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The Extraordinary Ethics of Self-Defence: Embodied Vulnerability and Gun Rights among Transgender Shooters in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Ethical ways of being form in response to bodily perceptions of vulnerability. Arguments that position firearms as defensive tools have become increasingly common in debates about gun legislation over the last two decades. This rhetoric has its origin in counter-hegemonic movements like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence, which argued that African-Americans need guns to resist state-sanctioned violence from the police. For white men and women, as well as transgender gun rights activists in San Diego, California, vulnerability forms a key part of the argument for expanding access to guns as defensive weapons. This ‘vulnerability politics’ (Carlson [2014a]. From Gun Politics to Self-Defence Politics: A Feminist Critique of the Great Gun Debate. *Violence Against Women*, 20(3):369–377) represents both a lived experience and ideological lens that informs ethical behaviour. Firearms owners fashion an ethical self through a combination of the prescribed, normative politics of gun rights rhetoric and creatively innovate with these scripts through their embodied experiences of threat.

KEYWORDS United States; embodiment; ethics; transgender; gun rights

Introduction

I am sitting next to Joan at her favourite breakfast diner in her rural hometown in Southern California. Joan is a member of several local gun rights activist groups and has been a keen shooter her whole life, learning how to handle firearms at a young age before going on to compete in national sports shooting tournaments. Now in her 60s, Joan transitioned to living as a woman nearly a decade ago. She developed a new relationship with firearms following this change and embarked on rigorous training in their defensive use. She keeps a compact firearm in her handbag wherever she goes and says that it brings her a sense of safety when she feels threatened by prejudiced strangers.

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As our waitress delivers huge portions of sausages, bacon, and eggs, Joan gives me an example of a time she felt she was in danger. As one of the leading figures in a conservative LGBTQ+¹ organisation in Southern California, Joan was invited to speak at a Republican Fundraising event in Los Angeles on the benefits of arming for self-defence as a transgender woman. However, she was unable to bring her firearm with her because the event was held in a public building. She said that this worried her because she had to walk through a district in LA nicknamed Skid Row, where many of the city's homeless population erect tents and make-shift shelters.

Joan said that she felt terrified as she hurried past the street's inhabitants. Her usually calm demeanour and trained situational awareness were absent. She felt the creeping onset of a panic attack, causing her to dive into an empty doorway to collect herself and breathe deeply. Finally, managing to push through the physically constricting fear that threatened to paralyse her, she walked the rest of the way to her destination.

As she found herself panicked by the streets of Los Angeles, Joan's sense of being vulnerable as a trans woman was compounded by the historical-cultural context in which her body learned to register threat – evoking collective and personal histories of violent prejudice against people like her perpetrated by dangerous men. Her body acted as an antenna that picked up and translated perceptual cues – the racing of her heart, sweaty palms, and butterflies in the stomach – into organised cognitive responses that draw on cultural understandings of safety, gender, and race. Ethical orientations towards threat form in response to these bodily perceptions of danger and vulnerability.

In Joan's story, I am transported from the rural space of her favourite diner to the landscape of inner-city LA, defined by urbanisation, poverty, and racial difference.² Both class and race are bound up with Joan's way of registering threat. Joan converted inner-city Los Angeles into a landscape replete with monsters, protective weapons (or the absence thereof), and existential threat. As Joan perceived herself as vulnerable to attack she came to think of her firearm as a guarantee of her safety – shooting a gun is a familiar embodied practice that has been a companion throughout her life and become even more important for her safety through the process of gender alignment.

During 12 months of ethnographic research with the Pink Pistols, a pro-LGBTQ+ firearms advocacy group and a predominantly white male gun rights organisation in Southern California, I found that men, women, and transgender people frame defensive gun use around narratives of being or becoming more vulnerable. A gun, they suggest, provides protection from the threats that they are likely to encounter. Fear motivates them to become involved in a political fight that has become a cornerstone of disagreements about American identity and belonging. Gun rights activists in San Diego find a sense of safety in the presence of firearms, but this security also comes with a more intense awareness of danger which actually intensifies their experiences of fear and vulnerability. Gun rights organisations draw on these embodied realities to create messaging that supports the individual right to own a firearm by SITUATING themselves IN a *politics of vulnerability* (Carlson 2014a; 2014b).

Vulnerability politics is an ideological and rhetorical approach to motivating political action through feelings of physical insecurity (Killias 1990; Pantazis 2000; Hollander 2001; Butler 2004; Fineman 2008). In the case of gun rights organisations, fear of crime is often embedded and mobilised within categories of race, gender, and class. Experiences of vulnerability, as Joan recounted above, form the embodied roots from which ethical, linguistic, and habitual scripts can grow into the fruits of a political ideology with specific stances on public safety, morality, and who one's enemies are (or look like).

As an embodied and political category of experience, vulnerability has been an important structuring narrative in arguments for gun rights in the United States for people from diverse backgrounds. Members of the gun rights organisations I spent time with were predominantly white, yet they drew on historically African American, Native American, and transgender experiences of violence to conceptualise themselves as vulnerable within public debate. Racial, gendered, and sexual minority groups who can claim an immediate embodied vulnerability serve as key examples for contemporary gun rights groups of why the right to own and use firearms remains relevant. When white male gun owners position themselves within a lineage of vulnerability that links them to the very people their ancestors conquered they legitimise their desire for access to deadly weaponry within a contemporary narrative that recognises diversity.

It is important to make clear that this article does not seek to answer the question of whether US citizens should or should not own guns, but instead aims to explore how a life can become enmeshed with defending the right to do so. In spending time with gun owners, I became aware of the associations I implicitly drew between gun use, violence, power, and oppression. This informed my analytical gaze and often prevented me from hearing what my participants were saying. Here, I deliberately nuance the image of who owns guns and why by looking at people with varied reasons for using firearms. By actually talking to and putting aside my preconceived notions about gun owners I was able to grasp the complex ideological, embodied, and emotional motivations that gun owners have for purchasing firearms (Harding 1991; Hochschild 2016).

An Alternative History of Gun Rights

When Ronald Regan became the first presidential candidate to take campaign donations from the National Rifle Association in 1980, the gun rights movement in the United States became firmly allied with the Republican Party (Kohn 2004; King 2007; Springwood 2007; Song 2010; Doukas 2012; Shapira 2013). Throughout US history the right to own a gun has been associated with the benefits of full citizenship and whiteness (Cox 2007; Springwood 2007). At the founding of the republic, it was illegal for slaves, freed black men, and white men who did not pledge loyalty to the revolution to own a gun (Winkler 2011, September). Despite the abolition of slavery following the American Civil War, the North increasingly allowed the South to re-establish white supremacy through the Jim Crow Laws that restricted the movement,

rights, and relative value of black lives. This included a ban on African and Native Americans owning firearms.

However, there is a long and less well-known history of American citizens using firearms to resist white supremacy. A grassroots movement founded by Native Americans in 1968 called the American Indian Movement (AIM) raised awareness of state oppression of indigenous communities in high profile acts of armed resistance (Smith 1996). During the Occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, a group of AIM activists and local Lakota people armed with rifles fought back against an unconstitutional three-month siege by the US military. Eventually, the government-backed forces outgunned them, disbanded supporters, and arrested the leaders (Camp 2020, March 12).

Similarly, founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence (as it was originally named), Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale believed that guns were tools that black Americans could use to resist unequal enforcement of the law and the frequent violence that was and still is used to police African-American communities. Following the assassination of Civil Rights leaders Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr, the Black Panthers recognised that they were always going to come up against a well-armed and organised police force that would not protect their lives or property.

The party began to organise armed counter-police patrols to ensure that interactions between officers and their community members remained peaceful. Well versed in the law, Huey P Newton drew his justifications for carrying guns from the Second Amendment telling one police officer:

Don't you know you don't remove nobody's property without due process of law ... here you are ready to violate my constitutional rights. You can't have my gun. The only way you're gonna get it from me is to try to take it. (Quoted in Bloom & Waldo 2016: 47)

By referencing the constitution Newton positioned himself as acting within the social contract of the United States when he armed against the police (Bloom & Waldo 2016). His final challenge to the officer to take his gun almost sounds like the famous statement by former president of the NRA, Charlton Heston, who thirty years later said that the government would have to take his rifle from his 'cold dead hands'.

When members of the Black Panther Party stormed into the California state capitol building in Sacramento in 1967, they argued that the Civil Rights Act had not solved anything for black people in America and that armed resistance was the key to freedom from a federal government that consistently dominated and disrespected them (Winkler 2011, September). Following this incident, Don Mulford, a Republican state assemblyman, proposed a gun control law that would restrict the right to bear arms in California cities, thus effectively ending Black Panther patrols. Then California Governor, Ronald Regan, backed The Mulford Bill stating emphatically that, 'guns are a ridiculous way to solve problems' (quoted in Winkler 2011, September).

There are in fact some striking similarities between the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party and contemporary conservative gun rights organisations. Both suggest that firearms are the first tool of defence against a tyrannical government and random attacks on the street from dangerous strangers (whether they be police or other

citizens). The Panthers formed militia like units to ‘police the police’ (Bloom & Waldo 2016), drawing their justification from the Second Amendment, while the gun rights activists I knew trained together with the aim of resisting a government attacks. Both the founding members of the Panthers and the gun rights activists I met have a savvy knowledge of the law that they use to argue against representatives of the state when they are challenged. The Black Panthers and conservative gun rights organisation started their movements by recruiting men, largely drawing on heteronormative associations between masculinity and protective violence. Yet, both shifted to accommodate women and non-binary people who believed in the right to wield guns in the protection of their lives and communities.

As Winkler (2011, September) has argued, these similarities may not be accidental. Contemporary gun rights organisations draw the language in which they frame arguments for gun ownership from African and Native American resistance movements that contested white supremacy in the 1960s and 70s (Winkler 2011, September; Bloom & Waldo 2016; Spencer 2016; Camp 2020). This rhetorically positions white, male gun owners as victims of the same powerful groups who oppress, mistreat, and kill people of colour and other minority groups.

The founder of the predominantly male, Republican voting gun rights organisation I spent time within Southern California has welcomed members of the LGBTQ+ community to their events and his approach to defending the right to own a gun consciously incorporates the language of civil rights and equality. At one activist meeting he told the audience, ‘its harder to be a gun owner in California than pretty much anything else’. He is not alone in promoting these ideas. The National Rifle Association often invokes the idea that gun owners are a persecuted or even oppressed identity category in the United States. These groups suggest that gun control laws deny the average firearm owner their basic civil rights and that they are being made into criminals for something that has been part of their family and nation for generations.

By attempting to close the gap between their own subjective experiences of threat and the threats faced by people based on their gender, race, sexuality, and sometimes class, white gun owners seek to legitimise their access to firearms while appearing to align themselves with resistance movements against white supremacy. It is a skilful marketing strategy that reaffirms an ethical legitimacy for firearms ownership that actually reconstitutes a powerful structural position by locating the means to inflict deadly violence on anyone they perceive as a threat (Young 1986; Connell 1995; Burbick 2006; O’Neill 2007; Meslzer 2009; Stroud 2012).

An Ethics of the Body

Ethnographic work with gun owners in the United States has often focused on the way that guns act as symbolic carriers of cultural meaning in the fields of gender, national identity, and politics (Kohn 2004; Doukas 2012; Springwood 2007) while others have investigated subjective accounts of carrying and shooting a gun (Latour 1994; Idhe 2001; Selinger 2012, July 24; Springwood 2014; Saramifar 2017). Yet this literature does not look at how the extraordinary practice of training to shoot and kill in day-

to-day life is conceptualised as an *ethical* practice. The anthropology of ethics is now a broad and quickly growing sub-discipline (Robbins 2012). I use ethics as a term to highlight those aspects of owning firearms that reference the continued maintenance or creation of a moral self in relation to an imagined community (Anderson 2006 [1983]) called the United States.

In societies without a shared religious or cosmological framework for morality and meaning, ethics can become connected to legal regimes, human rights, citizenship, bio-ethics and retributive justice (Lambek 2010: 3). A person's ethical actions and beliefs are also connected to an interior sense of self, playing an important role in defining who they believe themselves to be (Faubion 2011). Ethics are not just psychological, legal, or social constructs, they are created in action and through embodied habits (Lambek 2010). Faubion (2011) points to two forms of ethical self-making: (1) the reproduction and inhabitation of normative cultural scripts that are learned from one's participation in society, and (2) inventive or creative ethics that arise in response to novel circumstances. The dynamism of these two forces coming together allows us to consider ethics as both deterministic, i.e. handed to us by our culture, and generated in the embodied process of becoming a self. For this reason, I identify ways that my interlocutors are in the process of becoming ethical to show how intimate personal narratives appear in the politics of gun rights.

I have called the ethical subjectivity that forms in response to training with firearms *extraordinary* to indicate that this is a system of morality within which the use of deadly violence is seen as an ethically commendable action under certain circumstances. Of course, the notion of extra-ordinary is firmly situated in the eye of the beholder and training with a firearm has become an everyday or *ordinary* embodied practice for many of my interlocutors. Yet it cultivates a specific ethical subjectivity in the service of imagined events that are of an extraordinary, even unlikely, nature – for example, being confronted by an armed man who intends to harm you. For those who carry firearms for protection, the stakes are planted deep into life or death territory, tying the argument about gun rights to ethical assessments of ongoing embodied safety. While the practice of cultivating a defensive subjectivity might involve everyday habits, the moment at which someone chooses to use a weapon against someone is truly extraordinary.

Carrying a firearm and learning to shoot can become an integral aspect of a person's embodied way of 'being in the world' (Csordas 1994). This ties training with guns to particular interpretations of the body as safe in a personal ethics of action. Firearms merge into the unconsciousness of the body, transforming the boundaries around which a person is defined, 'the gun becomes what one is, not what one has' (Springwood 2007: 22), creating a kind of subjective hybridity (Haraway 1985) or 'enchantment' (Saramifar 2017) between weapon and wielder that informs broader perceptual schema for interpreting how one understands the likelihood of being violently assaulted. The process of incorporating a new skill into one's body involves a dialogue between attention, perception, and cognitive structures that draw on culturally conditioned ways of attending to the body (Leder 1990; Csordas 1993; Jenkins & Valiente 1994; Beauchez 2017). These ways of looking attribute form and

meaning to perceptions that are placed within larger systems of belief and experience. For example, a perception of physical insecurity might lead to the felt sense of vulnerability that then implies the need for action to escape that condition. This forms the basis of important ethical assumptions about the world, translating into habitual behaviour that reproduces those assumptions.

While the anthropology of ethics has illuminated how moral deliberation is often founded on ethical habit as well as on written codes, the ways in which people make decisions about who deserves to live and die in the moment can tell us a great deal about enduring national attitudes towards gender, race, and class. Different characteristics of bodies afford different kinds of action. The sensations and emotions that accompany perceptions of fear root into an interior landscape of mental representation, yet bodies exist in the material world and are marked by categories of identity like ethnicity, gender, ability, age, and more (Fanon 1986).

In the United States, whiteness simultaneously dominates and hides itself in public (Frankenberg 1993; Hartigan Jr 1997; Brodtkin 1998; Hage 1998; Ahmed 2007). It's very ubiquity makes it invisible – at least to those who are protected by belonging within it. The practices and beliefs that accompany firearms ownership function to hold in place a taken-for-granted way of being a citizen that is linked to the invisibility that whiteness affords. As the previous section discussed, owning firearms is one way that Americans from diverse backgrounds can claim an embodied sovereignty over their own safety. Yet, inhabiting a white body makes the choice to carry a firearm not only safer but also defensible against law enforcement. For people of colour the act of reaching for a firearm can result in becoming the target of deadly state violence or the subjects of increased legislation against their ability to do so (Carlson 2014b). Whiteness affords full citizenship, including all of the rights promised to individuals by the state, including the 2nd amendment to the constitution.

In the ethnographic examples that follow, I give a face to this process of ethical self-making as it links to the public-political world of gun rights activism. Moments of extraordinary ethical action become 'moral laboratories' (Mattingly 2014) that alchemise new subjective orientations towards safety and risk. This forms the embodied habits within which gun rights ideology takes root to grow new ethical and political branches that both prescribe and allow people to experiment with ways of being ethical. Bodies are key sites from which representations of a lack of safety are drawn. The sensory world as described in speech links intimate bodily experience with the rhetoric of shared collective ideologies – in this instance, the style and tone of the gun rights movement.

The Pink Pistols

In an article published in *Salon* in 2000, March, columnist Jonathan Rauch lamented a rise in hate crimes against the LGBT community. He suggested that laws cannot protect the thousands of queer Americans who face prejudice on a daily basis and urged members of the LGBT community to learn to shoot and carry concealed weapons for self-defence. This article came to the attention of a Libertarian member

of the Massachusetts state senate, who formed a shooting club called the Pink Pistols that has grown into an organisation with chapters around the country.

In 2007, Bill O'Reilly, former host of news commentary show *The O'Reilly Factor* on *Fox News*, claimed that the group represented a network of gangs who were using their pink pistols to threaten young girls into becoming lesbians (Paton 2013). The ensuing backlash against O'Reilly forced his show's producers to issue an apology, which ultimately significantly raised the group's profile (CQ Staff 2007). Soon they were being contacted to comment on legal cases and national debates regarding gun rights.

The Pink Pistols website states its mission clearly in two highlighted axioms, 'all people have the right to defend themselves from harm and everyone has an individual right to bear arms as protected by the 2nd Amendment' (Pink Pistols 2015). This message resonated with many conservative members of the LGBT community who feel that their use of firearms for self-defence is disregarded in what my informants often referred to as 'the liberal media'. Helen is one of those people. Following a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida in June 2016 that killed 50 people at an LGBT night-club (BBC News 2016), Helen was angry and afraid. She decided then that owning a gun for personal protection was the only way to keep herself and her community safe. She decided to form a local chapter of the Pink Pistols that has since grown into the largest in the nation. The group meets on a regular basis at shooting ranges to share their knowledge about defensive shooting or to receive training from experts.

Born and raised in San Diego, Helen calls her decision to publically transition a process of becoming her 'authentic self'. However, this has also meant battling prejudice and sometimes direct threat from friends, colleagues, customers, and strangers. Helen grew up with guns as a normal part of family life, but was convinced of their value as defensive tools when her father was attacked and almost killed when she was young:

I think I was just old enough to be like, you know, a little traumatised by the fact that other human beings, you know, have the ability to end your life if they should choose to do that ... you never really lose that self-defence mentality.

She now owns several firearms for home defence, suggesting that their presence in her life is even more important in light of her recent transition:

For me, it's all about the practical application as a tool ... I know that if somebody breaks into my home in the middle of the night that I have a force equaliser I can use, even if there's three dudes, you know. I'm not waiting for the cops. They can come clean up their bodies ... I'm sure you've seen the statistics, it's just the reality of being a targeted minority now is kind of shitty. You know, our lives are just as worth defending as anybody else's it's just we need to be more conscious.

Helen feels an increased risk of attack now that she has publically transitioned to living as a woman. According to a survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality (2015: 198), 48% of nearly 30,000 respondents reported that they had been denied equal treatment, verbally harassed, or physically attacked in the last year, while nearly half (47%) had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. Helen is quick to emphasise that she is not a 'victim', but told me, 'I've lost a lot of muscle

mass ... I'm definitely a fighter but I'm definitely realistic about my abilities. I was never really any more unsafe than anyone else prior [to transition].’ The way in which Helen perceives her body in transition is linked to how firearms can guarantee her safety within it.

To use the term ‘transgender’ in reference to one’s identity is to inhabit a structural position that launches the individual into a struggle for social and political legitimacy, but also physical safety (Stryker 2006: 2). Nordmarken (2014) draws a compelling portrait of this in an account of being recognised as a transgender man. He describes in detail the juxtaposition of rejection and empowerment that arise when someone sees gender non-conformity in his body:

I am being watched ... glancing up, I confront eyes querying me. Eyes wondering. Boy or girl? ... I enjoy the chaos my body prompts. These eyes feel and imagine themselves to be legitimate knowers. How dare I, as Other, challenge their abilities to ‘know’? ... Their failure to attribute a gender category to me makes my ambiguous gender performance a form of resistance ... I was a successful gender terrorist. Monstering successfully. (Nordmarken, 2014: 40)

Nordmarken builds on Stryker’s (1994) comparison between these moments and the experience of alienation felt by Frankenstein’s monster as he searches for acceptance in Mary Shelley’s horror novel. This highlights the fear and shame that can accompany non-conformity, but also how those feelings can be converted into resistance. Nordmarken’s presence in society disrupts assumptions about gender that are deeply embedded in both cultural institutions and cognitive schema. He demonstrates that the reclamation of ‘monstrousness’ from those who would see it in ambiguously gendered bodies shakes the foundations of what are considered normative performances of identity. This creates powerful opportunities for transgender individuals to challenge conventional expectations in political contexts.

In 2017, Helen was interviewed on a political satire show on the cable TV channel *Comedy Central*. Discussion centred around gun rights and whether liberals should consider purchasing firearms in light of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 general election. She was invited on to the show to make the case that private gun ownership should be seen as the first line of defence for minority communities at risk of prejudice or violent crime.

Along with four other members of the Pink Pistols, Helen spoke about issues of identity and belonging that she encounters as a transgender gun owner. During one exchange, the host asked, ‘was it easier to come out as a gun owner or a queer person?’ One of the panel replied, ‘I feel more accepted as a gay guy in the gun community than as a gun owner in the gay community’. The host suggests that the panel act out a scenario in which they ‘come out’ to him as gun owners. With a badly concealed smile on her face Helen played along, ‘so, there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you ... [pause] ... I’m a gun owner’. The host reacts in exaggerated anger and feigns disappointment in Helen who quips, ‘I wish that wasn’t as accurate as it often is’.

Belonging within an LGBTQ+ community with an enthusiasm for firearms places trans gun owners in multiple over-lapping identity categories. The struggle to find acceptance within the wider LGBTQ+ and gun owning communities indicates that

cultivating an ethical orientation through defensive shooting involves negotiating a sense of belonging in a contradictory process of connection and alienation. However, the unique interactions that occur when trans shooters meet the almost exclusively Republican members of the gun rights organisation I spent time with generate new identifications across diverse social groups. Trans gun owners challenge normative performances of gender within a conservative context by confirming the benefits of arming in self-defence based on their experiences of prejudice.

Helen has gained support within the gun rights movement in San Diego, but has spoken about how she feels that she stands out from the average member. While talking to a male gun owner in his 20s at one event I got the sense that there was some discomfort about the inclusion of transgender shooters in the organisation. In reference to transgender women, he shook his head sceptically and said, 'they are not natural'. When I told him that I had come with a member of the Pink Pistols, he seemed less open to answering my questions. This suggests that my sample of gun owners within the organisation might be skewed towards the more enthusiastically welcoming members. However, I also found that people who identified as traditional conservative Republican voters were forming friendships with transgender shooters and for two years running the head of the conservative gun rights organisation has given his 'Activist of the Year' award to transgender women. This accolade was presented in front of hundreds of applauding gun owners at an annual celebration dinner in San Diego and it was clear that both took pride in the recognition of their efforts.

Helen sits in the spaces between traditional divides that are drawn around social issues and identities in the United States. The antagonistic response that some gun owners have shown her actually allows Helen to position herself more legitimately as the young, tolerant face of gun rights activism in San Diego. She says that she uses the Pink Pistols to organise training for LGBTQ+ people in the practical skills of shooting and other defensive techniques, but also invites a variety of gun owners from the community to events to challenge stereotypes:

The majority of the LGBT community is very anti-gun and actually kind of anti-self-defence. And I get why, it's because of the way the right has treated the LGBT community. The average conservative might not have had any exposure to the LGBT community ... the underlying more powerful good is just in bridging those traditional divides ... I have successfully won over and been invited into the circles of right wing, conservative militias, as a ... [she pauses to reflect] ... as me! Just being in those spaces, I am decreasing the amount of people who would ever even consider being hateful in any open manner to an LGBT individual.

As Helen embarked on the process of overcoming fear so that she could begin to align her physical body with what she called her 'authentic' gender, she spoke of the stigma – even verbal or physical abuse – that accompanies the recognition of a body in transition. This in-betweenness unsettles popular binary notions of gender that are increasingly open to discussion as the visibility of trans issues increases in the media and political debate (Brubaker 2016). For people like Helen, new laws to protect LGBTQ+ people are steps in the right direction, but do little to combat the direct threat they feel at the hands of prejudiced strangers. Defensive shooting instructors and

the courses they deliver impart a distinctive ethical view of the world, but also an empowering narrative about safety that appeals to groups who already face a greater chance of experiencing violence and are desperate for solutions that bring a sense of personal agency.

As conservative gun rights organisations have become the most visible proponents of firearms ownership in the United States, they have drawn on a politics of vulnerability to suggest that even white men who occupy powerful positions in safe neighbourhoods need the ability to protect themselves. These attitudes reflect a real anxiety – stoked by media outlets like *Fox News* and Donald Trump’s alarmist rhetoric about rising crime rates or immigration – at the heart of the conservative movement. This generates an ethical gaze and subjectivity within which it is acceptable, even commendable, to prepare to kill citizens if they should appear threatening. Among the gun rights activists I spent time with, fear and its ethical consequences play out in public as well as within the intimacy of the body to define new ways of being an ethical self.

‘Gun Rights Are Women’s Rights’

Over the last two decades, the National Rifle Association (NRA), shooting ranges, and firearms manufacturers have increasingly appealed to women: promoting women-only tournaments and designing ‘female friendly’ pink firearms (Smith & Smith 1995; Carlson 2014a, 2014b). One of the key arguments behind this drive is that a woman can use a firearm to repel violent men, even suggesting they can be used to prevent sexual assault. The women I met in gun rights activist communities shared concerns with trans people that they are at a disproportionate risk of attack. They drew on their own experiences of violence and threat when assessing danger in the world. In discussions about the ethics of using deadly violence, my participants would often frame threat in terms of the need to protect innocents (nearly always coded as female) from other men or ‘bad guys’ who were described as pathologically evil. A fear of the risk of meeting one of these bad guys acted as the emotional force behind the argument for gun rights for men, women, and trans shooters alike. When I saw women speak in public about times when they faced threats in real life, they acted as key narrative tools within a politics of vulnerability.

In November 2018, I attended a talk at a university in San Diego entitled ‘Gun Rights Are Women’s Rights’. Organised by a campus chapter of a right-wing media company, this event brought together four young women who have quickly become famous in the gun rights media world for the young, diverse voice that they bring to gun ownership. The first speaker was Carmen, the director of Hispanic engagement for a media company and herself a Latina with ten years of experience in the US military. She told the crowd that she was convinced of the need for women to protect themselves after she was sexually assaulted on a college campus. She told her story in stark detail, linking her commitment to training with a gun to getting over fears that this experience had generated: ‘I know what it is like to be in the most vulnerable position imaginable. Perpetrators are evil, women need preventative measures’.

Okafor, an African-American woman on the panel followed Carmen with a criticism of modern feminism that she claimed is epitomised by the #metoo movement: ‘metoo makes women into victims. It should be #neveragain ... we have a right to choose how to defend ourselves ... Learn how to shoot your rapist’. Carmen quickly gestured for the microphone. ‘Modern feminism is full of shit’, she said, pausing for emphasis, ‘feminism has no desire to empower women ... it keeps women victims’. The crowd cheered as she passed the microphone to the next speaker.

Their rhetoric continued to utilise many of the key ideas that might be associated with women’s rights rhetoric – female empowerment, the ‘right to choose’, a proposed method of preventing sexual harassment, and strong female role models. Their personal testimonies of abuse set the event apart from male-dominated pro-gun meetings where men would draw on the past in their defences of gun ownership (in historical accounts that positioned gun ownership as an American tradition) or on the future (in imagined scenarios of danger or revolution).

The four panellists were directly addressing young women in the audience who were encouraged to speak before men during an open question section at the end. Just as the #metoo movement focuses on the power of personal testimony to call out abusers, these women’s stories were rendered important within the space given for their telling. They evoked the sympathies of a predominantly conservative audience who were able to hear them because they confirmed their deeply held commitment to firearms as tools of empowerment rather than oppression. The real experiences of threat that these women related added urgency and emotional valence to arguments for gun ownership by operationalising a notion of embodied vulnerability, signified by an increased risk from sexual assault and other forms of violent crime.

While vulnerability politics has been used to further the cause of marginalised groups, as it did for the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, and the Pink Pistols, it can also be mobilised within political projects that reproduce social privilege (Oliviero 2011; Carlson 2014b). These movements tend to obscure the different types of crime that people are likely to experience and replace it with a dominant group’s perspective. In the case of gun rights advocacy, the rhetoric and ethics behind defensive shooting draws on a particularly masculine experience of crime:

[A]lthough gun carriers may actively promote guns for women, they assume a particular understanding of crime that reproduces masculine privilege by emphasizing fast, warlike violence perpetrated by strangers – the kinds of crime men, as opposed to women, are more likely to face. (Carlson 2014a: 61)

In the United States, men are almost twice as likely to be victimised by a stranger than women (Catalano 2007) and are more likely to be murdered. On the other hand, women are both less likely to commit a crime and more likely to suffer intimate partner violence. One in three women reports having experienced sexual assault and other forms of violent attack, the vast majority of which are perpetrated by someone they know (Black *et al.* 2011). This suggests that the way gun rights organisations conceptualise crime does not accurately represent the kind of violence women and minorities are most likely to experience.

However, this critique does not account for the subjective effects of carrying a firearm, which my interlocutors claimed gave them an embodied sense of safety. Many of the women I interviewed first bought weapons to protect themselves from abusive partners, landlords, or co-workers. Some were followed by strangers or in one case even kidnapped. Their experiences of fear and suffering led to a desire to ensure that they would be able to protect themselves if they were put in that position again. While there is an important contradiction in the way gun rights organisations conceptualise crime from a masculine perspective, it is in the accompanying sense of mastery over threat that men, women, and transgender people find comfort in carrying guns.

Zigon (2007; 2009) has suggested that moral breakdowns, like the experience of prejudice or violence from a stranger, represent moments in which the creative potential of ethical self-making rises to over-power prescriptive ethical norms. However, the process of becoming an ethical self by training with a gun also puts the women on this panel in touch with the structuring rhetoric of gun rights. They have incorporated a particularly masculine narrative style as a way of describing their embodied experience of threat. This allows gun rights organisations to appropriate the experiences of vulnerable or marginalised groups to argue for firearms as equalisers in defending against criminal violence.

Know Thy Enemy

While Joan and I ate breakfast in her local diner in rural San Diego County, she reflected on the ethical challenges that can arise from carrying a firearm for self-defence:

A lot, a LOT [emphasis in speech] of thought has to be involved ... Because, first of all, now I have a lot more power than the other people around me, but I don't want to impose my will on people, I just want to make sure no-one imposes their will on me. You have the power over other people's lives in your hand and you understand that responsibility. People on the bad side don't get it that way. They think they can make somebody do what they want to do. The mark of a true psychopath is when they get their hands on a gun, or get their hands on a weapon and all of a sudden it makes them feel powerful and it gives them the ability to impose their will on other people.

Joan suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the kinds of people who can be trusted to wield the power of firearms and those who cannot. This way of dividing the world up into good and evil creates a coherent Manichean ethical universe. The enemy of this universe is made into an object that stands in for threat and who it is therefore morally justifiable to shoot. This reduces the lived complexity of human lives to a single act or characteristic, but beneath it lies a fear that one's life and body is in constant threat from the unknown.

Through cultivating the skills needed to carry a firearm in self-defence, gun owners come to inhabit an 'ethical subjectivity' (Faubion 2011; Anderson 2017) designed around their capacity to repel 'bad guys' converting vulnerability into protective strength through the exercise of potentially deadly violence against those marked as

'other'. In the narratives of my participants, 'bad guys' are a category of people who represent pathological evil, yet they often possess recognisable features as cultural others. They are always men and often coded as African-American, Hispanic, or working-class white (Young 1986; Stroud 2012).

At one defensive handgun course, I attended the paper targets bore images of Hispanic, African-American, and poor white 'criminals' wielding knives and guns in clumsy stereotypical representations. These literal and figurative two-dimensional images give defensive shooters an image of their enemy, constituting a 'racialised fear of crime' (Stroud 2012). The ability of a person of colour or trans person to protest or resist oppression so often depends on the split second decisions made by a police officer or armed civilian holding a firearm.

Anyone who has trained with a gun for self-defence looks down the barrel from a different experience of vulnerability. Each person brings their own conditioned images of gun use and other accompanying moral associations to their assessment of the legitimacy of gun ownership as a practice. The Black Panther Party drew on their own experiences of violence and disrespect as justifications for wielding firearms against the state. Similarly, the Pink Pistols and wider gun rights activist movement today draw on a *politics of vulnerability* (Carlson 2014b) to construct persuasive arguments for the benefits of owning a gun. To inhabit a white body is synonymous with a sense of belonging in American national space (Fanon 1986; Ahmed 2007); to inhabit any other kind of body is to be disbarred from belonging in that space. By deriving particular ethical habits from perceptions of danger, the body becomes a contested field of experience and representation. The privileges of whiteness are intimately bound up with the way that bodies can act. The ability to use the controversial right to carry a firearm for self-defence reaffirms one's belonging in a particular vision of America's history, present, and future.

Perceiving vulnerability in the body inevitably brings forth extended ethical reflection on the likelihood of being attacked, on human nature, and on where one can find protection. My participants seek out the ability to shoot and kill potential enemies imagining that random and extreme forms of violence from strangers are likely threats they will face. This ignores the kind of harm that gun owners from all backgrounds, but particularly white men, are most likely to suffer from – suicide. California gun owners are twice as likely to die from firearm suicide than the general population and two-thirds of all gun deaths are suicides (Wintemute *et al* 1999; Hemenway 2006).

Regardless of the type of violence gun owners are most likely to experience, it is in the felt sense of emotional-physiological security that they form the desire to carry a firearm. In particular, the transgender shooters with whom I spoke find a sense of stability in their capacity for violence that they gain while carrying a gun as they undergo the process of gender alignment. This allows them to participate in an ethical becoming that emphasises their own agency in defending against prejudice rather than relying on the kindness of strangers or the responsiveness and sympathy of law enforcement. This suggests that individuals shape unique ethical subjectivities and ideologies in a conversation between prescriptive ethical ways of being and creative, embodied experience

that come to life within other categories of identification like race, gender, gun ownership, as well as embodied perceptions like vulnerability.

Notes

1. I use the acronym *LGBT* or *LGBTQ+* throughout this article because this is how my participants referred to themselves. I also use their definitions of the term *transgender* – as a catch all for those who have transitioned, are transitioning, or who sometimes present a gendered identity that differs from what they were assigned at birth (Papoulias 2006: 231; Hines 2010; GLAAD 2018). In using terms like femininity or masculinity, feminism, and gun rights activism, I refer explicitly to the context of the contemporary United States where they have specific cultural meaning.
2. In LA, African Americans make up 8% of the population, but 34% of its homeless population (Lopez 2020, June 13).

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