RHETORIC AND GUNS

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Introduction
RHETORIC AND GUNS

Nate Kreuter, Lydia Wilkes, and Ryan Skinnell

Disparate people in disparate times have viewed massive, state-sponsored violence (war) as, alternately, a continuation or a breakdown of language. Quite famously (or infamously), Prussian cavalry officer and military strategist Carl von Clausewitz declared that "war is a mere continuation of policy by other means" (1984, 87). Contemporary Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has echoed a version of this thought, writing through a character in one novel that "war is what happens when language fails" (1998, 43). The discipline of rhetoric is generally good at theorizing and explaining the rhetorical failures that might lead states into conflict. Rhetoricians have spent much time studying rhetoric and war in the past century. Early twentieth-century English rhetorician I. A. Richards, for instance, defined rhetoric as "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (1964, 3), while the later twentieth-century American rhetorician Wayne Booth argued, apropos the 9/11 attacks, that "the only real alternative to war is rhetoric" (cited in Lunsford et al. 2016, 5). If violence occurs when rhetoric fails, then we need to study the rhetoric of that end point and how it is misunderstood.

The notion of war being the consequence of failed rhetoric is powerful, and maybe even mostly true. But in the United States, hot wars, particularly post-Vietnam, have had decreasing prominence in most people's daily lives.[1] At the same time, other forms of violence—specifically gun violence—have emerged as central to the fabric of Americans' daily lives. Unfortunately, the discipline has done less to help us understand the private violence of individuals within a distinctly US context. This is not to say rhetoricians haven't done any work in this direction, but rhetoric as a discipline has not yet systematically addressed the American gun crisis, wherein 100 people die at the muzzles of firearms each day (Brady 2019).[2] In part we think this is because of the commonplace that violence is a "failure of language." This volume stands alongside other

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recent scholarship on embodied aspects of rhetoric and violence, and with it we hope to move the discipline of rhetoric not only to study the failures of language that lead to violence but to examine how violence itself serves an ultimate rhetorical function, in addition to the physical and psychological damage that it inflicts.[3]

Despite the fact that tens of thousands of Americans die every year as a result of guns, victims of gun violence are obviously very different from states that enter into armed conflict. In negotiations between states, violence is always a potential outcome. It is, in fact, a constitutive threat in many state negotiations. But in most interactions we have with friends, neighbors, students, strangers on the bus, and so on, the expectation that we are "negotiating" to "prevent violence" is nonsensical. Consequently, aphorisms suggesting the "failure" of rhetoric/language to explain war simply don't often apply to victims of crime, domestic violence, race- or gender-based violence, suicide, accidents, or mass shootings. There is often no language or rhetoric that exists specifically to prevent private gun violence comparable to the way it exists to head off war. Addressing that rhetorical reality is another one of the central goals of this book. Both rhetoric and violence are exertions of power, and our discipline has much work to do to understand the intersections of rhetorical power, the rhetorically disempowered, and violence.[4] Does violence, for example, become a rhetoric of choice for the domestic abuser or white supremacist because of other rhetorical failures, or is violence for them an ultimate rhetorical act, the most forceful means of delivering their point? Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing about the guns owned by his father, a member and local captain of the Black Panther Party, observes, "The guns seemed to address this country . . . in its primary language—violence" (2015, 30). If the idea of considering violence as itself a rhetorical expression makes us uncomfortable, it should. The discomfort indicates necessary work, inquiry demanded of us by a society that has found no solutions for its internal violence.

RHETORICAL GUNS

At its most basic level, the American gun crisis has two origins, one rhetorical and one material. The rhetorical origin centers around a constitutional right to bear arms and a vocal, well-organized, predominately white constituency of Americans that resists interpretations of the Second Amendment that might restrict or regulate gun ownership. Before it was codified as an individual right in the Constitution, the right to bear arms was employed as a collective right

by government-controlled militias to "officially invade and occupy Native land" (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018, 18). From its beginning, gun ownership and use has been inextricably tied to gendered and racialized violence perpetrated primarily by white male European settler-colonists against Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). This foundational gendered, racialized violence enacted through firearms has never ceased. Since contact, firearm-based murders of Indigenous women and girls have been imperial, colonial, or federal policy (Adamski 2020). Firearm-based lynchings of Black people (Ore 2019), domestic assaults and murders of women of color across the United States (Squires 2016), and the torture and murder of poor women of color in Ciudad Juárez (Lozano 2019), alongside the endless litany of names-turned-hashtags through law enforcement's deadly force, bear witness to a rhetorically authorized history and present of gendered, racialized gun violence unique to the United States. As Coates writes, the fact that this violence falls most heavily on Black bodies is not a flaw in the system but "an intended result of policy" (2015, 17).

From this gendered, racialized rhetorical origin, a gendered, racialized material reality extends. Hundreds of millions of guns circulate in the United States, passing predominately through the hands of white men. One credible estimate puts the number at 393 million, or 70 million more firearms than citizens in the country (Ingraham 2018). It is easier in the United States to purchase a firearm than it is to open a bank account or vote. Given their material abundance and the ease of acquiring them, guns are readily available to enable accidental deaths, suicides, domestic murders, homicides, and mass shootings. So, guns circulate materially, and gun violence exists, circulates, affects, and is affected by rhetoric and language in a manner differentiated by gender and race and other identity markers.

Whether or not we can directly affect the material circumstances, rhetoricians—people who study argument, language, and pedagogy for a living—have a responsibility to investigate the relationship of rhetoric and guns more thoroughly than we have as a discipline up to this point. Guns and gun violence occupy a unique rhetorical space in the twenty-first-century United States, one characterized by silent majorities (e.g., most gun owners), vocal minorities (especially the firearm industry and gun lobby), and a stalemate that fails to stem the tide of the dead. How Americans talk about, deliberate about, and fight about guns is vital to how guns are marketed, used, and regulated. However, rhetorical studies where guns are concerned is not terribly different from studies regarding American culture more generally. Guns are ever present,

they exercise powerful functions, but they are commonly talked about in more oblique, unsystematic ways than they would seem to demand.

The chapters in this book are intended to contribute to more sophisticated understandings about guns, about the violence guns are capable of inflicting, about the violence guns sometimes do inflict, about the ways Americans talk about guns, and certainly about misunderstandings. It is about the nexus of rhetoric and firearms in this particular moment when the United States is experiencing acute crises related to firearms. Violent crime is down nationally, but firearms still facilitate thousands of murders each year. Self-inflicted violence in the form of suicides, committed primarily with guns, is rising nationally, especially among young men. Domestic violence reaches its most tragic crescendos in a nation where firearms are readily available and present in a high percentage of American homes. Mass shooting events, while still statistically rare, are now common enough to have established their own genres of news coverage within the media outlets that report them (Squires 2016). And, as we noted above, racialized and gendered violence proceed apace, as they have from long before the birth of this country.

There is widespread consensus that gun violence in America constitutes a crisis. At the same time, there are very different rhetorical responses to the crises of violent crime, suicide, domestic violence, and mass shootings. Some Americans advocate for large-scale controls on guns and gun rights to affect their availability and use, but not all Americans agree that the gun crises warrant changes to existing gun laws or legislative curtailments of Second Amendment rights. Some people argue, for instance, that a "good guy with a gun" will thwart the violence of the mass shooter, the violent criminal, or the homicidal spouse, and they therefore advocate for more guns and better availability. Arguments about what guns do, what individuals do, what laws do, and what the government can or should do are complicated, as are the people who advocate for any given position about guns. Often such arguments are wrapped up in questions of identity, community, and constitutional protections, which further complicate how Americans deliberate about guns and gun rights (see, e.g., Kelly 2020).

Guns played pivotal roles in the events shaping 2020 as the most tumultuous year yet for the United States in the twenty-first century. In the late spring, as the country struggled to balance personal freedom and public safety in response to the COVID-19 crisis, predominantly white right-wing militia groups intimidated the Michigan legislature, almost certainly affecting the body's policy choices, and without any consequences for those who toted arms into the legislative space. In

October, also in Michigan, fourteen members of a white nationalist militia, the Wolverine Watchmen, were arrested by the FBI for plotting to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Cooter 2020). Predominantly white right-wing groups, armed with military-grade weapons and paramilitary gear, deployed themselves to multiple Black Lives Matters protests in the summer, ostensibly to "protect private property," but actually in an attempt to intimidate a new generation of civil rights protesters. Some of these confrontations turned deadly. Just a few months before George Floyd's murder in police custody in May, Ahmaud Arbery was gunned down in Georgia while jogging, the victim of a modern lynching perpetrated by a former law enforcement officer, his son, and another man, who lanced Arbery with racial epithets before running him down with their truck and gunning him to death on a residential street in his own hometown. Arbery's murder, of course, bore sickening echoes of Trayvon Martin's 2012 slaying. Except for the specific people involved, there's no meaningful sense in which Arbery's and Martin's killing, or any other number of racialized shootings, are isolated incidents. Such acts are of course violence—often explicitly gendered and/or racialized violence—but their rhetorical origins and rhetorical effects as specifically entangled in gun violence have only begun to draw the systematic attention of the discipline.

The complexity of gun rhetorics is still further complicated by evolutions in the broader contexts in which such rhetorics circulate. One factor we see as a dangerous trend percolating through American society is the dismissal of the conclusions of experts altogether. Nationally we are experiencing a crisis, in that expertise and experts go widely unvalued; and experts are regularly contradicted by amateurs with little or no expertise but whose counterarguments are nonetheless treated as equal to those of the experts by credulous media and naive publics, fueled by social media (see, e.g., Ceccarelli 2011; Hartelius 2010; Nichols 2017; Rice 2020). Gun debates give us one important example. Never has the nature of American gun violence been better understood. Yet never has that understanding mattered less, as arguments about regulation often refuse to engage research in ways that support meaningful deliberation.

Another factor is the reanimation of an old cultural friction between rural and urban Americans, who once again seem to be splitting and separating along a series of ideological lines—a split that has accelerated since the 2016 presidential election (Rodden 2019). The urban/rural divide animates rhetorically powerful—if usually dangerously erroneous—arguments about education, wealth, motivation, identity, who counts as a "real American," and who is worthy of participating in

self-governance. Rhetoric about guns and about the urban/rural divide commonly reinforce one another, even when they do not appear to be explicitly linked.

Finally, we exist in a moment when it is easy to see that violence facilitated by guns is sometimes itself a rhetorical act—rhetoric with guns that is also rhetoric about them. How can we understand the mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, for example, as anything other than a rhetorically motivated (in part) attack by an avowed racist? How can we understand assertions from mass shooters around the world that their attacks are motivated by efforts to start race or cultural wars? Or assertions from men who vengefully target women? Certainly not as rhetoric/language being an obstacle to war. Since the mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, media pundits have been quick to designate school attacks perpetrated by the schools' own pupils as forms of "speaking out" wherein in the message is carried not through the vibrations of speech nor the scratches of writing, but out of the barrel of gun. Two decades after Columbine—arguably the most influential mass shooting in modern American history—the prevalence of guns-as-rhetoric is as prominent as ever. We needn't rehearse further the ways in which acts of violence are, in addition to everything else that they might be, also rhetorical acts—perhaps the ultimate rhetorical acts.

The nexus we are attempting to describe here, as is surely apparent, is every bit as complex, convoluted, and concerning as massive, state-sponsored violence or organized public violence. We do not expect to solve these problems with this book. Rather, we hope to deepen the care with which rhetoric scholars understand, engage with, and act in relation to rhetoric and guns. As such, the essays collected here take on a variety of complex issues from a multiplicity of complex perspectives.[5]

GUN RHETORIC(S)

Given the challenges of characterizing the multifaceted rhetorical situation at large and even the variety of views within this book, we have come to think of the essays collected here in terms of stasis theory. The classical model of stasis theory posits between four and six standard procedural stases—or potential points of disagreement requiring resolution. The stases provide a powerful heuristic for understanding the potential for argument about a given situation. In the classical model, the stases are existence, definition, value, policy, cause, and action. Sometimes the stases are presented as conjecture, definition, quality, and policy.

There are other ways of labeling the "core" stases, but in all iterations stasis theory contains the idea that issues are decided by moving through a series of steps that begins with the question "Does the thing exist?" and ends with the question "What, if anything, should we do about it?" In the formal model, developed in the ancient tradition primarily for court proceedings, interlocutors are compelled by the authority of law or a judge to argue at the same stasis point and progress through the stases systematically. This ensures that rhetorical adversaries engage one another at the same, relevant points of contention. Such a system, though, is not how public policy debate or public opinion formation proceeds. In these realms there are no rules, no systems or judges to compel constituencies to argue along the same plane of stasis.

Stasis theory need not always be as rigid as the formulation of its classical model, though. One powerful heuristic quality of stasis theory is that it allows us to see ways people disagree, and sometimes the reasons why. A person or group in favor of greater gun regulation, for instance, might argue at the stasis of policy, saying, "We need to forbid the sale of assault weapons." A common tactic of those who oppose such policies is to drag the debate in a more preliminary stasis of definition, arguing, for example, that we cannot regulate "assault weapons" because we have no definition of what constitutes an assault weapon. When two parties are arguing about different stases, there is no prospect of them arriving at a compromise because they are arguing about different things. When we ask if two people or parties are arguing at the same stasis, then, we're really just asking if they are arguing about the same thing. If they are, a resolution or compromise is possible, though by no means guaranteed. If they are not even arguing at the same stasis point, resolution is practically impossible. For people who want to help advance public deliberation about guns and gun violence, understanding stases is a powerful tool for understanding who is arguing about what at any given time, and for moving arguments into at least the same stasis.

In this volume we see rhetoricians taking on the problems of gun ownership and gun violence at a host of different stasis points (though authors do not characterize their arguments as such).

In her chapter "The Only Thing That Stops a Bad Guy with Rhetoric Is a Good Guy with Rhetoric" (chapter 1), Patricia Roberts-Miller opens the volume by diagnosing the anti-deliberative tendency toward demagoguery in the so-called gun debate: legitimate disagreements about gun policy are depoliticized and made into issues of identity and motive, of good guys and bad guys. Both the NRA and mainstream media coverage maintain a zero-sum battle between two groups inaccurately framed

as supporting either unrestricted access to and use of guns or an outright ban on gun ownership. Roberts-Miller notes that as "a gun owner opposed to the NRA's policies," she is in a category the NRA's rhetoric doesn't allow. But as long as rhetoric from the NRA and mainstream media reinforces a win or lose contest on the basis of misconstrued identity and motive rather than policy, there can be little movement beyond a tug-of-war between two group identities.

The rhetorical means by which Second Amendment rights activists on the internet amass and exert force on public discussions of gun policy are the focus of Nate Kreuter's chapter, "Muzzle Velocity, Rhetorical Mass, and Rhetorical Force" (chapter 2). Kreuter analogizes the physics and chemistry of firearms' operations to extend the concept of rhetorical velocity by theorizing rhetorical mass and rhetorical force and examining how they propel debates over gun policy. Kreuter's analogies help explain why a well-organized minority of "anti-regulation interlocutors are apparently more rhetorically effective within the American political/rhetorical landscape than their counterparts who advocate on behalf of sensible gun regulations."

Like Kreuter, Brian Ballentine targets the firearms industry's relentless development of ever-greater muzzle velocity in "Hunting Firearms: Rhetorical Pursuits of Range and Power" (chapter 3). Ballentine applies Kenneth Burke's theory of entelechy to question what the "end of the line" might be for gun manufacturers and users, given the constant push to increase a firearm's "killing power." As a hunter, Ballentine focuses on variations in firearm restrictions that deer hunters encounter from state to state, even as states and hunters hold in common the ethical principle of "fair chase." Discussing the stasis of firearms' value in the context of fair chase, Ballentine reveals the complexities and complications of gun use by hunters as ever-more-lethal firearms make their way to market without any "end of the line" identified by gun makers or users.

Lisa M. Corrigan shares Ballentine's concern with firearms as technologies in her chapter, "The Gun as (Race/Gender) *Technê*" (chapter 4), though her interest lies with functions of guns in the contexts of white supremacy and anti-Black racism. Corrigan analyzes how a "duty to retreat" was made into Stand Your Ground laws that codify "the gun's *technê* [as] one premised on both whiteness and property." Two primary effects of this racial *technê* are "a fundamental assertion of ontological Being for white people" and an "erasure or anti-Being for people of color (particularly Black people) in the United States." Guns exist and affect existence in very different ways according to race and gender differences, as white men are accorded the possessive power to stand

their ground while white women and people of color must retreat or risk death.

Ian E. J. Hill echoes Corrigan's interest in guns as technologies that affect people in radically different ways dependent on positionality. In "The Rhetoric of Open Carry: Living with the Nonverbal Presence of Guns" (chapter 5), Hill examines the paradoxical effects of open carry (the nonverbal presence of guns) in public spaces. Discussing the Black Panther Party's "defensive use of open carry" to protect their communities from governmental authorities also carrying guns, Cliven Bundy's armed standoff with federal workers, and other examples, Hill shows that "when guns are visible, they convey multiple meanings and messages depending on the political and social power possessed by different populations." Open carry, then, simultaneously conveys "the threat of violence and the promise of protection" in relation to personal security.

In his chapter "The Activism Gap and the Rhetoric of (Un)Certainty" (chapter 6), Craig Rood takes up the "gun control paradox," or the phenomenon of broadly supported firearms restrictions like universal background checks continually failing to become law, which reflects the "activism gap" between gun rights and gun reform supporters. Rood examines the role played by (un)certainty in motivating action among both groups, noting that "moral clarity and urgency" about gun reform "become clouded by appeals to uncertainty, complexity, and incrementalism," such as those made by President Obama after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. In contrast, rhetoric from the NRA attempts to shift the stasis from policy to cause by introducing uncertainty about a gunman's motives into discourse while leveraging a simple message about gun rights to produce certainty among gun rights activists. Rood closes with three options "as a framework for interpretation and invention" for gun reform activists to increase certainty and decrease uncertainty in their rhetoric and thereby help enact popular reforms.

Lydia Wilkes, in her chapter "This Is America on Guns: Rhetorics of Acquiescence and Resistance to Privatized Gun Violence" (chapter 7), examines acquiescence to gun violence, a mood of helpless half acceptance of the inevitability of gun violence, in discursive commonplaces like "thoughts and prayers" and technologies like body armor marketed to civilians as one explanation for the "gun control paradox." These rhetorics of acquiescence make gun violence seem uncontestable. While acquiescence may describe the national mood of those committed neither to gun rights advocacy and activism nor gun control advocacy and activism, Wilkes also examines resistance to rhetorics of acquiescence

from clergy members, NRA members and, most notably, the March for Our Lives organization, which was started by teenage survivors of the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Wilkes argues that March for Our Lives' social media and grassroots activism, which has already boosted youth voter turnout, can gather enough rhetorical mass to shift discourse from acquiescence to activism.

Bradley Serber also takes up March for Our Lives' rhetoric in his chapter "'The Last Mass Shooting': Anticipating the End of Mass Shootings, Yet Again" (chapter 8), in which he focuses on the group's Twitter handle and hashtag, @NeverAgainMSD and #NeverAgain, and their promise to be "the last mass shooting." Serber explores the benefits and risks of this rhetorical framing and argues that "perpetually anticipating the end of mass shootings" through commonly used phrases like "not one more" ultimately "sets up a never-ending cycle of heartbreak" because gun violence has only increased in spite of these passionate declarations. Serber suggests that March for Our Lives emphasize modest, attainable policy goals, as they do in their ten-point agenda for gun control, rather than the unattainable rallying cry of "never again."

Kendall Gerdes analyzes the long-standing debate over campus carry in Texas in her chapter "Campus Carry, Academic Freedom, and Rhetorical Sensitivity" (chapter 9). Gerdes shows how student activism and anti-Black racialized fear drove both a ban on campus carry in the 1960s and a revival of campus carry in 2016. That revival is tied to broader efforts to "normaliz[e] the presence of guns in every quarter of ordinary life," which chills free speech and academic freedom on campus, according to a lawsuit filed by UT professors. Gerdes reveals a connection between two supposed antagonists: academic freedom and student sensitivity. Defending academic freedom requires recognition of "the sensitive nature of our classrooms" in which "sensitivity to affection in language . . . makes it possible for us to study, teach, and learn."

In his chapter "National News Coverage of White Mass Shooters: Perpetuating White Supremacy through Strategic Rhetoric" (chapter 10), Scott Gage uses recent theoretical work to demonstrate the ways in which the national media has become complicit in reinforcing white supremacy. As he demonstrates, the tropes through which white mass shooters are covered by mass media outlets lean toward reinforcing racist framings of shootings, sometimes even by overtly repeating racist talking points and "laundering" them through the coverage generated by respected news outlets. Far from neutral, media coverage plays a significant role in shaping how the public reacts to mass shooting events and where it places responsibility for such shootings.

Matthew Boedy drills down into the rhetorical framing of gun rights within the white evangelical Christian ideology espoused by Turning Point USA, a college student political organization that campaigns for gun rights. In "Guns and Freedom: The Second Amendment Rhetoric of Turning Point USA" (chapter 11), Boedy shows how the organization constitutes freedom through its interpretation of the Second Amendment as divinely inspired and appeals to conservative Christian beliefs about gender to encourage more women to own guns. Turning Point effectively uses its totalized construction of freedom to target its political opponents through, for example, the Professor Watchlist. Finding himself on the list for opposing campus carry in Georgia in a public forum, Boedy muses about the tense situation inflamed by Turning Point's rigid rhetoric.

Nathalie Kuroiwa-Lewis continues the collection's examination of guns on campus with an analysis of the Civilian Marksmanship Program's information sheet "Air Rifle Marksmanship for Youth" in her chapter "Hiding Guns in Schools: The Rhetoric of US Mass Shootings" (chapter 12). The Civilian Marksmanship Program is a nationwide high school program sponsored by the JROTC (Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps) and the NRA: its members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School included both the gunman and students who died protecting their peers. Kuroiwa-Lewis applies psychic numbing and rhetorical silence as analytical lenses to argue that the information sheet frames air rifle marksmanship as a safe, inclusive sport that deters "potential negative interest" in guns. Minimizing the social effects of gun violence and emphasizing the recreational benefits of air rifle marksmanship, the information sheet attempts to separate guns from gun violence.

In "A Non-Defensive Gun: Violence, Climate Catastrophe, and Rhetorical Education" (chapter 13), Ira Allen considers the *topos* of a "defensive gun," from the genocidal origins of the Second Amendment to its function as the background condition of contemporary spectacles of gun violence, including but hardly limited to mass shootings. The notion of a "defensive gun" elides or even excuses violence done in the name of (self) defense as morally permissible. Allen ruminates on the consequences for us of disavowing the moral justification of "defensive gun violence," particularly in a moment when we are moving inexorably toward climate catastrophe and the remaking of new worlds that will inevitably involve gun violence. And he calls on us to return again to rhetorical education as a way to imagine possible ways of being in a darker, hotter future world.

The final chapter, "Talking Together about Guns: TTAG and Sustainable Publics" (chapter 14), by Peter Buck, Bradley Serber, and Rosa Eberly, presents itself in an unconventional form. Rather than functioning analytically, the chapter is an edited transcription of the authors' conversation about their own experiences as academics who have lived and worked in proximity to both gun violence and anti-violence activism. The chapter details the ways in which guns, gun violence, activism, and anti-regulation backlashes have converged and shaped the academic and community work of the authors. The chapter is both a testament to how real these issues are for working rhetoricians and a manifestation of the theory they are discussing. Not merely theoretical, guns and the violence that they both threaten and deliver are, as the dialogue shows, tangible realities. The stakes become even higher for rhetoricians and fellow academics who dare to confront gun violence and its sources, as this chapter and several others in the volume demonstrate.

We struggled with how to organize this book. There are clear resonances across chapters. Corrigan, Gage, and Wilkes (among others) focus centrally on race and white supremacy, for example. Ballentine, Kreuter, Rood, and Kuroiwa-Lewis (among others) directly take up questions of firearm technology. Boedy, Roberts-Miller, Serber, and Buck, Serber, and Eberly (among others) investigate interventions in public discourse. And Allen, Gerdes, and Hill (among others) ruminate on deeply embodied reactions to guns and gun violence. At the same time, nearly every chapter could fit comfortably into any other category. Race and white supremacy, technology, interventions in public discourse, and material embodiment are predominant themes in this book, as are activism, politics, media, family and community, hunting and sport, education, and more. Every chapter engages meaningfully in a number of these issues in ways that thwarted our efforts to make tidy groupings. In short, we opted not to break the book into sections. The chapters are organized, then, in what seemed to us to demonstrate a version of continuity—chapter 3, for example, foregrounds technology, and chapter 4 takes up questions of *technê*. The connections are not always quite so obvious, but we see the chapters connecting in a sort of loose daisy chain of themes, even as they all take up similar—and sometimes the same—issues. We have tried to make connections clear across chapters with citations to relevant works in the volume while trying not to overwhelm the reader by citing every resonance we see. Ultimately, we tried to help readers see the volume as we intend it, but the chapters can be read in any order without compromising the integrity of the whole volume.

The one exception is Catherine R. Squires's afterword, which we've placed at the end for obvious reasons. We asked Dr. Squires to write for this book not to sum up its importance (though we hope it is important); rather, we specifically requested her to envision the book's motivating potential for future avenues of research. Having read her work, especially *Dangerous Discourses* (2016), we are acutely aware of some limitations of this book. Our contributors' engagements with race are considerable, for example, but our engagements with gender are somewhat more limited. There are undoubtedly plenty of other aspects of the subject this volume does not explore. Those limitations belong to us as editors, not to the contributors and other people who made this book possible. When we invited Dr. Squires to write the afterword, we asked her to highlight those limitations as she sees fit because we want to ensure the discussions we're hoping to initiate don't immediately devolve into narrow echo chambers of like-minded agreement. She took our prompt in directions we could not have imagined, and for that we are immeasurably thankful. The relationship of rhetoric to guns is complicated. It would be counterproductive to suggest otherwise. And Dr. Squires's afterword has helped us see around corners we didn't even realize existed, a benefit we hope readers will likewise appreciate.

One more word about the contributors. A central premise of this volume is that scholars familiar with gun ownership, gun policy, and gun violence are uniquely positioned to offer insight into the rhetorical nature of America's gun culture and epidemic of mass shootings. Although not all of our contributors fit this profile, many of them do, and all of them have some personal investment in the issues. We have, therefore, asked them to be explicit about their positionality because we think it adds to the exigency of these chapters and to the power of the analysis. We do not come to these issues idly. In any case, the essays collected here indicate how essential it is that rhetoricians apply their expertise to public policy debates (which is not always natural for scholars, even though our discipline arguably originated in such debates), and in particular to the various cultural and policy discussions that surround firearms in the United States. This book builds on existing scholarship about guns to make the case that better understanding rhetorics of guns and gun violence can help Americans understand how to make better arguments about them in the world.

When all is said and done, we hope this book will give our readers an enhanced understanding of rhetoric's relationship to guns from the authors' efforts to analyze rhetoric about guns, guns in rhetoric, and guns as rhetoric, particularly as the issues relate to specific instances of

guns in US culture in media coverage, political speech, and marketing and advertising. *Rhetoric and Guns* also extends rhetoricians' sustained interest in rhetoric's relationship to violence, brutality, and atrocity.[6] It contributes to ongoing discussions about how rhetoric informs attitudes about and potential changes to the rhetorical environment and public deliberation about current issues. The goal is to intervene in discussions about rhetoric and guns—hopefully with the ultimate effect of reducing gun violence, but at the very least to introduce new lines of thought and action in discussions about guns in America. In other words, we see this as an early step, not a final word. As such, *Rhetoric and Guns* seeks to advance a more focused, systematic treatment of rhetoric's relationship to guns, gun culture, and gun violence until such investment is rendered moot.

NOTES

1. This is not to diminish the very real effects of war in Americans' lives at least since the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Those effects have been widespread and often devastating, particularly for military service personnel with multiple deployments (sometimes into double digits) and families who have sent children to war. On average, twenty veterans completed suicide each day in 2014, more than two-thirds by firearm (Office of Suicide Prevention 2016, 4). But for most Americans, the perceptible, daily effects of war have faded (e.g., Engels and Saas 2013; Ohl 2015; Simons and Lucaites 2017; Stahl 2009) so much so that Andrew Bacevich, foreign policy critic and former army lieutenant colonel, claimed in 2010 that war is part of "the wallpaper of national life" (23).
2. For crucial rhetorical research into gun violence, see Brummett 2018; Cryer 2020; Downs 2002; Dubisar 2018; Duerringer 2015; Duerringer and Justus 2016; Eberly 2018; Hogan and Rood 2015; Rood 2018, 2019; Squires 2016; Watts 2017; and Worsham 1998.
3. For other recent scholarship, see, e.g., Eatman 2020; Eberly 2018; Haynes 2016; Lozano 2019; and Watts 2017.
4. Though rhetoric scholars Crosswhite (2013), Engels (2015), and Stormer (2013), for example, have treated the intersection of rhetorical power and violence, their scholarship does not emphasize the resistance tactics and strategies of those who are rhetorically disempowered or how violence differentially secures or threatens people in relation to their embodiment. Recent scholarship by Lozano (2019), Ore (2019), and Squires (2016)—and this volume—attends to the intersections of rhetorical power, the rhetorically disempowered, and violence.
5. One thing we want to be absolutely clear about, given our aims, is that the chapters in this book do not present a unified vision of how to understand or address gun rhetorics. The individual authors do not necessarily see eye to eye about these issues, and no chapter is representative of all the contributors' shared beliefs. Ordinarily, we would not feel the need to state this outright, but given the charged nature of guns and rhetoric, we felt it necessary to be explicit.
6. See, e.g., Eatman 2020; Eberly 2018; Haynes 2016; Hogan and Rood 2015; Lozano 2019; Miller 2005; Ore 2019; and Worsham 1998.

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1

THE ONLY THING THAT STOPS A BAD GUY WITH RHETORIC IS A GOOD GUY WITH RHETORIC

Patricia Roberts-Miller

In March 2018, several friends on social media shared a *Scientific American* blog post titled "Why Are White Men Stockpiling Guns?" The post begins by pointing out that "three percent of the population now owns half of the country's firearms" and poses the question "So, who is buying all these guns—and why?" It goes on to cite various studies about gun owners in order to argue that "the kind of man who stockpiles weapons or applies for a concealed-carry license meets a very specific profile." That "profile" is that these white men are "anxious about their ability to protect their families, insecure about their place in the job market, and beset by racial fears." The article characterizes gun owners as irrational, racist, trying to "regain their masculinity," men whose "attachment to guns was based entirely on ideology and emotions" (Smith 2018). What is very unclear in the blog post is any logical connection between the specific statistic of 3 percent of the American population owning a disproportionate amount of guns and the characteristics of gun owners in general (an association not merited by the studies cited). That association enables characterizing gun owners as a homogeneously irrational, impaired, fearful, and ideologically motivated. In other words, an out-group. And furthermore, that out-group (a political and ideological construct) is both constituted and signaled by the material condition of owning a gun. This post irrationalizes the opposition.

What I want to suggest in this chapter is that this blog post epitomizes far too much of our public (and private) discourse about guns. What should be policy argumentation about the many issues regarding gun ownership and use is deflected to demagoguery, thereby transmogrifying the complicated array of policy options and opinions to a zero-sum existential battle between Us (rational, ethical, good) and Them (irrational, ideologically motivated, and bad) (see also Rood's chapter 6 in

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this volume). Instead of seeing our world as a lot of people at different places on a spectrum of policy options and commitments (a presentation of disagreement that makes fundraising and mobilizing support more complicated), demagoguery about *the* gun debate says there is no point in arguing with others about policy—*the* opposition is so malevolent, irrational, and mindless—so our goal should be the political (and perhaps literal) extermination of the Other.

Paradoxically, this demagoguery about our options regarding gun ownership, storage, and use—that there are two sides, and it is a question of identity (gun owners versus non–gun owners)—does not equally benefit "both sides," but singularly benefits the most extreme position advocated by figures like Wayne LaPierre of the NRA. To reduce policy argumentation about guns to the motives and identities of "gun owners" versus others is to grant the most demagogic aspect of extreme rhetoric like LaPierre's: that gun ownership constitutes membership in a homogeneous group whose univocal interests are represented by the NRA.

While I don't want to make the argument that "both sides" engage in demagoguery (since that's accepting the premise of there being two sides, the premise that enables the demagoguery), it's true that this demagogic approach is central to the rhetoric of groups like the National Rifle Association and Gun Owners of America. They reduce the available positions and commitments on gun laws to two identities: those who are anti-gun and gun owners. They thereby deflect from policy questions to relationship to guns: people who are opposed to guns, and people who own guns. It doesn't make sense to be anti-*gun*, and very few people (if anyone) are opposed to the *gun*—they're opposed to private gun ownership, open carry, concealed carry, private ownership of certain kinds of weapons, unlimited individual gun ownership. They're opposed to policies about guns, what people do with guns, the consequences of NRA policies. The very term irrationalizes the opposition by shifting the stasis from policy to an irrational motive.

Since my point is that public argumentation about gun ownership and availability is displaced by demagoguery, I should first explain what that means. There are four rhetorical steps in demagoguery. First, an issue is rhetorically divided into two (and only two) positions, which are represented by two rhetorically constructed groups: Us (in-group) and Them (out-group). As an aside, I should mention that in social group theory, the in-group is not the group in power; it's the group we're in. So, for the NRA or Gun Owners of America, the "in-group" is the imagined group identity of "gun owners"; for the author of the *Scientific American* blog post, the imagined group identity of "gun owners" is the

out-group.[1] The second step in demagoguery is characterizing the rhetorically constructed in-group as nuanced, rational, and *essentially* good, and the out-group as mindless, irrational, and *essentially* bad. Thus, the most extreme members of the out-group can be taken as representative of the out-group as a whole, but the most extreme members of the in-group can be dismissed as nonrepresentative exceptions. Third, policy is derived from identity, so the question in demagoguery is which group is better, and it's assumed that, from that determination of essential goodness, we can know which policy is better (ours, of course). Fourth, we are in a battle for existence with *them*, so any arguing about policy, any attempt to compromise (let alone deliberate) with *them* is trucking with the devil. We shouldn't communicate with *them* at all, but use all of our rhetoric to mobilize the in-group to action.

Since I'm saying that we should resist the assumption that policy affiliation necessarily and inevitably derives from identity, I should probably engage in full disclosure about my identity. Because of Texas common property laws, I'm a gun owner (I own quite a few, actually). My father owned guns, and I've shot them from time to time. My son and husband shoot with some frequency, and my husband has spent a fair amount of time hunting. (Full disclosure on full disclosure: my father also hunted, but he was really bad at it.)

Some of my favorite people really like guns. They don't *need* all the guns they own, in that they don't imagine themselves shooting an intruder or rattlesnake, but they like them. I don't really like shooting very much (at least not loud guns). While my son and husband shoot at targets, I tend to wander off and shoot out-of-focus pictures of birds. I like birds.

I also like books. So I collect them, including books I don't really need. I know people who like cars, vinyl albums, or teaspoons in the same way. I have the complete works of Wilkie Collins because I like reading them. I could get them from the library, and maybe someday I could get them on Kindle, but I take pleasure in having them here so I can pick one up at any time (and I don't like reading on digital devices). I have a lot of books I never read (such as the Eichmann trial's prosecutor's memoirs of the trial, in Hebrew, which I can't read). Collectors are like that. I collect books; some people collect guns.

One might argue that guns are different in that no one is likely to get killed with one of my volumes of Wilkie Collins (I don't really think someone could die of boredom from some of his worse stories, although it might sometimes seem that way). That's true, and certainly there is a difference between collecting books and collecting, say, plague viruses.

If what you are collecting is potentially dangerous, then it's reasonable to put limits on what you can collect, who can collect it, how that collection is stored, and how that collection is used. Because so many people die from others owning cars (in 2016, 38,748 people died from car accidents), we regulate car ownership and use (Xu et al. 2018, 14). I believe that, since a similar number of people die from guns (in 2016, 38,658 people), it would be reasonable to regulate guns as much as we do cars (Xu et al. 2018, 12). The NRA, however, is opposed to any such regulation.

I am a gun owner opposed to the NRA's policies—but that puts me in a category neither the *Scientific American* nor the NRA admits exists. Take, for instance, Wayne LaPierre's 2013 op-ed in the *Daily Caller*, "Stand and Fight." That editorial relies on a perfect binary of "us" and "them." He associates "us," gun owners, with the following identities and traits: Americans, prudent, lawful, decent, responsible, ordinary citizens, law-abiding, freedom lovers, genuine grassroots, survival, patriots, army of freedom. While LaPierre acknowledges that not all gun owners are members of the NRA, his op-ed assumes and asserts that his rhetorically constructed category of "gun owners" is identical to those who "support the NRA stance regarding gun ownership and availability": "We know that responsible gun ownership exemplifies what is good and right about America." Opposed to these patriots is a set of associations for "them": violent criminals, drug gangs, kidnappers, Obama and his cronies, flagrant violation of law, terrorists, Bloomberg, gun prohibitionists, corrupt politicians, anti-gun media, gun-ban lobbies, George Soros, England, enemies of freedom, coming siege.

In other words, LaPierre is relying on the rhetorical strategy that Ernesto Laclau (2005) calls "equivalential chains" and Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) call "paired terms." Laclau argues that populist reason works by equivalential chains—the demands of various people who are identified as "the people" perceive "an accumulation of unfulfilled demands" as essentially equivalent (73). Laclau's example is that clean water is much like good wages is much like good schools (73), except, of course, they aren't (75). What connects good schools and good wages is that they are goods for the disenfranchised. Laclau says, "The consolidation of the equivalential chain [is] through the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links" (77). That is, the in-group.

There is a second step, the division into "two camps" (Laclau 2005, 75), that Laclau didn't follow up in his discussion of equivalential chains, but it's important. Equivalential chains aren't just about who we

are—they're about who we are not. That insight is similarly acknowledged, but also not really pursued, in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's explanation of dissociation in *The New Rhetoric* (1969). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note that arguments rely on paired terms—sets of binaries in which positive terms are assumed to be associated with one another as in-group values, policies, or attributes (equivalential chains, in Laclau's terms) and opposed to related negative terms associated with out-group values, policies, or attributes. To extend Laclau's example, good wages (in-group policy goal) are associated with clean water and contrasted to poor wages. So, clean water is to unsafe water as good wages are to poor wages.

clean water	::	good wages
unsafe water		poor wages

In LaPierre's editorial, not only are the "us" terms associated with one another in equivalential chains (ordinary citizens are equivalent to gun owners are equivalent to patriots), but each "us" term is the exact opposite of some term associated with "them."

Good Americans	::	gun owners	::	NRA	::	law-abiding
Obama and cronies		gun prohibitionists		Obama, Bloomberg, Soros		violent criminals
prudent, decent, responsible	::	ordinary citizens	::	patriots	::	genuine grassroots
flagrant violation of law		corrupt politicians		terrorists		gun-ban lobbies

	freedom lovers	
::		
	enemies of freedom	

LaPierre doesn't explicitly say that Obama and his cronies are terrorists or violent criminals, and the connection is *very* tenuous. The connections among the positive terms are similarly tenuous (such as NRA being a genuinely grassroots organization). The connections that LaPierre's argument makes aren't *logically* argued; they're *associatively* connected. And they are associatively disconnected from the terms associated with the out-group.

This strategy of argument is common. Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner noted this associative rhetoric in the Bush administration's pro-Iraq invasion rhetoric. As they say:

> President Bush never publicly blamed Saddam Hussein or Iraq for the events of September 11, but by consistently linking Iraq with terrorism and al Qaeda he provided the context from which such a connection could be made. Bush also never publicly connected Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda. Nevertheless, whether or not Bush connected each dot from Saddam Hussein to bin Laden, the way language and transitions are shaped in his official speeches almost compelled listeners to infer a connection. (2005, 525)

While Bush couldn't make the connection between Iraq, bin Laden, and 9/11 *logically*, he could make it *associatively*. And, unhappily, people often make decisions on the basis of such associations—what Milton Lodge and Charles Taber call "processes of unconscious valence affect" (2013, 22). They say, "Evaluations that conform to a simple, bipolar structure, in which liking for a concept (for example, pro-choice) implies disliking of a second concept (pro-life), tend to elicit stronger I-E [implicit-explicit] correlations as well as increasing the speed, consistency, and efficiency of processing" (63). In other words, people make evaluations based on paired terms.

Lodge and Tabor argue that people rely on "identifications," which are "associative knowledge structures in long-term memory with varying chronic and momentary accessibility" (2013, 96). The accessibility of identifications is "influenced by the momentary accessibility of other identifications" via "*a congruent identifications effect* such that priming an in-group will increase the accessibility of all in-group identifications and inhibit out-group identifications, while priming an out-group will facilitate the accessibility of all out-group identifications" (96–97; emphasis in original). That is, priming the various concepts associated with the in-group will inhibit any impulse to identify with out-group concepts—invoking "freedom," "patriotism," or "ordinary citizens" will increase the sense of identification with the other in-group concepts (gun ownership, the NRA), while inhibiting identification with out-group concepts (Obama, gun prohibition).

LaPierre's proposed solution to the threats presented by the out-group is more commitment to the NRA, and more guns. In his conclusion, he says, "We will not surrender. We will not appease. We will buy more guns than ever. We will use them for sport and lawful self-defense more than ever" (2013).[2] LaPierre, and NRA rhetoric more generally, presumes and reinforces a binary between this MOAR GUNZ (to cite an old

meme) policy and banning all guns, so the policy options available to us as a nation are reduced to two: NO GUNZ or MOAR GUNZ. That false binary is then depoliticized by making it not a policy issue at all, but a binary of group identity.

This is savvy rhetoric. A depressing amount of scholarship shows that voters make decisions on the basis of identification with the presentation of a group rather than policies—people will vote against their policy agenda in order to vote with an identity (see especially Levendusky 2013 and Mason 2018). Were Americans to debate policy rather than identity, and not as a binary, the NRA would almost certainly not be as successful as it currently is at enacting gun policies that are tremendously unpopular, even with gun owners (as I discuss below). Thus, to the extent that public discourse about guns reduces the complicated array of policy options into a binary of identity (people who want unlimited guns versus people who want to ban guns), the NRA triumphs.

Unhappily, much anti-NRA rhetoric and even supposedly nonpartisan coverage of the issues of gun violence/ownership accepts, reinforces, and promotes precisely the frame (anything related to guns can be reduced to a choice between binary identities) that inhibits reasonable discussion. It does so by talking about "the" or "a" gun debate, referring to "both sides," trying to be "fair" by saying "both sides engage in demagoguery," accepting the NRA's representation of itself as speaking for all gun owners, describing the conflict about policy in terms of identities ("gun owners" versus "gun control advocates"), bungling information about guns, or accepting the binary paired terms of the NRA stance and just flipping them. This reduction of a complicated set of issues to a simple choice between two identities depoliticizes an issue by taking it out of the realm of policy deliberation and into partisanship (it's striking that people talk of "politicizing" an issue when they mean "treating an issue in purely partisan terms").

There is not "*a* gun debate"—there are many arguments about many different policy options. There are not "two sides"—so there is no possibility of "both sides" doing anything. And attitudes about guns do not come down to identity, let alone a binary of identities.

In regard to gun violence, there are multiple—different—problems, and we need to stop conflating them. For instance, consider the problem of mass killings. These incidents are almost always either aspirational claims for fame (e.g., Columbine High School), metastatic domestic violence (e.g., the Mercy Hospital shooting), or violence as the natural extension of eliminationist rhetoric (e.g., the shooting at the Knoxville Unitarian Universalist Church). David Neiwert has pointed out that the

Knoxville murderer's manifesto was "largely a distillation" of the many books by reactionary pundits that the murderer owned. It was a political act (2009, 3). Neither the Columbine nor Mercy Hospital murderers had a political agenda. Thus, the identities and motives even of this one kind of killing are not unitary, and it's unlikely that one single policy will solve all of them.

As long as we think about issues of gun ownership and gun violence in terms of pro- or anti-gun, we're not going to have a productive *policy* debate—because if we treat all gun violence as the same, it's easy for someone to point out that *this* proposal (say, mental health checks) would not have prevented *that* incident of gun violence. J. Michael Hogan and Craig Rood bemoan the current public discourse regarding gun violence:

> We need an honest, open, and robust debate over guns and gun violence—the sort of debate that empowers the American people to make informed judgments and take political action. We need a debate that marshals the best expertise and engages a wide variety of stakeholders, from gun manufacturers and law enforcement agencies, to hunters and sport shooters, educators, parents, and victims' rights groups. And we need journalists to mediate that debate with a renewed commitment to social responsibility and the public good. (2015, 360–61)

That renewed commitment should involve a rejection of the "two sides" model as well as the notion that policies can be argued as identities. Debates about policies regarding who can own guns, what kinds of guns people can own, how they can be modified, under what circumstances guns should be confiscated, whether and how that ownership should be recorded, when and where they can be carried, and so on should be *policy* argumentation. They should not be, as they currently are, truncated into an unanswerable question as to which of the two sides is made up of better people. Nor should the debate be framed as "gun owners" versus "gun control advocates," since those are not—despite the NRA's best rhetorical efforts—mutually exclusive categories.

Most gun owners either support more restrictive policies on guns or support existing levels of restrictions. Gun ownership and supporting MOAR GUNZ are not synonymous. As a 2017 Pew Research Center survey shows:

> Overwhelming majorities of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents and Democrats and Democratic leaners (89% each) say mentally ill people should be barred from buying guns. Nearly as many in both parties (86% of Democrats, 83% of Republicans) favor barring gun purchases by people on federal watch lists. And sizable majorities also favor

> making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks (91% of Democrats, 79% of Republicans). (Parker et al. 2017)

Perhaps most interesting, 88 percent of those surveyed said that gun laws should be what they currently are (31 percent) or stricter (57 percent). Even when broken down further, the survey does not support the NRA equation of gun owners and MOAR GUNZ: among Republican or Republican-leaning gun owners, 13 percent say gun laws should be stricter and 61 percent say they're about right. Among Democrat or Democrat-leaning gun owners, 64 percent say laws should be stricter, and 26 percent say they're about right. Thus, despite LaPierre's claims about gun owners' support for no restrictions, most gun owners support restrictions on gun ownership and use.

The NRA, as in LaPierre's editorial, responds to gun violence by appealing to the "responsible gun owners." This is an interesting substitution—of people for practices—and yet possibly a slip that might be used to get to better arguments about policies. What is a "responsible gun owner"? What practices do such owners follow that are responsible? If we can move the issue from their simply being good people to their observing good practices, then we are headed toward a set of policies to which responsible gun owners wouldn't object, since they're actually engaged in those practices—perhaps locking up guns appropriately, for instance.

If our country argues policies rather than identities, the NRA will lose. If the NRA can keep the argument focused on a false binary of gun owners versus gun prohibitionists, and on the issue of motives, it will succeed. Thus, to the extent that the media (and pro-restriction rhetoric) rely on that false binary and consequent motivism, they help the NRA.

Some years ago, Doug Downs elegantly showed that media do present gun owners as irrational. Downs analyzed representation of gun owners "in a 75,000-word corpus of newspaper stories, editorials, and letters to the editor" (2002, 45). He found that media representation of gun owners persistently and consistently presented them unfavorably: "Selfish, incompetent, dangerous, unreasonable on self-defense—one might as well call gun owners irresponsible. That is, in fact, the most frequent characterization of owners in this corpus, sometimes in precisely those terms but often . . . through insinuation and pre-supposition" (59). Downs argues that this characterization of gun owners marginalizes them, and "amplifies the very polarization it should seek to attenuate" (69). I would take the point further.

Earlier, I argued that LaPierre's piece exemplifies NRA rhetoric's reliance on binary paired terms—identifications that are presumed to be connected laterally, while in a binary relationship to other terms: one group is American and the other un-American; one is brave, the other cowardly; one is rational, the other irrational. What much anti-NRA and mainstream coverage does is accept the set of binary paired terms and simply flip the privilege instead of dissociating terms or deconstructing the binaries.

Two sets of paired terms ubiquitous in identity-based arguments about gun policies are afraid/brave and rational/irrational. A common theme in the MOAR GUNZ argument is that "the opposition" (anyone who disagrees with "us") is acting from a position of irrational fear about guns, and their position can, therefore, be dismissed. And it's true that policies advocating restrictions on gun ownership and use do have bases in fears—fear of a disgruntled student, fear of a firefight. But the MOAR GUNZ position is also a profoundly fear-ridden one. LaPierre's argument in "Stand and Fight" is that Obama's weakness and financial irresponsibility will mean a collapse of the government, in which there will be mass looting and no police. The MOAR GUNZ position appeals to fear of criminals (often coded as people of color; see especially Filindra and Kaplan 2016), fear of losing guns, fear of liberals, fear of the government. It's a very fearful argument. For instance, the argument at my own university in favor of concealed carry in classrooms relies heavily on the fear/fantasy of a campus shooter. Thus, it makes no sense to pretend that "one side" was fearful and "the other" was not, nor that the fears of "one side" were rational assessments of danger and those of "the other" side were not—it was the same fear. That someone advocates a policy out of fear is *not* a reason to refuse to engage their argument or dismiss their position from consideration; it's a reason to argue their policy, and not their motives.

That isn't to say that identities are completely irrelevant in policy deliberation, but that identity is simply one datum. And identity that presumes a complicated issue can be reduced to a zero-sum battle between two groups is always going to harm deliberation. But it is possible for the question of identity to be one that enhances democratic fellowship, even if it does little for policy deliberation. Projects such as "Hands across the Hills" (in which people from very different communities come together for structured dialogues) often end without a change in policy beliefs, but with less demonization of the Other. In one of the programs, people from liberal Leverett, Massachusetts, met with people from conservative coal country (Letcher County, Kentucky). One participant wrote that

the divisive issues of the 2016 election hadn't disappeared by the time they met together, "but our common concerns—wanting a steady good living, a future for our children and grandchildren—were in the foreground" (Dunn and Clayton 2018).

Elsewhere I've argued that we are in a culture of demagoguery in which all policy issues are depoliticized by being reframed as a zero-sum battle between two identities (see Roberts-Miller 2017, 2019a, 2019b). Important to that depoliticizing is the rhetorical strategy of "inoculation," a concept not discussed enough in our field. Inoculation is a kind of preemptive refutation, when a rhetor presents an audience with an opposition argument the audience might hear, and also refutes the argument—the idea is that the audience will be more resistant because they will recognize the opposition argument and be primed to remember the refutation (for a summary, see Compton and Pfau 2005). In a culture of demagoguery, inoculation is not so much preemptive refutation as preemptive straw man: an audience is presented with a weak version (or active misrepresentation) of "the" opposition argument (a move that depends on the issue already having been broken into a binary) with the goal of making the in-group feel that they shouldn't even listen to any member of "the" opposition—that is, to any disagreement. And, in a culture of demagoguery, motivism is one of the more straightforward ways to inoculate the in-group.

In short, a complicated issue is broken into two sides (the in- and out-group), and "the other side" is represented as having *no* legitimate point of view at all—their position is irrational, the consequence of bad motives, and therefore should not even be heard. Furthermore, it doesn't need to be heard—their stance on this one issue (gun ownership and availability) can be used to infer their stances on all other issues. This is a disturbing way for people to participate in democratic decision-making. Bradford Vivian puts it elegantly:

> Defining the fact that others hold competing beliefs or opinions from oneself as a symptom of deep moral failing, corrupted intelligence, or even evil can provide an important precondition of authoritarian governance. A zeal for equating a contrasting political affiliation with essential threats to the nation (as great as, if not greater than, threats posed by foreign adversaries) may transform institutions designed for democratically mediating among pluralistic values and agendas into undemocratic agencies of noncooperation and nondeliberative accruals of power. (2018, 434)

This is not to say that we must assume goodwill and good intentions on the part of every political figure, rhetor, or interlocutor. There are people engaged in bad-faith argumentation. But it does mean we should not

assume that disagreement with an in-group policy is all we need to know in order to believe that someone's political views are the consequence of bad intentions.

Characterizing gun owners as irrational and irresponsible yahoos whose views on gun policy can be dismissed because of their motives confirms the NRA presentation of gun policy debates as *really* a zero-sum contest between two groups. The NRA does *not* speak for gun owners. The NRA represents gun owners as fanatically committed to having all the guns carried in all the places—and to the extent that non-NRA media represent gun owners that same way, they are doing NRA work. I am not saying that "both sides" engage in demagoguery about guns, but that any "side" that frames any issue related to guns as a binary of gun owners versus non–gun owners is engaged in demagoguery. Identity is not policy, and if we hope to deliberate well about guns, we'd be wise to argue about the latter rather than the former.

NOTES

1. I'm not claiming that identity is irrelevant to political discourse. We can't talk about politics without talking about identities. I am saying that it's fallacious to assume that policy preferences regarding guns *necessarily* and *inevitably* derive from identity. If we assume that our political landscape is usefully described as left versus right, that gays and African Americans are inevitably on the left, and that leftists are hostile to gun ownership, then we cannot understand organizations like Pink Pistols (Rauch 2000) that promote gun ownership and concealed carry among gays, or people like Robert Williams, the Black civil rights activist who formed an NRA chapter in Monroe, North Carolina, in 1957 to arm African Americans.
2. That last sentence is particularly troubling—what, exactly, does it mean to use guns for "lawful self-defense more than ever"? Is he suggesting that people now use guns for self-defense when they might have used something else previously? Since the piece is called "Stand and Fight," is he calling for more kinds of "self-defense" such as happened with Trayvon Martin?

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