



Megan Burke

GENDER, TIME, AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence haunts our lives and our potential to do gender differently. How do we undo it?

by Megan M. Burke, PhD, Department of Philosophy

My research is a reflection on how sexual violence is encrusted into bodily life and norms of gender.

For a long time, feminist philosophers have accounted for the constitutive relationship between sexual violence and objectification and gender by thinking through how women and girls live space. They argue that the way girls and women are socialized to move in space, how they inhabit and take up space, and how they move their bodies reveals that experiences of space are not only deeply gendered, but also that sexual violence produces the gendered experience of space. For instance, the expedient and prepared way a young woman walks at night while leaving the library to get to her dorm room or car entails movement and an experience of space that is clouded by the threat of sexual violence and, importantly,

is an experience of space that produces gender. Or, more traditionally, we can see this in the way girls are taught to and then often do sit in a compact manner with their legs crossed and arms close by their side. It is argued that this constricted experience of space goes hand in hand with girls' and women's sexual violability.

My work expands on these points by suggesting that experiences of time are also gendered and confined by sexual violence. I suggest that there is a material past of sexual violence that structures and is generative of the reality of gender today, and that being a woman or girl is not just about an experience of space, but is about a particular, constrained experience of time. More specifically, I claim that sexual violence produces the temporal structure of femininity, which displaces a woman from her own future and confines her to a redundant present. This displacement serves to constrain women's freedom by restricting what is possible and in turn reifies heteronormative genders.

But time is also what ordinarily makes the relationship between gender and sexual violence disappear. Although feminists are aware of the prevalence of sexual violence as an effect of gender, because gender is

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such a thick past in our individual lives, to the ordinary eye the reality of gender and sexual violence is most often a forgotten past. It is not an event or series of events that we remember, but instead, it is anchored deeply into the experiences we have of ourselves and the world. This is to say that gender is the sedimentation of a particular past, a forgotten past laden with sexual violence, which minimizes one's freedom. As a forgotten past, we have lost sight of what we have learned to become in the present. We forget that we have become gendered beings and it is this forgetting that makes gender and sexual violence so tightly woven into the fabric of our lives. The present and future of gender is thus restricted by a forgotten past that is unfortunately rich with sexual violence.

If sexual violence is encrusted into normative genders, and, as I argue, our relationship to gender is a bodily forgetting, then the prevalence of sexual violence is not necessarily a presence. From my view, this means that sexual violence haunts our lives and our potential to do gender differently. My point is not that all bodies are haunted by sexual violence in the same way, but rather it is that when sexual violence makes gendered bodies the freedom that can be realized through gender is contradictory and limited. Ultimately, the motivation behind this analysis of gender and sexual violence is to think through how to undo their hold on individual and collective existence. ■

—Megan Burke was awarded a 2013 CSWS Graduate Student Research Grant for her dissertation-related project "Gender as Time: A Phenomenology of the Violence of Gender Normativity." In 2009, Megan was selected as a CSWS Graduate Road Scholar through a competitive process and invited to speak to students in the Eugene 4J system about women's contributions to agriculture. Megan also served as a coordinator for the CSWS Feminist Philosophy Research Interest Group. She completed her PhD in spring 2015. Her next adventure is a tenure track job at Oklahoma State University in the Departments of Philosophy and Women's and Gender Studies, a joint appointment in research with the majority of her teaching responsibilities in WGS.