

# Hashtags, testimonies, and measurements

## Gender violence and its interpretation

**Alessandra GRIBALDO**

Università di Roma Tre

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, I address gender violence through the act of witnessing and speaking out by the victims. Starting from a critical comment on some arguable points raised in the recent *Hau* journal forum aimed at discussing forms and claims of the #MeToo movement, I let emerge the conundrums that anthropology faces in dealing with the issue. A focus on domestic abuse as a specific form of gender violence allows me to delve into the twine of intimacy, agency and consent in the experience of the victims. I detect the specific dynamics that characterize the issue of speaking/not speaking out against violence by abused women and that underpin analytical biases. Then, I illustrate how these complexities can be found in the general assessment and measurement of gender violence as a global phenomenon. I conclude with a reflection on violence and women's voices as an opportunity for anthropological knowledge to deal with truth telling, intimacy, and the gendered act of speaking out.

**KEYWORDS:** GENDER VIOLENCE, INTIMACY, VIOLENCE ASSESSMENT, WITNESSING, #MeToo.

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Credibility, authenticity, proof, testimony are the largely shared modalities through which the truth of a fact is judged. Regarding the phenomenon of gender violence, the fact in question is both the violent act and the subject victim of the act, that is the subject who publicly speaks out against violence. The ways gender violence can be denounced are diverse and feminist movements take on the responsibility to convey collectively into the public sphere the singularity of witnessing and experiencing violence. It is known that the act of denouncing, witnessing and public speaking out of one's own experience of violence is particularly demanding for the victim. The reasons are diverse and span from trauma, practical and material conditions to denounce, the lack of proof, biases about credibility, the potential involvement with the perpetrator.

In this article<sup>1</sup> I wish to focus on a specific aspect, which is the conundrum represented by gender violence and the possibility of its certification and acknowledgment. How is anthropological knowledge questioned by the ways gender violence is attested or denied?

I illustrate my argument following three points. First, starting from a recent section of the last number of *Hau* journal about the #MeToo movement, I highlight the most problematic aspects related to the reception of the public speaking out against gender violence. Second, I identify the issue of intimacy as crucial to deploy the difficulties to deal with violence against women, referring in particular to domestic violence. Finally, I show how the trouble to identify the violent act can also be found in data collection and surveys on the phenomenon of intimate partner violence. Conclusions are drawn on the chances for anthropology to analyze social events that are characterized by – rather than difference and alterity – involvement, contiguity, proximity, and the *already known*.

### *Shortcuts*

The *Shortcuts* section on the #MeToo movement in the last issue of *Hau* journal represents a sign of the engagement by anthropology to deal with issues – such as the collective manners to convey personally experienced gender violence – that are non-orthodox for the discipline, providing acknowledgment and dignity of object of research and analysis. The journal section has been recently introduced to invite scholars to briefly reflect on specific under debated issues that can challenge the discipline. In that issue,

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the authors – Di Leonardo, Williams and Woodstone, Eriksen, and La Cecla – present different perspectives, drawing on theory, ethnographies, personal experiences and evaluations on a movement that has had a wide resonance notably in European and American countries.

Nonetheless, excluding the sharp contribution by di Leonardo, the debate appears somehow pervaded by many approximations and naivetés. In the opening of her introduction, the section editor Stavroula Pipyrou wonders, after having asserted the subjective variability of appropriateness of sexual behaviours, whether questionable sexual conduct maybe understood within the social and historical context or it is to judge “universally” unacceptable; if wrongdoings should be addressed legally instead than through social media shaming; what if the indicted is a woman, and moreover a feminist (Pipyrou 2018: 415). The quite predictable reference to the need of contextualization in order to judge what is legitimate or not, counterpoised to the notion of universality, flattens a rich debate in anthropology on gender and rights (Merry 2006, 2009). Moreover, the insistence on the notion of context can prove particularly thorny when gender violence and intimacy are addressed, as it can foster a vicious circle of opacity and indecidibility in respect to violent acts (Gribaldo 2014; Gribaldo forthcoming).

What is most striking is the view of the movement #MeToo as problematic inasmuch it represents a mass of mainly women who intend to have justice by their own, avoiding legal devices and rules. This approach sounds particularly deceptive, *in primis* because few are the cases in which the perpetrator has been called on personally – the Weinstein case lent itself to highlight the everydayness and pervasiveness of a system – and therefore the wish to punish the perpetrator has rarely been the main focus of the action. Secondly – as di Leonardo’s contribution underlines – addressing the law is particularly difficult for crimes that relate to gender and sexual violence, intimate partner violence, harassment. Various contributions to the section share a questionable view that to speak in legal terms has a decisive, effective and symbolic value in the definition of victimhood. Moving into an institutional dimension is perceived as a milestone that acknowledges that violence has been perpetrated, that the testimony of this violence is truthful, and that women are political subjects. It is well known how the pressure on the victim of violence to speak about the factual events, about herself and her relationship with the perpetrator and to denounce him before the law has vast implications and effects of revictimization.

In one of the contributions, together with the invite not to essentialize sexual difference, men are invoked who refuse “to give up forever the idea that their deep physical accomplishment is based on an encounter with women’s great physical depth” (La Cecla 2018: 438), referring apparently to

the (hetero)complementarity of the sexes. On the one hand the issue of gender is denied based on the claim that the difference in power lies in vulnerability, not in gender (Williams, Woodston 2018: 428). On the other hand, it is reasserted through the image of the crooked paths of desire and the encounter between the man and a female “other”, which implies the inescapable mutual hurt (La Cecla 2018). The fact that desire is not a choice and it is not governable by imposed morality or a contract cannot erase the fact that it is deeply affected by political and cultural processes. Regarding the complex issue of consent, to attribute to a “certain line of radical feminism” (La Cecla 2018: 436) the criminalization of sexuality and desire is particularly misleading. The contemporary debate within feminism and its queer and transsexual components as well as within the BDSM communities is clearly advanced in questioning desire and the importance to respond to it beyond moralizing stances. These movements radically rethink the relation between identity and expected sexualities and go beyond sexuality as an extractive dual relation, towards more intersubjective modes of desire and intimacy (Demian 2018).

It is not my intention to propose an analytic review of the section’s contributions. What I would like to highlight is that the general approach of the section reveals a peculiar stance in the urge to “judge” the movement: whether it is significant, effective, dangerous; whether it is riddled with rigidity, fostering uncontrolled denigration, sexophobic and puritan anxiety, false consciousness masked by political correctness. Even from the very title (“#MeToo is little more than mob rule vs #MeToo is a legitimate form of social justice”) rather than an analysis that refers to anthropological literature on the issue, the section is aimed at taking a stance on the very opportunity to speak out and consequently on the emerging collective subject. The use of the word “mob” is telling: it refers to the gap with a political pre-existent stable collective subject, identifying an inarticulate sub-political mass (Thompson 2013), which is furthermore prone to shared hysteria.

In the last two decades, anthropology has acknowledged the relevance of the social and political dimension of violence and suffering, leading to unprecedented interest in the mutual implications of violence and the production of subjectivity, and to interrogation of the notion of everyday as the site of the ordinary, in which experience and agency are shaped (Kleinman, Das, Lock 1997; Das *et al.* 2000; Quaranta 2006; Biehl, Good, Kleinman 2007). The theorization of interpersonal and structural violence has allowed a shift towards the relationship between subjectivity and power, focusing on the production of the subject as gendered (Moore 2007; Ortner

2005). Nonetheless, the section addressing the #MeToo movement does not bring into the debate any reference to subjectivity, violence, social suffering. The tangential claim to the need to address structural violence instead results in little more than a displacement device.

I believe that this approach and the consequent indifference to recent anthropological and feminist reflections (to which Malinowski's and Žižek's ones are preferred by the editor), is due to the peculiarity represented by gender violence as everyday violence: it is not only invisible and normalized, as literature attests since decades, but it is also implicated in a shared knowledge that deeply questions the sphere of common experience and intimacy.

The underlying question is: who is entitled to speak about gender violence and how? Not the single woman, nor the many, nor the feminist movement: the shift from personal sufferance to social acknowledgment should pass through institutions. The single witnessing of suffering seems to tell very little about the phenomenon and apparently much more about the incapability of the alleged victim to understand ambivalences and complexities of life. Witnessing in the #MeToo movement is judged as biased because decontextualized: the entanglement with the everyday and the broader social relationships makes it not substantive. Either women do not know (or, worst, do not acknowledge) the difference between harassment and desire or they simply lack in innocence (Ticktin 2017). In fact, they are not expected to be "mere victims" as they may have "their own agendas" (Eriksen 2018: 433). The pervasiveness of gender violence is therefore a socially acknowledged fact (no one denies it), and at the same time it bears the features of non-recognition, its public attestation proves uncertain.

Behind the anthropological shortcuts on the act of speaking out gender violence and the need to express a judgement over analysis, we may glimpse a way to cut short the reflection on the theme because of the embarrassing complicity of the #MeToo movement with the exploitation of violence and morbid penetration in emotional intimacy by the media (Dei 2005: 18-19). Declared intimacy and pain achieves a suspicion of implausibility, unrestraint, inappropriateness: mass media and especially social media exemplify the fiction related to the request of recognition of victimhood, which is often gendered. Moreover, bearing witness to suffering and the act of listening has been identified as privileged objects of a contemporary social-political language that is dominated by an "ethos of compassion". The use of this language has seen a sudden upsurge in recent years (Fassin, Rechtman 2007). Subjects learn to express their own inner being in words and images through various mechanisms of governmentality that weave together state policies and psycho-pedagogical discourses; these mechanisms also entail exposure to popular and entertainment modes of expression that

revolve around what is essentially an accumulation of discourse about the self, discomfort and suffering, and the exploration of intimacy of the relationships. The context surrounding testimony of intimate violence victims is clearly affected by these peculiar contemporary modes that bring into play gender differences, the presentation and display of the self, proof of authenticity and appeals for compassion.

By underlying the “complexities” of the movement and trying to eschew political correctness, the *Hau* debate on #MeToo ends up endorsing a common view regarding testimony of gender violence victims, following what is a general bias about battered women. The notion of harassment is subject to interpretation, the alleged act of violence is supposed to require specific contextualization, the victim is supposed not to be entirely capable to read the whole complexity of the event, the very experience of violence is subject to verification, and suspects are raised about an excess of sensitivity and, at worst, a manipulatory intent. Women who use the tropes of authenticity by speaking out on line about past harassment are not mere victims nor strategic agents alone. The voices of women who experienced harassment that spread in the media as much as those of whom have suffered intimate partner violence and testify in institutional contexts, are filtered by similar devices that make them sound inappropriate.

Working as an anthropologist on domestic violence has given me the opportunity to deal with the stratification of subjects, actions, testimonies, and the modalities of judgement that are involved in the possibility to know and better understand the phenomenon of gender violence and the act of denouncing it. Through ethnography it is possible to grasp the diverse meanings speaking out achieves in different spheres, the authority’s efforts and biases, the difficulties women face in the act of denouncing, their hesitations. Diverse works on domestic violence present a complex frame in which victims and perpetrators are enmeshed in opaque relationship of love and possession (Ferraro 2006; Mills 2006). The fact of being abused exposes victims to the blame of not to being aware enough to identify an adequate partner. The interviews I had with abused women during a research in the city of Bologna, Italy<sup>2</sup>, let emerge how this blame often became self-blame: the regret not to have been smart enough enmeshes in stories of romance, quarrels, revenge, male violence and female forgiveness. The claim to live a life free from violence is entangled in a widely shared heteronormative imaginary. Women are often not extraneous to dynamics of seduction, courtship, dependency, romantic love which frames and sometimes forecast

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2. I refer to a research carried out in the frame of a European action-research project in 2010-2011. See Creazzo 2013 for results and author’s contributions (2013, 2014, forthcoming).

abuse. Moreover, media culture provides a constant overlap between the seriousness of the violent acts and their trivial context. Italy is a good example of the modalities through which femicides are represented by the media: recurring images of her and him, about how the couple was normal and happy, the irrelevant reasons behind the violence, the ambivalence of passionate love and the consequent risk of “blindness” (Giomi, Magaraggia 2017).

I wish to let emerge, through a focus on domestic violence, the specific dynamics that characterize the issue of speaking/not speaking out against violence by abused women whose acknowledgment might avoid analytical biases, such as those found in *Hau* forum.

Ambivalence and the fragile relation with testimony is often the mark of women’s stances on violence. This perceived lack of determination and clarity in the statements and stances of women who have suffered violence by their intimate partners is acknowledged: social workers and law enforcement express this frustration in posing the infamous Freudian and ultimately unanswered question, “what do women want?”. Victims of domestic violence appear either too difficult or largely uncooperative, “there is no way to tell what victims really want” (Mills 2006: 48). Ambivalence towards pressing charges is often taken by social workers as a lack of responsibility and trustworthiness. The possibility/urge to denounce and the acknowledgment of subjects’ credibility entail a view of the victim that requires action and expression, where agency is the pre-requisite of emancipation and awareness (Gribaldo 2013).

The questionable nature of this view has been widely discussed by anthropological debates, highlighting the underlying bias towards those who do not speak out. In fact, if the act of speaking out – reporting the incident and expressing one’s experience as the victim of violence – is widely commended as a political and progressive reference, the ways in which stories of violence can and must be made public is not limited to breaking the silence (Ribeiro Corossacz 2018). The idea that speaking clearly and pressing charges are the only means of expression creates its own violence. As Veena Das emphasizes, the boundaries between saying and showing when violence is expressed are to be protected from the imaginary of unveiling and unraveling:

It is often considered the task of historiography to break the silences that announce the zones of taboo. There is even something heroic in the image of empowering women to speak and to give voice to the voiceless. [...] when we use such imagery as breaking the silence, we may end by using our capacity to “unearth” hidden facts as a weapon (Das 2007: 57).

Gender violence is a social event that often finds its certification through single witnessing of personal experience; as such it is subject to interpretation. The *Hau* debate focuses on this capacity of interpretation: what have these women really experienced? Can it be defined as violence?

The well-known recent open letter by Deneuve and colleagues on the male right to harass<sup>3</sup> – mentioned quite uncritically in the introduction by Pipyrrou as a defensible stance among others – deploys several clues that are at least controversial for a critical thought as it substantially holds up a virulent declaration for heteronormative sexuality (Lebovici, Zapperi 2018). A passage of the open letter is particularly telling: “we are not reducible to our bodies. Our inner freedom is inviolable”. As recently noted by Kipnis, this is an exceptional reduction of freedom to the sacred locus of inner mind (Kipnis 2018: 262). I wish to underscore that this modality to identify violence starting from the inner perceptions discloses an unavoidable intractability, leading to the conclusion that if violence is not perceived or denounced, it does not exist. The subjective interpretation is crucial for the crimes that most of the times do not involve other witnesses beyond the victim and the perpetrator. The characteristic of the violent act is that, in order to be recognized, it has to be perceived as such by the person who suffers it. This is a debated issue in anthropological reflection and in the ethnographic knowledge on violence, what Veena Das calls “the complexity of the inner” (1998: 187).

### *An intimate social fact*

The relation between gender and violence in anthropological terms has identified the historical relationship of tension between feminism and anthropology as a privileged space to rethink the crisis of representation in social sciences and the issue of ethnographic knowledge in its political meaning. It is not a case that the analysis of the contrasting senses of rape among prostitutes in the UK (Day 1994) summarizes the conundrums of a conclusive definition: violence and sexuality are intertwined with gendered power relations. In this sense the “awkward relationship” between anthropology and feminism (Strathern 1987) lies in the double perspective of a theory of the historically produced dominance and the adhesion to a political feminist project that entails – on the one hand – a story and a definite perspective, and – on the other – the anthropological practice not to superimpose taken

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3. “Nous défendons une liberté d’importuner indispensable à la liberté sexuelle”, [www.le-monde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle\\_5239134\\_3232.html](http://www.le-monde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html). Accessed on 04/06/2019.



for granted notions, languages and experiences to ethnographic contexts. It is a critical perspective that is epistemological and ethical at once (Josephides 2015). What kind of political commitment is possible, in which way can the context be considered, how to render meaning, how to report the experience of violence inasmuch as

the objectification and disassociation involved in the politics of naming and revealing requires the imposition of absolute values on particular practices regardless of how these are understood by those involved (Gow, Harvey 1994: 5).

In the effort to go beyond the practice of modernist feminism to generalize from the experiences of western, white, heterosexual, middle-class women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Fusaschi 2011), the relationship between experience and identity has become the focus of a reflection on gender, violence, and dominance.

Domestic violence or intimate partner violence is a specific aspect of gender violence: its demonstration, as a social fact in sociology and as a single event that requires penal judgement in the legal field, can provide productive hints for the debate. Domestic violence is a non-orthodox subject for anthropology, an awkward and minor theme of anthropological research; too obvious and widespread to constitute a novel issue, it is the quintessential non-exotic subject. A number of studies in various environments – from the legal space and social services to everyday life – have turned the ethnographic gaze towards domestic violence (Hirsch 1998; Abraham 2000; Merry 2000; Trinch 2003; Plesset 2006; Hautzinger 2007; Lazarus-Black 2007; Wies, Haldane 2011, among others). However, the theme of intimate partner violence remains relatively marginal in the general disciplinary debate and in particular the anthropology of violence<sup>4</sup>.

The taking over of the issue of violence by anthropology involves a process that in the last decades of the past century has been connected to a profound political and epistemological rethinking within the discipline. The novel view regarding forms of violence has addressed the nature of wars, conflicts and mass violence. Attention to violence and its spread over time and space has been capable to analyze identity and religion issues and the spread of large-scale terrorism. Nonetheless, gender violence has had trouble being considered on equal footing in the framework of anthropology of violence. The overlap between violence and armed conflict and the focus on the collective dimension of suffering has prevented acknowledgement of

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4. In the *Companion on Moral Anthropology* edited by Fassin the entry on violence explicitly leaves out domestic and family violence due to the fact that it is little studied in anthropology (Hinton 2012: 501).

interpersonal gender relationship as a space for relevant anthropological reflection. Even analyses of crime in peace-time (Scheper-Hughes, Bourgois 2004) that highlighted the structural dimension of violence due to social and economic inequalities (Farmer 2004) have marginalized everyday interpersonal violence against women as a private sphere.

The tension between individual and society plays an important role in the anthropological difficulties in theorizing violence. The effort to identify ritual violence as inclusive devices (Héritier 1996: 30), apparently does not reduce the effects on the subject over whom violence is exerted. The risk lies in considering “a transcendent, universal, unembodied subject”, subsumed by collectivity, a subject that does not count (Beneduce 2008: 34, in note). The understanding of collective violence as a means to annihilate the others’ culture, a device to erase the very meaning of victims’ everyday life (Dei 2005), risks to overshadow the gendered and intimate dimension of violence, where women are viewed solely as the main custodians of collective identity.

Intimate partner violence in particular, because of the intercrossing of various fields – psychology, pedagogy, law, and social services – is rarely chosen for theorization within anthropology as disciplinary tradition. Furthermore, domestic violence remains largely absent from an emergent ethnography of militancy and civil movements because of its lack of epics, as it identifies anti-heroic subjects: not only are they largely women, but they are also victims. Given the impossibility of finding class and generational constants, or significant correlations with socio-cultural aspects, domestic violence emerges as a latent element that is found everywhere – albeit in different forms – as a quasi-natural dimension of gender relations. The theme of domestic violence appears too structural to circumscribe, it is both not political enough and at the same time too politicized, and thus relegated to feminism as a stand-alone ideology and theory: it represents one of the few cases in which there is a remainder between the relevance of the phenomenon and the theoretical responses provided by the social sciences (Hearn 2012).

Violence in intimate relations enters into a daily, domesticated, normal dynamics of gender relations, beyond the state of exceptionality. It is a violence of the most personal sort, one-on-one, often committed in the most private context (the home), by the most intimate person (the partner). Outside witnesses are sporadic at best and often, except children, no one else is familiar with the facts of the case. The agency, experience, and perception of the victim in intimate relationship with the perpetrator draw the boundaries of the phenomenon.

Following Graeber's reflections on violence and bureaucracy, we may consider intimate partner violence as one of those "dead zones of the imagination" (Graeber 2012), that eludes a critical analysis, not so much because of a lack of relevance, but rather because it represents somehow an excess of relevance, and deals with fields of common experience that do not lend themselves to a rich and meaningful narrative, therefore representing an authentic disruption of expectations. We may speak of a *violence degree zero*, as a much-debated issue and at the same time an "area of violent simplification" (*ibidem*: 106). It is a social phenomenon that is globally recognized as evident and as constitutively submersed: the potential for it to emerge is related to the possibility that victims have of recognizing it and conveying it socially.

An example of the issue to consider victim's subjectivity can be drawn from a renowned work by Aihwa Ong. In describing the processes that build gendered citizenship in America among refugees' communities, Ong (2003) addresses the complex relationship between feminist issues as empowerment and the response institutions give to domestic violence. Ong's reflection poignantly illustrates a white middle class feminist pastoral power, and the ways feminizing technologies shape minority subjectivity. Compassioned, patronizing and racist stances towards Cambodian American refugees, identified as backward and patriarchal, find their ways through social work: social workers seek to empower women and encourage them to leave abusing partners, classifying dominant subjects and victims of patriarchy. Ong identifies a female subject, defined through ethnic Cambodian customary family norms represented as of unchallenged male power, who manages strategically for her own ends the logics of US social assistance. If Ong's analysis is revelatory in calling attention to the pervert role of state logics that exacerbate family tensions, nevertheless the woman who denounces violence is sketched in terms of judgement. At play here is the truth of the couple relationship that lies in intimacy. The collapse of this sphere through the intervention of the social services creates ethnicized men victims of essentialized women recipient of rights. Nonetheless we may wonder: can the fact that men are punished for behaviour perceived to result from cultural patriarchalism, shift attention from the violence exerted and the fact that women may wish to escape from it? Can a "shrewd woman who expertly used social workers, the police, the court system, and the self-help group to turn things in her favor" against a disempowered desperate husband (Ong 2003: 164) be a recognizable victim of domestic violence? Can her attempt to use the law to "punish and discipline" her husband and sometimes even "operating in her own self-interest" at the "moral costs" to

her family and community (Ong 2003: 166) mean a wish not as much to dominate her husband, but to live a “different” intimacy, distant from menace and the constant threat of violence? What can be known about her choices, desires and strategies as much as ambivalent and disruptive they could appear? Moreover, can a victim be strategic?

Veena Das, one of the authors who have more deeply investigated the tangle of violence, intimacy and subjectivity, raises two points that highlight the difficulties in addressing domestic violence. The first one refers to the issue of intimacy and emotions: the very notion of intimacy is hardly compatible with a broad definition of violence that even includes harsh language. The second point is the difficulty in conceptually identifying the question of consent (Das 2008: 292-293). These themes are evidently interconnected.

Feminist critiques have debated the notion of subjectivity, revealing the liberal order as a historical product, and problematizing the exclusively negative conceptualization of liberty according to which agency carries liberal-style visions of autonomy, control and individual action, possession and commodification (Brown 2000). Feminist jurisprudence in its different versions not only considers the formal and *de facto* constraints that impede women’s access to a state of individual autonomy, it also calls into question the features of the concept of autonomy as they have become consolidated in liberal thought and its application. The issue of consent, experience and the dimension of corporeality are a privileged space for reflection on the gendered subject and the law. Sexual offences have a particular ability to reveal the problematics of law and a sort of “moral magic” that consent entails (Cowan 2007: 66). As it is well-known, law’s claim to truth in rape trials unavoidably frames an alternative: consent is to be presumed whenever the lack of it is not established, leaving out considerations such as the constraints inherent in various degrees of intimacy, submission and fear of violence. This is a vision that assumes a notion of free consent in a state of nature, not marked by historical and social dynamics, in which coercion and consent are general logical axioms that precede sexuality (Butler 1997b: 95). How can we consider an illocution that doesn’t respond to the requirement of being taken up by the interlocutor and therefore is not “fully” successful? As Fricker suggests,

in sexual contexts at least, a woman’s ‘No’ does not receive its required uptake from a man, with the result that her would-be illocution thereby fails to communicate — it fails even to *be* the illocutionary act it would have been (Fricker 2007: 140-141).

Nonetheless it remains more than noise, haunting both legal and anthropological reasoning.

The notion of intimacy is key to reflections on domestic violence and the production of subjectivity. Intimacy and violence in late modern societies are in an apparently contradictory relation; love and intimacy have been identified as sites of active trust, where the romantic relationship enables the subject to express him or herself: intimacy between partners is the epitome of modernity (Giddens 1992). In the familial abuse context, the occurrence of violence brings together love, trust, relationship, desire and sexuality as exemplary sites of the gendered true self. The space of intimacy presents a constant tension between ambivalence, ambiguity and the authentic production of the subject (Sehlikoglu, Zengin 2015). Thus, intimacy shares the duplicity and elusiveness that can be found in the notion of violence. It is a space of scarring experience and at the same time a field of irreducibly ambiguous meanings, in some cases even in the perceptions of the subjects involved. The intimacy of past or present couples implies a kind of complicity, sharing and affection, forms of trust and dependence that include material conditions of mutual care, the daily sharing of space, shared children, common plans and money.

The vision of an equation between intimacy, reciprocity, solidarity and trust has been called into question in feminist approaches that have destabilized the assumption of the domestic and reproductive sphere as a safe core. The questions of connection and relatedness, which imply intimacy by definition, have been identified by several scholars as historically associated with sociability, and laden with constitutively positive aspects (Edwards, Strathern 2000; Berlant 2008; Broch-Due, Ystanes 2016). In his analysis of the relationship between witchcraft, kinship and intimacy, Geschiere suggests that the phenomenon of witchcraft might represent the dark side of kinship. While questioning the tenacious vision of kinship and intimate relationships as indisputable spaces of reciprocity (Geschiere 2013: xviii), his perspective emphasizes that addressing intimacy in anthropology means “to follow what people themselves define as intimate – what is ‘inside’ [...] ‘what people mark as a separate domain’, privileged and “immune for general understanding” (*ibidem*: xx). The coalescence between the Latin meanings *intimus* and *vis* in the expression *intimus vis* as “effective violence” (*ibidem*: 26), shows that the notion of intimacy can be understood as an attribute of powerful operational violence. In this respect, violence may be viewed as the dark side of intimacy.

These reflections on intimacy and violence are useful for an investigation of the ways law and institutions deal with domestic violence and strive to verify it. This dimension of separation, or rather, of identification of a

personal space that isn't reducible to a shared discourse articulated in abstract terms marks the experience of intimate violence. This form of immunity, this resistance to knowledge and understanding is crucial to the anthropological analysis of domestic violence and to the ways it is treated by the institutions. The victim's intimacy and her ability to express it as a space in which to investigate, understand, give meaning to, detect and finally prove violence is decisive precisely in as far as it has to force the limits of the legibility of intimacy in order to become shared. This dark side of intimacy is at the same time *already known*, and somehow expected. Vulnerability and violence, and the knowledge and discourses about them, are gendered in their very essence.

### *Measuring and interpreting*

These theoretical conundrums in analysis are evident in the debates on the evaluation of the magnitude of domestic violence. The general lack of data from several countries is not simply due to the reluctance, idleness or incapacity to see the phenomenon as relevant by the state or the local institutions. In fact, several obstacles arise when investigating intimate partner violence using quantitative methods, such as the complexity of standardizing elements including the degree of gravity and the variables surrounding motive and intentionality. The available statistics are moreover often difficult to compare due to their use of different methods and indexes.

Strikingly, the very issue of intimacy challenges the definition of a violent act. The complication lies in how victims define violence, and in the influence of the context on the possibilities of talking about violence. Victimization surveys may present biases due to the multiple ways in which violence can be experienced and described: ethnographic research shows that, instead of abuse and victimization, violence may be read as normal acts of discipline, naturalized as relational gender dynamics. The data relating to recourse to the law are not significant, and are even paradoxical: the number of criminal charges and the extent to which violence reaches the surface can even be inversely proportional to its pervasiveness.

Merry and Coutin have recently analyzed the deadlock regarding the statistical measurement of social facts and data gathering to meet the need for responses by policy makers. They have emphasized that technologies of knowledge are not at all objective, but include cuts, omissions and selectivity in the definition of the phenomena and their relevance. Indexes and measuring systems condition the legibility of the phenomena they want to investigate, producing regimes of truth. Discrete and objective unities

inevitably obliterate the complexity of events and relations, leading to a flattening of experiences, underplaying of contradictions, erasing of some facts and highlighting of others. The introduction and problematization of variables such as nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class can endanger the possibility of indexing domestic violence:

Global surveys require categories that can travel across such cultural borders while remaining commensurable. This situation creates a paradox: The survey categories need to be translated into local terms to measure local ideas and behavior accurately but need to retain their universal meanings to make comparisons possible across these borders (Merry, Coutin 2014: 6).

The difficulties related to the definition of violence in intimate relations are echoed in the reading of the phenomenon itself: the interpretability of the character of domestic violence is such that there exist divergent positions on its scope and gravity. For instance, according to the sociological school or “family conflict studies”, empirical and comparative research indicates that violence in households is more often reciprocal and gender symmetrical. In this perspective, the gender difference stands in the harsher physical consequences of abuses for women, in a higher perception of violence by women, and in higher publicity for women victims (Costa *et al.* 2015). On the other hand, the “violence against women” approach insists on the unreliability of the surveys and research related to such a complex phenomenon, claiming that abused women under-report and normalize intimate violence, and that men assaulted by intimates are more likely to press charges and less willing to drop them. This approach underlines the necessity to distinguish between defensive and offensive injuries, as most women who use violence against their partner employ defensive violence in response to ongoing, systematic abuse (Kimmel 2002). Furthermore, if we accept that women and men suffer intimate partner violence in an identical manner, we must explain the bizarre fact that women who are victims of abuse have been able to construct, although with a lot of difficulty, spaces for discussion, refuges and help networks, whereas men show – apparently only in this area – a surprising incapacity to channel their own interests into the institutions. Does claiming that the perception of violence and its physical consequences are less harsh for men mean that men experience abuse, but do not “suffer” from it? In general, the Conflict Tactics Scale methodology, most used in family conflict studies, is marked by the biased assumption that violence is the result of an argument and not the effort to control and prevail, therefore erasing the circumstances and the consequences, the nature of the relationship, motivation and intention for violence, the gender difference in retrospection on estimation of violent acts. The obvious

fact that a woman as well might also be violent, and not *naturally* a victim, becomes an argument to maintain the perfect (although potential) symmetry. These claims of gender symmetry omit a crucial point: the identification and analysis of the dynamics of gender (Kimmel 2002: 1344).

Johnson has explained the differences between the two strands of scholarships, by identifying two distinct phenomena: on the one hand situational conflict and contestation within the couple, and acts of violence related to domination on the other end, what Johnson (1995) calls “intimate terrorism”. The latter implies tactics and strategies of power and control by one partner over the other, which presents specific dynamics that are not captured in the surveys. However, this is a particularly problematic definition, as it defines a relation in which a subject is at the other’s complete disposal, and thus the object of infinite and unlimited violence. Aren’t resistances, strategy and overthrow possible in every relation of power? Contestation and domination are very difficult to tackle separately, much as gender relations and power relations are.

It is therefore the question of the perception of violence – the under and over estimation of violence and of victimization by gender – which is problematic in the process of data gathering and in the identification of the social phenomenon: the statistical approach must be objective to the extent to which it requires “little interpretation by the victim” (Merry, Coutin 2014: 6; Merry 2016). The emotional consequences of violence – included in the indexes on violence against women – pose particular problems for its measurement. This raises questions discussed in feminist theorizations and in reflections on violence in anthropology: what is an abusive act? What is violence? To what extent is the victim legitimated or moved to talk about the experience?

The analysis of the institutions in charge of certifying abuse allows us to further investigate the potential of the exercise of violence: how can the threat, the fear of violence be considered within an apparatus of law created to verify such violence? In his work on asylum courts in the UK, Anthony Good remarks the rejection of the subjective element – such as fear – in favor of the objective situation – that one could reasonably be afraid of. The inclusion of the subjective dimension of witnesses into the picture would mean rewarding the cowards and penalizing the brave, and, furthermore, failing to consider the cultural components in the production and expression of feelings (2007: 53). In order to elicit violence and allow it to be identified as such, it is necessary to abandon subjective meaning in favor of common sense. Yet the meaning of violence for the abused subject is crucial. Violence and gender are implicated in forms of subjectivity: the subject is constructed



through dominant models of discourse and practice that produce and reproduce the notions of individuality and agency. To address the meaning given to violence by the victim does not mean to undervalue the acts of violence; on the contrary, it means understanding the peculiarity of intimate violence, the issue of dominance and power and the “countercurrents of subjectivity” (Ortner 2005: 45). Reflections on intimate violence must investigate the boundary between subject and power and the constitutive remainder between these two dimensions.

### *Conclusion*

The anthropological concern on the social use of the term “violence” produces a paradox: analyzing it doesn’t mean focusing only on the subject who exercises violence (whether institutional, collective or individual), but also on the one who suffers it or witnesses it, the one who speaks out. An anthropology of violence inevitably must address the “political relations between performer and witness” (Riches 1986: 3).

The politics of naming violence is decisive for anthropology and feminism. Indeed, the critique of abstract notions of subjectivity and the complex knot that links violence to subjection, witnessing, and agency is a crucial point in both feminist theory and anthropological work addressing gender issues (Spivak 1988; Butler 1997a; Das 2007). If in “having a voice” and “claiming one’s voice”, politics and epistemology converge, nonetheless the transparency of voice as an expression of subjective experience in the conflation of knowledge and consciousness is constantly put to the test by ethnography (Keane 2000: 271). The victim’s experience, the possibility for her to speak in her own voice, and the effectiveness of this speech as a speech act proves crucial in the testimony of gender violence. It is so difficult to define the evidence of the “fact” in cases of domestic violence (and sexual assault) because the fact itself is defined *a posteriori*, since its very existence depends on how it is interpreted as experience: was the act perceived as violence? Was there consent? Was there some kind of provocation? These questions in turn entail the notion of limit: up to what point?

In general, social services and the juridical system, in their claimed neutrality and thus self-referentiality, are revealed as institutions that do not recognize the particular nature of intimate partner violence. The institutional form has been identified, in Italy and elsewhere, as a space that is hardly capable of taking gender violence into consideration in all its complexity.

In his political and institutional ethnology of truth speaking, Foucault (2014) addresses the way subjects are actually implicated in forms of veridiction (truth telling, *le dire vrai*) and how these generate specific forms of subjection and subjectivation. Here, between power (normativity) and knowledge (intelligibility) Foucault focuses on the notion of the subject and particularly the ways subjects understand and form themselves as subjects of experiences. The emphasis on who labels a given act as violent, in a context in which the only witness is the victim, takes us to the center of reflections on talking about violence, denouncing it and making it evident, expressing one's own experience, and at the same time bringing it to the attention of the public and the institutions. Gender and marginal subjects (Bargu 2017) question indeed the very act of truth telling.

To resume the *Hau* debate, the witnessing of harassment that recurs marked by the hashtag #MeToo, is a trace of something that cannot easily find a space and time to be narrated at the "proper" moment. It comes out *ex post* and meets a doubtful audience. It is a story that is known and trivial and at the same time annoyingly complicated. As Gilmore illustrates in a recent work on women's witnessing and credibility: "gender animates scandal, in part, because critical and popular notions of truth telling are gendered" (Gilmore 2017: 82). More generally gender scandals shift swiftly towards indifference, in some cases public indignation and the assessment of irrelevance are woven together (Gribaldo, Zapperi 2012).

This knot constituted by claims, authenticity of truth telling, entanglements with the status of victim, and recurrence and triviality of the experience, makes the witnessing of gender violence something that tells about – rather than the violent acts themselves – the puzzles faced in considering violence when it has to do with intimacy, time, relationship, the everyday. Gender violence is a kind of violence with no witnesses, not only because women hesitate to testimony, or because there are often no other witnesses available, but also because witnesses tell something that is somewhat *already known*. It may be not by chance that the most convincing contribution to the *Hau* debate on #MeToo refers in the end to a popular Black American radio anchorwoman who reminds that beyond the well-known ambiguity between the simple gaze and harassment, there is something that *can* be recognized and acknowledged (di Leonardo 2018: 424). The supposed undecidability of harassment in common and shared experience is relative: it is known, maybe it should only be known *better*. Anthropology in the field of gender violence might provide a more articulated picture to elaborate contiguity through the analysis of issues which are not marked by otherness and the unexpected.

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**Alessandra GRIBALDO** obtained her PhD from the University of Siena in 2004 and has been teaching cultural anthropology at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, the University of Bologna, and the University of Roma Tre. Her main research interests are kinship, reproduction, visibility, violence, subjectivity, with a particular focus on gender. Her work has been published in *American Ethnologist*, *Population and Development Review*, *Studi Culturali*. She is author of *La natura scomposta*, 2005, *La produzione del genere*, 2010 (ed. with V. Ribeiro Corrossacz), *Lo schermo del potere*, 2012 (with G. Zapperi), *Boundaries within. Nation, Kinship and Identity among Migrants and Minorities*, 2017 (ed. with F. Decimo). She has been fellow of the Independent Social Research Foundation in 2016-2017, and was recently recruited as Associate Professor in the Department of Studi Umanistici at the University of Roma Tre.

[alessandragribaldo@gmail.com](mailto:alessandragribaldo@gmail.com)

