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Why bodies matter: Discourse and materiality after mass murder[1]

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On a Friday evening in May 2014, Isla Vista, the student-dominated community adjacent to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I am a professor, was suddenly ripped apart by a series of horrific acts of violence. I began drafting the present essay soon after these incidents took place, and as I reflected on language and materiality from the standpoint of linguistic anthropology, it was difficult to think about anything else.[2] My profession had left me wholly unprepared to deal with the shock, the pain, the loss, the violation that the Santa Barbara community had experienced; academics generally avoid bringing our own emotions into our scholarly discourse. Yet my profession also offered me tools for thinking, alone and in conversation with others, about what had happened—the sense-making tools of theory and analysis. Even now, I do not feel ready—perhaps I will never feel ready—to offer a fully worked-out theoretical or analytic account of that summer evening, what led up to it, and what followed afterward. But my own and others' affective experiences were and continue to be vital to my ongoing sense-making process, pushing me to think harder about the relationship between language and materiality, and the roots of both in the human body.[3]

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Reduced to the official facts, as reported in the summary of the law enforcement investigation (Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office 2015), one account of that evening goes like this: In the early evening of May 23, 2014, a twenty-two-year-old man named Elliot Rodger stabbed to death his two roommates and a visiting friend in their shared apartment in Isla Vista. Some three hours later, Rodger uploaded a short video labeled "Retribution" to YouTube, laying out his murderous plans, and emailed his parents and thirty-two other people a 137-page document entitled "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger." He then left the apartment in his black BMW, armed with three semiautomatic handguns and over four hundred rounds of ammunition. He drove to a nearby sorority house, where he planned to murder all the women inside; unable to get past the locked door, he shot three other women on the sidewalk, killing two and seriously injuring the third. Rodger's next stop was a convenience store, where he killed one man. He continued to careen through the crowded streets of Isla Vista, injuring thirteen other people both by gunfire and with his vehicle. Finally, wounded by the sheriff's deputies pursuing him, he fatally shot himself in the head before he could be taken into custody; his shooting rampage had taken only eight minutes.

It is almost grotesquely obvious to point out that the events in Isla Vista were saturated with materiality, even well beyond the most glaring example, the murders that Rodger committed. Issues of materiality underlay both his actions and his motivations, as well as their representations in subsequent media reports and commentary. To begin with, his violent acts were carried out by means of human-made objects designed or used as weapons: knives, guns, and a motor vehicle. Yet these acts emerged from his earlier pattern of minor, almost pathetic assaults with decidedly non-deadly weapons: Rodger described in his written "manifesto"—as it was widely labeled—his

odd habit of splashing beverages on affectionate couples and on women who did not show interest in him.

Rodger's communicative practices were also materially mediated; he expressed his feelings primarily via digital technologies, using online video and discussion sites as well as his word-processed manifesto as outlets for his rage and bitterness. Moreover, these texts revealed that Rodger was greatly concerned with the material trappings of capitalist success and that he engaged in sustained efforts to transcend his middle-class socioeconomic background. The child of financially struggling film industry parents, he resented growing up in the shadow of Hollywood's wealth and fame, and after his parents' divorce he was angry with his mother for not marrying a rich suitor. He viewed symbols of affluence such as his prized (used) BMW 328i luxury coupe, purchased by his mother as a gift to him, as the key to sexual conquest. He unsuccessfully played the lottery, hoping that by becoming a multimillionaire he could win the admiration and sexual experience he craved. Finally, materiality was evident after the killings in the way that Rodger was interpellated into medicalized discourses, via news reports that he was in therapy, rumors that he had Asperger syndrome, and amateur psychologists' speculative diagnoses ranging from narcissism to bipolar disorder (cf. Kang 2014).

But most fundamentally, Rodger's obsession with materiality was evident in his focus on racial, gendered, and sexualized embodiment. He was a self-identified "involuntary celibate" inspired by the highly misogynistic "men's rights movement"; he desired yet hated blonde women, valorized whiteness, and despised men of color as well as his own Asian heritage (he was of both Malaysian and white British descent). His digital rants featured blatant expressions of misogyny and racism, and at least some of the victims of his violence were targeted on the basis of race and gender: All three of the men he murdered in his apartment were Asian American, and he set out into Isla Vista afterward with the deliberate intention of killing women.

The material dimension of Rodger's crimes is thus abundantly clear, but the linguistic dimension is perhaps less so. Indeed, given the overwhelmingly material reality of mass murder, it may seem bizarre, and even trivializing, to link this atrocity to "mere" language. Yet in the ensuing hours, days, and weeks, as journalists and commentators on social media scrutinized every aspect of Rodger's actions and motivations, it emerged that his acts of violence were thoroughly entangled with acts of language. These included his hate-filled posts on websites variously focused on body building, sexual frustration, and pick-up artists and their detractors, where he recounted his many grievances against women and the men who date them; his encounters with local law enforcement in the months leading up to the attacks; his series of YouTube videos and his manifesto, which circulated online, in which he had meticulously documented his murderous plans and motives; his email message to his parents and acquaintances in the midst of his frenzy of violence; and his brief interactions with his intended and actual victims, some of which were reported by survivors.

Language was also crucial to members of the UC Santa Barbara campus community both during and after the attacks: Campus members were sent emergency alerts by text and campus email, and many of us monitored developments via witnesses' posts to Twitter, the only information source quick enough to provide real-time updates as events rapidly unfolded. A makeshift graffiti wall memorializing Rodger's victims, constructed in the central part of campus soon after the murders, provided public space for written expressions of love, loss, and grief; a campus remembrance event offered additional opportunities for speeches, songs, and reflections. And most poignantly for me, in our class discussions in the days following the murders my undergraduate students referred to the killer, who was not a UCSB student and was not known

to any of them, by his first name, Elliot—even this small humanizing act, so jarring to my ears, was a matter of language.

I should note that my own ambivalence about writing this essay likewise rests on issues of language and materiality. For example, I have not provided URLs or other references for Rodger's confessional video or his manifesto, nor do I quote from them, because I am reluctant to treat these texts as ordinary sources or to give their author the attention he craved, even posthumously, by citing them directly. I recognize that this is a rather pointless act of principle: Both items can easily be found via an Internet search, and merely excluding them from my bibliography does little to counteract the reality that this essay amplifies their message even while denouncing it. And I am aware that this unintended consequence is inevitable; it has long been recognized that efforts to silence troubling talk necessarily result in its further circulation (Butler 1997).

Nevertheless, I am in good company in fearing the performative power of language to summon bogeymen, and this dread goes to the very heart of the relationship between language and materiality. Elliot Rodger's texts are not simply language, but visceral sensory realities: His unsettlingly blank face and voice emanate from a video on my laptop screen; the words he typed are preserved in a file on my hard drive, in an innocuous font that now eerily conjures that face and voice for me. (I confess that, like many UCSB community members, I am still unable to read Rodger's manifesto in its entirety.) And the deeply embodied experience of this digital connection makes my skin crawl: My eyes meeting his eyes, his finger pointing at me, his gruesomely vivid fantasies of the revenge he will exact from women for rejecting him. Fundamentally, I find, it is bodies that matter.

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The title of my essay responds to that of Judith Butler's (1993) poststructuralist feminist classic *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* which theorizes materiality as a discursive effect. (The title also echoes phrasing in a recent sociolinguistic volume on illness and disability [Ramanathan 2010].) While Butler's argument importantly advances an understanding of the sexed and gendered body as more than a straightforward physical fact, and her theory of performativity sheds light on the material effects of language, her perspective is inadequate to capturing the multifaceted and culturally situated relationships between discourse and materiality, relationships that have been most fully explicated within linguistic anthropology (Shankar & Cavanaugh 2012).

It is increasingly recognized within linguistic anthropology that language is not simply linked to materiality; it is, in itself, inherently material. In their introduction to a recent volume on this issue, the editors trace the broad remit of a materialist view of language, from sensory experience to the structures and technologies of global capitalism (Cavanaugh & Shankar forthcoming). This inclusive perspective is a welcome incitement to linguistic anthropologists and other scholars concerned with language, culture, and society to expand their attention to phenomena that might be overlooked in a narrower framing. I would caution, however, that in order to prevent linguistic anthropology's copious conceptualization of materiality from dematerializing, as it were, into vague abstraction, it is necessary to anchor our theorizing of the materiality of language in the embodiment of language, that most enduring fact of human communication. Embodiment is not simply one aspect of materiality among others; it is the sine qua non of materiality—and of language. Even in technologically mediated spheres, where boosters celebrate and detractors

deplore the separability of social interaction from embodied communication (e.g., Rainie & Wellman 2012; Turkle 2015), language is always produced and perceived by physical bodies, via eyes, ears, hands, tongues, and lungs.

In turning their analytic gaze to materiality, some linguistic anthropologists have scaled up, examining broad political-economic processes such as globalization and its brutish big brother, neoliberalism. Wide-view scholarship of this kind has shown itself to be critically necessary in exposing how language is appropriated by and complicit with late capitalism and processes of global inequality. But the urgency of such work, and the grand scale on which it operates, may draw attention away from the source of the materiality of language in everyday embodiment. In some research, materiality is theorized primarily or even exclusively as a matter of political economy, with embodiment entirely absent. Indeed, the body is something of an embarrassment to such theories: Its stubborn specificity and locatability, its intransigent physicality and especially its alarming fragility, fit uncomfortably with discourses of flexible flows, scalar scapes, super diversities, and technological triumphs. Yet a theory of materiality that does not start with bodies lacks an adequate conceptual foundation to account for any aspect of human experience.

This concern aligns with Angela Reyes's (2014) skepticism regarding some linguistic anthropologists' eager embrace of the "super-new-big" augured by globalization and its attendant techniques and technologies. To echo and paraphrase her, such a perspective sidelines practices and phenomena that fall outside of this frame as old, small, and un-super. To be sure, the present historical moment, like those that preceded it, yields new ways of being, doing, and communicating, and these must be examined closely and critically using the new theories and tools that this moment has made available to scholars. But the fascination with new (or seemingly new) large-scale processes often results in an analytic astigmatism that makes embodiment difficult to see; such top-down analyses rarely manage to reach all the way down to the ground where individual people with particular bodies encounter one another in specific places (including digital spaces).

In short, it is impossible to understand materiality—that ironically abstract concept—without placing bodies at the center of our thinking. Not only are bodies the locus of lived experience, but they are also the site of power relations and the source of social agency. As Frances Mascia-Lees (2011:1) writes in her introduction to *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, "the body has proved a fertile site from which anthropologists have mounted refutations of abstract, universalizing models and ideologies and interrogated operations of power, systems of oppression, and possibilities for agency and political change." Although the body has come in and out of analytic view as academic trends wax and wane, many language-oriented scholars of various stripes have maintained a steady focus on different aspects of embodiment (Bucholtz & Hall forthcoming). One general line of scholarship is concerned with the body as the driver of social action and interaction, including such fundamental elements of social meaning as gesture, gaze, touch, facial expression and locomotion, affect, and embodied encounter with the material world of objects and technologies, which jointly produce culturally significant activities and experiences. A complementary approach examines the embodied politics and practices of race, gender, sexuality, and other axes of difference as organizing categories of society, culture, and power, including the semiotics of self-presentation and cultural interpretation, such as voice quality, linguistic forms, and ideological discourses that render bodies culturally legible or illegible, valued or marginalized. Of course, there is often significant overlap between these two broad perspectives (e.g., Goodwin & Alim 2010; Mendoza-Denton 2008), and at their best, both emphasize the importance of locally situated individual experience and agentive action without

ignoring the larger sociopolitical processes within which these embodied practices participate, or against which they struggle. These different approaches to the body, while sometimes dismissed as apolitical "micro" analysis on the one hand or theoretically passé identity politics on the other, in fact provide crucial purchase for understanding the foundations and enactment of all material processes, from large-scale political-economic projects to devastating violent acts.

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As a feminist with a political commitment to examining the workings of race, gender, and sexuality, and as a linguistic anthropologist with an analytic commitment to understanding the consequentiality of even the briefest of social actions and interactions, I continue to struggle to make sense of the mass murder that Elliot Rodger perpetrated, which is too easily labeled a "senseless" act of violence. But the starting point for understanding is clear: At some level it aligns with all-too-familiar discourses of bodies and embodiment. Whatever else can be said of Rodger's actions, they are indisputably and inescapably about bodies: those he found beautiful and those he found revolting, those who had sex and those who did not, those who were killed or injured and those who dragged friends and strangers to safety. And they are equally about language: what the killer said and wrote, how he interacted online and face to face, and what may have been his last words, an unintelligible shout from his car to a young woman on the sidewalk, followed by a gunshot.

Some commentators attributed Rodger's sickening acts to weak gun control laws, others to inadequate treatment for mental illness. Misogyny, masculinity, racism, hyperconsumption, and a cultural fixation on sex were blamed in their turn—and certainly, all of these issues played a role, yet none fully explains what happened. But soon enough, the nation's attention shifted to the next high-profile incident of gun violence, and the next and the next, while students, faculty and staff, families, and community members were left with our grief, our anger, and our confusion. That spring I was teaching a large general education course on language, gender, and sexuality, and I found my students turning to me for answers. Rodger's actions illustrated, in the most horrifying way possible, many of the issues we had been discussing in the class: masculinity, street harassment, self-described pickup artists, virginity and abstinence, discourses of racial and gender hierarchy, the link between ideologies of male sexual entitlement and violence. I could not offer my students any reassuring explanations, but together, painfully, we talked about the resonances between our class material, their everyday lives, and the moment when those lives changed irreparably. (It is a grim indication of how commonplace such incidents have become in U.S. society that this is the second essay I have written addressing a mass murder to which I have some sort of connection [Hall & Bucholtz 2013]; see also Roy 2009 on the Virginia Tech mass shootings.)

I began this process of sense-making by contemplating the deeply affective dimensions of embodiment: the relational experiences of being and encountering bodies in the world, of affecting and being affected. An invaluable guide in this regard is Sara Ahmed's feminist analysis of how emotion gives shape to bodies—both of self and of other—through language; as she writes, "emotions work by working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds" (2015:191). Following feminist anthropological critiques of a psychologized and individualized view of emotion (e.g., Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990; Rosaldo 1984), Ahmed argues that because emotion "connects bodies to bodies" (2015:11), it is inherently social and relational, and hence political. This perspective is generally in line with the recent

"affective turn" in the humanities and social sciences, which in different ways theorizes the capacity of the body to act and be acted upon via simultaneous and interlinked experiences of emotion, cognition, and sensory perception (e.g., Clough 2007; Gregg & Seigworth 2010). Thus Elliot Rodger could assert that his emotions authorized both his entitlement to women's bodies and his right to destroy female bodies that were withheld from him; he could justify his sense of superiority over men of color based on his perception of them as "ugly" and himself as "beautiful." But as Ahmed powerfully illustrates through her wide-ranging discussions of hate, fear, and disgust, affects are not inborn psychic states but social and socialized phenomena. According to his own self-pitying narrative, Rodger had to teach himself to become a killer, an experience that conjured deeply bodily emotions for him: He writes in his manifesto that when he first tried to use a gun at an area shooting range the experience physically nauseated him. Yet ultimately he so transformed his affect that he could laugh before shooting two of his victims.

But affects are relational, and in the end what matters most about Rodger's affectively laden actions is that they violently reshaped the bodies and lives of many other people. Consequently, the widespread fascination with Rodger himself displaces and marginalizes the lives and experiences of those he killed, injured, and traumatized—a complaint that was raised by grieving students and family members in response to relentless and sensationalistic media coverage. This complaint is a reminder that a crucial part of the affective aftermath of violence is the work of memorialization. Rather than dwelling on death, memorializing requires a focus on living bodies and on the activities that gave those lives meaning: George Chen, age 19, made a point of helping his elderly neighbors; Katherine (Katie) Cooper, age 22, was an art history major who raised funds for a children's hospital; Cheng Yuan (James) Hong, age 20, was a talented computer programmer who was generous even with competitors; Christopher (Chris) Michaels-Martinez, age 20, loved sports and always brought treats when he visited his friends' homes; Weihan (David) Wang, age 20, was a passionate video gamer and basketball player; Veronika Weiss, age 19, was an athlete and math whiz. These slender fragments of complex lives, parceled out in media reports, allow readers to imagine that we knew the victims and invite us to participate vicariously in their families' and friends' affective experience of pain and loss—but the most meaningful acts of memorialization were not published in the press or performed in front of cameras but carried out quietly in homes and sacred spaces, among those who knew these young people best. At the community level, affective work in response to the killings was accomplished through a range of memorializing activities, including not only the graffiti wall and the remembrance ceremony in the UCSB soccer stadium, but also candlelight vigils at multiple University of California campuses, the creation of a memorial garden in Isla Vista's central green space, People's Park, and a variety of funds and scholarships. Through these memorializing acts, lives ended too soon continue to have a presence in the world of the living.

Violence may also arouse an affective politics. Rodger's crimes sparked several political movements, from "Not One More," grieving father Richard Martinez's emotionally raw one-man campaign for robust gun control laws (Lah & Hannah 2015), to the #YesAllWomen hashtag campaign that sprang up on Twitter in the days following the murders as a feminist rejoinder to the misogyny that in part drove Rodger's actions (Dixon 2014; Rodino-Colochino 2014; Thrift 2014). Such efforts, rooted in hope as well as anger, are designed to give meaning to lost lives by preventing future acts of violence. As embodied engagements, affects thus make sense of lived experience and produce agentive and collective action; for those forced to make sense of violence, understanding begins with the body.

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I have suggested that Elliot Rodger's acts of violence—his shocking violation of the bodily integrity of other human beings—and the discourses that authorized these acts, at least in his own mind, force us to confront the specificity of embodiment and its intimate connection to language. Linguistic anthropologists unquestionably need big-picture theorizing that helps us trace the linguistic dimensions of economic and political processes across time and space. But to stay analytically grounded and empirically accountable, scholars must examine these processes in relation to the everyday embodied and discursive worlds of social actors. Taking a large-scale view of such worlds obscures the agency of individuals to bring about change, whether for good or ill, on the so-called small scale, in the lives of real people.

Hence, any study of the materiality of language must necessarily also attend to the embodiment of language, its production and interpretation by physical beings in a physical world. To acknowledge this point is neither to make a theoretical commitment to a naïve materialism nor to dismiss the discursive basis of social life. As linguistic anthropology expands its spatiotemporal scope, it is crucial to bear in mind that vast global processes work their effects not in the aggregate but on the level of specific human—and nonhuman—bodies. Even as we scale up our analyses and theoretical ambitions, we remain responsible to the immediacy of embodiment, its refusal to be generalized or abstracted away, and this responsibility has consequences for our theoretical, methodological, political, and ethical commitments.

I confess that even now, long after I first learned the names of Elliot Rodger and his victims, I still have no wisdom to offer my students or my readers, no pat understanding, only frustration at others' certainties. I find it impossible to maintain the objective authorial stance of the linguist-scientist, the ironic stance of the postmodern anthropologist, or the righteous stance of the political activist. I can only make tentative observations from a shaky standpoint that my professional life has not prepared me to inhabit. Nor is it clear that this tragedy in a small place would merit the attention of scholars and commentators concerned with the "super-new-big"—compared to the violence of U.S. military interventions overseas and of the police state here at home, the murders in Santa Barbara may be set aside as anomalous, apolitical (despite the arguments that Rodger perpetrated gender- and race-based terrorism [Doyle 2014; Kohn 2014]), or only significant if taken in aggregate with other mass shootings elsewhere.

Having invoked Judith Butler in my title, I conclude by returning to her work—not her theory of gender or her theory of language, but her theory of ethics, emerging from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S. military and political response. In proposing an alternative to the violence of terrorism, counterterrorism, and war, Butler (2004) draws on Emmanuel Levinas's notion of "the face" of the Other—the simultaneous dignity and vulnerability of embodied existence that demands our compassion—as the foundation of ethical practice. Although Butler explores the face primarily as an image or representation, Levinas's ethical move is not representational but interactional. Like the interactional concept of face developed by Goffman ([1955] 1967) and taken up in politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987), Levinas theorizes the face of the Other as the center of relational personhood, of social obligation; although his ethical understanding of the face is not isomorphic with interactional conceptualizations of face, both framings acknowledge that (the) face places an ethical responsibility upon the social and affective self.

For Levinas, engagement with the Other is at once the fundamental ethical act and the fundamental discursive act. Butler describes "the situation of discourse" in this way: "That

situation is one in which we are addressed, in which the Other directs language towards us. That language communicates the precariousness of life that establishes the ongoing tension of a non-violent ethics" (2004:138). She builds on Levinas's ideas to argue that it is precisely the "precarious life" of the Other that demands our ethical response, our refusal of the impulse to violence and our willingness to enter into embodied discursive engagement. Even Elliot Rodger, in Butler's ethics, had a "grievable life" (2004:20).

The notion of precariousness brings me back to language and materiality. The anthropological critique of neoliberalism has led to a detailed exploration of what is now termed "precarity," the fundamentally uncertain material, embodied, and affective condition that constitutes contemporary life for most people in most parts of the world (e.g., Allison 2012; Stewart 2012). Although appealing to etymology can be a dangerous game, it may be worth remembering that *precarious* stems from the Latin word for 'prayer' and that its original meaning was to receive beneficence (materiality) through entreaty (discourse), a relationship that relies on the affective agency of both participants (cf. Ferrada, Bucholtz, & Corella Morales in preparation). As linguistic anthropologists trace the workings of materiality in interaction, then, we also trace the precariousness of embodiment, its vulnerability to violences both random and systematic, both sudden and mundane—a most insistent reminder of why bodies matter.

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Notes

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[2] An abbreviated version of this essay appears as Bucholtz (forthcoming).

[3] I am especially indebted to Lalaie Ameeriar for two online essays that she wrote soon after the attacks (Ameeriar 2014a, b). Although I did not discover her essays until this piece was completed, they powerfully express some of the key points I have tried to make here.