**Lesser Violence: Volume 1.**
Amie Soudien (ed.).
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*Lesser Violence* opens with a note reminding the reader to be careful with themselves: to take breaks from the book as needed. This mode of address conveys the intentionality of the contributors to embed care into the reading experience. Their openness around the process of creating this volume extends the sense of safety co-cultivated in the reading group the book is named after.

The reading group's conveners had their expectations of what should take priority in such a group: "Participants were not only interested in talking about the texts. They wanted to talk about their experiences [...] It wasn't simply about 'reading'" (12). The convenors note how academic spaces and practises limit what knowledge can be generated about violence. One convenor says such environments are alienating and truncate possibilities of knowing through emotion and experience (12). Another convener says that in prioritizing personal experience, the reading group countered the extractive nature of academia: "In the reading group, nothing was the 'other'. It was us." (13).

The collection focuses on experiences of violence through the lens of artistic practices. The contributors experiment in conveying meaning, from conversational interview to poetry to theatre script. As one of the conveners reflects, art offers "room for not knowing, not understanding..." (16). Art is generative in the context of representing violence because it offers the possibilities of conveying affective elements of the experience, especially in cases where words fail.

This is demonstrated through Gabrielle Goliath's contribution. Goliath analyses their installation titled

*This Song is For …* which explores "the afterlives of rape through the reimagining of the dedication song" (7). Goliath's collaborators share a song that holds some importance to them, speaking to their experience of rape. As these songs are played by an ensemble during the installation, a disruption is staged through a record scratch. Goliath writes, "The scratch […] offers to those present an opportunity to affectively inhabit a contested space of traumatic recall …" (35). In using the song and the scratch "as an alternative modality of representation" to encapsulate the experience of rape, Goliath shows the potential for us to access modalities which not only represent but affect too (38).

Reading this contribution, wherein lyrics from the songs chosen are interspersed in between Goliath's analysis, I was reminded of the songs that I leaned on after experiencing sexual assault. While I can tell you what happened to me, with thanks to Goliath's intervention, I realized another way—just as meaningful—through which I could convey something of that experience. Instead of using speech, I might now play you Lira's live rendition of "Something Inside So Strong" on repeat and through it, you would come to know the part of me that needed it as lifeline. In this teaching, Goliath illustrates one of the aims of *Lesser Violence*, which is to point us to different ways that we might come to share knowledge about the violence we experience.

One reading group convenor says, "to recognise [raced, gendered and sexualized] violence as normative […] is to recognise also our own entanglement, our implication." (10). Building on this, M Neelika Jayawardane writes on art institutions and their role in protecting abusers from social repercussions. Jayawardane notes how—regardless of the medium—art industries share several traits which enable violence. These include a) glorifying hypermasculinity, b) power imbalances between employees and employers and c) gatekeepers who punish and exclude those who speak up against abuse (104).

Jayawardane says art institutions often construct "an individual—an artist, photographer, or director—as "genius" (104). Jayawardane continues, "The genius artist was, and continues to be, framed as a magical if temperamental person […] who was able to harness the alchemy of commercial success with public adoration and critical approval—and therefore had to be catered to at any cost." (105). In a presentation in 2019, visual artist Sharlene Khan spoke to this glorification of the 'genius' artist, and the separation of art from the artist. Khan encourages their audience to consider their complicity in violence as it relates to their consumption of art. After detailing accusations of abuse against prominent artists, Khan asks, "How great was [the abuser's] language, their vision, their lyrics, their familiarity of your situation that granted them unrestricted access to their daughters, wives, partners' bodies? […] How cheap is the price of that movie ticket, that song, that exhibition against the huge price of personal and collective trauma that is being paid by victims of abuse daily?". Jayawardane's argument is extended by Khan, both writers insistent that a change in institutional cultures within the arts is necessary to meaningfully address gendered violence.

Throughout the volume, there is a strong evocation of spirit. In Nondumiso Msimanga's interviews with the cast of the play *No Sunday Easter for Queers*, several actors signal the impact of performing on the spirit, as well as sensing spirits as they are performing (84, 95). In Msimanga's commentary, they ask what it means to perform being dead or alive (85), ultimately uncovering the purpose of acting out stories of violence: "Feeling unfree makes us feel dead, so we act to feel alive" (98).

Donna Kukama's contribution tends to the spirit by recalling the names of women artists who have been "omitted from the gallery's archive, […] queer people murdered […] in hate crimes, and […] those who survived the violent attacks against them." (6). B. Camminga's invocation of spirits tends to transgender people who died migrating across the Mediterranean. Camminga lays the violence faced by trans people who make it to shore—how they are misgendered upon arrival—as well as the erasure of those who die during the journey. Here, Camminga highlights a project to count the number of murdered trans people across the globe: a practice of "bringing out your dead" inspired by James Baldwin. Here, Camminga drives home that trans lives matter, that "these deaths are not unimportant or forgotten or worse, coincidental" (79).

Finally, Saarah Jappie draws attention to the act of *sitting* with violence. Reflecting on their collaboration with Gabrielle Goliath, where they commemorate women and queer victims of gendered and sexual violence, Jappie is struck by the audience's difficulty in sitting with the performance. Jappie highlights the endurance needed of us all in witnessing and responding to violence: how we must "sit with discomfort", with the fact and impact of violence (27). Jappie's meditation returns us to the starting point of tackling violence: that what is needed of us before anything else is to bear witness and sit with mourning (27). In multiple ways, the contributions in *Lesser Violence* speak to this, providing leads on how the weight of bearing witness might be borne.


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**Work cited**

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