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REACTION RHETORICS: TARGETED VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC SECURITY

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how members of various publics respond to “targeted violence,” a broad term that encompasses a variety of attacks in which an individual, pair, or small group attacks as many people as possible in a public place. Building upon Albert O. Hirschman’s *The Rhetoric of Reaction* and contemporary versions of classical stasis theory, the project develops an anatomy of arguments that people have made in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, and the Isla Vista attack (#YesAllWomen). The chapter on the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting advances the concept of a rhetorical void, which describes the space into which arguments about guns, mental illness, and school security disappear after conversations about them reach impasses. The chapter on the Boston Marathon bombing focuses on a metaphorical version of heterotopic ossification, a painful medical condition caused by traumatic injury, in which a bone grows and calcifies in a place other than where it should be. The chapter on the Isla Vista attack explores two ideas—viral emptiness and empty virality—both of which refer to the role that social media play in shaping how their users understand and respond to targeted violence. As a whole, this project attempts to sever the link between the causes of targeted violence, which may not be knowable, and efforts to prevent it, which may not be achievable. By doing so, it explores alternatives to both succumbing to an all-consuming paranoia and burying our heads in the sand.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Tucson, Aurora, Oak Creek, Newtown, Boston, Isla Vista, Charleston, Lafayette, Roseburg, Colorado Springs, San Bernardino, Orlando. Over the last five years, various communities in the United States have experienced targeted violence in schools, movie theaters, places of worship, and elsewhere. Although targeted violence also has happened outside the United States—such as the Utøya Island attack in Norway and the Bataclan theatre attack in Paris—the United States has experienced an outbreak of such incidents in the last few years. The list of attacks has become so long that the details associated with them have started to blur together, even for those who follow them closely.

By studying some of these incidents and the public deliberation around them, this project contributes to ongoing conversations about the relationship between rhetoric and violence. Exploring both the rhetoric of violence and the violence of rhetoric, scholars concerned with the relationship between rhetoric and violence have asked difficult questions about where they overlap, where they diverge, and how they exert mutual influence upon one another.[1] One way that this relationship manifests is through the pairing of symbolic and material violence. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections,* Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between what he calls “subjective” and “objective” violence, with “subjective” violence resembling material violence and “objective” violence resembling symbolic and systemic violence.[2] He argues that those who study and try to prevent violence focus too much on subjective violence because it manifests more overtly and too little on objective violence, which operates more covertly.

Writing in part about targeted violence in *The Politics of Resentment,* Jeremy Engels also takes up Žižek's work on violence and takes a similar position about objective violence.[3] Whereas Engels focuses much of his genealogy on systemic forces that lead to targeted violence, however, this project mostly analyzes how people react to it after it occurs. Like Žižek, I am concerned with the "urgent injunctions . . . to *act now*" that typically accompany subjective violence,[4] but I disagree with his claim that scholars should "resist the fascination of subjective violence" in order to focus on less obvious, more systemic issues.[5] Consequently, this project seeks to complement Žižek's and Engels's work by examining how responses to targeted violence constitute publics and counterpublics and shape symbolic and material responses to traumatic events.

In order to study how people have described and reacted to incidents of targeted violence, I turn to three case studies. In particular, I explore the rhetoric surrounding the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, and the 2014 Isla Vista attack. Analysis of these three cases helps to explain how public reactions to targeted violence operate in different settings. Although each chapter deals primarily with a discrete incident, the individual chapters and the project as a whole present central problematics that apply to other cases as well.

Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of using case studies as a method, I follow Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson's efforts to build "more localized, issue-oriented, and explicitly fallibilistic" claims rather than grand metanarratives about how targeted violence functions in all scenarios or limited coherent claims that apply to only individual cases.[6] Following Fraser and Nicholson's lead, Rosa Eberly asserts that "contingent, medium-sized, practice-based, and probabilistic accounts of knowledge . . .

allow for a ground-up deliberative democratization of knowledge rather than a top-down epistemological tyranny."[7] In my use of case studies, I seek not to find a single, overarching explanatory mechanism but rather to reflect upon the insights that these cases generate and to explore similarities and differences in how people have talked about them.

To develop my case studies, I analyze the arguments that people have made in a variety of books, journals, newspapers, government documents, videos, speeches, and other texts. Through analysis of these texts, I explore how members of various publics have framed these events for members of their own and other publics. After doing so, I then explore how they have deliberated about what to do about them. Tacking back and forth between theory and criticism and comparison and contrast, my purpose is to develop a nuanced understanding of public reactions to targeted violence.

The first case study I explore is the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza shot his mother, twenty elementary school students, six adults, and himself. As the second-largest U.S. school shooting in terms of casualties—more than Columbine but fewer than Virginia Tech—and with a majority of the victims young children, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting stands out as a particularly gruesome event. Because children symbolize innocence and dreams for a better future, this shooting constituted a particularly egregious violation.

Following the shooting, the United States engaged in heated debates about gun policies, mental illness, and school security. Rather than leading to clear, consistent outcomes, however, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting produced radically different policy proposals for how to make schools and other public places safer. Gun control advocates called for weapons bans and gun-free zones, while gun rights advocates called for arming teachers or increasing the number of armed guards in schools.[8] Those concerned about Adam Lanza's mental health turned to mental health professionals to detect who among those with mental illness are likely to engage in targeted violence, but those same mental health professionals argued that they "have to be frank in acknowledging that mental health experts do little better than chance in predicting who will be violent."[9] Meanwhile, government organizations that had been working on making schools safer since Columbine found that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting exposed all kinds of vulnerabilities in school security measures that are difficult, if not impossible to fix. Insofar as public deliberation led to policy changes, it mostly led to local and/or incremental changes while leaving big picture concerns unresolved. Consequently, this chapter asks what happens when reactions to targeted violence fall into cyclical patterns of emergence and dissipation.

The second case I investigate is the Boston Marathon bombing. On April 15, 2013, two pressure cooker bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, initially killing three people and wounding over 260.[10] After several days, police identified two brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, as the primary suspects. The search for the two lasted four days and put the city on lockdown, eventually ending in Tamerlan's death during a shoot-out and Dzhokhar's capture. Because of the brothers' Chechen origin, media reports initially insinuated that the attacks might have been related to separatist attempts to declare independence from Russia. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev later claimed that the bombings were retaliation for US strikes on Muslim lands. His trial, which occurred in two phases, resulted in a death penalty verdict, which his lawyers promptly appealed.

The Boston Marathon bombing raises several concerns about targeted violence after 9/11. First, the city lockdown that followed the attacks put the city and the nation on edge in a highly sensationalized police chase. Second, if the Tsarnaev brothers were, as Dzhokhar claimed, motivated by a desire to retaliate for U.S. strikes on Muslim lands, then this is the one of my three cases that fits most squarely into the so-called “War on Terror.” In my chapter on the bombing, I explore how public responses to incidents that the U.S. government and media label as “terrorism” compare and contrast to other acts of targeted violence. Specifically, I investigate how the framing of the bombing as a terrorist act complicated Tamerlan’s burial and Dzhokhar’s trial in terms of fairness, due process, and sentencing.

The third case I analyze is the Isla Vista attack. On May 23, 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen others in a killing spree at multiple sites in Isla Vista, California. Shortly before his attack, Rodger distributed a lengthy manifesto full of misogyny and racism and uploaded a YouTube video explaining that he was taking “retribution” for women not showing an interest in him and leaving him a 22-year-old virgin.[11] Like the Boston Marathon bombing but unlike the Sandy Hook shooting, the Isla Vista attack raised concerns about ideologically motivated targeted violence.

A striking feature of the conversations about the Isla Vista attack is that many of them directly involved the internet. Although this attack was neither the first nor the last incident of targeted violence to garner attention online, the digital aspects of the attack and reactions to it raised questions about the role that the internet plays in either contributing to or providing a forum for preventing targeted violence. First, the controversy around what to do with Rodger’s manifesto and YouTube videos makes for a challenging case in media ethics, internet censorship, and the spreading of ideas that may lead to additional violence. Second, social media responses to the attack call into question the efficacy of digital activism. In this chapter, I explore whether digital media practices facilitate the spread of targeted violence and if these practices complicate efforts to prevent it.

In its discussion of these cases, this project has five primary goals. The first goal is to justify a generic shift from narrower categories like “school shootings” and “terrorist attacks” to the broader category of “targeted violence” in order to engage in a more comprehensive study of related phenomena. The second is to explore the publics theory and public memory contributions to the study of targeted violence as a public problem. The third is to develop an anatomy of different types of reaction rhetorics that occur in response to targeted violence. The fourth is to call into question the common instincts that many people have to search for causality and prevention after targeted violence occurs. Finally, the fifth is to search for alternative coping mechanisms beyond ignoring the possibility of targeted violence completely or exaggerating its probability to the point of obsession. Insofar as rhetoric is concerned with the role of language, argumentation, and “that which can be otherwise,” it is uniquely situated to explore how people deliberate about targeted violence and alternative ways in which they might do so.[12]

Making the Generic Shift to "Targeted Violence"

In their early writing about genre, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson use the metaphor of a "constellation" to suggest that genres help critics "see the movements of a group of individual stars and enable us to understand the interrelated forces in celestial space."[13] In other words, they help critics see idiosyncrasies, patterns, and the relationships between them simultaneously. Although Campbell and Jamieson were speaking more of categories of speech texts rather than events, their metaphor is useful to this project insofar as it concerns how critics construct boundaries around their objects of study. Critics of genre criticism warned that it too easily devolved into "cookie cutter" criticism and suffered from problems related to the "Linnaean blues" of creating a taxonomy of objects that are difficult to categorize.[14] By following Fraser and Nicholson and Eberly's search for "fallibilistic" and "probabilistic" conclusions rather than master narratives about reactions to targeted violence, this project tries to avoid the top-down, one-size-fits-all kind of approach that the "cookie cutter" critique implies. Meanwhile, the problem of the "Linnaean blues" in other narrower categories like "terrorism" and "school shootings" is precisely why I make the case for a shift to the broader term "targeted violence."

What exactly is "targeted violence," and why do I use this term? In U.S. government documents, the term "targeted violence" originated in a 1995 joint Secret Service and Department of Justice document written by psychologists and government officials working in the area of threat assessment, which attempted to distinguish between situations in which potentially violent individuals were "making" a threat or "posing" a threat.[15] In their original writing about the subject, Robert A. Fein, Bryan Vossequil, and

Gwen A. Holden defined targeted violence as a situation "in which an identifiable (or potentially identifiable) perpetrator poses (or may pose) a threat of violence to a particular individual or group."[16] Despite its ambiguities, especially those in parentheses above, the definition created a new way for threat assessment professionals to think about threats. In the 1990s, threat assessment professionals and law enforcement officials had grown concerned about the resources wasted in response to investigating bomb threats and other threats that turned out to be baseless. At the same time, they also worried about a boy-who-cried-wolf scenario in which officials did not take a threat seriously when they should have. Because of this tension, threat assessment professionals looked for patterns that would help them distinguish between credible and non-credible threats to individual and public safety.

This distinction became all the more important after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 and the flood of bomb threats that followed it. Although the original concept was broad enough to include crimes like stalking, rape, kidnappings, and assassinations, targeted violence took on a new meaning after the Columbine shooting and the 9/11 attacks. In the aftermath of events like these, "targeted violence" has come to refer to incidents in which an individual, pair, or small group plans to kill and injure a large number of people in a public space.[17] More specifically, it has come to focus on one of Fein, Vossequil, and Holden's secondary definitions of targeted violence: "violent attacks occurring in settings . . . where unsuspecting victims believed themselves to be safe."[18] In other words, threat assessment professionals did away with the individual crimes that were part of the original definition in order to focus on the more collective ones.

Although those who study targeted violence might benefit from focusing on narrower categories like “terrorist attacks” and “school shootings” as different kinds of events, studies that treat these kinds of attacks as separate from one another also come with some drawbacks. Labeling certain attacks as “terrorism” depends upon an elusive definition that often depends upon who gets to define who a “terrorist” is and what constitutes “terrorism.” Moreover, “terrorism” implies an ideological intent that may not be present in the case of mental illness. Meanwhile, focusing on school shootings as such emphasizes the place where an incident occurs and the weapon of choice used to carry it out. However, the Franklin Regional High School stabbings, which took place in a school but did not involve guns, and the San Bernardino shooting, which involved guns but did not take place in a school, resemble school shootings closely enough to warrant analysis in the same category. For that matter, if what unites these kinds of events is neither the weapon of choice or the location but rather that the attacks occur in presumably safe spaces, then events like the Germanwings plane crash, the Boston Marathon bombing, and the restaurant machete attack in Columbus, Ohio, which neither took place in schools nor involved guns, also belong in the same category.

A generic shift to the broader category of targeted violence changes the focus from the place, weapon, or motive to the process by which individuals plan to commit violence in public places. This shift allows those who study these attacks to see broader patterns across them. Moreover, it allows them to make different claims about why and how targeted violence happens and what, if anything, politicians, law enforcement officials, and citizens can do to prevent them. Although the term “targeted violence” may not be the best phrase to describe these events, for now, it seems to be the least bad option.

Studying Targeted Violence as a Public Problem

Within this framework of targeted violence, this project investigates how members of various publics deliberate about these attacks and what to do about them. Politicians, journalists, mental health professionals, local community members, and those who have not experienced targeted violence respond to these kinds of attacks in many different ways. Following Žižek and Engels's concern with "objective" violence, it makes sense to begin by treating targeted violence as a public problem, even if this project deals more heavily with "subjective" violence and responses to it. By treating violence as a public problem, I seek to understand how members of different publics deliberate about it after it occurs. To do so, I turn to questions in publics theory and public memory.

An important area of concern in publics theory has to do with the privatization of public problems, specifically those around mental health and affect. In their work on the rhetorics of mental health and therapy, Ann Cvetkovich and Dana Cloud discuss the downsides of therapeutic practices that accompany neoliberalism's privatization of public problems. In her work on depression, Cvetkovich argues that "depression can be seen as a category that manages and medicalizes the affects associated with keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it."[19] She goes on to say that "what gets called depression in the domestic sphere is one affective register of these social problems and one that often keeps people silent, weary, and too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness"[20] Similarly, in *Control and Consolation in American Politics*, Cloud argues that rhetorics of therapy "encourage citizens to perceive political issues, conflicts, and inequities as personal failures subject to personal amelioration" rather than public concerns that transcend the individual psyche.[21] When mental health professionals privatize public problems, it places the burden on individuals to take their mental health into their own hands rather than to engage in collective action that might resolve the root causes of their struggles.

Although their work does not address targeted violence, the conditions that Cvetkovich and Cloud describe have major implications for the mental health component of targeted violence. First, privatization places the burden of seeking out mental health services on individuals, and many of them do not seek it out. Some do not think they need it, some cannot afford it, and some do not want the stigma associated with it. Second, privatization sends a message to those who struggle with mental illness that individual problems require individual solutions, and these individual solutions may include harm against oneself or others.

Unlike Cvetkovich and Cloud, Engels does take up the relationship between neoliberal privatization and targeted violence. Like the two of them, Engels argues that the privatization of public problems results in misplaced emotions and that this, in turn, produces "a context ripe for symbolic and material violence."[22] Within this context, citizens who might otherwise direct their anger at "economic exploitation, political alienation, and a legitimate sense of victimhood" instead direct it "into a hatred of our neighbors and fellow citizens."[23] He argues that "when it is a social system, not an individual, that wrongs us, it is much harder to target our resentment."[24] Under neoliberalism, economic woes manifest not as public concerns that citizens direct at the economic systems that exploit them, but rather as private problems that result in misdirected resentment against other citizens. Occasionally, this misdirected resentment erupts in targeted violence.

Thus, one important component of public deliberation about targeted violence has to do with privacy and misdirected emotions. Another component has to do with how they discuss and engage in public memory. Here, Kendall Phillips's distinction between "the memory of publics" and "the publicness of memory" is helpful.[25] When it comes to the memory of publics, important questions arise over who gets to determine how to remember acts of targeted violence. When it comes to the publicness of memory, however, issues arise over whether to hold ceremonies and build memorials, when and where they should be, and what they should consist of. Phillips is careful to suggest that these frames are not mutually exclusive, and in the context of targeted violence, both of them matter.

Related to these two frames, two other important aspects of public memory regarding targeted violence are time and space. In terms of time and memory, Jenny Edkins contrasts what she calls "trauma time" to linear time.[26] Trauma time entails a temporal circling back to a traumatic event, often in an unpredictable way. Trauma time and linear time thus exist in tension with one another. "Trauma time," she says, "has to be excluded for linearity to be convincing, but it cannot be put to one side: it always intrudes, it cannot be completely forgotten."[27] In the context of targeted violence, trauma time leaves victims of attacks vulnerable to retraumatization. It may play out in predictable times, like anniversaries, and it may play out at less predictable times, like when another incident occurs.

Meanwhile, in terms of space, communities affected by targeted violence often construct memorials to commemorate the attack. In *Memorial Mania*, Erika Doss describes an almost unhealthy obsession in the United States with building memorials. She explores the ways in which public affect—specifically grief, fear, gratitude, shame, and anger—produces some peculiar memorialization practices and argues that “today’s growing numbers of memorials represent heightened anxieties about who and what should be remembered in America.”[28] Throughout her analysis, Doss discusses the challenge of resisting public demands for memorials, especially when such demands have strong connections to people’s emotions, desires, and identities.

By treating public memory as a subset of responses to targeted violence, this project asks a number of questions: (1) How do different publics remember the events and individuals associated with targeted violence and with what consequences? (2) For whom and by whom is such memory crafted? (3) For what purposes do publics remember and forget such events? (4) What possibilities do such memory practices open and foreclose? Like publics theory, public memory plays a large but complicated role in public responses to targeted violence. By studying targeted violence as a public problem, this project investigates how people of different backgrounds with different interests and purposes have deliberated—often in the context of public memory—about targeted violence.

Developing an Anatomy of Reaction Rhetorics

In order to study how people have deliberated across differences about targeted violence, this project develops an anatomy of responses to targeted violence. This anatomy first examines how members of various publics frame and deliberate about targeted violence itself through what I call action. Second, it explores how these people argue about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate responses to targeted violence through what I call reaction and overreaction, underreaction, and inaction. I use the plural "rhetorics" here to connote that each category I describe—action, reaction, overreaction, underreaction, and inaction—has its own rhetoric. When I use the phrase "reaction rhetorics," I refer to all of these latter rhetorics simultaneously.

This anatomy of reaction rhetorics builds off of previous work by Albert O. Hirschman. In *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, Hirschman attempted to delineate particular subgenres of reaction—which more closely resemble what I call overreaction—in the context of proposed economic policy changes.[29] More specifically, he provides three primary categories of reaction: perversity, futility, and jeopardy. The first, perversity, suggests that a well-intentioned policy will have unintended negative consequences. The second, futility, suggests that a proposed policy will be insufficient insofar as it fails to address larger structural issues. The third, jeopardy, suggests that the proposed ends toward which a policy aims do not justify the means.[30] Hirschman argues that those who oppose new policies employ these arguments in order to shut down discussion and thwart change.

Placing Hirschman's work in another context, James Arnt Aune adds a fourth category, the argument from radical evil, to Hirschman's original three rhetorics of reaction.[31] The argument from radical evil fits well into the context of targeted violence because individuals frequently invoke it to describe perpetrators and those who resemble or sympathize with them when other causes might be to blame. Questioning whether evil exists and, if so, whether humans can identify it with any degree of certainty, Aune argues that “the argument from evil . . . can be remarkably powerful in mobilizing people for action, yet it is extremely corrosive of democratic politics.”[32] Similarly, Rosa Eberly argues that “claims about ‘evil’ shut down deliberation” because “it is nearly impossible to argue with claims about ‘evil.’”[33] Like perversity, futility, and jeopardy, the argument from radical “evil” often silences opposing viewpoints, despite the ontological and epistemological problems that underlie it and the possibility of alternative explanations for catastrophic events.

Hirschman, Aune, and Eberly generally agree that individuals and groups use rhetorics of reaction in order to shut down discourse, yet they each have slightly different ways of understanding how rhetorics of reaction shut discourse down. Hirschman theorizes the rhetoric of reaction as a fiscally conservative argument against liberal economic changes. Aune sees it as a morally conservative argument against both the “enemy” other and liberals whose postmodern refusal to acknowledge Evil is perceived as a sign of weakness. Eberly sees it as an obfuscation of other causal factors and ensuing policy solutions. Given Aune and Eberly’s contributions, it makes sense to import the rhetoric of reaction into conversations about targeted violence because “evil” is a common yet questionable pejorative term that politicians, journalists, and citizens often use to label the perpetrators of targeted violence.

By expanding this conversation from the rhetoric of economics to the rhetoric of violence, this project explores how arguments about the presumed motives of perpetrators of targeted violence—whether ideology, mental illness, or some other factor—open up or shut down deliberation. Hirschman's work provides a useful but incomplete framework for exploring how reaction rhetorics operate in the context of targeted violence. In studying reaction rhetorics, a major goal of this project is to expand Hirschman, Aune, and Eberly's work in order to create a broader anatomy of reaction rhetorics with the hope of fostering a deeper understanding of public deliberation about violence.

Action Rhetorics

To build an anatomy of reaction rhetorics first requires rhetoricians to ask what these reactions are reacting to. I define action as an anthropogenic (that is, human-caused) act of material public violence that threatens a sense of public safety. Action rhetorics, then, refer to how people talk about action. Individual incidents of targeted violence are not as straightforward as one might expect. Action implies not a stable, objective, agreed-upon "reality" but rather, in line with Richard Vatz's contention that "meaning" is not discovered in situations, but *created* by rhetors," a social construction.[34] How various publics describe the perpetrator, victim, context, motives, and consequences often shapes how they understand and respond to the event itself. For instance, fighting over whether guns, mental illness, a lack of school security, or a culture of violence played the biggest role in leading to a school shooting already sets the agenda for discussions about how best to prevent additional incidents, assuming that they all can be prevented.

Prior to causality and prevention, however, there is a recurring challenge after targeted violence to get people to agree on what exactly happened. More precisely, there is often a challenge to get people to agree *that* anything happened. A recurring phenomenon, perhaps even an emerging genre, after incidents of targeted violence consists of conspiracy theories about the events. At the time of writing, simple Google searches for “Sandy Hook hoax,” “Boston Marathon hoax,” and “Isla Vista hoax” return roughly 500,000, 300,000, and 25,000 hits, respectively. Meanwhile, searches for conspiracy theorist claims about other incidents, such as the shootings at Umpqua Community College, Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, and the Inland Medical Center in San Bernardino return similar numbers. For perspective, a search for “Holocaust hoax” returns approximately 600,000 results.[35] Quantitative measures of Google hits might not be the best method of determining influence, but these numbers are pretty staggering, given that that the earliest of these events took place only a little over three years ago and that few people seem to remember the Isla Vista shooting by name.

This project is not about conspiracy rhetoric per se, but because of the prevalence of conspiracy rhetoric that follows acts of targeted violence, I treat it as a component of action rhetorics in the Sandy Hook and Boston chapters.[36] Much of the conspiracy rhetoric surrounding targeted violence resonates well with what Richard Hofstader calls “the paranoid style” and with Charles Stewart’s claims about the grounding of conspiracy theory in fears of government overreach.[37] Many of the targeted violence conspiracy theories from the last few years blame the Obama administration and/or members of the media for fabricating events in order to push rapid and sweeping gun control measures, regardless of whether such measures pass. When conspiracy theorists make this kind of argument, the action rhetoric that says that an event never took place becomes the warrant for calling the policies justified in the name of that event an overreaction.

Recent incidents of targeted violence seem to be particularly prone to conspiracy rhetoric because of the internet, which many scholars of conspiracy rhetoric have recognized as a catalyst in the spread of conspiracy theories.[38] The internet makes it easy for conspiracy theorists to generate, advocate, and circulate their claims and difficult for their critics to regulate, moderate, and invalidate them. This combination of mistrust in the government and tools that facilitate spreading conspiracy theories that feed into this mistrust make it easy to question basic details about incidents of targeted violence.

In the context of action, conspiracy rhetoric undermines a shared sense of whether and how an event happened. In discussing conspiracy rhetoric, I am not particularly interested in trying to "prove" or "disprove" what actually happened in any of my case studies, as these kinds of claims are, by and large, unfalsifiable.[39] Law enforcement officials and journalists often share only limited details about targeted violence. When they do, they sometimes get these details wrong, especially in the early reports that race to be the first to report on an incident in the twenty-four-hour news cycle. Even though some evidence may be missing, unclear, or contradictory, there does seem to be enough corroborating evidence to make the judgment that these events actually happened. If the details of each event were clearer, more comprehensive, fully accessible, and incapable of manipulation, then perhaps action would not be rhetorical. For many reasons, however, it is difficult to imagine a world in which this would be possible or even desirable. Moreover, even if action were more stable, people still can and would disagree about how to interpret it and what to do about it. Rather than trying to argue about what did or did not happen, I am more interested in what conspiracy rhetorics *do* for those who do or do not believe them.

Conspiracy rhetoric is not the only feature of rhetorics of action, nor is it the only controversial one. For those who accept the more standard narratives, there are other complications as well. Aside from disagreements about what happened in any given case, different people will argue over what an event means, what to call it, and why it matters. Even if different people were to agree upon the details of what happened, they will continue to disagree upon the interpretation of those details. Thus, action has a rhetoric of its own, and it is important to recognize its uncertainties before delving into reactions.

Reaction Rhetorics

With action defined this way, reaction and overreaction constitute two types of responses to targeted violence. Those who argue for and against policy solutions or other responses to targeted violence may not use the words “reaction” and “overreaction” explicitly, but they do make arguments that fit within these generic categories implicitly. Reaction, as I use the term, implies a presumed “fitting response” to the situation, not unlike what Lloyd Bitzer describes in “The Rhetorical Situation.”[40] Targeted violence often creates an exigence for a rhetorical response. Reaction implies a perceived appropriate response to this exigence. Overreaction refers to a perceived disproportionate or otherwise inappropriate response to the original action, often used to justify maintaining the status quo.

Furthermore, I suggest that a more developed anatomy of reaction rhetorics also ought to investigate rhetorics of underreaction and inaction as possible counterparts to claims of overreaction. On its face, underreaction resembles what Hirschman calls futility in that both see a problem as a symptom of a larger issue rather than a cause in and of itself. However, whereas futility often shuts down policy debate by claiming that a proposed policy is insufficient, underreaction could open it up for further discussion of a better or more comprehensive policy. Additionally, in response to claims of perversity, futility, and jeopardy, policymakers must also consider the consequences—positive or negative, intended or unintended—of inaction. Insofar as they might constitute alternative responses to perversity, futility, and jeopardy, these additional reactive categories warrant exploration.

Each of these categories is concerned with what is appropriate, and the traumatic nature of targeted violence heightens the sense of urgency for politicians, law enforcement officials, and others to find appropriate responses when an incident occurs. However, determining in advance what is or is not appropriate is nearly impossible. In his article "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," John Poulakos argued that *kairos* and *to prepon*, the Greek terms for a sense of an "opportune moment" and "the appropriate" are "rhetorical motifs whose essence cannot be apprehended strictly cognitively and whose application cannot be learnt mechanically."[41] Similarly, Michael Leff argues that the Roman term *decorum* "is incapable of being formulated in terms of abstract, artistic precepts" and "has no substantive stability across situations."[42] In other words, "the" appropriate reaction to targeted violence, may not exist, or at the very least, those who claim to know it cannot be sure that they have found it. As publics typically use reaction rhetorics to analogize from the present in order to predict the future, they cannot be certain of what constitutes appropriateness or inappropriateness.

For this reason, grounding the line between reaction and overreaction in the "fitting response" notion of Bitzer's rhetorical situation oversimplifies matters. After all, Bitzer is not without his critics. Richard Vatz's critique that "no situation can have a nature independent of the perceptions of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it" makes a good starting place for understanding action rhetorics and their relationship to reaction rhetorics because assessments of what is appropriate depends heavily upon who constructs a rhetorical situation and how.[43] Rhetorical situations are not objective phenomena that exist in the "real" world, but rather social constructions that frame the observations, experiences, and attitudes toward the world in particular ways. Action does take place in the real world, but human understanding of it is limited by how much information about it is accessible, how clear that information is, who has the authority to interpret it, and what lenses they use to do so.

But there are additional factors to consider with the rhetorical situation as well. Barbara Biesecker's concern that Bitzer's version of the rhetorical situation oversimplifies both the nature of audience identity and the power of rhetoric makes room for a more fluid, diachronic view of the interactions among speaker, audience, and situations.[44] Building upon critiques from Biesecker and others, Jenny Edbauer's work on rhetorical ecologies is particularly salient for this project because it factors in public, affective, networked, interactive, and evolving elements that shape and reshape the rhetorical situation.[45] The exigence of action is multifaceted and unstable, and the responses to it often rely on the pre-existing but also malleable affects, ideologies, narratives, and relationships of the person who makes the response. A "fitting response" for a member of one public may seem completely rational to others within that public and completely irrational to members of other publics.

Furthermore, the range of reaction rhetorics to an event may have nothing to do with policy but instead with emotional responses to trauma. In some cases, a eulogy, an apology, or other modes of epideictic speech might be considered to be a sufficient reaction. For instance, Campbell and Jamieson discuss the healing power of speeches like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Reagan's *Challenger* speech.[46] When these speeches go well, they can have great emotional and unifying power without requiring a change in policy. At the same time, these speeches also risk being considered underreactions, and when they go poorly, they can add further insult to injury. Nevertheless, national eulogies demonstrate that discussions about appropriateness extend beyond policy debates.

In addition to national eulogies, public memory practices also might be considered sufficient reactions in some cases. In lieu of a policy change, providing outlets for public memory can be a powerful way to respond to trauma. Done well, memorials, anniversary ceremonies, and other public commemorations of events can help communities honor the victims, process their grief, and learn from the past. Done poorly, they however, they can retraumatize both individuals and communities, exploit people's suffering, and provide false hope. Like national eulogies, public memory risks being considered an underreaction to targeted violence. By ending each chapter with a section on public memory, this project explores the variance in memory practices and what they might mean for communities affected by targeted violence.

Like action rhetorics, reaction rhetorics vary considerably. If action rhetorics are themselves contested, then the variance within reaction rhetorics should not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, the terrain of reaction rhetorics can be difficult to navigate. By developing a broader anatomy of reaction rhetorics, this project analyzes how reactions to targeted violence enable and constrain certain possibilities for public deliberation.

Using Stasis Theory to Question the Rhetorics of Causality and Prevention

Much of what is at stake in the rhetorics of action and reaction has to do with causality and prevention. That is, action rhetorics often try to identify what caused a previous incident of targeted violence and reaction rhetorics often try to prevent future ones. One way to understand the connection between causality and prevention is to turn to stasis theory. In ancient Greek courts, stasis theory helped plaintiffs, defendants, and logographers distinguish between four different kinds of arguments: questions of fact (which, I following Corbett and Eberly, will call "fact or conjecture"), definition, value, and policy.[47] George Kennedy and Edward P.J. Corbett and Rosa Eberly suggest that the stases were "arguably inchoate" in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and later introduced by Hermagoras of Temnos.[48] Although Hermagoras's work is lost, the stases reappeared later in the works of Hermogenes, Cicero, and Quintilian.[49] In more contemporary settings, the stases help people classify and clarify what exactly they are arguing about.

To the original four stases, Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor added a separate stasis that deals with questions of cause (which I, following Corbett and Eberly, will call "causes and consequences"). They contend that causality is not exactly a new addition, but rather one that "the ancients would have subsumed . . . under definition, for in the courtroom the notion of motive would help define actions."[50] Their addition of a causal stasis separates out a subject's nature and what people call it from what caused it to happen or what effects it might have. With Fahnestock and Secor's addition, there are five stases. The stasis of fact or conjecture deals with a subject's nature. In narratives, it often includes the basics of what did or did not happen in a given case. The stasis of definition deals with what we call things. The stasis of causes and consequences deals with cause-and-effect relationships. The stasis of value deals with what whether something is good or bad, ethical or unethical, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, and other evaluative judgments. Finally, the stasis of policy deals with what we should do about something.

Aside from what each stasis does, it is important to understand that the stases are closely interconnected. What happens at one stasis rarely stays at that stasis.[51] For instance, in the abortion debate, different answers to the question "At what point does life begin?" (fact or conjecture) often shape answers to whether abortion constitutes "murder" (definition), what consequences might ensue from allowing, restricting, or banning abortion (causes and consequences), whether abortion is good or bad for individuals or for society (value), or what policies, if any, a society should enact regarding abortion (policy).

When it comes to targeted violence, action rhetorics deal mostly with the stases of fact or conjecture, definition, and causes and consequences. They seek to determine what happened, what to call it, and what caused it. Reaction rhetorics, on the other hand, mostly deal with the stases of value and policy. They ask what would constitute an appropriate response and what we should do about targeted violence. The dominant feature of action rhetorics is causality, and the dominant feature of reaction rhetorics is prevention. When targeted violence occurs, it activates human desires to find causal explanations and to implement preventative measures in order to restore lost senses of security and justice. If only someone or something could prevent the next attack, the logic goes, then victims of the attack would not have died in vain.

Consequently, linking causality and prevention is a common feature of rhetoric that follows targeted violence. In their discussion of national eulogies, Campbell and Jamieson explain that when presidents deliver these kinds of speeches, they typically do four things: they (1) "adopt a personal tone," (2) "make sense of the event . . . by addressing such questions as why the tragedy happened and what meaning it has for the nation," (3) "transform the symbols of destruction into symbols of resurrection and renewal," and (4) explain "how the president and the government will ensure that the tragedy will not be repeated."[52] In other words, to provide a sense of continuity, presidents often link rhetorics of causality and prevention in order to generate a sense of faith that life will go on.

However, there are several complications that undermine a clear sense of what causes targeted violence. One of these complications is the anthropogenic element of targeted violence. Leading research on what leads individuals to commit acts of public violence suggests that it is difficult, if not impossible, for experts to determine in advance who will commit targeted violence. After the Columbine High School shooting, government organizations sought to identify a profile of the kind of individual who might engage in targeted violence. Although the idea sounded promising to government officials, law enforcement officials, and citizens, the research consistently has found that no profile exists.[53] The search for the types of people who might commit targeted violence yielded criteria far too broad (e.g. that more than 90% of school shooters are male) to avoid the possibility of catching non-threatening individuals in a wide net along with threatening ones.[54] The FBI and Secret Service have consistently held that “there is no accurate or useful ‘profile’ of shooters.”[55] An FBI document even goes so far as to say that “trying to draw up a catalogue or ‘checklist’ of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal.”[56]

Thus, the search for a profile also raised the issue of the unintended consequences that the idea of a profile might produce. The lack of a clear, coherent profile does not prevent some individuals from acting as if one existed and using vague criteria to label others as potential threats. Despite the lack of such a profile, the anthropogenic nature of targeted violence makes it easy for politicians, journalists, and citizens to label individuals as potential threats and to stigmatize, scapegoat, quarantine, or otherwise mistreat them as such. Moreover, those who resemble, relate to, or are related to perpetrators of targeted violence often face guilt by association. Although the efforts to create a clear profile might provide a sense of comfort and security, this sense of security often depends on false or shaky premises and can also lead to the unwarranted surveillance and mistreatment of individuals.

If government organizations cannot determine in advance who will commit targeted violence, then another possible route to causality might lie in how targeted violence happens. If comparing demographic profiles of attackers did not yield much useful information, then perhaps comparing situations might. Others who have studied targeted violence have tried this approach, but, in doing so, they have found that targeted violence resists generalization. One factor of this resistance is that, despite the spike in attacks in the last few years, there still are not many cases from which to generalize. In his *New Yorker* interview with Peter Lanza, Andrew Solomon explains that “the problem with generalities about mass murderers is that the sample size is tiny, and most die before they can be examined. Almost half of all mass murderers commit suicide in the act, and many others are killed by police.”[57] Even if the perpetrators of these acts were to survive, they might not be willing to describe their intent, and even if they did, there would be no way to verify that their statements were sincere, trustworthy, or generalizable.

Moreover, the limited number of cases that do exist differ significantly from one another. Previous shootings have demonstrated that perpetrators of targeted violence develop a variety of adaptive strategies. For instance, in the Westside Middle School shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the shooters pulled a fire alarm, hid in the woods, and then opened fire upon their victims. At Virginia Tech, when Seung-Hui Cho entered Norris Hall, he locked the exterior doors to the building, which prevented police officers from entering and victims from leaving the building. In Norway, Anders Breivik used a car bomb to distract police from the island where he then shot and killed nearly seventy people and injured dozens of others. Just as schools and law enforcement officials adapt their strategies based on previous shootings, attackers also change their strategies. The adaptive nature of targeted violence raises concerns about law enforcement inadvertently training the next generation of school shooters to better protect themselves and to make their attacks deadlier.

These findings suggest that causality is complex and perhaps unknowable. Because the stases are interconnected, uncertainties with causality also imply uncertainty within prevention. After all, preventative measures depend on having something clear to prevent and effective ways to prevent it. Previous incidents of targeted violence hint at some possible ways to reduce the risk of future ones, but they still involve some guesswork, require tremendous political will, and even if implemented may not guarantee safety. Gun control measures and the involuntary hospitalization of the mentally ill often meet resistance. Queues and metal detectors might work in small places with low traffic, but they take time with large groups of people. Finding weapons guides and manifestoes on the internet is difficult and raises concerns about free speech.[58] Moreover, preventing their dissemination is nearly impossible. Although each of these controls might make a difference, collectively, they are tough to enact.

Moreover, policies justified in the name of safety and security are often costly in terms of time, money, resources, and liberties, and they cannot always guarantee the very security they seek to provide. Physical barriers cost money to build and take time to funnel people through, and people regularly find ways to get past or around them. Large, open spaces with heavy traffic not only make good targets but are also nearly impossible to secure. Well-trained armed individuals, whether police officers or citizens trying to play hero, misread situations and misfire under pressure.[59] Weapons bans are difficult to pass, let alone enforce, and they might simply push weapons underground, either via traditional black markets or via new technology like 3D printing.[60] Ultimately, however, the biggest problem lies not in security measures themselves but in human creativity. Determined individuals will seek and find weak spots in any security measure, and because no system is foolproof, yesterday’s innovations often become today’s vulnerabilities.

In short, efforts to restore a collective sense of security in the aftermath of targeted violence often fall short of their goals. These events by nature seem to defy simple, unproblematic, and wholly effective solutions. Nevertheless, under conditions of fear and uncertainty, individuals and communities often rush to draft policies intended to deliver quick results. Although this rush to policy makes sense insofar as human beings are concerned with their own safety, it often blinds them to unintended consequences. Seeking to foster collective and pragmatic reasoning about difficult issues, this project asks how public deliberation about targeted violence can account for the possibilities that causality may not be knowable and prevention may not be achievable.

Searching for Alternatives to Ignorance and Obsession

The uncertainties embedded within the rhetorics of causality and prevention are not exactly comforting to those who are concerned about targeted violence. Nevertheless, they are important to wrestle with because failing to do so provides a false sense of security. This project takes seriously the synecdochic threat that targeted violence poses to individuals in presumably safe spaces. In other words, it explores the indeterminate space between the local community part directly affected by targeted violence and the broader community whole indirectly affected by it.

The fifth goal for this project, then, is to search for alternatives between ignoring the problem of targeted violence completely or obsessing over its ever-present possibility. To borrow the title from a nationally circulating documentary produced by Penn State's Applied Research Lab, the project grapples with the hypothetical "can" in the notion that "It Can Happen Here."[61] In the context of targeted violence, this "can" carries a lot of weight. In the move from part to whole or from there to here, the ambivalence of “can,” or worse yet, “could,” complicates this decision-making by focusing on hypotheticals. It closely resembles the ambiguity behind Fein, Vossequil, and Holden’s criteria of “potentially identifiable” perpetrators who “may pose a threat.” Targeted violence can happen anywhere at any time, but that does not mean that it will or must. Targeted violence is a highly traumatic phenomenon. However, despite its relative frequency in recent years, it remains low in probability. Keeping impact and probability in mind, this project searches for alternatives to succumbing to an all-consuming paranoia, on the one hand, or burying our heads in the sand, on the other.

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Chapter 2: The Rhetorical Void after the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

In February 2015, the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission appointed by Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy released its final report. Despite the Commission's attempt to synthesize its findings into coherent recommendations, the report unreflexively described two incommensurate positions. The first position imagined an optimistic, normative space in which parents should not have to worry about their children's safety when they send them off to school in the morning. The opening paragraph of the report declared that "there is one place other than a home in which every person, whether a child or adult, should feel absolutely safe and secure from the threat of physical harm: *school*."[1] Later, the report declared that "regardless of socioeconomic, ethnic, or gender divisions, households across the state and across the nation seek and deserve safety and security for their families."[2] This optimistic position suggested that those who wished to prevent targeted violence could learn from what happened at Sandy Hook and prevent it from happening again.

The second position described a more pessimistic, descriptive space in which the threat of targeted violence constituted a real and ever-present possibility, even if the probability of any given act of targeted violence remained low. "Although no community wants to contemplate another such tragedy on the horizon," the Commission postulated, "Connecticut and the nation must proceed in the knowledge that crisis events, whatever form they may take, may befall our communities at any time."[3] Between the descriptive and the normative, government agencies, law enforcement officials, politicians, school administrators, and others have tried to eliminate, or at least reduce, the threat of targeted violence. Yet the threat continues in spite of their efforts because perpetrators of targeted violence adapt their behavior and evade detection.

This chapter explores the tension between these optimistic and pessimistic positions. The optimistic position hinges upon the rhetorics of causality and prevention. The overwhelming responses following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting consisted of promises to learn from this shooting in order to prevent the next one. In his national eulogy on the day of the shooting, President Obama declared that “we’re going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics.”[4] Speaking at an interfaith prayer vigil two days later, Obama remarked, “we will be told that the causes of such violence are complex, and that is true . . . but that can’t be an excuse for inaction.”[5] Similarly, the non-profit organization Sandy Hook Promise, which was founded by parents of children lost in the shooting, declared that its mission was to “prevent gun-related deaths due to crime, suicide and accidental discharge so that no other parent experiences the senseless, horrific loss of their child.”[6] Seeking to restore lost senses of hope, normality, and justice after moments of rupture, rhetorics of causality and prevention promise that such events will not repeat themselves.

Yet what happens when the intimations of certainty behind the rhetorics of causality and prevention belie the material and symbolic obstacles that run counter to this promise? What happens when these rhetorics, which promise predictability, depend upon the unpredictable? To grapple with these questions, this chapter explores action rhetorics around causality and reaction rhetorics around prevention. Despite the logic suggesting that determining causality will lead to prevention, action rhetorics after the Sandy Hook

Elementary School shooting call into question what happened in Newtown, what to call the event, and what caused it to happen. Insofar as they address causal mechanisms, action rhetorics around the shooting point to guns, mental illness, and school security, but the exact role that each of these factors played in the shooting remains unknown and likely unknowable. Despite identifying some starting places, major questions about causality remain unclear.

If prevention depends upon causality, then the lack of a clear cause also suggests a lack of clear preventative measures. Even with more clarity, however, fixing the issues around guns, mental illness, and school security is difficult for both political and practical reasons. As Obama conceded, the factors that contribute to targeted violence are stubborn, multifaceted political issues. Recognizing the stubbornness of these factors, others have expressed related concerns that these issues might continue to remain unsolved. For instance, in an op-ed for the *Baltimore Sun*, journalist Leonard Pitts, Jr. argued that the United States has seen what, by his account, should have been many "'tipping points' where guns are concerned," including the shooting of Representative Gabby Giffords and several others in Tucson, the *Dark Knight Rises* shooting in Aurora, and the Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown.[7] Nevertheless, Pitts echoed the sentiment expressed by fellow journalist Dan Hodges that "in retrospect, Sandy Hook marked the end of the US gun control debate. Once America decided killing children was bearable, it was over."[8]

Taking these journalists' concerns seriously, the reaction rhetorics portion of this chapter asks what happens when deliberation about single issues, whether gun policy, mental health, school security, or other factors of targeted violence, reaches impasses or dead ends. When these issues do not get resolved, they allow the problem as a whole to continue as long as its individual parts remain relatively unchanged. Reaction rhetorics after the Sandy Hook shooting indicate a rhetorical void in the search for causality and prevention. A rhetorical void is the space into which a larger conversation about a major issue disappears when the individual conversations that sustain it drop out one by one as they remain unresolved. The process by which these conversations appear, disappear, and periodically reappear only to disappear again happens regularly with the rhetorics of causality and prevention following targeted violence. By placing these conversations in this space, however, my purpose is not to undermine the work that they do or to imply that they are hopeless and futile endeavors, but rather to destabilize them as the dominant rhetorics that follow targeted violence in order to make room for other equally, if not more, important conversations. Facing the rhetorical void is undoubtedly discomfiting. However, acknowledging it makes room for other important conversations that, in the previous quests for causality prevention that this project attempts to eschew, have not yet received much attention.

Action Rhetorics about the Sandy Hook Shooting

Because of its focus on the "facts of the case," action seems like it should be fairly straightforward. As a description of what happened, narratives told via firsthand and journalistic accounts try to establish, at the stasis of fact or conjecture, an agreed-upon account of what exactly transpired in a given case. A common version of the Sandy Hook narrative often includes the following details: at various points in his life, mental health professionals had diagnosed Adam Lanza with autism, sensory integration disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.[9] Peter and Nancy Lanza divorced in 2009, and Adam Lanza had cut off contact with his father, brother, and uncle in 2010. Lanza completed the last few years of his high school education through a combination of being on “homebound status”[10] and taking courses at Western Connecticut State University. Between August 2009 and December 2012, Lanza conducted extensive research on mass shootings, played online first-person shooter games, participated in gun enthusiast forums, and edited Wikipedia entries on several mass shootings under the pseudonym Kaynbred. Before the shooting, he had spent months in his bedroom with garbage bags over the windows and communicating solely via e-mail with his mother.[11] Nancy Lanza owned the guns that her son used during the shooting, and she often took Adam to the shooting range as a way of bonding with him. Nancy Lanza left for a three-day trip to New Hampshire in the few days leading up to the shooting and left Adam home alone. Then, on the morning of December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza shot his mother and proceeded to Sandy Hook Elementary School, where he shot his way through the front door, killed twenty children and six adults, and then took his own life.

Despite the plausibility of this narrative, establishing a factual record of what occurred is not nearly as easy as one might expect. Corbett and Eberly warn that claims at the stasis of fact or conjecture “are among the most contentious and fraught kinds of claims externally.”[12] This is often the case because the other stases regularly depend upon factual and conjectural questions to supply data and warrants for their claims. In descriptions of the Sandy Hook shooting, action rhetorics are not straightforward. For starters, a group of conspiracy theorists questioned whether the shooting ever took place.

Looking at inconsistencies and anomalies in news media reports, the seemingly abnormal behavior of some of the victims' parents, and restricted access to the building, conspiracy theorists questioned whether the Sandy Hook shooting happened at all and, if so, whether news audiences could trust what the media had to say about it. Early media reports on the shooting inadvertently helped to feed conspiracy theories: journalists got many of the details wrong as they competed to get the details out first. For example, many early news reports misidentified the shooter as Adam's brother, Ryan Lanza, and mistakenly claimed that Nancy Lanza was a kindergarten teacher at Sandy Hook.[13] The confusion over the shooter's identity seems to be that Adam had been carrying his brother's ID at the time of the shooting.[14] The confusion over Nancy's identity seems to have originated from an unreliable witness interview on the day of the shooting.[15]

Nevertheless, conspiracy theorists viewed these inconsistencies as evidence that the Obama administration fabricated the shooting in order to push through rapid gun control legislation. As one source put it, "regardless of where one stands on the Second Amendment and gun control, it is not unreasonable to suggest the Obama administration's complicity or direct oversight of an incident that has in very short order sparked a national debate on the very topic—and not coincidentally remains a key piece of Obama's political platform."[16] From the standpoint of conspiracy theorists, action rhetorics coming from the media were at best naïve and at worst outright lies and fabrications to support a political agenda. From the standpoint of many members of the media, perhaps most notably *CNN*'s Anderson Cooper, conspiracy action rhetorics were at best delusional and at worst insensitive and retraumatizing to victims' families.[17]

Presuming that the shooting actually happened and in a manner similar to what the media ultimately have described, other issues remain in the action rhetorics about the shooting. For example, at the stasis of definition, another part of action has to do with what to call the event. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Newtown resident MaryAnn Murtha calls for the media, politicians, and citizens not to refer to the shooting as "Newtown" or "Sandy Hook," but instead by the date "12/14," in a shorthand similar to referring to the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as "9/11."[18] Despite the common practice of referring to mass shootings by their locations (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Tucson, Fort Hood, etc.), she posits that "having your town's name synonymous with an evil act does not aid the healing process; in fact, it adds to the pain and casts shadows."[19] To give an additional rationale for referring to the event by date rather than location, she explains that "12/14" serves as a reminder of "the number of beautiful children and talented educators taken from us that day: 12 + 14 = 26. If we call that day 12/14, we shift the focus from where these horrors happened to when they happened and how many lives were lost. And sadly, we know this could have happened anywhere."[20] Murtha's attempt to redefine the event by time or numbers rather than location suggests a link between place and memory, which, once severed, can help members of a local community cope with what happened without the need to leave the place behind.

Murtha's redefinition of the event may not have caught on in national discussions, but it appears to have stuck in Newtown. Reporting on the first anniversary of the shooting, *New York Times* reporter Michael Wilson noted several euphemisms—including Murtha's—that Newtown residents used regularly while referring to the event.

"A new local vocabulary has grown around the day," he observed. "No one refers to the shooting by that word, but rather, as 12/14, the way one might say 9/11. The phrase 'She's a mom,' is understood to mean the mother of a victim. . . . The six women killed in the school that day are often called 'the guardians.'"[21] In addition to the stasis of fact or conjecture—the "what happened here?"—these euphemisms indicate an important supplemental action rhetoric at the stasis of definition, the "what should we call it?" The local responses to this question show that each individual language choice, however small it may seem, can make a difference.[22] By resisting the media's use of "Newtown," "Sandy Hook," "shooting," and "victims," at least some Newtown residents have chosen to redefine their own action rhetoric in order to reconstruct their memory of the event in a way that might alleviate some of their pain.

Despite these local efforts to redefine the language around the shooting, changing the national vocabulary has proven more difficult. Carolyn Mears, the mother of two children who survived the Columbine High School shooting, recalls a similar desire from Littleton residents to speak about what had happened in non-spatial terms. In Littleton, she explains, "we didn't want our community and school to become synonymous with mass shootings and tragedy but we didn't have a choice, and unfortunately, neither will Newtown."[23] Nevertheless, the practice of allowing local residents to come up with alternative names for the event, the victims, or other details can aid the healing process, even if these practices remain only local.

Meanwhile, Murtha's attempt to shift the conversation from the place to the time and the number of victims raises two related questions about how to discuss the event: what constitutes a "victim," and based on the answer to that definition, how many victims were there? The second question seems like it should have a straightforward, countable, noncontroversial answer. Murtha’s equation says there were twenty-six. Her number includes the students and staff shot by Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Her number is also perhaps the most common response to the question. In his book about the shooting, journalist Matthew Lysiak recalls the “hundreds of makeshift memorials” with “twenty-six angels, twenty-six flags, [and] twenty-six votive candles.”[24] In the same sentence in which he describes Newtown’s makeshift memorials, however, he proposes another possible response to the question, adding that “only one [memorial] could be found that mentioned Nancy Lanza.”[25] After all, Adam Lanza also shot her on 12/14.

Lysiak’s main discussion of Nancy’s memory appears in a chapter entitled “The Trial of Nancy Lanza,” which, along with the concluding chapter of the book, asks tough questions that suspend Nancy Lanza in a purgatorial space between victim and accomplice. Lysiak’s conclusion asks a lot of “what ifs,” acknowledging that:

> most of the “what ifs” fall on Nancy Lanza, who is no longer around to defend herself: What if Nancy Lanza, who knew her son was mentally ill and had seen his collection of violent images, hadn’t stockpiled her home with weapons? What if she hadn’t left her mentally ill son at home for weeks at a time? . . . What if Nancy Lanza had chosen a different hobby for her mentally ill son?[26]

At the same time, many of his earlier descriptions of Nancy Lanza suggest an overwhelmed but determined mother frustrated with mental health professionals, school administrators, and her ex-husband, none of whom could answer her questions or provide the help and care that she and her son needed. With nowhere else to turn, it seems that she took matters into her own hands in the best way she knew how. The choices she made along the way led many people in Newtown and elsewhere to see her more as an accomplice than a victim, and yet, given the lack of support she received, others have framed her as a victim of broken mental health and special education systems.

The question "who counts as a victim?" thus complicates the total number of victims because different reports answer that question in different ways. The dedication section of Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report lists twenty-six victims.[27] The Office of the Child Advocate report, from which the Advisory Commission drew heavily, lists twenty-seven, including Nancy Lanza.[28] Andrew Solomon's *New Yorker* piece, which describes his interview with Peter Lanza, takes the victim number discussion one step further. "Depending on whom you ask," Solomon writes, "there were twenty-six, twenty-seven, or twenty-eight victims in Newtown. It's twenty-six if you count only those who were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School; twenty-seven if you include Nancy Lanza; twenty-eight if you judge Adam's suicide a loss."[29] Of course, individuals will continue to disagree about whether to include Nancy or Adam as victims, and some might even argue that fighting over how many victims were killed is rather insignificant in the big picture of how the nation should talk about and remember the event; yet, choosing to include or not to include Nancy and Adam frames later discussions of guns, mental illness, and parenting in particular ways.

Regardless of whether one counts Nancy and Adam as victims, the questions that action rhetorics raise about their respective roles in the shooting and how those roles might have been otherwise are many. Why did Nancy make the choices that she did? Could she have intervened earlier or in different ways? Could others have helped her in more or better ways? What about Adam? What drove him to commit such an act? Two of the primary government reports on the shooting wrestle questions of culpability, causality, and inevitability. In its assessment of Adam Lanza's educational and mental health history, the Office of the Child Advocate report expresses that:

> while we describe the predisposing factors and compounding stresses in [Adam Lanza's] life, we do not conclude that they add up to an inevitable arc leading to mass murder. There is no way to adequately explain why [Adam Lanza] was obsessed with mass shootings and how or why he came to act on this obsession.
>
> In the end, only he, and he alone bears responsibility for this monstrous act.[30]

Similarly, the Advisory Commission laments that "with the shooter and the person closest to him—his mother—also deceased on December 14, 2012, much remains unknown about the state of his mind and his mental health in the months leading up to the shootings."[31] In instances of targeted violence, prevention rhetorics depend heavily upon intent and causality. Insofar as causality remains unclear, unknowable, and perhaps ungeneralizable, prevention is limited in terms of what it can accomplish.

Deliberating about Guns, Mental Health, and School Security

Despite lingering questions about what happened in Newtown and what caused it to happen, many people tried to learn from the incident and to infer how they might prevent similar occurrences in the future. The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission looked at three of the most common ideas that emerged after the shooting. More specifically, Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy tasked the Commission with investigating the roles that guns, mental illness, and school security played in the shooting. The Commission's investigation into each of these subjects led to proposals to solve, or at least mitigate, these complex problems. At the same time, the Commission's deliberations about each of these subjects arrived at impasses, as did similar deliberations from politicians, mental health professionals, and government agencies. Although deliberations about each of these topics contained some promising ideas, none showed signs of solving the problems entirely in the near future. As a result, in local and national conversations, arguments about each topic emerged, circled around each other, and faded into the background as each remained unsolved and as other news events moved into the foreground.

Since the shooting at Sandy Hook, this pattern of emergence and dissipation has recurred after other incidents of targeted violence. To analyze why and how this pattern occurs, I explore the impasses around each of these issues. However, because this pattern focuses heavily on causality and prevention, I later turn my attention to other non-preventative subjects, including controversies over space, distribution of money, goods, and services, efforts to help the town cope with loss and trauma, and public memory.

Symbolic and Material Obstacles to Preventing Gun Violence in the United States

Of the three subjects that Malloy identified, guns appear to have received the most treatment in public address responses to the shooting from politicians, lobbyists, and media sources. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama lamented that "in the two months since Newtown, more than a thousand birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries have been stolen from our lives by a bullet from a gun."[32] Even though the vast majority of these cases did not result from mass shootings, the point is not lost. Obama goes on to list the Sandy Hook shooting and other recent mass shootings individually, arguing that "Gabby Giffords deserves a vote. The families in Newtown deserve a vote. The families of Aurora deserve a vote. The families of Oak Creek and Tucson and Blacksburg, and the countless other communities ripped open by gun violence—they deserve a simple vote."[33] Months after the shooting, Congress voted on an assault weapons ban and a call for universal background checks. Despite testimony from Sandy Hook victims' parents, the Senate voted down both measures.

At the same time that Obama, his administration, and others called for gun control, gun rights advocates called for more guns. A week after the shooting, NRA Vice President Wayne LaPierre called upon Congress "to appropriate whatever is necessary to put armed police officers in every school."[34] Extending the classic NRA argument that "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," LaPierre argued that "the only way to stop a monster from killing our kids is to be personally involved and invested in a plan of absolute protection."[35] Placing the logic of an assault weapons ban up against LaPierre's logic of more guns indicates that both gun control and gun rights advocates seek a level playing field but with opposite conclusions about how to bring it about: fewer guns or more guns.

Rather than pushing the nation as a whole in one direction or another, as victims' parents had hoped and conspiracy theorists had feared, the shooting polarized the nation. Lysiak reports that "during the first six months, five states tightened gun laws . . . [while] fifteen states have loosened them."[36] Focusing on weapons bans, background checks, and magazine limits, states like Connecticut and New York sought to solve the problem of mass shootings by trying to keep guns away from "bad" people. Meanwhile, by mid-2014, South Dakota and eight other states passed laws permitting armed teachers, suggesting a move to put more guns in the hands of "good" people.[37] Of course, following Aune and Eberly's concerns about the rhetorics of "evil," who constitutes a "good" and "bad" person with a gun is not always clear, stable, or knowable.

Regardless of where one stands on the issue of guns, some startling facts about the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School produce evidence for both sides. Gun rights advocates argue that many gun control laws would not have prevented the shooting at Sandy Hook. LaPierre contends that labeling Sandy Hook, or any school or location, as a gun-free zone signals to "every insane killer in America that schools are their safest place to inflict maximum mayhem with minimum risk."[38] For school shooters, many who plan to die in the act, a law on the books or a sign in the window will not prevent them from bringing guns into a building. Meanwhile, Lysiak argues that "stronger gun laws would not have stopped Adam Lanza from walking into Sandy Hook Elementary School" because the guns he used were purchased legally by his mother, and "under Connecticut's current legislation, it was already illegal for Adam, at the age of twenty, to own a firearm."[39] Background checks and gun-free zones alone cannot prevent school shootings or other kinds of targeted violence.

Meanwhile, gun control advocates argue that limiting assault weapons can have a significant impact. In late 2014, victims' families filed a lawsuit against the Bushmaster rifle manufacturer and Camfour distributor for "negligent entrustment," essentially arguing that the makers and sellers of the gun share some responsibility with Adam Lanza for the people killed by their product. The lawsuit alleges that "the AR-15 was specifically engineered for the U.S. military to meet the needs of changing warfare. The weapon was not designed for home defense or hunting. This weapon was designed to efficiently kill other human beings in combat."[40] The efficiency of weapons in Sandy

Hook suggests that fewer casualties will result from limitations on weapons. At Sandy Hook, Adam Lanza fired 154 rounds in about five minutes.[41] In Tucson, Jared Lee Loughner "sprayed over 30 bullets into the crowd" in only 15 seconds.[42] Recognizing the efficiency that such weapons provide, Newtown resident Mary Ann Jacob remarked, "Make no mistake. If there was a police officer in our building that day, he would be dead. Adam Lanza did not knock on the door and ask for permission to come in. He shot his way through the door barely seconds after he got out of his car."[43] A single police officer or armed teacher with a concealed handgun likely will not stop a shooter armed with one or more assault rifles, but banning such weapons or at least limiting their efficiency might limit the frequency, duration, or casualty and injury counts of mass shootings.

Even laws geared toward these ends face obstacles, however. Not only do they face political opposition from the gun lobby, but they also face the problem of what to do with the estimated 300 million guns already in circulation in the United States and the possibility of a developing black market.[44] Moreover, a focus on school shootings as shootings limits attention toward guns as the only possible weapon of choice. A focus on targeted violence as the broader genre of which shootings are only a subset expands attention toward alternative means that attackers could use to achieve similar ends. Not only are guns politically divisive, but with information about how to make other kinds of weapons and materials for those weapons widely available on the internet, they may not be the only weapons that schools have to worry about. Although reforms to gun laws might make a difference in terms of the number and severity of school shootings, people on both sides of the gun debate disagree about which laws to pass, and the symbolic and material obstacles to preventing gun violence are many.

The Promises and Perils of Focusing on Mental Illness

Recognizing the challenges of gun policy changes in the United States, some have chosen to focus their attention on another common factor in school shootings: mental illness. "There is little comfort to be taken from any explanation following such an event," the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report says, "but somehow it seems easier to believe that the source of such horror lies in an individual's pathology, in a condition that could be cured or contained if adequately identified, than in more indeterminate values and practices that shape our entire culture."[45] Despite this observation, "mental illness" as an umbrella term conflates many diagnoses into a general category, and psychologists explain that even specific diagnoses within that category are weak predictors of violence. An article published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in response to Sandy Hook and other similar events acknowledges that "best estimates show that only 4% of violence can be attributed to persons with mental illness . . . [and that] mental health experts do little better than chance in predicting who will be violent."[46] The Commission's report concludes that "a diagnosis such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia alone tells us almost nothing about a person's likelihood of committing acts of violence toward others."[47] Moreover, based on testimony from a team of mental health professionals consulted by the Commission and reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the report adds that "those with mental health challenges are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators."[48] Not only is "mental illness" too broad to be a useful diagnostic tool, but associating mental illness, generally or specifically, with violence risks subjecting nonviolent individuals to additional harm.

The Advisory Commission report thus expresses concerns about psychologists and psychiatrists casting too wide a net when using predictive measures to try to capture violent individuals. They conclude that:

> attempts to predict such events face little likelihood of success. Even if we could devise an instrument or method of predicting violence with a 95% rate of accuracy, violence is a rare enough occurrence (with rates of serious violence among even identifiably high risk populations hovering in the low single digits) that our predictions would still yield an unacceptable number of false positives. In reality, our predictions are far less accurate than that, with actual measures generally achieving no more than a 50% accuracy rate. Any test that purports to predict future violence will produce far more wrong answers than correct ones. This combination of low base rate events and tests with low levels of accuracy therefore makes predictions of specific future violent acts something of a fool's errand, with overreaching a near certainty.[49]

Concern about overreach is not only about unfairly detaining, punishing, or mistreating those with mental illness, the vast majority of whom turn out never to be violent, but also about stigma. The Advisory Commission explains that "stigma discourages people from accessing care, interferes with care once it is accessed, and informs a fragmented and inadequately funded system of care. Many individuals who struggle with mental health challenges either do not seek care or discontinue care prematurely, and experts have identified stigma as a major factor."[50] At the same time, it also recognizes that "while it is clear that we must work to eradicate stigma and its effects on people suffering from mental health challenges and their families, it is far less clear how we should go about doing so."[51] Psychologists recognize stigma as one of the main barriers to those with mental illness seeking help, but they also struggle with how to alleviate stigma, especially when the media, politicians, and others link mental illness with targeted violence.

Outside of the expert realm of mental health professionals, a popular exchange from the blogosphere about the Sandy Hook shooting illustrates some additional challenges around mental health stigma. Shortly after the shooting, a concerned mother who identified her son with Adam Lanza took to the internet with a blog post called "I am Adam Lanza's Mother." In the post, which went viral, Liza Long described concerns about her son "Michael" (a pseudonym) and her struggles to get him treatment. Like Adam Lanza, Michael exhibited behavior that doctors struggled to diagnose and treat. Long explained that over time doctors have diagnosed her son with "sensory integration disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, ADHD, anxiety, depression, autism spectrum disorder, juvenile bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and dysgraphia" and have prescribed a long list of prescriptions.[52] While describing a violent episode in which he threatened to kill his mother over her request for him to return an overdue library book, Long explained, "I love my son, but he terrifies me."[53]

Concluding her piece by identifying with the mothers of the shooters at Sandy Hook, Columbine, Aurora, Tucson, and Virginia Tech, Long argued that "in the wake of another horrific national tragedy, it's easy to talk about guns. But it's time to talk about mental illness."[54] Later on, she added, "Adam Lanza is the twenty-eighth victim."[55] Long's post focused mainly on the stigma and challenges she faces as a mother of a child like Michael in order to shift the conversation from guns to mental illness. If only she and others like her could get the help that Nancy Lanza couldn't, she implied, then the next school shooting might not happen.

Long's post received no shortage of criticism. A response post entitled "You are not Adam Lanza's Mother" on another blog criticized Long's original post for complaining "about mental illness stigma while reinforcing it by explicitly tying it to violence, and in particular, mass killings."[56] The author of this post argued that "by reducing 'mental illness' to 'outward behavior,' the [Long] article dehumanises the mentally ill and completely glosses over the inner mental life and experiences of those with mental illness." Another blog post by the same title on the site *Autism Wars* called out Long for making a false analogy, highlighting the ways in which Long differed from Nancy Lanza, such as keeping weapons away from her son and seeking treatment for him when she feared he was dangerous.[57] The author of this "You are not Adam Lanza's Mother" worried about the further stigmatization of those with autism, the vast majority of whom are considerably more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of violence. She warned that "even an implication that attempts to conflate autistic meltdowns with murderous rage places an entire population of children and adults who are already terribly abused at horrible risk for harm." The implication here was that although Long might have had good intentions about trying to break the stigma and to set up support and resources for parents of children with autism and other mental health issues, she inadvertently cast further unwarranted stigma upon a whole class of children.

Linking mental health and targeted violence sets up a vicious cycle when those who commit mass shootings could have sought treatment for mental illness but failed to do so. Many mentally ill individuals who do not seek out treatment fail to do so because of the stigma and/or the costs associated with it. The Lanza family appears to be no exception to this pattern of not seeking treatment. The Advisory Commission concludes that "although it is unclear exactly what role stigma played in the Lanza household, it seems likely that the stigma attached to mental illness and the behavioral health system affected the family's choices and internal dynamics as well as its interactions with the community."[58] If stigma did play a role in the Lanza family's choices, then it is possible to imagine in hindsight how more and better treatment might have prevented the shooting. However, if stigma played a part in why the Lanza family stopped seeking treatment for Adam, that same stigma might also keep other families from seeking treatment. Worse yet, the fact that Adam Lanza had been diagnosed with several illnesses before the shooting only exacerbates, rather than mitigates, the conflation of those illnesses with mass shootings and the stigma that follows.

Recognizing this concern, the Commission warned that "this central misconception [conflating mental illness and violent behavior] can distract from other efforts to reduce violence and unnecessarily stigmatize millions with mental health disorders. It could also actually undermine public safety by discouraging people who pose the greatest risk from seeking services."[59] Although many perpetrators of targeted violence exhibit symptoms of mental illness, the vast majority of those with similar diagnoses will not go on to commit targeted violence but nevertheless face stigma as a result of being placed in the same category as those who already have. Recognizing mental illness as one component of targeted violence may lead to more and better research, funding, and services for the mentally ill, but using either “mental illness” as an umbrella term or specific diagnoses in order to predict violent behavior also can undermine efforts to identify and help those who need treatment. Consequently, reaction rhetorics that focus on mental illness do have their promises, but when politicians, lobbyists, and citizens advocate reliance on mental health professionals to prevent targeted violence, they must also recognize the perils that accompany that position.

Insecurities about School Security

Frustrated by the impasse in federal gun legislation and the limited funding, services, and predictive value of mental health, some schools, tech companies, and individual inventors have turned to the issue school security. Much of their energy has gone toward approaches designed to secure school perimeters and classrooms, to invent and regularly test emergency operation procedures, and to give teachers, staff, and students more ways to protect themselves or escape if necessary. Some of these efforts have focused on designing and redesigning safer school facilities and programs, while others have gone in the direction of quick-fix gadgets. For instance, a 2014 *Washington Post* article described the burgeoning industry of “barricades, bulletproof backpacks, ballistic whiteboards, and online apps to monitor for homicidal plots” and estimated that the “school security market that is expected to reach $720 million this year.”[60]

While all of these efforts promise to make schools safer, they miss several important factors, such as context, feasibility, solvency, and unintended consequences. Few people disagree that safer schools are an important part of preventing school shootings or that safer schools are not a desirable goal. However, what constitutes a “safe” school varies by context and may not be knowable *a priori*. Not everyone agrees on how to make schools safer, whether they can ever guarantee total security, or that security measures justify particular sacrifices. Consequently, there is often ambivalence about wanting schools to be safer but not wanting to pay for them to be that way and not wanting to do so at the expense of maintaining a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere.

In the school shooting documentary *It Can Happen Here*, Ted Mink, the sheriff for Jefferson County, CO, at the time of the Columbine High School shooting, summarized this ambivalence well:

> I’m not advocating an armed fortress. I don’t think that’s conducive to education, but I do think that there is a responsibility beyond law enforcement to create those safe schools. Again, it’s the parents, it’s the school officials, it’s the kids, and it’s the teachers all working together to take ownership . . . and because we are cognizant of “it could happen here,” we feel safe. We feel safe.[61]

In the opinion of Mink and several other individuals interviewed for the documentary, there must be a collective responsibility for ensuring school safety and a collective trust in its effectiveness. At the same time, there are limits to what security measures many advocates want to put in place and at what and whose expense. Though Mink did not concede it here, there is also a question of whether these security measures can actually guarantee total security.

Looking more closely at the reaction rhetorics around school security, his last comment, “we feel safe,” glosses over the cold reality that *feeling* safe is not the same as *being* safe. Much of the rhetoric of school safety deals with securing physical spaces. The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report dedicates fourteen pages to specific site-level security recommendations: locking doors, security cameras, lights, parking and traffic regulations, communication systems, etc.[62] At least in theory, each of these measures individually, and all of them collectively, reduce the risk of another shooting. The key word here is “reduce,” which is not the same as “eliminate.” Some of these measures cost more than others in terms of time, money, and sacrifices. For instance, installing locks or cameras will be easier than moving the location of windows.[63] They also vary in terms of effectiveness. For instance, designating specific parking areas away from the building to keep intruders out only works if intruders care about following posted parking regulations.[64] In short, schools may not have or want to spend a lot of money on security measures, and even when they do, the measures can only approximate, but not necessarily guarantee, total security.

Rather than providing comfort, the search for total school security exposed a wide range of design and procedural vulnerabilities that schools and other large spaces face. One concern that the Sandy Hook shooting raised was to make sure that classrooms can lock from the inside under all circumstances. While this capability may seem obvious to many school administrators, the school did not provide it in at least one of the two rooms at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Substitute teacher Lauren Rousseau could not lock her classroom door because the school did not provide substitutes with keys. Providing her with keys potentially could have saved the lives of Rousseau and her students.

Meanwhile, well in advance of the shooting, the school had several security measures in place regarding visitors. Lysiak explains that school safety procedures dictated that "before entering the building, visitors had to first ring the doorbell. Security cameras installed outside the school's main entrance let the clerical staff identify the person before hitting the buzzer and allowing them in. Once inside, parents had to show photo identification before going any farther."[65] The Sandy Hook Commission report added that on December 14, "as was customary, the front doors of the school were locked." In theory, security measures designed to keep staff and students safe should have stopped Adam Lanza from entering the building in the first place or from entering classrooms once inside.

However, in a manner that resembles Lysiak's comments that gun laws already on the books in Connecticut should have prevented the shooting in theory but failed to do so in practice because Adam Lanza did not want or need to follow the rules, the school security measures failed for mostly the same reason. Neither locked entrance doors nor front desk attendants would get in his way. The Advisory Commission report goes on to explain that Lanza "used the Bushmaster rifle to shoot out a plate glass window on the right side of the entrance doors to the front lobby."[66] After that, the rules that should have protected the school's staff and students no longer applied. As the Newtown resident mentioned earlier put it, Adam Lanza "did not knock on the door and ask for permission," nor did he need to.[67] When it comes to targeted violence, Murphy's Law ("anything that can go wrong will go wrong") overrides the laws of the state and the policies, procedures, and other preventative measures of institutions.

It is precisely this Murphy’s Law mindset that simultaneously perpetuates and undermines the action rhetorics of causality and reaction rhetorics of prevention in relation to school security. An analysis of government documents from the FBI, CIA, Department of Homeland Security, and other organizations reveals a shift from the Columbine to Virginia Tech to Sandy Hook shootings that indicates that these organizations are far less optimistic about preventing school shootings than they were ten or fifteen years ago. Treating these documents as public address responses to the shootings at Sandy Hook and elsewhere reveals the hindsight lessons that major government agencies have tried to learn from previous incidents and the recommendations that they have given moving forward. In the efforts learn from these cases, hindsight does teach some valuable lessons: develop a plan for an active shooter and run practice drills with it, make sure all classroom doors lock from the inside, and install bulletproof glass wherever possible. However, like Lysiak’s list of “what ifs,” most of which fell upon Nancy Lanza, these hindsight lessons generate an ever-growing list of “what ifs” and hypothetical scenarios that fall upon schools. Guided by the rhetorics of causality and prevention, government agencies have tried to identify and rule out as many potential threats as possible. By doing so, however, they have found more problems than solutions.

A great strength of the documents these agencies produced is their sensitivity to context. In their efforts to be comprehensive, government agencies focused on the “school” part of “school shootings” in order to account for similarities and differences that different schools might face. Their attempts to be comprehensive led them to consider a variety of contextual factors that might influence how a school shooting could differ in different scenarios: K-12 schools vs. institutions of higher education, urban vs. rural environments, location-based concerns, and differences in budgets and resources. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, they found several challenges that were unique to individual schools, many of which are difficult if not impossible to solve.

One major challenge has to do with size. Less of a problem for K-12 institutions, size presents a major problem for colleges and universities. Many college campuses are large and population dense with lots of people moving about all day long. A post-Virginia Tech FBI document called “Campus Attacks” warns about how campuses typically are comprised of “many buildings, often with larger classrooms, separate faculty for each department, more uncontrolled access and egress, and irregular schedules that minimize regular contact between educators and students.”[68] At large universities, limited communication can make it difficult for faculty, staff, and students to assess who is around, what is happening in their lives, and whether they might be dangerous. Furthermore, in the event of an actual shooting, many campus layouts make it easy for a shooter to target many people at once and to flee to other locations. In short, college campuses facilitate movement, making it easier for potential and active shooters to move from place to place unnoticed.

In addition to size, location, particularly as it relates to police response time, also poses a challenge for many schools. A Department of Homeland Security (DHS) document lists the time frame for how long most school shootings last from start to finish. According to the DHS, most are over within 10-15 minutes.[69] Recall how quickly Jared Lee Loughner and Adam Lanza’s weapons fired: seconds and minutes. Even in an urban environment, a fast police response to events this quick is often too late. In a rural environment, a pre-Sandy Hook FBI document warns that “the far-flung patrol responsibilities and limited staff levels of those agencies make a 20-30 minute response time an optimistic best-case scenario; in reality, it may take 45 minutes to an hour before authorities arrive.”[70] Thus, lockdowns that shelter students in place could subject them to additional danger.

At the same time, running from the scene might seem like a viable option, but the FBI warns that doing so “also may increase individual vulnerability to other hazards.”[71] Under such conditions, those who run from a shooter may find themselves trapped even after they flee. The FBI notes, for instance, that “some schools may be situated next to natural barriers, such as streams and rivers that can prove dangerous to students” and other schools may face extreme temperatures, which also may expose children to danger.”[72] Furthermore, the agency expresses concern that allowing children, especially young children, to disperse can make it difficult to account for all students and their safety. Guides pertaining to younger students often cast them as highly unpredictable, easily frightened, and difficult to control. They stress that “young populations cannot be counted on to react the same as older students.”[73] They may not fully grasp the seriousness of the situation, and even if they do, they may not keep calm, follow directions, or stay with the group. Furthermore, in lockdown situations, “teachers cannot quell [students’] crying by logical reminders [of] why they should remain quiet,” thereby putting them at a greater risk of a shooter discovering their location.[74] The heartbreaking irony here is that the youngest and presumably most innocent and vulnerable students might be at the greatest risk during a school shooting. Better school security still may not protect them.

Aside from location-based school security, government agencies also sought to make schools safer by focusing on students and situations. Profiles of the types of students who might pose a threat proved unhelpful after Columbine. When demographic profiles failed, government agencies turned to behavioral approaches to prediction and prevention. Consistent with micro-sociologist Randall Collins's work on violence, these behavioral approaches suggest that situations, rather than categories of people, are better indicators of when violence will occur.[75] The current recommendations in this area from the U.S. Department of Education include watching for "contextually inappropriate" instances of behaviors such as "acquisitions of multiple weapons . . . escalation in target practice and weapons training . . . interest in explosives, [and] intense interest or fascination with previous shootings or mass attacks."[76] Adam Lanza exhibited each of these behaviors. Perhaps most disturbingly is the last one. When police entered Nancy Lanza's home, they found a seven-by-four-foot spreadsheet in nine-point font containing Adam's meticulous research on previous mass shootings.[77]

Even though the Department of Education's criteria described Lanza quite well, hindsight forensic theories do not always translate well into effective predictive measures. Several problems remain when teachers and students try to use them to find others like Lanza. First, many of these behaviors are private, which means that they can and often do go unnoticed. Adam Lanza did all of them, but he did them either alone or with his mother, and, in the last few months before the shooting, in total isolation. Norwegian mass shooter Anders Behring Breivik acted similarly, preparing his attack over the course of nine years, completely undetected. Second, determining what is "contextually inappropriate" is both vague and subjective, and as a result, many behaviors get by unnoticed or unreported. A joint Secret Service and Department of Education study found that before a mass shooting, “concerning behaviors were observed by friends, family, associates, professors, or law enforcement in 31 percent of the cases.”[78] In other words, the vast majority of cases contained no reports. In order to act upon these criteria, teachers, students, or family members first have to be able to observe them and second have to speak up about them.

Despite some of the problems of staff and student vigilance, the Advisory Commission report encourages schools to create more “opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to observe and be more aware, beyond the traditional classroom environment, so that they can observe at the earliest opportunities changes in student or adult behavior that might be cause for concern.”[79] In an odd move, it uncritically imports the Transportation Security Administration’s post-9/11 phrase “if you see something, say something,” despite the fact that Adam Lanza had not attended Newtown High School, let alone Sandy Hook Elementary School, for years before the shooting.[80] The only person who really “saw” Adam was Nancy Lanza, and even then, he only communicated with her via e-mail despite the two of them living in the same house. Vigilance might help in some scenarios, but because there was nobody to be vigilant other than perhaps Nancy Lanza, it did not prevent the shooting at Sandy Hook.

In short, the contextual variables that challenge school security are many. Schools can and should continue to make efforts to improve security, but some measures may not be feasible, effective, or desirable. If Murphy’s Law is the central guiding principle behind school shootings, then total security may be a fiction. Despite the argument that there is no price for children’s security that is not worth paying, if nothing can guarantee that security, then the proposed measures required to approximate it necessitate some cost-benefit analysis, and not just in terms of money. Even the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report concedes this point, explaining that:

> The Commission heard testimony about how some countries have transformed their schools into what might at best be described as "gated-communities," but which might more accurately be described as akin to minimum security prisons in terms of their design. Such facilities may, in fact, effectively eliminate some risk of an event like Sandy Hook. But they achieve that objective at a great cost, not just financial, but mental, emotional, and self-developmental as well. That is not the direction the Commission believes the American educational system should follow. Short of transforming our schools into gated communities or prison-like environments, no school can be totally free of the risk of violence.[81]

Although there is plenty of agreement that schools in the United States should have better security, there is plenty of disagreement over what that means, how to achieve it, and whether it will successfully eliminate or even reduce school shootings. Because of the wide variety of environments in which schools are situated and the unpredictable nature of both shooters and events, school security is a complex subject that resists the rhetorics of causality and prevention. Like the rhetoric about guns and mental illness, the rhetoric of school security evinces tensions between reaction and overreaction.

The Rhetorical Void

The impasses in public deliberation about guns, mental illness, and school security indicate the larger problem of a rhetorical void. Like a black hole, a rhetorical void is a space where other objects go to disappear. After a school shooting occurs, politicians, lobbyists, school administrators, and law enforcement officials entertain conversations about guns, mental illness, and school security, but because each of these issues is complicated and lacks an easy solution, the conversations around them are short-lived. Gun control advocates call for changes in gun policy until the NRA and its supporters step in to ensure that those policies fail. As the gun debate stalls, public deliberation shifts to mental health until those who advocate for more and better-funded mental health services realize that taxpayers do not see mental health as a public good and that the best experts cannot predict who among mentally ill populations might commit violence. After that, deliberation shifts yet again to school security until those who call for additional school security measures realize that those measures are expensive, are not foolproof, and condition young children into a life of constant threats and fears. When none of these issues can be solved completely, they circle around each other and then disappear one by one into the void until the next incident occurs. Once it does, the conversations re-emerge only to disappear yet again. When the conversation shifts so easily, politicians, lobbyists, school administrators, and law enforcement officials continue to promise change, yet little if any change occurs.

The rhetorical void is winning the battle over the rhetorics of causality and prevention. It shows itself in the defeated look on the faces of Sandy Hook victims' parents who lobbied in Congress for limits on assault weapons only to have elected representatives vote against their proposals. It appears in already bullied autistic children now further stigmatized by the actions of one individual whose behaviors do not fit neatly within a single label within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and who does not speak for them, yet speaks for them. It manifests in a multi-million-dollar industry of fancy locks, cameras, and gadgets that can be compromised as easily as a bullet going through a glass window or a rock holding a door open so that a teacher can smoke outside between classes. And it shows up in the fears that even the best efforts in any of these directions are, and will always be, inadequate.

When conversations re-emerge and disappear after each incident of targeted violence, they exhibit what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism." Berlant describes cruel optimism as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic."[82] She explains that optimism becomes cruel "when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially."[83] Government agency searches for causality were supposed to be a source of comfort, but they have become a source of anxiety instead. Causality is a dead end. Prevention is a dead end.

This is not to say that steps toward gun policy reform, mental health funding and research, and school security are unworthy goals or that those fighting for these things should give up now. Nor is it to say that the rhetorical void has won the war over how U.S. Americans talk about school shootings. It is winning the battle over rhetorics of causality and prevention, and those rhetorics are currently winning the war over how to talk about school shootings and other acts of targeted violence. But what if those who are tired of the rhetorics of causality and prevention change the battlefield? There are plenty of other subjects that people do not discuss, or at least not discuss as seriously, when the sole conversation about school shootings is about how to prevent the next one.

Alternatives to the Rhetorical Void

If the rhetorics of causality and prevention are caught in a rhetorical void, then perhaps an alternative rhetorical space exists. Whereas deliberation about guns, mental health, and school security are caught in debates about the line between reaction and overreaction, many of the alternative debates focus more on underreaction and inaction. They do so out of necessity, as many of them deal with either a lack of preparation or a lack of long-term planning. A common refrain after school shootings is "I never thought it could happen here." In the documentary *It Can Happen Here*, Frank DeAngelis, the principal at Columbine, attested that "if someone were to ask me prior to April 20, I would have said it could never happen at Columbine High School. This is an ideal high school."[84] Others made similar comments about the Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook shootings.[85] The central premise of the documentary is that mass shootings can happen anywhere. Its focus on the shooting at a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, is but one example of a shooting happening where nobody would have thought it could. Since the documentary's release in 2010, the United States has seen shootings and other acts of targeted violence in plenty of schools and other locations, and they happen in urban, suburban, rural, and environments.

When the "I never thought it could happen here" refrain pops up, it often does so under the rhetoric of prevention. It sounds a warning siren to other communities that they are not sheltered from these attacks. Amidst the repeated expressions of "I never thought it could happen here" after Columbine High School shooting, Denver Mayor Wellington Webb warned that "this shooting reinforces the idea that school violence can take place anywhere in the country. No one is immune when somebody goes off and uses a gun."[86] After the Nickel Mines shooting, a columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, "There is no longer any denying the reality. If it could happen at the West Nickel Mines Amish School, it can happen at your child's school or mine."[87] After the Sandy Hook shooting, Newtown resident Teri Brunelli warned, "You hear about it happening over there—another state, another country. . . . If you aren't safe here, in this town, where are we safe?"[88] However, there are other instances in which affected community members invoke this logic in a way that has nothing to do with prevention. Instead, it has to do with preparedness, or lack thereof. In the context of preparedness, "I never thought it could happen here" can also mean "how might we prepare for it in the case that it does?" Whereas prevention rhetorics create a rhetorical void based on trying to create circumstances that may never exist, preparation rhetorics produce an alternative space for discussing and planning for the long-term impacts of school shootings.

A difficult conversation that must take place following a school shooting is what to do with the money. Following natural or anthropogenic disasters, it is common for donations to pour in. As of December 2014, two years after the shooting, Newtown had received a total of $45 million, $17 million from the U.S. government and $28 million from charities.[89] Although money can be a source of comfort, it cannot replace lost loved ones and comes with its own set of problems. $45 million is a lot of money, but determining how to spend it is not easy. The distribution process raises difficult issues and questions. A 2013 *Washington Post* article reported that:

> Families say that dealing with questions over how to distribute the millions of dollars sent to help Newtown heal is instead causing them more pain. How much should go to the families of the slain children and educators? To the families of the children who witnessed the massacre but survived and will need to pay for years of therapy? Or to the Newtown community at large? And who gets to make those decisions?

Although distributing funds needs not equate to putting a price on human life, trying to figure out how much victims' families should receive can easily feel that way.

According to Lysiak, Newtown residents decided that "families of each of the twenty-six victims would receive $281,000. Twelve additional families of children who survived the shooting will each get $20,000, while the two teachers who were wounded will receive $150,000 to be split between them."[90] Lysiak goes into little detail about the process by which the community decided upon these numbers other than to say that they had "a rancorous debate," but it is easy to imagine how the final totals amounts might have been different and how exhausting the debate could become. Christina Hassinger, the daughter of Sandy Hook Principal Dawn Hochsprung, explained that "nobody who has been through this wants to have to go and deal with the boards and committees and talk about money and justify why you need it. Money is the last thing you want to have to deal with, especially when you are grieving."[91] Nevertheless, money will always be an issue following an event like this, and good systems do not yet seem to exist for how to handle it.

In addition to the influx of money, Newtown also had to figure out what to do with the influx of things. After the shooting, the *Hartford Courant* reported that the town received “about six tractor-trailer truckloads of donated items.”[92] The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission explained that “the town was inundated by gifts from well-meaning people around the country, indeed the world, who hoped the gifts would provide some comfort to the grieving families and members of the community in general. Delivery trucks, even tractor-trailers, filled with items such as stuffed Teddy Bears essentially dumped these gifts on the Town, which was ill-equipped to distribute or store [them].”[93] Although arguably well-intentioned and perhaps comforting in the short-term, such donations pose long-term problems. For starters, there is no good place to keep them. If left outside for public display, ribbons, teddy bears, and other materials will succumb to weather conditions and grow mold. Thus, in a move resembling cremation, the town decided to grind the “thousands of teddy bears and other stuffed animals that came to Newtown from all over the world into ‘sacred soil’ that is available to be used in a memorial.”[94] Aside from this storage problem, public display also means public for everyone, even those who did not want or need another reminder of the shooting. What Kendall Phillips called “the publicness of memory” becomes a problem for Newtown residents who do not want constant reminders of the shooting and its victims. Rather than keeping donated items in Newtown, they are currently being held in at a storage facility in East Hartford. [95] At some point, many of the remaining items will likely return to Newtown to be part of a memorial or in a museum, but for now, they remain stowed away.

Meanwhile, another issue related to things is not what gets donated to the town, but rather what is already there. For instance, what should the town do with the school? What should they do with Nancy Lanza’s house? With Adam’s belongings that the police found inside it? In each of these cases, the final decision was to destroy it. After several meetings, a school task force decided to raze the old Sandy Hook Elementary School, as the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, did after the shooting there, and to rebuild a new one on the same site. The *Hartford Courant* reported that "no families who lost someone in the shootings, and no Sandy Hook Elementary School teachers or staff, spoke" at the January 2013 meeting.[96] However, the decision about what to do with the school generated controversy with different individuals interpreting the physical space and the memories associated with it in different ways. One parent expressed concerns about retraumatizating students by sending them back to the school, acknowledging that he "know[s] that there are children who have said they would like to go back to Sandy Hook" but arguing that "the reality is we have to be so careful. Even walking down the halls, the children become so scared at any unusual sound. I don't see how it would be possible."[97] Meanwhile, high school student Mergin Bajraliu, a former student at Sandy Hook whose little sister survived the shooting, argued that "one psychopath should not get away with taking away our school" and that "razing the school is the weak way out."[98] Although the task force ultimately decided to destroy and rebuild the school on the same site, this plan created quite a bit of controversy.

Determining what to do with Nancy Lanza's house was slightly less controversial but no less interesting. Like the school, it no longer stands. In this case, the Hudson Savings Bank of New Jersey took ownership of the house and eventually "burned all of the items left in the house to ensure that no one could sell them as murder memorabilia."[99] After all, if Adam Lanza had researched and revered other mass shootings, then presumably someone like him might want to be in possession of his belongings. A senior vice president for Hudson Savings explained that the bank "didn't want anything from that house showing up for sale on eBay two years from now."[100] The concern is not totally unfounded. People interested in owning "murderabilia" already have purchased things like art, music, and writings from people like John Wayne Gacy, Charles Manson, and Ted Kaczynski.[101] Others even have tried to purchase locks of Charles Manson's hair and "the refrigerator in which [Jeffrey] Dahmer had held his victims' body parts."[102] Because nobody in Nancy Lanza's house survived the shooting, destroying the house and everything in it was an easier move. In other cases, figuring out what to do with the shooter's belongings might be more complicated. In any case, the bank's decision shows the haunting power of material objects and the concerns that they generate.

The controversies over material objects also gesture toward larger issues related to the more symbolic aspects of public memory of the shooting. Although people outside of Newtown might have expected the town's residents to commemorate the event through all kinds of memorials and ceremonies, many people within the local community have actively resisted such memorialization efforts. Unlike the people in the case studies that Erika Doss describes in *Memorial Mania*, residents in Newtown have, by and large, not clamored for memorials.[103] Newtown's memorialization efforts, or better yet, its anti-memorialization efforts, make a potential limit case for Doss's work, as they neither wholly deny nor wholly conform her hypotheses.

For several months, a number of well-meaning organizations tried to provide relief to the residents of Newtown via entertainment. Sports teams, including the New York Yankees, New England Patriots, Boston Bruins, and Boston Red Sox invited community members to special games. College and professional sports teams donned special patches on their uniforms. Nickelodeon, Broadway performers, and James Taylor held special benefit concerts.[104] Broadway producers Van Dean and Michael Unger described how they felt compelled to “do something positive” and “to give people a little bit of escape.”[105] At the same time, Unger pointed out that they wanted “to program [the Broadway benefit concert] in such a way where the songs are meaningful, but not too close for comfort.”[106] Unger’s comment here suggests a difficult balancing act between providing coping mechanisms on the one hand, and providing constant reminders of what happened on the other.

To pose the problem a bit differently, journalist Peter Appelbome asks, “Where is the line between respecting the magnitude of what happened last December and being engulfed by it? And when do events and observances become an unwelcome public reminder of private grief?”[107] In the case of the Sandy Hook shooting, Newtown’s First Selectman[108] E. Patricia (Pat) Llodra repeatedly has answered Applebome’s questions by suggesting that the town needed a release from even the most well-intentioned commemorative acts. In July 2013, after a special game day at Yankee Stadium, Llodra declared that Newtown “would stop accepting offers for similar events in the interest of gingerly prodding residents toward a future less defined by the Dec. 14 shootings.”[109] Mark Barden, the father of victim Daniel Barden, shared Llodra’s perspective. He explained that “on a personal level, people have continued to show us such a tremendous outpouring of love and support, and we don’t feel a need to move away from that. But when outside agencies want to come and build things, and set up walls and benches and events for us, we don’t need to see constant reminders of what happened. It’s permanently etched into our soul and psyche for the rest of our lives."[110] Many residents of Newtown have tried to resist the processes of commemoration and memorialization, despite how well-intentioned such efforts might be, in order to facilitate their own efforts to cope and heal. Through their resistance, they have set themselves apart as a counterpublic to outsiders who might not understand what they are going through.[111]

This resistance to memory practices does not stop at events and ceremonies planned by others, but instead also applies to events planned by Newtown residents. In particular, the town has not held official anniversary ceremonies. Shortly before the first anniversary of the shooting, Llodra declared that Newtown would not be holding an anniversary ceremony. "If we build it, they will come," she said. "So we have to not build it."[112] Although individuals within the town might find some comfort in events and ceremonies, many Newtown residents and politicians expressed concerns that they do more harm than good.

Additionally, like Columbine and Virginia Tech and other sites of targeted violence, Newtown also has struggled with whether it should build a memorial to commemorate the event and if so, what it should include. In the months following the event, the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission received about $80,000 in donations that were given "specifically for a memorial" and an additional million dollars from a group called the Newtown Memorial Fund.[113] Despite the money raised specifically for this purpose, several families have indicated their opposition to the town building any memorial. [114] This opposition raises the question of what the town should do with money raised for a specific purpose if the town decides not to use it for that purpose. In response, Kyle Lyddy, the chair of the memorial commission, has said that the committee wants “to make sure we do what is right. What is right for our community? I am still not sure.”[115] The town still has many things to work through with regards to public memory, and these questions lack easy answers.

Beyond the Rhetorical Void

In short, reaction rhetorics to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting are caught between the optimism of the rhetorics of causality and prevention and the pessimism of the rhetorical void. The rhetorics of causality and prevention may be optimistic, but the repeated emergence and dissipation of causal and preventative topics after each incident of targeted violence exhibits what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism.” They inspire people to imagine a world in which law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, and citizens can know the causes of targeted violence in advance and prevent future incidents from happening. Imagining that world often results in one of two things: it either leads those who aspire to prevention to deny the symbolic and material obstacles to knowing causality and achieving prevention, or, in the process of imagining that world, forces them to confront all of those obstacles at once. When communities ignore the problem completely, it leaves people and places vulnerable to future attacks, but when they obsess over every single hypothetical, it can be overwhelming, and it makes it difficult for people to go about their everyday lives.

Nevertheless, the pessimism of the rhetorical void may not be a source of comfort to those who worry about targeted violence either. The rhetorical void portends that changes in responses to targeted violence will be slow, if they even happen at all. Guns, mental illness, and school security have surfaced repeatedly as topics in public deliberation about the Sandy Hook shooting and other similar events that have followed it, but changes that politicians, law enforcement officials, school administrators, and mental health professionals have made have been incremental, if they even have happened at all. As conversations about these topics have disappeared time and again into the rhetorical void, there are no clear indicators that any of them, or the problem of targeted violence as a whole, will ever be solved completely.

Between optimism and pessimism, and beyond the rhetorical void, there must exist an alternative space in which those who wish to minimize the occurrence and severity of targeted violence can take the threat of targeted violence seriously enough to continue to propose new policies and practices but not so seriously that they become agoraphobic. Although it is not entirely clear what this alternative space would look like, the search for such a space might begin by focusing on reduction rather than elimination and preparation rather than prevention. Moreover, it would come with reminders that the “can” in “it can happen here” is not deterministic.

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[9] Office of the Child Advocate, "Shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School: Report of the Office of the Child Advocate," November 21, 2014, http://www.ct.gov/oca/lib/oca/sandyhook11212014.pdf; Matthew Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013); Solomon, "The Reckoning."

[10] Under Connecticut law, parents may obtain doctor's recommendations to have their children placed on "homebound status" if deemed "too disabled to receive services in school even with modifications and supports." Office of the Child Advocate, "Child Advocate," 43. The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report explains that "'Homebound' status differs from home schooling in that the latter represents a commitment by parents to provide an equivalent education outside of a school environment; in Connecticut school districts are not required to provide special education or other services to homeschooled children. A student on 'homebound' status, on the other hand, is by definition a child receiving special education services pursuant to an Individualized Education Program (IEP)." Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, "Sandy Hook Commission Report," 89–90.

[11] Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy*; Office of the Child Advocate, "Child Advocate."

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[13] "Children and Adults Gunned down in Connecticut School Massacre," http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/14/shooting-reported-at-connecticut-elementary-school/; Greg Jaffe Duggan , Paul and Colum Lynch, "Adam Lanza Is Recalled as a 'rambunctious Kid' with Family Problems," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2012,

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

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[21] Michael Wilson, "A Year of Painful, Daily Reminders in Newtown," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2013, A1, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/14/nyregion/for-newtown-a-year-of-painful-daily-reminders.html.

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[23] Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy*, 253.

[24] Ibid., 206.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 258.

[27] Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, "Sandy Hook Commission Report," viii.

[28] Office of the Child Advocate, "Child Advocate," 2.

[29] Solomon, "The Reckoning," 3.

[30] Office of the Child Advocate, "Child Advocate," 108.

[31] Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, "Sandy Hook Commission Report," 68–69.

[32] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address," 2013, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Wayne LaPierre, "NRA Press Conference," December 21, 2012, 7, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/12/21/us/nra-news-conference-transcript.html.

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[36] Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy*, 240.

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[61] Squilla, Lynne, *It Can Happen Here*.

[62] Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, “Sandy Hook Commission Report,” 37–50.

[63] Ibid., 48.

[64] Ibid., 39.

[65] Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy*, 11–12.

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Bureau of Investigation), 3, accessed July 27, 2015, https://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/campus-attacks/campus-attacks.

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[71] Ibid., 6.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid., 3.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Collins argues that it is "not violent individuals, but violent situations" that determine whether violence will occur. Based on flaws and inconsistencies in demographic research about who is likely to commit violence, he argues that "it is a false lead to look for violent individuals" and that those who wish to understand violence should look instead to "the contours of situations, which shape the emotions and acts of the individuals who step inside them." Collins, *Violence*, 1–2.

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[77] Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy*, 165.

[78] Duncan, Delisle, and Esquith, "Emergency Operations Plans (Higher Ed)," 79.

[79] Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, "Sandy Hook Commission Report," 17.

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[82] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press Books, 2011), 24.

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[93] Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, “Sandy Hook Commission Report,” 67.

[94] Altimari, “Memorial.”

[95] Ibid.

[96] Gary Stoller, “Newtown Residents Ponder Future of School Building,” *USA Today*, January 14, 2013, sec. News, 3A.

[97] Ray Rivera, “Newtown Debates Building’s Fate after Shooting,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2013, A17.

[98] Stoller, “Future of School Building,” 3A.

[99] Dave Altimari, “Bank Burned Lanza Items; Tactic Used to Prevent Memorabilia Sales; Sandy Hook School Shootings,” *Hartford Courant*, December 5, 2014, B1.

[100] Ibid.

[101] James Alan Fox, Jack Levin, and Kenna Quinet, *The Will to Kill: Making Sense of Senseless Murder*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012), 3–4, 137.

[102] James Alan Fox and Jack Levin, *Extreme Killing: Understanding Serial and Mass Murder*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), 6.

[103] Doss, *Memorial Mania*.

[104] See Viv Bernstein, “N.R.A. 500 in Texas Thrusts Nascar into the Gun Debate,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2013, D4; Ted Mandell, “Change the Game on Gun Laws,” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2013.

[105] Kristin Stoller, “Broadway Will Bring Newtown a Little Joy; Area Natives Van Dean and Brett Boles Rally Their Famous Friends,” *USA Today*, January 8, 2013, 7D.

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[106] Ibid.

[107] Peter Appelbome, “Ready for Less-Tearful Future, Newtown Is Declining Tributes,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2013, A1.

[108] Newtown has three elected Selectmen who serve two-year terms. Despite the gendered nature of the term, a “selectman” may be male or female.

[109] Appelbome, “Declining Tributes,” A1.

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[111] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone, 2005).

[112] Wilson, “A Year of Painful, Daily Reminders in Newtown,” A1.

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Chapter 3: Heterotopic Ossification after the Boston Marathon Bombing

The Boston Marathon bombing took a heavy toll on all of its victims, but it took a particularly harsh toll on Jessica Kensky and her husband Patrick Downes, who were newlyweds when the bombs went off on Boylston Street. A January 2015 *Boston Globe* article captured their frustrations and the difficult decisions they have had to make since April 2013. The explosion damaged both of their left legs badly enough that they had to amputate them below the knee, and it also destroyed the Achilles tendon, ankle, and heel on Kensky's right leg. When doctors suggested amputation of her right leg as well, Kensky told her father that they would "have to kill [her] first." Eventually the pain became too strong to bear, and in early 2015, Kensky decided to amputate the right leg as well. While seeking treatment for the pain in her right leg, Kensky's left leg developed a medical condition known as heterotopic ossification. As the article describes it, this condition meant that "a painful knot of bone grew at the end of Jess's amputated left leg, making it impossible to wear her prosthetic." It goes on to explain the condition as "a haywire response to blast trauma that has also afflicted many Iraq and Afghanistan war amputees."[1]

There may not be a more fitting metaphor for what many survivors experience psychologically after targeted violence. Etymologically, the term describes a process (*ify*) of bone growth (*os*) in a place (*topos*) other than (*hetero*) where bone normally exists. This bone growth is unique to traumatic injuries and implies permanent pain, stiffness, dis-figurement.[2] Moreover, for Kensky, it means that artificial substitutes cannot replace what once was natural, at least not for some time or without significant help from others.

As a physical condition, heterotopic ossification is a painful, present, and bodily reminder of loss and suffering, but it is also the result of the body's efforts to heal itself. Metaphorically, heterotopic ossification could refer not to a physical bone growth, but instead a mental and emotional condition of feeling permanently out of place as the result of a traumatic event.

This chapter asks if a metaphorical equivalent of heterotopic ossification is possible in a public sense rather than an individual one. Action rhetorics after the Boston Marathon bombing suggest that the framing of certain acts of targeted violence as "terrorism" in the post-9/11 United States overdetermine reactions to such events in comparison to acts of targeted violence that do not receive that label. "Terrorism" is heterotopic in that it classifies certain acts of targeted violence and their perpetrators as unique while treating non-terrorists differently. Although all acts of targeted violence are acts of terrorism, those perpetrated by Muslims receive special treatment in both the law and public discourse. Thus, one issue at stake in the generic shift to "targeted violence" is that the broader category renders acts perpetrated by Muslims less exceptional.

While action rhetorics demonstrate the heterotopic nature of claims about what constitutes "terrorism," reaction rhetorics after the Boston Marathon bombing suggest ossification. When the government, media, and citizens define an act of targeted violence as "terrorism," it elicits certain kinds of responses that regularly sidestep matters of due process. In my analysis of reaction rhetorics, I explore controversies around Tamerlan Tsarnaev's burial and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's trial and sentencing in order to see how the framing of this event as a "terrorist attack" resembles or is different from the framing of other acts of targeted violence.

Action Rhetorics about the Boston Marathon Bombing

On Monday, April 15, 2013, competitive runners from all over the United States and beyond gathered for the annual Boston Marathon. Held annually on Patriots' Day, which commemorates the anniversaries of the battles of Lexington and Concord, the marathon is one of several events on this day with an epideictic flair. In her book on the Tsarnaev brothers, journalist Masha Gessen notes that on Patriots' Day in Massachusetts, "the battles are reenacted; the Red Sox play their home opener at Fenway Park; schools and state offices are closed; and the Boston Marathon is run. It is like Massachusetts' own big American holiday. Though if you have never lived anywhere in America outside Massachusetts, you might just think Patriots' Day is a big American holiday, period. Kind of like a second Fourth of July."[3]

Typically a fun, celebratory, competitive event, the Boston Marathon that year quickly transformed into a scene of chaos. Around 2:49 p.m. two bombs went off near the finish line on Boylston Street, "killing three people and injuring at least 264 others, including 16 who lost limbs."[4] Addressing the bombings in several speeches over the next few days, President Barack Obama recounted tales of "exhausted runners who kept running to the nearest hospital to give blood, and those who stayed to tend to the wounded, some tearing off their own clothes to make tourniquets."[5] Acts like these contributed to the "Boston Strong" theme that would later emerge from the event, but for the next few days, fear and uncertainty prevailed.

Directly following the attack, survivors, journalists, and law enforcement officials began to speculate about who the bomber(s) were and what their motives could be. Answers to both questions remained uncertain, but initial guesses held in common the assumption that the bombings must have been conducted by Muslim extremists. Attention quickly turned toward Abdulrahman Ali Alharbi, a 20-year-old Saudi student who was injured by and then hospitalized after the second blast. While the FBI questioned him from the hospital, media outlets began reporting his name and picture as the suspect in question. The day after the bombing, the FBI exonerated him.[6] Shortly after that, attention turned toward three other suspects: Sunil Tripathi, Salaheddin Barhoum, and Yassine Zaimi.[7] Like Alharbi, the FBI later cleared these three of charges; Tripathi, it turns out, had gone missing before the bombing and, after the police found his body, they determined that he "had been dead for weeks" prior to the marathon.[8] Two things are noteworthy here: first, in the rush to find the person or people responsible for the attack, law enforcement officials mistakenly had identified several false leads. Second, although the assumption that Muslims had conducted the bombings later turned out to be correct, it led to racial profiling that falsely identified and negatively affected several individuals who turned out to be innocent.

As law enforcement officials cleared these suspects, the actual bombers remained at large. With the city and much of the nation anxiously awaiting more details, the search for the bombers continued over the next few days. Three days after the bombing, on the morning of Thursday, April 18, the police released surveillance images of two men known as "Black Hat" and "White Hat," both of whom were carrying backpacks.[9] The images were grainy and taken from bad angles, which made it difficult to identify the suspects.[10] As police struggled to figure out who "Black Hat" and "White Hat" were, important breaks in the case came that same night, when two brothers, later identified as Tamerlan and Dzhokhar ("Jahar") Tsarnaev, shot and killed MIT police officer Sean

Collier and later carjacked an SUV. The SUV’s owner, who managed to escape the vehicle, claimed that Tamerlan confessed to him that he perpetrated the bombing in order to coerce him into abandoning the vehicle. During a shootout with police, Dzhokhar drove the SUV toward the officers who had managed to tackle Tamerlan. As one of the officers at the scene describes it, the vehicle “raced at 35 or 40 miles per hour right at them,” and the officers moved out of the way as Dzhokhar ran over his older brother and then escaped.[11] Tamerlan died early the next morning from injuries sustained by police fire and the SUV while Dzhokhar went missing.

Shortly thereafter, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick ordered a lockdown, which “affected more than 930,000 people across six neighborhoods” and shut down the city’s transportation systems as police searched for Dzhokhar.[12] During the lockdown, a worker in a South Boston public relations office ironically described the quiet streets by saying “the town is just dead,” an eerie observation, given what had just occurred a few days earlier.[13] Even hospitals locked down and wouldn’t let staff members or patients leave.[14]

The next day, police found the younger Tsarnaev brother hiding under a boat in suburban Watertown after receiving a call from the boat’s owner. After another gunfight, SWAT teams managed to capture Tsarnaev and transport him to a nearby hospital. While in custody there, Tsarnaev reportedly told officials that the marathon bombing was one of several possible attacks that he and his brother had considered. According to reports, they had originally planned a July 4 attack but moved their plans up “because they completed building bombs more quickly than they had originally anticipated.”[15] Additionally, he explained that because they were not captured right away, they “planned to drive to New

York with their remaining arsenal of explosives and launch an attack on Times Square."[16] Tsarnaev's statements show that not only are detection and prevention difficult for law enforcement, but also that perpetrators who live through their attacks and remain undetected can continue to pose a threat.

With one brother dead and the other in custody, new details emerged about their story, and people began to speculate about their motives. Once the media reported that the brothers were of Chechen descent, some suggested that they acted out of solidarity with Chechen separatists seeking independence from Russia, especially since the Chechen fight for independence made headlines worldwide in the 1990s after a series of violent incidents. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov quickly tried to deny any links between the Tsarnaev brothers and the fight for independence, contending that "any attempt to make a link between Chechnya and the Tsarnaevs, if they are guilty, is in vain. They grew up in the US, [*sic*] their views and beliefs were formed there. The roots of evil must be searched for in America."[17] Reports confirmed that the brothers, while of Chechen descent on their father's side, had grown up mostly in Kyrgyzstan and the United States, spending only a little time in the southern region of Russia that includes Chechnya and neighboring Dagestan, where their mother grew up.

The message that Tsarnaev allegedly wrote in the boat where he was hiding hinted at a different motive. According to the indictment against him, Tsarnaev:

> wrote a message on an inside wall and beams of the boat that said (among other things): "The U.S. Government is killing our innocent civilians;" "I can't stand to see such evil go unpunished;" "We Muslims are one body, you hurt one you hurt us all;" "Now I don't like killing innocent people it is forbidden in Islam but due

> to said [unintelligible] it is allowed;" and "Stop killing our innocent people and we will stop."[18]

Prosecutors also alleged that Tsarnaev's internet history included downloaded materials from jihadi websites, including articles from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine, a web forum called At-Tibyan, and elsewhere.[19] The first issue of *Inspire* contains an article called "How to Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom," which "includes instructions on how to build IEDs using pressure cookers or sections of pipe, explosive powder from fireworks, and shrapnel, among other things."[20] This and subsequent evidence presented at the trial suggested that the brothers had acted in resistance to U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the "War on Terror." Consequently, politicians, journalists, and lawyers framed the bombing as an act of terrorism.

On June 27, 2013, the U.S. government indicted the surviving Tsarnaev brother on thirty counts of terrorism-related charges, most revolving around the "possession and use of a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence" and the "use of a weapon of mass destruction."[21] Seventeen of these counts carried a possible death sentence. Notably, the U.S. government charged Charleston shooter Dylann Roof, who killed more people than the Tsarnaev brothers and claimed that he had hoped to start a "race war," not with terrorism, but rather with a hate crime.[22] Although charges against Tsarnaev and Roof both carry possible death sentences, "terrorism" and "hate crime" connote two different things. U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch recently announced that the government would seek the death penalty for Roof, but he still awaits a trial and sentencing.[23] Meanwhile, while Orlando shooter Omar Mateen is dead, his alleged declaration of allegiance to ISIS and targeting of a gay nightclub make his actions difficult to classify.[24] In his national eulogy for the victims of the Orlando shooting, President Obama declared that the shooting at the Pulse nightclub was "an act of terrorism but it was also an act of hate."[25]

Tsarnaev, on the other hand, survived his attack and his trial occurred roughly two years after the bombing. The trial proceeded in two stages, one to determine guilt or innocence and another to determine whether Tsarnaev would receive life in prison or the death penalty. Judy Clarke—a high-profile defense lawyer known for her staunch opposition to the death penalty and for her previous defenses of clients like Susan Smith, Ted Kaczynski, Eric Rudolph, Zacarias Moussaoui, and Jared Lee Loughner—would represent Tsarnaev.[26] The prosecution called over 150 witnesses and provided all kinds of evidence against the two brothers, including surveillance pictures and videos, purchase receipts, pieces of weapons, autopsy reports, testimony, e-mail exchanges, internet histories, and even social media posts, much of which the *Boston Globe* released to its readers via an interactive database.[27] Despite Tsarnaev's "not guilty" plea, even Clarke conceded that "it was him" to the jury and said during her closing statements at the first stage of trial that the defense team was not asking the jury "to go easy on Jahar."[28] On April 8, 2015, the jury convicted him on all thirty counts. Just over a month later, on May 15, the same jury sentenced him to death.

This account, which resulted in Tamerlan Tsarnaev's death and his brother's capture, trial, and sentencing, may seem like a clear, definitive account of the Boston Marathon bombing and its aftermath. Within this account, however, there are still some unresolved questions. For starters, like the action rhetorics around the Sandy Hook shooting, some people do not accept the narrative that the Tsarnaev brothers could have carried out this attack on their own. Just like after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, conspiracy theories have followed the Boston Marathon bombing. Gessen lists several of them at the end of her book on the subject. One such theory suggests that the Russian Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (FSB) enticed the Tsarnaev brothers to set off bombs in Boston in order to reposition Chechen separatism as a threat in order to justify a Russian security crackdown before the 2014 Sochi Olympics.[29] Another one, drawing mainly upon the city shutdown, suggests that the FBI might have prompted it "in order to test the agency's ability to impose martial law in America."[30] In the latter case, Gessen concedes that she finds the explanations of FBI motives to be "the weak part of the theory" and that the evidence conspiracy theorists provide for it seem "nitpicky and hardly worth repeating.[31]

Nevertheless, she posits her own conspiracy theory about a botched sting operation, in which Tamerlan, who also dealt marijuana, worked as an informant for the FBI and/or the Watertown Police Department for a while in order to break up a drug ring before going rogue and deciding on the bombing plot.[32] Noting the FBI tipoff about Tamerlan Tsarnaev from the Russian FSB and the FBI's limited follow-up, similarities between two uninvestigated drug-related homicides (one that took three of Tamerlan's friends and one that took a former Watertown police officer), the mysterious death of another of Tamerlan's friends at the hands of the FBI shortly after the bombing, and skepticism about whether, how, and how quickly the brothers had radicalized, Gessen suggests that the FBI and the media presented citizens with false or misleading narratives.

Unlike the Sandy Hook shooting conspiracy theorists, Gessen does not deny that the event itself took place, even if she calls into question key details of the U.S.

government's story. Moreover, like Clarke, Gessen does not deny *that* Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev carried out the bombing, but she finds the state's alleged reasons *why* they did so suspect. She contends that:

> [T]he difficulty of making sense of their story occurs sometime before Jahar's non-confession confession[33] and has only a little to do with the lack of a clear picture of the steps they took to manufacture and plant the bombs. What is truly lacking from the story is a clear and accessible explanation for how two young men who appear to be very much like hundreds of *thousands* of other young men came to cause carnage in the center of their own city.[34]

To her, and to others who share her skepticism, the story of Tamerlan and Dzhokhar self-radicalizing toward jihad after living a mostly secular life seems implausible. It is more reasonable, in her estimation, that the FBI had both something to hide and the ability to cover its tracks. Despite the evidence allegedly found on their computers, Dzhokhar's note inside David Henneberry's boat, and testimony from those who knew them, Gessen finds it implausible that two young stoner brothers, the younger of whom seemed to be adjusting well academically and socially to life in the United States, could quickly develop both the desire and the know-how to build pressure cooker bombs to deploy at the marathon.

Critics reviewing the book have praised Gessen for her ability to provide a clearer picture of the Tsarnaev family's story and others close to them but criticized her for promoting conspiracy theories in the last two chapters. In a review for the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani wrote that Gessen's "background would seem to make her an ideal author for this story: an immigrant, she was a Russian-speaking teenager when she moved with her parents to the Boston area, and she later returned to Russia to report on the transformative changes rocking the former Soviet Union and the wars in Chechnya in the 1990s."[35] Kakutani added that the book "spends a lot of time describing conspiracy theories that hovered around the case . . . without providing persuasive evidence to support them."[36] Similarly, Janet Napolitano calls most of the book "straightforward and captivating" up until its conspiracy theory turn, which she describes as "laughable."[37] Of course, such reviews likely will not dissuade conspiracy theorists. Despite Kakutani's concerns about evidence and proof, a major part of why conspiracy theories work is because they prey upon missing details or contradictions in the available evidence. Moreover, when it comes to Napolitano's critique, conspiracy theorists are unlikely to accept the words of the woman acting as Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security at the time of the bombing at face value.

For those who accept the standard narrative, the story of the Tsarnaev brothers turning to jihad helps establish rhetorics of causality and prevention. In Napolitano's words, "when we understand better what causes young men like Tamerlan and Dzhokhar to commit such acts, we will know better how to prevent them."[38] But will we, really? Those seeking to understand why and how the Tsarnaev brothers turned to radical Islam and violence remain largely puzzled. After the bombings, many friends, family members, and community members seemed surprised that the brothers would do something like this. Moreover, even a lead from the FSB about Tamerlan and early FBI visits did not prevent this attack. More importantly, however, in the case of self-radicalization and "lone wolf terrorism," what happens in one case often fails to apply to others, and detection and prevention are difficult, if not impossible, to carry out.

For those who reject the dominant government and media narratives, conspiracy theories cast doubt upon the actions of the U.S. or Russian governments and their role in the "War on Terror." Such criticism could go in several different directions. Those concerned with secrecy, surveillance, and unchecked government power could use FBI failings or allegations of a cover-up to push for more transparency from the government and for limiting government surveillance and control of citizens. Those already hostile to the United States or Russia could use the Tsarnaev case as additional evidence to support their perspective. In either case, it is unclear exactly what the end goals of these conspiracy theories might be or how likely they are to generate change.

Regardless of whether people accept or reject the government and media's narratives about the Tsarnaev brothers' self-radicalization, other definitional issues about what to call the event also raise implications for framing and making sense of the event. Writers for the *New York Times* called the bombing "the worst terrorist attack on American soil since Sept. 11, 2001."[39] Napolitano declared that "there is no episode more disturbing and disruptive in Boston's history" than the 2013 marathon bombing. While undoubtedly a disturbing event, statements like these reveal some questionable assumptions behind the impulse to reach grand conclusions. At the stasis of value, by what criteria can they conclude that the marathon bombings are the "worst"? Number of casualties? If so, the three victims killed in the blast, Officer Sean Collier, and perhaps Tamerlan and Dzhokhar (if he is executed), make six, but what about Nidal Hasan, who killed thirteen and injured thirty at Fort Hood in 2009? Better yet, moving away from the common conception of the Muslim terrorist, what about attacks committed by Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech, Jared Lee Loughner in Tucson, James Holmes in Aurora, Adam

Lanza in Newtown, or Dylann Roof in Charleston? Are they not “terrorists” as well? Or, in the case of events in Boston, is the bombing more “disturbing and disruptive,” to use Napolitano’s words, than the Boston Massacre, the Battle of Bunker Hill, or the Great Fire of 1872?

Extreme statements about the “worst” attack amplify what happened at the 2013 Boston Marathon. By doing so, they uncritically follow the impulse to ask whether each new event constitutes the “worst” one, an impulse that some have argued is problematic. Writing shortly after the Sandy Hook shooting, Northeastern Professor James Alan Fox wrote an op-ed for *USA Today*, in which he argued that “there is no purpose in looking for record-setting. Does the pain and suffering associated with the Sandy Hook shooting change in any way if it were the largest in history? Would that make this episode any more significant or tragic?”[40] How people frame the events influences how they respond to and remember them. Careful attention to language helps members of various publics understand and respond to each event in its own context rather than rushing to judgments about its place in history or whether it was “worse” than any other event.

Like the action rhetorics surrounding the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, action rhetorics after the Boston Marathon bombing were far from clear or simple. At the stasis of fact or conjecture, conspiracy rhetorics coming from both incidents show skepticism of dominant government and media narratives. At the stasis of definition, important fights occur over who constitutes a “victim” and what counts as “terrorism” matter greatly. At the stasis of causes and consequences, both resulted in great pain, regardless of whether mental illness, ideology, or something else is to blame. However, in this case, reaction rhetorics dealing with the line between reaction and overreaction, underreaction, or inaction show how memories of 9/11 and the “War on Terror” played a large role in shaping how politicians, law enforcement officials, lawyers, journalists, and citizens framed and responded to the bombing both in the United States and in other countries.

Due Process and Reaction Rhetorics

In terms of reaction rhetorics, many of the concerns following this case had to do with matters of due process under the Fifth Amendment. Figuring out what exactly “due process” means, in many cases, but particularly in cases related to the “War on Terror,” is neither clear nor straightforward. Who gets labeled a “terrorist,” who gets to do the labeling, what rights “terrorists” possess, and what legal protections, if any, they should have are often controversial. In the Tsarnaev case, for example, Senators Kelly Ayotte, Lesley Graham, and John McCain called for the U.S. government to try Dzhokhar Tsarnaev as an enemy combatant.[41] Doing so would have placed him in a military rather than civilian court, and by their estimation, would have led to better intelligence. The *Boston Globe* editorial board disagreed, arguing that there was “no evidence that Tsarnaev . . . was part of Al Qaeda or an affiliated group” and that, as a U.S. citizen captured on U.S. soil, “he no more meets the legal definition of ‘enemy combatant’ than James Holmes, the man awaiting trial for allegedly killing 12 in a mass shooting in Aurora.”[42] Regardless of who won that debate, due process ultimately comes down to questions of fairness, but, as a question of value, what is “fair” depends on other tough questions like “to whom” and “under what circumstances” and “why” and “how do we know?”

Matters of due process have plagued the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, both the narrow legal sense and more broadly construed as matters of fairness that go beyond the law. Moving chronologically, it makes sense to begin with the more metaphorical case of "due process" with Tamerlan Tsarnaev. Because his brother allegedly ran him over during the shootout in Watertown, due process in the legal-judicial sense was not a concern with Tamerlan.[43] However, thinking abstractly of what process might be "due" him led to a difficult fight over what to do with his body. After the shootout, authorities transferred him to Graham Putnam & Mahoney Funeral Parlors in Worcester, Massachusetts. Once there, Tamerlan's remains generated several challenges for the funeral home's owner, Peter A. Stefan. For starters, though perhaps the least of Stefan's problems, Tsarnaev's wife, Katherine (Karima) Russell Tsarnaeva, chose not to gather her husband's remains and turned over burial responsibilities to his family. Ruslan Tsarni, the brothers' uncle, claimed the body, but he and Stefan struggled to find a place that would accept Tamerlan's body for burial. A week after Tamerlan's body had arrived at the funeral home, the *Boston Globe* reported that Stefan was having a hard time finding a permanent home for it, as "the cities of Cambridge and Boston and cemeteries in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey refused to accept Tsarnaev's remains."[44] In a *New York Times* article, Tsarni expressed that "a dead person needs to be buried—that's what tradition requires, that's what religion requires, that's what morals require."[45]

Others disagreed. Not only did Stefan struggle to find a place willing to bury Tamerlan, but people expressed their anger that Stefan had agreed to take the body in the first place. Protesters outside of the funeral parlor threatened that if Stefan or anyone were to "bury this terrorist on U.S. soil" that they would "unbury him."[46] Eventually, police came in to guard the funeral parlor and its staff.[47] After hearing about the story on *NPR*, a Virginia woman decided to offer some help. Martha Mullen explained that she could not “see what good it does to stand outside and protest against a dead body. It’s an exercise in hatred and bigotry.”[48] The protesters and Mullen clearly had different interpretations of what would be appropriate to do with the body. After concluding that the protests had “portrayed America at its worst,” she decided to contact the Islamic Funeral Services of Virginia, which found a cemetery willing to take the body. Tamerlan Tsarnaev is buried at Al-Barzakh cemetery in Doswell, Virginia.[49] While not a legal due-process issue, this incident demonstrates other challenges that often accompany “terrorism” cases, particularly since similar protests did not accompany the remains of Adam Lanza and Elliot Rodger.

Meanwhile, matters of legal due process complicated his brother’s trial. Two primary concerns involved time and space. In terms of time, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s defense team protested that the prosecution presented documents late and that doing so did not allow the defense team adequate time to process them. Moreover, reporters for the *New York Times* pointed out the “unusual speed” with which this case went to trial, noting that it moved “more quickly than 99 of the 119 federal death penalty cases that have gone to trial in the last decade.”[50] Tsarnaev’s lawyers requested that the trial be pushed back from January to September, but the judge denied their request. Several critics of the move also pointed out that the trial would likely overlap with the two-year anniversary of the bombing on April 15.[51] Concerned that a rushed trial with fresh memories of the bombing would not be fair, critics urged Judge George O’Toole to move the trial to a later date.

Others took issue with where the trial would take place. Despite precedent from Timothy McVeigh's trial after the Oklahoma City bombing, Judge O'Toole determined that it did not violate due process to hold the trial in the same state, and even the same city, as the bombing. In that case, Judge Richard Matsch determined that trying McVeigh in Oklahoma would be unfair and moved the trial to Colorado. Critics raised many objections to O'Toole's decision to hold Tsarnaev's trial in Boston. For instance, in an op-ed to the *Boston Globe*, Elizabeth Lunt and Michael Hussey from the Massachusetts Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers argued that:

> Boston and the people of Boston were personally affected by the Marathon bombings—everyone who ever attended a Marathon; everyone who ever cheered as a friend or relative ran the race; everyone who watched the events on television. And even if the Marathon itself did not have an impact on every man, woman, and child in Boston and its environs, the pursuit and capture of the defendant did. Metropolitan Boston was shut down.

With the bombing so close in both time and space, critics maintained that Tsarnaev could not reasonably receive a fair trial.

Another concern, though perhaps a more inevitable one, had to do with process of death penalty jury selection. Several critics took issue with the fact that jurors had to be "death qualified," meaning that those who were not at least open to the death penalty in the abstract were automatically excluded.[52] Writing for *Cognoscenti*, a project from radio station *WBUR*, Carol Rose argued that as "these jurors were . . . not representative of all of Boston, not a fair cross-section of our community. Rather, they were a fair cross-section of those who believe in the death penalty, and assured the court that they could impose it."[53] Although her concern about fair representation may have some merit, she and others miss the point that death penalty convictions in the United States must be unanimous, and therefore a single juror who is categorically opposed to the death penalty, as opposed to open to it in context, would guarantee that the death penalty would not be an option. Unless advocating for an alternative (i.e. a majority vote, which also raises issues of fairness), the concern here seems overstated.

Despite these concerns, others argued that this case met the standard of due process.[54] Also writing for *Cognoscenti*, Erin Dionne, a potential juror who was not selected for the Tsarnaev trial, described her experience and the conclusions she drew from it. After describing the twenty-three-page survey she had to fill out during *voir dire*, Dionne remarked:

> I empathize with every person selected. No matter what they decide, there's a group out there who will vilify them for their decision. There's been a lot written about the pool; a lot of glib remarks about 'idiots' and people 'skipping' out of the courtroom. But these are your neighbors. Your friends. Your coworkers. No one has asked to be there. No one volunteered. No one is an 'idiot.' These people are more than what you see on a survey or in a soundbite. To reduce them to two-dimensional cutouts is naïve and does all of us a disservice. Instead, thank them for putting their lives on hold. Thank them for doing their best to get it right. For participating in the process. And wish them luck, logic, and strength for what they will see and the burden they will carry.[55]

Because of the process that she went through and the stakes involved, Dionne seems convinced that the jurors were qualified of making well-informed and rational decisions. Nevertheless, the previous concerns about time, place, and representation still remain.

To the extent that opinion polls accurately reflect public opinion,[56] polls conducted between the first and second phases of the trial regarding what citizens thought would constitute an appropriate punishment for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev indicate a fascinating divide based on proximity to the site of the crime. Given the shock value of witnessing the crime firsthand, the possibility of having some connection to the victims, or, at the very least, being surrounded by stories of the bombing in its aftermath, it normally would make sense to expect Bostonians to be most in favor of the death penalty, followed by Massachusetts residents, followed by the nation as a whole. In fact, just the opposite occurred. On the national level, a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll found that 70 percent of respondents supported giving Tsarnaev the death penalty.[57] By contrast, on the state and city levels, the *Boston Globe* found that just under nineteen percent of Massachusetts residents, and just under 15 percent of Bostonians, supported the death penalty in this case.[58]

What accounts for such a drastic divide? Journalists and the analysts they interviewed offered several explanations. One explanation was that Massachusetts residents by-and-large are more inclined to oppose the death penalty than to support it. The state officially abolished the death penalty in 1984 and prior to that had not executed a prisoner since 1947.[59] Moving up a level of abstraction from this particular case to a more general opinion, the *Boston Globe* poll found that only about 30 percent of Massachusetts residents supported the death penalty in general for "heinous crimes."[60]

Meanwhile, an article from the *New York Times* explains that one of the major delays in selecting a jury for the case was that it was difficult to find jurors from Massachusetts who neither supported nor opposed the death penalty.[61] Following this explanation, one might conclude that, despite the severity of Tsarnaev's crimes, a majority Massachusetts residents saw the death penalty as an overreaction for any number of possible reasons: the fact that he was only nineteen years old when he committed the crime, sympathy generated by the defense's narrative that he acted primarily under the influence of his older brother, the total costs of the execution process as opposed to keeping him in prison, concerns that execution by the state could turn him into a martyr, or other explanations like the generally leftist politics in Massachusetts or Catholic opposition to the death penalty. Indeed, when the *Boston Globe*, *New York Times,* and *USA Today* allowed user-generated comments responding to the sentencing phase of the trial, different readers who opposed the jury's decision provided each of these reasons to back their positions.[62]

While these lines of argument suggest that Boston and Massachusetts residents were perhaps more sympathetic than the rest of the nation, an alternative explanation suggests the opposite. Some of those who opposed the death penalty explained that they did so not because they saw it as an overreaction, but rather as an underreaction to Tsarnaev's crimes. Frank Perullo, the president of the company that conducted the *Boston Globe* poll, speculated that "voters seem to be concluding [that] the supermax prison, where he will potentially be spending his days living an isolated lifestyle worse than Dante could imagine, is a more fitting and harsher penalty than death itself."[63] If sent to the ADX Supermax Prison in Colorado, Tsarnaev would be locked in a single cell for twenty-three hours a day with no contact with members of the media and only two fifteen-minute phone calls with immediate family members each month.[64] His own lawyers argued that "being put to death would not be punishment enough."[65] Some who opposed the death penalty in this case likely saw life in prison as a harsher sentence.

Aside from the difficult question of which punishment most appropriately fits the crime, other issues were also at stake in the sentencing phase. Another common issue with death penalty cases has to do with whether and to what extent the death penalty can bring closure to those directly and indirectly affected by the event. In the *USA Today* forum, reader Christos Gerasopoulos wrote that "if anyone who lost a loved one wants Tsarnaev dead, then he should die. Terrorists are trying to kill us. The benefit of a little closure, and even vengeance, for victims' family members outweighs any increased threat that might come our way if Tsarnaev is executed."[66] Indeed, there was at least one person who seemed to fit Gerasopoulos's description: Krystle Campbell's father, William Campbell, told the *Boston Globe* that he thought that "the system worked and the jury did their job"[67] Although he later added that peace and closure "won't come for some time," he also said that "he hopes the trial's end will bring some peace to the families that still suffer, and to the amputees who face their losses daily."[68] Others who did not lose loved ones but were severely injured in the blasts expressed similar sentiments. Richard Donahue, who was injured in the shootout in Watertown, said that "the verdict, undoubtedly a difficult decision for the jury, gives me relief and closure as well as the ability to keep moving forward."[69] Put more bluntly, another injured victim told the *Boston Globe* that she was "thrilled with the verdict."[70]

Others, however, were less than thrilled. One victim expressed that the verdict "doesn't bring me peace" but instead "brings sadness and cause to reflect, again, on just how senseless all of the deaths and injuries resulting from this situation are."[71] Another explained that she has to "watch my two sons put on a leg every day. So I don't know about closure. But I can tell you it feels like a weight has been lifted of my shoulders."[72] Although some victims clearly wanted Tsarnaev dead, others were either ambivalent or even opposed to that outcome. Perhaps the most direct challenge to Gerasopoulos's argument, however, came as an op-ed written by Bill and Denise Richard. The Richards were perhaps most commonly known as the parents of eight-year-old victim Martin Richard. However, the explosion that took their younger son took other things from them as well. Their older son, Henry, escaped from the blast with minor injuries, but Bill lost both of his eardrums and suffered second- and third-degree burns, Denise had gone blind in her right eye, and their daughter Jane lost her left leg.[73] If anyone had grievances with Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, it was the Richard family.

And yet, shortly before the jury would decide Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's fate, Bill and Denise Richard published an op-ed in the *Boston Globe* asking them to choose life for him. Why? For them, a death sentence for Tsarnaev would mean more of a beginning than an end, as death penalty cases in the United States often come with years of appeals. Although a death sentence sounds both final and immediate, sentencing Tsarnaev to death on May 15 does not mean executing him on May 16. Death penalty experts told the *New York Times* that it could take more than ten years of new trials before Tsarnaev is executed, if he is at all. For the Richard family, each appeal by Tsarnaev's defense team will generate inevitable media attention and remind them of what he took from them. "As long as the defendant is in the spotlight," they explained, "we have no choice but to live a story told on his terms, not ours."[74] For the sake of putting Tsarnaev out of sight and out of mind, they called for the Justice Department to negotiate life in prison in exchange for Tsarnaev waiving his rights to an appeal. A few days later, Jessica Kensky and Patrick Downes joined the Richards, arguing that life in prison would be the best way to ensure that Tsarnaev "disappears from our collective consciousness as soon as possible."[75]

Though ultimately unsuccessful in persuading the Justice Department or the jury not to issue the death penalty, their appeals still made a powerful statement. In the *New York Times* forum responding to the sentence, a writer from Buffalo, NY, wrote:

> When the parents of the 8-year-old boy who was killed, Martin Richard, asked for life in prison rather than the death penalty in order to avoid the long, drawn-out and inevitable appeals process, that clinched it for me. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev may deserve the death penalty, but the victims, their families, and the rest of the country deserve to move on, live life, forget about this bad man, and not waste millions of dollars on appeals and perhaps decades of dredging up the ugly details.[76]

Victims' objections to a death sentence test whether the converse of Gerasopolous's claim also holds. In other words, if anyone who lost a loved one wants Tsarnaev alive, then should he live?

As it turns out, concerns about Tsarnaev's appeals were not unfounded. On the day that the jury issued the death penalty for Tsarnaev, the *Boston Globe* ran a political cartoon by Dan Wasserman with an image of the finish line tape on Boylston Street with flowers and a single running shoe. Behind the finish line, additional lines say "appeal,"

"appeal of appeals," and "more appeals."[77] In other words, while the sentence might seem like an end to the story, it is not over yet. On August 17, 2015, Tsarnaev's defense team submitted an appeal on several grounds, including the fairness of conducting the trial in Boston, the influence of media publicity on the jury, and even the constitutionality of the death penalty itself.[78] Despite the hope that death penalty supporters had that the sentence would finally bring a sense of closure, the possibility of appeals means that Tsarnaev likely will not be executed for a long time, if he is even executed at all.

"Boston Strong" Public Memory

Of course, not all of the responses to the Boston Marathon bombing took place in the realm of law. Bostonians also found some consolation through public memory practices. In a sea of blue and yellow ribbons, T-shirts, bracelets, not to mention social media hashtags, the phrase "Boston Strong" became so widespread that a *Boston Globe* writer suggested calling it "the city's post-disaster brand."[79] Whereas Newtown by-and-large has resisted efforts to preserve public memory, Boston cannot seem to get enough of it. Newtown, unsure what to do with the massive influx of donations, exported its perishable teddy bears and other perishables from makeshift memorials to a warehouse in East Hartford; Boston sent its makeshift memorial items to be cleaned, fumigated, and stored in indoor, temperature-controlled rooms to preserve for posterity.[80]

Though the process involved removing plant debris, sand, mold spores, and even bugs from artifacts like clothing, shoes, posters, photos, and letters, workers from the Boston Public Library, Boston City Archives, and Northeastern University's "Our Marathon" project have worked hard to clean, catalogue, store, and even digitize artifacts from the makeshift memorial at Copley Square and donations from elsewhere. The "Our Marathon" project, which won a 2013 international award for the Best Digital Humanities Project for Public Audiences, insists that "no story is too small for Our Marathon."[81] Between its repeated calls of "never forget" and the piles of shoes, the memorials in Boston more closely resemble the anamnesis of Holocaust museums than the amnesia in Newtown.

A seemingly minor but particularly poignant event that took place around the one-year anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombing shows just how pervasive memory of the bombing has become. The 2014-2015 winter in Boston was a particularly miserable one. During a bad blizzard in January 2015, a mysterious figure shoveled only the finish line on Boylston Street, leaving the rest of the area covered in snow. Later identified as local bartender Chris Laudani, who told *ESPN* that he "didn't want to be called a hero," the "Boston Shoveler" became a minor celebrity.[82] Philip Hillman, who originally posted the picture on Twitter in order to identify Laudani, said that "for us, the finish line has become sacred ground. When I looked out there and saw that, I thought, 'How cool is that?' I love my city. It just was like, Boston is strong, and even the storm couldn't stop us."[83] The story shows that virtually anything can be repurposed into a reminder of the marathon and a symbol of strength and resilience.

Unlike Newtown, Boston seems to have a near-obsession with its memory of targeted violence. One explanation might be that the larger connection to the "War on Terror" fits better into national memory. Another might be that the idea of Boston Strong, especially as sports teams have appropriated it, reimagines an awful event into a symbol of unity and pride. Yet another might be that Boston is a much larger and more historic city, so memorials, ceremonies, and archives do not have quite the intrusive, overbearing presence that they might have on those who wish to forget the event that they might in a place like Newtown.

Then again, there is one advantage that Newtown has over Boston: the power to reject anniversaries. This is not to say that the residents of Newtown do not spend every 12/14 thinking of the victims of the shooting, but they can resist undesired anniversary ceremonies. Short of canceling the event entirely, the marathon will continue to serve as a reminder of what happened in 2013, even if the city moves it to another date or location. Though the Bill, Denise, Jane, and Henry Richard attended the first anniversary of the bombing,[84] Bill lamented that it was "unfortunate that Martin didn't die in a car accident on a random night. . . . Martin died at the Boston Marathon. The Marathon is going to happen every year, and it's going to be public, whether we like it or not."[85] Thus, despite their very different treatments of objects and spaces, both Newtown and Boston still experience what Jenny Edkins calls "trauma time."[86] Despite the rejection of anniversary ceremonies in Newtown and the widespread efforts to remember the marathon constantly in Boston, both will periodically return to the event, at predictable moments and unpredictable ones, as time goes on.

Comparing and contrasting memorial practices in Newtown and Boston shows two extremes of public memory practices in the aftermath of targeted violence. Newtown leaders and residents have tried to erase what Kendall Phillips has termed "the publicness of memory" while Bostonians have done whatever they can to preserve it.[87] As a result, Newtown has so far resisted Doss's "memorial mania" while Bostonians are perhaps a prime example of it.[88] It is hard to predict which practices different communities will choose following an incident of targeted violence, but from these two examples, it is clear that “the memory of publics” can take communities in wildly different directions. What might work in large, urban areas like Boston might not work in smaller, rural areas like Newtown. Moreover, what works in Boston in 2013 might not work in Boston at some other time. For that matter, whatever seems to have “worked” in any of these places was still controversial, at least somewhat impulsive, and far from perfect, if not downright flawed.

Resisting Heterotopic Ossification

Many of the descriptions of and responses to the Boston Marathon bombing show a kind of public heterotopic ossification that the post-9/11 United States is experiencing. The heterotopic part exists in the label “terrorism” itself. “Terrorism” sets apart acts of targeted violence committed by Muslims from other acts of targeted violence committed by non-Muslims. By doing so, it frames the events in relation to the 9/11 attacks in ways that allow for profiling, detention, and mistreatment. Moreover, it places small-scale attacks in line with the much larger, more memorable attack from 2001 and in order to magnify their character. Double-standards that apply to those labeled “terrorists” but not to other perpetrators of targeted violence show the hypocrisy of government and citizens alike.

Meanwhile, once the government, journalists, and citizens label an event as terrorism, it justifies behaviors that might not be justified in other cases of targeted violence. Matters of due process, whether legal or otherwise, take on a different meaning when “targeted violence” becomes “terrorism.” Government actions that otherwise occur mostly in the imaginative fiction of Hollywood movies, like shutting down a major city, become justifiable. Labeling an event as “terrorism” elicits certain kinds of responses to targeted violence perpetrated by Muslims. If politicians, journalists, and citizens wish to resist heterotopic ossification, then resistance ought to begin with a generic redefinition.

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Chapter 4: Viral Emptiness and Empty Virality after the Isla Vista Attack

In an interview shortly after the Isla Vista attack, *NPR*'s Brooke Gladstone asked digital activist Deanna Zandt, "does it take a hashtag to start this kind of conversation? And then, what do you expect it to achieve?"[1] The two were talking about Zandt's Tumblr page, "When Women Refuse," and the similar social media hashtag #YesAllWomen. "When Women Refuse" and #YesAllWomen both emerged shortly after the Isla Vista attack as responses to the perpetrator's misogyny. Although previous attacks also generated plenty of conversations on social media, the internet played a particularly important role in this attack and the responses to it. As a result, the Isla Vista attack and the responses it generated raise questions about how social media practices affect their users' understandings of and responses to targeted violence.

As a starting point for exploring the promises and perils of social media responses to targeted violence, I turn to Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*. Drawing upon Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which laments the twentieth-century decline of voluntary associations and the weakening of social ties in the United States, Turkle's *Alone Together* describes how twenty-first century technologies, particularly robotic companions and social media, cause those who use them to "expect more from technology and less from each other."[2] She contends that "these days, whether you are online or not, it is easy for people to end up unsure if they are closer together or further apart."[3] New media facilitate the rapid and widespread sharing of information, but much of that information is shallow. Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and related technological platforms might make their users feel more connected, and in many cases can strengthen existing social ties or even create new ones, but much of what takes place on social media consists of surface level interactions.

Turkle rejects what she calls “triumphalist” and “apocalyptic” narratives about technological progress, but her position between the two nevertheless is critical of how technology facilitates the development of shallow relationships and expectations of quick-fix solutions to problems.[4] With regard to targeted violence, “triumphalist” accounts might praise social media’s ability to help people spread information, discuss difficult topics, build solidarity, and try to heal. At the same time, “apocalyptic” accounts might criticize how social media also can spread misinformation, traumatize and retraumatize social media users, cordon off individuals from those with whom they disagree, and inhibit dialogue. Social media responses to targeted violence not only make it difficult to tell whether users are closer together or further apart, but also call into question whether their responses to targeted violence are more or less healthy than they were before Facebook and Twitter.

One manifestation of being “alone together” occurs through virality. When something on the internet “goes viral,” it spreads rapidly to a wide audience, just like many viral illnesses. Often hailed as a kind of gold standard by marketers, journalists, and others who seek to reach large audiences, social media posts that “go viral” signify power, influence, and often profit. On the one hand, virality brings many people together quickly. On the other hand, these people only “come together” in a very shallow, minimally interactive way. Although the exact threshold of virality is indeterminate and depends upon context, responses to targeted violence often go viral. Worse yet, as the widely circulated video of former news reporter Vester Lee Flanagan II’s on-air shooting of two of his former colleagues shows, images of targeted violence themselves can go viral.

The incident I discuss in this chapter, Elliot Rodger's attack in Isla Vista, California, preceded Flanagan's shooting by a little over a year, but responses to the Isla Vista attack also show the dark side of virality. More specifically, responses to the Isla Vista attack exemplify viral emptiness and empty virality. As an extreme manifestation of being "alone together," viral emptiness describes the process by which individual feelings of loneliness spread rapidly to a large audience. By contrast, empty virality describes the promises of counter-violence social media campaigns and the obstacles that interfere with those promises. Put together, viral emptiness and empty virality show the challenges of digital responses to targeted violence.

Action Rhetorics about the Isla Vista Attack

He called it the Day of Retribution. On May 23, 2014, twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger stabbed his two roommates and one of their friends to death in their apartment. A few hours and a Starbucks vanilla latte later, he uploaded a series of videos to YouTube and e-mailed a 137-page manifesto to his parents and therapist shortly before driving to the Alpha Phi sorority house at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He pounded on the door for almost two minutes, but nobody answered. Outside of the sorority house, he shot and killed two young women from the Tri Delta sorority and injured a third. From there, he drove to nearby vacant building and fired shots into it, shot and killed a young man standing outside a market, and continued to drive around the streets of Isla Vista, trying to shoot and run over pedestrians and bikers in his BMW. The second part of his attack took less than ten minutes.[5] His parents, Peter and Chin Rodger, raced toward the scene, but they were too late to stop their son. By the time they arrived, their son had killed six people and wounded another fourteen before taking his own life.[6]

The YouTube videos mostly described rejection from his peers, especially from women. In one video, he declared, "I'm sexually attracted to girls, but girls are not sexually attracted to me. . . . I will not let this fly. It's an injustice that needs to be dealt with."[7] In another one, he admitted that much of his frustration came from being a twenty-two-year-old virgin who had "never had the pleasure of having sex with a girl, sleeping with a girl, [or even] kissing a girl."[8] In another, he suggested that "when you hit puberty, your life either becomes heaven on earth or a living hell. . . . My life turned into a living hell. No girls liked me, and I hated them all for it."[9] In another, he filmed a young couple making out at the beach and asked "why does he deserve to get that experience and not me?"[10] Insofar as those who wish to understand Rodger's motives can trust him at his word as an expression of intent, it seems that loneliness and rejection and a grand sense of entitlement about women and sex played a large role in shaping his worldview and actions.

In his final video, "Retribution," Rodger described his plans for the second stage of his attack and his personal justifications for it:

> On the Day of Retribution, I am going to enter the hottest sorority house of UCSB, and I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up blond slut I see inside there. . . . After I have annihilated every single girl in the sorority house, I will take to the streets of Isla Vista and slay every single person I see there. . . . You deserve to be annihilated. I will give that to you. You never showed me any

> mercy, so I will show you none. You forced me to suffer all my life, and now I'll make you all suffer. . . . I can't wait to give you what you deserve: utter annihilation.[11]

Rodger was upset with women for rejecting him. He also expressed frustration with the men who, in his opinion, were not worthy of these women's love. Together, the videos tell the story of a young man with disturbingly entitled and narcissistic views about women and sex. They also tell the story of a young man struggling with bullying, loneliness, rejection, and jealousy. Worst of all, they tell the story of a young man who planned a deadly attack well in advance and whose writings concluded that his actions were justified.

The manifesto, entitled "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger," includes longer and more detailed musings. Much of it reads more like an autobiography than a manifesto, capturing details about his family life, hobbies, and platonic relationships. Much of it is also racist and misogynistic. In the racist parts of the manifesto, he bemoans his own heritage, namely that he is half white and half Asian, which, in his opinion, "made [him] different from the normal fully-white kids that [he] was trying to fit in with."[12] At one point, Rodger describes his jealousy as he watched a young fully Asian man talking with a white girl at a party because he "always felt as if white girls thought less of [him] because [he] was half-Asian."[13] When he saw this young man and woman interact, it confirmed in his mind that there must have been other reasons that women did not show any interest in him. These comments and the fact that all three individuals he stabbed in his apartment were all Asian men suggest that Rodger had suffered from internalized racism.

His racism, however, is not limited to the part of his own heritage that he apparently resented. At another point in the manifesto, he complains that, in his words, “an inferior, ugly black boy” had managed to seduce a white girl whereas he, as a half white male, could not. From his point of view, it seems, race—and in particular, whiteness—ought to play a significant role in women’s choices of their sexual and romantic partners. In his mind, the white part of his heritage alone should have entitled him to more sexual advances from women, especially white women. “I am descended from British aristocracy. *He* is descended from slaves,” he wrote. “I deserve it more. . . . If this is actually true, if this ugly black filth was able to have sex with a blonde white girl at the age of thirteen while I’ve had to suffer virginity all my life, then this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is.”[14] While not apparent in his YouTube videos, Rodger’s racism appears quite a bit in his manifesto, which led even his father to admit in an interview with Barbara Walters that he was surprised by how racist his son was.[15]

In addition to its racism, the manifesto is, like the YouTube videos, full of misogyny. In writing, however, Rodger is much more explicit and detailed in his thoughts about women and previous smaller acts of violence that he had taken against them. At one point, he describes pouring hot coffee on two young women because they failed to smile back at him when he smiled at them. Frustrated by the lack of attention, he claims that “those girls deserved to be dumped in boiling water for the crime of not giving me the attention and adoration I so rightfully deserve!”[16] At another point, he describes filling a super soaker full of orange juice to spray at young men and women for “enjoying their pleasurable little lives together” and wishing that, instead of orange juice, he “could spray boiling oil at the foul beasts."[17] From these acts, it appears that his feelings of jealousy often turned into feelings of anger and a desire for revenge.

Over the course of his manifesto, his writings about women become increasingly dehumanizing. Eventually he declares that women "are like a plague that must be quarantined" and that their "rejection of [him] is a declaration of war."[18] Perhaps most disturbingly, the epilogue to his manifesto describes how he "would take great pleasure and satisfaction in condemning every single woman on earth to starve to death" in concentration camps, where he, as a guard in an "enormous tower," could "oversee the entire concentration camp and gleefully watch them all die" while thinking "*If I can't have them, no one will*."[19] Though he recognized that there was "no way [he] could possibly rise to such a level of power in [his] lifetime," many women and men feared that he had such extreme views about women and still managed to act upon them in the way that he did.[20] Consequently, these fears prompted many later conversations among feminists about the role that masculinity plays in targeted violence.

Racism and sexism aside, another disturbing piece of Rodger's manifesto is his revelation that, like the Columbine shooters, he also envisioned an attack much larger and more gruesome than he was able to carry out in practice.[21] Despite his reassurances to himself that "nothing can go wrong" and that the plan "needs to be perfect," many things did not go according to his plan.[22] For starters, he had originally planned on committing his attack approximately a month earlier on April 26, but got sick with a cold and pushed it back about a month.[23] On the postponed Day of Retribution, however, other things did not play out as he had hoped. He had planned to kill everyone inside of the Alpha Phi house, but did not plan on getting locked out. Additionally, the manifesto explains that he originally had planned to kill his brother and stepmother, but decided against it out of fear that, by doing so, he also might have to kill his father.[24] He also detailed using his apartment as his "personal torture and killing chamber," where he would torture people, kill them, behead them, and then collect the heads in a bag, which he later would display publicly at the end of his killing spree.[25] Although his failed plans likely are not a source of comfort for his victims' families, the attack could have been much worse.

Another thing that Rodger did not plan on when he got sick during his original Day of Retribution was that his mother would grow suspicious of the videos he had posted on YouTube. After watching those videos, which did not include the final "Retribution" one, Chin Rodger expressed concerns about her son to his therapist, who in turn called local police to do a welfare check on him on April 30, 2014. This encounter was his third run-in with police in less than a year. The first occurred in July 2013, when he got into a fight at a party after he tried to push several people off a ten-foot ledge. The second happened in January 2014, when Rodger made a citizen's arrest of one of his roommates for allegedly stealing twenty-two dollars' worth of his candles.

During this third time when police went to check on him, Rodger reassured them that his mother was a "worry wart" and that her concerns about his behavior were all just a big misunderstanding.[26] The police questioning him described him as "shy, timid, and polite" and determined that he "did not show any signs of being, or make any statements indicating that he was, a danger to himself or others."[27] They also claimed that they "had no information that he had weapons or reason to believe that he had weapons" and concluded that they "did not have cause to place him on an involuntary mental health hold, or to enter and search his residence."[28] Because they determined that he did not pose a threat, they neither viewed the YouTube videos, which Rodger later took down, nor ran a weapons check on him.[29] Had they done either—or better, both—perhaps they could have prevented Rodger from completing has attack.

Even Rodger appeared to have recognized just how differently the welfare check and the events that followed it could have turned out. In his manifesto, he wrote that "as soon as I saw those cops, the biggest fear I had ever felt in my life overcame me. I had the striking and devastating fear that someone had somehow discovered what I was planning to do, and reported me for it."[30] Unfortunately, the police officers had not discovered his plans and would not take additional action that might have led to their discovery that day. "*If they had demanded to search my room,* that would have ended everything," he continued. "For a few horrible seconds I thought it was all over."[31] Had the police viewed the YouTube videos before running the welfare check, it might have made them more suspicious of Rodger's affirmations that everything was fine. Moreover, because he had purchased his guns legally, they would have shown up in a weapons database. Unfortunately, they trusted him at his word.

A common theme that arises in the action rhetorics around this incident is how police officers, family members, and others close to a perpetrator of targeted violence can approximate, but not guarantee, detection and prevention. Narratives about this incident read as a list of missed opportunities. If just one thing had been different at several points along the way, Rodger's Day of Retribution might not have happened. Nevertheless, despite some unexpected obstacles and delays, Rodger eventually carried out his plans.

Viral Emptiness, Threat Assessment Identification, and the "Copycat Effect"

Reflecting upon the attack and its aftermath demonstrates the complexity of social media as a factor of targeted violence. Rodger's manifesto and video posts paint a picture of a young man who acted out after years of loneliness, rejection, and insecurity. He turned to the internet to find others like him, and he used the internet to spread his feelings of loneliness, frustration, and anger as widely as possible. As they spread online, his digital materials exhibited viral emptiness. Viral emptiness describes how an attacker's feelings of emptiness spread rapidly via social media. When viral emptiness contains threats and fear appeals, it gives the attacker additional power to terrorize others well after his or her attack. Moreover, when emptiness goes viral, it gives future attackers inspiration for something to imitate.

A major concern here is what Loren Coleman has dubbed "the copycat effect," a term that links media coverage of certain events with clustered, repeat incidents of those events.[32] Coleman's argument is that the media's sensational and melodramatic reporting on particular events inspires those who consume media coverage to replicate those same events.[33] Moreover, Coleman adds, the 1990s television adage "if it bleeds, it leads" produces many media reports of pain and death, which, in turn, inspire some of those who watch said reports to cause pain and death to others.[34] Thus, his case studies, which focus on temporal and spatial clusters of phenomena like suicide, self-immolation, and school and workplace shootings, suggest that media coverage, particularly in the twenty-four-hour news cycle, incites the imitation and replication of violence.

Recall the giant spreadsheet of Adam Lanza's research on previous attacks that police found in Nancy Lanza's home. Lanza is not the only person to have done research on targeted violence before committing it. A September 2015 *Mother Jones* study found evidence of at least "74 plots and attacks across 30 states where the perpetrators claimed to have been inspired by the Columbine massacre."[35] A recent *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* article by Forensic Psychologist J. Reid Meloy and his colleagues describes how many perpetrators of targeted violence draw upon previous attacks by exhibiting the behavior that forensic psychologists and threat assessment professionals call "identification."[36] Like Kenneth Burke, the forensic psychologists behind this concept draw their interpretation of identification in part from Sigmund Freud's. Unlike Burke, they also draw upon Anna Freud's understanding of identification as it relates to aggression. In *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, she describes how children identify with other aggressors in order to become aggressors themselves. Through impersonation and imitation, she explains, "the child transforms himself [*sic*] from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat."[37] In this way, previous acts of aggression inspire new acts of aggression.

The threat assessment concept of identification expands Freud's definition to describe common behaviors shared by perpetrators of targeted violence. More specifically, threat assessment identification consists of "any behavior that indicates a psychological desire to be a 'pseudo-commando,' have a 'warrior mentality,' closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system."[38] Of these criteria, the fourth one, identification with previous attackers or assassins, is of greatest interest when it comes to the copycat effect. Meloy et al. explain that "identification with other attackers or assassins can be both historical or contemporary, and fictional or nonfictional" and occurs when the imitator "glorifies the acts of others, wants to be like them, and also wants to diminish their infamy through his or her own."[39] It often manifests through "a desire to trump the number of casualties from previous mass murders."[40] By identifying closely with previous attackers and trying to replicate or even outdo their behavior, new perpetrators of targeted violence often draw inspiration from previous attacks.

However, there seems to be more to this definition of identification than mere replication. It is not just that new attackers draw inspiration from previous attackers, but that this identification, like all identification, requires, in Burke's understanding, confronting "the implications of division."[41] By identifying with previous attackers and assassins, new attackers divide themselves from virtually everyone else. Consider, for instance, Rodger's repeated claims in his manifesto and YouTube videos that he no longer considers himself, and others have long not considered him, part of humanity. Paradoxically, he considers himself to be simultaneously above and below human beings. He makes plenty of statements about his own privilege and narcissistic view of himself, pointing out that he is descended from British aristocracy,[42] that his family can afford for him to have luxuries like driving a BMW and owning $300 Giorgio Armani sunglasses,[43] that he looks down upon the "brutes" who were more successful with women than he was,[44] that he is "more than human,"[45] and that on the Day of Retribution he will be "a god, exacting [his] retribution" on the "disgusting, wretched, depraved [human] species."[46] At the same time, his manifesto begins with the lamentation that "all [he] ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life amongst humanity, but [he] was cast out and rejected" and ends with the conclusion that he is "not part of the human race" because "humanity has rejected [him]."[47] Regardless of whether he thought of himself as above or below humanity, he saw himself as radically divided from almost all others.

It is in this radical division that the analyses of Coleman, Sigmund and Anna Freud, Burke, and threat assessment professionals converge. When Burke describes identification and division in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, he refers to "that most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts, where millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act. We refer to that ultimate *disease* of cooperation: *war*."[48] Though far from cooperative, targeted violence often manifests as a kind of war. The lone individual, pair, or small group identifies with one or a few previous attackers and declares war on the rest of humanity, hence the language of "pseudo-commando," "warrior mentality," and "military or law enforcement paraphernalia" in threat assessment identification. Rather than a "disease of cooperation," targeted violence is perhaps best thought of as a disease of the copycat. Rather than a war that the perpetrator plans to win, it is an intermittent battle that the perpetrator hopes to replicate.

Rodger's manifesto and YouTube videos did not make explicit claims about identifying with figures like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Seung-Hui Cho, Jared Lee Loughner, James Holmes, or Adam Lanza. However, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that they could have influenced and inspired him indirectly, given the extensive media coverage of their attacks. However, both his manifesto and his internet search history do show explicit signs of identification with Adolf Hitler and other Nazis as well as Xinjiang Chinese knife attackers. His computer's internet history included, among other things, searches for "If you were Adolf Hitler," "Reincarnation of Hitler, "Heinrich

Himmler," "Joseph Goebbels," "Did Adolf Hitler have a girlfriend," and "Guangzhou train station knife attack" and "Xingjian [*sic*] railway station terrorist knife attack explosion bombing."[49][50] In addition to his manifesto's discussion of concentration camps, he refers at one point to the Day of Retribution as "the final solution."[51] Like Adam Lanza, it appears that Rodger drew inspiration from previous attackers.

Moreover, it seems that Rodger has inspired other copycat attacks, including the September 2015 shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon. The shooter there allegedly posted on the website 4chan to wish other users a "Happy Elliot Rodger Day" on the one-year anniversary of the Isla Vista attack.[52] Other conversations shortly after the Umpqua attack discussed a "Beta Uprising"[53] a reference to those who, like Rodger, saw themselves as should-be alpha males who had trouble attracting women and therefore would take up arms to attack others.[54] Before his attack, Rodger wrote on web forums geared toward "incels" (internet shorthand for "involuntary celibates") to suggest an uprising of this kind. On one site he wrote, "one day incels will realize their true strength and numbers, and will overthrow this oppressive feminist system. Start envisioning a world where WOMEN FEAR YOU."[55] Though the relative anonymity of sites like 4chan and the challenges of deciphering the intent and meaning of messages posted there make it difficult to know if statements or threats are credible, there is some evidence that others have identified with Rodger and likely will continue to do so.

The father of one of Rodger's victims expressed similar concerns about media coverage. In an interview with Anderson Cooper, Richard Martinez, whose son, Christopher, was killed in the Isla Vista Attack, praised Cooper for choosing not to use the shooter's names or pictures and gave several critiques of other media outlets for their coverage of targeted violence. Martinez began by saying that "when the media puts [*sic*] the shooter's name out there, they put his picture out there, they put his videos out there, they're giving the shooter exactly what they wanted."[56]

Yet the idea of rewarding perpetrators constituted only part of Martinez's complaint about media coverage. The other part, he explained, is that "out there right now, today, this minute, there's another shooter just like this kid, absolutely like this kid, and he's listening to the message that this media at this time is sending to him, and he's seeing that this shooter was rewarded by his horror and is accomplishing his purpose."[57] Martinez might well have been describing Umpqua Community College shooter Christopher Harper-Mercer, given the parallels between this shooter and the one who killed his son.

When the media give perpetrators of violence attention, those perpetrators achieve a kind of macabre celebrity status or, in the case that the perpetrator dies, a kind of posthumous reward. As perpetrators of targeted violence receive attention for their attacks, others who seek that same attention take notice. They draw inspiration and make plans of their own. Their identification with previous attackers divides them from whomever they decide to attack. The replicability of viral emptiness thus demonstrates that one response to targeted violence actually might be additional targeted violence.

Trying (and Failing) to Prevent Viral Emptiness

Viral emptiness is not a concern unique to Richard Martinez. When the *New York Times* released copies of Rodger's manifesto, the newspaper received complaints that its coverage "'perpetuates a culture in which violence is rewarded with notoriety'" and creates a "'conscious copycat effect.'"[58] At the same time, other readers backed the idea that there is "democratic value to publishing and referencing Elliot Rodger's manifesto," and *Times* editor Allison Mitchell claimed that "it's a disservice to try to shield [readers]."[59] Editors at different media outlets have made different decisions about what to cover and how to cover it, but the proliferation of traditional and new media outlets ensures that plenty of information about targeted violence is available for those who seek it.

This discussion raises an important but complicated question for journalists and audiences alike about whether the benefits of sharing information about perpetrators of targeted violence outweigh the harms and risks. Regardless of where one stands on this question, however, one has to grapple with the implications of new media. Coleman ends *The Copycat Effect* with seven recommendations for the media, but the media that he wrote about in 2004 are not the same that exist today.[60] In his chapter on school shootings, Coleman criticizes twenty-four-hour news channels like *CNN* for bombarding audiences with news coverage and forcing other media outlets "to compete for the latest breaking horror story."[61] If not for the demands for the newest and most detailed updates, demands that the media themselves have more-or-less manufactured, perhaps the media would not supply as much information about targeted violence. While Coleman's point about television exposure and print media still holds, technology has changed a lot in the last dozen years. The year that Coleman published *The Copycat Effect* was the same year that Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook. With the rise of blogs and social media, more people have the ability to circulate information, and that information travels more quickly and with few or no gatekeepers to edit, revise or verify it.

Consider, for instance, the controversy that Google faced with Rodger's videos on YouTube. Like the editors of the *New York Times*, moderators at Google, which owns YouTube, also wrestled with what to do with Rodger's videos. After some controversy, the company took down the final video, "Retribution," on the grounds it "violated the service's guidelines against acts like stalking, intimidating behavior and the making of threats." [62] However, the site's moderators left Rodger's other videos up and have since let others re-upload "Retribution" from accounts other than Rodger's official one, which suggests that the site is either more concerned with short-term rather than long-term repercussions or more concerned with Rodger's own account rather than the accounts of other users.

Two major obstacles facing YouTube and other similar platforms are the challenges posed by user-generated content and the site's multimodal format. As a user-generated medium, YouTube has moderators rather than a central editor. The sheer volume of traffic that the site receives makes it nearly impossible to review videos in advance. Around the time of the Isla Vista attack, YouTube users were uploading roughly 100 videos per minute.[63] Consequently, unlike the gatekeeping model from newspapers, YouTube's process often translates to a decentralized review of content only after users have posted it. Responding to YouTube's removal of Rodger's video, Clay Calvert, the director of the First Amendment Project at the University of Florida, said that "YouTube may have an ethical obligation to monitor postings, but there are so many postings every day that that truly becomes impossible." [64] Unless the site hires a large number of full-time content reviewers, limits the number of videos it allows, and/or significantly slows down the process from original upload to publication, practical concerns will continue to override ethical ones.

Moreover, the multimodality of YouTube videos further complicates the review process. As a multimodal medium, a YouTube video includes audio and visual elements, which are harder to mine for content than written text. Speech-to-text software might facilitate the review of audio material by converting it into searchable text, but this software is imperfect, depends upon context, and, as a result, still requires reviewers. Moreover, speech-to-text software still does not help with visual images. In addition to the sheer number of videos, the format of such videos presents many additional obstacles to detection and prevention.

These problems aside, strong supporters of free expression and concerned citizens might defend leaving the video up for other reasons, such as the idea that viewers who see a video like Rodger's could see a video with enough time to prevent an attack. However, evidence from this incident calls that defense into question. Although Chin Rodger called the police after seeing some of her son's videos, other YouTube users did not. Before YouTube took "Retribution" down, some of the people who saw the video on the night of the attack worried about its content but decided not to report it. "Could someone tip off the police just in case?" one poster asked. "Don't," another replied. "Whatever happens. [*sic*] We didn't do anything so just let it happen if it does." [65] Unlike the Sandy Hook shooting, where "if you see something, say something" did not really apply, in this incident, people saw something but chose not to say something. Whether these users could have prevented the attack or not, these comments demonstrate the common threat assessment problem that individuals who suspect that someone might commit targeted violence choose not to speak up until it is too late.

At this point, it may not even be possible to censor enough material to prevent the copycat effect. Even if the more conventional journalistic outlets were to agree on what not to share, the internet has altered how people spread and archive information related to just about any subject, including targeted violence. Laws or policies might have some effect, but total censorship of materials related to targeted violence would make it very difficult for those who study it to do so. From writing this dissertation and other related projects, my internet history must look at least as suspicious as Elliot Rodger's or Adam Lanza's.

Furthermore, there have been enough of these incidents now that those who go looking for them have plenty of examples to imitate. As part of their conversation about identification, Meloy et al. also describe what they call "cultural scripts," which lay the foundational narratives and details for identification.[66] In other words, plenty of people know enough about the Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, and Isla Vista attacks that suppression of these cultural scripts from print, television, and digital media will not erase them from public memory. Those who wish to find previous examples already have plenty of places where they can find them.

Viral emptiness is thus both dangerous and difficult to prevent. The instincts concerned citizens have to learn about and discuss what happened in each instance of targeted violence often are at cross purposes with their instinct to prevent it, as the more widely and rapidly information circulates, the greater its ability to inspire copycats. Journalistic practices that more carefully consider how reporters explain the who, what, where, when, why, and how of incidents of targeted violence show some potential, but with the proliferation of traditional and new media, not to mention the fact that stories about targeted violence also generate revenue, these practices are difficult to standardize. The best hope likely lies in training social media users to be more cautious and critical of what they post, but with billions of users each making their own choices, it is unreasonable to expect everyone to agree on what not to share. Given the obstacles to preventing viral emptiness, it is likely that the spread of information about previous attacks and attackers will continue to inspire copycats in the future.

From Viral Emptiness to Empty Virality

Rodger's emptiness was not the only thing to go viral after the Isla Vista attack, however. Several responses to the attack also went viral. In this section, I focus on three of those responses. First, I look at the #YesAllWomen campaign, which blamed a corrupt version of masculinity for producing Rodger's views on women and sex. Second, I analyze the change.org petition against Berger Bros. Entertainment, which blamed the producers of the film "Del Playa" for trying to exploit the Isla Vista attack for profit. Third, I look at the #NotOneMore campaign, which blamed the NRA, Congress, and gun rights advocates for blocking gun control measures.

Each of these campaigns shows, on some level, how collective action on social media might channel the traumas associated with targeted violence into productive energy. Responses to Isla Vista also seemed to develop out of a sense of emptiness, but a collective one much different from the individual one that Rodger must have felt. When this collective emptiness goes viral, it brings a lot of people together, however loosely or ephemerally. Virality is one indicator of social media's power to bring people together, and collective action over social media can produce social and political change. At the same time, just as emptiness can go viral, virality also can be empty. Studying the #YesAllWomen, *Del Playa*, and #NotOneMore campaigns shows some of the strengths and weaknesses of social media activism as a response to targeted violence.

Together Alone: #YesAllWomen as a Response to Rodger's Viral Emptiness

The first and largest campaign that took place after the Isla Vista attack came as a response to Rodger's misogyny. Under the framework of #NotAllMen and #YesAllWomen, the Isla Vista attack sparked national conversations about feminism and masculinity on social media. Participants in the #YesAllWomen campaign by and large came together as a response to their own feelings of emptiness about their fears of men like Elliot Rodger, the lack of safe spaces in which to express those fears, and the desire to have their voices heard. If Turkle is concerned that social media simply make their users "alone together," I suggest that campaigns like #YesAllWomen allow users to be "together alone." That is, social media provide a space for people who feel alone in their problems and uncomfortable expressing them face-to-face to find solidarity with others like them and to have conversations that otherwise might not happen. They come together on social media despite and because of their aloneness in other spaces. In this case, the conversation happened to be about feminist issues, but it could just as easily have been about race, sexual orientation, or any number of topics.

The #NotAllMen conversation that eventually became #YesAllWomen was already starting to brew well before the attack. According to journalists Jess Zimmerman and Emannuella Grinberg, the exact origin of the phrase “not all men” is hard to pinpoint, but by mid-2013 it became a popular feminist satirical response to the common experience of men interrupting feminist conversations on the internet to “mansplain” that any feminist argument must be guilty of overgeneralization and/or misandry.[67] One of the earliest Twitter posts from Shafiqah Hudson put it this way: “ME: Men and boys are socially instructed to not listen to us. They are taught to interrupt us when we- RANDOM MAN: Excuse me. Not ALL men.”[68] Well before the Isla Vista attack, “not all men,” a shorthand for “not all men are like that,” was a common way to interrupt feminist issues. Oddly, what seemed on its face to be the legitimate calling out of a hasty generalization itself became a common red herring to sidetrack online and face-to-face conversations about feminist issues.[69]

After the Isla Vista attack, however, the phrase morphed from “not all men” to “yes all women” when Twitter user @gildedspine first used the new version the day after the Isla Vista attack.[70] As the words “are like Elliot Rodger” became the implicit fill-in-the-blank ending for “not all men,” the phrase took on new meaning. Because Rodger’s extreme misogyny appeared to be his primary motivating factor, the Isla Vista attack prompted a large conversation about masculinity, harassment, stalking, domestic violence, rape, and other symbolic and material violence against women. In essence, part of what led to #YesAllWomen’s virality was that it came in response to the violence that Rodger perpetrated in an effort to prove his virility.

In the four days following the attack, over 1.6 million tweets on Twitter used the hashtag #YesAllWomen.[71] A sampling of those posts reveals the many struggles, fears, frustrations, and double standards that women face every day. “I’ve spent 19 years teaching my daughter how not to be raped. How long have you spent teaching your son not to rape? #YesAllWomen," one mother wrote.[72] Recounting her experience with domestic violence, another wrote, "because I wasn't 'asking for it' when he hit me, and I shouldn't have to defend myself a decade later. #YesAllWomen."[73] Calling attention to the culture of slut shaming and harassment, another wrote, "#YesAllWomen b/c we are called fat, ugly, and slutty/threatened w/rape all the time online, & we are told to 'just ignore the trolls.'"[74] The list goes on and on. The common theme throughout this conversation is that while it may be true that "not all men" are like Elliot Rodger, "yes all women" live in fear of men who think and act like him. If there is anything positive to come out of the Isla Vista attack, the phrase "yes all women" has become everything from a powerful slogan to a validation of shared life experience to a support group to an educational tool and a battle cry. It is a massive amalgamation of typically private discourse made public in an undeniable expression of widespread problems.

For those who might think that #YesAllWomen is or ought to be only by and for women, however, that has not been the case. Plenty of #YesAllWomen tweets have captured men's reactions as well. A sampling of these tweets reveals that #YesAllWomen opened up a space for men who otherwise might not engage in feminist issues to do so. One husband wrote, "my wife has had a self defense/escape plan since she was a teen. I cannot fathom how it feels to live like that. No man can."[75] A father added that he "started reading the #YesAllWomen tweets b/c I've got a daughter, but now I see I should be reading them b/c I've got two sons."[76] A wife wrote that her "husband didn't 'get it' until he spent half an hour on the feed. Then he looked ashen. 'I had no idea'. #YesAllWomen."[77] These moments in which men "get it," some for the first time, indicate that the conversation reached some men in ways that other feminist conversations had not. Even if plenty of men continue not to get it, and even if the active participation in this conversation that took place in the days following the attack has since subsided, the number of people talking about feminist issues and the emotional resonance of their expressions demonstrates that #YesAllWomen played a significant role in how many people have understood, reacted to, and remembered the Isla Vista attacks.

That said, the #YesAllWomen campaign still had its limitations. For starters, the conversation that it brought to light is not a new one, and it alone will not bring an end to patriarchy. Although it contains many powerful and promising contributions, the conversation appears to have dissipated as quickly as it arose. People on social media continue to use the hashtag, but not with the same frequency or intensity as they did in the days after the Isla Vista attack.

Moreover, several developments that led the Twitter user who started #YesAllWomen, a young Muslim-American woman, to distance herself from the movement are worth noting. Writing around the time of the one-year anniversary of starting #YesAllWomen, Kaye M (@gildedspine) wrote about how capitalist commodification, feminist in-fighting about intersectionality, and, worst of all, harassment and rape and death threats, had made her "particularly bitter, and disappointed, that it did not live up to its name and promise."[78] Although she said that she does "not regret giving women a place to speak and be heard and acknowledged on a worldwide scale," she did acknowledge that #YesAllWomen has not been quite the utopian space that she and others like her had hoped it would be.[79]

As a reaction to targeted violence, #YesAllWomen demonstrated many of the strengths and weaknesses of social media activism. On the one hand, it brought people together to talk about important and difficult issues. As a rallying cry, it gave people solidarity to make it through difficult times. On the other hand, its limited interactivity and its ephemerality made it difficult to sustain, and its publicness made it susceptible to attacks that stemmed from the very ignorance and resentment that it tried to undermine. Though not exactly empty, #YesAllWomen has displayed only limited power.

Del Playa *and the Rhetoric of "Too Soon"*

As the #YesAllWomen campaign faded into the background, another viral social media campaign arose a little over a year after the attack. This campaign focused less on the attack itself and more on media representations of it. More specifically, controversy ensued over the production and release of trailers for the horror film *Del Playa*, which producers had scheduled for release in October 2015. Although the film's producers insisted that their film was a work of fiction, critics contended that the film paralleled the story of the Isla Vista attack too closely. A trailer for the film depicts a young man who, after a history bullying and failing to attract women, goes on a killing spree in Isla Vista. Two taglines accompany the trailer: "In every school there's a girl that every guy wants and can't have" and "Monsters aren't born. They are created."[80] The film also appears to have taken its title from Del Playa Drive, one of the streets in Isla Vista where Elliot Rodger shot and ran over pedestrians in his BMW. In an August 2015 promotion for the film, Berger Bros. Entertainment boasted that it took "less than one year from the inception of the idea" to produce the *Del Playa*, thus admitting that the idea behind the film's plot came several months after the Isla Vista attack.[81]

In response to the trailer's release, UCSB graduate Kate Nollner created a petition on the website change.org to halt the release of the film.[82] In her letter to Berger Bros., Nollner claimed that *Del Playa* "not only justifies the motives behind the Isla Vista gunman, but also glorifies his actions."[83] Within two days of the trailer's debut on YouTube, the petition had garnered over 20,000 signatures.[84] In addition to Nollner's stated concerns about justification and glorification, petitioners added their own concerns that the film disrespects both victims and survivors, that it interrupts the healing process, that entertainers should not profit from other people's pain and suffering, that entertainers should not retraumatize their audiences, that the timing was "too soon," that the film could inspire copycats, and that, like Rodger, it is terribly misogynistic.[85]

In response to the petition, director Shaun Hart issued an apology in which he stated that "it was never our intent to monopolize on the tragic shootings in Isla Vista that took place last year" and that despite the film's similarities to the attack, *Del Playa* "is not about Elliot Rodger."[86] He later added that "our intentions were not to make light of such a serious issue, but to engage our audience in an active discussion about bullying and violence."[87] Despite the potential contribution that the film could make toward the serious issue of bullying, however, petitioners remained, by and large, unconvinced that the benefits outweighed the costs. Since Hart's apology, both the producers and their critics have been oddly quiet, and the film still has not been released. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), it still is not yet rated, and there are no updates there, on Berger Bros. Entertainment's official website, or in the newspapers that first reported on the petition about if or when the film will make it into theaters. It seems that the producers quietly decided to delay or abandon the project, most likely over fears of a backlash, but given that the film still appears as a featured item on the production company's website, it is possible that it will resurface in the future.

One of the more common complaints about the film in the petition was that it was "too soon" to make and release a movie like this, even as a fictional representation. This conversation is particularly intriguing because different petitioners disagreed over what exactly "too soon" meant. Some suggested that the producers could release the film at some point in the future, just not while the wound was still fresh. Others suggested that it would always be "too soon" to make money off of the pain and suffering of others. For this reason, it will be interesting to see whether the film ever debuts and how audiences will respond if it does.

Meanwhile, there is another dynamic at play in the rhetoric of "too soon," one that has to do with spatial, rather than temporal, proximity to the attack. This spatial dimension begs the question, "too soon for whom?" Many of the film's petitioners live or once lived in or around Isla Vista, which gives them a different perspective on both the attack and the film than those who are further removed from the area. In an interview with Radio New Zealand on the rhetoric of "too soon," Kendall Phillips explained the complex interplay between more direct and more indirect experiences of trauma.[88] On the one hand, Phillips explained, "those who have experienced the trauma most personally don't want to talk about it, don't want it turned into public record, and often want more functional things like health care and education."[89] On the other hand, he said, those who have not experienced trauma directly often "want to recreate that narrative in a broad public sense, and sometimes these two things are pitted against each other, which, I think, is often unfortunate."[90]

Perhaps what Phillips implies here is the possibility that *Del Playa* could produce a powerful conversation someday for those less directly affected by the Isla Vista attack, and perhaps even for those more directly affected by it, despite the pain it might cause. Whether that is a conversation is about bullying, as Hart claims he intended, a conversation about fictional representations of trauma, pain, and loss, or a conversation about something else entirely, it is possible that there lies at least some value in representing and discussing difficult subjects even if it might feel like it is "too soon" to do so.

In the campaign against *Del Playa*, it looks as if virality prevented the release of a film on the grounds that it seemed insensitive, exploitative, and potentially dangerous. These might well be good reasons to delay or cancel a film's release, but critics have used these same lines of argument to censor other works with redeeming qualities, and there might also be value in allowing it to premiere.[91] For instance, even if the film does portray men like Elliot Rodger in a positive light, audiences do not need to buy its portrayal and can use the film as an educational tool. Moreover, for those who have not experienced targeted violence close to home, fictional representations can spur important and difficult conversations about the causes of targeted violence and how people might respond to it if and when it occurs.

Despite casting the petition as an overreaction, Hart, Berger Bros. Entertainment, and the film's supporters nevertheless have ceded to its demands, at least temporarily. However, other fictional and nonfictional depictions of targeted violence generally, and school shootings specifically, are becoming harder to avoid.[92] Depictions of the Isla Vista attack might be "too soon" for many members of that community, and virality appears to have suited their needs, at least for now. However, for those outside of Isla Vista, movies like *Del Playa* not only could generate conversations about targeted violence, but they also will continue to be produced whether it is "too soon" or not. However well-intentioned and successful particular viral campaigns against movies, television, and literature might be, fictional accounts of targeted violence, even those "based on a true story," will continue to appear as long as audiences will consume them.

The Public Memory of #NotOneMore

Aside from the #YesAllWomen and *Del Playa* campaigns, another social media campaign appeared around the phrase "not one more." This phrase, later captured on t-shirts, plastic wristbands, and as a hashtag on social media, came from Christopher Michaels-Martinez's father, Richard Martinez, who uttered them during the main UCSB memorial service for his son and the other victims on May 27. Directed toward the National Rifle Association, "not one more," meaning "no one else should have to die from gun violence," became a battle cry for gun control supporters. In a speech given shortly after the attack, Martinez asked those who "talk about gun rights" why those rights should come before "Chris's right to live."[93] After he urged gun control supporters to be vocal about the issue with politicians, he teamed up with Everytown for Gun Safety, a group created in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, to send 2.4 million postcards with "not one more" on them to politicians all over the country.[94]

The idea of #NotOneMore clearly follows the rhetorics of causality and prevention. It puts the blame on guns. The back of the postcard reads, “Richard Martinez, whose son Christopher was killed in the May 23 shooting in Santa Barbara, said: We don’t have to live like this. Too many have died. We should say to ourselves, ‘Not one more.’ I couldn’t agree more. That’s why I pledge to support local, state and federal candidates who will fight for common-sense laws to reduce gun violence.”[95] The website for the postcard drive features images of survivors and those who lost loved ones in the Sandy Hook, Aurora, Tucson, Virginia Tech, and Northern Illinois shootings; survivors and those who lost loved ones to gang violence, domestic abuse, and suicide; and celebrities and politicians who support the cause.[96] The logic behind the #NotOneMore campaign is that politicians must do whatever they can to prevent others from death or injury as a result of civilian gun violence.

Grounded in the rhetorics of causality and prevention, #NotOneMore seeks to honor the dead by urging politicians to enact gun control measures that will help prevent future attacks. In doing so, however, its messages often contradict themselves. For starters, as many gun rights advocates have pointed out, the other weapons that Rodger used—namely, knives and his car—killed and injured as many of his victims as his guns did. Perpetrators of targeted violence often do so by other means: the Columbine shooters also planted bombs that failed to detonate; Anders Breivik’s car bomb did detonate, as have the vests of many suicide bombers; in each of their recent attacks, the Xinjiang separatists that Rodger researched killed and injured far more people with knives than he, Adam Lanza, or Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did with guns, even if they acted in pairs or small groups. Total gun control, if it were possible, would ensure that “not one more” person dies as a result of gun violence, but it will not ensure that “not one more” will not die as a result of targeted violence.

That said, there is plenty of evidence that higher rates of gun ownership translate into higher rates of gun deaths and injuries.[97] Focusing heavily on guns as a facilitator of targeted violence may help reduce the frequency and severity of targeted violence. The NRA’s quip that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people” is a complicated one, as guns make killing more efficient, particularly when they are specifically designed to do so. It makes intuitive sense that guns designed to shoot a lot of rounds with high accuracy in a short period of time will be more deadly and injurious than guns that are not. If guns do not cause targeted violence, their efficiency surely catalyzes it. Guns may not kill people, but people with guns do. If guns result in higher casualty and injury rates than other means, then focusing on guns that fire quickly, accurately, and with heavy force could reduce the frequency of mass shootings and the number of deaths and injuries that result from them. In this sense, #NotOneMore’s efforts to reduce gun violence do make some sense. Still, #NotOneMore implies elimination, not reduction.

With this focus on elimination, Martinez and his supporters face another major obstacle in terms of how they have framed their campaign. It is clear that Martinez wants politicians to act, and the gravity of his experience and the passion in his voice give him a commanding presence. What he has yet to figure out, however, is what exactly he wants politicians to do. One of the most common phrases out of his mouth after the attack was “do something.” In one appearance, he explained that “these things are going to continue until somebody does something” and asked, “where the hell is the leadership?”[98] In another, he said, “people are looking for something to do. I’m asking people to stand up for something. Enough is enough."[99] To politicians, he said, "I don't care about your sympathy. Get to work and do something."[100] Making claims similar to President Obama's remarks that "our thoughts and prayers are not enough," Martinez is frustrated with political inaction and calls repeatedly for change.[101] His ethos as a grieving father and his voice, facial expressions, and tears while making these appeals create a powerful statement that is hard to argue with.

However, the question still remains, what "something" does he want politicians to do? The instinct to translate his grief into action is understandable on both rational and emotional levels. So is his instinct to try to prevent others from experiencing what he and his family have been through. However, without a particular course of action to take, even the most well-intentioned calls to change the status quo often fail. It is nearly impossible to argue with a grieving parent. Nevertheless, members of Congress voted against several gun control measures only months after the Sandy Hook shooting, despite powerful testimony from the grieving parents there. It is not my intent here to argue with yet another grieving parent. Martinez alone should not be responsible for figuring out what that "something" should be, but without a clear "something," it is unlikely that anything will change.

In *A Problem from Hell*, Samantha Power describes how the "never again" mantra so common after genocides has failed to live up to its own promise.[102] Often presented as the best, or perhaps the only, way to ensure that the dead have not died in vain, "never again" suggests that future preventative acts will remedy the horrors of the past. Unfortunately, instead of "never again," genocide has happened "again and again" in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and elsewhere. To admit the failure of prevention is not to admit that the dead have, in fact, died in vain, as there are other ways to remember and honor them. Nevertheless, this admission is not a comforting one, and each "again" brings back horrible memories of past traumas. Consequently, grounding memory of the Isla Vista attack in "not one more" runs the same risk of becoming "more and even more." Actually, with shootings in Charleston, Lafayette, Oregon, San Bernardino, and elsewhere, it already has.

Like the campaigns around #YesAllWomen and *Del Playa*, the campaign around #NotOneMore illustrates the tension between optimistic hopes for what social media campaigns can do and the reality of their limitations and unintended consequences. Although these limitations do not necessarily negate the good that these campaigns can accomplish, acknowledging them encourages social media users to be more reflexive about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and to what end. Conversations happening on social media can be generative and exciting, but they also can fade just as quickly as they appear. Similarly, hashtags and memes can make powerful rallying cries, but they just as easily can become empty platitudes to retweet or "like" without any critical thinking or action. If there is hope for virality around targeted violence, it lies in critical reflection about social media practices and actions that go beyond good intentions.

Viral Emptiness, Empty Virality, and the Future of Targeted Violence

At this point, it is difficult to imagine targeted violence without social media responses. My purpose in identifying viral emptiness and empty virality is not to condemn social media for perpetuating targeted violence and exacerbating its problems.

There are plenty of people who use social media to try to stop, limit, or better cope with targeted violence, even if social media themselves can obstruct these same goals.

Like Turkle, I see neither a utopian nor a dystopian future, but the kinds of virality I discuss here suggest that social media responses to targeted violence are, to various degrees, doing what viruses do and making us sick. Viral emptiness shows how quickly and widely the ideas of attackers and the cultural scripts of their attacks can spread. Viral social media campaigns make up one way to respond to targeted violence and viral emptiness, but it is unclear at this point whether campaigns that exhibit empty virality are sufficient enough to counteract them. Both viral emptiness and empty virality imply the need to reflect upon the role that the internet plays with targeted violence. Even with this reflection, we may not find a cure, but perhaps we can manage our symptoms better.

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Chapter 5: A "What Now" Without a "Why"

The introduction to this project began with a list of incidents of targeted violence that have happened in the United States in the last five years. Half of these incidents—the shootings at a church in Charleston, a movie theater in Lafayette, a community college in Oregon, a Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs, a medical center in San Bernardino, and a gay nightclub in Orlando, not to mention other large attacks in Germany, Kenya, France, Belgium, Nigeria, and elsewhere— occurred within the course of a little over a year since this project began. Although it is possible that the recent outbreak is an anomaly that could end in the near future, the pattern suggests otherwise. Moreover, as both action and reaction rhetorics show, these events have lasting consequences that extend well beyond the events themselves. Even if this list were to end with the most recent attack in Orlando, members of various publics will continue to deliberate about what these events mean, why they matter, and what to do about them.

Aside from this list, the project began with five primary goals: (1) to justify a definitional shift from "school shootings" to "targeted violence," (2) to frame targeted violence as a public problem, (3) to import and expand the reaction categories that Hirschman developed within the realm of targeted violence, (4) to question the rhetorics of causality and prevention, and (5) to search for alternatives to either ignoring targeted violence or obsessing over it. The introduction and case studies mostly dealt with the first four of these goals, which I will recap briefly here because of their importance. However, the conclusion to this project will deal primarily with the fifth goal of searching for alternative ways to cope with targeted violence.

Justifying the Generic Shift to "Targeted Violence"

The first goal of this project was to justify a shift from narrower categories like "school shootings" or "terrorism" to "targeted violence." The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting constitutes a school shooting in the strictest sense, but the other events also contained elements that involved guns and occurred near schools. The Boston Marathon bombing might fit under the heading of "terrorism" but it is unclear why it is the only one of the three that does so. Meanwhile, the Isla Vista attack happened near a school and involved guns, but Elliot Rodger had no academic affiliation with UCSB and killed and injured as many people with other weapons as he did with guns.

Despite their differences, these events—and especially the rhetoric displayed in reactions to them—have much in common, not only with each other, but also with other events like Anders Breivik's attack in Norway, the Germanwings plane crash, and the shootings at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, and the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. They involve large, sudden attacks on unsuspecting victims in presumably safe spaces. Regardless of the weapon of choice or location, sudden, violent attacks that kill and injure a lot of people result in many of the same material and symbolic outcomes. Focusing narrowly on "school shootings," "terrorism," or other categories like stabbings or plane crashes, is simply too limiting. At the stasis of definition, "targeted violence" comes with its own problems, but until a better phrase comes along, it at least enables more comprehensive studies of a wide variety of events and rhetoric in response to them.

Targeted Violence, Publics Theory, and Public Memory

The second goal of this project was to frame targeted violence as a public problem. Framing it as such produced implications for publics theory and public memory. In terms of publics theory, one aspect of this project explored how responses to targeted violence constitute publics and counterpublics. The other publics theory aspect of this project, which I treat in greater detail below, concerns the privatization of public problems. In terms of publics and counterpublics, these three cases explored how different groups have tried to understand and react to targeted violence. Not surprisingly, across and within different groups—politicians, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, journalists, and citizens—people take very different approaches to how they describe and respond to targeted violence.

Aside from publics theory, another important public aspect of targeted violence has to do with public memory. Each of these attacks generated significantly different public memory practices. Newtown's active resistance to memorials, ceremonies, and archives contrasts sharply with Boston's near-obsession with them. Meanwhile, memory practices around Isla Vista, insofar as they exist, occur mostly in digital spaces. "Appropriate" public memory is contextual and depends heavily upon exigence and audience, but Vatz's critique of Bitzer reminds us that these things are not objective and Biesecker and Edbauer's critiques remind us that they are neither simple nor static. There is no "right" way to remember targeted violence, but there may be better and worse ways, and they change across space and time.

Entailments of Action and Reaction Rhetorics

The third goal of this project was to develop an anatomy of reaction rhetorics and to analyze its entailments. Reaction rhetorics allow rhetoricians and others interested in targeted violence to recognize the complex role that language plays in shaping how people think and what people do in response to targeted violence. Beginning with action rhetorics, disagreements about what exactly happened in any given case highlight the difficulty of establishing, at the stasis of fact or conjecture, a "shared reality."[1] In addition to conspiracy theorists, who might deny that an event actually happened, several other factors complicate the narratives around targeted violence. The media rush for journalists to be the first ones to get "the facts" often leads to misinformation and speculation, and some of the details they seek, such as the attacker's motives, may not be known or knowable. The anthropogenic factors of targeted violence and the variance in human behavior not only mean that shooters are hard to detect, resourceful, and adaptive, but also that it is difficult for those who try to make sense of targeted violence to know their motives with any degree of certainty.

Moreover, to the extent that perpetrators' motives are knowable, the commonly presumed motives of mental illness and ideology are not particularly useful as diagnostic tools for prevention. While they seem plausible, these motives may not even be accurate or wholly explain what led Adam Lanza, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, Elliot Rodger, or others like them to commit acts of targeted violence. There are plenty of mentally ill individuals and ideologues who do not go on to perpetrate targeted violence. Even when threat assessment professionals focus on these groups as potential perpetrators of targeted violence, Fein, Vossequil, and Holden's line between when people are “making” and “posing” a threat is often unclear, and stigmatizing members of both of these groups risks justifying their mistreatment and pushing them further into the shadows.[2] At the stases of fact or conjecture and causes and consequences, determining what happened in these cases and what causes targeted violence more generally remain unclear.

Beyond the concerns at these stases, concerns about definition and value also complicate action rhetorics. Who constitutes a “victim” and whether the attackers or those close to them are themselves, in some sense, “victims” are good questions that complicate responsibility and blame for attacks. Meanwhile, the fact that only Muslim attackers receive the label “terrorist” while other attackers do not shows the degree to which *heterotopic ossification* from the so-called “War on Terror” conditions responses to targeted violence in the United States and other Western countries. Determining whether to refer to an event by its location, date, or other alternatives appears to make a difference for the people most directly affected by targeted violence, and comparing casualty and injury numbers from each attack to determine whether it is the worst of its kind belittles the suffering of victims of attacks with lower numbers and inspires perpetrators to try to kill and injure more and more people.

Although those who seek to understand targeted violence might expect the facts of the case to be obvious and beyond the realm of rhetoric, there is surprisingly little agreement upon the causes of targeted violence. Moreover, the more agreed-upon parts of action rhetorics around targeted violence expose vulnerabilities in terms of predicting who will commit targeted violence and securing public spaces at least as often as they provide reassurances. The widespread availability of weapons, the contextual factors that leave schools and other sites open to attack, the cultural scripts already in circulation, and the barriers that interfere with detection and prevention are hardly comforting to those who are concerned about future acts of violence. Action rhetorics vary considerably, and even where a shared reality exists, it does not prescribe what to do in response to the problems that people agree upon.

Reactions to an Unclear Action

Given the uncertainty of action rhetorics, it is no wonder that reaction rhetorics also vary considerably, as what exactly they are reacting to is not entirely clear. Reaction rhetorics seek the most "appropriate" response to targeted violence, but there are several problems with this kind of approach. For starters, the perfectly appropriate solution to targeted violence does not seem to exist. To return to Hirschman's categories, one person's claim of an appropriate reaction often contains within it another's accusation of overreaction based on concerns about unintended consequences (perversity), insufficiency (futility), and ends that do not justify means (jeopardy). And yet, even if a perfect solution remains an illusion, failing to try to solve the problem gives way to claims about underreaction and inaction.

Given that "the" appropriate reaction may not exist, different people have different standards for what constitutes appropriateness. Consolidated media, algorithms, and partisanship make it easy for people to frame targeted violence only through their pre-existing networks, narratives, and ideologies while giving little, if any, consideration to alternative viewpoints. Yet, without a shared frame of reference, it is difficult to make decisions at all, let alone wise ones. Each of the case studies in this project points to different dangers associated with trying to react to an action that is unclear, multifaceted, contextual, and divisive. The rhetorical void of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting demonstrates that searching for a magical wholesale solution to targeted violence may, in fact, be an obstacle both to making more realistic incremental improvements and reducing anxiety. Guns, mental illness, and location security are large and complex problems in the United States and elsewhere, and trying to solve all of them simultaneously exposed just how difficult it may be to solve any of them. At the same time, given the rhetorical void's resemblance to Hirschman's category of futility, it is important to remember that not trying at all may be worse than trying and failing. Perhaps the best thing that the rhetorical void has to offer, then, is to introduce humility into melioristic attempts to solve the problem of targeted violence.

Meanwhile, heterotopic ossification after the Boston Marathon bombing shows the extent to which 9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror" overdetermine reactions to targeted violence perpetrated by Muslims. Charleston shooter Dylann Roof, Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho, and Virginia TV news reporter Vester Lee Flanagan II are no less terrorists than the Tsarnaev brothers or the San Bernardino and Orlando shooters. However, because Roof, Cho, and Flanagan were not Muslim, the media and politicians did not accuse them of terrorism. For that matter, Roof, who notably was arrested rather than taking his life or being killed by police in his attack, is being charged with hate crimes rather than terrorism, despite his claims he had hoped to start a "race war."[3] Imagine if he had brown skin and/or called it a "holy war." The Boston Marathon bombing shows just how much the stasis of definition matters. If the post-9/11 United States is ossified in a place other than where it should be, then politicians, lawyers, and citizens will need to wrestle more with the definition of “terrorism” in order to get the nation unstuck.

Additionally, the viral emptiness and empty virality of the Isla Vista attack offer grim warnings about the role that social media play in shaping how their users understand and respond to targeted violence. Viral emptiness shows not only how pernicious manifestos, cultural scripts, and other materials belonging to perpetrators of targeted violence can be, but also how quickly and widely they can spread. Well-intentioned social media counter-violence campaigns also can spread benevolent messages just as quickly and widely, but the concept of empty virality reminds those who create and participate in these campaigns that good intentions sometimes simply are not enough and, worse yet, occasionally can cause additional harm.

Across these case studies is the additional complicating factor that reactions to an unclear action can manifest in many different ways. Although reactions can manifest in changes to local, state, and federal laws, they also can manifest in the courtroom, in speeches, in public memory practices, in classrooms, and even in hashtags. It also can manifest as the conscious selection of inaction. To determine which of these options might be an appropriate is difficult enough, let alone deciding what might be appropriate within each category. If action is unstable, then reaction will be as well.

Severing the Link between Causality and Prevention

Keeping in mind the challenges that plague action and reaction, a fourth goal of this project is to test the unstable relationship between causality and prevention. After all, one of the key reasons to study action is to determine causality, and one of the main goals of searching for an appropriate reaction is to use findings about causality to aid in prevention. However, the quest for causality under the logic that it will lead to prevention is quixotic. Insofar as it is knowable, causality is complex. Because human behavior varies widely, perpetrators' motives and strategies vary widely. Moreover, because there is no clear profile that sets apart those who might commit targeted violence from others, they remain hard to identify and efforts to identify them ban be accompanied by severe and destructive unintended consequences.

Nevertheless, just as targeted violence persists despite efforts to prevent it, human instincts to identify causality persist despite the vulnerabilities that the search for causality has exposed. Shortly after the Germanwings plane crash, lawyer Kate Klonick wrote an article for *Vox* in which she described the instincts that follow targeted violence, as identified by cognitive psychologists. The first instinct, she explains, is "an emotional 'why' component driven by anger and sadness."[4] The second, she says, is a "rational 'who or what is going to make sure this doesn't happen again'" component.[5] Though perhaps oversimplified a little too neatly into *pathos* and *logos*,[6] Klonick's separation of these instincts is an important move, as one focuses more on the stasis of causes and consequences and the other more on policy. After making this separation, Klonick goes on to explain that "these processes are closely related and often at cross purposes. Punishing someone for a past event doesn't always make it more likely we can prevent bad events in the future. Conversely, making things safer in the future doesn't always give us the vindication of punishment."[7] Klonick suggests that both instincts are natural, but she expresses concern that the human instincts that drive people to search for clear and easy answers for “why” and “what now” bring dissatisfaction when those questions have complex, imperfect answers, if they even have answers at all.

Targeted violence lacks easy answers to both the “why” and “what now” questions. The “why” question largely depends on retrospective attempts to determine perpetrators’ motives. To the extent that those perpetrators make them known, to the extent that they go beyond mental illness, and to the extent that they are trustworthy, perpetrators’ motives vary significantly. So do their tactics and weapons of choice. They plan. They hide. They adapt. Most importantly, they differ. They differ from one another, and they differ from the vast majority of nonviolent individuals. Despite these differences, however, they share enough demographic characteristics, interests, and behaviors with others that even experts who specialize in mental health and threat assessment have a hard time picking them out from a crowd. Consequently, answers to the “why” question vary considerably.

Meanwhile, because the “what now” often depends upon the “why,” it, too, is difficult to answer in a definitive way. Knowing how to stop a future event often requires an understanding of what caused it in the past. However, when the “why” question lacks a clear, knowable, and fixable answer, it severs the link between causality and prevention, at least in theory. Despite this severing, the sheer horror of targeted violence keeps alive the human instinct to find quick, cheap, all-encompassing, and lasting solutions. The quest to answer “what now” continues, but in a haphazard rather than linear, predictable way.

This instinct, according to law professor Lawrence Solan, results in “laws that are hyper-reactive to situations,” much in the same way that Edwin Sutherland described quickly passed sexual psychopath laws in 1950.[8] By hyper-reaction, however, Solan seems to mean something different from overreaction. Rather than being concerned with appropriateness, Solan is concerned with the interplay between time and process. When policymakers "do things too quickly in reaction to immediate situations," he says, they will turn to the instinct to blame rather than to "more contemplative pragmatic ideas."[9] As a quick fix based in knowledge about a particular situation, hyper-reaction hypothetically could result in either an appropriate reaction or an inappropriate overreaction. However, because the appropriate reaction is difficult to know in the moment, and because the information is limited and the process is rushed, hyper-reaction has a tendency toward the latter.

When mental health professionals refuse or are unable to answer the "why" and "what now" questions, citizens often turn, for better or worse, to politicians. The day after the Umpqua Community College shooting, Republican presidential hopefuls Donald Trump and Jeb Bush got themselves into big trouble for their responses to what had happened there. In a phone interview on *MSNBC*'s *Morning Joe*, host Willie Geist asked Trump, "If you were president of the United States, you would have received a phone call some time yesterday afternoon that a guy had walked into a community college in Oregon [and] shot the place up. Ten dead at least at this point this morning. What would you have done to have stopped that?"[10] In response, Trump answered, "You're always going to have problems. . . . It is a terrible situation, it's huge mental illness, you're going to have these things happen, and it's a horrible thing to behold."[11] That same day, speaking at a 2016 Conservative Leadership Project event in Greenville, South Carolina, Bush remarked, "Look, stuff happens. There's always a crisis, and the impulse is always to do something, and it's not necessarily the right thing to do."[12] Toeing standard conservative lines about limited government, Trump and Bush suggested that new laws were not the answer.

Journalists and politicians rushed to criticize Trump and Bush on the grounds that their statements were insensitive, fatalistic, and meant to evade any kind of blame or responsibility. Professional bloggers declared that "Trump's heartless response . . . proves he's a sociopath" and that Bush's statement demonstrates that Republicans have "no sense of decency."[13] Asked to respond to Bush's "stuff happens" comment, President Barack Obama replied, "I don't even think I have to react to that one," suggesting that he found Bush's statement ludicrous.[14] Democratic National Convention Chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz replied, "Americans are killed and injured, families lose their loved ones, and an individual who wants to be President of the United States shrugs his shoulders and says, 'stuff happens.' No. The reason this keeps happening is because we let it."[15] Many of the responses to Trump and Bush criticized them for implying that if they became president, they would resist legislation on gun control and use the complex and repetitive nature of targeted violence as an excuse for inaction.

Targeted Violence and the Failure of the American Dream

Recognizing how frequently targeted violence has occurred in the United States in recent memory, the satirical news publication *The Onion* has run four different versions of a fake story under the headline "No Way to Prevent This, Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens": one after the Isla Vista attack, one after the Charleston shooting, one after the Umpqua shooting, and most recently one after the attack in San

Bernardino.[16] Because they included the Isla Vista attack, which used knives and a car in addition to guns, it is unclear whether the writers meant "targeted violence" more generally or "mass shootings" more specifically by "this." If the writers meant "targeted violence," then they clearly glossed over other times besides the recent past and other places beyond the United States in which civilians have perpetrated targeted violence. If they meant "mass shootings," then they clearly glossed over targeted violence which occurs by means other than guns. Nevertheless, the point is clear: the United States has a unique—or, better yet, "exceptional," as criminal justice professor Adam Lankford puts it—problem with targeted violence that it can confront, at least in part, with gun control.[17]

In his analysis of mass shootings from 1966 to 2012, Lankford found that "62 percent of all school and workplace shooters were Americans" and that "the U.S. has five times as many [mass shooters] as the next highest country on the list (The Phillippines)."[18] One explanation that he gives for these figures is that the nation has the largest number of guns per capita.[19] Simply having more guns makes it easier for those guns to fall into the hands of those who wish to commit targeted violence. The other explanation, however, has to do with the ideology of American exceptionalism. The American dream, he says, sounds promising on its face but "guarantees a level of success that can't always be achieved through hard work and sheer willpower."[20] Lankford explains that many cases of targeted violence stem from the "dark side" or "failure" of the American dream, hence Rodger lashing out because of his inability to attract women or Flanagan shooting two of his former colleagues on live television because of his career troubles.[21]

Lankford's analysis resembles Jeremy Engels's argument in *The Politics of Resentment*. His diagnosis is that "it is precisely where the American Dream becomes a nightmare that the politics of resentment begins" and that "violence is the product of a rhetorical culture that has embraced the politics of resentment."[22] Following Žižek, Engels suggests that neoliberalism has undermined the American Dream, and that this, in turn, feeds both subjective and objective violence.[23] Speaking about both the causes and consequences of resentment, he argues that "it is only natural in an age of resource scarcity—and in the scarcity of hope—that those Americans who, in the past had been blessed by the promise of the American Dream, look to protect their privilege from encroachments."[24]

Reading Engels and Lankford together, it seems that what is happening with targeted violence is that individuals who do not see themselves as able to achieve the American Dream have concluded that rather than trying "to protect their privilege from encroachments" by alternative economic, political, or other means, that their best, and perhaps only, option is violence. Forensic psychologist Paul Appelbaum explains that acts of targeted violence are "suicides with murder as an epiphenomenon, rather than murders that happen to end in suicide."[25] If the people—notably mostly men—who commit targeted violence feel impotent (literally in Rodger's case, but figuratively in others), see no viable future for themselves and feel victimized, they may decide to take not only their own lives but also the lives of others. Thus, one explanation for why the United States has witnessed a sudden and intense wave of targeted violence is tied to the 2008 recession. An optimistic reading of the situation thus might conclude that if the domestic and international economy recover, the United States and other countries will witness fewer acts of targeted violence. Of course, a pessimistic reading recognizes that there are other factors to a person's livelihood than financial security.

Of course, there are plenty of people like Rodger and Flanagan who do not go on to perpetrate targeted violence, and the point at which a person concludes that he or she has not and will not achieve the American dream is subjective and arbitrary. U.S. Americans can take steps to control the country's guns and to question the ideological entailments of the American dream, but given how deeply entrenched both are in U.S. culture, and given that there are alternative weapons to guns and alternative motives to the perceived failure of the American dream, it is unlikely that either move will solve the problem of targeted violence once and for all. Nevertheless, if the nation can reduce either the frequency or severity of targeted violence, or even the pernicious effects of its guns, culture, or other related problems, then it is worth it to keep trying. Conceding that "these things happen" need not be an excuse to do nothing.

Given that Trump's and Bush's comments came the day after the Umpqua shooting, it is fair to call their statements insensitive, even if the journalists who prompted them to respond to this particular event at this particular time could have waited to do so or not asked them at all. Moreover, if the subtext beneath their assertions that targeted violence (just) "happens" is an implicit argument that nobody should do anything to try to stop it from happening, then it is fair to call their statements myopic.

On their own, however, the mere statement that "these things happen," and the implication that they will continue to do so, is not an unreasonable conclusion. When Geist pressed Trump to clarify his position, he asked if Trump meant that "some people are going to slip through the cracks, and there's not much you can do about it."[26] Trump responded, “You know, it’s not politically correct to say that, but . . . people are going to slip through the cracks.”[27] When I began this project, I naïvely had hoped that my work eventually would point me toward a solution to the problem of targeted violence, but I have come to agree—however reluctantly, partially, or temporarily—with Trump and Bush’s position that targeted violence will continue to happen. Perhaps it ought to be politically correct to say so.

Despite the inevitability that people will, at least some of the time, find ways around even the best preventative measures, policymakers and citizens can and should deliberate about how to respond to targeted violence. When they do, however, it is important for them to recognize that their answers to the “why” and “what now” questions may result in incomplete and unsatisfying answers. For Klonick, these questions are all about trying “to gain a semblance of control, to soothe the anxiety and panic that emerge in the wake of such a massive tragedy.”[28] When it comes to targeted violence, however, nobody has total control, and trying to gain it often leads to rash decisions, bad policy, and anxieties about failure.

In the search for control, those who wish to put a stop to targeted violence like to believe that there are right and wrong answers. What the rhetorics of action, reaction, and overreaction allow us to see, however, is how often human beings disagree about the experiences we have, the narratives we construct about what they mean, and what we think we ought to do about them. When people cannot agree at the basic stases of fact, definition, and causes and consequences, then it is unlikely that they will agree at the stases of value and policy. Even if they did, the policies that they produce still might not prevent all acts of targeted violence. Moreover, whereas the stasis of policy often implies legal or institutional rule changes, at its most basic level, it simply asks “what should we do about this?”[29] Sometimes the answer results in legal or institutional change, but sometimes it implies other things like attitudinal change or behavioral change. Sometimes, the best answer to “what should we do about this?” may, in fact, be “nothing” or “let’s wait and see.”

As a lawyer, Klonick seems to be talking more in the context of legal and institutional change, but her response to the challenges of “why” and “what now” might well extend to other realms as well. When it comes to the stasis of policy, her advice is to keep these instincts consciously in check. “While we can’t quash our impulse to blame,” she says, “we can do something about how we react to it—by slowing it down.”[30] Slower deliberation might not necessarily mean better deliberation, and given the emotional energy that targeted violence generates, it may not always be easy, or in some cases even possible, to slow it down. However, perhaps if not better decisions, slower deliberation can lead to fewer poor decisions with less lasting and severe consequences. Targeted violence makes everything seem urgent, but focusing exclusively on trying to prevent it can cause additional stress and additional problems. The paranoia that accompanies the rhetorics of causality and prevention is pathological. A society that lives in fear gives the perpetrators of targeted violence exactly what they want.

Yet, there is something deeply unsatisfying about not being able to have certainty and total control. If targeted violence can happen anywhere and anytime, then how can anyone go about living their lives? Despite advances on any or even all of the issues that typically follow targeted violence, a total solution still may not be possible to achieve. People will continue to plan and carry out their attacks, and targeted violence will continue to happen. However, to conclude that targeted violence is at least somewhat inevitable does not mean that those who are concerned about it should stop trying to reduce it or, worse yet, stop living their lives.

I do not presume to have the appropriate reaction between optimism and pessimism, as I am not convinced that the appropriate reaction exists, or if it does, it certainly does not exist in the same way for everyone. However, a potential source of comfort is Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*. Following Heidegger and others, Tillich distinguishes between fear, which takes a direct object (i.e. "I am afraid *of* X") and anxiety, which does not.[31] For this reason, Tillich argues, fear is less problematic than anxiety, because people can confront their fears directly in order to overcome them.[32] Anxiety, he argues, is pathological, especially when it transcends the individual psyche into a public feeling but still gets treated as a matter of private concern, much in the same way that Dana Cloud and Ann Cvetkovich worry about the privatization of public mental health problems.[33]

Following Tillich's assertion that anxiety is rooted in concerns about humans' lack of control over nonbeing and the unknown, it makes more sense to place human preoccupations with targeted violence more in the realm of anxiety than fear.[34] His writing shortly after World War II well precedes Fein, Vossequil, and Holden's shift to targeted violence, but it closely resembles the tensions present in the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission's report about the dreams of a hypothetical normative world without targeted violence and the reality of a descriptive world where it remains a possibility. In Tillich's assessment, the basic human instinct to strive for security is not inherently pathological but easily can become that way when it becomes obsessive. In his explanation:

> Pathological anxiety about fate and death impels toward a security which is comparable to the security of a prison. He who lives in this prison is unable to leave the security given to him by his self-imposed limitations. But these limitations are not based on a full awareness of reality. Therefore the security of the neurotic is unrealistic. He fears what is not to be feared and he feels to be safe what is not safe. . . . *Misplaced* fear is a consequence of the pathological form of the anxiety of fate and death.[35]

Tillich's comments here once again raise concerns that *feeling* safe is not the same as *being* safe and that obsessing over things that make us feel safer can be pathological.

His answer to this anxiety is to search for "the courage to be," which he describes as "the ethical act in which man [*sic*] affirms his [*sic*] own being in spite of those elements of his [*sic*] existence which conflict with his [*sic*] essential self-affirmation."[36] To look for agency beyond the rhetorics of causality and prevention does not mean that there is no agency. Agency can be partial and incremental, and it can pop up in some unexpected places that have nothing to do with policy. It can be as simple as listening to others and validating their experiences. It can be making the choice to donate toward long-term mental and physical health care rather than sending another teddy bear or building another memorial. It can be deciding to give someone a proper burial or not to give a nineteen-year-old the death penalty even if they have committed heinous crimes against you and your country. It can be fighting an oppressive ideology by joining in solidarity with others who are hurt by it or deciding what to share and what not to share online. It can be going to work every day and not being afraid to go out in large public spaces. It can be breathing deeply, turning off those instincts to assume the worst, and choosing to focus on all the good in the world.

Focusing on alternatives to the rhetorics of causality and prevention suggest a new way to look at targeted violence by providing a "what now" without a "why." Grounded mostly in the stases of fact and conjecture, definition, and causes and consequences, action rhetorics demonstrate that the "why" of causality may not be knowable. Grounded mostly in the stases of value and policy, reaction rhetorics show how different publics reason about what matters to them and how they arrive at answers to "what now," which, this project shows, may include, but also may extend well beyond, prevention. Separating out causality and prevention challenges the "why" and provides new answers to the "what now." As incomplete and perhaps unsatisfying as these answers may be, they do not rely on false promises of certainty and, as a result, allow publics to define and redefine whatever "what now" is best for them at any given moment and on their own terms. As a result, a "what now" that need not depend on a "why" can be more liberating than oppressive.

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