Challenging legacies: rearticulating ‘honour’ and ‘the child’

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In this paper I trace the combined origins and variations of the trope of ‘honour’ and the figure of ‘the child’: from medieval Europe to contemporary postcolonial contexts. What remains constant are the cultural and political agendas fulfilled in the name of the child, in particular as a warrant fuelling religious and racialised persecution. This background to child protection poses considerable challenges to educationalists and advocates for children. However, engaging with these gives rise, I argue, to positive strategies for change: firstly, to illuminate the wider agendas constellated around ‘the child’ – and so better identify whose ‘honour’ (and whose interests) is at stake; secondly, to attend to the gendered and cultural dynamics that surround children, including their interplay with questions of national identity and cultural reproduction; thirdly, a feminist and social justice perspective to questions of culture and honour neither exonerates violence in the name of cultural respect, nor ignores the complexity of power relations through which such evaluations are made.
This paper is about the ‘other side’ of honour; how claims to ‘honour’ also do work that – in terms of concerns with ethics, equality and equity – dishonour the doer, and the name of whatever wider causes such work is supposedly done. Equity, in its standard dictionary definition, is ‘the spirit of justice which enables us to interpret laws rightly’ (MacDonald, 1978, p.443). It takes elaboration of one’s conceptual framework to arrive at an understanding – still less a practice – of ‘equity’. It also takes consultative and evaluative work, alongside analysis and commitment. All this work is not often done in relation to ‘the child’, whose ‘honourable’ status is so often presumed – or else, those children who depart from this notion are somehow curiously no longer designated children.

Appeals to ‘honour’ are politically ambiguous; notions of honour, respect and privilege are closely related; and set in play ideas of esteem and worth that are relational concepts and so presume cultural codes of ethics and morality. Hence, the one who is honoured is empowered to acknowledge this and so can confirm the honour of those who honour them; or else, if they refuse this then they are vulnerable to charges of dishonour, of dishonouring others by rejecting the value of their honouring. This is part of the process of recognition central to the process of social being (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). So the stakes are high; honour talk leads easily to its obverse, dishonour. Moreover, we can also see that – following the well-worn tracks of the ways language is ‘man-made’ (Spender, 1985) – how honour drifts into specifically gendered sexual understandings (around virginity and chastity). It is precisely premised upon the equation of control of women and children, of (cultural as well as biological) reproduction with the survival or annihilation of identity.

Any online search pairing the terms ‘honour’ and ‘child’ gives rise to thousands of hits on campaigns and debates about ‘honour crimes’, and the attacks and frequently murders of – usually – young women who have seemingly violated cultural codes of propriety. As feminists have pointed out, there is no ‘honour’ in killing, while no religious teaching calls for such actions. Further, the preoccupation with women’s sexuality and activity as an index of cultural or religious identification reflects a patriarchal paradigm which positions women and children as property, with women carrying the burden of cultural as well as biological reproduction (as moral guardians of children) and children carrying the burden of futurity of the community or nation (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1998; Ueno, 2004). As Anne McClintock (1995) noted, this heteropatriarchal dynamic was central to the naturalisation of colonial rule. While queer theorists such as Edelman (2004) have highlighted how the position of futurity accorded children also presumes and installs a hegemonic heterosexuality, other queer theorists have been quick to indicate the manifold ways both real embodied children and even fictional representations of childhood actually transgress some presumptions (Stockton, 2008; Bruhm & Hurley, 2004).

While usually associated with Muslims within the current political context of Islamophobia, it is important to note that ‘honour crimes’ are certainly not specific to predominantly Muslim countries or communities, nor even to communities...
from Asian and African contexts, but have a long tradition within Christendom too. Indeed, as recent researchers on ‘forced marriage’ have proposed, if we extend the definition of this practice from ‘forced’ to ‘pressurised’ marriage, then we begin to see beyond the blinkers imposed by hegemonic discourses of ‘religion’ and even ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’, to address class and economic considerations too, as they shape, interact with and intersect with discourses and practices of gender and sexuality (Chantler, Gangoli & Hester, 2009; Gill & Sundari, 2011).

In multiple ways, the child has been made to stand for, or symbolise, matters other than him or herself – whether goodness, innocence, authenticity, spontaneity, the (past, lost, or even ideal) self, or honour. From challenging the spurious naturalisations and generalisations of purportedly universal developmental psychological models, and the injustices they effect through what their abstractions either overlook and so devalue or, more explicitly, problematise and so stigmatisate, I have become resolutely suspicious of any claims about what children are ‘like’. That is not to say I am suspicious of the children, but of the claims – usually claims made about, rather than by, children: their content, their form, and the powers they maintain and, further, perform (though children are sometimes also adept at recognising and mobilising such claims too).

The ‘figure’ of the child (Castañeda, 2002) not only works to stand in for, and so often infantilises or renders subject to the list of qualities associated with being ‘child-like’, whole communities, peoples, even nations – as in aid campaigns (Hutnyk, 2004), or war reporting (Wells, 2007). In so doing it plays a central role in sustaining imperialist discourse – of intervening and knowing what is best for others. The benevolent desire to ‘help’ is politically ambivalent. Child therapists, child rights advocates and educators alike know what damage such presumptions do for children, and similar considerations apply at the level of international development – in terms of both human and economic policies (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Burman, 2008a).

There is a specific cultural-political history that has given rise to why and how the child came to ‘personify’ (as Steedman, 1995, put it) subjectivity in the western world, a history that has its immediate roots in early European modernity. But the moral-rhetorical force wielded by ‘the child’ has come to function (as Baird, 2008, commented of the Australian context) as another kind of ‘fundamentalism’. Honouring the child can be a way of maintaining an exclusionary honour of, and for, the nation.

On women and children
Feminists and childhood activists have not always seen eye to eye, for significant reasons (Thorne, 1987; Riley, 1987). This is not least because of the ways women’s interests have been equated with children’s, how women have been rendered as children in terms of status and power, and especially how the – at least rhetorical – inviolability of children’s needs has worked to regulate women as mothers, pathologising especially working class, indigenous and minoritised women whose mothering practices do not ‘fit’ the models and theories championed by professionals and policymakers (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989; Burman, 2008b, 2008c).
Feminist antiracist activism supporting women, especially minority ethnic 
women, in experiencing domestic 
violence offers some further important 
analytical frameworks. This highlights 
how children figure prominently in 
women’s decisions to stay or leave violent 
intimate relationships, and how the fear of 
children being removed from their care by 
social workers frequently prevents women 
disclosing such violence (Burman & 
Chantler, 2005; Burman, Smailes & 
Chantler, 2004; Chantler, Burman & 
Batsleer, 2003). Beyond this, conditions 
and campaigns for and about women and 
children also cannot be absolutely 
distinguished because half of all children, 
as girls, will (in most cases) grow up to be 
women. Here we encounter another 
major issue concerning actual and 
semiotic links between women and 
children: the pressure to give birth to and 
corresponding preference for, boybabies 
which is skewing gender ratios in at least 
half the world; as well as a host of 
additional issues of care and value 
affecting girls’ survival and situation 
(Arditti Duelli Klein & Minden, 1989).

This closely connects with the theme of 
honour. Feminist analysis has challenged 
the ways interpersonal violence in the 
‘home’ is seen as a private issue (so not, 
it would seem, meritng state 
intervention), and also to resist the ways 
violence was psychologised (as ‘her’ 
problem) and, in the case of black and 
minoritised women, ‘culturalised’ (as 
‘their’ problem) (Burman et al, 2004). 
More significantly, this highlighted how 
even service providers who would 
acknowledge the role of systemic issues 
(such as poverty or racism, for example) 
often failed to grapple with key state-level 
instigators of the abuse, in the form of 
precariousness of immigration status that 
worked to keep women trapped in 
abusive relationships. This could be used 
as a tactic of manipulation and violence 
as where women were told by their 
partners ‘if you try to leave me, I will 
report you and you will be deported’ 
(Chantler et al, 2003).

Thus violence, like honour, is many-
layered – simultaneously material and 
symbolic, public and private, and in 
significant ways defined and conjugated 
by the state as well as its subsidiary 
apparatuses (such as the police, social 
workers or other medical, psychological, 
educational or social support workers). 
For all the talk of ‘rescuing brown women 
from brown men’ (as Spivak, 1993, p.297, 
quipped so presciently, even before such 
tropes were mobilised to warrant the 
invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq), 
transnational discourses of ‘security' 
articulate those of gender and violence. 
The concern for women, as with children, 
often emerges as mere political window-
dressing for other, more insidious, 
agendas. Debates about forced marriage 
are a children’s and women’s issue if ever 
there was one, and this connects closely 
with questions of honour. But in the 
United Kingdom (at least), this issue is 
entirely conflated with an immigration 
control agenda – with legal and policy 
initiatives raising the age of recognition of 
marriage for immigration purposes on the 
misconceived assumption or pretext that 
this may deter what is called forced 
marriage (Burman & Chantler, 2009).

Making more connections 
So this brings us to the ways ‘the child’ 
fits with other social categories and axes 
of oppression, that is, to how a 
consideration of childhood intersects with 
other social positionings. I want to look
further back and ask some rather different questions.

First, as we have seen so far, current ideological formulations connect honour with women and especially girls, but, if the connection between child and honour is gendered, in the direction of femininity, has this always been so? And if not, what might this mean?

Second, does the trope of honour relate to children in other ways? Here we can consider whether the child as icon, personification, figure – of innocence, or identity of something precious to be protected - is also mobile and malleable to political agendas.

While this does not address practical responses to the ways specific children, girls, boys - and women too - are instrumentalised, regulated and subordinated by these discourses of honour, a first step on the road to doing this is to identify how and when these chains of symbolic associations between the notional child (or women) and notions of tradition, nation, civilisation, development and so on work, and what work they do.

To do this we go to Medieval Europe, to a time when England was ruled by a collection of feudal authorities and newly occupied by the Normans; indeed to a time when – if we are to take any note at all of the volumes of literature on the history of childhood (notwithstanding their debates and contests, Ariès, 1962; Pollack 1983), we cannot presume that children carried the meanings and indeed lived lives we would recognise as children’s lives today. Yet clearly children did figure within discourses of familial, cultural-religious and national honour.

Other tales of blood and honour
So now we turn to some tales from a colonial centre. These are cautionary tales, whose relevance is a matter for us to consider, rather than presume. Early 12th century England saw a rash of child murder accusations that came to be known as the origins of the blood libel, a motif that has structured anti-Semitic discourse ever since. The timeline begins in 1144 (with William of Norwich), with at least another five cases up to 1255, a date which saw the particularly well-known case of Hugh of Lincoln. This period coincided with a worsening of Christian-Jewish relations in England culminating in 1290 with the expulsion of Jews. This first case it is seen as ‘leading to the establishment in Europe of the sort of continuing folklore that makes the blood libel a “legend” rather than a series of related rumours’ (Bennett, 2005, p.119). And the libel ‘legend’ continued and travelled throughout Europe.

I do not have space here to review of theories of antisemitism, or the links between antisemitism and other forms of racist oppression. Nor also the interesting discussions about the historical relationships between antisemitism and misogyny (Gilman, 1993; Harrowitz, 1994; Britzman, 1997). At least, though, we can note that there are good reasons to attend to its forms and trajectories as shaping subsequent forms of racialisation and racism. Certainly this appears relevant in relation to state-level matters such as immigration control (Cohen, 1987; 1988; 2006).

A whole host of ‘explanations’, ranging from the political-economic to the local-national to the insider-outsider, to the specifically religious have been mobilised
to account for the blood libel and child murder claims:

- Folkloric work has traced how a story becomes a legend and then how that legend in its retelling by particular authorities becomes history (Bennett, 2005).
- In particular, the medieval English monk and ‘chronicler’ Matthew Paris (1200-1259) is credited with providing the apparently authoritative accounts of various of these stories of ritual murder and blood libel, although his own role in embellishing and fuelling such claims alongside documenting contemporary accounts is now well established (Bennett, 2005; Utz, 1999).
- As an expression of anti-Jewish feeling emerging during the period of the second crusade (various).
- As a means of the church generating more status and income. Utz (1999) claims that because English churches lacked saint’s relics, the clergy attempted instead to claim numerous children as martyrs (p.29) since the process of burying them inside the building and so making it a site of pilgrimage would generate importance and wealth for the church.
- As a means of the church attempting to challenge crown authority.
- As an expression of local grievances to Norman central authority (Bennett, 2005).
- As a reflection of shifting economic relations between Christians and Jews arising from changing taxation practices introduced by the crown (Stacey, 1988). This period saw a complex combination of legal changes prompted by the king’s desire to extract more and more money from his subjects, and especially from Jews (who were under such economic pressure that they would have left the country were they not prevented from doing so) and then when Christians took on such debts by buying them as bonds they too were pressurised to pay in ways that both dangerously heightened the visibility of Jews and exacerbated tensions between Christians and Jews (Stacey, 1988).
- Some accounts also highlight the coincidence of the ritual murder claims with changing religious iconography within Christianity – from an all-powerful father to cult of Virgin mother, so the dangerous male figure was displaced onto Jews (Utz, 1999, p.24-5).

These children lived, and they died unnatural deaths. William (of Norwich), Hugh (of Lincoln) and other children were killed, sometimes perhaps by accident, otherwise deliberately. But they were not killed by Jews. Indeed, there appears to be quite a lot of contemporary evidence that other parties killed the children in question, including that others confessed to the murders (Bennett, 2005). So the more interesting question is why and how the accusations took such forms, and who believed them. These accusations – sometimes supported by confessions extracted under torture – were followed by massacres and hangings. Yet few, if any, cases of blood libel have ever been upheld. That is one kind of ‘justice’, perhaps, but somehow one that fails to capture what is at issue in the generation of a myth, a legend that has lived on and
on, and sporadically reappearing, particularly in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century leaving cultural resonances available to be revived by the Nazis, and even beyond.

Close inspection shows strange anomalies, absences and contradictions both within each story and in its relationship with others. These reveal the internece ways the cultural economy of childhood related to a set of other cultural and material economies, and intersecting local, regional, national and international axes. Far from being aberrations from ordinary medieval life, analyses propose that such myths were central to its mode of existence: ‘Like other false medieval accusations against the Jews, host desecrations and well-poisonings, the myth of Jewish ritual murder developed as one of the most virulent models of reading the world in medieval Christendom’ (Utz, 1999, p.26).

In relation to the iconography of the child, (Bennett 2005) summarises how ‘suspicion fell on the Jews’, he [Thomas of Monmouth, a Norwich monk] wrote, ‘since it was agreed that no Christian would do such a thing’ (p.120). Echoes occur in fifteenth century Germany with the tales of Cesarius of Heisterbach in Germany where childhood equates with the purity that supposedly Jews hate, as indicated in particular by ‘its joyous song and appearance’ (JVL). ‘In Cesarius’ version, the child sings the Salve Regina. The Jews cannot endure this pure laudatory song and try to frighten him and stop him from singing it. When he refuses [Cesarius writes] they cut off his tongue and hack him to pieces’ (JVL, p.3). One particularly sinister feature that emerges from these stories is the theme of collective responsibility, so that punishment for any alleged crime was not only meted out upon the accused individual but also his/her entire community.

To summarise, we can find ‘reasons’ that operate at the level of personal factors (Matthew Paris, the not-so-accurate chronicler), local issues (community tensions and politics in particular towns and cities), factors relating to the church (its need for martyrs and money; and its rivalry with the crown); national level issues (changes in crown taxation policy) and international ideological and financial issues – the second crusades – which were, after all, waged against Jews as well as Muslims (and the need to pay for them). Accounts vary according to discipline and predilection as to which factors are most important. Overall, while we may allow that all are important, none can be absolutely distinguished from or separated from the others.

The issue is not to ‘explain’ the blood libel, for there can be no ‘rational’ explanation. Racism is not rational. It cannot entirely be explained, or explained away. This is one of the problems that – as antiracist educators and activists – we struggle with. To address its affective hold on our minds and bodies, we have to enter into a different regime of understanding.

**Another take on equity, and the child as icon**

Earlier I described the child as an icon. An icon is a painted object of worship, some kind of fixed, elevated, often two-dimensional object engaged with from a distance. Icons are often fragile, and (as the term ‘iconoclast’ suggests) can be broken. We can make an alternative reading of ‘equity’ alongside its
association with justice. Perhaps significantly, from the United States there is a reading of 'equity' as 'the value of a property in excess of any charges on it' (MacDonald, 1978, p.443). We are talking about psychic economies here – those that run alongside and in relation to political economies in which capitalism governs relationships, as well as objects, of production. Neoliberalism intensifies these relational aspects now that most of our manufacturing industry and raw materials are exhausted or 'outsourced'. There are also significant connections with models of childhood – both as future citizens and workers (Ailwood, 2008; Lister, 2005), as expressing the contemporary biopolitics of 'risk' (Nadeson, 2011) and in terms of the relationship with models of political subjectivity (Pupavac, 2002). According to this reading, the 'equity' of the child would be what remains when we take away the claims made about it. Or rather, equity is what emerges as 'in excess' of these claims. Yet what if this 'excess' is not merely produced through arithmetical subtraction, but rather arises as a complex effect of those 'charges', those demands on our materially and psychically pressured calls?

Part of that implicit subterranean, out-of-the-reach of rational argument quality comes from the association with children, with childhood; and in these cases with religious imagery and commitments that can be mobilised to connect and unite people, unite them against others. As the psychoanalyst Winnicott (1949) pointed out, the banal sentimentality that surrounds everyday talk about children, and is usually so unhelpful for them, indicates this kernel of feeling; such that one usually encounters hostility if one tries to subject it to analysis. It sits with other 'bedrock' assumptions about human nature, of the order that Seshadri Crooks (2000) highlighted as covertly working to equate humanity with whiteness. As such, the trope of the child plays a significant, if not exclusive, role within axes of 'racialisation'.

In her analysis of the myriad ways power enters and structures our lives, Gordon (2008) discusses Toni Morrison’s description of ‘furniture without memories’ in terms of ‘that sad and sunken couch that sags in just that place when an unrememberable past and an unimaginable future force us to sit day after day… everything of significance happens there among the inert furniture and the monumental social architecture' (pp.3-4). I want to suggest that the child works like this in our minds, something that is just there in the background, something not particularly noticeable or important, just something that furnishes or supports other – much more obvious – aspects of our lives. This figure of the child may appear ‘inert’, but this means its agency or activity is something that we have to work at, to make visible, to see what work it does in structuring how we move and shape our bodies around it; how it fits within the wider landscape of structures and relationships, what it maintains, affords and limits; that is, all that ‘…happens among the inert furniture and the monumental social architecture' (pp.3-4). Gordon’s (2008) call to be receptive to 'hauntings' speaks to a project of rendering into discourse of subjugated pasts. It connects with mine here of problematising what is taken for granted, treating with suspicion what is presumed, and struggling to be open to possibilities that current political conditions disallow explicit articulation.
Shifts, slippages and stumbling blocks
Clearly there are major conceptual and interpretive leaps in making connections between medieval English cultural and economic life and current concerns – notwithstanding the obvious resonances of this colonial history. But it is the differences thrown up by such histories, as well as any similarities, that should attract our attention. I will finish my analysis by outlining three features.

1. From boy to girl
One striking aspect of the early blood libel/child murder stories is that the focus was on boys. This is ‘accounted for’ in terms of the ways the murders were said to re-enact the crucifixion, with the boychild metonymically representing the divine child Jesus and his later fate, including his tortures and martyrdom. If the boy-god-child is the quintessential victim of this time, it is of a piece with the boychild as subject. This invites us to think about why and how it is the girlchild who now occupies this position as subject of these discourses. (We should recall that while no boys were ritually murdered by Medieval Jews probably more girls than boys are subjects of ‘honour’ crimes - see also Taefi, 2009; Gangoli, McCarry & Razak, 2009.)

Some clues are offered in the interpretations of the trajectories of the blood libel, and indeed in much later versions circulating in ballads and nursery rhymes into the twentieth century. Here the many versions of ‘little’ or ‘Sir’ Hugh are also supplemented by others such as ‘The Jew’s daughter’ where an adolescent girl lures a Christian boy into her father’s house where he is slaughtered and is bled to death. Utz (1999) notes how, over the years, ‘…together with the increasing temporal distance from the medieval source texts and the new genre-specific demands, the ritual character of the murder and the religious affiliation of the girl become less and less important as the ballads concentrate more and more on themes such as seduction, initiation or love’ (p.38). As well as being perpetrators, by the late nineteenth century girls are also victims. With the consolidation of heterosexual discourses, questions of gender and sexuality are by now much clearer concerns.

The blood libel/child murder stories provide a particular and particularly long-lived narrative strand through which we can trace certain twists and turns in the iconography, the changing images and their meanings of, and about, childhood. This shift of focus from boy to girl as quintessential child victim can be set alongside Steedman’s (1995) account of the rise of the girlchild as the personification of interiority in the early modern period. Obviously there are as many histories of the meanings and forms of gender (relations and identities) as there are of childhood, but I will risk an overgeneralisation to claim that it is primarily girls who feature in child protection cases and prototypical child charity fund-raising campaigns. The fact that child rights campaigners have to make such strenuous efforts to draw attention to the abuse of boys (e.g. Ennew, 1996; Kelly & Pringle, 2009) is a case in point. Symbolically, boys traverse the more public space of inter-community relations while – as we have seen – girls embody the private. Eriksson (2009) has recently proposed that boys’ psychological immaturity so aligns with traditional notions of childhood that the wishes and participatory rights of boys who do not conform to this notion are
often overlooked in social work interventions. Meanwhile girls now partake of gendered discourses (of femininity as well as youth) that, within prevailing understandings, command certain sets of cultural associations (including modesty, passivity, etc.). Within Christian iconography at least, they personify deity less than they represent community property and propriety. They also invite readings in terms of enclosed space, the space of the home and community. This brings me to my second point.

2. The shifting scale of the stranger and neighbour?
It is widely assumed that anti-Semitism has taken the forms that it has owing to Jews' position as one of Europe's most longstanding indigenous minorities. Discussions of the blood libel link its emergence and proliferating forms to economic and political factors affecting both the visibility of Jewish communities and the extent of contact between them and their Christian majority neighbours or compatriots. The 'ritual murder'/blood libel accusations were levelled by Christians about harm done to Christian boys by Jews.

Unlike, say, discussions of 'ritual' or 'satanic abuse' which usually concern radical Christian communities (white and black) of the global North, discussions of 'honour crimes' usually involve the gaze of the normative, and so presumed morally superior, western subject onto others. Honour crimes are presumed to occur – perhaps within 'our' midst but not in 'our' communities. They are presented as alien intrusions from elsewhere, rather than – as Spivak's (1993) early analysis of sati or widow-burning in colonial India suggests – relationally constituted responses to particular cultural-political engagements in which the western colonial spectator is complicit. The cultural register implied by the discourse of 'honour' has led many antiracist feminist activists to argue that 'honour crimes' should rather be understood and acted upon as forms of domestic violence (Siddiqui, 2003).

3. The stickiness, mobility and ambiguity of 'honour'
What is honour then? It seems to function to compose and tie communities into relations of belonging. In Sara Ahmed's (2004) terms, it is 'sticky' – it sets up particular connections or associations that are not necessary but seem difficult to avoid or shed. It sets up affective bonds of relation that connect. But at the same time as they connect you and me they also separate this 'us' that we have formed from 'others'. 'Honour' is one of the cultural modes by which culture and community is formed. You honour me, I honour you; we all feel good. It is one of those rituals of mutual confirmation that also elaborates hierarchies of distinction, according value to their associated cultures and traditions, and, further, normalising such hierarchies. There may even be useful connections in this history. In his recent book, For Honour and Fame: chivalry in England 1066-1500, Nigel Saul (2011) claims links between medieval chivalric codes and the origins of the rules of engagement in war, including the Geneva Convention – a convention which is – as the saying goes, more 'honoured' in the breach than the observance.

Significantly, honour topicalises love. Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979) discussion of anti-Semitism combines a reading of psychoanalysis with a Marxist analysis of the ravages of capitalist
accumulation and exploitation. Their analysis of the group’s relationship with the leader via the sublimation of the people’s needs for power and fulfilment posits love as well as hate as a key element: ‘uncontrolled longing is channelled into nationalistic rebellion;… Anti-Semitism is all that the German Christians have retained of the religion of love’ (p176). More recently, Ahmed (2004) has also addressed how hate crimes have explicitly been discoursed as acts of love, where the hate is depicted as originating from elsewhere, from the object of hatred, and instead subscribing to a narrative of ‘love as protection’. We might note that the 1518 page document posted online by Andrew Berwick, the anglicised penname of the Norwegian Anders Breivik, just before he went on his murderous rampage in Oslo and Utoya in June 2011 contains 80 mentions of ‘honour’. These include not only derogatory descriptions of supposedly Muslim practices but also claims about duty to, and honour of, his rendering of ‘western culture’ purified by him of ‘cultural Marxism’, ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘islamic colonization’ and based on the codes and mores of the medieval Knights Templar – whose origins like in the same period as the blood libel and ritual abuse murder cases I discussed earlier.

Hence if there is something to learn from this rather sobering and gruesome history, some of which is still reality, perhaps we can identify three positive strategies to take us forward. Firstly, it is important to avoid the abstraction structured within the notion of ‘the child’, that generalises from specific children situated in particular contexts, and instead to illuminate the wider agendas constellationed around ‘the child’. In this paper I have tried to do this by attending both to specificities of, and shifts within, trajectories of ritual abuse and honour crimes narratives. By such means we may be better equipped to identify whose ‘honour’ (and whose interests) are at stake and so act in practical ways to secure, or alternatively to counter, this.

Secondly, such work enables attention to the gendered and cultural dynamics that surround children, including the interplay between these, including how these link to questions of cultural belonging, cultural exclusion, cultural reproduction and – increasingly – national identity, even as this is also articulated in relation to transnational agencies – whether UNICEF or the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Third and finally, we can bring a feminist and social justice perspective to the question of culture and honour that neither exonerates violence in the name of cultural respect nor ignores the complexity of power relations through which such evaluations are made.

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