

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Composing Violence: The Limits of Exposure and the Making of Minorities**

By Moyukh Chatterjee. Duke University Press, 2023. 184 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1966-4.

Moyukh Chatterjee's *Composing Violence* is a rigorous analysis on understanding political violence that persists as durable order. As opposed to exposure politics, he understands violence through composition. Delving into a critical ethnographic study of the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, Chatterjee composes violence by looking at the afterlife of violence—when violence leaks beyond its immediate sites and persists in the everyday.

Violence in the everyday in South Asia has been looked at by anthropologists such as Veena Das, Paul Brass, Gyan Pandey, Sudhir Kakar, and others, but as opposed to cultural understandings of violence (narratives, rumor, and so on), Chatterjee critically looks at the structures that produce violence. He argues that the liberal and secular foundations of modern nation-states produce violence—violence that is essential for the creation of permanent majorities and minorities. Thus, though he looks at everyday violence, as opposed to Brass or Das, he does not look at violence with the intention to expose—expose the culprits, the brutality, or the processes. For he is looking at violence that is not hidden but celebrated out loud on the streets—it is televised, and the perpetrators and victims are out there for everyone to see.

He, in fact, takes a step forward by walking around the politics of exposure to ask what we can understand about political violence when it is no longer hidden? He arrives at the answer that such public political violence is critical for the maintenance of modern states. In India, divisions based on caste and tribe identities are successfully erased when the Muslim is constructed as the permanent minority. It is only through such politics, that the majoritarian dream of a unified “Hindu *Rashtra*” (nation) is achieved. His moving away from exposure politics allows him to argue that political violence is not intrinsic to South Asian states or communities alone but is characteristic of any modern nation-states, more specifically Western liberal democracies. This opens up discussions surrounding limits of law, in fact, the role of law and legal structures as foundations of a liberal democracy in the production of minorities and sustenance of violence.

Instead, he composes violence through the objects of political violence—the event, the witness, the archive, the trial, anti-impunity activism, the fact-finding report, the unspeakable—each of which forms a chapter of the book. The book thus, in a poetic sense, is a *meta-composition* of Chatterjee's understanding of violence using composition politics. After all, reflecting Bruno Latour, Chatterjee understands composition as stitching together of various elements “while retaining their heterogeneity” (Latour 2010: 473). His decision to chapterize his book by pulling in each of the heterogenous but related objects is an act of composition in itself.

In the first chapter titled “A Minor Reading,” he looks at how minorities are created through narratives of binary understanding—Hindu versus Muslim mob—by dominant media houses and everyday law while completely disregarding the messy economic rivalry narratives, caste divisions of localities, local musclemen politics, all of which he terms as “what everybody knows.” By tracing “what everybody knows,” he looks at the power of master communal narratives blanketing over tangents that helps create the permanent minority. In the next chapter on “Composing the Archive,” he looks at forms that lie at the surface of the archives—aggregation, repetition, and the trace—to show how archives reproduced anti-minority violence. In the next chapters on the witness and anti-impunity activism, he critically looks at law and the limits of law itself, understanding how legal infrastructures reproduce and enliven anti-minority violence. In the chapter “Against the Witness,” he looks at lower court trials and their role in silencing the Muslim witness and making his reality null and void. To understand limits of anti-impunity activism, he looks at JF, a legal aid NGO that provided support to Muslim witnesses to testify against their Hindu neighbors in court but their working with law, as opposed to understanding how the limits of it led to Muslims being exposed to further violence in courtrooms. In the final chapter titled “Beyond the Unspeakable,” he shows how sexual violence, instead of being hidden and unspeakable, is being reported, circulated and confronted often by women themselves. However, Muslim women’s bodies and narratives are attacked and dismissed as “exaggeration,” which Chatterjee understands as sexual violence spilling well beyond immediate scenes and germinating in new scenes—courtrooms, police reports, neighborhood walls, and the like.

Chatterjee has used a wide range of ethnographic moments and archives to drive across a compelling argument. From witnessing courtroom trials to reading archives of judg-

ments, police reports, or newspaper articles, he uses a variety of methods. What stands out is his critical analysis of the archive itself and his own reading of archival documents as objects of violence and minority production. Though the reader gets a glimpse of his positionality as a Hindu man from an affluent family (his father is mentioned to be working for the Central Government in Delhi), who had been visiting Gujarat since 2002 as a volunteer and later as an anthropologist, he does not dwell much on his positionalities and how those could have gotten entangled with his research.

As a Hindu man analyzing sexual violence against Muslim women, his writing, for me, lacked emotional investment and came across as cold, abstractive and analytical. I failed to imagine the women—their anger, shame, and fear. They looked like mere entry points for forwarding an argument. Besides, the narratives of hope or narratives that could counter such structural and mounting violence come scattered toward the end and are not engaged with much at all.

The book shows the importance of Gujarat as a site of understanding festive political violence and the process of composing it. Chatterjee’s dwelling on Gujarati Hindu middle-class’s historical aversion to Gandhian philosophy (despite Gandhi’s origin and lifelong works in Gujarat) and finally the far-right movement in India using Gujarat as their laboratory to experiment the building up of the “Hindu *Rashtra*” are important to understand the present anti-Muslim violence in India. Anti-minority violence is based on the contradictory aims of destroying one world and creating another. This book shows the processes that produce and sustain that violence. It is an important addition to studies on violence, conflict, minority, Hindu nationalism, among others. This book will help trace and understand how the far-right in India successfully took the ‘Gujarat experiment’ and spilled it over in the rest of the country with the aim of producing the permanent minority. It will help locate mech-

anisms of present right-wing modern states in churning out such political violence and engaging in minoritization. It arrives at a critical time in South Asian politics but also globally, as far-right states and movements are growing. Though it will be of interest to anthropologists, political analysts, lawyers, and journalists, I would recommend it be read by anyone interested in understanding the functioning of modern nation-states.

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## ■ REFERENCE

Latour, Bruno. 2010. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto.'" *New Literary History* 41 (3): 471–490.

### **Policing Race, Ethnicity and Culture: Ethnographic Perspectives across Europe**

Edited by Jan Beek, Thomas Bierschenk, Annalena Koch, and Bernd Meyer.  
 Manchester University Press, 2023. 332 pp.  
 Hard cover. ISBN 978-1-5261-6558-9.

In the US-centric literature on policing, the ethnographic perspectives on Europe that the volume brings forth are a more than welcome addition. The book opens up a comparative field of investigation in Europe by convincingly placing race, ethnicity, and culture at the heart of how police (re)produces—and governs—difference in their complex moral and institutional settings.

The Introduction by Jan Beek, Thomas Bierschenk, and Annalena Koch charts the contributions of the book and underlines the particularities of policing differences in Europe. The focus lies on everyday interactions between police and the “migrantized,” understood as those othered through processes of culturalization, ethnicization, or racialization, and who often constitute a protracted “object” of policing. While the figure

of the migrant bears significance in police work in many European contexts, its selection as determining the theoretical concept of “migrantization” stems from the particularity of the category of “migrant” in German bureaucratic documents as producer of alterity. From the beginning, then, the conceptual framework of the volume bears the imprint of the centrality of Germany in the collection of chapters: six out of the thirteen chapters deal either exclusively or comparatively with German police practices.

The collection gathers an impressive team of police ethnographers working across different European contexts. The frequent and effective cross-referencing between chapters puts them in dialogue with each other in four coherent parts. The first part tackles processes of categorization of difference in France and Germany (Jérémy Gauthier and Jacques de Maillard), the United Kingdom (Rebecca Pates), Sweden (Ida Nafstad), and The Netherlands (Paul Mutsaers and Tom van Nuenen). The authors of the chapters show how legal and bureaucratic categories do not overlap with the underground categories of police practice, how occupational socialization and institutional guidelines underlie processes of racialization, and how the circularity of categories and institutional arrangements such as policing quotas uphold and reproduce racialized policing practices.

The second part, with chapters on Denmark (David Sausdal), Russia (Ekaterina Khodzhaeva), Germany (Nina Müller), and Switzerland (Lisa Marie Borelli), focuses on everyday policing practices more broadly, and on how difference is concretely produced in everyday encounters between the police and various “others.” The cases of police as bureaucrats (as last chain before the criminal justice system or the deportation apparatus enter in action, or as agents of migration control) highlight the moral and instrumental reasonings that inform policing practices at street level. The chapter by Nina Müller focuses on how police with a migration background in Germany understand their own

liminal position within the policing system, and act to perform competing identities in their everyday work.

The last two chapters of this section already tackle cases of translation in police work, which is the focus of the third section of the volume. With two studies from Germany and one from Portugal, the three chapters making up this part address dimensions of policing as and in translation. The chapters on Germany highlight the inclusive and non-inclusive linguistic practices of police facing situations where translation was made necessary during operational trainings (Annalena Kolloch and Bernd Meyer) and how the concern informing communicative practices more broadly stems from the primacy of the aim of policing itself (“doing police”) that surpasses linguistic translations and relates to “organizational translations” (Jan Beek and Marcel Müller). The chapter by Susana Durão examines how everyday racial interactions in the classroom between Portuguese and African cadets at the academy of police contribute to the reproduction of colonially imbued figures of otherness in the space of *Lusofonia*—the Portuguese-speaking world. Her argument calls for attention to the coloniality of policing in Europe.

Part four of the volume sheds light on the relationship between police and ethnographers in two different contexts. Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers reflects on her position as “cultural expert” and highlights the culturalist assumptions that inform the policing of Albanians in the United Kingdom. In the final chapter, Gisela Pauli Caldas and Thomas Widlok advocate for culturally sensitive trainings for police beyond the “culturalist” strategies currently operating in Germany and provide the example of an interdisciplinary seminar gathering together police trainees and anthropology students in exercises of perceiving and approaching “foreign milieus” in Cologne.

The volume is wrapped up by an insightful postface by Ian Loader. He pertinently reflects on how the collection of studies employs dif-

ferent translation moves: by posing the necessity of a distinctly European perspective on policing to counteract the centrality of the United States in policing studies; by positioning the stance of the researcher on the line between studying up (the police) and down (the victims of their racial policing practices); and by a distinct orientation to everyday police encounters.

With only one case from Eastern Europe (Russia), and one from Southern Europe (Portugal), as well as the predominance of German case studies, the volume delivers only partially its promise to draw on cases “across Europe,” as the subtitle has it. While a laudable step in the direction of making ethnographic comparisons productive across European cases, the volume overshadows the specificities of policing in Central-East European and Southern European contexts, reinforcing, inadvertently, the centrality of Western Europe to what “Europe” means as an area of scholarly inquiry.

Partially related to this blind spot, perhaps, is the conspicuous absence of a case study focusing in depth on Roma (or Sinti, Gypsy, or Travelers groups), even though those classified under this broad umbrella are often paradigmatic “others” policed across Europe as criminalized and undeserving subjects—and the volume does mention the Roma sparsely in a few chapters. The Roma, a population policed in ethnicized, racialized, and culturalized ways both “at home” and as migrants from Eastern Europe, both domestically and transnationally, constitute a rich case study that could have highlighted many of the conceptual points of the volume, and whose absence from the book is rather difficult to justify.

Notwithstanding these dimensions that could have been given more space in the book, the volume will be an invaluable read for scholars of policing but also for those interested in the governance of racial, cultural, or ethnic difference in Europe more broadly. It signals the contours of a theoretically and politically rich research agenda

on the continent that will hopefully grow in conceptual sophistication and geographical coverage.

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### **Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side**

By Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton. Stanford University Press, 2023. 253pp. ISBN 9781503-634275.

“Maybe this is why he had come to talk to me: to erase history” (89), reflects the author Alexander Hinton when interviewing Khan, perpetrator of mass atrocities who served as a Khmer Rouge soldier and subdistrict militia. Written as a dialogue between two experienced anthropologists, the powerful *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (2023) engages in research with perpetrators of mass violence and enforced disappearances in two different parts of the world: Cambodia and Argentina. The text offers “guidance on how to conduct oneself there” (209), where fieldwork involving perpetrators of mass violence is concerned, grounded on the pursuit of “practical wisdom” (209).

The book builds on three decades of the authors’ fieldwork and is in dialogue with some of their previous work. The authors combine creative nonfiction, ethnodrama, and methodological reflections on the encounter with perpetrators. They ask what researching and writing about perpetrators produces in the researcher, since interviewing perpetrators of mass atrocities involves an encounter which marks and leaves traces on the researchers.

The Introduction begins by asking how to approach perpetrator research. Discussing the difference made by and Kjell Anderson between “architects, organisers and killers” (7), the authors introduce the term “perpetrators-facilitators,” which includes broad categories of perpetrators who have participated

in or facilitated forms of violence. Together with the consideration of “perpetratorhood” as a process, the book “raises questions about agency, motivation and dehumanisation” (9). The authors dialogue about the term “perpetrator” and suggest paying attention to previous process of dehumanization of victims and not just to the violence involved. Echoing the words of writer Vasily Grossman on the rise of fascism, that “many people living in normal conditions have no idea of the cellars and basements of their own being” (10), the authors avoid approaching the perpetrators from the monster/human being dichotomy. Instead, they approach perpetrators of mass atrocities from the point of view of a “shared humanity.”

Part one, “Interviewing,” reflects on the authors’ encounters with perpetrators during their fieldwork in Cambodia and Argentina. The first chapter, “Spectacular Perpetrators,” centers on the Cambodian genocide. Alexander Hinton uses the metaphor of the spectacle to refer to the encounter with the perpetrators. The fundamental obstacle when interviewing a perpetrator is represented by the “chimera,” the imaginary projected during the interview. This affects the researcher, who should bypass his/her “spectacular optics” (59): “If all interviews involve optics, then interviews with perpetrators are of a spectacular sort, treading the ground of dramatic and devastating violence” (48). Arriving in Banyan, the author refers to the local cadres who devastated villagers’ lives instead to the spectacular leader perpetrators such as Pol Pot. Among these cadres, Hinton says that “perpetrators often want you to see them as an exception, not as spectacular” (50). They minimize or deny their participation in mass atrocities. When interviewing perpetrators, the researcher must navigate through secrecy, denials, justifications, and seduction, and concentrate not only on words but also on the performance of the interview, on how and when perpetrators say things. Robben mentions that “Argentine perpetrators would generally present themselves as ordinary men”

(51). Hinton agrees that “Most of them want to be acknowledged as fellow human beings, and we, as researchers, may afford them that space of humanity” (51), despite the fact that they had dehumanized their victims. This space is not “exculpatory” but a space where they may uncover themselves: “The spectacular perpetrator is a chimera; people like Lor are not” (60). Lor, interviewed by Hinton, was an S-21 cadre accused of killing hundreds of people.

In the second chapter, “Seductive Perpetrators,” Robben mentions seduction during the interviews. Referring to the enforced disappearance conducted by Argentinian armed forces, the author explains how the perpetrators try to get the interviewer to see the facts through their perspective, offering a certain image of themselves. In this mistrustful relationship, the author refers to the dynamics of the interview, proposing affective and cognitive empathy, an “empathy without compassion” (81). On the one hand, this empathy allows one to grasp how these perpetrators “experience the world” (70). On the other hand, empathy is without compassion “for persons who designed repressive structures and cruel operating procedures” (83).

The second part, “Dreaming,” deals with the impact that encounters with perpetrators and mass atrocity testimonies have on the researcher. The authors suggest dreams as a way to work out emotions experienced during fieldwork. Dreams and nightmares work on anxieties and conflicts provoked by lived experiences during fieldwork. Dreams over time persisted as “a sort of analytical, ethical and psychological compass” (25) guiding the authors in the field.

Robben entered a process of psychoanalysis when he investigated perpetrators in Argentina, reflecting on his anxiety dreams. This allowed him to understand his position during the interviews. From the analysis of dream associations revealing personal fluctuations in the relationship with authority, Robben mentions the guide figure of the analyst during his research and compares it to the

protagonist in Andrei Tarkovsky’s “Stalker.” In this way, attending psychoanalysis sessions, he sheds light on the role of “fieldwork anxieties and unconscious process” (129) during his research on Argentine perpetrators.

Hinton refers to “excavation” during interviews, a metaphor expressing the risks of digging into perpetrators’ words and thoughts, which contaminate the researcher. Researchers should pay attention to “psychodynamics that influences the interaction with perpetrators” (129). In this context, Hinton gives the example of a dream that he had while conducting fieldwork in Cambodia in 2012, involving the S-21 security center where thousands of people were tortured and murdered; the word which the author associates to his dream is “ruin,” since these encounters with the perpetrators of mass killings produce “a sense of disorder, abjection and dirtiness” (34): “It ruins you. The anthropology of perpetrators renders the researcher abject. If the word *abject* suggests rejection (being cast out) and diminishment, it shares with *ruin* the notion of a collapse of boundaries and order” (142).

Facing ruin and abjection opens the path to different forms of expression. To encounter, talk to, and relate to perpetrators of mass atrocities is an experience which is difficult to translate into writing. The authors are committed to forms of creative ethnographic writing as a way of subverting the limitations of fieldwork itself. The chapter “Nearing the Paradox” suggests representing perpetrators “as contradictory figures instead of one-dimensional evildoers” (34) while condemning them at the same time.

Finally, the chapter “Curation” focuses on experimental writing that allows to approach mass violence perpetrators avoiding a “petrification” (206) of the subjects, the metaphorical figure of the Medusa looming when one writes about perpetrators: “The need to constantly search for the ‘Medusa in the room,’ a hunting and uncanny presence” (205).

The book offers a *curative* reading: healing and, at the same time, crafting together

pieces to be displayed in search of meaning. A necessary and exceptional book not only for anthropologists researching genocide and mass violence but also for a broader audience interested on how to approach and write about violence.

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### **There Is No More Haiti: Between Life and Death in Port-au-Prince**

By Greg Beckett. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 312 pages. ISBN: 9780520378995.

“There is no more Haiti” (6); the book’s title recalls Manuel’s words, Greg Beckett’s friend and main informant. They echo a chilling claim: “Haiti is dead” (6). These haunting words became the point of departure for Beckett’s story “of a city that grew into a monster” (1), a story at once epic and tragic, made of many stories that “take shape somewhere in the gap between hope and despair” (1). And of course, as he himself points out, “there are many ways to tell such stories” (1). One of the book’s great achievements, in this respect, is to have brought the power of narrative in anthropology back to the forefront. In fact, Beckett’s beautiful narration immerses us into the lives of his interlocutors. Partly written in direct speech, sometimes in free indirect discourse, the story unfolds like a vast conversation. In this way, it allows us to follow the turbulent meanderings of the thoughts of the Haitians he accompanies day by day. But this book goes further: it shows, in the minutest details of daily struggles, that the crisis is not an exceptional moment in the lives of Haitians but an ordinary condition of life. The book records how crisis marks the bodies and affects the minds, how crisis resides everywhere—in yourself, “your house, your neighborhood, in your daily routines and habits.” And to achieve such a result, Beckett undoubtedly had to pay close attention to the

words and silences of his companions. His anthropology is above all a profound work of listening.

The context in which he carried out his main research for this book, between 2002 and 2007, was one of political transition, which is reflected in each of the characters in his book, whether they are taxi drivers, drug dealers, or middlemen between the state, NGOs and the civil society. A certain political horizon had come to an end; the hopes for a radical change embodied in Aristide had been dashed. The end of his political project, the first in history to show genuine concern for the underprivileged, marked the closing of a door on a certain future for Haiti. The possibilities that ignited the masses were extinguished as quickly as they had been ignited. People were left with no imaginable future and an indigestible past, where the present had become virtually impossible to inhabit. It is this particular experience of being stuck, of so many lives trapped in a sort of limbo in the anticipation of more catastrophes to come, that this book endeavors to account for. How does Manuel—and Alexis, Yolande, Maxo, Vincent, Daphne, Wilfred, and all others—cope with such a present? How do they “come to terms with the weight of it” (5)? This book tells “a human story, a story about how crisis feels to those who live with it every day” (5).

The narrative starts with the issues around the preservation of a parcel of forest in the middle of the slum of Martissant. Beckett articulates in interesting ways the environmental with the urban crisis, showing how blurred the line is between natural disaster and politics. The forest has become not only the center of all tensions but also the double emblem of both Haiti’s perpetual crisis and of the country’s rebirth, of a possible and desirable future. Beckett masterfully shows how this bit of forest, the only one left in and around Port-au-Prince, surrounded by an eroded landscape of scarred, bone-like mountains, has become an issue in the midst of slumification, extreme poverty and violence, and a total lack of urban planning. This

landscape of loss, for many, is the landscape of the loss of a dream of another Haiti (*yon lòt Ayiti*), the loss of a nation, “the loss of a world.” (44) The question, how does one live within such a landscape, is the focus of the second chapter. Beckett follows his companions as they are looking for life (*chache lavi*). Doing so often entails waiting. This kind of temporality of “waiting for something to happen” (69) in a numbing rhythm that makes each day bleed into the next is, however, not passive. It’s an active expectation, through which a whole underground, informal and creative world emerges. Haitians have developed a particular way of getting by that they call “*fè pratik*”, literally “doing practice”, which is a way of creating specific forms of affinities and mutuality, and thus building networks of relationships that allow one to sustain a daily living, though very precarious. It also, however, creates the conditions for specific forms of violence; as Wilfred told Beckett, “Sometimes, when you look for life, you die” (69). “But sometimes you don’t. Sometimes you get stuck somewhere between living and dying” (105). The third chapter shows convincingly that this stuckedness is produced by a kind of disorder that does not just happen but is made. And it is made, not by the inability of the Haitian people to govern themselves, as the cliché goes, but by local political maneuvers, international interference, diplomatic ostracism, and corporate predation. Yet, *dezòd* means more than disorder: it also means

anarchy, panic, and disaster, because the disorder created and maintained has the face of violence and it functions according to an economy of terror. This was especially the case after the coup in 2004 that removed Aristide from office. A period of systematic, state-sponsored and free-floating violence ensued, reshaping the life of entire neighborhoods. It then became “hard to know how to live with it, since *ensekirite* [insecurity] also destroys the contexts in which meaningful action takes place” (157). As Beckett notes, the mood of people changed, as well as their tone of voice and their body language. A world had just ended, but then it was drifting again into unknown regions, causing many people to be shocked (*choke*), living with the constant possibility of their own death. The final chapter picks up the thread again from the earthquake of January 12, 2010. Beckett notes that even though things seem to repeat themselves, they “move and shift, something new comes to occupy the space where you once were.” (193) Thus, you begin to think differently, too. The portrait of the city Beckett depicted is not only one of ruins and endings. It is also one of beginnings. And, while I understand Beckett’s metaphysical temptation to imagine that there is something else “beyond all this ordinariness” (239), I’d rather stick to Luc’s words: “Haiti is at a crossroads” (62).

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