**In Public Spaces**

We all, at various moments, both give and receive the message that public space is dangerous to different degrees. Access to public space is controlled by fear and through the threat and the reality of assault in public—on transportation, in parks, in commercial spaces, and on the street. This reality activates different modes and levels of vigilance in everyone. For people who have experienced violence, the relationship to this vigilance is distorted, sometimes subtly and sometimes tragically.

Yet the dangers are also real. Public contexts—not only common spaces, but also schools, workplaces, and institutions—present many and varied encounters with violence. Many of us have experienced violence while negotiating these contexts, and the resulting anxieties resonate in complex ways long afterward. These are the anxieties we bring to learning, which is an activity that happens most often in public.

Consider a woman who was followed to work this morning by a stranger. It is the second time she has seen him, though, and it was uncanny the way he knew she would exit the parking garage by that particular door. Few use this exit, but she always does. By the time she gets to her desk, she is full of adrenalin and wobbly, but trying to talk herself out of it, scolding herself for being paranoid.

This morning there is a group training session for a new computer program, about which she is nervous because she has never felt very comfortable around computers and is afraid her younger colleagues will catch on much faster than she. At the training, her boss, who has been making jokes with sexual innuendo to her for the last few months, chooses her station to observe the screens, and is looking over her shoulder, hovering behind her. As the instructor gives a particularly confusing command, her boss brushes against her back, and she jumps, right as the instructor asks her if she needs clarification. She blushes. Everyone asks if she is okay.

*Yes, of course*, she says. *I just can’t learn computers.*

Though violence can and does happen in all public spaces, urban streets, workplaces, schools and other institutions, and public washrooms are sites where we can see its machinations very clearly.

**On urban streets**

Many people feel afraid on city streets, and don’t feel they own or can freely participate in public spaces. People who don’t feel like they belong there, or who aren’t fully present or grounded, might behave in ways (such as spacing out, extreme risk taking, or severe skittishness) that make them more vulnerable. Predators have excellent radar. Some of us may have had the tools we all need to be safe in public compromised by our experiences of violence. If our fear of the street makes us leave our bodies, we cannot notice our surroundings calmly. Effective vigilance looks like relaxed alertness. Such awareness is possible when we are embodied, and so is the wherewithal to think on one’s feet when intimidated or threatened.

Violence in this context has a disproportionate impact on women, and can take the form of rape, physical assault, stalking or harassment.

Gays and lesbians, queer and Trans people, Muslim people, racialized people, immigrants, homeless and underhoused people, people with intellectual and physical disabilities, and many others are all subject to random hate-based attacks and the constant fear of these attacks. Many sex workers have the streets as their workplace, and it can be a particularly violent one. Threats on the street may look and feel different depending on past experiences, and as with everything, may affect learning. For example, someone attending a class in a building at the corner on which she used to work, or still works, might have a disturbing or problematic experience getting there.

The streets are indeed mean. Practices such as forced prostitution, trafficking of women and children for sex trades, and sex tourism also take place on our streets, within our borders, and online. All this is not even to discuss how much more vulnerable to violence are the people who live and sleep on the streets, under bridges, and in public parks.

**In workplaces**

Work environments are often fraught with power imbalances, providing conducive settings for threatening and coercive dynamics. The #metoo moment has opened the discussion on one of the most pervasive. An environment of sexual harassment in the workplace can be caused by sexual assault in forms from unwanted touching to rape, pressure to have sex, or a poisoned atmosphere due to sexist jokes or comments. These behaviours, as with all forms of sexual discrimination, affect women more than men, and are about power and control more than sex.

Many countries have laws against sexual harassment, and many unions, corporations and organizations have their own harassment policies. However, due to the power dynamics of the workplace, the economic inequality of women in society, and biased or ineffective reporting and complaints procedures, few take formal action.

The effects of all kinds of harassment in the workplace and the risks involved in reporting are multiplied for those who experience other forms of oppression based on race, language, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation or age, or who have a personal history of violence and abuse. Racism, homo- and Transphobia, ableism, and ageism are forms of violence that can affect all individuals in the workplace.

**In schools**

Schools have historically been, and continue to be, the sites of abuse against children, whether at the hands of teachers, administrators or other students. The institutional power represented by schools, and the churches/states that run them, dwarfs the agency of a child.

Bullying among students can take the form of physical abuse, verbal abuse or emotional abuse, in person or online. Bullying, broadly defined, is when children discriminate against each other based on race, class or socio-economic status, sexuality, gender, ability, size or looks. It is a clear example of how the powerless participate in maintaining larger structures of power and inequality. Institutional violence is perpetrated by schools through racist and other oppressive policies. An example is the ‘Safe Schools Act” in Ontario, Canada. Rooted in racist perceptions of young black men as violent, this Act targeted racialized youth, further disadvantaging them in the school system. Schools also empower abusive teachers with unsupervised access to students.

The ways disability is stigmatized provides one of the starkest illustrations of violence perpetrated by and in schools. The failure of educational institutions to respond to students with disabilities has at times been a profound one, and a moral one.

Consider a person who has cerebral palsy and speaks with difficulty who finds that she is assumed not to be too bright at school and is put in the remedial class. Now she is not getting the chance to learn at an appropriate level, and people often don’t bother to wait long enough to let her finish her sentences or try to understand her. She is laughed at by classmates and on the street. These violences build layer upon layer and impact her sense of self and future possibilities. Her school environment has colluded beautifully with all this, as it has historically colluded with the dehumanization of all that is “other,” of those with intellectual and learning disabilities, and all manner of cognitive and physical differences.

Institutions are also often the tools used by ongoing projects of colonialism and cultural genocide. A Canadian example is the vicious legacy of residential schools visited upon Indigenous communities. Over the 19th and well into the 20th century, about 150 000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were removed from their communities and forced to live at church-run, government-funded schools, the sites of an aggressive assimilation policy aimed at eradicating traditional languages, teachings and ways. The intersection of race and gender in these projects are evident in this description and analysis by Marlene Starr, a survivor of the residential school system:

My memories of life in residential school are sporadic, as are my memories of my life as a child in general. I remember two incidents of severe child abuse; one in which I experienced abuse, the other in which a classmate was the victim. She was an adolescent girl who was humiliated in the worst possible fashion. Sister Theresa, a formidable woman, forced her to stand in full view of the rest of us girls for hours with her blood stained panties over her head. While she stood there, we treated her as if she were invisible. We saw it as a way of maintaining the dignity of the victim, whereas in truth we were validating the unjust treatment by simply accepting it. I would dearly love to have memories of abuse blotted from my mind, but they remain there, firmly etched. (Starr, 2004: viii)

Violence experienced at or perpetrated by a school can cause people to associate learning with violence. Survivors of school-based violence often experience difficulty learning, particularly in a formal classroom.

**Institutions**

Beyond schools, violence also occurs in public institutions such as hospitals, mental health institutions, seniors’ homes and prisons. People in these institutions are already considered by society to be weak, unwell or criminal and are otherwise devalued, and so have few defences.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities have routinely been institutionalised through the ages. Some of these environments have become infamous for the abuse they wrought, including the practice of forced abortion and/or sterilisation of females.

Such grim examples aside, bureaucracies in general can be very disempowering. Public institutions that exist to “help” people often silence and coerce us instead. Children’s Aid Societies, courts, social assistance programmes and food banks can act as steamrollers over the agency of the “client.” Not following a rule of which you were unaware, or not signing a form you did not receive or could not read, can result in the denial of anything from needed benefits to the opportunity to raise your own child. Due process is often not followed to inform people of their rights, and redressing bureaucratic injustices can be prohibitively complex, costly and humiliating.

But even those of us who know how to—and agree to—comply with the system are violated by institutions in insidious ways. Another phenomenon that could jeopardize our dignity is being forced to make a compelling *story* out of our experiences. In order to prove ourselves eligible for this or that bit of assistance or benefit or program, not only must we continually explain our circumstances to strangers, but we also must repackage these circumstances as stories that fit the given criteria. Presenting ourselves as members of the requisite category (say, in need of subsidized housing) also implies complying with all its rules, which can involve surveillance. But the gravest danger is that our stories are hijacked and reframed into stereotypes, and we become the “Welfare Mom” or the “Poster Child” for whatever initiative, for which we are expected to express endless gratitude.

**Washrooms**

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The uncertainty of learning new things can make anyone feel vulnerable. For people who have experienced violence, feeling vulnerable can be extremely unsettling, and may make learning seem almost impossible.

Another equally universal moment of vulnerability happens every time we have to use the washroom. We don’t have a lot of time to spare in these moments, moments we don’t really want to draw attention to – and we’re definitely physically defenceless when we are relieving ourselves.  The washrooms of public spaces like schools, restaurants and public transportation may feel particularly scary.

For Trans and non-binary people, for gender outlaws of all kinds, the washroom can be a site of discrimination, of shaming and threatening, of being told we are wrong in our way of presenting ourselves in the world. A colleague in this work was once a 5-year-old tomboy who asked her male teacher if she could go to the washroom during quiet reading time; his response: “Are you going to wear a dress tomorrow?” made her wonder, must she conform if she is to be sure of being allowed to use the washroom when she needs to?

If tough times with washrooms take place in school, how do we return to learning, trust our own knowledge, sit with other students, and listen to our instructor when we are not sure who will reject us next, when we cannot even calmly relieve ourselves without fear? Chronic “holding it” can create long-term health problems; this along with having our identities denied or ignored is blatant violence.