

Introduction: Cultural Violences

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It is no longer clear (if it ever was) that one can distinguish between a “good” and a “bad” violence, a violence that is necessary and one that is wanton, excessive and capable of in principle elimination, one that is justified by virtue of its constructive force while the other is condemned as destructive, negative. Which is not at all to say that there is no difference between forms of violence or that we must abandon the right to judge force and violence, whatever force and violence such judgements involve: quite the contrary, it means that we must hone our intellectual resources much more carefully, making many more distinctions, subtleties and nuances in our understanding than any binarised or dialectically structured model allow. And refuse the knee-jerk reactions of straightforward or outright condemnation before we understand the structure and history of that modality of violence, its modes of strategic functioning, its vulnerabilities and values.

Elizabeth Grosz,
“The Time of Violence:
Deconstruction and Value”

In her 1997 keynote address at The George Washington University’s “Cultural Violence” conference, published here as “The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value,” Elizabeth Grosz sidles up to the subject of violence. She neither mounts a frontal assault on violence nor does she rush to its defense—whatever these violent metaphors might mean in this context. Rather, she suggests that violence is itself a slippery thing: that, as the application of force, violence is always contextual,

its deployment varied, its results uncertain. Beyond this, she suggests that violence in fact may be inherent to thought itself. With constant reference to the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida, Grosz proposes that violence may be constitutive of thought and knowledge, that it may structure their very possibilities. She invites us therefore to consider violence both as a de-structive force and as a con-structive force, as both a negativity and as a positivity. But the question then arises: how are we to know the difference? How, in her words, can one “distinguish between a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ violence”?

The response that she provides functions as an imperative for academics within the human sciences—to begin with, she challenges all of us who profess to be students of culture to scrutinize the “mundane or empirical” displays of violence with which we are confronted on a daily basis in terms of their histories, contexts, and “modes of strategic functioning.” Here she suggests that to formulate effective strategies of response both to obvious and subtle deployments of force, the labyrinthine web of power relations defining such demonstrations must be carefully traced. Those who study cultural manifestations of violence must seek to understand the hows and whys of force, even as certain acts or events of violence are decried or lauded. We would add to Grosz’s cogent analysis that, given the urgency of response in particular situations, such considerations must *accompany* response, not delay or displace it. This caveat, in fact, suggests a second of Grosz’s emphases: that intellectual and academic discourse must engage in a constant process of self-interrogation and review.

“The violence of writing, of thought and of knowing,” as Grosz puts it, ensures that our own language is never “innocent.” Even as we judge acts of violence as good or bad—and we cannot avoid making such value judgments—we must be aware of the ways in which our values and judgements themselves participate in and perpetuate the structures of violence they critique, as well as create new situations of imbalance. Language, academic and otherwise, Grosz reminds us, resonates. It is always capable of exceeding our present intentions and the contextual boundaries of its production with ensuing ramifications that cannot be predicted. Thus, Grosz charges the Academy to explore and engage with not only “external” manifestations of violence, but to be aware of “internal” dynamics of force as well, of its own roles in the production and perpetuation of violence. Indeed, that there is an “inside” to the “Ivory Tower” which delimits it and cleanly separates it from some “outside” is among the assumptions that Grosz’s approach to violence contests. Her emphases on the “spaces between,” on undecidability and uncertainty, reveal the manner in which the articulation of boundaries—disciplinary, geographical, nominational, and otherwise—is always a violent process which seeks, in Derrida’s terms, to “mystify” its origins, to conceal its present lack of foundation.

The papers in this volume respond to Grosz’s dual call for a rigorous interrogation of structures of violence and simultaneous self-reflexive Academic vigilance, and can be said to address the relationships between violence and cul-

ture in two ways. The first approach to this relationship figures violence as a problem of epistemology, that is, as a problem of *knowing*. Essays in this provisional category attend to the failures of individuals and cultures to examine how they articulate and order knowledge. Violence, it is implied, results from uninterrogated assumptions about the workings of thought, language and the world. The second approach to the relationship between violence and culture addresses the violence of *rhetoric*: that is, how violence results from the interplay between language and knowledge. Essays in this provisional category are more interested in tracing interconnections between language, knowledge, and power than in addressing disciplinary structures of knowledge. However, in their attention to and questioning of cultural patterns and practices, all the essays contained here are invested in the project of the Human Sciences—the project of questioning traditional disciplinary boundaries of university curricula and institutionally-established structures of knowledge.

As organizers of the “Cultural Violence” conference, we sought to participate in this endeavor of the human sciences by assembling members from many different academic disciplines and backgrounds to explore the ways in which something called “culture” could act as a “violent” force both to construct and marginalize difference, and to constrain individual expression. Our objectives were the following: to address the manifest displays of violence with which we are confronted on a daily basis, to examine the unspoken ways in which “culture” undergirds conflict and fosters violence between individuals and among groups, and to consider the discursive boundaries of various disciplines. The definitions of the terms themselves, “culture” and “violence,” were left open to contestation. This strategy was intentional—we felt that the inevitable tensions generated through the juxtaposition of diverse disciplinary and methodological approaches to each would performatively—and productively—highlight the different ways disciplines consider these two terms and the violences of Academia itself: among them the “parsing” of knowledge, the imposition of definitions, and the articulation or acknowledgement of power and force within each discipline.

The papers included in this volume, gathered from the 1997 “Cultural Violence” conference and supplemented by selections from Kansas State University’s 1998 “Violence Incorporated” symposium, represent a spectrum of discourses and disciplines that we might variously term philosophy, literary criticism, cultural studies, legal studies, and women’s studies. In many ways, these essays engage and compliment, as well as contest one other. We have sought to arrange the essays so as to foreground these convergences and divergences. At times, the approaches to the subject of violence of/in culture from what are traditionally considered to be separate disciplines foregrounds the arbitrariness of such divisions within the academy—the violence of parsing. At other moments, the discrepant approaches to the subject within the same discipline reveal a different violence—that of the subsumption of difference in the name of uniformity. The plurality of voices included here, taken as a whole, illustrates the violence of categorization in general—categoriza-

tion which, importantly, strives to conceal its own contingency. We are aware that manifold connections and disconnections exist between each essay included here, and that our imposed order is one of many ways to structure the reading experience toward certain ends. We encourage the reader to make other connections and debate our designations accordingly.

We begin with Elizabeth Grosz's keynote presentation, "The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Violence," in which Grosz seeks to understand violence as the condition for the possibilities of thought and knowledge themselves. Violence is thus conceived of, from one perspective, as a form of "enabling violation," to borrow from Gayatri Spivak—as something which simultaneously forecloses certain possibilities while opening up others. Remaining within the discipline or discourse of "philosophy," we next turn to Ken Itzkowitz's "To Witness Spectacles of Pain: the Hypermorality of Georges Bataille," whose close reading of Bataille's work demonstrates the ways in which moral systems of valuation themselves can function as violent forces of constraint. Itzkowitz observes that,

For Bataille, we need to abandon the assumption that the rules of morality are absolute, that they are productive in all contexts, rather than to regard them as limited in their application to our lives. We do better by opening up to the options of a "rightness" morality rejects and a "wrongness" morality accepts, in this way making it possible to employ 'immoral' values when these have life-affirming effects, and to refuse 'moral' values for the same life-affirming purpose.

Bataille, in his "Nietzschean revaluation of ordinary moral values," thus serves as a radical example of an intellectual engaged in the process of scrutinizing violence called for by Grosz.

Zrinka Stahuljak's "The Violence of Neutrality—Translators In and Of the War (Croatia, 1991-1992)" straddles the line between considerations of "theoretical" violence—that is, violence as a question of epistemology, and "empirical" violence—that is, concrete deployments of force against identifiable populations. In this piece, the European Community's position of "neutrality" is undermined as the violent erasure of the translator's testimony is revealed. The translator, Stahuljak argues, is placed in an impossible position. She or he is asked to convey or communicate meaning without loss and without interpretation—in short, to remain "neutral." Yet, what the process of translation reveals is that one can never be neutral in respect to language, that meaning and interpretation are inherently intertwined, that language itself is never "neutral." As Paul de Man proposes in his consideration of Walter Benjamin, what the attempt at translation reveals is in fact the disarticulation of the original, the way in which every text is open to multiple interpretations and how determinate meaning is always imposed through a forceful act of will which excludes other competing interpretations.

With Lisa Garbus's essay "The Unspeakable Stories of *Shoah* and *Beloved*," the ability of language to communicate explicit meaning is itself called into question. In a striking formulation, Garbus proposes that what lit-

erature does is *fail*, that “Literature uses language as the vehicle to arrive at the very place where language breaks down.” However, in this failure of language paradoxically lies its success—the breakdown of the Symbolic structures of language gestures toward the Real, that which is outside of language, that which can only be experienced as loss. The failure of literature opens us to this constitutive outside and propels us toward mourning. For Garbus, this mourning is also a form of “leaving,” a way to accept loss as loss. As with Stahuljak’s essay, Garbus is concerned on a basic level with the issue of the communication of determinate meaning. Her essay thus poses questions of epistemology and narration: how is it that a culture “knows” an historical event? What is outside language? And how do artists reconfigure structures of knowledge and memory through their narration of events?

David Hoegberg’s “Principle and Practice: The Logic of Cultural Violence in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” also performs a textual close reading in order to extrapolate the larger argument that acts of violence often spring from “unexamined assumptions and contradictions within the culture and shared by a majority of its members.” As per his title, he explores the confusion that arises when discrepancies exist between a culture’s system of morals and its specific sanctioned practices. Hoegberg’s conclusion is that Achebe provides a recipe for “positive cultural change,” change which can be realized through the contextual analysis of acts of violence. As in Garbus’s essay, the author or artist here is a figure who is in a position to challenge a culture’s conception of itself, exposing its contradictions and inconsistencies, calling attention to its ways of knowing—or not knowing—which can lead to violence.

Steve Macek, in his “Places of Horror: Fear of the City in Recent Hollywood Film,” and Greg Wahl, in his “‘I Fought the Law (and I Cold Won!’): Hip-hop in the Mainstream,” shift the terrain to the “frontlines” of popular culture. Macek analyzes representations of the decaying urban environment in contemporary cinema, especially in *Seven*, in order to argue that such depictions function ideologically along class and racial lines to reinforce suburban hostility toward allocation of resources for inner cities. He proposes that movies such as *Seven*, which depict the inner city as a zone of “ambient fear,” function to decontextualize violence and thereby mystify the sources and nature of real social and economic problems faced by cities in contemporary cultures. Macek is here attentive to the ways in which discourse is manipulated to support particular political agendas. Greg Wahl similarly attempts to look at the development of hip-hop music within the context of the larger cultural climate. His consideration of the rise to prominence of selected hip-hop acts eschews blanket condemnation or valorization of the genre on the basis of violent, misogynist, or racist rhetoric in favor of a more nuanced analysis of the “subtle dynamics of socioeconomics, race, and power in consumer society” which these groups successfully confronted and manipulated in their rise to prominence.

Mary Kate Kelly examines a different manifestation of racial spectacle in her “Performing the Other: A Consideration of Two Cages,” which explores the con-

struction of “otherness” and the discourse of primitivism in the work of 1930s phenomenon Josephine Baker and in a contemporary performance piece by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Kelly’s essay critiques and interrogates the fascination with “authenticity” that exists in Western culture and her analysis focuses on how the work of these artists’ successfully or unsuccessfully challenges racist cultural beliefs. Akin to Garbus and Hoegberg, Kelly addresses the critical interventions by artists and cultural critics as they challenge a culture’s concept of Other and Self and call attention to racist ideologies.

Sung-Uk Hwang’s “Ecological Panopticism: The Problematization of the Ecological Crisis” explores subject formation from a different perspective and argues forcefully that the rhetorical devices of “greenism,” the discourse of “ecological crisis,” shape ecological concerns in such a way as to reinforce current relations of power. He proposes that “Ecological panopticism, or the modality of disciplinary power over the green movement, serves to maintain present relations of power by forging subjects themselves and fabricating their interests.” Hwang concludes that the language of ecological crisis functions to obscure the historical roots of contemporary ecological concerns and the inherent oppositional relationship between conservation of resources and capitalism.

Jennifer Wood’s essay, “Refined Raw” confronts the violence of language in a separate, yet related, domain of knowledge—the Law. She contends that narratives presented as “victim-impact statements” in homicide cases effectively disguise the authority of the legal system and the state power which it upholds. In contrasting the “innocence” of the victim with the “guilt” of the defendant, Wood argues that certain racially-inflected definitions of innocence and guilt are invoked and reinforced with dramatic consequences. Furthermore, as Wood details, “The state in effect exploits the victim’s weakness by using it to impose and legitimize the defendant’s death sentence. Although the victim’s weakness legitimizes the state’s power to execute its citizens, rarely is the victim’s weakness recognized as an alibi for the power of the state.” As in Hwang’s consideration of the discourse of greenism, Wood explores the relationship between power and language and exposes how particular rhetorical practices can function violently to discipline and control both groups and individual subjects.

Anne E. Shaw and Alane C. Spinney characterize their study from the start as an examination of the relationship between “rhetorical” and “real” violence. Using examples of sidewalk protesters from three Milwaukee clinics where abortions are performed, they propose that “the highly iterative nature of the demonstrators’ rhetoric normalizes cultural conflict around clinics, establishing a backdrop against which clinic violence can occur.” Violence is directly linked to the foreclosure of dialogue: repetition is used to prevent communication and “reinforce[s] absolutist rhetoric,” which, in turn, escalates into violence. As in all of the essays included in this volume, the foreclosure of dialogue or the refusal to interrogate language and cultural presuppositions is revealed to structure violent possibilities.

If one theme can be said to resonate across the diverse thematic, disciplinary and methodological approaches to the subject of “cultural violence” included here, it is that the potential for violence is heightened when individuals, groups, and whole cultures fail to follow the Socratic maxim and “know themselves,” that is, to examine their practices and values and languages. The potential for conflict becomes most acute, the scholars included here argue, when internal inconsistencies exist, when, to refer to Hoegberg, unexamined assumptions and contradictions—discrepancies between principles and practices—structure responses in the absence of understanding and communication. The obligation of the scholar, artist, or critic artist then is to work to expose these contradictions and inconsistencies, to examine and attempt to understand relationships of power and the ideological assumptions which structure violent possibilities. In conclusion, we can do no better than again to quote from Elizabeth Grosz: as students of culture and individuals committed to combatting the violent subjugation of individuals, “we must hone our intellectual resources much more carefully, making many more distinctions, subtleties and nuances in our understanding than any binarised or dialectically structured model allow. And refuse the knee-jerk reactions of straightforward or outright condemnation before we understand the structure and history of that modality of violence, its modes of strategic functioning, its vulnerabilities and values.”