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Toxic Speech: Toward an Epidemiology of Discursive Harm

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ABSTRACT. Applying a medical conception of toxicity to speech practices, this paper calls for an epidemiology of discursive toxicity. Toxicity highlights the mechanisms by which speech acts and discursive practices can inflict harm, making sense of claims about harms arising from speech devoid of slurs, epithets, or a narrower class I call ‘deeply derogatory terms.’ Further, it highlights the role of uptake and susceptibility, and so suggests a framework for thinking about damage variation. Toxic effects vary depending on one’s epistemic position, access, and authority. An inferentialist account of discursive practice plus a dynamic view of the power of language games offers tools to analyze the toxic power of speech acts. A simple account of language games helps track changes in our discursive practices. Identifying patterns contributes to an epidemiology of toxic speech, which might include tracking increasing use of derogatory terms, us/them dichotomization, terms of isolation, new essentialisms, and more. Using this framework, I analyze some examples of speech already said to be toxic, working with a rough concept of toxicity as poison. Finally, exploring discursive toxicity pushes us to find ways that certain discursive practices might “inoculate” one to absorbing toxic messages, or less metaphorically, block one’s capacity to make toxic inferences, take deontic stances that foster toxicity, etc.

Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously. One tends to understand Schiller's distich on a "cultivated language which writes and thinks for you" in purely aesthetic and, as it were harmless terms. . . . But language does not simply write and think for me, it also increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it. And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have little effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.

—Victor Klemperer¹

It is awkward to talk about hatred between Hutus and Tutsis, because words changed meaning after the killings. Before, we could fool around among ourselves and say we were going to kill them all, and the next moment we would join them to share some work or a bottle. Jokes and threats were mixed together. We no longer paid heed to what we said. We could toss around awful words without awful thoughts. The Tutsis did not even get very upset. I mean, they didn't draw apart because of those unfortunate discussions. Since then we have seen: those words brought on grave consequences.

—Léopold Twagirayezu, a convicted génocidaire

Toxicity is the degree to which a substance (a toxin or poison) can harm humans or animals.² Toxic speech, like any toxin, is a threat to the well-being and even the very lives of those against whom it is deployed. The level of threat can fluctuate, its power can be acute or chronic, the damage can be local or systemic, but toxicity damages all it touches. To many, this claim may seem hyperbolic, but even a sketch of the concept of toxic speech dispels the hyperbole.

Taking the idea of discursive toxicity seriously draws upon a medical conception of toxins, allowing us to highlight parallels in our speech practices. This requires a robust conception of health against which to frame the concept of toxin. We also must consider the normative implications of understanding discursive harms this way, because some of these implications are fraught. If I convince you that we need to worry about more than speech acts that inflict sudden and immediate wounds, then we will need to develop an *epidemiology of discursive toxicity*. Thinking in epidemiological terms highlights that toxic speech is a community problem in need of social solutions.³ This discussion explores a model of toxicity as poison, but a viral disease model may highlight the power of contagion.

1. Klemperer 2013, 15–16.

2. Fauci 2008.

3. An epidemiological approach to social problems guides the pathbreaking work of Cure.org in fighting gun violence, the leading cause of death for people under thirty-four in the United States. <http://cureviolence.org/>.

People who think about how speech harms have tended to focus on the oppressive power of epithets, slurs, and derogatory terms.⁴ Speech does harm through hurled epithets, through casual uses of derogations and slurs (“You know, Jane, the so-and-so . . .”), and through the constant repetition of discursive tropes that cascade across the lives of whole groups of people. Those who focus on hate speech lean toward the “words that wound” conception, wounding like a punch in the nose or a stab in heart. These are, indeed, notable cases of discursive violence. Their harms are real and do matter. Deeply derogatory terms, a special category of even more powerful slurs, are part of the systems of oppression in which they are embedded; their toxicity creates and reinforces damage to both targets and communities. Toxic speech is a much broader category than slurs and derogations. It includes the friendly German coworker, unsympathetic to Nazis, who nevertheless asked Klemperer, “Is she really a German?” (Klemperer, 100). It includes the Hutu on the Kigali bus in 1998, who said to the tall slender young man, “you have long legs,” invoking genocidal divisions and issuing an implied threat. Like Léopold Twagirayezu, who says the words changed meanings after the killings, Klemperer argues that the poisons lived in the shifting meanings and uses of everyday terms. He says, “The poison is everywhere. It is born by the drinking water of the LTI [the Language of the Third Reich], nobody is immune to its effects” (Klemperer, 97). This paper argues for the value of considering the scope and dimensions of this broader category, with particular attention to harms to both individuals and communities.

The concept of toxic speech can make sense of claims about harms arising from speech devoid of slurs, epithets, or a narrower class I call ‘deeply derogatory terms.’⁵ Further, it highlights the role of uptake and susceptibility, and so suggests a framework for thinking about the variability of damages. In addition, exploring discursive toxicity pushes us to find ways that certain discursive practices might “inoculate” one to absorbing toxic messages, or less metaphorically, block one’s capacity to make toxic inferences, take deontic stances that foster toxicity, etc. Toxic effects vary depending on one’s epistemic position, access, and authority. An inferentialist account of discursive practice tied to a dynamic view of the power of language games offers tools to analyze the toxic power of speech acts. Let’s begin with a simple account of language games, to see how to track changes in our discursive practices. Identifying patterns here will be part of an epidemiology of toxic speech, which might include tracking increasing use of derogatory terms, us/them dichotomization, terms of isolation, new essentialisms, and more. A sketch of the concept of toxicity highlights the mechanisms by which speech acts and discursive practices can inflict harm. It tells us what to watch. Using this framework, I’ll analyze some examples of speech that has already been said to be toxic, working with a rough concept of toxicity as poison.

4. For example, Matsuda et al. 1993; Maitra and McGowen 2012.

5. Tirrell 2012, 190–96.

At the core of my account is a basic picture of language games—practices of use—that tracks how we enter a game, what we can do within it, and how we exit (drawing on Sellars 1954; Brandom 1998). We ask what a particular speech act allows us to say next (those are inferential moves, internal to the game), and what our utterances allow us to do in the world beyond speaking (these are exit moves, licensed departures from the language game). Some speech acts are of particular significance because of their power to change ongoing practices, while others matter primarily because of the actions they license or engender. Attention to language discloses it as a causal force behind actions while revealing how our discursive practices play a constitutive and normative role in what those actions are and in who we are. Language always acts in concert with collateral social practices. By attending to our linguistic practices, we can trace changing permissibilities governing speech and action, and track modes of violence. Looking at how toxicity works, we can see how discursive norms can change through repetition, endorsement, and uptake.

Toxic speech damages the social body. Specifically, it changes the practices that shape a society. Even toxins aimed at medicinal healing inflict damage; when chemotherapy introduces toxins to kill cancer cells, the toxin kills, and then the body restores. This creepy analogy actually fits how *génocidaires* have talked about their murderous projects—as ridding society of a cancer, for example. When, in 2006, Dr. Naasson Munyandamutsa, a Rwandan psychiatrist and genocide survivor, said: “Words have killed my country,” he was focused on words that were part of a process of changing social practices from 1990 to 1994 to prepare citizens to kill their neighbors.⁶ These anti-Tutsi derogatory terms, especially ‘inyenzi’ (cockroach) and ‘inzoka’ (snake) were initially applied to guerilla soldiers of the Tutsi-led RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front), who were fighting for the right of Tutsi in exile to return. Gradually, spreading suspicion, the terms were applied to all Tutsi. As Twagirayezu says, the Hutu carelessly tossed around these and other words, and only later realized their toxic power. Compare this to current practices in the United States and the European Union that apply ‘terrorist’ to people seen as Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim. Such usage sows seeds of distrust, undermines the basal security of all members of the groups targeted, and eases the process of imposing sanctions against them. This propagandistic use of a slur reshapes social relations. The point is power.

I. A SIMPLE STORY ABOUT ORDINARY SPEECH

Individual speech acts derive meaning from the practices within which they are issued, and their development and variation also shapes future versions of the practice. Think of language games as somewhat discrete practices, and speech acts

6. Naasson Munyandamutsa, M.D., speaking at “The Language of Genocide” symposium, Harvard University, March 27, 2007.

as moves within these games. Following Sellars, we can see these moves as having three major types: entrances, internal moves, and exits. Within a language game, scorekeeping tracks a speaker's commitments, among other things. Entrance moves get us into the game, moving us from world to words. Internal moves are from words to words, speech acts to speech acts. Following Brandom, I take these internal moves as inferential, and so tightly wound up with norms. None of our terms exists in isolation; each is part of networks of associated terms that form socially sanctioned inferential roles. If, as Brandom says, "Inferring is a kind of doing" (Brandom 1998, 91), then it is something for which we are accountable.

Whether our inferences are inductive or deductive, sound or silly, we are responsible for our inferential moves as actions within the game. My inferential moves license others to make those same moves while deferring justification back to me. These inferences and their licenses can also be challenged. Sometimes toxicity will be found in assertional licenses, as when Fred says something about Ricky's ethnicity and then Ethel, a Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) worker, makes an inference about Ricky's potential criminality. TSA-Ethel's inference may in turn license exit moves—behaviors toward Ricky. Licenses are transferrable, so Ethel's ethnic inference can be taken up and used by other TSA agents as well, and if challenged, they can defer justification back to Ethel, who is likely to defer back to Fred. Given that this is an example of profiling, we must question the legitimacy of such exit moves. Challenges tend to push the game backward—they cannot undo the move but they can revoke a license. Challenges can also be used to carve off inferential moves, un-licensing them by denying their legitimacy if the challenge succeeds. Over time, enough challenges or challenges of the right kind might kill the viability of the move, depending on how local or global the challenge becomes.

Speakers are responsible for actions their licenses engender beyond the game. A patient's giving the doctor a set of symptoms counts as moving from world to words, so is an entrance move to the healthcare game. The doctor's diagnosing is an internal move, from words (symptom list) to words (diagnosis). This internal move has power to generate other internal moves, and also, importantly, spurs exit moves. A prescription based on the diagnosis is an exit move, from words to world. The lines of task-responsibilities are quite clear in this case.

An inferential role includes inferences that delineate treatments deemed appropriate to those who are so classified. These can be everyday toxins. Some are more noticeable than others, and changes in one inferential role might not occasion the same changes in a parallel inferential role. In today's United States, most people know that calling an adult African American man 'boy' is unacceptable, for it denies his adulthood, licenses autonomy-undercutting actions, and more. In parallel, calling an adult woman 'girl' also denies her adulthood, licenses autonomy-undercutting actions, and more. And yet, worldwide, people seem to accept such usage. Dropping racist uses of 'boy' did not eliminate racism, but it did stop one insidious stream of indignity. Dropping sexist uses of 'girl' would not eliminate sexism, but it would, similarly, eliminate one autonomy-undermining

discursive practice. Rae Langton offers three criteria of illocutionary acts of subordination: those that *rank* a group as inferior, *legitimate* discriminatory behavior, and *deprive* group members of important powers; all count as subordinating illocutions (Langton 1993, 303). These can offer helpful guidance in tracking toxic inferences; speech acts that illegitimately rank, or legitimate discrimination, or deprive of important powers all involve toxic inferences. Inferences that delineate “appropriate” treatments are part of the language-language moves, but also engender exit moves, actions beyond speech.

Our speech acts also undertake a meta-level *expressive commitment* about the very saying of what is said. Expressive commitments are commitments to the viability and value of particular ways of talking, modes of discourse. Saying “Lee is a cockroach” commits the speaker to the viability and value of using the terms associated with cockroaches to talk about Lee, and, in principle, others. It allows hearers to infer things about Lee based on what they know about cockroaches. Saying “Syrian refugees are snakes” commits Donald Trump to the viability and value of using the inferential role of snake to talk about Syrian refugees, and by extension, applies inferences associated with snakes to many other immigrants and refugees.⁷ The expressive commitment spreads. Considering expressive commitment reveals a further dimension of how toxicity is transmitted and becomes epidemic. Trump made this broader scope of ‘snake’ explicit in his speech about his first one hundred days in office.⁸ When a presidential candidate, and then the same person as president, uses ‘snake’ for a whole category of vulnerable people, we must look to the history of that term for guidance on its viability and value. Both ‘snake’ and ‘cockroach’ were widely used to license inferences and deadly nondiscursive actions before, during, and after the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, 1994. Surely ‘snake’ is viable. Its value—separating in-groups and out-groups, rendering the out-group as a threat—is also its liability and danger.

Expressive commitment will not be enough to explain the damage of toxic speech, however, because toxins bring damage beyond words. So, the exit moves of a language game are crucial to the toxicity of its speech acts. It is always nasty to call someone a “cockroach,” but in Rwanda’s 1994 genocide of the Tutsi, with other social and political forces in action, that word unleashed deadly violence. Saying “There are cockroaches at Nyange Church” was a known way to license the murder of the Tutsi hiding there. The contextually licensed exit moves were horrific. When toxic speech acts threaten to license violent exit moves, as we saw in the United States following Trump political rallies, or the spike in racial and ethnic violence after his election, then the speech is no longer mere words. Such speech not only licenses the violator’s moves, it also puts the target on alert,

7. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-compares-syrian-refugees-to-biting-snakes/>.

8. Associated Press, “Trump Turns to ‘The Snake’ to Warn about Border Security,” May 2, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/05/02/us/ap-us-trump-the-snake.html?_r=0.

demanding vigilance, taking a social, political, or moral toll, while exacting a psychological and physical toll as well.⁹

II. TOXICITY

Our epigraph from Klemperer offers an intense conception of the power of language to shape persons. “Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously.” As if describing a chemical reaction, Klemperer says that language “dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it.” Without resistance, there’s absorption. This is especially true in childhood. Derek Black, raised to become the new hope of American white supremacy, was groomed in the ideology and practices of his community of origin. He bought in completely and publicly, including having his own blog on the website *Stormfront*. Later, in college, trying to blend in, he met people whose very lives challenged his core beliefs. His college friendships with people formerly seen as Other led to a new grasp of discrimination. Eventually, Derek Black changed course, leaving behind his home-grown racism. Inbred practices of fear and disregard were rooted out with conscious effort.¹⁰ Derek Black’s family thinks college poisoned him, whereas most liberals would think his parents poisoned him. These opposite perspectives depend on distinct values that generate differing conceptions of health. Speakers and hearers accommodate to shifts in community practices, easily tainted with new stains. Having been raised into the white supremacist movement, Black might use its toxicity as an excuse, but instead, he has taken responsibility for its harms and is working to fight for the most vulnerable members of society (Black 2016).

Understanding toxins requires a conception of health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”¹¹ This positive conception of health is functionalist, relying on norms of well-being governing those functions. Accordingly, WHO has identified social, political, and economic factors as shaping the health of a population. For example, there is a direct correlation between income or wealth and health access, across nations

9. There were 1,094 bias incidents cited around the nation in the first thirty-four days after the election. Of these, 37% explicitly referenced Trump or one of his slogans. Potok 2017. *Only Words* is the title of a groundbreaking book by Catharine A. MacKinnon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

10. Black 2016; Saslow 2016.

11. World Health Organization 2006.

and within nations.¹² Similarly, the US Centers for Disease Control has identified five factors as social determinants of health: economic stability, education, social and community context, health and healthcare, and neighborhood and built environment.¹³ Any social and linguistic group that forms a community, *qua* community, will have a set of shared overlapping norms and values, shared goods in the ethical sense, that together help to settle what counts as the well-being (good health) of individuals within that community. The degree to which a society achieves these will be a measure of its own health as well. Where do our language practices fit into this picture of health? Surely our discursive practices have effects on education, economic prospects and stability, how safe people feel in their neighborhoods, and more.

In explaining the harms of extreme poverty, Claudia Card describes a conception of *decent functioning*, starting with basic physical and environmental goods but then moving into more psycho-social normative goods. She says: “Basics for decent functioning ordinarily include access to nontoxic air, water, and food; sleep; the ability to move one’s limbs; the ability to make choices concerning the shape and direction of one’s life and to act on some of them; freedom from severe and unremitting pain and from deep shame or humiliation; affective bonds with others; a secure sense of one’s human worth; and last, but not least, the ability to hope.”¹⁴ As the list lengthens, it becomes clearer what harmful speech can disrupt. Toxic speech has the power to cause pain, inflict suffering, inspire shame and humiliation, damage affective bonds with others, undermine one’s sense of one’s own worth, and ultimately undermine hope. Getting used to disparagement, or what Sandra Bartky calls “intimations of inferiority,” is a way to live with chronic toxicity.¹⁵ Accommodating to racism and sexism helps those targeted to get by, but at a cost, and that cost is worth assessing. This is part of what I mean by an epidemiology of toxic speech: Which populations are harmed? How is their well-being damaged? What triggers the toxic effect? Are there inoculating protections? Are there antidotes?

Klemperer’s arsenic metaphor impels consideration of cases in which harms accumulate with multiple doses and prolonged exposure. To use an obvious case, not everyone reacts the same way to words that (usually) harm like a punch in the nose; many targets become accommodated to their use. Such words “are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little while the toxic reaction sets in after all” (Klemperer, 16). Think about how inured people get to the racist and sexist remarks they hear every day. Even someone who is targeted

12. World Health Organization, *Social Determinants of Health: Key Concepts*. http://www.who.int/social_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/key_concepts/en/.

13. Centers for Disease Control, *Social Determinants of Health: Know What Effects Health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/>.

14. Card 2014, 24.

15. Bartky 1990, 7, 18, 22, 29.

by and copes with the avalanche of these expressions might one day have reached a level of saturation that sets off new reactions. We must attend to speech that harms gradually, by changing the boundaries of the normal, and by corroding our capacities to function at our highest levels and to our best-held ideals. Yes, it is this process we need to understand: how speech changes the boundaries of the normal. We need to know how the process of being subjected to hate speech shifts the boundaries of the normal.

Medically, toxicity's harm admits of degrees, and can be acute or chronic, depending on the number and potency of exposures. A poison's impact and degree of *hazard* depends on its potency, route, dosage, and susceptibility or uptake. Susceptibility depends on the condition of the subject. Once exposed, some effects may last a lifetime, while others may be overcome.

All these aspects of medical toxicity guide us to notice aspects of damaging speech acts and their language games. Some speech acts are very potent, delivering harmful messages that undermine decent functioning nearly immediately, and some of these cases have long-lasting effects. Some speech acts with a seemingly milder level of disrespect (for example) gain their power from repetition, so that the person might not be much damaged by any single event, but mightily damaged by the deluge of these across her lifetime. Route of exposure would likely map onto one-on-one speech vs. public speech, written vs. oral, known speaker or anonymous. Dosage would include both quantity and frequency, so would overlap with potency to some extent. Susceptibility factors would help guide our understanding why uptake varies.

In cases of acute toxicity, harmful effects arise from a single or short-term exposure. Cyanide or polonium are so toxic that any contact results in acute toxicity, and with these chemicals, death. Not all acute toxicity is fatal. A bite from a rattlesnake or copperhead is acutely toxic, threatening death, but treatments can forestall death. Is there a discursive parallel to polonium? Perhaps not exactly. Imagine a long-term interracial couple, who think things are good . . . then one day in a fight, one hurls a racist epithet at the other. In a different context, with a different speaker, the damage might be minimal, seen as same-old/same-old, but from *this* speaker to *this* hearer, in this relationship, the act of hurling this epithet explodes their relationship. Polonium to the relationship, with damage to the individuals. Context and content are crucial. And to make matters more complicated, we must note that in a complex organism (a human body or a social collective) some toxins might have legitimate curative roles.

Scientists know that there are as many effects of toxicity as there are systems in a body. Toxins can damage our blood, brains, nerves, heart, skin, kidneys, and more. Generally, poisons tend to either accelerate or slow down our natural systems, disrupting our capacity to function, often turning our very bodies against us. We might think of some varieties of discursive toxicity as turning our own discursive practices against us. Some might think of extreme free speech policies as inflicting this kind of self-referential damage. Strict gender identification practices

would fall into this category on many feminist views.¹⁶ Pronoun choice is a minefield for those who are transitioning between sexes, for example.

Chronic toxicity occurs in cases where toxins are tolerated at low levels, while their effects build up over prolonged, continuous, or repeated exposure, damaging the body's functioning, sometimes also resulting in death. Arsenic poisoning, dosed over time, leads to chronic toxicity, and can become fatal or sometimes can be reversed with treatment. Lead poisoning, much too common, does not often lead to death but causes physical and cognitive impairment that can last a lifetime. Constantly hearing sexist and racist comments can have a corrosive effect on the well-being of those targeted or described by the speech acts. These effects not only damage the individual's self-esteem, but also shape the ways that others treat her. The target is damaged in limits to exercises of autonomy, social power, and often to self-conception, while the ones doing the targeting are damaged differently, morally damaged by their own injustice. Each social location offers different epistemic costs and benefits; the damages of oppression often lead to important insights about social life. These epistemic benefits in no way mitigate the moral wrong of oppression, however, and offer no salve to the conscience of oppressors for the toxic harms they unleash.

In a late November 2016 op-ed in the *New York Times*, reflecting on the US presidential election and the state of the nation, Derek Black took responsibility for the damage his public work did to set the stage for the rise of white nationalism in the United States, saying, "No checks and balances can redeem what we've unleashed" (Black 2016). He notes the broad reach of ideas he used to spread: "The wave of violence and vile language that has risen since the election is only one immediate piece of evidence that this campaign's reckless assertion of white identity comes at a huge cost. More and more people are being forced to recognize now what I learned early: Our country is susceptible to some of our worst instincts when the message is packaged correctly" (Black 2016). Marketing, like Mary Poppins's spoonful of sugar, makes racist nationalism palatable to many, making our society susceptible to a set of messages that unleash the worst in us.

We should evaluate Klemperer's inescapability claim that toxic language is totalizing, affecting everyone, to one degree or another, even resisters. This seems grounded in a view about contact and causation: contact was unavoidable, for the discursive changes Klemperer was discussing, and so widespread acceptance of the steady shift of meaning became inevitable. As the Nazis reshaped the inferential role of 'hero' and 'German', the people came to use these terms accordingly. They lacked the power to keep the old meanings dominant. Resisting pays the dominator his due—he is the one to answer to, his meanings control the narrative, resisting is not futile but saps one's energies that are vitally needed for building one's own practices. This needn't be an either/or: resisting by building an alternative is a solid form of indirect attack, but still, one must keep an eye on the dominant inferential practices.

16. See Frye 1983, for example, especially chapter 2, "Sexism."

Like toxic chemicals, toxic speech has a stronger effect on the most vulnerable. Focusing on worldwide trends in hate speech, Susan Benesch takes a different stance, describing hate speech as “the special scourge of minorities and indigenous peoples: like a disease that afflicts only certain populations, it can cause some people to suffer greatly, while others remain unaware and unsympathetic. It gives rise to both psychological and physical harm, and affects a variety of minority and indigenous communities” (Benesch 2014). Here, Benesch emphasizes differential vulnerability, depending not only on individual susceptibility to uptake, but also on how hate is “nurtured by coinciding factors: economic hardship, large-scale migration, competition between groups for political power after the fall of repressive central regimes, and the ease of expressing hatred online” (Benesch 2014). Hate speech doesn’t stand alone, but takes power from and returns power to the collateral forces that Benesch and others have noted—economic, migratory, and political hardships especially. Like other forms of toxic speech, the harm of hate speech is not borne evenly across a society, but falls most heavily upon the most vulnerable (see Matsuda 1993). Notice how this fits with the susceptibility element of the toxicity. Klemperer might be right that toxins affect everyone to some degree, but the vulnerable suffer more. Also, Benesch’s claim that some people “remain unaware and unsympathetic” leaves open the question whether the practice might cause boomerang harms. Benesch emphasizes physical and psychological harms, but harms also include damages to social standing and powers, to economic potential, and more. Those with the least power suffer the most severe harms.

We must also consider just what toxicity most damages. If it bypasses rationality, it may taint one’s ability to develop appropriate and considered judgments. It would thereby impair the exercise of autonomy, and one’s self-understanding. When rampant in society, it damages our capacity to interact with others, effectively imposing quarantines on some. This would limit our capacity to participate as equals in cooperative activities. We should not assume a one-size-fits-all conception of harm; variability is the norm.

Except with certain highly toxic substances, like polonium, identifying the substance alone will not settle how hazardous it is or whether toxicity is acute or chronic. Most toxins have different kinds of harmful effects depending on the material, the concentration or potency of the exposure, the dose or quantity, the mode of transmission, and the body’s susceptibility. Despite its highly variable effects, lead poisoning, for example, when controlled for sameness of exposure, dose, and route, always does the greatest harm to children, especially the very young, and impoverished, malnourished children.¹⁷ Youth and malnourishment increase uptake of lead into the system; the child’s own growth spurs increased absorption, with potential damage to brain development, the central nervous system, and more. Susceptibility is enhanced during development.

17. World Health Organization, “Lead Poisoning and Health,” September 2016. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs379/en/>.

III. TOXIC SPEECH: NOT JUST SLURS

Epithets and slurs are not necessary for doing the work of social exclusion and sending damaging messages about competence and potential. Slurs just get the job done efficiently. Many cases of toxic speech do not feel like a kick in the teeth; they are usually received as facts or edicts requiring accommodation. Accommodation usually leads to chronic conditions. The examples that follow tend to be public and political, but we must also worry about the person in your office (or school, or family, or friend group) whose speech is toxic, undermining the health and well-being of individuals and their community. The schoolyard bully, for example, is a master of toxic speech. In surveys that I conducted in the 1990s, asking students at three universities about their experiences with harmful words, I expected racist and sexist terms to be the most frequently cited. Surprisingly, perhaps, “moron” was among the most commonly cited harmful epithets students had experienced. “Moron” is a schoolyard bully term, so for college students to cite it signals lingering effects of the damage speech can inflict.¹⁸ “Moron” is like arsenic.

To see that epithets are not necessary for toxicity, consider a speech by Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who leads the Netherlands Freedom Party (PVV Partij Voor de Vrijheid), which has an anti-Islamic platform, pledging to close every mosque in the Netherlands, ban the Qur’an from all public buildings, and pull Holland out of the European Union.¹⁹ In March 2014, Wilders staged a rally in which he called out to his followers: “Do you want more or fewer Moroccans?” The crowd chanted: “Fewer! Fewer!” Wilders replied, “We’ll take care of that.”²⁰ Notice that Wilders never used a slur. He did what Eric Swanson calls cuing ideology—evoking “a broad range of beliefs, interests, practices, and so on.”²¹ Wilders did not need to use a slur. At trial, it came out that the call and response were staged for the video. Nevertheless, the total speech situation, and audience participation, had varied effects. In cuing ideology, Wilders doesn’t just cue beliefs; the process is not entirely rational. Remember what Klemperer says in our epigraph: the language “increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being.” Ideology, according to Swanson, is “a cluster of mutually supporting beliefs, aliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world” (Swanson, 6–7). When Wilders got the audience to practice their anti-Moroccan chants, this strengthened and gave permission for anti-Moroccan attitudes. Considering the targets, chants hit hard; assessing Nazi chants, commonplace in the early years of the Third Reich, Klemperer tells us that “chanting hits out with a bare fist at the good sense of the addressee, and endeavors to subjugate it” (Klemperer, 255). It is a power play that bypasses rationality.

18. Surveys at University of North Carolina, Georgetown, and University of Massachusetts, Boston.

19. Boztas 2016; Darroch 2013; Wilders 2013; Wilders 2016; *Economist* 2016.

20. See the event: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_YEpoG5N8k.

21. Swanson 2015, 1.

In December 2016, newspapers widely reported that Wilders was convicted of hate speech, but the actual judgment was more nuanced. Wilders was convicted of demeaning Muslims, but cleared of most other charges. Nevertheless, he issued this statement: “I cannot believe it, but I have been convicted because I asked a question about Moroccans. . . . The Netherlands have become a sick country” (Wilders 2016). Wilders’s speech act was a question, not an assertion, but this did not change the damage inflicted, and his using a polite term of reference did not change the threats implicit in what he said or the implicature he issued. Toxicity is not about the form of the speech act, and does not depend on any specific types of terms to do its work. The American white supremacist website *Stormfront* banned slurs in 2008, but did not become less toxic.²²

Explicit epithets were not necessary to poison the 2016 campaign for the forty-fifth presidency of the United States with sexism, racism, and xenophobia. Speeches by Republican candidates were rife with toxic messages, but none were as overtly divisive as those of Donald Trump. In announcing his bid for the nomination, Trump said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. [*sic*] They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us [*sic*]. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”²³ He promised to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it, to ban Muslims from entering the United States, and more. Trump inculcates fear and promotes social division. Republican Lindsay Graham, also adept at promoting fear through divisionist ideologies, called Trump “a race-baiting xenophobic religious bigot” and “the ISL man of the year.”²⁴ Graham knows what he is talking about. *Foreign Policy*, for example, said of Graham: “In a town filled with threat-mongers, fear-merchants, and hand-wringers, there is no one mongering more threats, selling more fear, and wringing more hands than Senator Graham,”²⁵ so it is telling that Graham would condemn Trump for using this same set of strategies, only even more overtly.

We pay attention to toxicity to limit our *hazard*. Toxicity needs to be dosed and delivered, and institutional power is not required. Toxins require uptake, which should not be thought of as voluntary. Often, discursive uptake might not even rise to the level of self-awareness, and it might bypass our rational choice. Sometimes, outlier status diminishes a person’s capacity for toxicity, undermining their

22. Saslow 2016.

23. *Washington Post* staff, “Full text: Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid,” June 16, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/?utm_term=.e8691f46435b.

24. “Divisionist” is a term often used in Rwanda’s post-genocidal reconstruction. The Graham quote was widely reported. One source: *The Week*, December 8, 2015, “Lindsey Graham: Donald Trump Is a Racebaiting Xenophobic Religious Bigot.” <http://theweek.com/speedreads/592955/lindsey-graham-donald-trump-racebaiting-xenophobic-religious-bigot>.

25. Cohen 2015.

potency. Other times, with constant repetition leading to greater and greater uptake, the actions of an outlier can gain powerful toxic effect. Trump's blustering incoherent nastiness and his ignorance of national and international politics rendered him an outsider in the race for president, and many thought this would keep him out of office. It did not turn out that way. With every hostile spear he throws, Trump's toxicity continues to grow, and grow in increasingly concentrated doses as he sees his power as a source of impunity rather than responsibility. If making friends at a liberal college broke Derek Black out of his racist echo chamber, the election of Trump made him determined to speak out against the toxicity he had helped distribute.

IV. NOTICED TOXICITY

On the day after the election, political analyst Susan Demos called her persistent nausea "morning-after sickness," probably caused by the many ways that Trump's rhetoric attacked her core values of "liberty, equality, kindness, and compassion."²⁶ In an interview a few days later, Gregg Popovich, head coach of the San Antonio Spurs basketball team, used similar terms to explain the impact of the election's endorsement of Trump:

I'm just *sick to my stomach*. Not basically because the Republicans won or anything, but the *disgusting* tenor and tone and all of the comments that have been xenophobic, homophobic, racist, misogynistic. I live in that country where half of the people ignored all of that to elect someone. That's the scariest part of the whole thing to me. We live in a country that ignored all of those values that we would hold our kids accountable for. They'd be grounded for years if they acted and said the things that have been said in that campaign by Donald Trump. . . . I'm a rich white guy, and I'm *sick to my stomach* thinking about it. I can't imagine being a Muslim right now, or a woman, or an African American, a Hispanic, a handicapped person. How disenfranchised they might feel.²⁷

Popovich's comments highlight several important factors. First, he says that Trump's comments were themselves "disgusting" and made him nauseated. They fly against Popovich's values, but also values that he assumed were part of America's social fabric and explicit political ideology. He emphasizes that "we would hold our kids accountable" for such bad behavior. And yet, Trump was not punished at the polls; 62 million Americans voted for a man who stands for xenophobia, misogyny, racism, and more. They voted for a man who said that a national newscaster, Megyn Kelly, had "blood coming out of her eyes" and "blood coming out of her wherever,"²⁸ who repeatedly called Syrian refugees "snakes,"²⁹ who mocked

26. Demos 2016. See also Fisher 2016.

27. Rohlin 2016, emphasis added.

28. Yan 2015.

29. Atwood 2016.

reporter Serge Kovaleski for his disabilities,³⁰ and who bragged that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and lose no votes.³¹ Trump's sense of entitlement and impunity were fully on display throughout the campaign. Elsewhere in the interview, Popovich describes Trump's mocking of the reporter Serge Kovaleski for his disabilities as the behavior of a seventh or eighth grade bully, and returns to the need for maturity and compassion in a leader. These values issues are important for analyzing social and political health.

Second, although Klemperer emphasized latency, Popovich's language of nausea and disgust shows overt symptoms. Many people had physical reactions to the election, perhaps because this result seems to endorse the speech of the candidate elected. Physicians reported increased flare-ups in patients with chronic diseases like arthritis and asthma, increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, and an increase in suicidal ideation.³² Dr. Danielle Ofri writes that "These are real medical side effects, and they are occurring even before changes in the Affordable Care Act, the Supreme Court, immigration policy, and environmental legislation alter the landscape of our country. Add up the additional medications prescribed, extra ER visits, delayed procedures, missed work, plus the fallout from other illnesses being relegated to the back burner, and you have the makings of a major medical toll from this election."³³ When Popovich says that it makes him sick to his stomach that members of his society thought Trump's character and behavior weren't disqualifying, he spoke for many Americans, including many of the 65 million who voted for Hillary Clinton. Part of what fueled Popovich's nausea, and the distress of others, was a painful cognitive and affective realignment in their relations to their neighbors and their country. Trump's many derisive and divisive speech acts were no longer dismissible, so uptake of some sort became inevitable. The latency period was over and the toxin took effect. A sense of real hazard emerged. Contamination grew, and with it, these somatic reactions.

Third, like many philosophers and linguists, Popovich takes speech as influencing attitudes and behaviors. Trump's attempt to dismiss his vulgar comments about women as just "locker-room talk" is ineffective, not least because he actually brags about committing sexual assault.³⁴ Speech licenses or engenders actions, fosters attitudes, and if given sufficient uptake, can shape culture.³⁵ So not only does the viral video of Trump's bragging license boys and men to engage in similar speech acts, these speech practices may well license exit moves like sexual assault and rape.

Earlier I mentioned that any speech act is open to challenges. Challenges can attack the accuracy and truthfulness of the claim, the propriety of saying it, and

30. Shephard 2016.

31. For a video of Trump's comment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFqCJfUKlls>. Also, Diamond 2016.

32. Tsoulis-Reay 2016.

33. Ofri 2017; Gold 2017.

34. Bullock 2016.

35. On accommodating attitudes, see Langton 2012. On action-engendering discourse, see Tirrell 2012.

the expressive commitments it entails. Some professional athletes responded to “locker room talk,” saying this was not what they and their teammates say in their locker rooms, and some even urging Trump not to normalize such discourse.³⁶ This challenge doesn’t directly address the original claim, only Trump’s attempt to evade responsibility. One response to Trump’s bragging about his lack of sexual self-control was a plethora of women who chose to speak out for the first time about their experiences of being sexually assaulted, including some who charged Trump.³⁷

Finally, Popovich’s observation that those targeted by Trump’s divisive discourse must feel “disenfranchised” marks an effect of casting people outside the political fold, outside the circle of concern of politics, and outside the protection of the law. One could argue that this is “just” a psych-out, since their capacity to vote is not lost, but that would miss the point of many of the threats issued as campaign promises. Divisive discourse is an exercise of power, signaling whose concerns matter and whose concerns do not. As we think about toxicity, we must think about power.

V. A NEW AND LESSER ‘NORMAL’

So far, we have been talking about toxins as if they were like poisons, but viruses and bacteria are also toxic. Viruses operate somewhat differently with respect to the mechanisms of uptake and in patient outcomes. Some viruses are rapid onset, like Ebola or the Norovirus, while others have long periods of latency, like shingles. Small changes in one’s medical state can pass undetected, until, during a checkup, the physician says, “Oh, you have X,” and the patient says, “Oh no, I feel fine!” The physician knows: the patient doesn’t know what fine feels like anymore. Incremental changes in the patient’s blood and other systems have passed unnoticed, moving the baseline to a new and diminished ‘normal’.

Commentators from across the political spectrum have used virus talk to explain Donald Trump. In the conservative *National Review*, Charles Cooke explains “the Trump virus” as causing a cognitive disruption, saying the virus “implants in its hosts the unshakable conviction that one of the most execrable clowns in the history of these United States is a hero who deserves to be elevated to the White House; then, having inculcated the conceit, it removes the faculties that are necessary for its removal.” This virus protects against cures through self-protective conspiracy theories and “civic confusion.”³⁸

Just weeks before the 2016 US presidential election, *Washington Post* reporter Marc Fisher asks whether Trump has “transformed America, or simply revealed

36. Twitter short list: <https://twitter.com/i/moments/785531175007846400?lang=en>.

37. Crockett 2016.

38. Cooke 2015.

it,” whether Trump is exploiting old patterns, gone underground, or whether he has “loosed into the culture a new virus of confrontation and anger?”³⁹ Fisher cites John Lott Jr., president of the Crime Prevention Research Center, as saying, “Trump has given some people permission to say things they were afraid to say.” In the same article, Republican consultant Frank Luntz says that people were at first “horrified by his offensive statements. But as time went on, they came to enjoy and absorb it.” Each repetition of an outrageous speech act makes the next one less of a surprise, until such speech becomes common enough to seem “normal,” lowering the standard of acceptability. It isn’t mere repetition, however; Trump was a candidate for president of the United States, representing one of the two major parties. This is a powerful platform from which to endorse ideas, behaviors. His repeated explicit acts of disrespect articulated endorsement of disrespect not seen in a major candidate in recent decades. His endorsement of xenophobia and racism was embraced by his fans, who cited his speeches as inspiration for assaulting others.

Remember Klemperer’s warning that Nazi discursive changes were “imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously,” until finally the results were toxic. This does not claim that the language caused Nazism or anti-Semitism, but rather a claim that resistance broke down, eroded by the viral onslaught of discursive changes. Some were overtly propagandistic, some more covert. All shaped the condition of the society and the characters of those who comprised it. As people get used to hearing the language used in these ways, new normal emerges. That new normal may promote the values of some, while severely damaging the lives of others.

Mere frequency is insufficient for establishing a norm; “often” doesn’t automatically generate “ought.” To see how a new normal emerges from repeated discursive moves which are perhaps odd at first, but then more common, remember that communication is social and deeply cooperative. Grice and others see this cooperative aspect as rooted in mutually recognized intentions, but the cooperation is more structural than that. Brandom’s take on communication is helpful in reminding us that it is about “*cooperating* in a joint *activity* (coordinating social perspectives by keeping deontic score according to common practices)” (Brandom 1998, 479). Imagine: Ben derogates Ann with “X”; Chaz hears it, takes it as derogatory, doesn’t like it, but likes Ben and decides to let it slide. A new license emerges from Ben’s unchallenged utterance. A while later, Chaz hears Ann call Ted an “X,” and again lets it slide; the license is reinforced. A pattern emerges, Chaz learns the moves. Chaz still may not like it, but these moves are now becoming familiar. These events are not just building a frequency norm, but also shaping the discursive activities of the people involved, setting out patterns of norm-governed moves. Once there is a pattern, we can see Chaz’s “letting it slide” as allowing the practice to take hold. Letting an inference license stand is short of endorsement,

39. All quotes in this paragraph from Fisher 2016, emphasis added.

but it does not escape grip of the normative. A single use of “X” doesn’t introduce a new derogating activity, but multiple uses across variant contexts can.

Toxicity arises from several factors. Chronic toxicity for an individual might result from a single dose with a long latency period. E.g., Ben’s comment, as a one-off, might have seemed innocuous at first, but suppose it got under Chaz’s skin. The more Chaz thought about it, the more it damaged his view of Ben, their relationship, etc. A child who hears a slur for the first time might grasp the derogation, but might not until there are more instances. More often, chronic toxicity arises from shifting the permissible moves in our speech activities, resulting in a series of damaging internal and exit moves. Consider Brandom’s dance metaphor for conversation, offered in response to Habermas: “Conversational partners should not be pictured as marching in step, like soldiers on parade, but more as ballroom dancers, each making different movements (at any moment, one leads and the other follows, one moves forward and the other back, one sways left and the other right, and so on) and *thereby* sharing a dance that is constituted precisely by the coordination of their individually different movements” (Brandom 2000, 363). We can think of the conversational dance as either pre-choreographed or improvisational. Brandom’s appeal to ballroom dance suggests formal dances like the tango or waltz, with set patterns and clearly established norms. Ballroom dance is coordinated, stylized, choreographed. This metaphor helps highlight toxic speech that reinforces existing harmful power structures like racism, sexism, homophobia, and more. The ballroom dance metaphor does not help explain how we move the baseline or create a new normal. Such speech doles out doses of harm to siphon power from those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Once one starts to notice it, an entrenched derogation dance is easy to trace.

Not all dance is like ballroom, however. Understanding many forms of toxicity, particularly emerging forms, is clearer if we think of the dance as improvisational: one move spurs another, some bits are repeated but some are echoed in variation, in parallel structures, and so on. The dance is not pre-choreographed, but it is still a cooperative dance. In performing arts, a key element of improvisation is the “yes, and” move: you accept what your partner has said and add something specific that shapes the narrative or theme somehow. Inferentialism’s emphasis on *endorsement* captures the “yes” part of “yes, and.” Speech acts can change with the kinematics of score, just as viruses mutate. So, in the story above, Chaz notices that “X” applies to Ann, according to Ben, but then when Ann uses it for Ted, Chaz thinks that it isn’t a gender-specific slur. (Or someone is using it wrong.) Its gender specificity will be more settled the more cases Chaz encounters.

Some toxins introduce new inferences to an already existing inferential role; some prune the role. Cooperation is the key to how new patterns of inference are internalized, and key to establishing new language games. In cooperating, Alex makes moves in concert with Anna, reinforcing an old game or perhaps instituting a new one. Cooperation is what makes resistance so crucial. When a practice is toxic, stopping the damage takes avoidance and containment, via direct or indirect chal-

lenges. Noticing which changes bring harm is sometimes easy, sometimes quite difficult. It might be some of the most important discursive and political work we do.

VI. DISCURSIVE EPIDEMIOLOGY

Earlier I called for an epidemiology of toxic speech. We need to identify the populations harmed, how their well-being is damaged, whether there are triggers. We also need to learn whether there are inoculating protections or antidotes. Epidemiology studies public health, especially epidemics. It assesses adverse outcomes, dysfunction, disease, and death. Physicians addressing morbidity and mortality look for incidence of poor health or disease (morbidity), and try to learn the rate of deaths per population. They assess cases to find better practices.

Discursive morbidity is the degree to which a discourse is unhealthy for users, targets, bystanders. These effects surely vary across roles, for harms to targets are likely to be different from harms incurred by user or bystander. Even though the dose is greatest to the target, often the harm to bystanders is not negligible. When someone uses toxic speech against a member of your own group, you might absorb the message, or it may trigger responsive resistance. A woman in a group of men who hears a sexist joke is “put in her place” by that joke telling, and even if she challenges it, the message has landed to some degree.

Discursive mortality should be thought of as operating in two major ways. First, it would be the degree to which a discourse actually kills users, targets, or bystanders. Language never acts alone, so even the deadly utterance of “She’s Tutsi” on a 1994 Kigali street is not in itself deadly. It triggers a deadly language-exit move. It is *action engendering*, but the person with the machete does the killing. To track discursive mortality we should track incitement, but the category may contain even stronger phenomena. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda found the defendants in the Media Trial guilty of *genocide* for their speech acts on the radio, not for aiding and abetting, which would be the easier case to make, but for commission of genocide. That case, and the Seromba Case, which also found speech to count as *commission* of genocide, are too complex to present here, but these cases are a good place to look for evidence of discursive mortality.⁴⁰

Second, we also could think of discursive mortality as arising when discourse renders certain ways of life utterly impossible. In our second epigraph, Twagirayezu says, “It is awkward to talk about hatred between Hutus and Tutsis, because words changed meaning after the killings.” Since the killings were up close and done by neighbors, the word “neighbor” has become fraught, signaling ongoing troubled social problems. This could include generating conceptual impossibilities. In Rwandan society, neighbors protect each other; when this vital feature is

40. UN-ICTR Media case (99-52) and UN-ICTR Seromba case (01-66).

lost, the concept blows apart. Discursive morbidity alters available expressive commitments, since these are about viability and value of modes of speech. Neighbor-talk is now a problem. Further, it closes down social pathways so that the person one has been, a friendly neighbor, cannot be carried forward into the future.⁴¹ This morbidity leads, in some cases, to what Orlando Patterson calls “social death”: the physical person does not die, but the social, psychological, and perhaps moral person is lost.

Remember toxins are agents that damage health and functioning. It is helpful to keep in mind philosopher Alex Brown’s set of categories of speech that are variously restricted in jurisdictions around the world. That a jurisdiction considers these worth curtailing suggests that these types of speech acts are likely to be toxic. Brown’s list includes group defamation, negative stereotyping or stigmatization (esp. media), expression of hatred, incitement to hatred, threats to public order, dignitary crimes or torts, denying, etc., acts of mass cruelty, violence, or genocide, violations of civil or human rights, expression-oriented hate crimes, time, place, and manner restrictions (Brown 2017). These are all clues to potential toxic speech.

Developing methods for assessing discursive morbidity and discursive mortality has the potential to reveal patterns in our practices that undermine individual and social well-being. There is much more to explore in considering poison and viral models of toxicity. Poisons might be handled by someone without self-harm while inflicting terrible harm on the target. Similarly, someone might be a carrier of a virus without being symptomatic, and yet infect others who suffer terribly. So, whether the toxin is a poison or a germ, we see that the transmission isn’t always direct, detectable by looking at who is delivering it. Elsewhere, for example, I argue that the killers in Rwanda, seeking social vitality, inflicted one set of harms on their victims, and ended up with self-inflicted harms, internalized damage, and more (Tirrel 2016). Think about speech we are hearing now: a neo-Nazi’s dysfunction is different from what he inflicts on others. So we must look for acute, direct, and immediate effects, chronic and latent conditions, and boomerang effects of handling toxicity.

To catch toxic threats early, we must listen to what we say. To succeed, we need a robust conception of individual and collective health to help with early detection. There is work to do in assessing susceptibility, looking for what makes some people more vulnerable than others, and for methods to mitigate uptake. How might resistance be inculcated? Strengthening the vulnerable might be easier than eliminating all toxins. Context of speech, like a chemical’s physical environment, has a significant impact on its viability and value. We must pay attention to expressive commitments, asking what happens when we say that around here.

The point of tracking toxicity is fostering conditions for health. This paper does not address issues of responsibility and blame, and whether a toxicity model

41. See J. Lear’s *Radical Hope* for an extended analysis of the cultural damage the United States did to the Crow nation.

would let some perpetrators “off the hook.” My concern here is an epidemiological one. Assessing blameworthiness is a much more complex issue in many cases. Let’s close with a reminder from a *génocidaire* from Rwanda highlighting the power of speech practices, independently of intentions and the presence or absence of hate:

Maybe we did not hate all the Tutsis, especially our neighbors, and maybe we did not see them as wicked enemies. But among ourselves we said we no longer wanted to live together. We even said we did not want them anywhere around us anymore, and that we had to clear them from our land. *It’s serious, saying that—it’s already sharpening the machete.* (Pio Mitugirehe, quoted in Hatzfeld 2005, 218)

Let us make sure that no one is sharpening the machetes.

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