

Conversations on Violence

Conversations on Violence

An Anthology

Brad Evans and Adrian Parr

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2021 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Brad Evans and Adrian Parr 2021

All the interviews featured in this anthology have been previously published in the histories of violence section of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Copyright on these is retained by the authors.

Translation of *Like You*, by Roque Dalton is reproduced by permission of the translator.

The right of Brad Evans and Adrian Parr to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4167 5	Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4168 2	Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0735 9	PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0737 3	Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0736 6	EPUB eBook

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Contents

Introduction	I
<i>Brad Evans and Adrian Parr</i>	
1. The Poetry of Resistance	4
<i>Malcolm London</i>	
2. Breaking the World	10
<i>Marina Abramović</i>	
3. Trans-species Encounters	16
<i>David Rothenberg</i>	
4. Recovering from an Addicted Life	24
<i>Russell Brand</i>	
5. Non-Violence and the Ghost of Fascism	31
<i>Todd May</i>	
6. Without Exception: On the Ordinarity of Violence	38
<i>Lauren Berlant</i>	
7. The Anatomy of Destruction	46
<i>Gil Anidjar</i>	
8. The Intimate Witness: Art and the Disappeared of History	55
<i>Chantal Meza</i>	
9. The Death of Humanitarianism	63
<i>Mark Duffield</i>	
10. The Expulsion of Humanity	72
<i>Saskia Sassen</i>	
11. When Art is Born of Resistance	78
<i>Martha Rosler</i>	
12. The Tragedy of Existence	89
<i>Simon Critchley</i>	

13. The Violence of the Algorithm <i>Davide Panagia</i>	94
14. Thinking Art in a Decolonial Way <i>Lewis Gordon</i>	104
15. What Does an Anti-Fascist Life Feel Like? <i>Natasha Lennard</i>	112
16. Life in Zones of Abandonment <i>Henry A. Giroux</i>	118
17. The Violence of Absent Emergencies <i>Santiago Zabala</i>	129
18. The Ghosts of Civilized Violence <i>Alex Taek-Gwang Lee</i>	137
19. Violence Is Freedom <i>Roy Scranton</i>	145
20. Slavery in America <i>Ana Lucia Araujo</i>	152
21. Why We Should All Read Walter Benjamin Today <i>James Martel</i>	159
22. Unlearning History <i>Ariella Aisha Azoulay</i>	169
23. The Crisis of Containment <i>Gareth Owen</i>	179
24. The Violence of Poverty <i>Ananya Roy</i>	188
25. The Violence of Denial <i>Linda Melvern</i>	194
26. Why We Should All Read Malcolm X Today <i>Kehinde Andrews</i>	202
27. America is Not a Fascist State. It's an Authoritarian One <i>Ruth Ben-Ghiat</i>	209
28. The Atmosphere of Violence <i>Fatima Bhutto</i>	215

CONTENTS

29. The Inherited Memory of Art <i>Mark Bradford</i>	222
30. If You Look Closer, You Will See <i>Isaac Cordal</i>	227
31. The Revolutionary Potential of Pacifism <i>Richard Jackson</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	243

Introduction

Brad Evans and Adrian Parr

The discussions in this anthology are part of an ongoing public conversation, which aims to question, rethink, and critique violence in all its varied forms. We are not content to simply reduce violence to questions of physical harm; neither do we believe that violence is something that can be neatly solved through some scientific explanation, as if its “root causes” could be identified and acted upon through righteous intervention. Often it seems we can only barely grasp the true lived effects of violence, hoping that we can still rescue something of the human out of its worst experiences. This is why we insist that conversations need to take place across all sectors of society, especially in terms of bringing together those who bring critical force to bear upon violence, along with those artists and creative producers who understand that any critique of violence must take seriously human emotions and our capacity to imagine better worlds. We are certainly not idealists, though we do cling to the idea that the world can be better than the one we currently live in—where all forms of prejudice have seemingly been liberated, where new forms of fascism are on the rise, where everyday forms of humiliation are paraded as entertainment, and where the persecution of others can be enacted on a whim for those continually seduced by the entrapments of power. This anthology then, we believe, takes us directly to the heart of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. For whilst violence may appear timeless, demanding an appreciation of the histories of its occurrence, it also needs to be accounted for in terms of its contemporary logics, its effects, and its intellectual justifications.

Critics may counter and suggest this endeavor stretches the concept of violence too far. And that, as a result, the concept itself loses all meaning and definitive purpose. What does it mean to say violence is psychological as much as it is physical? Just tell the petrified child who awaits his abusive father every night that violence should only be “labelled” once the body feels physical pain. Or tell the addict—who

feels alone in this world, their emaciated body suspended as it clings to life—that they are not feeling the violence of a society that finds it easier to marginalize and criminalize those in need. But these examples also raise distinct problems. Too often we see how the focus on emotions can lead to oppressive interventionist practices in the name of therapeutic governance. Moreover, there is an evident danger to the promotion of ontological vulnerability, wherein all claims of victimhood are collapsed and new hierarchies of suffering—which are often far removed from the actual experience of violence—are imposed. And we only need look at the internet today to see how easily the hyperarousal of victimization easily slips into the public shaming and verbal abuse of others. Thus, as part of introducing a critique of violence in its many different forms, our response certainly isn't to advocate a new tyranny, whether of a digital or emotional kind. It is rather to take far more seriously the art of the political as an open field of dignified possibility.

As such, readers will find in this volume that we give equal importance to the voices of artists, cultural producers, and literary writers. Yet even this comes with its challenges. Is this not just a cultural pastime, we can already hear the sceptics ask? No work of art, they may argue, has ever stopped a bullet. Well, comes the riposte, only on the rarest of occasions has a bullet has ever stopped a bullet (except in death). And might we not ask how many would remember the bombardment of Guernica today were it not for Picasso's intervention? This, however, still involves thinking about art and aesthetics as modes of representation. By contrast, our understanding of art is affirmative, creative, and transgressive; in short, it exhibits precisely those characteristics that stand in direct opposition to the violence of negation, destruction, and suppression.

Originally published as part of the "Histories of Violence" series in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, these dialogues are ultimately a provocation to think. If Hannah Arendt was correct in her insistence that violence triumphs when thinking is denied, our task must be to remain open to the idea that thinking matters and confronting the intolerability of violence using multiple grammars is at least an important start. It is also important to note that the publication of this volume was delayed due to the global lockdown following the Coronavirus pandemic. This planetary event has already proven itself

crucially relevant to our concerns in many evident and urgent ways. Indeed, the virus itself has revealed more fully the structural violence of our societies—that this violence was compounded by the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests this provoked, serves as a timely reminder of the struggles we must contend with on a daily basis. Added to this, a worrying trend has emerged on the left that openly calls for a position where engaging in debate with the opposition should no longer be tolerated. Violence is intolerable. For that reason, it needs to be confronted. This requires dealing with difficult and challenging thoughts and ideas. If history shows us anything, it is that oppressive thoughts cannot be banned or bombed out of existence. Instead, we must rise to the intellectual challenges they present. To echo the beautiful and timeless words of the El Salvadorian poet Roque Dalton:

I believe the world is beautiful
and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone.
And that my veins don't end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who struggle for life,
love,
little things,
landscape and bread,
the poetry of everyone.

(Roque Dalton, *Like You*)

1

The Poetry of Resistance

*Adrian Parr interviews Malcolm London,
January 2017*

Malcolm London is an internationally recognized Chicago poet, activist, educator, and musician who has been called “the Gil Scott-Heron of this generation” by Cornel West. This conversation deals with the politics of poetry, performativity, the meaning of education, life growing up in conditions of poverty in the West side of Chicago, along with the importance of the art of the spoken word in challenging narratives of violence.

ADRIAN PARR: The content of your spoken-word performances mixes intense personal experiences with social critique and commentary. Can you describe what motivates your writing and performance?

MALCOLM LONDON: The motivation is very simple, and it really has to do with how I began as a young poet, which is in the vein of art poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who is also from Chicago. She says that *our duty as poets is only to tell the story of what is right in front of our nose*. I learned that early on by simply being in programs like Louder Than A Bomb, which is a youth poetry slam in Chicago and elsewhere. It simply began by understanding I am an expert on my own experience. It then becomes relatively easy to talk about social and political issues when you are born into the city that is the most segregated city in the nation and on the West Side of Chicago.

Initially, it may not have been my intention as a 16-year-old to write about social justice issues, but I wrote about what I saw. What I saw was my brothers, my cousins, and my friends in trouble and arrested. What I saw was corpses of neighbors and people that I loved piling up

around me. What I saw was that my educational experience was a lot different than other folks in the city. What I saw was a mother who would work extremely hard for a hard life, and who could barely keep two young boys, and a roof over our heads.

I think the pedagogy and philosophy around spoken-word poetry is to provide spaces and platforms for young people who are deliberately unheard, to begin to tell their story. As a learner and now as an educator of spoken word, you listen to the stories of so many young people and you begin to realize how many of these stories overlap. Through their stories you understand the many issues that touch their lives. You begin to hear how capitalism affects young people—whether or not they know how to spell that word, they inherently understand it. You begin to hear about the wage gap. You begin to hear about achievement gaps. You begin to hear all these things, but with poetic license, and in a way that hopefully reimagines the situation that a lot of people talk about and the situations that they come from.

You mention that your educational experiences are different. Could you expand upon that a little more?

I often say that I got my education on the Number 66 Chicago Avenue bus. I say this because in a city like Chicago, which I imagine is like a lot of American cities, you see segregation firsthand. What I learned was definitely not in a textbook, but I definitely learned it on the journey home each day. That education came from seeing how one side of the city experiences police repression, and another side of the city experiences tall buildings and cleaner neighborhoods. On one side of the city, homicide rates soar, and on the other side, people get to go to bed safe.

It's not that I want anybody from the other side of the city, or from the more affluent neighborhoods, to have less, but it occurred to me that in my neighborhood, folks didn't have enough. So when young people like myself begin to tell that story, they begin to see there are gaps in the story, there are missing pages from the books you are reading and learning from. So it becomes necessary to rewrite those pages and rewrite that history of segregation and inequality.

When you describe yourself as an educator are you referring to this rewriting of history and retelling stories by telling your own story?

When I use the term “educator,” I mean someone who is both a happy and determined learner. I think that anybody who is actively learning can also be an educator. For me, an educator inspires other young people to learn about themselves and other things.

How does spoken-word poetry test the limits of language and do you see this as being a political act in itself?

Cornel West once told me: “Poets are the legislation of the people.” That sums up perfectly what poetry is for me. For me, spoken word pushes the limits. It allows young people of color to define themselves on their own terms by how they use language. In a country that is not made for young people of color, but a country that has been made on their backs, spoken word allows young people of color to appropriate and change language in ways that make it their own. This is what makes spoken word a political act. Especially now, at this moment in American history, with Donald Trump, this is an increasingly dangerous time for young Black, Latino, and Muslim people.

By using a language that has excluded me and has been used to discourage me, I simultaneously reclaim that language and rename the world. This makes spoken word a political act.

Can you describe how your work is connected to Black queer feminism?

My work doesn’t draw on Black queer feminism. My work is educated by it as best as it can be. In the context of my political organizing, the phrase *Black queer feminism* ensures that when we are talking about ending oppression we place the most marginalized folks in our community at the center and not on the outskirts of our struggles. They can’t be mere tokens of our activism. I think Black queer folks are at the intersection of many forms of oppression. In order to have work that is both liberatory and revolutionary it needs to be informed by Black queer feminism. That is what I hope my work does.

As a young Black man living in America, who grew up on the West Side of Chicago, what is your firsthand experience of state violence, and in your view are race relations in America improving or worsening? And why?

I think the West Side of Chicago exists primarily because of state violence. There are many ways state violence works. Whether it comes from interactions with police, living in neighborhoods that have an extreme police presence for no other reason than the false idea that more people who live where I live are criminals or are criminalized more, or whether it be the poverty that exists. I think poverty exists because the state fails to respond. In this respect poverty exists because of the state. Some of the tangible ways state violence works is by the closing of Planned Parenthoods on the West Side of Chicago.

Being a young Black person from the West Side of Chicago, I am affected by state violence. In a lot of ways, I am alive because of state violence. I continue to struggle, to build, and to imagine because of state violence and to hopefully eradicate it.

Are race relations in America getting any better? Absolutely not. All you have to do is look at who is unfortunately in the White House and there lies the answer. It's 2017 and Native Americans are still fighting for grounds and treaties they were given over 200 years ago. There are more Black people in prison now than there were in 1865. And this has continued to occur under a Black presidency. So, race relations in America are not getting any better. Unfortunately, I think they are getting a lot worse. It became harder to see these things when America aligned itself with a post-racial identity. Having a few people of color in positions of power has made it harder to see how racism is getting worse. Right now, we are seeing a rise in hate crimes and explicit forms of racism. Things are getting a lot worse because it is becoming a lot harder to have these conversations, particularly from those who benefit from not having these conversations, such as folks invested in upholding white supremacy and the privileges that it allows.

I think emotionally we are in a worse place than where we were. This is because the *enemies of progress* are allowed to continue to flourish both in a covert manner and through the use of coded forms of language, as you see with the *alternative right*. It allows people who are indifferent to continue to ignore the rise in racism. People

might not necessarily be lynched on a tree, but they are lynched on the branches of government. There are so many different ways racism works, whether this is through imprisonment or by the Congress diminishing necessary public resources. Unfortunately, racism in America is getting worse.

There was a news report that came out today from Mississippi. I don't know if you have read it yet, but it is terribly upsetting: a white student tied a noose around a Black team player's neck and yanked on it. The police discouraged the parents of the terrified Black student from filing a report. The white student's parent used to be a former law enforcement officer. We are in 2016, not 1916, and that something like that could be taking place in America today is shameful. It prompts me to think about something you just said and that I want to pick up on. You said: "I'm alive because of state violence." How so?

What I mean by that is that the West Side of Chicago does not exist in a vacuum. The poverty I was born into, I did not create. The poverty my mother was born into, she also did not create. So when I say that I am alive because of state violence I mean that the conditions that I was raised in were not conditions I had any control over. In a lot of ways these conditions were created because of explicit forms of state violence and the nuances of how state violence works.

I have always deeply admired your work. I think it brings to life a lot of things that remain invisible and unheard within the political landscape of the United States. And it also taps into other minority struggles that are occurring around the world both in terms of the energy and force you bring to issues of inequity and violence. In a way your work comes to life because of state violence. Do you think it is this context of state violence that makes spoken word so lively, charged, and politically resonant?

These struggles make my art more necessary. I think for people who share my skin or share the same struggles, art has always been something that is functional. No artist that I know in my communities has the luxury of making art for art's sake. We don't have the luxury of

writing poems about flowers just for the sake of writing poems about flowers. I do not have that privilege. The way art functions in my life is directly connected to very real, lived experiences, and to this specific time in history.

I want to be careful because I don't want to say that because there is crime on the West Side of Chicago, that makes my art more living and more intense. Although that is true, I am ultimately writing art so that pain and trauma does not exist.

Do you think spoken word can be used as a tool for political activism and social change?

I am an artist. I see myself as a poet. I've been always intrigued by what poetry can do. Mostly what I have learned about politics comes from writers. I've been in gifted classes and programs, but it wasn't until I wrestled with a James Baldwin book, for instance, that I could digest the information. Statistics or political science only captures a partial reality. Art brings something else to our understanding of politics. It makes politics more tangible.

It is often hard to have honest conversations about political struggles in the absence of art. Spoken word helps a young person develop their internal "eye/I" to see the "we," the "they," and the "us." It is not just spoken word that does this. I think any art form does. It is the moment when the classroom is no longer just the journey to a better taxpaying citizen, but becomes a journey on how to leave the classroom and become a better human being.