural – not political – alliance between the US and Israel, one based on their shared values and essential 'goodness'. Making the racial alliance between the US and Israel invisible, her representation of Jews as Western also distorts the heterogeneity within this religious category, which includes Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi and other Jews. She elides such differences and identifies all Jews with the West, and defines Muslims as the leading anti-Semites. In a reversal of actuality, the settler societies that are the US and Israel are transformed into the victims of these Muslims. David Goldberg has argued that the Holocaust has been made into 'the mark par excellence of race and racially inscribed histories' in Europe, with the result that 'Europe's colonial history and legacy dissipate if not disappear' (2006: 336). His critique of this obscuring of the European legacy of racism and its present removal from scrutiny through a singular focus on the Holocaust is pertinent to Chesler's text, for she reproduces these gestures in her presentation of Jews as the only victims of racial hatred. Her argument is based on an implicit denial of the racism and anti-Semitism that exist not only in Europe, but also in the US.

Chesler is participating in a fantasy of the West, which presents the category to itself as enlightened benefactor, and which specifically includes white women: 'As a feminist, I have long dreamed of rescuing women who are trapped in domestic and sexual slavery against their will with no chance of escape' (2003: 198). In keeping with this imperial feminist fantasy, she claims that her own feminism was sparked by the hyper-patriarchy of the Muslim world: 'My so-called Western feminism was certainly forged in that beautiful and treacherous country [Afghanistan], where I observed and experienced the abysmal oppression of women, children and servants. Forever after I was able to see gender apartheid anywhere, even in America' (Chesler, 2003: 16). I argue that hers is a feminism that revels in its own superiority, and that of its culture and society. This view is not tempered by the exhaustive anti-racist critiques of the 'white (wo)man's burden'.

Butler's analytic frame begins with the injury done to the US by the 9/11 attacks: 'That U.S. boundaries were breached, that an unbearable vulnerability was exposed, that a terrible toll on human life was taken, were, and are, cause for fear and mourning; they are also instigations for patient political reflection' (2004: xi). The breaching by the US of the boundaries of other countries in the decades preceding the attacks, including Afghanistan and Iraq, are mentioned in passing, but do not shape the discursive field, although Butler does note that 'others have suffered arbitrary violence at the hands of the U.S.' (p. xiv). But this suffering of others, concretized most pertinently in the bodies of the Iraqi and Afghan populations prior to 9/11, and the many, many other well-known victims of US

aggression, is not the starting point for her analysis (Mamdani, 2004; Johnson, 2000). Instead, a particular attack on the US, from which she attends to the generalized suffering of a generic humanity, shapes the frame. This framing foregrounds, however unintentionally, the experience of the (white) American subject, who has suddenly and graphically discovered its own vulnerability, as it does the imperialist perspective articulated by the Bush Administration. That this subject neither revels in nor denies the violence done by the US state, complicates, but does not contest, the imperial perspective. Butler seems to be deeply disturbed by the US violence in this War because of the violent *response* it is likely to engender, and which will likely threaten US populations in the future. Butler searches for an understanding of the injury done to the self and to the Other by positing a vulnerability that shapes the experience of human beings: '[t]o be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways' (2004: xii). Although she allows that this vulnerability is not equally distributed, her analysis nevertheless proceeds on just such an assumption as she reflects on the possibility of a political community based on this shared experience of vulnerability and loss.

Such a community becomes the 'we' of her text: 'Despite our differences in location and history', she argues,

> . . . my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a "we," for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire. (Butler, 2004: 20)

In the absence of a discussion of the particularities of the loss of others, the (white) subject's experience of loss becomes the ground on which this community is to be identified. Although Butler repeatedly and explicitly cautions against the assumption of a universally shared human condition, her analysis also repeatedly and explicitly reproduces the notion of a universalized human experience:

> I am referring to violence, vulnerability, and mourning, but there is a more general conception of the human with which I am trying to work here, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others: this conception means that we are vulnerable to those we are too young to know and to judge, and hence, vulnerable to violence; but also vulnerable to another range of touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives at the other. (2004: 31)

The analysis of the current destruction of sovereignties by the US, its invasions and occupations, becomes grounded in a shared primal, pre-individuated psycho-existential experience of vulnerability that elides the alterity historically instantiated between those doing the occupying and those being occupied.

The common experience of vulnerability that Butler's conceptualization

of the human subject foregrounds may be relevant in some phenomeno-logical, existential sense. But the use of such 'primal vulnerability' as the primary lens for an examination of an imperialist war places her discussion in a liberal-individualist frame so abstract as to severely hinder under-standings of how geo-political power relations are being restructured by the US through this War. Indeed, the specific vulnerabilities created by imperialist relations become secondary to the primary vulnerability of the infant condition. Consequently, Butler's imposition of the collective 'we' in prioritizing a condition of infancy assumes the primacy of this condition as also the ontological point of departure for the Other (if they are to be included in her conception of the human). The implication is that the experiences of occupied peoples can be approached as being essentially the same as those of imperial subjects. Such a commonality of experience, I argue, is practically impossible in the absence of the transformation of the conditions of imperialist domination. Butler seems to reject humanist assumptions *and* yet applies them to develop her analysis of violence. Her generic 'human' subject relies on an implicit denial of the recognition that the injuries, violence and losses suffered by occupied populations are significantly different, and that these peoples are immensely more threat-ened with violence and injury than are the subjects of imperialist powers. In making the racialized distinctions between the forms and degrees of violence experienced by Afghans, Iraqis and other Muslims and white subjects disappear through her resort to humanist assumptions, the experi-ence and perspective of the (imperial) white subject is restored to central-ity. Richard Dyer points out that one way in which whiteness is reproduced is through the treatment of whites as a human norm. He argues that it is racial power that enables white subjects to claim this position of the human: 'There is no more powerful position than that of being "just" human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race' (Dyer, 1997: 2). Butler reproduces a classic feature of racial power by making whiteness invisible, even as the definition of the human is claimed by the white subject.

My concern with Butler's framing of events is not so much that the psychoanalytic and philosophical approaches she uses cannot be useful in shedding light on the War on Terror. After all, many critical race theorists, from Frantz Fanon onwards, have drawn very fruitfully on both for theo-rizing violence, suffering and pain (Fanon, 1986). What I find problematic is Butler's reproduction of the universalist assumptions of Western philo-sophical and psychoanalytic traditions. Commenting on Sigmund Freud's insistence that the 'individual factor' required attention, Fanon had cautioned that 'the Black man's alienation is not an individual question', for, '[b]eside phylogeny and ontogeny stand sociogeny' (1986: 13). He criticized psychoanalysis for 'its failure to account for the relationship between personal history and history writ large. Psychoanalysis, he argued, disregarded history's "organizing line of force" and the ensuing repercus-sion on the individual psyche, as well as on the unconscious, when it was destroyed or eradicated' (Cherki, 2006: 21). Butler's placing of the injury

to the US at the centre enables the presentation of the most powerful politi-
cal community on the planet as vulnerable to the vastly unequal societies
that it is invading and occupying. She gives credence, however inadver-
tently, to the paranoid fantasies of Western vulnerability by way of a
psychoanalytic theory that does not acknowledge the impact of race and
white supremacy on the psyche.

A frame that took as its starting point the history and magnitude of the
violence done by the US would have shattered the historical amnesia that
defines the violence in this conflict as originating from others; however,
Butler's decontextualized references to 'state terror' are no substitute for
such a discussion. She concludes that the violence of the US can be under-
stood as largely a defensive violence:

> Tragically, it seems that the U.S. seeks to preempt violence by waging violence
> first, but the violence it fears is the violence it engenders. I do not mean to
> suggest by this that the U.S. is responsible in some causal way for the attacks on
> its citizens. And I do not exonerate Palestinian suicide bombers, regardless of
> the terrible conditions that animate their murderous activities. There is,
> however, some distance to be traveled between living in terrible conditions and
> suffering serious, even unbearable injuries, and resolving on murderous acts.
> President Bush traveled that distance quickly, calling for "an end to grief" after
> a mere ten days of flamboyant mourning. Suffering can yield an experience of
> humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence, and these can
> become resources, if we do not "resolve" them too quickly; they can move us
> beyond and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who regenerates
> infinitely the justifications for war. It is as much a matter of wrestling ethically
> with one's own murderous impulses, impulses that seek to quell an overwhelm-
> ing fear, as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock
> of the suffering one has inflicted. (Butler, 2004: 149–50)

It is a curious argument to suggest an equation between the 'murderous
acts' of Palestinian suicide bombers and those of the American President,
who has the Pentagon at his disposal to carry out his 'impulses'. I also find
problematic the implication that a similar 'overwhelming fear' and experi-
ence of 'suffering' gives rise to the 'murderous impulses' of Palestinian
suicide bombers and the President of the US. The notion that Palestinians
should renounce violence, even when living with 'unbearable injuries', in
order to be recognized as 'ethical' subjects subjugates their experiences and
priorities. This renders almost impossible the consideration that their
actions might be construed as having ethical and moral foundations within
a different epistemic and ontological paradigm.

Butler's suggestion that non-violence is the ethically and morally
superior response to 'suffering' implicitly calls into question the militant
liberation movements of most of the third world in the 20th century. It
assumes there is no difference in the violence of those resisting invasions
and occupations of their lands and that of the occupying forces. Such a
political stance, especially in the absence of sustained engagement with
the extensive debates on the efficacy of the use of violence or pacifism by
nationalist movements, forecloses the possibility of a serious engagement
with the others who live with organized, imperialist violence. It also

renders the subjects of occupying powers innocent of responsibility for such daily violence.[4] Butler's text re-enacts for the present the historical experience of white colonizing subjects, who have repeatedly projected their violent actions, and their fears of retaliation arising from such violence, on to the Other, even as they were slaughtering them in their millions (Galeano, 1973; Drinnon, 1997; Hochschild, 1999). Today, such delusional fears of retaliatory violence are projected on to the Arabs, Afghans, Iraqis and Palestinians by many Western elites and their armies engaged in invading and occupying the countries of those they ostensibly fear. This delusional fear of the Other has been a key feature constituting the innocence of imperial whiteness, such that the white subject comes to define its violent forays into the territories of others as defensive, and hence necessary, violence.

While one can readily agree with Butler's critique of the media for using the 'aesthetic dimension of war' to 'exploit and instrumentalize the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself', what is one to make of her claim that 'of course, it was the spectacular destruction of the World Trade Center that first made a claim on the "shock and awe" effect, and the U.S. recently displayed for all the world to see that it can and will be equally destructive' (Butler, 2004: 148–9)? By what measure can the violence perpetrated by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan ever be defined as 'equally destructive' to the attacks on the Twin Towers? This fantasy of the enemy as one that is able to wreak a violence equal to that of the US army, and those of its allies, has been a key plank of the Bush Administration's war propaganda.

Unlike Butler and Chesler, Eisenstein seeks to deconstruct the category of the West and the homogeneity of whiteness. Rejecting the concept of the West, 'the so-called West is as much fiction as real; as much appropriation as originary; as exclusionary as it is promissory' (2004: xv), she questions the East/West binary. She also rejects the proposition that feminism is the sole preserve of the West, and highlights 'polyversal humanity' and 'alternate feminisms' from 'elsewhere' (p. xv). She stresses the need for recognizing a common humanity across the East/West and religious/secular divides (p. 5). However, she rejects the East/West binary only to elevate gender above other social relations. This is the crux of her analysis:

> A masculinist-military mentality dominates on both sides of the ill-named East/West divide . . . the two sides of the divide share foundational relations, even if differently expressed, especially in terms of male privilege. Neither side embraces women's full economic and political equality or sexual freedom. In this sense fluidity has always existed between the two in the arena of women's rights and obligations. (Eisenstein, 2004: 151)

Emphasizing the violence that is done to Afghan women by Afghan men, she downplays the violence done by the men *and women* of the Western imperialist nations that have presently occupied that country. One cannot argue with her contention that sexual economics and gendered violence underpin the economic order. But it is less than convincing to argue that the only forms of imperialist feminism are neo-liberal feminism and the Bush Administration's hijacking of 'the language of women's rights', and

that it is only the women who directly work in the Administration (who 'speak as women of the West' (Eisenstein, 2004: 160), who are 'showcase[d] masquerad[ing] as a masculinity in drag' (p. 156)) who reproduce imperialist relations. 'Radical' forms of Western feminism are misunderstood by third world feminists, she argues, and this only contributes to a right-wing takeover of feminism. Her definition of racism attributes it largely to 'capitalist' and 'imperialist' interests, its reproduction mainly to white male elites. Such a position renders invisible the significant racial benefits that have accrued to all white women from imperialist relations.

   In the absence of a critique of the racially exclusionary forms of feminisms (including radical feminisms) that can be found in the US, Eisenstein returns to the familiar terrain of white feminists claiming their own experience as gender victims to present themselves as the natural gender allies of women in the third world. Although Eisenstein does not re-centre the white imperial subject in quite the manner of Chesler or Butler, she does not fully de-centre it either. Rather, she allows for the feminized imperial subject to be presented as endangered by patriarchy, both of American and Muslim men, but not Muslim women as endangered by the racism of white men *and women*. Predictably then, there is considerable criticism of anti-racist and anti-colonial male leaders for their sexism, as there is of anti-racist feminists for inadequate comprehension of their oppression, but little substantive critique is to be found of the racism of white mainstream and radical feminisms. Disappointingly, this text demonstrates that a rejection of the East/West binary can coexist with the re-inscription of a white gendered subject position as innocent of, and removed from, its complicities with empire-building. Eisenstein's highlighting of male violence in the US is certainly important, especially as patriarchal practices in their Western and 'secular' garb are being removed from scrutiny through the hypervisibility given to these practices in the Islamic context. But simply pointing to the white male domination of white women does not really challenge the Western racialized-gendered discourse that has defined non-white men as inherently, and far more, patriarchal and violent. This discourse has now become most virulently anti-Muslim, but it has been directed in the past against all third world peoples, most popularly through the Western cultural constructs of Black and third world 'machismo'. Eisenstein surprisingly ignores this historical tradition of the West as she argues that a 'Global Misogyny' (2004: 150) lies at the core of the current conflict, with white women equally threatened by it.

(Mis)Engagements with the Other

A surprising feature shared by the three texts becomes evident as attention is paid to the nature of their engagements with the Islamists who have been constituted as the absolute Other in the war rhetoric of the Bush Administration. All three demonstrate a reluctance to engage with the substantial Islamist critiques of the US and the West, with the political demands of the alleged perpetrators of the attacks of 9/11, and with the insurgent forces

in Afghanistan and Iraq in their concrete, embodied particularities. In the period leading up to the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network made a very specific set of demands of the US. These included the withdrawal of US troops and bases from Saudi Arabia; the lifting of the United Nations sanctions against Iraq, enforced most stringently by the US and Britain; and the end of the occupation of Palestine. These demands were largely ignored at that time and later the media actively suppressed their discussion in the aftermath of the attacks. All three texts contribute to the suppression of discussions of these demands, as well as the critiques of the US that underpin them. The demands are clearly political in nature, even if driven by a militant religious ideology. In this, all three texts help sustain the Bush Administration's dismissal of 'the enemy' as driven singularly by an irrational hatred that Americans cannot possibly comprehend.

Chesler's analysis pivots on her reproduction of Muslims as an absolute Other, whose actions cannot be comprehended rationally. She warns that: 'coordinated attacks against Jews and Israelis are escalating. They are synchronized and choreographed, Arafat-style, bin Laden style, so that separate attacks occur simultaneously . . . Those for whom progress is anathema, who resonate only to stasis, uniformity, hierarchy, conformity, are now armed with the latest western weaponry – with which they hope to Talibanize the entire world' (Chesler, 2003: 13–14). In addition to the gory violence waged by Muslim men, who also 'hijack' international conferences, the violence of Muslim women is defined as no less lethal. Let alone engage with Palestinian accounts of their history, Chesler does not even engage Jewish critics of Israel and Zionism, except to lambast them for pandering to the Muslims who would destroy them. Her political stance in defining Muslims as the only enemies of Jews is a dangerous one, for it leaves little room for vigilance against the anti-Semitism of non-Muslim Americans. Her refusal to recognize that anti-Semitic forces in the US can hate both Jews and Muslims alike leads to a rejection of the possibility of any similarity of interests between the two, of any commonality between their religious traditions. She denies that there could be any aspect of shared humanity between them. In the process, she makes invisible the strong alliances that have historically existed between Jews and Muslims in anti-colonial and anti-racist movements of the past, and indeed, of the present.

Butler does not engage in an explicit discussion of the discourse of the West, or of whiteness. This is surprising, given the ubiquity of the claims of Western civilizational superiority triumphantly dominating the public sphere in North America. Instead, as discussed above, Butler's 'human' subject is generalized to such a degree that a discussion of power relations between white and non-white subjects can be evaded. Such power relations, however, cannot be willed away, even by the most sophisticated and ardent of attempts at inclusion of 'others' in the category of the human. These relations can be glimpsed in the fissures that punctuate her analysis: 'That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief', Butler explains (2004: xii). If all share the condition of loss, injury and

vulnerability that human corporeality ensures, then what distinguishes 'us' from the 'others' who can also 'be injured'? Who is the 'another' who can subject the 'we' of her imagined community to death at 'their whim'? The limits of Butler's abstracted conceptions of the community of the 'we' are such that they do not (cannot?) speak directly of/to the 'an/other' who can subject 'us' to death. She grapples with the possibility of the community of the 'we' from a number of different angles: 'I think that if I can still address a "we," or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage' (Butler, 2004: 24). If that is indeed the case, then what makes this 'other' Other? For many of 'them' are also living 'beside' themselves, clearly motivated – at least in part – by 'emotional grief', 'sexual passion' and 'political rage'. In what ways is Butler, who is living 'beside herself', unusual in her theorization of this conflict? Her analysis remains haunted by the dread of the Other, a dread that transcends the shared vulnerability she is so concerned to present. Her statement of vulnerability that 'we are subject to death at the whim of another' is also a projection of the violence of the West on to its racial Other.

   Butler does not engage with how the West is defined by those who have been constituted as its Other. The attacks of 9/11 were perpetrated with an implicit definition of the US population as implicated in, and responsible for, the violence done by their state in their name. I argue that it is only by engaging with definitions of the West *as defined by its others* that the possibility of transcendence of the binary between the West and its Other becomes possible, a transcendence that Butler clearly seems to welcome. Yet her approach cannot further such transcendence because it does not address this imperial/racial binary or the demands made by specific human others. Such reluctance to engage with the concrete critiques and demands of peoples living under occupation has been one way in which Western subjects have asserted their power to define the nature of (non-white) others. In place of an engagement with these embodied others, Butler chooses to engage with the same. In her discussion of the precariousness of life, she engages with Levinas' theorization of ethics by reflecting upon the self's encounter with the 'face' of/as the Other. This encounter gives rise to a desire both to kill the Other and to live by the exhortation to refrain from such murder, she explains. Butler's turn to Levinas to explicate the importance of the face as/of the Other, and on the propensity for murderous rage that arises in the self, and not only in the Other, is not an actual engagement with the Other. It does not contribute to making the Other(s) in this conflict more understandable, their actions more comprehensible, and hence recognizing their humanity. This is an engagement with the same that only furthers the dehumanization of the Other as beyond the rational, beyond the ethical.

   Eisenstein repeatedly points to the common experiences of male violence shared by women everywhere, and she draws parallels between the violence of 'misogynist fundamentalism' and secular patriarchies (2004: 153). 'Neither form of masculinism – bin Laden's terror tactics or

Bush's bombs – is good enough for women and girls living across the globe', she argues (p. 155). This violence is said to emanate from a shared 'masculinism' that endangers the lives of all women. Men become the Other of the global community of women and girls, as race retreats from view. Eisenstein's text perhaps comes closest to an attempt to engage with some of the West's 'others' in her discussion of 'feminisms from else-wheres'. But her claims that Black and Latina feminists 'critically pluraliz[ed] feminism beyond the liberal individualism of the mainstream white women's movement', and that 'anti-racist feminists embraced differ-ences in order to build a larger collectivity and inclusivity of "women"' ring somewhat hollow in the absence of an engagement with these anti-racist feminists' critiques of the racism of radical, as well as mainstream, white feminisms (p. 186). She thus diminishes such critiques.

How is it that the incarceration, torture, and murder of Muslim men on the slightest suspicion of harbouring animosity towards the forces that occupy their societies do not interrupt the paranoid imaginings of the white feminist who envisions *herself* and *her* society as threatened by a commensurable violence at the hands of these men? I have argued that it is the institution of white supremacy – now conflated with Western civiliz-ation – which relies so heavily on the narrations of its essential innocence, which enables such feminist imaginings. The works of Butler, Chesler and Eisenstein analysed in this paper have very different priorities, and they lead to very different political choices. None of them, however, can be char-acterized as engagements with actual others that could further the under-mining of the prevailing dehumanization of the Other. Engagements between exalted (white) subjects (which situate these embodied subjects in their relatively powerful locations) and (non-white) others (in their embodied, relatively powerless, concreteness) are vital, if such Othering is to be subverted, and if feminists are to refuse complicity with an imperi-alist paradigm that has historically refrained from such exchanges with those it dominates. Instead of destabilizing the contemporary practices that reproduce whiteness and its alterity, these texts contribute in the ways discussed above to their respective re-stabilization. I began this paper with questions about what feminists have learned from the substantive critiques and theorizations of past racial and imperialist encounters, and how these lessons might inform the engagements of feminist theories with the War on Terror. Whether this War is analysed from political-economic, philosophi-cal, cultural or psychoanalytic perspectives is moot. It needs sustained and rigorous analysis from all these perspectives, as well as a good many more theoretical traditions and perspectives. What is indispensable, however, is the disruption of the practices that reproduce Western supremacy and white racial innocence.

Notes

1. Phyllis Chesler's groundbreaking *Women and Madness* is considered to be one of the foundational texts of second wave feminism. Chesler's work

remains pertinent to women's studies as she has recently produced *The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom*, denouncing feminism and women's studies. Eisenstein has been a prominent proponent of socialist/materialist feminism, and Butler's work is considered foundational to post-structural and postmodern feminism.

2. For more on my position on the War on Terror, see Thobani (2002, 2003).
3. Irshad Manji is perhaps among the most prominent of these feminists (see Manji, 2003).
4. Fanon, for example, argued that violence is the overriding principle in the colonial order, and thus 'decolonization is always a violent phenomenon' (Fanon, 1963: 35).

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