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On Violence

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[The] world made a huge effort of the will to ignore the reality...what-must-on-no-account-be known, namely the impossible verity that barbarism could grow in cultured soil, that savagery could lie concealed beneath decency's well-pressed shirt."

-- Salman Rushdie, [Shame](#)

What [Vivian Gornick](#) says about experience can also be said of violence: it's a large piece of territory. A writer confronting experience and an anthropologist tackling violence start with the same questions: "What about it? What exactly is it? Where was it? How to enter it? From what angle and in what position? With what strategy, and toward what end?"

In keeping with the mission of *Open Anthropology* to bring the discipline into the public conversation about critical social issues and contemporary policy debates, this edition focuses on violence. In the broadest sense, violence is the exercise of force that inflicts injury or damage. In the world as it currently exists, there is no dearth of illustrations or indicators of violence. News reports in the first two weeks of July 2013, the time of this writing, cover stories that include: [the death of Trayvon Martin and the violence of racism in a jury trial in Florida](#); [the torture of solitary confinement](#); [death by drone](#); [bomb attacks in Iraq](#); [malign neglect of the factory floor](#); and one "[view from the victim room](#)," a tiny sample of stories from a tiny sample of English-language press outlets that share one common feature: death, injury, damage was inflicted by force.

These are headline topics that unveil the surface but do not answer important questions about the large territory that is violence. The surface lends itself to easy explanations that I suspect nobody really finds all that convincing or relevant. Some people explain violence with a shrug, "It's human nature, is all" or find blame in an other's culture or belief system, "they are a violent people."

Most anthropologists avoid such totalizing statements that tend to end discussion and erase history and context. Instead, they approach the subject systematically, building and arranging the knowledge they have acquired. Towards that goal, anthropologists and other social scientists have developed labels that differentiate forms of violence, categories that include the *spectacular violence* of war, genocide, and

massacre; the *structural violence* of unequal social and economic relationships—the violence of racism, sexism, and class inequality; and *interpersonal violence*—all forms that are understood to be intertwined, interconnected phenomena.

The categories are not designed to tame understanding but enlarge it. They offer one entry point to study violence from a particular angle, to assess it from a particular position. There is political violence and there is economic violence. There is armed violence, and the tools and technologies of violence. There is domestic violence. There is symbolic violence, and there is violence in war *and* peace.

Thus, the anthropology of violence is large territory that leaves little room for essentialist views. Violence is neither timeless nor inevitable. In its specificity, there is nothing inherently natural about violence. The devil is in the details that anthropologists gather, observe, analyze and interpret. By means of this painstaking process, the dehumanizing violence of stereotype is more likely avoided. Caricature—such as "the" peaceful man in nature or its flipside, "the fierce warrior"—can be replaced with nuance. Stereotype can be replaced with the knowledge that what is observed on the ground in social relationships is the result of complex processes and dynamics. With this insight, typecasting can be more clearly recognized, its roots and purposes uncovered.

Violence takes center stage in this slim anthology written by anthropologists across time, sub-discipline, and journal title culled from the [full AAA collection](#). Ten articles and two book reviews represent a fragment of what anthropologists have written on the subject in AAA journals, in other scholarly publications, and in books (please also see "Anthropologists Engaging Violence 1980-2012" the [American Anthropologist Virtual Issue](#) edited by [Virginia R. Dominguez](#)). Each article presented in Open Anthropology's collection offers some bit of information or insight, a fact of history, a description of context, the portrait of a situation, a revelation.

Taken as a whole, this collection draws attention to the critical ingredients in the making of violence. Domination is a critical element. In any given situation and amid complex processes and dynamics, certain questions are central: In what specific way is the playing field of social life uneven? Who uses violence, of what types, and to what ends?

We begin with [R. Brian Ferguson](#), one of anthropology's most important contemporary scholars of war who is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the exciting, new Master's Program in Peace and Conflict Studies at [Rutgers University](#). In all of his work on the lethal violence that is war, Ferguson practices what he preaches: "war should be studied not as a disembodied cultural pattern, but as a behavioral reality in a concrete historical situation."

This is exactly Ferguson's approach in "Blood of the Leviathan: Western Contact and Warfare in Amazonia," published twenty-three years ago in [American Ethnologist](#) (AE), the journal of the [American Ethnological Society](#) (AES) and currently edited by [Angelique Haugerud](#) (who is also author of the hot-off-the-presses [No Billionaire Left Behind: Satirical Activism in America](#)). Ferguson is meticulous in his research, interdisciplinary in method, and comprehensive in the scope of his knowledge. "Blood of the Leviathan" has stood the test of time.

Arguing against prevailing theories that the occurrence of non-state war can be explained by indigenous factors alone, Ferguson makes the case for examining the actual situation in which the fighting occurred. In terms of warfare in Amazonia, those real circumstances included and involved contact with Europeans that began with "the most disruptive observers imaginable: raiders seeking slaves or mission 'converts'" (238) and later, government agents and even anthropologists. Ferguson traces the history of contact and reveals its consequences on native peoples and for lethal violence. Contact ("the intrusion of the European state") had conflict-generating effects: it *fomented* warfare, *triggered* migration, *introduced* epidemic diseases, *caused* depopulation, and *forced* displacement. Given the ease with which biologically oriented

explanations and Hobbesian claims about war are accepted as common sense truth, Ferguson's message and information bear reviewing. By taking into account the full context of players on the unequal field of social action, Ferguson refuses simplistic "us versus them" reductions (Natives are savages/the West is civilized; the West is evil/Natives are pure).

Halfway through the article, Ferguson discusses "fighting over Western manufactures," offering telling information and analysis about what happened once steel tools (and later, guns) were introduced by Westerners "to attract Indians" (243-244). Ferguson assesses the evidence and offers this general statement on what happened: "...when something this valuable enters Native systems of exchange...this entry both creates conflicting vital interests and transforms relations of cooperation at all levels of social organization. Furthermore, these conflicting interests, fully embedded in the totality of social relations, shape political alignments and generate social hostilities, up to and including war" (245).

A particular tool figures in the second article in our collection titled "The Term Tomahawk." The tomahawk in question is not the [land attack missile](#) of the modern age, but the instrument noted by outside observers used by the Indians of Virginia "to fell a tree, or to cut any massy thing in sonder" as the 17th century writer [William Strachey](#) described the tool.

"The Term Tomahawk" was written in 1908 by William R. Gerard for the [American Anthropologist](#), the flagship journal of the AAA currently edited by [Michael Chibnik](#). Gerard, affiliated with the [Bureau of American Ethnology](#), provides a brief study of the history of the word, and hints at how it changed with contact, a theme raised by Ferguson in "Blood of the Leviathan." Gerard relies on written sources, including Strachey and his contemporary, Capt. John Smith, author of the [Map of Virginia, 1612](#) and in 1624, [The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles](#).

Gerard reveals that while the first written reference to the tool was Smith's 1612 notation, sometime before that date, "the Indians of Virginia had been supplied from England with small iron hatchets of inferior quality manufactured for trade purposes, and to which, naturally, they transferred the name of the stone implement which the metal one superseded" (279, emphasis added). The statement begs some questions: Who, exactly, supplied the Indians with these iron hatchets? Who transferred the old name to the new tool? And was there a corresponding change in the function of the new tool named "tomahawk"?

Gerard does not address these questions—it was not the main focus of his piece. But he offers a tantalizing statement that begs further reflection. I can't get Ferguson's revelations out of my mind as I read Gerard's statement: "It is therefore to the iron hatchet of the white man's manufacture and the adopted Virginia Indian name which English-speaking people everywhere applied to it, and not to the stone implement, that is due the widespread fame which this formidable implement of aboriginal warfare acquired" (279-280).

In "Powhatan's Pursestrings," the third article in our collection, [Alex W. Barker](#) takes the reader through a detailed examination of "the meaning of surplus in a seventeenth century Algonkian Chiefdom," the very same time and place referred to in Gerard's 1908 article.

Barker is Director, [Museum of Art and Archaeology](#) at the University of Missouri and "Powhatan's Pursestrings" appeared in the 1992 volume of the [Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association](#), the journal of the [Archaeology Division](#) currently edited by [Cathy Lynne Costin](#).

The greater part of Barker's report is the political economy of the native chiefdom of Powhatan who anthropologist Frederic Gleach explains were "an Algonkian-speaking paramount chiefdom occupying the coastal plain of Virginia from the south side of the James River north to the Rappahannock" ([Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures](#), 22). Barker takes a detailed look at available data to understand key factors in agricultural production for surplus (tribute to the chief) by

agricultural producers "content" with subsistence. The situation is complicated involving ecological conditions, the mobilization of labor, a dynamic form of political organization, internal actors—and contact with outsiders.

My purpose here is to come to terms with violence. With that in mind, I follow Barker's essay, staying with his careful review of the literature, the data, and the argumentation to get a sense of the rise and sustenance of this chiefdom. The gem appears in the section titled "Surplus Production and Demography" (70) where Barker refutes a theory and helps unravel a mystery. The theory goes like this: population pressure led to competition over scarce resources (the best agricultural soil)—led to indigenous warfare between smaller chiefdoms—led to a victor: the Powhatan chiefdom, with Wahunsonacock the paramount at the time of English contact. Barker complicates the trajectory by noticing discrepancy in the numbers and formulating a "counterintuitive" argument: In the Chesapeake, there was "a sudden and profound *decrease* in population coeval with the rise and expansion of the Powhatan paramountcy" (73, emphasis added).

The mystery is this: what caused the "sudden and profound decrease in the population"? Barker offers clues. More than fifty years before Capt. John Smith offered his observations of the territory and the chiefdom, an ill-fated Spanish attempt to settle the region brought with it deadly disease. Along with other factors, such "demographic disruption" has consequences for violence, up to and including war, as Ferguson explains in "Blood of the Leviathan" (241-243).

All this history! It is convoluted, not seamless. It can be a pain to sort through, and it can be painful to face the deep-rooted beliefs it destroys, including that there is little else to uncover or little left to know. [Nancy Marie Mithlo](#) takes up the problem of history in the fourth article in our collection, "History is Dangerous," published in 1995 by [Museum Anthropology](#), the publication of the [Council for Museum Anthropology](#), currently co-edited by [Jennifer A. Shannon](#) and [Cynthia Chavez Lamar](#).

[Mithlo](#) is an anthropologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and author of the book ["Our Indian Princess": Subverting the Stereotype](#).

A first-person account of her own coming to consciousness, "History is Dangerous" begins in a high school classroom where Mithlo is bored with the subject, especially war history. A museum experience changed her mind. A displaced Chiricahua Apache, Mithlo visited the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and recognized her "affinity to this horror" (50). Thus began her own journey into history—personal family history and the story of her tribe that was named by others—that was named after the place of their imprisonment—The Fort Sill Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache Tribe of Oklahoma (50).

Mithlo is the docent who brings the reader with her to [Fort Sill](#), a military training and artillery center established in 1869 that is also site of the violence brought on Mithlo's people and her family. The official [US military Fort Sill homepage](#) describes its origins: "Fort Sill soldiers originally *protected* settlers in Texas from raids by the plains Indian tribes" (emphasis added). Mithlo offers a different reading of the past and of the violent place that includes a cemetery "...where my father or even I could be buried by the United States army because our ancestors waged war against the government for the protection of our homelands" (emphasis added). Mithlo continues, "We lost all of our lands, yet the United States government will continue to bury us" (55).

The tour with Mithlo is not intended to comfort. The victors may write history but Mithlo is among those who see violence in conventional representations of the past and how these get reproduced in the present, making it difficult to live with dignity into the future. Mithlo's exploration is poignant and textured. She sees *all* the violence and concludes, "history has neglected its duty to instruct...we humans have not learned a thing" (56).

Carlos Y. Flores goes on where Mithlo leaves off by means of a multidimensional project he describes in his 2004 article, "Indigenous Video, Development and Shared Anthropology: A Collaborative Experience with Maya Q'eqchi' Filmmakers in Postwar Guatemala." Flores who teaches anthropology at the *Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos*, published "Indigenous Video" in [Visual Anthropology Review](#), the journal of the [Society for Visual Anthropology](#), currently edited by Mark Westmoreland and [Brent Luvaas](#).

A self-described Guatemalan Ladino, Flores describes complications and contradictions in his effort to work with indigenous Mayan filmmakers. For Flores the anthropologist, a central goal was to provide by means of a filmmaking project "new mechanisms for cultural reconstruction and social healing after an acute process of social dislocation and militarization." (31). For the Q'eqchi' people of the [Alta Verapaz province](#), that acute process was the brutal, [35-year counterinsurgency war](#), aided and abetted by the United States. The numbers are staggering as anthropologist [Beatriz Manz](#) reports: "[The Guatemalan Army](#) pulverized communities, inflicting more than 600 massacres, 200,000 deaths, the displacement of 1.5 million people, and tens of thousands of disappearances, most significantly in the 1980s" (152).

Flores recounts his collaborations with the local videomakers, noting his own surprise at their choice of subject, focus, language, message and overall intent—and what was made absent by those choices in the making of *Qa Loq Laj Iyaaj* (Our Sacred Seed). He came to a second film project understanding there are multiple stakeholders in the struggle for memory; inevitably some voices will dominate and others will be silenced. In the case of the second film, a Catholic priest, his congregants and a monument in the form of a 50-foot cross were at the center of the film [Rub'el Kurus](#) (*Beneath the Cross*). Flores believes "the memorial cross, and by extension the film production, became not only a public sphere where the survivors could symbolically reunite with their murdered kin and openly mourn them, but also a space of political denunciation of past atrocities" (39).

Jon Wolseth is the author of the sixth article in our collection, "Everyday Violence and the Persistence of Grief: Wandering and Loss Among Honduran Youths," published in the [Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology](#), the publication of the [Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology](#), currently edited by [Andrew Canessa](#).

"Everyday Violence" goes to Honduras, Guatemala's neighbor to the south, where full-blown war is not present, but large-scale structures of domination and oppression make for an uneasy peace. Wolseth conducted fieldwork in the area of [El Progreso](#), an urban center hit hard by contemporary conditions rooted in a centuries-old [global political economy](#). In such a place, violence gets turned inward, resulting in gun murder and gang wars. These are symptoms of structural violence, although they appear as ordinary criminality, an illusion that places failure on individual or cultural weakness.

Wolseth depicts life at the ragged edge of survival, and it's heartbreaking. The persistence of grief is palpable as young men wander the streets with no place to go—where "violence from without becomes subjectivity" (Adrienne Pine, [Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras](#), 26, emphasis added). Loss dominates while the structures of power, oppression, and inequality are not held accountable, rendering it ever more difficult for "damaged" people to build a peaceful society. In El Progreso, prospects for the future are dim and jobs are few in a "neoliberal" global economy marked by low wages, a vulnerable workforce, and ever-limited social services. Young men are enveloped in deep sorrow, an emotional state counterproductive to political activism. Grief "weighs upon them, and prevents them from taking collective action" (314-315).

In Barrancabermeja, Colombia—the setting of the next article—collective action is at the center of the story. "Fighting for Justice, Dying for Hope: On the Protest Line in Colombia" is a short piece by Vanderbilt University Professor of Anthropology [Lesley Gill](#) who has an extensive and impressive

research and publications record on Latin America. "Fighting for Justice" appeared in the 2006 issue of [North American Dialogue](#), the publication of the [Society for the Anthropology of North America](#), currently edited by [Susan Falls](#).

Gill explains the situation: [Barrancabermeja](#) is an oil town in a hot region of the country's decades-long counterinsurgency war where paramilitaries with clandestine government support have murdered, assassinated, tortured and made people disappear. In such a climate and in context of Colombia's bloody labor history, workers, trade unionists and human rights defenders fight for justice—for decent working conditions and wages, the right to unionize, the right to associate. Official "demobilization" of the paramilitary is a façade and a farce; the paramilitary functions as a shadow state in Barrancabermeja where activists face the threat of death and live in constant uncertainty.

Gill describes events in Barrancabermeja on "International Day of Protest Against Coca-Cola," a countrywide set of demonstrations sponsored by [SINALTRAINAL](#), a Colombian labor union. The anthropologist is also an "internationalist" whose very presence may keep the police and paramilitary from violently disrupting the event. The photographs that accompany her article show a nonviolent protest with children and adults participating in political street theater.

The protest was peaceful; in the dark of night a union leader was murdered. It is a wonder that grief doesn't take full hold and paralyze, as it has with Wolseth's lost boys of El Progreso. Colombia's unionists understand that possibility. "They know that without a vigorous union and a sense of alternatives, there can be no hope," Gill writes, "Yet keeping hope alive remains their biggest challenge" (13).

Everything is interconnected—contemporary conditions and the policies and practices of local and international players, and global dynamics and the concrete historical situation described in each of the articles in this collection. In order to understand violence of any kind and as manifest at any level, coming to terms with those policies and practices and dynamics is essential.

Writing to US anthropologists, Brown University anthropologist [Catherine Lutz](#) brings this message home, laying out an argument that demands self-reflection: the US position and role in "the long process of militarization and empire building that has reshaped almost every element of global social life over the 20th century" (723). Lutz published "Making War at Home in the United States: Militarization and the Current Crisis" one year after 9/11 in a special "In Focus" set of articles from [American Anthropologist](#).

"Making War at Home" is a brilliant synthesis of the pervasiveness of militarism at home and abroad and the processes by which militarism has come into being. It also offers an exposé of "[The Military Normal](#)," a social condition made invisible by political rhetoric, public relations and propaganda, by secrecy laws, and the normalization of violence more generally. Lutz exposes the costs: in lives lost and blowback, in dollar amounts, and in how whole communities are dependent upon the local military base and the war economy.

Lutz's closing remarks are powerful, urging US anthropologists and their students to confront their own country's active participation in the violence. It's not enough to learn about "the violence that plagues other lands," she writes. There are "tortured bodies and burned landscapes" behind the façade. In front stands the "US imperium, global militarization, and the cultural politics that make its wars seem either required of moral persons or simply to be waited out, like bad weather" (732). The face of power may glitter, but its moral claims are suspect. Lutz writes, "Our job as intellectuals is to struggle to understand the crisis presented by terrorism in all its forms," a job also for citizens of the world (723).

In her article, Lutz makes reference to Hugh Gusterson of George Mason University, and his notion of "nuclear orientalism" (724). That idea appeared in Gusterson's 1999 piece "Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination," that we include as the ninth article in this collection. It was published

in [Cultural Anthropology](#), the journal of the [Society for Cultural Anthropology](#) currently edited by [Anne Allison](#) and [Charles Piot](#).

"Nuclear Weapons" also casts the anthropological gaze on "us," not "them." Gusterson takes apart the words, phrases, dialogue and discussion that frame US cultural conceptions of who and what are dangerous and where nuclear violence might likely explode. He writes about perception, and how fear and uncertainty get tamed, purged and recast. His observations began with fieldwork at the [Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory](#) in California. There, Gusterson interviewed weapons designers and began to recognize a pattern: talk about the dangers of nuclear weapons followed a predictable cultural script. Gusterson explains the specific ways this talk and those perceptions comprise an "orthodoxy [that is] so much a part of our collective common sense that...it can usually be stated as simple fact without fear of contradiction" (112). He also makes clear that this talk and those perceptions do not match any reasonable reality, and that they ultimately serve to legitimate dangerous military policies and practices.

For this reader, the language is familiar, the reasoning is recognizable, and the implications are frightening. What we talk about when we talk about nuclear weapons is this: "ours" are okay, "theirs" are a problem. Gusterson calls this a "system of nuclear apartheid" steeped in an orientalist conception of the world: "...orientalist discourse constructs the world in terms of a series of binary oppositions that produce the Orient as the mirror image of the West: where 'we' are rational and disciplined, 'they' are impulsive and emotional; where 'we' are modern and flexible, 'they' are slaves to ancient passions and routines; where 'we' are honest and compassionate, 'they' are treacherous and uncultivated" (114).

The double standard does not just insult, it is downright dangerous. Though the framework can lull anyone into complacency, Gusterson wakes us up, "...if one reviews the U.S. nuclear safety record, the comforting dichotomy between a high-tech, safe 'us' and the low-tech, unsafe 'them' begins to look distinctly dubious" (122).

In context of the violence, it seems reasonable that people might live in anticipation of it. This theme is taken up in the final research article in this collection, centered in a place that has seen its fair share of spectacular and structural violence: Lebanon. In the aftermath of [the wars of modern Lebanon](#), University of Pittsburgh anthropologist Sami Hermez engaged in what he describes as "fieldwork in unsettling times" (329).

One year ago, Hermez published "'The War is Going to Ignite': On the Anticipation of Violence in Lebanon" in [PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review](#), the journal of the [Association for Political and Legal Anthropology](#), currently edited by [John Conley](#) and [Justin Richland](#).

Hermez struggles to come to terms with how ordinary people experience and manage the anticipation of violence, an expectation that runs deep in Lebanon. Violent times and ordinary times overlap, Hermez explains, just as uncertainty stands in tense relationship with certainty, especially in places where conflict is not resolved. Anticipation and uncertainty are feelings that have a temporal dimension and must be managed so to move from one moment to the next in life. The feelings, memories, recollections, and talk about violence are "constantly present as a structuring force in social life," Hermez believes, and the full anticipation of violence is "a useful technique," injecting certainty into uncertainty (330; 333).

Two book reviews round out this collection "On Violence." One is [Michael E. Hodge's](#) "Walk With Me As I Travel Along the Way: Racism Revealed," a 2009 review of two powerful books by Janis Faye Hutchinson, [Power, Race, and Culture: The Evolution of a Black Anthropologist](#) and [The Coexistence of Race and Racism: Can They Become Extinct Together?](#). The review was published in [Transforming Anthropology](#), the journal of the [Association of Black Anthropologists](#), currently co-edited by [Dana-Ain Davis](#) and [Aimee Cox](#).

The second brings us back to where we began in a critical review written by [R. Brian Ferguson](#) of [War before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage](#) by Lawrence Keeley published in *American Anthropologist*.

Vivian Gornick titled the book referenced at the start of this essay, *The Situation and the Story*, a work about writing. Gornick explains, "The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (13). Each of the articles in this collection details the context or circumstance of violence. Between the lines lies the story. In tackling the large territory that is violence, anthropologists enter from multiple angles and different positions. And *toward what end?* I believe there's common cause: the world as it exists is not the world as it might be.

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