"Attend to the Oats": Guns, Mansions, Man Cards, Money, and the Vitality of Things

Response to Dean

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For more than 100 years, philosophers have been coming to grips with the reality that the atomistic (paradigmatically male) human, willing and acting heroically or poorly, is a fiction. Samantha Deane—following John Dewey, Donna Haraway, and Barbara Stengel—takes us a long step past that insight to suggest that we won't make any sense of sociopolitical—or ethical—issues that arise until we acknowledge that action and agency are never individual but always relational through and through. That is, we are always acting-with ("com-posting with") animate *and* inanimate entities *who are acting with and enabling us!*

When we create a model—or tell a story—that has explanatory power with respect to guns and the ways they are (mis)used, that model must be "agent-based" to be useful. That is, all the tokens in the story, even the non-human, are construed as agents—including, in the story Deane invokes, guns, mansions, and man cards. All confer on each other vitality of a kind that grounds agency. That is, all have the potential in interaction to enable others to be and act in certain ways. A gun enables me to be a killer, a hunter, or otherwise a threat in ways that my natural endowments generally would not. A person in a murderous rage or an even-the-score gang fight invites and enables a gun to be an instrument of murder, while a hunter culling a deer herd with a rifle in hand becomes a steward of the environment and a provider for her family. Guns, even if never used, can confer manliness and confirm certain political commitments. On the other hand, association with guns can render persons "guilty," or in the case of Sarah Winchester, crazy.

With Haraway, Deane maintains that we can no longer think through stories that are not thoroughly agent-based. There is no such (instrumental)

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relation as agentic subject/passive object. Furthermore, stories of human exceptionalism and heroic individualism are unsustainable. Agency is, as Deane characterizes it, not an individual human accomplishment but the product of "becoming with" and the process of "rendering capable" within and on complex heterogeneous networks.

For Deane, guns, mansions, and man cards are just a few of the things that might "carry" stories about gun violence forward, rendering those stories not so much believable as re-tellable.[1] These objects—and the stories we tell through them—make us capable of being more than we can be without them—but also prompt us to carry out the intentions that are part of that object's being in the world. As humans, we have a response-ability that none of these agents have—at least for now: the response-ability to think through these things and to think about the vitality we offer these particular objects, understanding that we are making worlds and agents in the process just as we are being made. Thinking in this way requires attunement, a kind of careful "attention to the oats."

Deane bites off way more than a mouthful in "Women, Guns, and Guilt." To understand her argument demands an appreciation for experiences of misogyny and nuances of feminist theory, conceptualizations of and arguments about gun violence, and understandings of responsibility as prospective capacity vs. retrospective blame. Deane handles all these sources and seemingly disparate ideas smoothly, making an argument that is both fascinating and hard to dispute. I won't; but I will try to extend her thinking. In particular, I want to focus on Deane's use of Sarah Winchester as both agent and patient in this story.

Winchester functions as far more than a straw woman here; she is a person whose lived experience and responses to that experience—in the contextual soup of turn-of-the-last-century gun manufacturing and wealth accumulation—instantiate the psychic illness that is gun violence and the representation of psychic illness often ascribed to women who choose to live their own lives. Deane offers the dominant Winchester story: She is, after the death of her infant child and husband, so overcome with grief and so tainted by the Winchester blood money that she escapes geographically (to the West Coast), there to wallow in guilt and disorientation. She is no heroic agent; she is clearly

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the polluted patient. The guns fuel her psychological dysfunction, the mansion holds her hostage. There will be no man card for Sarah. Forget Shuffelton's representation of toxic masculinity; Sarah doesn't even warrant the modified (wo)man card of the minimally competent person.

Winchester, despite being deceased, is captive to this story. She is constructed as a crazy lady, a singular, female individual who is assigned the burden of gun violence. This is why Deane employs this story, to help 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" and to urge us to "stay with the trouble," without blaming, so that we can see a constructive path forward by telling a different story. But she doesn't, though she does point to the practices that would make the retelling possible: learning to listen and education of attunement. Both of these amount to "attending to the oats," that is, attending to the things that carry the story, construing them as active participants in the story that you tell.

Deane is pointing toward an ethic of response-ability as the path to avoiding the madness of gun violence. It is not a path of absolution (blame/punishment/retribution/forgiveness), but rather a path of responsiveness evident in what we pay attention to. It is needed because madness is itself an object fashioned from the stories we tell. Sarah Winchester is fashioned as mad because it suits someone's interests.

What and whose story should we tell? Too-many white men, young and not so young, have taken up automatic weapons to declare a narrative of their own nightmares, but their stories are buried in politicized portrayals of public emergencies. Others—like the Parkland Officer—charged with keeping children safe in schools abandon their posts in the face of real threats. Administrators and policy-makers pass the buck by purchasing metal detectors, installing bullet-proof glass, and locking kids in and down, in ways that exacerbate feelings of insecurity while gaining little actual safety. Politicians in thrall (and debt to) the NRA and hiding behind the Second Amendment are unable to muster the courage to vote for the kind of sensible gun reform that New Zealand, for example, legislated in days. How would attending to the oats change those

stories? Deane suggests that the oats are things; I agree. But I want to expand the archive of things beyond physical objects. Whiteness, adolescence, mental illness, public emergencies, media coverage, media ratings, insecurity, safety, the need for control, and fear act agentically just as do security guards, metal detectors, the NRA, and "gun reform,"—these are all *things* to which we ought to attend because they act on and through us. And there is one more thing that ought to be recognized as agentic: money.

I return to Sarah's story with an eye on the way money functions in and carries forth her story on my way to suggesting that money is the thing of things that shapes stories of gun violence. But I also don't want to ignore Sarah's autopoietic fantasy, her sense that she might be the maker of her own history, and money's role in that. Deane dismisses the autopoietic fantasy as fantastic—and I think she's right. But that doesn't mean that we—and Sarah—don't dwell in such fantasies. And I want to do that by thinking about one *thing* that enables her and others to imagine that fantasy might become reality: her money.

Let's think for a minute not about Winchester and guns, but about Winchester and one very large and quirky mansion located in California. Any story about a mansion is pretty much always also a story about money. Winchester headed West after the death of her infant child and husband, (perhaps) moving not away from guilt, but toward her extended birth family, especially a sister. She took an exorbitant amount of money, $529 million, with her; she would rely for the rest of her life on income from her half-interest in the Winchester company. It was *her* money, subject to no restrictions for use. This money enabled Winchester to appear to act independently, even as the money itself impacted her actions. That's not madness.

Her move to the West Coast was an utterly reasonable choice made by a woman whose immediate family died, who relocated to join members of her family of origin, and *who had the means to do so.* She was responding sensibly to the hand she was dealt. But she also functions as a kind of agentic hero in two other stories we might tell: the first she was reinventing herself as a *maker*, an aspiring architect after the death of her child and husband, practicing her craft on her own home,[2] (making her own history); in the second, the continuous

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accretion of rooms in the mansion casts Winchester as a generous spirit seeking to keep workmen employed in difficult economic circumstances.[3]

I have many more questions about Winchester, questions whose answers might help me re-tell a gun violence narrative that does not reinscribe the violence and also does not dump the responsibility for gun violence on crazy women. I have no space to explore them so I will just list them:

- Was Sarah upset about the impact of the Winchester rifle, the source of her money? And if not, why not?
- Was Sarah thinking with the objects that enabled her? Was she composting consciously? Was she able to see the guns, the money, and the mansion, as enabling her to be a particular kind of person in the world? What stories did *she* tell that offered meaning and mobility to guns?
- How did her story get skewed? Who told *that* story and how did money figure in it?
- Can guns (and mansions and man cards and money) think?[4]

The story Deane builds her fine paper around suggests that gun violence is caused by crazy, captured in crazy, and causes crazy. But I can't help thinking we ought to be attending not merely to the mansion but always and also to the money. The same, I think, is true of all the stories we tell—official and unofficial, public and private—about gun violence. It is hard to imagine a gun as vital without a human, but it is remarkably easy to recognize the vitality of money.

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1 As I write this, I am thinking through a pragmatist conception of truth, including Dewey's notion of "warranted assertibility."

2 In truth, the building anomalies in the mansion may have been as much a function of her mis-takes and efforts to get things right as of madness or even earthquakes. The weirdness in the house do not sound so strange to me. The study where I sit drafting this response has a large picture window

in an interior wall; I installed it to let light into an upstairs hallway and let a small room seem larger. The building housing the Department of Teaching and Learning at Peabody has two doors that open onto mid-air, a function of melding the old front of the building with a new back end whose floors don't match up. And earlier in my life I too lived in a big old house where the back staircase ended in a second floor ceiling. As a fan of back staircases, it was deeply disappointing to me that this secret passageway was closed to me.

3 Katie Dowd, "Everything You Think You Know about the Winchester Mystery House Probably Isn't True," *SFGate*, February 6, 2018, https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/real-story-of-sarah-winchester-mystery-house-12552842.php"

4 I'm inclined to say no, but perhaps the answer is "not yet." We are quite willing to entertain the idea that elephants or monkeys participate in something worthy of the term "thinking." But what about trees? Where does the capacity to think come from? And further, we might wonder about smart devices: smart phones? smart refrigerators? voice dictation software? Is there a sense in which it makes sense to say that these items "think"? And there are other questions we might ask about guns: Does it make sense to say that guns seek "to be of use"? Do guns offer themselves to us humans in ways that extend our capacity for good as well as for harm?

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