

Identifying violence: Ethics, representation, and politics in Lee Ann Fujii's *Show Time*

Violence: An International Journal

2022, Vol. 3(1) 109–113

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/26330024221087091

journals.sagepub.com/home/vio



Jonathan S. Blake

Berggruen Institute, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Nicholas Rush Smith

City University of New York - City College, New York, NY, USA

University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Death haunts Lee Ann Fujii's *Show Time* (2021). She tells us so in her first sentence: “A man is dead”. But death hangs over this magnificent, long-awaited book in another way: Fujii passed away in 2017, before finishing it. For those of us who knew her—and her friends, colleagues, mentees, and admirers are legion—it is impossible to read the book without deep sadness, for every page is a reminder that a sparkling, sensitive intellect was lost too soon.

We came to see Fujii's mind and spirit at work while participating in several writing groups on collective violence that she, building upon her remarkable networks, formed while in New York. Our meetings were extraordinary intellectual events, assembling an interdisciplinary group of established scholars like Fujii and historian Michael Pfeifer, with graduate students and junior scholars like ourselves, Gema Kloppe-Santamaria, and Stephanie Schwartz, among others. Members workshopped drafts that formed parts of at least seven books (including *Show Time*).¹ Throughout, Fujii set a generous tone, even as we read each other's work closely to sharpen arguments, negotiate ethical and representational dilemmas, and consider the political implications of our writing—aspects of *Show Time* that we explore in this essay.²

Show Time, like Fujii's entire oeuvre, interrogates the relationships between violence and identity. In the book, she deepens our understanding of the role of identity in every stage of violence by shifting our attention away from the structural circumstances in which violence occurs to the moment of its enactment. She does so by insisting that violence is a *performance*—a performance we need to understand if we are going to explain how and why violence happens.

Corresponding author:

Jonathan S. Blake, Berggruen Institute, 304 S. Broadway, Suite 500, Los Angeles, CA 90013, USA.

Email: jblake@berggruen.org

Performances, of course, require actors. One theme that emerges throughout all of Fujii's work, but which is at the forefront of *Show Time*, is that otherwise ordinary people often play key roles in violent dramas. Indeed, her careful reconstructions of violent events show that ordinary people often take the lead and, by insisting violence is theatrical, she shows us *how*. By examining how people rehearse violence, cast for it, determine roles during its enactment, and stage side shows, she shows how violent performances draw in killers, victims, and audiences, whether they want to be part of the show or not.

In this regard, the disturbing scenes Fujii recounts raise a set of ethical and representational dilemmas. For most readers, *Show Time* will be difficult to read because Fujii does a remarkable job of rendering the brutality of violent displays, along with the perverse joy it engenders in some participants. This raises a question, though—the type of question she pushed us to ask: when it comes to representing such violence, what ethical obligations do scholars have?

This question is particularly loaded when there are disputes about what took place, attempts to silence its consequences, or efforts to harness the violence for future political aims. Fujii does not articulate a clear prescription for navigating these challenges in *Show Time*, but one implication of her text is that we should make the representational dilemmas we face manifest. When there are silences or disputes, we should bring them to light and interrogate them directly, as she does in her account of the ongoing silence surrounding the Maryland lynchings (see esp. Chapter 4). A second lesson seems to be that when violence is used for future political ends, we should make that usage explicit, even if the potential costs are high, as she does when she describes how the Rwandan Patriotic Front, Rwanda's ruling party, uses memories of the country's genocide for cynical political purposes (see esp. Chapter 6). Our duty, then, is to dive head first into the muck. In choosing to study these issues, we take on the responsibility to do the hard work—sifting through data, reflecting, and then re-sifting; questioning ourselves, our sources, and their relationships; exposing and interpreting ambiguities, contradictions, and silences.³

The challenge of such an approach, though, is that it is often at odds with the scientific goal of much political science research, which seeks purportedly neutral explanation. This tension raises the political implications of Fujii's work and what it tells us about the politics of how we study violence. Indeed, in her masterful depiction of violent dramas, Fujii leaves out one crucial participant: the audience. To be clear, she describes the audiences present at the various killings in depth. Yet, we readers, who are a secondary audience for this violence, are left out of the discussion. However, one implication of the dramatic framing in *Show Time* is that reading about acts of destruction should not be something we do as a removed academic exercise. We have duties to bear witness, to be horrified, and to be politically motivated by the horrors—for we are also now part of the show.

This raises yet another Fujiiian question: How do we navigate the dual role we typically play as dispassionate analysts of violence and *zoon politikon*? Fujii's answer seems clear: even as we study violent practices, we need to keep the politics of violence—and the politics of studying violence—at the forefront of our research because any analysis is already fraught with political implications of which we may be unaware.

The issue of how our own identities bear on our work as writers and readers brings us back to the central questions at the core of all of Fujii's work about the relationship between violence and identity. It highlights the important analytical—and political—move Fujii made in choosing the cases at the heart of *Show Time*: by treating the United States as just another violent country alongside Rwanda and Bosnia, Fujii challenges notions of American identity predicated on exceptionalism.

Lest there be any question, the events of January 6, 2021 made clear the violent style of American politics. Even after all the ink that has been spilled over that day, *Show Time* still provides an original and invaluable lens for understanding the storming of the Capitol. By examining the insurrection as a *performance* that was *staged* for an *audience*, we can see it not as a failed coup but as a successful violent display. Commentators who dismiss the insurrectionists as lunatics who were never actually going to overturn the election are missing the point. From a Fujiiian perspective, the January 6 crowd was a collective constituting itself and articulating their political ideals through violent display. Through the assault, they brought “to life ideas about how the world should be and more especially, how it should be ordered—who should have power and who should be included and on what basis people should claim belonging” (Fujii, 2021: 2). In this case, the assembly laid claim to the center of American political power to present a vision of American political, social, and racial order where they dominate.

Fujii's analysis illuminates several specific aspects of January 6. Her attention to violent display as an “aesthetic affair”, for instance, helps to explain the outlandish costumes of several insurrectionists (Fujii, 2021: 2). Why dress in furs and Viking gear to try to overthrow the government? Again, it is about bringing a political vision to life: “we ‘real Americans’ can do whatever we like”. And while most attention has been paid to the people who dressed most bizarrely, Fujii's framework draws attention to the fact that much of the crowd wore costumes and held props to create “a certain ‘look and feel’” (Fujii, 2021: 2): Trump gear, American and Confederate flags, tactical armor, a t-shirt emblazoned with “Camp Auschwitz”. Their behavior, too, helped stage a particular tone by disrespecting the “temple of American democracy”. Insurrectionists took time to smear feces on statues, urinate on the Capitol steps, pose for photos with their feet on Nancy Pelosi's desk, and steal the House Speaker's podium. While short of the murderous acts in *Show Time*, they emerge from the same logic of display. Through the costumes they wore, the symbols they carried, and their actions, the insurrectionists fully embodied their roles as defenders of a “new political order, where the justice of the mob took precedence over that of the state” (Fujii, 2021: 68).

For many Americans, among the most galling images of January 6 were vocal police backers attacking law enforcement, including the blatant hypocrisy of beating police officers with a Blue Lives Matter flag. Fujii, again, offers insight. Identities, she makes clear, are fluid, contested, and contradictory and can be forged and reformed through violence. “This is not America,” exclaimed one insurrectionist. “They're shooting at us. They're supposed to shoot BLM [Black Lives Matter], but they're shooting the patriots” (McCormick, 2021).⁴ To this rioter, an officer who goes “off script” by “shooting the patriots” no longer inhabits the role of police (a role that is “supposed to shoot BLM”); he is the enemy. Violence toward the police is part of the “recasting” that transforms friend to

enemy, while simultaneously staging the insurrectionists' preferred social order, an America where "patriots" rule, preferably with the support of police, but if need be, without it.

And here Fujii directs us to a final element of the rampage: the actors. To be sure, the performance had directors who bear responsibility: Donald Trump and his cronies. But, in the main, the actors in the drama—as in the violent dramas in *Show Time*—were utterly normal people. They included a gym owner, an attorney, and employees of a direct marketing firm, a data analytics firm, and a liberal arts college, among many other perfectly banal jobs. Put differently, and to return to the theme from Fujii's first book, the rioters were our neighbors. This is perhaps the most haunting conclusion of Fujii's scholarly project: when the identities we all hold intersect with violence, more of us are capable of playing a role than we care to admit.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Books include [Blake \(2019\)](#), [Fujii \(2017, 2021\)](#), [Kloppe-Santamaria \(2020\)](#), [Pfeiffer \(2017\)](#), [Schwartz \(2021\)](#), and [Smith \(2019\)](#).
2. Fujii's detailed suggestions and questions could sprawl across a page, covering every aspect of the text, from improving our style (find more "evocative" verbs; "not my favorite word here, but I like its vividness"; "use a different word because of the valence" of a term) to challenging our arguments and pushing us to clarify and deepen them, always with an eye toward thinking about the intended audience and how to broaden it. Comments often came with her characteristic sense of drama and humor. For instance, written across the top of one of Blake's draft chapters was "watch out for repetition, particularly within the same para[graph]; watch out for repetition, particularly within the same para[graph]".
3. It is no surprise that Fujii paid such close attention to questions of method and was such an innovative methodologist. Her desire for uncovering truths about difficult subjects required a dedication to the craft of research. Her commitment to research ethics and research methods were two sides of the same coin. See [Fujii \(2009\)](#), esp. Chap. 1; [Fujii \(2010, 2015, 2017, and 2021\)](#): esp. Chap. 4).
4. As if to prove Fujii's point, another insurrectionist tried to comfort the dismayed woman, saying: "Don't worry, honey. We showed them today. *We showed them what we're all about*". ([McCormick, 2021](#); our italics.)

References

- Blake JS (2019) *Contentious Rituals: Parading the Nation in Northern Ireland*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fujii LA (2009) *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fujii LA (2010) Shades of truth and lies: interpreting testimonies of war and violence. *Journal of Peace Research* 47(2): 231–241.
- Fujii LA (2015) Five stories of accidental ethnography: turning unplanned moments in the field into data. *Qualitative Research* 15(4): 525–539.
- Fujii LA (2017) *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Fujii LA (2021) *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- McCormick A (2021) Madness on Capitol Hill. *The Nation*. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/capitol-trump-insurrection-explosions/> (March 28, 2022).
- Pfeiffer M, ed. (2017) *Global Lynching and Collective Violence: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Kloppe-Santamaria G (2020) *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Schwartz SR (2021) *Homeward Bound: Refugee Return and Local Conflict after Civil War*, Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California.
- Smith NR (2019) *Contradictions of Democracy: Vigilantism and Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Author Biographies

Jonathan S. Blake is a USC/Berggruen Fellow at the Berggruen Institute. He holds a PhD in political science from Columbia University and is the author of *Contentious Rituals: Parading the Nation in Northern Ireland*, published by Oxford University Press in 2019.

Nicholas Rush Smith is Associate Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York—City College and Senior Research Associate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg. He is the author of *Contradictions of Democracy: Vigilantism and Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, published by Oxford University Press in 2019.