

Cruel Pessimism:
Masculinity and Lone Actor Domestic Terrorism in the U.S.

A Senior Honors Thesis in American Studies

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of American Studies

Tufts University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of the
Bachelors of Arts

By

Emma Brown

Thesis Committee:
Professor Freedom Oeur
Professor Heather Curtis
Professor Matt Hooley

Abstract

This project reconceives lone actor domestic terrorism in the United States as a function of violent normative masculinity. I argue that current theories overinvest in the psychological and ideological profiles of perpetrators as distinct from the nexus of violence and masculinity. Four case studies of attacks by domestic terrorists will be explored. Social failure perceived as an assault on their masculine self-concepts coupled with the perceived redemptive potential of violence is highlighted as the common denominator motivating each attack. To ground my analysis, I draw on theories of masculinity, patriotism, and nationalism, particularly what Eric Madfis calls the “symbolic equation” of masculinity and violence, to show that violence is not simply the goal of lone actor terrorism, but also the means by which the perpetrators endeavor to assert or reclaim their masculinities. The purpose of this project is to show not how deviant, but in fact how proximate, lone actor domestic terrorists are to state and mainstream society.

Acknowledgements

Infinite thanks to the intellectual powerhouses who sat on my committee: Professors Freedom Oeur, Heather Curtis, and Matt Hooley. Words cannot express how much I appreciate your brilliance, support, rigor, and thoughtfulness. What an absolute honor it has been to be your student and mentee. I chose American Studies for the professors. The quality of your teaching and your genuine desire to see us succeed and better the world has made every single day at Tufts a humbling experience.

And of course, thank you to my hero and my biggest fan, the support system I need but do not deserve: my mom. Mom, without you, none of this would have been possible, and nothing I am would be possible. I love you and I hope I make you proud.

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Preface

I awoke one Sunday morning last June to a barrage of news stories that had broken the night before while I slept. It was the kind of frenzied reporting and scrambling to piece together the who, what, when, where, and why that could only mean one thing: a mass atrocity had occurred in the United States. As I absorbed the panic that these horrible events emanate, I frantically skimmed article after article trying to find out what had happened.

Orlando. Nightclub. Gunman. Standoff. Many casualties. ISIS.

As I jumped from news source to news source gathering bits and pieces of information and unconfirmed reports, a picture in my head of the incident in question started to come into focus. The initial shock of understanding the scope of the tragedy that occurred on June 12, 2016 at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida had not yet worn off when I learned that it was the deadliest (or “worst”) mass-shooting incident in United States history. The person accused of killing 50 people, including himself, was identified as Omar Mateen. Frankly, the only thing that disturbed me more than the scale of the carnage left in his wake was something about him that was mentioned casually in many of the articles I read that day: he was a father.

That Mateen had a son forced me to realize something so glaringly obvious about domestic terrorism in the United States that it took me twenty-one years and almost an entire college education to figure out. *The overwhelming majority of domestic terrorists in the United States are men.* Further, lone actor domestic terrorists, or perpetrators not directly sponsored by or connected to terror cells or organizations, are almost always men.¹ Indeed, violence, particularly large-scale violence, is a predominantly male act. Most people who allege to be counterterrorism experts focus on religion, abnormal psychology, radicalization pathways, political ideologies, and even childhood experiences as predictors of terroristic tendencies. However, rarely do they

point to the maleness of terror or implicate mainstream understandings of masculinity for their role in producing violence. It is my opinion that so long as we sideline or ignore masculinity, we are addressing the issue of terrorism in an unproductive manner.

Introduction

The Archive: Theorizing the Connection Between Masculinity and Violence

What Eric Madfis identifies as the “symbolic equation” of masculinity and violence has been apparent to me for a long time.² It is the reason why a friend of mine shattered a light bulb with his bare hands during an argument with his ex-girlfriend, landing him in the emergency room on the night of his school’s homecoming dance. It is why a boy my age, the quarterback at a rival high school, had to have his leg amputated at the knee during our senior year due to an injury he sustained in a football game. Violence is not an exclusively male act (though it overwhelmingly is). However, the use of violence to construct one’s sense of self, to redeem the loss of one’s own self-concept or social status, and to respond to looming threats of the same, absolutely is. I chose to take on a project about masculinity and violence for my Honors Thesis because it deserves our attention and, indeed, because it can be a matter of life and death.

I will never know what it is like to be a man in America or to be held to the impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity. I am acutely aware that my identities and lived experiences both enrich and limit my analysis. That said, this project is not a futile attempt to understand an experience that is not my own. Rather, this project seeks to interrogate the ways in which power operates in our lives, and specifically how power creates and sustains violence through the construction of normative masculinity and its expectations. There is something undeniably insidious about the symbolic equation of masculinity and violence, especially since an American man’s self-concept is often defined (by self and others) by the way he performs masculinity. In other words, a person’s gender performance has the ability to confer social life, status, and subjecthood, and for men, performing masculinity necessarily involves doing violence. This is why smashing a light bulb with one’s bare hands is legible as a solution to the emotional pain

and anger resulting from being broken up with. This is why so many men risk life-altering, if not life-ending, injury to their young, healthy bodies to engage in aggressive contact sports like football. The pain inflicted to self and others is justified means to an end. The perceived gains that masculinity brings – the benefits of being a knowable, incorporated, normative subject – appear to greatly outweigh the (self-)destruction left in its wake. Further, the perception that violence can be leveraged to redeem lost status or to reverse social failure is fundamental to masculinity, particularly white masculinity. In extreme cases, such as events of lone actor domestic terrorism, death is the justified destruction, the collateral damage in the terrorist's pursuit of life.

I have already touched on the two theoretical frames I will use to ground my work. The first is Jasbir Puar's idea of death as "collateral damage in the pursuit of life." In her book, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Puar illuminates the gendered and racialized narratives that inform Western concepts of terrorism. Puar argues that terrorists are constructed as "failed and perverse...emasculated bodies" and that manipulating perceptions of the terrorist's gender (or effectively revoking it) serves a larger project of killing terrorists both physically and philosophically.³ While Puar's work focuses mostly on the queering of Arab men, Muslim men, and men of color, the case studies in my project are white American men. One of the men in my project has a mixed-race identity (his father is white and his mother is Asian), but before taking his own life he scorned his Asian heritage and often identified exclusively with his whiteness.

The second theoretical frame that will ground my analysis is Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism." In her book by the same name, she describes cruel optimism as something that happens "when something desired is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."⁴ She explains that,

[This] might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.⁵

As my aforementioned anecdotes suggest, aspiring to social acceptance by conforming to performances of gender that necessarily involve violence to self and others is an inherently cruel relation. For American men, especially white men, dominance in a gender and racial order are both goals and expectations of existing in mainstream society. When outcomes do not match expectations, this disconnect is legible as personal failure or as a failure of the structures tasked with awarding benefits to the entitled. If it is the former, the self-policing characteristic of cruel optimism will continue to chip away at one's individuality until nothing but the skeleton of conformity (or nothing) remains. If it is the latter, then cruel optimism has transformed into what I will call "cruel pessimism," when disillusionment about one's inability to attain that which they desire ensues, and a desire to reconcile the experience of failure or status loss takes over. As I move through my case studies, I will identify a crucial turning point in each man's life where cruel optimism about his ability to embody hegemonic masculinity becomes an impossibility. I argue that this transition from cruel optimism to cruel pessimism is also the point at which the men commit to doing terror.

Masculinity and the State

Masculinity is a construct that evokes a host of socialized characteristics and unattainable expectations that are understood to be attributable to those who society identifies as men. Women can also embody masculinity but with different implications and results. Early 20th

century theorists posited a “sex-role” theory of biological determinism. Though ultimately rejected by contemporary scholars, the sex-role theory illuminated how masculinity and femininity are coproduced in a process that, according to R.W. Connell, “constitutes a gender order.”⁶ Thus, masculinities are not men, but rather are simultaneously the producers and results of the position (in a gender order) of the men who embody them. Connell argues that there are multiple masculinities and implicit power relations that operate between masculinities and across a gender order.

Scholars have been eager to define a single “hegemonic” masculinity to which those who feel entitled to power and dominance aspire. Since first appearing in gender studies literature in 1982, hegemonic masculinity has become a topic of interest of many scholars seeking to more concretely explain masculinity and its social implications. However, discourses centering a white, heterosexual, wealthy, able-bodied cisgender man as the epitome of hegemonic masculinity limits our understanding of masculinity and its relationship to state power and violence. For one, a singular definition of hegemonic masculinity obfuscates the hegemonic forces that allow men embodying alternative (e.g. non-white, non-wealthy, non-macho) masculinities to access power. It also leaves uninterrogated how certain behaviors, characteristics, and ideologies that break from socialized expectations can further subordinate or reduce the position of particular bodies in a gender order but not others. Most crucially, scholarship focusing on hegemonic masculinity legitimates state forces and structures of power that are responsible for constructing and maintaining a gender hierarchy and does nothing to uncover and dismantle the insidious relationship between masculinity and nationalism, specifically the use of “masculinity” as justification for deserving or not deserving subjecthood.

Terrorists are understood to oppose state authority by claiming a measure of the state's monopoly on fear and violence. Unlike acts of state-sponsored terror (e.g. settler-colonialism, slavery, police brutality), anti-state terror (what the state calls "terrorism") threatens the power relations between subject and state because in becoming terrorist, the subject accesses power intended to be exclusively accessible to the state. The momentary vulnerability of the state is reconciled by releasing upon the terrorist a wrath of physical and symbolic violences for the purpose of destroying the corporeality and the idea of the terrorist. Symbolically, this is often achieved by depicting them as "failed and perverse...emasculated bodies."⁷ Attempting to neutralize the threat of the terrorist by framing him in relation to a lack of masculinity (and thus a presence of femininity) shows that the power to manually reorder a (ex-)subject's gendered positionality is necessary and leveraged as a tool of revoking subjecthood and exercising state violence. Conversely, state-sanctioned masculinities (what Puar calls "masculinities of patriotism") "work to distinguish, and thus discipline or incorporate and banish, terrorist from patriot."⁸

Masculinities are constantly policed and observed, corrected and aligned with state interests. The control societies in which we live reward the masculinities of patriotism with subjecthood and dominance in relation to other masculinities and all femininities. Thus, it follows that if a hegemonic masculinity were to exist, it would be that of the patriot, a knowable, controllable, loyal, yet disposable subject. Terrorism takes on its symbolic dimension when the masculinity of patriotism becomes the thing desired to be embodied or exorcised by and from self, state, and society.

Reframing the Discussion: The Cruel Optimism of Hegemonic Masculinity

Existing literature on Terrorism Studies as well as media portrayals of lone actor domestic terrorist attacks focus almost exclusively on the importance of radicalization pathways and histories of mental illness, both of which suggest that terror is the result of deviance from normal society. But to commit an act of terror is to position oneself in a dominant position, one that simultaneously allows the perpetrator to possess power and to subordinate the violated. To be sure, there is something crucially normative about aspiring to dominance, desiring that which is hegemonic and powerful. The terrorist has access to power during (however fleeting) an amount of time that the violence is sustained. This violence is the means by which the perpetrator's desire for power, status, and dominance is expressed. Not simply a mental health crisis gone awry or an outsider's rogue desire to inflict harm on random innocents (as the name "lone wolf" terrorist would suggest), lone actor terrorism's hallmark quality is the individual actor's desire to access power and to reverse the perceived subordination of his own masculinity in ways that reflect a genuine investment in society's constructions of gender and power relations.

The popular conceptualization of lone actor domestic terrorism ensures the erasure of linkages between terrorism and violent normative masculinity.⁹ For example, R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt note how "the issue of masculinity was withdrawn from scrutiny" in media depictions of the Columbine massacre.¹⁰ This left the media "with no way of representing the shooters except as monsters."¹¹ Indeed, reducing lone actor terrorists to subhuman entities removes that which is human from consideration as cause for the violence. Calling a terrorist "a monster" pushes him beyond a genderable subject, effectively taking gender out of the discourse. This conveniently renders masculinity, which is only attributable to seen/visible human subjects, invisible.

The “lone wolf” epithet also distorts what appears legitimate and relevant to the discourse on lone actor terrorism. The idea of the “lone wolf” evokes images of a subhuman being who operates on the margins of society in self-induced exile and relishes his solitude. However, terror perpetrators who exist outside of society see their isolation as neither positive nor self-induced. Further, they do terror to regain entry into the society from which they feel outcast, or to rid a corrupt society of its ills. What they aspire to attain is the power and status that they believe hegemonic, patriotic masculinity confers. Given that masculinity itself is a construct of the nation-state which oppresses both those who are subjugated and objectified by it, to understand the violence of lone actor terrorism as a means of redeeming one’s masculinity necessitates characterizing these men as ideologically fully integrated members of U.S. society who are conditioned by and afflicted with highly normative perspectives on the standards of what constitutes “legitimate” masculinity in form and in practice. In other words, to claim that these men are “lone wolves” who enjoy their existence on the margins is to obfuscate the reality that their actions prove their integration into and incriminate their role as stakeholders in society’s gender expectations.

To endeavor to redeem self and society with such violence shows that lone actor terrorists are not fringe members of contemporary society, but that they are insidiously produced by gender norms that society expects them to exhibit and inhabit. For these men, dominance in a gender order is the thing that is desired. But hegemonic masculinity is something that does not exist and cannot be achieved. Devastatingly, it ultimately leads to the demise of the terrorist and the suffering of innocents all for the sake of drawing the public’s and the state’s momentary attention to a symbolic grievance that cannot be reconciled.

Lone actor domestic terrorists operate according to what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism.”¹² This is “when something desired is actually an obstacle to one’s flourishing.”¹³ By reconceptualizing terror as a gendered endeavor, hegemonic masculinity is exposed as the (unattainable, unreal) thing that is sought. If perpetrators see themselves as on the brink of losing that which gives them life and subjecthood in relation to the nation-state, then their impending social failure must be reconciled with actions that can guarantee them life. In this way, “death becomes a form of collateral damage in the pursuit of life.”¹⁴ Violence, death, and suicide (by self or by state) are leveraged to achieve this end.

Though the traditional definition of the terrorist identity is something static, permanent, definitive, and complete, I conceptualize the terrorist identity as one that is transitional, goal-oriented, and temporary. This is because the violence perpetrated by a lone actor domestic terrorist is in service of a larger symbolic project. For example, Dylann Roof wanted to start a “race war” wherein white men would rid society of its ills (read: Black people) and restore order. The symbolic equation of masculinity and violence is mobilized to achieve this. In other words, violence is not the goal of lone actor domestic terrorism, but rather the means by which lone actor domestic terrorists reach a redemptive end.

When viewed through the lens of the masculinities of patriotism rather than the traditional lenses of radicalism and pathology, lone actor domestic terrorism can be understood as redemption of self and society, as well as self from society. Indeed, from lone actor domestic terrorists we can learn much about what it means to be a man in America. In the following three chapters, I will look at the relationship between violent normative masculinity and lone actor domestic terrorism. The first chapter explores the cases of white supremacists Dylann Roof and Elliot Rodger. Roof is on federal death row for murdering nine Black churchgoers at Emanuel

AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. In 2014, Rodger went on a killing rampage in Isla Vista, California that left seven dead, including the gunman. In the second chapter, the case of U.S. Army veteran Timothy McVeigh illuminates the proximity of patriotic masculinities to terrorist masculinities. In 1995, McVeigh committed the worst act of domestic terrorism by a U.S. citizen in the nation's history when he bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Finally, the third chapter focuses on the youngest perpetrators of terrorism and their ambitions to be "All-American" boys. The case study used in this analysis is the Columbine High School massacre of 1999, perpetrated by Columbine students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Refusals and Assertions

On whiteness and terror

Michael Kimmel acknowledges that white men commit the overwhelming majority of mass murders in the United States. However, few white men are labeled "terrorists" in mainstream scholarship and media. As Jasbir Puar notes, "terrorist" is a gendered and racialized term often reserved for men of color, those "failed and perverse...bodies" that can be placed in direct opposition to the state and the patriotic subject. White men, though more violent and more deadly than any other demographic in modern history, are typically exonerated from being associated with their acts of terror on the basis of their race alone. To refuse the white supremacist frameworks of the state that pit the patriotic subject against the terrorist, all of the men in this project who access the state's monopoly on fear and violence as a means of redeeming a perceived loss (of status, of masculinity, of the ability to be optimistic, of dominance, of hope) or a looming threat of the same are referred to as terrorists. To be sure,

white men are the original American terrorists. Historically, they have been the primary architects and profiteers of terror and violence in the United States.

On names

Academia and its conventions require that I address the perpetrators in my case studies by their last names only. I find this limiting, as it preserves an artificial degree of separation between reality and scholarship. Though I oblige the academy by conforming to this standard practice, I wholly reject the dehumanizing work done by this formality. We must not forget that Dylann, Elliot, Timothy, Eric, and Dylan were human beings before they became statistics and their lived experiences became data to be analyzed. The point of this project is to remind us of how proximate lone actor domestic terrorists are to state and society. To put it bluntly, terrorists are pretty normal guys. They are produced by the same power relations that we inhabit and are implicated in upholding. We must not forget that these five boys and men were family, friends, neighbors, classmates, roommates, fellow soldiers, and more to the people they encountered during their short lives. And we must not forget that the next man added to this list could be someone we know, love, and perhaps even respect. When he is, by what name will we call him?

Notes

1. I can think of one exception, Tashfeen Malik, who was responsible for the 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California. Malik did not act alone but with her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook.
2. Eric Madfis, "Triple Entitlement and Homicidal Anger," *Sage Journals* 17, no. 1 (2014): 78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X14523432>.
3. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xxiii.
4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Raewyn Connell, "Masculinities," *Raewyn Connell*, http://www.raewynconnell.net/p/masculinities_20.html.
7. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiii.
8. Ibid., xxiv.
9. R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Sage Journals* 19, no. 6 (2005): 834. DOI: 10.1177/0891243205278639.
10. Ibid., 835.
11. Ibid.
12. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
13. Ibid., 1.
14. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 32.

Chapter I:

Perpetrators and Their Grievances:

The Proximity of Lone Actor Domestic Terrorists to State and Society

“You’re not wrong, Walter. You’re just an asshole.” –The Dude (The Big Lebowski)

The state has a vested interest in rendering the violence of lone actor domestic terrorism unimaginable. The proximity of terrorist grievances to the concerns of normative subjects implicates power as both the producer and beneficiary of this violence. The media reinforces this narrative of lone actor domestic terrorism as “unthinkable” by dehumanizing the terrorist and rendering society’s complicity in his violent logics illegible. This creates a safe distance between the deviant terrorist and the patriotic subject, and neither the state’s monopoly on fear/violence nor society’s inherently violent power relations are called into question.¹ Evidence that a deviant terrorist is an iteration of the patriotic subject can be found in that which lives on after his life has ended and the violence has subsided: the terrorist manifesto. Lone actor domestic terrorism is not simply the product of abnormal psychology or radical ideology. The terrorist manifesto illuminates the normativity of the grievances and motivations identified as justification for his acts of violence. Thus, it is essential to carefully read the words penned by the perpetrators themselves in order to understand the insidious proximity of the people behind the attacks to state and society.

Dylann Roof

Avenging a Deteriorating Social Order: White Supremacy and Ideas About the “Good Life”

In grade school, Dylann Roof had a Black friend. This friend was Taliaferro Robinson-Heyward, and according to Robinson-Heyward, Roof never made him feel uncomfortable.² In fact, prior to the 2015 attack on the historic Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, Robinson-Heyward claims he did not know that Roof was racist, let alone a white supremacist whose cyber alias and domain name was “The Last Rhodesian.”³ At the time of the attacks, 20-year-old Robinson-Heyward was an employee of a local funeral home, and devastatingly, was tasked with preparing two of Roof’s shooting victims for burial.⁴

Caleb Brown, a biracial man and another one of Roof’s childhood friends, recalled in an interview with the *New York Times* that after Roof discovered that Brown’s father was Black, he “didn’t change his behavior toward me.” Brown and Roof’s friendship was like any other. The boys enjoyed playing video games and skateboarding together. They even had sleepovers. According to Brown, Roof’s mother was “welcoming and tolerant of all races.”⁵ Roof’s father lived in a predominantly Black area of Columbia, South Carolina, and he would often invite his Black and Hispanic employees to his house parties. Neighbors summed up the general sentiment about the Roofs this way: they were “as normal as normal could be.”⁶

Aside from murdering nine Black churchgoers during a weekday Bible study session, there was conceivably nothing abnormal about the 21-year-old South Carolinian. Indeed, there is something frighteningly normative about the way in which Roof navigated his whiteness and Southern society. He has been described as a shy and quiet boy who “says African-American,” not “the N-word.”⁷ But after dropping out of high school, it seems he underwent an important change from naive inquisitiveness (i.e. asking Brown about his dark skin and curly hair) to an

isolated, internal kind of intellectual curiosity about race, power, and violence. In the months leading up to his attack, a friend noticed that Roof became “a lot more quiet...like, emotionless.”⁸ This same friend (who is a white man) acknowledged that he knew Roof to be racist and admitted he disclosed to him that he would do “something big” to act on his racist views.⁹ Neither he, nor anyone else, alerted authorities.

The silence of those who knew of Roof’s intentions is disturbing. However, the success of Roof’s efforts to keep quiet about his plans to those outside of his trusted inner circle of white people is equally alarming. Indeed, this success was made possible by Roof’s strategic navigation of his private and public lives, and the fact that his whiteness affords him a right to privacy that protects him from public scrutiny. As a white supremacist living in a city largely populated by Black folks, Roof internalized his racism and perceived superiority with strategic silence. Todd Rutherford, a South Carolina state legislator, described it this way:

Roof’s father and grandfather both live in neighborhoods where they are surrounded by African Americans. Dylann Roof can be racist if he wanted to, but he would have had to have done it in his house.¹⁰

And that is exactly how he did it: in the safety of the house that white supremacy built. Roof’s extreme bigotries became manifest only in tactful places: his own home, his own mind, his white friends’ homes, his website,¹¹ and the anonymous online discussion forums of which he was a member. His “research” on Black on white crime, eugenics, and white superiority/Black inferiority (to name a few) became an echo chamber of white supremacist organizations and fascist sources, including but not limited to: the white supremacist African governments of Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC).

Perhaps organizations such as the CCC or the KKK are less overtly vocal about their views today than they might have been at one point in time. However, they are by no means less present or active, and they are certainly not marginal. The election of (KKK-endorsed) Donald J. Trump shows this to be true. In an opinion article published on the CCC's website called "Why Donald Trump Should (and Will) Win the Election," Filip Dewinter argues that Trump will prevail in the presidential election because he "says what the common man thinks but dare not say." According to Dewinter, Trump is like the common man because he is "politically incorrect, anti-immigration, wants to keep and bear arms, Islam-critical, independent, and conservative."¹²

That a man backed by two major white supremacist organizations won the highest political office in the United States is both horrific and unsurprising. Just as many Trump supporters stayed silent about their political allegiance throughout the polling process, so too did the bigotries and violent intentions of Roof remain closely guarded. As the laws have evolved to protect women and people of color from discrimination and hate, white supremacy has also adapted to the changing times by moving into the fortified privacy of white homes, organizations, and minds. Since the interests of the civil rights movement converged with those of state power (most crucially in the form of U.S. foreign relations during the period of global decolonization movements), Americans have adopted a public-facing policy of anti-racism. The "official" discourse on race in the United States acknowledges that racism is bad, wrong, and un-American. Thus, the state benefits from apprehending and bringing to justice a white supremacist domestic terrorist, as it protects the image of the U.S. as an anti-racist place where bigotry is not tolerated. In doing so, the state effectively makes it as difficult as possible to face its own history and policies of anti-Blackness and racist terror. Further, by framing Dylann Roof's violence as

isolated, marginal, and deviant, the state obscures the involvement of large-scale white supremacist organizations and works to quell agitation by true anti-racist activists.

The narrative of the United States as a “post-racial” country is widely accepted and reiterated. However, the election of Trump exposes a markedly different political reality. Frankly, there is nothing deviant or abnormal about Dylann Roof. Like Trump, he says what the common (white) man thinks but “dare not say.” Moreover, he did what the common man desires to but dares not do. Not only is Roof representative of a powerful silent constituency of white people who keep their bigotry hidden from public scrutiny, he and his fellow white supremacists view themselves as true patriots. The danger of white supremacist terrorists such as Dylann Roof is not how deviant, but how normative their views on subjecthood are and how proximate they are to both state and society.

The Masculinities of Patriotism

The fallacy of the current discourse on terrorism is that its origins are ideological in nature, when in reality the views of people labeled lone actor domestic terrorists often reflect those of mainstream society. Society’s quickness to distance itself from lone actor domestic terrorists such as Roof is not a rejection of difference, but rather a fear of publicly acknowledging familiarity, proximity, and complicity. Jasbir Puar argues that consciously or subconsciously, “the terrorist imagination...dwells within us all.”¹³ She quotes Jean Baudrillard:

In the end, it was they [the terrorists] who did it but we who wished it. If we do not take this fact into account, the event loses all symbolic dimension; it becomes a purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics we need only repress. But we know well that such is not the case. Without our profound complicity the event would not have reverberated

so forcefully, and in their strategic symbolism the terrorists knew they could count on this unconfessable complicity.¹⁴

The term “terrorist” has become synonymous with something foreign, deviant, and non-human. By obscuring state and societal complicity in the violence of lone actor domestic terrorists, the United States renders perpetrators illegible in the context of normative subjecthood. However, as Jasbir Puar articulates, the terrorist imagination is familiar and proximate to those who consider themselves normative, “good,” and patriotic subjects. Building on Puar, I assert that terrorism and patriotism are not mutually exclusive, but rather coexist and are coproduced in a society predicated on violence, nationalism, and a gendered and racialized hierarchy.

Puar explains that “terrorist” is a gendered and racialized term. Patriotism in the U.S. is gendered as well, as it confers a status of dominance in a social order organized by discourses of nationalism and masculinity. To be sure, lone actor domestic terrorism is a distinctly male act, and many of the men U.S. society labels “terrorist” are intimately informed by and organize themselves around notions of patriotism. In his manifesto, Roof includes an entire section on patriotism. He describes why he cannot be patriotic of a country such as the United States in the current political moment, calling American patriotism “an absolute joke.”¹⁵ However, he also alludes to a desire to be patriotic and a willingness to fight for the kind of society toward which he is capable of being patriotic (read: an overtly white supremacist nation).¹⁶

Roof’s decision to turn to violence is one that ideology or radicalization alone cannot explain. Eric Madfis identifies a “symbolic equation” of masculinity and violence, which men in the U.S. are socialized to embody.¹⁷ While the raced and gendered identities of the patriot are complex and intersecting, what Jasbir Puar calls the “masculinities of patriotism” offer compelling

insights into understanding lone actor domestic terrorism as a function of violent normative masculinity.¹⁸

Omissions in Existing Scholarship

Contemporary theories of lone actor terrorism remain silent on topics such as masculinity and the gendered aspects of violence. Many scholars of Terrorism Studies focus on radicalization pathways, mental illnesses and other psychological vulnerabilities, and lived experiences of violence as risk factors associated with the development of lone actor terrorists. These factors in isolation erase the implications of masculinity and the precarious ways in which men in the U.S. are socialized to equate masculinity and violence. For example, terrorist scholar Knut Sturidsson argues that personality traits and individual characteristics drive the criminal behavior of lone actor terrorists.¹⁹ He writes that, “psychological motives,” including “the need for a sense of coherence, a need for validation, and a need for self-esteem,” sufficiently explain lone actor terrorism.²⁰ However, Sturidsson fails to acknowledge the origin of the feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and incoherence experienced by the terrorists, thus erasing the important role played by masculinity and U.S. gender order in constructing a perceived need for redemption; in fact, he does not mention gender at all.

To be sure, looking at lone actor terrorism in the context of Madfis’ “symbolic equation” of masculinity and violence is illuminating. James Gilligan asserts that, “the emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence.”²¹ All violent men, Gilligan claims, hold a powerful, devastating secret: “they feel ashamed.”²² Violence arises when “these men perceive themselves as having no nonviolent means of warding off or diminishing their feelings of shame or low self-esteem - such as socially rewarded economic or cultural achievement, or high social status, position, and prestige.”²³ In other words, losing the status and respect that they have been

socialized to expect functions as a form of deep shame that must be replaced with its opposites: pride and validation.²⁴ In the case of violent men generally and lone actor terrorists in particular, violence is a performance of masculinity that is leveraged as a means of eradicating feelings of shame and dishonor.²⁵

Gender Studies offers new insights into the relationship between lone actor terrorism and masculinity. In his scholarship, Madfis explores the relationship between intersecting identities (gender, race, sexuality, and class) and mass murder. Specifically, he focuses on entitled white men who experience economic or social decline and reconcile this perceived loss of status through violence. He claims that men and women are socialized differently, and that “violence is a masculine act.”²⁶ “Thus,” Madfis writes, “masculine gender identity is paramount to the explanation of violence as a solution to the predicament of status loss to the entitled.”²⁷

Further, he draws on theories about school shootings put forth by gender scholars to show why the shame associated with subordinated masculinities (in contrast to hegemonic masculinities such as patriotism) makes mass murder “an even more masculine atrocity” than other kinds of violence.²⁸ Citing the work of Hilary Neroni and James Gilligan, Madfis claims,

In America (and many places elsewhere), violence serves as a solution to men’s problems, not only because of their differential socialization and the equation of violence with masculinity but because our culture fosters the notion that violence serves as an appropriate masculine reaction to any shameful loss of masculinity.²⁹

Dylann Roof murdered nine people in a church because he believes the existence of white people is directly threatened by Black Americans, who he calls “the real racists.”³⁰ Whether he saw it this way or not, violence became the redemptive means of reconciling his perceived loss of status in society. While he might have taken more extreme measures than most, this

perception is not unique to him. Over the past year, Donald Trump's bigotry and hateful rhetoric have emboldened many "common men" to speak and act on their racist views. The Southern Poverty Law Center claims that hate crimes increased more dramatically in the weeks following Trump's election than they did after 9/11.³¹ What was once kept at bay by the respectability politics of the late twentieth century has been unleashed by a leader who validates, encourages, and spews vile rhetoric. These are the exact sentiments that drive white men like Roof to commit atrocities.

Elliot Rodger

The All-American Boy: Whiteness, Sex With Women, and Popularity Among Men

The first line of Elliot Rodger's 141-page manifesto reads: "Humanity....All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women."³² To Rodger, May 23, 2014 was the "Day of Retribution." On that day, he murdered six people in Isla Vista, California near the University of Santa Barbara campus. In a video posted just hours before his rampage, Rodger explains the reasoning behind his impending attack.³³

"Well, this is my last video," it begins. "It all has to come to this."

He asserts that tomorrow will be the so-called "Day of Retribution," "the day in which I will have my revenge against humanity, against all of you." We soon learn that his purpose for exacting revenge against the entire human race was that he was a 22-year-old virgin who had never kissed a girl or had a girlfriend. To Rodger, dealing with "loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires" was too painful to bear. To be sure, it was something he did not believe he should be obligated to bear. "Girls gave their affection and love and sex to other men, but never to me," he says. He describes the fact that he still has his virginity as "torturous," and laments

that girls have never found him attractive. “I don’t know why you girls aren’t attracted to me, but I will punish you for it.”

His plan was two-fold. First, he would “enter the hottest sorority house at UCSB and... slaughter every single spoiled stuck up blonde slut that I see inside there.” Next, “I’ll take to the streets of Isla Vista and slay every single person I see there.” He targeted the women who rejected him and the men who looked down on him, claiming that they had treated him “like a mouse” his entire life. He continues:

Now, I will be a god compared to you. You will all be animals. You are animals. And I will slaughter you like animals. I’ll be a god exacting my retribution...If I had it in my power, I would stop at nothing to reduce every single one of you to mountains of skulls and rivers of blood – and rightfully so. You deserve to be annihilated. And 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 will make you all suffer.

Rodger felt that he had been denied access to the things he associated with hegemonic white masculinity such as women and social status, and it is clear that he believed this to be a grave injustice. He says the “popular kids” deserve to die for “the crime of living a better life than me,” and says that women should be punished for rejecting him. He puts this bluntly:

If I can’t have you, girls, I will destroy you.

On the actual “Day of Retribution,” he began by lying in wait and ambushing his two roommates and their friend, killing them one by one as they entered the apartment.³⁴ According to the graphic police report, the three victims died from multiple stab wounds (15, 25, and 94 wounds, respectively), and the apartment was covered in blood.³⁵ In his manifesto, Rodger fantasizes about murdering his two Asian housemates in his “torture and killing chamber” so that

he could “secure the entire apartment for myself” and then lure unsuspecting victims into the apartment to be maimed and slaughtered in horrific ways.³⁶ The three bodies were not discovered until after Rodger had gone on his shooting spree and committed suicide. While investigating the crime scene, detectives discovered Google searches for “torture devices” and “how to kill someone with a knife” on Rodger’s laptop.³⁷ In addition, his pillows and mattress were slashed, indicating that he had practiced his stabbing technique.³⁸

After these initial murders, he went to the Alpha Phi sorority house as planned. No one answered after several minutes of his aggressive knocking on the sorority house door. Less than thirty seconds after the knocking stopped, the women of Alpha Phi heard a dozen gunshots fired directly outside of their house. A woman’s scream was then followed by three or four more gunshots. Rodger, unable to gain entry into the sorority house secured by key-code lock, shot three female UCSB students who happened to be walking past the Alpha Phi house as he turned to leave. He killed two and severely wounded the third. He then got back in his two-door BMW and drove down the streets of Isla Vista, shooting at college-aged men and women and intentionally running over pedestrians, bikers, and skateboarders with his car. He exchanged gunfire with police and then shot himself in the head while still driving. In an eight-minute rampage on the streets of Isla Vista, Rodger shot to death a 20-year-old man and injured thirteen others. After committing suicide, his BMW crashed into a parked car at an intersection and finally came to a stop.

The Perfect Guy: White Male Entitlement

In his last video, Elliot Rodger wondered about the women he desired: “I don’t know what you don’t see in me, I’m the perfect guy.” In his mind, it was not his fault that he could not get a

date. He referred to himself as a “supreme gentleman,” but confessed that, “all of those girls that I’ve desired so much...looked down upon me as an inferior man.”³⁹

Rodger was nine years old when he became aware of social hierarchies. In fourth grade, “I realized...that some people were better than others,” his manifesto reads.⁴⁰ “When I became aware of this common social structure at my school, I also started to examine myself and compare myself to these ‘cool kids.’ I realized, with some horror, that I wasn’t ‘cool’ at all.”⁴¹ Aside from his self-described “dorky-ness” and social anxiety, a major source of insecurity for Rodger was his mixed-race identity. His father is white and “descended from British aristocracy,” and his mother is Asian.⁴² He confessed that this made him feel “different from the normal fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with.”⁴³ He even admitted to dying his hair blonde in elementary school because he thought blonde-haired people “always seemed so much more beautiful.”⁴⁴

Later in his manifesto, Rodger talks about his first week in Santa Barbara. He includes an anecdote about a Black man named Chance who is a friend of his first two roommates. Chance visited Rodger’s apartment often and liked to talk about his sex life. One day, Chance told Rodger that he had lost his virginity at thirteen to a white girl. This upset Rodger so much that he locked himself in his bedroom and cried.

“How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me?” he laments.⁴⁵ “I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. *He* is descended from slaves. I deserve it more.”⁴⁶ He consoled himself by calling Chance a liar, but dreaded the possibility that his story could be true.

If this [story] 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. They would give themselves to this filthy scum, but they reject *ME*? The injustice!⁴⁷

Many publications call Rodger a “woman hater,” but to say that misogyny alone inspired his violence is an analysis that lacks nuance. His misogyny was inextricable from his racist worldview, and his decision to terrorize people cannot be divorced from his whiteness. Rodger saw sex the way he would eventually learn to see violence: as redemptive, as a glorious equalizer that would flatten the social hierarchy he perceived himself to be at the bottom of despite embodying many qualities he viewed as hegemonic: his whiteness, his relative wealth, his intelligence, his “gentlemanliness.”

Throughout his manifesto, he expresses his white supremacist perspective. He mentions eating at a restaurant in Santa Barbara with his father a few tables away from a young interracial couple. The woman was “a hot blonde white girl” and the man was “a dark-skinned Mexican guy.”⁴⁸

“The sight of them enraged me to no end,” he writes. “I regarded it [the interracial couple] as a great insult to my dignity.”

How could an inferior Mexican guy be able to date a white blonde girl, while I was still suffering as a lonely virgin? I was ashamed to be in such an inferior position in front of my father...it was so humiliating. I wasn't the son I wanted to present to my father. I should be the one with the hot blonde girl, making my father proud. Instead, my father had to watch me suffer in a pathetic position.⁴⁹

Although there is no evidence to suggest that his father instilled ideas in him about who he should date or be seen with, Rodger convinced himself that to be a virgin was to be a disappointment and a failure to his white father. Not only that, but to be unable to prove his

masculinity in ways that men of color and other “inferior” men were able to pushed him over the edge. Rodger often returned to the idea that there must be something mentally wrong with women who dated these inferior men and ignored him. He believed himself to be the “perfect guy,” and saw nothing but the power of wealth and whiteness when he looked in the mirror.

“On the morning of the first day [of college classes], I donned my fabulous Armani Exchange shirt and put on my new Gucci sunglasses...I said to myself that there was no way I could possibly have trouble with getting girls now.”⁵⁰ He describes going to Starbucks to buy a latte, then continuing on to class “with the confidence that I would appear as a superior gentleman to all of the students there. I *was* a superior gentleman. That was what I was born to be, and it was now time to show it to the world.”⁵¹ When he arrived on campus, he went to the bathroom and repeated his favorite mantra to himself. “‘Yes,’ I thought. ‘*I am the image of beauty ad [sic] supremacy*’.”⁵²

Rodger made it clear that he was superior not simply because he was a “gentleman” while other men were “obnoxious brutes,” but that he was superior because he was (half) white.⁵³ His race matters in the context of his sex life because as a white man, he felt entitled to everything (white women’s bodies, sex, relationships, acceptance, homosociality) and felt he should have been given priority over non-white men and white men who he perceived to be inferior. This included his “fat and ugly” former roommate Spencer who he was outraged to discover was not a virgin, as well as “jocks” and other “popular kids” who lacked his refinement but had “beautiful girlfriends.” To Rodger, women were objects he could possess and to which he believed he should have had unlimited access. Thus, being denied sex challenged his self-concept as an entitled white man. He did not really care about women; he cared about power and dominance. In Rodger’s mind, those two things were fused to the men that women “throw themselves” at.⁵⁴

According to Michael Kimmel, men are taught that they are “entitled to women’s bodies, entitled to sex.”⁵⁵ Days before his 22nd birthday, Rodger decided to go to a party in Isla Vista. “I was giving the female gender one last chance to provide me with the pleasures I deserved from them,” he writes.⁵⁶ Rodger adopted this logic of entitlement as part of the process of becoming an American man. He expected sex and affection from women as a reward for his conformity to what he perceived to be the rules of hegemonic white masculinity. He did exactly what he thought he needed to do; he went to parties at college, he dressed nicely, he even started a fight with a group of big “popular” guys at a party and got badly beaten because he thought that girls “would have offered to walk me to my room and take care of me,” and “would have even offered to sleep with me to make me feel better.”⁵⁷ When these actions failed to produce their intended results, he blamed sexually active men for stealing the women he thought should rightfully be his, and resented women for rejecting his advances and not finding him attractive. He became outraged that the women he desired “treated [him] like scum” while they “gave [themselves] to other men.”⁵⁸

A Privileged Upbringing

Growing up, Elliot Rodger wanted for nothing. His family is well off, he went to good schools, and he traveled the world. His parents divorced when he was young but he maintained relationships with both sides of his family. His father, Peter Rodger, is a Hollywood filmmaker and Elliot often had the opportunity to attend exclusive celebrity events. If there ever were such a thing as a proverbial silver spoon, it would likely be protruding from Rodger’s unkissed lips.

His privileged upbringing appears to have played a role in his ideas about masculinity. Indeed, his self-concept was informed by an aspiration towards hegemonic masculinity, which is characterized by constantly falling short while failing to recognize one’s many privileges. In his

manifesto, Rodger describes how he used the luxuries he was afforded to try to garner women's attention. He seems convinced that the way to a woman's heart is through wealth. He admits to buying expensive clothes of designer brands and telling his divorced mother she should marry her wealthy boyfriend "for the sake of my happiness."⁵⁹

"Being rich will definitely make me attractive enough to have a beautiful girlfriend," he writes. "If I was a millionaire and owned a house like the one [his mother's boyfriend owned], I could have any girl I want."⁶⁰

In the months leading up to the rampage, he convinces himself that he will win the lottery if he plays. He believes that some divine intervention will move the odds in his favor and make him rich enough for women to want him. He plays the Mega Millions lottery. "I was meant to live a life of significance and extravagance," he writes. "I was meant to win this jackpot. It was destiny."⁶¹ Just months before his shooting spree, Rodger wasted hundreds of dollars purchasing losing lottery tickets. Broke and still sexually unsatisfied, he reached the point where cruel optimism about his masculinity was overtaken by cruel pessimism. "My life was at a crucial turning point," he writes. "The world is brutal, and I need to fight for my place in it."⁶²

Michael Kimmel and Eric Madfis theorize the strong connection between white men, anger, and violence. Kimmel argues that young American men are told "don't get mad, get even."⁶³ Elliot Rodger's manifesto provides compelling evidence for Kimmel and Madfis' theory, but it also shows how "getting mad" is legible to certain men as a means of performing hegemonic masculinity.

To be angry about the injustices one faces is a sign of strength. It is a sign that one has the *will* to fight back against those injustices, rather than bowing down and accepting it as fate. Both of my friends James and Philip [who were also virgins] seem to be the weak, accepting type;

whereas I am the *fighter*. I will never stand to be insulted, and I will eventually have my revenge against all those who insult me, no matter how long it takes.⁶⁴

Like Roof who saw himself as a martyr for his white supremacist cause (or the “Last Rhodesian”), so too did Rodger perceive himself to be a rare crusader for justice, a “fighter” who refused to “accept fate” and would ultimately have his “revenge.” Violence as a means of fighting for his place in society and taking control of his own fate became necessary and had always been justified by the equation of masculinity and violence. Further, he felt he should not have to avail himself of any non-violent mechanisms to prove himself worthy of sex with women and popularity among other men. His manifesto communicates a sense of loss that he felt after failing to win the Mega Millions. This loss of hope marks the shift from cruel optimism about his masculinity to cruel pessimism, as he began to perceive that the thing he desired was eternally unattainable unless redemptive action could be taken to correct the unjust/flawed structures keeping it out of reach.⁶⁵ In the final video, Rodger speaks about the purpose of his premeditated violence.

I’ll take great pleasure in slaughtering all of you. You will finally see that I am in truth the superior one, the true alpha male.

The distinction between cruel optimism and cruel pessimism is crucial as it helps disambiguate the link between lone actor domestic terrorism and state sanctioned violence. Cruel optimism functions as an internal mechanism of self-policing, and masculinity is created by power. The real, felt consequences of masculinity’s perceived significance exist because state violence does. This is how cruel optimism, the aspiration towards hegemonic masculinity, protects the state from anti-state violence and from needing to exhaust resources policing its subjects. Hegemonic masculinity is fraudulent; it is a construct and an inaccessible goal. But so long as men continue

to aspire to something unattainable, they will continue to self-regulate, ultimately preserving the state's monopoly on violence against its subjects. Elliot Rodger deeply desired hegemonic masculinity and the societal benefits that he believed would accompany it. He saw dominance in a gender order as his only means of survival in American society. As his optimism about his ability to embody hegemonic masculinity deteriorated, it began morphing into a kind of pessimistic anger that shifted blame from self to society and was more directed towards perceived external injustices than personal failures. His response (and ironic final attempt at performing hegemonic masculinity) was to leverage what he understood as the redemptive potential of violence. If he could not have what he felt entitled to, he believed the only logical option would be to destroy it.

In his manifesto, Rodger calls his plans to kill the people he thinks have wronged him his "final solution." Over the course of his young adulthood, any hope of turning his perceived failures into successes died and were reborn as resentment towards the women and superior men whose acceptance he so desperately desired. In his video, privileged Rodger says he has suffered an "injustice, a crime" at the hands of the people who rejected him. Perceiving violence to be the only legitimate means to redeem his subordinated masculinity, he planned his "Day of Retribution."

Notes

1. This conceptualization draws on Weberian theory. Max Weber's original formulation of the modern state is an entity comprised of institutions that maintain a monopoly on the use of violence. Thus, state-sanctioned violence is established as the only legitimate form of violence.

2. Frances Robles and Nikita Stewart, "Dylann Roof's Past Reveals Trouble at Home and School," *New York Times*, July 16, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/us/charleston-shooting-dylann-roof-troubled-past.html?_r=1.

3. Rhodesia was a British colony in southern Africa that declared its independence from the United Kingdom in 1965 when Britain refused to recognize the white minority rule. Minority indeed, as white people comprised only three percent of the population but held total power. Despite its brutal repression tactics, the regime was toppled in 1979 by Black resistance movements. Like the Confederacy, Rhodesia has become a symbol of a lost cause for white supremacists worldwide, as many identify with the myth of whites as "underdogs." For more on Rhodesia's relationship to contemporary white supremacy, see Robert Beckhusen's article "Why White Supremacists Identify with Rhodesia."

4. Robles and Stewart, "Dylann Roof's Past."

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. www.lastrhodesian.com.

12. Filip Dewinter, "Why Donald Trump Should (and Will) Win the Election," *American Renaissance*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.amren.com/news/2016/11/why-donald-trump-should-and-will-win-the-election/>.

13. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 61.

14. Ibid., 61.

15. Dylann Roof, "Here's What Appears to Be Dylann Roof's Racist Manifesto," *Mother Jones*, June 20, 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/06/alleged-charleston-shooter-dylann-roof-manifesto-racist>.
16. See Dylann Roof's manifesto: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/06/alleged-charleston-shooter-dylann-roof-manifesto-racist>.
17. Eric Madfis, "Triple Entitlement and Homicidal Anger," *Sage Journals* 17, no. 1 (2014): 78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X14523432>.
18. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiv.
19. Michael Fredholm, *Understanding Lone Actor Terrorism: Past Experience, Future Outlook, and Response Strategies* (Routledge, 2016). 244.
20. *Ibid.*, 244.
21. James Gilligan, *Violence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). 110.
22. *Ibid.*, 111.
23. *Ibid.*, 110.
24. *Ibid.*, 111.
25. *Ibid.*, 111.
26. Madfis, "Triple Entitlement," 78.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 79.
30. Roof's Manifesto, 1.
31. Melanie Eversley, "Post-Election Spate of Hate Crimes Worse than Post-9/11, Experts Say," *USA Today*, November 14, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/11/12/post-election-spate-hate-crimes-worse-than-post-911-experts-say/93681294/>.
32. Elliot Rodger, "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger," *New York Times*, May 25, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/25/us/shooting-document.html>.

33. Elliot Rodger, "YouTube Video: Retribution," *New York Times*, May 24, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000002900707/youtube-video-retribution.html>.
34. Bill Brown, "Isla Vista Mass Murder, May 23, 2014, Investigative Summary," Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office, February 18, 2015, <http://www.sopr.org/news/2015/02/19/49941/isla-vista-shooting-investigation-elliott-rodger-so/>.
35. Brown, "Isla Vista," 55-60.
36. Rodger, "My Twisted World," 132.
37. Brown, "Isla Vista," 42-43.
38. *Ibid.*, 40.
39. Rodger, "YouTube Video."
40. Rodger, "My Twisted World," 17.
41. *Ibid.*, 17.
42. *Ibid.*, 84.
43. *Ibid.*, 17.
44. *Ibid.*, 17.
45. *Ibid.*, 84.
46. *Ibid.*, 84.
47. *Ibid.*, 84.
48. *Ibid.*, 87.
49. *Ibid.*, 87.
50. *Ibid.*, 99.
51. *Ibid.*, 99.
52. *Ibid.*, 99.
53. *Ibid.*, 122.
54. *Ibid.*, 110.

55. Michael Kimmel, *Guyland* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). 227.
56. Rodger, "My Twisted World," 122.
57. Ibid., 122.
58. Ibid., 132.
59. Ibid., 68.
60. Ibid., 69.
61. Ibid., 104.
62. Ibid., 75.
63. Kimmel, *Guyland*, 45.
64. Rodger, "My Twisted World," 72.
65. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

Chapter II:

Are Terrorists Really Non-State Actors?

Understanding Patriot and Terrorist Masculinities as Coproduced Logics

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

–William Ernest Henley’s *Invictus*, 1875, and Timothy McVeigh’s final statement, handwritten and presented to the witnesses of his execution.¹ “*Invictus*” is Latin for “unconquerable.”

The masculinities of patriotism are lauded as the epitome of American manhood. In a country fueled by virulent nationalism, for a man to be considered a patriot is for him to achieve the ultimate hegemonic social status. As an arm of the state and an institution that maintains the state’s monopoly on fear and violence, the military is principally invested in the symbolic interpretation of violence as a means to restabilize the correlation between masculinity and nationalism. The strategic framing of the United States Armed Forces as simultaneously the most dominant world force and the perpetual underdog affords all men, regardless of their personal situations, the ability to participate. In other words, the military is perceived to equalize and

elevate; this is especially appealing to men who believe they have been unfairly prevented from reaping the societal benefits to which they feel entitled. For some, the military provides a fast track to the social recognition that their fathers and fathers' fathers had and that they feel they deserve as well.

Though definitions of who belongs in the Armed Forces are expanding, discourses surrounding military patriotism continue to revolve around the axis of masculinity. To be incorporated into this realm of military patriotism, soldiers are made to embody at least these three hegemonic qualities: toughness (both mental and physical), discipline (loyalty to the state at the expense of agency), and brotherhood (validation seeking from equal/superior men even at the expense of one's perception of his own self-worth). None of these is natural or even necessary to be a good soldier, but all are crucial performances in service of a larger goal towards patriotic, hegemonic masculinity. Failing to perform these three qualities well can result in embarrassment and rejection from superiors, with devastating implications. Further, men who do everything "right" or who believe they have done what they were supposed to and still do not reap the benefits of hegemonic social status can become angry, disillusioned, and pessimistic about their lives and future prospects.

I once heard a veteran say, "UVA [the University of Virginia] takes great men and makes them average; VMI [Virginia Military Institute] takes average men and makes them great." In his mind, not only does a liberal education stunt a man's ascension into proper American manhood, intellectualism and the cultivation of critical thought reverses one's potential as an American man and contributing member of society. On the other hand, any man, regardless of his humble background, meager means, prior behaviors, or general "averageness," can become "great" simply by receiving his higher education at a military institute. This indicates that patriotism is a

skill to be learned and embraced, something utilized to inform one's understanding of self and society. To many American men, whether they participate in the Armed Forces or not, patriotism is accepted as the most valid framework for understanding legitimate American masculinity. And it is the aforementioned veteran's competing values-added/diminished narrative of patriotism as a means of reaching greatness/mediocrity as an American man that informs my discussion of the masculinities of patriotism and the coproduced logics of the masculinities of terrorism.

Timothy McVeigh

The Oklahoma City Bombing

As he sat awaiting execution in ADX Florence, a federal Supermax prison for male inmates, Timothy McVeigh still had more to say. The jury had spoken: requests for appeals and stays had been filed on his behalf and denied, and his execution date was approaching more quickly than those of most other inmates on "Bomber's Row."² Nevertheless, the public was still curious about the man behind the worst domestic terror attack in U.S. history, the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and the perpetrator in question felt compelled to explain himself.

The symbolic force of lone actor domestic terrorism cannot be overlooked. To the terrorist, the message sent by his act of violence is more important than the violence itself. Institutions and power cannot be dismantled or even maimed by a single, isolated act of violence. However, targeting an entity representative of the system that the perpetrator perceives to be problematic draws attention to it and links the structure to his grievances. The premeditation is significant. McVeigh chose to bomb a federal building and kill federal employees because they represented corrupt state power. Dylann Roof scouted Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston for months prior to his attack and ultimately chose it because of its historic significance to the Black

community.³ Like McVeigh, Roof did not know any of his victims personally; he confessed that he killed the nine parishioners because “Blacks are raping and killing white people on the streets every day,” and even though “what I did is still miniscule to what they’re doing to white people every day,” he hoped his actions would reverberate and have larger consequences, namely the start of a race war.⁴ He did not single out his victims as people; he attacked them for what they represented to him. Similarly, when planning his attack, Elliot Rodger wanted to target the “hottest sorority at UCSB,” but no evidence exists that a member of this sorority had ever rejected him or that he even knew any of the members personally.⁵ But for McVeigh, Roof, and Rodger, selecting the Murrah Building, Mother Emanuel, and the Alpha Phi sorority house, respectively, were important and purposeful decisions. While the individual victims of terrorism are often random,⁶ the place of the attack and what the scene represents to the terrorist are not.

McVeigh’s mission was not over when he bombed the Murrah Building. In fact, his work had just begun. Writers Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck saw his eagerness to tell his story as an opportunity; they visited McVeigh and his family members several times over the course of his time at ADX Florence and then on death row at the United States Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana, uncovering the details of why and how that enthralled the American public. In 2001, McVeigh was executed. The same year, Michel and Herbeck published his biography. They called their book *American Terrorist*.

The why and how of lone actor domestic terrorism are easily knowable. In the case of McVeigh, the why had to do with anti-government sentiment and perceived assaults on personal freedoms. The how is fertilizer, a Ryder truck, and fuel oil. But whether the American public accepts these facts as viable answers to why and how is another question entirely. Usually when the question of why is asked, why does not mean, “Why did he do it?” but rather, “Why did he

do it to me/to those people/in Oklahoma City/at this time/for those reasons?” In other words, the obvious answer of why is not enough to satisfy the obsessive attention given to the extraneous whys and hypocritical whys of morality and just cause.⁷ And how is not, “How did he do this?” but instead, “How could he have done this?” These futile questions do not prevent future attacks; in fact, they distract from discussing what is glaringly obvious and exceedingly mundane about terrorism: the act’s symbolic dimension.

In *American Terrorist*, Michel and Herbeck insist that the questions most Americans wanted McVeigh to answer were “Did you bomb the Murrah Building? And if so, why?”⁸ However, McVeigh told us why many times. In an interview with Ed Bradley on *60 Minutes*, McVeigh had this to say about why he bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City:

If government is the teacher, violence would be an acceptable option. What did we do to Sudan? What did we do to Afghanistan? Belgrade? What are we doing with the death penalty? It appears they [the government] use violence as an option all the time.⁹

Timothy McVeigh chose the Murrah Building because he wanted to bring the violence inflicted by the state to a government entity and its employees. He quite literally took a page out of the state’s playbook in the hopes of calling attention to the injustices wrought by state violence. “I have great respect for human life,” he said. “My decision to take human life at the Murrah Building – I did not do it for personal gain...I did it for the greater good.”¹⁰ McVeigh saw himself as a martyr and the U.S. government as a corrupt bully. He hoped that, “Once you bloody the bully’s nose...he’s not coming back.”¹¹

It is this overt symbolism of lone actor domestic terrorism that requires our attention. Terrorists rarely make it difficult to discern the symbolism of their actions. When they do not kill themselves or get killed by law enforcement, they often hope to share the meaning of their

actions with anyone who will give them attention, especially when that includes people in positions of power or potential supporters of their cause. Further, the question of morality is a nonstarter for the terrorist, as he often believes he occupies the moral high ground. For Timothy McVeigh, he felt that his act of violence was necessary and justified.

To waste time and resources arguing about the morality of an act of terror is intentionally exhausting. It is the politics of distraction at work. It pulls energy away from exposing questions of why and how that implicate state and society, questions that might disambiguate the link between patriotism and terrorism. Interrogating power in this way can ultimately uncover truths about how masculinity and gendered expectations produce lone actor domestic terrorism. To truly understand these acts of terror and illuminate more promising means of preventing them, we must start by asking the most basic questions of all: How, when, and why did Timothy McVeigh become an American terrorist?

I do not believe that Michel and Herbeck chose the title of their book because they necessarily believed that “American Terrorist” was the best way to characterize McVeigh. I do, however, believe they chose this title because they thought it was provocative. To be effective, the title had to capture potential readers’ attention. Sensationalizing and leveraging the supposed mystery and unknowability of lone actor terrorism accomplished this goal. What is an American Terrorist? Not even 75 hours of interviews with the man at the center of the story could fully explicate the meaning of the phrase. In an interview with MSNBC, coauthor Lou Michel said that after writing the book, his personal opinion was that McVeigh was simply a “human being with a limited range of feelings in the areas of empathy and sympathy and with an oversized sense of rage and resentment.”¹²

Even after gaining incredibly intimate, almost unprecedented access to the man accused of committing the worst act of domestic terrorism in United States history, the journalist who tasked himself with uncovering the truth about Timothy McVeigh still placed more value on how the man made him feel than on what actually made the man a terrorist. McVeigh may have been emotionally incompetent, but mental illness or general apathy does not a terrorist make. Michel's conclusion about McVeigh is irrelevant. His project fails to generate a nuanced approach to understanding lone actor domestic terrorism, thus continuing to perpetuate reductive narratives for public consumption. McVeigh himself acknowledged the shortcomings of Michel and Herbeck's insights. After reading the book, he said he was satisfied overall but "disappointed with the way he was portrayed and the explanation of his motive."¹³

Of course, Michel and Herbeck's findings are not inadequate simply because the subject of their book did not like what they had to say about him. *American Terrorist* is illegitimate and useless as a means of understanding McVeigh's attack on the Murrah Federal Building because it does not take into account the fact that McVeigh's understandings of self and society were constructed by power. His understanding of patriotism and his role as a patriotic subject informed his act of terrorism. In other words, his relationship to the state is crucial to disambiguating his motive and self-concept. To McVeigh, bombing the Murrah Building was a logical, necessary counterattack to what he perceived to be assaults on him and his fellow Americans by their own government. These concerns and the violence used to counter them only appeared urgent to McVeigh because of his understanding of and incorporation into American patriotism.

We do not need to interview Timothy McVeigh to know that he had been desensitized to killing long before he bombed the Murrah Building. He was a veteran of the Gulf War and one

of the best snipers in his company. He admitted that the Army had “taught him how to switch off his emotions.”¹⁴ Further, McVeigh would probably say that the killing he did overseas was less justifiable than the attack he carried out on U.S. citizens in Oklahoma. He recounted a story for his biographers about a time during his deployment when he killed an Iraqi man by essentially blowing his head off. When the order to fire on suspected enemy combatants was given, McVeigh caught a glimpse of a man’s head through his scope and pulled the trigger. “His head just disappeared ... I saw everything above the shoulders disappear, like in a red mist,” he said.¹⁵ Later, he confessed to being emotionally disturbed by the experience.

What made me feel bad was, number one, I didn't kill them [the Iraqis] in self-defense... When I took a human life, it taught me these were human beings, even though they speak a different language and have different customs. The truth is, we all have the same dreams, the same desires, the same care for our children and our family. These people were humans, like me, at the core.¹⁶

No one questioned Timothy McVeigh about the deaths he inflicted abroad, and despite these expressed humanistic perspectives, no one invoked this quote while condemning him as a soulless monster, a white supremacist, or even a “human being with a limited range of feelings in the areas of empathy and sympathy.” This is because preconceived notions exist about who can be a terrorist and who can be a patriot, what constitutes an act of terror and what constitutes an act of patriotism. The narrative is dichotomous; one person cannot be both terrorist and patriot. But for many lone actor domestic terrorists, becoming terrorist would not be possible without having been, being, or desperately desiring to be, patriot.

American Man, American Patriot, American Terrorist

From the first moment he donned his desert camouflage until April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh was considered an American patriot. Since that day, he has been known only as a domestic terrorist. One act of (albeit, large-scale) violence was enough to cast doubt on a lifetime of service and obedience to the state. Of course, McVeigh did not stop being a patriot the day he committed his act of terror. His evolution from war hero to the face of evil in the all-American flesh began long before his plot to destroy the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

If we want to understand why Timothy McVeigh did what he did and more importantly, prevent similar violence from happening again, we must start by getting to know McVeigh's life story. Through it, we can begin to understand the deep, indivisible connections between the masculinities of patriotism and the masculinities of terrorism.

McVeigh was born on April 23, 1968 in Lockport, New York.¹⁷ His parents divorced when he was eleven years old, and from then on he lived with his father, William.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, the most notable thing about young Timothy was his aversion to bullies and penchant for justice. He was bullied in school and struggled to find his place.¹⁹ He dropped out of Bryant & Stratton College soon after enrolling and subsequently enlisted in the Army.²⁰ At 20, McVeigh graduated from the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia.²¹

From the first time his grandfather showed him how to shoot, McVeigh was infatuated with guns.²² He spent a considerable amount of time reading about firearms and explosives and practicing his shot. His expertise and superior skillset earned him the Bronze Star and the Combat Infantry Badge in the Gulf War and "a rare perfect score in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle gunner competition."²³ By all accounts from released Army correspondence and interviews with former commanding officers and Army evaluators, McVeigh was the best of the best.

But when it came time to prove himself, he choked. On day two of his 21-day trial for the Green Berets, McVeigh washed.²⁴ “No do-overs.”

No one could have predicted it at the time, but this failure was the beginning of the end of Sergeant McVeigh’s promising future. Already a decorated soldier, his fellow infantrymen and superiors thought that this moment of weakness would not define him, that he would continue to rise through the ranks of the Army with the same speed and determination that had characterized his career to that point.²⁵ He surprised everyone when he said he was heading back to New York.

McVeigh was honorably discharged from the Army on New Years Eve, 1991.²⁶ He returned to his father’s home and took a security guard position.²⁷ By February 1992, he was publically expressing anti-government sentiments in the form of opinion articles written to the editorial board of the *Lockport Union-Sun and Journal*.²⁸ In his first letter to the editor, he lamented the failure of democracy, corrupt politicians, rising taxes, and “the disappearance of the ‘American Dream . . . substituted with people struggling just to buy next week’s groceries.’”²⁹ “AMERICA IS IN DECLINE,” he argued. “Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn’t come to that! But it might.”³⁰

Though his writing often served as a much-needed outlet for his growing anger towards the government, his father did not approve of the behavior. William felt that personal opinions should be kept private, which caused a rift between them and may have been a reason why Timothy soon left New York.³¹ By the summer of 1992, McVeigh had resumed his wandering in search of somewhere to belong.³² His first stop was to northeastern Michigan to visit his Army friend Terry Nichols.³³ He took odd jobs and was a peripheral member of the gun trading community.³⁴ He had a mail-order gun business under the name “Tim Tuttle” to protect from being associated with the controversial political views he espoused.³⁵ According to the

Washington Post, he “regularly visited gun shops, many of which had become distribution points for militia tracts.” As the paramilitary and anti-government movements he followed began to gain momentum, he found himself embedded in and emboldened by their increasingly militant messaging and tactics. A year before his attack, he dropped his NRA membership allegedly because they were too “soft on defending assault weapons” from government regulation.³⁶

Cruel optimism is when “something desired is actually an obstacle to one’s flourishing.”³⁷ McVeigh’s inability to meet the requirements of the Special Forces was the beginning of the end of his cruel optimism about fitting the mold of hegemonic, patriotic masculinity. He could not perform the required physical activities, which broke him mentally. He devolved from decorated soldier to low-level security guard. The rapid fall from grace he experienced at the age of twenty-three embarrassed and depreciated him. As he worked to make sense of his situation, McVeigh’s response to the assault on his masculinity began to transition from shame to rage. He blamed the government for his shortcomings and projected his sense of inadequacy onto the systems he felt were responsible for his loss of status and the erosion of personal rights and freedoms. We can infer that he wanted to embody the aspects of hegemonic masculinity required of the patriot – the toughness, discipline, and brotherhood – because when he failed, he felt inadequate, and perhaps less human, than ever before. This is cruel optimism at work. Prior to his wholesale rejection of state logics and powers, he desperately desired something that was an obstacle to his flourishing and sought life from the unattainable standards of hegemonic masculinity. Once he began to view the state as fundamentally flawed and attribute his feelings of shame and inadequacy to state injustices, he became pessimistic about his life chances in a society driven by said state logics.

Timothy McVeigh's failure in the Berets trial catalyzed the disruption of his desire to seek life by performing normative, hegemonic masculinity. However, I believe that the ultimate turning point in his transition from cruel optimism, which maintains the status quo and protects against overt assaults on state entities, to cruel pessimism, which can lead to anti-state violence, came in the form of a notice of overpayment to his home in Lockport, New York on February 15, 1993.³⁸ The letter stated that he had been paid too much for his Army service and that he owed \$1,058 to the federal government.³⁹

McVeigh was irate. He penned a letter of reply to the Department of Defense Finance and Accounting Service. It reads in part:

I have received your notice informing me of my debt owed to you, as well as your threat of referring me to the Justice Department (Big Brother)...In all honesty, I cannot even dream of repaying you the \$1,000 which you say I owe. In fact, I can barely afford my monthly rent. Assets? The only thing which I own of any value is my car, a 1987 Chevrolet/Geo Spectrum. If you really want the car, go ahead and seize it....My car is my only way to get to work; to support myself. But I guess that's all irrelevant to you. Go ahead, take everything I own; *take my dignity*. Feel good as you grow fat and rich at my expense; sucking my tax dollars and property, tax dollars which justify your existence and pay your Federal salary. Do you get it yet? By doing your evil job, you put me out of work.⁴⁰

In Timothy McVeigh's case, the rhetorical framework of paying taxes and being subjected to property seizure are coded, symbolic language for the revocation and seizure of his worth as a subject of the state, as an American man. When we think of hegemony – whiteness, masculinity, wealth, etc. – as property, we see how the association between McVeigh's masculine self-concept and his perception of his ownership of property/assets is linked to his subjecthood.⁴¹ His

concept of masculinity was constructed such that his ability to exist (and perceive himself) as a hegemonic, patriotic American man was fundamentally threatened by the government “sucking [his] tax dollars and property.” The money was less important than what the status of being broke and valueless meant for his self-concept. He was not interested in being rich, but he did want to be able to live independently and not have to rely on government assistance in order to survive. Additionally, in line with his conservative values, McVeigh felt that hard work and loyalty to one’s country should be a sufficient foundation on which to build a worthwhile life. But as he moved through life, he realized that the country he swore to protect, serve, and defend often took more than it gave. Rather than being the beacon of hope and justice that it claimed to be, McVeigh found that the American government routinely prevented its own people from living the humble American Dream and from enjoying the personal freedoms he believed were self-evident. As he became increasingly disillusioned, the federal defense branches (law enforcement and the military) that he had once sought acceptance from started to look like “bullies” picking on innocent citizens and assaulting the brotherhood that had adopted McVeigh after his initial band of brothers rejected him: his fellow anti-government militiamen. In a sense, McVeigh was a super patriot. He viewed the notice of overpayment and the disappearance of U.S. citizens’ personal freedoms as injustices that could not be tolerated. He overcompensated by striking back against the institutions and people that represented these perceived injustices twice as hard, ultimately slaughtering scores of innocents. McVeigh called the bombing a “tragic event” and the human cost of his actions “collateral damage.”⁴² This makes sense, as McVeigh believed he was not responsible for the initial violence and considered his actions to be self-defense. McVeigh viewed the situation a matter of life and death. Inaction would have been equivalent to suicide.

McVeigh's act of violence was in service of a larger goal. He desperately wanted to live, and he felt that he could not live so long as the government was assaulting and taking away the fundamental rights that he felt made him human: the right to bear arms, defend himself, speak freely, make a living, have privacy, etc. His self-concept as an American man made these freedoms manifest as entitlements and absolute necessities. And many people agree with McVeigh; the pro-gun rallies he frequented were well attended and the organizations he was associated with had robust memberships. But McVeigh was different from many of the others he met in anti-government spaces. Like Roof and Rodger, he was tactful, calculating, and most importantly, compelled to act. In a post-attack interview with *The Guardian*, McVeigh described his act of violence this way:

If I'm wrong then I'll adapt, improvise and overcome, but if there is a hell, then I'll be in good company with a lot of fighter pilots who also had to bomb innocents to win the war.⁴³

His use of language comparing himself to a "fighter" killing to "win the war" harks back to the crusader/martyrdom explanation given by Roof and Rodger in their manifestos. The deaths incurred in McVeigh's attack on the Murrah Federal Building were simply collateral damage in pursuit of his larger goal: life as a recognized, protected, yet independent subject of the state who benefits from all of the privileges to which he feels entitled.⁴⁴ His acknowledgement that those killed were likely innocents reveals a symbolic dimension to his act of terror. He saw the Murrah Federal Building as his stage, the people inside as merely players. During the trial, prosecutor Joseph Hartzler asked Michael Fortier, a friend of McVeigh's and an accomplice to the bombing, if he had had any discussion with McVeigh prior to the attack about "the deaths that such a bomb would cause."⁴⁵ Fortier testified that McVeigh had explained the consequences of his plan in terms of Star Wars.

He considered all those people [in the Murrah Building] to be as if they were the storm troopers... They may be individually innocent, but because they are part of the evil empire, they were guilty by association.⁴⁶

Overall, the Oklahoma City bombing tells us more about the symbolic equation of masculinity and violence and the coproduced perception of the redemptive potential of violence than it does about mental health, political radicalization, or even morality. To become an American terrorist, McVeigh first had to be an American patriot. To become an American patriot, McVeigh had to be principally invested in normative logics of what it is to be an American man.

Just two weeks after receiving the notice of overpayment, national headlines began covering a story that would have a profound effect on McVeigh. A man by the name of David Koresh was organizing an isolated community of Branch Davidians, a group that had split from the Seven-Day Adventists decades earlier, at the Mount Carmel Center in the rural town of Waco, Texas.⁴⁷ Allegations of criminal activity at the compound where Koresh and his followers lived caught the attention of state and federal government. In February 1993, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) obtained a search warrant for suspected weapons violations at Mount Carmel but soon turned over the investigation to the FBI following an unsuccessful raid that left four government agents and six Branch Davidians dead.⁴⁸

On April 19, 1993, the FBI decided to end its 51-day stand off with the Branch Davidians. Failed negotiations and mounting hostilities as well as accusations of child abuse at the compound led newly appointed U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to approve a plan to release several rounds of tear gas into the compound in an attempt to force its residents out.⁴⁹ Government officials claim not to have known that Branch Davidians had gotten word of the government's plan to smoke them out and had subsequently poured lighter fluid on the floors of

the compound. The fuel eventually ignited upon coming into contact with the gas, grenades, and flares that were dumped inside the center by the FBI.⁵⁰ National news channels broadcasted the fire on live television as it continued to burn for many hours. In total, 76 Branch Davidians were killed, the less than a dozen survivors were arrested, and the compound was a total loss.

Over the course of the two-month stand off, the meaning of what was happening in Waco fascinated McVeigh. Those close to him identify these events as crucial to the formation of his anti-government views. He saw the government intervention at Mount Carmel as an assault on “law-abiding citizens” and feared that this kind of government oppression/repression of rights was the new normal.⁵¹ In March, McVeigh visited the compound in Waco to witness the standoff and to protest the government’s activities.⁵² In a later interview, William McVeigh would attest that Timothy became “obsessed with the deaths of the Branch Davidians.”

As McVeigh was becoming more involved in pro-gun, anti-government networks, he continued to express his fears and political views in correspondence with friends and family.⁵³ In October 1993, he confided in his little sister Jennifer about his “lawless” anti-government behavior and that he had an “urgent need for someone in the family to understand me.”⁵⁴ On Christmas Eve, 1993, he wrote another letter to Jennifer telling her to “re-evaluate your definition(s) of good and bad.”⁵⁵

In the past, you would see the news and see a bank robbery, and judge him a “criminal.” But, without getting too lengthy, the Federal Reserve and the banks are the real criminals, so where is the crime in getting even? I guess if I reflect, it’s sort of a Robin Hood thing, and our government is the evil king.⁵⁶

There is much we can learn from these letters, McVeigh’s visit to the Mount Carmel complex, and his preoccupation with the Branch Davidians. First and foremost, McVeigh saw himself as a

crusader for justice. Justice-seeking is not an exclusively male attribute, but using violence as a means of “getting even” often is. McVeigh had mentioned in earlier opinion articles that he did not wish to shed blood but that it might become necessary. That feeling of necessity was realized soon after the Waco siege. He saw the Branch Davidians as part of his band of brothers; in McVeigh’s mind, the government’s raid of the Mount Carmel complex was an unconstitutional assault on the residents’ Second Amendment rights, as well as their right to privacy, freedom of expression/religion, etc. He did not necessarily agree with the ideologies of the Branch Davidians, but he saw them as “law-abiding” citizens who were being oppressed by their own government, an experience to which he felt he could relate. Witnessing the Waco standoff and siege confirmed to McVeigh that his fears were being realized, and it served as a catalyst for his future anti-government actions. According to a source close to McVeigh, “War had been declared...He was merely responding, a soldier defending his country from oppressors.”⁵⁷ His paranoid obsession with the events at Waco is believed to be the reason why he chose the second anniversary of the siege, April 19, 1995, as the date for his attack.⁵⁸

The Dangerous Proximity of Terrorist and Patriot

Contrary to popular opinion, Timothy McVeigh likely did not commit an act of terror because he was a sociopath. There is no evidence to suggest that he enjoyed killing, but there is proof that he felt his actions were necessary and justified, that the deaths incurred were collateral damage in an attempt to save countless others from what he saw as the violence of a nation in decline against its own people. The goal of his actions was not violence alone. Violence was leveraged in response to the perceived assaults on his being. To McVeigh, the government was a bully and he was a crusader for justice. Gore Vidal characterized McVeigh this way:

For Timothy McVeigh, [Waco] became the symbol of [federal] oppression and murder. Since he was now suffering from an exaggerated sense of justice, not a common American trait, he went to war pretty much on his own and ended up slaughtering more innocents than the Feds had at Waco.⁵⁹

The irony of McVeigh's story is that he might have been the epitome of a good soldier. He was a super patriot: steadfast, disciplined, and unwaveringly loyal to his cause. He was just dedicated to the wrong cause. There are no medals of honor for bringing the war home, only the revocation of subjecthood. We do not talk about what was patriotic or even normal about McVeigh because that would implicate the state and we, the people, in his act of violence. It is easier, as Jasbir Puar notes, to reject the terrorist, to dehumanize and emasculate him.⁶⁰ But upon close inspection, we see that McVeigh embodied every aspect of the hegemonic white male patriot. And he never stopped being a patriot; he just took the motto of freedom and justice for all and violently turned it against the state he believed to be systemically misusing it.

The gendered mantras of the military and equally gendered logics of patriotism are rarely illuminated. This would require us to acknowledge that terrorists can also be compelled by a desire to serve and protect, that their actions might be the direct result of the all-American equation of masculinity and violence, that they might be more proximate to state and society than not. Most crucially, it would ultimately lead us to the conclusion that a terrorist can be and in fact often is a patriot before, during, and after his act of terror.

The credibility of state logics that frame the United States as the defender of the free world is constructed with thin rhetorical truisms and marred by events like the Waco siege and the bombing of Oklahoma City. This is why the prescribed response by state and media is to kill off (literally and conceptually) whatever of the terrorist might resemble the normative qualities of a

patriot. Timothy McVeigh was an American terrorist, but he was also an American patriot and an American man. How much ownership over feeble narratives about justified violence and the proper order of things do we forfeit by acknowledging McVeigh's proximity to state and society? By acknowledging the foundations, not simply the consequences, of his actions? Gore Vidal notes how the stripping of McVeigh's subjecthood and subsequent reframing of his being from once-patriot to bloodthirsty heathen shows that the state has no interest in uncovering the relevant "whys" of the Oklahoma City bombing.

Why? McVeigh told us at eloquent length, but our rulers and their media preferred to depict him as a sadistic, crazed monster – not a person like the rest of us – who had done it for kicks.⁶¹

Still, the last line of Michel and Herbeck's book and the question that continues to distract conversations about lone actor domestic terrorism in the United States remains that single three-letter word: *Why?*

Constructing why as both the most crucial and least answerable question about lone actor domestic terrorism functions to draw attention away from what is normative about the terrorist and the logics that inform his decision to do violence. These logics expose the proximity of the masculinities of patriotism and the masculinities of terrorism, if not illuminate how they are one and the same. Thus, it could be inferred that making connections between terrorist and patriot logics or uncovering the ways in which state violence is implicated in the cruel construction of American men's (self-)destructive self-concepts are more dangerous to the state's survival than the combination of past and future acts of domestic terror combined. If, to the terrorist, death is collateral damage in the pursuit of life, then perhaps deaths inflicted by American

men/patriots/terrorists are collateral damage in the maintenance of the terrorist/patriot dichotomy, and thus the state's ability to sustain power.⁶²

Notes

1. Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, *American Terrorist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 382.
2. So affectionately named because he shared a cell block with infamous bombers Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) and Ramzi Yousef (Ibid., 361).
3. Glenn Smith et al., "Testimony Shows Dylann Roof Scouted Emanuel AME Church for Months Before Mass Shooting," *The Post and Courier*, December 13, 2016, http://www.postandcourier.com/church_shooting/testimony-shows-dylann-roof-scouted-emanuel-ame-church-for-months/article_ce5fa596-c12d-11e6-903b-974d94ad04f3.html.
4. *Associated Press*, "Prosecutors Detail Months Leading Up to Charleston Church Massacre," *CBS*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/dylann-roof-charleston-church-shooting-prosecutors-give-timeline-actions/>.
5. Elliot Rodger, "YouTube Video: Retribution," *New York Times*, May 24, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000002900707/youtube-video-retribution.html>.
6. Random, or as McVeigh put it, "collateral damage."
7. I consider the moral objections to McVeigh's acts of violence to be hypocritical in part because of the people's tendency to cherry-pick issues of morality. Crusading for justice from a moral perspective necessitates condemning state violence as well as violence by domestic terrorists. After multiple stays of execution and appeals were denied, McVeigh finally embraced his fate to die by lethal injection. He is quoted as having said that if he had to die to prove his point, he still had "won... 168 to 1." Callous as his statement may have been, even McVeigh noted the irony of his death sentence and the fraudulent discourse of morality leveraged to condemn him. Thus, by paying attention to McVeigh's story we can see how his death not only exposes the ways in which state violence is normalized and unquestioned, but also the proximity between state and terrorist logics, particularly the perceived inevitability and redemptive potential of violence and death as collateral damage in pursuit of a larger goal.
8. Ibid., 380.
9. Ibid., 380-381.
10. Ibid., 382.
11. Ibid., 383.
12. MSNBC, "McVeigh Biographers Share 'Chilling' Audiotapes," *NBC News*, April 15, 2010, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/36634339/ns/msnbc_tv-documentaries/#.WML86YWR-OI.

13. Susan Candiotti, "McVeigh 'pleased' yet 'disappointed' with book," *CNN*, April 5, 2001, http://www.cnn.com/2001/LAW/04/05/mcveigh.book/index.html?_s=PM:LAW.
14. Office of the Clark County Prosecuting Attorney, "Timothy James McVeigh," *Clark Prosecutor*, n.d., <http://www.clarkprosecutor.org/html/death/US/mcveigh717.htm>.
15. John Garvey, "The Life and Death of Timothy McVeigh," *Race Traitor*, Fall 2001, <http://racetraitor.org/lifeanddeath.html>.
16. Ibid.
17. Michel and Herbeck, *American Terrorist*, 12.
18. Ibid., 22.
19. "McVeigh Author Dan Herbeck Quizzed," *BBC*, June 11, 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/forum/1378651.stm.
20. Michel and Herbeck, *American Terrorist*, 38.
21. Douglas O. Linder, "The Oklahoma City Bombing and the Trial of Timothy McVeigh," *University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law*, 2006, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/mcveighaccount.html>.
22. Michel and Herbeck, *American Terrorist*, 23.
23. Dale Russakoff and Serge F. Kovalski, "An Ordinary Boy's Extraordinary Rage," *Washington Post*, July 2, 1995, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/oklahoma/bg/mcveigh.htm>.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. His second letter expressed his opinions on the moral imperative of hunting animals for food rather than buying packaged meat at the store for consumption. He argued that animals killed by hunters lived happily, and that it is wrong to raise animals for slaughter due to their

despicable quality of life. "Would you rather die while living happily or die while living a miserable life?" he asked (Russakoff and Kovalski, "Ordinary Boy").

31. Russakoff and Kovalski, "Ordinary Boy."

32. In high school, McVeigh programmed and hacked government computer systems under the alias "The Wanderer," which he took from a Dion song by the same name (Michel and Herbeck, 32). The song is about a man who wanders around "from town to town," in search of "pretty girls" with the intention of never settling down and living life "without a care." By his own admission and as corroborated by friends and family members, McVeigh struggled to interact with women and never had a girlfriend. Although he had limited success finding love, this ode to Mr. DiMucci's highly desirable character may reveal that he wished to be a ladies' man or even felt entitled to women's affection.

33. Terry Nichols would eventually be convicted for his role in the 1995 attack. He is currently serving a life sentence in prison without the possibility of parole.

34. Russakoff and Kovalski, "Ordinary Boy."

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

38. Ibid., 1-2.

39. Michel and Herbeck, *American Terrorist*, 117.

40. Ibid., 118, emphasis is mine.

41. Cheryl Harris' critically important work *Whiteness as Property* provides the framework for this analysis. Harris writes, "The relationship between expectations and property remains highly significant." Expectations, or entitlements, are a means of constructing power relations, which are constantly reaffirmed by the institutions that do the work of "distinguishing which expectations are reasonable and therefore merit protection." That is not to say that "all expectations give rise to property," but when they do not, it disrupts one's understanding of self and society, as well as one's relationship to it (Harris, 1729).

42. 19/04/1968-11/06/01, "Timothy McVeigh Interview (60 Minutes) 2000," *YouTube*, September 3, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smLYgadzaHI>; Office of the Clark County Prosecuting Attorney, "Timothy James McVeigh."

43. Ryan Gorman, "20 Years After the Oklahoma City Bombing, Timothy McVeigh Remains the Only Terrorist Executed by US," *Business Insider*, April 19, 2015,

<http://www.businessinsider.com/20-years-after-the-oklahoma-city-bombing-timothy-mcveigh-remains-the-only-terrorist-executed-by-us-2015-4>.

44. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 32.
45. Linder, "Oklahoma City Bombing."
46. Ibid.
47. J.B. Smith, "Scholars tackle 'cult' questions 20 years after Branch Davidians tragedy," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, April 13, 2013, http://www.wacotrib.com/news/religion/scholars-tackle-cult-questions-years-after-branch-davidian-tragedy/article_a3fa463e-d1b4-5eda-b49e-95327bc276d7.html?mode=story.
48. Ibid.
49. Richard Scruggs et al., "Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco, Texas," *U.S. Department of Justice*, October 8, 1993, <https://www.justice.gov/publications/waco/report-deputy-attorney-general-events-waco-texas>.
50. The government maintains that the Branch Davidians intentionally set the fires (Justice Department report); the surviving community members claim that the fires were started as a result of the FBI assault (whether intentionally or not).
51. Russakoff and Kovaleski, "Ordinary Boy."
52. Linder, "Oklahoma City Bombing."
53. These personal letters were never presented at trial (Thomas).
54. Jo Thomas, "McVeigh Letters Before Blast Show the Depth of His Anger," *New York Times*, July 1, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/01/us/mcveigh-letters-before-blast-show-the-depth-of-his-anger.html>.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Russakoff and Kovaleski, "Ordinary Boy."
58. Ibid.
59. Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got To Be So Hated* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 81.

60. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiii.
61. Vidal, *Perpetual War*, ix.
62. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 32.

Chapter III:
Angry White Boys:
Becoming Men, Becoming Terrorists

*"Isn't it fun to get the respect we're going to deserve?" –Eric Harris to Dylan Klebold
in reference to their plan to kill their classmates at Columbine High School.¹*

As Lauren Berlant attests, there is something undeniably cruel about desiring something that is an obstacle to your flourishing.² To be eternally optimistic about that which wreaks havoc on your being is to exist within a control society that wages low-intensity warfare on your life chances. When promises do not parallel outcomes, disillusionment ensues. Indeed, for some, what is experienced differs so vastly from what is expected that optimism itself becomes an impossibility. In the case of the youngest lone actor domestic terrorists, the perceived redemptive power of violence serves to reconcile being refused that which they believe themselves to be entitled. Thus, violence becomes a compensatory mechanism with which they eliminate people who represent the structures and societal conditions they consider responsible for the discrepancy between their expectations and realities.

In the previous two chapters, pessimism as a consequence of reaching a point of no return has served to ground my analysis of what moves American men to commit mass atrocities against their fellow citizens. Indeed, it is the cruel, self-destructive nature of desiring acceptance and hegemony in a social order that creates space for disillusionment and vengeance-seeking. As with the previous case studies, the following analysis exposes the transition from cruel optimism about embodying hegemonic masculinity to cruel pessimism, a catalyst for terror and violence. In this chapter, I will use the Columbine High School massacre to explore the precarious

transition from American boyhood to manhood, and the ways in which American manhood is constructed to create violence, to create terrorists. In becoming terrorists, young perpetrators' conceptualizations of their position within a gender order evolve from optimism about what they believe had been promised to anger towards that which they believe to be preventing them from reaping the benefits of (white) masculinity.

In relation to cruel optimism, cruel pessimism is an equally insidious and more immediately self-destructive experience. Rather than inflicting the slow violence of self-policing on himself, cruel pessimism motivates the perpetrator to do violence to others. These acts of external violence inevitably become state-assisted suicide. In other words, self-destructive conformity gives way to violence towards others, which effectively results in total destruction being visited upon the perpetrator. The desire to be hegemonic in a gender and racial order is salient in the context of cruel pessimism. This is why young white men are decidedly more likely to do violence and (self-)destruction than any other demographic. The evolution from optimism to pessimism coupled with the symbolic equation of masculinity and violence informs the terrorist's decision to resort to violence in order to achieve said status. Therefore, the cruel pessimism embodied by young lone actor terrorists such as the students behind the 1999 attack on Columbine High School, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, is the antithesis of deviance and an iteration of violent normative masculinity.

Columbine

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold met at Ken Caryl Middle School in Littleton, Colorado.³ There was nothing exceptional about the two boys. Eric's father was in the Air Force, so the Harrises moved around a few times before settling in Littleton in 1993.⁴ Harris liked playing sports and collecting baseball cards as a boy, and in seventh or eighth grade he developed an affinity for

computers and video games.⁵ Similarly, Klebold enjoyed pitching for his little league team and later became interested in computers; he even helped maintain his school's server and built his own home computer.⁶ He operated the lights and sound for school theater productions and spent much of his time filming videos at home and for class projects.⁷ His parents described him as a "gentle" and "extraordinarily shy" boy who never expressed any violent intentions.⁸ In fact, Klebold was characterized as a sheltered child who had been part of the CHIPS (Challenging High Intellectual Potential Students) program at the Governor's Ranch Elementary School until transferring to Ken Caryl.⁹

To their parents' knowledge, Harris and Klebold were typical teenagers. Neither showed any fascination with guns. They had a few close friends, including each other, Harris' childhood friend Brooks Brown, and Klebold's friend Nathan (Nate) Dykeman.¹⁰ Harris and Klebold were coworkers at a pizza place in town.¹¹ They did not have many romantic interactions with women, but there is no reason to believe that they were isolated from their female peers. Harris had a girlfriend at one point, and Klebold had female friends from class and from his involvement in theater productions. During their senior year at Columbine High School, Harris talked about wanting to become a marine after graduation.¹² He scored average on the initial entrance exam and an army recruiter came to the Harris house to meet his parents and discuss enlistment.¹³ That spring, Klebold's family put a down payment on a dorm room at the University of Arizona, where he was supposed to begin his studies in computer science the fall after graduating from Columbine.¹⁴ The Klebolds visited the university in March, and Dylan appeared genuinely enthusiastic about the four years to come.

Harris and Klebold's plans for the future never came to fruition. On April 20, 1999 at around 11:00 a.m., they arrived at Columbine High School in separate cars.¹⁵ Each was strapped with

utility belts containing several rounds of ammunition, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) of all sizes, several weapons (guns and knives), and matches to light the bomb fuses.¹⁶ Both carried a backpack and duffle bag filled with propane tanks and bombs that they intended to use to blow up the school.¹⁷ In fact, they had hoped to kill “over 500 people” with the blast and then shoot survivors as they ran from the burning building.¹⁸ They were dressed in the same uniform: a black trench coat, t-shirt, and black combat boots; Harris wore a black glove on his right hand, and Klebold wore its match on his left (he was left-handed).¹⁹ They walked calmly onto campus at around 11:19 a.m. and opened fire outside where some students were eating lunch on the grassy hill that sunny April day.²⁰ The rampage lasted less than an hour. By 12:08 p.m., the gunmen were dead from self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the head.²¹ Both Harris and Klebold had indicated in writings prior to the attack that they fully expected to die alongside their classmates that day. Harris had been on antidepressants for some time and Klebold often wrote down suicidal thoughts in his journal.²²

The Killers: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold

It is difficult to make any generalizations about the motives behind the attack on Columbine because Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were very different people. Harris was an angry teenager who wrote at length about wanting to kill people and about how much he hated the world and everyone in it. “I want to burn the world, I want to kill everyone except about five people,” his journal states.²³

“You know what I hate?MANKIND!!!!...kill everything...kill everything...”²⁴

“I’m full of hate and I love it.”²⁵

In Klebold’s 1998 yearbook, a message from Harris states, “God I can’t wait till they die. I can taste the blood now – NBK.”²⁶ Harris also wrote in his journal about wanting to have violent

sex with women and to tear human flesh apart with his teeth.²⁷ The same page of his journal ends with a description of the guns used in the Columbine massacre. Harris mentions that this massacre is what he was meant to do with his life, that he has reached a “point of no return.”²⁸ The entry was written after he found out that the antidepressants he was on and a chest condition he suffered from would have disqualified him from becoming a marine.

“[Being a marine] would have given me a reason to be good,” he writes.²⁹ However, without this opportunity, he felt condemned to a life of evil. On the page of his planner for Mother’s Day 1999, Harris quotes Shakespeare: “Good wombs hath born bad sons.”³⁰

In contrast, Klebold’s journal reads more like the thoughts of a depressed, suicidal, self-loathing individual who hates his existence more than the world around him. The first page of his journal includes a drawing of a box labeled “existence” and a dot labeled “me” on the outside of the box.³¹

“I swear -- like I’m an outcast, & everyone is conspiring against me...” he writes.³² At one point, he describes going on a shooting spree, but most of his entries are about unrequited love, his existence as a social outcast, and his desire for acceptance and death. His journal includes many pictures and poems. One poem simply reads, “The lonely man strikes with absolute rage.”³³

Like Harris, Klebold reached a point of no return. In January 1998, the boys were caught stealing from a van. Even though the crime was minor and they only had to serve a short term in a juvenile diversion program, Klebold believed he had permanently been marked a criminal.³⁴ He discussed wanting revenge for being humiliated by the police, penning these words in Harris’ yearbook: “Killing enemies, blowing up stuff, killing cops!! My wrath for January’s incident will be godlike.”³⁵ In fall 1998, he took a creative writing class with Harris and Harris’ friend, Brooks

Brown. A story he wrote for the class, “The Mind and Motives of Charles Manson,” disturbed their teacher. The paper was about “a man coming into town and killing all the popular kids.”³⁶ When questioned about it, Klebold dismissed it as “just a story.”³⁷

It is unclear when they first expressed to one another a desire to plan an attack, but both Harris and Klebold communicated a shared goal of inflicting harm in the home videos they filmed together. In one video, they described how their rage had been building over the years: Harris’ because he was forced to move around so many times and was always the “new kid” at the “bottom of the food chain” in school, and Klebold’s because of people constantly “ripping” on him, from his older brother to the “stuck-up” kids in school.³⁸ They spoke about wanting to “kick start” a revolution with their actions, “a revolution of the dispossessed.”³⁹ The boys also made a video for school called “Hitmen for Hire,” where Harris and Klebold played two hitmen that nerds, geeks, and other social outcasts at school could pay to kill bullies.⁴⁰

Their desire to inflict pain as redemption for the perceived injustices they experienced throughout their lives is undeniable. But what is also undeniable is the sense that Harris and Klebold felt they had no way out once they committed to planning the attack on Columbine. In their final video, filmed just half an hour before the attack, the boys took turns apologizing and saying goodbye to their families. The perpetrators speak for themselves, so I will simply copy the transcript, taken from evidence item #333, excerpted from the Columbine Report. For context, “Reb” is Harris’ nickname (thought to be short for rebel), and Susan is the girl that Harris had watched a movie with the weekend before the shooting.

Klebold: Hey mom. Gotta go. It's about a half an hour before our little judgment day. I just wanted to apologize to you guys for any crap this might instigate as far as (inaudible) or something. Just know I'm going to a better place. I didn't like life too much and I know I'll be

happy wherever the fuck I go. So I'm gone. Good-bye. Reb...

Harris: Yea... Everyone I love, I'm really sorry about all this. I know my mom and dad will be just like.. just fucking shocked beyond belief. I'm sorry, all right. I can't help it.

Klebold: (interrupts) We did what we had to do.

Harris: Morris, Nate, if you guys live, I want you guys to have whatever you want from my room and the computer room.

Klebold adds that they can have his things as well.

Harris: Susan, sorry. Under different circumstances it would've been a lot different. I want you to have that fly CD.

Harris: (eventually) That's it. Sorry. Goodbye.

Klebold: (sticks his face in the camera) Goodbye.⁴¹

After reaching a point of no return, Harris and Klebold felt it was their duty to carry out an attack on their classmates and teachers at Columbine High. Their words indicate that they felt a great deal of remorse about the suffering they planned to inflict. However, it is also clear that they felt they were doing “what [they] had to do,” as if the choice to do violence was not their own. We can infer from this video that Harris and Klebold expected to become casualties of their own violence, and that carrying out their plan in full meant that they could not survive it. This pessimism about their life chances shows how desperate they were to find peace and acceptance, or at least “a better place” than the world they inhabited.

Losers vs. Psychopaths: Misconceptions of Lone Actor Terrorism in the United States

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s act of terror provides a compelling case study for this project because it is such a high-profile event. Columbine is a household name, and most people think they know or have an opinion about what happened there. There are online communities

dedicated to discussing the before, during, and after of the rampage, books recounting the experiences of survivors, and films sensationalizing the tragedy. There seems to be a fascination with the Columbine massacre, perhaps due to the age of the perpetrators and victims, the scope of the carnage, the location of the attack, and the details about the killers and the school itself that emerged following the subsequent investigation. After all, Columbine High School could have been in Anywhere, America. Littleton is a rural, Christian community made up of mostly white middle and working class folks. The town was rocked to its core, and the shocks reverberated across the country, striking fear into the hearts of parents and school officials everywhere. On April 20, 1999, the unthinkable happened. Americans needed a way to fathom the unfathomable.

When people talk about the Columbine killers, they characterize them in two ways, and neither is exactly accurate. The first camp characterizes Harris and Klebold as outsiders who were provoked to violence after enduring years of bullying at the hands of student athletes and other kids in the “in crowd.”⁴² The second camp views Harris and Klebold as cold-blooded, psychopathic killers. These folks tend to see Harris as the mastermind behind the attacks and Klebold as his subordinate accomplice.⁴³ This may be due in part to Klebold’s parents referring to him as a “follower” in interviews after the attack and an eye-witness to the shootings claiming that the “shorter” gunman (Harris) appeared to be in charge while the taller gunman (6’3” Klebold) seemed to be following his orders.⁴⁴ But nothing indicates that there was an imbalance of power between the two. In fact, Klebold’s first journal entries related to his violent intentions begin in 1997, whereas Harris’ do not begin until April 1998, the same month Klebold’s writing starts to show a serious commitment to carrying out an attack. If anything, they fed off of each other’s desires to do harm and co-conspired for the whole year leading up to April 20, 1999.

From what we know, it is unlikely that these boys were cold-blooded, psychopathic killers whose actions can be explained by a psychological diagnosis alone. Although they seemed unaffected that some of their friends may get caught in the crossfire because “war is war,” when he arrived on campus the morning of April 20, Harris saw Brooks Brown in the parking lot.⁴⁵ The two had had a rough patch in their friendship not long before the massacre but had recently reconciled.

“Brooks, I like you now. Get out of here. Go home,” Harris said.⁴⁶ He could have killed Brown on the spot, and in an interview years later, Brown still could not understand why Harris let him live.⁴⁷ Harris had written in a blog post, “I don’t care if I live or die. All I want to do is kill and injure as many of you as I can, especially Brooks Brown.”⁴⁸ Psychologists have characterized Harris as a remorseless psychopath and “brilliant killer without a conscience.”⁴⁹ They have called him “irretrievable” and argued that he was not just some “wayward boy who could have been rescued.”⁵⁰ However, his actions call this analysis into question. In a home video filmed by Harris just a couple of weeks before the attack, he apologizes to his friends at work, the “Black Jack Crew” (he worked at Blackjack Pizza), and says, “You guys are very cool. Sorry, dudes. I had to do what I had to do.”⁵¹ He talks about how he will miss his friend Bob.

“It’s a weird feeling knowing you’re going to be dead in two and a half weeks,” he says.⁵² He mentions wishing he could have visited “old friends” one last time, appears to wipe tears from his face, and turns off the camera. In a different video, he gives another glimpse into his emotional side:

My parents are the best fucking parents I have ever known. My dad is great. I wish I was a fucking sociopath so I didn’t have any remorse, but I do. This is going to tear them apart. They will never forget it.⁵³

After completing the juvenile diversion program, Harris penned a letter of apology to the van's owner that seemed genuine. But psychologists are convinced that this letter was simply a performance, since Harris wrote this in his journal around the same time:

Isn't America supposed to be the land of the free? How come, if I'm free, I can't deprive a stupid f---ing dumbshit from his possessions if he leaves them sitting in the front seat of his f---ing van out in plain sight...⁵⁴

We will never know the full extent of Harris' psychological profile, but it appears he was at least troubled by his own conscience, if not fully convinced that he ought to answer to it.

Klebold's mental health was similarly complex. He was severely depressed and suicidal. During the attacks, Harris asked one student who was hiding under a desk in the library to identify himself.

"John Savage," the student said. He was a classmate of Klebold's and the shooter recognized him immediately.

"What are you doing, man?" Savage recalled asking Klebold. "Oh you know, killing people," he replied. "Well, are you going to kill me?" Savage asked, and Klebold responded, "No, get out of here."⁵⁵ Savage wasted no time fleeing the library. Like Harris, Klebold's mental health cannot fully explain his involvement in the Columbine massacre, although both boys were decidedly unstable.

People in both the bullying camp and the psychopath camp have embellished and even fabricated facts about the killers' lives to make their actions seem more understandable, if not justifiable. Some believe that Harris and Klebold were gay and explain the boys' rage from a perspective of gay liberation.⁵⁶ This is the result of reports being released by investigators claiming that classmates at Columbine had bullied them and called them "f*ggots." It is also a

function of the discourse surrounding terrorist masculinities, which Jasbir Puar says are framed as “failed and perverse.”⁵⁷ “These emasculated bodies,” she writes, “always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction.”⁵⁸ Homosexuality thus becomes the pathology that explains deviant behavior. Puar links the queering of the terrorist to an investment in rendering him an “unfathomable, unknowable, and hysterical monstrosity.”⁵⁹ This constructed unknowability is a means of obscuring the terrorist’s proximity to state and society. However, despite ongoing, distracting debates about their sexualities, we know from their own personal writings and prior relationships with girls that Harris and Klebold were both heterosexual. Ironically, creating distance between the perpetrators and knowable subjecthood is one of the few ways that mainstream society can make sense of lone actor domestic terrorism.

Others believe that Harris and Klebold were white supremacists and that their attack on Columbine was racially motivated. It has been posited that the boys were neo-Nazis because the day of the attack coincided with Hitler’s birthday, and they were rumored to have had white supremacist symbols in their possession.⁶⁰ On the day of the attack, witnesses claim that Klebold called Isaiah Shoels the “n-word” before Harris killed him. However, Shoels was the only Black victim at Columbine, and all but one of the other twelve victims were white. The victims at Columbine appear to have been chosen at random. Like Dylann Roof, Elliot Rodger, and Timothy McVeigh, Harris and Klebold killed people who they believed represented society’s fundamental flaws. Further, Harris blogged about “hating racism,” and said that racists “are the scum of society.”⁶¹ “Don’t let me catch you making fun of someone just because they are a different color,” he wrote.⁶² In addition to speculations about their sexuality and racial motivations, people have also blamed the influences of pop culture, such as angsty German

music and rap songs by artists like Eminem that the boys listened to, for inciting violence. However, these associations obviously do not prove causation.

There is a degree of validity to the argument that the rampant bullying experienced by Harris and Klebold inspired their attack on Columbine. Gender is constantly being policed internally and externally, and bullying serves two main purposes. The first is to further subordinate non-dominant people (in this case, non-dominant boys). But ostracizing nonconformity can also better one's own positionality in a gender order. Thus, if Harris and Klebold truly were at the bottom of the social hierarchy among seniors at Columbine, it is logical to assume that they probably experienced significant bullying. Indeed, the boys were angry that the popular kids at Columbine rejected them, and they were subjected to a hostile environment due to the violating, insulting acts of their more hegemonic classmates. Klebold's mother said that her son came home from school one day saying it had been the "worst day" of his life.⁶³ He told her that "jocks" at Columbine had pelted him with ketchup-soaked tampons in the cafeteria. The abuse Harris and Klebold endured was verbal and physical: some days the bullies would ambush the boys with ketchup or other condiments, and they would have to walk around for the rest of the school day with stains on their clothing. Harris was ridiculed in gym class for never taking his shirt off; he felt uncomfortable doing so because he had been born with a chest indent and was self-conscious of the defect. As a result, he was constantly bombarded with emasculating insults. By many accounts, the bullying went on for years unabated. Students claim that teachers and administrators knew about this culture of toxic masculinity at Columbine, and even saw the abuse take place, yet they turned a blind eye.

The malicious environment at Columbine was certainly a factor but does not explain the massacre in its entirety. To characterize Harris and Klebold solely as victims of their peers'

abuse or irretrievable psychopaths is to erase the larger symbolic nature of their attack and render the massacre's true purpose unknowable. The attack was not a crime of passion, but a thoughtful, premeditated event that Harris and Klebold spent many months planning and modeling after successful large-scale terror attacks like Timothy McVeigh's. They may have seen themselves as victims, but they also saw themselves as diametrically opposed to those who bullied them. Their "two man war against everyone else" was a battle between humanity, or those who rejected them and did not understand them, and Harris and Klebold, who considered themselves to be more "evolved" beings than their peers.⁶⁴ By the time they carried out the Columbine massacre, they had acknowledged the fact that they would never be like the people who simultaneously tormented and ignored them.

On the day of the attack, Harris wore a t-shirt with the words "Natural Selection" across the back.⁶⁵ A decade and a half later, Elliot Rodger would believe that he, too, was more evolved than the rest of society. He would fantasize about putting all women in concentration camps so that he could pick exactly which women and which men would be worthy of reproduction. Similarly, Harris wrote that he "loved" natural selection because it entails "getting rid of all the stupid and weak organisms." He believed that the government should remove "warning labels" so that true natural selection could run its course, implying that he saw himself as able to survive and even thrive in a world with no protections, while those less evolved beings would struggle or die.⁶⁶ He felt worthy of dominance, but when he did not succeed in "dominating" the way he felt he should, he got angry that the system had been manipulated to fail him. In his own way, Klebold also expressed sentiments about what he perceived to be his unique existence. An entry in Klebold's journal dated March 31, 1997 reads:

As I see the people at school - some good, some bad - I see how different I am (aren't we all you'll say)...I see jocks having fun, friends, woman, LIVEZ...or rather shallow existences compared to mine (maybe). Like ignorance = bliss - they don't know this world (how I do in my mind or in reality, or in this existence) yet we each are lacking something that the other possesses -- I lack the true human nature...& they lack the overdeveloped mind/ imagination/ knowledge tool...⁶⁷

I find this entry particularly compelling, as it reveals something often overlooked about the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre and about young, white lone actor domestic terrorists in general. They deeply desire something others appear to enjoy but that they themselves are refused. Eventually, the thing desired not only becomes an obstacle to the boys' flourishing, but is acknowledged for what it is: an impossible, unattainable goal. For Harris and Klebold, this goal was social acceptance from the successfully normative men and women at Columbine, a sense of normalcy. Importantly, while lone actor domestic terrorists often see themselves as inferior, or "lacking" in certain capacities, they see themselves as dually superior in ways that their "enemies" are unable to embody. This cognitive dissonance is a function of white supremacy. White men perceive their subordination in a social order as a grave injustice that must be remedied. Like Elliot Rodger, Harris and Klebold saw themselves as particularly intelligent and evolved. However, their gifts did not match expectations of hegemonic masculinity at Columbine, and they did not confer onto the boys the privileges that they believed ought to accompany hegemony. Athleticism, having "fun, friends, and women," and being considered "popular" were both the requirements and effects of social acceptance. Harris and Klebold did not embody these adequately.

Hegemonic masculinity rejects difference and rewards conformity. The Columbine killers perceived their inability to conform as permanent social failure. Klebold's March 31st entry continues:

Thinking of suicide gives me hope, that I'll be in my place wherever I go after this life. That I'll finally not be at war w. myself, the world, the universe - my mind, body, everywhere, everything at PEACE... me- my soul (existence). & the rotine [sic] - is still monotonous, go to school, be scared & nervous, somewhat hoping that people can accept me... that I can accept them...⁶⁸

It is clear that Harris and Klebold grappled with and felt compelled to reconcile their subordinated social statuses. Like Elliot Rodger, they experienced a rejection from the normative social order that they deeply desired to be accepted by, and they felt like they were being kept from reaping benefits they were entitled to enjoy. Not simply the vengeful victims, Satanic neo-Nazis, or psychopathic killers that most Americans want to categorize them as, Harris and Klebold's reasoning was complex, calculated, and informed by violent normative masculinity, whiteness, and a desperate desire to find the promised land of acceptance, if only in death. They sought the rewards of conformity for years, but they failed to embody that which they perceived to be able to give them life: the hegemonic masculinity of their more popular, athletic peers. They believed that their intellect and tech savvy-ness made them superior, even god-like. When they continued to be rejected and insulted by people they themselves believed were inferior in a sense ("jocks" and "popular kids," much like Rodger's framing of his hegemonic peers as "brutes"), they realized that purging society of its unsalvageable ills (including, perhaps, themselves) would be more effective than trying to earn its acceptance. To redeem the subordination of their masculinities and lack of social status, they used violence to finally level

the playing field they felt could not be leveled in any other way. Like Rodger, Dylann Roof, and Timothy McVeigh, Harris and Klebold reached a turning point where the cruel optimism they had about their lives decayed into cruel pessimism. Klebold's journaling shows that he had given up on "this life," that he could no longer be optimistic about it, but that he had hope for what life may exist after death: "my place." Thus, his death, Harris' death, and the deaths of their victims became collateral damage in the pursuit of life.⁶⁹

Reframing Justice

In the wake of the Columbine massacre, fifteen crosses were erected in memoriam to the twelve students, one teacher, and two gunmen who died that day. But soon after, Brian Rohrbough, the father of one of the students shot and killed by Harris and Klebold, cut down the perpetrators' crosses. He said the murderers should not be "honored in a place reserved for the victims."⁷⁰

The symbolism of Mr. Rohrbough's action is poignant, and it raises important questions about lone actor domestic terrorism in the United States. Are the perpetrators of this violence also its victims? Is there a just way to see victimhood without establishing a hierarchy of suffering? Is victimhood one thing, experienced one way, or multiple, conflicting things? Further, questions of culpability abound. Do the perpetrators alone bear responsibility for the violence they felt compelled to inflict? Are the dead complicit? Are the living complicit? I refuse to blame Harris and Klebold's victims for their own deaths and injuries. But if I make this refusal, then who do I blame for the deaths of Harris and Klebold?

When I think about Columbine, I wonder about the relevance of justice and the inevitability of suffering. Does it matter that an innumerable amount of injustices and societal violences occurred before Harris executed his classmates? Before Klebold held a TEC-9 to his left temple

and ended his own life? No number of injustices or perceived injustices could ever justify or absolve them of the atrocities they committed, and no amount of justice or love served to counter the hate they unleashed that day could ever bring the victims back to life, could remove the bullet fragments from the bodies they maimed, could make Richard Castaldo, paralyzed in the attack, walk again, or could erase the horrors from the memories of survivors. So, if the pain of terrorist violence is inevitable and indeed intended, then what role does (in)justice play in creating or preventing such violence? Is violence created anew and each act of violence independent from every other, or is there a finite amount of violence available to be appropriated and redirected to serve the perpetrator's purpose? Was Columbine, and is the violence of lone actor domestic terrorism, inevitable? Unfortunately, I do not believe we can answer this in any way but the affirmative with our current worldviews and accepted notions of justice. But I believe it is possible for existing conceptions of justice to be reimagined so that the symbolic equation of masculinity and violence, the perceived redemptive potential of violence, and the construct of hegemonic masculinity as necessary and life-giving, are stripped of their power. Indeed, if anything, this project has led me to imagine a new version of justice for all that is characterized by a universal aspiration to freedom rather than hegemony, where any given individual's deepest desire is to be unbound, to center difference as the path to wholeness, and to reject conformity to that which obstructs our flourishing as the cruelest form of confinement and an insidious shackling of human potential.

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Conclusion

In the cases of Dylann Roof, Elliot Rodger, Timothy McVeigh, and Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, certain themes arise. Each of these themes is legible in the context of masculinity, whiteness, and power. The first theme is entitlement. In each case, feeling denied something they believed rightfully belonged to them and the cruel pessimism that accompanied it served as a catalyst to violence. The sense of loss that read as an assault on their self-concepts as American men was made possible by the entitlements each of them had been socialized to expect. Reading their own words, we see that the language of ownership, property, and entitlement abounds. The society they inhabited did not match their expectations of what they thought the world could (or should) be. This cognitive dissonance between expectations and realities is also relevant in the second major theme: the superiority/inferiority complex.

In each case study, the perpetrators aspire to dominance in a social order. Moreover, they believe they are entitled to dominance and the benefits that accompany hegemony. However, despite identifying themselves as superior men, they are all troubled by characteristics that mark their inferiority. They are super patriots who get rejected by the Special Forces. They are “the image of beauty and supremacy,” yet they cannot get a date. They are “evolved” beings with superior intellects that are bullied relentlessly. They are the rightful heirs of the South yet they are being pushed out and forced to accommodate the “real racists.” In their minds, these contradictions necessitated corrective measures. The perceived redemptive potential of violence was leveraged to this end. When they reached a point of no return, cruel pessimism ensued. The men saw themselves as “fighters” for a cause, and each fully expected to become a martyr. Dylann Roof’s manifesto ends by saying that he ran out of time to write, so many of his “best thoughts” would be lost forever. This implies that he expected to die during or right after his

rampage at Mother Emanuel. Timothy McVeigh wanted to be sentenced to death. He used his own capital punishment as a last act of defiance against “Big Brother,” drawing attention to the barbaric nature of the United States death penalty in his final days. The other three men committed suicide immediately following their attacks.

The perceived injustices identified by each man as cause for his attack show that their masculinities informed their decisions to do violence. It is only possible to feel left out of something that you believe was made for you. Thus, a desire to be accepted by the state and by society exposes the core of the terrorist as a reflection of mainstream society and state power. Lone actor domestic terrorists in the United States are not simply deviant lone wolves or sociopaths. In many ways, these men are proximate, knowable, and patriotic. They are “as normal as normal could be.”

Whiteness and masculinity are constructs of the state. Although constructs are not real, the violence that emerges from perceptions of their significance absolutely is. Thus, the violence of lone actor domestic terrorists in the aforementioned cases was not necessary, innate, or inevitable. It was inspired by something unreal, the consequences of which were devastating.

Masculinity operates in insidious ways in our lives. As I have shown, it is simply a means of understanding self and others in a gender order. Masculinity cannot give social life to men because gender and its performances are about power (hierarchy, dominance and subordination), and power is only interested in sustaining itself. Further, violence is not and will never be life-giving. For a man to leverage violence for redemptive purposes exposes the insidious, intentionally contradictory control that power maintains over its subjects.

Power begets power. On an individual level, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy of control that sustains itself by becoming incorporated into our thought-processes, self-concepts, and

relationships. If we are not working to eradicate it, know it, and recognize it within ourselves, it controls us. It slips into the cracks of our psyches and breaks open fissures of vulnerability.

Under the force of power's insistence that we conform, obey, and desire things that are obstacles to our flourishing, hairline fractures of self-doubt become grand canyons of self-loathing. In the case of lone actor domestic terrorists in the United States, as with all incorporated subjects, power and their understandings of their relationship to it informs everything they do. Their violence, their desperation to create a world wherein they can be accepted and accept others, and their aspirations to dominance within this new world order are illuminating.

To be violent is to succumb. To terrorize is to legitimate the state's heinous framework of violence as justice. Power works to create distance between its subjects, to make it difficult for ties to bind, and to break existing human bonds. Thus, Roof, Rodger, McVeigh, Harris, and Klebold were pawns that power played to tear communities apart, to create suffering, and to distract people from living whole, meaningful, and just lives with questions of Why?

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