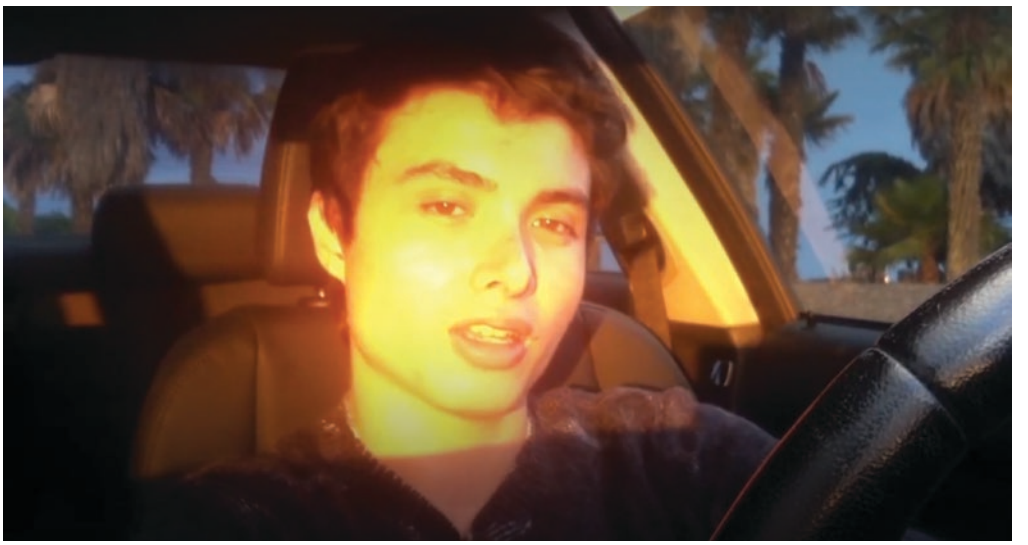
An Inconsummate Man

The Violent Dramaturgy of Elliot Rodger

Michael Stablein Jr.



Consider the unprecedented number of crimes whose perverse gratuitousness is explained only by our powerlessness to take complete possession of life.

—Antonin Artaud ([1938] 1994:9)

We have arrived at the point where we expect our intelligibility to come from what was for many centuries thought of as madness [...,] to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for.

—Michel Foucault ([1976] 1990:156)

For Elliot Rodger, sex was worth killing for. On 23 May 2014, just outside Santa Barbara, California, 22-year-old Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen more before he killed himself. He was what many would call an incel—an involuntary celibate: "All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life [...] but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me" (Rodger 2014:1).[1] But he didn't just kill for want of sexual intercourse with women, so unbearably

1. As Lisa Sugiura notes, "Rodger never used the term incel to describe himself, yet he has become an idol, a martyr for the incel cause, revered by many in the community" (2021:28).

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out of reach: he killed for want of the consummation of manhood itself. He blamed women for his lack of it; he blamed humanity for withholding it. He fixated on this unobtainable manhood as crushingly unfair and, in the face of this impossibility, he grasped for an alternative.

For Elliot Rodger, violence was the alternative. If he couldn't perform his gender sexually, he would have to perform it violently. In lieu of consensual consummation, he would go on to devise a singular performance of mass murder. And he left behind a document that exposes the social scripts of generic masculinity and its failings—scripts that can, all too often, prompt the performance of tremendous violence.[2] What happened on 23 May was not theatre, but mass murder is a performance, a now habituated performance of contemporary masculinity.[3] I ask that we look for the dramaturgical operations of masculinity's violence—the composition and rehearsal of its performance. Performance studies must attend to such violence and the social dramaturgy of its scripts: the refusal of vulnerability as the necessity of the role; the will to power as the casting of harm. Boys will eventually play men.

In advance of that violent day, what he devised as his "Day of Retribution," Rodger decided to tell his story himself. *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* is a 141-page PDF file that painstakingly provides "every single detail about my life, every single significant experience that I have pulled from my superior memory, as well as how those experiences have shaped my views of the world" (2014:1). I read it as a literary supplement to his violent event and, in the vein of Rebecca Schneider, I read it for the performance remains. Rodger is not the first, nor the last, to kill like this (or for these reasons). Such violence, "repeated again and again and again, however fractured or partial or incomplete, has a kind of staying power—persists through time—and even, in a sense, serves as a fleshy kind of 'document' of its own recurrence" (Schneider 2011:37). But, from the material document of the manifesto, what remains is another example of a long-held genre of masculinity continuing to sputter and spin out in the present—"*then* as well as *now*"—with performances of tremendous violence (37). Rodger's document regularly resurfaces on web forums with sympathetic followers canonizing him as "Saint Elliot" and "the Supreme Gentleman." Gone viral, violent performances recur in and outside of US American contexts. A year later, Chris Harper-Mercer killed 9 people in Roseburg, Oregon. He left behind a manifesto detailing a life of social

2. Thinking with Richard Schechner, "I don't say 'texts,' which mean written documents. I say 'scripts,' which mean something that pre-exist any given enactment, which act as a blueprint for the enactment, and which persist from enactment to enactment" (1973:6). A script may—and often does—include a written text but encompasses a broader generic potentiality implicit within it—scripts as "patterns of doing, not modes of thinking" (7). Rodger's manifesto is a written document that evidences the scripts of generic masculinity and one of the ways they can play out on individual subjects.

3. The Violence Project's data finds that, from 1966 to the present, 98% of mass shooters identify as men (VPRC 2025). But, as recently as 2024, 15-year-old Natalie Rupnow shot and killed a teacher and a student before killing herself (and injuring six others) at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wisconsin, on 16 December (Bauer 2024). However, as argued here, masculinity (often in tandem with whiteness) plays out less as a biological category than as a "subject position, a signifier, or an imaginary identification that is often synonymous with power and authority"—or, in the case of Elliot Rodger, the desperate pursuit of it (Kelly 2023:10).

Figure 1. (previous page) Digital still from the video posted to YouTube by Elliot Rodger (since removed by YouTube) titled, "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," 23 May 2014. (Screenshot by Michael Stablein Jr.)

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and sexual rejection: "People like Elliot Rodger [...] They've told me what to do, showed me the way [...] And just like me, there will be others" (Harper-Mercer 2015:1). In 2018, Alek Minassian hailed Rodger as his inspiration before driving a van onto a Toronto sidewalk, killing 10 people (see Edwards 2018). Certain genres of violence not only remain in their repetitions, they amass an almost guaranteed dramatic effect.

Virally and journalistically referred to postmortem as his incel manifesto, initially the document reads more like a coming-of-age novel, albeit a particularly tedious one.[4] Or rather, it reads like a perverse inversion of the genre in that it traces not the development from boyhood into manhood but rather a masculine degeneracy in the face of perceived social exclusion. The popular American coming-of-age narrative is a ready-to-hand generic form for contemporary, straight, white masculinity. Striving for social and sexual autonomy as a particular form of mastery, this is how boys become men.[5] This is how genres become embedded social scripts. Every day, boys perform (and men reperform) the expectations of this masculinity according to its generic logic; they sync up with its developmental timeline. At 22 years old, Elliot Rodger got stuck—*an inconsummate man*—out of sync with generic masculine time.[6] He could not have sex, could not come of age, no longer a boy but not yet a man.[7] While Rodger is one of the more violent instances of this failure to meet the expectations of generic masculinity, he is nonetheless paradigmatic of how this genre has recently proved a relentless cudgel of normative teleology. In his writing he aches to dispense with the past in order to wrestle a future into the present—or presently dispense with a foreclosed future altogether. More still, his *Twisted World* points to—indeed has deeply resonated with—countless, untold attempts to come of age: other unmarked if not unremarkable boys who likewise failed to become men. From autobiography ("This story will explain why" [2014:1]) to manifesto ("My plans will come to fruition and I mustn't let anyone stop me [...] *If I can't have them, no one will*" [133, 136]), Rodger's revision of this genre became the narrative justification and then dramaturgical score for his performance of consequential violence. If dramaturgy can be most broadly defined as the making of story into actable form, Elliot Rodger's *Twisted World* labors to make his story of inaction into the score for an actable, as actionable, masculinity.

Rodger was a social actor precariously proximate to (thus dangerously desirous of) manhood and the fuzzy ideals of masculinity that attach to it. Manhood is impossible to accomplish. The trouble is not only with its impossibility as such but with its operational disguise as a generic imperative: boys will not be boys; boys will be men.[8] Working against a common slip in gender and sexuality

4. Regarding the postmortem designation of the text as a *manifesto* see Durso (2014); Massarella, Rosenbaum, and Greene (2014); and Bellini (2014).
5. In *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, Kenneth Millard traces a complex genealogy of this genre at odds with its continental antecedent, the *bildungsroman*—a genre struggling to square generic constraint and "historical determinism" with a political ideology of "self-fashioning" and individual autonomy as a form of knowledge (2007:10). Of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Millard writes that "by withholding sexual experience, women can thus prevent boys from coming of age in the only way that the boys recognise or understand (or have been taught by their male elders) [...] Once again here the novel's real subject is epistemology; sex is interpreted by the narrator as a form of knowledge that he needs to experience in order to become a man" (2007:78).
6. My notion of generic masculine time extends from both Jack Halberstam's and José Esteban Muñoz's writings on *straight time*. Muñoz: "an autonaturalizing temporality that we might call *straight time*. Straight time tells us that [...] the only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality" ([2009] 2019:22); Halberstam: "In this category we can include the kinds of hypothetical temporality—the time of 'what if'" (2005:5). Generic masculine time leaves those like Elliot Rodger waiting for consummation and eventually feeling out of time.
7. For further critical writing on involuntary celibacy and a cultural history of the portmanteau *incel* see Nagle (2016), Sugiura (2021), and Witt (2020).
8. For Lynne Segal, "The closer we come to uncovering some form of exemplary masculinity, a masculinity which is solid and sure of itself, the clearer it becomes that masculinity is structured through contradiction: the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question [...] As it is represented in our culture, 'masculinity' is a quality of being which is always incomplete" ([1990] 2007:103–04).

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studies that inadvertently essentializes masculinity even as it labors to unpack gender's construction, I am looking for the narrative, performative, and affective movement of masculine desire. Here, I am making a crucial distinction between a common understanding of masculine violence (the violence of masculinity as such) and the need for masculine accomplishment (the need to accomplish an inherently unattainable but necessary, seemingly inevitable, manhood). That insatiable need is particularly susceptible to violence. Manhood is the product and masculinity is the process or proof of concept that anticipates the former as a fixed, final, and unwavering accomplishment—a consummation devoutly to be wished—one that puts an end to the suffering of desire. Engaging Rodger's *Twisted World*, his text is the story of a generic breakdown, the justification for violence, and concomitantly a violent dramaturgy in pursuit of a consummate manhood.

This driving movement of masculine desire is not only gendered (and sexualized) but also raced. Rodger's frustrations operate on imbricated registers of racial, gendered, and sexual (un)fulfillment. As he puts it: born to, simply, a Chinese-Malaysian mother and, emphatically, a white father "of British descent, hailing from the prestigious Rodger family," Rodger fixates on his mixed-racial embodiment and masculine failings as destructive circumstances of both inheritance and debt:

> I realized that there were hierarchies, that some people were better than others [...] On top of this was the feeling that I was different because I am of mixed race. I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the normal fully white kids that I was trying to fit in with [...] I had to adapt. (17)

Not fully white, nor fully a man, Rodger has a desperate feeling that something essential, something necessary and inevitable, is missing.

Elliot Rodger considered himself a man or a man-on-the-way, albeit a man going his own way; however, he would not be considered (nor did he consider himself) white.[9] He recalls that, at an early age, even the most banal racial failures had lasting impacts. Rodger "always envied and admired blonde-haired people, they always seemed so much more beautiful" (17). But at the salon with his father, he learns he's "too young for a full bleaching" and after only bleaching the top of his head blonde, he leaves with yet another reminder of his mixed-race identity, with roots that make him look "so silly with blonde hair at the top of my head and black hair at the sides and back" (17). And though we encounter anecdotes such as these within the text, they are accounts of a social script staged in real life. Masculinity entails both banal and violent attempts to master race's and gender's scripts. Rodger's early failures to accomplish manhood have consequential effects—failed stagings or rehearsals for later acts that were different certainly in degree if not in kind. Later in the text and in life, such failure continues and confounds, as he recounts:

> I came across this Asian guy who was talking to a white girl. The sight of that filled me with rage. I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half-Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian. I never had that kind of attention from a white girl! And white girls are the only girls I'm attracted to, especially the blondes. *How could an ugly Asian attract the attention of a white girl, while a beautiful Eurasian like myself never had any attention from them*? (121)

With age comes a more exasperated scene of desperation and a further misunderstanding of what's missing. As David Eng insists, "for Asian American men racial identity was—and continues to be—produced, stabilized, and secured through mechanisms of gendering" (2001:16). Masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality form a matrix of ideals that are impossible to accomplish (though far more trenchantly difficult for some), continually undermining each in turn. They form a "circular process [...] in which internalized racial feelings of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration

9. In a twist of irony, postmortem journalism often writes of Elliot Rodger as indicative of rampant, white male violence, overlooking his racial makeup entirely. See, for example, Cooper (2014) and Taylor (2019).

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are re-externalized, transformed, and displaced in the process as a war between the sexes" (2001:20–21). While, for Rodger, masculinity and the accomplishment of manhood stubbornly persist as a primary concern, dominant presumptions of sexuality, race, and gender are always functioning in league to assure their mutual impossibility. Not merely (though certainly) a war between the sexes, throughout his text he stages a war waged against his own racialized gender. Rodger's "story is obsessed with the psychic effects and seductions that normative white male heterosexual images exert upon the sexual and racial identifications of these young boys," images and scenes that only serve to both exemplify and prevent a consummate identity (2001:31).

Given his racial anxieties, it is perhaps no wonder that the first victims of Rodger's "Day of Retribution" were his "utterly repulsive" roommates: Weihan Wang, Cheng Hong, and their friend George Chen (Rodger 2014:128). Their deaths, as an opening act of his violent performance, were not happenstance—wrong place, wrong time—"In fact, I'd even enjoy stabbing them [...] to death while they slept" (128). Their deaths played out like a tragically necessary first act, an exposition to further violence, an ex-position he hated and wished to destroy—a scene of what Amia Srinivasan rightly calls complexly racialized self-loathing. Yet, in Srinivasan's blockbuster essay contending with Elliot Rodger and his ilk, she also suggests, "Rodger was a creep, and it was at least partly his insistence on his own aesthetic, moral and racial superiority, and *whatever it was in him that made him capable* of stabbing his housemates and his friend a total of 134 times, not his failure to meet the demands of heteromasculinity, that kept women away" (Srinivasan 2018; emphasis added). This is a prevalent rhetoric of monstrosity that not only distances us from the social production of such monsters but likewise risks resisting a critical intimacy with the violent ramifications of the racialized and gendered melancholy Srinivasan recognizes. Regarding the melancholy of race, Anne Cheng has insisted, "[there] are still deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be" (2001:7). After all, it is not what was in him but rather what was not, *what he felt he was not*, and the socially produced sense of social ejection that accompanied this feeling, that made violence so readily available. It is with this in mind that Srinivasan later asks (this time of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho) "is it not precisely this ideology of a 'natural' masculinity [...] a masculinity that is never fully accessible to a skinny, friendless, pimply East Asian boy—that produced [him]" (Srinivasan 2021:108)? Too often, the excuse for violence effectively papers over the site of its production.[10] Considering the remarkable ease with which we can move from Elliot Rodger to Seung-Hui Cho, a troubling kind of casting problem starts to emerge. To what lengths will certain young men go to fit a generically white masculine role? Given the statistics, what better way to act the part of a white man in America than by picking up a gun and pulling the trigger?

The Genre of Gender

In his *Twisted World*, Elliot Rodger loses himself at the intersection of genre and gender: "This is the story of how I, Elliot Rodger, came to be" (2014:1). It's a kind of life writing turned dramaturgical manifesto, offering itself as both a recitation of what didn't happen and a spur to make something happen—it is story and score. Read in this way, it reveals the consequential movement from narrative to performance, from genre to gender, from a discourse of discontent to a violent dramaturgy of masculinity. It is the story of Elliot Rodger, "the ideal, magnificent gentleman" (109), but also the story of the man that will "never become a reality for me," as well as his "attempt to do everything, in my power, to destroy everything I cannot have" (137). Rodger divided the manifesto into six chapters with each title helping to trace (or be helplessly entranced by) a generically developmental, though hopelessly stunted, narrative logic. Recounting from "Age 0" to 22 years old,

10. As Jennifer Doyle writes of Rodger in *Campus Sex, Campus Security*, "The killer kills, anger at women gives a crazy shape to that killing. But she is only an alibi" (2015:79). I offer then that we interrogate not only what Rodger should or should not expect from women but also the social and generically masculine form of expectation itself and the dramatic lengths young men will go to meet it.

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the sequence of his chapters read: A Blissful Beginning, Growing Up in America, The Last Period of Contentment, Stuck in the Void, Hope and Hopelessness, and Santa Barbara: Endgame. The chapters give order, the kind of order we expect from certain narrative genres, only to evidence what Rodger sees as disorder—developing and ultimately justifying this perception through the act of narration itself. In the days leading up to his "Day of Retribution" and eventual suicide, the narration is a last-ditch attempt to redirect an unfulfilled life, an unfulfilled genre, into a violently gendered performance.

Following Sylvia Wynter's contention that gender and race are "a function of 'genre'" and her call for the "destruction of the genre," I not only take masculinity as a function of genre but also assert that certain narrative genres are exemplary of a uniquely masculine project: boys becoming men, the drive to accomplish gender itself as a mode of becoming a whole human (2006:24–25).[11] Feminist thought has productively outlined the principal damage of this drive in men's foil—women. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray writes "her lot is that of 'lack,' [...] her own desire only as the expectation that she may at last come to possess an equivalent [...] Woman derives pleasure from what is *so near that she cannot have it*, *nor have herself*" ([1977] 1985:23–24, 31). Here, Irigaray extrapolates a feminine experience of lack from a patriarchal presupposition of masculine wholeness. If girls only become women insofar as that becoming is always inherently incomplete, it is because, by contrast, boys can become men, indeed must accomplish manhood. In fact, under a white Western patriarchy, girlhood often takes an inverted or merely reproductive structure—an ideal woman being either girl-*ish* or giving birth to a boy who must one day become a man.

Much of the literature on Elliot Rodger rightly centers on his violence against women, in speech and act. But more often than not, to Rodger, it is he who is lacking—"I am not part of the human race. Humanity has rejected me" (135); he is cast in what Wynter has called a "narratively condemned status," and it is women who hold all the cards (Wynter 1994:15).[12] Rodger laments, "[the] power that beautiful women have is unbelievable. They can temporarily turn a desperate boy's whole world around just by smiling" (76). Desperate to turn from a boy into a whole man, what women seem to have—and withhold in sexual consent or a smile—is that unbelievable power to make him whole. Of concern here is not only his castigation of "women who, he imagined in a sad mix of entitlement and self-pity, owed him fulfillment"; ultimately, Rodger surfaces the masculine necessity of fulfillment tout court (Solnit 2014:123). To be a man is to need to always already be fulfilled, such that need is never part of the equation.[13] Rodger inadvertently reveals Irigaray's feminine lack as an inherently masculine lack ("suffering in loneliness and unfulfilled desire" [135]), projected onto women ("I concluded that women are flawed" [117]), but emerging here as a violently masculine project ("If I cannot have it, I will do everything I can to *DESTROY IT*" [137]). In that last outcry, "it" plays pronominal proxy for a complicated slippage between sexual intercourse, sexuality, and sex or gender as a whole identity. Put in generic terms, for Elliot Rodger,

11. Wynter explains that although she uses "the term 'race,' and I have to use the term 'race,' 'race' itself is a function of something else which is much closer to 'gender.' Once you say, 'besides ontogeny, there's sociogeny,' then there cannot be only one mode of sociogeny; there cannot be only one mode of being human; there are a multiplicity of modes" (2006:23).

12. Wynter's phrase comes from a letter to her colleagues on the occasion of the acquittal of the four policemen who brutally beat Rodney King. While the figure of Blackness is properly the central position of narrative condemnation there, I cite it here in line with her contention, cited prior, that the conception of race itself is a function of genre and one mode, among many, of being human. To invest in such a genre, to continue to expect it to deliver on promises kept, is to invest in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the "rehabilitation of white, male heterosexuality: its return to sites of centeredness, beauty, prosperity, and power" (1993:26).

13. Casey Ryan Kelly helpfully distinguishes lack from a more prevalent discourse of white masculine loss when he writes that while "white masculinity is strategically framed in terms of loss, it is more fitting to conceptualize it as a *lack*: an illusory sense that the white male self, or subjectivity for that matter, was ever whole [...] and yet it is loss they require to make the case for masculinity's recovery" (2020:17–18). He goes on to insist that "the rhetorical performance of victimhood brings neither mastery nor wholeness, merely an interminable and recursive encounter with lack" (19).

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getting laid, having sex, means being a man. Sex, women, manhood all start to slip and slide in signification, but the overarching social script of masculinity remains. Unattainable, intolerable, and stubbornly implacable, his dramaturgical struggle becomes the destruction of the genre by means of fulfilling it—a genre that both presupposes narrative development (a coming of age) and an after-the-fact affirmation of an always already fixed identity.

In addition to sharing an etymology, both genre and gender are structures that repeat themselves and, by dint of their repetition, engender expectations and social forms. In this vein, Lauren Berlant argues for a socially capacious reading of genre. Expanding beyond mere aesthetic taxonomy, Berlant wrestles with our desperate attachments to generic security (see Berlant 2008, 2011, and 2018). Genre sets the stage of our expectations, but it is also what we use to see those expectations play out, or not. Early on, Rodger recalls the saccharine social drama of a fifth-grade graduation from elementary school—specifically that "the graduation theme song was 'Time of Your Life' by the band Green Day, one of my favorite bands" (25). Over a video montage of the school year in review, the song refrains: "It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right / I hope you had the time of your life." Both art and life are saturated by generic expectations (and if we're lucky, dramaturgical fulfillment). Rodger writes, "I saw a few glimpses of myself caught in the footage, and I felt gratified" (25). Genre helps him describe the affective scene, but a certain dramaturgy serves as the affective stage on which he gets to see himself played out.[14] As Berlant suggests, it's not affect that's waning, but genre: these "archaic expectations about having and building a life," about coming of age, where "the situation threatens utter, abject unraveling" (2011:6). Now, the genre that for so long held him in thrall is not just waning, it's breaking, and an "intensely present and enigmatic" holding pattern Berlant called an impasse is flooding the scene (2011:4). Lingering on this scene, Rodger writes, "I felt so accomplished and proud [...] I was happy, things were good" (25). Earlier that year, a friend of his parents patted him on the back, telling him that "'in the next ten years, you'll have a great time [...] a great time.'" In the next ten years? "I had no idea what he meant by that. I wasn't even thinking about my future at that point; I was living in the moment [...] I can't help but think about that moment. If only I knew what was in store for me, right then and there" (20). What is someone like Elliot Rodger capable of when being stuck is something predictable—and in the end it's just not right?

In a later essay, Berlant points to what happens when those expectations are not fulfilled but are left hanging. We start to flail: "We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis. We improvise like crazy, where 'like crazy' is a little too non-metaphorical" (2018:157). But Rodger isn't Berlant's subject; if for Berlant we flail to avoid a kind of violence, Elliot Rodger violently flails—flails through violence—so as not to fall through the cracks. He improvises like crazy, and that violent improvisation is a little too nonnarratological—too off-script. Story gives way to manifesto gives way to dramatic violence. Rodger is seeking a substitute for the consummation that genres of masculinity taught him to expect: "I was so desperate and I needed to do *something* right there and then. It was a matter of life and death. If I couldn't make it, then I had nothing to live for" (104). This is a kind of *dramaturgy of genre* where genre is not only something that works on us but is something we try to act on, to play out, to make something happen, to make us someone. In life and in his narrative recounting of that life, dominant genres make demands on Elliot Rodger, but he also dramaturgically demanded that genres deliver on their promises. His violent improvisations operate on a dramaturgical register that might get him unstuck, giving him room to move. Rodger starts to script an alternative, to stage a gruesome adaptation to a genre that won't deliver on its promise. More acutely, Elliot Rodger sees genre just like he sees women: women perpetually hold out on their promises, are unrelentingly demanding, and are always just out of reach. By contrast, dramaturgy provides an actively masculine

14. In a recent issue of *Theatre Journal*, Kirstin Smith offers the term *genre-scenes* to describe "events and situations which are steeped in genre convention" (2023:2).

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solution to what he sees as the feminine passivity of living in the grip of genre's impossible expectations and cruel withholding.

Rodger's desperate proximity to the promises of heterosexual consummation, of whiteness, of manhood, his desire to (Irigaray again) "at last come to possess an equivalent"—this is the generic Hydra of contemporary American masculinity. What's more, the accomplishment of manhood—and its sentinels: whiteness, straightness, and their promised securities—seemed nonnegotiable. Something had to give. At a hundred pages in, Rodger flips the script. After a childhood of failures, narrative recollection gives way to intention, his story becomes the fuel for a future of violent action. Genre was meant to serve as the narrative container of retrospection—a life lived; when this fails, Rodger seeks to perform his gender in excess of that container. Where genres of expectation fail him—where gender's involuntary, iterative, and performative force takes hold—dramaturgy presents an alternative: what can he do, what must he do, to make manhood take actable (as actionable) shape? In a world of generic and performative disappointment, what can he make gender do?

A Violent Dramaturgy

"Tomorrow is the day of retribution, the day I will have my revenge against humanity, against all of you [...] You will finally see that I am, in truth, the superior one, the true alpha male" (in Garvey 2014). On the eve of that tragic night, Elliot Rodger posted a nearly seven-minute video to YouTube titled "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," featuring only himself, seated behind the steering wheel of his car, seared by the light of a setting California sun. In an unsettlingly direct address, he hailed an unknowing and unwilling audience into his scene. A performance, featuring likewise unknowing and unwilling actors, was already being performed for a camera. But as I have intimated above, a dramaturgy of violence was already at work in his *Twisted World*: "I must plan this very efficiently. Nothing can go wrong. It needs to be perfect. This is now my sole purpose on this world" (2014:133). Hard on the heels of a dirge of recollection and regret, Rodger turns to dramaturgy, the dramatic intention of theatrical delivery, to stage his final event. But his dramatic intention is not violence, violence is merely the means. Rodger's dramaturgy is instigated by a fervent and desperate belief that a failed and involuntary genre of gender can be redressed by a volitionally effective *drama of gender*. In the last scene of all, which ends this strange eventful history, Elliot Rodger acts "the true alpha male."

Yet, after Judith Butler, the functional purview of gender is generally the performative, so my title begs the question, why the use of dramaturgy? And what would constitute Elliot Rodger's violent dramaturgy of gender? While it is a term broadly applied to the interpretation of a dramatic composition, dramaturgy is also a less used term "for the composition itself" (Turner and Behrndt [2007] 2016:5). Dramatic theory's conception of dramaturgy, the dramaturg, and the dramaturgical deals with the methods and positions from which one might interpret, aid, or talk about the drama at hand. By slight contrast, or perhaps extension, sociology's dramaturgy includes both the interpretive thrust of the former (applied to the *drama of life*) and the composition of (inter)action itself (where *-urgy*, érgon, is the *work* of drama). Given these approaches, I deploy dramaturgy as capaciously as genre to include the actual work of staging a life. What happens when people like Elliot Rodger are persuaded that they can (and must) fully control the production of their gender identity? Thinking dramaturgically in social life, Rodger believes he can, in a scene of utter mastery and misery, stage his life, stage his gender—a scene where he is both actor and dramaturg, a proper one-man show.

Though, unlike the compositional quality of social dramaturgy, gender's performative iteration is incessant. While Butler often and to clever effect insinuated dramatic metaphor into their theory of performativity, they were at pains to regularly iterate that it functions beyond the level of the individual. Contra J.L. Austin, performativity is not just something we enact to try *to make something happen* (and more infelicitously than not); performativity *happens to us*, constantly, especially when it comes to our gender. Try as he might, Elliot Rodger misfires time and time again: "no matter how much I practiced" (69), "[no] matter how hard I tried" (100), "I didn't feel like I accomplished

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anything" (43). Trying to do things with gender, Rodger is trying to get laid because he believes getting laid will (performatively) make him a man. But much like the sexual (in)experience of the incel, gender's performativity can be nearly involuntary. As theatre historian Aaron Thomas neatly puts it, "when it comes to gender [...] the script has hold of the actor and not the other way around" (2021:17).[15] Butler's theory of gender performativity represents a rather felicitous marriage of genre and gender. Dramaturgy, by contrast, presumes to offer a mode of active composition. Social dramaturgy, from Erving Goffman to Charles Edgley, suggests a public encounter where a self can be crafted and enacted: "We act to be sure, but in the course of action we simultaneously appear [...] and act both retrospectively and prospectively as we plan future acts" (Edgley [2013] 2016:3).[16] When the world—and its genres of masculine development—have seemingly robbed Rodger of what he expected to be, he tries to make gender work on his own terms.

In the later pages of his text, Rodger writes: "It was time to plot exactly what I will do on the Day of Retribution [...] I will finely deliver to them all of the pain and suffering they've dealt to me for so long" (2014:131). "Finely" could be read here in that gray space between simple error and parapraxis—where an overlay of "will finely deliver" and the perhaps intended *will finally deliver* unintentionally interpolates mastery and finality in the future imperfect tense. Read in this way, Rodger will both masterfully plot, and actively plots for mastery of, a consummate masculine self. For Rodger, this mastery is synonymous with masculinity as such. Nonetheless, dramatic machinations for an impending performance of violence are at work. Fragments of careful staging, well-laid plans to revenge past harms, and violent expectations all begin to materialize:

> After doing a lot of extensive research within the last year, I found out that the sorority with the most beautiful girls is Alpha Phi Sorority [...] I will sneak into their house at around 9:00 p.m. on the Day of Retribution, just before all of the partying starts, and slaughter every single one of them with my guns and knives. If I have time, I will set their whole house on fire. Then we shall see who the superior one really is! [...] After I have killed all of the sorority girls at the Alpha Phi House, I will quickly get into the SUV before the police arrive, assuming they would arrive within 3 minutes. (132)

In this final chapter—"Santa Barbara: Endgame"—stories become plans and plans become the score for a violent performance. "There is no postponing it anymore, no backing out. If I don't do this, then I only have a future filled with more loneliness and rejection ahead of me, devoid of sex, love, and enjoyment. I have to do it. It's the only thing I can do" (134). His writing is now a forward-looking rather than retrospective temporality of address; it is no longer narratological, it's dramaturgical. What's more, the affect shifts; Elliot Rodger reads as newly, albeit troublingly, expectant: "I was now armed with weapons, possessed great intelligence and philosophical insight, with the willpower to exact the most catastrophic act of vengeance the world will ever see" (124). He believes that he can take dramatic control, that gender can be redeemed dramaturgically. This isn't how gender works—be it on the narrative register of genre or in the scripts of a normative social dramaturgy (still beholden to audience reception and a history of gender)—and this is what makes such individually volitional dramaturgy so violent.

Rodger resolves, "I will either thrive there, or destroy the place utterly. Since I failed to thrive there, I had no choice but to plan my Retribution" (2014:125). In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman gives us something unsettlingly close to hand when he writes, "the performer may

15. Consider also Joseph Roach: "Juxtaposed to performance, complementing it to a degree, but sharply corrective about what seems implausibly utopian in it (such as the possibility of revising one's assigned role in life while engaged in the act of repeating it), is the concept of performativity [...] With performance, the performer makes the acts; with performativity, the acts make the performer" ([1992] 2007:457).

16. Later in Edgley's dramaturgical handbook, a volume of essays on *The Drama of Social Life*, Michael Schwalbe claims, "dramaturgy sees the self as a dramatic effect—an essential character imputed to an individual based on his or her expressive behavior" ([2013] 2016:88). Of terrible concern to us here, so does Elliot Rodger.

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allow his presentation to suffer from inadequate dramaturgical direction. The setting may not have been put in order, or may have become readied for the wrong performance, or may become deranged during the performance" (1959:52). Goffman goes on to suggest that the "incapacity to maintain this control leaves the performer in a position of not knowing what character" he can enact from one moment to the next, "making it difficult for him to effect a dramaturgical success" (137). Add to that, the "director is likely to respond to this responsibility by making dramaturgical demands on the performance" (99). Goffman's language is evocative of Rodger's dramaturgy: disorder, derangement, and the dramaturgical demand, or the control necessary to make things right by way of the performance itself. Tiring of the unbearably involuntary performative infelicity of his celibacy and thus his gender, Elliot Rodger turned to violence to try to stage his masculinity, to craft it and enact it, by force if necessary. His violence is a voluntary, volitional attempt to become a man by dramatic means.

This distinction between performativity and dramaturgy helps to make some sense out of the senseless violence of Elliot Rodger. It also underlines the dramatic double-bind of identification. It helps to interpret his concerted movement from genre's text to gender's embodiment, from the involuntary to the volitional, from recollection to retribution, as a strained, scripted, and premeditated composition. It is because gender is both so generically unreliable and so performatively intractable—and masculinity so seemingly necessary, nonnegotiable, and impossible—that I argue for a reading of Elliot Rodger's violence as his dramaturgical alternative.

But, drawing again on Berlant's genre flailing as a crazed improvisation, "it's not always a wildly inventive action" (2018:157). Put simply, we've seen this scene before. In what at first blush might look like a violently creative backlash against a genre that doesn't work for him, Rodger ended up improvising with the pieces—and reenacting prior blockbuster performances—that all too generically have come to signify masculine violence: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Seung Hui-Cho, Steven Kazmierczak, Adam Lanza, John Zawahri, just to name a select few.[17] It's copycat crime, copycat masculinity. It's genre all over again and a precedent of dramatic effect—as Kirsten Smith puts it, the "use of genre to enact [...] dramaturgical possibility" (2023:6). Taking a dramaturgical cue from Edgley, all of these young men likewise invested in "this kind of sudden transformation, the attempt to pull off a change." They also index "where it failed and *the status quo* was maintained" ([2013] 2016:4).

But such failure is a feature, not a bug, of generic masculinity; masculine violence (the movement of masculinity as inherently violent) is the status quo that gets reproduced and maintained by each of these violent events. Recalling Goffman, the derangement of Rodger's performance, driven by the disorder he sees in his own life, is precisely the arrangement masculinity makes with its subjects—the expectation of an impossibly orderly development from boyhood to manhood. Most perverse of all, masculinity works best when it's not working. It seems Elliot Rodger is most a man when he is violently fighting, flailing, and *failing* to accomplish it. The six dead, the fourteen injured, his suicide, and the manifesto itself—this is the violent work, a violent act, of gender. This is Elliot Rodger's violent dramaturgy.

Manifesting Masculinity

Violence is a habitual conceit of generic masculinity's cultural operations. Though, depending on your vantage point, masculinity may appear more prominently as a montage of mundane scenes of nonviolence: a boy before the mirror shaving for the first time; a huddle of young male athletes

17. See the 1999 shooting at the Colorado Columbine High School enacted by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold; the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, enacted by Seung Hui-Cho; the 2007 shooting at Northern Illinois University in Dekalb, Illinois, enacted by Steven Kazmierczak; the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, enacted by Adam Lanza; and the 2013 shooting at Santa Monica College in California, enacted by John Zawahri.

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planning their next play; a husband carrying his newlywed over the threshold; a father playing catch with his son. Taken together, these scenes manifest an ideal, developmentally ordered, generic masculinity. But as bell hooks plainly reminds us: "Every day in America men are violent" (2004:55). What's more, their "violence is deemed 'natural' by the psychology of patriarchy, which insists that there is a biological connection between having a penis and the will to do violence" (55). In line with my argument here, hooks objects, reminding us "that the will to use violence is really not linked to biology but to a set of expectations" that produce violently expectant young men like Elliot Rodger (55). I am reading for the dramatic and formal qualities of expectation embedded within Rodger's manifesto, for how the threat of violence in language works to spur the enactment of a violent performance, and, finally, for how Rodger endeavors to enlist this violence as a means to manifest manhood itself.

The grounds for claiming Elliot Rodger's violent act as a performance that manifests masculinity are conceptually specific. Against present currents to despectacularize the violent event—an event but not merely a *news event*—we should reconsider the theatricality of violence, not to flatten or reduce it to the exceptional, but rather to reveal it as dramaturgically dimensional and critically capacious. While it may be argued that violence itself is not performance, that is only because "historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition" do not situate it as such; proceeding from Schechner, I read Elliot Rodger's violent acts *as performance* because it *is performance* and his manifesto is the script that sets the stage ([2002] 2013:38). Often, in the theatre of masculinity, "it is necessary to live as if 'as if' = 'is'" (Schechner [1988] 2003:xvii–xviii). Victor Turner points out that the etymological root of the word performance is the French *parfournir*, meaning to complete or to bring to completion (1982:91). Jon McKenzie, in *Perform or Else*, insists that "performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge" (2001:18). Reading violence as performance reveals a compulsory masculine expectation to complete the self—or else. Rodger's text is the pitch, the score, and the rehearsal for his final performance.

One hundred pages into *My Twisted World*, Rodger changes form: "It was only when I first moved to Santa Barbara that I started considering the possibility of having to carry out a violent act of revenge [...] That is when I realized that this threshold existed, and if I crossed it, I will have to carry out this Day of Retribution" (101). The latter third of his text slides into polemical address and justification—a pep talk before the big game. Here, Rodger attempts to actively manifest his manhood from the voided position he sees himself occupying.

His manifesto justifies the necessity of violence and rehearses revenge as retribution. Rodger's manifesto is both radical and reactionary. Retribution serves not only as vengeance; Rodger also demands that we reattribute to him the qualities he had long expected, that we designate him at last as the man he was always meant to be. Martin Puchner writes of the genealogy of the manifesto-as-genre that, post Marx and Engels, the "revolutionary manifesto" aimed to "create a genre that must usurp authority it does not yet possess, a genre that is more insecure and therefore more aggressive in its attempts to turn words into actions and demands into reality"—the making of story into actable form (2005:12). I suggest that we read Rodger's text and subsequent actions, like Puchner, as "the act of self-authorizing manifestation [...] coalesced into a distinct genre" (19). Given this, the aforementioned coming-of-age genre and the manifesto could actually be read as generic cousins: be it coming of age in order to manifest masculinity or wielding masculinity to manifest a consummate manhood. Generically, coming of age is something that happens to you, but the manifesto is presumably a genre one can use to make something happen. Both genres are defined by anticipation. In fact, Rodger now finds himself deploying these genres in tandem to usurp a gender he feels he does not yet possess, a gender that is always necessarily insecure, leaving him aggressive in his dramaturgical attempts to turn words into actions and gendered demands into reality.

In this movement between genres—in Rodger's search for a generic foothold and for masculine mastery—language's formal possibilities are tested. Language is quite literally put to use; this is the

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generic affordance of the manifesto. A discourse on dramaturgy, violence, and the manifesto rhymes distinctly with Antonin Artaud. Now, with this final critical and historical detournement, I do not intend to problematically collapse Rodger and Artaud in time, in purpose, or in act. But given my dramaturgical focus, Artaud's oeuvre provides a double peculiarly proximal to Elliot Rodger. In the 1930s, Artaud penned a series of manifestos for a "Theatre of Cruelty" collected in *The Theater and Its Double* ([1938] 1994). Throughout, he called for "a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being" (13). By dint of their shared flair for terror but also given the promised force of the manifesto-as-genre, there is a distinct though unlikely rhyme in Rodger's and Artaud's language of violence.

The "cruelty" of Artaud's manifestos, and his attendant call for dramatic violence, certainly *signified*—though notably did not realize—the kind of physical violence performed by Elliot Rodger. If Rodger's violent dramaturgy is a theatre of cruelty, it is born from a perceived failure, echoing Artaud, "to take complete possession of life" (9). But where Artaud aspires to the revolutionary—with a violence capable of breaking our stultified forms of living—Rodger, with admittedly a similar tenor of terrifying revolt, desires a violence far more reactionary—railing against forms his violence will only serve to reify.

Artaud chiefly (discursively and theatrically) wanted to wake us up, to brutalize *forms*—"a violent and concentrated action is[/as] a kind of lyricism" (82). Here, I reintroduce that "is/as" distinction to draw out a shared slippage between performance and analogy. Unlike Artaud, at that junction between *is* and *as* (a man), between verb and preposition, between a *doing* and the relation that references how a thing was *done*, Elliot Rodger is less working on language than he is worked up and warped by it. Such confusion is, as Artaud states (though in the 1930s), a "sign of the times," with Rodger (in 2014) truly baffled by a "rupture between things and words, between things and ideas and signs that are their representations" (7). Sex = manhood, or manhood = violence, or are they the other way around? For Artaud, the theatre's *double* is real life, but the theatre comes first—what follows from such a cruel theatre is the world as it could/should be. While Elliot Rodger seems to ask throughout, *do I come before or after my own (un)doing?*

Again, Rodger and Artaud occupy distinct historical and sociocultural milieux (and Rodger very likely neither read nor heard of Artaud), but they share a generic substrate. As much as American theatre studies and French poststructuralism might wish to fully recoup Artaud and his writing, thinking alongside Kimberly Jannarone, his Theatre of Cruelty is an "aggressively one-directional" dramaturgy of control—"organized in such a way as to claim the utmost dominance over spectators" (2010:25, 91). Or, as Peter Brook put it: "He wanted an audience that would drop all its defenses, that would allow itself to be perforated, shocked, startled, raped" (1968:53). Of course, many have rightly chalked all of this up to the stylistic verve of the avantgarde at that time. For Artaud, at least, violent calls never met violent ends. As Brook pithily put it: "Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed" (54). But, Jannarone again, "[w]hat is more difficult is to see how fascistic structures of thought manifest themselves among the intellectuals, artists, leftists, and 'ordinary people' who, throughout the twentieth century, have found themselves part of a totalitarian world and have no idea how they arrived there" (2010:28). And of primary concern here, how do certain genres of doing (in the case of the manifesto) and of a thing done (in the case of coming of age, becoming a man) provide such structures of thought to manifest?

As if prophesying "Saint Elliot," Artaud exhorts: "What he sets in motion is the MANIFESTED" ([1938] 1994:60). Artaud goes on to wonder "whether a little real blood will be needed, right away, in order to manifest this cruelty," for fear of a "useless and unfulfilled play" (88, 103). Compare this to Rodger's final pages: "Humanity is a cruel and brutal species, and the only thing I could do to even the score was to return that cruelty one-thousand-fold" (2014:131). Attempting to assault a calcified genre of masculinity and sexuality whose "painful cleavage [...] is responsible for the revenge of things" (Artaud [1938] 1994:8–9), Rodger incidentally makes Artaud's desire to "break through language" all too explicit (13). After all, for Artaud, such violence and blood are to be placed "at the service of the violence of the thought" and, significantly, as "an exceptional power of redirection"

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(82–83). The import of theatre's *double-ness*—its capacity to estrange, change, and thus invent *real life*—is collapsed, by Rodger, into the site and necessity of his final act.

Michael Kimmel has said of Rodger:

> The ideal of the American man is we don't get mad, we get even [...] As he says, it's the day of retribution. It's restorative. It's a way to retrieve your manhood [...] You don't just kill them, you take yourself too. You go out in a blaze of glory and then your manhood is magnificently restored to you. (in Nelson 2014)

I quibble with Kimmel's emphasis on retrieval and restoration. I wonder whether Rodger, for all of his rhetorical posturing, ever truly felt like a man. His affect, if not the tenor of his grievance, differs from many other American men who seethe at the prospect of ceding or even sharing in what has always been rightfully theirs. Rodger's tension by contrast registers more in the subjunctive and as a failure to ever really launch. Nonetheless, the perversity of contemporary masculinity is such that in order "to take yourself," to manifest and then grab hold of that long-awaited manhood, you have to quite literally take yourself out, in a blaze of glory, "like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames" (Artaud [1938] 1994:13). And with each passing year, more and more of these young men continue to take so many others out with them when they go.

In the end, Rodger's violence does not attend to Artaud's broader cultural and civilizational preoccupations with spectacles "more pressing and disquieting than those of any individual whatsoever" ([1938] 1994:87). It is rather more pointedly (and solipsistically) another violence altogether—Artaud's exhortation against those simple and solitary "violent satisfactions," the mere reality of an act done—that deceives Rodger to the very end (84). For when Rodger insists, "we shall see who the superior one really is," he presumes to shatter a prevailing generic masculinity, to brutalize its form, but only plays pawn to the everyday and atomizing movement of masculine desire itself (2014:132). To be a man, for Rodger, requires not only that words describe certain actions but also that certain actions can become a word: man.

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