

Rape and the invisible work of survival

RUBY ALEXANDER

Abstract

This essay explores the various forms of violence experienced by women and gender minorities in capitalist societies. The author argues that this violence is generated and necessitated by relations associated with capitalist structures. Drawing on the work of Karl Marx and Silvia Federici, the author demonstrates the importance of historical and political analysis when trying to understand the causes of gender-based structural violence. She also considers how this may help us to understand the high rates of gender violence in Aotearoa New Zealand, and its roots in the nation's capitalist framework.

Key words

Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, capitalism, Silvia Federici, Nahla Abdo, gender violence, rape culture

Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest rates of family and intimate partner violence amongst member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; Leask, 2017a). In addition, an estimated one in five adult women are sexually assaulted during their lifetime (Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle, & Perese, 2007), and only 10 percent of these incidents are believed to be reported to the New Zealand police (Leask, 2017b). One in three girls under the age of 16 experience sexual harassment, with 70 percent of these incidents deemed 'serious', involving genital contact (Fanslow et al., 2007). The prevalence of gender-based violence in Aotearoa New Zealand indicates that this phenomenon cannot simply be reduced to individual actions, but is systematically reproduced (Abdo, 2014). Actions that appear as individual occurrences create identifiable patterns of activity across time. Colonisers of Aotearoa New Zealand have maintained a long legacy of violence against women; misogyny is deeply embedded within Pākehā culture, and cannot be disconnected from these origins (Mikaere, 1994). Traditionally in English culture, marriage symbolised a transfer in property from father to husband, and accordingly, a wife's last name changed to reflect this (Mikaere, 1994). The imposition of cultural norms such as these onto Māori society has had a particularly abrasive effect on Māori women as part of Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history (Mikaere, 1994).

This article will utilise a materialist understanding of history to explore the theory that domestic violence and sexual violence can be understood as types of non-consensual work – forms of socially reproductive labour – that are forced onto victims. The victims of abuse must endure this 'work' to survive, and to reproduce both themselves and future generations of workers required for capitalism's survival. In countries with persistently high rates of sexual violence, the capacity to endure this non-consensual work becomes folded into the female role. Exposure to violence, however, is distributed unequally. The most vulnerable in our society – gender minorities, marginalised ethnicities, and those in lower socio-economic thresholds – are most likely to be subjected to violence. They are also the groups most pressured to perform traditional forms of social reproduction (Federici, 2012). These are the communities most

dispossessed by capitalism, and therefore the easiest to exploit in underpaid, or completely unwaged, areas of the economy. In this article, I explore the different forms of violence experienced by women and gender minorities in capitalist societies such as Aotearoa New Zealand, to show that this violence is generated and required by the relations created within capitalism. First, I draw on Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism to demonstrate the necessity of historical analysis. I then discuss the work of Silvia Federici, who traces the origins of female-directed violence to Medieval Europe; I argue that, in order to implement the capitalist mode of production, women's economic, material, and sexual status must inevitably be denigrated. Finally, I analyse the deep-seated misogyny in Aotearoa New Zealand culture and the embodiment of violence in its multiple and interlocking forms.

Historical materialism

Historical materialism was first articulated by Karl Marx as a theory of history. This theory asserts that to analyse a society, one must understand how its inhabitants organise collectively to create methods of production (Fraser & Wilde, 2011). In *A critique of the German ideology*, a work co-authored with Friedrich Engels, Marx posits that the presupposition of human history is, of course, human existence, which itself requires that humans can subsist (Marx & Engels, 1846/1968). Human beings are distinguished from animals when they begin to produce the means of their subsistence, out of which springs their broader material life. A mode of production, then, is not simply a means of survival, but an expressive form of life, or a determinate form of existence: 'As individuals express their life, so they are' (Marx & Engels, 1846/1968, p. 8). Marx's theory of historical materialism helps us to understand how capitalism produces and reproduces violence. Instances of such violence typically appear in news media as isolated individual acts. However, I argue that these acts stem from common pressures of life under capitalism and patriarchy. The task (or work) of enduring them is necessary for the survival of individual victims; yet such endurance is also necessary for patriarchy to continue functioning. In this lies a contradiction: the endurance and rehabilitation of the self after experiencing sexual violence actively feeds into maintaining the structures of domination from which this violence stems.

The vulgar concept of work

An understanding of work is vital for this analysis. Certain ideological norms, such as notions of work, develop historically. These received ideas shape behaviours, ethics, and value systems (Jones, 2017). Hegemonic ideals function to normalise certain behaviours within certain societies and to demonise others (Marx, 1867/1990). These ideals are often reflected in state vehicles, such as law, government, and state policy. According to Campbell Jones in 'The value of work and the future of the left' (2017), the widespread understanding of work that exists today is 'the vulgar concept of work' (hereafter VCW). The VCW is particular to the capitalist mode of production. In the industrialised capitalist West, this is the dominant understanding of work, and it functions to reduce the collective understanding of work to the action of a self-sufficient individual. Thus, 'work is understood to be the intentional, instrumental, purposive activity of a largely isolated individual, generally in return for money' (Jones, 2017, p. 154). This understanding of work has its origins in liberal political philosophy and classical political economy, and is vital to capitalist economic theory today. Jones argues that this understanding of work has been almost universally accepted as 'work as such' in contemporary societies. This

understanding of work must be contested, as it places an unrealistic onus on the individual, dismisses the inherently collective conditions of work, and functions to exclude many of those who complete essential work for society from the wage relation (Jones, 2017). The VCW reflects only one side of the capital relation, thereby privileging individuals who come from wealth, creating hierarchies of exclusion from wealth, and blaming those who are excluded from this wealth for the very reason that they are excluded.

The collective concept of work

Marx explores an alternative position on work in *Capital: Volume I* (1867/1990). For Marx, work is purposive action which impacts on and changes the form of nature. This purposive action generates use-values with the capacity to satisfy human needs (Marx, 1867/1990). Under the capitalist mode of production, use-values are predominantly found in the form of the commodity. A commodity is a material object which fulfils human need (Marx, 1867/1990). Commodities are generally purchased with money. Therefore, to satisfy their needs, humans must have access to money to purchase commodities. For example, when hungry, a worker buys a sandwich. The worker must purchase this sandwich with money. In order to get money, the worker has to earn it by working. Generalised commodity production and exchange is fundamental to capitalism, as is the extraction of profit through the systematic underpayment of the labour-power required for production and exchange.

Prior to profit, however, processes of ‘social reproduction’ – an essential form of labour – must occur. This term was coined by Marxist feminists to describe the reproductive processes which human beings must complete for labour-power to regenerate itself (Federici, 2012). Social reproduction refers to both the daily and long-term reproductive needs required for the sustained existence of a worker. Daily or short-term processes include practices such as domestic labour, education, socialisation, and care work (Daellenbach, 2017). Meanwhile, processes such as procreation, lactation, and productive gestation are necessary for the long-term, generational replacement of labour-power (Daellenbach, 2017). Short- and long-term activities of social reproduction are intertwined: for example, eating can fall under both the daily fulfilment of needs, as it provides the body with the energy necessary to complete labour. It can also be considered as long-term because it provides nutrients which maintain the body for future procreation. The activity of social reproduction firmly centres around self-preservation: the maintenance and preservation of human life. In capitalist societies, this form of work is generally excluded from the wage relation. Because social reproduction therefore does not contribute to the market economy as obviously as waged labour does, it is deemed valueless according to the vulgar concept of work. Yet social reproduction is the form of labour most basically required for society to function, because it is the labour which unpins all economic life (Daellenbach, 2017). Humans, fundamentally, must reproduce themselves in order to work, or contribute any economic value. Human beings require food, sleep, shelter, clothing, and other necessities to survive (Daellenbach, 2017). However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, as in other capitalist nations, these necessities are not recognised as such. Rather, the neoliberal government provides minimal support in their provision (Rashbrooke, 2014). This is reflected in our rampant rates of child poverty and homelessness (Rashbrooke, 2014).

The burden of social reproduction is disproportionately imposed on women, migrants, and indigenous peoples (Federici, 2012). It is no coincidence that capitalism exploits those most vulnerable in society. Federici argues that this vulnerability was engineered specifically for the purposes of exploitation through violent processes such as slavery, land enclosure, and other colonial methods. Paid forms of socially reproductive labour exist, such as care-work

(childcare, eldercare, healthcare), and paid domestic work (cooking and cleaning). However, this type of work is overwhelmingly unpaid: it is the ‘miscounted’ work that capitalist societies rely on to optimise levels of exploitation and thereby maximise profit margins (Jones, 2017).

Primitive accumulation and women

In her book *Caliban and the witch*, Silvia Federici analyses the great witch hunts in medieval Europe as a necessary precursor to capitalism (2014). This is important for my analysis of the misogyny present in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Federici traces the origins of violence against women in a European context. She also analyses social reproduction, arguing that domestic work used to be seen in medieval Europe as a category of work which was necessary for the functioning of society. As such, it was respected. She therefore argues that there is a significant error in Marx’s analysis of capitalism, and specifically his key concept of primitive accumulation, laid out in volume one of his seminal work, *Capital* (1861).

Primitive accumulation describes the working classes’ mass dispossession from their land and other resources in a historical process of resource privatisation, as a required precursor to capitalism. This generalises exchange relations across society; access to food, land, and shelter are now mediated in new ways through exchange, and creates a mass of individuals with nothing to exchange but their labour-power. Federici argues that Marx’s failure to include the witch hunts in his account of primitive accumulation points to a wider problem of the erasure of women and women’s work from the public consciousness. In *Caliban and the witch*, she brings an account of Europe’s witch hunts into the history of primitive accumulation. The witch hunts occurred in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries and persecuted women on a mass scale, killing thousands. Those identified as ‘witches’ were predominantly women, while men often took on the role of ‘witch-hunters’ (Federici, 2014). These attacks on women caused the proletarian body to turn inwards, searching for the internal threat of witchery and implementing a hostile divide between working class women and men (Federici, 2014). The hunts also exacerbated pre-existing hierarchies within the working class, all while this collectivity was being dispossessed by the mercantile and aristocratic classes (Federici, 2014).

The public demonisation of women during this period led to a pivotal change in how women and their bodies were perceived. Women began to be excluded from public life, traditional forms of women’s work were devalued, and their bodies were framed as reproductive vessels to be filled (Federici, 2014). The result was that a new sexual division of labour arose alongside the processes of privatisation and land enclosure. Women became defined in nurturing terms, such as mothers, wives, and daughters (Federici, 2014). These terms functioned to belittle women’s social location and obscure their status as workers. Women’s work was reconstructed as a communal resource, which existed to serve society. Women became a substitute for the land lost in the enclosure of the commons, and their bodies were used as an emotional outlet for men to channel this loss. Federici argues that women themselves became the commons, as their work was redefined as a natural resource, ready for plunder (2014). This process of primitive accumulation dispossessed women of centuries of their shared knowledge, including their expertise in herbal remedies which had been passed down through generations. Such knowledge was erased as the witch hunts targeted its bearers: midwives, elderly women, and other women healers were targeted as a result of their ability to heal through unseen forces, identified as a trait of witchery (Federici, 2014). A new patriarchal power relation was also implemented, which emphasised the exclusion of women from waged labour. This in turn resulted in women’s growing reliance and subordination to men (Federici, 2014). Such

degeneration of women was a required feature of early capitalism, and has continued to be 'a necessary condition for the existence of capitalism in all times' (Federici, 2014, p. 13). According to the traditional sense of primitive accumulation, the working class must remain in a process of continuous dispossession from the means of subsistence and dependent on the sale of their labour-power (participation in the waged economy). But for this to even be possible, Federici argues, labour power as such must be regenerated at minimal cost to the capitalist economy. The subordinate position of women is thereby necessitated by capitalism. The construction of female inferiority is necessary in order to relegate women to the realm of domesticity. It also enables the unpaid position of this work, which thus results in labour power being reproduced as cheaply as possible.

Violence and reproduction

The witch-hunts were an obvious display of state-backed violence against women which permeated the domestic realm. 'Witches' were publicly executed: the state either burned, drowned, or hanged them (Federici, 2014). This public degradation of women had huge repercussions on women's social status and autonomy. A new family structure mirrored this societal change – women were deemed untrustworthy and generally incapable, leading to a more intensified patriarchal element in the nuclear family. The family was restructured with a patriarch as the head, and thus was experienced as 'as a micro-state or a micro-church' in which 'single workers live[d] under the roof and rule of a master' (Federici, 2014, p. 98). In Mediterranean countries and other parts of Europe, women were dismissed from waged labour, and subsequently from public spaces in general. Unaccompanied women in the streets were at risk of verbal or sexual abuse, which deterred them from leaving the house alone (Federici, 2014). In fifteenth-century Venice, rape was effectively legal, and the raping of proletarian women called for nothing more than a 'slap on the wrist' (Federici, 2014, p. 47). Gang-rape was also a common practice. The perpetrators would carry out their attacks openly at night, carrying their victim out into the street or breaking into the victim's home, without even attempting to hide their identities. Moreover, women largely lost the right to participate in economic activities as individuals, and in seventeenth-century France, women were legally declared 'imbeciles' and were not allowed to make legal contracts or represent themselves in court (Federici, 2014).

Thus, Federici argues that the use of corporeal violence to quash women's agency can be traced back to the witch hunts in Medieval Europe. Federici notes that the imposition of processes such as land enclosure and increased taxation were initially met with fervent resistance by the proletarian body. However, in a society which prioritised religious worship and believed in spiritual realms, the threat of witchery superseded the threat of capitalism. Federici therefore argues that the witch hunts functioned to distract the proletarian body from the imposition of capitalism. Her historical analysis of the European witch-hunts uncovers the origins of the violent attitudes towards women that remain prevalent in our society today. This display of state-backed violence against women explicitly encouraged the use of violence against women, devalued women's work, and undermined women's status in society.

There are common threads which weave through the misogyny of medieval Europe and into today's commonplace violence against women. One explicit link is that rape and other forms of sexual violence remain unexceptional today, as they did during the period of the witch hunts. In addition, women's economic activity is valued as secondary to that of men's, which is reflected through gender pay gaps, such as that of 12 percent in New Zealand (Kenny,

2012). Another, and perhaps the most unsettling, parallel is that state-backed violence against women is currently being weaponised in an international context. In her book, *Palestinian women's anti-colonial struggle within the Israeli prison system*, Palestinian activist Nahla Abdo argues that sexual violence is utilised by the Israeli state to coerce women and deter them from participating in revolutionary forms of resistance (2014). When considered alongside Federici's analysis of the witch hunts and the increasing subjugation of proletariat women during this historical epoch, it is apparent that gender-based violence has become a strategic manoeuvre with political and socio-economic objectives. Violence can be used as an institutionalised mechanism which deprives women of autonomous control over their bodies and their labour (Sears, 2016). The state can and does utilise gendered sexual violence against individuals to create institutionalised hierarchies of dispossession (Sears, 2016). This is not a phenomenon that is particular to Medieval European society, but as Abdo argues, is also a premediated mechanism used by the Israeli state today to deter the Palestinian struggle (2014). This raises the possibility that other states likewise utilise sexual violence to relegate women and gender minorities to a subordinate status within society, by either explicitly or implicitly condoning gendered violence. Is this the case in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Violence in Aotearoa

Aotearoa New Zealand was the first colonial state to implement votes for women on 19 September 1893 (Devaliant, 1992). This achievement is often used as 'evidence' that Aotearoa New Zealand is a relatively equitable society in terms of gender relations. In recent times, rampant rates of sexual violence and misogynistic activity have suggested otherwise (Leask, 2017a). As I mentioned at the start of this article, rates of domestic and sexual violence in Aotearoa are disproportionately higher than those of other OECD nations (Leask, 2017a). There is also a failure of the police force to hold perpetrators of rape accountable, with only 15 percent of reported rape cases making it to court (Johnston, 2018). That we are living in a rape culture is further evidenced by the 'Roast Busters' scandal, where a group of young men intentionally intoxicated teenage girls to gang rape them, before shaming them on social media (Dennett & Steward, 2014). The New Zealand police force were criticised for how slow their response was to this misogynistic violence; they were aware of the men's activities for two years before taking effective action (Gavey, 2013). In this time frame, multiple sexual assaults were perpetrated by the Roast Busters group on school-aged girls.

Physical and sexual assault are not the only forms of violence with which women in Aotearoa New Zealand must cope; there are many forms of violence which may infiltrate their lives. This country's misogyny is institutionally embedded. The current sanctions against solo mothers is one example of institutionalised misogyny present in Aotearoa New Zealand. This sanction is imposed on beneficiaries who have not named the father of their child on the child's birth certificate. Due to sections 176, 177, and 178 of the 'Social Security Rewrite Bill', solo mothers' benefits are being docked by \$22-28 per child, per week. This policy is effectively racist, as 52.8 percent of the women this sanction is imposed upon are Māori. A woman may not wish to name the father of their child for reasons of personal safety. Specialists working in this area attest that women are unlikely to name the child's father if he has subjected them to physical or emotional violence (Harris, 2017). This legal sanction therefore punishes some of the most vulnerable members of our society, and is an example of sexist and misogynistic structural violence perpetrated particularly against already marginalised women.

Nahla Abdo and modern state violence

Another form of violence experienced by women in capitalist societies is that of ideological violence. Nahla Abdo has sought to uncover why rates of sexual and physical violence directed against women tend to increase during civil war (2014). She argues that these forms of violence are used by colonial states to quash female resistance and control the wider population. Talking specifically about Israel, Abdo suggests that the violence itself is not the only weapon wielded by the state; rather, the *potential* for sexual violence and the fear of its occurrence also acts as a prime mechanism of control. Moreover, the repercussions of sexual assault during civil conflicts are far-reaching. Although rape is often perceived in western discourse as an action perpetrated by an individual and which causes harm only to the immediate victim, the consequences of sexualised violence are multifaceted. Violence can affect the victim's family members, friends, and entire community (People Against Prisons Aotearoa, 2017). In the case of Palestinian women prisoners detained in Israeli prisons, Abdo notes that these women's bodies are viewed by Israeli prison workers as sexualised and racialised objects upon which violence can be perpetrated. Violence is inflicted on them by agents of the state to create a culture of docility and thereby dominate those who resist state policy. Abdo argues that the use of female bodies and sexuality is thus a key strategy to gain political power over women: 'Women's bodies and sexuality are rendered a prime site of humiliation, subjugation and victimisation' (Abdo, 2014, p. 21).

The function of women's fear in capitalist ideology

As I have suggested above, the fear of sexual violence plays a role in capitalist societies. It acts as a deterring mechanism which coerces women into putting limitations on their lives. This might involve choosing not to walk home after a certain hour, or not travelling to certain areas alone. To fully understand the repercussions of this, we must first understand ideology and how it works to perpetuate sexual violence. According to Marx and Engels, the production of ideology is woven into the concrete material situation of a given society (Marx & Engels, 1846/1968). This material situation is shaped by the means of production, which are used to produce what is necessary to sustain human life, and the relations of production by which they are organised. Only on the basis of the labour which enables life can humans think, reflect, and construct their ideological worldview. As Marx and Engels insist, 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life' (1846/1968, p. 155). Formations of consciousness, as ideology, generally function to maintain the current relations of production. Hence, Marx and Engels argue in *The German ideology* that the ideas of each epoch are the ideas of the ruling class: 'The class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force' (1846/1968, p. 172). Therefore, the ideology of a capitalist society maintains the capitalist relations of production, including the subordination and exploitation of the working class by those who profit off their labour.

In Aotearoa New Zealand and other capitalist colonial states, gendered fear is a received part of our ideology. Women's lives are shaped in response to the fear of violence on both a daily and long-term basis. The boundaries that women develop to limit their potential exposure to violence are enacted and followed as a form of self-preservation. This process occurs throughout women's lives. A safe woman must be cautious. It is easier to blame women who are victims of violence, to say they were 'asking for it', when they do not follow generalised safety protocol. In Aotearoa New Zealand, we have a rampant victim-blaming culture as part of our wider rape culture (Leask, 2017b). Moreover, women do not have equal access to safety

or the ability to keep themselves safe. This ability is shaped by women's particular social location. Exposure to violence is more likely the lower down the socio-economic scale one sits (Fanslow et al., 2007). It is mediated by one's access to use-values which enable safety – such as the money required to catch taxis at night. Incidence rates of sexual and domestic violence within the family are also exacerbated by lower socio-economic status (Costa et al., 2016). Scholars generally hold that this is a result of higher levels of stress on the family, due to lower incomes overall (Costa et al., 2016). Hence, the effects of patriarchy do not impact all women or men equally. Exposure to violence is more likely depending on one's material situation.

The cycle of violence begins at work

There is no doubt that gender violence is a serious problem in Aotearoa New Zealand. The country's rates of sexual and domestic violence have reached almost epidemic proportions (Leask, 2017a). Federici's analysis of Medieval Europe, which I laid out above, reveals the origins of misogyny and the devalued status of women in European societies during this period. But how is this violence generated and maintained? The ways in which this violence is consistently preserved within the working-class populace is pivotal to my analysis, and it is to this issue that I now turn.

bell hooks's 'cycle of violence' describes a cycle of abuse particular to the capitalist mode of production which creates perpetrators of violence, beginning in the workplace. Male workers are subjected to coercion or control by an authoritative figure who is in a position to degrade them (hooks, 2015). The male worker must repress his need to resist the exploitative situation in order to secure the wages required for subsistence (hooks, 2015). The worker represses his reactions to workplace violence until he is in what hooks describes as a 'control' situation, a situation where he does not fear retaliation: 'The home is usually this control situation, and the target for his abuse is usually female' (hooks, 2015, p. 122). Through the expression of this violence, the worker's emotional pain is released, and he might feel relief, even pleasure (hooks, 2015). Aotearoa New Zealand's continuously high rates of intimate partner violence indicates an implicit acceptance of this behaviour (Leask, 2017a). This makes such violence difficult to eliminate: it is 'condoned and accepted, even celebrated' in such a culture (hooks, 2015, p. 120).

I contend that the endurance of violent assault is a type of social reproduction demanded of women in capitalist societies, especially those women in long-term domestic partnerships. Due to women's historical exclusion from paid labour (as discussed previously), many women rely on men for their material livelihood, or to supplement their own inferior income (Kenny, 2017). Likewise, many children will be economically dependent on their father or male guardian. As a consequence, enduring the violence originating from the capitalist workforce becomes a part of the woman's role within the family and within wider society. It is a form of work necessary for the women's survival and that of their offspring – a purposive activity that secures the material resources necessary to both her immediate and future survival.

Conclusion

Capital's violence reverberates in all aspects of society. Since the initial development of capitalism in the seventeenth century, a culture of misogyny has ripened, in which women's minds and bodies have been degraded in the public eye. Women's bodies have become 'shock-absorbers' for the violence which working class bodies experience in capitalist societies. This ongoing, systematic violence towards women can be traced back to the initiation of capitalism.

This mode of production requires the exploitation of a large ‘underclass’ of workers. It requires a world in which there is ongoing violence and poverty (Marx, 1867/1990). Fundamentally, this is a situation of lack, exploitation, and battery for the working masses so that the capitalist class can accumulate wealth (Marx, 1867/1990).

Women’s labour has been continually devalued. In Aotearoa New Zealand, sexual violence is largely ignored, and thus allowed to perpetuate. Years of oppression have taught women that their voices and experiences are not valid, reinforcing the nation’s victim-blaming culture. Reports of sexual violence are extremely low as a result of our rape culture; only a small fraction of these incidents are reported to the authorities (Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 2009).

In a society that accepts and implicitly affirms sexual violence, enduring this violence is a form of socially reproductive labour which feminised workers must complete so that our society can function. Sexual violence is also a socially accepted means of quashing women’s resistance to capitalist patriarchy. Violence is reproduced by the capitalist state to subjugate women, and to possess women’s labour as an unpaid resource (Abdo, 2014). As can be seen from bell hooks’s cycle of violence, victims of sexual assault complete purposive activity in enduring these traumatic events for the collective working class. Perpetrators complete their own cycle of social reproduction – but they can be taught to resist, and find another outlet for the violence engendered in them by capital. This energy must be channelled into the breaking down of capitalism itself. Solidarity among the working class must be reinstalled so that we can collectively break free from capital’s violence. As hooks insists, ‘Violence is inextricably linked to all acts of violence in this society that occur between the powerful and powerless, the dominator and the dominated’ (2015, p. 118).

RUBY ALEXANDER is an Honours student studying Sociology at the University of Auckland. As a Marxist feminist, her work analyses the violence generated by the capitalist mode of production, and how this brutality disproportionately effects those dispossessed by processes of colonisation, imperialism, and patriarchy. Her work draws an explicit connection between economic activity and gendered violence.

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