

Technologies of impotence

Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence*, trans. Kieran Aarons (London: Verso, 2022). 250pp., £17.99 pb., 978 1 83976 105 8

'To begin from muscle rather than from law', proclaims French philosopher Elsa Dorlin in *Self-Defense*, her first monograph to be translated into English. (An extract was originally translated in *RP* 2.05 (Autumn 2019).) Various describing her own intellectual project as a phenomenology of violence, a genealogy of violence and a constellational history of self-defence, Dorlin adopts a distinctive Foucauldian perspective on the co-constitutive relation between corporeal self-defence and political empowerment, whilst interrogating the carceral origins of the juridical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Dorlin's intersectional lens successfully challenges the liberal fantasy of a moral economy that perpetuates an *a priori* distinction between the shielded and the armed. Less directly though no less categorically, *Self-Defense* also takes issue with femocratic forms of empowerment, rightly condemning the humanitarian conflation between material need and the need of protection, especially as the latter pertains to the treatment of racialised women in a colonial context. Undoing the oppressor/oppressed binary while foregrounding the difference between those subjects whose right to use physical and armed force is defensible, and those whose access to arms is pre-judicially criminalised, Dorlin reimagines biopower through a prosthetic imaginary where racialised gendered subjectivation occurs via a dialectical movement between weaponisation and disarmament.

Unlike Foucault's docile bodies, Dorlin's weaponised (dis)armed bodies are activated, stimulated and roused: 'It is a matter of *conducting certain subjects to annihilate themselves as subjects*, arousing their power of action to better guide them towards their own ruin. It is a matter of producing beings who in defending themselves destroy themselves' (original emphasis). In this particular form of subjectivation posited by Dorlin, technologies of power produce impotence, corporeally and politically, as the subject of self-defense is always already criminalised. Otherwise put, this process of subject formation is a process of becoming-defenceless through self-defence. When working to undo the binary logic of victim/ag-

gressor and prey/predator, Dorlin's analysis is indebted to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational observations on the imperialist philanthropy of 'white men [...] saving brown women from brown men'. In this respect, it could be argued that Dorlin's proposition of (dis)empowerment as a technique of the self sits in marked contrast with recent feminist discourses on the agentic potential of vulnerability (see for instance, Leticia Sabsay, Victoria Browne, Ewa Ziarek and indeed Butler). The message that women of colour need no white male saviours is pronounced loud and clear and, despite her detached authorial voice, and at times historicist facticity that appears over-reliant on secondary sources, Dorlin punches back against the current swelling tide of liberal, reactionary and fascist white feminisms.

Originally published in French in 2017, *Self-Defense* predates Judith Butler's *The Force of Non-Violence* (2020). This bibliographical reference is significant because Dorlin's engagement with biopolitics closely follows Butler's humanist ethics of preservation of life as articulated in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), and I would suggest that it is with reference to, and as an extension of, the Butlerian 'grievable' that one ought to read Dorlin's proposed category of the 'defensible'. Such an extension enables Dorlin to convincingly put forward a novel conception of the constitutive relationship between disempowerment and powerlessness, with the emphasis now placed on the self-reflexive character of what might be understood as 'passive agency'. Exemplary illustrations are offered through the techniques of torture endured by the bodies of Millet de la Girardière and Rodney King, accompanied by other instances of individual resistance, such as the fictional heroine of Helen Zahavi's 1991 novel *Dirty Weekend*. When Dorlin's prose strikes successfully, the Francophone reader encountering the text in English can imagine the analytical role that Dorlin's alliterative associations play in the construction of her argument, as is the case through the aural proximity of the words *coupable* (i.e., guilty, culpable) and *capable* (i.e., able, capable). More pressingly perhaps,



because there are no translator's notes in the English edition, and because Dorlin does not explicitly distinguish between *puissance* and *pouvoir*, one is left uncertain as to whether the conceptual difference between 'power-over' and 'power-to' would have been linguistically and conceptually discernible in the French original. Dorlin is curiously silent on the formative function of epistemic violence in sustaining colonial and state oppression, and the opportunity to mobilise Fanonian radical psychiatry for a psychosomatic reading of defencelessness is regrettably missed. Moreover, despite the book's emphasis on corporeal power and counterpower, Dorlin's racialised gendered bodies are always already able – and able to take up arms, if given the correct training. This able-bodied premise notwithstanding, scholars working within critical disability studies who may not be in dialogue with Black feminist scholarship can find in *Self-Defense* a useful starting point for analysing crip subjectivation, especially with respect to the corporeal double-bind experienced by a person interpellated as defenceless and dehumanised.

It is worth noting that Dorlin's genealogy does not suggest a categorial distinction between modes of subjectivation produced in quotidian instances of self-defense undertaken by sole individuals, and modes of subjectivation produced in historical moments of collective uprising. Although the book's ideological preoccupation appears to rest on the latter mode – a key chapter is dedicated to the rhetorical and tactical function of armed self-defense in the Black Panther Party – the manner in

which Dorlin transhistorically poses the political subject with respect to citizenship and citizens' rights, and the constitutional right to bear arms and to train to bear arms especially, betrays an unexpected un-Foucauldian allegiance to the philosophical primacy of the state. Dorlin argues for a conception of US vigilantism that would historically situate it 'as part of a process of rationalizing governmentality' and follows the same line of argument when discussing militarised self-defense in the nation-state formation of Israel. Dorlin's metonymic move from individual-self to collective-self is narrativised compellingly across several chapters that revisit the familiar imaginary of the American national subject as constituted by the right to armed self-defense. Whilst doing so, however, Dorlin inadvertently overemphasises a genealogical continuity between the subjecthood of the slave and the subjecthood of the freed Black person in the antebellum period. This continuity is further extended into the present moment through mobilising a political conception of Blackness which, although serving to analyse instances of neoliberal carceralism by revealing the vigilantist origin of Neighbour Watch voluntarism for instance, presupposes the racialised subject as the racialised citizen, with the voices and bodies of the racialised stateless, as a consequence, excluded.

Dorlin's engagement with the role of the military and militarised subjectivation raises further unresolved questions about modes of coercive and coerced citizenship. Drawing on the Abu Ghraib documents examined by artist Coco Fusco in *A Field Guide for Female Interrog-*

ators (2008), Dorlin proposes that we consider such acts of imperialist sexual violence in the same genealogical lineage, or what Dorlin calls a 'citational relationship', as the white supremacist violence undertaken by vigilante groups in the late eighteenth century. Dorlin's argument is that self-defense here stands for collective self-defense in the name of the American nation, where feminised, sexually aggressive white bodies ('blonde' female soldiers) rape male racialised prisoners of war. Dorlin traces the changed biopolitical role of the 'white woman' in such race relations, from the position of a white female body assumed fragile and in need of protection, to the position of a white female body assumed assertive and carefully deployed as an instrument of torture. As indisputable as such a genealogical narrative might be, it nonetheless remains unclear – especially given the political import of her publication – why Dorlin does not differentiate between modes of subjectivation that emerge in the organisational context of small-scale clandestine armed struggle and those that emerge in the expansionist context of global military operations.

This reservation brings me to my final point, which concerns Dorlin's genealogical method. *Self-Defense* is organised in a manner that appears to fluctuate between snapshot episodocity and linear historicism. It is unfortunate that the selected corpus of material is at once too geographically limited and too eclectic for the overarching discussion to not feel inexhaustive. The majority of examples are derived from experiences of racialisation and subjectivation through criminality in a US historical context (key exceptions being her narratives on the *krav maga* in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and jiu-jitsu in the Suffragettes). Although perhaps the book's original intent was to bring 'American' Black studies to France, for Anglophone readers at least, it is a lost opportunity that the investigation restricts its genealogy of French colonial violence to introductory comments on the *Code Noir* and does not incorporate analyses of contemporary Afro-French and Arab-Muslim subjectivation. Dorlin's citational approach does not call for the deployment of case studies or representative samples in a quantitative social-science sense, of course, yet a theoretical justification over the suitability of the chosen material would have enhanced the book's overall readability and intellec-

tual cohesion. Lastly, the absence of a crisp narrative that foregrounds the historical relationship between those selections – whether such a historical relationship is to be understood causally or otherwise – means that Dorlin's non-linear rendering often collapses into a timeless contemporaneity.

As a genealogy of disempowerment and counterpower, rather than as a philosophy of violence (in a Fanonian, Sorelian or Benjaminian vein), *Self-Defense* attempts to develop new feminist conceptual tools such as 'dirty care', 'phenomenology of prey' and 'thanatoethics' but, disappointingly for a reader who expects a philosophical proposal, it does not put those conceptual tools to use. Dorlin's intellectual project is also arguably best understood as indexically Barthesian, rather than phenomenologically Fanonian. Dorlin may not begin 'from law' (although in the case of *Code Noir* she does) but neither does she begin 'from muscle'. It would be more accurate to say that Dorlin begins from her gut – from her own anger, which then informs her discursive analysis of mediated episodes of police violence; contemporary popular visual and literary culture; and, for the majority of the publication, archival material of clandestine organising (primarily accessed through previously published accounts). Despite its philosophical shortcomings, *Self-Defense* does cover significant ethical terrain, especially when it exposes political contradictions such as the development of neoliberal homonormativity's relationship to whiteness (see her discussion of the Gay Liberation Front in early '70s San Francisco and The Lavender Panthers in the penultimate chapter). Once again, perhaps Dorlin's intent had been to sketch a historical and political continuity between neoliberal racist homonormativity and fascist homonationalism, but much is obfuscated in her account and such a crucial point of argumentation is never made explicit. At a historical conjuncture when extra-parliamentary far right formations, actively supported by nationalist governments and states, have a discursive and financial monopoly on legitimising and enacting racialised and ethnonationalist violence, Elsa Dorlin's *Self-Defense* may not be essential reading as such, but it nevertheless rightly insists on calling for an end to such abuses and dehumanising technologies of power.

Chrys Papaioannou