

Perpetration, Gender and Performance

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REVIEW OF: Clare Bielby and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer eds., *Perpetrating Selves: Doing Violence, Performing Identity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018). 305 pp. (hardback). ISBN 978-3-319-96784-4.

This volume of collected essays is broad in its scope and thus has the advantage of addressing many themes. Clare Bielby's and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer's aim is to explore how individuals who perpetrate violence understand and represent themselves or are understood and represented by others and in public discourses. The book is divided into three sections, each of which includes an interview with what the editors call 'practitioners': with Steve Pratt, a former SAS soldier who later wrote and performed a one-man theatre piece about violence; with John Tsukayama, who conducted interviews with personnel involved with the torture of Iraqis in the Iraq war; and with two curators from the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds. The volume's first section, 'Enactments and Bodily Performances', considers how violence might be 'done' as a (bodily) performance, the second section focuses on narrative, and its role in facilitating perpetration and responding to it afterwards, and the final section is dedicated to the representation of perpetration in museums. The critical emphasis of the volume is on violence as a process and how this links to the process of identity construction. It seeks to move away from the understanding of 'perpetrator' as a subject position: "doing" violence is always also part of "doing" our identities,¹ which is in turn inseparable from 'performing identity'.² Further, gender is central. Consistently running through the contributions is an interest in the relationship of perpetration and gender, with particular emphasis on masculinity because of the 'often mutually constituting relationship between masculinity and violence'.³ This focus on gender is one of the volume's strengths. Finally, the editors are interested in the question of empathy, what it means to empathise with someone who has perpetrated

1 Clare Bielby and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, 'Perpetrating Selves: An Introduction', in *Perpetrating Selves: Doing Violence, Performing Identity*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), pp. 1–12 (p. 3).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.



violence and the ethical implications of representing violence that elicit positive empathy for those who perpetrate violence.

The editors adopt an intentionally broad understanding of violence, with contributors writing about many different types. Violence is understood not just as an act, but as acts that occur in the context of less visible forms of violence, such as structural and symbolic violence or state violence which is not acknowledged as such. This allows them to ask whether there are also forms of perpetration inherent in linguistic or artistic forms that represent or enact violence. The result of this broad understanding is an extensive range of topics, many of which are interesting and insightful. In the first section on performance, Melissa Dearey analyses the dance in the music video for the singer Sia's 'Elastic Heart' (2015), performed by the twelve-year-old dancer Madeleine Ziegler and the actor Shia Leboeuf. Dearey considers the ways in which the performance resonates with tropes of child abuse, including the exculpatory narrative whereby the seductive girl uses her sexuality to assume power in the relationship, turning the abusing man into a victim of her desire. Although Dearey's analogies with the 1937 film of *Heidi* and to the case of Madeleine McCann remain unconvincing, her discussion of the importance of Ziegler's and Leboeuf's star personas is excellent. It draws attention to how stardom and media coverage of their lives leads to slippage in the identities between the dance roles and the biographies of the dancers. The slippage of identity is also at the heart of Katarina Birkedal's autoethnographic study of cosplay, in which she reflects upon what she sees as 'the embodiment of and desire for perpetrator bodies'⁴ when she assumes the role and costume of Loki the Norse god and Marvel supervillain. Birkedal's argument is interesting when she focuses on how her interpretation of Loki allows her to turn his monstrosity into something 'delightful and queer'⁵, thereby challenging the militarism of the narratives in which Loki is embedded. Her analysis is, however, substantially weakened by her insistence that Loki is a perpetrator. Not only is perpetration not generally determined by attributes of 'liminality, queerness and villainy',⁶ but Loki is a mythological/fictional figure. Cosplay is play and play can be very serious. Play and fantasy have a complex relationship to real life (as psychoanalysis has long argued). It is important to understand this complexity, just as

4 Katarina H. S. Birkedal, 'Embodying a Perpetrator: Myths, Monsters and Magic', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 39–60 (p. 42).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

it is important to engage critically with the pleasure and enjoyment we experience when reading, watching or playing with perpetration in fiction. However, addressing this complexity is not achieved by making easy equivalents. What would pleasure mean if cosplay involved dressing up in the uniforms of German reserve police battalions and pretending to shoot other cosplayers into a ditch? Even here there would be a fundamental ontological difference between that and an instance of cosplay slipping from playing at violence into committing it.

The book's second section illustrates the importance of analysing narratives for understanding how perpetration is constructed and related to. Clare Bielby draws productively on narrative criminology and a feminist theoretical framework to think both about violent masculinity and the way in which that masculinity is 'scripted'. She discusses *How it all began* (1975), the memoir of Michael Baumann, former founder member of the Movement 2 June terrorist group.⁷ Her analysis reveals how Baumann constructs himself as a dilettante or rogue, portraying terrorism as fun. Alongside this is his self-stylisation as an honourable working class guerrilla fighter. His proud dependence on his body and instinct is part of his masculine self-sufficiency and is in contrast to the Red Army Faction which is feminized through its reliance on technology. His violence is thus also more democratic. Bielby's chapter is an excellent example of the importance of analysing how gender interacts with class and race to help understand how perpetration becomes possible. In a stimulating juxtaposition, Robyn Bloch analyses femininity in Olivia Forsyth's memoir, *Agent 407: A South African Spy Breaks her Silence* (2015).⁸ Bloch points to Forsyth's concurrent and contradictory narratives of being both a superspy for the Apartheid government and a passive victim. This double narrative is inseparable from her construction of gender: Forsyth presents herself both as an active woman with agency who challenges the conservative patriarchal Apartheid system and as a victim of men's objectification of her as a mere 'honeypot'. Bloch's anger at Forsyth's self-proclaimed 'act of contrition', which is anything but, combined with her own position as a white South African woman who lives within power structures that are the legacy of Apartheid, leads Bloch to reflect on the place of empathy in responding to the memoir. This is welcome, but remains far too brief and dependent on her positing that 'empathy is seen as

7 Michael (Bommi) Baumann, *Wie alles anfang*, 4th edn (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 2007 [1975]).

8 Olivia Forsyth, *Agent 407: A South African Spy Breaks Her Silence* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publications, 2015).

an automatic good⁹ despite critical discussions of empathy that complicate such a view.

The volume returns to masculinity with Josephine Metcalf's analysis of Shaun Attwood's memoir trilogy,¹⁰ in which he describes his party and drug lifestyle that led to his arrest, his experiences in a brutal jail environment awaiting sentencing, followed by his time in high security jail. The memoir is written from the perspective of a man who no longer sees himself as a criminal. Metcalf draws on narrative criminology for her analysis, a methodology that studies how offenders situate their actions within a longer narrative of their lives. (A methodology that is long familiar to literary critics and oral historians). She posits that Attwood might be thought of as a narrative perpetrator by writing so explicitly about violence. And, in echoes of Birkedal's approach, she suggests that at Attwood's educational school talks, by dressing in prison gear, students 'almost become perpetrators through bodily enactment'.¹¹ Metcalf's is an interesting essay, which points to the complexity of the sometimes contradictory identities Attwood reveals. But there is too little consideration of the differences that inhere between perpetrating violent acts and describing textual practices as perpetrating violence.

Nicki Hitchcott, in the only chapter on fictional narrative, offers an excellent and nuanced discussion of the moral ambiguity that is central to most representations of perpetrators in Rwanda genocide fiction. Especially in the texts by Rwandan authors, there is a blurring of categories between perpetrators and victims, with writers of fiction indeed suggesting that the majority of Rwandans are victims, including many of those who perpetrated violence. Although novels that challenge a clear dichotomy have provoked scandal in the academic world, with the argument that the reader may empathise with a killer, Hitchcott points out that in Rwanda perpetrators were often forced into performing acts of violence. This puts the category of victim beyond the concept of guilt and innocence or good and evil. Hitchcott concludes that fiction challenges the ethnopolitics that has been attached to the genocide, with resultant generalisations about Hutu guilt and Tutsi

9 Robyn Bloch, 'Innocent Superspy: Contradictory Narratives as Exculpation in a Woman Apartheid Perpetrator Story', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 113–132 (p. 128).

10 Shaun Attwood, *Hard Time: A Brit in America's Toughest Jail* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2010); *Party Time* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2013); *Prison Time: One Man's Journey Through the Arizona Department of Corrections and His Deportation Back to England* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2014).

11 Josephine Metcalf, 'It's My Destiny': Narrating Prison Violence and Masculinity in the Shaun Attwood Trilogy', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 133–154 (p. 146).

victimhood. She argues that fiction is a space in which complex questions can be explored and reflected on.

The final section explores how perpetration is represented in museums. Gabriel Koureas analyses two objects in the London Imperial War Museum to demonstrate how they become 'anthropomorphised, metonymic substitutes for the perpetrating self',¹² reinforcing a hierarchy of empathy as well as the distinction between justifiable and non-justifiable violence. Koureas's discussion of the *Néry* gun is instructive, not least the significance of its positioning. The 'heroic' first world war gun is displayed next to the remains of a car used by a suicide bomber in Baghdad in 2007 that killed 38 people, but the perpetrator is absent from the display. Furthermore, the gun's positioning within the clean lines of the atrium are in stark contrast to the mess of war. Thus the car functions as a 'peepshow' into the lives of others who have no voice, and the violence of the *Néry* gun is condoned as justified. Koureas shows how the Ferret Scout Car is presented to demonstrate Britain's benevolent role in the UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus. But there is no reflection on the car's former use as part of the British response to the Greek Cypriot War of Independence 1955-1959, and the role of British as the original perpetrators through colonial expansion. Koureas's attention to space is complemented by Birga Meyer's comparison of the representation of male Holocaust perpetrators in three museums in different national contexts. She helpfully defines how she understands the term perpetrator in this context, namely those who 'enabled, ordered, aided and/or participated in severely discriminatory, exclusionary or murderous policies and actions during the National Socialist period'.¹³ Meyer argues that in the Contemporary History Museum Ebensee in Austria, historical events are conceptualised as being driven by abstract structures with acts of perpetration excluded. In contrast, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Hungary portrays perpetrators as strong, cold-hearted men with a lust for power. Neither encourages the visitor to understand perpetrators as complex subjects in specific contexts. The Comprehensive Museum in Italy does though emphasise agency for all historical actors thereby also encouraging visitors to adopt an active and critical position.

12 Gabriel Koureas, 'Selective Empathy in the Re-designed Imperial War Museum London: Heroes and Perpetrators', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 199-221 (p. 202)

13 Birga Meyer, 'Identifying with Mass Murderers? Representing Male Perpetrators in Museum Exhibitions of the Holocaust', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 223-245 (p. 225).

In the final essay, Susanne Luhmann offers an excellent analysis of the affective economies of the exhibition at Ravensbrück concentration camp entitled 'In the Auxiliary of the SS: Female Guards at Ravensbrück'. It constructs what she sees as 'a uniquely gendered perspective on the Holocaust'¹⁴ that challenges the stereotypes of sadistic and sexually deviant Nazi women. Luhmann considers how the exhibition manages anxiety: anxiety around the ethics of perpetrator representation in relation to the victims; anxiety over the types of identification that might be elicited; and anxiety around female perpetration. It seeks to alleviate anxiety in different ways. The museum breaks up the space of the original guard house, refusing to offer the experience of 'what it was like'. The display space encourages individual reflection and prevents Neo-Nazis using it a site of pilgrimage. The exhibition relies on survivor testimony and didactic display texts contextualise perpetrator testimony when it is used. In a fascinating comparison of the opening testimony of the survivor Maria Unguari and the camp guard Anna G., Luhmann draws on food studies to show how two memories of food reveal power relations and strategies of identity construction in the present. Unguari reclaims her agency and femininity by putting the wellbeing of her unborn baby ahead of her dignity, so that when she is forced to eat 'like a dog', she refuses to view herself in that way. Anna G.'s idealised memory of abundant food and being cared for lovingly by inmates tells us about the 'truth' of her desire not to be culpable or hated, for the memory itself is so at odds with the historical evidence.

A real strength of the volume is the three interviews held with practitioners. The first is with Steve Pratt, a former SAS soldier who left the army following 'a kind of mental health breakdown', which included fantasising about shooting his commanding officer and two others. In the interview he talks of how performing his one-man theatre piece, *The Making of a Dangerous Individual*, liberates him from the burden of his past and allows him to 'neutralise the masculine'.¹⁵ The second interview is with John Tsukayama, who interviewed fourteen former US military and intelligence personnel who witnessed, objected to or participated in the abuse and torture of detainees in the Iraq War (2003–2012). He himself was a former professional interrogator in criminal interrogation and his contribution is fascinating, not least

14 Susanne Luhmann, 'In the Auxiliary of the SS: Female Guards at Ravensbrück', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 247–269 (p. 248).

15 Bielby and Stevenson Murer, 'The Making of a Dangerous Individual: Performing the Perpetrating Self – An Interview with Steve Pratt', in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 61–81 (p. 76).

the comments on his methods and ethics. He remarks on how ‘nobody we interrogate is going to tell us anything if they feel we disdain them,’¹⁶ describing how crucial it was to establish a positive relationship with them. He views such empathy as ethical, because only by understanding how people end up in situations in which they perpetrate can such actions be avoided. The final interview with Jonathan Ferguson and Lisa Traynor from the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, offers an interesting discussion around the difficulty of an exhibition that focusses on objects presented out of context and without considering the people who use the weapons.

The interviews are instructive not just because of the interesting insights of the interviewees, but because they at times gesture towards a conceptual weakness of the volume: the reluctance to engage in detail with definitions of perpetration and violence. ‘Anyone who “does” violence is a potential perpetrator’ for the purposes of the volume, Bielby and Murer state.¹⁷ Meyer points out in her chapter that the term perpetrator is often taken for granted in critical literature and its contested character is not adequately engaged with. Indeed, in the interview with the curators of the Royal Armouries Museum, Bielby contends that ‘perpetrator is quite a loaded term that implies a moral value judgement.’¹⁸ Its loadedness is reflected in the extensive scholarly discussions around the helpfulness or accuracy of categories of perpetration, bystanding, complicity, etc. Increasingly, critics across disciplines have pointed to the limitations of understanding ‘perpetrator’ as a subject position, pointing to the importance of people’s behaviours, often contradictory, in the context of social practices, institutional roles and processes of normalisation at the time that violence is committed and afterwards.¹⁹ The volume is a helpful contribution to this wider move

16 Bielby and Stevenson Murer, ‘By Any Means Necessary’: Interviews and Narrative Analysis with Torturers – A Conversation with Dr. John Tsukayama, in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 177–195 (p. 183).

17 Bielby and Stevenson Murer, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

18 Bielby and Stevenson Murer, ‘Curating Violence: Display and Representation – An Interview with Jonathan Ferguson and Lisa Traynor (Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds)’, in *Perpetrating Selves*, ed. by Bielby and Stevenson Murer, pp. 271–289 (p. 273).

19 Much of this discussion takes place within the context of genocide research, including the far-reaching debates concerning the extent of perpetration and its overlap with bystanding and complicity in relation to the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community). See for example: *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. by Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers. Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors. Webs of Violence in Rwanda*

away from a determining category of self, but it nevertheless misses the opportunity to engage more precisely with these debates. The all-encompassing definitions of perpetration and violence result in a levelling out of different degrees of harm. This means that critical differentiation is diluted and the opportunity to reflect on how we evaluate violence and perpetration is diminished. Thus, in one interview the discussion relates to torture and murder in Iraq and in another we are asked to think about perpetration in relation to looking at someone through a sniper sight in a museum. The fantasy of violence or play with violence is too often seen as being on a continuum with, or even equivalent to, an act of violence. Perpetration of violence in the symbolic is in the symbolic sphere and fantasy violence is just that. Neither are the same as acts of violence, be they structural or slow or subjective (and these types of violence too are contested terms that could helpfully have been discussed).²⁰ The harms caused are different, or harm may not even be caused, even more so when fiction, play and fantasy are introduced into the mix. By attending to differences we can start to understand the relationship of play, fantasy and fiction to the ontologically different realm of real harm. Of course there is a complex relationship, as some of the contributions attest, including Dearey's and Hitchcott's. The volume overall, however, would have been further enhanced by explicitly engaging with these differences throughout.

(Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009); *New Directions in Genocide Research*, ed. by Adam Jones (New York: Routledge, 2012), especially the articles by Ernesto Verdeja, 'Moral Bystanders and Mass Violence' and Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, 'Genocidal Masculinity'; *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives*, ed. by Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stefan Kühl, *Ordinary Organizations: Why Normal Men Carried Out the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

²⁰ See Mark Hewitson's discussion of violence, including a challenge to the notion of symbolic violence, in the introduction to his *Absolute War: Violence and Warfare in the German Lands, 1792-1820* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

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