

Women, Guns, and Guilt: The Bridge Between Pragmatism and New Materialism Depends on Our Response-ability to Think

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Sarah Winchester, the wife of gun capitalist William Winchester and daughter-in-law of Oliver Winchester, proprietor of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company (WRAC) and maker of the famous Winchester rifle, was shrouded in death. She buried her 40-day-old infant daughter, her sister-in-law, mother, husband, and father-in-law in short succession—not to mention her association with the gun business. Following Oliver’s death, Sarah fled the east coast and the gun business to oversee the construction of a 24,000 square foot 160 room house. That home, now known as the Winchester Mystery House, features several unusual architectural features, such as staircases that go nowhere, doors that do not open, and windows designed to make up look down and down look up. According to popular opinion, and one crafty journalist, the house is a testament to Sarah’s concern for and fear of vengeful ghosts seeking retribution for their untimely death at the barrel of a gun. For those who burden Sarah with a nation’s guilt and grief for mounting tolls of gun deaths, Sarah’s San Jose house looms large. However, staff records of the home tell a different story. According to staff, the earthquake of 1906 is to blame for the destruction of parts of the home, which Sarah chose not to fix, thus making staircases appear useless and so on. At this point, it is impossible to know Sarah’s motivations; nevertheless, it is clear that her unusual association with death and guns opened the door for society to clothe her in madness and to read her actions as a manifestation of the consciousness of the entire gun business.¹

I begin with Sarah Winchester because I am interested in thinking about how we might “stay with the trouble,” of gun violence without thrusting the burden onto singular, mostly female, individuals.² The tale of Sarah Winchester and her home has been told since at least 1923 when her house was turned into

a tourist attraction. In the last ten years, three films about her supposed guilt have graced the silver screen. On my view, these ghoulish tales about Sarah and her home allow us to repeatedly transfer our guilt and ambivalence about guns onto Sarah (and women like her) and absolve us from having to think too hard about life with guns. In other words, the continuous and contemporary retelling of Sarah Winchester's story illuminates our unwillingness to stay with the trouble of gun violence in American society. Moreover, our unwillingness to share in guilt and grief over life with gun violence has resulted in new manifestations of Sarah's house in the form of prison-like school buildings, armed teachers, and stop-gap gun regulations. In this paper, I propose that we ought to "stay with the trouble" of school gun violence by enacting "response-ability" for the thingy power of guns. To work out what it means to live the presence of the gun, I turn to Donna Haraway, who develops a theory of the mud and muddle that demands a constant attunement to the things, like guns, that trouble multispecies companionship.³ For Haraway, the point is to find a way to make sense of life with and within the recoil of the gun.

Following Barb Stengel, this paper is an attempt to construct a string figure of critical pragmatism and new materialism to explore the human capacity to construct a different narrative frame about and around gun violence.⁴ Stengel asks educational theorists from both camps to "make kin" by dwelling in one another's archives so that we might make sense of the possibility that "agency is both more limited and more widely distributed" than either methodological purview has yet granted. The point is not only to re-think human effects on the world but also to consider the ways in which things are "delegates and actors that render humans capable of social, ecological, behavioral, and cognitive practices."⁵ I start by linking together new materialism and pragmatism. To accomplish this task, I erect a bridge between John Dewey's pragmatism and Haraway's new materialism by re-centering the conversation around the difference between the practice of thinking and what has traditionally been called agency. Second, I define what it means to live in the aftermath of gun violence. One way to recuperate life, or to stay with the trouble, is to tell different stories. Drawing from Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction and the

ways in which Haraway positions re-storying as a thinking practice, I explore what it means to tell stories attuned to the things that keep the story moving.⁶ Weaving together Dewey's theory of human learning with new materialism's attunement to the actors and delegates that make any story worth telling, I return to Sarah Winchester's ghosts to argue that we can only stay with the trouble of contemporary gun violence—in particular, school gun violence—by relieving Sarah and contemporary women like her from the burden of caring for the casualties of our gun culture. We must, instead, listen to our own ghosts and attend to our human response-ability to think in ontologically heterogeneous configurations of publics.

The Difference Between Agency and Thinking

Examining a few key concepts from Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, Stengel situates new materialism as a mode of inquiry and practice that shares key concerns with critical pragmatism. The first concept Stengel draws on is the notion of com-post where “with bread, at table together—not ‘posthuman’ but ‘com-post’ takes place.”⁷ In refusing human exceptionalism, but intentionally not invoking posthumanism, Haraway and Stengel situate humans as members of an imaginative com-post heap where a theory in the mud and muddle emerges to make sense of life. Haraway asks, “what happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable: not available to think with?”⁸ She answers that as human beings who have the capacity to think, we must cultivate a new ecology of thinking practices that make apparent the heterogeneous ontologies of the beings and objects who/which compose this/our world. In this exchange, Haraway makes a key methodological move not common in posthumanism and its corollary field new materialism—she de-centers the human subject while acknowledging the response-abilities of these now de-centered humans. In so doing, Haraway creates an opening for critical pragmatist philosophers of education, like Stengel or Dewey, to engage in the conversation.

Pragmatist thinkers such as John Dewey, William James, Jane Addams, and Richard Rorty reject the search for how to accurately represent reality, how to know other minds, and how to know anything for sure. Instead, they attend

to the ways in which humans learn to think and act in light of contingent and uncertain futures.⁹ However, pragmatism's concern with stale dichotomies is often not extended to the divide which separates agentic subject and passive object. Instead, pragmatists like Dewey and Rorty are interpreted as saying humans are complex thinking beings who, alone, have the power to be agents but who do not gain their exceptional power or place in the hierarchy of being from an extra added ingredient called the mind, intellect, or soul.¹⁰ Haraway and Stengel, in their shared attention to what it means to live in disturbing and troubled times, open up space to take another look at this reading of pragmatism.

When critical pragmatism and new materialism are connected in a theory of muddle, the product of "becoming with" and the process of "rendering capable" is agency.¹¹ No longer understood as a human accomplishment, agency is a capacity to act within and on complex heterogeneous networks. As such, agency is not the god-like ability to organize or control one's environment. It is a shared and distributed capacity to move in tandem with ontologically distinct others. As companion agents, actors, delegates, and practices, each is responsible to and for the generation and recuperation of social, ecological, behavioral, and cognitive practices that constitute the world. We are not, however, all responsible in the same ways. Thinking is a distinctly human response-ability. In fact, on Haraway's view, surrendering the capacity to think is to indulge in self-fulfilling apocalyptic fantasies.¹² Think we must, repeat Haraway and Stengel.

Educational theorists will recall that thinking is central for Dewey. In *Experience and Education* Dewey tells us that it is "sound psychology which tells us to stop and think" and in *Democracy and Education* he articulates the need for thinking habits.¹³ Although not all habits need to be thinking or cognitive practices, when we get into the habit of stopping, observing, remembering, and reflecting, we retain the capacity to consciously move within complex associations. How does one retain the capacity to both think about a habit and still routinely act in accordance with the habit? Dewey responds that habits determine the channels of thought.¹⁴ As Teri Wilson and Matthew Ryg state, "thought is, in this sense, both conditioned *by* habits but achieved through critically reflecting *on* habits."¹⁵ On Dewey's view, habits structure the thoughts we have but thinking

is the process of asking whether the habit and its attendant thought-channels are conducive to our growth.¹⁶

Cognitive habits and thinking practices require constant attention to our associations. Thinking, for Dewey, is not an individual activity. The ability to make plans and act in sympoietic partnerships emerges in the space between unthinking biological and social habits and the cognitive habits that demand thought. As complex and networked humans who bear the response-ability to think, we are not merely minds that inquire or reflect. Rather, as D'Agnes points out, Dewey's aim is to "understand and leave intact 'the cord that binds experience and nature' without taking intellectual experience as primary."¹⁷ The task of education is, therefore, to learn how to take equally seriously the affective and embodied experiences of humans and nonhuman animals, the interaction of nonhuman things, and human obligation to think about and within these relations. In other words, Dewey's epistemology, which replaces notions of representational knowledge with experience and certainty with thinking habits, requires a different attitude toward the ecologies in which we live.

For pragmatists and new materialists alike the response-ability to think is a characteristic and an obligation of being human. Humans are not unique because they have agency nor because they have minds. Humans are unique because they have the capacity and obligation to think in association and communication about the ways in which they impact the process of living and dying well with others. Deweyan pedagogical practices explore the specifically human obligation to think in association. Dewey insists, "the human being whom we fasten upon as individual *par excellence* is moved and regulated by his association with others; what he does and what the consequences of his behaviors are, what his experiences consists of, cannot even be described, much less accounted for, in isolation."¹⁸ Thinking is our response-ability and it cannot be done alone. Rather, thinking requires attunement to the multispecies actors and delegates who constitute our associations and that color our experiences. A refusal to attend to these complex associations is a re-instantiation of human exceptionalism, of old dualisms, and a harbinger of apocalyptic fantasies, says Haraway. We cannot make sense of, or explain, biological life in isolation; hence, thinking

practices require a vivid engagement with and attunement to our companions.

Sarah Winchester and the Fantasy of Autopoiesis

The story of Sarah Winchester helps us see the difficulty of understanding humans as complex actors who must think but who are not the only actors or agents on the scene. The stories we tell are crucial to the practice of thinking. As material semiotic accomplishments, stories generate worlds and construct or obscure ways to live and die well with a host of companions. The story of Sarah as mad heiress to the Winchester fortune who built a house to trap the ghost of a nation's obsession with guns absolves us from having to think about the complex presence of guns in our associations, society, and culture. Further, the tale of Sarah the mad, places the onus of responsibility for responding to guns and the death they cause at the feet of (grief stricken, emotional, and therefore crazy) women. While stories about Sarah portray her as a traditional agent who interacts with the world, for example overseeing the construction of a house, they also portray her as not rational, autonomous, or masculine enough to accept her command of things and nonhuman matter. In the autopoietic fantasy where bounded individuals interact with contexts, use tools to advance human history, and compete to take up all the air in the atmosphere, the story of Sarah is a cautionary tale of a woman's failure to become an agent.

Insofar as we approach the story with an eye to the ways in which Sarah's status as human is established by her ability to make detached, objective decisions, we breathe fresh life into a dangerous Cartesian epistemology wherein the generic masculine universal reigns. On the Cartesian view, the autopoietic woman is self-making and capable of controlling the impingements of social gender norms. Yet as Haraway points out our ideas of biological sex and our ideas of gender grew up together. In fact, these twin concepts were always meant to regulate and govern the appearance and behavior of bodies in society such that it's impossible for female subjects to achieve autopoiesis. Sarah Winchester, no matter her path, could not outrun the social gender norms which interpreted the actions of her grieving female body as mad but also absolution.

What to do? Introducing Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of story-

telling, Haraway instructs us to look at the lowly things that keep the story going instead of the heroic man who is chief producer of knowledge and who makes history through his employment of tools as weapons. If we shift our focus from Sarah as the failed heroine/agent, we notice the things and events—a house, an earthquake, guns, social gender norms, and ghosts—which place and pace the story. The problem, says Le Guin, is that as humans evolved and stories generated worlds along with heroic characters it became difficult, “to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched the newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats”¹⁹ Yet these are the tales of sympoietic beings whose culture and stories have space for all human subjects to live well. Haraway and Le Guin agree that we must attend to the oats, instead of the heroes or agents. When we listen to the lowly objects of Sarah’s story, we release our caricature of Sarah the mad and are forced to confront the complex story of guns, gun violence, and social gender norms as well as Sarah’s complicated life. Relieving the myth of Sarah from the burden of our gun guilt allows us to take response-ability for our contemporary obligations to think by telling different stories.

The carrier bag theory of story-telling, or re-storying, is a powerful mode of thinking that helps the self-interested human hear what one’s companions are saying. To deal with gun violence, to stay with the trouble, our pedagogical practices must be attuned toward the string figures that appear when pragmatism and new materialism make kin—specifically an ecology of thinking practices that enable us humans to listen to the thingy agents and nonhuman others that constitute our ethical community. Although framed as a human response-ability, thinking practices reveal to humans the things, matter, and animals that act and interact with us. The names Haraway gives to these kinds of thinking practices are legion—string figures, speculative feminism, re-storying, urgencies, and sympoiesis. All are a part of the human response-ability to listen and think.

One recent example of this kind of re-storying can be found in the 2018 Connecticut Supreme Court ruling that gun makers, including Reming-

ton, can be sued for wrongful marketing.²⁰ Remington marketed the gun used by the shooter of Sandy Hook Elementary School with the slogan, “consider your man card reissued.” Amy Shuffelton first drew our scholarly attention to the ways in which Remington’s marketing re-instantiated gender norms via the suggestion that carrying a gun helps a man establish his agency.²¹ The current lawsuit has re-directed the public’s attention to Remington, its marketing, and the immunity Congress has granted gun companies from being held liable when a gun the company produces is used in a massacre. The case itself, which relied on whether non-consumer plaintiffs could be said to be in a business relationship, is not an especially noteworthy example of re-storying attuned to the agency of guns or social gender norms. However, in popular imagery and through reporting on the case, space emerged to think about the temporalities of guns, what opportunities particular objects afford us, and the ways in which companies market to particular categories of people.²²

The temporality of things, what Jane Bennett calls thinghood, like childhood, is a space in time during which a stage of one’s being is separated from the continuity of being. Things become vital members of the public when, in a moment of independence, they affect other bodies.²³ That vitality, however, disappears when humans neglect their obligation to think with these vital things. Thus, the vitality of things is fleeting and momentary. This makes it hard for us humans, who can never get outside of ourselves for long enough to know what it must be to be a thing, to attend to the agency of nonhuman things. Insofar as the Remington case encourages us to attend to the companions which render us capable, the guns, the marketing, and the social gender norms which contributed to the massacre at Sandy Hook and elsewhere, it opens a space to tell a story about the things make life and death possible.

The practice of telling stories attuned to the things that propel the story onward encourages humans to view things and their being anew. As an educational practice it brings into view the ubiquity of interaction and the multispecies companionships that make life livable. To re-tell the story of Sarah Winchester is to tell the stories of the Winchester Repeating Rifle, the gun that worked its way across the west, exterminated native peoples, disciplined

enslaved bodies, and provided food and sport. It requires attunement to the interactions and temporalities that are willed to death in the autopoietic fantasy of man as the maker of history. That is, learning to listen and the education of attunement force us to muddle through the disturbances of vital things and nonhuman others.

Staying with the Trouble

Listening to the urgency of contemporary school gun violence, requires re-storying the narratives we construct around these horrific events. For instance, instead of focusing on the individual, autopoietic young men or boys who turn tools into instruments of death and schools into graveyards, we should attend to the ideas and things that keep these stories moving. In so doing, we develop the cognitive habit to think alongside, not for, our companions. Shuffelton provides an example of this in her work on guns, honor, and masculinity. In the historical vein, Pamela Haag's research on the creation of gun markets exposes the things and the men who populate mythic stories of American progress and provides the means for her readers to re-story the gun.²⁴ Yet, the human task of telling stories about the carrier bags that make the heroine's journey possible, or the house that provided shelter from the dangers yet to be overcome, or the gun that renders humans capable of killing one another is always hindered by the reflex to put our human selves at the center.

One way school-based educators might take up the work of living in times troubled by gun violence is to create space for students and teachers to grieve together even though an act of school or rampage gun violence has not occurred with the walls of that particular building. Young people are thinking about gun violence. Teachers are thinking about it. As Youth Poet Laureate of the US Amanda Gorman, puts it, "I wake up in a cold sweat from the same nightmare. I'm at school. The pop-pop of bullets rings out. Just as panic shocks my brain, I open my eyes, limbs tangled in my bed sheets."²⁵ Gorman decides that courage and hope are more powerful than fear and thus advises her reader to transform their world through hope. What if instead of hoping our human companions will choose kindness or allowing teenagers and teachers alike to suffer through individualized nightmares, we engaged in sustained remembrance

by sharing stories about the delegates and actors that populate our fears? Re-storing the gun's thinghood and telling stories about things that keep the story going. place the responsibility for dealing the gun violence on the community and our shared response-ability to think differently.

Insofar we continue to ogle Sarah Winchester and her ghosts, we abdicate our response-ability as humans to think about who lives, who dies, and how. And we have continued to place our grief, ambivalence, and worry about guns at the feet of Sarah Winchester and women generally. Women have continued to lead the way in contemporary gun control advocacy. Organizations like the Million Mom's March and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America are the direct result of school gun violence. These groups have seen moderate success in gun policy changes and attracted a significant public. As of 2018, Mom's Demand Action has 200,000 members and is backed by millions of dollars in funding.²⁶ Yet we undermine the work of these women when we tell the same autopoietic stories about humans who encounter guns and the women who grieve.

For critical pragmatists, like Stengel and Dewey, and new materialists, such as Haraway, the autopoietic fantasy is no longer available to think with; it cannot explain or make sense of the dynamic richness of life. It never could. Dewey was adamant that multispecies association is a fact of human life, and he left open the possibility of understanding the environment as agent.²⁷ In his parlance, "a thing is one when it stands, lies or moves as a unit independently of other things, whether it be a stone, tree, molecule or drop of water, or a human being . . . [Yet] the tree stands only when rooted in the soil; it lives or dies in the mode of its connections with sunlight, air and water. Then too the tree is a collection of interacting parts; is the tree more a single whole than its cells?"²⁸ Interaction is a constitutive fact of being. Interaction not only paints a picture of a political system or democracy. It frames how humans must think. In contrast, to craft a narrative that features man the maker, man the tool user,

or man the self-creator, is to surrender one's capacity and response-ability to attend to interaction and to grow in associations. Rightly so, Haraway refers to the impulse to create such narratives as apocalyptic.

To stay with the trouble of school gun violence and to craft lives in the wake of guns, we must develop an ecology of thinking practices that attend to the material and semiotic work of life troubled by guns. Current realities render gun violence the problem of the women who are left to grieve, young people who are scared or impacted by gun violence, and the dead. This situation is untenable, if a different and less violent reality is the goal. As we see in the story of Sarah the mad, this reality leaves no room for nonhuman actors and delegates who/that render us capable to speak.²⁹

The effect of turning our attention toward the things that move the story onward is twofold. Not only do we cultivate thinking practices that take seriously the vitality of nonhuman companions, but we also recover the voices of humans who have not fit the generic masculine universal. Forcing Sarah and the various publics launched by grieving mothers to bear the burden of our guilt and sorrow for the continued presence of gun violence is an abdication of the human response-ability to develop cognitive habits and an exaltation of an oppressive and dangerous human exceptionalism. Think we must. By telling different stories we can, as Stengel suggests, "learn to listen, to attend carefully, and relentlessly, to unexpected others."³⁰

1 All details of Sarah Winchester's life are drawn from her biography: Mary Jo Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune*, (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2012).

2 The phrase "staying with the trouble" is drawn from the title of Donna Haraway's 2016 text,

Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.

- 3 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).
- 4 Barbara S. Stengel, “Com-Posting Experimental Futures: Pragmatists Making (Odd)Kin with New Materialists,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 38, no. 1 (2019): 7–29, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9627-2>.
- 5 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 16.
- 6 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, (New York: Grove Press, 1997).
- 7 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 11.
- 8 Haraway, 30.
- 9 Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
- 10 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
- 11 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 12
- 12 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 35.
- 13 John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (New York: Free Press, 1997), 64 and John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Simon & Brown, 2012).
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27 Stengel, “Com-Posting Experimental Futures,” 27.

28 Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 186.

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