

Rhetoric and Guns, edited by Lydia Wilkes, Nate Kreuter, and Ryan Skinnell. University Press of Colorado, 2022. 259 pp.

Reviewed by Sean Murray, Piedmont Virginia Community College

The editors of *Rhetoric and Guns* contend that rhetoricians must boost their analysis of gun violence, as the issue has not been “systematically” examined in the field (3). While scholarly volumes devoted to gun rhetoric do exist, the current reality of our gun impasse demands a fresh rhetorical examination, which the contributors cogently deliver here. “Race,” “technology,” “interventions in public discourse,” and “embodied reactions to . . . gun violence” are identified by Wilkes et al. as the four fundamental “resonances” or themes spanning the volume’s fourteen chapters (14). These resonances provide a helpful way to organize this review, though the book is not sequenced into discrete sections as such. Beyond the resonances, what unites the chapters is the contributors’ concerted effort to curtail gun violence through rigorous research and analysis.

Race, the first resonance, covers three chapters. In chapter four, “The Gun as (Race/Gender) *Technê*,” professor/activist Lisa M. Corrigan uses Heidegger’s notion of “*technê*” to illuminate the racial and gendered dynamics of U.S. gun policy, particularly Stand Your Ground laws (71). Essentially, she argues that guns enable Caucasian males to manifest “themselves through a biopolitical erasure of Black people,” concluding that white people’s mounting fear of the diversifying population foreshadows a future of deadly, racialized violence (79). In the face of such racialized gun violence, Lydia Wilkes probes the “rhetorics of acquiescence,” or societal numbness, that overcomes communities in chapter seven, “This Is America on Guns: Rhetorics of Acquiescence and Resistance to Privatized Gun Violence.” However, she takes pains to emphasize that this stupor is only available to the privileged; Black mothers, in contrast, have rejected numbness and instead mobilized against racialized gun violence. Likewise, Wilkes highlights the “glimmering hope” embodied by March for Our Lives participants, who also repudiate paralysis (131–32). This optimism offers readers a respite from the sobering tone pervading much of the book. Chapter ten, Scott Gage’s “National News Coverage of White Mass Shooters: Perpetuating White Supremacy through Strategic Rhetoric,” is congruent with Wilkes’ acquiescence critique. Gage examines the “apocalyptic sublime,” a phenomenon by which media viewers become dazed from interminable shooting tragedies while media producers utilize language that ignores the systemic reality of anti-Black violence (170). He closes with a paradox: scholars want to help, but by “intellectualizing violence,” they may inadvertently diminish the emotional pain with which people live (182). His caution is compelling,

raising questions about how best to leverage academic work for maximum impact on public policy.

Next, the technology theme appears prominently in four chapters. For example, in chapter two, “Muzzle Velocity, Rhetorical Mass, and Rhetorical Force,” Nate Kreuter presents the unique analogy that “the physics of how firearms actually operate also serve as metaphors through which we can understand the rhetorical forces that drive contemporary American gun policy debates” (32–33). A gun owner himself, Kreuter equates the velocity, mass, and force of a bullet exiting a gun to a message’s delivery speed and effectiveness. Briefly, rhetorical velocity is the speed at which a message initially travels; rhetorical mass is a message’s weight, often affected by the number and/or status of the speakers; finally, rhetorical force, drawing on the physics formula, $F = M \times A$ (force equals mass multiplied by acceleration), is produced by combining a message’s velocity and mass. To illustrate, Kreuter relates his personal experience of publishing a piece on gun violence only to find himself facing a frenzied backlash from the anti-regulation crowd. While the finer points of the physics comparison may strike some as abstruse, Kreuter spurs readers to ask crucial questions: Why do some perceptions about guns spread faster and persist longer? And how can proponents of stronger gun laws mine the physics metaphor to achieve their goals? Charting a different course in chapter three, “Hunting Firearms: Rhetorical Pursuits of Range and Power,” Brian Ballentine frames science not as metaphor but as the means for humans to “actualize the maximum potential” of their technological creations (49). He employs Kenneth Burke’s work on “entelechy” (49) to argue that our collective craving for “technological advancement” (66) explains why we push firearms and projectile capabilities far beyond what hunters need to kill animals. His firsthand knowledge as a hunter, combined with the volume’s only photographs, provides a basic education on bullets and rifles that can boost non-gun-owning readers’ confidence to participate effectively in policy debate. In chapter six, “The Activism Gap and the Rhetoric of (Un)Certainty,” Craig Rood applies his extensive scholarship on guns to the problem of rhetorical complexity and uncertainty obfuscating public discussion. He encourages reform advocates to progress by 1) emphasizing the “*certainty*” of their arguments, 2) highlighting the “*uncertainty*” of far-right claims, and 3) confronting the false expectation that legislation can eliminate gun violence (112–14; emphasis mine). Finally, in chapter twelve, “Hiding Guns in Schools: The Rhetoric of U.S. Mass Shootings,” Nathalie Kuroiwa-Lewis touches on gun technology via a discussion of Parkland shooter Nikolas Cruz’s legal purchase of an AR-15, though the chapter centers on a rhetorical analysis of an information sheet from the Civilian Marksmanship Program, an organization Cruz took part in as a student. Her astute examination, grounded in the notion that “language creates

reality” (201), demonstrates how this youth-focused organization fabricates a false sense of safety around guns.

The third theme, “interventions in public discourse,” surfaces in four chapters, each offering rhetorical strategies for gun reform advocates to reframe the debate. For instance, Patricia Roberts-Miller’s chapter one, “The Only Thing That Stops a Bad Guy with Rhetoric Is a Good Guy with Rhetoric,” elucidates the rhetorical, demagogic process by which discussion on guns is simplified to an existential struggle between “those who are anti-gun and gun owners,” a distortion that negates the fact that many gun owners believe in some level of gun regulation (20). Bradley A. Serber, in chapter eight, “‘The Last Mass Shooting’: Anticipating the End of Mass Shootings, Yet Again,” urges reform activists to focus their rhetorical efforts on pragmatism and perseverance rather than prevention, underscoring Rood’s earlier cautioning about viewing legislation as a panacea. Matthew Boedy warns of the organization Turning Point USA’s promotion of gun rights in schools via their appeals to Christian nationalism and female empowerment in chapter eleven, “Guns and Freedom: The Second Amendment Rhetoric of Turning Point USA.” Eventually, he shares his personal story of landing on the group’s “Professor Watchlist” as a propagandist against freedom for writing and speaking out against permissive campus carry laws (194). Echoing Kreuter’s story in chapter two, Boedy’s experience illustrates the political right’s rhetorical strategy to paint outspoken academics as radicals intent on limiting people’s liberties. Finally, chapter fourteen, “Talking Together About Guns: TTAG and Sustainable Publics,” by Peter D. Buck, Bradley A. Serber, and Rosa A. Eberly, encapsulates an edifying conversation among key organizers of a Penn State series of public gun discussions that can serve as a blueprint for activists aiming to host similar forums.

“Embodied reactions to gun violence,” the final resonance, includes chapters five, nine, and thirteen. Ian E.J. Hill’s chapter five, “Rhetoric of Open Carry: Living with the Nonverbal Presence of Guns,” illustrates how the government reacts differently depending on the race of people openly carrying firearms through comparisons of the Black Panthers’ 1967 armed protest at California’s state legislature, Ammon Bundy’s 2014 clash with the Bureau of Land Management, and the 2014 police killing of Tamir Rice. In chapter nine, “Campus Carry, Academic Freedom, and Rhetorical Sensitivity,” Kendall Gerdes links a Texas law permitting campus carry to white students’ “racialized fears” and recaps the University of Texas at Austin faculty’s unsuccessful challenge to the new law (153). This legal analysis will interest college professors, as it provides a case study on disputes over academic freedom. In chapter thirteen, “A Non-Defensive Gun: Violence, Climate Change, and Rhetorical Education,” Ira J. Allen’s discussion shines for the link he forges between gun deliberation and our environment— topics rarely connected in public discussion. He explains that

his gun is not a so-called “defense gun,” a dubious label given the murky line between self-protection and aggression; rather, it is “an-end-of-the-world gun,” reserved for society’s imminent disintegration should we fail to halt climate change (218). Allen dangles a modicum of hope via “rhetorical education,” defined here as “a form of sense-making, constraint-negotiation on behalf of fuller political community, developed in and for contexts of frequent violence” (229). He paints rhetorical education as a way to live more honestly with the violence inherent to the “rhetorical tradition” and references helpful sources like Cheryl Glenn’s “Rhetorical Education in America” (230).

Ultimately, *Rhetoric and Guns* is a substantial contribution to the ongoing conversation on gun violence, providing key knowledge and insights pertaining to history and policy, as well as a reminder that language shapes the reality in which we live—and die. As most contributors here specialize in rhetoric and composition, the volume will serve as a valuable resource for scholars in these fields, related disciplines such as communications and media studies, plus a variety of other areas including public policy, political science, and sociology. That several of the contributors are gun owners prevents the book from being pigeonholed as an echo chamber and makes it a springboard for productive discussion in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses. Beyond academia, activists seeking to change the way we talk about guns and lawmakers wanting to impact policy will find this collection useful. In the end, *Rhetoric and Guns* challenges readers of all backgrounds to educate themselves and work constructively to minimize the gun violence rife in America today.

Charlottesville, Virginia

Sean Murray teaches English composition at Piedmont Virginia Community College and science, technology, and society at the University of Virginia.