

Interpreting Violence, Violent Interpretations: Introduction

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the key terms of the edited volume: violence, interpretation, narrative, hermeneutics, and ethics. It articulates how interpreting violence refers both to the process of meaning-making involved in understanding representations of violence and to the potential violence involved in interpretive acts themselves. Drawing on the distinction between understanding and explanation, it fleshes out the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, which emphasizes the unfinalizable nature of understanding and suggests that understanding guided by openness to the singularity of the other can be nonviolent. The contributors of the volume discuss different forms and levels of violence and explore the possibility of nonviolent interpretation in relation to a range of different ways of narrating violence. The introduction lays out the three sections of the volume. The first, “Representing Violence,” deals with the various representations of violence in literature and discourse, with a particular focus on the ambiguousness involved in the act of representing and on how representation itself can be an act of violence. The second section, “Understanding the Violence of Perpetrators,” focuses on making sense of the acts of those who commit violence. The final section, “Articulating Inherent Violence,” explores different levels of violence with particular attention to the violence that inheres in systems of signification and social structures. Overall, the Introduction explains how the volume provides conceptual resources for thinking about violence in its many forms in times of global crises. Violence ranges from discursive and structural to concrete, embodied violence. In this volume, we explore the ethical potential of literature and other arts in processes of making mechanisms of violence visible while also acknowledging that often good intentions can mask complicity in social structures that perpetuate practices of oppression.

Interpreting violence has a twofold meaning. It refers both to the process of meaning-making involved in understanding representations of violence and to the potential violence involved in interpretive acts themselves. Narratives can be violent interpretations as representations of violence or as interpretations by which we understand ourselves or others. While poststructuralist thinkers, in particular, contend that language, narratives, and understanding (which involve naming and categorizing the other) are inherently violent, from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics it can be argued that genuine understanding is inherently nonviolent, receptive and self-altering. Some hermeneutically inclined thinkers argue that in a pursuit of understanding, “We engage in dialogue with others to allow their being to unfold. We try to allow the world around us to speak” (Mootz and Taylor 2013, 1). Some see a difference in explanation and understanding in terms of their ethical implications: explanation allegedly limits our perception of violence as much as it opens it up because the analytical categories on which explanations are predicated imply mastery and appropriation of something singular, whereas understanding allegedly implies dialogical relationality. Etymologically, *ex-planus* (l. Barnhart 1988, 357) means to lay something out flat and visible, to equalize difference. Conversely, understanding derives from the Old English “to stand in the midst of, stand between” (Barnhart 1988, 1185). Although it may be an accident of history that “understanding” retains this relational connotation while “explanation” implies a singular dominant agency, the difference between these concepts points towards the ethical importance of dialogical relationality as opposed to one-directional acts of appropriation. Thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas (1988) and Jacques Derrida (1997) assert that understanding, too, due to its reliance on language and its

categories, makes not just explanation but also understanding and interpretation inherently violent. In contrast, the hermeneutic tradition suggests that there are different ways of using language and that an understanding guided by openness to the singularity of the other can be nonviolent. Instead of saying that interpretation is inherently violent, it may be better to acknowledge that there is a spectrum from violent to nonviolent processes of interpretation, that is, from what Hanna Meretoja calls “subsumptive” to “non-subsumptive” interpretations: while the former subsume singular phenomena under fixed categories, the latter acknowledge the need of categories to expand and transform in the temporal, interpretative process in order to do justice to the singularity of the interpreted phenomena (2018, 107-8).

The tendency of explanations to concentrate on what preceded (motivation, circumstances) or what followed (justification, response), means that the experiential elements of violence easily escape. It is these experiential elements, excluded or marginalized by explanatory frameworks, that narratives of violence often try to evoke, and by emphasizing the singularity of those experiences, as well as the interpretive processes at work by multiple actors, including those interpreted as victim, perpetrator or witness, they can invite further interpretive acts with no implication that such interpretation will ever be complete. Narratives representing complex experiences of violence can furthermore reframe the notions of victims and perpetrators by focusing on those who are not directly involved but privileged by structures that they inherit, those who are “implicated” (Rothberg 2019) in a history of violence and injustice and who sustain the inherited structural injustices, not by being perpetrators in a conventional sense, but by being either the silent and passive “beneficiaries” (Robbins 2017) of these structures, or by using unmotivated violence in the name of self-defense. Through the figure of the implicated subject and the beneficiary, attention is called to forms of violence that are not really visible within certain economies of representations, often conceptualized as structural, symbolic or systemic violence (Dodd 2017, Žižek 2008), but which exacerbate and perpetuate poverty and inequality around the globe.

Violence can assume myriad forms. Individual instances of violence accumulate in the never-ending and unwritable history of violent acts. Even as we type, prisoners in Myanmar are tortured, wives and children are beaten around the world, the Russian army bombs Ukrainian cities to rubble, and teenagers in Chicago indoctrinate one another in gang loyalty. In every instance – every contact with a lived body, every threat or fear of another strike – the individuals involved are changed in an interplay of circumstances, decisions, receptions, responses and interpretations. Explanations of violence tend to absorb a violent act into a system that fits the act itself into a framework, the explanatory power of which arises from its ability to deem some factors and experiences less relevant than others; thereby much of the experiential and interpretive excess of these acts of violence will be rendered invisible through the process of explanation. Nevertheless, many attempts to explain violence serve *practically* ethical goals. They can clarify circumstances that encourage one person to harm another. Insofar as they clarify motivations for past violent acts, explanations facilitate decisions about punishment in line with legally codified principles of justice. It is primarily the assertion of the completeness of any explanation that renders such acts interpretively violent.

Philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes that, in contrast to an explanation, an act of understanding is never definitive. Hans-Georg Gadamer describes understanding as a dynamic interplay of possible meanings that reveal, in their forthcoming, invisible preconceptions (2004, 269). As these preconceptions are revealed, they change, and reflective persons learn about themselves and approach new singular events with a more subtle capacity to receive them. Gadamer compares the otherness of a text to the otherness of a person whose position differs from us, but who we want to understand (271). That understanding encompasses an always inadequate but nevertheless necessary attempt to see a person, a text, or a situation holistically,

knowing that the partial data an interpreter has to work with will bias the interpretive act in specific ways and knowing, in the case of a text, that the process of understanding creates as much as discerns connections between a written or filmic narrative and shared, lived reality. Standing among possible interpretations or between an event and the language we bring to it, one who seeks understanding knows herself to be in the midst of categories she did not create, events she did not initiate, possibilities she cannot foresee. One knows oneself to be confronted with others whose differences from oneself can never be exhaustively known. While the “hermeneutics” of our volume’s title means theoretical reflection on interpretation and understanding and does not entail a commitment to a certain conception of these phenomena, the contributions in this volume share the idea of the infinalizable nature of interpretation, which Paul Ricoeur formulates as follows: “The key hypothesis of hermeneutic philosophy is that interpretation is an open process that no single vision can conclude” (Ricoeur 1991, 33; see also Marion’s idea of “infinite hermeneutic,” 2013, 59). While Richard Kearney defines hermeneutics in terms of an “art of deciphering multiple meaning,” especially “the practice of discerning indirect, tacit or allusive meanings, of sensing another sense beyond or beneath apparent sense” (Kearney 2011, 1), Rita Felski (2015) emphasizes that hermeneutics does not entail the idea of unearthing a singular “hidden meaning” - rather, as Gadamer and Ricoeur also stress, it is a process of co-production in which meaning arises ever anew in the encounter between the world of the text and the world of the reader (see also Gadamer 2004; Ricoeur 1988; Meretoja 2018). The process of interpretation need not be motivated by suspicion (Ricoeur 1970; Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003) and need not claim to find a meaning that excludes further interpretations. In consequence, and somewhat paradoxically, an approach to violence that aims to be *interpretively* ethical must aim at a relationally-grounded dialogical form of understanding, which must, in order to remain nonviolent, never hope to entirely, conclusively succeed.

Contributors to this volume pursue understanding of a violent act or event, not because we will arrive at an explanation that will exhaust the possibility to know it and not because our efforts at nonviolent understanding will ever offset the propagation or performance of violence in some imaginary ethical scale of value, but in order to contribute to the proliferation of nonviolent understanding, which in turn can, in its small way, reduce the circumstances in which violence is likely to be (always unpredictably) committed. In their 2020 book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler says nonviolence is neither “a means to a goal nor is it a goal in itself.” They call it “ungovernable,” “ongoing,” and “open ended,” “an active mode of thought or understanding, unconstrained by instrumental and teleological logics” (125). In this spirit, scholars featured here attempt to practice and encourage nonviolent forms of reasoning. We share the goal of disrupting the often-unquestioned interpretive acts that make it possible for people to see violence as justifiable. We ask instead how violence can be narrated, read or viewed in ways that encourage mutual recognition, solidarity, even love, rather than indifference or hatred. Contributors also discuss the extent to which acts of interpretation can themselves be violent. They discuss phenomenological-hermeneutic and other contemporary conceptualizations of knowledge that call for new reconfigurations of intersubjectivity. By foregrounding the tension between discursive and embodied violence as well as their complex entanglements, contributors explore the relationship between these different forms of violence. Can stories direct our attention to that within the human that evades designation but nevertheless calls for protection? Can certain narratives of violence instead turn our attention to why some lives are considered worthy of protection, while others are not? Or to the violence immanent in the category of the human, directed at the non-human, animal or nature, in ways that challenge their human centered or intersubjective framing? (Wolfe 2012)

We are not working with a shared definition of violence or interpretation but, instead, the contributors discuss different forms and levels of violence and explore the possibility of nonviolent interpretation in relation to a range of different ways of narrating violence. In Hannah Arendt's slim 1969 volume *On Violence*, she notes that "violence and its arbitrariness [have been] taken for granted and therefore neglected" in the history of Western philosophy (8). "There exists," she continues, "a large literature on war and warfare, but it deals with the implements of violence, not with violence as such" (8). Since then, much research into violence has been performed. In 2020, when Scott Straus and Michel Wierviorcka launched their publication *Violence: An International Journal*, they observed that violence is "a major theme in the humanities and social sciences" (3), and the titles of publications concerned with violence bear this out,¹ but the study of "violence as such" remains fragmented among multiple disciplines, multiple categorizations of types of violence, and multiple contextual foci. It is not possible to express concern about this fragmentation without evoking the possibility that violence as such can be defined, but such a definition will always be impure and available for the violence-promoting act of declaring something not to have been violent. To adapt a phrase from Derrida, "The purity of the question" of what violence as such is "can only be indicated or recalled through the difference of a hermeneutical effort" (1978, 99). Within scholarship on the representation of violence and the interpretations of such representations, which is the special focus of this volume, disciplinary fragmentation reinforces generic differences in written and filmic texts. Historians, criminologists, and psychologists work with terrorist manifestos and violent institution's bureaucratic narratives of their own abuses. Literary analysts work with memoir, fiction and poetic narration; media scholars with film. There are, of course, scholars who work across these divisions (Matthew & Goodman 2013, Ayyash 2019; Davis & Meretoja [eds] 2020), and this volume makes an intentional effort to breach disciplinary boundaries.

Like violence as such, ethics as such must remain without preconceived definition in order to remain undogmatic and receptive of the complexity of the unique ethical quandaries specific instances produce. Ethics is, nevertheless, at the heart of the communal scholarly endeavor this volume represents. The representation of violence for another's consumption is an inherently ethically charged issue because it invites readers or viewers to imagine someone else's pain or the suffering of others (Adorno 1973; Sontag 2003). A story may encourage readers/viewers to place themselves in the position of victim, perpetrator, witness, rescuer, or implicated subject. They may imagine the events narrated in the manner invited by the text or in a resistant fashion, but by engaging a depiction of violence at all, they deem it a pleasant or ethically worthwhile use of time and thought. This collection investigates the layers of interpretation involved in narrating violence and designating the engagement with violent stories as meaningful. Contributors focus especially on violence performed with political or symbolic goals, including war, colonialism, terrorism and mass violence, but our aim is to offer novel insights about the ethical quandaries of narrating and interpreting violence that are broadly applicable.

With regard to narrative, we contend that stories play an important part in the epistemological acts of recognizing or failing to recognize an individual's life as precious, precarious and grievable. As theorists hailing from the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition such as Paul Ricoeur (1988, 1991) and Jerome Bruner (1987) have argued, we tell ourselves about ourselves and about other people in the form of narratives and such storytelling is an ethically charged process of interpretation. Narrative hermeneutics suggests that it is through narrative processes that our lives become objects of complex reflection (Brockmeier 2015; Brockmeier & Meretoja

¹ Straus and Wierviorcka's journal is preceded by the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (est. 1986), *Journal of Family Violence* (est. 1986), *Violence and Victims*, which is focused on interpersonal violence (est. 1986), *Terrorism and Political Violence* (est. 1989), *Violence Against Women* (est. 1995), *Psychology of Violence* (est. 2010). Only *Violence* and the *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* (est. 2007) explicitly integrate the study of public and private forms of violence.

2014). The forms of narration through which we become aware of fictional or non-fictional violent events, therefore, shape the very possibility of our ethical perspective toward those involved in violence. Narratives, however, are not inherently (due to their narrative form) ethically good; rather, their ethical potential or harmfulness should be evaluated contextually (Meretoja 2018). Ultimately, the meaning of narratives takes shape through our interpretative encounters with them. By recognizing the multi-layered, temporally complex nature of every act of interpreting a violent story, this collection offers insights that are relevant for acts that most people engage in every day - reading the news, turning on a film, or picking up a novel. Moreover, in addition to concrete narrative artefacts, there are implicit cultural narratives that function as models of sense-making that underlie such concrete narratives and which lead us to narrate our experiences in certain ways (see Meretoja 2022).

The essay collection grows out of an interdisciplinary multi-year project involving thirty scholars from eight countries. Many of these scholars have contributed to bodies of scholarship related to this book's aim, including ethical criticism, interdisciplinary narrative studies, trauma studies, histories of violence, memory studies, and holocaust and genocide studies. Their new work, represented here, steps out of these more specialized fields of inquiry to confront the contemporary increase in politically-motivated violence against non-combatants and the increase in literary and media representations of that violence in a globally-connected public sphere. Rather than try to explain violence, this collection tries to approach narratives of violence – in literature, bureaucratic reports, humanitarian campaigns, terrorist manifestos, and film – with understanding. This does not mean accepting, but it means creating conditions for dialogue.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first section, entitled “Representing Violence,” deals with the many and various ways in which violence is represented in literature and discourse. It has a particular focus on the ambiguousness involved in the act of representing and addresses the question of how representation itself can be an act of violence, continuing the violence that it represents. The double meaning of representation as “the act of presenting somebody/something in a particular way” and “the fact of having representatives who will speak [...] for you or act in your place” (Oxford Dictionary Online) has a complex significance when related to violence. The privileged role ascribed to the victim in humanitarian representations of mass violence could be understood as an effort to present without re-presenting, that is, without acting or speaking for the victim. However, as Cassandra Falke points out in her chapter “Witnessing Violence in Literature and Humanitarian Discourse,” a narrative that tries to present without re-presenting, may also unintentionally perpetuate the violence that it seeks to condemn. Falke proceeds from the observation that our time is the “era of the witness” (Wieviorka). Thousands of pages of testimony to violence during the Holocaust combine with a growing testimonial record from Biafra, Palestine, and Syria to create an unmanageable mass of recorded victimization. In our age, the figure of the witness is venerated for possessing truths about humanity available only to the victim. For the sake of highlighting the extremity of suffering, Falke points out, critics and humanitarian organizations often publicize the most shocking experiences and the most vulnerable victims, however stripped of a context that could establish peace and compassion as norms against which this violence is contrasted. Such portrayals risk normalizing what they strive to condemn. Through the figure of the reader as witness, Falke explores ways that violence can be represented without instrumentalizing suffering. In its ability to carry us beyond the bounds of the familiar, literature, she argues, is uniquely suited to the ethical representation of violence that preserves its excess untamed.

The chapters by Avril Tynan and Amrita Ghosh both deal with representations of historical violence that in different ways continue in the present. In today's memory culture, remembering

a violent past often involves an effort to come to terms with it, addressing its unresolved calls for justice. Tynan's contribution "Memory, Encore! Popular Music, Power and Postwar Memory," calls attention to the use of memory as a way to *avoid* dealing with present demands for justice and responsibility. Attentive to the use of memory in cultural representations of the Algerian War, Tynan argues that it often illustrates an ongoing rejection of judicial practices and resistance to reconciliation. In an analysis of the French author Didier Daeninckx's short story "Corvée de bois" (2003), she argues that memory moves in circular ways that prevent a just resolution of the past. The story's explicit and even gratuitous presentation of war atrocities is entangled with popular culture and radio to suppress or perhaps censor memories of the past, Tynan claims. Memories of wartime violence are silenced by noise or the more insidious subversion of background music, which makes them dissipate into everyday environments and actions. Tynan concludes that although memories of the war return again and again in Daeninckx's story, they are not articulated with the performative power to come to terms with the past or to evoke any calls for justice and responsibility in the present, but are turned into standardized recycled forms that dilute and ultimately de-realize historic violence as intangible background noise.

Cultural representations of colonial violence are also examined by Ghosh in her chapter "Rethinking Planetary in the Specter of (Neo) Colonial Violence," which combines a reading of *The Strangler Vine* (2014), an adventure novel and historical thriller by the English historian and writer Miranda Carter and contemporary uses of the term "thug" in the US. Using the metaphor of the strangler vines, Carter revises the idea of violence and criminality of "thugs" in 19th Century India. By following the history of the term "thug," Ghosh shows how Carter's novel engages not only colonialism but also contemporary political discourse. Ghosh connects the novel to President Barack Obama's speech on the Baltimore riots in 2015 and President Donald Trump's speech in 2020 on race riots in America. Ghosh claims that Carter's shift in gaze and alterations of the adventure genre pose as a critique of colonial violence. Yet, the novel, she argues, also undermines its own decolonial narrative and ironically raises important questions on the very notion of colonial violence. By so doing, it shows how power and discourse are updated in asymmetrical planetary intersections and contexts that have uncanny reverberations at the present time.

Jakob Lothe's chapter, "Variants and Consequences of Violence in Iris Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*," examines the ethical dimensions of representing violence at the intersection of fiction and philosophy. In a reading of Iris Murdoch's 1974 novel, Lothe focuses on how, and why, the main characters in the novel variously engage in or become entangled in acts of violence. He emphasizes that violence forms an essential part of Murdoch's fictional exploration of ethical issues, which then encourages the reader to engage in a dialogue with Murdoch as an implied author. Taking his cue from Emmanuel Levinas's claim that we are bound in networks of responsibility to known and unknown others whose vulnerability bids us not to commit violence, Lothe argues that the violence represented in Murdoch's novel is a constituent element of an ethics that emerges through the fiction's narrative, yet intimately linked to her philosophical writings.

In the final chapter of this section, "Violent Appetites: Distaste and the Aesthetics of Violence," Tero Vanhanen interrogates into the role of distaste in aesthetic representations of violence. Starting by pointing to the boundaries between tasteful and distasteful representations of violence within classical aesthetics, Vanhanen proceeds by examining Thomas De Quincey's infamous essays on murder as art from the 1820's. For all the glinting irony of his writings, De

Quincey, Vanhanen argues, keeps violence at an arm's length just as classical aesthetics does. By narrating from the perspective of a bystander rather than the victim or the perpetrator, De Quincey assumes that a distance can be upheld between the audience and the violence, which weakens the affective power of violence to shock and makes it intelligible and interpretable, even permitting readers to experience violence as sublime. Vanhanen criticizes this sort of distancing, which is common in "tasteful" representation of violence. Through case studies of violent works of literature and their critical reception, Vanhanen argues for the need to elaborate less distancing ways of interpreting and responding to represented violence, ways that do not turn away from the shock and horror of violence by turning it into safe and comfortable modes of entertainment.

Part Two, "Understanding the Violence of Perpetrators," focuses on making sense of the acts of those who commit violence, hermeneutically and critically. Within scholarship on violence, there has been an increase in research on perpetrators. To understand the conditions of possibility of violence, it is not enough to focus on victims; it is also necessary to study why ordinary people end up committing atrocities. The chapters in this section explore the violence of perpetrators, focusing mainly on the Nazis and their collaborators in the Second World War but also drawing links to other forms of mass violence, including contemporary mass shootings and the ongoing violence committed by humans on nature.

Brian Schiff's chapter "A Manifesto on the Hermeneutics of Violence" brings interpretive tools to bear on understanding perpetrators of mass violence whose actions are often considered a hermeneutic puzzle because they seem too extreme to be understood and because their own interpretations are dismissed as mere fabrications and lies. Schiff argues that understanding must be predicated on restoring the interpretive horizon of violent actions, the set of collectively shared narratives that made violence possible. Mass violence requires synchronized and convincing efforts in the symbolic realm in order to motivate would-be perpetrators, to provide justifications for action, and to preempt potential dissent. Reviewing the scholarly debate on the motivations of genocidal perpetrators and closely analyzing the manifestos of contemporary mass shooters, Schiff argues that perpetrators are acting within a different moral horizon, supported by the narrative and symbolic resources of their time and context, in which, from their perspective and that of those around them, it makes sense to denigrate and destroy the other.

Erin McGlothlin's "Narrative Mastery over Violence in Perpetrator-Authored Documents: Interpreting Closure in *The Stroop Report*" focuses on a relatively little-known document on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, an album known today as *The Stroop Report*, which was assembled by SS commander Jürgen Stroop and his staff as a commemorative souvenir for Heinrich Himmler. It documents the German military response to an uprising in which the violent effort to transport the remaining Jewish ghetto population to Treblinka was met with armed revolt by beleaguered ghetto internees. The report is comprised of daily military reports, photographs depicting combat and captured ghetto fighters and residents, and a narrative summary. Few critics have investigated the report's narrative and its attempts to achieve mastery over the events it documents. McGlothlin examines the rhetorical strategies Stroop employs in his report to discursively induce closure through its construction of a straw enemy deserving of the full brutality directed at it and through symbolic and performative declarations of the vanquishment of that enemy.

Helena Duffy's chapter "Space of Murder, Space of Freedom: The Forest as a Posttraumatic Landscape in Holocaust Narratives" braids together Holocaust studies and environmental

humanities by focusing on forests in the context of Holocaust perpetrator fiction. The chapter examines two novels, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* and Philippe Claudel's *Brodecke*, which cast the forest as a Holocaust setting and thereby reinvest it with the symptomatology of human trauma. While endorsing Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a belated response to painful events, and of history as an enmeshment of the victim's and the killer's traumas, the two novels broaden this conception by stressing trauma's embodiment and embeddedness in nature. Duffy shows how Littell and Claudel challenge a humanistic understanding of trauma, reframe the Holocaust as a product of modern ontology with its privileging of the human within the human/nonhuman binary, and suggest that this binary has legitimized both our abuse of the nonhuman world and the dehumanization and oppression of human groups.

The third and last section of the volume, "Articulating Inherent Violence," explores different levels of violence and pays particular attention to the violence that inheres in language, systems of signification and social structures.

In "Physical, Emotional, and Discursive Violence: The Problem of Narrative in Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*," Hanna Meretoja distinguishes between different varieties of violence: physical, emotional, and discursive. She then critically discusses, in the light of the distinction between subsumptive and non-subsumptive cultural forms, the view that narrative is inherently violent. By drawing on discussions on our shared vulnerability and destructibility, it explores the possibility of dialogical, non-violent understanding. In the latter part of the chapter, she analyzes narrative in relation to different types of violence in Karl Ove Knausgård's autobiographical series *My Struggle*. She argues that the series is fraught with a tension between a non-subsumptive and a subsumptive dimension: while the narrator-protagonist has crucial limits in relation to (non-subsumptive) dialogical openness to others, the self-reflexive strategies of the series have potential to promote the readers' ability to engage with the cultural narratives that surround us in ways that could contribute to breaking certain cycles of violence.

In "Reading Violence, Violent Reading: Levinas and Hermeneutics," Colin Davis explores the hermeneutics of violence in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Although Levinas is usually associated with ethics rather than hermeneutics, a large part of his work consists of interpretive commentaries on the Talmud. Davis draws on this commentary to sketch what a Levinasian hermeneutics might look like. He suggests that Levinas associates Talmudic study with violence done both to the text and the commentator, looking particularly at a commentary entitled "The Damage Caused by Fire." He also discusses similarities and differences between Levinas's reading practice and the thought of the major hermeneutic thinkers of the twentieth century: Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Davis concludes by suggesting that a Levinasian hermeneutics is characterized by the combination of faith and rigor and by drawing attention to the ways in which interpretation can be a matter of life and death.

Amanda Dennis' chapter "Style and the Violence of Passivity in Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*" examines the inherent violence in words. Her analysis of Samuel Beckett's 1961 novel *How It Is* (*Comment c'est*) starts by interrogating into the violence involved in the novel's own signifying process, being composed in strophes without punctuation. Dennis deals with the relationship between the novel's refusal of traditional sentence structure and its unflinching descriptions of physical violence and ritualized torture. She argues, however, that the work's bold coupling of bodily violence and broken syntax is possible to read not only as a linguistic and stylistic innovation that discursively grasps limit-experiences, but also, and even more importantly, as an exploration of new forms of relationality, which through foregrounding embodiment and the materiality of language, can open for a radical reimagining of subjectivity, sociality and, ultimately, of community.

In the last chapter, “Vulnerability, Violence and Nonviolence,” Victoria Fareld explores the connection between the concept of vulnerability and the language of violence in contemporary feminist philosophy. In recent years, we have witnessed a resurgent interest in the concept of vulnerability but often it is seen as a condition that has to be reduced in human life and which is primarily equated with injurability and passivity. In contrast, several feminist scholars call for a reconceptualization of vulnerability as not only limiting but also enabling and activating. Fareld examines the place and role of violence in this reclaimed understanding of vulnerability. She discusses the connection between different forms of violence and nonviolent ways of understanding subject formation, embodied life and responses to human vulnerability. She concludes by stressing the constitutive role of violence in a relational ethics of nonviolence.

Overall, we hope this volume provides conceptual resources for thinking about violence in its many forms in times of global crisis. As the volume shows, violence ranges from discursive and structural violence to concrete, embodied violence in war against humanity, against nature, and in everyday interpersonal relationships. Often discursive violence is directly linked to bodily violence, as can be seen in the case of racist violence where hurtful words often lead to physical assaults. Becoming aware of the interconnections between different forms of violence and of the ways in which cycles of violence are perpetuated by practices and structures that often remain invisible is a necessary step in working towards breaking such cycles. In this volume, we explore the ethical potential of literature and other arts in such processes of making mechanisms of violence visible while also acknowledging that often good intentions can mask complicity in social structures that perpetuate practices of oppression.

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