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Thinking Violence and Rhetoric

Erin J. Rand

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BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEW ESSAY

THINKING VIOLENCE AND RHETORIC

Erin J. Rand

The Culture of Vengeance and the Fate of American Justice. By Terry K. Aladjem. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008; pp. xx + 246. \$26.99 paper.

God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence. By Michael Cobb. New York: New York University Press, 2006; pp. xiii + 229. \$70.00 cloth; \$22.00 paper.

Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire. By Wendy Brown. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006; pp. xi + 268. \$21.95 paper.

In the Wake of Violence: Image and Social Reform. By Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008; pp. x + 349. \$59.95 cloth.

American culture is gripped by an obsession with violence. From hate crimes to violent video games, from Iraq to Afghanistan to Gaza, from action films to the death penalty, it seems our most pressing and controversial contemporary issues have violence as a common theme. And even as the traumas of 9/11 begin to blur slightly in our national memory, we nonetheless continue to return to the images and the sense of panic associated with that day as the exemplar of the senseless and devastating pain of violence.

Although these visible acts of violence are undoubtedly both compelling and horrifying, they tend to distract our attention from underlying forms of violence that generate both violent acts and our efforts to maintain peace. Slavoj Žižek calls these less visible forms of violence “objective violence,” and he describes them as being embodied in our language and in the functioning of our political and economic systems. Unlike “subjective violence,” the violence that is outwardly recognizable and “is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal,’ peaceful state of things,” objective violence, on the other hand, “is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible

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since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.”¹ It is not merely that objective violence is more difficult to see than subjective violence, Žižek explains, but that “the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking.”² Thus, in the face of overwhelming violence, Žižek exhorts us not, as we are often enjoined to do, to take immediate action, but rather to pause to think and learn.

In a similar fashion, each of the four books I review here advocates thoughtfulness about violence and seeks to move beyond a reaction to its horrors. By considering the relationship between rhetoric and violence, specifically as it is manifested in American culture, these authors each challenge us to take a step back from violent actions to understand violence’s functions in the construction of identities, in social movements, in our system of justice, and in discourses of tolerance. In the face of our preoccupation with violence, these authors move beyond simple condemnations of violent actions, suggesting instead that there is something to be learned, for instance, from the way the leaders of reform movements respond to violent actions by their radical members, from our personal and national impulses toward vengeful retaliation, or from the deployment of tolerance discourse to legitimize violent actions of the state.

By engaging thoughtfully with violence, these authors not only promote new understandings of violence itself, but also suggest various relationships between violence and rhetoric. Does rhetoric provide a means to forestall or prevent violence? Does rhetoric act as a catalyst that can produce or inflame violence? Can the use of rhetoric undo the damage of violence? Can rhetoric reinterpret violence’s effects, or potentially resignify the harms done by violent acts? Can rhetoric legitimate the use of violence for progressive purposes? Does rhetoric itself act violently? Of course, none of these authors offer a comprehensive or conclusive answer to any of these questions, nor do they provide solutions to the problems of violence with which our culture is currently preoccupied. Instead, and more usefully, they present situational arguments and conditional conclusions, some of which are provocative and potentially incendiary. In other words, they provide us with the opportunity to (re)consider our assumptions about the explicit and implicit role of violence in American culture and its relationship to language and rhetoric, and open a productive moment for thoughtful critical reflection.

The first of these texts, Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp’s *In the Wake of Violence: Image and Social Reform*, explores the ways in which social reform movements have responded when certain factions within the group have committed acts of violence. The reform groups that she examines—abolition, women’s suffrage, anti-abortion, animal welfare, and environmental reform—are not

typically associated with violence, and the majority of their proponents neither participate in nor condone violent actions. Thus, the challenge they face is to respond to the violent actions of an independent, radical wing of the movement. Depending on the rhetorical strategies they choose, the movement can marginalize or make heroes of the violent faction; it is these choices of rhetorical strategies that are the subject of Jorgensen-Earp's study. She looks for thematic similarities across the discourses of moderate movement spokespeople in the wake of reform violence, and argues that they utilize a limited array of rhetorical strategies. Their primary goal, she asserts, "is to avoid a backlash against the movement by a public alienated by violent actions"; a secondary goal of some movements is "to take conscious advantage of any positive effects wrought by radical violence" (4).

Jorgensen-Earp traces the rhetorical strategies of moderate movement members across seven chapters, which are grouped according to the three rhetorical themes that emerge from her study. The three-pronged response of reform movements, which does not necessarily proceed in a particular order, includes the following aspects: "dissension and division from the radical wing, intense internal debate over the efficacy and morality of violence, and uneasy unity based on the belief that violence cannot nullify the principles at stake" (12). As she explores each of these themes, she also notes the ways in which reform movement responses to violence are similar to, but not fully explained by, William Benoit's typology of image restoration strategies and other studies of the use of apologia in groups and organizations. Common to all the rhetorical strategies that Jorgensen-Earp examines is the way in which the movements' responses work as a "catalyzing rhetoric"; that is, "Image restoration discourse at the time of violence serves as a catalyst to accelerate the rehabilitation of the movement's image" (14).

Jorgensen-Earp begins her discussion of the first theme, "dissension and division from the radical wing," by noting some of the ways in which particular movements have progressed down the path toward violence. She then identifies three subgroups of reformers that comprise twentieth-century, single-issue reform groups: (1) "constitutionalists," who obey the law and use the current system to garner attention and educate about their cause, (2) "nonviolent militants," who use nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience, and (3) "violent militants," who utilize terrorist, violent tactics to create a crisis to increase the pressure for reform (3, 32). For example, in the environmental movement, the Sierra Club represents a constitutionalist group, Greenpeace is a nonviolent militant group, and the Earth Liberation Front a violent militant group. In spite of the differences among these subgroups, however, the public perception of the movement often is of a single, coherent group, so the moderate reformers must move quickly to deny their involvement in any

violent actions through both verbal and symbolic condemnations of the violent faction. Jorgensen-Earp notes that these condemnations face various rhetorical challenges. For instance, movement leaders need to distinguish themselves from the violent militants while avoiding any suggestion that the movement is splintering; they also must address the violence without allowing it to take center stage: "Violence provides a new imperative at the same time that it threatens to make the radical wing the epicenter of a movement" (45).

Another step moderate reformers must take to distinguish themselves from the violent militant group is to demonstrate that the violent reformers are beyond the scope of their restraint or control. Movements sometimes make this move by claiming "mistaken identity," and bemoaning the unfair tarnishing of the mainstream group's image by the fringe group's violent actions (63). Leaders also attempt to evade responsibility for violence through appeals to defeasibility; that is, they maintain that they "lacked either key information or control over aspects of the situation," and therefore could not have prevented the violent faction from carrying out their terrorist activities (77). Finally, Jorgensen-Earp suggests, the moderate movement must defend itself against claims that even if it did not directly support the violent actions, it nonetheless conspired with, colluded with, or incited the violent actors. This leads moderate reformers not merely to distance themselves from the violent militants, but also to characterize them in ways that position them on the fringe of the larger movement: "Steps are taken by moderate rhetors to define the identity of the perpetrator in such a way as to isolate and direct negative attention onto the violent actors and away from the movement as a whole" (100). Jorgensen-Earp discusses a variety of techniques through which the violent faction is characterized, such as abstracting the human actors involved, drawing attention to the small number of violent militants compared to the mainstream movement, and questioning the sanity, goodwill, and self-control of the violent faction.

The second theme Jorgensen-Earp identifies in moderate movements' responses to violence, "intense internal debate over the efficacy and morality of violence," primarily involves denunciations of violence as detrimental to the movement, but also includes, to a lesser degree, discussions of the potential benefits of violence. In addition to the negative public perception of the movement that may result from violent actions, Jorgensen-Earp points out that it may also create a contradiction in the group's moral stance: "Moderate movement leaders appear to be painfully aware of the inconsistency of a self-described moral group taking immoral action in support of their moral cause" (134). Furthermore, she suggests that internal disagreements about violence as a tactic may actually overwhelm a group's agreement about its purpose. In other words, moderates worry that "in the radical mind being 'right' about method starts to supersede being right about the goal. A desire to force

reform through coercion replaces a desire to convert opponents through persuasion" (146).

On the other hand, Jorgensen-Earp also describes a minority of moderate reformers who actually highlight the benefits of violent action and are prepared to reap the rewards of its instrumental effects for their movement. Aside from the obvious media attention that violence almost always attracts, violence on the fringes of a movement can cause the mainstream movement to reaffirm its commitment to nonviolence, and to appear, in contrast, more conservative and reasonable. As Jorgensen-Earp describes in one example, "The crises of violence made hitherto unacceptable demands of moderates appear 'reasonable' and encouraged a new alliance between the government and the movement's mainstream" (165). Regardless of how discussions regarding the morality and efficacy of violence are resolved, though, they reflect the movement's recognition that rhetorical strategies must be employed to manage its public face.

Jorgensen-Earp's third and final theme in moderate movements' rhetorical responses to violence, an "uneasy unity based on the belief that violence cannot nullify the principles at stake," reflects the commitment of a movement's members to their cause, and the desire to present a unified front to external audiences. Though the constitutionalist and nonviolent militant factions of the movement may continue to disagree with the use of violence, Jorgensen-Earp suggests that they often take on the violent faction's "just war" rhetoric to justify their actions. That is, the moderate movement contends that although violence is generally reprehensible, "the violent actor is a 'reluctant belligerent,' an individual (or group) who takes up arms for a just cause, but only as a last resort" (185). To demonstrate that all other options have been exhausted and that violence is, indeed, the last resort, movement leaders argue that reformers have been frustrated, provoked, and oppressed by the institutions toward which their reforms are targeted; in other words, the responsibility for the violence lies at the feet of those institutions which have stubbornly refused to grant the desired reforms (184, 189).

Of course, sometimes the violence undertaken by reformers results in the death of one of the members of the group; when this is the case, she or he is embraced as a martyr whose virtues and ideals are extolled by the movement as a whole. As Jorgensen-Earp explains, "Violent activists who become movement martyrs, by design or misadventure, are given the opportunity to publicize their own vision—to have others see what they see. The effect may be only temporary, but martyrs gain a certain degree of movement unity as appeals even from the nonviolent cluster around the symbol of their broken bodies" (231). Martyrdom ultimately allows the movement to make historical analogies (for instance, to slavery or the Holocaust) to explain the present cycle of

violence, and therefore to imply that granting the suggested reform will bring an end to such future violence (244).

Jorgensen-Earp's study points to the importance of a rhetorical analysis of the response of reform movements to movement violence. After all, the discourse produced in the wake of violence is directed both outwardly to external audiences and inwardly to various factions of the movement, and constitutes not only a public identity for the movement as a whole, but also the private identities of individual activists. Far from envisioning rhetoric and violence as antithetical, then, Jorgensen-Earp suggests that violence actually stimulates the production of rhetoric. It is ironic, she concludes, that "violence, often meant to convey both a refusal to compromise and a belief that the time for talk is past, becomes the creative wellspring of a new thematic discourse" (258).

Also concerned with the role of violence in movements, Michael Cobb's *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* asks readers to reconsider the rhetorical violence of religious hate speech, suggesting that it may, in fact, provide opportunities for queer self-expression. Opening the book with a description of the demonstrations and rhetoric of the Westboro Baptist Church in response to the murder of Matthew Shepard, Cobb argues that this sort of religious condemnation does not only function harmfully. Instead, he explains that he is "interested in the fact that queers have long used such hateful expressions as the conditions of their publicity in a U.S. public sphere—a sphere that necessarily always shapes the positions from where anyone, especially queers, can speak" (9). Cobb draws not only on Judith Butler's notion of the resignification of hate speech, but also on Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling," which Cobb proposes can explain the ways in which the hatred of the religious right can be "transformed into inarticulate language of the queer" (11–12). By turning to the writings of authors such as James Baldwin, Stephen Crane, Jean Toomer, Tennessee Williams, Dorothy Allison, and Alice Walker, Cobb demonstrates the ways in which the violent, religious language of the Christian right can be incorporated into expressions of queerness and queer politics.

Throughout the text, Cobb makes the controversial argument that queers should strive not for an accurate or truthful self-representation, but for a fictional public identity that can be manipulated strategically for political advantage. This "productive lie," Cobb suggests, may be best articulated and mobilized through violent religious rhetorics, and would aim to prevent queers from being stripped of their citizenship, instead recasting them in terms of "queer martyrdom" (147–48, 36). Cobb's claims, which may initially seem counter-intuitive or even politically dangerous, emerge through his development of two important moves: first, that the religious language condemning homosexuality takes the form of the jeremiad, or political sermon, which "creat[es] social cohesion through linguistic acts of religious devotion"; and second, that

the citation of religious hatred makes possible an imprecise but highly useful analogy between homophobia and racism (25).

By understanding violent religious language as jeremiad, Cobb is able to explain its role in the definition of the nation and its citizenry. He notes, “powerful expressions of unity are often religious rhetorics. . . . The words of God are conveniently and easily used to express the deep sentiments of an anxiously conservative and collective population of people” (6–7). The unity constructed through religious rants against homosexuality is concerned primarily not with sexuality, however, but with authority and sovereignty, or with the power to define who does or does not count as a citizen of the nation. Thus, Cobb asserts, “much of the force of this form of religious rhetoric comes from its ability to describe and situate queers as both external and internal to the nation” (30). In other words, the jeremiad functions to both constitute and disavow queers as American citizens, to require queers as the enemy within.

Cobb turns to Giorgio Agamben’s figure of *homo sacer* to clarify the fraught and seemingly contradictory role created for queers through violent religious rhetoric. *Homo sacer*, he explains, is “an object of religious fascination, and an object that is reviled by the community; it is blessed and cursed simultaneously,” and though it is banned from the community and may even be killed, its death does not count as sacrifice (33–34). The queer, Cobb argues, who is reviled and currently denied the full rights and privileges of American citizenship, fulfills the role of *homo sacer* in this country; that is, even as queer lives are constantly made available for violence and even killing, queer deaths do not become “sacrificially symbolic” (35). When death does not have symbolic force, life itself is disposable and insignificant; Cobb therefore advocates a kind of queer martyrdom, in which queer deaths are understood as sacrificial, and queer lives accordingly become valuable.

Notably, it is through the rhetoric of race that Cobb sees the possibility for queer martyrdom. “Race,” he maintains, “has the capacity to give people a language of sacrifice—at least in the current political and legal system in the United States. . . . Racial rhetorics have the capacity to make the deaths or loss of the queer matter, which would thus enable queers to count as lives that should count as lives worth living” (37). Therefore, Cobb argues that the analogy between racism and homophobia, in which the pain and discrimination suffered by racial minorities is used to illuminate the experience of queers, is politically productive. This “like race” analogy has, of course, drawn significant criticisms, which Cobb acknowledges and describes. For instance, the comparison between race and sexuality elides the differing origins and historical specificities of each form of discrimination, and risks the dangerous implications of casting sexuality as a biological, immutable trait. Furthermore, suggesting that sexuality is “like race” not only ignores the existence of queers of color, but also

exploits the struggles of racial minorities, thereby reinscribing the constraints of racial categories and reenacting racism itself (42–45).

In spite of these dangers, or more accurately, precisely because of them, Cobb insists that the “like race” analogy is necessary to queer politics. Describing the virulent antigay rhetoric sparked by Colorado’s passage of Amendment 2 (which denied claims of discrimination to queers), Cobb notes that the language of the religious right relied upon a distinction between race, which was understood as a legitimate form of difference that was worthy of legal protection, and sexuality, which was understood as a “behavior” or “lifestyle” that deserved no such protection. Thus, the Right was able to draw a line between “hate” and mere “disapproval,” where the disapproval of a particular set of sexual practices did not constitute hatred of a recognized and protected minority group. Since the religious rhetorics that seek to deny rights to queers use the refusal of the “like race” analogy as a central strategy, queer politics must necessarily concern itself with the analogy, no matter how faulty or problematic. And because, as Cobb contends, “race has become, like it or not, the fundamental category of difference in the United States,” it is important for queers to be able to articulate their claims in racial terms (130). Doing so would make it “harder to voice a public opinion against gays,” or “to define a traditional and religious community against the carriers of social decay, of social disease, of social ‘unnaturalness’” (122). In other words, if sexuality is understood to be “like race,” then the jeremiads of the Christian right could no longer constitute queers as outsiders or enemies, and queer deaths would matter.

Cobb also emphasizes that it may be in the flaws—rather than the accuracy—of the “like race” analogy that its productive value lies. He reminds us that an analogy does not suggest that one term is the same as another term, but rather that the relationship that exists between a first set of terms (between racial minorities and racism) is similar to the relationship that exists between a second set of terms (between queers and homophobia). Thus, the analogy might be best understood to imply that “queers have a relationship to hatred and political coercion that resembles (but is not the same as) the hatred and political coercion experienced by African Americans” (44). Ultimately, the analogy’s failure to be precise, its ability to misname even as it names, illuminates the catachrestic language that Cobb finds most valuable to queer politics. He claims, “By learning to be mistaken, to be figurative, to be literary and stylized in one’s answers to the nation about who one is, the minority begins to be tentative, strategic, and is perhaps able to circumvent certain toxic rhetorical patterns such as the American jeremiad” (47).

For Cobb, then, the violence of religious hate speech is troubling but also productive for queer expression and queer politics. Violent language can constitute categories of minority identities and, as in the catachrestic use of the

“like race” analogy, can be put to strategic and resistant purposes. Even the violence of murder, if properly invested with the symbolism of sacrifice and martyrdom, can be wrested from the grasp of the religious right and made to signify queerly.

Terry K. Aladjem, in *The Culture of Vengeance and the Fate of American Justice*, sees less productive potential in violence. He is concerned with American culture’s preoccupation of late with vengeance, or a punitive, angry sort of “justice” that often takes a violent form. Aladjem notes that if, according to the liberal traditions of our nation, “rational justice” opposes and “arises with the taming or transformation of revenge,” then we are currently experiencing a heightening of the contradiction between these two conceptions of justice (xii). Nowhere is this contradiction more apparent than in arguments about the death penalty in cases of murder, where, Aladjem suggests, perhaps the urge for vengeance is a reaction to societal feelings of grief, anger, and indignation. This is a problem, then, of theodicy: the individual and collective desire to rationalize reward and suffering, or to understand loss within a framework of good and evil. Accordingly, Aladjem asks, “If American justice and other such modern things fail to rationalize suffering or to account for good and evil, has vengeance, in some sense, come to take its place?” (xiv). Demonstrating both our cultural obsession with vengeance and our legal system’s denial of it, Aladjem ultimately contends that at stake in our contradictory notions of justice is nothing less than democracy itself.

Aladjem’s argument is carried out through four chapters. In the first, he identifies the problem with our current system of justice—that it cannot account for vengeance—and describes the origins of this problem in the liberal theories that shape our traditions of justice and punishment. Citing theorists such as Locke, Hobbes, Kant, and Hegel, Aladjem asserts that justice is always set apart from vengeance through divisions between the rational and the emotional and between the public and the private. In every version of liberalism, he states, “there is the same supposition: Vengeance, that knot of grief and rage that demands a remedy and will not let go, can somehow be divided from its better aspect, detached, converted, or transposed into legitimate punishments, so that the rational law may proceed free from the taint of its pernicious effects” (10). This assumption also undergirds the two perspectives that justify punishment in the American legal system. According to the utilitarian view, punishment works prospectively to reform or rehabilitate the criminal and to deter future offenders. The retributive view, on the other hand, is concerned with the moral balance of a society, and therefore punishes retrospectively to restore the morality that has been disrupted by crime (14–15). What both of these perspectives share, then, is a belief that the irrational pain and grief caused by a crime can be measured and repaired through the process of

rational justice. Aladjem calls this “transformation of vengeance into justice” a myth, since it is only “an article of faith that pain and anger can be channeled justly, and that punishment is somehow elevated in the process” (32, 28). In other words, the American system of justice both relies upon and seeks to deny the impulse to vengeance, and the recent cultural emphasis on vengeance that troubles Aladjem “is a sign, perhaps, that the ill-founded attempt to rationalize punishment and to deny its vengeful aspect has reached a point of intolerable stress, and that a crack in the foundation has begun to affect the edifice” (46).

In his second chapter, Aladjem turns an eye to the specifics of American culture, where he sees similarities in the ways in which we respond to violent events and, through these responses, effect a redefinition of justice through a vengeful theodicy. Considering a variety of sites in which violence is enacted or referenced—ranging from commemorations of 9/11 to talk shows and talk radio, from the O. J. Simpson case to news coverage of natural disasters, from real crime television shows to action-adventure movies—Aladjem suggests that Americans are conditioned to attend to the details of a case to assign blame, to see the enforcement of the law as a personal process, and to understand conflict in terms of good and evil. This results, he contends, in a culture that is “far more interested in reaching the vengeful conclusion than in discovering the *truth*” (64). Because in our secular society we cannot turn to religion or an omnipotent God to explain the existence of evil, pain, death, and cruelty, we instead seek to find meaning in the offending acts themselves: “For every unaccountable misery in our secular world, there is an effort to find the blamable aspect, to identify some small evil that can be remedied or resolved within a greater theodicy of revenge” (75). Thus, Aladjem argues, a dangerous inversion of justice has taken place: our need for theodicy has begun to undermine the commitment to rights and liberty that is central to a healthy democracy.

Aladjem’s third chapter considers the problem of vengeance as it has been described and taken up historically and literarily. He examines the characters and stories of Oedipus, Othello, and Hamlet, as well as Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” to posit that the private impulse to vengeance not only plays a role in the construction of the self and the past, but also involves a self-deception that has very public implications. In each of these artifacts, Aladjem notices the centrality of the eye or the faculty of sight to representations of vengeance (for instance, “an eye for an eye” or the desire “to see the offender suffer” and “to make him see”), and suggests that this signifies a yearning to change the perception of oneself and of one’s world (98–99, 111). Thus, vengeance is essentially rooted in a form of self-deception, since it “sees what it wants to see” (116). To put this differently, exacting vengeance does not require actually knowing the precise truth about a crime committed, but rather imagining a version of that crime that can be avenged through punishment. Aladjem also addresses the

role of the audience—those who watch and witness—in scenes of punishment. Though the presence of an audience is integral, the specific role of the audience in the process of punishment has varied across times and places. The “audience” present in contemporary American legal processes is the jury, and unlike earlier audiences whose displays of ridicule, pity, or sympathy for the condemned played a part in their punishment, jurors are meant to embody “the abstract, aggregate reason of a citizenry,” whose emotions are constrained by the procedures of the legal institution. We must imagine, as Aladjem puts it, “that this audience is not thirsty for blood, but hungry only for justice” (133–34).

In his final chapter, Aladjem makes a compelling case for the contradiction within the American system of justice that prompts his book: “Our democracy should reflect the will of the people, but when the people want revenge, they are hostile to those rational legal propositions that make up the fabric of that democracy” (146). That is, vengeance, especially when it is incorporated into the conventions of our legal system through assumptions about the state’s infallibility, poses a threat to democracy. Aladjem is concerned here with the tendency for decisions rendered in capital cases to be presumed to be final, even when, as in the case *State of Texas v. Roy Wayne Criner*, new evidence could introduce reasonable doubt about the defendant’s guilt. Though a jury’s decision can always be only provisional—the best decision given the available evidence—disallowing reconsideration or refutation of that decision gives it, along with the state’s judgment, the appearance of infallibility. Thus, through a “political/rhetorical achievement’ of the highest order,” a jury’s verdict is treated “as if it were true” (154). Aladjem warns, “we are in danger of forgetting how tenuous this all is, or indeed, of accepting the terms of vengeful self-certainty over and above the essential *uncertainty* of democratic truth. There is no more ‘as if’ in the ‘finality’ of a capital verdict, only the amnesiac verisimilitude of a vengeful conclusion that seeks to put legal authority itself beyond all doubt” (155).

Aladjem’s argument is ultimately in favor of the contingency of authority as the means for preserving democracy. “Doubt,” he suggests, “plays a greater part in democratic thought and judgment than one might think” (155). The search for the truth should always take precedence over the desire for finality, and citizens should be tentatively compliant within a fallible state rather than obedient to a supposedly infallible one. He explains, “Where democratic justice pursues the truth in the awareness of its own fallibility, then, it is no absolute authority and does not embody a uniform morality. It cannot do what theodicy does to resolve evil or make the world meaningful” (175). In other words, maintaining a democracy does not require disavowing the urge toward vengeance, but rather emphasizing the contingency of its authority precisely by taking a stand against vengeance.

Just as Aladjem is skeptical of the discourses of vengeance that claim to uphold American values, so too is Wendy Brown skeptical of the discourse of tolerance in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Brown argues that “tolerance,” often advanced uncritically as a means for achieving peace in a multicultural society, may actually promote some of the violence that it is said to prevent. The central question of her book is, What kind of political discourse, with what social and political effects, is contemporary tolerance talk in the United States? (4). In answer to this question, she contends that tolerance “produces and positions subjects, orchestrates meanings and practices of identity, marks bodies, and conditions political subjectivities” (4). Brown does not criticize tolerance itself, but the ways in which it works as a means of depoliticizing democratic struggle and dissent. Depoliticization, she explains, “involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalization, and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious, or cultural on the other” (15). The problem arises when a tolerant attitude rather than political attention is offered in response to issues of inequality, exclusion, or violence. Across seven chapters, in which she considers a variety of targets and discourses of tolerance, Brown argues that tolerance discourse exercises power to constitute particular subjects as worthy of tolerance, to give others the ability to practice or withhold tolerance, and ultimately to legitimize illiberal and potentially violent actions when the limits of tolerance are reached.

Brown begins by explaining that tolerance does not imply a respect for difference; on the contrary, tolerance is a means to overcome one’s disapproval and to mask the power that is involved in this seemingly generous gesture. As Brown puts it, tolerance is “a posture of indulgence toward what one permits or licenses, a posture that softens or cloaks the power, authority, and normativity in the act of tolerance” (26). Thus, tolerance serves both to accommodate the other and maintain its difference, so that the tolerated object is incorporated even as it is marked as liminal or marginal. Clearly, then, tolerance should not be mistaken for equality, since “tolerance takes shape as a complex supplement to liberal equality, making up for and covering over limitations in liberal practices of equality, completing what presents itself as complete but is not” (36).

By constituting different subject positions for those who tolerate and those who are tolerated, tolerance essentially produces the differences—while casting them as natural—that it professes to protect (47). Brown illustrates this function of tolerance in the next chapter, where she compares the “Jewish Question,” which is primarily understood as a matter of tolerance, to the “Woman Question,” which is framed in terms of subordination and equality. Brown explains this discrepancy between the two groups by examining the distinct ways in which the “difference” of each is understood. The difference of

Jews and the difference of women are constructed through specific processes by which bodies are racialized and sexualized, their differences are understood to be public or private, and the association among members of each group is regulated. Brown contends that because the discourse of women's difference is a subordinating discourse (it subordinates individual women to individual men in a patrilineal, heterosexual culture), women do not require tolerance as do Jews, who pose a more direct threat to the public relations among men. She concludes, "sexualization functions as a more relentlessly subordinating discourse and is therefore precisely what permits women's enfranchisement as political equals without the risk of substantive equality—and, more importantly, without the risk of a challenge to the masculinist, heterosexual, and Christian norms at the heart of the putative universality of the state" (73).

Today, tolerance does not issue only from the state; tolerance discourse also circulates within and across a variety of sites, such as schools, churches, museums, and casual conversation. As such, Brown conceptualizes tolerance as a form of Foucault's "governmentality," a kind of governance in which the state's power is intensified by its dispersal among citizens and nonpolitical institutions (79). Tolerance discourse, emanating as it does from a number of non-governmental locales, "not only governs subjects, it not only quiets potential civic conflict or social unrest, it also shores up the legitimacy of the state and in so doing shores up and expands state power"; and therefore, Brown suggests, tolerance discourse also plays a role in "legitimizing certain kinds of state violence" (82). In fact, it is when the state is most neglectful of legal demands for equality that its calls for tolerance are most insistent. Brown offers two examples of contemporary issues where state violence is masked or softened by tolerance discourse: same-sex marriage, where citizens are asked to be tolerant of homosexuality while the state denies equal rights, and the treatment of Arab Americans after 9/11, where the official discourse of religious tolerance is belied by the state's domestic racial profiling and foreign policies targeting Islam (96–105). In both cases, difference is depoliticized and the burden of addressing social inequalities is removed from the state and transferred to the private realm of individual citizens and attitudes.

In the following chapter, which focuses specifically on the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance (MOT), Brown further demonstrates the depoliticizing function of tolerance discourse. The museum strives to help visitors understand the Holocaust in the larger context of prejudice, anti-Semitism, and ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual violence. The MOT teaches tolerance and respect for different peoples and beliefs, but as Brown points out, this message conflicts with its moral message that "eliminates any ambiguity or complexity, as well as any political dimensions, from the issue: there is wrong/violence/intolerance on one side, and right/coexistence/tolerance on the other" (129).

The depoliticizing effects cultivated through tolerance discourse are fourfold: (1) political conflicts are reframed as personal prejudices, eliminating power from the scene; (2) conflict is ontologized and the historical positioning of subjects disregarded; (3) social differences are considered natural and as the cause of intolerance; and (4) the specificities of various kinds of differences—religion, culture, ethnicity, race, and so forth—are elided, rendering them interchangeable (142–43). The MOT therefore works as an example of the way that the depoliticizing function of tolerance discourse not only emerges from a variety of sources, but can also be wielded tactically and intentionally toward political ends.

Brown's final two chapters treat tolerance as a civilizational discourse, by which she means that it defines the boundaries of the "civilized," including particular practices, peoples, and states while excluding others. As the "cardinal object of tolerance and intolerance," culture is used to explain supposedly natural hostilities between groups of people, and the tensions of multiculturalism are addressed through tolerance discourse (150, 152). But not all people are perceived to have the same relationship to culture; as Brown explains, liberalism posits culture and politics as entirely separable: "Non-liberal polities are depicted as 'ruled' by culture or religion; liberalism is depicted as ruled by law, with culture dispensed to another domain—a depoliticized and voluntary one" (171). Thus, this separation from culture is figured as a necessary condition for individual autonomy, and accordingly, for tolerance. In other words, "tolerance is extended to almost all cultural and religious practices seen to be 'chosen' by liberal individuals, but it may be withheld from those practices seen to be imposed by culture inscribed as law, as it may be withheld from whole regimes considered to be ruled by culture or religion" (171). Tolerance as a civilizational discourse, then, privileges Western civilization even as it simultaneously marks non-Western practices and regimes as both uncivilized and intolerable (179). The implications of this distinction are particularly troubling for Brown, since tolerance "does not merely serve as the *sign* of the civilized and the free: it configures the *right* of the civilized against a barbaric opposite that is both internally oppressive and externally dangerous, neither tolerant nor tolerable" (204). Viewing a regime or set of practices as uncivilized and intolerable creates a worrisome legitimization for (often violent) imperialist actions. Thus, while Brown does not oppose tolerance itself, she does take issue with the "depoliticizing, regulatory, and imperial aims of contemporary deployments of tolerance" and the potential violence and injustice that they may foster (205).

For Brown, then, the apparent virtues of tolerance actually camouflage the tolerating agent's disdain for and superiority to those who are tolerated. Worse, the rhetorical employment of tolerance discourse can lead to the

degradation of both parties: the “uncivilized” and intolerable are vulnerable to violent imperialist action, whereas the “civilized,” by finding violence to be legitimate and justifiable, call into question the very civilization they intend to police. Ironically, tolerance, which is intended to contain the violence of hateful practices and discourse, inflicts a more insidious sort of rhetorical violence and establishes a hierarchical framework that sustains future violence. Brown’s deep concerns about the violence of tolerance discourse is echoed by Aladjem’s uneasiness with the prominence of vengeance in Americans’ conception of justice. Both Aladjem and Brown deliver powerful arguments for the potentially violent effects that can be produced through rhetoric. These effects do not necessarily result from a rhetorical incitement to violence and may not be visible as explicit acts of physical violence, but may be better understood as alterations to the very structures through which we find particular forms of violence justifiable and particular targets of violence unworthy or undeserving of protection.

Although by no means condoning violence, Jorgensen-Earp and Cobb each describe a more productive relationship between violence and rhetoric. For Jorgensen-Earp, violence can act as a catalyst that spurs reform movements to respond rhetorically, thereby producing discussion both inside and outside the movement regarding the potential dangers and value of violent tactics. Jorgensen-Earp contends that violence always requires explanation, so it necessarily results in a proliferation of discourse about the issues at stake, but she does not go so far as to theorize a transformative or inventive role for the rhetorical outcomes of such conversations. Cobb, on the other hand, offers a specific analysis of the uses to which rhetorical violence can be put. Unhinging violent religious rhetoric from necessarily violent effects, he sees in this language a resource for strategic queer expression and politics. Rooted neither in the identity of the individual nor in American legal and cultural discourses, Cobb’s view of rhetorical violence situates it as a means for altering the violent relationship between the nation and the queer citizen.

In spite of their different objects of study, critical perspectives, and theoretical engagements, all four of these authors share a commitment to nuanced analyses of violence that neither denounce too facilely violent acts nor romanticize violence’s critical potential while ignoring its material effects. Although their arguments display varying degrees of concern for the ethics and risks of violence, as well as for the potential scale on which those risks may register, they do not lose sight of the actual experiences of violence—inflicted by individuals or the state, locally or internationally, affecting one or many—that prompt their inquiries. As scholars who seek to address violence rhetorically or understand the violence of rhetoric, our work should be driven by this tenuous balance between, on one hand, the responsibility to criticize violence and

alleviate real suffering and, on the other hand, the necessity of considering the productive potential of violence.

The books that I have reviewed here, especially when they are considered in conversation with one another, provide the means for maintaining this complicated balance while engaging the thorny questions regarding the relationship between rhetoric and violence. They do so, in part, by reflecting indirectly on two important assumptions about violence—assumptions that I think must constantly remain under consideration if we are to understand and perhaps transform the ways in which violence functions in our contemporary culture. First, although a reduction in violence and an increased commitment to peaceful interaction are certainly important goals, we must not be content to presume that squelching violence necessarily imposes peace. In other words, by assuming violence and peace to be opposed, we run the risk of overlooking the violent rhetorical effects that may be produced by any cultural discourse, no matter how apparently benign. This is most effectively addressed by Brown and Aladjem, who each note the dangerously violent effects of discourses that seek, respectively, to promote tolerance and acceptance, and to reduce violent crimes and increase the accountability of their perpetrators. These texts demonstrate that our explorations of cultural violence must not be limited to those occasions on which violence is explicit; calls for unity, diplomacy, responsibility, and civility, although certainly more heartening and palatable to democratic sensibilities, may have unintended violent effects just as damaging and worrisome as those of calls for war, segregation, and repression. Indeed, it may be the violence done by the former discourses—by virtue of their obfuscations—that ultimately creates a culture within which more explicit forms of violence can be expected and even implicitly condoned.

But if violent rhetorical effects may ensue from ostensibly peaceful discourses, so too may crucial forms of rhetorical agency be founded in discourses of violence. This second assumption—that violence works to inhibit agency, constrain choices, and limit freedom—is clearly called into question by both Jorgensen-Earp and Cobb, who consider the enabling possibilities of violence for reform movements and for queer citizens. Understanding violence as a potential scene of invention or resource for agency need not prevent us from also recognizing its inhibiting, constraining, and limiting effects; in fact, it may be precisely through these effects that violence acquires its productive rhetorical potential. If violence forcefully, compellingly, and irrevocably narrows the grounds for response, it necessarily enables particular possibilities even as it eliminates many others, therefore founding and defining the rhetorical agency of the subject. Thus, violence and rhetoric may not, in fact, be antithetical, and outright denunciations of violence may foreclose rather than protect the agency of its victims.

By participating in a conversation about violence in American culture that refuses the impulse to be merely fascinated or horrified by its spectacles, the authors of the four texts reviewed here maintain a stance of thoughtfulness on a topic that, as Žižek suggests, seems to resist thinking. They pause to reflect on the relationship between rhetoric and violence and the ways in which violence functions culturally, and in so doing open a space in which to begin to rethink some of our most basic assumptions about the morality, effects, and modalities of violence. As we continue this conversation, we must recognize both the urgency of the demand to address our cultural fixation on violence, as well as the importance of the time for thinking, and we must insist on a critical stance that disavows neither the urgency nor the thoughtfulness that a responsible scholarly consideration of violence compels.

NOTES

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).
2. Žižek, *Violence*, 4.