

Fall 2013

Review of Moira Fradinger, *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins*.

Cristina Vatulescu
New York University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Vatulescu, Cristina (2013). Review of "Review of Moira Fradinger, *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 10 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol10/iss2/4>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol10/iss2/4>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Moira Fradinger, *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. 352 pp. ISBN 9780804763301.

Reviewed by Cristina Vatulescu, New York University

In *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins*, Moira Fradinger has produced a thought-provoking book. A model of comparative literature, the book combines insightful close readings, a thorough engagement with the historical context, and theoretical sophistication. “Resolutely interdisciplinary” (19), *Binding Violence* should be required reading for students of literary and political theory, and for anyone interested in the relationship between literature, democracy, and politics in general.

The ambition of the book becomes immediately apparent upon a reading of its table of contents. Fradinger has picked three texts that seem unrelated: Sophocles’s *Antigone*, D.A.F. de Sade’s *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat*. In the course of the book Fradinger provides fresh and sophisticated readings for each of these major texts, while also engaging their cultural contexts and their rich afterlives. Furthermore, she fully answers the ambitious challenge that she set up through her unorthodox choice of primary texts, by convincingly showing that all three of them complexly address the same fundamental problem, the paradox of democratic logic. It is the book’s central argument that this paradox or aporia of democratic logic has often led to a particular form of what Fradinger calls “binding violence.” Fradinger uses the introduction to boldly articulate this original thesis and to carefully define her terms. Building on the work of contemporary political theorists Ian Shapiro and Alan Keenan, Fradinger first reminds us that “in democratic theory, a democratic solution for the definition of the demos is yet to be found” (5). The problem lies in that “logically speaking, the political space that opened up in ancient Greece would seemingly entail the dissolution of its own borders: the closure that signifies the birth of the polis entails an exclusion that collides with democratic inclusiveness. Simply put, the binding together of the city as a distinct city goes against the principle of equality” (8). This fundamental paradox of membership and equality, the question of who constitutes the community and who is left out, quickly turns in times of crisis into questions about how to close off membership, and about who gets excluded when the boundaries of the demos are drawn and redrawn.

Fradinger conjures up the urgent actuality of this paradox of democratic logic while taking us on a journey through “three key moments when democracy is reconfigured”: the Athenian “invention of politics,” the French Revolution and “its reinvention of politics,” and the third wave in the experiment of democracy, “the imperative democratization” that marked the last two decades of the twentieth century. This is the first key to the mystery concerning the choice of the three texts: it is, as Fradinger clearly explains, this history of political autonomy that inspired her choice: The texts are taken here as “literary symptoms” (10, 11) of their times, exposing what other types of discourses may occlude. First and foremost, they show that the paradox of democratic membership is anything but an abstract theoretical problem. Indeed, in Fradinger’s readings, these texts variously show how the question of membership repeatedly turns into acute political crises that lead to violence. This violence excludes not only strangers but former members in order to redraw the boundaries of the demos. Fradinger notes that Polynices is defined by Sophocles as “not a slave,” or not an other to the entitled members of his demos, just

as the daughters (soon to become victims) of Sade's libertines are their very own blood, and just as Trujillo, the dictator of Vargas Llosa's novel, causes the genocide of the Haitians despite (or maybe because of) his Haitian blood. In excluding not just those who were always other but also those who used to be one's very own, this violence bloodily binds a new community. For Fradinger, then, violence is not an accident that befalls democracy at some point or other of its existence; instead, it is foundational, lying "at the roots of political cohesiveness" (13). As "democracy's ghostly other" (11), binding violence could not be more central to Fradinger's conception of politics. Indeed, she goes as far as to redefine political life as "a specific configuration of a collective's relation to violence" (5).

Fradinger's incisive articulation of binding violence is suitably representative of her method. *Binding Violence* engages a rich literature on violence. Fradinger takes issue with the ways in which modern societies have conceptualized violence as "a rupturing of the self or of the other, both considered as already whole units" (12). Instead she derives insights from her literary texts and incorporates radically different accounts of violence, like that of Walter Benjamin, who saw violence not just as law-breaking or even law-preserving but also, more fundamentally, *law-making*. Another inspiration for her rethinking of foundational violence is Michel Foucault's insightful reversal of Carl von Clausewitz's dictum that "war is the continuation of politics by other means" in his assertion that "politics is the continuation of war by other means" (13). In line with a tradition of thought that treats violence as a rupture of a whole self, Clausewitz envisioned symmetrical forces established through political processes before the beginning of war. Foucault's reversal of the now commonplace dictum sends a message that Fradinger develops further: war, and in Fradinger's account, other forms of binding violence like genocide, precede and found politics, rather than temporarily interrupting it during a crisis. Fradinger further clarifies her term by contrasting it to René Girard's seminal work on human sacrifice as a "scapegoat mechanism" whereby violence preserves communities as the sacrificial murder channels it to save the community from self-destruction. In Girard's account, the "chosen victim is innocent, sacred and an outsider or someone on the fringes of society" (16). By contrast, the violence that Fradinger makes us aware of is not "a sacrifice that stops internal fighting or restores an order" (16). Instead it turns former members into pariahs and establishes what she calls a "structure of enmity" inside the community. To qualify this fratricidal violence Fradinger creates a new compound word, "endocide," to signify the annihilation of a part of the very same group in crisis. Fradinger develops previous seminal concepts not only in the creation of her central concept, but also in the creation of possible solutions to this crisis of democratic membership. Among the most compelling examples is her reworking of the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation, which emerges from its journey through her texts in a new avatar, as artistic sublimation, "a laboratory of meaning where experiments in change happen" (23). In her analysis of artistic sublimation, Fradinger shows how "it is sublimation's work with the form rather than with the object" which roots its "capacity for a political transformation," and thus its potentially liberating function.

Fully conversant with the most recent debates in literary and political theory, Fradinger navigates through them gracefully and creatively. One case in point is her development of Giorgio Agamben's articulation of the state of exception, which Fradinger alters to "zone of exception" to "indicate not a defensive but an instituting process" (17). A state of exception is a *temporal* measure that all industrialized nations can declare in times of perceived national danger, a time

when “the law legally suspends itself, in order to preserve itself” (17). Fradinger’s zone of exception draws attention to the fact that this perceived necessary “evil of politics” does not befall communities only at limited moments of their history. Instead, she argues that communities that call themselves democratic *are instituted* in a zone of exception, the zone where membership is drawn by way of deciding about inclusion and exclusion, about life and too often about death. As a result, Fradinger deconstructs the assumed innocence of these communities’ beginnings, exposing instead the “primary violence of belonging” (17), which is shown to be inextricably linked to exclusion and death. This exposure of the foundational politicization of death builds on Michel Foucault’s and Achille Mbembe’s discussions of biopolitics and necropolitics, by developing a link between necropolitics and the conundrum of democracy—the problem of membership. If Foucault defined biopolitics as modernity’s politicization of life and death, Fradinger takes a cue from Mbembe by focusing on the politicization of death—necropolitics. She then goes back in time to ancient Greece to “trace the complement to the biopolitical link: a necropolitical link, a politicization of death” which she relates to “an imaginative failure to confront the political and social demand of equality” (29).

Fradinger roots this insight in the literary analysis of her three main texts. In light of her readings, we come to see that “Creon and the Sadeanites almost seem to materialize in Llosa’s dictator, Trujillo, who redesigns membership with an actual genocide and a permanent state of exception” (29). Indeed, Fradinger shows how Trujillo’s genocide of Haitian immigrants in 1937 can be interpreted as “his binding of a political constituency through the transformation of the Haitians into ‘life that can be killed’ with impunity—that is, outside legal and community rites, to follow Agamben’s formulation” (28).

As we have seen, the classical narrative of political autonomy gives us the first key to the choice of texts. However, it is the three chapters, each an exemplary reading of one text, and the two interludes, which fill in the vast gaps between ancient Greece, revolutionary France, the twentieth-century Dominican Republic, and our own globalized times, with tours de force, which together provide full justification for the author’s choice. Fradinger prepares us for her readings by declaring that “I have wanted to write about these texts both from within the disciplines that consider them as objects of study and from without, blurring those disciplinary limits.” This is an ambitious program, given that the texts belong to such different fields and have had such rich afterlives.

In her first chapter, “Sophocles’ *Antigone* or the Invention of Politics,” Fradinger departs “from the Hegelian tradition that sees the tragic as the clash between the pre-political and the political spheres, and from recent interpretations that insist on discussing Antigone’s relation to the city in terms of her representing religion, womanhood, or tradition” (26). Instead, Fradinger rescues Antigone from the pre-political realm to which she has been most often relegated, arguing that Antigone and Creon represent two different kinds of politics. It is fittingly through close attention to the kinds of *political speech* that define Antigone and Creon—the ritual and the edict, respectively—that Fradinger reaches her insights. As a result, her departure from the critical tradition is not limited to her new reading of Antigone, but instead takes on Creon’s long-held position as the representative of the rule of law. Fradinger surprisingly yet cogently argues that Creon’s defining political speech, the edict, places him at the threshold of the law, in the realm of executive decision. In an extended analysis of the edict, Fradinger notes that when he orally

proclaims that the burial of Polynices is forbidden and imposes the penalty of death on anyone who does not obey, Creon issues an edict which does not “derive from an existing law . . . but rather suspends the universal validity of both the laws of funeral rites and treason” (55). As a decision that has the *force of law*, Creon’s edict has “a democratic veneer” that has long been taken for the real thing. Instead, Fradinger argues, the edict represents “the collapse of law in a decision,” a decision taken by an authoritative figure of the state in times that are deemed so exceptional as to bypass the usual legal practices. Creon’s edict is then a speech act invested in the creation of a zone of exception.

Dedicated to Sade’s *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, the second chapter reads this text in relationship to the problem of membership as it is radically posed by the French Revolution. Indeed, Fradinger argues that the text “occupies with respect to the discourses of the Enlightenment, the place that tragedy occupied with respect to the ancient polis, exposing its internal contradictions” (102). Fradinger anchors her reading by drawing parallels between the Sadean imaginary and the starkly evoked violence of the revolution, exploring the points of intersection between the text and its times, and engaging with the extensive literature on Sade. Using striking examples from a wealth of accounts of the French Revolution, Fradinger reminds us that the political violence of the times made “transgression the norm while Sade was writing” (111). In vigorously removing Sade from “the locus of moral and literary ‘monstrosity’” and instead reinserting his work back into this climate of extraordinary political violence, Fradinger clears the ground for her new reading of the text. In her reading, Sade’s society of equals “speaks more of the violence that renegotiates a pact of membership rather than of the catalogue of sexual or (linguistic) perversions that modern criticism saw in it” (111).

The last chapter tackles Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat* and the genre of dictator novels. Indeed, as in the previous chapters, Fradinger manages to pay the text the greatest respect while alternating between what she calls her zooming in and zooming out devices. Zooming out, the “Interlude” that precedes the chapter again poses an ambitious hypothesis: that the genre of the dictator novel, “identified by critics as ‘native’ to Latin America,” “is in strong dialogue with the French and American reinventions of politics,” and as such it is “a transatlantic genre” (173). Rather than seeing dictators as particular Latin American “metaphors for the regional failure of modernization,” Fradinger provocatively argues that, “born hand in hand with the ‘Social Contract,’” the dictator novel meditates on the paradoxes hidden within the ideologies of social contract,” and as such they should be read as a response to the “world events of the French and American revolutions” (178-182). Zooming in through an invocation of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, the recognized cornerstone of Latin American literature that she reads here as an embryonic dictator novel, Fradinger links the Latin American dictators to other powerful figures of Western sovereignty: the Roman dictator, the Venetian Council of Ten, Robespierre and Napoleon. The following chapter engages with the literature on two centuries of dictator novels, reading them as narratives of political foundations.

I have saved my favorite insight of *Binding Violence* for the end of this review. As a self-conscious hybrid of literary and political theory, *Binding Violence* offers illuminating pages on its methodology. The sophisticated articulation of its working hypothesis about the relationship between literature and politics is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the book. Fradinger’s introduction presents her hypothesis that “[a]rt can orient us through the unsaids of an era, if we

are attentive to tracing textual displacements and appropriations” (23). The rest of the book tests this hypothesis, showing “literary texts open visionary doors to unveil what other social discourses may not yet have articulated” (246). Fradinger does not idealize literature, dwelling on instances where artistic sublimation and its experiments in change “take the thought of their times to its ultimate, woeful, consequences” (22). She also remains aware throughout of “the remainder of materiality that cannot be symbolized” (20) or of “what remains unsignified” (21) in literature. However, her way of seeing literature not as a simple reflection but as “refracting, digesting, distorting—in brief, transforming—the political imagination of an era” (20) opens in her conclusion to a potential response to the crisis of democracy, a call to face “the imaginative failure to confront the political and social demands of equality,” with “the force of imagination” that can be transformed by literary texts.