

# Up in Arms: Gun Imaginaries in Texas

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## The Explanatory, Social, and Performative Power of Gun Imaginaries

*Benita Heiskanen and Pekka M. Kolehmainen*

In this closing chapter, we return to the ways in which imaginaries related to firearms—complete with their explications, actions, and reactions—serve as lenses to understanding Texas history, society, and culture, as well as its greater relationship with U.S. gun culture. As a title and a metaphor, *Up in Arms* speaks to the range of clashes brought about by the U.S. Constitution's Second Amendment right to keep and bear firearms, the sundry groups and individuals involved in said clashes, and their ramifications on quotidian, politico-ideological, and scholarly levels. By focusing on various approaches to imaginaries, images, and/or imagi(ni)ng of guns in Texas and the United States, the contributors to this volume have built a bridge between theoretical and everyday viewpoints, which reveal firearms' deep-seated connections to identity formation, everyday behavior, and belief systems that shape fundamental questions and attitudes about individual and collective being in the world. In so doing, the chapters particularly elucidate the explanatory, social, and performative power embedded in discourses and practices taking a stand on gun rights and/or restrictions.

Because neither gun culture nor gun imaginaries are the property of any one discipline alone, this book's discussion has made a case for a transdisciplinary American Studies approach based on a phenomenon-based starting point, one which underscores various interpretive lenses through an examination of imaginaries, images, and/or imagi(ni)ng, and their historical, cultural, and societal manifestations. While scholarship on guns often has a monodisciplinary focus, this work has sought to offer an interpretive framework that steers beyond disciplinary boundaries, providing a toolbox and a roadmap for discussing both historical and contemporary imaginaries. Moreover, given the symbiotic nature between the federal- and state-level dynamics of gun debates, the volume has approached the gun question as a dialogue between the national explications and place-based realities of groups of people in favor of or opposing gun rights. Because of its special status in national imaginaries and lore related to firearms, the Lone Star State serves as an apt arena to explore the projected imaginaries surrounding the rationales of gun-carrying, and also

highlights the interrelationships between local-national liaisons embedded in discussions of gun culture.

## 1 The Explanatory Power of Guns

The contributors of *Up in Arms* have demonstrated the multiple levels through which imaginaries facilitate the explanatory power of guns. Through imaginaries, guns become connected to larger deliberations about U.S. nationhood and culture. In so doing, imaginaries allow the creation of connections which invest guns with explanatory power in relation to larger socio-historical, political, and cultural dynamics. As various social groups turn guns into objects of imagination and imagi(ni)ng, *guns as imaginaries* can be amplified and utilized in various types of formal and informal messaging, including both top-down and bottom-up approaches. The chapters in this volume have traced such processes and messaging from a range of temporal, social, and cultural vantage points.

Through a historical journey across landmark events and characters, Laura Hernández-Ehrisman's discussion is a case in point in demonstrating the explanatory firepower of guns in Texas history, mythology, and tradition. Depicting the ways in which gun culture was imagined into the very core of collective identity, built environment, and popular culture, her chapter illustrates the ways in which Texas mythologized itself as an imaginary of the Wild West, one that has perpetuated the image of the state as being unique from the rest of the nation. In particular through popular culture representations, Texas has, throughout its existence, been depicted as standing for and epitomizing the essence of a community imagined through guns. Such conceptualizations are reflected in present-day statements of ebullience, including the slogan "We Don't Dial 911," which are spread through paraphernalia, commercials, and political campaigns. In such portrayals, the fiercely independent character of "Texan-ness" has rested firmly on the capacity to draw one's own gun—eye-to-eye and toe-to-toe—in the face of imaginary adversaries. As Hernández-Ehrisman demonstrates, Texas has thus been principally imagined as a community through guns, with its history explained by gun battles and its identity reinforced by gun-carrying.

Yet, as Pekka M. Kolehmainen's chapter makes evident, Texas's gun culture also stands for and exemplifies the national imagery of gun carrying in many ways, echoing various imaginaries and stories that guns tell about U.S. history, society, and culture. For example, the rhetoric surrounding the Founding Fathers serves as a gateway to negotiations about Texas's relationship between

national culture, and the multiple and fraught intricacies embedded therein, which speak to fundamental beliefs about nationhood, inclusion, and exclusion. Through the Founding Fathers' envisioning of the right to keep and bear arms, Kolehmainen forges a connection between gun imaginaries and political imaginaries tied to partisan ideological viewpoints, while also driving legislative efforts and policy agendas. Furthermore, with examples from local and national political campaigning, Kolehmainen's chapter probes the subtle ways in which state-level politics not only has to do with guns, but particular types of guns as sources of identity formation. Such signification is used for tactical purposes in politico-electoral agendas and the like, in particular signposting state-level identity and the collective identification of Texan-ness. Moreover, guns play a key role in shared narratives, cultural artifacts, and nostalgia for a long-gone past that may have precious little to do with *de facto* circumstances of the present.

Beyond the federal- and state-level discussions, the volume reveals the explanatory power of gun-carrying in various spatio-temporal settings. The various site-specific contexts, ranging from educational forums and places of worship to media and popular cultural representations, illustrate what guns mean for people's senses of security and insecurity on a quotidian basis. Focusing on events on The University of Texas at Austin flagship campus, Lotta Kähkönen, Benita Heiskanen, Mila Seppälä, and Juha A. Vuori depict the ways in which individuals and groups conceptualize, represent, and commemorate guns as imaginaries in various contexts of the armed campus. Through a discussion of the memories constituted around the trauma of the Tower shooting at UT Austin in 1966, Kähkönen presents a temporal linkage of trauma experiences on campus between different generations of Texans, and the ensuing imaginaries of both those who did and did not experience the actual event.

Heiskanen illustrates the visceral imaginary reactions toward Campus Carry prompted by the news of the imminent implementation of the legislation in 2015. The responses which were triggered by perceptions of the impact of guns on personal security or insecurity particularly highlight the explanatory power of guns before and after the armed campus became a reality. Seppälä, in turn, discusses youth activism against gun culture as radical political imagination after the Tower shooting and with the implementation of Campus Carry, calling attention to the generational experiences of the activists taking issue with the status quo in various contexts of higher learning. Vuori's case study on videos targeting student activists highlights how popular culture is intrinsically linked with conceptualizing vernacular security culture: that is, senses of security and insecurity beyond official, top-down viewpoints of security conceptualizations. Albion M. Butters's treatment of the multiple interpretations

of guns as fetishism illustrates the various explanatory processes and meta-discourses attached to guns in such contexts as places of worship, which may ostensibly have little to do with firearms but are nevertheless central to identity formation and the belief systems of practitioners of religion.

## 2 The Social Power of Guns

One of the main insights of the original research conducted for this book is that imaginaries and narratives surrounding gun culture reveal much about the social power of guns, underscoring a whole host of issues that have no bearing on the function of firearms per se but, rather, the discordant social realities of the people debating them. The volume's discussion—which takes into consideration quotidian experiences, grassroots activism, policymaking, and cultural discourses—highlights the vast range of ramifications of the presence of guns for social relations. Indeed, the power of an individual to carry a loaded, lethal weapon necessarily affects the sensory perception, spatial maneuvering, and embodied reactions of not only the carrier but those adjacent to the weapon. As evidenced by the research for this volume, not knowing which members of a social group are carrying firearms has consequences for individual, intra-, and intergroup relations. The understanding of the social aspects attributed to the everyday functioning of guns and gun-carrying thus plays a critical role in delineations of identity, community building, and social divisions, both contemporaneously and historically.

Whether civilians as gun carriers—either as “good” or “bad” “guys with guns”—are imagined as threats or saviors fundamentally has to do with perceptions of which people in society are imagined as heroes and which are perceived as victims. Historically, white men in the United States have been regarded as defenders of the frontier homestead against the perceived threat of non-white men. Indeed, it is against the understanding of this historical background that the myth-making and cultural representations around *Texas as a gun imaginary* and *guns as a Texan imagery* also assume meaning. Even though Texas imaginaries and narratives about gun culture—complete with the historical mythos about frontier masculinity, the Alamo, and the Texas Rangers—suggest a link between guns and whiteness, Hernández-Ehrisman complicates the notion of Texas gun culture as whiteness. By revisiting the events leading up to the annexation of Texas into the United States, her discussion exposes the ways in which Texas history was always intrinsically about the interactions and power-brokering between Anglos, Mexicans, Indigenous tribes, and the enslaved. Butters reveals the ways in which guns provided an imaginary for men to see themselves in unison, belonging to a national story

in which they—as armed heroes—defended their country and community. In the twenty-first-century context, Heiskanen points out how the debates surrounding Campus Carry were centrally about the assumed racial, class, and gender imaginaries associated with gun carriers and how the contestation of social hierarchies on campus reflected social organization in U.S. society. In Vuori's treatment of videos, gun imaginaries also serve as models for imagined futures in potential active shooter scenarios, for example, corresponding to individual beliefs about the capacity of one's behavior in a crisis situation.

Throughout this volume, the contributors exhibit the multiple ways in which guns have come to serve the purposes of media, cultural, activist, and moral imaginaries that eventually assumed a life of their own, irrespective of what state legislators or university administrators wanted to envision. Deliberately pushing beyond policymaking, the volume highlights the ways in which communities themselves experienced, negotiated, and challenged gun rights and restriction—and their ramifications—on multiple fronts. Vuori's discussion, for instance, depicts how leftist and feminist posturing were presented in YouTube videos as threatening vis-à-vis gun rights activists in their effort to limit individual rights and, in so doing, emasculating individual gun carriers. Butters's discussion of firearms fetishism points to the ways in which gun-carrying supports a notion of a religious protector/masculine hero ideal, informing individuals' understanding of their own morality, religiosity, and masculine prowess. Drawing on first-hand interviews, media texts, and cultural representations, the contributors showcase the actual practices and representations through which individuals imagine their social existence together. Therefore, it is in the social power produced around guns that historical cultural, and political phenomena come together or collide, serving as gateways between real life and imaginary scenarios. When all is said and done, the lived experiences that the discussion draws from demonstrate best the ways in which guns serve as a locus to forge connections, drive interactions, and shape social relations and individual and collective identities.

### 3 The Performative Power of Guns

A main premise for this volume's discussion at the outset was that gun imaginaries have significant performative power and that they serve important functions in history, society, and culture. Throughout the volume, therefore, the chapters discuss this performative aspect, either implicitly or explicitly. Kähkönen's discussion of the capacity of narratives to serve an ameliorative function for a collective need to understand the long-term effects of the Tower shooting of 1966 on the community is one such example. The Tower shooting



itself has been used as a tool for arguments by activists for and against firearms legislation. Moreover, the performative power of guns is particularly evident in the chapters by Seppälä, Heiskanen, and Vuori, who consider the grassroots measures with which various communities advocated for their agendas, either for or against the Campus Carry legislation on and off campus, as well as in online contexts. Seppälä shows how “March for Our Lives” activists and the organizers of “Cocks Not Glocks” galvanized a future-oriented agenda through the envisioning of a radical political imagination and mass mobilization. The “Cocks Not Glocks” movement’s performative dimensions were specifically evidenced in its ability to reimagine gun control activism through humor, while “March for Our Lives” generational utopias redefined the goals of gun control activism across the United States.

The flip side of the performative power of gun rights activism is displayed in Vuori’s discussion of videos that advocated for the Campus Carry legislation in Texas. The publicly staged mock shooting in Austin, as well as the video depicting the murder of a “Cocks Not Glocks” activist holding a dildo for protection in lieu of a gun, display the performative power of guns as violent spectacles. In the context of YouTube or the streets of Austin, these examples show the ways in which gun debates penetrate shared public space into areas beyond campus. Their distinct performative goal was to advocate for even looser gun regulation in the form of so-called “permitless” or “Constitutional Carry.”

The temporal scope of the volume traces the ramifications and possibilities that the performative power of guns enabled at different historical moments. Kolehmainen’s chapter highlights the ways in which guns have been used to perform historical imaginaries, connecting the struggles of contemporary political activists with their imagined historical forbearers, thus also linking guns to historical narrativizations of imagined pasts. Seppälä illustrates how the possibilities of political imagination have been expanded and constrained by the performative power of guns at different times, from the radical imagination of the 1960s to the scope of present-day gun activism. Kähkönen explores the dynamics of trauma and silence as factors constraining cultural expressions in the aftermath of the Tower Shooting. These elucidations underline the ways in which the performative power of guns is always conducted in dialogue with broader historical, political, and cultural sentiments.

#### 4 Entangled Gun Imaginaries

The explanatory, social, and performative power of guns respectively become entangled in such ways that guns are understood vis-à-vis their broader societal contexts and everyday surroundings. The Campus Carry legislation in Texas

was a threshold moment in which such entangled imaginaries of guns became apparent, reflecting both past gun legislation and future scenarios. While in 2016 the notion of Constitutional Carry legislation seemed but a far-fetched fantasy of the most avid pro-gun advocates, during the finalization of this volume in 2021 it became a reality. Governor Greg Abbott signed HB 1927 into law on June 17, 2021, and it came into effect on September 1. For individuals meeting a specific set of legal criteria, the bill removed the existing requirement for a permit to carry a holstered handgun. During the signing ceremony, the Governor described the bill as a document that “instilled freedom in the Lone Star state.”<sup>1</sup> Just as the Campus Carry bill had come into effect on the 50th anniversary of the Tower Shooting, the Constitutional Carry bill was passed in the first legislative session after the fatal mass shootings in El Paso and Midland-Odessa.

The passage of Constitutional Carry—the “Holy Grail of gun laws,” as it is known by some gun rights advocates—serves as an apt ending to the examination of gun imaginaries discussed in this volume. At their core, imaginaries serve as tools for people to mentally process the presence of guns in U.S. society, politics, and culture. Through contesting and competing imaginaries, activists on both sides of the issue have created divergent social realities which connect guns to deeper fractures between their worldviews. The gun question has thus become tangled up with other issues, fueling fissures and antagonisms that emerge elsewhere in the political landscape. By studying the issue of guns from a transdisciplinary point of view, the volume has demonstrated the interconnectedness of guns with a range of relevant historical, political, and cultural phenomena.

Although Texas is repeatedly imagined through its association with guns, *Up in Arms* has demonstrated the extent to which this association has been culturally constructed, politically manufactured, and historically contingent. To call attention to such contingencies, the volume has located various avenues of influence that have fostered the mythical connection between Texas and guns. At the same time, the chapters in the volume have elucidated the connections that guns have forged between local Texan identity and formations of national identity. Through their varied discussions of gun imaginaries, the contributors have revealed the many ways in which Texas is indeed special—and, then again, how it is not—for such matters ultimately remain in the (bulls)eye of the beholder.

1 Heidi Pérez-Moreno, “New Texas Law Allowing People to Carry Handguns Without Permits Stirrs Mix of Fear, Concern Among Law Enforcement,” *Texas Tribune*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/08/16/texas-permitless-carry-gun-law/>, accessed April 28, 2022.