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Violence

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Editorial

As part of an effort to grapple with the meaning of violence, Hannah Arendt argued that it was curious how infrequently violence was taken up for special consideration in conversations of history and politics, remarking that “this shows to what an extent violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all” (8). While we are not suggesting that violence has eluded the critical eye in the time since Arendt’s argument, there is something remarkably resonant about the idea that violence is taken-for-granted as part of human existence, and thus—for privileged citizens protected from its affects—invisible.

In this issue, the contributors explore how violence continues to define and shape social, political, and cultural terrains. In what follows, we explore what it means to talk about violence and follow this with a general introduction to the pieces in this special issue that tease out the various locations of violence and its representations across different spaces.

Defining Violence

In general in western society, we think of violence in its most manifest forms: war,

terrorism or massacres. But violence operates in many forms, some of them more subtle or latent and arguably more destructive given their structural and far-reaching character.

Some forms of violence are easily recognised, others decontextualised and depoliticised through complex cultural processes of normalisation and denial (Brison). Violence can become a spectacle, an aestheticised representation, or it can be reduced to banality when its horror and trauma is refracted through everyday lives and spaces which are shaped by violent systems and ideologies (Arendt). Notions of trauma, spectatorship, testimony, and witnessing circulate through narratives of violence. Ideas of “civilisation” implicitly and explicitly reference competing discourses of violence and put them to work in damaging ways, often in the service of ideals (liberalism, for example) that mask the very violence that supports them. Even those discourses that claim most ardently to uphold principles of safety and inclusion (for example, multiculturalism) are impeded by or invested in systems of violence, and in fact they depend on it for their very legitimacy. For those of us living and working in white, patriarchal, settler states, it is inevitable that our cultural and material conditions are underpinned by a systemic and perpetual condition of violence.

Even for those of us who feel generally safe, violence is all around us, shaping how we live, work, think, feel, and act. However, violence is not equally experienced throughout the world or within our own communities, nor is the absence of violence. Ultimately, feeling safe from violence is often a marker of privilege and safety often comes at the price of violence enacted upon others.

What makes violence so powerful as a force with material and symbolic consequences is both this articulation with privilege and its resultant banal expression in everyday spaces. Projects of racial, gendered, sexed, classed and ableist exclusion and violence operate below the surface of conscious registration for those not immediately impacted by them, allowing violence to elude critical interrogation. In this respect, even the idea of safety is only possible through a guarantee of violence, a guarantee written into the lands themselves, the institutions of the state, and the discourse of Western liberal traditions.

Both victims and perpetrators of violence differ in their visibility. In easily recognised forms of violence, there is usually an actor who is violent and a victim of that violence. However, even in the most obvious cases, there are examples of missing perpetrators. For example, domestic violence is often discussed using passive language that centres the victim and erases the perpetrator (Katz and Earp). Or in the case of police violence against minorities, even where there is compelling evidence of police brutality, legal systems fail to find and sentence perpetrators (e.g. Chernega; Waters).

This process of erasure is itself a further act of violence that places blame on victims, leading outsiders to question why they didn't take action to prevent their victimisation. However, increasing attention has been given to these subtle erasures; for example, Jane Gilmore's book *Fixed It: Violence and the Representation of Women in the Media* calls the mainstream media to task for their representation of gender violence as a problem

women experience, rather than a problem perpetrated by men.

This issue of *M/C Journal* invited responses to the theme of “violence,” understood broadly, as it operates through various social, cultural, institutional, and affective domains. The articles included here demonstrate the complexity of different forms of violence. They cover terrain such as symbolic violence and the discursive, political and social domination that shapes contemporary or historical realities; pedagogical violence and the operation of power and control over the means of intellectual, social and cultural production in spaces of learning; physical violence and the attendant damages that this entails; technological violence and the ways in which media technologies facilitate or resist violence; and violence as a subject of public interest in forms including news media, true crime, and entertainment.

This issue’s articles intersect in interesting ways which encourage readers to think about multiple aspects of violence. We explore some of the common themes below, and in doing so introduce readers to the rich collection of ideas included in this issue.

Enacted Violence

It is interesting to consider what we can learn from violence by thinking about the perspectives of those who perpetrate it, and those who experience it. As discussed above, sometimes these agents are easier to spot. Larissa Sexton-Finck’s contribution reminds us that the most visible forms of violence aren’t necessarily the most damaging. In her essay, she explores her experience of being in a car crash. The obvious perpetrator of violence is the driver of the car that caused the crash, but as we read through her experience we see that she was victimised in many ways by those who filmed her experience in order to sell it to the news. These ‘citizen journalists’ are likely to think of their work as important and not as enacting violence on others, but Sexton-Finck’s firsthand experience of being filmed highlights the violence of the act.

Similarly, some practices are so commonplace that it is easy to overlook the violence inherent within them. Yirga Woldeyes gives us the example of museum collections, a taken-for-granted effect of colonisation, which perpetuates an ongoing violent epistemic power differential. This is another example of violence with an invisible perpetrator; museums consider themselves keepers of knowledge, protectors of culture and heritage. Where collecting is considered an act of violence, it is typically perceived as action from the past, rather than an ongoing act of violence with continuing experiences of victimisation. However, as Woldeyes’ article makes clear, the violence of the act reverberates for generations.

For Ailie McDowall, violence works in subtle ways that are both unconscious or explicit. Exploring pre-service teacher engagements with an Indigenous education subject, McDowall speaks to the limits of intention (Milner) by highlighting how the good intentions of pre-service teachers can result in ideological violence through the bringing of Indigenous peoples and knowledges into Western

epistemic comprehension as part of an effort to know. Further, while educators are often called to envision “preferred futures” (Hicks) in their teaching practice, McDowall shows us that ethical calls to teach and live responsibly and critically in the face of colonial logics results in a deferral of that responsibility to the future, what McDowall identifies as an act of violence.

Representations of Violence

Social understandings of violence are both shaped by, and influence, representations of violence in media, culture, and the arts. Such representations can themselves be forms of symbolic violence, that is, “violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it” (Bourdieu 17).

As mechanisms for transmitting normalised ideas of politics and peoples, representations can effect such symbolic violence by disseminating hegemonic notions of exclusion/inclusion, safety/harm, and justifications and logics for violence. Indeed, as Dervin argues, “representations do have an ideological component and [...] an exercise of power is always present in representations” (185).

Yet, we are wise to remember that representations, the projection of power, and the ideological legitimation of symbolic violence that may inhere in representations can neither guarantee truth nor action as people exercise agency and speak and act back to and against those very representations of “truth”. The authors in this issue work within this tension, highlighting efforts by some to either create and deploy representation as an instrument of legitimating violence or critically engaging representations of violence as part of efforts to dismantle and surfaces the symbolic violence transmitted through various works.

When considering the symbolic violence of media, it is crucial that we consider who is doing the representation, and how that representation is mediated. Social media (as discussed in the contribution by Milton and Petray), has different characteristics to products of the culture industry (Adorno) such as commercial news reporting (Sexton-Finck) or cinematic films (McKenzie-Craig). And these are different again in the literary genre of the autobiographical novel (Nile) or the form of the public testimony (Craven).

Some representations of violence allow for more agency than others. Creative works by victims of violence, for example that discussed by Sexton-Finck, challenge viewers and draw our attention to the ways the commodification of the culture industry (Adorno) makes us complicit as spectators in acts of violence.

In a similar way, creative representations of enacting violence can cause productive discomfort by going against stereotypes and norms about who perpetrates violence. Carolyn McKenzie-Craig's contribution compares representations of

gender and violence that defy expectations. McKenzie-Craig considers the Swedish film *Män som hatar kvinnor* (released in English as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) alongside work from non-binary artist, Cassils, and her own creative works. In all three of these works, women and non-binary agents enact violence in ways that unsettle viewers, forcing contemplation about the nature of violence.

Likewise, literature provides a fruitful arena for examining violence as a cultural force. Indeed, post-colonial scholars have shown us that literature has been a tool of violence, and has, in contrast, also been used to “write back” to oppressive ideologies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, after Salman Rushdie). Richard Nile’s essay considers the power of violence to echo through families in cases of intergenerational trauma. In considering an autobiographical novel that takes the form of a family drama, Nile traces the reverberations of real wartime violence and family violence and shows how fictionalising such trauma can reveal new ways of looking at it, both for the author of such a work and for the historians and literary scholars who examine such work.

In the article by Milton and Petray, the authors explore how violence mediates and regulates ideas of belonging as it is represented through a lens of citizenship via social media. Through an exploration of a digital space, Milton and Petray highlight the bifurcation of people into us/them, a split predicated on desires to protect the sanctity of “us” and “our” citizenship through the use of violent discourse to normalise the divide. What is perhaps most striking is the reminder that categories of inclusion are powerfully framed through everything from the banality of seemingly mundane language and everyday languages of race (Billig; Hill) through to more abhorrent language and far reaching discourses of normalised violence. Through this, Milton and Petray draw our attention not just to the manifestation of violence online but also its use as a strategy for regulating inclusion into the deemed “legitimate” community through the very act of representing people as either legitimate citizens or not.

As who counts as a citizen in need of state protection is contested, so is what counts as violence. In “The Last of the Long Takes: Feminism, Sexual Harassment, and the Action of Change”, Allison Craven reminds us that the naming of systemic violence remains a crucial early step in the fight against it, and goes some way toward dismantling its taken-for-grantedness. In considering Lauren Berlant’s notion of the “diva citizen” in relation to Anita Hill’s 1991 testimony of sexual harassment, Craven reframes the #metoo movement as a call to action to which, crucially, the body politic must respond. Craven draws our attention to the fact that the second-wave feminist movement’s naming of workplace sexual harassment created the conditions for a public that would hear and witness these later testimonies.

In naming violence where we see it and considering violence from various and multiple scholarly dimensions, the essays in this issue refuse to shelter it beneath the veil of the everyday, the arbitrary, the taken for granted. In explicitly naming violence, they bring it out into the open, and they allow us to consider alternatives. Creative works, for example, offer an opportunity to play with the meanings of violence, and to reimagine

what it means to be an aggressor or a victim (McKenzie-Craig; Sexton-Finck). Through such explorations, these pieces collectively draw to our attention the possibility and need for futures different from the histories and present that we inherit and live within today. Together, the arguments, insights and calls for something different compel us to confront that which some seek not to discuss, that which some of us might take for granted as a condition of everyday life. Through such calls, we are asked to confront what it means to live and relate ethically together for something and somewhere different.

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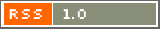
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