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An American gunplay: performances of race, gender, and nationalism in three acts

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**AN AMERICAN GUNPLAY:
PERFORMANCES OF RACE, GENDER, AND NATIONALISM IN THREE ACTS**

By
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Senior Thesis

*Submitted to the Faculty of Vassar College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor's of Arts in Science, Technology, and Society*

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

In April 2011, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed a bill into law which designated the Colt Single Action Army Revolver (also commonly referred to as the Colt “Peacemaker”) as Arizona's state firearm. The revolver has been heralded by many as “The Gun that Won the West”, and made to perform in various iterations of patriotism and national identity. “Anytime you see a Western movie, the revolver in John Wayne's hand is a Colt single action,” said Senator Ron Gould, the bill's sponsor. “This is a historic firearm and it fits well with the story of Arizona.”¹

However, many do not buy this act.

The fact that this designation was made only three months after the mass shooting involving state Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson—a tragedy which claimed six lives and wounded thirteen—was unsurprisingly a cause of upset to many. Opponents have described the creation of a “state firearm” as an insult to the victims of that attack, as well as a means of providing free publicity for a private company based far out of state. The dismay was matched by many of Arizona’s 250,000 Native Americans, who say the Colt was used as a tool of genocide by white settlers to drive them from their ancestral lands.² Albert Hale, another democrat and ex-Navajo president, said in a speech “This gun symbolizes extinction and

¹ Schwartz, David. “Arizona House votes to make Colt revolver official state gun.” Reuters. April 20, 2011. Accessed May 02, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-colt-arizona-idUSTRE73J4E820110420>.

² NewsFeed, TIME. “Arizona Gets an Official State Gun - And It’s Manufactured in Connecticut.” Time. April 30, 2011. Accessed May 02, 2017. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/04/30/arizona-gets-an-official-state-gun-%E2%80%94and-its-manufactured-in-connecticut/>.

extermination. To glorify this action and act as if a John Wayne movie is real history is very disturbing."³

As historian Karen Jones once said, “the firearm [conveys] a power far beyond its ballistics range”. Guns are arguably the most fiercely desired, deeply feared and broadly contested material objects in the United States. In the social imagination, firearms have long served as potent, evocative artifacts, upon which Americans project, negotiate, and understand their identities. Some firearms transcend materiality and perform in a social drama of their own—they enliven figures such as John Wayne, and even come to embody the enigmatic “national character”. However, as the “Peacemaker’s” varied reception goes to show, whether individuals are willing to buy into the gun’s nationalistic act is partly influenced by which side of the barrel they see themselves on.

Main Argument

Central to my thesis is the observation that guns (or rather gun-human relations)⁴ constitute *scripts*. They engender certain expectations of their “natural” use and their “righteous” owners. As a result, guns prompt different behaviors for different bodies while reinforcing social roles.⁵ However, like a playwright’s script, they allow for resistance and improvisation.⁶

³ "Weapon Used to Kill American Indians Now Arizona State Gun." Indian Country Media Network. May 02, 2011. Accessed May 02, 2017. <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/05/02/weapon-used-kill-american-indians-now-arizona-state-gun-31598>.

⁴ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 3-4.

⁵ Such a phenomenon might be seen through people’s varying levels of fear and entitlement around guns

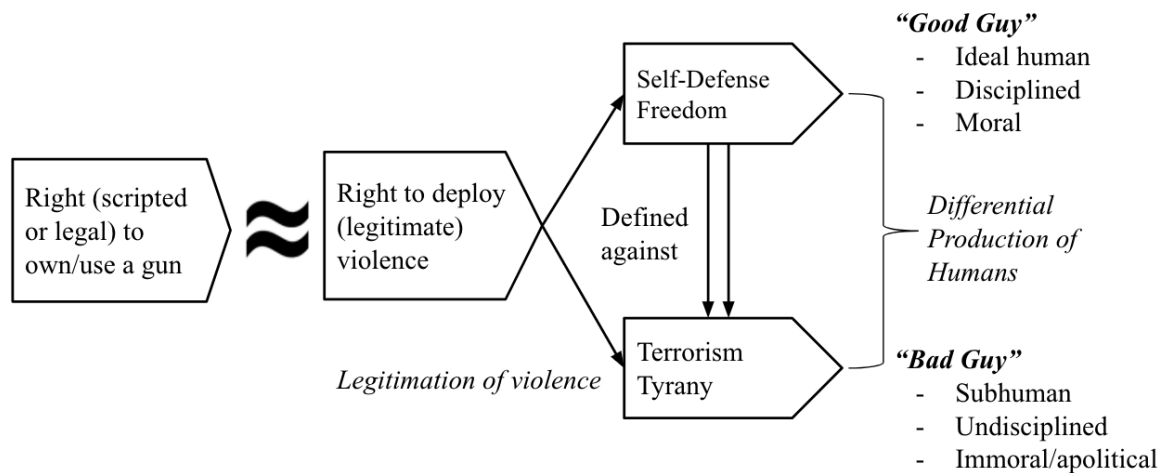
⁶ My notion of a script borrows from Bernstein’s notion of a “scriptive thing”, although I do not purchase the overall thrust of her argument. Briefly, scriptive things invite or prompt historically-located practices while allowing for resistance and improvisation. Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*.

As has been noted, social relations (including gender and race relations) are materialized in tools and techniques through mutually scriptive processes.⁷ Provided not only the gun's historical deployment by white men in imperial projects, but also their disproportionate control over the means of cultural production, gun scripts most often figure white men as the "righteous" and "natural" users. As scripts are embedded in a network of power relations, the performances they structure *do work*—they stabilize, reproduce, or challenge existing social orders.⁸

Importantly, if the "natural right" to use a gun is tacitly understood to mean the right to deploy violence, these scripts intimate questions of social and political ontology: whose violence is moralized, whose victimization is naturalized, and who can kill whom under the guise of the acceptable? Contests among different social groups to assert their prominence as the "righteous" gun user must be understood as entangled within these same motives.

⁷ Lerman, Nina E., Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen Mohun. *Gender and technology: a reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

⁸ As a point of clarity, my conceptualization of the term "performance"—one that indicates an emergent property of the interactions between people and guns—follows two distinct but complementary schools of thought. First, I understand a performance in part as the *meaningful bodily behaviors* that emerge through scriptive things, as Bernstein describes. Second, I understand performance as it relates to the performativity of social roles, particularly gender and race. Following Judith Butler's theory, the performativity of gender (here, also of race) is basically understood as the involuntary reiteration or reenactment of established norms of expression. Both concepts imply behaviors that are reproduced and transmitted through historically and socially-constituted norms; however, in the latter definition these behaviors are instructed by social forces, rather than those emerging through engagements with "things". See: Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Taylor and Francis, 2006. Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*.



Research Questions and Methodology

Figuring the gun as a source of not just material but symbolic power, this thesis aims to assess 1) how relevant social groups⁹ have inscribed the gun with markers of race, gender, and nationality to assert their authority as the dominant, righteous users, 2) how people's experiences of how they are perceived with guns varies depending on these same factors, and 3) how various users have exploited and renegotiated the symbolism underlying guns, as well as the insinuation of gun violence, to make claims of social power and authority. These questions drove the present assemblage of three case studies, which lead towards understanding the persistence of firearms in the most gun-obsessed nation in the world.

I began my research by identifying three spaces and subcultures of "armed Americans", where gun owners articulate a distinct gun politics. The subjects of my research were individuals within Project Appleseed, The Crossroads of the West gun show, and the Huey P. Newton Gun

⁹ Kline, Ronald, and Trevor Pinch. "Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States." *Technology and Culture* 37, no. 4 (1996): 763.

Club (HPNGC). These three cases were chosen for the divergent ideologies, demographics, and structural contexts that they represent, briefly:

- 1) **Project Appleseed** is a marksmanship training program that holds shooting clinics across the country, with the aim of teaching not just the skills with a rifle but what they call the “Heritage”. During breaks, instructors recite stories of the American Revolutionary War that celebrate the histories of various “Riflemen”.
- 2) **The Crossroads of the West Gun Show** is the largest moving firearms trading and selling congregations in the nation, with the present example having been held in Phoenix, AZ. While the enterprise is politically heterogeneous, I focused on the ideologies intimated by the representation of guns in frontiering motifs of the “wild-west.
- 3) **The Huey P. Newton Gun Club** was founded with the mission of ending police terrorism in black and brown communities, primarily by arming their members and enforcing community patrols. Named after the founder of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the HPNGC situates its work within a historical pedigree of black liberation movements.

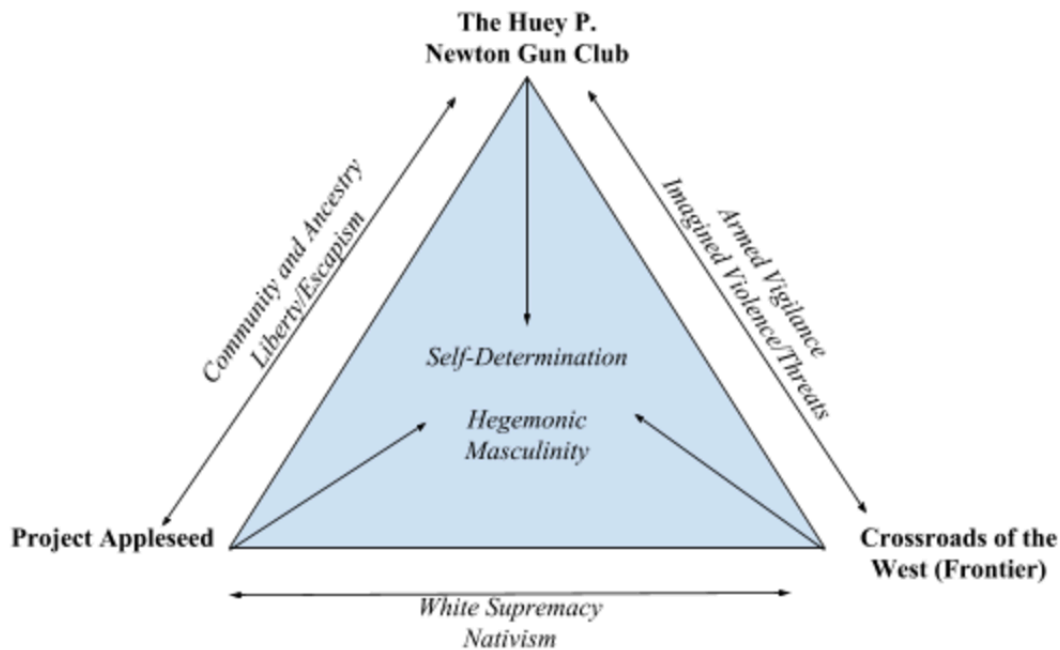
<i>Case Study</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Primary Demographic (race/gender)¹⁰</i>	<i>Primary Activities</i>	<i>Primary Source Material</i>
Project Appleseed	Arizona	White men	Providing marksmanship training and “History” lessons	Participant observation
The Crossroads of the West Gun Show	Arizona	White men	Firearms selling and trade	Participant observation
The Huey P. Newton Gun Club	Texas	Black men	Political activism, community patrols, armed protests	Interview with founder

Drawing from participant observations, in-depth interviews with group members, as well as websites and other visual media, I have looked to the cultural practices around guns for how they reveal historically-situated social roles and notions of identity—both individual and national. These practices and performances refused to speak to a single story, reflecting a highly diverse set of experiences. Thus, the following chapters present most prominently as a series of

¹⁰ Demographics are based on observational inference

vignettes, each being in a sense disjointed but as a unique manifestation of the cult of the gun in a different place and social context.

Concept map: Shared Values Between Case Studies



Outline of Chapters

Chapters II and III provide case studies on Project Appleseed and the Crossroads of the West gun show. Given the preponderance of conservative white men in these spaces, these chapters will begin to map out the constellation of meanings that inscribe within whiteness and masculinity. These groups valorize distinct white masculine archetypes—the colonial citizen-soldier and the frontiersman—who are constructs of a mythologized history of gun owners in America. The ways in which guns are scripted and made to perform within mythologized

narratives of American history, and with what consequences, will be a central point of inquiry within these chapters.

Chapter II seeks unpack the cultural messages attached to rifles at Project Appleseed, a rifle marksmanship training program that seeks to teach not just the skills with a rifle but the “Heritage”. This chapter will first analyze the oral histories of the Revolutionary War recited by Appleseed representatives, and how they serve to dialectically co-constitute rifles with ideologies within a nativist project. Appleseeder’s celebration of marksmanship, which enable them to imagine and access communities and alter-egos, will be framed as a response to feelings of status decline and alienation.

Chapter III serves to provide an optic into the markets and cultural economies in which traditional gun owners may encounter and engage with guns, using the Crossroads of the West gun show—the largest moving firearms trading and selling congregations in the nation—as a distinct case study. The Crossroads relies on a representation of the gun that carries a decidedly western genealogy—which situates guns at the critical nexus between hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy. When inscribed within frontiering narratives, the performance of self through guns necessitates an aggressive stance against the racialized “others”, and projects racial and gendered hierarchies.

Departing from “traditional” uses of guns, Chapter IV will draw connections to and situate the performances of an emergent gun rights groups, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club (HPNGC). With a focus on the ‘imagined’ violence enacted by the HPNGC, this section will describe how the performances scripted by the HPNGC function to symbolically renegotiate and

reterritorialize the ideological space of the gun.¹¹ The HPNGC's current strategies, which involve tactics such as armed police patrols and demonstrations, will be framed in the historical context of the early movement which Huey P. Newton co-founded—the Black Panther Party of Self-Defense. At times figuring the right to bear arms as a matter of life or death, the HPNGC's claim to gun ownership rights becomes a metonym for their right to self-defense, self-determination, and at the most basic level, political ontology. On some level, these emancipatory appropriations of firearms provide their members with the opportunity to (re)claim a mode of manhood, humanity, heroism, and citizenship that is often off limits to them.

¹¹ Halberstam, Judith. "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance." *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 187.

CHAPTER II – PROJECT APPLESEED: NATIVISM AND THE (RE)ENACTMENT OF AMERICAN RIFLEMEN

Introduction

Project Appleseed can help transform you from a man with a rifle into a Rifleman. A Rifleman is more than a man (or woman) with a rifle. A Rifleman understands that owning and mastering a rifle is part of his heritage as an American. And he knows why: This is a nation founded by Riflemen -- men and women skilled in the use of arms.

At Project Appleseed, we want to return America to being a nation of Riflemen. And we want you to join us.”¹

Although the nine-to-five itinerary is jam-packed with the technicalities and the competitive sporting flourish expected of standard regimens, Project Appleseed is no typical shooting program. Appleseed instructors teach not only the skills with a rifle, but what they deem the “Heritage”. Between target practices, Appleseed instructors slip out of their role as shooting coaches, and into that of civics teachers to deliver “Heritage Presentations” about various riflemen during the American Revolutionary War. Having received training by their founding organization, the Revolutionary War Veterans Association (RWVA),² they recite a series of tales that capture the essence of the mythic epoch.

Although people may be tempted to dismiss and harangue the organization for how its narrative of the Revolutionary War is ideologically infused and in some cases fabricated, or how it reinforces a patriarchal and ethnocentric reading of American history,³ such an approach would

¹ Project Appleseed. Accessed July 16, 2016. <https://appleseedinfo.org/index.html>.

² Contrary to popular misconception, it is not an association of current military veterans (i.e. to be a veteran of the revolutionary war you would have to be ~300 years old).

³ While much can be said about the symbolic violence enacted through these ethnocentric narratives, as well as their oppressive consequences (See: Chapter III), my analysis of Project Appleseed will divert from these issues to discuss the function of these narratives in the quotidian lives of the white, male shooter.

achieve little in terms of understanding its appeal to prospective members. Intrigued by the website's description, I attended my first Appleseed in effort to better understand what compelled these shooters to band together with the collective mission to "Save America"⁴ by returning it to a nation of 'Riflemen'. While there are manifold interpretations of the rifle across the country, what is its significance to these mostly white, middle-aged men, who are motivated by a burning sense of urgency to ensure that marksmanship remains an essential part of American culture? What does the rifle *embody* for them? More importantly, who is this "Rifleman" and why are they so intent on playing the role?

Their questionable veracity aside, Appleseed's historical accounts dialectically co-produce rifles with themes of populism, self-reliance, and masculine heroics—all of which constitute the emergent "national character" of the Rifleman.⁵ By figuring the "Tradition" of marksmanship as their exclusive inheritance, Appleseeders carve out a social identity that is, in the face of a changing nation, as fixed and embodied as their engagements with the rifles themselves.

Gun Myths, Nativism, and Status Decline

Nestled deep within 180 acres of pinyon-juniper and high country cover, Northern Arizona provides a scenic backdrop for a summer Appleseed clinic. With gunshots echoing off the hills in the background, the shoot boss prepares us for a talk about the significance of April 19, 1775—the first day of the Revolutionary war: "We start with a fun question. Where was the

⁴ "A Plan to Save America." Project Appleseed. Accessed February 2, 2017. https://appleseedinfo.org/as_our_plan.html.

⁵ Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

American Revolution won? Anybody know, anybody want to give me a guess?" Myself and the shooters sitting at picnic tables glance at each other curiously.

After a moment of silence, an assistant suits up to deliver his line: "I'm thinking it was won in the hearts and minds of the colonists."

Smiling with phony acclaim, our shoot boss responds "That is precisely correct! We often think about the war as being won at a particular location at a particular date. But it's not even the American Revolutionary War that we're talking about, it's the American Revolution."

...

In one of his online statements, founder Jack Dailey (who goes by the pseudonym "Fred") employs a politically affective narrative of the Revolutionary War, which situates marksmanship as not only present in but constitutive of the founding of a national ethos:

Rifle marksmanship has been a pillar in the American experience, from the moment our forefathers settled this land, and it was solidified as an American Heritage on April 19th, 1775, when "marksmanship met History and the Heritage began". Throughout America's history, the skill of the rifleman has stood out as one of those skills that distinguished those of this land from those of others. At no time in our history did this uniquely American skill mean so much as during the Revolutionary War, when our Founding Generation was forced to utilize these skills in defense of their, and our, Liberties and Freedoms.⁶

Since the gun is so central to many Americans' ethnic, national, and gender identities, the national history of firearms has been assiduously mythologized to advance a host of cultural mores, particularly those centered around themes of individualism, patriotism, and militarism.⁷ As Robert Arjet described: "If we take 'mythic' to mean those qualities of a story that predispose hearers and viewers to understand that story as a description of the world, an argument about

⁶ "Learn Today, Teach Tomorrow. Marksmanship." Project Appleseed. July 19, 2009. Accessed May 1, 2017. <https://appleseedinfo.org/smf/index.php?topic=8173.0>.

⁷ Hofstadter, Richard. "America as a Gun Culture." *American Heritage*, October 1970.

how it works, and a prescription for what to do about it, gun narratives are without a doubt important myths of our time.”⁸

The functions of Appleseed and the RWVA’s narratives are twofold. First, they establish a clear in-group of ‘true’ Americans, based on a selective interpretation of the nation’s founder-origin story. The mythologized identities of the Riflemen, both in terms of their personal values and their demographic characteristics, are crafted to emulate (and therefore attract) the modern ‘average Joes’ of America—working-class, conservative, white men. The terms “Liberty”, “Freedom”, and “Heritage”, within their historical context, correspondingly denote meanings that exclude the experiences of other groups, such as indigenous peoples and slaves. Second, by inscribing marksmanship within this ethnocentric frame, Appleseed’s gun myths figure the rifle as an exclusive prop by which white American men can present themselves as distinctly patriotic—as such, they contribute to “the gun’s unique suitability as a channel for white male power”.⁹

While such features would seem appealing at any point in history, the fact that Appleseed was founded and peaked in growth within the past few years (reportedly having taught tens of thousands of shooters) is not insignificant. In an article written for SWAT magazine, Stewart Rhodes frames Project Appleseed’s mission to ‘turn America back into a nation of riflemen’ as addressing much more than declining marksmanship skills:

“Pick up a rifle and you change instantly from a subject to a citizen.” A student of history, [Colonel Cooper] understood the fundamental necessity that a free people, if they are to remain free, must be a nation of riflemen, keenly aware that their rifles are the final guarantors of liberty. America was once such a nation, but that awareness and tradition have been in steady decline, slowly

⁸ Arjet, Robert. *Open Fire Understanding Global Gun Cultures*. Compiled by Charles Fruehling. Springfield. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007, 126.

⁹ *Ibid*, 134.

strangled by apathy, neglect and the willful, criminal exclusion of our own heritage from public schools, where children are intentionally kept ignorant of the American Revolution, and where skill with a rifle is certainly not listed among the essential “life skills.”¹⁰

Rhode’s statement resonates with a population of white American men, who are grappling with a profound sense of displacement as they witness the “steady decline” of their status in the American political scene.¹¹ Of course, inbuilt to this notion is the sense that, while the status of women, people of color, and immigrants is on the rise, theirs is *unfairly* on the wane.¹² With this background, Appleseed’s celebration of marksmanship, which they frame as part of their “Tradition” and “Heritage”, can be seen as part of a broader response to a growing feeling of political alienation and cultural displacement. As political scientist Filindra posits, in the mind of this type of gun owner, “This is my way of expressing my ‘more-equal-than-others’

¹⁰ Rhodes, Stewart. “The Appleseed Project: Turning America Back Into A Nation of Riflemen.” *S.W.A.T.*, February 2008, 85.

¹¹ Regarding the decline of white men, John Fitzgerald Gates writes: “White male privilege is under attack... White men are vilified for hogging power, denying opportunity, fostering elitist systems, and holding the country back. They are called racists and bigots for trying to maintain their vision of an America that is slipping away daily. Now, they are beginning to feel the stresses of ‘otherness’ that has long been the Achilles heel of the oppressed. They are responding to protect their interests in a nation built for them that increasingly rebuffs them. They are losing the country.” From: Gates, John Fitzgerald. “Empathy for Angry White Men.” *The Huffington Post*. April 03, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-fitzgerald-gates-phd/empathy-for-angry-white-m_b_6999366.html.

¹² It may be just as easy to describe these fantasies as stemming from the longing for a white-washed and mono-cultural nation. In questioning why Project Appleseed’s movement emerged within the past decade—at the peak of conservative anxieties—it seems that a fairly straightforward answer emerges: racism. Of course, Appleseeders do not express their mission in such terms. Acknowledging real feelings of victimization amongst historically (and for the most part, contemporarily) privileged communities does not preclude the racial resentment and hegemonic masculinity that pervades every facet of the organization. Racism and sexism are not mutually exclusive from feelings of cultural displacement; rather, I would argue that they are inextricably intertwined. Regardless of whether one sees this notion as good or bad, fair or unfair—the important feature is here is that it is *resonant*. It is this resonance that makes Project Appleseed’s mission to “Save America” so attractive to a predominantly white, mostly male, and highly nativist demographic.

status in a society where egalitarianism is the norm. I can't say that some people are better and some are worse in terms of racial groups. But I can show it symbolically. I can show I'm a better citizen."¹³

The perfect symbol for this act is the rifle, marking the moment of transition from tyranny to liberation. Along these lines, James O. Farmer writes of Southern white Civil War reenactors, "It is not surprising that the era of affirmative action has seen a corresponding growth in the reenactment hobby, for it offers both an escape from that world, however brief, and a *symbolic defiance* of it."¹⁴ By embodying the Revolutionary citizen-soldier, Appleseeders perform the willingness of "true" Americans' to defend their liberty, whether against foreigners or the agents of a tyrannical government.¹⁵

While there are manifold implications to these performances, reducing them to spiteful nativist productions does not capture the emotional nuances that furnished their scene. In my observation, I found that the ethos of the Rifleman was not one of belligerence. Though masculine individualism sustained his character, external connotations aside, the Rifleman came to exemplify themes such as sacrifice, perseverance, humbleness, and moral courage.

The Rifleman and other Man-of-Action Heroes

A common theme that ties together these gun myths is a nostalgia for the imagined feats of men who showed seemingly impossible mastery over their primitive weaponry. The enigmatic

¹³ Ingraham, Christopher. "White resentment is fueling opposition to gun control, researchers say." *The Washington Post*. April 04, 2016. Accessed January 20, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/04/04/white-resentment-is-fueling-opposition-to-gun-control-researchers-say/>.

¹⁴ Farmer, James Oscar. "Playing Rebels: Reenactment as Nostalgia and Defense of the Confederacy in the Battle of Aiken." *Southern Cultures* 11, no. 1 (2005): 46-73. Cited from Kreiser, Lawrence A., and Randal Allred. *The Civil War in Popular Culture: Memory and Meaning*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014.

¹⁵ Schwartz, Mattathias. "Firing Line." *The New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 2010.

figure of the “Rifleman”, conceived in various iterations as the general archetype of the citizen-soldier, provides the heroic character through which Appleseed shooters look to perform their identities and make their lives meaningful. The riflemen described in their stories were not rich and powerful men; rather the “Riflemen” came to embody the teams of “regular people making deep sacrifices”.¹⁶ During my experience, Appleseed instructors would passionately recount the sacrifices that soldiers and their families made for cause and country, and decry what they perceive as pervasive apathy and historical ignorance sully our national character. A prominent example is the tale of “Morgan’s Riflemen, said to be one of the first companies of riflemen put together, and one the most widely mythologized. Our shoot boss recounted this story as such:

Morgan thought that, in order to put together a group of men who were very skilled in marksmanship, he would need to find people who shoot to stay alive: people who lived on the outskirts, people whom we would today refer to as “hillbillies” or “rednecks”. These 96 men would accomplish feats such as shooting a shingle at 250 paces on their first try, and marching 600 miles to Boston in 21 days—all without any of today’s modern conveniences. After asking us rhetorically, how many of his riflemen gave up in the process, our shoot boss answers with a “big fat zero”.

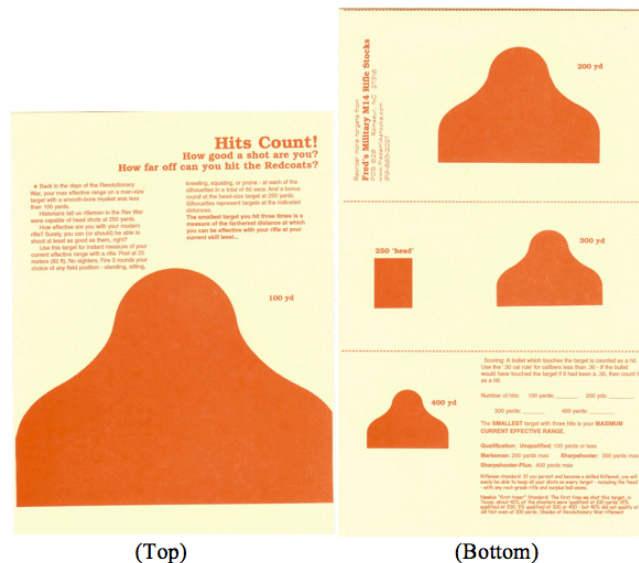
These stories reaffirm the importance of the rural dwelling patriot, whose skills with a rifle would provide the bedrock of America’s freedom. The Rifleman functions as an “placeholder, or effigy, that their contemporary namesakes occupy to reactivate founding

¹⁶ Schocket, Andrew M. "To Re-create a More Perfect Union: Originalism, the Tea Party, and Reenactors." In *Fighting over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution*, 165-200. NYU Press, 2015, 198.

mythologies of citizenship itself.”¹⁷ Through marksmanship training, Appleseed provides shooters with a platform upon which they can perform their identities into existence. Particularly for men whose work lives are defined by the stifling constraints of hierarchy and organizational dependence, playing citizen-soldier for a weekend may also offer them a mode of escapism from repressed lifestyle.¹⁸

...

The first Appleseed shoot—the Appleseed Qualification Test (AQT)—is highly symbolic. Shooters fire thirteen rounds, representing the thirteen colonies, into “redcoat” targets:



As the AQT goes, the smallest “redcoat” silhouette you hit three times on the AQT is said to be a measure of the farthest distance at which you can be effective with your rifle: three shots into the 200-yard redcoat silhouette earns you a “Marksman” title, the 300-yard makes you a “Sharpshooter”, and the 400-yard makes you a “Sharpshooter-Plus”. Keeping all twelve of your

¹⁷Oliviero, Katie E. "Sensational Nation and the Minutemen: Gendered Citizenship and Moral Vulnerabilities." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 3 (2011): 685.

¹⁸Kohn, Abigail A. *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

shots in each redcoat, in addition to getting the thirteenth into the 250-yard “head” shot target, will earn you the illustrious title of “Rifleman”.

In this romanticized recreation of the past, target training offers the perfect contemporary vehicle for these identity plays. Like effective theater, Appleseeder’s performances as Riflemen and citizen-soldiers transports them to another place and time, collapsing the distinction between the role and actor. The front side of the target gestures to the exercise’s historical relevance:

“Back in the days of the Revolutionary War, your max effective range on a man-size target with a smooth-bore musket was less than 100 yards. Historians tell us riflemen in the Rev War were capable of head shots at 250 yards. How effective are you with your modern rifle? Surely you can (or should) be able to shoot at least as good as them, right?”

By shooting “redcoats” and subjecting themselves to the rigorous trials of strength in the AQT, Appleseeders inhabit this mythologized history, and through this space they make guns meaningful in their lives now. Using the gun in these rigorous trials of strength allows men to construct themselves in a dramatic fashion as man-of-action soldiers and patriots. By creating their own masculine rites of passage through the AQT, Appleseeders can performatively reinforce the status of their physical skills, even as they no longer in broad demand.

Community and Touching the Past

One of the dads who came with his 10-year old son, brought snacks and bottled water to share with the group. I learned later that the two younger men assisting the shoot boss in instruction had driven a long way north, on their own dime, to volunteer their time to guiding the shoot.¹⁹ Surprisingly, I did not hear a single conversation explicitly reference American politics, save a couple rather tame discussions of changing gun laws in the state and the implications for

¹⁹ Our shoot boss also casually reference the “Heritage” presentations as “story time”, during which time we’re allowed to eat our “munchies”.

gun owners. Most of the dialogue centers around where people are from, what they do, and other personal topics that arise when shooters come together to compare targets.

Despite the nativist rhetoric and the insurrectionist allusions, the atmosphere at my first Appleseed shoot was far from that of a new battleground. Rather, most shooters treated these outings as a family retreat, where they could escape the constraints of society and form communities amongst those of like mind. In what seems to be a time of cultural displacement, Appleseeders, “all hearken back to the Revolution because it provides a communal emotional touchpoint for what they think of as the nation’s ideals, for who belongs, for what being a citizen means, and for the nature of the compact between citizens and the government.”²⁰

Aside from ideology, the essential element tying these Appleseeders together is the rifle. With the gravity of its symbolic import, the rifle gathers Appleseeders together for a common mission, and helps to expel a growing sense of otherness. In his manifesto Jack Dailey accounts:

Since our Founding era, [marksmanship] has been passed on from generation to generation...This skill has shown to be useful and practical to the people of America...in being a cultural link across generations and social structures.....In no other nation in the world is this Tradition so rooted in the founding of a nation and so freely passed on from one generation to the next. When an American Rifleman slings their rifle over their shoulder, they carry with them a Heritage that they can trace back to the birth of this nation, to that first American generation, just as their fathers and grandfathers were able to.²¹

²⁰ Schocket, Andrew M. *Fighting Over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution*. New York University Press, 2015, 200.

²¹ "Learn Today, Teach Tomorrow. Marksmanship." Project Appleseed. July 19, 2009. Accessed May 1, 2017. <https://appleseedinfo.org/smf/index.php?topic=8173.0>.

As what anthropologists have termed a “structural operator”, the rifle offers its user the opportunity to come into direct, intimate contact with past persons and past epochs.²² Although most Appleseeders use modern long rifles, their physical inauthenticity does not preclude their ability to “touch the past”. Their rifles provide them with a sense of strength and reassurance in the face of a precarious national future: “You have over 230 years of proof to lean upon and millions of fellow Rifleman, from then to [now], to share the load with.”²³

Conclusion: The Problem with Reenactment

Project Appleseed offers a platform where mostly white male members can celebrate their lasting supremacy, and relive the romantic dream of founding a new nation. The figure of the Rifleman—animated by histrionic tales of sacrifice and masculine heroics—seems to emerge from the desire to relive a mythologized American history that has given their national, racial, and gender identities meaning.²⁴ Through ritualistic marksmanship training, they can assure themselves that they have not lost the strength and character of the enigmatic Rifleman, and reengage with what they feel multiculturalism has deprived them of.²⁵

²² Auslander, Mark. "Touching the Past: Materializing Time in Traumatic “Living History” Reenactments." *Signs and Society* 1, no. 1 (2013): 163-164

²³ “Learn Today, Teach Tomorrow. Marksmanship.” While Appleseeders acknowledge this sense of displacement in their criticisms of contemporary American culture, they keep a positive outlook in the face of decline, often describing their work as “waking up” the “sleeping” American in all of us (the American dream is not dead, it is just dormant). In his endorsement of Project Appleseed, Rhodes optimistically writes, “it is not too late to turn the tide, to once again make America a nation of riflemen ‘who know very much what they are about,’ as one British officer described the men of April 19, 1775 who ‘gave ball for ball,’ as they swarmed around the retreating Regulars all the way back to Boston.” Rhodes, Stewart. "The Appleseed Project", 85.

²⁴ Springwood, Charles Fruehling. "Gunscares: Toward a Global Geography of the Firearm." In *Open Fire, Understanding Global Gun Cultures*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007.

²⁵ Kohn, Abigail A. *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 98-99.

Whatever truth there may be in such explanations, these performative (re)enactments and the fantasies they invoke are perhaps most truly understood as shadows of a larger, darker drama. As Andrew Schocket wrote of reenactors, “Trying to bring back the Revolutionary era, whether through policy or through physical recreation, cannot be done without either doing violence to the past, undoing much of what we value about the present, or both.”²⁶ The rifle’s ability to draw Appleseeders together and reinforce their social identities, is dependent on its inscription with the colonial habitus of their “Heritage” and “Tradition”. By extension, the emergent performances entail actions and ways of thinking that are embedded within colonial systems of domination and oppression. While shooters’ (re)enactments of these mythologized histories during Appleseed shoots seem isolated and ephemeral, the emergent performances entrench a colonial repertoire of tactics that, while not directly combative in nature, deploy symbolic violence—they expel the voices and agency of those whom the white colonial regime has historically oppressed.²⁷

As Schocket has described: “One person’s essentialist nostalgia may coincide with another’s painful, repressed memory.”²⁸ Understanding the motivations, desires, and affective habits that guide the scripted performances between shooters and their rifles is essential to understanding their influence on individual identity. However, a holistic understanding of these

²⁶ Schocket, Andrew M. *Fighting Over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution*. New York University Press, 2015, 199-200.

²⁷ While the Riflemen as moral characters are defined through their fight for “Liberty” and “Freedom”, Appleseeders do not tarry in the fact that, historically, few of these white revolutionaries actually wanted to extend that freedom to slaves and indentured servants. We have all been inured to the violent erasure of indigenous peoples, slaves, women, and other people of color in American history. And in recent years these groups have fought for their right to be represented, their histories acknowledged. So perhaps the best way to “Save America” and remedy these feelings of a fragmented national ethos, is to embrace diversity and the mosaic of experiences that comprise our nation’s (or many nations’) collective histories

²⁸ Schocket, Andrew M. *Fighting Over the Founders*, 198

performances, and their socially transformative power, requires an engagement of not only the actions that unfold in that spatiotemporal event, but the ghosts of the other, presently invisible performances that haunt it.

CHAPTER III - THE CROSSROADS OF THE WEST GUN SHOW: RACIAL FRONTIERS AND WHITE MALE 'MIGHT AND RIGHT'

It's mid-July in Phoenix, AZ. The parking lot at the Arizona State Fairgrounds is filling up, mostly with white and beige pickups. Occupying my rearview is a giant white Ram, which looms behind me as I pay the parking toll fee. "Do I stand out?" I think to myself as I exit my car and make my way towards the entrance (Of course I do).

A couple carries boxes full of ammunition in each of their hands as they leave the show. Another group pushes a flatbed stacked full with equipment, long rifles over their shoulders. Food stands outside of the stadium are selling Indian fry bread, Mexican food, and lemonade.

From observing the steady flow of guests trickling into and out of the stadium, it becomes clear that, unsurprisingly, the predominant demographic in attendance is white men: even more specifically, white men outfitted in black t-shirts, red and white baseball caps, and some form of camouflage. White men sporting tight jeans, big belt buckles, and cowboy boots.

As I buy tickets, I look to the banner above the ticketing booth, which proudly displays "Crossroads of the West Gun Show", a cowboy boot and spur pictured in the corner.



Introduction: The Crossroads of the West Gun Shows

The Crossroads of the West gun shows have been a West coast tradition for over 35 years, with regular shows throughout Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California. Last year, the

Crossroads attracted over half a million guests, more than any other gun show in America.¹ In Arizona, the state with the most relaxed gun laws in the nation, the Crossroads provides an optic into the nature of the commercial activities amongst firearms markets—notably, their target consumers, their advertising tactics, as well as their buying patterns.

The spaces at gun shows are often scrutinized for the way that they reflect gender divisions and racial inequalities: while White men represent just a third of the U.S. population, they compromise about 60 percent of adult gun-owners.² Aside from white men's considerable monopoly over the market, the fact that firearms have been scripted as 'white' and 'manly' objects through both the real and imagined history of their use, has a decisive role in guiding their distribution today. Sellers across the country are keenly aware of how important historical fantasies are to the marketing of their firearms.

In the present case study, the Crossroads gun shows are orchestrated around the jingoistic theme and staging of a mythologized American *frontier*³ complete with a dramatic reverence of the atavistic masculine ideals, primitive violence, and rough-justice ethos of white America's mythic Western heritage. At the symbolic intersection between the present and the fantasy of America's frontiering past, the Crossroads of the West offers a hypothetical space for new

¹ Crossroads of the West Gunshows. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://www.crossroadsgunshows.com/>.

² Drake, Bruce. "About four-in-ten Americans live in a household where there is a gun." Pew Research Center. July 25, 2013. Accessed April 01, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/26/about-four-in-ten-americans-live-in-a-household-where-there-is-a-gun/>.

³For the purpose of this paper, I use the term "frontier", at times synonymously with the "wild-west" or the "Old West", to invoke the notion of 'unknown', 'savage', and 'hostile' territories that have become central motifs in narratives of white, masculine identity formation, both in America and abroad. The term "frontier" is of course a highly problematic phrase when used seriously in the context of historical narrative (Karen Jones describes it as the "methodological 'F' word" rebuked by revisionist historians, which unscrupulously fails to consider history beyond the frame of the Anglo-Saxon male). From: Jones et al. *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire*:

territories of (white) masculine conquest, and plays off its patrons' longing to perform these gunfighter identities into existence. Yet what begins as a quixotic dream of gunfights and glory can quickly turn into a nightmare, when seemingly anachronistic performances of Manifest Destiny and "regeneration through violence" are inevitably re(enacted) in the modern context of white supremacy, toxic masculinity, and American imperialism.⁴

Men's Guns

Inside the arena, there are hundreds of vendors at tables selling everything one needs to build their own personal arsenal, and then some. Of course, there is a diverse assortment of handguns and rifles, along with tactical gear, optics, mounts, reloading equipment, and the like. Some booths focus on collectibles, with customized pistols, intricately engraved with polished rosewood and pearlite grips, sitting in clear display cases. Wholesale ammunition vendors take up the entire back portion of the stadium.

Aside from the ammunition stores, it would seem that the real stars of the show are the military-style rifles or "black gun"⁵ booths. A yellow banner featuring skull and crossbones reads "Black Gun Stuff – Your one stop assault shop". Component parts and accessories for black guns, including AK-47s and AR-16s, are priced competitively, with 30-round magazines

⁴ Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through violence: the mythology of the American frontier, 1600-1860*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. On the role of warrior myths in the modern culture, see Gibson, James William. *Warrior dreams: paramilitary culture in post-Vietnam America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

⁵ The term "black gun" is typically used to describe military-style rifles (especially AR-15s which were the first to use the black finish) in contrast to the typical image of a green hunting rifle. These types of guns are also often referred to in popular media as "assault rifles", however they do not fit the legal definition of an assault rifle, which constitutes a selective-fire rifles that can fire in automatic or burst modes (a common source of confusion, the AR in AR-15 stands for Armalite, the company that produces it). The term EBR (Evil Black Rifles) is often used sarcastically in response to the medias misconstrued portrayal of these guns.

available for as low as \$19.99. A young man says to his friend, “Gotta get you that AR fool, good shit”.

Judging from the comments and facial expressions made upon each of my purchases, I suspect the vendors are wildly unaccustomed to female patrons, particularly those in my age range: “I love seeing ladies buy gun stuff, I just think it’s so cool”. The middle-aged vendor from whom I bought a few hundred rounds of .22LR bullets felt it apt to comment, “You have a beautiful smile, I just have to tell you”.

Gun ownership is facilitated by a constellation of cultural processes, including media representations of guns, ritualized access to firearms, and ideas about appropriate behavior for people of different social positionalities. Men often seek out guns because of how they make them feel: tough, primitive, and empowered. Since guns are lethal, they instill their users with the capacity to control others, and are thus highly effective tools for achieving masculinity.⁶ Women on the other hand may avoid guns since they feel they are being mocked, hypersexualized, or belittled while carrying.

Historically, attempts to reassert the hegemonic form of American masculinity—particularly during times of crisis—have found an ideal vehicle in in the cult of the gun.⁷ Aside

⁶ Stroud, Angela. *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

⁷ Gibson describes how masculine archetypes revolving around “hard bodies”—Rambo-like figures who have massive muscles and huge firearms—emerged as a cathartic response to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, and as a means to restore the virility of what some viewed as to be the foreign policy of the Carter administration. See Gibson, James William. *Warrior dreams: paramilitary culture in post-Vietnam America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

Not coincidentally, the National Rifle Association—known to embrace its own version of “frontier masculinity”—took a decidedly political turn at the same time as threats to white hegemonic masculinity arose—most notably, civil rights, feminism, and LGBTQ movements.

from its functional implications, the notion of the gun as a ‘domineering machine’ has been facilitated by its attachment to a host of hyper-masculine archetypes—the first of which were arguably the gunslingers of wild-west.⁸ Figures such as Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson and Daniel Boone would come to define a new masculine paragon of decidedly unrestrained character. The pistol-whipping protagonists to these tales were depicted as, “uncivilized, anarchic, and fiercely independent men who survived through courage, physical skills, and cunning. They could not bear the inhibitions of civilization (the East) and so they lived on the cusp of wilderness.”⁹ Whether as cowboys, Indian fighters, buffalo hunters, or lawmen—these gunslingers thrived in environments characterized by the cathartic and gratuitous use of violence, especially as it related to matters of honor. Western codes of killing found that “any disrespect, insult, or challenge to one’s name, reputation, or courage demands ‘satisfaction’ in the form of a violent, often deadly conflict.”¹⁰

As countless scholars have unpacked, these sharpshooting characters were largely myth, as were the Old Western cow towns rife with pistol fights and casual murder.¹¹ Robert Dykrsta describes how, “the uniquely savage and homicide-ravaged Old West is a construct as phony as America's favorite ‘invented tradition’—the quick-draw street duel reenacted every day in a

See Melzer, Scott. *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

⁸ Importantly, the emergence of hegemonic masculinity was thought to have been connected to the ethos of Manifest destiny

⁹ Holt, Douglas B., and Craig J. Thompson. "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 2 (2004): 427

¹⁰ Indick, William. *The Psychology of the Western: How the American Psyche Plays out on Screen*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008., 24

¹¹ Udall, Stewart L., Robert R. Dykstra, Michael A. Bellesiles, Paula Mitchell Marks, and Gregory H. Nobles. "How the West Got Wild: American Media and Frontier Violence A Roundtable." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2000): 277.

score of tourist venues.”¹² Aside from bolstering the gun industry, these images of guns were critical in helping Americans define a national identity: one fiercely independent and brutal. This masculine archetype would remain popular amongst men those who found “fewer and fewer public acknowledgements of their masculine prowess in the industrializing United States.”¹³ In his 1959 *Time* article, Peter Lyon describes the catharsis that Western stories offer in depicting primal methods of conflict resolution:

“In the cowboy’s world, justice is the result of direct action, not of elaborate legality... Says sociologist Philip Rieff: “How long since you used your fists? How long since you called the boss and s.o.b.? The Western men do, and they are happy men.” Says motivational research Ernest Dichter: “America grew up too fast, and we have lost something in the process. The Western story offers us a way to return to the soil, a chance to redefine our roots.”¹⁴

Despite (and precisely due to) the fact that the United States has become overwhelmingly urbanized, most Americans continue to glorify this mythical Hobbesian heritage. The Crossroads plays off its predominantly male consumers’ nostalgia for the rough-and-tough gunmen of the Old West, and offers guns as a means for buyers to produce themselves in these same primitive and martial terms. Particularly as men’s lives become further structured by work and urbanization, “Men use the plasticity of consumer identity construction to forge atavistic masculine identities based upon an imagined life of self-reliant, premodern men who lived outside the confines of cities, families, and work bureaucracies.”¹⁵

¹² Udall, et al., “How the West Got Wild,” 279. As Dykrsta points out “During its celebrated decade as a cattle town only fifteen adults died violently in Dodge-an average of just one and one-half per cowboy season.”

¹³ Greenberg, Amy S. *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010., 13

¹⁴ Lyon, Peter. “The Six-Gun Galahad.” *Time*, March 30, 1959, 53. Cited by Indick, *The Psychology of the Western*, 25.

¹⁵ Holt, Douglas B., and Craig J. Thompson. “Man-of-Action Heroes,” 426.

That said, this mythologized primitive heritage has only been widely celebrated in cases where it was held up by a select few. Like the stories of the citizen-soldiers from the Revolutionary War (Chapter II), the glorified gunslingers in these productions were almost invariably depicted as white men, thus appealing to discourses of not only hegemonic masculinity, but also white supremacy. Such observations prompt an important question: just who is permitted to be the lawless, cowboy-hero in this assumed egalitarian structure?

Manifest Manhood and the White Knights of the American “frontier”

The wild-west frontier serves as an appropriately sanitized vision by which to implicate the gun in Hobbesian themes of social Darwinism and masculine conquest. As an imagined, but very real site in our national cultural memory, the western frontier continues to shape American culture and masculinity. In his 1893 address, Frederick Jackson Turner presented his historical vision of the “Frontier” as the process by which the American identity was born:

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth...this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.¹⁶

This “recurrence of evolution”, the constant need to conquer primitive lands and peoples in pursuit of new civilizations, was described as a formative process whereby white American society would earn and maintain its supremacy.

The frontier was the place where white men combatted their ‘natural’ enemies and defeated them in literal and moral victories. Cultural productions depicted the white gunslinger as exploring virgin territory and battling hostile Native Americans and Mexicans. Nowhere is

¹⁶ Huber, William. "The Literary Frontier - Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" as a Thematic Element of Narrative ." *Antipodes*, 4th ser., 13, no. 1 (1999).

this better epitomized than in the “border dramas” of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: “At the turn of the century consumers in cities across the United States and Europe flocked to see reenactments of Bill Cody killing buffalo and battling Native Americans and Mexicans. Actual Native American and Mexican people and exotic live animals gave further authenticity to the large traveling productions.”¹⁷ In these tales told by and for white men, indigenous peoples were feminized and depicted in savage and animalistic terms—most often the human symbols of their conquest over the “natural” world. Women, African-Americans, and other people of color seemed to fade into the background (Indeed, there were black cowboys).¹⁸

Both symbolically and practically, guns played a vital role in propelling white colonists across the nation in the era of Manifest Destiny. In cultural productions that “celebrated the conquering of the West as a triumph of civilization over savagery, whites over Indians, and of civilization over nature”, firearms were figured as essential thematic elements around which ethnic identities were discursively organized.¹⁹ Rifles and revolvers were propped up as the tools of empire, agents of white American might and right, which were deployed by white men to control contested spaces. The gun being a unique product of Euro-American ingenuity, it was invoked as evidence of the whites’ technological and consequently racial superiority. Epitomizing this notion are the 1873 Winchester Repeating Rifle and the Colt “Peacemaker”—both enshrined as the guns that “Won the West”.²⁰

¹⁷ Peñaloza, Lisa. "Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo." *Journal of Consumer Research* 28, no. 3 (2001): 372.

¹⁸ Taylor, Quintard. *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

¹⁹ Kohn, Abigail A. *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 86

²⁰ Jones, Karen R. *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.

Yet with the closing of the frontier during the fin de siècle, how could these men fulfill their “manifest masculine destiny”²¹ at a time when large-scale territorial battles had virtually disappeared from American soils? The short answer is that Americans have always created new opportunities and new frontiers to violently assert their dominance, in a variety of ways.

Nightmares of the “New West”

Tucked away in the side room are a diverse assortment of booths that specialize in satirical, propagandistic novelty items of a rather unsavory nature. Underneath the guise of “politically incorrect” hyper-masculine bravado, many of the products sport themes of white preservation and racial purging.



Putting the myriad of “Keep Out” and “We Shoot Back” signs into context are confederate flags toting skulls and crossbones, anti-refugee placards, and various items expressing anti-Mexican immigrant sentiments. Not far from this scene are booths selling “Old West Memorabilia” and “Indian Artifacts”—frontiering motifs that bring me back to the essential American ethos that made this all normal.

Although no one would seriously argue that the mythology of the Western frontier alone drives white male owners to point their guns, literally or symbolically, at people of color—the fact that the gun is inscribed within such narratives certainly attracts more willing personalities. In what sociologists might refer to as the “back stages” of gun shows, racialized gun violence

²¹ Gross, Jeffrey. “Boyish Play and Manifest Destiny: The Transition from Civilizer to Killer in America and Abroad.” *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 2 (2008): 62.

remains the explicit rising action of white America's masculine character development. To understand how the racist fantasy of the wild-west finds its way into American gun culture and identity today, one might first examine the following products, which were held for sale at the Crossroads:



(Left) International terrorist hunting permit | Permit No 91101

(Right) Join the Marines travel to exotic distant lands meet exciting unusual people and kill them

By blazoning explicit themes of racial purging, these visuals hark back to the American tradition of slaughtering the racial “other” in the never-ending process of national subjectification. Even while the “Other” has taken the form of the Arab “terrorist” or the faceless caricature of an “exotic” “unusual” people²², these depictions implicate the spectator in a narrative based on the same fronting logic: The frontiersman gains strength and revitalizes the male self “from a masculinized landscape defined against ‘civilization.’” To do so, he seeks out racialized “others” on whom to project the unacknowledged hostile savagery of his own culture.^{23, 24} Within the prevailing notion that white male American identity is born through

²² Given what appears to be a rice hat, the caricature was likely an allusion to the Vietnam war

²³ Meola, Frank M. "A Passage Through 'Indians': Masculinity and Violence in Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13.1 (1999): 5-25.

²⁴ Interestingly, the notion of a “New Frontier” as it relates to the genocide and displacement of Native Americans has been invoked more than once in U.S. Military politics. Richard Slotkin explains how it shaped the language during the Kennedy administration’s counterinsurgency “mission” in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, using it to understand and justify military intervention: “Seven years after Kennedy’s nomination, American troops would be describing Vietnam as “Indian country” and search and destroy missions as a game of “Cowboys and Indians”; and Kennedy’s ambassador to Vietnam would justify a massive military

“evolutionary encounters” with inferior peoples, the deployment of firearms against people of color becomes tantamount to the performance of nationhood.²⁵

Indeed, the frontier narrative of American identity is at its core a morality play, with the white frontiersman—representing the force of “good”—wielding (if not drawing his very essence from) the gun. This identity of the white gun-wielding American patriot is dependent on his perpetual conquering of the racialized enemy, an act that requires some moral surgery to be successful. For the gun’s deployment against another human being to be justified, this performance is dependent on the “enemy” being scripted in threatening, animalistic, and spectrally human terms (*Fittingly, a seller at one of the back booths wears a shirt that reads, “All lives matter, except ISIS, fuck them”*). Thus, performing the white frontiersman in all his rugged, hyper-masculine glory not only requires that the actor/consumer present himself with his gun; it also requires that he present the legitimate object of his violence.

For the ‘good’ white American frontiersman, the performativity of the racialized enemy is engaged through the discursive co-production of ‘righteous owners’ as both threatened and invulnerable.²⁶ Popular manifestations of this discourse can be found in various iterations of “No

escalation by citing the necessity of moving “Indians” away from the “fort” so that the “settlers” could plant “corn” From Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. Norman, OK: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2008. 3.

²⁵ This performance cuts to the very ontology of America as a nation: As legal scholar Sora Han argues, “The United States is not AT war. The United States IS war”. The very constitution of the country is grounded in the normalized deployment of violence against indigenous peoples. Sora Han, *Bonds of Representation: Vision, Race and Law in Post-Civil Rights America*. Unpublished dissertation. University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006. Cited from Smith, Andrea. “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy.” *Color of Violence*, 2016, 66-73.

²⁶ Oliviero, Katie E. “Sensational Nation and the Minutemen: Gendered Citizenship and Moral Vulnerabilities.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 3 (2011): 679-706. Since the implicit acknowledgement of one’s vulnerability contradicts hyper-masculine standards, many signs compensate by producing extra machismo displays: for example, “This place is protected by a pit bull with AIDS”

Trespassing” signs, which most often function as bravado that makes patent owner’s willingness to deploy deadly violence:



(Left) Trespassers will be shot
| Al trespassar te pego un tiro

(Right) If you come through this door
you will be killed | Si vienes por esta
puerta te mato

Such signs are crafted for people who would *expect* their homes to be invaded, and as such they engage in a macho performance of aggressive, preemptive self-defense. The central message conveyed by these signs affirms the gun owner’s engagement in protecting their home, thus employing the gun to produce an “especially vigilant kind of citizen who is distinctly masculine in character.”²⁷ By translating the deadly warning into Spanish, the signs above layer this performance with a racialized inscription of “us” versus “them”, producing the figurative Spanish-speaker in threatening and alienating terms.²⁸ Once blazoned as the tool by which white frontiersmen protected themselves from ‘savage Indians’ and ‘Mexican bandits’, the gun is effortlessly recast in the contemporary context of Mexican immigration scares.

Amongst (predominantly white male) gun owners, the performative value of the gun, when played out in America’s frontiering narratives, is made apparent by the fact that these signs found a welcome market at the Crossroads. While such politics certainly vary between individual gun owners, the fact that gun show vendors ostentatiously promoted these frontier ideologies in a

²⁷ O’Neill, Kevin L. “Armed Citizens and the Stories They Tell: The National Rifle Association’s Achievement of Terror and Masculinity.” *Men and Masculinities* 9, no. 4 (2007): 459

²⁸ It should be noted that these signs were not much bigger than a standard 3x5 index card which, relative to a standard “No Trespassing” or “Private Property” sign, made it largely impractical as an actual deterrent (one might even criticize signs like this as inviting a burglar into your home by alerting them that the owner stores guns inside).

widespread assortment of paraphernalia, points to their significance as cultural capital. As products of dominant ideologies, gun scripts gesture beyond their theatrical scene to the broader regime of oppressive American identity politics, and encourage behaviors that performatively (re)produce them.

Guns are inscribed within these performances in ways that ultimately serve to stabilize heteropatriarchal and white supremacist regimes, scaffolding the reiterative structure of performativity through their very materiality. Since guns are seen as integral ‘engendering devices’ of white masculine characteristics, men are compelled to (re)enact gun violence (whether in reality or in spectacle) in order to normatively perform their gender roles.²⁹ The continuous reiteration of this performance then naturalizes the association of masculinity with the combative behaviors that the guns evoke.

Beyond maintaining hegemonic forms of masculinity, these scripted performances also serve white supremacy through necessitating the dehumanization and criminalization of ethnic and national “others”. For the traditional performance of frontier masculinity to succeed, the white male gun owner must not only construct himself in dominant terms, but also project hostility and belligerence onto an external identity—the “savage”, the “criminal”, the “terrorist”, or the “trespasser”. By taking up arms and investing his performance with the gun’s authenticity, he performatively (re)affirms the dangerousness of the racial “other”, figuring their threat as tantamount to his preemptive violence.³⁰

17. ²⁹ Beynon, John. *Masculinities and Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University, 2002,

³⁰ Oliviero, "Sensational Nation and the Minutemen," 679-706.

Conclusion: Going off Script – The Necessity of Counter-Narratives

When I finally make my way out of the stadium, there is a man sitting front and center in a chair, holding a sign that says “Used Glock 19 for sale”. While he is one of many unlicensed vendors selling similar items, he may be the first person of color I have seen in any selling position. He is wearing a baseball cap that reads, “Make America Native Again”.

Through the recapitulation of frontier mythologies and the toxic machismo of the Old West, the Crossroads sets the stage for a performance of ontological import, where moralized gun violence against the racial “other” is the process by which the white masculine American character is forged. Not only do these scripts lend to the normative reenactment of patriarchy, American exceptionalism, and white supremacy—they also serve to moralize racial violence and validate of otherwise meaningless claims of Euro-American exceptionalism. Even if their violence is not immediately physical, the performative dimensions of the frontiering gun scripts direct symbolic and ontological violence against historically disenfranchised groups—people of color, women, and immigrants.³¹

That said, while a large portion of “armed Americans” may still purchase these frontiering scripts, there are and have always been myriad other ways of interacting with and understanding one’s identity through guns. As Bernstein describes, “the term script denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but, rather, a necessary openness to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation.” Guns alone do not determine the user’s actions, even while charged with the

³¹ The fact that these scripts facilitate such dehumanization is significant—as dehumanization is often the first step in the justification of actual violence against a group. On symbolic violence see: Thapar-Björkert, Suruchi, Lotta Samelius, and Gurchathen S. Sanghera. "Exploring symbolic violence in the everyday: misrecognition, condescension, consent and complicity." *Feminist Review* 112, no. 1 (2016): 144-62.

scripted animative power of these historical representations. All that said, if we acknowledge that users from all backgrounds maintain substantial agency, what happens when we go off the script?

CHAPTER III - THE HUEY P. NEWTON GUN CLUB: BLACK NATIONALISM AND ARMED DEFENSE

Preface: American Gun Violence and Racial Trauma

Note: The subject of this section is the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, a group whose dominant ideology locates the gun as a critical source of liberty, self-determination and empowerment. To those mourning recent police killings, the Charleston Church shooting, and the long legacy of white violence enacted against various peoples of color, the gun occupies a space of intense trauma and silence. Feeling it in poor taste to discuss these themes in the context of contemporary America—without first recognizing its complicated and poignant contrasts to the broader spectrum of black and brown experiences—it is with this unspectacular background that I preface this next section.

“An American firearm icon”

These are the words that, in a public auction, George Zimmerman used to describe the 9mm handgun with which took the life of an unarmed 17-year-old high schooler.

The tragedy began on February 2nd 2012 with a call to the police, during which Zimmerman reported what he described as a suspicious person— Trayvon Martin—walking in his neighborhood. His only rationale for this judgement was the fact that Martin was black, male, and wearing a hooded sweatshirt. Ignoring police instructions not to approach him, Zimmerman pursued Martin on foot, initiating an altercation that would end in him fatally shooting the teen in the chest. The next year, Zimmerman was found not guilty of second degree murder and manslaughter.

Despite attempts to derail the auction, the handgun sold unceremoniously to an anonymous buyer for \$250,900.

It is no secret that the gun has been a symbol of white supremacy from the colonial and antebellum slaveholding eras to the twenty-first century. Zimmerman’s 9mm handgun is one of many guns that is still lionized for instrumental role in the killing and genocide of people of color (the colt Peacemaker, the state gun of Arizona, being another example).

With the disposability of African American life on especially blatant display, the gun has emerged prominently in a language that speaks to the victimization of black people against a wave of white terrorism: “Hands up, don’t shoot”, and “Black Lives Matter”. Thus, wrapped up in these painful continuities of both state and white vigilante violence—entities that, with each new killing of another black citizen, become harder to distinguish—the gun has come to embody a space of collective trauma for many black Americans.

In terms of the present-day numbers, African Americans' collective experience of guns and particularly gun violence differs fundamentally from that of their white counterparts. On average, black Americans are half as likely to own a gun as white Americans, but comprise half of the total victims of gun homicide.¹ Of these victims, young men of color are most affected: gun-related homicide is the leading cause of death among Black teens.² Gun injuries to Black teens outnumber those suffered by white teens by a ratio of 10 to 1.³ According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, from 1980 to 2008, 57 percent of victims of justifiable homicides committed by civilians were African American.⁴ In 2016, black males aged 15-34 were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by law enforcement officers.

Given that the sight of a black person with a gun elicits extremely hostile reactions from law enforcement and citizens alike, African Americans may be less apt to view guns as a viable option for self-defense.⁵ The killing of Philandro Castro, a licensed concealed carrier with no criminal record, served as a poignant reminder that the right to carry a gun, while race-neutral in text, would not be upheld for sections of black Americans.

Beyond the statistics, the centrality of guns in various depictions of white terrorism—from rampant police brutality, to the Charleston church mass shooting, to regular militarized

¹ Morin, Rich. "The demographics and politics of gun-owning households." Pew Research Center. July 15, 2014. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/the-demographics-and-politics-of-gun-owning-households/>.

² "Leading Causes of Death (LCOD) by Age Group, Black Males-United States, 2014." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. January 26, 2017. Accessed May 01, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/men/lcod/2014/black/index.htm>.

³ "Nonfatal Injury 2000-2015." Injury Prevention & Control. April 20, 2017. Accessed May 01, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/nonfatal.html>.

⁴ Cooper, Alexia, and Erica L. Smith. "Homicide Trends in the United States, 1980-2008 Annual Rates for 2009 and 2010." *The Bureau of Justice Statistics* NCJ 236018 (November 2011).

⁵ "The Science of Justice: Race, Arrests, and Use of Force." Center for Policing Equity. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://policingequity.org/research/1687-2/>.

assaults on peaceful protests—has made it instrumental in a more vicarious form of racial trauma. Viral videos depicting police shootings of unarmed black men and boys—Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Philando Castro, and Terrence Crutcher, being among these —have been met with expressions of psychological anguish from black social media users. Beyond constituting an additional form of terror, these depictions further contribute to the normalization of violence toward black life in America.

Enter: The Huey P Newton Gun Club

To many Americans, sentiments of helplessness and victimization are a prominent part in the emotional landscape of the gun. However, the gun is and has always been a site of contested meanings. The Huey P. Newton Gun club seeks to resituate the gun in an essential fight for liberty, solidarity, self-determination, and survival. Harkening back to the early discourse of the Black Panther Party of Self Defense, the HPNGC articulates its gun politics in a way that foregrounds the necessity of self-defense, while also condemning the transgressions of law enforcement within their communities. Thus, the gun in its symbolic portent enables the HPNGC to not only to insinuate the possibility of violent retaliation, but also to make claims to modes of citizenship and masculinity that have previously been of limits to them

The Huey P Newton Gun Club (HPNGC), which describes itself as “a coalition of different organizations and groups supporting armed self-defense as well as patrols” staged its first public demonstration in August 20th, 2014, during which it conducted an armed march through Dixon Circle, a predominately African American neighborhood in Dallas. As the website describes, “In the city of Dallas not unlike any other city across America there is an issue with “police terrorism”. The term terrorism is used because of the systematic murders of unarmed defenseless black, brown, and poor people without regard for life.... We promoted

armed self-defense from blatant racist black and white racist cops.”⁶ In response to the patrol, Dallas police Chief David Brown ordered a SWAT team to be on standby, which the HPNGC said “[encouraged] a violent standoff”.⁷

The HPNGC’s armed patrol was in response to a report published by Dallas Communities Organizing For Change, which revealed a rampant racial bias in the application of deadly force against Black and Hispanic citizens. The report, titled “A History of Violence—Uncovering Excessive Deadly Force by the Dallas Police” was based on data gathered between 2003-2014, which was obtained in an open records request to the Dallas Police Department (DPD). The report contained harrowing statistics on officer involved shootings, confirming the long-held suspicion that black communities in Dallas suffered from police shootings at rates far higher than their respective population density. In eight of the ten years reported, black communities consistently suffered from both fatal and non-fatal shootings at rates twice the average of the general populace, and in many cases, much higher. An individual by the name of Clinton Allen was the most well-known victim of these police killings, having been shot 7 times (including once in the back) by Marine Corps Veteran and Dallas Police Officer Clark Staller on March 10th, 2010. Allen was unarmed at the time.



The HPNGC Logo: America painted with the colors of the Pan-African Flag
From: <https://hueypnewtongunclub.org/about>

⁶ "About." Huey P Newton Gun Club. Accessed May 01, 2017.
<https://hueypnewtongunclub.org/about>.

⁷ Ibid.

In order to better understand the politics of the HPNGC, I interviewed Yafeuh Balogun, who co-founded the group alongside Babu Omawale. Balgoun made it clear to me that he represents more of the political office of the group, “I personally am not the gun enthusiast, I personally am not the individual that can sit down and just talk about weapons and break weapons down, but I am one of the individuals that can hold a political conversation about what we’re doing, why we’re doing it.” While Balgoun dates the inception of the HPNGC back to 2007, during which time they were carrying out community patrols on a “very minute level”, the group did not gain much media attention until this initial public demonstration. At the time, the mission of the HPNGC:

...was simply to educate the masses of black people in Dallas of their right to bear arms as mentioned in 2nd amendment the Constitution of the United States and also Article 1 of the Texas Constitution. What we found is largely a community that desires to be educated about arms.⁸

As their website states, the choice to “invoke ancestor Huey Newton”—the co-founder of the Black Panther Party of Self Defense (BPP) who was murdered in 1989 in Oakland CA—in the gun club’s title came logically “at a point in history where black men and women are murdered wholesale by various police agencies around the United States.”⁹ The gun’s symbolic politics in the HPNGC mobilization and stand-off with the police cannot be understood without being framed within the historical pedigree of black armed resistance movements in America.

Huey Newton’s autobiography employs a “dignifying account” of the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which invokes narratives designed to illustrate the inherent decency and dignity of their movement in the broader context of anti-racist political resistance and Black Nationalism. The history of the BPP in the civil rights era is considerably more

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

complex and nuanced than Newton's personal account would have you believe; however, what is most significant here is how Newton's story provided a character to aspire to, and a model of citizenship and morality that spoke to the HPNGC's politics.

Huey P Newton and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense

Long before the Black Panther Party was ever conceived, the movement's founders—Huey Newton and Bobby Seale—began to lay out its foundation in a series of involved discussions and readings concerning the philosophy of self-preservation and aggressive resistance. These sessions, which Newton would later describe as their “political education classes”, would pore over literature written by “veterans of people's wars”, who had “worked out successful strategies for liberating their people”. After being particularly inspired by Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, the four volumes of Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare*, Newton described their meditations as such:

Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, *not by any philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint*...for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. At bottom, this is a form of self-defense. Although that defense might at times take on characteristics of aggression, in the final analysis the people do not initiate; they simply respond to what has been inflicted upon them. People respect the expression of strength and dignity displayed by men who refuse to bow to the weapons of oppression.¹⁰

Newton seemed especially drawn to an idea that Fanon, writing during the Algerian war, described to be the “third phase of violence”:

the violence of the aggressor turns on him...Yet the oppressor does not understand...he knows no more than he did in the first phase when he launched the violence. The oppressed are always

¹⁰ Newton, Huey P., David Hilliard, and Wiese Donald. *The Huey P. Newton Reader*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003, 50. Italics added

defensive, the oppressor is always aggressive and surprised when the people turn back on him the force he has used against them.¹¹

This pivotal phase in the fight for liberation, also described as the “Year of the Boomerang”, would foreshadow the future of their movement within the next few years.

Before it became emblematic of the Black Panther Party, Newton and Seale’s tactic of armed self-defense was met with a great deal of resistance within their communities. In the Spring of 1966, when they spoke to members of local college-based organizations about an upcoming rally, they proposed staging an armed march, which Newton said would provide a much needed “jolt” to the establishment, as well as a potential recruiting device for people who they could not convince through words alone: “To recruit any sizeable number of street brothers, we would obviously have to do more than talk. We needed to give practical applications of our theory, show them that we were not afraid of weapons and not afraid of death....*if the Black community has learned to respect anything, it has learned to respect the gun*”.¹² Although open carrying guns was perfectly legal at the time, both groups unsurprisingly rejected the idea, a member calling the tactic “suicidal”.

Before the Party began any armed patrols, they were preceded by a growing number of citizen patrols being implemented in predominantly black communities. Typically, these citizen patrols would follow police in their encounters with community members, taking pictures and tape recordings of misconduct and then reporting it to the police. As one might expect, these reports would bring about little change, as the authorities responsible for dealing with them, who were police officers themselves, would typically side against the citizen.

¹¹ Ibid, 51. It should also be noted that the panther was invoked as a symbol for the movement for this very reason: “The panther is a fierce animal, but he will not attack until he is backed into a corner; then he will strike out.”

¹² Ibid, 48. Italics added

Newton and Seale's plan was to continue these citizen patrols, but in order to make them more effective, the patrols would need to openly carry firearms. The patrols were first implemented mostly between Newton, Seale, and a few other members. At first, Newton saw them as being successful in not only addressing police harassment and brutality, but also shaking the establishment: "never before had guns been an integral part of any patrol program. *With weapons in our hands, we were not longer their subjects but their equals.*"

In describing how the patrol's confrontations with the police would typically play out, Newton's language speaks to a language of noble, masculine heroics:

Out on patrol, we stopped whenever we saw the police questioning a brother or a sister. We would walk over with our weapons and observe them from a "safe" distance so that the police could not say we were interfering with the performance of their duty. We would ask the community members if they were being abused. Most of the time, when a policeman saw us coming, he slipped his book back into his pocket, got into his car, and left in a hurry. The citizens who had been stopped were as amazed as the police at our sudden appearance....Nobody had ever given them any support or assistance when the police harassed them, but here we were, *proud Black men, armed with guns and a knowledge of the law.*¹³

Newton also describes how legal education became an integral feature of their movement. When he saw a police officer was harassing a citizen, he would stand by and loudly recite the relevant laws, helping educate those who were gathered to observe. If a citizen was arrested under their patrol, the Party would follow them to jail and immediately post bail, often recruiting them that very day.

The functions of their newly implemented patrols extended far beyond a practical means of self-defense; they were also a means for profound communal empowerment:

By standing up to the police as equals, even holding them off, and yet remaining within the law, *we had demonstrated Black pride to the community in a concrete way.* Everywhere we went we caused

¹³ Ibid, 59. Italics added

traffic jams. People constantly stopped us to say how much they respected our courage. The idea of armed self-defense as a community policy was still new and a little intimidating to them; but it made them think. More important, *it created a feeling of solidarity*.¹⁴

As the Black Panther Party began to attract more attention from the press, conservative politicians and organizations alike began to rally for gun control reform. The “Panther’s Bill” of 1967 (also known as the Mulford Act, which passed with full support of the NRA and California governor Ronald Reagan), would soon restrict citizens’ ability to carry guns in public spaces. Although this ultimately signaled the end of public community patrols for the Black Panther Party of Self Defense, they did not give in without a fight.

On May 2, 1967, a group of 30 Black Panthers, 24 men and six women, walked into the California state Capitol building, toting rifles and shotguns in order to publicly protest the bill.

Seale recited a prepared document:

take careful note of the racist California legislature aimed at keeping the black people disarmed and powerless Black people have begged, prayed, petitioned, demonstrated, and everything else to get the racist power structure of America to right the wrongs which have historically been perpetuated against black people. The time has come for black people to arm themselves against this terror before it is too late.¹⁵

The nuances of this protest, which went through lawfully and without incident, would be lost to much of white America. Their first impression of the group, partly thanks to local media, would lead them to understand the Black Panthers as a militant anti-white movement.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, 67. Italics added

¹⁵ Winkler, Adam. "The Secret History of Guns." The Atlantic. February 19, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2017. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/the-secret-history-of-guns/308608/>.

¹⁶ Wing, Nick. "Here's How The Nation Responded When A Black Militia Group Occupied A Government Building." The Huffington Post. December 21, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-panthers-california-1967_us_568accfce4b014efe0db2f40.



The front page of The Sacramento Bee on the night of the protest.

Image from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-panthers-california-1967_us_568accfce4b014efe0db2f40

From Then to Now: The Specter of Black Retaliation

Black people were not considered citizens at the founding, they were not even considered human. Exercising rights was not something that was expected of them, but exercising rights was something that had to be done to ensure survival, particularly the right of self-defense.¹⁷ - Babu Omowale

Forty-eight years after the Black Panther Party of Self Defense first began instituting its tactics of armed patrols, the HPNGC began to employ firearms in a political theater of its own, with much of the discourse still reflecting the philosophy of self-defense, black pride, and the ‘boomerang’ of racial violence.

Despite the stark parallels in their discourse, when I spoke with the co-founder Yafeuh Balogun, he asserted that the HPNGC is not any type of Panther-affiliated organization: “We’re not attempting to duplicate. We’re not attempting to take the place of. We’re not in the position to do that. Those were different times. That was 1966, this of course is 2017.”¹ Rather, the choice to pay homage to Huey Newton had to do with “his knowledge in terms of how to deal with the

¹⁷ Wilson, Jason. "It's a matter of survival: the black Americans fighting for gun rights." The Guardian. July 27, 2016. Accessed May 01, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/27/african-american-black-gun-rights-second-amendment>.

law...with Oakland police officers at the particular time, which is similar to what people have experienced here...We emphasize that in Huey P. Newton because he was able to navigate through that system."¹⁸

According to the website, the organization was founded with three central aims:

1. *We want immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black and brown.*
2. *We want to cease black on black violence and self-hatred.*
3. *We want to arm every black men and woman throughout the United States, which has been the greatest fear of the establishment.*¹⁹

This first point is virtually identical to the seventh point in in the Black Panther Party's October 1966 ten-point platform—demonstrating how, even with almost half a century of political reform and the triumphs of the civil rights era, police brutality has never ceased to plague black and brown communities.²⁰

Following the release of the report on the DPD's excessive use of deadly force, Omawale, who also serves as the national minister of defense in the People's New Black Panther party, stated, "[We] wanted to create an atmosphere where police were not so quick to go into our communities and murder our own people. We thought that if we organize our own patrols in

¹⁸ Interestingly, Balogun told me his step father had filed an injunction against another organization that chose to claim the name of the Black Panthers.

¹⁹ "About." Huey P Newton Gun Club.

²⁰ In fact, according to some reports, police killings on a national level appear to have been on the rise. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a distinguished author on black politics, writes "It is no exaggeration that men and women in blue have been given a license to kill—and have demonstrated a consistent propensity to use it." Despite the violent crime rate decreasing since the early 1990s, data from the Surveillance for Violent Deaths National Violent Death Reporting System (reporting deaths from 16 states) suggests that death by legal intervention is the third leading cause of violence-related deaths, accounting for 24.4 percent of the more than 16,000 violence-related deaths in those states in 2015. From US violent crime rate, 1960–2012. Sources: FBI, Uniform Crime Reports, prepared by the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data;

our own communities, it would bring down the percentages of police killings in our neighborhoods.”²¹



HPNGC members during an armed patrol

From: <https://youtu.be/LBQbZsaDYcY>

In a video of one of their demonstrations, dozens of HPNGC members, dressed in all black, carry out an armed march along the streets in full formation. Their attire further symbolizes their position as soldiers on the frontline: black berets, shades, and tactical military outerwear touting the HPNGC patch on the arm. Aside from the allusions to classic BPP uniform, a man at the end of the line wears a dashiki—a prominent pan-Afrikanist symbol during the American Civil Rights era.

The spectacle of armed, militant black citizens invokes complex feelings amongst Americans. Taking into account not just the threat that a gun poses, but also how racism shapes people’s perceptions of criminality, the most prominent emotion is likely fear. The criminalization of people of color in America has a long history, which has resulted in an increase in policing behaviors by legal authorities, leading to disproportionate incarceration, the

²¹ AJ+ - Meet the Huey P. Newton Gun Club. Accessed May 01, 2017.
<https://www.facebook.com/ajplusenglish/videos/877731629035012/>.

normalization of police abuse, and inequitable life chances for black Americans.²² As Balogun told the New York Times: “The thought of a black male with a weapon scares America²³... They automatically fear that we’re seeking some form of vengeance. We’re not seeking vengeance. We just want to protect our community and our homes.”²⁴

As a protective measure, the HPNGC participates in the creation of a spectacle of invulnerability by carrying military-style rifles and shotguns in full BPP uniform. This spectacle enables the HPNGC to performatively embody what invulnerability looks like, as well as to produce a masculine show of hostility to deflect police encroachments. However, with a growing consciousness of the state violence being disproportionately enacted upon black and brown people, some people may see another dialogue emerging from these protests: retaliation. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Omawale stated, “Police always have, what you call, the upper hand. But when you have armed militant black men who are out patrolling the community, they may seem a lot less likely to commit violence against someone, knowing that there could be repercussions.”²⁵

The purposes of the marches are manifold; they are displays of black unity and discipline, a black person’s right to bear arms, and most of all, black empowerment.²⁶ The armed marches

²² Carlson, Jennifer. *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016.

²³ As a manner of precaution, Balogun describes how he and other members always try to travel in numbers and to have a camera rolling.

²⁴ Robles, John Eligon and Frances. "Police Shootings Highlight Unease Among Black Gun Owners." The New York Times. July 08, 2016. Accessed May 01, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/09/us/black-gun-owners-police-shootings.html>.

²⁵ Meet the Huey P. Newton Gun Club. Accessed May 01, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/ajplusenglish/videos/877731629035012/>.

²⁶ "On the ground with America's Black Power soldiers - BBC Three." BBC News. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/item/028220ee-8280-4abc-a47e-7836d3a3e64a>.

are always nonviolent, conducted in a legal manner, and highly organized, with marchers remaining within routes preset by law enforcers. That said, they do not depend on any subtleties to convey their rage, nor do they make it obscure who the target of their contempt is: the police. This is most patent in their chants:

*A pig is a pig, that's what I said!
The only good pig is a pig that's dead!
If you scared of the pigs, then you aint a real n***er!
Oink oink!
Bang bang!*²⁷

By openly carrying large firearms and spouting threats at the police, the HPNGC expresses fantasies of violence and rage in ways that are concrete and terrifying.²⁸ The aims of the HPNGC as a whole expand far beyond scare tactics, and while they are not oblivious to the image they put out, many leaders of the HPNGC ask that people be willing to appreciate the nuances to their demonstrations. In an interview with Breitbart, Balogun defended their use of inflammatory rhetoric with the following statement:

We think that the people should take the position of armed self-defense as it relates to police brutality issues where *police don't respect our rights as human beings. Our right to live. Our right to breathe.* And it says so in the United States Constitution whereas when our second amendment rights are being infringed upon, we should have a right to regroup ourselves and take up...positions of self-defense. *And I stress the terminology self-defense.*²⁹

²⁷ "Visuals." Huey P Newton Gun Club. Accessed May 01, 2017.
<https://hueypnewtongunclub.org/visuals>.

²⁸ Halberstam, Judith. "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance." *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 187.

²⁹ Klein, Aaron Jul. "Breitbart's Aaron Klein Confronts Black Militant Leader Over Cop Killings: 'Why Are You Not Responsible?'" Breitbart. July 18, 2016. Accessed May 01, 2017.
<http://www.breitbart.com/jerusalem/2016/07/18/breitbart-aaron-klein-confronts-black-militant-leader-cop-killings-not-responsible/>.

From Criminal to Citizen-Protector: How the HPNGC Articulates Gun Rights

Although some of the HPNGC's tactics recapitulate complicated arguments about the relationship of threat to change, the most critical feature to take note of from the praxis of armed patrol amongst the HPNGC is that it is inextricably rooted in the philosophy and lived experience of self-defense. The HPNGC employs the gun in a manner that is not only reactionary, but pitted against a force—that of state violence—that has historically used it alongside its political immunity and supreme social power to oppress black communities, the latter having assumed criminal intent.

The philosophy of self-defense can have many implications; importantly, it reaffirms one's own humanity and worth:

Our mission is to educate the masses of people on the necessity of self. That includes self-preservation, self-defense, and self-sufficiency through militant culture. Safety, caution, and attention to detail are at the core of our way of life. We desire a world of peace, justice, and equality for all humanity, and specifically people of color.³⁰

It also reaffirms their right to self-determination, and freedom from governmental oppression. To pack a gun is to determine your own fate, ensuring your own safety and dignity in the eyes of the government.³¹ In fact, being able to own a gun has historically been synonymous with being recognized as a full-status person in the eyes of the state.³²

In a nation where black people feel as though they are being treated as second-class citizens, showcasing their gun rights in a wholly legal and peaceful manner asserts their status in

³⁰ "About." Huey P Newton Gun Club.

³¹ Kohn, *Shooters*

³² Yuill, Kevin. "'Better Die Fighting against Injustice than to Die Like a Dog': African-Americans and Guns, 1866–1941." In *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire*, edited by Karen Jones, Giacomo Macola, and David Welch. New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2013.

a way that both mimics and subverts the dominant archetype of the heroic citizen-soldier (Chapter II). Although couched in patriarchal undertones, the guns allowed these men and women to perform and play out stories of heroic vigilante justice, claiming their own models of heroism in a way that pushes back against racialized understandings of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. On their website, the HPNGC list multiple incidences in which they have received civilian reports on issues in the community (e.g. an Exxon store clerk pulling a gun on a community member) to which they respond and effectively take the role of law enforcement.³³ In a more recent high-profile confrontation, the HPNGC valiantly defended a local mosque from a rightwing, anti-Islamic extremist group by the name BAIR (the Bureau for American Islamic Relations). After the HPNGC appeared with arms at the ready, the “gun-toting mosque protestors” ended up leaving the scene.³⁴

As a result of black people’s exclusion from historical narratives of patriotic American gun ownership³⁵(Chapters II and III), and the stereotype of criminal black man, Americans tend to view exercising gun rights as a ‘white male’ activity. Bobby Seale spoke to this dynamic in his autobiography; when he attended a party at which the guests told him and Newton to check their

³³ "Visuals." Huey P Newton Gun Club.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ The Black Panther Party of Self Defense and other recent narratives surrounding the role of guns during the anti-lynching and civil rights movements, have detailed the many instances when prominent black civil rights leaders (MLK, Ida B Wells to name a couple) have taken arms as a means of critically needed protection. These narratives should be read critically, as the fact that they emerged within recent decades points to their being framed within the context of the modern, white gun-rights movement. Framing the primary struggles of these leaders in terms of the right to own the gun distracts from the fact that the gun was only necessary as a means to defend from ever present threats of lynching, assassination, and other white supremacist violence. Representatives of the NRA, for example, are known to advertise these stories; however, their dedication to the lives of black Americans remains to be seen. See:

Cobb, Charles E. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015. Yuill, Kevin. "‘Better Die Fighting against Injustice than to Die Like a Dog’.

guns, Seale speculated: “They had been brainwashed to the position that a black man couldn’t have a gun, but a cop could. That’s what was wrong with them.”³⁶ Particularly for black men, the performance of legal open-carry also subverts their association with criminality and hyper-masculinity,³⁷ enabling them to model “a kind of citizenship tied to law-abidingness and the civic duty to protect oneself and others”.³⁸

Along these lines, Balgoun places little emphasis on situations in which the gun is mobilized in a combative way, pushing back against the notion of black gun ownership as an inherently criminal activity. Echoing the ideas of Huey Newton, Balgoun figures the gun as a kind of “microphone” or a political tool used to “organize the masses of people” around issues important to the community:³⁹

when we do...community empowerment patrols...we use our weapons as opportunities to really discuss...things other than, ‘Hey, that’s a nice weapon, whatchu got those guns for’ types of conversations... We use our weapons to discuss issues of poverty. We use our weapons to discuss issues of classism. We use our weapons to discuss issues of sexism. All of these are very real issues that we’re facing in the community.

³⁶ Seale, Bobby. *Seize the time: the story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1991, 74

³⁷ In cultural production that has its roots in slavery, black masculinity has been construed as threatening to white men; black male bodies are depicted as unruly, and needing to be “tamed” by white men. See Ferber, A. L. “The Construction of Black Masculinity: White Supremacy Now and Then.” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 31, no. 1 (2007): 11-24.

³⁸ Arguably, this mode of citizenship can also be modeled by black cops, though the discussion of black cops is beyond the scope of this discussion. Carlson, *Citizen-protectors*, 124.

³⁹ Of course, the HPNGC’s use of guns had created a great deal of tension with groups whose images would be greatly compromised by association with them. Balgoun cited the example of a local organization named Mothers Against Police Brutality. “That’s an organization that we very much...helped upstart, but at a certain point when we introduced the guns into the equation or into the conversation...they distanced themselves and it was not necessarily because they disagreed with us but it was because they had a different way or a different method about getting that message across...It wasn’t necessarily a conflict ... it was only a matter of us observing or knowing what they were doing...and try to complement it. And so that’s how we...indirectly work together is by complementing these organizations”

Unlike popular discourse employed by gun enthusiasts, which tends to center around the technological fetishization of firearms and their destructive capacity, Balgoun foregrounds the gun's capacity to draw people together for a concrete, and seemingly straight-forward cause: "the gun, though very sensational...really is a political tool....our primary position really is about education. And it's really about promoting conversation...What we find is that, when we promote the conversation around issues...people are more open to discussion."

Likewise, the HPNGC's mission places substantial emphasis on the role of education, figuring it as the most central activity that the organization engages in. This education extends beyond promoting an understanding of one's legal rights to a gun, and reaches further into topics such as violence prevention and youth empowerment: "We feel that properly educating young men and women about weapons and anger can prevent careless acts from occurring." Beyond violence-prevention programs, the HPNGC is also involved in "educational seminars such as camping, hunting, and mentorship" which they say, "have shown positive results with the youth"⁴⁰

Almost paradoxically, the HPNGC brings guns into a context where they are expected to counteract the effects of toxic masculinity and violence, helping to establish a culture that emphasizes community and social justice. However, given how the HPNGC perceives themselves in relation to the broader national climate, such a feat can only be accomplished in isolation. As Omawale described: "By us arming ourselves, we're able to create a culture of being independent from government institutions who don't have our best interests in mind."⁴¹

⁴⁰ "About." Huey P Newton Gun Club.

⁴¹ "On the ground with America's Black Power soldiers - BBC Three." BBC News. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/item/028220ee-8280-4abc-a47e-7836d3a3e64a>.

While they do not use the term explicitly, the mission that the HPNGC describes on their website draws from many of the basic tenets of Black Nationalism:⁴²

We believe in freedom and our right as a nation within a nation to determine the political will and destiny of our people. It should be embarrassing to be colonized and we intend to change the course of our current condition and better the lives of those we serve. We are servants above anything else and more than militants we employ the revolutionary ideals of nationalism. Nationalism will only organize the talents that we currently possess as a people and aid our function as a nation. The beginning of this [task] is to arm the body and minds of black people in AmericaThe ultimate goal is to unify mentally as well as politically the Afrikan mind worldwide and call for a Pan Afrikanist solution. With this in mind we have a political right to agitate for our own political freedom and journey for liberation.⁴³

Like the Black Panther Party of Self Defense, carrying guns while equipped with knowledge of the law enables members of the HPNGC to perform a mode of civic responsibility and self-determination that upturns the white nationalist agenda. Beyond drawing together black actors in a show of humble solidarity and communal empowerment, this performance reaffirms the righteousness of their mission and the prospect of their liberation.

Conclusion: Reframing Gun Culture

The dominant scripts that situate guns as tools of white nationalism are subject to constant negotiation amongst “non-traditional” users. The performances of the HPNGC interact with these scripts—not just to mimic them, but also to interfere with them, challenge them, and suggest alternatives.⁴⁴ While it should be noted that there is a substantially larger representation

⁴² Harris, Jessica C. "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party." *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (2001): 409.

⁴³ "About." Huey P Newton Gun Club.

⁴⁴ Law, John, and Vicky Singleton. "Performing Technology's Stories: On Social Constructivism, Performance, and Performativity." *Technology and Culture* 41, no. 4 (2000): 765-75.

of women in the HPNGC than in the other two organizations profiled, at first blush, their armed patrols seem to reinforce previous performances that situate the guns within the realm of toxic masculinity. Although it is still rooted in the culture of self-defense, the black open carriers of the HPNGC still perpetuate a hyper-masculinity whose root concern is performing the capacity to dominate weaker men that is celebrated in American culture.

While the strategies of the HPNGC may be seen as using ‘white male tactics’ as a means of furthering their cause, as Judith Halberstam describes, “role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation”.⁴⁵ As the nuances of the HPNGC’s politics have suggested, their group does not celebrate the *actual* use of violence; rather, their primary mission is to maintain peace and union within their communities, central features of the Black Nationalist agenda. Unlike their white counterparts, black open carriers are faced with the challenge of subverting association of them with criminality, and compensating for the dearth of ‘responsible’ black gun owners represented in popular culture. Furthermore, given the prominent, negative perceptions of violence in their communities, they provide firearms training in tandem with violence prevention and community empowerment programs.

Of course, there is no simple relationship between the imagination and the actualization of violence, and whether these performances have a tangible effect on the levels of violence and police brutality in their communities remains to be seen. But even as an empty threat, the HPNGC’s reclamation of the gun serves to destabilize the narrative of victimization and dehumanization to which they have been subjected. With firearms in the hands of the ‘wrong people’, of ‘the wrong skin’, the HPNGC’s armed performances disrupt the logic of typical

⁴⁵ Halberstam, Judith. "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance." *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 191

representations—they discharge hegemonies, they burst national psyches, but most importantly, they force us to (re)imagine alternatives.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid

APPENDIX A: LIMITATIONS

I work at Dell computers as a salesperson, and I work very hard just like everyone else. I have a family to take care of like everyone else. I have two children...From a media perspective you would probably view somebody like myself as being an extreme radical. But I'm not in this to be radical and I'm definitely not in this to be a martyr. I'm in this thing because I want to express...the political positions I believe in, and what I do believe in, as related to police brutality, is that...each and every one should feel that they are being treated equally.... these are important issues that we deal with, when we do these patrols....and it's quite an experience.

- Yafeuh Balogun of the HPNGC

This country was built by people who disagree. You look at our voting schedules, how the president is elected, how members of Congress are elected, how members of the Senate are elected...how the judges are elected, and that all goes back to say that you can't ever sweep the country in one election. It can't be done. You've got to do it for a whole generation, because this country is framed up to protect those disagreements....

Right now, there're things throughout this country that are awesome experiences, awesome parks, awesome things that are part of your heritage of being an American, and you don't even know they exist. If somebody who thinks differently than you is protecting them and keeping them safe, it's great for you. It's important to remember our differences. So...I'd like you to try to find someone who disagrees with you, and bring them to an Appleseed—not to change their minds, but to learn how people who disagree with one another still worked together to build this country.

- Speech by an Appleseed Shoot Boss

Despite employing interviews and participant observations, the purpose of this thesis was not to serve as an ethnographic account. Instead, I noted certain commonalities in terms of how shooters interacted with guns, figuring them as talking points from which to address the broader, external dynamics at play. Throughout my observations and field work, I found that each of

these “gun cultures” were as complex and multilayered as the broader societies to which they belong. Provided with the task of comparing the dominant performances, my ultimate analysis left little room for nuance, and even less for individual voices.

While it has been my hope that these analyses may provide a qualitative interpretation of some of the prominent cultural processes underlying the desire for guns in these social niches, this thesis should in no way be seen as an attempt to scientifically detail and account any aspect of these three ‘gun cultures’. My initial research was exploratory in nature, and even while furnished with first-hand accounts and media resources, this paper does not come even remotely close to grasping the complexity of these groups.

APPENDIX B: A LACK OF SUBJECT DIVERSITY IN GUN CULTURE RESEARCH: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the wake of an upsurge in high-profile mass shootings,¹ the national gun control debate has been a prominent part of American politics. Kahan, Braman & Gastil describe how the gun control debate has taken two forms. The first of these is empirical; conducted primarily in social science journals and legislative chambers, the empirical debate depends on hard data to form claims about the consequences of firearms regulation and its ability to mitigate the economic and public health burden of gun crime. Proponents of gun control argue that under-regulated and pervasive gun ownership facilitates violent crime and accidental shootings. Opponents argue that gun control prevents law-abiding citizens from protecting themselves in the event of an attack, many insisting that more guns in the hands of responsible owners is the only way to reduce the death toll. Preoccupation with empirical data, despite its merits, will inevitably miss a key point: what individuals believe about the effects of gun control can't be disentangled from how they feel about them.² Thus, the second gun debate—the field in which this thesis is set—is cultural.

The traditional subjects of inquiry in gun culture research consist largely of conservative, rural-dwelling, white American men. Aside from their preponderance in the demographic makeup of gun-owners (60 percent being white males, 51 percent living in rural regions, compared to 31 and 15 percent of the national population, respectively),³ the focus stems from

¹ King, Ritchie S., "Mass Shootings Have Become More Common In The U.S." FiveThirtyEight. December 03, 2015. Accessed May 01, 2017. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/mass-shootings-have-become-more-common-in-the-u-s/>.

² Kahan, Dan M., Donald Braman, and John Gastil. "A Cultural Critique of Gun Litigation." In *Suing the Gun Industry: A Battle at the Crossroads of Gun Control and Mass Torts*, edited by Timothy D. Lytton, 105-26. University of Michigan Press, 2005.

³ Morin, Rich. "The demographics and politics of gun-owning households." Pew Research Center. July 15, 2014. Accessed June 01, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/the-demographics-and-politics-of-gun-owning-households/>.

their historical monopoly over gun laws and their prominence in employing them abroad and overseas.

Examining white men's interactions with guns does have its merits; however, by structuring research in a way that frames whiteness and nativism as the primary motives behind owning guns, we fail to account for the diverse experiences of gun owners who do not belong to this demographic—people of color, women, and liberals being prominent examples. Of course, the ways in which “non-traditional” gun owners encounter guns, the emotional valence to these interactions, as well as the social networks involved are profoundly different.⁴ While vital information can be obtained through exploring the “traditional” gun cultures through previously used framework, it is also necessary that we suggest counter-narratives in the context of thinking about how people of color form their identities around the use of guns.

Very little gun culture research has come close to these reaching these goals. Of the scholarship that draws from drawing from in-depth interviews and participant observation, three of the most cited pieces on gun cultures are Scott Melzer's *Gun Crusaders* (2009),⁵ Jennifer Carlson's *Citizen-Protectors* (2015), and Angela Stroud's *Good Guys with Guns* (2016).⁶ Melzer provides rich analysis of his observations as a participant in National Rifle Association (NRA) meetings, citing leader speeches, materials, and member interviews to understand the cultural and political import attached to firearms by the nation's largest gun rights lobby. He analyzes

⁴ I use the term “non-traditional” here (albeit hesitantly) to describe groups apart from the white male demographic, who are largely occluded from the narrative of America's gun cultures, and/or who proportionally represent a minority amongst gun owners. As the term ‘traditional’ is already heavily racialized and imbued with heteropatriarchal norms in everyday language, I employ it to describe the gun culture that was created by, and largely benefits, white male Americans.

⁵ Melzer, Scott. *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2009.

⁶ Stroud, Angela. *Good guys with guns: the appeal and consequences of concealed carry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

how the NRA frames liberal threats to gun rights as *moral* threats, which jeopardize the status American virtues of self-reliance, rugged individualism, and hegemonic masculinity. Carlson and Stroud examine how the desire to own a handgun is shaped by carriers' social milieu, and the cultural pressures to fulfill patriarchal duties. Both authors explore the moralization of guns through the discursive production of "good guys" and "bad guys", and the value that carriers place on their guns as an expression of their senses of self.

To date, few researchers have foregrounded the role of race as their primary level analysis. Jennifer Carlson's *Citizen-Protectors* (2015),⁷ explores how the desire to own a gun in reaction to failures of law enforcement practice is differentially shaped by the race of the carrier. However, Carlson places race as secondary in relation to class and gender in her analysis. Todd Christopher Couch's dissertation "*Arming the Good Guys?*" (2014)⁸ examines the racial framing underlying the politics of a majority white, male Students for Concealed Carry (SCC) group on a college campus. While Couch rigorously explores systematic racism as a powerful force in motivating SCC members to take up arms, the discussions are still centered around the ideologies of white male carriers.

⁷ Carlson, Jennifer. *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁸ Couch, Todd Christopher. "*Arming the Good Guys?*": An Examination of Racial Framing in Students for Concealed Carry on Campus. PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2014.

APPENDIX C: THEORIZING THE GUN AS A NON-HUMAN ACTOR

In forming the theoretical framework for this thesis, I drew from a variety of academic fields under the realm of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in order to explore the ways in which the gun ‘scripts’ can emerge through human-gun interactions, and differentially influence the actions of their owners. In particular, I borrow from actor-network theory and “thing” theorists to embrace the notion that guns, as non-human actors, can be understood as having a form of subjectivity, being, and agency of their own.⁹ Pushing back against the treatment of artifacts as passive, scholars in the new field of material culture studies have argued that “to understand important aspects of past and present societies, we have to relearn to ascribe action, goals and power to many more ‘agents’ than the human actor”¹⁰ Among these developments, “thing” theorists have inverted the longstanding study of how people make things by asking *how things make people*, how they gather social worlds, and how they tie together human actors and things in “stable, hard-to-break cognitive relationships.”¹¹ As things disrupt the boundaries between people and objects, the thing “names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”¹² Particularly as it relates to performance and identity formation, people’s material interactions with guns (or better yet, human-gun relations) are more holistically interpreted by thingcentric frameworks that engage both entities in mutually scriptive processes.

⁹ Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2005. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 3-4.

¹⁰ Olsen, Bjørnar. “Material culture after text: re-membering things.” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 87

¹¹ Preda, Alex. “The Turn to Things: Arguments for a Sociological Theory of Things.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1999): 358. See also: Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

¹² Brown, “Thing Theory,” 3-4.

Among the few studies to date that have used this approach, *Open Fire*¹³ provides an impressive collection of essays and articles, thoroughly informed by theory from the field of material culture, that analyze the social, cultural and political significance of firearms and the worlds they create. In a more mainstream piece, Abigail Kohn's *Shooters*¹⁴ provides an anthropological study of "gun enthusiasts" through frequenting gun shops and shooting ranges. Although much of her analysis is centered around the social and historical roots of the desire for guns, Kohn invokes theories of cultural materialism in discussing the "savage beauty" of guns to their users, the sense of empowerment that comes with improving shooting skill, and the visceral thrill of discharging a weapon.

¹³ Springwood, Charles Fruehling. *Open fire: Understanding Global Gun Cultures*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007.

¹⁴ Kohn, Abigail A. *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.