

The Big Words and Our Work: Peace, Women, and the Everyday

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The Big Words and Our Work: Peace, Women, and the Everyday

Tani Barlow

ne of the questions before us is how to knit the big words—like peace, human security, gender, and justice—into the routines of everyday life. How is it possible to put these words around a quotidian experience so indentured to violence, war, and predatory capitalism and to the brutal commodity life and the normalization of human suffering that accompany them? The deceptively simple question of gender and everyday life and the project of examining how gender can be used as a category of analysis in peace work poses, for me at least, the general problem of how these words,

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big words, can be renewed. If my own students cannot grasp in an affirmative way what the word "justice" might mean outside the parameters of a degraded political discourse in the United States, how can I think about contributing to a larger effort? If I myself am lulled into a soporific state by fatuous safety rituals imposed during our state of emergency, then how can I participate in linking words to alternative and progressive renewed content? Where is the outside of this war-debased everyday life in the place that I live? In response to my own rhetorical questions, I argue that in fact the PeaceWomen project of gathering and disseminating stories about the one thousand worthy women of peace renews the words, reformatting those stories with unexpected content.¹

Let me begin by saying why I think the project of peace, women, and the everyday is so challenging analytically. Since our aim is to engage academically with existing debates in peace studies and feminist studies, we confront a contradiction. These forms of scholarship are usually aligned with national traditions, but global and regional progressive projects require logics beyond national forms. For instance, among other feminists in the United States, Judith Butler understands the war against Iraq waged by the George W. Bush administration as a feminist question. She expands Giorgio Agamben's thesis of the state of emergency to consider a problem Butler calls "indefinite detention" (2004). The illegal detention of socalled enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba has compromised the rights of all citizens in the United States, she argues. Since a death cannot be publicly mourned unless the dead is a subject (i.e., is not abject and illegible under conditions of sexed subjectivity, an immigrant, an enemy combatant, or a terrorist), declaring under law a class of nonsubjects (such as "detainees") threatens the civil standing of everyone else. Not only do these detentions violate the law of universal civil rights guaranteed

This article draws on the larger PeaceWomen Project as a form of praxis and on the book 1000 PeaceWomen across the Globe (1000 Women 2005). The PeaceWomen Web site describes the organization: "In 2005, one thousand women from 150 countries were collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of hundreds of thousands other female peace activists. The main objective of the initiative from Switzerland was to give value to the courageous, often dangerous, and mostly invisible work of women for human security and justice by giving them appropriate recognition. Unfortunately, the Nobel Peace Prize was not awarded to the women, but the worldwide campaign made their peace-building work more visible and helps to transport their knowledge into important peace negotiations" (http://www.1000peacewomen.org/eng/ueberuns_geschichte.php). The original group of activists has published translations of the original English publication of 1000 PeaceWomen across the Globe in Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish. Local and regional collectivities have published focus books that elaborate the work of the PeaceWomen from their area. These include titles on Brazilian, Arab, and Chinese PeaceWomen.

to all U.S. citizens and the U.S.-backed doctrine of universal and natural human rights of all persons regardless of their citizenship, but the sovereign suspends everyone's rights by declaring that he is legally entitled to suspend the rights of some. Through the exception—for example, the indefinite detention of some—the sovereign declares himself the decisive power, beyond the state's legal superstructure. The state's administrative enforcement power is rerouted to enforce not the law but the exception. Thus, the declarative categories of "enemy combatant," "war on terror," "indefinite detention," "homosexual," "woman," and so on and the policy of unending war against multiple enemies shifts the U.S. state apparatus away from a politics of recognition—that is, civil rights—to the disenfranchisement of everyone.

Grateful as I am to Butler for stepping forward courageously to combat this seizure of power in the United States at a time when it was actually dangerous to do so, we cannot get to a redefinition of peace and human security this way.² Butler writes as a patriot. She is a human rights activist whose primary commitment is to a Habermasian goal of national civil society and rule of law, of extending the rights of personhood and the claim of legal legibility to all legitimate claimants. While I do not dispute the necessity of the rule of law, the question of which deaths register as deaths worth mourning is for her a matter of who can be recognized as a citizen—or perhaps more fairly, whose personhood is guaranteed under the rule of international human rights law. If Butler were to investigate the unboundaried quality of human rights law, she would be led, I believe, to the problem of the regulatory function that the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions play in stabilizing liberalizing capital. Bretton Woods institutions grant civil rights in exchange for cultures of capital that have no exterior. Butler would (in my imagination, at least) be confronted with how these discourses of first-world civilization minimize and regulate human suffering in arenas of high conflict such as Colombia, Kashmir, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Iraq.³ She might even come

² It is a symptom of the everyday naturalization of the war on terror that today we can freely criticize the Bush wars. Everyone is listening, and no one is hearing.

³ "The United States and Great Britain, as the principal authors of the current war, have been urged by rights activists to shoulder responsibility for the war's refugees—a responsibility they have so far evaded. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the principal international body for refugee issues, succeeded in finding new homes for just 404 refugees in the first nine months of 2006 and it hopes to resettle 20,000 by the end of 2007. That would be 1 percent of the current total. The agency's fund-raising mark for 2007 is \$60 million—for humanitarian relief rather than resettlement—of which it has so far raised only half. As with the war itself, the situation of the war's refugees is at once dire

face to face with the devastation wrought by the 1997 Asia Finance Crisis at the instigation of the same institutions that circulate and amend (see Song 2006, 2009), through the process of consultation with scholars like ourselves, these vital civilization discourses. The two sides of the coin are economic liberalization through the World Bank and the proposed terms of liberation, such as "gender," "peace," and "human security." But Butler did not investigate the double bind of international feminism.

Despite the fact that the terms "gender" and "women" are part of the neoliberal development agenda, an important antidote is the growing effort in Asia to instrumentalize the safeguards built into the global governance ideologies of "region," "gender," and "women," to retool these terms by attaching them to social movements for political redress, as with the politics surrounding sexual slavery. Since the 1990s the instruments developed by global governance institutions, such as the report on the 1998 rapes of Chinese-Indonesian women submitted by UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and current PeaceWoman, lawyer Radhika Coomaraswamy (UNCHR 1999), and Yayori Matsui's pan-Asia Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery staged in Tokyo in 2000, have signaled that, within Asia, sexual violence would be treated with utmost gravity and as an element of the general ideology of global governance (Matsui 2001, 2002). Moreover, the effort to instrumentalize global governance terms outside global governance institutions is cumulative. Violence against Women in War-Network, Japan (VAWW-Net Japan 2000), which also originally proposed the tribunal, interpreted the 1998 Jakarta event in the context of rape and the genocide policy of Serbs in Bosnia.⁴ Linking genocide in Europe to Indonesian rape murders, Matsui's VAWW-Net vested its work in an emerging body of extranational, or international, people's law.

In a move that has important implications for our present purposes, VAWW-Net stressed that the "authority for this Tribunal comes not from a state or intergovernmental organisation but from the peoples of the Asia-Pacific region, and indeed, the peoples of the world to whom Japan

and full of dangers for the region and the world—and no one seems to know how to resolve it" (Rosen 2007).

⁴ In May 1998, there were a series of riots in Jakarta in which ethnic Chinese women were raped, tortured, and murdered (see *ColorQWorld* 1998). VAWW-Net Japan was eventually supported by women's groups in six Asian countries subjected to Japanese military rule in World War II. For an account of the tribunal (Le Tribunal de Tokyo et les femmes de réconfort/Tokyo Tribunal and comfort women), see VAWW-Net Japan (2000).

owes a duty under international law to render account."5 That the organizers of the tribunal believed they were stepping "into the lacuna left by states" but not "purport[ing] to replace their role" and did not accept the "intergovernmental" or global governance matrix as a worthy substitute reinforces several points. First, their statement appeals to the peoples of Asia and the world to publicly acknowledge and mourn the dead unjustly slaughtered in a war initiated by a sovereign state government. (Could such a tribunal judge the slaughter of the innocents in Iraq?) Second, the Asian framework of the VAWW-Net Tribunal and its relation to the UN matrix represented a general shift in power within the nongovernmental organization (NGO) world itself. As economist and NGO leader Gita Sen notes, by the time of the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), "globalization had become part of everyone's vocabulary. No longer was it a situation where the North worries about gender equality and the South about development" (in Thom 2000, 32). Third, the statement acknowledges that, like the bureaucratic and geopolitical institutions of the United Nations from which it drew much of its rhetoric and a sense of its jurisdiction, VAWW-Net saw its own efforts as an effect of reregionalizing forces, an agent of them, and, most importantly, an alternative to them. The tribunal's claim to speak for the peoples of Asia rested on the regulatory discourse of international agencies, but it was not constrained by that fact. Terms legislated in the NGO world cannot be used under its purview exclusively or solely at its pleasure. Matsui's project simply exceeded the boundaries of the NGO-United Nations matrix.

Does the 1000 PeaceWomen project stand adjacent to and in agonistic relation to the global governance matrix, as VAWW-Net did? It, too, raises the possibilities and deficiencies of the UN matrix as both a disabling and enabling platform. Logically it is neither possible nor advantageous to distinguish sharply between national and international domains of gender scholarship, or even between local and global. Analogously, I see no virtue in drawing an artificial distinction between scholarship fully vested within global governance rhetoric and scholarship positioned outside of that regime. Asia—a real enough social, economic region knit, as Wang Hui's recent (2007) work has conclusively demonstrated, from a variety of ongoing political strains—is a useful analytic framework in international gender scholarship. That is not because Asia as such possesses heuristic stability or

⁵ The source for these generalizations is a UN document titled "The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery," http://www1.jca.apc.org/vaww-net-japan/english/womenstribunal2000/Judgement.pdf, 2.

political or economic integrity (obviously it does not). Rather, it is because Asia as a qualifier in scholarship confirms the centrality of sexual difference and gender politics in international justice and social movements.

The one thousand biographies that make up the PeaceWomen project are of women—widows, pious Muslims, creative artists, Catholic nuns, social gospel advocates, communists, ex-communists, anticommunists, social democrats, communitarians, prostitutes, former slaves—who by and large pursue immediate and everyday justice claims either in the absence of fixed organizational protocols or in agonistic relation to institutionalized global governance. For instance, police officer Hua Meiqing, who is working to abolish domestic violence at her job with the Qingdao Public Security Bureau, came to peace work by reinventing a mission for herself outside her strict job definition (1000 Women 2005, 205-6). Shahjahan Apa established service centers (without apparent UN consultations) to prevent dowry murder after her daughter suffered that fate (1000 Women 2005, 173-74). Biro Bala Rava, an Assamite whose mentally disturbed son had stood accused of being a witch, built a congregation devoted to ending "feudal attitudes" about witchcraft (1000 Women 2005, 227). Andrea Smith, a Western Band Cherokee woman, founded INCITE! Women of Color against Violence out of frustration with mainstream social services in the United States and with local NGOs (1000 Women 2005, 243-44). Most of the PeaceWomen who were selected for inclusion in the book (and another one thousand potential candidates who were not selected) do not hold high official positions in global governance institutions; some, in fact, had no prior knowledge that such institutions even existed. Yet global governance institutions and civility discourses were crucial to the general project. Its organizers solicited the recognition of the Nobel Committee and sought funding, access, and other forms of cultural capital from a powerful and far-away institutional order. But in case after case the book presents PeaceWomen as found objects. Organizers found them already engaged in work that organizers determined, through their processes of selection, would exemplify the everyday labor of peace work.

The relation of these found PeaceWomen to the organizational logics of global governance is a politics of recognition. Many never sought recognition; the project organizers sought them out. The organizers and book editors desired to show how diverse and abundant women's work for peace is, whether the gaze is fixed on it or not. The 1000 PeaceWomen project employed the Nobel Committee as a speculum, which recast a collectivity of everyday peaceful women into a political project. The rhetorical power of 1000 PeaceWomen across the Globe comes in part from its

alignment with powers that grant recognition. "Peace," "human security," "women," and "gender" have official definitions in global governance statutes. Global governance statutes are the law in that respect. Some of the biographies are stories about how a woman sought global governance recognition for her project. Chadian PeaceWoman Achta Djibrine Sy took poor women to NGO offices to convince them that they did not require "recognition papers" from the government to value themselves (1000 Women 2005, 195). But the PeaceWomen project used the complex politics of recognition instrumentally. While global governance fixes global capitalism, PeaceWomen glamorizes the work of women who show what is possible in a capillary sense outside of these fixed boundaries. In the words of the president of the Association of 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005, "Convinced that mainstream international politics alone does not bring about peace, these women . . . opted for a new perspective and created new paths" (Vermot-Mangold 2005). While many of these women come from the Left and stand in agonistic relation to official governance words like "human security" or "gender," theirs is a relation of the part to the whole based not on similitude but on difference.

Each of the one thousand individuals becomes an instance, a case or example of the general, political subject—PeaceWoman—whose work is to make peace. Politically, PeaceWomen work to "end wars and violence based on insatiable greed which have turned dignified, rooted, caring human beings into paupers, refugees, migrants, selfish, individualistic, terrorists, criminals; violence which is making millions hungry, sick, insecure" (Bhasin 2005). In line with their effort to create multiplicity in the place of singularities, the organizers offer several definitions of peace in a sequence of introductory book chapters. The most simple is "human security and dignity" (Menz 2005). But peace is also defined as a name for "diversity, dialogue, justice, democracy, transparency, human rights, caring, nurturing, love" (Bhasin 2005). A third definition sees peace in transitive terms as the vocation of "women [who] act without heed for their own safety [and] . . . assume responsibility for their village, their region, their country, for other human beings" (Vermot-Mangold 2005). Among their definitions of peace, the editors also included the statement of Peace-Woman Zazi Sadou, who argues: "Peace must become the focal issue in all international relations talks. It has become clear that we need to reconsider the significance of peace in our lives and to advocate social justice. To get to that point, it is essential to bolster and help women worldwide, especially those in the South, to rise to their duties. We have to strive for women to be represented in governments and decision-making spheres

so that their needs are vocalized in official platforms" (1000 Women 2005, 232).

Left wide open is the important question of how to characterize PeaceWomen as a collective subject in a historical sense. Is the feminine subject of PeaceWomen rooted in a discourse of submerged international cooperation or in the older communist discourse of friendship or in the United Nations' FWCW rhetoric of global sisterhood? What made these individuals PeaceWomen before the invention of the term? The great power of the 1000 PeaceWomen formula lies in its claim that the work of women precedes the categorical understanding of women's solidarity. This claim is a useful departure from development discourse. It enables us to resituate questions about what gender justice and social justice are. These are not institutional problems to be instigated or operationalized à la the Ford Foundation-funded "autonomous" women's movements (Wesoky 2002). Rather, they are claims for justice and the desire for an ordinary peaceful life whose history includes older, diffuse, currently reviled Left politics. After all, Chen Yue and her little brother, who witnessed a robbery and were critically injured during their efforts to apprehend the criminal, were acting as much on socialist community ethics as they were acting in defense of peace (1000 Women 2005, 185). Development, in other words, is not the only logic in town. So an invitation that this project extends is to help differentiate intellectually what kind of rapprochement with neoliberal governmentality is unavoidable and where these developmentalist goals launched in the name of women can simply be disregarded.

In this sense, the 1000 PeaceWomen project confronts scholars directly with the question of how the activist is related to the programmatic goals of the larger political undertaking. The effort to expand on the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize project may wish to enter the debate about the relation of generality and case. The political vision of womanhood exists before the law in both senses of the term. Women exist before the law is articulated as law, and they bend before it. What is raised as we enter into this debate concerns the law, not the instance. It asks what, beyond the "law" of development discourse and the case study—or country studies, to use UN lingo—of the good women of the South can be stipulated as universally true. For instance, in 2001 Kofi Annan wrote: "We must . . . broaden our view of what is meant by peace and security. Peace means much more than the absence of war. Human security can no longer be understood in purely military terms. Rather it must encompass economic

development, social justice, environmental protection, democratization, disarmament, and respect for human rights and the rule of law."

In 2003, the PeaceWomen project sought to instantiate this law. It made visible a set of women peacemakers who would illustrate why the law is applicable and yet why it is not prior to the existing, ongoing work of peace. It sought, in other words, to implement the law on the basis of a claim that that law had already fulfilled and anticipated the spirit of the law of "mainstream international politics" and consequently shows what is above, beside, and beyond the law's shortcomings. This is a scholarly problem concerned with the appearance of the law of human security, its definition, and its status as an official declaration. In this regard, PeaceWomen illustrates how the work of everyday politics lies adjacent to, and in agonistic relation to, the aims of the mainstream global governance world. Global governance terms and words are indispensable for mainstream NGO work, as they are, no doubt, for ours as scholars. This is so in a political sense, since the existence of the PeaceWomen publication forms a platform that will enable and disable certain kinds of collaborative work. But it is also true in a philosophical sense. The project "is linked to the law that it relates, appearing, in so doing, before that law, which appears before it" (Derrida 1992, 191). For Jacques Derrida, the relation of the law and its case concerns the generic, mutually imbricated quality of literature in relation to the law and to the universal contentions of philosophy.7 Ours is a different project. And yet, it is the same.

If the relation of PeaceWomen to the laws of development is one of adjacency and agonistic indebtedness, then what specifically are the PeaceWomen doing that makes them different from various official sub-

⁶ This quotation is taken from Kofi Annan, "Towards a Culture of Peace," which was formerly posted on the UNESCO Web site but is no longer available.

⁷ Also see the summary of this point in "An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in which Derrida notes: "The first time I addressed the question of the law in a lecture on Kafka's 'Before the Law,' I made a distinction between the law in general and the law in the strict sense or legal justice—in French, *le droit* and *la loi*. In French when you speak of the law (*la loi*), you do not necessarily refer to legal issues. . . What we see in Western democracy today is the increasing importance of the legal authority on politics—sometimes in an abusive fashion, as is the case in Italy, France, and in this country too. We have a feeling that today the independence of justice is the crucial test for democracy. So a philosopher interested in ethics and/or politics must come back to the question of the law. With democracy becoming truly global, philosophers must be, can't escape, really, looking at law and justice" (Derrida 1998). I am not denying that other laws exist. Derrida's point is not exclusively about juridical law. However, the United Nations casts its language in a process that mirrors legal structures, and this is why I cast the discussion as I do.

jects like "women in Asia" or "women working to support themselves," as in the vaunted microlending schemes of the Grameen Bank? There is evidence scattered throughout these heterogeneous stories suggesting that the so-called PeaceWomen seek not "development" but a coming community, where peace insures the ability to live as social beings in commonality and to properly mourn the dead. In this regard, the project helps to introject feminist concerns into the current debates over whether there is a historical possibility of a human "being in common" that is not rooted in the idea of humanity (Nancy 1990, 160). This possibility is, Jean-Luc Nancy argues, a newly finite history, a history where being in common "does not mean that several individuals possess some common nature in spite of their differences, but rather that they partake only of their otherness" (160). And, of course, it means our source of commonality is rooted in our fragility and proximity to death. It is, as Agamben suggests, a commonality that rests on our new inability to separate the homo sacer, the bare life that can be destroyed without being sacrificed, from the so-called moral sacrifice, which can be mourned (Norris 2005, 13).

So a question in feminism that should be introjected into general debates now is how, in the coming community of peace, legitimate public mourning rituals are affirmed and how the dead are seen. This is partly the question of recognition, again. In framing the question of who is legitimately mourned, Butler, for instance, is supposing that only subjects are buried; the abject, the enemy, the anonymous are destroyed without memorials. And, as her discussions of Antigone have made clear, the sacrifice of oneself to insure proper mourning of another is a project fraught with danger for female subjects. We hear something like this refrain throughout 1000 PeaceWomen across the Globe, as in the story of Mary Kayitesi Blewitt:

The genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994 shaped the mission and destiny of Mary Kayitesi Blewitt. The turbulence that had driven her parents into the camp came back to haunt her. Most of her family members were butchered. Grief and trauma engulfed the survivors. Few were lucky to give a decent burial to their loved ones.

Being a Tutsi in Rwanda during the 1959 revolution and later in 1994 was considered a curse. Insecurity and fear dominated their lives. At the time of Mary's birth, her parents were in Burundi as refugees. Her father died when she was five. Her mother remarried, but her stepfather later died, leaving her to fend for eight children. The family then moved to Uganda. In 1986, Mary went to the UK

to study at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Life was beginning to look normal until suddenly in 1994 when the genocide began. A million lives were lost in 100 days; 50 of the victims were those of her immediate family.

Mary's stepfather had been a doctor. From him she learned the great value of support and providing relief where and when one can. So when the killing stopped, she went to Rwanda to bury her family and try to help. (1000 Women 2005, 99)

What if we asked current debates on *homo sacer* and the coming community what is to be done about the woman survivor of genocide? How does her work as a PeaceWoman illustrate the political future in a finite history where being in common is assured?

More concretely, what did Mary Kayitesi Blewitt do to bury her family? How did she find the remains? Did she mark the grave sites? Is there a permanent marker that tells their story and seeks to inoculate against the outbreak of another genocide? How is it phrased? It is suggested in this testimony that Ms. Blewitt's rituals of mourning led her directly to the effort to provide relief, which eventually led her to set up a survivors' fund called Surf that offers social services through existing networks like Associations des Veuves du Genocide, Solace Ministries, and Ibaka. What is this relationship of service and mourning? In the work of finding and memorializing the death of her family, this woman seems oblivious to "development," or even perhaps suspicious of any development that would reconsolidate the "insatiable greed" that led to the genocide in the first instance. She is most keenly concerned with how to mourn her family's deaths appropriately. Through her example we are allowed to reconsider how a feminist might intervene in debates over a mourning that interdicts revenge and therefore the restoration of patriarchalism over the corpses of the unjustly killed.8

The debates on mourning are linked to a second and related debate in feminist theory about community. How, to use Luce Irigaray (1985) as our example, can G. W. F. Hegel's "eternal irony of community" (that women can never belong because we are the ground for the continuous production of the fraternal order of the community) be undone? How, to borrow the feminist politics that Derrida's final (1997) book on the category and historiography of friendship raised, can future women qualify as a case in the general laws of friendship? And should there be no place called "woman" in Agamben's coming community, what sort of apatriarchal words and spaces could be carved out? Here, more than other places in feminist debate

⁸ A discussion of how mourning can lead to fascism appears in Haver (1996).

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right now, I think the 1000 PeaceWomen project has something to say. If the subject of the enunciation is PeaceWoman and not friend or comrade or sister, then is this project a threshold over which we can also step into the possibility of a community rooted not in the irony that women's blood will be spilled to protect the bodies of patriarchs à la Irigaray (1985) but in something else?

If so, perhaps María Eugenia Zabala viuda de Polo is an exemplar of the coming community as well as being one of 1,000 PeaceWomen. When the war in Colombia destroyed her familiar life, María Zabala began, according to the story, "the difficult task of surviving":

"There was no time for crying for the dead, no time for grief, for mourning, for anything like that" [Zabala explains]. She left the countryside, taking on her new identity as a widow, a displaced person and the head of a family. In the city, the cruel urban environment and the indifference of the human swarm around her sparked off the beginning of her work campaigning for the rights of the displaced women and victims of the Colombian political war. "In those neighborhoods, I got to know women and families that had fled from their original homes. Seeing people in need, I turned my home into a refuge for all of them. I also raised the flag and began to knock on doors."

María Eugenia Zabala organized, participated in, and invented different initiatives to aid the cause of the displaced population. She transmitted her love of nature to the women's group, and they decided to go back to the countryside. In her role as a leader, she was the first in Colombia to negotiate for plots of land for women and their families, as part of the agrarian reforms. She, along with other women, fulfilled a dream when they built the Enchanted Valley—a cooperative for agricultural and livestock production—where, on the human level, neither daughters nor sons have commerce with war and whose desire is to achieve "a peace born from justice." (1000 Women 2005, 164)

Is this not a threshold over which we, too, might step?

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