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SPEAKING OF VIOLENCE

Introduction

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Introduction: Speaking of Violence

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Claudia Rankine's 2014 book of poetry, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, features a list of the names of black Americans killed by police brutality and other acts of racist violence. The list fades to grey at the bottom, suggesting continued losses. Of these deaths Rankine writes: "Because white men can't police their imaginations, black people are dying." This year has seen the names of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, George Floyd, David McAtee, and many others added to that list, highlighting the systematic racism, misogyny, and transphobia experienced by people of color in the United States.

This year, protests focus attention on the nation's ongoing racist profiling and police brutality, with activists calling for the defunding of police forces and expressing grief and rage through demonstrations, boycotts, and civil unrest. A study led by Rutgers sociologist Frank Edwards finds that about 1 in 1,000 black men and boys in America can expect to die at the hands of police. This rate is 2.5 times higher than the likelihood for white men and boys (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2019). Officers who murder often receive light suspensions and administrative support, with others resigning in solidarity when homicide charges are brought. Despite widespread corruption and failure to address racism in policing, this epidemic is still officially being denied by public figures and political leaders as a widespread or systematic problem. Over the last several weeks, black communities, along with activists and allies, have once more united in protest to collectively grieve these losses and advocate for change. Although a renewed faith in community action and solidarity has emerged from these most recent tragedies, many struggle to maintain hope for progress in the face of powerful systematic forms of violence and inequity. Social justice workers are engaged in decades-old debates about the necessity for violent revolution, the presence of purity testing and superficial and performative forms of activism, and the further marginalization of women and trans people of color within the human rights context.

National and local governments and law-enforcement agencies have violently retaliated against even peaceful protestors with the use of excessive force, tear-gas, rubber bullets, and in some instances gunfire. President Trump has called for the mobilization of the National Guard against civilians, an act which former defense secretary James Mattis calls a violation of constitutional rights. In the press, America's tensions are symbolized visually in surreal images of protestors demonstrating at the CNN headquarters and the fence outside the White House, now reclaimed by memorial art for black men and women killed by the police.

Globally, we face the intimate enemy of contagious disease in the form of covid-19, and this epidemic outbreak has also thrown into relief structural inequities in medical care access, financial security, and anti-Asian racism. Quarantines and public health restrictions have exacerbated mental health issues for many, who feel isolated in this time of acute unrest.

In the face of these crises, the familiar questions raised in this issue feel increasingly urgent: upon which systems, psychologies, and cultural framings does violence depend? What kinds of resistance are possible? What can we learn from how violence is represented in movies, art, literature, and politics? And, perhaps most significantly, how can healing take place in a world that is so deeply ruptured? This year's contributors examine violence in film, history, and literature, across a variety of geographical and historical contexts. The first section begins with a study of the embodied experience of violence, as Joyce Sabreena Niles writes about the scarred bodies of Tamil women in Sri Lankan diasporic Tamil women's writing. Scars become both a means of bearing witness to and recording inscribed acts of violence and a resistance to the valorization of pure or unsullied female bodies. Harry Olafsen then examines Jordan Peele's horror film *Us* through the lens of Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Peele uses the figure of the doppelgänger to dramatize racial relations between the "aboveground" people and the "Tethered." The unique status of the doppelgänger as both like and unlike the hegemonic culture opens up an uncanny space for critique. The third article returns to sexual violence, which Dr. Swatie argues is treated as a cathartic spectacle in the Bollywood movies *Article 15* and *Section 375*. Both the familial and the male gaze are used to sympathetically align the viewer with the films' male protagonists, creating a politics of identification that promotes fictions about rape by framing them as truthful within the film's discourse. With this issue's final full-length article, Thi Nhu Trang Nguyen uses the Confucian concept of violence as the disharmony of a system to look at love and femininity in Tony Bui and Tran Anh Hung's films. She finds that depictions of the traditional Vietnamese woman which emphasize silence, sacrifice, and endurance, can, while they are seemingly conservative, actually enable a means of resistance to the expression of violence.

The second section features Lydia Craig's review of Deborah A. Durham Thomas' *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair*. Craig discusses Thomas' strategy for understanding historical inequity, which Thomas calls "Witnessing 2.0." Thomas combines political advocacy with archival materials to understand the forced removal of Christopher "Dudus" Coke from West Kingston, Jamaica to the United States. Witnessing 2.0, which involves a feminist practice of intersubjective and deeply relational listening and watching, suggests one possible response to violence that enables us to "generate meaningful forms of repair... through the 'real love' of deep recognition" (Thomas 19). Following Craig's review are two essays nominated from the University of Iowa's 2019 Craft Critique Culture Conference (CCC). Maddison McGann's essay takes a lighter turn as she studies snark in the context of 19th-century British print culture, arguing that the serial publication format made it possible for authors to adapt to criticism during the publication process, a form of collaborative creation that embeds print review culture in Victorian book production. The issue's closing piece by Maria Capecechi understands Solmaz Sharif's 2017 book of poetry *Look: Poems* in the context of Judith Butler's "grievable lives." Grievability is a form of subject recognition that creates a frame of visibility to deny dehumanizing cultural narratives. As she reimagines the lyric form through documentary collage, Sharif is able to humanize the subjects of her poetry, contesting a Western imperialist framework that would constitute them as necessary casualties of war. These

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essays have in common a concern with the human response to violence, grief and loss. By speaking of violence, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of both its structural and intimate forms and to share in the collective search for change, healing, and hope.

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