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Post-Tragedy Consumption in the USA: Feminist Reflections on School Shootings, Time, and Capitalism

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June 21, 2022. I submitted the first draft of this work to my professor and editor of this anthology, Dr. Gloria González-López, on May 21, 2022. Three days later, the shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, took place, killing two teachers and 19 students. While there had been 27 school shootings to occur between January and end of May 2022, before Uvalde,[1] news of the tragedy at Robb Elementary encouraged another surge of conversations and protests around school safety and gun reform. Multiple mass shootings over the past two decades have likewise encouraged an examination of school safety, each launching U.S. schools to question how to protect its community and urgently implement prevention of this kind of violence. Nonetheless, these tragedies continue to occur.

The following critical essay had been almost two years in the making and news of Uvalde spun this work into further urgency. Uvalde's proximity to The University of Texas at Austin and the coalition of feminist thinkers found in this anthology brings the frustrating unsurety of what will happen next into sharper focus. Currently, the only certainty is one that has persisted for decades: children, teachers, and administrators are unsafe in U.S. schools. And this troubling reality has launched decades of safety, security, and school-based policing measures that have disproportionately criminalized BIPOC students and students with disabilities.[2] As such, the following subject matter remains prevalent as a dark undercurrent in American culture and an ongoing history.

* * *

May 21, 2022. Nine months after the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, two reporters from *The Washington Post* attended the 2018 National School Safety Conference held in Orlando. Present were 105 vendors—75 percent more in attendance than in previous years—selling products, concepts, and solutions to school safety initiatives.[3] Featured as part of the expo was a 300-pound ballistic whiteboard decorated with animal illustrations and five demonstrative bullet holes priced at $2,900 U.S. dollars. The vendors explicated the purpose of their product: "'What we want to do is just to give the kids, the teachers, a chance,' one of [the sellers] said. 'So, they can buy a few minutes,' the other added" (Cox and Rich 2018).

The threat of an active shooter attacking a school has become a prominent concern in the United States over the past twenty years.[4] As a result, and since the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in Newtown, CT, in 2012, the school security industry has expanded into a $2.7 billion enterprise.[5] Expos such as the National School Safety Conference have opened a market comprised of entrepreneurs and ex-military or security personnel to fill gaps in the school safety market. These products are props to bolster a sense of security, address a mistake, or answer the refrain of "if only" post-tragedy. Varying from tourniquets, pepper-ball guns, and facial recognition software, some products attempt to fill multiple gaps at once, such as an armored classroom door, advertised to stop bullets, identify weapons, photograph a shooter, and notify the police. (The price tag for this multivalent technology is set at $4,000 U.S. dollars).[6] The more affordable objects, such as emoji bulletproof backpacks, sell for around $119 U.S. dollars.[7] However, conferences such as these convince concerned buyers (who include teachers, parents, students, and administrators), that despite funding and class disparities between school districts, there is no price tag for their children's safety. Reporters from *The Post* interviewed a vendor promoting a door-security and weapons-detection system priced at $500,000 U.S. dollars. When asked about the steep price, the seller responded, "'If you think $500,000 is expensive, go down to Parkland, Florida, and tell 17 people $500,000 is expensive. That's $29,000 a kid… Every person would pay $29,000 a kid to have their kid alive'" (Cox and Rich 2018).

After a shooting, schools often feel surmounting pressure to address the problem and provide solutions. This inclination, I ar-

gue, instigates a performance of action, foresight, and care. The specific demand for products has fostered an entrepreneurial spirit that welcomes new concepts and sweeping promises for safety. This tendency is what I will refer to as *post-tragedy consumption*, or the capitalistic tendency to quell the mass public's fear through the invention and production of specialized goods. Moreover, post-tragedy consumption hinges on a heteronormative and gendered construction of labor. Here, "gendered" refers to the process by which certain roles, jobs, or duties are assigned or expected of people based on their perceived gender. The invention of products produced as part of this trend rely disproportionately on teachers and women to act as the first line of defense or the operators of these products, situating their carework under the order of paternalistic protection. In other words, the mass panic that disseminates under the state of emergency attempts to calcify a gendered dynamic between those who mandate safety protocol and those who manage it. The entrepreneurs who find opportunity after a tragedy, therefore, operate under a masculine protectionism while simultaneously necessitating feminized acts of nurture and care.

In the following essay, I will analyze how reactions to tragedy and trauma are an opportunity for capitalistic production while also posing the following questions: Is it possible to make room for grief to exist alongside the production of these goods? And what kind of carework might relieve the capitalistic exploitation of women's labor under the state of emergency? Post-tragedy consumption is symptomatic of what queer and performance theorist Jac Pryor (2017) critiques as linear or "straight time" in the context of trauma and survivorship (4). Straight time, according to Pryor (2017), is a temporality that favors actions that move "back to normal" or "business as usual" following a traumatic event, adhering to capitalism's conception of time according to the "temporal mandates of the clock, the calendar, and the hourly wage" (32). Importantly, they counter their notion of "straight time" with what they call "time slips," or performance's agency to queer time post-tragedy and outside the time of capital.[8] In other words, "straight time" moves linearly, aligning with the timeline of capitalism and heteronormativity, while "time slips" allow for potential outside this linearity. While exploring the possibility for time slips and healing under the state of emergency, I will also examine the disproportionate labor dynamic between the women who must complete carework in order to fulfill the desires of post-tragedy consump-

tion. Ultimately, I offer that products conceived under the state of emergency in U.S. schools may also possess a feminist and queer temporality, and have the agency to straddle, slip and grieve between multiple points in time.

Defining the Public and Disaster Discourse

To reconsider time in this context first requires an interrogation of the subject or *public* that experiences it**.** When I say "public," I refer to Michael Warner's (2002) definition of the term as a "fiction that produces a social imaginary" (12). These, Warner argues, remove our identifiers and render us—the masses—as objective. That is, not a target, not an object, but as in the opposite of 'subject'—losing the subjecthood. Put differently, as we absorb public discourse, our subjectivity shifts from selfhood to objectivity. However, this objectification is in tension with our drive to identify with and find ourselves embedded within publics. Warner (2002) explains that "something becomes public only through its availability for subjective identification" (175). In other words, something—a worry, trend, or pattern—becomes a public when it can abstract selfhood and encourage the masses to identify with its definition as a public subject. I bring up this distinction to amplify abstraction's power in the case of a mass disaster, such as a school shooting. Warner (2002) makes the claim that "disaster is popular because it is a way of making mass subjectivity available, and it tells us something about the desirability of that mass subject" (177). Such a desire for subjectivity becomes particularly illuminated when put up against mass injury. For example, the statistical likelihood of a school shooting is extremely low. Mass shootings in schools account for about one percent of annual gun-related deaths in the United States.[9] Nonetheless, shootings create an abstracted public that imagines itself simulated within that nightmare, and as a result, mandates careworkers' labor for the potential of becoming the new icon of mass injury. Parents, teachers, students, and administrators join a public that is constantly on edge and afraid of an active shooter scenario.

This kind of public anticipation embodies what Warner calls a "collective witnessing," or an intimacy between a public and its media and encourages us to find subjecthood or identification within an abstracted mass public.[10] "Subjecthood" here refers to finding personal identification in something or someone else, while an "abstracted" implies that an event is made opaque, and

therefore more accessible or relatable to a group or individual. The more opaque an event, the more ambiguous and therefore, more easily appropriated by a public. This process of witnessing and finding identification in abstracted mass tragedy equates to what Warner calls "disaster discourse."[11] When we see disaster discourse on display after a tragedy in various media outlets (online, printed, social, etc.), we are more inclined to participate in post-tragedy consumption in order to protect and reinforce our sense of safety and subjecthood. In the case of school shootings, organizations, inventions, and events such as the National School Safety Conference place affected communities on view and commodify their injuries and fears. Such communities become public images of disaster that offer subjectivity for other concerned publics—reinforcing the idea that "it could happen to anyone"—and thus fortify the necessity to purchase solutions. This is what I would argue Warner means when he explicates public discourse—and especially disaster discourse—as a type of consumable good.

Take, for example, the emoji bulletproof backpack: concerned and abstracted publics cling to their identification in the potential for a disaster and find solace in this safety product. Sold at the Home Security Superstore, this product is described as capable of blocking 9mm and .44 Magnum shots. Before adding it to their cart online, buyers can view an isolated photo of the backpack and one taken from a high angle of a young person crouching down and blocking their body with the backpack as a shield. What was once a staple or quotidian item for a young person attending school now identifies with a previous mass disaster. In other words, the backpack caters to a public of young people who love emojis and interacts with disaster discourse. It also renders safety as a purchasable and aspirational good, excluding low-income or working-class parents and students from these kinds of safety innovations. Nonetheless, such goods reinforce the intense need to identify and see oneself in the potential for disaster. As disaster discourse and mass injury subjectify the abstracted masses, goods produced for post-tragedy consumption likewise abstract everyday objects to enhance the public's subjectivity, making them participants in mass tragedy. For instance, the bulletproof backpack serves as an everyday object that allows its users to subscribe to the panic that comes with attending school in the United States.

The Gendered Labor of Panic

As disaster discourse invites collective witnessing, women find themselves as another integral product in post-tragedy consumption. The synchronization between grief and capitalism reinforces a heteronormative gendered dynamic critical to school safety. Put differently, while these goods and technologies are meant for students or young people in the classroom, they reinforce a paternalism that attempts to reinforce safety and quell panic. U.S.-based school teachers are predominately women; a recent survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) found that 76 percent of K–12 teachers and 89 percent of elementary school teachers are women. More critically, the teachers and administrators who lost their lives in the unspeakable tragedies at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012 and at Robb Elementary in 2022 were also all women.[12] The disproportionate number of women in teaching roles—who oversee these bulletproof and surveillance technologies—ultimately assume caretaking roles under enforced, paternalistic performances of protection.

Protecting young students under the state of emergency is a gendered dynamic that spurs from the "masculine" state and functions through "feminized" notions of care. This gendered polarity roots in carework and caretaking's association with women and "protection" with chivalrous and masculine connotations. Caregiving is a recurring form of labor for women in contexts of both paid and unpaid work. Whether for children, aging parents, or paid employment, women encounter multiple moments in their lives where they are expected to act as nurturers.[13] Similar to the mandates of school safety preparation, women must constantly preempt dangerous scenarios and be "on call" to care at a moment's notice or plan ahead.[14] This need to plan for children's care is a critical link to women's role in planning and managing safety preparation. To care, therefore, is to have foresight. It is an active preparation to make sure those being cared for do not come in harm's way.

Presumably, masculinist protectionism presides over feminized care. Feminist scholar Iris Marion Young (2003) offers a definition of masculinist protectionism in the context of post-9/11. She explains that the U.S. government has since developed a habit of "masculinist protection," explaining that the "stronger U.S. security state offers a bargain to its citizens: obey our commands and support our security actions, as we will ensure your protection" (Young 2003, 3). Young also writes that in "this patriarchal logic, the role of the masculine protector puts those protected,

paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience" (2). In other words, despite the state of emergency being predicated on women's carework, masculinist protectionism attempts to both supervise and place women in a subservient role. Under this model, women—teachers, caretakers, etc.—falsely have no obligation but to stay out of the way and be saved. She illuminates these assumptions further by offering the nuclear family as a way to understand gender roles in safety. Young critiques: "When the household lives under a threat, there cannot be divided wills and arguments about who will do what, or what is the best course of action. The head of the household should decide what measures are necessary for the security of the people and property, and he gives the orders that they must follow if they and their relations are to remain safe" (5). In other words, protection hinges on a (paternalistic) leader to order the safety protocol for those in compliant (and feminized) roles.

This dynamic hinges on an oppressive, heteronormative power structure that renders teachers, women, and careworkers as products of post-tragedy consumption. The goods developed to mitigate risk in schools are objects that reflect masculine protectionism but require care to monitor their use. They are also not enough. Teachers must care for students in the U.S. school system's current state of emergency, meaning they operate under the assumption that they are *always potentially* in harm's way. As a result, the state of emergency locks the heteronormative construction of labor into a latent panic: teachers, women, and those in "feminized" labor roles must follow orders under the paternalistic guise of duty, protection, and care.

It's important to note that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic briefly stalled the fear that motivated post-tragedy consumption and active shooter preparation in schools. Remote, online teaching and learning placed unprecedented pressures on teachers and students, briefly distracting the continual threat of school-based gun violence with infection and illness. At the same time, the pandemic has made more evident the gendered and racialized labor structure that underpins capitalism and entrepreneurship. Especially in early 2020, the public found itself immersed in a ubiquitous and unprecedented disaster discourse and in economic stasis. Life slowed down for many, while for the now so-called essential workers, life became predicated on total exhaustion due to the demand for productivity.

Scholar and activist Altheria Caldera (2020) writes of how the pandemic's required slowness offered a time of rest and self-care,

and spurred reflections on the capitalistic exploitation of Black women's labor (709). While stitching together the work of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis, Caldera discusses the way in which Black women's labor demonstrates an ongoing history of exploitation in the United States, specifically for the advancement of white men.[15] Caldera importantly notes that this labor—both paid and unpaid—is devalued both in social status and compensation while posing the critical question: "Who benefits most from the hard work of Black women and other women of color?" (Caldera 2020, 711). "Hard work," in this sense, is necessary for returning to business-as-usual and contingent on Pryor's notion of "straight time." Productivity in the face of tragedy and trauma is critical to the greater project of capitalism and masculine protectionism, and a required component of "feminized" acts of care. As a counteraction, Caldera advocates for a pivot away from "hard work" by finding value in work that is life-giving, affirming, and encourages self-care.[16] She reflects on her experience interrupting these encroachments during the early months of COVID-19 with her own self-care, noting that finding opportunity for this kind of carework is indicative of Audre Lorde's oft-quoted statement: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'"[17] In other words, self-care is an act of resistance that affirms women of color's labor and exists outside the logic of capital.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to define and identify self-care as carework under the state of emergency. For instance, those who embrace the entrepreneurial spirit post-tragedy (as demonstrated by Cox and Rich's fieldwork), fervently believe that their work performs a form of care. They are investing their work and labor in the improved possibility of saving a student's life. However, this form of carework embraces both materialism and American individualism that Caldera notes as antithetical to the form of care she and Lorde describe as an act of self-love and protest.[18] Post-tragedy consumption and its entrepreneurs assume there to be both a personal and economic gain. Entrepreneurs' products operate under the influence and power that comes with claiming safety and preparedness, and they are ultimately only available to the schools that have the means and resources to purchase them. As a result, the combined effect of hard work, straight time, and disaster discourse calcifies a heteronormative and gendered dynamic that enhances the public's drive to find subjectivity. As such, it simultaneously reinforces and underpins our drive for individualism while in a state of panic. This produces an exhausting feedback loop

that keeps us worried, tired, but still operating under the state of masculine protectionism. While time cannot be bought, it can be exploited, and disrupting from this feedback loop is perhaps where we can follow Pryor's lead and slip through time.

Business-As-Usual

I want to return now to Pryor's intervention of linear or "straight time" and its link to capitalism and commodification in the wake of tragedy. As Warner explains how persons "construct themselves as the mass subject" by "consuming thematic materials of mass-media discourse,"[19] Pryor and Caldera might add that that these discourses maintain a sense of production and healing that align with capitalistic notions of betterment and productivity. Pryor counterargues that disaster cannot exist in this linear temporality, but in fact, becomes unraveled in the context of trauma and survivorship. Pryor summate that time comes in tension with the nation-state's conception of healing and progress post-disaster, which favors any efforts toward "business as usual."[20] Likewise, the slowness, healing, and self-care that Caldera writes of compress under the push toward productivity and "hard work."

Caldera, Warner, and Pryor each pay close attention in this regard to the public sphere's power to regulate emotion and time after (or in the case of COVID-19, during) a disaster. They point to the important distinction that emotion and time must be productive, erasing the potential for grief and self-care. Pryor explains further in the context of post-9/11:

> If to stay in grief is to hold on to melancholic attachments—to obsess over the past, to psychically repeat, to refuse to move forward, or onward, or away from the pain of loss—then grief is the antithesis of official national affect. This is precisely why the fireman, the policeman, and the rescue worker emerged as our new national heroes: they represented fearlessness, resilience, productivity, and progress—not fear, grief, weakness, and depression. They represented a resolutely "American" (and masculine) sense of time.[21]

The same workers that Pryor mentions here are similar to those who adopt the entrepreneurial spirit and forge forward to help populations after school shootings. Many of the vendors interviewed by *The Post* at the National School Safety Conference were

former military, police officers, or security workers.[22] And while their products appeal to the grieving mass public—and sometimes those specific populations who fell victim to active shooters—they do not make room for grief, nor do they release the gendered labor of panic. Products such as armored doors and whiteboards, bulletproof backpacks, and surveillance systems push collective trauma back in sync with capitalism. They distort regular objects from the school day and alter them into militaristic and protective items. As such, they transform the classroom into a buyable bunker and enforce the constant state of emergency under the guise of a regular school day. Teachers then must also operate under masculine protectionism and perform the labor that underpins a piece of technology like a multivalent armored door. Such a commodity's high price tag reinforces its assumed effectiveness while absorbing the shock of mass-disaster, and to reiterate Warner's argument, render the mass public subject to the nation and its markets. It becomes an object of post-tragedy consumption that the public feels it should have *just in case*. Moreover, it transforms safety into something communities must *afford*—a form of safety that does not promote access but excludes working class and communities of color from acquiring these tools. Under the exclusionary logic of the nation-state, there is no use in grieving or dwelling in trauma, there can only be progress and opportunity. In short, such goods offer publics the opportunity to identify with mass-disaster and to fall into step with "business as usual" when what they really need, as offered by Pryor, is time.

The Queer Potential of Time in Post-Tragedy Consumption

I would like to reiterate the question I posed at the top of this critical essay: Is it possible for grief to exist in the production of these goods beyond the realm of "business as usual"? Further, is it possible to locate a feminist and queer temporality in post-tragedy consumption? What needs to occur for the gendered labor of panic to release its heteronormative construction? Pryor offers their conception of "time slips" as distinct from the linear or "straight time" that pursues post-tragedy consumption. Time slips occur when "normative conceptions of time fail or fall away, and the spectator or artist experiences an alternative, or queer, temporality" (Pryor 2017, 9). In other words, time slips illuminate moments in performance that queer time. They allow for us to experience time outside "straight time," allowing for it to repeat, recognize, and attempt to heal trauma.

Therefore, is there a way to actually use these commodities to disrupt entrepreneurship? While post-tragedy consumption aligns with straight time, I want to explore the possibility of these objects produced post-tragedy to have the power to allow grief to happen and to perform Pryor's time slips. Whether or not these objects become staples or investments within school classrooms, these safety commodities have the potential to acknowledge and assist in grieving past tragedies. As inventions, they attempt to problem solve and offer solutions with the decisive goal to save lives. They appeal to a grieving mass public with the intent to prevent future tragedies, but instead of asking, *what can we do better?* they look to the past and ask, *what could we have done?* Their production pushes forward in a linear fashion, or in straight time, but the objects or goods themselves juggle multiple tragedies from multiple points in time. These commodities have the potential to convey the message: "if only." A young person wearing an emoji bulletproof backpack, for instance, holds an object that straddles and slips through time: the young person participates in the present commodification of safety while acknowledging past tragedies—wearing an item that maybe could have or should have helped—while anticipating future emergencies.

Safety preparation is a performance. As such, it has the power to transcend time and to make room for grief. It also offers an entrepreneurial opportunity that exists in a capitalistic logic. Tragedies present holes in adequate preparation and therefore gaps to fill within the market, and those goods that fill the gap reinforce classist, sexist, and racist systems that offer safety to only those individuals or school districts who can afford it. Nonetheless, this action of invention and post-tragedy consumption appeals to affected schools, communities, and the abstracted public's need to identify and find subjectivity in mass disaster while exploiting the critical labor of carework. This participation in disaster discourse places safety as an aspirational commodity and trauma in a linear timeline toward normalcy and productivity. However, safety preparation, especially the objects produced in an effort to provide solutions and mitigate risk, perhaps perform a deference and layer multiple points in time. They assert future alternatives to a tragic past while performing protection in the here and now.

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June 21, 2022. This research remains ongoing. But as these tragedies continue to occur and build statistics, it becomes more dif-

ficult to look into these events as part of my graduate research on performances of safety preparation, the police state, and school shootings in the United States. I cannot stop questioning how diving into this traumatic source material that has so deeply affected the lives of others is serving me on a pathway to earn a doctoral degree. I'm a white woman who has not been criminalized by school-based policing; I am not a mother and I don't have younger siblings attending school; I am not a schoolteacher preparing to protect her young students. Within the writing and research model of academia, each new shooting begins to feel like another case study to be studied alongside other scholars and theorists. There have been many instances—especially after the shooting in Uvalde—when I have wanted to pivot in another direction on my professional pathway.

Being part of this community of feminists has reminded me, however, that raising these investigative questions, leaning into our vulnerabilities, and remaining honest about our challenges are a critical form of collective care. Writing and researching within the academy cannot be an insular process. Rather—as I've learned from Dr. Gloria and my peers—it should function as an act of healing and service that uplifts and gives back to affected communities. This is how our research projects persist, remain ongoing, and ever-evolving, in coalition.

Notes

1. According to data gathered by *Education Week's 2022 School Shooting Tracker*, last updated June 8, 2022.
2. For more information, see the 2017 report conducted by American Civil Liberties Union, *Bullies in Blue: The Origins and Consequences of School Policing.*
3. Cox and Rich, *Armored school doors, bulletproof whiteboards and secret snipers*.
4. Many cite the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, CO, as the first incident to incite the need for teachers, administrators as well as students to instill some form of active shooter preparation.
5. Cox and Rich, *Armored school doors, bulletproof whiteboards and secret snipers*. And Everytown Research and Policy, *The Impact of Active Shooter Drills in Schools.*
6. Cox and Rich, *Armored school doors, bulletproof whiteboards and secret snipers*.

7. The Home Security Superstore, n.d.
8. Pryor, *Time Slips*, 9.
9. Everytown Research and Policy, *The Impact of Active Shooter Drills in Schools*.
10. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics,* 170.
11. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 177.
12. Anne Marie Murphy, Rachel D'Avino, Mary Sherlach, Dawn Hochsprung, Lauren Rousseau, Victoria Leigh Soto, and the gunman's mother, Nancy Lanza, were the adult victims from the shooting at Sandy Hook in Newtown, CT. At Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX, teachers Eva Mireles and Irma Garcia lost their lives alongside 19 children. Each of these women died protecting their students.
13. Rutman, *Child Care as Women's Work,* 629.
14. Rutman, *Child Care as Women's Work,* 629.
15. Caldera, *Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation*, 710.
16. Caldera, *Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation*, 712.
17. Lorde (1988) as cited in Caldera, *Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation*, 715.
18. Caldera, *Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation*.
19. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics,* 185.
20. Pryor, *Time Slips*, 4.
21. Pryor, *Time Slips*, 21.
22. Cox and Rich, *Armored school doors, bulletproof whiteboards and secret snipers*.

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