

CARROLL C. ARNOLD DISTINGUISHED LECTURE 2018

GUNPLAY



JOSHUA GUNN
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



ON OCTOBER 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold Lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as their earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, the late Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the coauthor (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because of a fascination with empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed "The Teacher of the Field" upon retirement from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.

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GUNPLAY

Following is a transcript of the 2018 Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture as delivered.

LECTURER'S NOTE: As is typical of published lectures, what follows is not a precise transcript; as delivered, the speech contained a number of ad lib remarks that I have simply forgotten. The lecture relied heavily on slides and media clips, most of which cannot be duplicated in this medium. When possible, I transcribe or describe the content of a slide or media clip in brackets. References omitted from oral delivery, as well as material cut for time constraints, are included in the footnotes.

WHAT IF THE HOKEY POKEY IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?—Robert L. Scott¹

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN by reflecting on the exigency that triggered this year's conference theme, "Communication at Play," which we have been told is intentionally "ambiguous" and "fun."² To help refresh your memory of this causal crisis, I have a short clip:

VIDEO CLIP: *The clip is from an early scene in the 1971 film Harold and Maude, shortly after the titular characters meet for the first time at a stranger's funeral. The camera exits the door of a church to the blare of a triumphant marching band; an over-the-shoulder shot shows pallbearers carrying a casket and unloading it into a hearse. Perversely, as the casket is loaded, the high school band marches by, bearing U.S. flags and playing an upbeat, patriotic tune. A title below the video reads, "National Communication Association Conference, November 2016, Philadelphia."*

That's right, my friends, the exigency for our playful conference theme today is our somber, 2016 conference in the City of Sorrowful Siblings. For many of us, the 2016 conference was funerary, both a wake and a call from beyond by our interred sisters and ancestors of color to "get out"—like, to Canada—or to "get woke." This darkly comical scene from Hal Ashby's 1971 cult film *Harold and Maude* captures our attempts to play the part of resilient marchers while pall-bearing the political, motivating our comrades to push back the darkness despite a mournful mood that something—both a promise and a pretense—has died. I am not so much referencing the unexpected results of the election as I am the palpably distressed personality of our congress then, and the belief that long-established norms of propriety have been perverted.³

Despite a melodramatic or secretly jubilant mood, however, the field marshaled on, trampling the brittle grasses of apathy and birding for flights of humor and beer—which is to say, we played. One of the most widely read scholars of play—second only, I suspect, to Jean Piaget⁴—is British psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott, who argued that play is a form of creativity and essential for selfhood.⁵ Elaborating Winnicott’s theory, André Green put things more starkly: “I think it is in the presence of horror that we understand the necessity of play in making [reality] bearable.”⁶ In this respect, First Vice President Muir rightly understood that play is reparative. Whether it is warranted, the widely expressed horror about our current political predicament prods a puckish riposte, from late night television skits, to web-based satire, to a conference lecture.⁷

In this spirit, I am reminded of an anecdote about a lecture that Winnicott gave last century: As he saddled up to speak, so the story goes, he produced a handgun from his briefcase and laid it upon the podium. After some minutes of audience discomfort, Winnicott presumably said that the revolver was for the person who dared to claim that his presentation was inappropriate.⁸ I thought that I might repeat the gag tonight, but then aborted this bad idea with plan B: a so-call headshot to advertise this talk (see Fig. 1). Needless to say, NCA chose not to use this shot. Which now, as you can see, is presently more gigantic than any poster or print advertisement. Some people said it was the best headshot they’ve ever seen. They said it was! That’s all I’m saying. But, I don’t know. So, we didn’t use it.

Still, the dis-ease over this deliberately ambiguous headshot underscores a primary assumption of my remarks today. Like a funeral procession striding aside a marching band, “play” is not simply an ambiguous concept—it is fundamentally an ambivalent one. Culturally, the word “play” is romanticized in the fantasy of an innocent nonage, and with the possible exception of sport,⁹ we rarely think about cheating or how some folks refuse to “play nice.”¹⁰ The hegemony of play’s innocent connotations is well-represented in the call of this conference, and especially in the follow-up imperative on CRTNET that any proposed conference play-spaces must reflect fun or “whimsy,”¹¹ as opposed to, say, the fetish dungeons of so-called grownups and their fifty shades of play.¹² Because of these demands for compulsory fun, I felt an obligation to address the dark side of play.¹³

Given the concept’s ambivalence, I will argue that an attention to a public’s modes of pathological play—that is, foul or dirty play, broadly speaking—produces something like a partially developed Polaroid of the communicative structures that enable and constrain difficult conversations. To put this more plainly, today I will argue that contemporary modes of pathological play are symptomatic of a structural shift from neurotic to perverse norms. My focus here is not on the individual, but on the aggregate or congeries of persons that constitute a community or public, which is a characteristically sociological or materialist vantage that regards playing dirty as a cultural expression of a popular and festering pus.¹⁴



Figure 1: The Speaker as a Middle-Aged Ham.

In the broadest strokes, the context of my remarks today is a forthcoming, book-length argument that U.S. political culture is becoming increasingly perverse.¹⁵ The concept of “play” is central to this argument because of the reality testing that play represents. My gambit is that an attention to darker cultural trends in play, from video gaming to politics, does tell us something about shifts and changes in the social body.

To this end, I’ll elaborate my argument about the cultural perversion of play in four parts. In the first part, I’ll take some time to explain what I mean by neurosis and perversion using a model cribbed from Jacques Lacan, a philosophically oriented, French psychoanalyst. Doing so will help me to better explain Winnicott’s conception of play in trans-individual terms in the second part. In the third part, I illustrate how mediated spectacle represents an ascendant form of perverse play in our time, most conspicuously for us in electoral politics. Finally, I will bring the cultural logics of play to bear on one of the most significant public health problems of our time: playing with guns.



ON PSYCHICAL STRUCTURES AND SYMBOLIC EFFICIENCY

BECAUSE SOME OF WHAT I WILL DISCUSS TODAY IS ABSTRACT, I think it will be helpful for us to begin with a couple of unrelated examples that, of course, I will argue are related. The first clip is a cultural critique clothed in comedy¹⁶:

VIDEO: *Shown is clip from a skit from the Key and Peele comedy series on the Comedy Central channel. Keegan-Michael Key appears as a “senator” at a press conference.*

SENATOR: These allegations, that I have sent inappropriate pictures, over the Internet, are completely ridiculous! They are levied by my political rivals, who are trying to embarrass me and advance their own agenda. So, let me be perfectly clear: these allegations are false! I will be vindicated! Next question. Phillip?

REPORTER PHILLIP: TMZ has obtained an actual photo of your genitalia; they’re posting to their website as we speak; they’re saying you took it. How do you respond?

SENATOR: Ok, I may have, I may have sent one photo of my genitalia. Ok, but I assure you that was an isolated incident, it was a one-time thing!

This skit from the incomparable Key and Peele references one of the celebrated scandals of our time, which is now a technologically facilitated mainstay in our news media: sexting.

Speaking of sex, you’re likely expecting my second example to come from the White House, which it does. But only by degrees, because the victim of foul play here is not a person:

VIDEO: *Shown is clip from the Meet the Press show on NBC, featuring Chuck Todd interviewing President Trump’s personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani.*

TODD: You believe this is on them? That you would’ve, that you guys have not delayed the interviewing, ah, delayed the negotia—

GIULIANI: No!

TODD: —tions with Mr. Mueller?

GIULIANI: Yes! Each time by three or four days so we can write a letter in response. They have taken two to three weeks to get back to us. So, uh, what I have to tell you is, look, I’m not gonna be rushed into having him testify so that he gets trapped into perjury, and when you tell me that, you know, he should testify because he’s gonna tell the truth and he shouldn’t worry, well, that’s so silly because it’s somebody’s version of the truth, not the truth, he didn’t have a, a conversation about—

TODD: Truth is truth, I don't mean to go, like, I—

GIULIANI: No, it isn't truth. Truth isn't truth! The president of the United States says, I didn't, I—

TODD: (fist to forehead, laughing) Truth isn't truth? Mr. Mayor, do you realize what, I, I, I—

GIULIANI: No!

TODD: —this is going to become a bad meme!¹⁷

...or it's going to become an excellent example for a lecture on perversion! Here Rudy Giuliani bumbles through an argument familiar to us, that truth is perspectival, at best a cognitive coordination of Venn diagrams, especially in a legal system premised on an adversarial process. Although most of us understand what he meant, it was nevertheless taken up as an astonishing statement and kind of motto for so-called "fake news," political disinformation, and the "truthful hyperbole" of the present administration.

Finally, of course, indecision about where to locate the place of truth in our contemporary moment overlaps with the ethical issue of responsibility: Without an anchor in truth or fact, to what or whom are people responsible? Many may claim common decency, or perhaps the all-seeing-eye of Deity. Even so, in our contemporary, mediated social world, what matters the most is acting right now, in the present, achieving immediate notoriety through action. Such an attitude or approach, often adopted by those who claim the radical or extreme, is the disposition of a "troll." For example:

***VIDEO CLIP:** Segment from a 2016 ABC Nightline program, featuring journalist Terry Moran interviewing right-wing polemicist Milo Yiannopoulos about his racist and sexist attacks on actor and comedian Leslie Jones.*

MORAN: Are you a troll?

YIANNOPOULOUS: Of course!

MORAN: What is trolling? How do you look at it?

YIANNOPOULOUS: I like to think of myself as a virtuous troll, you know, I'm doing god's work.

MORAN (as voiceover): Milo Yiannopoulos, also known as Nero online, joined in the tormenting of Jones, calling her a man on Twitter to his 350,000-plus followers.

MORAN: In the Twitter storm, you called her a "dude"—

YIANNOPOULOUS: —Ah, sure, I was mean to—

MORAN: If Leslie Jones were right here—

YIANNOPOULOUS: —I've gone native.

MORAN: —would you say, "You look like a dude?"

YIANNOPOULOUS: Yeah, probably.

MORAN: You would say that to her?

YIANNOPOULOUS: Yeah probably. I probably would.

MORAN: Then you're an idiot. Really.¹⁸

Now, I have presented here three examples that may not seem related, at least intellectually, but they do reverberate with a delicate discomfort: sexting scandals, the unmooring of truth, and hate speech. I would submit that their relationship has to do with *authority*, and more pointedly, with the perception in each case of the erosion or absence of an authority. In each example, the speaker assumes, consciously or not, that there is no ultimate oversight, that truth is unanchored, or that injurious speech is permissible.

What is common to these examples is formal: In each case, we can imagine a speaker set into relationship to some object of meaning, which I will designate here as discourse. So, a politician is made to confront images he dispatched of his “junk”; a lawyer is set in relationship to something called “truth”; and a social media troll is called on to reckon with his vile tweets. And in each case there is an assumption of the absence of some Third Thing, a kind of authorial overseer that might judge these behaviors as untruthful or immoral. In these examples, this Third Thing is initially perceived to be either absent or inconsequential. Authorities are faking it to make it; facts are the fabrications of biased journalists; and there is no punishing government or God because, well, because humility is for losers.

Following the work of political philosopher Jodi Dean and Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek, the elision or erosion of this Third Thing is dubbed “the decline of symbolic efficiency.”¹⁹ A given community is symbolically efficient when everyone shares common anchors, such as a language. In some ways, many of us would be tempted to describe symbolic efficiency as another term for successful communication, *except for one thing*: Žižek argues that, in our time, “symbolic efficiency” also refers to an assumed *authority*, a deference or humility to something larger and more powerful than ourselves, traditionally Deity, but more commonly the rule of law, society as such, the “people,” and so on. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this sense of a larger, outside authority is first experienced in childhood as a disciplining parent.²⁰

Of course, the Third Thing is a refiguring of Freud’s famous Oedipal Triangle, which y’all know has been heavily critiqued because of assumptions that we consider sexist today. It has also been critiqued for imposing a familial triangulation against the social in harmfully totalizing or prescriptive ways, as Deleuze and Guattari have argued.²¹ A lot of criticism today, however, takes aim at Freud’s presumed individualism, which would suggest his insights only pertain to the clinic and cannot be extrapolated for the diagnosis of social or public problems.²²

This is the pickle that Lacan helps us tackle: He argued we should regard the Oedipal model *figuratively*. Each figure in the model is often culturally gendered, but that has less to do with the individual or biological sex, he says. Rather, one must rethink the triangle in terms of a primary parent and a secondary parent, each of which has a maternal and paternal function, respectively.²³ So with Lacan, we get something like this (see Figure 2):

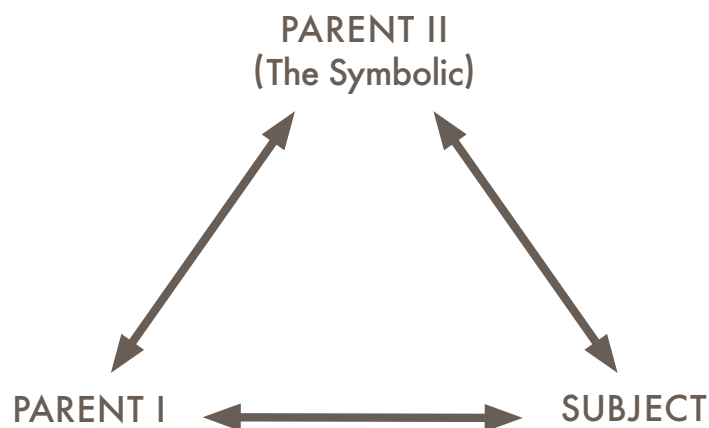


Figure 2: The Oedipal Triangle.

Unavoidably, this formal structure relies on a mythic childhood to help explain it, but functionally, Lacan suggests the model describes a dynamic process that we are constantly negotiating throughout our lives as a disposition toward others.²⁴

Here I have an admittedly crude sketch of why Lacan has become so appealing to humanists: The second parent or paternal function is equivocated with the symbolic writ large, which is to say the structuring of culture itself. The second parent, in other words, is a figural vehicle for a subject's entry *into* the world of language and meaning. The implication here is that even the family form is determined by the symbolic, not the other way around.²⁵

Becoming a subject of the family format in this way entails two sorts of moves: First, there is an *alienation* from the primary caregiver, the primary dyad of child-mother, for example. Then, there is a separation from this primary parent with the introduction of a new, second figure, and, by extension, a parade of figures—sister, brother, uncle, family dog, toys, and so on—as socially fungible, but nevertheless significant, love substitutions.

Now, I recognize this is abstract stuff, but here's why I dragged y'all through it: Becoming a self-conscious person in the social world, a reckoning with thirdness, *requires playing*. The Oedipal triangle is just one way of conceptualizing the important, formative functions of play and its relationship to the art of substitution that we term, simply, "creativity." Before a young person can successfully become alienated from the primary parent and then separated as a self-conscious person, she has to negotiate how this is done by playing with various objects that stand in for the primary caregiver. Here is where Winnicott's theory of play provides brilliant insights: Before a child successfully detaches from the primary parent, various objects are played with to ease this transition in a liminal or holding space. These objects represent, in some sense, a kind of primal security. Winnicott calls these objects, simply enough, "transitional objects."²⁶

Winnicott argues that these transitional objects are also subject to aggression, that children will first try to consume them until they learn that, despite those efforts, the object can't be eaten or destroyed. This first and formative form of play, he says, is an imaginative zone of creativity, a what-if space in which rules and social codes are negotiated. For Winnicott, successful playing teaches us that objects have an independence of their own, a kind of vitality that eventually gets afforded to other people—a kind of concern or caring for others, not as objects, but as subjects in themselves.²⁷



THE VARIETIES OF PLAYFUL EXPERIENCE

AT THIS JUNCTURE, one can probably sense how Winnicott's understanding of playing anticipates the dirty play of my opening examples. As I'll soon suggest, pathological play represents a reduction of others to objects and the evaporation of goodwill.²⁸ If playing represents the fundamental, creative means of making and maintaining relationships with others, then the dirty sexter or sneaky lawyer or social media troll are having a kind of "object trouble," and they're certainly not playing by the same rules as everyone else.

How, then, do we describe the rules of everyone else and the cultural playing that these both confine and condone? The answer, of course, is the symbolic efficiency of the Third Thing, an assumed authority. You see, for many psychoanalytic perspectives, the "norm" is actually neurosis. This is to say, most of us are neurotic, which means we have accepted the "no!" of the second parent and learned to substitute for the primary parent. Lacan suggests that the biggest substitution is language itself, or as I like to joke, *rhetoric is a substitution for your mother!* Socially sanctioned play, which is most familiar to us as sex, sporting, and entertainment, operates on the basis of mutually shared rules and often various implied social contracts. Such a view of neurotic or normal playfulness is consistent with research on play across a broad spectrum of humanistic and scientific perspectives.²⁹

Regardless of one's theoretical commitments, there is a widespread consensus that play is central to the brain, body, and overall social being of many animals, not just humans.³⁰ When our field self-identified as "Speech," assumptions about play and childhood development were important for those who studied stuttering and the speech sciences.³¹ Play has been most usefully theorized by scholars and practitioners of performance studies, for whom play plays a significant role in the classroom, on the stage, and across the page.³² Most of the play research in the social sciences takes aim at video games,³³ and much of this constrained by widely known media effects scholarship that can discern a connection to aggression, but no direct causal relationship between violent media and social violence.³⁴

The critical and social scientific work on play in communication does, however, track a perception of a shift in modes of play, the most conspicuous of which are aggressive or mean.³⁵ Arguably, my opening examples bespeak a kind of dirty gaming: the sexter, the lawyer, and the troll seem to understand cultural norms and expectations, but violate them anyway, as if to say, "I'm going to issue racist and sexist attacks because I can." In these examples, paternal or symbolic authority is denied, suggesting that a perverse form of cultural play is afoot.

This is where I suggest Lacan's ideas about psychical structures are useful. Playing dirty is demonstrative of a decline or erosion of symbolic efficiency that Lacan terms the "perverse structure," which gives us a vocabulary for describing when play goes wrong.³⁶ The pervert is the person who hears the "no" of the paternal parent but refuses to give up the maternal parent, as if to say, "I hear you pops, but mom is still mine." The motto of the pervert is that "I know what I am doing is wrong, but I'm doing it anyway." The pervert is alienated because they heard the "no"; they just don't separate.³⁷

Whether or not you think that Lacan's refiguring of the Oedipal triangle works, I hope his definition of a structural perversion nevertheless makes sense: "I know what I'm doing is wrong, but I'm doing it anyway." The neurotic feels guilt, recognizes her abilities, and uses play as a creative way to negotiate limitation. On the other hand, the pervert understands the rules, but thinks only suckers and losers follow them; this is because the pervert is the enforcer of the rules!

The signature of the pervert is the communicative strategy of "disavowal," a gesture that affirms a rule or truth at the same moment it is denied. We have already heard disavowal in my opening examples, particularly with the statement, "the truth isn't truth." The problem is that disavowal actually represents a perversion of play and a fundamental *lack* of creativity. Bad play is almost always scripted and rigidly rule-bound—it is, in fact, often by book, only it's a book many of us like to pretend doesn't exist. I will explain.



THE PLAY OF POLITICAL PERVERSION

BUT FIRST, I RECOGNIZE that much of what I have said is abstract and that it would be helpful to concretize the theory I'm describing here. So far I've suggested that cultural norms are shifting from a default or normalized neurotic structure toward perversion, which is a disposition or strategy of relating to others that acknowledges consensus reality at the same moment of its denial. This duplicity is a defense mechanism termed "disavowal." I am also arguing that foul play is a form of disavowal as well.

Before I move on, I do need to make a caveat here that I am *not* critiquing perversion as such, only the kind of perverse games that intentionally harm others. Perversion as such is *not a bad thing*, because humans are, fundamentally, aberrations of reproductive norms. Freud believed that perversion was universal and common. In fact, he argued that every one of us is functionally perverse: Insofar as we enjoy food for reasons other than its nutritional value, or insofar as we enjoy sex for reasons other than reproduction, we are all deviants from the dictates of a lingering, religious dogma of the natural order.³⁸

From a classically psychoanalytic vantage, perversion is the default—Freud said we all come into the world *polymorphously* perverse. So, to hear it from Sigmund, it appears that it is actually heterosexuality that is a perversion of the default perversion—which is to say, the human home base is, basically, queer.³⁹ So, I don't mean to criticize perversion *per-se*; *I adore straight people! Some of my best friends are heteros!* And, besides, today "perversion" is often just another word for fun, which, you know, girls just wanna have. Behavioral or common perversion becomes pathological only when others are forced to play *without consent*. Indeed, for medical, legal, and moral communities, "mutual informed consent" is the decision rule between common perversion and the pathological extreme.⁴⁰

What I'm after here, then, is what Lacan described as a *perverse structure*, a disposition of character that repeats certain relational patterns that many of us would describe as transgressions. Strictly speaking, structural perversion is not transgressive at all, but rather a compulsive repetition of defenses. What appears as playfulness is actually a form of disavowal or dirty work, an acknowledgement of consensus reality and a denial of it at the same time. For example, consider this scene in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 2016: "If she [rival candidate Hillary Clinton] gets to pick her [Supreme Court] judges," Trump belched at a rally, "there's nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know."⁴¹ Of course, I could not let Trump's presidency go without mention, because I have been arguing for some years now that his rhetoric is structurally perverse. These shots from the stump are particularly demonstrative of playing dirty: What makes disavowal a perverse rhetorical strategy, however, is the relationship implied by such turns of speech in the "I don't know" coda: the speaker is above or beyond the symbolic order he denies, he takes no responsibility for it.



ON TARGETED VIOLENCE

TRUMP'S OBVIOUS EXAMPLE of political obscenity leads, finally, back to guns. To illustrate with an example closer to home, I want to take you back with me to Texas⁴²:

VIDEO CLIP: *The clip is a segment from the ABC news program Nightline concerning the high school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas, on May 18, 2018. The clip features a voice over narrating the events; a montage of aerial clips of the school grounds; young people running; emergency dispatch radio recordings; still photos of families grieving and hugging; interviews with students; and all of this connected by a continuous, ominous drone.*

Although mass shootings seem to be increasing, their frequency is not; they are getting deadlier.⁴³ Despite popular rhetoric concerning an epidemic of what Professor Bradley Serber argues we should term “targeted violence,”⁴⁴ such perceptions are largely the consequence of media overexposure and a firmly entrenched genre of what we could term “active shooter television.” I underscore that this *Nightline* segment foregrounds recordings of calls to emergency personnel, the slow zoom of images of weeping families, and an ominous, interweaving drone, all of which have become ubiquitous, generic features that deliberately double as traumatic stressors for viewers. There is also mounting evidence suggesting that the media coverage and framing of targeted violence encourages imitation and fame seeking.⁴⁵

Moreover, tele-playing with affect attempts to collapse a sense of spatial and temporal distance and delay, exacerbating a sensibility of crisis that seems almost phatic and addictive in character.⁴⁶ This is to say that the ossified genre of active shooter television is itself now a popular, breaking-news fixation. As a form of repetition compulsion, we should not be surprised that “addiction” is often linked to disavowal: these are both compulsive, and they are both defensive.

If our attention to the media coverage of targeted violence is addictive, we need to also say—in the same breath—that many claim the same about gun ownership. *These addictions are intimately related, two sides of a shared projection.* Popular discussions of gun violence frequently rehearse the adage that “America is addicted to guns,”⁴⁷ with “three-in-ten American adults” claiming to own a gun, “and another 11%” living with someone who does.⁴⁸ This so-called addiction is reflected in high gun homicide rates; in the United States, gun deaths are 25.2 times higher than in other “high-income” countries. Parts of Central and South America are worse.⁴⁹ Although media overexposure has helped to raise awareness and set agendas, public discussion tends to focus on issues of mental health or “common-sense” gun control, routinely missing the opportunity, like a broken record, to understand targeted violence as a systemic reaction.

Owing to a U.S. tendency to resign the responsibility of violence to individuals, we appear to have locked ourselves into the “erroneous assumption that prevention requires prediction.”⁵⁰ Of course, many preventative measures have been taken too, but my point is that our individualistic ideology leads to failures such as profiling: we know, for example, that weapons and whiteness are linked. But to-the-person profiling doesn’t help: Shooters tend to be white, male, and prone to aggression; however, this is an impressionist portrait of a rather large pond. There are, simply, “no reliable predictors” for mass shootings.⁵¹

Well, none at least if we narrowly focus on individual actors. Our public addiction to reruns of real-time catastrophe and individual responsibility, this cycle of control-freakism from left to right, might be better dubbed a “structural violence,”⁵² which Johan Galtung described as avoidable, non-personal violence experienced as social injustice, but obscured or hidden in cultural fantasies of the American spirit. Analyst Glen Slater elaborates: “when you look hard enough you come to see that the ethos of the American Dream has a built-in but well camouflaged structural violence, a series of dynamics that promote opportunity but create disenfranchisement.”⁵³ The observation resonates with Robert Merton’s argument over 60 years ago: U.S. culture stresses financial success without structural opportunity, leading to massive strains and the relief valve of criminal innovations and quick fixes.⁵⁴

What better represents the quick fix than a gun, a symbol of power and control, an object that functions as a route to mastery much like a transitional object, except the object isn’t transitional—it’s stuck!?!? The gun is jammed in culture and cannot be substituted. “The Swiss are armed to the teeth,” reports Helena Bachmann, but targeted violence there is rare, which is a point the National Rifle Association (NRA) likes to emphasize. But in the United States, and in no small part *because* of the NRA,⁵⁵ the gun persists as a constant object, something that rhetoricians term synecdoche, but which we can more generally describe as a fetish.⁵⁶ Of course, I hardly need to detail the fetishism of the gun; John Lennon did that already on the *White Album* in 1968. What I do want to stress here is the way in which the gun has become an object of play, a synecdoche celebrated first in childhood as a toy and later on screens as a great equalizer of power. Rhetorically speaking, the gun is a part that stands in for whole fantasies of Western expansionism and self-made men of action.⁵⁷

Consequently, gunplay is shorthand for a ubiquitous fantasy of leveling the playing field. Notably, gunplay is tied as much to the camera as it is to the bullet: There is the fame-seeking component I’ve already mentioned, which consists of circulation in multiple media, an aspect of targeted violence as a route to celebrity. If you’ve gone viral, *you’ve made it in America*. But there is an epistemic symmetry to gunplay and mass media: both are a kind of shooting that depend on what the late Paul Virilio described as a logic or “aesthetic of disappearance.”⁵⁸ A logic of disappearance is another way of describing motion and action: Unless something disappears from the scope or the frame, nothing happens, no one is moved. Reflection and thinking are perhaps better reserved for stilettos and still photography, which is a curious way to say that disappearance is the peek-a-boo of gunplay, an addiction to *action*.⁵⁹ Shoot first, think later.

Consider, for example, my state governor shooting off his mouth at a press conference shortly after the massacre at Santa Fe High School:

We also know, uh, information already, uh, that there, that the shooter has information contained in journals on his computer and cell phone, that, that, he said, that, uh, not only did he want to commit the shooting, but he wanted to commit suicide, uh, after the shooting. As you probably know, uh, he gave himself up, and admitted at the time that he didn’t have the courage, uh, to commit the suicide that he wanted to, uh, take his own life earlier.⁶⁰

Is the violence of or at this scene reducible to one troubled teen, when those who are most responsible for framing it evoke the fantasy of masculine resolve? That the trench-coat wearing shooter and others partake in the same

Columbine script should be obvious: Cowards don't shoot straight; they miss. Again, I repeat that playing dirty is not creative; it is a prefab game, and the rules must be ruthlessly enforced. Governor Abbott played along, as did Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who revived the national discussion for arming teachers.⁶¹ This is a rather uncreative solution that mistakes prevention with prediction, based not on research, but on Hollywood westerns.⁶²

And this point brings me back to the electoral politics with which I began, but now in a slightly different light. Many of us who study politics have been asking ourselves, in the wake of the 2016 election, how did Trump secure the presidency despite all the predictors and polling and conventional logic? One answer, of course, is that Trump put conventions—this is to say, both politics as usual and the RNC rally at Nuremberg—on amphetamines. But another is an electoral response to an ideological promise that dismantles the structural means to achieve that very same promise.

As many of you know, countless public figures, from Susan B. Anthony, to Malcolm X, to the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, have publicly decried this disjunction, each in their own way pointing out the perversion of trying to dream “American,” each in their own way pointing out how the restful dream for a few is a nightmare for everyone else. Some have suggested that the sentiment that people of color are prevented from dreaming was quelled during the Obama presidency, perpetuating what Jordan Peele terms the post-racial lie.⁶³ Some have argued that the unprecedented number of women running for office this year marks ours as the “Year of the Women,”⁶⁴ and yet we keep hearing the echoes of “#MeToo” everywhere at an increasing volume.⁶⁵ Regardless of your politics, the most recent national elections reflect a resurgent racism and misogyny, a kind of perverse and criminal innovation or demand to *blow it all up*—not just figuratively, but also literally.⁶⁶ This call for an explosion is not a revolution. It's an amplification of what we've had and what we've got.⁶⁷

In what sense has voting been reduced to quick-fix action? Is voting the outcome of a considered and reflective process? Is pulling the lever for Clinton or Trump or anyone akin to the control-freakism of shooting? It could be that electoral politics is no longer a liminal space of transition and play, a moment of pure contingency and “what if?” but rather a cruel game; it could be that voting obscures the violent structure underwriting it, that the Electoral College and voter suppression—both vestiges of anti-suffrage and slavery—give lie to the pipe dream of “liberty for all.”⁶⁸

Many have said that playing politics is war by other means.⁶⁹ Insofar as elections can result in the dismantling of welfare writ large, such as ending human services or separating families at the border,⁷⁰ or describing anyone of color as a criminal or animal,⁷¹ or refusing to provide enough aid to a devastated Puerto Rico,⁷² or supporting dictators and fascists who kill reporters,⁷³ or goading anti-Semitic shooting sprees,⁷⁴ or making fun of women who were sexually assaulted,⁷⁵ or trying to repeal health care coverage for those who need it,⁷⁶ or inspiring the rise of “nationalism” and Nazism,⁷⁷ or in responding to mass shootings by saying we need more guns, including armed teachers⁷⁸...in what sense can we say that electoral politics has become mass shooting by other means?



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NOTES

- ¹ My late advisor, **Robert L. Scott** (1928-2018), had a bumper sticker of this question on his car. At his memorial service, lapel buttons of this saying were given to attendees. I dedicate this lecture to R. L., as well as to Carroll Arnold, two luminaries renowned in the field for their playfulness and generosity. Although popularized by Jimmy Buffett, the popular, existential Hokey Pokey query predates the song. It's an appropriate summation of my answer to Lenin's question, which some readers may have at the end: *cultivate charity*.
- ² "NCA Convention is Open for Submissions." *National Communication Association*, February 7, 2008, 1 <https://www.natcom.org/nca-inside-out/nca-convention-central-open-submissions>.
- ³ Of course, insofar as the Electoral College is a vestige of slavery and a reminder that elites are fearful of demotic stupidity, one might argue that our elections have been perverted at least since 1804. So, I mean to reference the mood and tone of the 2016 convention, not the beliefs or events that framed them. For many of us, the mixed emotions of that time remain unsorted. See **Akhil Reed Amar**, *The Constitution Today: Timeless Lessons for Issues of our Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 327-357; and **Sanford Levinson**, *Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where Our Constitution Goes Wrong (And How We the People Can Correct It)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 79-122.
- ⁴ **Jean Piaget**, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. **G. Gettegno** and **F.M. Hodgson** (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962).
- ⁵ **D.W. Winnicott**, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 72-73.
- ⁶ **André Green**, *Play and Reflection in Donald Winnicott's Writings* (London: Karnac, 2005), 8.
- ⁷ . . . to press corps roasts of **Sarah Huckabee Sanders'** smoky eyes. See **Abby Ohlheiser** and **Emily Yahr**, "The Harshest Jokes from Michelle Wolf's Correspondents' Dinner Speech." *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2018/04/29/the-harshest-jokes-from-michelle-wolfs-correspondents-dinner-speech/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.76404328cc4e.
- ⁸ **Salman Akhtar**, *Matters of Life and Death: Psychoanalytic Reflections* (London: Karnac, 2011), 65-66. Nervous laughter probably ensued, of course! And whom among us would not identify with Winnicott? No doubt many of us have been censured for failing to write or teach about "communication!"
- ⁹ For example, see **Bill Pennington**, "Parents Behaving Badly: A Youth Sports Crisis Caught on Video," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/sports/referee-parents-abuse-videos.html>; and **Lauren Ezell**, "Timeline: The NFL's Concussion Crisis," *Frontline* (PBS), October 8, 2013, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sports/league-of-denial/timeline-the-nfls-concussion-crisis/>.
- ¹⁰ **Green**, *Play and Reflection*, 15-16.
- ¹¹ "The goals of the Play Space are to: (1) Cultivate innovation, creativity, and collaboration; (2) Generate fun, whimsy, and laughter; and, (3) Experiment with playful communication as a means for knowing, doing, and creating." **Kristen Blinne**, "NCA 2018 Call-Play Space Idea(s)." *CRTNET* (E-mail listserv for the National Communication Association), Post #16483, May 7, 2018, <https://lists.psu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?S1=crtnet>.
- ¹² I reference, of course, **E.L. James'** wildly successful, kinky bestseller, *Fifty Shades of Grey*." See **Barry Brummett**, **Joshua Gunn**, **Jon Hoffman**, and **Amy Young**, "NSFW: Experiencing Immanence or Transcendence Upon Hearing Gilbert Gottfried's Rendition of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the Postmodern Workplace, Or Liberatory Criminology." *Science Journal of Sociology & Anthropology* (2014), <http://www.sjpub.org/sjsa/sjsa-235.pdf>.

- 13 I reference a more recent turn to the “dark side of communication” in communication theory. For example, see **Brian H. Spitzberg** and **William R. Cupach**, Eds., *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 14 To use a ready-made—as opposed to self-made—example, I am more interested in understanding the games of our current president as an expression of a larger cultural system, not some scheming soul behind the green door (or curtain).
- 15 Tentatively titled *Political Perversion*, the book is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press.
- 16 Key and Peele, “Sexting Scandal.” *Comedy Central*, July 31, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMG_RGsysT4.
- 17 NBC News, “Rudy: Giuliani: ‘Truth Isn’t Truth,’” *Meet the Press*, August 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1jsZ7lgbtw>.
- 18 ABC News, “Milo Yiannopoulos Interview: No Regrets on Leslie Jones Attack, Part I.” *Nightline*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkrY6Ny7pMg>. Mr. Yiannopoulos’ apparent conviction in his omnipotence led to his firing by the “alt-right” Breitbart News Network and the cancellation of a lucrative book contract with Simon & Schuster, not because of his hate speech or patently racist and sexist remarks, but because he joked about one of the few cultural perversions that remains forbidden in Western culture: pedophilia. See **Rebecca Hersher**, “After Comments on Pedophilia, Breitbart Editor Milo Yiannopoulos Resigns.” *NPR*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/21/516473521/after-comments-on-pedophilia-breitbart-editor-milo-yiannopoulos-resigns>.
- 19 **Žižek** borrowed the term “symbolic efficiency” from the structural anthropologist **Claude Levi-Strauss**, who used the term to describe the way in which communities can communicate quickly because of common referents. See **Slavoj Žižek**, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 2008); 375-404; and **Jodi Dean**, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), esp. 4-9.
- 20 I more fully elaborate the decline of symbolic efficiency elsewhere: **Joshua Gunn**, “On Social Networking and Psychosis.” *Communication Theory* 28.1 (2018): 69-88.
- 21 **Gilles Deleuze** and **Félix Guattari**, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. **Robert Hurley**, **Mark Seem**, and **Helen R. Lane** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
- 22 In communication studies, a similar criticism was extended by **G.P. Morhmann** in respect to “fantasy theme criticism,” which he argued overlooked the Freudian insight that fantasies are often deceptive and should not be read at face value; see **G.P. Morhmann**, “An Essay on Fantasy Theme Criticism.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68.2 (1982): 109-132.
- 23 For a lucid explanation of this point, see **Charles Shepherdson**, *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 115-151.
- 24 Notably, Lacan is not so much interested in persons in the Oedipal model as he is (dis)positions—which is why he uses the language of structuralism. Psychoanalyst **Stephanie Swales** explains structures “indicate fundamentally different ways of solving the problems of alienation, separation from the primary caregiver, and of castration....” See **Stephanie S. Swales**, *Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiii.
- 25 This means that “the primary site where the subject is articulated is not in relation to the family but in relation to the whole economy of discourse that determines even the character of the family.” **Christian Lundberg**, *Lacan in Public: Psychoanalysis and the Science of Rhetoric* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 130.
- 26 Many of us are familiar with transitional objects, especially if we have been involved in raising children in some way: these objects are teddy bears or dolls or blankets—or in my case, a Kermit the Frog—made sleazy over time by encrusted saliva. *And don’t you dare wash them!* In youth, this transitional period of separation and alienation is not easy; a young person must learn that parents do not cease to exist when they disappear, a lesson taught by peek-a-boo, or what **Piaget** described as “object permanence.”

- 27 In her series of lectures titled *Public Things*, **Bonnie Honig** draws on Winnicott's theory of the transitional object to argue for the profound significance of shared, public objects as a kind of social "holding space." See **Bonnie Honig**, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); my thanks to **Barbara Biesecker** for pointing me to this remarkable study.
- 28 Well, sort of. In a more common sense, those made to witness a pervert's presumed transgressions are objectified, insofar as their humanness or capacity to relate is denied. I think, however, **Sergio Benvenuto** makes a compelling case that perverts demand others as subjects to witness them while denying them any sense of charity; see **Sergio Benvenuto**, "Perversion and Charity: An Ethical Approach." *Perversion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives/Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, eds. **Dany Nobus** and **Lisa Downing** (London: Karnac, 2006), 59-78.
- 29 Much of this research can be traced back to Freud and the case of "Little Hans," a boy who had a phobia of horses. Freud's therapeutic technique with adults depended on free association in speech, something children couldn't quite master. So, he discovered a child's playing with toys could be another way to help them verbalize by proxy. Freud's daughter, **Anna Freud**, as well as **Melanie Klein**, would later help to develop "play therapy" as a childhood technique, leading in turn to the insights of **Piaget** and **Vygotsky** on the crucial importance of play for cognitive development. See **Anna Freud**, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, revised ed. (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1966), esp. 83-91; **Melanie Klein**, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, trans. **Alix Strachey** (New York: The Free Press, 1975), esp. 16-34; **Jean Piaget**, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. **C. Gattegno** and **F. M. Hodgson** (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962); and **Lev S. Vygotsky**, "Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child," trans. **Nikolai Veresov** and **Myra Barrs**. *International Research in Early Childhood Education* 7.2 (2016): 3-25.
- 30 For example, see **Robert M. Fagen**, *Animal Play Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).
- 31 See, for example, **Margaret Gray Blanton** and **Smiley Blanton**, *Speech Training for Children: The Hygiene of Speech* (New York: The Century Company, 1919). **Smiley Blanton** would later become a psychoanalyst and undergo analysis with Freud himself. See **Smiley Blanton**, *Diary of My Analysis with Sigmund Freud* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1971). For reasons we do not have time to explore here, the field gradually moved away from the social scientific study of play and communication in the postwar period, and consequently, there's not a ton of research to review. I reference, however, the use of play therapy in the treatment of speech disorders, which disappeared in much of our literature as the speech sciences established their own labs and, eventually, departments. Although it is difficult to document, I suspect communication scholars also moved away from the study of children and play therapy techniques after news of **Wendell Johnson's** infamous "Monster Study" became known. I detail some of this history in **Joshua Gunn**, "Speech's Sanatorium," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101.1 (2015): 18-33.
- 32 **Richard Schechner** features play as a central component to performance studies in his popular textbook, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 89-122. There is some strong, although yet to be acknowledged, resonance between performance theory's interest in "the liminal norm" and **Winnicott's** theory of play; see in particular **Jon McKenzie**, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), esp. 93-94; and **Peggy Phelan**, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. 1-33. Links between play and performative writing are, of course, overdetermined; see **Michael S. Bowman**, "Killing Dillinger: A mystery." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20.4 (2000): 342-374; and **Della Pollock**, "Performing Writing," *The Ends of Performance*, eds. **Peggy Phalen** and **Jill Lane** (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 73-103; Also see **Michael J. Hyde** and **D. Kevin Sargent**, "The Performance of Play, the 'Great Poem,' and Ethics." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13 (1993): 122-138. In argumentation theory, play has been investigated by **Dale Hample** and his colleagues in respect to perceptions of playfulness and aggression in arguments. See **Dale Hample**, **Benjamin Warner**, and **Holly Norton**, "The Effects of Arguing Expectations and Predispositions on Perceptions of Argument Quality and Playfulness." *Argumentation & Advocacy* 43 (2006): 1-13; and **Dale Hample**, **B. Han**, and **D. Payne**, "The Aggressiveness of Playful Arguments." *Argumentation* 24 (2010): 405-421.
- 33 Also, much of this work builds on the influential theory of playing and games of **Johan Huizinga**. See **Johan Huizinga**, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016).

- 34 See **Robert Busching, Johnie J. Allen, and Craig A. Anderson**, "Violent Media Content and Effects." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (March 2016), <http://communication.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-1?print=pdf>.
- 35 The title of **Christopher Paul's** recently published book pretty much sums it up: *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
- 36 See **Jacques Lacan**, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, trans. **John Forrester** (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 220-226. The core of **Lacan's** remarks on perversion is located in *Book IV*, on the topic of object relations and "Freudian structures" in 1956-1957; this seminar has yet to be published in English. "Working" English translations by **L.V.A. Roche** and others are available for "private use" on the Internet; see **Patrick Valas'** website for more details: <https://www.valas.fr/>.
- 37 For elaborations, see **Bruce Fink**, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 165-202; **Swales**, *Perversion*; and **Paul Verhaeghe**, *On Being Normal and Other Disorders: A Manual for Clinical Psychodiagnostics*, trans. **Sigi Jottkandt** (New York: Other Press, 2004), 397-427.
- 38 **Sigmund Freud**, *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII*, trans. **James Strachey** (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), 135-172.
- 39 See **Tim Dean** and **Christopher Lane**, "Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis: An Introduction," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, eds. **Tim Dean** and **Christopher Lane** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3-42.
- 40 See **Sergio Benvenuto**, *What Are Perversions? Sexuality, Ethics, Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 2016), xv-xix; and **Verhaeghe**, *On Being Normal*, 307-402.
- 41 **Donald Trump**, "Donald Trump on Hillary Clinton and the Second Amendment," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DE_uCKedvcU.
- 42 ABC News, "10 Victims Dead in Texas School Shooting, Explosives Found, Official Say," *Nightline*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8UX7pKBppc>.
- 43 See **Bonnie Berkowitz, Denise Lu, and Chris Alcantara**, "The Terrible Numbers that Grow with Each Mass Shooting." *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/mass-shootings-in-america>; and **Eve Watling**, "America's Gun Violence Epidemic: Mass Shootings Getting Deadlier." *Newsweek*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/americas-gun-violence-epidemic-mass-shootings-getting-deadlier-1146879>.
- 44 **Bradley A. Serber**, "Reaction Rhetorics: Targeted Violence and Public Security" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2016), 7-10.
- 45 **Brad J. Bushman**, "Narcissism, Fame Seeking, and Mass Shootings." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62.2 (2018): 229-241.
- 46 For an early analysis of this affective effect as "apocalyptic," see **Joshua Gunn** and **David E. Beard**, "On the Apocalyptic Columbine." *Southern Communication Journal* 68.3 (2003): 198-216.
- 47 **Glen Slater**, "A Mythology of Bullets." *Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture* 81 (2009), <https://www.depthinsights.com/pdfs/MythologyOfBullets-GlenSlater-SpringJournalV81-PsychologyOfViolence.pdf>, 1-2; for example, see **Tim Dickinson**, "The Gun Industry's Deadly Addiction." *Rolling Stone* (March 14, 2013), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-gun-industrys-deadly-addiction-99443/>.
- 48 "The Demographics of Gun Ownership." *Pew Research Center*, June 22, 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/06/22/the-demographics-of-gun-ownership/>.
- 49 **Kara Fox**, "How US Gun Culture Compares with the World in Five Charts." *CNN*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/03/americas/us-gun-statistics/index.html>.
- 50 **Dewey Cornell** and **Pooja Datta**, "Threat Assessment and Violence Prevention." *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, ed. **Laura C. Wilson** (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 359.
- 51 **Benjamin Winegard** and **Christopher J. Ferguson**, "The Development of Rampage Shooters: Myths and Uncertainty in the Search for Causes," *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, ed. **Laura C. Wilson** (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 60.

- 52 Slater, "A Mythology of Bullets," 6.
- 53 Slater, "A Mythology of Bullets," 6.
- 54 Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3.5 (1938): 672-682; also see James Alan Fox and Jack Levin, "Explaining Mass Shootings: Types, Patterns, and Theories." *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, ed. Laura C. Wilson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 47-48.
- 55 See Laura J. Collins, "The Second Amendment as Demanding Subject: Figuring the Marginalized Subject in Demands for an Unbridled Second Amendment." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17.4 (2014): 737-756.
- 56 For an elaboration of fetish as synecdoche, see Hartmut Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), esp. 309-313.
- 57 Slater puts this chillingly well: "The power of this fantasy is at the root of the addictive attraction of guns. When you hear from childhood on that you live in 'the land of opportunity,' that you are 'special,' and that you can 'be all you can be,' or you simply see this self aggrandizement all around, then someone or something comes along and clips your wings, the ability to reach for a gun is like having a god-like sense of agency in your back pocket." Slater, "A Mythology of Bullets," 8.
- 58 See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Verso, 2009), esp. 15-39.
- 59 My argument here is what Barry Brummett would term "homology criticism." For an excellent reading of killing imagery and weaponry, see Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Homologies: Form, Culture, Experience* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 126-158.
- 60 Greg Abbott, "Texas Gov. Greg Abbott Delivers Remarks on Santa Fe School Shooting." *PBS News Hour*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYg3rlNjfw>.
- 61 Erica L. Green, "Betsy DeVos Eyes Federal Education Grants to Put Guns in Schools." *The New York Times*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/us/politics/devos-guns-in-schools.html>.
- 62 Or novels like *The Open Square*, which Rosa Eberly suggests was part of the 60s zeitgeist that fostered Charles Whitman, the "Texas Tower Sniper." See Rosa A. Eberly, *Towers of Rhetoric: Memory and Reinvention* (Online: intermezzo, 2018), esp. <http://intermezzo.enculturation.net/05-eberly/eberly-ch2.html>.
- 63 Rebecca Keegan, "Jordan Peele on the 'Post-Racial Lie' that Inspired *Get Out*." *Vanity Fair*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/jordan-peeel-get-out-screening>.
- 64 "It's Not the 'Year of the Woman.' It's the 'Year of the Women.'" *CNN.com*, November 4, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/03/opinions/midterm-elections-year-of-woman-roundup/index.html>.
- 65 For an overview of the "#MeToo" movement, see KT Hawbaker, "#MeToo: A Timeline of Events." *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208.htmlstory.html>.
- 66 The remarks of one Florida voter sum it up well: "I believe [Trump] is a force for positive. I don't think we needed just a nice, normal politician. I think our country was in such a state that we needed a wrecking ball to go into Washington and wreck it." See Judy Woodruff, "How Florida Voters are Thinking Ahead of Election Day." *PBS News Hour*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-florida-voters-are-thinking-ahead-of-election-day>. Also see Luciana Lopez and Michelle Conlin, "Fed Up With Washington, Trump's 'Deplorables' Shake Up the Elite." *Reuters*, November 6, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-voters/fed-up-with-washington-trumps-deplorables-shake-up-the-elite-idUSKBN1341AB>.
- 67 In other words, Trump makes transparent what was already underwriting the U.S. political establishment, a point underscored by his failure to "drain the swamp." See Conor Friedersdorf, "Trump Has Filled, Not Drained, the Swamp." *The New Atlantic*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/09/meet-the-new-swamp/540540/>.
- 68 See Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying our Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018); George C. Edwards III, *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Kamala Kelkar, "Electoral College is 'Vestige' of Slavery, Say Come Constitutional Scholars." *PBS News Hour*, November 8, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/electoral-college-slavery-constitution>.

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- ⁷⁰ **Ginger Thompson**, “Families Still Being Separated at Border—Months After Trump’s ‘Zero Tolerance’ Policy Reversed.” *USA Today*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/27/donald-trump-zero-tolerance-policy-border-migrants-families-separated-immigration/2132426002/>.
- ⁷¹ **David Leonhardt** and **Ian Prasad Philbrick**, “Donald Trump’s Racism: The Definitive List.” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/15/opinion/leonhardt-trump-racist.html>.
- ⁷² **Brian Resnick** and **Eliza Barclay**, “What Every American Needs to Know about Puerto Rico’s Hurricane Disaster.” *Vox*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/9/26/16365994/hurricane-maria-2017-puerto-rico-san-juan-humanitarian-disaster-electricity-fuel-flights-facts>.
- ⁷³ **Mark Hannah**, “Trump’s Support for Saudi Arabia Contradicts CIA, Subverts National Security and Puts Millions of Lives at Risk.” *NBC News*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-s-support-saudi-arabia-contradicts-cia-subverts-national-security-ncna938591>; also see **David A. Graham**, “Trump’s Effusive, Unsettling Flattery of Kim Jong Un.” *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/trumps-effusive-unsettling-flattery-of-kim-jong-un/562619/>.
- ⁷⁴ **David Cray**, “Before Pittsburg Shooting, Anti-Semitic Incidents Were on the Rise.” *PBS News Hour*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/before-pittsburgh-shooting-anti-semitic-incidents-were-on-the-rise>.
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- ⁷⁷ **Mallory Simon** and **Sara Sidner**, “Trump Says He’s Not a Racist. That’s Not How White Nationalists See It.” *CNN.com*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/12/politics/white-supremacists-cheer-midterms-trump/index.html>; and **Avesha Rascoe**, “A Year After Charlottesville, Not Much Has Changed for Trump.” *NPR Weekend Edition Saturday*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/11/637665414/a-year-after-charlottesville-not-much-has-changed-for-trump>.
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