

SOMEONE SHOT MY BOOK

It is the dilemma or double bind of undertaking to put the undecidability and elusiveness of signification in touch with political responsiveness, in shifting contexts of social suffering and affliction, political death and displacement, where life reaches its limit. Of course, it is the limit that creates the event of life, that is the necessary condition for the experience of life. —Athena Athanasiou¹

In any case a poem (a poet) is always an uncomfortable and threatening being who belongs equally to the chambers of the living and the dead

— Chus Pato²

1. Bullet

Someone took my book out into the woods and shot it.³ The book is intimate with violence now in at least two ways: both as subject matter (violence is what it's about), and as target. The book reaches the gun as its interlocutor. Or, now the book, with holes throughout, needs to be written again.

But when someone shot my book, I felt it got what it deserved, that it had met its precise right audience. And I felt the book had received its precise right author. The book had been re-authored, or finally authored, by the bullet.

¹ “Technologies of Humanness, Aporias of Biopolitics, and the Cut Body of Humanity” 127

² *Secession/Insecession*, with Erin Moure

³ Thank you to Nick Gulig for reading the book with a pellet gun.

In aiming to silence life, the gun makes life more present; it makes available, quite literally brings to hand, the grief we are already feeling, the grief that one could call the precondition of living. I don't mean to trivialize or exaggerate. But in trying to understand what guns might give us, why some of us want them so badly, I turn to this: in intimacy with death, in close proximity to grieving, is where we find ourselves most alive. *It is the limit that creates the event of life that is the necessary condition for the experience of life.*

“I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions” writes Judith Butler in her important 2004 essay, “Violence, Mourning, Politics” (Butler, *Precarious* 19).

Butler's venture: the just community could only be one that consistently recognizes—that does not banish—vulnerability, fear, grieving, those states that in attempting to deny we only become more and more subject to.

“Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” she continues (20)—a precise description of social life I think, though mostly we attempt to locate ourselves outside of loss, refusing exposure. Perhaps what guns seem to promise (to some) is to bring us closer, by way of the metonymic power of the object, to our actually lived vulnerability. Despite the claim that guns protect, we know that a person carrying a gun or a person with a gun in their house is far more at risk of death or injury than one who is unarmed, just as a society that is rich with guns is a society rich with risk.⁴ I don't want here to rehearse the

⁴ According to a recent study conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, people who carry guns are 4.5 times more likely to be shot and 4.2 times more likely to get killed as compared with

numbers. Rather, I want to consider the position of the one who is armed. For it seems only true that if I own a gun, I not only know that I could hurt you, I also acknowledge that you could hurt me. As much as the symbol of a gun might seem to project power, it also suggests deep vulnerability. As one Senator said to me during a hearing on gun control bills: “I assume everyone I meet is armed.” The one who assumes this lives in fear, close to grief.

I’d like to say then, perversely, that the gun and the poem share a common purpose. And that purpose is to allow us these proximities.

2. Alert and Awake

Think of the mass killings in our country that have occurred in places we might consider sacred: the church, the temple, the school, the theater, now, the dance club. These places are not simply “public,” they are, or were, places reserved for peace and communion, heartbreakingly figured by the Emanuel prayer circle in Charleston, South Carolina. In entering these spaces we remove ourselves from the chaos and struggle associated with the street or the marketplace as well as from the privacy of the home. This temporary shelter shared with others, often others we do not know, offers the promise of the common world that Hannah Arendt refers to as “the political,” for they are spaces of conversation, contemplation, imagination, and pleasure—the groundwork of critique and of action. The killings that have happened in these spaces, then, don’t so much as break into this sacred space as they reveal it as already broken. They reveal to us that the losses

unarmed citizens. Branas CC, Richmond TS, Culhane DP, TenHave TR, Wiebe DJ. : “Investigating the link between gun possession and gun assault.” *American Journal of Public Health* 99(11): 2034-40, 2009. The researches looked at 677 shootings over two-and-a-half years to discover whether victims were carrying at the time, and compared them to other Philly residents of similar age, sex and ethnicity. The team also accounted for other potentially confounding differences, such as the socioeconomic status of their neighborhood.

we experience were already in place, waiting to happen. The sense of sacred space is, we now know better, an illusion. As the NRA likes to remind us, there truly is no “gun-free zone.” The killer we might have once thought excluded from these spaces enters them in order to show that such exclusion is a lie we’ve told ourselves. For the killer, there is no “outside” no ban – he is present, included everywhere.

In this sense, the act of killing exposes the fundamental lack of borders, the failure of demarcation, not just of the individual body but also of the so-called public sphere (which has always been marked by what it tries and fails to keep out). Maybe the increased insistence on the “right to bear arms” is at least in part an expression of an increased sense of boundary-less-ness that contemporary life has made acute. The gun, though seemingly a way to protect the limit of home or body, in fact reveals to us the “zone of indistinction” between public and private, between self and other, and between life and death.⁵

The gun does not so much free its owner of this heightened vulnerability as it sharpens it, requiring or allowing the carrier to feel “alert and awake” at every moment. See the following advice from the website “The Truth about Guns”:

Assuming that family safety is Job One, the all-important question becomes how, when and where might a life-threatening attack occur? The obvious answer... There is no way of knowing. The uncomfortable truth: family members and loved ones could be outside your care when an attack occurs. They could be with friends, at school, shopping,

⁵ It’s important to note that the “right to carry” movement is not universally popular; rather, it is dominated by a specifically raced and gendered group – the white male. See Chad Kautzer “Good Guys with Guns: From Popular Sovereignty to Self-Defensive Subjectivity” for an analysis of what he calls “the emergent and pernicious form of political subjectivity in the United States—one which engenders equally problematic notions of freedom, security and sovereignty.” Kautzer analyses the crisis of white masculinity in contemporary America, reading the rapid increase of “right to carry” and “stand your ground” laws as a “legalization of non-state violence” and as symptomatic of that crisis.

eating at a restaurant, driving – anywhere. Put that to one side. Where’s the most likely place for a violent attack to occur when you’re with your family? Again, who knows? You can’t know if, when, where or how it will get real. The easiest way to cover the spread (as it were): carry a gun whenever you’re with your loved ones. At the mall, soccer games, grocery shopping, wherever and whenever you gather. But especially at home – if only for one simple reason. You spend more time with your family at home than you do in any other physical location. So if it’s going to happen someplace where y’all are, the odds are it’ll be at home.

It’s also important to note that rapists, stalkers, psycho exes, disgruntled employees and other dangerous enemies know where to find you and your loved ones: at home.

“The Truth about Guns” (www.thetruthaboutguns.com)

Another popular gun-lover’s website “Wide Open Spaces” offers 10 reasons a person might want to carry a gun. This is reason #9:

Better Situational Awareness

Some people say that when they carry, they are more on edge and are better aware of their surroundings. When I carry, my senses are on high alert and I tend to know more of what is going on around me. Having a gun means I have to know what is happening...

Since threat is everywhere, and most of all at home, there is no moment that one should not be on “high alert.” The presence of the object (in your pocket) delivers you from your stupor. Long ago (1800), William Wordsworth wrote of how blunted the modern mind had become, so used to stimulus it no longer cares to react, but rather sits passively in an almost “savage torpor.” Poetry,

he wrote, has the unique capacity to stimulate the mind without the “violence” of so much of contemporary urban life. Leap into modernism, and you can find this again such as in I.A. Richards’ *Science and Poetry* (1926) where Richards argues for the labor of reading as a kind of stimulant which will draw us from the “torpor” of the unfocused life, delivering us to, “the fullest, keenest, most active and completest kind of life” (*Poetries and Sciences* 38).

3. Distance and Proximity

Revolutionary poetry may, exceptionally, have nothing at all to say about any fact that will be identified as political; its grammar may be thoroughly opaque and its sentences almost totally free of direct social reference. But imperatively it must do this one thing: it must hurt and thrill a reader with an irresistible premonition of the feeling of being more fully and really alive than ever before, the feeling that is the true, unmistakable and inalienable basis of revolutionary subjective universality.— Keston Sutherland
 “Revolution and Being Really Alive”

In what we could call here, only half jokingly, the poetics of concealed carry, Keston Sutherland (like Wordsworth and Richards before him) calls on poetry to act on us the way the presence of the gun acts on our NRA enthusiast: to awaken us into hyperawareness, to hurt us and thrill us into greater proximity with life.

But one can say, many have said, that awakening this “feeling of being more alive than ever before” is exactly what writing can *not* do, that writing is instead a form of estrangement, that in attempting to represent experience, writing kills experience. Even when turning away from mere representation or mimesis, even when poems try instead to *be* experiences, some will point out

that poems (and all writing) always fall short. Whatever the experience one might have in having a poem, the argument goes, it's always at a remove from the "real," which would then have to be understood as pre-linguistic, or sur-linguistic—as bodily and immediate.

And yet it's precisely in the failure, in the gap between the poem and "experience" that the poem matters most. I would venture that a poem can draw us nearer to our intensities, our desires and our grief, not because it describes such feelings with accuracy, but because it does not. The gesture or attempt, the reach toward that is always a falling short, is itself the moving element—which is why the single most resonant sentence about grief that I know is from Emerson writing on the death of his son: "I cannot get it nearer me" ("Experience").

One could say that the root of social pain is this failure, but then so are the roots of social presence. To write is to approximate, to approach. For the very reason that poetry fails to bring us our experiences of loss and vulnerability, it *is* loss and vulnerability.

The unsatisfiable desire that the poem represents, that the poem *is*, pays tribute to the ways in which I am not and never was self-possessed, not and never will be secure, to how I am instead and forever: disarmed.

A fourteen-line poem on not giving up

1. a freckle between her shoulder blades
2. I keep trying to zip it
3. have never
4. this system of marks, scrapes and wounds
5. made palatable
6. on stage or screen or page
7. No no
8. I wanted to be some kind of healer or farmer
9. or else to be the wounded one
10. to make my mother cry
11. desire achieves its lastingness
12. pity narrative
13. the body the
14. astringent bright blooms

“Only sheer violence is mute,” said Arendt, who also posits that great speech and great action are coeval and coequal, belonging together in the realm of the political. But if reasoned speech stands opposed to violence, poetic writing stands, instead, against it—leaning on it, the way we might lean against a wall. This is because unlike speech, the language of the polis, poetic language reaches toward the silence of grief, the muteness of violence. Poetic language lives in that failure, never hitting the mark. As poet Andrew Joron puts it, “where language fails, poetry begins.” The poetic cry, he says, is “a triumph in defeat” (*Cry* 1, 5).

“Poetry is a scar,” writes Fred Moten on a number of occasions, pointing to the ways that poems tend to mark wounds, revealing the places we – as an individual or social body – are broken. “[Poetry] miscommunicates catastrophe in unseemly festivity,” he says (*Stolen Life*, unpublished ms.). In his critical study *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Moten writes of the moment where “shriek turns speech into song.” He finds one articulation of this moment in Frederick Douglas’s *Narrative of the Life* where Douglas describes in close succession the shrieking of his Aunt Hester as she is being whipped and the “reverberation” of the “wild songs” sung by slaves who, in Douglas’s words, “consult neither time nor tune.” Douglas calls these songs “rude and incoherent,” noting that even though he could not make out their words, they filled him with sadness, moved him to tears (*Break* 20).

A disturbed and disturbing form of communication aims at that which is disturbed or disturbing in the world, or in ourselves.

5. Mother

“There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded,” wrote Kristeva in 1980 (*The Powers of Horror* 5), anticipating Butler’s description of the body as constituted precisely through its

attachments, losses, and exposures (20).⁶ In *Revolution and Poetic Language* (1977) Kristeva describes this “founding in want” as a phase in human psychic development she names the *chora* (really both a time and place) during which the pre-linguistic subject finds herself in a bodily, rhythmic “semiotic motility” (46), regulated by and dependent upon the mother’s body. (Kristeva borrows the term from Plato’s *Timaeus* where it describes a receptacle or space, capable of transforming its character in response to whatever passes through—thus, associated with the mother).

The developmental version of the *chora* precedes the so-called “mirror stage” in which the child, having broken from the mother’s body, begins to structure its identity through the symbolic order. But crucially, Kristeva emphasizes that the semiotic *chora* is not a “stage” that is superseded or transcended; rather, its status is continual, in dialectic with the symbolic. As the symbolic’s “precondition,” it’s also its twin (50). While Lacanian theory posits, in Kristeva’s words, that “dependence on the mother is severed, and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other,” (48) Kristeva argues for the *continued presence* of the pre-symbolic semiotic motility (and therefore attachment to the mother) which finds its expression precisely in art, especially in poetic language. It’s in poetry (most acutely for Kristeva the modernist experimentation with language and form) that we can clearly see the *disruption* of the symbolic at play. Breaks in normative grammar, the overt use of rhythm and sound, syntactical disturbances, and the refusal or delay of semantic meaning all constitute the semiotic in language.

These are the aspects of poetry that poets always call upon in defining their genre, but what’s most distinct, and to me lasting, about Kristeva’s take, is that her semiotic is first and foremost a

⁶ Early on, Butler critiqued Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic as failing to truly subvert the hegemony of the symbolic, as naturalizing the cultural proscription of motherhood, and as pathologizing lesbianism. Butler asserts (in 1989) that in Kristeva’s theory “the semiotic is invariably subordinate to the symbolic” (1989, 105). While not wanting to engage in a lengthy critique of Butler’s reading, I’ll just say that in contrast, I read Kristeva’s semiotic and symbolic as in dialectical oscillation rather than in some kind of battle for dominance. See “The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva” *Hypatia* 3:3 (Winter 1989) 104-118, and *Gender Trouble* 101-118.

language of the body and of its drives, drives that are regulated through their dependence on another. Their presence in the poem then, are the mark of “abjection” or dependency, which Butler posits as a foundation for justice.

6. I/You

Unlike a poem whose object is absence (the missed or the missing), violence directs itself toward a presence, a seen (or in the case of “precision guided munition,” *mapped*) object. And though it probably goes without saying that the perpetrator of violence is in some way confused about his or her desires, in the moment of enacting violence, the positioning of subject and object, the *grammar*, could not be more clear: I - hurt - you: subject - action verb - object.

“The thetic break” is Kristeva’s term for the linguistic structure in this relation. Any statement that insists on the position of the subject *as* subject is “thetic.” The “thetic phase” of language acquisition establishes the speaker as a subject in relation to whom all other things and beings are objects. “There can be no language without a thetic phase” (72), admits Kristeva. And yet, in describing ritualized sacrifice as an extreme manifestation of the “thetic,” she acknowledges the violent potential lurking in all structural relations where a subject acts upon an object.⁷ “The sacred—sacrifice—which is found in every society is, then, a theologization of the thetic,” she writes in a chapter of *Revolution in Poetic Language* titled “Poetry that is not a Form of Murder” (78).

And yet, as the title of that chapter indicates, Kristeva argues throughout *Revolution in Poetic Language* that not all language is in this way violent. Poetry answers to the violent face of the thetic

⁷ Of course, so-called second-wave feminism roots its critique of patriarchy in an assessment of the subject/object relation. As Simone de Beauvoir writes, “[Man] is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.” “[Men] propose to stabilize her as object...to doom her to immanence” (no pag).

by offering the ontological dislocation that opposes the thetic break: "...poetic mimesis is led to dissolve not only the denotative function but also the specifically thetic function of *positing* the subject" (58). Poetic mimesis (what Kristeva calls "denotative mimesis") manages this dissolve of the thetic precisely because it works to dismantle the clear delineation of subject and object. This blurring of boundaries between I and you (experienced in the earliest relationship between mother and infant) is what Kristeva refers to with the term "jouissance":

In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself, and releasing from within them the drives born by vocalic or kinetic difference, jouissance works its way into the social and symbolic. In contrast to sacrifice, poetry shows us that language lends itself to the penetration of the socio-symbolic by jouissance, and that the thetic does not necessarily imply theological sacrifice. (79-80)

Not just an idea about language, Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic oscillation allows for an identity similarly oscillating between dependence and independence, between self-presence and abjection, and because of such uncertain founding, an identity in relationship not girded by violence. (That Kristeva locates the roots of this identity in maternity does not mean she necessarily fetishizes the maternal body. Rather, as Kelly Oliver has written, "Kristeva uses maternity as an example of an experience that calls into question any notion of a unified subject. Maternity becomes a prime example of what [she] calls a 'subject-in-process'... Kristeva analyzes maternity in order to suggest that all distinctions between subjects and objects, all identifications of unified subjects, are arbitrary" [Kelly Oliver 9].)

Butler's theory of identity, like Kristeva's (though less obviously), also draws on the early experience of dependency on a caregiver:

I may wish to reconstitute my “self” as if it were there all along, a tacit ego with acumen from the start; but to do so would be to deny the various forms of rapture and subjection that formed the condition of my emergence as in individuated being and that continue to haunt my adult sense of self with whatever anxiety and longing I may now feel. (26-27)

“At one level, this situation is literally *familiar*...” she writes. Pressing beyond the realm of psychic development (and not considering, as Kristeva does, ways in which this model of selfhood finds expression in language), Butler asks us in 2004, as the War on Terror begins to define American life and soon life far beyond our borders, to resist the self-defensive subjectivity that she sees quite literally marching down the avenues.

Much more recently, in a conversation with Sarah Ahmed, she rearticulates the central question of that essay:

What if we shift the question from “who do I want to be?” to the question, “what kind of life do I want to live with others?” It seems to me that then many of the questions...about happiness, but perhaps also about “the good life” – very ancient yet urgent philosophical questions – take shape in a new way. If the I who wants this name or seeks to live a certain kind of life is bound up with a “you” and a “they” then we are already involved in a social struggle when we ask how best any of us are to live. (Ahmed 10)

Kristeva too suggests the political potential of this recognition or “rapture” (*jouissance*), writing that only when the semiotic is present to disrupt symbolic signification and the division between subject and object that the symbolic expresses and enforces, only then, does “the signification process join social revolution” (61).

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It seems clear that the turn away from emotional expression in poetry that, with the advent of Conceptual Poetry, made such headlines just a few years ago (and what transformative years they have been), but which can be traced to (some of) Language Poetry's rejection of subjective expression as well as to the digital poem's interest in pattern and process, was, when most sincere, actually an attempt to turn from destructive and potentially violent ideologies of subjectivity. Wanting the poem to belong to a collective, or to reflect social realities rather than "individual" ones, a poet or critic might valorize supposedly "desubjectivising" strategies, such as collage, appropriation, procedural or documentary poetics (though all of these strategies can be mobilized for other reasons as well). Wanting to escape what seems like the bind of the ego in order to comment on culture more broadly, a poet might also stridently avoid material too close to home, too burdened by feeling. However, as such, the arguments "against expression" represent a failure to recognize what other models of identity might be at work in poems that highlight emotion. The argument hinges on what I consider to be a patriarchal concept of self and a limited idea of the political work emotion can do.

If selfhood is in fact a shared entity, a vector made and remade through its encounters, then its emotions are shared as well – and this means, quite simply, that the emotional experiences we might discover in reading poems, or might find in making them, are not "private," they do not "belong" to their author like some abstract form of property she's trying to protect. This does not, however, make emotions less valuable, less powerful, or less important. Rather, it makes them

more so. The social source and aim of emotion *is* its agency, its politics, and its engagement. This is why emotion in poetry matters: not because it's mine but because it's ours.

7. No longer alone

While gun ownership might in fact reach toward a (distorted) version of the vulnerability that Butler and Kristeva theorize as central to the building of something we could call, without shame, community, the gun carrier's sense of that vulnerability requires not that he *mourn*, the crucial second term in Butler's essay's title, but that he re-draw the boundaries of his corporeal self, his "family," or perhaps his immediate community. The carrier projects his losses, but among them is not the bounded body itself. "There is no such thing as the human," writes Athanasiou, "instead, there is only the dizzying multiplicity of the cut human, the human body as interminably cut, fractured. In the clefts of history and at the limits of representation, the cut body of humanity tells the story of the indeterminability that haunts the dreams and nightmares of the 'fully there'" (125). Therefore, despite what I read as the gun carrier's desire (shared with the poet) to be awakened into increased aliveness and charged affective attachment to others, the "self-defensive subject" (Kautzer's term) in insisting on being "fully there" reaffirms the thetic split. And, if rather than performing the decisive grammar of the thetic from the position of subject, he finds (as often happens) the bullet returned to his own body, then the gun has shown us only how bi-directional thetic violence truly is.

But the problem for the poet, a problem shared by anyone who seeks to create what Athanasiou calls a “haptic technology,” a generator of empathy, is how to deny our protections, how to stand exposed when difference and separation seem to mark the human body, in a society “stratified and marked by group conflict,” (Kautzer “Insurgent Subjects”), where the threat of exposure seems to open us to the unbearable. For the most vulnerable people in a culture, those who are quite literally attacked (and today I am thinking of the trans woman, the black male, the poor), the question seems almost perverse. “The problem, then, remains....” writes Athanasiou, “how to think representation (cultural, political, textual) without the ontological presuppositions of authoritarian self-presence; how to think the body beyond the ‘ontic,’ beyond the representational presuppositions of the birth to presence; how to think the political beyond sovereignty; and, finally, how to think the language of the political beyond denomination” (128).⁸

Poetic language, when most activated, thinks through these questions by way of threading shriek into word, cry into articulation. A poem will not stop a bullet, but it might, in this way, answer it. Not heal a loss but draw attention to the losses we carry – as Nathaniel Mackey has written, poetry, “if not exactly a loser’s art, is fed by an intimacy with loss and may in fact feed it” (36).

When the book met the bullet, it met the thing it was after and the thing that was after it: not its own death, but its own life, made palpable through and in the broken face that was now its cover.

⁸ In a society that invests well over 50% of its discretionary budget on its military, with a gun industry pulling thirteen and a half billion dollars in revenue each year, the problem remains: how to create an economy of peace? <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/san-bernardino-shooting/americas-gun-business-numbers-n437566>