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Mad Violence, White Victims, and Other Gun Violence Fictions: The Gap between School Shootings and Systemic Gun Violence

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School shootings make up a miniscule amount of U.S. gun violence, but often dominate media and political discussions of youth and guns (Price 164).¹ While most children are unlikely to experience a school shooting, many still suffer from the broader effects of gun violence each year, especially youth of color (Fowler et al. 4). Nevertheless, the fear of rampage shootings in majority-white communities pervades nonfiction publishing for young readers, obscuring the larger issue of systemic gun violence. Rather than repeating adults' fears of rampage shooters, however, many youth activists of color today have used the outpouring of support after the 2018 Parkland shooting to redirect the conversation to address gun violence more broadly, focusing on victims of color, racial inequality, and their absences in mass media. Even as adult-led media dramatize school shootings through a narrative countdown to the moment of violence, youth activists rewrite these scripts to focus instead on the time lost to all gun violence, especially for youth of color.

This redirection has its parallels in work by scholars of children's and young adult culture, particularly as the killings of Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and other Black children and children of color continue to remind us of the violence of racism and white supremacy. Althea Tait argues that these killings demonstrate how the deaths of Black children are at once made spectacularly representative and quickly erased. Writing after the killing of Trayvon Martin and subsequent protests, Tait asks whether our grief and protest work to break down the structures "that cause us to forget Black children in a way we do not forget the

¹ No central database tracking school shootings or total gun-related deaths exists due to the 1996 Dickey Amendment, prohibiting the Center for Disease Control from funding research that advocated for or promoted gun violence prevention (Ollove). Because of this, data gathered by media, non-profits, and universities differs. Researchers agree, however, that school shooting victims represent a miniscule percentage of gun violence fatalities overall, though the data varies minimally given restrictions on collecting information on gun violence. According to Everytown Research, approximately 2,900 children die annually from gun violence; of these, an average of 18 will be killed due to school shootings ("Gun Violence in America"; "The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Teens"). The 2020 budget included funding for gun violence research, which may provide for substantial research changes in the future (Ollove).

children who lost their lives in Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland” (220). I pick up Tait’s comparison of Martin’s killing with school shooting victims to further examine the effects of treating school shootings as wholly different from other gun violence, especially those resulting in the deaths of children of color. Like Tait, I suggest that school shootings generate extensive media coverage and affective responses *not* because they are the deadliest or most common incidents, but because they disrupt the idealized white supremacist haven of a homogenous white space by threatening the implicitly abled, white middle-class child as the symbol of American futurity. When we see school shootings as inherently different forms of gun violence, we reenact the ableist and racist ideologies proposing that Black children and other children of color should be feared, policed, and punished, while white children should be mourned, medicated, and protected.

In this article, I examine how documentary texts about historical school shootings prioritize a fear of madness in predominantly white suburbs, thus obscuring a holistic analysis of gun violence and the real racial and socioeconomic diversity of its victims. I begin by establishing the ableist and racial codes underlying discussions of school shootings via analysis of the 1999 Columbine shooting, a common referent for school violence in the U.S. Nonfiction texts for young readers like Dave Cullen’s *Columbine* (2009) and Judy L. Hasday’s *Forty-Nine Minutes of Madness: The Columbine High School Shooting* (2013) whitewash reality by ignoring the racial systems governing who qualifies as and who is punished for being distressed. These narratives use madness to recharacterize school shootings into suspenseful dramas in which mentally or emotionally disabled and violent outliers threaten the otherwise safe (read: white) suburbs.

In the final section of the article, I contrast these narratives with how youth activists in the wake of the 2018 Parkland shooting criticize political responses to school violence, instead calling for more comprehensive attention to gun violence and its effects on communities of color. Like adult writers, youth activists also use the language of time to talk about gun violence. But rather than a countdown to the shooter as a ticking time bomb, youth activists focus on the time lost by victims of color. The youth activists I discuss position school shootings like Parkland within the discourse of broader gun violence, including gun ownership legislation, police brutality, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Putting texts for young readers in conversation with the words of young activists, I argue that the focus on mad white school shooters works to distract us from the roles that personal and structural racism play in gun violence.

In her editor's introduction to a special section on youth activism in *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, Breanna McDaniel cautions us: "A cycle of false concern from policymakers holds space for them only until the next school shooting. It's time to listen as they define their resistance and hold space for them until their activism achieves justice." Taking up the calls by Tait and McDaniel, I hold space here for young activists Edna Lizbeth Chavez, Emma González, and Naomi Wadler. Following youth activists like them, I advocate for reading all children of gun violence within the same conceptual story: that of the U.S.'s ongoing violence of ableism and white supremacy. Such a reframing of school shooting narratives within the broader context of gun violence demonstrates that the ableist and racist mechanisms prioritizing the purity of white youth and the tragedy of white death are the same mechanisms that criminalize and pathologize children of color while erasing their deaths.

Columbine and the “Absence” of Race from White School Shooting Narratives

Couched in language about “mental health” or “urban violence,” rationales for treating school shootings as unique spectacles frequently rely on ableist and racist codes that criminalize disabled people and people of color. By these faulty logics, the deaths of children of color from gun violence are affectively tragic, but unsurprising. White gun violence perpetrators are outliers who must be (mentally) abnormal, while both gun violence perpetrators and victims of color are perceived as ubiquitous. Tait gestures toward this gap by considering how writers of children’s and young adult literature are undertaking “a literary triage of sorts...to absorb the assaults on Black humanity by providing breath,” invoking Eric Garner’s final words and presaging the deaths of Manuel Ellis and George Floyd,² each of whom were killed by police even as they cried out, “I can’t breathe.” Whereas the deaths of children of color are so often tied to language of criminalization tethering the child to an adult’s or their own supposed crime, discussions of majority white school shootings tend to focus on the disability or madness of the perpetrators, who are frequently white youths themselves.

Indeed, children who are victims or perpetrators of daily gun violence seem to belong to entirely different stories than those of school shootings, according to literary, scholarly, and even sociological coverage. This linguistic separation of daily gun violence in cities (assumed to involve predominantly communities of color) and infrequent suburban (supposedly predominantly white) school shootings extends across fields. The FBI, for instance, replays assumptions about disparate causes of gun violence in their 2013 study on active shooter incidents. Rampage school shootings here are separate from “gang” or “drug violence” by virtue

² For information about police killings of Manuel Ellis and George Floyd, see Chappell, Ortiz and Gutierrez, and Saldivia.

of the “risk to civilians,” the “apparent randomness of so many victims,” and because “the shooters’ actions did not appear to be another criminal act” (Blair and Schweit 44). Their distinctions often ignore small contradictions (e.g., that several school shooters steal firearms before using them) that favor the idea that racially-coded “drug” and “gang violence” are essentially different from school gun violence. This racialization extends to the scholarly discussion of school shootings, as in Katherine Newman et al.’s (2004) claim that “[u]rban and rural people live in different worlds where murder is concerned” (56), and because of that, “we are looking at a separate genre of youth violence” (57). In fiction, Kathryn E. Linder notes, writers problematically characterize “suburban/rural” school shooters as “Primarily White Males,” while those in “urban” narratives are “Primarily Black/Latino or Other Minority Males” (9). This whitewashed treatment of rampage school shootings suggests that gun violence is new and shocking in majority white communities but expected in communities of color.

The distinction between these stories is not really about gang involvement or whether a child dies on school grounds. The different categories thinly veil racial undertones about who lives or commits violence in “urban” and “suburban” neighborhoods. Coded language like “urban violence” reaffirms long-standing racial stereotypes in which people of color create the inherent violence of the cities, while white people populate otherwise safe suburbs. One of the legible, racist results of this occurs as predominantly white victims of rampage school shootings act as signifiers for the idealized child of the nation — becoming in effect “America’s children” — while the stories, videos, and actual lives of killed children of color are not given the “breathing room,” to follow Tait, to evoke national changes to gun violence. Yet, the most common perpetrators of the deadliest rampage school shootings (and all other public mass killings) in the U.S. are white men (Newman and Fox 1305; Lankford 482).

To account for these so-called anomalies, media and political narratives often instead point toward a localized issue of disability or “mental illness.” Such pronouncements of mental illness of white school shooters are racist precisely because they seek to separate these perpetrators from “normal” unthreatening white boys, while there is no separation from violence or criminalization presumed for children of color. Repeated framing of white school violence perpetrators in this way has fed into what sociologists term the “cultural script of a school shooter” (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 248), a sort of persona complete with habits, clothing, and musical tastes adopted by bullied white teenage boys who become shooters and who are “insane,” “mentally ill,” “nut[s],” “crazed,” “disturbed,” “unstable,” or “troubled” (“Senate Judiciary”; McCrummen; Brooks; Egan).³

Assigning madness to white suburban school shooters also falsely perpetuates what mad studies scholar Margaret Price calls the belief that “madness lead[s] inexorably to a violent explosion” (146).⁴ Relying on the madness as motive explanation encourages fear, surveillance, and punishment of distress and disability, even in the absence of violence. Characterizing all school shooters as “mentally ill” is not only incorrect diagnostically, it also erases the reality that disabled and distressed people are much more likely to be victims — rather than perpetrators — of gun violence (Newman et al. 59; Pinals et al. 197; Price 144, 163; Schildkraut and Elsass 77; Swanson and Felthous 168). Policing distress and disability moreover disproportionately harms students of color, who are more often siloed into classrooms specific to students with disabilities or “emotional disturbance,” and punished, suspended, or expelled in greater percentages (Nelson et al. 14; Ramey 195-196; Watts and Erevelles 275, 282). Attributing white violence to distress

³ These terms come from descriptions of the shooters at Columbine, Newtown, and Virginia Tech.

⁴ Admittedly, some school shooters have been service users of the medical or psychiatric industries, but many had no previous interaction with psychiatrists or clinical diagnoses prior to shootings and several shooters were only “diagnosed” posthumously (Newman et al. 59; Pinals et al. 196; Price 144; Schildkraut and Elsass 77).

thus relegates madness and disability to individual, biological causes without acknowledging the social and cultural contexts of violence, including the ableist and racist constructs of “non-normative” embodiment or what constitutes criminality (Watts and Erevelles 276).

The idea that white school shooters are ticking time bombs reinforces the idea that school shootings are individual threats unrelated to systemic gun violence that can be solved through surveilling distressed bodies. The emphases on time and madness are especially legible in coverage of the April 20, 1999 Littleton, Colorado shooting, which itself became the basis for several school shooting fiction and nonfiction texts (Larkin 1313; Newman and Fox 1294; Newman et al. 47). Although then-President Bill Clinton declined to consider Columbine part of a school shooting “epidemic” in his response to the tragedy, he nevertheless employed pathological language of intervention, prevention, and treatment. Because the U.S. did not want what Clinton called “another rash of this,” he advocated for doing “more to recognize the early warning signs that are sent before children act violently,” which would allow us to “be more effective in preventing” school shootings. This language of “early warning signs” characterizes school shootings as insidious viral attacks against the corporeality of the nation at large.

In his 2009 nonfiction book *Columbine*, Dave Cullen similarly equivocates on the role of pathology in understanding the shooting. Cullen sets up a discourse of madness, implying (despite his argument to the contrary) that distress is predictive of violence and can be diagnosed through surveillance. He dedicates a chapter to the history of “psychopaths” and posthumous diagnoses of one of the shooters (239-246). Referring to the shooters, he writes, “An angry erratic depressive and a sadistic psychopath make a combustible pair” (244).⁵ Later in the book, though, Cullen advises against generalizing, emphasizing “*There is no profile*” of a school

⁵ I make a deliberate choice to not name the shooters, following multiple activists’ calls to refuse the celebrity of shooters.

shooter (322). His note that those youth who most match the “warning signs” outlined by the FBI were “more likely to be suffering from depression or mental illness” further muddles his stance on madness and violence (323). Beyond Cullen’s stated claims, mining his index indicates a preoccupation with disability or distress, with entries for “the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*,” “early warning signs,” “medications,” “Psychopathy Checklist,” and other biomedical language. These cumulative entries function almost like diagnostic lists for the profiles that Cullen warns readers against.⁶

Teaching materials for the book additionally suggest that gun violence is an individual act attributable to madness, rather than entangled in the same racial, socioeconomic, and political threads as gun violence more broadly. Although initially intended for an adult audience, *Columbine* has become required reading in various high schools and won multiple awards (Cullen, *Columbine Teacher’s Guide*; Dave Cullen). His *Columbine Teacher’s Guide* has potential essay topics, vocabulary lists, and modules for different subjects. Within these, the “Literature Module” includes four discussion questions on the topic of “Character,” each of which is about the shooters (e.g., “Can you identify other fictional psychopaths in literature? How about angry depressives?”) (38). A question on “Plot & Structure” falls into the disability surveillance/prevention model evidenced above by Clinton, asking students, “At what point in the narrative could one decision or one action have changed the outcome? Which characters had a chance to make a difference but didn’t?” (39).

School shooting nonfiction books intended for younger audiences also rely on madness as motive explanations. Judy L. Hasday’s *Forty-Nine Minutes of Madness: The Columbine High School Shooting* (2013) and other works like it — *Massacre at Virginia Tech: Disaster &*

⁶ For recent work on how indexes and knowledge organization reinforce gender-based, racist, and other forms of embodied violence, see Koford (2014) and Roberts and Noble (2016).

Survival (2008) and *Newtown School Shooting* (2014) — present shootings like Columbine as suspenseful, consumable episodes in history while ostensibly explaining how and why these tragedies happen. Enslow Publishing describes the series of which Hasday’s book is a part as sharing “detailed overviews of devastating world disasters, weaving important background information with gripping accounts from survivors and victims” (“Disasters”). They advertise “high-interest topics great for reluctant readers” with a “new design and color photographs” (“Disasters”). These visual design elements, however, teach young readers to fear disability and to surveil their peers for signs of madness.

Hasday’s book incorporates ableist language in its title and cover image. The image shows a crowd at one of the school’s memorial services within which a man holds a large white poster reading “Stop the Madness.” Written for readers aged 10 to 14, the book provides a short documentary account of the shooting in its hardcover 7 ½ x 9 inches and 48 pages (“Disasters”). The red title on the book’s cover and the green paint splatter designs within visually evoke the victims’ blood otherwise sanitized from the book. Images in the book include stills of the cafeteria security camera during the shooting (in which the shooters and their weapons are the focus) as well as an image of injured student Patrick Ireland escaping the shooting through a second-story window (Hasday 24, 27). Because the books are marketed toward librarians and teachers, young readers likely engage with these images in the very settings where the books suggest such violence is still possible from their peers.

The design and back matter of Cullen’s and Hasday’s books use disability and distress to turn the shooters into terrifying villains, making the Columbine shooting a historical event memorable for its shooters’ evil, rather than cultural concerns about violence, white supremacy, or access to weapons. Despite references to the shooters’ racist web comments or their obsession

with Nazis, neither Hasday's nor Cullen's indexes contain entries for "race," "racism," or "white supremacy." Cullen largely dismisses one survivor's early report that shooters were targeting people of color (*Columbine* 149, 151). He omits that the only Black victim, Isaiah Shoels, was subjected to racist slurs during the shooting. Perhaps the racist killing of Shoels does not fit into Cullen's narrative of a crazy (white) school shooting because, in Cullen's words, "city schools had been armed camps for ages, but the suburbs were supposed to be safe....[where] it was new to middle-class white parents" (*Columbine* 15). His framing reaffirms, maybe inadvertently, that in the suburbs white violence is shocking, but anti-Blackness is unsurprising.

Both Cullen's and Hasday's books do, however, have index entries for Nazism. While the books mention how the shooters' Nazi beliefs were possibly complicated by one shooter's Jewish mother (*Columbine* 128; Hasday 14), neither book critically examines the extended implications of Nazism on other people, including people of color and disabled people. Although they draw attention to the Columbine shooters' anti-Semitism, Cullen and Hasday minimize race as a factor. Their flattening of Nazism to anti-Semitism disregards the very real history, threats, and effects of ableism and racism within Nazi ideology. The erasure of Nazis' disabled victims and victims of color reenacts its own violence in memory and reaffirms that neo-Nazi violence and school shootings affect primarily white victims due to mad violence. Mad violence becomes a way of Othering school shooters in efforts to rationalize and even disregard white supremacist violence. As this reading of Cullen's and Hasday's works shows, the Columbine narrative upholds the supposed purity of white middle-class children, while also ignoring evidence that some of these children enact and fantasize about violence, particularly against children of color.

Youth Activists and Systemic Gun Violence

Whereas the adult-written narratives discussed above headline the madness of white perpetrators for “gripping” and “high-interest” stories, youth activists Edna Lizbeth Chavez, Emma González, and Naomi Wadler use the spectacle of school shootings to redirect attention toward broader issues of systemic gun violence, structural racism, and the erasure of victims of color. Following the deadly shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018, survivors and other youth activists coordinated multiple events including a school walkout, several rallies, attendance at local and national political events, and the broader March for Our Lives, what they call “the largest single day of protest against gun violence in history” (March for Our Lives). The event took place more than one month after the shooting and included the titular march and rally in Washington, D.C., as well as sibling marches across the globe. Activists’ speeches foregrounded the reality that while children of color go unaccounted for in popular understandings of school violence, they are overrepresented in data on school punishment and incarceration.

Highlighting the connection between school shootings and police brutality, South Los Angeles teenage activist Chavez told the crowd, “our school district has its own police department,” but “instead of making Black and Brown students feel safe, they continue to profile and criminalize us.” Chavez forced the crowd to reckon with how school safety relies on criminalizing non-normative affect or bodyminds as distressed and disruptive, often through oppressive, racialized language. Policies of enhanced surveillance and security, which restrict bodily autonomy and criminalize youth (Hilton 230), are ostensibly rationalized by the inherent violence of the presumably distressed student of color — even as media suggest that the most feared figure in schools should be the distressed “(white) suburban adolescent boy” who

becomes a school shooter (Kusz 400; Böckler et al. 14n15; Lankford 482). The white shooter, who harms white victims in white suburban spaces, must be surveilled for his potential victims' sake, but, as Chavez notes, that surveillance extends and furthers the already disproportionate systemic violence enacted upon students of color.⁷ Instead, children of color face greater risks in the securitized classroom, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline (Erevelles 69).

When students across the world took part in school walkouts on the one-month anniversary of the Parkland shooting, school officials largely supported student actions. This is in clear contrast to lower participation and school support for past walkouts organized by various Black Lives Matter activists (“Youth Empower”; Fattal; Heim et al.). This is partly because media and politicians frame the predominantly white victims of rampage school shootings as at once universally mourned and capable of being mourned without political implications (Leonard 105). As Tait reminds us, white children take up more breathing room in our tributes to gun violence victims, and they are given more space to grieve than children of color. School officials especially warned students to avoid making the post-Parkland walkouts political, encouraging students to “make a statement of solidarity rather than engage in an act of political protest” (Fattal). Other schools tried to absorb the protests into the school day, holding moments of silence over lunch or school-mandated assemblies, effectively neutralizing what were intended as radical acts and limiting youth political agency (Washburn; Yee and Blinder).

Yet the idea that school shootings or our responses to them can be apolitical is patently false. Republican politicians are more likely to receive funds from the gun rights lobby, vote for measures supporting gun rights, and oppose those that promote gun violence prevention (Price et al. 424, 428). Conservative voters are also more likely to oppose gun violence prevention, own a

⁷ For a thorough examination of the confluence of race and disability in education, see Erevelles, Watts and Erevelles, and Hilton.

gun, and support campus carry practices (Oraka et al. 180; Hassett et al. 55). Instead of being apolitical, school administration and political responses to school shootings put the relative erasure of youth gun violence victims of color into sharp contrast.

Youth activists have called out this racist hypocrisy. At the March for Our Lives, 11-year-old Naomi Wadler spoke out about the absence of Black children in discussions of gun violence in and out of schools. She joined 1.6 million other students who walked out of school or held silent for 17 minutes to represent the 17 victims of the Parkland shooting (“ENOUGH”). However, Wadler told the March for Our Lives crowd that she and her friend led a walkout “for 18 minutes, adding a minute to honor Courtlin Arrington an African American girl who was the victim of gun violence in her school in Alabama, after the Parkland shooting.” Wadler’s metaphorical use of time allows her to reappropriate activism around the Parkland shooting, adhering to a public narrative in which it is acceptable and morally right to grieve the majority-white victims of rampage school shootings, while also underscoring the racial disparity in how gun deaths are mourned.

As Wadler’s activism highlights, gun violence and its coverage are both political and racial. She positioned her speech as a means of intervening in the erasure of Arrington and all “the African American girls whose stories don’t make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don’t lead on the evening news.” Wadler noted that she has been criticized and called a political “tool” for gun violence prevention, even as Black children like herself are at a significantly greater risk of being victims of gun homicides than white children — approximately ten times more so between 2012 and 2014 (Fowler et al. 4).⁸ Her speech

⁸ It is worth noting that this period includes the deadly Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, in which 20 children died, the majority of whom were white, constituting approximately 1/8th of the white children gun homicide victims during the selected years.

radically draws attention to her own precarious embodiment while she literally and symbolically accounts for killed Black girls. By addressing the crowd despite the fact that people think she is “too young to have these thoughts on [her] own” (Wadler), Wadler disrupts several ontological premises about her role as a youth activist. In so doing, she takes up and takes *back* time, refusing the erasure of both her own agency and the deaths of youth of color like Arrington.

Acts of memorializing through time like Wadler’s recall the ticking time bomb stereotype of mad white school shooters. As Cullen’s book is popular in classrooms and his teaching guide prompts students to ask who could have intervened to save the white victims, students like Wadler must walk out of school to memorialize gun violence victims of color. The authorizing of one group of victims over the other demonstrates how, in Rahsaan Mahadeo’s words, “time is subtractive for racialized people but additive and profitable for whites” (187). Wadler’s walkout reverses this by adding time for Arrington and other Black women.

Wadler’s protest speaks to the quotidianness and brevity of lives under systemic gun violence, borne legibly by victimized and killed children of color whose lives and media coverage of them are far too short.⁹ Daylanne K. English calls this “temporal damage” — “the distinct temporality produced by both race and injustice” (3), a concept that Emma González makes evident in her own speech at the D.C. march. González started her speech by telling the audience, “Six minutes and about twenty seconds. In a little over six minutes, 17 of our friends were taken from us, 15 were injured.” After listing each Parkland victim and what they “would never” do again, González stood silent at the podium, finally ending by telling the crowd, “Since the time that I came out here, it has been six minutes and twenty seconds.” Her speech, like

⁹ The quotidian nature of systemic gun violence on children of color directly speaks to Christina Sharpe’s crucial work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016).

Wadler's walkout, reclaims time to represent the deaths of her classmates and demands we examine how racism and gun violence directly affect perceptions of youth and time.

The temporal activism of youth activists in the wake of Parkland calls our focus to the persistent systemic punctuating of the lives of people of color across the U.S., asking us like Tait to sit in the absence of their breaths. Youth activists like Chavez, González, and Wadler demand we consider how we spend our time and money, questions particularly pertinent in the U.S., where Black and Indigenous bodyminds have long been commodified in exchange for white time and money. Their actions encourage a reframing of school shootings as equally enmeshed in the racial and social politics of American violence. I end with Chavez's words here and a suggestion that if adults cannot foster change, then we should cede our time to the youth who can:

Arming teachers will not work! More security in our schools does not work! Zero-tolerance policies do not work! They make us feel like criminals. We should feel empowered and supported in our schools. Instead of funding these policies, fund mentorship programs, mental health resources, paid internship and job opportunities....It's important to work with people that are impacted by these issues — the people you represent. We need to focus on changing the conditions that foster violence and trauma. And that's how we will transform our communities and uplift our voices.

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