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...we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves...like a suicide.

— Franz Kafka, qtd. in Cixous 17

Toward Death and Violence — Rhetorical and Creative Potential

a reader's text

Giovana Driussi

I wrote this essay for readers, hoping to provoke, inspire, enrage and enjoy. Death and violence have been painful and productive forces in my life, and specifically in my writing. In this essay I share some of these experiences and relate them directly to writing, as well as public, political, rhetorical, and historical topics. My desire is to affect personal and public reflection, and to display rhetorical agency in both spheres, thus demonstrating that such divisions, and most if not all binaries, are social constructs that beg for challenge.

1. Throes

I want to write about the destructive power of simplified thinking, an act of cognition that most often creates a psychic reality of binary oppositions. Judith Butler, in her book *Precarious Lives*, addresses both of these concepts, writing specifically about "anti-intellectualism" and the dangers of "reductive binaries" within the framework of post-9/11 America. Rather than positioning these ideological tendencies around a specific event as Butler does, I will explore their implications primarily from a subjective and personal vantage point from which I cannot escape my personal history nor my identity as a citizen and life-long resident of North America. Additionally, I will focus my efforts toward uncovering ways in which these mental tendencies limit progress and specifically force, or at least encourage, our contemplations away from the uncomfortable subject of death and violence. I maintain that there is creative potential in many acts of violence and the contemplation of mortality, and the current socially sanctioned disregard for these facts is immoral and promulgates a nation closed to many opportunities for change and progress, creating a citizenship unwilling to take

corrective measures to effect international policy or allow for personal healing, and does so by maintaining delusional notions of clear categorical distinctions, unexamined binaries, and lies.

"For my purposes death represents a brutal ripping, a savage passage from one consciousness to an unknown, a border crossing that is most often surrounded by rage, wailing, or panic."

Before continuing I need to address the fact that I will, at times, write in terms that place concepts in binary opposition to each other; for this apparent contradiction I find support and approval for personally writing in binary terms from Patricia Williams, who, while examining social perceptions of herself, does so in dualistic terms by identifying "a paradigm of larger social perceptions that divide public from private, black from white, dispossessed from legitimate" (7). I feel this explanation applies to what I will write, topics that at their generative center rely heavily on boundaries expressed as dualities and traversed often without invitation and in the midst of massive struggle.

2. Breathe

Oh, reader. I hope those paragraphs made sense! I'd be embarrassed if you knew how much hand-wringing, coffee, laundry and completely unnecessary reading I've done in the name of "research" just to wretch up that matted hairball of an introduction. I'm overwhelmed by the number of ideas and relationships that are multiplying in my mind, increasing and morphing even as I try to commit them meaningfully onto a page. I'm so confused I think the last few words I looked up in a dictionary were "that," "played," and "public." I am depending on Ann E. Berthoff's belief that "Meanings don't just happen: we make them; we find and form them. In that sense, all writing courses are creative writing courses.... Meanings don't come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed reseeing the ways out of chaos" (69-70). I'm relying on the productive value of chaos. Like I said, I will sometimes write in binaries, and I feel "chaos" occupies the same space as violence and death. "Oh, but death is still," you argue? No. For my purposes death represents a brutal ripping, a savage passage from one consciousness to an unknown, a border crossing that is most often surrounded by rage, wailing, or panic.



Woman Laying on Bed in Underwear

3. Body

You should also know that what I write is completely dictated by my personal biography, created by two people whose histories and lineages are convoluted in part because their lives were driven by reactions to sociopolitical, economic, and geopolitical realities.

4. Tearing



disfigured breasts

From my mother's side I know little; hers was a fragmented family with a long, unbroken line of fertile, unapologetic adulteresses who never stayed in one man's home very long. The feminist explanation for this type of rebellious behavior is obvious and I won't bore you with it. Rather, what made her impact most relevant was her choice to care for her dying mother in our home; her mother died noisily and slowly of emphysema. Within months of the end of that ordeal, my mother's cancer furiously came out of remission with its own collection of sounds, smells, and days of delirium. I think those long years of living amongst the dying *created* in me an impetus to write. I think it explains why I get petrified sometimes when faced with a blank page, or why I have to rewrite paragraphs endlessly because so much *death gave me* too many words. Helen Cixous writes, "The first book I wrote rose from my father's tomb.... it was the only thing I had to write... the only *asset*.... And I said to myself that I wouldn't have written... I wouldn't have had death, if my father had lived. I have written this several times: he gave me death. To start with" (11-12; 4th ellipsis in original). And Thomas Bernhard describes the birth scene of his writing:



This path took me past a butcher's shop. Open doors, axes, knives, cleavers, tidily arranged, slaughtering instruments, some bloody, others shining and clean, slaughtering pistols, then the noise of the horses collapsing, those huge open bellies vomiting bones, pus, blood. ... My grandmother always took me with her. Moreover, in the mornings I walked alone in front of the cemetery. In the afternoon, she took me to visit the morgue. She picked me up saying "Look, a woman lying there. Nothing but corpses." (qtd. in Cixous 8)

5. Devouring

"Fostering historical amnesia and refusing to acknowledge the violent and hegemonic nature of their own ideology allow those who have historically run this country to perpetuate the myth that this is a democratic society" (Leistyna and Sherbloom 14). My father's position (and that of his parents) is far more complicated in terms that define oppressed and oppressor. My father's personal life, and that of his immigrant parents, complicates the ordinarily clear distinction of powerful center and

marginalized Other. Both of his parents willingly, enthusiastically, surrendered their first languages and abandoned their former identities; my grandfather retained just enough of his Italian self to process through the American deep fryer that magically turned Giovanni into Johnny, a new self, which, among other things, he eventually used to open "Johnny's Italian Cottage," the kind of warm and cozy pizzeria with red checkered table cloths that has become part of the American-constructed Italy.



Johnny

It is, however, important to historicize the years of which I write, because although this particular stereotype remains, currently America's construct of "Italian" has broadened to include that which is exotic and alluring—images exploited by commercialism. But I am writing of the mid-40s, the midst of World War II, during which time the only acceptable Italian Other was non-threatening, less intellectually developed, and descended from a Dionysian culture driven more by a potentially self-destructive primal Nature than the highly cultured American society. Edward Said addresses this phenomenon, but he does so by distinguishing between European and non-European "portions of mankind," and in so doing ignores the various historical applications of his own theory. I consider the new identity my grandfather created, strongly influenced by "[r]ace theory, ideas about primitive origins and primitive classifications... these were elements in the peculiar amalgam of science, politics, and culture whose drift, almost without exception, was always to raise Europe or a European race to dominion over non-European portions of mankind" (232). This theory applies to any culture we have positioned as Other, as parts of Europe were during WWII; socially constructed categories are not fixed.



Poster for US Naval Aviation

6. Mori

My grandfather insisted on one primary rule for the house: English only, surrendering his native Italian and my grandmother's Spanish — of which she spoke not at all. Aneil Rallin quotes Ana Castillo: "Many of us, too many of us, do suffer the anxiety induced by the pressure to speak 'correctly'... whatever our relationship to language, all mestizas are products of the hegemony that has instilled in us contempt for our cultural identity" (2).

7. Crossings

My father eventually joined the U.S. Navy, paid for a college education with the G.I. bill, and spent almost his entire professional life working for the Department of Defense for that same country, that same department that once deployed troops against his father's Italy. Who oppresses whom? The lines of division are so fuzzy they give me a headache. With my father and grandfather as examples of indefinable categories, I contend there are no simple or smug moral absolutes. I challenge popular and uncritical calls for peace that stem from a false categorization of good and bad; I insist that there is productive, progressive, and creative potential in chaos, violence, and death. To this end we should consider bumper stickers and graffiti.

8. Entropy

Whenever I'm stuck in traffic and becoming unbearably irritated, seeking distraction, I often end up reading bumper stickers. This is never a good idea. They are just little sound-bite size groups of words with seemingly shallow meanings, yet they often aggravate me a great deal. The ones that bother me the most are usually flat, unexamined pleas to the public from well-meaning, though terribly short-sighted, liberal-minded drivers: "War is Bad for Children and God's other Creatures," or "Imagine World Peace." What would happen if we all walked around with visions of world peace? Would this urge us to examine how our foreign policy is making such visions impossible for nations all around the globe? No. It asks that we don't acknowledge the piles of dead bodies, the bombs, and the ugliness of reality that people in other parts of the world endure regularly.



"September 11, 2001 - Best Photos - 6308.jpg"

Butler writes, "the United States needs to think about how its own political investments and practices help to create a world of enormous rage and violence" (14). To which I add a succinct summary of Noam Chomsky's thoughts taken from an interview for the *Harvard Educational Review*: "[W]e as a society often work against the values that we publicly profess, such as the growth and health of children, the social and economic well-being of all people... historically the United States has been based on a 'culture of violence'" (qtd. in Leistyna and Sherbloom 1). Such bumper stickers are examples of dangerous binary thinking; binaries that rely on false categorizations encourage people to not consider or even acknowledge the fact of global violence and the oppressive role of U.S. foreign policy. It's important that having witnessed the

violence and having been ravaged by the pain of death following 9/11, we don't "then spend our lives *not seeing what we saw*" (Cixous 9).

9. Fraud

I enjoy reading what people write on bathroom walls: secret writing. Even when it's signed or marked by an insignia designed by an individual to represent her, to signify an identity personally chosen for announcing her existence to the world, the writing remains anonymous by the sheer volume of the populace. Marking public property, these lovely criminals write private pleas, tiny stories, poems, or professions of love and life-time unions, or raging hatred begging for expression, confessions, and promises. I love reading what strangers write on the private side of walls, protecting them from shame in public areas—language written in secret for the public. I know, reader, that you're wondering how this relates to the oppressive influences of U.S. foreign policy, imaginary categories, or the death and violence that are always associated with these circumstances. It does.



Graffiti signatures

Bathroom wall writing is inspired by the same drives that motivate graffiti writing, and its criminality is equally assigned (another instance of stifling the words of marginalized people). The same legislation that denies their civil right to Free Speech protects horrid displays of hate and intimidation generated from centralized, powerful groups. For example, the Supreme Court has ruled that Ku Klux Klan members, having trespassed onto an Other's private property to implant a burning cross, are protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.^[1] Such unjust and inconsistent applications of civil rights demonstrate the ability of the dominant center to silence the Other in an exploitative interdependent relationship and that is "one of the main ways that power relations are established in society.... we never expect to hear the latter talk about the former — what they say has already been ruled irrelevant, because by definition they have no knowledge..." (Fillingham 18). Additionally this social dynamic isolates the authoritative center and protects it from acknowledging the dysfunction, the cruel and immoral aspects of the hegemonic social structures we've established on the global stage as well as those that are contained nationally.

So who, if not the public, should be allowed to write on public property? Graffiti writers are not protected by the First Amendment. Joe Austine and Michael Willard, writing specifically about New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority explain "Writing [graffiti] began in predominantly African American and Puerto Rican American working-class neighborhoods, which tended to be the most socially 'invisible' areas of the city.... During the early 1980s, Mayor Ed Koch began a second 'war on graffiti'" (244-255). Such an absurd waste of public funds was intended to "protect the average middle-class citizen" from insecure feelings and images that might imply that "'no one was in control' of the city and [that] its public spaces were unsafe" (245). Indeed New York City was not safe, and the mayor did not serve N.Y. residents by helping them maintain this false impression of security.



Graffiti face

Further, the rhetoric and media noise that perpetuated the inane presumption that graffiti somehow threatened anyone's safety surely shifted the public's attention away from any real threat, leaving international foreign policy unexamined and the subsequent events of 9/11 a shock to most people. Judith Butler warns against the tragic consequences of such insulated thinking that took place both before and after 9/11: "[I]f we paralyze our thinking in this way, we shall fail morality in a different way. We shall fail to take collective responsibility for a thorough understanding of the history that brings us to this juncture" (10). Chomsky sheds further insight, examining ways in which our dysfunctional and depraved power structure is further protected and nurtured by the media, exploiting the fact that "[p]eople are scared, they're upset, the world isn't working, and they don't like the way things are. You [the media or Center] don't want people to look at the actual source of power, that's much too dangerous, so, therefore, you need to have them blame or be frightened of someone else" (Leistyna and Sherbloom 7). So we have wars on terrorism, wars on drugs, wars on graffiti, wars launched in the name of Family Values to protect us from the very scary idea of gay marriage, anything to divert us from examining our role in any real threats to the U.S. and humanity in general.

10. Love

I'm on the phone with my dad: "Honey, why do you sound funny? What's going on, are you okay?"

Me: "What? No. I'm fine. I..."

Dad: "Why do you always call me when you can't write and it's the end of the world?! I can't help you...—"

Me: "No! Dad! I'm just... I'm just trying to hold a lot of ideas in my head at the same time, and I—"

Dad: "Oh, well shit then, calm down. What. What do you want?"

And I start to explain, and he immediately refers me to an email he sent to me last time I supposedly asked him this question. I have no idea what he's talking about, and I'm sure it's not the same question, and that I'd never find the email. I don't want to lose him. I try to explain about my idea and how I'm sure there's a law or something in his scientific world that will support what I'm trying to work out in my head... A half hour later, he takes a bathroom break during which time, through sheer force of will and strenuous mental gymnastics, I make what he's told me about life at the atomic level work to support what I want to write, then he comes back on the phone: "Honey. Darn it. You know. That's my fault. They're not anti-electrons, they're protons."

Me: "What?! No!" My brain flat lines _____.



"Somebody is Always Watching" by Reza Kassai, used with permission

I'm pretty sure as he's talking and explaining it the second time: with the correction it would have easily worked out the way I wanted it to in the first place. But now, after making it work the other way, I can't read just my thoughts to accommodate this one single detail; all I have to do is replace one word with the other; my dad doesn't think it's a big deal. "It's *just a word*, replace 'anti-electron' with 'proton'" and he continues... He doesn't understand why a simple word exchange is making my brain bleed. He doesn't understand that all I have are words. Now he's talking about how things get heavier when the atoms are heavier and he's going through the periodic table. Now he's going to his book shelf and pulling out old physics and chemistry books, trying to find books that will help me understand; so now he's surrounded by books and I'm surrounded by books, and then I realize that while I was stuck trying to reconcile "anti-electron" with "proton" I had written three pages of notes, and neither of us understand why I always get stuck on the gravity part about the curvature of the earth and how that keeps satellites from dropping out of the sky. He says I'm a smart girl and this isn't a hard concept; it'll make sense if I just close my eyes and visualize it. Now he's done. He has cauliflower ear and has to go, and I let him go.

Now I'm on the floor. I close my eyes and I watch my brain explode, leaving skull chips and grey matter stuck to the walls until they start dripping and falling — enough for my cat to eat until the stench alerts my neighbors that something's not right in apt #5.

11. Truth

Friend: "Well your dad has to think that way; he built bombs for the government!"

Me: "Not, bombs, lasers, *nuclear* physics, he worked with lasers. You know, like sensory lasers?"

Friend: "For sensing what? And then what? Once they sense something, what happens? What gets triggered? What button gets pushed?"

Me: "They're just protecting us..."

Friend: "He was part of the war machine; that's all I'm saying, and it's clouding your judgment."

Me: "He spent the last ten years working on protective night vision goggles so our soldiers could see at night and not get their eyes fried by laser beams sweeping by. You'd be surprised how complicated that is, so they can see out, but a laser can't get in."

Friend: "But what are our soldiers doing over there anyway that they would need protection from lasers sweeping by?"

My friend is right. I know he is. But we can't just abolish the Department of Defense. It's not that simple. Fine. Call it something else, something that doesn't soften the fact of what it is. The Department of Offense? The War Department? The Department that Protects Our Cushy Lives through Violence and Oppression? That's a ridiculous title, and anyway, that's not the problem. The problems are complicated, but I know a beginning that will point us in the right direction begins with defining what the problem is NOT. "As Kenneth Burke says, to name something *A* is to declare simultaneously that it is not *not-A*. All rhetorical functions can be derived from that most profound of linguistic facts..." (Berthoff 70).

12. Closure

Dear reader, I would like to hold all of this text neatly between two strong bookends and offer you answers. I don't have any. But my inability to offer you two heavy cut stones like the ones in my book cases doesn't mean this text will fall over, pushed by the weight of these words, and slide into a messy pile of letters on the floor!

If I knew the answers I wouldn't need to write. I don't even know the questions until I write, and I dare suggest you don't either or you wouldn't be reading. This is a two part collaboration: you take what you have, and you bring it here to read what I have, and hopefully you've found a new lens through which to view some ideas. A new angle never hurts — not true — it could hurt, but we need not run, always, from pain. And that's all I, and I hope we, at this point, will continue to ponder: if violence, dying, death, those unsightly and brutal facts, sights, smells, sounds, and images of our existence have something to teach us, and they do, then we must check our aversions and examine what is so frightful. Great thinkers and revolutionaries are not afraid to look, and further, their minds are open to see and acknowledge great potential in that which most turn away from. And with that knowledge gained, so is its power. Rhetorical and creative potential is power untapped.

Notes

[1] For an extensive interpretation of the ruling by the Supreme Court on *Virginia v. Black* et al. case number 01-1107, argued December 11, 2002 — decided April 7, 2003 — see Schauer, 202-204. For a more concise interpretation of this case within the context of free speech in contemporary American life see Butler, *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* 52-53.

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