

Roundtable

Rated R(epresentation): Violence in Romance Literatures and Cultures

Welcome to our second Working Papers roundtable discussion. In this issue our papers explore representations of [violence](#) and the violence of [representation](#) in literary media. The questions these papers propose, and the answers they venture, involve a complex nexus of issues. To what extent are textual practices violent acts? How are violent images deployed to undermine some identities and create others? What role does violence play in the proliferation of national, historical, ethnic, sexual and philosophical discourses? These are just a few of the problems under consideration in this issue.

In the space below, we have asked Emily Butterworth, Andrea Goulet, Crystal Hall and Craig Epplin a number of questions that address the problematic and suggestive relationship between violence and representation(s). Their varied responses indicate that there are numerous ways to approach the topic; in fact, when considered together, violence and representation are irreducible to one, singular interpretation or a stable interpretive model.



• [Emily Butterworth](#)



• [Craig Epplin](#)



• [Andrea Goulet](#)



• [Crystal Hall](#)

Are there intrinsic meanings to violence, or does it become meaningful only when narrated, aestheticized, or stylized?

Andrea Goulet: Meaning implies symbolic or representational significance. Does violence have extra-linguistic effects? Yes, of course. Does it have “meaning”? I’d say no – or at least not social meaning. An individual who inflicts or suffers violence certainly ideates about it, so I guess that’s already a certain meaning before communication.

Craig Epplin: “Meaning,” to me, suggests that a narration or some other sort of representation—“aestheticized,” “stylized,” or not—is already in place. So, no, I don’t think it makes sense to talk about intrinsic meanings to violence.

Crystal Hall: Perhaps I will take a naïve approach and say yes, violence does have an intrinsic meaning. Violence suggests a common understanding between author and audience and/or victim in order to be understood as violence. There could be no violation if both aggressor and victim did not agree on the boundary or code being transgressed. Whether the violence occurs at the level of plot, is thematized, or even becomes the style of the work, the violent act ignores a convention, whether it be representational, moral, or other. Violence is inherently social according to this definition.

Emily Butterworth: The texts I have worked on most consistently are concerned with linguistic violence, so in a sense their relationship to violence is already metaphorical – insult and defamation are described (experienced?) as a wound, fatal or debilitating. Here, not only does violence have to pass through language to be described, but this type of violence is already necessarily linguistic. However, it is interesting to speculate on the sort of experience of linguistic violence that prompts these somatic metaphors – is it somehow visceral itself? Attempts to figure linguistic violence as physical violence point to a conception of physical violence as more primary than linguistic violence, perhaps. Here I found [Judith Butler's](#) work on hate speech of great interest and useful application to the early modern period: if subjects are fundamentally constructed through language, then language can undo and harm them: slander can operate a meaningful violence on the subject because he or she is constructed through language.

The chiasmic relationship between representation and violence that we foreground in this issue begs the question of interpretation: how do we interpret violence?

Emily Butterworth: Interpretation was a crucial concern in the early modern period and somewhat paradoxically generated a vast textual production surrounding the problems and stakes involved. In the texts that I have read on slander, interpretation takes centre stage since slander is itself relational, or a question of position – actionable slur or unpalatable truth? And since linguistic violence itself interprets the subject in unrecognizable or painful ways, the battle ground (as it were) of social and intimate identity is fundamentally one of interpretation.

Crystal Hall: I would like to ask a series of questions to respond to this idea. How do we interpret peace? Charity? Passivity? Could our answers to the interpretation of violence be found in our analyses of other social phenomena? My final question is, why do we interpret violence?

Two ways of interpreting violence in the Italian context come to mind. The first is an economic give-take situation in twentieth-century novels where the violent acts steal something from the female protagonist (blood, tears) and as a whole suggest a failing project of gender equality in Italy. The second comes from the [Orlando furioso](#), a sixteenth-century epic poem in which the title character's fury, shocking for the period in its ghastly depictions, is generally discussed in terms of what it is not. Orlando's violence is contrary to courtly decorum, contrary to the intellectual project of the poet, et cetera. In both cases, violence is not interpreted as a stand-alone quality, but in opposition to something else.

Is representation a violent act?

Craig Epplin: Perhaps, although there are many kinds of representations, which can be violent in varying degrees and manners. Besides, we have to distinguish representational violence from other sorts of violence, those that are not filtered through discourse—between the bullet or the knife or the whip and the flesh there is no discourse. Of course, these two classes of violence have often gone hand in hand, for instance in nineteenth-century Europe's discursive domination of the "orient" that was coextensive with the physical domination of that region's colonial subjects. [Diamela Eltit](#), the great Chilean writer, explored this conjunction of discursive and bodily violence in her 1983 novel [Lumpérica](#): she dramatized the dissolution of collective narratives during the Pinochet dictatorship by cutting her own arms as she read the novel in a Santiago brothel.

Emily Butterworth: Early modern conceptions of slander centered certainly on the violence of the (mis)representation. But could it not also be restorative? Thinking about the early modern texts I am familiar with, the desire to represent at least the injustice of violence done – to reputation, social standing, social prospects, and thus even to livelihood – could be explained at least in part as a desire to repair that unjust

violence and to reformulate the defiled and deformed identity in terms recognizable (or at least acceptable) to the subject. However, this is admittedly the representation of a certain form of violence, which itself passes through language and so must perhaps be combated with the same means.

Andrea Goulet: Representation can work as a sublimating force, as with those cozy detective novels, which allow sweet grandmothers to enjoy reading about murderous acts they'd never tolerate in life. The classic detective genre (as opposed to noir, gothic, horror) seeks to contain the bodily, visceral effects of violence: Reason dominates Instinct, Order reclaims Disorder, and the bloody corpse becomes the "figure on the carpet" - an enigma to be analyzed, observed, and resolved. But on the other hand, the abstraction of the epistemological quest is always "pierced" by the sensationalism of the battered body or the atavistic brute. In a paper I did on [bibliophilia](#) in late 19th-century crime fictions, I used the Freudian notion of [scoptophilia](#) to link the detective's scientific inquiry (his book-lust) to the violence he disavows (the blood-lust of the criminal). Curiosity is a passion that's been troped as both ennobling and transgressive - and our own book-lust may well be fueled by the forces of blood-lust.

What role does the representation of violence play in the creation and iteration of national identities? Does gender difference complicate this question?

Emily Butterworth: The question of national identity is a very interesting one in the early modern period and one (in France at least) that, as well as being predicated on a necessary gesture of both inclusion and exclusion, does seem tied up with a certain representation of violence - that of the warrior class, the old aristocracy, to which the emerging bourgeoisie and new nobility had a somewhat ambivalent relationship. If French identity was predicated in mythic memory on valor on the battlefield, this had to be acknowledged while perhaps being replaced by a more civil - civilized? - version of Frenchness. The position of women in the debates does complicate the issue. If, on the one hand, the emerging ideal of national culture (in the seventeenth century at least) was sketched out in the female-run salons of the [Old Regime](#), new models of masculine valor had to be found that were not overly (or even overtly) feminized. To return to the question of violence and representation, there is a sense in which women writing on the question of slander feel originally slandered (as it were) by a social model that constructs them as inferior and incapable.

Crystal Hall: My first thought about national identity comes from Italian film. The primary nation-building or identity-strong films of Italian cinema are based on revolution. [Cabiria, 1860](#) and the [Gattopardo](#) were released at times when the ruling political body either needed to reinforce certain values such as victory, strength and superiority (e.g.: the associations between Cabiria and fascist values) or when directors wanted to highlight the violence done to their compatriots (1860 and the Gattopardo). Gender roles are certainly defined and reinforced in these cases, though I can't say how they might complicate it.

Craig Epplin: I'll mention a specific example. Throughout Latin America, from approximately the seventies through the nineties, a testimonial mode of literature became common. Its various incarnations responded to a range of circumstances, but a common theme among them was an attempt at restitution of some sort of violence. The first example of the genre was based on the testimony of an ex-slave in Cuba; others responded to recent forms of state violence such as the slaughter of indigenous communities in Guatemala or the crimes of the South American dictatorships. The ambition of these texts, it seems to me, was to reclaim a space within the national narrative, to allow what had been suppressed to be represented. Of course, the testimonial narrative contained its own internal dynamics, as the interactions between the "informant" and the writer reproduced an asymmetrical relationship of power-knowledge.

Andrea Goulet: On the morning of 9/11, I met with my Introduction to French Literature undergrads, some of whom had not yet heard of the attacks. We were reading France's founding war-cries, the medieval epic poems [La Chanson de Guillaume](#) and [La Chanson de Roland](#), and the students had been titillated by the gross-out

descriptions of the Christians' deaths at the hands of the Sarrazins (i.e. Muslims): riverbanks strewn with blood and brains, swords stuck into eyesockets, et cetera. I asked the class whether they wanted to discuss the reading or just have a conversation about the World Trade Center attacks and it quickly became clear that the themes were the same ones – martyrdom, religious nationalism, revenge, crusades, and killing. The whole history of patriotic wars is pretty man-centered, of course, but a recent New York Times Sunday Magazine [article about women soldiers raped by their superiors](#) in the U.S. Army reminds us of the interconnectedness of sexual and political violence.

Often, when one discusses violence in the media, the question of social responsibility and moral implications arises. Is this a tired issue, or one that requires our constant attention?

Crystal Hall: The recent events at [Virginia Tech](#) and the resulting media frenzy are particularly telling; they indicate to us that media coverage of violence requires our constant vigilance and a demand for non-violent representation of violent acts.

Andrea Goulet: Yes, of course we need to be aware of the moral implications of media representation. But journalism and art are two different things and it's hard to know what to consider when judging the latter. Short of condoning snuff films, do we have the right to decide how representations of violence will and should be viewed – and by whom? Does the “ick” factor of the multiple torture-rapes in [Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York*](#) mean it shouldn't have been published? (Maybe!) I used to be against all censorship, but I have to admit that since having kids, I've become less dismissive of Tipper Gore... (Even at my age, I can't watch [The Shield](#) without having nightmares – remember when Vic Mackey rams a guy's face onto the hot coil of a stove burner? – so why would I want children to see that?)

Emily Butterworth: The question of identification with representations does require constant attention, I think, since it interrogates means of subject formation which appear naturalized but may be revealed as historically determined. In considering how we react to violent representations (and even how these reactions are themselves represented) we may uncover other mechanisms at work.

Is there a theory of violence?

Emily Butterworth: Theories? Surely we are back to the knotty issue of interpretation again – and a proliferation of ways of seeing. If the experience of violence itself seems irreducible and incommensurable, attempts to represent it may always be plural and provisional.