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“As Americans, We Grieve”: Mass Shootings & Collective Trauma

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“As Americans, we grieve...”^[1]

Mass shootings in contemporary American society have emerged as events of profound political and cultural symbolism; indeed, the news media has often attributed to them the label of “crisis.”^[2] They have a singular status in the modern American collective consciousness, one not occupied by other forms of violence. Mass shootings have attained this status, I argue, precisely because their violence transcends the immediate act itself; they are threefold acts of violence, enacted on the bodies of their victims, the minds of their witnesses (both first and secondhand), and society collectively. Through the elaborate national discourse that has been constructed around them, mass shootings have emerged as attacks on society as a whole – mass violence in the most literal of senses. Individuals become witnesses and are thus implicated in the trauma of the event; simultaneously, their personal grief is transformed into collective pain. There are four key drivers that enable this threefold victimization: first, the sense that mass shootings represent a narrative rupture; second, the personalization of a collective anxiety tracing back to 9/11; third, the modern idiom of trauma, which provides a new lens through which to understand and justify the grief reaction; and fourth, the development of new normative grief rituals, performed through social media, which serve to create a shared trauma narrative and to allow individuals to affirm their group membership and community identity in a time of flux and fragility.

Mass shootings are felt as powerfully disruptive of the everyday; they are an inappropriate disruption of not only the “contingent, unremarkable and ordinary” stream of everyday life, but also the normatively coherent, telic narrative of individual and collective life.^[3] These mass shootings, by definition, take place in public areas presumed safe, in a world presumed largely untouched by senseless violence; they “somehow seem to occur in a more poignant version of reality.”^[4] Not only does violence intrude into the most quotidian spaces in mass shootings, but it is an irrational, senseless kind of violence. The victims of mass shootings are victimized by virtue of their presence, rather than any personal quality. The lack of a coherent, understandable explanation for these events renders the lives of

individuals and groups “out of control,” by introducing incoherency and ambiguity into otherwise highly structured narratives. This sense of disruption is felt all the more deeply in the context of a modern moral logic that declares certain deaths unacceptable. As technology has developed over the past decades, the umbrella of “preventable” death has widened, accompanied by a growing intolerance of risk and a sense that violent death, in a “well-ordered society,” is inappropriate.^[5] The concept of “living on,” a sense of life as a continuation of an orderly, nonviolent everyday narrative rather than as a series of events involving the dramatic exercise of agency, is best interpreted through a framework of collectivity. It is our collective living on that is most shaped by this logic, and so mass shootings are quite literally an affront to modern *collective* life – or, as President Obama put it after Orlando, “an attack on all of us and on the fundamental values...that define us as a country.”^[6]

This sense of “it should not happen here,” however, is accompanied by the increasing understanding that it *could*. Mass shootings reinforce the growing anxieties of a society that has felt increasingly beleaguered by violence in the last two decades. In particular, instability and fear entered the national narrative after 9/11 in a way more real and present than before; previously unthinkable violence became a reality, and therefore a future potential.^[7] Violent and random death at work, school, or a movie theatre has become a legitimate fear, and a rising sense of helplessness encouraged individuals to conceive of themselves as potential victims of an inevitable future mass shooting and as responsible stakeholders.^[8] Each new act of violence is incorporated into the national consciousness as a symbol of our own vulnerability, both personally and collectively. A generalized grief over loss of life becomes a deeply personal fear that the next victim could be you or someone you love. The intrusive potentiality for violence resounds on every level: collectively, we are preoccupied with these attacks, exploring them in media and shaping a group identity in resistance to the normalization of violence; individually, our sense of personal safety in public spaces has been altered; and physically, our anxieties are made manifest in graphic images of the attacks.

If 9/11 was the seminal act of violence that victimized the American public, then each mass shooting since has served as a reenactment of that trauma. It was 9/11 that marked a discursive shift to focus on the trauma of bearing witness; afterwards, as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman note, “both survivors and witnesses, but also television viewers and residents of the United States in general were suffering from exposure to a traumatic event.”^[9] The concept of trauma—“the tragic event and its psychological traces”—thus profoundly transforms the social construction of grief and victimhood “by applying the same psychological classification to the person who suffers violence...and the person who witnesses it.”^[10] Trauma provides a language to understand shared psychological pain and

a justification of the grief response. It is the mechanism through which bystanders are implicated in the narrative of these violent events.^[11] In bearing witness, personal grief is legitimated and becomes a valid assertion of shared national suffering.^[12]

New technology has transformed the ways in which we both witness and grieve these events – and in doing so fundamentally changed their discursive significance. Because of rapid information sharing technologies like Twitter, mass shootings almost instantaneously enter cultural consciousness as “historical,” and the process of narrative construction in collective memory occurs simultaneously with the unfolding of events. This deepens affective engagements by intensifying the sense of personal involvement.^[13] However, although there is a sense of direct or unmediated involvement in the tragedy (compounded by the legitimization of the victim role through the concept of the pathogenic and trauma-inducing image), this form of communication creates highly mediated collective “trauma narratives” that are constructed collaboratively and shared memetically. In part because of their temporality, these trauma narratives shape individual perceptions of the events in accordance with their “contemporary manifestation of collective trauma in the public arena.”^[14]

These “trauma narratives” do not only include the actors directly involved in the event, however; they tell the story of the event as a cultural process, or transform the initial trauma into collective memory.^[15] It is no longer only the bare facts of the event that are recorded for posterity; rather, related but tangential narratives and details are all woven together to form a public memory of the event.^[16] Because trauma has created a victim space for viewers as well as participants, their stories have a legitimate place in the “trauma narrative.” Indeed, they have an important place: “the collective event supplies the substance of the trauma which will be articulated in individual experience; in return, individual suffering bears witness to the traumatic aspect of the collective drama.”^[17] The tragedy of the mass shooting is most fully realized in its collective witnessing. We as observers are not only enabled but also compelled to recount our personal narratives (where we were, how we were affected), and in doing so deepen the sense of a mutual, collective victimhood.^[18]

As social media has shaped the development of these narratives, so too has it informed the development of modern grief rituals, which are themselves written into the social memory of these events. Because of the perceived importance (and legitimacy) of expressing empathy, distress, and grief in the aftermath of a mass shooting, those expressions have taken on a normative social force. Publishing a written expression of grief becomes a fundamentally social act and a mark of group membership. Although these elegies are almost certainly performative in the truest

sense, that is not to say that the distress articulated in Facebook statuses is necessarily or solely inauthentic—it certainly may be real and felt, and asserting it may be a means of participating in a collective palliation of suffering.^[19] Expressions of personal distress enable individuals both to take part in the communal activity of meaning-making and to assert their membership in a community. Individual pain echoes a “national victimhood...[that] manifests itself via a claim to collective identity.”^[20] This appeal to a collective identity is clear in the suggestive phrasing of President Obama’s speech after Orlando, when he stated that “as Americans, we are united in grief.”^[21] In times of flux, group membership and identity can be particularly important; here they both stem from and reaffirm the collective violence of the mass shooting.

The use of culturally scripted expressions of mourning as affirmations of identity and group membership was most poignantly evident in the aftermath of the shooting in Orlando. Participation in grief rituals through social media served as an affirmation of identity and belonging for the LGBT community. The history of the LGBT community in the US is rife with individual and collective violence at a number of levels, and the shooting in Orlando was a specific attack on a safe space – the trope of the mass shooting writ small and projected onto an already beleaguered community. The LGBT community has, in some sense, claimed ownership of this grief as a part of their continuing historical narrative, and the pain and trauma of it was felt acutely by community members. Personal narratives incorporating the pain of this tragedy thus become explicit declarations of identity and community.^[22]

These tragedies do not and cannot occur in isolation; they have entered the modern cultural consciousness as reified symbols of collective distress over our own vulnerability and fragility. The normative construction of mass shootings as a culturally specific category of events that could, but should not, disrupt the everyday life of their literal and primary victims (a role into which we are encouraged to project ourselves), of their secondary victims (those exposed to trauma through media coverage), and of the society as a collective, grants them a unique social status. Some critics have argued that the particularly intense reactions to these events are the result of racism or xenophobia – a reflection of the American public’s inability to empathize with or care about “the tragedies of other places.”^[23] While these factors clearly play a role in the shaping of mass shootings as cultural phenomena, such arguments radically oversimplify the complex relationship between contemporary American society and these forms of violence. Rather than emerging strictly from a sense of American exceptionalism, the construction of mass shootings as powerful symbols is also the consequence of a particular cultural moment that engenders the tragedies, their discursive significance, and their affective resonance simultaneously. Mass shootings emerge as a collective experience

enabled by a cultural shift in perspectives on violence and enacted through social media, using the modern idiom of trauma.

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Notes

[1] Obama, Barack. (2016, June 12). Remarks by the President on Mass Shooting in Orlando. *White House Office of the Press Secretary*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/12/remarks-president-mass-shooting-orlando>

[2] Cf. the Guardian's headline "1,000 mass shootings in 1,260 days: this is what America's gun crisis looks like." <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/oct/02/mass-shootings-america-gun-violence>

Throughout this piece, I intend to limit the scope of the category "mass shooting" to its most commonly referenced form: a contained incident of multi-victim civilian gun violence that occurs in a public space, is perpetrated by a single shooter, and victimizes strangers apparently at random. Examples include Columbine, Aurora, Sandy Hook, and Orlando.

The intensity of the focus on mass shootings as a hallmark of American violence is, if understandable (per the argument of this article), statistically disproportionate. For example, so far in 2016, 259 people have been killed in "mass shootings" (using a generic definition of gun violence incidents with 4 or more victims – a more limited definition, as I posit above, would have a lower count); in total, there were 7,238 deaths due to gun violence. Statistics from <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org>, 11 July 2016.

That said, from a cultural perspective, media focus is a mere echo of social sentiment; in a recent poll, 68% of Americans listed mass shootings in the US as "very or extremely important news events." Associated Press. (2016, December 26). Poll: Mass shootings weight on Americans in 2015. *MLive*.

http://www.mlive.com/news/us-world/index.ssf/2015/12/post_144.html

[3] Biressi, Anita. (2004). "Above the Below": Body Trauma as Spectacle in Social/Media Space. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 8(3), 338.

[4] Zakaria, Rafia. (2013, April 17). The Tragedies of Other Places. *Guernica*.

<http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/rafia-zakaria-the-tragedies-of-others/>

[5] Stearns, Peter N. (2008). Texas and Virginia: A Bloodied Window into Changes in American Public Life. *Journal of Social History*, 42(2), 314.

This also ties to the ongoing shift from dramatic forms of sovereignty, which focus on life in the extremes and the ability to end life, towards what Berlant describes as a biopolitical hegemony, consisting in the authority “to regularize life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways.” Berlant, Lauren. (2007). Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency). *Critical Inquiry*, 33, 756.

[6] Obama, op. cit.

[7] 9/11 is often explicitly referenced when discussing this sense of helplessness or defeat after mass shootings. Cf. Wright, Annie. (2016, June 13). 11 small ways to feel less helpless this week from a trained therapist. *Upworthy*. <http://www.upworthy.com/11-small-ways-to-feel-less-helpless-this-week-from-a-trained-therapist>

[8] In 2007, 82% of Americans said that “no matter what universities do, they would not be able to prevent shootings on campuses from happening.”

Saad, Lydia. (2007, May 2). Americans Skeptical About Preventing Virginia Tech-Like Incidents. *Gallup*.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/27430/americans-skeptical-about-preventing-virginia-techlike-incidents.aspx>

This is in stark contrast to an earlier poll in 1999, when only 43% of respondents believed that “shootings like the one in [Red Lake, Minnesota/Columbine] will happen again regardless of what action if taken by government and society.”

Newport, Frank. (2012, December 17). Newtown Shootings Context: Americans’ Attitudes Towards Gun Control. *Gallup: Polling Matters*. <http://pollingmatters.gallup.com/2012/12/newtown-shootings-context-americans.html>

The sense of personal responsibility invoked by the epidemic framing and empathetic personalization of the mass shootings is also clear in comments like: “It is no longer acceptable only to grieve. We must address the specter of violence made manifest in children’s graves.” Dr24hours. (2012, December 17). Connecticut. *Infactorium*.
<http://infactorium.com/2012/12/17/connecticut/>

[9] Fassin, Didier and Richard Rechtman. (2009). *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. (Rachel Gomme, trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2.

[10] Ibid., 4, 21.

[11] Ibid., 284.

[12] Jarvis, Lee. (2011). 9/11 Digitally Remastered? Internet Archives, Vernacular Memories and WhereWereYou.org. *Journal of American Studies*, 45(4), 807.

This idea of “national suffering,” the sense that mass shootings represent an assault on national identity and security, is reinforced by the growing expectation that the president involve himself in the mourning process. For further discussion, see: Heim, Joe. (2013, May 22). A growing role for the president: America’s consoler in chief. *The Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-growing-role-for-the-president-americas-consoler-in-chief/2013/05/22/5f275ca0-c226-11e2-914f-a7aba60512a7_story.html

[13] Hence why “the [traumatic] impact of TV images is more intense when people watched events in real time, that is, as they occurred.” Young, Allan. (2007). Posttraumatic Stress Disorder of the Virtual Kind: Trauma and Resilience in Post-9/11 America. In *Trauma and Memory: Reading, Healing, and Making Law*. (Sarat, Austin, Nadav Davidovitch, and Michal Alberstein, eds.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

[14] Fassin & Rechtman, op. cit., 17.

I use the term “trauma narrative” as a deliberate reflection and invocation of Kleinman’s concept of an “illness narrative,” in hopes of echoing its associations with broad and secondary social symptoms of diseases and of calling to mind the critical “epidemic” metaphor used to describe mass shootings.

[15] Emphasis added. Fassin & Rechtman, op. cit., 73.

[16] Haskins, as quoted in Jarvis, op. cit., 798.

[17] Fassin & Rechtman, op. cit., 18.

[18] See Jarvis, op. cit.

[19] As Fassin and Rechtman explain, “empathy[] posits a sort of communion in trauma.” Fassin & Rechtman, op. cit., 18.

[20] Jarvis, op. cit., 807.

[21] Emphasis added. Obama, op. cit.

[22] In fact, a number of people publicly came out as LGBT in the days following the shooting, many explicitly referencing a desire to stand with the community in the wake of the tragedy. Cf. White, Alan and Patrick Strudwick. (2016, June 13). People Are Coming Out as LGBT in Response to the Orlando Attack. *Buzzfeed*. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/people-are-coming-out-as-lgbt-in-response-to-the-orlando-att>

[23] One blogger remarks, after the Boston bombings: “What all this has resulted in is the displacement of compassion and empathy with anger and resentment. Because when the names of slain white children are spoken, I can barely hear them anymore. My ears are plugged with the unuttered names of the Black and brown children whose lives didn’t mean enough to be spoken aloud on CNN. When I see photos of their smiling white faces, I can only imagine the smiles of fallen Black and brown children whose faces never grace the news.” McKenzie, Mia. (2013, April 22). Hey, White Liberals: A Word on the Boston Bombings, the Suffering of White Children, and the Erosion of Sympathy. *Black Girl Dangerous*. <http://blackgirldangerous.org/new-blog/2013/4/22/hey-white-liberals>

Another says: “Boston is no different, no more or less tragic than the bombings that have razed the marketplaces of Karachi, the school in Khost, the mosque in Karbala. And yet it seems so.” Zakaria, op. cit.

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