Reading, Violence, Solidarity

> *Acquiring the ability to read, it transformed me, man. Like we say it in Spanish,* la cultura cura. *Culture heals. And that's what healed me was culture. It made me positive. One thing for sure it did, it helped me to stop seeing my so-called enemy as my enemy and to start seeing him as my brother.* — Max Cerda, "Death Is Contagious"[1]

The first encounter between Max Cerda and Raymond Cruz, members of rival gangs in Chicago, was a confrontation, after which Max had sworn "I'm gonna get this punk, whoever he is." Soon after, however, their respective gangs united, and Max and Raymond began a friendship that grew into brotherhood. At the age of 18, two years older than Max, Raymond decided to leave their neighborhood and its gang lifestyle, and he encouraged Max to do the same. Yet Max resisted, and after several months he convinced Raymond to return to the neighborhood that they had shared, "just to spend some time with me." On the day that Raymond returned, April 18, 1979, Max and Raymond were ambushed. Max survived the attacked unharmed, but Raymond was shot 13 times; he died within minutes, in Max's arms. The night of Raymond's funeral, Max set out for resolution:

> The night we buried him, it was like five of us walking around, trying to find the enemy. We were hurt. Full of anger. Full of pain. I didn't worry about getting locked up. I didn't worry about dying. I was looking for death, bro. I was running right into it, head on.[2]

By the end of that night Max had found the resolution that he sought, by shooting Ralph Negron, Isaac Negron, and Yolanda Guiterrez. The next day, April 23, 1979, Max was arrested, charged with two counts of murder and one count of attempted murder. Though charged as an adult, Max was 16 years old.

Convicted, Max Cerda spent 18 years in prison, including five and a half years in solitary confinement. Unlike so many others whom the prison system fails to rehabilitate, if not wholly destroys, Max found a path toward growth, change, and redemption:

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[1] Max Cerda, "Death Is Contagious," in *How Long Will I Cry? Voice of Youth Violence*, ed. Miles Harvey (Chicago, IL: Big Shoulders Books, 2013), 91.

[2] Cerda, 89–90.

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> A lot of people go to the hole and they find the end of the world. For me, I found a new world. I found a world of self. That's where I learned how to think. It's where I learned how to read. It's where I learned how to cry. I needed that so much.[3]

While in prison, Max met Luis Rosa, a Puerto Rican nationalist who preached Latino awareness and Latino unity to the other inmates. Max also met Jose Pizarro, personal security to the leader of the Folks gang, the principal rival of Max's gang, People. Guided in equal measure by the newfound sense of solidarity to which reading and introspection had led him and the influence of Luis Rosa's doctrines of Latino unity, Max began to work in cooperation with Jose toward an alliance between the two rival gangs. Together Max and Jose, while in prison, co-founded the Latino Cultural Exchange Coalition. Since their release, they have used this coalition as a forum and as a means of discouraging local teens from following the path toward violence.

What, if anything, does Max Cerda's story reveal regarding a possible answer to the problem of violence? Without suggesting that any elements of Max's story are essentially constitutive of an answer to violence, there are aspects that warrant closer investigation. To begin, in at least two instances Max—by recognizing a shared need and a shared experience between the other and himself—was able to overcome a fundamental tension with, and propensity for violence toward, another person. Further, as Max explicitly contends, learning how to read had a profound influence on his capacity to recognize, and to value, the growing sense of brotherhood between himself and others. Ultimately, it was this sense of brotherhood, of solidarity, which encouraged and allowed Max to turn away from violence.

QUERY 1/QUALIFICATION 1: What is meant by this designation "violence"? Are there causes and consequences common to all possible manifestations of violence that would thereby allow for a comprehensive and unifying account of the problem and its solution? Perhaps, but the scope of the present essay is not sufficient to properly frame or attempt to answer this question. Instead, I will focus only on direct, immediate acts of violence perpetrated by one individual against another, regardless of the apparent reason for that act. Obviously, this omits a vast range of incidents and experiences that rightly deserve consideration: although violence is often blatantly individualized and intentional, it can also be cultivated in deep-rooted institutionalized policies or prejudices. How do we categorize police killing civilians and civilians killing police, terrorist attacks, carpet bombing, drone strikes, and wars for control of natural resources? And what of the unceasing, and too often undetected, violence of corporations promoting products they know to be toxic or denying evidence of the harm their products are doing? What of the violence of poverty, of homelessness and unlivable wages, and of unequal access to adequate healthcare? Each of these scenarios, and many more still, are as acutely deserving of attention as any individual and immediate act of violence by one person against another. And while I will propose a manner of understanding the latter instances of violence that will suggest a possible path of remediation, whether that understanding can be applied to ALL forms of violence warrants further investigation and discussion.

[3] Cerda, 90.

I would like to add my voice to those calling attention to how reading can or may discourage violence, and this by increasing readers' appreciation for other perspectives and for other approaches to life. This is not to suggest that there can be a single, effective way of combatting violence, or even that there can be a single account of the definitions and causes of violence. The violence that permeates American culture in the second decade of the twenty-first century takes many forms, thus it would be misguided to attempt to attribute the problem of violence to a unifying cause or condition. At the same time, it would be equally misguided to ignore that violence often coexists with the inability, or intentional refusal, to recognize, respect, and relate to the inherent worth of the individual person. As Max Cerda's story suggests, the identification of commonalities can profoundly influence one's behavior toward another person. Further, reading can be an immensely effective way of discovering, and appreciating, such commonalities.

QUERY 2/QUALIFICATION 2: What is meant by this designation "reading"? Does the kind of material being read matter? It is likely that this matters a great deal—reading a novel by Thomas Mann or a play by Eugène Ionesco surely must produce an effect greater than that of reading a book of recipes, a blog post about changes in the weather, or a scientific article proposing a novel way to combat the meteoric rise of diabetes in America.[4] But where should the line be drawn? What of poetry or song lyrics? What of other nonfiction forms of writing—memoir, long-form reporting, and literary essays? What of television and film? The scope of the present essay is not sufficient to properly interrogate all manners of creative expression to determine their fitness as a tool to combat violence. Instead, I will focus specifically on literature. My claims here regarding literature should thus NOT be presumed to apply for all other forms of creative expression. At the same time, pending further investigation and discussion, my claims also should not be presumed to exclude all other forms of creative expression.

A recent issue of *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* features a study from Eva Maria Koopman, of Erasmus University Rotterdam. She investigated the effects on readers of the foregrounding of emotional states and responses while reading. She was interested particularly in readers' empathetic responses. She was guided in part by Susan Sontag's contention that "[l]iterature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours."[5] Koopman uses both quantitative and qualitative measures to demonstrate that what we read can actually affect not only how we feel, but also how we then relate to others. Citing Viktor Shklovsky's contention that a primary function of

[4] See, e.g., **Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy**, *Scientific American*, October 4, 2013.
[5] From Susan Sontag's speech **Literature Is Freedom**, October 28, 2003. She was accepting the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels (the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade).

literature is to "make everyday objects and situations appear strange,"[6] Koopman presents "foregrounding" elements as those aspects of a text which achieve the defamiliarization described by Shklovsky: "'foregrounding' designates textual features standing out from ordinary language, with the supposed function of deautomatization instead of simple communication."[7]

In her study, Koopman presented readers one of two forms of an extract from the Dutch novelist Anna Enquist's *Contrapunt* (*Counterpoint*). That is, the extract was either in its original form or modified to remove all emotionally foregrounding elements, such as metaphors, images, and other aspects that would compel reflection on the part of the reader. Koopman found that "readers who had read the 'original' version scored higher on empathy after reading than those who had read the version 'without foregrounding.'"[8] By actively engaging the context and perspective of the text, reading allows one to immerse oneself in a new position, new characters, and a new world, which in the best of circumstances may allow one to feel "other than" oneself, to feel like someone else who has undergone different experiences, and to understand both the good and the bad that is attendant on those experiences.

D. Watkins, a writer and educator from Baltimore, has similarly suggested reading as a primary way in which the propensity toward marginalization and violence in our cities may be quelled. Watkins, who grew up in East Baltimore during the height of the crack era, writes with both experience and insight, having lived in the violent world that he wants to change. Teenagers in his neighborhood, including Watkins himself, sold drugs on the corners. In 2000, just before he was to graduate from high school, Watkins lost his brother and a close friend to drug-related murder. In his essay "The School of Failure," Watkins offers the following:

> I once heard Sherman Alexie say, "Rich people who don't read are assholes and poor people who don't read are fucked!" He's right. So if we can help create readers and writers, thinkers will be birthed, people will be better communicators, social relations will enhance drastically, and our city will be a less violent place.[9]

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[6] Eva Maria Koopman, "Effects of 'Literariness' on Emotions and on Empathy and Reflection after Reading," in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (Vol. 10, 2016), 83.

[7] Ibid. This further crystallizes the qualification issued above that the notion of "reading" considered here deals explicitly with "literary" texts. By Koopman's definition, and by that implied throughout the present essay, the kinds of foregrounding elements that elicit emotional responses in a reader are precisely the elements that differentiate literary texts from other kinds of writing.

[8] Ibid, 82.

[9] D. Watkins, **The school of failure: The worst public schools do one thing very well – they teach poor black kids how to stay in the American underclass**, *Aeon*; April 2015. Here as reprinted in *The Beast Side: Living and Dying While Black in America* (New York, NY: Skyhorse, 2015), 79.

Another example can be found in the experiences of Michael Wood, who joined the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) in 2003. His first assignment was walking the Western District, which comprises such neighborhoods as Sandtown-Winchester, Penn-North, Druid Hill, Poppleton, and Mondawmin.[10] He also worked with the Violent Crime, Narcotics, and Major Crimes divisions before leaving the department in 2014. In June 2015, in the wake of Freddie Gray's death while in BPD custody, Wood began to publicize some of his personal experiences of the corruption and abusive policies of the police department. Much of what he reported accorded with allegations that had been made in the past, and it added to the chorus of similar accounts that were then coming from Ferguson, St Louis, New York, Cleveland, and many other cities across America.[11] Yet there was one aspect of Wood's story that was both surprising and remarkably insightful: in an interview with *The Washington Post*, when asked what had fostered his own transition from participation in these practices to reporting them, Wood revealed the following:

> I got my master's degree. The critical thinking required to earn my degree helped me more fully process those revelations [of the wrongness of the actions by police] I had in 2007. It taught me to think about things differently, to evaluate information in different ways. I started reading news from alternative media, seeking out different perspectives. Then I think the national discussion after Ferguson really drove it all home for me. That whole discussion was so divisive, but it was also instructive. So much of it goes back to a lack empathy. You start to see how neither side is able to see things from the other's perspective.[12]

Once Wood, through reading, allowed himself to recognize the varying perspectives and positions of those affected by his and his fellow officers' behavior, he gained a fuller understanding of them as individuals, as *people*, and he was thus able to change his behavior accordingly and report those who would not.

Wood's experience illustrates Koopman's claims perfectly, and grounds the guiding contention from Susan Sontag:

> One task of literature is to formulate questions and construct counter-statements to the reigning pieties. And even when art is not oppositional, the arts gravitate toward contrariness. Literature is dialogue; responsiveness. …

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[10] This area would figure prominently in the days of unrest in April 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray, who lived in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. On April 27, the day of Freddie Gray's funeral, significant demonstrations arose in the Mondawmin and Penn-North areas, ultimately erupting into destruction of property, looting, and violent confrontations between residents and police.

[11] For a particularly thorough and alarming history of police violence in Baltimore, see **Bill Keller's excellent interview with David Simon** for *The Marshall Project*.

[12] **An Interview with the Baltimore Cop Who's Revealing all the Horrible Things He Saw on the Job**, *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2015.

> Literature offers not only myths but counter-myths, just as life offers counter-experiences—experiences that confound what you thought you thought, or felt, or believed.[13]

It is worth emphasizing that reading—and of literature in particular—is here proposed not as a manner of gaining knowledge of Truth, but rather as a manner of gaining new experience and understanding and synthesizing these new perspectives with what one has previously assimilated. This contention calls to mind pragmatist thinkers like the late Richard Rorty, who proposed a turn away from Truth and toward freedom, a turn that he connected to an "unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity."[14] Rorty contended that individuals can be united as a society in the shared recognition of the contingency of language and of belief and by the simultaneous recognition of the shared potential for suffering. These realized commonalities, Rorty concluded, could form the basis for a meaningful solidarity, constituted as "the ability to see more and more traditional differences . . . as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us.'"[15]

Reading can build solidarity insofar as it can help us see ourselves in the other, help us recognize in the other's suffering the potential for our own suffering, and perhaps help us think more deeply about the harm we cause. This kind of solidarity is what Max Cerda experienced, as a direct result of reading, and it allowed him to move beyond violence.

The French ethicist and Talmudic commentator Emmanuel Levinas proposed: "In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility."[16] This responsibility to the other takes on added significance when considered through the lens of violence. The other is someone I could harm. The other, like me, is someone who can suffer harm. What we therefore have in common, the other and I, is the capacity to experience pain and the responsibility to not cause an other's pain. This, we hope, unjustifiably or perhaps not, is what reading literature can contribute to individuals and to society: it compels one to more fully comprehend and explore the world and one's various places in it. It can allow people to see as if through others' eyes and thus to better understand the world as *they* see it. It can offer an opportunity and a means by which a deeper understanding of oneself and of others can be achieved and the capacity for relation between the two realized.

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[13] Sontag, **Literature Is Freedom**, *op. cit.*

[14] Rorty, "Method, Social Science, Social Hope," in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 208.

[15] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1989), 192.

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance* [*Alterity and Transcendence*], translated by Michael B. Smith (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 101.

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