

‘Do You Think I Can Kill You?’ Exploring Intimate Femicide in South Africa and Why Intimacy Hurts So Much

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on two South African books published recently dealing with violence against women, namely Nechama Brodie’s *Femicide in South Africa* (2020), and Kopano Ratele’s *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022). Both authors explore strategies for the prevention of violence against women and this article supplements their strategies with an idea put forth by Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). The article argues that intimate femicide persists in South Africa, to an extent as a result of the construction of a certain type of ‘hard’, ‘patriarchal’, ‘traditional’ masculinity that cannot admit its own frailty, dependence, impotence and powerlessness, and attempts to conceal its needs by becoming violent. Arendt argues that violence and power are opposites and that equating male violence with power is a lie that violence perpetuates about itself. Arendt proposes that the antidote to this false mastery and control is the activity of thinking, as distinguished from knowing. The article argues that the activity of thinking acts as a brake on the fantasy of masculine mastery and control and can perhaps minimise violence.

Keywords: thinking, masculinity, intimate femicide, mastery and control

INTRODUCTION

There are two important books about interpersonal violence in South Africa published in the past two years, that I draw on for this article: Nechama Brodie’s *Femicide in South Africa* (2020) and Kopano Ratele’s *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022). What both books clearly have in common, just from reading their titles, is that they deal with violence. But what interests me more specifically, is that they focus on violence *against women*. I want to take a common theme that runs through these books, namely strategies for the prevention of violence against women, and supplement these with an idea put forth by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Life of the Mind* (1978). The strategies suggested by Brodie, mostly relate to the media’s portrayal of violence and how some crimes, perpetrators and victims are spectacularised and others invisibilised. Her message, (too) simply put, is that without the correct information, we will always fail at our strategies to prevent violence, and therefore an intervention at the level of media and reporting on violence is important. I agree with her diagnosis of the problem of media coverage of violence in South Africa, as well as her suggestions to correct this difficulty, but this particular problem and strategy is not the focus of my article. Rather, I use Brodie primarily to sketch the nature and extent of Intimate Femicide in South Africa by following her detailed analysis of it, as reported in the media. Ratele’s main strategy (also too simply put here) is to address the dearth of love and care that boys and men experience in society as a possible intervention to prevent violence against women (and, presumably between men). He argues that this lack of love, experienced on both a personal and institutional level is, perhaps, one reason why violence against women persists to the degree that it does in South Africa. I agree that we need to pay attention to the ways in which we raise boys to become loving, caring men, and I agree that this love need is mostly unadmitted and therefore remains unconscious for many men in South Africa. I also agree that satiating this love and care need for men, might serve as an antidote to violence, but I am more interested in exploring how this need became invisibilised, unacceptable and unconscious in the first place. I argue that we can trace the origin story of the invisibilisation of this need, to a specific construction of what Ratele refers to interchangeably as a ‘patriarchal’, ‘hard’, ‘traditional’ or ‘colonial’ masculinity. Put differently, I argue that it is this construction of a ‘hard’ (rational) masculinity, that denies its embodiedness, emotionality and dependence (and in fact projects these onto femininity)

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that actively shapes masculinity as a construct that does not have this love need (is utterly, and unrealistically independent), that needs to be reassessed and rethought. I use Arendt's specific distinction between thinking and knowing, as a possible strategy to simultaneously expose the delusion of mastery and control baked into the construction of a patriarchal masculinity, as well as to subvert it.

INTIMATE FEMICIDE

Nechama Brodie writes that we have a femicide problem in South Africa. Femicide is broadly and simply when men kill women *because* they are women. In other words, the term describes those circumstances when women are murdered and their femaleness is *not* incidental to the crime (2020: 16). It is also obviously true that we have a homicide problem in South Africa – men who kill and are killed by men. Men as both perpetrators and victims. Who needs to take responsibility and spend time and resources on preventing this iteration of violence is not the focus of this article, but suffice it to say that I am broadly aligned with the view that since it affects us all, we should all worry, about all victims of violence, men included.¹ Instead, in keeping with the theme of intimacy, I am interested in Intimate Femicide and will shortly sketch the extent of this issue that we are all probably quite tired of hearing about, but that remains an urgent problem. What does it mean when Brodie states that in South Africa, we have a specific problem of violence against women, particularly sexual violence and fatal violence against women?

By drawing our attention to the difference and distinction between homicides and femicides, Brodie is situating violence against women firmly within the misogyny of society. Interpersonal violence between men is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the violence meted out by men against women. Studies of inter-personal violence, including studies on non-fatal injuries in South Africa have shown that most violent injuries between men arise from: 'everyday life, most often involving strangers and including poorly defined arguments and quarrels over money, women and drunkenness whereas most women are attacked by someone they know' (Brodie, 2020: 16). More than half of women who are killed, are murdered by partners or former partners.² This translates into the shocking statistic that every six hours, a woman is killed by her husband or boyfriend or partner or ex-husband or ex-boyfriend.³ This is all the more shocking because women are generally led to believe and to buy into the 'stranger danger' trope, or the *Female Fear Factory*, as Pumla Dineo Gqola conceptualises it in her 2021 book with that title. With this description, Gqola draws our attention to the ubiquitous fear that women experience constantly and consistently, and she argues that this fear is a product that the patriarchy actively manufactures. The female fear factory thus refers to a public performance or trope promoted by patriarchal institutions, and men, to instil fear in women as a strategy to control women. This trope would have women believe that they are most in danger in public spaces, from monstrous men, who are unknown to them. But the statistics⁴ tell us, and Brodie argues, that more than the risk of entering public spaces, entering into romantic type relationships with men, is a risk factor for violence against women.⁵ This is a difficult reality to wrap our heads around and it brings me to the heart of my article, which is to ask and wonder how intimacy can be the birthplace of both: connection and belonging on the one hand, as well as of violence, aggression and death on the other. As is probably obvious by now, I am speaking specifically about heterosexual relationships between men and women⁶ and other configurations of intimacy lie beyond the scope of this article.

¹ See for instance Louise Du Toit's chapter Contesting the meaning/s of sexual violence in the South African postcolony: where are the male victims? in *Intimacy and Injury* (2022) and Du Toit, L. and Le Roux, E. (2020). A feminist reflection on male victims of conflict-related sexual violence. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(2), 115-128.

² See for instance Mathews, S., Abrahams, N., Jewkes R., Martin L. J., Lombard C. and Vetten L. (2008). Intimate femicide-suicide in South Africa: A cross-sectional study. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, 86(7), 552-558.

³ Men killing their daughters for not respecting patriarchal rules of behaviour, particularly around sexual agency, is also a major aspect of femicide. (See for example (dis)honour killing).

⁴ To put the South African situation in perspective globally, the femicide rate (meaning the number of murders per 100,000 women) in South Africa is currently more than six times the global average (Brodie, 2020: 14). The World Health Organisation estimated that the global rate of 'female total homicide' was 2.3/100 000 women in 2017 (UNODC, Global Study on Homicide) (Vienna, 2018). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/GSH2018/GSH18_Gender-related_killing_of_women_and_girls.pdf. During the same period in South Africa, the femicide rate was 14/100, 000 (Brodie, 2020: 14).

⁵ Lisa Vetten first made this observation in Vetten, L. (1996). Man Shoots Wife?: Intimate Femicide in Gauteng, South Africa. *Crime and Conflict*, 6(Winter), 1-6.

⁶ This is because I am specifically interested in violence, in intimate relationships and I want to argue that there is something about the construction of masculinity that makes this violence so possible and common. Feminine bodies obviously do not have to be female bodies as such and would include all gender non-conforming, 'feminised' bodies too.

DO YOU THINK I CAN KILL YOU?

That we even have such a term as intimate femicide, and not for instance intimate homicide, is interesting to me. The implication being that intimacy somehow evokes violence in men, towards women, but not in women towards men. The ubiquity of this gendered problem is neatly illustrated when Kopano Ratele writes in his book, that he asked his wife whether she thinks he will kill her. It is interesting to me, first, that he asks the question, second, that she answers that she cannot be sure and third, that *he* does not seem to worry that *she* will kill him.⁷ Women as perpetrators of violence is another topic I am very interested in, but it is also not my focus here.

But let us stay for a moment with the question, and the underlying assumption of the question: that it is he, and not she, that might commit murder. To be clear, I am not disturbed by the question, I think it is a good question and appropriate for the times we live in. That we live in these times, where such a question should be asked, is what is odd and disturbing. It is, for me, emblematic of the intimate gender relations I am writing about. I want to try to understand this phenomenon of intimate femicide. Of this unanswerable question between a man and a woman, in an intimate relationship, about violence, as something that cannot be ruled out. Ratele writes:

I ask, But you don't think I can hurt you, do you? That I can kill you?

I don't know. You *never* know. She stresses the words, dragging out 'never'. Maybe there are circumstances we haven't tested you under.

But the probabilities? I ask.

The probability is low, she responds. But there is always –

Ja, I know, I say.

There is always a chance, she says. (2022: 11)

It may sound very strange, Ratele writes, but it is his view that talking like this, about almost everything, is the best guarantee, if ever there can be a guarantee, that there will be no murder in such a relationship. I argue later on that it is not only 'talking like this' that potentially prevents violence, but also *thinking* like this and about this. He writes:

I can hurt you emotionally, yes, I say. Not kill you.

I don't know, she says.

I don't feel that I'm capable of killing you.

You never know with perpetrators, she says.

You never actually know, I say. But why is that? (2022: 12)

Why is the question Ratele asks so appropriate, and so relevant, and so important to ask – and to talk, and to think about? In other words, why would a man ask this of a woman he is in an intimate relationship with? Why does this question make sense to us? Is there something women inherently do in intimate relationships that invites murder, and hence the question? I think we can all agree that this is not the case. Is it that men are naturally violent and aggressive in ways that are so overwhelming that the urge to kill is sometimes simply too strong, even, and especially in an intimate relationship? No. I argue specifically against this type of essentialising, naturalising idea that there is something inherent about the biology and morphology of a man that leads him to commit murders. On that note: I also avoid, rather than argue against, the idea that environmental factors such as poverty, violent neighbourhoods, parentless upbringings, and the myriad other socio-economic-political factors, contribute to the prevalence of violence. I can say that my view is that these factors are not pervasively determining but that they surely can and do play a role. But these factors fall in other disciplines involved with empirical research and they are not my focus here. It is thus a limitation of this article that I do not focus on violences that are endemic at an institutional level and are reproduced through the logics of coloniality, patriarchy, capitalism, the Anthropocene, etc.

⁷ At one point in their conversation Ratele suggests that perhaps his wife *might* kill him under 'extreme conditions, like if [he] was about to throw [himself] and [their] son off the bridge, [she] would shoot [him]' (2022: 12). This idea, that women are only likely, or even 'allowed' to be violent when they are protecting their children, is explored in Sjoberg and Gentry's *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (2007).

Instead, I approach masculinity from the sphere of social constructivism, or to follow Raewyn Connell in Ratele's book, 'configurations of practice'. Approaching masculinity in this way means to highlight the social and cultural construction of masculinity or what Judith Butler would call performativity. It contrasts with the biological essentialism mentioned above, that says there is something inherently violent to maleness. And importantly, this constructivist approach means that change is possible, whereas biological essentialism implies that masculine violence is inevitable and unalterable.

And so I wonder: What is it about masculinity, and the performative expectations it exerts on men that, not exactly causes, but perhaps triggers or induces them to be violent in intimate relationships with women?⁸ One of the answers in Ratele's book, for mending what is broken, in a masculinity that leads to violence, is to focus on and replenish the care and love deficiency suffered by many men. He writes: 'At the risk of becoming tiresome, what I would like is for us to broaden our view in imagining love, in order that we may integrate men's affection needs into our society and into our conception of humanity' (2022: 54).⁹ I agree that this is a problem and that it needs to be addressed. That we need to talk more about how boys can be raised to be emotionally attuned, empathetic, loving, caring men, and yet it is not where I want to focus my attention. Because although Ratele sometimes makes it explicitly clear that women are not to be held responsible for dispensing this emotional labour, and that it is men who, amongst themselves must do this work; my worry is that women will (continue to) be disproportionately burdened with this emotional labour; that a type of incel¹⁰ logic might emerge: love us properly, or else. He writes at one point: 'It seems that to *be* unloved, or to experience the self as unloved or unlovable, may be a breeding ground for different forms of violence against others (...) that is to say, a deficiency of love can result in a variety of unfavourable consequences' (2022: 55; emphasis added). He wants to draw our attention to what can be gained from expanding the dominant conception and practice of love and how we might fold vulnerability into how men love.¹¹ Yet women and girls are unloved and neglected in myriad ways too,¹² and it does not lead to *them* acting violently, implying that there is something about the construction of masculinity specifically, that we need to pay attention to.

Therefore, what I want to focus on instead of (simply) the *existence* of this love need, is what Ratele refers to as the failure to recognise, admit or even acknowledge men's dependence on others and men's unadmitted need for love. He is concerned with working towards recognising and admitting this need, with the aim of getting the need met as a project that might help curb men's violence. And really, since we are fundamentally relational, we humans are such needy beings, we are, naturally, not self-sufficient. We need to ask for *so* much from each other: recognition, respect, sex, help, support, love, forgiveness, redemption, acceptance. What is it that makes expressing these multifaceted needs to the Other feel so impossible, to a socially constructed, hyper masculinity, or what Ratele also sometimes refers to as 'traditional' or 'hard' masculinity? Asking for these needs to be met implies our vulnerability and dependence, and we are faced with the uncertainty of whether they will be met.

That is why I want to take a step back. Instead of the goal being only to recognise, acknowledge and accept these needs, (difficult and worthy of our efforts as that may already be), with the goal of the needs being met, as an antidote to violence; I would suggest that we sit with the deeper work of understanding how this need is or became invisibilised in the first place, as something unacceptable or even shameful for a man to feel or to express. What is it about an 'acceptable' manly masculinity that rejects and refuses to acknowledge and admit this need for love and care, and leads to what Irigaray might call a symbolic matricide?¹³ I would argue that it surely has something to do with how, the western enlightenment's prototypical 'reasonable man' as rational and self-sufficient - of independence, mastery and control - has at its heart, the agenda to hide and obscure any forms of attachment

⁸ Indeed this has been addressed by many scholars, feminists and critical masculinities scholars over many years and is not a new question. It remains, however, very urgent, important and worth asking repeatedly.

⁹ Elsewhere he writes that love appears to him to be the most vital force against violence.

¹⁰ 'Incel' is a concept that refers to men who are 'involuntary celibates'. These men occupy a space in the so-called 'manosphere' and simply put, they feel hard done by because they are not desired within the current sexual economy. For an excellent discussion on incels see Laura Bates *Men Who Hate Women* (2020) and Amia Srinivasan *The Right To Sex* (2021).

¹¹ Scholarly work has indeed emphasised vulnerability and masculinity and also proposed it as a key strategy in challenging problematic imperatives of masculinity for men. See for example Shefer T., Kruger, L.-M. and Schepers, Y. (2015). Masculinity, sexuality and vulnerability in 'working' with young men in South African contexts: 'You feel like a fool and an idiot ... a loser'. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 17 (sup2), 96-111.

¹² Ratele argues that men are not loved institutionally but I would argue that women experience an even greater dearth in institutional loving or care. I am thinking specifically of rape complainants who have historically been disbelieved (see Mirander Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* (2007)) and male perpetrators being disproportionately exonerated. See also Kate Manne *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2018) where she conceptualises 'Himpathy', one form of which is the 'excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence' (2018: 197).

¹³ Irigaray conceptualises symbolic matricide to mean the denial and cancellation of the debt that Plato's intelligible (masculine) realm owes to the material (feminine) realm which is discarded in the Cave Myth as mere illusion and therefore falls outside the economy of truth. See Irigaray, L. (1985). *Speculum of the other Woman*. USA: Cornell University Press.

and dependence that undermines this construction.¹⁴ This could entail the *threat* to mastery and control of masculinity and men as knowing, rational beings, potentially being provoked by entering intimate, dependent relationships. Because within these intimate relationships we can become so bound to an Other, that the loss of them makes us inscrutable (or unknowable) to ourselves.

Women have, historically been undermined as rational subjects with full *control* over their cognitions (and emotions), by casting them as emotional or hysterical. The ‘rational’ subject, culturally¹⁵ symbolised and conceptualised as neutral, universal and objective, is however, covertly ultimately coded as masculine.¹⁶ This construction of masculinity as *the* sex and subjectivity is well explicated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2011) where she describes ‘the absolute human type’ as masculine (2011: 5). She goes on to say that ‘[h]umanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being’ (2011: 5-6). Some of the words she uses to describe the situation of women *vis-à-vis* men are: ‘relative’, ‘particular’, ‘negative’, ‘inessential’. While ‘he is the Absolute, she is the Other’ (2011: 5-6). Since he is absolute, he is able to be rational and speak on behalf of everyone, because he is not tied to his body, sex and particularity, the way she is. De Beauvoir describes the situation as follows:

I used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell me: ‘You think such and such a thing because you are a woman.’ But I know my only defence is to answer, ‘I think it because it is true,’ thereby eliminating my subjectivity; it was out of the question to answer, ‘And you think the contrary because you are a man,’ because it is understood that being a man is not a particularity. (2011: 5)

Similarly, Irigaray argues that in this dominant realm of what is considered rational, women cannot speak *as* women, because women are partial, particular and therefore cannot speak the Truth on behalf of all humans. Whitford sums Irigaray’s argument up as follows:

When women attempt to speak in their own name, to speak *as* women, to speak their truth, as one might say, this is rejected in the name of truth; truth it is said, has a universal character, and women cannot speak for the universal. But as Irigaray sets out to show in *Speculum*, this is so *by definition*, and the economy of truth has been used to justify the exclusion of women. (1991: 102; emphasis added)

This dominant conception of western (masculine) rationality is based on exclusionary models wherein male/female symbolism is used to express binary, hierarchical¹⁷ relations of domination and subordination. Thus, in contrast to this masculine (parading as neutral) subject, feminine subjectivity is burdened with all that the rational, neutral (but masculine) subject wishes to disavow – emotionality, embodiedness, immanence. Put differently, the cultural symbolisations ascribed to male and female, results in a generalisable difference in how men and women live their bodies and act/speak in the world. The damage this hierarchical binary does to women as epistemological subjects is well documented by feminist theory, and of course this damage is pernicious and severe. However, perhaps this more realistic expectation of women, as fleshy, emotional,¹⁸ immanent beings (as, in actual fact, are men) is precisely why they resort to violence less frequently than men.¹⁹ In other words, women perhaps do not have to ‘achieve’ the level of mastery and control to keep their femininity intact, where a certain type of masculinity perhaps

¹⁴ The western enlightenment project arguably also had a decisive impact on shaping larger systems of mastery and control namely coloniality, capitalism, human-centredness and the extractivism and violences embedded in these systems that result in violence not only against women, but also against many humans, other species and planetary resources. The focus of this article, however, remains limited to intimate femicide, as but one iteration of the myriad violences caused by systems of mastery and control.

¹⁵ I am situating the cultural expectations around masculine and feminine within a western paradigm, given South Africa’s colonial history and the still present influence of western cultural imperialism on South Africans’ thinking and meaning making. Indeed, Ratele refers to himself as a ‘westernised African’, given the ‘dominance of Western cultural ideas in our lives’ (2022: 44).

¹⁶ As well as a range of other definers such as white, western, middle class, heteronormative, etc.

¹⁷ Ratele neatly illustrates this hierarchy when he writes that the belief in a certain ruling form of masculinity means that ‘men do not want to show their vulnerabilities to women because that would supposedly *bring them down* to the level of the feminine. They do not want to be seen to be like women – hesitant, yielding, emotional, soft (...)’ (2022: 32; emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Ratele ponders why it took him, a scholar on masculinity, so much longer to write about love, than about violence. He writes: ‘I have wondered why this was so: did I feel that love was an inappropriate subject, too soft, when placed against the hardness of violence?’ (2022: 17). He points to the peculiarity of perceiving men as emotional creatures when he argues elsewhere that men need to (re-)educate themselves about the fact that their ‘vulnerability as an *emotional being* – an animal with feelings – is a precondition for a different kind of intimacy’ (2022: 20).

¹⁹ As said, I am very interested in female perpetrators of violence although this is not the focus of this chapter. Although there is interesting scholarly work on this subject (see for instance the work of Lou-Marié Kruger) I am concerned here primarily with the question that Ratele asks his wife, but that she does not ask him, and why this makes sense to us.

does create the (unrealistic) expectation that men should be unemotional and 'in control' of themselves, and possibly others too. The expression of this masculine urge for mastery and control is described by Ratele when he writes about 'Men who want to control women and experience uncontrollable rage when they cannot do so' (2022: 101). He writes further that:

although some researchers may feel that men pretend not to know – how to speak of their anger, express feelings of being unworthy of love or control themselves in order to not take responsibility for their actions - there are men who actually do not have the tools to analyse their own emotions and behaviour. They do not know – and violence gives them a sense of mastery. (2022: 101)

The point is, it might be harder for men to accept their limitations – both in terms of their need for others, as well as their status as knowing (rational) beings - given the unrealistic expectations and standards set for mastery and control, by patriarchal masculinity.

I would argue, and this really is the crux of this article, that for men to get to a point where they *can* admit the need for love and care, would mean to forsake the illusion of mastery and control that keeps them safe from having to admit, to themselves or others, their overwhelming dependence and non-mastery. And the loss of this mastery too often results in violence, in a (futile) effort to restore it. Admitting the need exposes a vulnerable space of non-mastery and what Ratele calls the: “not-knowing” how to speak of [men’s] inner lives, rage pain, frustration’.

FORSAKING MASTERY AND CONTROL

I turn now to Hannah Arendt to help me think through this quandary of the loss of mastery and control leading to violence. For Arendt, mastery is a delusion. At the centre of *On Violence* (1970), is her famous distinction between violence and power. Arendt insists that power can never grow from violence and that, politically speaking, power and violence are opposites since where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. She writes that '(r)ule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost' (1970: 53). She argues that a decrease in power invites violence because those who hold power and 'feel it slipping from their hands (...) have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it' (Arendt, 1970: 87). She also argues that 'impotence breeds violence and psychologically this is quite true' (1970: 54). So the equation of male *power* with violence is, for Arendt, a lie that violence perpetuates about itself, since '[violence] will do anything – destroy women and the world – rather than admit that its power is uncertain' (Rose, 2021: 179). Ratele seems to agree with this idea when he writes:

Men’s violence is always a reaction; a reassertion or deflection. Regardless of whether a person realises it, he uses violence to (re)assert power and to repel his sense of vulnerability, his own hurt and impotence, perhaps even a sense of hopelessness. (2022: 32)

Arendt would surely disagree that men (*re*)assert *power* through violence; however, the more general point, that violence often erupts from a sense of powerlessness, seems to be true for both thinkers. The precarity and fragility that violence seeks to conceal by parading as power is, amongst others, men’s unconscious knowledge of his shared (with women), human frailty, dependence and neediness, i.e., non-mastery and uncertainty. Ratele writes that '(b)oy and men have an unmet affective need to care and be cared for. They need others, although this need for belonging may be unconscious or unadmitted' (2022: 35).²⁰ This idea of unconscious knowledge is an interesting one, because it reveals a gap between a knowing and not-knowing and it is on this gap that we can focus, to bring about change.

The antidote to this false mastery and control through violence is, for Arendt, the activity of thinking. Arendt understands thinking, as the product of reason, to be an interminable process which does not have an *end* that it can claim. She distinguishes between thinking and knowing, which she develops at the hand of Kant’s distinction between, on the one hand, the faculty of thinking, which Kant called *Vernunft* (reason) and on the other hand, the faculty of cognition, which Kant called *Verstand* (intellect). The two faculties have, in Arendt’s analysis, different natures, moods and purposes. On its most elementary level, the distinction lies in the fact that, in Kant’s own words: 'concepts of reason [thinking] serve us to conceive [*begreifen*, comprehend], as concepts of the intellect [knowing] serve us to apprehend perceptions' (quoted in Arendt, 1971: 57). Arendt explains that the intellect (knowing) desires to grasp what is given to the senses, but that reason (thinking) wishes to understand its meaning. In contrast with the aim of the intellect and the (scientific) quest for knowledge, to arrive at Truth, Arendt proposes the pursuit of meaning as the ultimate aim of thinking. She argues that 'to expect truth to come from thinking signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know' (1971: 61); which is the *end* that the intellect or cognition claims for itself: a knowing and truth, even of unanswerable questions. Arendt compares philosophers

²⁰ He goes on to argue that 'lovelessness and absence of care may be sources of aggression' (2022: 37).

of this latter persuasion with ‘children trying to catch smoke by closing their hands’ (1971: 122). She says that ‘(c)ompared to an object of contemplation, meaning, which can be said and spoken about, is slippery; if the philosopher wants to see and grasp it, it “slips away”’ (1971: 122).

Thus, futile grasping for mastery and control, as an impossible endeavour and overblown fantasy, is for her the impotent foundation of violence. And thinking is the other side of false mastery and knowledge. Thinking thus acts as a brake on the fantasy that the world is there to be mastered. Arendt asks whether ‘[t]he activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of the specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it?’ (1971: 5). She suggests that if the ability to tell right from wrong turns out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we should demand its exercise from every sane person, regardless of intellect or ignorance. Thus when Arendt suggests, at the beginning of *The Human Condition* (1962), that we should engage in the ‘simple’ task of ‘nothing more than to think about what we are doing’, she is, in fact, setting the rather difficult task of engaging in a process that is under threat from the certainty offered by a knowing that cannot bear to contemplate its own finitude and frailty.

CONCLUSION

The call for papers for the Slow Intimacy conference described intimacy as an interaction in which a person knows something and then shows what and that they know to an Other. It is this certainty of knowing and its implication of transparency – of self and other - that I wish to problematise by pointing to those unconscious knowings that we, by definition, *cannot* show. For intimacy to become a safer space for women ‘we’ (read ‘men’) might thus need to suspend somewhat the knowledge project, in favour of the activity of thinking in service of understanding, which is inherently uncertain precisely because it is tentative, interpretive and provisional. A letting be of what/who you try to understand, which is the opposite of mastery and control, of knowledge and truth. Therefore, I propose, in an effort to prevent violence against women, that we advocate for the activity of thinking that Arendt encourages. This would entail considering, but not locking into place, the meaning of masculinity, and its expectations of mastery and control; and that we unmake and remake the masculine subject more realistically as a frail, dependent being, just like the rest of us.

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