Organic Shrapnel and the Possibility of Violence

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Abstract

In his book, 9/11: The Culture of Commemoration, David Simpson recognizes the political work of violence, suggesting “[w]ar cannot easily survive the capacity to imagine oneself in the body of the other.” As Simpson infers, the notion of being embedded in the life of another poses significant challenges to the perpetuation of violent acts. In this paper, I offer a re-theorization of violence that takes up the metaphor of “organic shrapnel”, a phenomenon in which human flesh from a suicide bomber or victim is driven under the skin of a survivor. What organic shrapnel suggests is not only that the body is simultaneously permeable and weaponized; the image also constructs trauma as a relational and possibly ethical experience. Using the figure of organic shrapnel, I argue for a broader understanding of the term violence itself – one that addresses its unfolding in both space and time rather than as an absolute and single act. Working through several ways of re-theorizing violence with regard to hospitality, the body, its spatial and temporal threshold and the significance of the other, the paper asks: what might it mean to reconsider violence as a site of potential ethical formation and address rather than the foreclosure of relational bonds?

Introduction

In a contemporary political climate so saturated with the rhetoric of violence, new analyses are needed to destabilize the binarisms that divide perpetrator and victim, peace and conflict, self and other, among many more. These distinctions, so easily constructed in order to justify acts of aggression against particular populations, act as borders that allow new directions in theorizing violence to stagnate. What would it mean, with this in mind, to reconsider the term “violence” itself; to push the boundaries of what constitutes violence as well as consider what scenes of violence make possible as much as they delimit? What would it mean to consider violence, not as one moment in time, but as a set of spatio-temporal relations continually unfolding across multiple and varied sites of impact? Indeed, what if we moved beyond an obsession with impact itself and considered what happens before and after? In this paper, I follow Simon Springer’s lead in considering not simply the why of violence, but...
the how and the where as I suggest that in order to subvert dominant rhetoric surrounding violence, particularly in terms of which bodies can suffer violence and which can be held responsible, the term violence must be reconfigured; violence must be looked at, not as the foreclosure of ethics but, rather, as a site of potential, albeit complicated, ethical reflection. In so doing, I look at the phenomenon of organic shrapnel, or, the embedding of one’s flesh in another’s. Working towards a discussion of how organic shrapnel might change our perspective on violence, I begin by offering a reading of foundational theories that have revolutionized thinking on violence but not yet opened it to a discussion of its spatial and temporal possibilities. I then offer a reading of organic shrapnel and its ethical implications. Finally, I use the figure of organic shrapnel and the image of momentum it conjures to offer four ways of re-theorizing violence that seek to extend the concept out from its most dominant forms of understanding.

To be sure, I do not mean to suggest that violence is a condition of ethical relations but, instead, that a measure of relationality conditions the possibility of violence. Relationality does not describe the moment of impact or aggression; rather, it sets the scene for a complex sociality. Violence itself is, of course, not ethical; it is, in fact, a severing of ethical relations. However, this paper moves to extend the moment of violence into a scene of address – a space of more sustained reflection that might give us pause to consider what violence does, how it brings strangers into proximity, and what effect that recognition might have on the journey toward non-violence. This turn opens up the notion of violence as more than a moment and, instead, reads such conflict as an encounter that is not satisfied with the traditional impulse to categorize violence into physical, emotional, institutional, or even more progressive categories of racialized and gendered forms. In other words, the conventional notions of what violence is and does must be re-contextualized to open avenues for debate that these definitions preclude. This is not a question of what might constitute a “just” violence but rather an exploration of the extent to which the threat of violence that conditions our interactions with one another might lead to an ultimate recognition of shared vulnerability. This recognition would serve not as justification for the necessity of violence but would instead reveal its absurdity. Ultimately, I read violence as an encounter with more depth and breadth than the single moment of impact to which is it often reduced – a turn which, I argue, transforms a decidedly unethical act into an extended space of ethical reflection.

Categorizing Violence

Many theorists have tried to account for the ways in which human interaction results in harm and destruction by taking up the task of defining what violence is. To be sure, these theories are not so reductive as to make simple delineations
between the forms or actors of violence, yet it would seem that these discussions might be more effectively leveraged with a consideration of violence as composed of several movements through time rather than one moment of time – a task I hope to unfold here. To date, major thinking on violence is often a project of categorization that offers some useful, but limited, insight. Violence, as the extant criticism illustrates, is a complex and contextual field of operation with many variables. Studies of both peace and violence require an interdisciplinary approach to attend to their multi-modalities. Not always physical, violence can take on varying forms, from the individually enacted to the much larger configurations of cultural, state or global conflict. According to sociologist Johan Galtung, arguably the “founder” of Peace and Conflict Studies, violence occurs as a triumvirate, with each form or level giving legitimization or resource to another. Direct violence – the immediately recognizable form of violence – is an assault on well-being or survival, most often with physical consequences. Importantly, direct violence has both an identifiable victim and perpetrator. Structural violence, on the other hand, while still resulting in physical harm, has a much less identifiable cause yet can be seen in effects such as resource depletion and famine, economic sanctions, the deterioration of living conditions among the urban poor, and so on. As Galtung explains, this violence “is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances.” The third form of violence studied by Galtung is cultural violence. This form of violence attempts to render the other two (direct and structural) invisible by legitimating their causal acts and allowing them to continue unchallenged, effectively normalizing their destructive effects. It “makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right - or at least not wrong.” While Galtung’s violence “triangle” offers a preliminary explanation for the cyclical and mutually reinforcing nature of violence, and certainly deepens the field of peace studies, the categorization of violence, indeed, the definition of violence itself, is in need of serious re-thinking.

I raise Galtung’s work in this context, not to subject it to critique but to show how re-conceptualizing or re-defining violence (which he did in ground-breaking ways) opens it to new interpretations necessary for its cessation. In short, we need to understand not only its ends, but its processes more deeply. Thus, my purpose here is also to extend Galtung’s thinking on violence as “built into the structure,” a more fluid conception of violence that might open us to further discussions of its temporality with significant implications for ethical philosophy. For example, while the success of peace is premised on the absence of violence, it remains to be theorized how peace might be imagined through a succession of moments that make time and space for reflection rather than in a single act that would foreclose interrogation. Again, this is not to advocate violent acts but, rather, to point out that a definition of peace premised on the eradication of conflict also forecloses the possibility of ethical relations between disparate parties that necessitate we linger on the threshold of violence a little
longer. Taken out of an explicitly political climate to which he responds, Galtung’s definition of violence leaves little room for re-thinking the term in the manner of philosophy.

Slavoj Žižek offers a more contemporary assessment of violence that both reinforces and, at times, troubles Galtung’s work. Yet he offers a suggestion for thinking violence differently that I hope to extend further into a discussion of time, space, and ethics. Like Galtung, Žižek posits three forms of violence: for Žižek these are subjective, objective, and systemic. Subjective violence is characterized as crime and terror, akin to Galtung’s “direct” violence. These are the more obvious or “visible” forms of violence that “lure” us into thinking that other modes of violence are less dangerous. Objective or ideological violence would include hate speech and racism, which often remain invisible as well or are disguised within more observable scenarios such as humanitarian crisis or political protest – the “SOS call” that “change[s] the topic” from the underlying causes of injustice. Finally, systemic violence occurs within economic or political systems. According to Žižek, globalization, capitalism, fundamentalism and language must all be considered systemic forms of violence yet become invisible next to the more obvious signifiers of conflict. As a result, violence is, in Simon Springer’s words, “rendered as a ‘thing’, an occurrence without a history or geography.” Thus, Žižek intervention is to consider the ways in which dominant and universalizing human rights discourse that obsesses over subjective violence (often occurring “elsewhere”) obscures and obfuscates systemic forms of oppression. Much like Springer’s challenge to open violence to a greater understanding of its geographical (or spatial) and historical (or temporal) dimensions, Žižek too advocates looking at violence differently – looking “sideways”, in fact, to recognize the violence that often goes hidden and the systems that render it so. It is within the very field of Conflict Studies, specifically in forms of humanitarian intervention, that systemic violence is elided. He argues that “a step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance.”

Significantly, Žižek also urges us to stop working so furiously (and often unsuccessfully) to stop violence but rather to “learn, learn, and learn” its causes. While Žižek is useful in uncovering less obvious forms of violence (and the violence of rendering these forms silent and hegemonic) he says little about the term violence itself. In his analysis, violence – while not always active – is always a destructive force, save perhaps for his discussion of divine violence which, while admittedly a “work of love,” is also quite possibly “a pure event which never really takes place.” In short, Žižek’s thoughts on violence, while compelling, focus on a repressive violence rather than a violence which hints at a more intimate encounter through which ethical relations might be recognized.

Cognizant of these foundational interpretations, yet departing from them, this paper now looks to the term violence itself, to see it as suggestive of possibility as
much as destruction. What might it mean to think violence differently and to reconsider, in violence, a site for reflection on potential ethical formation and address rather than the foreclosure of relational bonds? This paper addresses this question, and the boundaries carried and contested within it, by examining the extent to which ethics can arise through rather than in spite of a moment of potential violence. To this end, I read encounters with others through the figure of “organic shrapnel”, a metaphor for a provocative corporeal hospitality; that is, the possibility of being literally and figuratively embedded by the life of another. The term “organic shrapnel” implies an event in which some element of living material acts as a form of shell munition, its trajectory originating from a biological organism and potentially embedding itself in another. Scholarship on the term is limited and the image itself has been attributed to the fictional work of author Don DeLillo in his 9/11 novel *Falling Man*. While DeLillo’s use of organic shrapnel refers specifically to the body of a possible terrorist or victim which, as a result of the trauma of suicide bombing, has lodged itself in a survivor’s body, the image encompasses much more. “Organic shrapnel” offers a compelling account of the ways in which other lives become part of our own through violence and the extent to which this incorporation can be disavowed and emptied of sustained philosophical reflection. To this end, the image of organic shrapnel, employed literally in fiction but used metaphorically here, and the figure of the other or stranger will be indispensable to this discussion. Both organic shrapnel and the stranger ask particular questions of us, not the least of which is how we might respond when confronted by the other in a moment of potential violence.

**Organic Shrapnel: A Case Study**

It is within an arena of trauma and fear that DeLillo conjures his reference to organic shrapnel in his 2007 novel. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, protagonist Keith Neudecker makes his way through the ash to seek medical help. In the hospital, bits of glass are extracted from Keith’s skin and he is given an education in the deeper fragments that are often never retrieved from bombing victims. When a suicide bomber is “blown to bits”, the doctor tells him, “fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who’s in striking range...They call this organic shrapnel."117 This scene, occurring within the first few pages of the novel confronts the worst fears of a victim of terrorist attack. Not only does Keith feel the effects of emotional trauma firsthand as he witnesses the planes collide with the towers; he also must face the combined physical and psychical shock of an unwilling incorporation as the scale of trauma is reduced from the grand spectacle of the towers to the intimate invasion of one’s own body. This scene leaves aside the inorganic violence of the planes and weaponizes a vulnerable body in such a way that it can simultaneously inflict and suffer harm. The bomber (or, in this case, the possible
hijacker) does not, of course, survive his own act of violence. Indeed, one cannot be certain if any bits of flesh do in fact belong to a terrorist or not. Before the reader can contemplate the implications of this, however, the doctor is quick to clarify: “This is something I don’t think you have.”

In her own study on affect and aesthetics in literature written about 9/11, Rachel Greenwald-Smith takes up the image of organic shrapnel in DeLillo’s text as a metaphor for the lasting impact trauma has on a survivor’s body. She writes: “The exposure to such horrifying events appears to involve an eerie permeability where the force of the experience radically alters the world, and with it the corporeal existence of its victims.” Using Greenwald-Smith’s recognition of the trauma of this occurrence as a starting point, I read organic shrapnel as a metaphor for relationality; that is, the ways in which we are all, in some way, a part of one another. What organic shrapnel suggests is not only that the body is simultaneously permeable and weaponized; the image also constructs trauma and violence as social. In other words, violence is first and foremost a relation, a recognition that should give us pause to consider both the spatiality of an encounter that brings self and other into proximity as well as a temporal relation that when theorized as a series of movements rather than a single act opens the concept of violence to new interrogations. The profound and unavoidable sociality of our existence, in this case, compels us to ask questions that are inherently ethical regarding the shared precarity of bodies, and what the voice of that vulnerable body might ask of those who seek to do it harm. Organic shrapnel, therefore, offers a compelling image for considering the breaching of personal borders, the velocity of interpersonal relations and, most significantly, how we engage or disengage with the lives of others.

Although Falling Man does well to represent the general disjuncture experienced by New Yorkers following the terrorist attacks, it also reproduces a polarizing discourse of self and other. Indeed, DeLillo’s swift treatment and glossing over of the metaphoric embeddedness of organic shrapnel is indicative of his representation of otherness in the text. While there are many sites where ethical relations could possibly be forged or reflected upon, these moments appear only to be dismissed as they are attributed to Keith’s inability to connect to the world around him. To be sure, there is struggle in Falling Man, but it is the struggle of the individual to make meaning after tragedy rather than a coming to terms with one’s relationship and responsibility to others as lives inevitably collide after 9/11. Falling Man, of course, does not promise an ethical encounter with otherness. DeLillo himself admits the need to focus on the stories of New York victims, as opposed to the event of 9/11 itself in which the “world narrative belong[ed] to terrorists.” However, with DeLillo’s attempt to reclaim New York in mind, it is interesting that these images of relational possibility are continually raised, signaling perhaps the recognition that one might be asked to respond to others in times of trauma. How much more curious then does that make the

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repeated invocations of organic shrapnel in the text? For it would seem that in *Falling Man*, the image is only brought forth in order to highlight the necessity of avoiding relations with the other. Thus, the image of organic shrapnel becomes a significant tool for interrogating not only the extent to which we are implicated in and by lives that are not our own but also which lives we allow to take “root” in our own. The possibility of carrying the other within speaks to an awareness of the violence that is not only always lurking but is precisely the basis upon which our interactions with others and indeed our very self is predicated. Moreover, organic shrapnel teaches us about how to think the question of violence differently and as an invitation to ethical hospitality, corporeal and beyond. To speak of an ethic of hospitality or its failure, for that matter, is to speak, not to one relation apart from other sets of “ethics,” but rather a set of relations – a cultural cultivation of unconditional acceptance of strangers, without question. To borrow from Derrida, hospitality is not one modality of ethics; rather, “*hospitality is ethics*”\(^{21}\) and always arrives with the possibility of violence.

How then, do we re-theorize violence in a way that attends to its ethical possibilities as well as its material function? While the recognition of structural and cultural violence has been an intervention crucial to projects of human rights and non-violent ethics, thinking the question of violence differently means stepping forward and backward at the same time. It moves forward by asking new questions and opening up new possibilities for considering the relationship between violence and subjectivity. It looks backward to the word itself and considers the extent to which traditional and even alternative theories of violence have elided an intervention into the very terms of the argument. Re-conceptualizing violence reclaims the word from its destructive connotations and asks a series of questions: What if we were open rather than shielded to violence? How does an ethical encounter require that we become more susceptible to violence? How does the body figure in a re-theorization of violence? What might it mean to re-temporalize an act of violence? To explore the possibilities opened on its threshold? Finally, how does our responsibility for the other, as a foundational requirement of subjectivity, become the most violent but ultimately ethical imperative? Ultimately, the new image of violence that organic shrapnel offers attends to the ways in which violence is always lurking in every act of hospitality, is intimately related to the body, is a threshold of ethical relations, and is crucial to the formation of the subject.

**Hospitality and the Threat of Violence**

The violence of invitation is a theme taken up by Jacques Derrida in his influential essay “*Hostipitality*” [sic].\(^{22}\) The law of hospitality, for Derrida, is fraught with contradictions for, as Immanuel Kant initially infers, hospitality is a question of right and not of philanthropy. Derrida echoes this sentiment, citing hospitality as “a welcome without reserve and without calculation, an exposure without
limit to whoever arrives [l'arrivant].” Yet Derrida questions the paradox in Kant’s original formulation, for his hospitality – one premised on “behave[ing] peaceably” requires that the host evaluate the potential guest or stranger on the basis of that foreigner announcing his or her arrival with a name. Hence, there is a certain violence in this invitation – a violence of conditions – the threat of which can only be transcended if that stranger gives no name at the door, and the host invites them in nonetheless. In this way, the violence of demanding the other announce him or herself transforms the potential violence inherent in inviting a stranger in with no questions asked. What Derrida implies, is that this kind of unconditional hospitality involves – indeed requires – a measure of risk; that is, it necessitates a host who is master of his or her house yet at the same time who relinquishes that security in order to welcome the stranger, whoever or whatever they may be. This aporia forms the basis of Derrida’s hospitality and is crucial to a re-appropriation of the term “violence” as it means one must accept the possibility of violence as the very basis of any ethical encounter with the other. This is a slightly different approach than one taken by philosopher Richard Kearney, who points out that “hospitality” and “hostility” share the same Latin root. Yet what Kearney’s interpretation reveals is that hospitality itself already involves a subversion of language; that is, while hospitality and hostility seem to signify disparate categories, the guest and the enemy, hospitality is only just or pure when it refuses to make this distinction. According to the Latin etymology, they are both hostis. The implications for reconfiguring the term violence are then significant, for the real violence enacted in the circumstance of hospitality is when the host requires the visitor to announce or identity him or herself. Thus, the violence in the event of hospitality is not the one we expect and it opens up new practical and philosophical possibilities for what violence may or may not do.

Violence and the Body

If we extend the metaphor of hospitality or, rather, reduce its scale from the home to the body, we find another challenge to dominant notions of what constitutes violence. Hospitality opens not only the home but also the body to the possibility of violence and disturbs the normative reasoning that posits the body as a private and impenetrable entity. According to Judith Butler the body is open to exposure and invasion in ways not immediately recognized: “[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency; the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instruments of all these as well...the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own.” As Butler points out, we are always already susceptible to violence at the same time as we are capable of committing it. This opening of the body, however, raises concerns about the normative perceptions about what the body of the human is, or rather what constitutes a human body at all. Some bodies, Butler tells us, are not seen as
human within frameworks that deny precarity to certain categories of “others.” It is within this framework that those such as DeLillo reveal which bodies are permitted to interact with our own. In his essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo considers the physical and metaphoric implications of what the collision of 9/11 means for the people of New York. He writes: “Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage.” For DeLillo, being vulnerable to exposure is reason to close our lives to the address of others – to foreclose hospitality and seek ways to mitigate exposure. Indeed, as David Simpson cogently recognizes: “[w]ar cannot easily survive the capacity to imagine oneself in the body of the other.” It is only when we begin to see this violence differently, as an exposure that, in Butler’s terms, open us to mortality and vulnerability but also to agency and the recognition that the bodies we inhabit are never really our own, that we might begin to alter the ways we respond when this border is breached. Yet much like Derrida’s suggestion that pure hospitality is always impossible, this defiance of borders at the level of the body is a potential but ultimately complex site of ethical hospitality leading to a crucial question in the theory of hospitality itself: How does the violence of corporeal invasion reflect the ways in which the body is simultaneously vulnerable and weaponized and how might this violence reinforce the idea of hospitable relations as “unwilled and unchosen?”

Embracing the Threat of Violence as the Threshold of Ethics

To respond to the question above, reconfiguring the body as both the cause and the subject of violence necessitates unpacking the moment of violence itself and bracketing off the moment of impact from the crucial momentum that precipitates the actual act or blow. The concept of violence, in other words, can be re-theorized by situating it as a threshold – an edge rather than an end. What might it enable in our thinking around the inevitability of violence, to consider the implications of a violence not yet completed or acted upon but always hovering, possible, and threatening? To contemplate the threshold of violence rather than its culminating act is to hold violence always in tension and to extend and blur the boundaries that distinguish peace and harm, here from there, and before from after. This pause allows time to make and respond to an address from those who share in the encounter of violence as friends, enemies, or something in between. Without this address, the self cannot be fully narrated and as such, relies on the scene and structure of address, the giving of an “account of oneself” in order to discover itself as a subject. Extending the threshold of violence gives space for this address to take place. Pausing at the border of violence allows us to consider the relations and possibilities that are formed in and only in this liminal and interstitial space, revealing that the actioning or withdrawal from the violent act is neither an inevitability nor an
anomaly but rather an ambivalent moment enacted via the interworkings of complex social, cultural, and ethical phenomena.

As a site of address then, the threshold of violence can act as a way of both temporally and spatially extending the ethical moment of encounter in which social relations are forged. Butler writes:

> An account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself. Moreover, the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our “singular” stories are told.32

As Butler hints, the threshold of violence reveals the sociality of the address. This violence, of unfreedom and the possibility of harm, is not between strangers; indeed, one ceases to be a stranger at the moment the address is received – what Butler might call Hegelian recognition. Violence is, after all, a necessarily relational encounter, one that – if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable – affirms our participation in a community of shared precarity. When we put ourselves in harm’s way, and open ourselves to the possibility of doing harm (defensive or retaliatory), we enter into this relation. In this case, while the completion of violence may sever the ethical possibility of that relation, the threshold of violence preserves it – each party captive to that lingering encounter in a suspended and ever-unfolding space. According to Butler “violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another.”33 What Butler implies is that immediately prior to the act of violence we are engaged in a relation – a relation only possible because violence remains an option. Thus, the term “violence,” when viewed as a threshold rather than a teleological act with an ultimate and inevitable end, implies a necessary and interdependent relation with serious implications for how we position ourselves as autonomous individuals in situations of conflict.

**The Other as Constitutive of the Self**

Re-spatializing and re-temporalizing ourselves as individuals in a violent encounter necessitates a contemplation of the other. Thus, a way of further re-theorizing violence is to consider the ways in which the other indissolubly constitutes the self. In other words, the identity of the self relies on protecting rather than extinguishing the other. The other, or stranger, according to Jean Greisch, poses “a question in both the ontological and ethical realms.”34 As
Greisch infers, the relation between self and other (a relation in which violence is always a possibility) is a condition of both ethics and being. On this point Butler too notes: “I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no ‘you’ to address, then I have lost ‘myself.’”

This relation or address between the self and the other, however, seems deceptively simple and easy to adopt in most encounters. But to what extent does this scene of address hold up in a relation primarily founded upon the possibility of violence? Here, Butler reminds us:

...we must think of a susceptibility to others that is unwilled and unchosen, that is a condition of our responsiveness to others, even a condition of our responsibility for them. It means, among other things, that this susceptibility designates a non-freedom and, paradoxically, it is on the basis of this susceptibility over which we have no choice that we become responsible for others.

As Butler suggests, the relation with the other that forms the basis of the constitution of the self reveals the inherent violence of the non-freedom of unchosen relation. Responsibility for the other, in other words, carries with it a violence towards the self.

In her analysis of the organic shrapnel image in DeLillo’s text, Greenwald-Smith argues that the anxiety produced by the trauma of embeddedness is useful. This anxiety:

...could slowly grow and make its presence known...through a bodily disruption of expectations, a palpable insistence that we are more permeable to others than we might think, an unmistakable bump under the skin that could hold the promise of a different mode of interaction with the social and political circumstances of our contemporary moment.

While the notion of a bump under the skin is usually more disconcerting than promising, this bump might also serve as a constant reminder of its origins and of the taken-for-granted-ness with which we approach our distinct bodies and corporeal boundaries. While traditional definitions of violence focus on prevention, such a move seeks to foreclose any potential for ethical relations with both distant and proximal others. Yet, as Butler points out, “there is no wishing away our fundamental sociality.” Indeed, the very social relations that might lead to violence might also sustain us as we discover, through the negotiated threshold of violence, the full extent of human ethical possibility.
Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the concept of violence can be productively reconfigured with a nod to both its spatial and temporal complexities. Indeed, recognizing violence as a process evolving and developing over both space and time opens the concept to surprising new interrogations, among them – ethical ones. While foundational theories offer a compelling starting point for thinking about violence in its varied forms and manifestations, I have offered several frameworks for thinking the question, problem, and even possibility of violence differently. In summary, re-theorizing violence as a process carried out over time and space rather than a single and ultimate or definitive act in time and space is made possible by considering violence as tethered to hospitality, intimately related to the body, as a threshold of ethical relations, and as fundamental to the formation of the self. Perhaps the most striking figure for thinking through some of these theoretical moves is the figure of organic shrapnel, an image of corporeal invitation and invasion. As metaphor for relationality, simultaneously imbued in a process of violence, organic shrapnel asks us to reconsider how we are embedded in and by lives that are vastly different than our own. Ultimately, organic shrapnel asks us to be open to this precarity, to be open to a particular kind of violence that can only be understood as an encounter enacted in pieces, over and over again and at multiple sites of impact. In an abstract sense, we are always engaged in a process of being “given over to each other, at each other’s mercy”, to borrow once more from Butler. We are always embedded with and transformed by the lives of others, both strange and familiar. They take root under our skin as bumps that testify to our own precariousness and permeability. How we choose to respond, either by incorporating these fragments or disavowing their power to transform, is the question we must capture within new thinking on the function of violence.
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7 Galtung, 1990, 291.

8 Galtung, 1990, 302.


10 Žižek, 2008, 11.


13 Žižek, 2008, 1.

14 Žižek, 2008, 8.

15 Žižek, 2008, 205.

16 Žižek, 2008, 196.


18 DeLillo, 2007, 16.


26 Kearney, 2003 68.
31 Butler, 2005, 39.
33 Butler, 2009, 27.
35 Butler, 2005, 32.
37 Greenwald-Smith, 2011, 170.
38 Butler, 2005, 33.

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