

“Good Guys”: The Ethical Lives of Gun Owners

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Abstract

Gun rights activists in the United States have been incredibly successful in opposing state regulation and restrictions on firearms. Activists argue that violence in the U.S. will subside not through firearm restrictions but by allowing “good” people to continue to buy, possess, and carry guns who will then be able to stop “bad” people from committing violence. Based on participant-observation with a grass-roots, gun rights organization in the state of Georgia, this thesis critically examines what it means to be a “good” gun owner. I argue that gun owners cultivate themselves ethically by learning new skills which disproportionately prioritize anonymous human attacks as the most concerning threat to one’s physical and social integrity. I further show the implications of such a worldview as being enacted in gun owners’ everyday lives.

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Introduction

Nick stepped out of his vehicle as a man came up from behind him and put what police later identified as a paring knife against his neck. A second man then materialized in front of Nick and demanded his wallet and car keys. Thinking quickly, Nick managed to push the man with the knife far enough away so that he could draw his concealed revolver. Nick then proceeded to fire three shots into the assailant's body. The second man fled and Nick holstered his revolver. A nearby police cruiser heard the fired shots and quickly arrived. Only twenty-two at the time, Nick had spent the night playing Dungeons and Dragons with some friends to celebrate their last day of college a few hours before the attack.

The police arrived and Nick put his hands in the air, telling them that the men had tried to rob him and that he had defended himself. The police disarmed Nick and briefly detained him in the back of their cruiser. Witnesses corroborated Nick's story and a few minutes later he was taken to the hospital for a few stitches on his neck and wrist from the paring knife. All that remained was for Nick to fill out a police report and then wait for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) to process the case and return his revolver. It took five months to get the gun back from the police and in the interim period Nick first borrowed one of his grandfather's older handguns while saving enough money to buy a new one for himself – determined not to be unarmed (or poorly armed) while waiting for the GBI to process the case. After the shooting, Nick joined an online gun forum to discuss his experience and a sheriff in a nearby county offered to loan him a gun until his was returned. Another active member of the forum Nick went to for emotional support was one of the officers who had responded to Nick's self-defence shooting.

That morning, Nick had written the last exam of his college career and in the evening he had killed a stranger in self-defence. When I asked Nick how he felt about the incident a few years later he told me that it had not been a situation he wanted to be in, but that he had prepared for it. “I think I did fairly well,” he said. “And I don’t regret any of my decisions. I didn’t want to be in that situation in the first place but since it happened, I think I handled it fairly well.”

Nick is the only gun owner I met while doing fieldwork in Georgia who has killed in self-defence. By the criteria of gun owners he did everything right: Nick had prepared in advance for a potential attack, acted quickly, and, after he was no longer in danger, holstered his gun instead of shooting the second assailant who was already in flight (and therefore no longer a threat). Nick best represents what many of my informants would refer to as a “good guy with a gun.” He was well-prepared for the attack, responsible enough not to allow anger or a sense of revenge to overcome him, and quick-thinking in a moment of danger. But, armed only with a paring knife, was Nick’s life truly in danger or was one of the assailants killed over a wallet? Many if not all of my informants would argue that the intentions of the assailants are irrelevant; that they were willing to put Nick in a situation for which he could feel his life was in danger is enough to merit the killing. And that a sheriff was willing to give him a loaner gun before Nick got his own back shows that at least part of the criminal justice system agrees.

The United States of America does not require citizens to register legally purchased firearms and as such there are no official figures and no easy way to determine how many guns there are in the country. An approximation of the number of firearms owned in the United States has been undertaken by Cook and Goss by adding all the non-military firearms manufactured in the United States from 1899-2011. Cook and Goss then added imported firearms into the U.S. and subtracted firearms exported, and further subtracted 1% of the stock since 1945 to rule out

guns that no longer function so that “the current total is reduced to 245 million – about four guns for every gun owner” (Cook and Goss, 2014: 3). By this count, the United States has more guns than any other industrialized nation in the world while firearms in the US account for 30 000 deaths per year (Cook and Goss, 2014: 1). The Gun Violence Archive – a partisan database – already chronicled 4,127 gun related deaths and 8,336 gun related injuries and 88 mass shootings¹ in the United States from January 1, 2016 to April 26, 2016 (The Gun Violence Archive, 2016a).

Research Aims & Questions

My research takes as its guiding question, “what does it mean to be a good guy with a gun?” The term “good guy with a gun” is often used in pro-gun rhetoric that argues the most efficient way to stop gun violence in the United States is not to tighten restrictions on who can own a gun but to actively arm community leaders and moral exemplars such as teachers, religious leaders, and regular citizens so that if a threat (or “bad guy”) materializes, a “good” person will be there, ready to shoot.² This thesis aims to understand how, with the use of firearms, individuals render themselves into ethical subjects and, subsequently, how this ethical labour changes the ways in which gun owners view and inhabit the world around them. How does owning and learning to use a gun change how gun owners understand themselves as moral and others as amoral or even evil?

¹ The common definition of a mass shooting is a shooting in which four or more people (excluding the perpetrator) have been killed or injured.

² Examples of this sentiment are endless. After the racially driven mass shooting at a historic African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina, Reverend Kenneth Blanchard publically said that the shooting could have been prevented if the Reverend Clementa Pinckney (who was also murdered in the attack) had allowed and encouraged his congregation to carry firearms (Hayoun, 2015, June 19). Three years earlier, in the NRA’s official response to the Sandy Hook School shooting, Executive Vice-President of the NRA, Wayne LaPierre stated “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. Would you rather have your 911 call bring a good guy with a gun from a mile away or from a minute away?” (The Guardian, 2012, December 21).

This thesis is organized in three parts. The first chapter discusses the kinds of skills gun owners actively cultivate in order to become (and remain) good gun owners. The second chapter illustrates the kind of worldview learning these skills produces. The third chapter shows how this kind of worldview is enacted in everyday life. The narratives around gun ownership remain for the most part masculine and obscure the role women play as gun owners. Based on these narratives as well as my own experiences in the field, the title of this thesis retains its gendered framing where both “good” and “bad” guys and the interactions between them are imagined predominately in masculine terms. In this kind of masculine imagining, bad *guys* exist and one must be ready to meet them with violence – whether this means staying self-reliant by protecting oneself, being a good father by protecting one’s family, or being a guardian for the public at large. The gendered implications and adjoining mentality are clear: women are rarely – if ever – criminals or heroes within the epic imagery of gun violence. Guns and the gun owners become a kind of “masculinist protection,” often reifying traditional roles and expectations of men and women (Young, 2003; cf Carlson, 2014).

Methodology

For two and a half months, in the summer of 2015, I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, meeting and talking to gun owners and gun rights activists. The vast majority of gun owners I met, interviewed, and spent time with are active members of a gun rights organization called Georgia Carry, a non-profit grassroots organization that has been wildly successful in pushing pro-gun legislature through the Georgia House of Representatives as well as courts through lobbying and litigating. Georgia Carry was started in 2006 in part by a former police officer transitioning into law. No longer a police officer and therefore no longer permitted to carry a gun with him at all

times, he realized how restrictive Georgia's carry laws are for regular Georgians. Writing on a popular pro-gun Georgia blog,³ the former officer made a call out to any other gun owners interested in becoming politically involved in challenging restrictive gun laws. Shortly after, a small group of men met at a local restaurant and drafted their concerns and strategies on the back of a napkin and Georgia Carry was born.

Since 2007, Georgia Carry has been essential in expanding and deepening gun rights in Georgia. Georgia Carry was essential, for instance, in bringing in Georgia's House Bill 60 (and later House Bill 492 which clarified and expanded HB 60) titled "The Safe Carry Protection Act" but nicknamed "The Guns Everywhere Bill." Enacted on July 4, 2014, HB 60 allows licensed gun owners to carry their firearms into such places as bars, restaurants, places of worship, airport lobbies, and some government buildings. While religious leaders and business owners can prohibit guns from their premises, the offence for bringing a gun into a prohibited area became the same as not wearing footwear or a shirt when signage asked the patron to do so; similarly, carrying a firearm on a campuses changed from a felony to a misdemeanor. School districts may appoint staff to carry a firearm and felons are allowed to invoke the "Stand your ground" law if the individual feels their life is threatened, even if the gun they are using has been illegally acquired.⁴ More recently – because of a litigation effort by Georgia Carry – a new bill that would allow licensed students over the age of 21 to carry firearms on campus (HB 859) passed through the Chamber of Legislation. And though Georgia Governor Nathan Deal vetoed HB 859, he waited till the fortieth and final day in which he could decide to sign, veto, or silently allow the Bill to pass.

³ Georgiapacking.org

⁴ "Stand your ground" laws make it legal for individuals to use deadly force in public if they feel their lives are in danger. However, that individual still may have to prove that their life was actually in danger. I thank Patrick for that clarification.

Georgia Carry has been so successful and efficient in shaping gun-related policy in the state of Georgia that, according to Georgia Carry's Executive Director Jerry Henry, the National Rifle Association (NRA) even approached the group about becoming an affiliate – an offer they politely declined. In addition to lobbying and litigation, Georgia Carry also prepares informational pamphlets on current gun laws and maintains a regular public presence – attending as many events as they can including public BBQs, gun shows, municipal events, and Atlanta's annual pride parade.

My first experience with Georgia Carry occurred two weeks into my fieldwork. I met a member of the organization at a weekend gun show and, after a long conversation about guns and self-defence, he invited me to another event the group would be participating in the following weekend which was, incidentally, the Fourth of July. The Fourth of July celebration was being held at a bar in the neighbouring town of Marietta which had invited the organization to set up a table so as to inform the bar's clientele about gun rights and current laws. As I looked up the bar online for directions I noticed a few reviews and articles that accused the owner of the bar of being racist for messages that he periodically displays on his outdoor signage (Wing, 2012, September 19)⁵. Ekta, my roommate in Atlanta at the time, had agreed to drive me to the bar on her way to another party. Originally she had planned to come out with me to see what a gun rights booth looked like but, as we sat reading about the bar, Ekta decided to drop me off

⁵ The bar came under heavy criticism in 2012 when their outside sign read: "I heard the White House smelled like collard greens and fried chicken." The sign was taken down soon after but has been periodically replaced with other statements, including a large discount advertised on all pork items on their menu during the month of Ramadan.

and continue driving. We spent the car ride discussing the privileged access I have, as a white man, to do research on gun rights and ownership in the Deep South.⁶

It was the mid-afternoon by the time I arrived at the bar and the morning downpour had been replaced by sweltering heat. I crossed the parking lot and paid the ten dollar entrance fee, feeling nervous and unsure as to how I should present myself. I worried that the gun owners representing Georgia Carry would be unwilling to speak to me, closing a potentially exciting field site and meaning that the hour long drive to the bar was in vain. The first thing I noticed about the clientele of the bar was that – instead of guns – most men were openly carrying large knives to the side of their belts. They also wore leather vests and had long hair tied in ponytails; the parking lot was filled with Harley-Davidsons; I was at a biker bar.

I looked around and saw no indication of a Georgia Carry presence. In my blue checkered shirt and white shorts I suddenly felt overwhelming out of place. Ordering a beer, I awkwardly asked the waitress if anyone from Georgia Carry was present.

“Who?” she asked me.

“Georgia Carry...”

“Who?” She asked louder over the music.

“Georgia Carry” I repeated.

“Oh, you mean the gun guys – they’re behind the other side of the wall setting up their table.”

I walked over and saw a group of middle aged men in bright coloured polo shirts quietly arranging an array of pro-gun buttons, informative pamphlets, and membership forms. Just under ten men and women had arrived to represent Georgia Carry and celebrate the Fourth of July, all of them sporting handguns at their side. I approached their table and introduced myself as a

⁶ Patrick, a gun owner who I spent much of my time with, made a similar remark near the end of my fieldwork where he wondered aloud at how difficult, if not impossible, this research would be to for a person of colour or a woman.

researcher from Canada, interested in guns. One member introduced himself as Tony and motioned me into the shade, asking what I wanted to know. Our conversation lasted eight hours and Tony became one of the gun owners with whom I spent the most amount of time with during my fieldwork, conducting a subsequent (yet equally long) recorded interview and meeting regularly at Georgia Carry events in what could be considered “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 2000: 107). In the days and weeks that followed the Fourth of July event, I was introduced to many of the active members of Georgia Carry and began to attend as many meetings and events as I could – which included their annual two day Georgia Carry convention. At each meeting or event I attended I met new members of Georgia Carry interested in participating in an interview.

In total, I conducted eleven recorded interviews, two conversations over the phone, and spent time regularly with gun owners in more social contexts, whether at a shooting range, a comedy club, or a baseball game. The majority of active Georgia Carry members are white men well into adulthood and only in two instances did my interviews with Georgia Carry members stray from this demographic. The first was with Patrick who, in his early twenties, is significantly younger than any other active Georgia Carry member I ever met. Patrick has a Bachelor’s degree in history and sociology and was the most self-reflexive gun rights activist I encountered while conducting fieldwork.⁷ The other Georgia Carry member I met who did not fit this category is Catherine, currently the only female Executive Member of Georgia Carry. Catherine, a certified NRA-instructor, also volunteers for an organization which helps other women learn to shoot.

Interviews were a good opportunity to spend time with gun owners, especially those who were significantly older than me. When I interviewed young gun owners, however, I found their

⁷ And as my fieldwork progressed the rapport Patrick and I had moved from simple curiosity about one another and into genuine friendship.

tone switched to serious professionalism whenever I turned on my voice recorder. In these situations, I found the most candid and vibrant discussions occurred casually over lunch or a coffee. The most illuminating insights into gun ownership and self-defence, however, always took place spontaneously: in a parking lot after a Georgia Carry meeting, in line to order a beer, or in a dynamic group discussion or debate.

Throughout this fieldwork I also spent time with other gun owning Americans, conducting interviews with employees at a shooting range I frequented and one gun owner I met through a mutual friend. While these three gun owners carried every day, they typically only owned no more than three guns and were not in any way politically active for gun rights. After my interview with Jackson, an African-American employee of the shooting range I often visited, I asked him about the racial prejudices that guide how someone carrying a gun is seen as more or less dangerous. We were waiting for the same bus and Jackson shook his head. “The African-American experience with guns,” he said, “that’s a whole other story.” While this thesis discusses how threats are often racialized in the worldview of gun owners, these worldviews are those of white men living in the Deep South.

In addition to the participant-observation work which guided this thesis, I spent countless hours online reading gun blogs and forums, watching gun related YouTube videos, scanning through pro-gun Twitter feeds, and patiently reading comments on gun related articles. In voluminous and diverse online venues, gun enthusiasts are creating their own “vernacular cultures of digital media” where they interpret and discuss what it means to be a gun owner in contemporary American society (Coleman, 2010: 408). As lives are increasingly lived in a world that comprises both face-to-face and digitally mediated relationships and interactions, a study on

the role of gun ownership in what it means to live an ethical life must examine lives being lived in online and offline realms (Boellstroff, 2008: 5).

From cowboy role playing sports shooters (Kohn, 2004) to concealed carriers in economically depressed Michigan (Carlson, 2015; Carlson 2012) to the history of self-protection in the civil rights movement (Cobb, 2014) and the larger history of African-Americans and firearms (Johnson, 2014), the reasons Americans own guns, and the ways in which they interact with their firearms, is anything but homogenous. Throughout this thesis I use term “gun owner” frequently but what I mean by “gun owner” is not every American (or every Georgia resident) who owns a firearm. The gun owners described in this thesis are a very specific group of gun owning Americans who highly prioritize self-defence. The gun owners I met and spent time with not only own multiple firearms but also carry guns, whether openly or concealed⁸ on an almost constant basis, and are politically active when it comes to gun rights as members of Georgia Carry. Other gun owners I met who were not affiliated with Georgia Carry were regularly dismissive of the practices and mentality of its members, writing them off as “extreme” or “intense.”

While the worldviews and practices of gun owners I did research with may constitute only a small, non-representative segment of American gun owners, what makes these particular gun owners so interesting, and this study worthwhile, is that these gun owners have a disproportionate impact on America’s political landscape when it comes to gun laws and regulations. While other gun owners and carriers may consider Georgia Carry members “intense,” they have certainly benefited from the accomplishments of Georgia Carry’s activism, being able to carry their firearms into an increasingly growing list of settings.

⁸ ‘Open carry’ refers to when a gun is carried on a person openly, usually at the beltline while ‘concealed carry’ is when a gun is carried out of sight such as inside a jacket, on the ankle, in a pocket, or hidden at the waist.

When President Barack Obama announced his plan to deploy an executive order on restricting how guns are sold online, the United States president assured viewers that he believes in the Second Amendment and that “A majority of gun owners agree that we can respect the Second Amendment while keeping an irresponsible, law-breaking few from inflicting harm on a massive scale” (The White House, 2016, January 5). The gun owners I met certainly agree that the Second Amendment can be respected while preventing criminals from causing harm; however, their means of doing so could not be further from the goals of the Obama administration. Whether or not President Obama is correct in assuming that many gun owners are willing to make concessions in gun regulation in attempts to curb gun related violence, this thesis is about the gun owners who are not willing make such compromises and argue that to tighten gun regulations will only encourage criminals. This thesis is about gun owners who – through grassroots activism – work towards relaxing gun restrictions rather than tightening them, and who, in many ways, are succeeding.

The anthropology of ethics and morality

In discussing the specific practices gun owners undertake in order to understand themselves as ethical beings, I draw on the anthropology of ethics and morality. Only recently have anthropologists begun to treat ethics as an anthropological object, though issues of morality have always been present in anthropological work, as Didier Fassin writes,

The moral question presents the historian of anthropology with a surprising paradox: it has been omnipresent within the discipline since its inception, to the extent that it could almost be said to haunt anthropology's quest for human truth, and yet, at the same time, it is absent both from the numerous summaries provided by those chronicling the progress of the field and by encyclopedia and dictionary authors, thus posing the question of whether it is not a blind spot or a shameful blot (2014: 2).

This ‘blind spot’ can be, to some extent, attributed to how morality has been historically understood by anthropologists influenced either by a Durkheimian approach of studying morality through societal rules and obligations or a Boasian argument for cultural-relativism. As Michael Lambek explains, the problem of a Durkheimian approach is that “associating the ethical with the obligatory and identifying the latter as the criterion for social facts meant that anthropologists were unable to distinguish the ethical from the entire realm of the social; moreover, this limited the field to the ‘moral’ one of constraint and conformity” (2010: 12; cf Laidlaw, 2002). By prioritizing how individuals living in a particular community are expected to behave and act, anthropologists obscure the conflict and negotiation embedded in moral decision making and action and do not recognize ethical labour as unique from larger social practices.

Anthropologists writing against a Durkheimian conception of morality often differentiate the terms “morality” and “ethics” whereby morality refers to moral norms and obligations and where ethics denotes the ways in which individuals come to form their own understanding of what it means to be or live a “good” life.⁹ Sometimes such understandings come through conforming to rules and obligations whereas other times the ethical is realized by challenging normative ways of being. As Naisargi Dave writes,

Morality is here understood as a system of codes and norms, the space of the institutional and juridical, which mandates what *must* be done rather than what *could* be done. By contrast, ethics for Foucault comprises practices and techniques that we perform on ourselves to *become* moral subjects and (in an Aristotelian vein) to achieve happiness, brilliance, and life (2010: 372).

Inspired by these discussions of ethics and anthropology, I refer to ethics and the ethical in discussing the specific practices gun owners undergo to realize themselves as good people and good gun owners and refer to morality when it comes to shared understandings of normative thinking, of how individuals should or should not act.

⁹ Though others opt to treat the two terms interchangeably (Lambek, 2010: 8-9; Laidlaw, 2014: 4).

Similarly, anthropologists working in the Boasian tradition understood what was moral or ethical as relative to the specific criterion of a “culture” and, subsequently, the legitimacy of such a morality can only be understood through the “culture” it comes from. This sense of cultural-relativism is dependent on a specific understanding of culture. As James Laidlaw explains,

A doctrine of the ethical relativity of cultures can get off the ground only if there exist entities of something like the kind Boas and his disciples believed in: internally integrated, self-contained, and analytically isolable cultures [...] Anthropologists generally no longer think of “cultures” as endogenous self-productions [...] They are no longer comfortable with a concept that effectively defines questioning, criticism, dissension and debate within “a culture” as pathological conditions, and defines those who “go against the grain” of their cultures as necessarily immoral (2014: 27).

A cultural-relativistic perspective takes what appears to be normative behavior within a community to be “good,” leaving little room for internal conflict or changes in what is considered good action or how that “good” is interpreted by members of said community. And, while the ways in which individuals and groups understand morality and attempt to make themselves ethical beings is necessarily culturally specific, it does not mean that humans shape themselves strictly based on such a definition of culture. A more dynamic approach in understanding how individuals understand themselves as morally good beings, how they come to these understandings, and what kinds of cultural implications this kind of ethical understanding entails would treat seriously how moral norms and laws are established, challenged, and enforced as well as how individuals see themselves as ethical in forms that may not fit exactly into a normative morality (Howell, 1997: 4).

For these reasons, I avoid using the term “gun culture” as either an analytical or descriptive category. While the concept of culture has formed one of the bedrocks of anthropology, what culture is – despite countless attempts at definitions – remains elusive and ambiguous (Borofsky et al, 2001: 432). Furthermore, when “singularized, frozen, or

nominalized, ‘culture’ can be a dangerous concept, subject to fallacies of pejorative and discriminatory hypostatization” (Fischer, 2007: 1). To categorize the individuals I met under the banner of “gun culture” would distort the diverse and even contradictory ways in which Americans engage with and understand themselves in relation to firearms – making a small group of gun rights activist appear to be indicative of all American gun owners. And while the ways in which the gun owners described and discussed in this thesis do relate to guns comes from unique historical and political contexts (and would differ from other contexts such as hunters in the north of Canada) and can therefore be considered *cultural*, to call it a *culture* risks obscuring the specificity of the practices and worldviews of the gun owners who make up this thesis. By not relying on the term “gun culture” I am also acknowledging the great potential for caricature which gun owners routinely encounter.

As the anthropology of ethics continues to generate increased interest, many anthropologists have taken this moment to chart out for how they believe the inquiry should progress. Lambek, for instance, asserts that an anthropology of ethics should not become its own body of study such as medical anthropology or political anthropology. He writes that, “rather than attempting to locate and specify a domain of ethics, we ought to clarify and deepen our understanding of the ethical quality or dimension of the full range of human action and practice” (2010: 11). Laidlaw echoes Lambek’s concerns, writing that ethics should not become a subdiscipline of anthropology but instead be “a pervasive modification of the discipline” that introduces a “new dimension of thought” into anthropological inquires (2014: 2).

Anthropologists are arguing that ethics should be treated as a fundamental dimension of the human condition.

Within the anthropology of ethics I rely on four conceptual frameworks to better think through the lives of the gun owners I conducted research with: freedom, responsibility, moral resources, and the everyday. These concepts relate to what sort of freedom gun owners have to make themselves ethical, the responsibility that this kind of ethical work entails as well as how responsibility itself becomes a way in which one renders oneself ethical, the moral resources more generally which gun owners I met in Georgia can draw upon, and how ethical labour is performed in gun owners' everyday lives.

Freedom

Many anthropologists have grappled with what kind of freedom individual agents have in rendering themselves ethical and the role which “freedom” plays in ethical work. Following Foucault, both Laidlaw and Faubion argue that some amount of freedom is necessary for agents to render themselves ethical, citing Foucault's example of a “slave in chains” whose actions are determined completely by another as having no ethics (Faubion, 2011: 37; Laidlaw, 2014: 98).

Laidlaw criticizes much of critical theory for its tendency to ignore individual free will, prioritizing instead the modes of structural powers which influence their lives (be it neoliberalism, colonialism, religious indoctrination etc.). Laidlaw further writes that agency is often defined in terms of how individuals reproduce, challenge, or change power structures.

So it systematically conflates any question of freedom – whether or in what sense peoples' actions are unconstructed and really their actions – with that of their structural or transformative efficacy, and therefore recognizes “agency” only in actions conducive to certain outcomes: those that are structurally significant (2014: 5).

In trying to move away from understanding freedom in relation to how individuals relate with structures of power, Laidlaw warns against understanding freedom in “soaring” terms where individual action is perceived to exist uninfluenced or “liberated” by all social factors (2014: 96). Instead, following Foucault, Laidlaw argues that the practice of freedom is neither wholly

structurally determined nor devoid of any external influences but rather “exercised through the medium of relations of power” (2014: 98).

Saba Mahmood also challenges this notion of agency in understanding how individuals understand themselves as ethical beings. Based on her work with the women’s piety movement in Cairo, Mahmood criticizes feminist scholarship for tying freedom to a liberal notion of agency and autonomy where to be free or to have agency, women must, in some way, be challenging or subverting power structures. Mahmood writes that the ways in which women in the Muslim mosque movement inhabit norms and strive towards them also reveals an ethical self-fashioning, where understanding how individuals inhabit norms “allows us to deepen the analysis of subject formation and also address the problem of reading agency primarily in terms of resistance to the regularizing impetus of structures of normativity” (2005: 22). By understanding the specific practices individuals use to inhabit and strive towards norms, anthropologists can come towards a deeper understanding of how they understand themselves as ethical.

Joel Robbins defines these two aspects of morality in human life as the morality of freedom (having the ability to make moral choices between competing “goods”) and the morality of reproduction (adhering to moral norms and expectations) (2012: 188-119; cf Cassaniti and Hickman, 2014: 258). Robbins argues that instead of focusing on one or the other, anthropologists need to understand the presence both have in human action and decision making practices. Robbins continues that the best way to develop a framework of morality which will take both freedom and reproduction into consideration is through understanding peoples’ specific cultural values. By cultural values, Robbins means “cultural concepts of the good or desirable [...] those cultural conceptions that arrange other cultural elements (such as cultural ideas about persons, kinds of actions, things, etc.) into hierarchies of better and worse and more and less

desirable” (2012: 120). To understand how kinds of competing cultural values are negotiated and acted upon opens up a space to see both the morality of freedom and reproduction in action.

However, attempting to decipher a hierarchical list of “cultural values” amongst a specific group of people risks homogenizing the diverse and conflicting beliefs of those people. Instead of mapping out the importance of certain cultural values amongst gun owners I did research with, this thesis aims to better understand and articulate the gun owners’ own concepts of good and desirable and how these conceptualizations contribute to the production of new cultural norms.

Dave, in her work on queer activism in India, sees freedom as a productive site of ethical work, where freedom is not only exercised through power relations but can be something containing mystery, hope, and potentiality. She writes that,

People are drawn to activism because they nurture ethical ideals of what the world *ought* to look like. They act out of conflicted beliefs in the possibility of justice. They act in part because they desire the practice of new freedoms that they can only yet imagine, but still strive to enable. But the political institutions that activists must engage in order to effect these transformations are far from conducive to the cultivation of such radical imaginings (2010: 370).

Here, activists necessarily have to work through relations of power to realize their goals, exercising a limited kind of political freedom in hopes of creating a stronger, safer space in which to develop themselves in the future. In a very different way, the gun owners I met who are involved with Georgia Carry work in the confines of legal and political spheres by litigating and lobbying in hopes of pushing the space for gun owners further and wider. In acknowledging the freedom they exercise is not absolute (they all have proper carrying licences and do not bring firearms into their places of employment if prohibited) they still work to widen the public space in which freedoms as a gun owner can be practiced. Their radical imaginings may not seem radical to gun owners, in part because they are so successful in having new legislation passed.

That these goals are so politically accomplishable in the state of Georgia is indicative of the place of firearms in the American political and legal systems as well as the cultural capital which predominately white gun owners in the Deep South possess and utilize. These imaginings, however, certainly seem radical to many Americans who are not gun owners and who loudly oppose the changes in Georgia's gun regulations.

In this thesis I follow how gun owners understand freedom as “a local explanation” (Tsing, 2013: 28). Many gun owners I met understand freedom to mean the level in which they can own and carry firearms (I often heard states with relative lenient gun regulations colloquially referred to as “the free states”). Freedom means not just being able to carry a gun but being able to defend oneself – maintaining a physical autonomy unconstrained by either a would-be assailant or the government. To carry a gun, however, can also evoke the freedom to conform to an imagined and nostalgic past of moral clarity. Many (mainly Christian) gun owners I met decried the moral decay of America and saw the freedom to carry a gun as one of the last hallmarks of a once glorious country that has declined with the loss of prayer in school and clearly defined gendered divisions of labour. Here, the freedom to carry a firearm does not only aspire towards a soaring notion of freedom of complete autonomy but also laments the loss of rigid rules, norms, and obligations.

Responsibility

In trying to make ourselves look ethical, we are giving an ethical account of ourselves and therefore take responsibility for our own actions: in making ourselves ethical agents we are also ensuring that we hold some kind of responsibility for our actions (Keane, 2016: 140-141). But what responsibility looks like and how it is interpreted by those trying to “be” responsible is culturally specific and often contradictory. Whether understanding patient and psychiatrist

responsibility in the aftermath of Greece's psychiatric reforms (Davis, 2012: 17), the importance of self-responsibility in living an "ordinary life" in neoliberalizing Russia (Zigon, 2011: 153), familial obligation and responsibility in rural China (Oxfeld, 2010: 69), or the gendered dimensions of responsibility in modern Greece (Paxson, 2004), anthropologists have identified responsibility as an important dimension of how humans cultivate and live an ethical life (Lambek, 2010: 1).

Max Weber proposed two kinds of ethics in "The Profession and Vocation of Politics": an ethic of commitment and an ethic of responsibility ([1919] 1994). An ethic of commitment has the individual act "by following the principles of his religion or ideology whatever the cost may be"; where an individual working within an ethic of responsibility "will do so by anticipating the potential effects of the decision made" (Fassin, 2016: 191). Or,

"To put it loftily, the distinction is instead between an actor whose ends preclude compromising even by the means that would attain them and an actor for whom the ethical life must always be a life of compromise, a pursuit constrained by the obligation to leave some room, some way for others to pursue their own goods, their own Good" (Faubion, 2001: 154).

While Weber proposed the ethics of commitment and responsibility as two distinct orientations, the lived experiences of gun owners showed me that, in pursuing their own understandings of what it means to be good, gun owners can embody both an ethic of commitment and an ethic of responsibility in different aspects and roles of their lives.

The gun owners I did research with adhere to an ethic of commitment in their ideals but practice an ethic of responsibility in their political and social lives as gun rights activists. These gun owners believe that the Second Amendment guarantees the right to bear arms that should not be infringed upon through government regulation. Many gun owners I met argued that more guns meant less crime and firmly, and vocally, believed that they should have the ability to be as

heavily armed as they want, wherever they go. At the same time, gun owners acknowledge the difficulty of achieving this goal and so, when lobbying for greater gun rights, they are relatively modest with their demands (though others may not agree), asking for small relaxations in gun laws each year and are even critical of other “no compromise” gun advocacy groups who, they argue, achieve little to no political success for gun owners because of their all-or-nothing attitude.

Living an ethic of responsibility relates closely to Laidlaw’s conception of freedom exercised through power relations. Most of the gun owners I met are employed in places where they cannot carry a firearm. And while many complain about the ability to defend themselves they also must balance this with the ability to be financially secure and stable. Instead of finding other jobs, gun owners keep their firearms in their vehicles outside of work. Similarly, gun owners are also concerned about their image as being responsible. At a rally or event, gun owners I met will rarely have more than one alcoholic drink if they are openly carrying despite being legally allowed to do so. This is not necessarily to avoid making other, non-gun owners feel uncomfortable but to promote an image of a responsible, morally good gun owner. These ethics of responsibility and commitment never exist in pure isolation from the other but form tensions in which gun owners negotiate in their work of becoming ethical, especially in the tensions between being ready for a potential threat and being safe with firearms (further discussed in Chapter One).

While gun owners understand their own responsibility in one way, other non-gun owners may see this responsibility in a starkly different light. Individuals and groups who push for further gun control – as well as survivors and family members of victims of violence in which a gun was used – may very well understand gun rights groups who push for further ease in

accessing and carrying firearms as anything but responsible. These debates ask what can be meant by “responsibility” in a moral context and whose conceptualization of responsibility becomes dominant?

Moral resources

Everyone has multiple resources available to them in which they can draw from and experiment with how a moral life can and should look. The exercise in freedom is, in part, choosing what kinds of moral resources to use and how to relate to them; as Foucault argued, individuals cultivate themselves as ethical subjects by creating a relationship with the kinds of culturally specific resources available to them (1985: 5). Resources can be anything from a religious text, community norms, or individual moral exemplars and in understandings what resources are available, how these resources change into new forms over time, are controlled and managed, anthropologists can gain better insight into how certain ethical formations or moral norms emerge in culturally specific contexts.

Moral resources can come from stories and personalities as Harri Englund writes of two “radio grandfathers” in Zambia who, respectively, narrated stories which were meant to foster sympathy for “the Other” in their listeners while still respecting ranked difference (Englund, 2015: 268). The moral authority of the “radio grandfathers” was based on the authority vested in them through age, their ability to tell stories, and the ability they had in creating moral sentiment but the radio grandfathers also practiced a kind of “multivocal morality”: assembling different – independent – voices together (2015: 252). Conversely, the resources may not be identifiable choices but subtle practices imposed upon individuals. Helle Rydstrøm, for instance, studies how, in rural Vietnam, children (though especially girls) learn to “become locally approved moral beings” through their bodily and corporeal processes (2003: 3). Here, the learning of a

specific way to move one's body can be understood as a resource (albeit one that may not be optional) that children learn in order to be understood culturally as morally good.

Joel Robbins shows how conflicting moral resources available to individuals can create stress in individuals' lives who attempt to follow multiple moral resources in different directions. Robbins studies how the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea began to experience themselves as sinners during the rise in conversions to Christianity and subsequent "cultural change" where "Christian morality engages their [the Urapmin's] traditional moral conventions while at the same time presenting an alternative set of conventions that although seemingly remarkably similar, are actually different in ways that make them impossible for the Urapmin to follow successfully" (2004: 215). What is understood to be a moral resource is not necessarily an option that can be chosen among many and may feel like anything but a choice, leading to individual stress and community tension.

The kinds of resources gun owners draw upon to understand themselves as living ethically good lives is enmeshed in the political and historic legacies of the United States of America. Many gun owners I met draw upon the American Constitution as a resource whereby owning and carrying a firearm can be seen as not taking their 2nd Amendment Right for granted which reads: *A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.*¹⁰ Similarly, many gun owners understand patriotism more broadly to be a moral resource. In carrying and owning firearms, gun owners can see themselves as the "true" Americans who understand how the country was settled and gained its independence. Patriotism aligns the moral righteousness of America's Founding Fathers with that of a gun owner on his way to the range. Other gun owners I met understand the image of a good father or husband as a moral resource where learning to shoot and carry a gun

¹⁰ For a critical reading of the text and its commas see Burbick, 2006: 74

allows one to be a better protector. Throughout this thesis I look at the specific resources gun owners draw upon to become “good guys with guns”. Whether these resources be as simple as a YouTube video giving advice on shooting accurately or seemingly innocuous stories about self-defence encounters, they help validate understandings about what it means to be good and further guide ethical strivings.

Everyday action and moral reflection

Many anthropologists use the lens of the everyday to better understand the ethical dimension in human life. Veena Das has pioneered much work which connects the ethical and the everyday, arguing that ethics and morality in ordinary life “are more like threads woven into the weave of life rather than notions that stand out and call attention to themselves through dramatic enactments and heroic struggles of good versus evil” (2012: 135). In understanding how individuals live their everyday lives, we can better understand what it means for these lives to be ethical and find not just ethics in human action but where, within the everyday, spaces of moral reflection and self-reflexivity are fostered and maintained.

Much of Das’ work on ethics and the everyday focuses on how human beings relate to one another. She explains that the everyday is “the site in which the life of the other is engaged” (2010: 376). Using an ethnographic example of a Hindu man marrying a Muslim woman in a low-income neighbourhood of East Delhi, Das shows how – despite an atmosphere of antagonism between Hindu and Muslim communities – the young couple’s life together slowly becomes acknowledged and accepted through everyday acts and speech. Das writes that the newness of their relationship within their respective families and communities creates “the possibility that, even when the national rhetoric is vitiated by a vision of a strong Hindu state in which the presence of Muslims is barely tolerated, a small community of love can come about

and, at least in some lives, break the solidity of oppositional identities” (2010: 397). Elsewhere, Das continues this line of thought by arguing that “to create a space for the other is itself a mode of living ethically” (2015: 75).

In the ordinary moments and everyday routines of gun owners with whom I did research I learned much about how they understood themselves as ethical gun owners. In slowly learning the skills involved in being a competent and responsible gun owner, gun owners also learn moral lessons about the presence of evil in the world and the importance of being constantly ready for that evil to materialize in the form of a human threat. Instead of creating spaces for the other in their lives, the everyday routines of gun owners I met prioritized defending themselves against those they did not know or understand (as discussed in depth in Chapter Three). A sense of ethics is attained, in part, by acknowledging the potential threat in the other and making oneself ready: to be a good guy with a gun means to be ready for the bad guy with a gun. The kind of ethics this invites individuals to cultivate is one that is not open to the messiness of human relations but closed to, and even fortified against, human life becoming too messy. In working with gun owners, I have been confronted with my own moral concerns about differences in what a good life can mean and even the danger certain kinds of ethically good lives can pose to others. It is in this space of ethical discomfort that this research has been conducted.

To consciously study the ethical or moral dimension of human life runs the risk of moralizing on the part of the researcher. Whether such a moralizing project is consciously worked towards (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 417) or not, conflating the study of ethics and morals with moralizing can occur, especially in morally charged situations. Fassin, particularly worried about young anthropologists, writes that, as a way to avoid bringing in one’s own moral ideals and concerns into a research site, research must “consider the anthropologist’s own moral

prejudices – or in a more neutral way, value judgements – as objects of his scientific investigation as well as those of his ‘others’” (2008: 337). Fassin concludes his article, writing that the moral discomfort such research often poses can be a “heuristic rather than paralysing” way of understanding human life (2008: 342; cf Caduff, 2011: 477-478).

By attuning myself to and participating in the everyday lives of gun owners I inhabited a challenging and fraught space where this sense of ethical discomfort was used in asking new questions and verbalizing my felt dissonance between what I considered morally good and the claims my informants regularly posited. The kindness, generosity, and openness that the gun owners I met regularly displayed towards me adds a new level of trepidation on my part in terms of writing critically about the people I met.

“I have a deep seeded fear of you taking my words out of context or caricaturing my views and painting me as a gun nut,” Tony told me before beginning an interview. The space of ethical discomfort did not end at the field site and has lingered throughout the writing of this thesis. I hope it will be apparent to the reader that I have attempted to display a critical yet honest portrayal of what it means to be a good guy with a gun – though always understood by me, an outsider. One late evening I sat in Tony’s car as we drove through the rural suburbs of Atlanta. Tony put on an Oscar Peterson song I recognized and when I complimented him on the music choice Tony smiled at me. “I bet you didn’t think gun owners liked good music?” he asked, laughing.

In the first chapter of this thesis I take seriously the common saying “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people” and ask what it means to understand firearms as devoid of moral property or agency. In seeing the gun as an ordinary object gun owners must make themselves into specific kinds of ethical subjects in order to be a “good guy with a gun.” Here, the “good”

refers both to a moral virtue and a practical competency with firearms where one cannot exist without the other and, conversely, those who are seen to be morally “bad” with firearms are assumed to be poor shooters as well. The specific kinds of skills gun owners learn in order to be good gun owners focus on attentiveness and responsibility. However, both skills also work to (1) forefront the risk of an anonymous assailant above other kinds of threats and (2) create moral categories about who is and is not a good gun owner articulated on racialized lines.

In the second chapter I explore what kinds of moral implications learning the above-mentioned skills have on gun owners’ worldviews. I argue that space is reimagined to be good and bad through a metaphor of a moral landscape which reinforces historic concerns about segregation in the Deep South. Furthermore, gun owners come to see themselves as protectors of higher moral worth than both the evil criminals and the passively innocent public. Self-defence becomes not just a moral right but a natural one when emphasizing the immanent evilness of anonymous crime: those criminals are understood as natural predators who can fairly and lawfully be killed. Gun owners I met, however, do not understand themselves to possess this immanent sense of wickedness because of a sense of self-control and responsibility. The real power comes from being able to believe one *could* but will not use firearms for anything but self-defence.

The third and final chapter looks at how this worldview becomes enacted in the everyday lives of gun owners. By prioritizing anonymous attacks as the most serious kind of crime gun owners develop routines of self-defence in the case of such an attack occurring. Despite regular acknowledgements that the probability of such a crime is quite low, gun owners will still strategically place firearms around their homes to be ready for such a situation anywhere they are and will even buy insurance to cover legal fees in case they kill someone else in self-defence.

Stories are shared and circulate of self-defence situations that have occurred throughout the United States, validating such concerns. The emphasis on the potentiality of anonymous attacks and importance of being ready for them creates a sense of moral absolutism when such a situation does occur where so long as one feels their life is in danger they are morally justified in using their firearm for self-defence irrespective of the context in which this self-defence moment occurred.

Chapter One: Skill

In Don DeLillo's classic novel, *White Noise*, the quirky professor Jack Gladney is gifted a small .25 calibre handgun by his equally eccentric father-in-law Vernon. As Jack takes the gun he ruminates on his first experience holding a firearm. "A loaded weapon." He muses. "How quickly it worked a change in me, numbing my hand even as I sat staring at the thing, not wishing to give it a name. Did Vernon mean to provoke thought, provide my life with a fresh design, a scheme, a shapeliness?" (1985: 241). Ultimately, the unexpected presence of a gun in Jack's life prompts him to act on his latent desire of killing his wife's ex-lover.

The kernel of violence that the handgun awoke in Jack Gladney is indicative of a common argument against gun ownership in the United States: owning a firearm makes individuals more prone to violent acts, enabling *and* inspiring them to act in ways that would have otherwise never seemed feasible or imaginable. Critics routinely challenge the logic that the gun can be a defensive tool and not a violent weapon in everything from editorials¹¹ to public health research¹² to political statements.¹³ Even in conversations with friends and family I had while conducting this fieldwork, serious concerns as to whether or not I felt safe while spending so much time with gun owners was always sure to surface amidst more lighthearted conversations. In both joking and worried tones I was repeatedly asked if I ever thought one of

¹¹ Brian Anse Patrick argues that these sorts of editorials, particularly when targeting the NRA, markedly increase NRA membership and willingness to act among its membership, strengthening the NRA and pro-gun lobby groups more generally (2002: 145).

¹² Public health researchers have, since the 1990s, treated firearm ownership as an object of public health research, arguing that owning guns increases the risk of a homicide occurring in one's home (Kellerman et al, 1993 cf Hemenway, 2011). Similarly, Branas et al have argued that individuals who possessed a gun during a violent interaction made them 4.46 more times likely to be hurt and 4.23 times more likely to be killed (2009: 2037). As public health research continued to criticize gun ownership federal funding for such research was struck; in 1996, Republican Senator Jack Dickey brought in a bill that curbed any federal funding to research which linked firearms to violence. Dickey recently expressed his regrets for championing the bill (Dickey and Rosenberg, 2012, July 27).

¹³ President Obama, for instance, has consistently criticized the United States' inability to curb gun violence. In a recent interview with the *BBC* he stated that the difficulty in seeing through proper gun legislation has been the issue where he feels most "frustrated and most stymied" (BBC, 2015, July 24).

the gun owners I was conducting research with may shoot me if I was to acerbate them in some way.

Such arguments and concerns send many gun owners I met into visible frustration and ensures them that the ‘anti-gun’¹⁴ segments of the U.S. (and elsewhere) are thoroughly uninformed about what it means to own a gun. And to their credit, not once did I ever feel in danger for the two and a half months in which I surrounded myself with heavily armed Americans. Even in social situations where gun owners were carrying while consuming alcohol, those who I met and interacted with demonstrated an impressive and rigorous commitment to safety. Which is why they became so annoyed with claims that the guns on their hips, strapped to their ankles, in their safes, on their night stands, and wherever else firearms may be strategically tucked away were making them less safe.

In this chapter I critically look at how gun owners understand firearms, as objects, to have no moral property or influence on humans in and of themselves, and instead understand the person wielding the gun to be a fully formed (un)ethical subject: a good guy or a bad guy. Gun owners often argue that a firearm itself does not provoke individuals into acts of violence and that those who use guns to hurt themselves or others would do so even if they had no access to firearms. But if that is the case, are gun owners automatically “good” by having the right set of priorities? I argue that the idea of a “good guy with a gun” is not simply a well-intentioned (and armed) individual but a very specific type of person (or subject position) that is created through learning a number of skills which highlight attentiveness and responsibility. The “good” in good gun owners implies a dimension of competency and morality and is attained by learning to keep the image of a threat – especially a random one – at the forefront of their imagination.

¹⁴ The term ‘anti-gun’ is a politically motivated term gun owners use to categorize those who are not ‘pro-gun’. In the same vein, gun owners I met frequently referred to themselves as being for ‘gun rights’ as opposed to simply being ‘pro-gun’.

Furthermore, this idea of a good gun owner is understood by many of the gun owners I met to be representative of legal gun owners whereby it becomes assumed that legal gun owners are responsible, attentive, and capable of protecting themselves or others from a threat.

Conversely, those who use firearms for nefarious purposes are believed to have not only acquired the gun illegally but to not know how to properly use the firearm they illegally possess. “Bad guys” with guns are frequently described in racialized terminology and imagery which creates a binary way of thinking about good and bad people where a good, legal gun owner is predominately imagined as being a white man while a “bad,” illegal gun carrier is imagined to be an African-American man. The purportedly colour-blind discourse in which criminality is articulated further reinforces this racialized binary.

The two sides of “good” in learning to be a good gun owner: competency and ethical cultivation

While still new to Atlanta, and without many contacts in the gun world, I began to regularly visit a nearby shooting range in an attempt to meet gun owners while at the same time familiarizing myself with the basics of how to shoot a gun. The closest range was still a long walk from where I was living and could take upwards of an hour depending on the heat and whether I had to seek shelter from a spontaneous downpour, common during Georgia’s summers. Following sidewalks that vanished into highways, I arrived at the range drenched in sweat and out of water. Each time I entered I would admit to the clerk my general ignorance of firearms while they walked me through the different types and calibres of guns I could rent. These interactions felt educational for me until I went for dinner with one of the range’s employees and began to understand the multifaceted skills inherent in being a good gun owner.

Professional shooting ranges¹⁵ are designed to have an initial, lobby-like entry room where patrons first arrive. Before being able to shoot, customers must first provide identification, sign a waiver, and then decide how much time to rent at the range. While more seasoned gun owners bring their own firearms, ammunition, targets, safety glasses, and hearing protection (referred to as “head gear”), all these items are also available to rent. Most ranges have a diverse selection of handguns, rifles, shotguns, semi-automatic rifles, and sometimes even fully automatic guns. Following this interaction, the shooter – already wearing their head gear and with all firearms unloaded and pointed at the ground – walks towards a soundproofed double door. The shooting range itself is broken up into specific “lanes” with a small counter on each one for guns and ammunition to be placed. Most ranges I visited had no more than ten lanes and for every four or five shooters a range officer was present to supervise the patrons, not unlike a lifeguard. Before a new shooter walks through the double doors the range officer is notified through a walkie-talkie built into their protective earphones and they are assigned a specific lane.

David had worked at this particular range for nearly two years as both a range officer and shooting instructor. A graduate from Georgia State with a Bachelor’s degree in chemistry, he had trouble finding a well-paying job so juggled his time working both at the shooting range and as a personal trainer. His Georgia State T-shirt concealed the .45 calibre handgun he carried at his beltline as we walked into a Mexican restaurant in downtown Atlanta. We sat down and David smiled cheerfully, laying his hands down on the table in an intentionally dramatic gesture. “Guns,” he said. “What do you want to know about them?”

After a couple hours we began to feel comfortable in the other’s presence and our conversation became more candid. I had taken a basic shooting course with him a week earlier

¹⁵ During my fieldwork I had heard stories about unprofessional shooting ranges – especially outdoor ones – but only visited those with the safety measures in place described here.

and told him that I had been rather surprised at how many attendees of this training course owned guns yet did not know how to use them. David rolled his eyes and told me that many of the gun owners he encounters while working at the shooting range are ill-prepared for self-defence and naively think that simply owning a gun will keep them safe. David then confessed that he worries many of his own coworkers would not know what to do if someone were to burst into the store and open fire. I asked if such a situation had ever occurred. He paused.

A few months earlier David had been working as a range officer on a slow day when one of the clients shot himself in the heart. The bullet went through the man's body and narrowly missed David's head. "I tried giving him mouth to mouth," David said. "But he was already dead." Employees at most shooting ranges are trained to identify suspicious behaviour in their clients that may indicate suicidal ideation or violent tendencies. David explained that this man had exhibited such traits and that the employees were debating whether to ask him to leave when he shot himself. I asked David what the man had been doing that initially alarmed him and his coworkers. David elaborated, saying that the man had arrived at the shooting range alone and on foot. He was nervous and sweating when he entered and seemed to choose the rental firearms on an arbitrary basis. The man spent much of his lane time staring downrange or looking at his cell phone and made frequent trips to the bathroom. All indicators, David said, of a potentially dangerous person.

After witnessing the shooting David told me he developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He bought a motorcycle and went on long, solitary rides, reflecting on whether it was right to own firearms. He resolved, however, that the suicide could have just as easily been a homicide and that he needed to continue carrying a gun for protection. David bought a more powerful handgun and tried to become more attuned to signs that someone may turn to violence

– inside or outside the range. As David narrated this tragic story I realized that I had been performing all the signifiers of suspicious activity during my trips to the same shooting range. I worried that one of David’s coworkers had already flagged me as a potentially dangerous person. Whereas most clients drive to the shooting range, know exactly what they want to shoot, and often come with friends, I would arrive alone, looking dishevelled from the long walk, and have difficulty choosing the gun I wanted to rent. My subsequent trip to the range was riddled with the fear that I, unknowingly, was coming off as a bad guy with a gun.

The fear of not knowing how to look the part of a good (albeit a novice) gun user made me think more critically about what kinds of practices gun owners learn in order to make themselves into “good” gun owners. To be “good,” here, means not only that a gun owner or user has no intention of using their firearm for unjustified harm, but that they understand how to demonstrate that lack of intention to other gun owners. By “unjustified harm” I mean violence that is understood by other gun owners as merited. If a gun owner were to shoot a burglar in self-defence such violence would largely be considered an acceptable use of force – even if the burglar was only attempting to steal a television. Through my own inability to feel as though I was “a good guy with a gun” I realized that this “good” implied an intertwining dimension of competency and morality where a good gun owner must not simply subscribe to and follow dominant moral norms and codes but also must develop an ethical relationship with firearms and *as a gun owner*.

In thinking about how an individual *becomes* ethical by learning skills and working on themselves, I draw on Michel Foucault’s framework for analyzing how an individual becomes an ethical subject. In understanding how individuals make themselves into ethical subjects, Foucault makes a useful distinction between two different kinds of morality. The first type of morality

Foucault refers to can be considered the term's more immediate connotation: "a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies" (1985: 25). Here, morality means the sets of moral norms and codes dominant in a particular community which individuals are reminded of and made to seem normal through institutions like the family, the school, or the church. Foucault adds that at times these rules are explicitly stated through teaching or doctrine; however, they can also be "transmitted in a diffuse manner, so that far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another, and cancel each other out on certain points, thus providing for compromises or loopholes" (1985: 25).

The second dimension of morality, for Foucault, "refers to the real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them" (1985: 25). This second meaning of morality, the "real behaviour" of individuals in relation to moral codes, is often referred to as "ethics" by anthropologists using Foucault. The ethical actions of human beings are predicated on how one relates to moral rules: how values and norms are complied with or challenged, explained away or enforced. Foucault's understanding of morality and ethics as a way of developing a relationship to what is considered 'good' in a particular cultural context has been transformative for anthropological work on ethics because it provides a framework for looking at, and asking questions about how individuals understand themselves to be ethical and what kinds of resources they draw on to realize this ethical cultivation.

Foucault further argues that in relating to moral norms and values, individuals take up ethical subject positions. An ethical subject position is recognized within a particular cultural context, though not necessarily seen by all members of a community as ethically good. Such an ethical position could take the form of a good mother, an upstanding citizen, or – in this case – a

good gun owner. Each subject position is a potential site of contention even within its own context; for instance, a good mother in North America may be understood by some as a compromising figure who prioritizes the needs of her husband and children while others members within the same community would take offense to such a patriarchal conception of what and who constitute a good mother. This concept of a subject position is interesting, as James Faubion explains, because in this sense no one is born as readymade ethical beings. Instead, ethical subjects must adapt themselves to fit into the kinds of positions available to them based on the moral resources available (2011: 4). In this way, becoming an ethical subject is a dynamic and cultural process that sees ethical cultivation in a way that does not overly prioritize either determinism or a kind of “soaring freedom” (Laidlaw, 2014: 96).

Faubion further explains that these kinds of resources, values, and codes,

invite actors to make themselves into subjects of esteemed qualities or kinds. Actors who take up such requests and invitations freely and self-reflexively are ethical actors, and their distinctive domain is the ethical domain, of which Foucault identifies four basic parameters. One of these he called “ethical substance.” It refers to that stuff – carnal pleasures, the soul, or what have you – which demands attention and fashioning if a given actor is to realize himself or herself as the subject he or she would be. The second parameter he calls the “mode of subjectivation.” It refers to the manner in which a given actor evaluates and engages the criteria that determine what counts as living up to being a subject of one or another quality or kind. The third parameter is that of “askesis” from the Greek for “training” or “exercise.” It refers to the particular work that a given subject has to perform on his or her ethical substance in order to become a subject of a certain quality or kind. The fourth parameter is that of “telos.” It refers precisely to the subject that is in the end of any given actor's striving (2011: 3-4).

To contextualize these four parameters of becoming an ethical subject in the context of gun owners, we could imagine that the “ethical substance,” here, would be security and safety. The “mode of subjectivation” would be a kind of self-mastery which encompasses a broad range of acts and deliberations about how to secure oneself, one’s loved ones, and one’s property: where to keep firearms in daily life, when to teach children how to shoot, whether to comply with a law

or expectation which prohibits bringing a gun into a specific place. And the “askesis,” the actual work being done, would imply anything from regularly practicing at a shooting range and watching videos on the internet that give tips on how to draw a holstered gun quickly, to learning to detect a potential criminal in a public area or training oneself to immediately take note of exists in a restaurant upon entering. Finally, the “telos,” or kind of ethical subject gun owners strive towards is the “good guy with a gun”: an individual who has some level of mastery over firearms and could quickly use one to defend oneself and perhaps others. Such an ethical position links into how many gun owners understand what it means to be an American exercising their Second Amendment Right which imaginatively links them with the Founding Fathers of the United States (Kohn, 2004: 61), and sometimes even what it means to be a competent parent who can protect their families if a threat arises (Carlson, 2015: 34-35).

Foucault’s analytical framework is not meant to simply explain how individuals become ethical agents but to generate new questions about how ethical lives are formed and lived. As Saba Mamood comments, this framework is not a “blueprint” that charts various ways in which people around the world become ethical but instead, “raises a series of questions about the relationship between moral codes and ethical conduct, questions that are answerable only through an examination of specific practices through which historically located moral norms are lived” (2010: 30). This analytical framework goes beyond addressing questions of good and bad and instead asks “what makes the ethical question possible at all?” (Hacking, 2002: 118).

In drawing on Foucault’s analytical framework here I want to ask how, and in what ways, gun owners train themselves to become ethical within their role as gun owners. Training, here, does not simply mean learning to shoot a gun but learning and practicing new skills which contribute to one’s ethical self-formation which blend ethical goodness and competency with

firearms. In her work with queer activists in India, Naisargi Dave focuses on how these activists' practices (the askesis) render them – to themselves – as ethical agents and, furthermore, how these practices open up new ways of imagining what a good life could look like whereby the practices themselves constitute “an imaginative labour of inventing new possibilities” (Dave, 2012: 8). In practicing skills, gun owners are also imaginatively reconstituting what is possible, though for radically different ends. To learn the skills associated in being a good gun owner, gun owners are also reimagining the world and themselves within it – a point that will be further explored in Chapter Two.

Becoming a good gun owner is more than just learning to shoot accurately and being a well-intentioned person. It involves, as described above, training oneself in relation to moral codes. This kind of training – which can be considered an engagement in the world – generates new knowledge about what the world is and how to inhabit it. In *Perceptions of the Environment* (2000), Tim Ingold argues that individuals learn to understand themselves and the world around them through this very kind of skill learning and practice. “Learning to see”, he writes, “is a matter not of acquiring schemata for mentally *constructing* the environment but of acquiring the skills for direct perceptual *engagement* with its constituents, human and non-human, animate and inanimate” (2000: 55, original emphasis). To learn a skill is also to learn to see oneself and one's environment in a new and culturally specific way. Gun owners who regularly practice shooting firearms, gun safety, and how to be ready for a potential threat are also practicing new ways of seeing their environment that forefronts the potential of violence, criminality, and danger.

In the following two sections I will focus on two different kinds of skills gun owners regularly practice: attentiveness and responsibility. In learning to be attentive and responsible, gun owners are also training themselves to prioritize the possibility of a threat and to see

themselves as morally good in contrast to the perceived evil nature of real and potential criminals.

“Keeping your head on a swivel”: Situational awareness and the forefronting of threat

After being seated at a downtown bar with Patrick¹⁶ – who, at 23 years old is the youngest active member of Georgia Carry I met – I jokingly remarked that he was also the first gun owner I had met who sat with their back to the front entrance. Every other time I had met a gun owner in public, whether for an interview or for an informal discussion (as was the case with Patrick), the gun owner would either insist on sitting in the chair with the best vantage point of the front entrance or would arrive early and be already sitting there by the time I arrived.¹⁷

Casually, Patrick responded that there was a bouncer at the front entrance checking IDs so that if someone were to burst through the door it would create a commotion, alerting Patrick. The side entrance, which I had my back to and was unaware existed, was open without any security. If a threat were to materialize through the side door, Patrick would be the first to see it happen; if an altercation occurred at the front door with the bouncer, Patrick could quickly escape through the side entrance – throwing our table to floor to cause a distraction if necessary. Neither of us had been to this bar before; the knowledge of the building’s layout came from Patrick’s initial minutes (if not seconds) of entering the establishment.

¹⁶ All names have been changed in this thesis save for Patrick’s, Tony’s, and Jerry Henry’s. Patrick’s and Tony’s names have been left unchanged as per their respective requests. Jerry Henry’s name remains unchanged as he is a public figure who regularly appears on media outlets (I also gave him the option of appearing under a pseudonym for which he expressed indifference).

¹⁷ In the few situations where I interviewed two gun owners at once, the person with a restricted view of the restaurant or bar would always remark that the only reason they were willing to sit where they were was because the other gun owner was a good friend of theirs and they trusted their friend’s capability to maintain an awareness of the situation.

Patrick's quick attention to where the building's exits were and how well they were being monitored by the staff is referred to by many gun owners as *situational awareness*. Situational awareness, simply put, means staying aware of one's surroundings without losing focus of one's principle reason for being there. In this case, situational awareness means enjoying a drink with a friend while staying attentive to who walks in and out of the bar, what the staff are doing, and whether any nearby conversations are getting overly heated. Many gun owners I met consider situational awareness to be a general life skill.

Greg, a graduate student in public health and regional coordinator for the gun rights group Students for Concealed Carry,¹⁸ told me one evening as we sat in Turner Field Stadium to watch a baseball game that "it's important to keep your head on swivel." His remark was both a reference to the number of unsuspecting fans he had seen struck by a fly ball and a follow up statement to a question I had asked him earlier – whether he is more alert when carrying a firearm. Situational awareness, Greg explained, is important not just in the case of potential human threats but in everyday life as well. He told me he was not trying to encourage a "Jason Bourne"¹⁹ type of hyper-vigilance but that it is important to stay alert, whether for fly balls or criminals.

To be aware of one's surroundings may not sound particularly like a skill, however, the kind of awareness gun owners practice is an awareness in relation to a gun owner's vulnerability to a threat – whether that be from a fly ball or a potentially violent person. When speaking about situational awareness, many gun owners I met referenced a formulaic, colour-coded system devised by Jeff Cooper, a former marine who formalized many handgun techniques – which

¹⁸ A student run organization which advocates for concealed carry on college and university campuses. Visit their website at <http://concealedcampus.org/>

¹⁹ The protagonist of the *Borne Trilogy* films played by Matt Damon. Jason Bourne is a former CIA agent suffering from memory loss who, in the first film, is constantly surprising himself at the acuity of his senses.

charts the level of peril one may be in and the appropriate response. In a dimly lit pseudo-speakeasy connected to a Mexican restaurant, Tony explained to me Cooper's colour-coded awareness model.

Code white means that you are completely unaware. You've seen people pick up their cell phones and just completely zone out. This is something that happened in California where there was a bunch of people on a commuter train and a crazy guy pulled out a .45, pointed it at another guy who was playing with his phone, shrugged his shoulders and put his gun away. Did it again and then put it away. Did it again, put it away. Did it again; shot the guy. No one saw it. The entire *fucking* train was like this [mimics looking down on cell phones]. When he shot him they were aware that he shot him; they didn't know beforehand.²⁰ It is complete code white – no one has any idea of what's going on.

Next step up, code yellow, that's where I'm at. I am aware of my environment. I am aware that there's two people behind that bar, I am aware that light turned off [gestures towards a light], I am aware that there's two people over there talking, having a pleasant conversation. *If* they were not having a pleasant conversation I would be more tuned into them. I am aware of my environment and I don't focus in on something so much that I lose situational awareness. In other words, I just saw her [the server] go by. I wasn't watching her, but I knew she was coming from my peripheral vision. And in fact I knew which one [servers] it was. I keep track of what's in my environment so I can respond to it in case things start going bad.

Code orange. You've just detected a threat. The guy over here is acting like a *fool*. He's starting to get really angry and it looks like he might have a knife in his back pocket. I'm focusing in on him but I'm still trying to be aware of everything else but he is a threat. We've picked out a threat. We're watching. And if he acts in any kind of aggressive way you're going to respond.

Code red. He's just pulled a knife and he's coming at you. Your only option at this point is to respond. Either draw the gun, fire, run, you've got to respond. Because he's going to hurt you.

Black. That's when you've decided that he's going to die. You pull the gun out and you start shooting and all you're focused on is what you're doing. You've completely gone past everything else: you're in a tunnel vision. You are using an extreme amount of adrenaline, you have lost fine motor controls, you have lost hearing – someone could be screaming in your ear and you don't hear them because your life is threatened and you're going to die if you don't do this. And everything feels like it's in slow motion. As soon as you've dealt with the threat, you've shot him in the chest a few times and he's fallen down, you take your gun off target and you take a breath trying to get back to code red. At that point you go back to code orange. You're looking around and somewhere at that

²⁰ An actual incident which occurred September 23, 2013 on one of San Francisco's light rail rails. Footage of the shooting was captured on the train's security system (cf O'Connor, 2013, August 10).

point you get sick. Your body is not designed to handle this much adrenaline all at once. I've had this, I told you about when I was driving and the guy in the car.²¹ Once I was out of orange and at yellow I couldn't stop shaking for half an hour. That's a normal reaction, and some people actually start vomiting. It's a normal reaction. That's how we deal. We plan, we think about. I've been to code red several times, and I hate it. No one wants to be at that because it's the worst of all situations. You know you're about to die. I was halfway to black when I drew on that guy in the car. I already had my finger on the trigger and I knew that he was going to pull out a gun. Had I seen a gun, I'd be firing already.

The heightened sense of attention demonstrated and described by Patrick, Greg, and Tony is not merely an attunement to the movements and activities around them but is a focus specifically on whom is, or could become, a threat. Cultivating a sense of awareness is necessarily done in relation to an anticipated event, situation, or phenomena. Colin Scott has written on the specific forms of attention Cree hunters living on the coast of the James Bay cultivate in order to attune themselves to the specific noises geese make (1989). Similarly, Paul Nadasdy, in working with members of the Kluane First Nation in the southwest of the Yukon, found that through patience, hunters developed forms of attention which gave them the ability to hear a moose from a far distance away (2003: 106). In both cases, the kind of attention hunters learned was always trained on a specific animal; always in relation to their unique sounds and body movements. For gun owners, this sense of attention is focused on the possibility of a specific event unfolding where someone they do not, or only vaguely know, becomes violent.

Cultivating such an attention for the possibility of a threat to materialize foregrounds the chance of a threat occurring. In Tony's rendition of the colour coded levels of fear, he explains that different levels of awareness he is also revealing what those levels of awareness are

²¹ Tony is referencing a story he recounted to me the first time we met in which, while driving, another vehicle began driving aggressively, forcing him to stop on the side of the road. The man began to scream at Tony from his car. He disappeared behind his seat and Tony worried he was going to produce a gun and shoot him. Tony preemptively drew his own handgun and had it trained on the man's car. When the man came back up from behind the seat – unarmed – and saw Tony's handgun the man drove away.

constructed in response to: namely, a random, unexpected attack.²² As Tony narrates the hypothetical man charging at him with a knife, bent on killing Tony for no other reason than he can, Tony is also reaffirming that “bad guys” exist; that evil exists and could materialize anywhere. Tony also remarks upon a situation in which he had reached “code black.” Tony was convinced this man was armed and was ready to kill him despite the man *not* being armed. In Tony’s own words: “I was halfway to [code] black when I drew on that guy in the car. I already had my finger on the trigger and *I knew that he was going to pull out a gun*. Had I seen a gun, I’d be firing already.” By maintaining the particular kind of situational awareness described above, Tony became convinced that a rash driver was about to kill him and nearly killed the man himself in an act of pre-emptive self-defence brought on by a constant readiness for an anonymous threat to materialize. While hunters focus their senses on the movement of a particular animal, the sense of attention gun owners cultivate cannot be that specific as what a threat is or can be does not follow a specific pattern. By honing their active awareness towards the possibility of a threat, gun owners risk seeing a threat which is not there.

To practice a level of attention which stays casually vigilant to the possibility of a violent assailant emerging in an otherwise nonviolent atmosphere is to reaffirm that such people exist and that, in one’s readiness against them, a gun owner is different from them. By no means were the gun owners I met fearful of such an attack, what was stressed was being ready. But being attentive of such a risk in all casual situations one puts oneself in creates a constant – if casual – reminder that random threats occur; that people exist in the world who may want to cause them harm for no reason at all. By keeping one’s head on a swivel gun owners are reifying anonymous, human attacks and prioritizing them above other types of threats.

²² It is also worth noting that this colour coded system was based upon Col. Cooper’s own combat experience.

Balancing Defence and Responsibility: becoming a safe gun owner

Foucault writes that a moral action cannot simply be reduced to an act conforming to a rule, it necessarily involves a deeper, more complicated relationship to how individuals, as ethical agents, understand and relate to these codes – especially when considering that multiple and even contradicting codes, norms, and expectations are often presented as legitimate options and choices (1985: 29). For the gun owners I met, while safety with firearms was an enormous concern, mandatory training classes were scoffed at as being both unconstitutional and ineffective. Gun owners regularly expressed the importance of learning firearm safety but on one's own terms. As Ethan, a retiree from the military, NRA certified pistol instructor and active Georgia Carry member, remarked,

We believe in training. We believe in that, but we want it to be voluntary. We're very concerned about state mandatory training, just because it becomes a limiting factor, it becomes an economic factor. Training in some states is \$200 extra, forget the licence, it's extra. I mean, if you're talking about somebody on a limited income that maybe needs the gun, they can't get it because they can't afford the training. There's a lot of states surrounding us: Texas, Florida, Tennessee, and South Carolina – South Carolina doesn't recognize our licence there. North Carolina, they all have mandated trainings by the state. And it's like an eight hour course for instruction, they shoot maybe 30, 40, 50 rounds or whatever it is. But it's sort of canned training. It's sort of like taking the driver's test. You're going to drive around a parking lot a little bit and maybe go on a road and that qualifies a 16 year old to take a 3000 pound machine out on the highway. Okay, not really, but we do believe in training but we believe you gotta seek out training. And training may be getting with someone who's familiar with the gun and who can give you some basics about safety. I've never really been trained as a kid – except my dad taught me about how to shoot, how to aim, about gun safety, all those kinds of things.

Interestingly, most Georgia Carry members I met were either NRA certified instructors themselves or had taken multiple NRA training courses. They argued that mandatory training does not instil the ability to be safe and competent with a gun; safety must come from a personal journey with firearms where individual gun owners discover what kind of training fits their own learning styles and personalities, whether this be through personal mentorship or training courses

new gun owners find on their own. Deliberating on the reasons to take courses and how one properly should go about getting trained – emphasizing a personal experience and niche that must be cultivated on an individual basis – is a mode of subjectivation: to understand the mode in which safety and security can be cultivated and is part of the deliberations in figuring out what it will mean to become a good gun owner. As Ethan explains, cultivating a skill-based relationship with one’s own firearms cannot be bought but must be negotiated, freely and self-reflexively seeking out the resources available to new shooters, resources that are recognized by other gun owners as such and have a profound moral quality to them.²³ Whether one learns to shoot from a father or male figure, National Rifle Association designed courses, or from a community of gun owners, one is learning not just to shoot accurately but is also seeking out moral resources necessary to become a good gun owner.

For many gun owners I met, becoming a responsible gun owner will inevitably include taking at least one course certified by the National Rifle Association (NRA). While many outside of the gun world consider the NRA to be only a lobbying group, they are, as Carlson notes, the largest grass roots firearm training and safety institution in the United States (2015: 60).²⁴ The NRA have three basic rules to gun safety, reiterated in most training workshops and plastered on the walls of training sites I visited: (1) Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction; (2) Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot; (3) Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use (NRA: Programs and Services, 2016). The first time I heard these rules was in a basic shooting class taught by David. After stating these basic safety rules he admitted that he

²³ No one I met would consider, for instance, someone under the influence of drugs or alcohol as a proper shooting instructor. While gun rights activists do not want to impose a rigid training regime, they nevertheless recognize a limited number of legitimate forms of acquiring the proper shooting skills.

²⁴ The NRA also publish video and print material to educate children on firearm safety, employing the help of an animated, anthropomorphic eagle who sings catchy songs about what to do if a child finds a gun. See <https://eddieeagle.nra.org/> for more information.

does not follow the third rule about keeping his gun unloaded. He explained that, if, at 3am, an intruder breaks through his window or door there will not be the time to load the handgun on the nightstand. In all my time in Georgia, I never met a single gun owner who actually kept all their firearms unloaded.²⁵ Such interpretations of safety rules (produced by respected institutions at that) hint at the ways in which gun owners develop ethical relationships with rules and regulations which aim to find a balance between being safe and having the freedom to be ready for a potential attack. It is through this practice of freedom where gun owners negotiate responsibility and readiness.

Gun owners understand rules and codes of firearm safety in relation to the hindrance these rules may have in self-defence situations and how they limit an individual journey in forming their own relationship with firearms. For the gun owners I met, the priority above all else is being able to defend oneself and they assume others will learn how to do that in a safe and productive manner when given the space to act freely. If we understand the ethical substance gun owners work with to be a sense of safety and security, then the mode of subjectivation – the ways in which individuals understand and relate to autonomy and safety – are oriented towards being able to defend oneself. Despite the different relationships gun owners form with safety rules and their trepidation with mandatory training, there is one ritual which gun owners adhere to with painstaking devotion: guns should never be pointed at anything that is not going to be intentionally shot at. While this is a variant on the NRA's first rule of gun safety, it is practiced with an almost tedious insistence. For instance, when a gun owner wants to show someone else their firearm, the gun owner will first make sure the firearm is empty (that it contains no

²⁵ Most of the gun owners I met own more than one firearm. While "carry guns" or other firearms meant to be easily accessible if a threat materialized are typically loaded, guns stored in a safe are typically left unloaded. I thank Patrick for this clarification.

bullets)²⁶ – even though they knew it to be empty.²⁷ Typically, the person who then receives the unloaded gun will go through the exact process of checking whether the gun is loaded or not themselves, despite having just witnessed the same check being carried out. And even *then* the gun will always be pointed at the ground with the holder’s fingers kept away from the trigger. Despite knowing that a particular firearm is unloaded and cannot shoot, it will still be treated as a fully loaded gun and never pointed at anyone else.

Unintentionally pointing a gun at another person is known as *swiping*, where the invisible line coming out of the barrel of a firearm makes contact with someone’s body. Greg recounted a story to me of how he had been “swiped” at a shooting range once on an outing organized by Georgia Tech’s marksmanship club. A new member to the club was taking a break from shooting and accidentally pointed his gun at Greg in mid-conversation. As soon as the novice shooter swiped Greg, half the shooting range – including Greg – had their guns trained on him, ready to fire. The new member was immediately kicked out of the shooting range and barred from the marksmanship club.

Gun owners think critically about safety codes and, as such, stress the importance of responsibility with guns while not completely complying with the rules as dictated by organizations (like the NRA) or agree with mandatory training programs. At a workshop I attended about readiness and carrying concealed firearms, the speaker – a military instructor and proud gun owner – went on a digression about irresponsible gun owners. He recounted an anecdote where, at a party, he met a couple who mentioned they own a Glock handgun. After the presenter curiously inquired about what model they owned the couple admitted they were not sure; in fact, they could not even remember where they had kept the handgun within their home.

²⁶ This would include making sure a bullet is not ‘chambered’ in the gun. A gun with a magazine can still contain a useable bullet in its chamber if the gun was cocked before discharging the magazine.

²⁷ I had never seen any gun owner hand someone else a loaded gun to look at or try.

The presenter, surprised and disgusted, resolved after that moment to always keep an extra \$500 free within his finances in case he meets someone else who owns a gun but does not keep track of its whereabouts. If he does meet such an irresponsible gun owner again, he explained, he will insist on buying their gun on the spot, ensuring the gun is never used in an unintentional act of violence.

In learning a particular kind of responsibility, the gun owners I met attempt to find a balance between the highest levels of safety possible that does not interfere with their ability to defend themselves. Most gun owners, in addition to keeping their guns loaded, will keep the safety of their gun off and a bullet chambered. At the same time, they will never put their finger even close to the gun's trigger unless they plan on shooting. In an interview with Daryl, an active Georgia Carry member, at the restaurant he manages he echoed earlier sentiments about training and responsibility.

Daryl: I think it's really a matter of responsibility, going out and educating yourself. If you're too stupid to go out and take the time to learn how to use it that's not my problem.

Bradley: So, as a gun owner you have certain responsibilities and those responsibilities are to be trained and know how to use your gun?

Daryl: Yes, but what is training? Because I could spend an hour at the range and learn more about my gun that I'm going to be using than if I took a class on gun safety. Because really, there's four rules to gun safety: never hold a gun up if it's loaded, never aim at somebody you don't intend to shoot, never turn the safety off unless you're going to fire and, um, I forget what the last one is. But I don't trust mechanical safeties. The only safety is this [*holds up index finger*] if this is not on the trigger it's not going to shoot. If this is on the trigger, it's going to shoot. That's really all that gun safety class teaches you is those four rules. And then they show you pictures of what happens when things go wrong but when it comes to actually using your weapon in defence or even using it for anything, every weapon is different, there's thousands upon thousands of guns out there and they're all a little bit different. You know my two main carry pistols, they take apart different, they shoot different ammo, they have different magazines, they load differently. One of them, the barrel rotates the other, you know, has a smaller barrel. But those are what I have and so I need to learn those, not what this guy has. Not what that guy has, not a general overview of how a gun system works.

Rules and guidelines for gun safety are respected but not necessarily followed to the letter – evident in Daryl forgetting one of them and not following another. Instead, gun owners experiment with the resources they have around them to try and understand how to be both a responsible and a ready gun owner.

In Cheryl Mattingly’s work on African-American parents in the Los Angeles area raising children with severe disabilities and chronic illnesses, she uses the trope of “moral laboratories” to better illuminate the kinds of moral reasoning and dilemmas parents make about what is best for their children with often limited knowledge as to what will be the outcome of these decisions. “I have chosen this trope of the laboratory,” Mattingly explains, “precisely to emphasize that these are spaces of possibility, ones that create experiences that are also experiments in how life might or should be lived” (2014: 15). In learning to be a responsible gun owner, individuals undergo similar experiments (though of a wildly different nature) with how best to be safe with their firearms as well as to be ready to use one at a moment’s notice. Gun owners draw on codified rules and communal norms as moral resources to be used to the limit of their perceived productivity and expect each other to undertake such experiments themselves freely and self-reflexively. Though, with 1964 accidental shootings in 2015, an insistence that these experiments in responsibility be a personal one has high stakes (Gun Violence Archives, 2016b).

From Good Gun Owners to Legal Gun Owners to Real Gun Owners

I would like to revisit the kinds of skills Ingold wrote about in *Perceptions of the Environment*. Ingold argues that humans – whether they be hunters, basket weavers, or reindeer lassoers – actively engage in learning skills associated with these roles which, in turn, helps to shape new (or at least modified) ways of knowing and being in the world around them. In this

praising account of how individuals learn skills there is, however, scant mention of the stress and anxiety inevitably attached to learning a new skill. Nor is there any mention of how failing to learn a culturally valued skill changes one's own sense of self, sense of cultural knowledge, or place within a community.

Throughout my time in Georgia I would repeatedly hear gun owners remark at how badly gang members shoot with terms like “gang banger” and “thug” repeatedly used by gun owners to refer to any young African-American male who was considered suspicious or threatening. At a charity shootout with airsoft guns, a gun owner I knew was shooting poorly and a mutual acquaintance approached him and jokingly asked him why he did not just start holding his gun sideways since he was already missing all his targets. The joke being that shooting a gun sideways, a practice associated with gang members, significantly reduces one's aim. By understanding how individuals cultivate the skills necessary to be both ethical and competent gun owners, I would like to conclude by arguing that these skills also work to create and reinforce moral boundaries delineating who is, or can be considered, a good gun owner and bad gun owners. These moral boundaries reinforce a dichotomy between a good gun owner and a bad gun owner predicated both on ethics and competency and based on gun owners' own understanding of race.

Despite the resistance gun owners have to mandatory trainings, gun owners who I met still insist they – as legal gun owners – are one of the most law abiding groups of people in the United States. Whereas safety norms and rules are experimented with, all the gun owners I met are adamant that they would not break any firearms-related law unless their life was in danger.²⁸

²⁸ It is worth reiterating here that gun laws in Georgia are quite lax in terms of where one can carry and if a business owner puts a “no guns” sign on their window the punishment for transgressing their rule is akin to not wearing a shirt at a McDonalds restaurant.

Gun owners, in my experience, develop the ethical by conforming to laws, even if they complain about them at the same time. Furthermore, the insistence that legal gun owners are law abiding reinforces the claim that they being armed is not a threat and that further gun control will do nothing to stop crime and only affect them – the only ones who would follow gun laws and regulations in the first place. Subsequently, a logical misstep occurs where gun owners first argue that their law abiding nature means that nearly everyone who legally purchases a gun is both law abiding and competent by coupling the moral good with being good with a gun.

Bradley: What would you two say the ratio is between people who really know what they're doing with guns who carry and those who carry who've shot just a couple times?

Tony: More than 90%. The people who carry – remember we are making a distinction between those who legally carry – those people who have gone through the process of being trained²⁹ and have gone through the process of getting the card – which I think is an infringement but I'll let that go. Okay I want to expand on why I let that go: before we had legalized concealed carry we had this rage of “ban everything.” When I was in high school you could carry without a permit in Florida. And you could do it for most of the United States. Then, they [gun control advocates] were like, “oh gosh we've got to ban everything.” And the exception they made was concealed carry with a permit. The interesting thing with that is that we could clearly delineate those people who had the gun legally and those who didn't. And the statistics show that we are by far the most law abiding people who walk the planet. We commit crimes at a fraction of the rate of the police and we can prove that with statistics. We are not the problem. The problem are the gangbangers. What is it like 57% of crimes or murders are being committed by criminals³⁰ and most of those are criminals who are being murdered?

Jacob: I think too, of all the guns that are legally acquired less than 2% are actually used in crimes.³¹

²⁹ By process of being trained Tony is not referring to a mandated training but the kind of learning process described in the above section.

³⁰ Presumably, Tony means individuals with an existing criminal record as opposed to first time offenders.

³¹ Jacob's statistics are dubious if not outright false. Firstly, crimes involving guns infrequently result in the recovery of said gun and even when they do it can be difficult to determine how the gun was acquired. Cook et al. interviewed adults convicted in Chicago on firearm related crimes and asked them how they acquired their firearms. The research team found that only rarely did these convicts either buy a gun from a retail store or steal them directly, obtaining them instead from social networks which does not necessarily indicate that the gun was acquired illegally (2015). See Roth (2002) for a critical dismantling of statistics regularly used by pro-gun public intellectuals.

Tony begins by stating around 90% of legal gun carriers³² are competent in firearm safety and use but quickly moves onto not just how competent legal gun owners are but how law abiding they are as well. Being a good gun owner means both these dimensions of “good” – competent and moral – and that Tony collapses firearm knowledge, moral goodness, and simply owning a gun legally (as opposed to illegally) is telling of the way in which Tony and other gun owners see legal gun owners as a group. And while Tony has a penchant for exaggeration, other members of Georgia Carry I met also agreed that the majority of legal gun carriers were (1) incredibly law abiding and (2) possessed a competency in firearm use and safety. When asked, Billy placed the number of legal gun owners who know how to use a firearm and have sought out formal training themselves at 95%, Daryl said 75%. These percentages should not be understood as factual (or even verifiable) statistics but as representative that gun owners believe the bulk of legal carriers are prepared to use their firearm in case of an emergency.

It is important to stop and note that by “Tony and other gun owners” I mean, specifically, members of Georgia Carry who spend their free time working towards expanding gun rights and – for many – whose social circles were composed largely by other gun owners. David and Jackson, the two employees of the shooting range I interviewed, were less optimistic about how many legal gun owners had a basic knowledge of gun use and safety. Jackson told me that maybe half of the clients at the range who own guns themselves³³ understood how to use their firearms properly. Both Jackson and David said on separate occasions that an unsafe gun carrier scares them just as much as someone intending to cause harm. Members of Georgia Carry are politically active gun owners who organize much of their spare time around shooting and

³² By legal gun carriers I do not mean gun *owners* but those who have the specific licence to carry a firearm on their person. It is also important to note that not all gun owners are licenced to carry and not everyone licenced to carry a firearm carry on a daily basis.

³³ As opposed to someone like me who would rent guns from the range and therefore have access to a firearm only while shooting under supervision.

discussions about firearms. Many of the members of Georgia Carry I met own a minimum of five or six firearms³⁴ whereas David owns two handguns and Jackson owns only one. However, in their discussions of legal gun owners, Georgia Carry members project their own training, sense of responsibility, and impressive competency with firearms onto the majority of legal gun owners. In doing so, Georgia Carry members conflate the categories of a good gun owner – a position they strive towards – with a legal gun carrier, assuming the same kinds of considerations they give firearm safety and use extend to anyone who took the time to stand in line and register for a concealed carry permit. Furthermore, a second conflation occurs where good gun owners change to legal gun owners and are understood as the stand in for “real” gun owners.

In *America’s 1st Freedom*, one of the many NRA backed websites, Cam Edwards (host of *Cam’s Corner*) reflects on how he understands the meaning of “gun culture.” In a question posed to Edwards, a man explains to the host that his family has been ripped apart by gun violence and proceeds to beg Edwards to stop glorifying “gun culture.” In response, Edwards makes a distinction between “gun culture” and “gang culture,” arguing that, “I don’t think the biggest problem in our most violent neighbourhoods is a glorification of legal, responsible gun ownership” (Edwards, 2015, August 5).

In a striking example of how the “culture concept” is often deployed in order to make brazen and discriminating generalities, Edwards argues that gun culture – which means here “real” (normative) gun ownership – refers exclusively to the kinds of gun owners described in the pages above who are actively trying to cultivate a particular kind of ethical relationship with firearms. These individuals, however, are not the only gun owners in the United States. Edwards continues his post, arguing that what would help reduce gun violence is not to stop valorizing gun culture (as he sees it) but to fight “gang culture” through a proliferation of NRA certified

³⁴ The record number of firearms owned among Georgia Carry members I heard was 51.

training centers to teach firearm safety and responsibility in low income neighbourhoods and to enact more punitive criminal justice measures which would target the “worst offenders” through “vigorous prosecution and/or community intervention” (Edwards, 2015, August 5). The safe, law abiding gun owner is seen as the real gun owner which delegitimizes other gun owners *as gun owners*. In response to a plea to cease promoting “gun culture,” Edwards responds that in order to stop “*gang culture*” initiatives must be established to crack down on criminals *and* to promote learning how to properly use firearms. The dichotomy of “good” and “bad” guys with guns is meant in both the sense of morality and competency with firearms where having one skill is seen to beget the other.

In their book, *Racecraft*, Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields challenge the conventional reasoning that the existence of race creates racism and instead argue that, in fact, racism creates race and leaves “black persons in view while removing the white persons from the stage” (2014: 25-26). Both racecraft and witchcraft³⁵ presuppose an “invisible ontology” which creates in turn, a circular reasoning (2014: 201). Fields and Fields provide an example of this kind of racecraft where an African-American police officer pursuing a car thief was killed by a fellow, white, officer who assumed the African-American officer was the criminal. The authors write that the,

diagnosis of many people is that black officers in such situations have been “killed because of their skin colour.” But has their skin colour killed them? If so, why does the skin colour of white officers not kill them in the same way? Why do black officers not mistake white officers for criminals and blaze away, even when the white officers are dressed to look like street toughs? Everyone has skin colour, but not everyone’s skin colour counts as race, let alone as evidence of criminal conduct (2014: 27).

³⁵ The term “witchcraft,” here, takes E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s research among the Azande at face value when he writes, “Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist. None the less, the concept of witchcraft provides them with a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events. Witchcraft beliefs also embrace a system of values which regulate human conduct” (1976 [1939]:18).

In a similar way, racecraft is at work in the creation of this dichotomy between a good responsible, gun owner and a bad, illegitimate criminal using a gun. And while terms like “thug,” “gangbanger” or even just “gang member” which gun owners often employ to discuss such criminals are not explicitly linked to African-American men, the terms are still coded language “used to refer to or speak of Blackness without overtly sounding racially prejudiced” (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016: 354).

The dual meaning of “good” in being a good gun owner has the same implications for being a “bad” gun owner. Since criminality – especially in urban centers with a large African-American population – is often perceived through racialized imagery (Carlson, 2012: 1120), these “bad guys” are understood as likely being African-Americans. As Tony told me,

We have a gang problem, we have inner city crime problems. We do not have a gun problem. Guns are used by these criminals but we need to deal with that problem and until we recognize, until we are willing to face up to the fact that people with the wrong colour skin and the wrong accent are over represented in these groups we’re spinning our wheels.

There is an underlying belief by the liberals that is environment. If we are to control the environment we can make people be good people. I flat out don’t believe that.

Not only are gang members assumed to be from racialized groups, but they are also excluded from being “real” gun owners and are instead criminals *with* guns. In this way, the responsible, white gun owner is seen not just as a good gun owner but a “real” one, responsibly keeping their guns close in case a criminal, far too often imagined as African-American, is to appear with a gun or some other “tool” being used for violence. To see the gun as simply a tool reinforces the insidiousness of an imagined criminal’s intent: even without the gun they would find a new tool,³⁶ anything, to cause violence for their own pleasure or gain.

³⁶ When I once asked a gun owner if he did not think that having a gun would make a would-be criminal more likely to commit a crime I was encouraged to visit a maximum security prison and ask some of the murderers

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to explain how gun owners I met in Georgia learn skills and work on themselves to become ethical beings within their role as a gun owner. I have shown how to be a “good” gun owner means to learn how to be both morally good with firearms and competent with them. The specific kinds of skills this entails is attention and responsibility where gun owners learn to stay vigilant against any kind of would-be-threat while maintaining a balance between being ready to use their firearm at a moment’s notice and being safe with these firearms. What learning these two skills also does, however, is to reinforce moral boundaries between who is and is not considered a “good” gun owner; in the same way that gun owners develop a sense of ethical and competency based “good” they also assume that a bad guy with a gun – specifically alleged gang members – do not understand how to properly use a gun and at the same time will use that gun with violent and malicious intents. This distinction is further propagated with how good gun owners understand themselves to be “real” gun owners: to be representative of all legal owning gun owners who then are believed to be competent and responsible themselves. The perceived gang members, then, are not even seen as gun owners, but violent individuals who have found a gun as a convenient tool to carry out the crimes they would still be doing otherwise with a rope, a knife, or their bare hands.

In the next chapter we will examine the kind of moralized worldviews which are created by learning the skills described above; where by becoming a good gun owner, certain new ways of seeing the world open up.

behind bars whether they cared if the murders they committed were done with guns or with their bare hands (the expected response was that they did not care).

Chapter Two: Moral Worldviews

In Alexandra Horowitz's fascinating book, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes*, Horowitz goes on the same walk with eleven individuals trained to see the world around them in markedly different ways (2013: 3). The skills these individuals – an urban sociologist, a psychologist, and an artist to name a few – have learned dramatically changes the way each one sees the same space. In learning skills, individuals are not only changing their own sense of self but also modifying the ways in which they see and interact with the world around them. As Ingold writes, “Environments are constituted in life, not just in thought, and it is only because we live in an environment that we can think at all” (2000: 60). An environment that one understands oneself as inhabiting is shaped by the way in which individuals perceive that environment: by what they prioritize as (un)important, (un)revealing, or (un)interesting. An urban sociologist, an artist, and a concealed carrier would all notice and relate to different aspects of the same neighbourhood. As gun owners learn the skills described in the previous chapter, their worldviews become increasingly moralized and moralizing. This occurs through both how the physical and symbolic environment is understood and how a gun owner relates to those who occupy the physical and symbolic space around them.

In his work on the NRA and the American culture wars, Melzer argues that committed NRA members, and the group more generally, view the status of gun rights as “the only factor standing between traditional American values and a culture war victory for the political Left” where being a proud and active gun owner represents the traditional, and authentic American (2009: 45). While the above mentioned worldview – especially when coupled with a sense that the United States is in moral decline and growing increasingly instable – prompts individuals to become gun owners (Carlson, 2015: 11), becoming a “good” gun owner changes the way in

which individuals understand human nature and human relationships and fosters the need to always be prepared.

Specifically, this means that danger takes on a moral element and the potential of becoming a victim to a (specifically) anonymous attack is prioritized more than any other kind of danger. Other individuals are seen through the categories of aggressors or potential victims and the ability to defend oneself against another human being, even if it means fatally shooting someone else, is seen not just as a moral right but as “natural.” Finally, a belief by gun owners that they have the ability to control the potential power their firearms enact lends, paradoxically, to feeling of great power in which gun owners know that they *could* use their firearms to end another life, but will not because they possess a heightened sense of self-control. This blind spot in the ontology of a good gun owner presupposes that the good gun owner’s sense of control prohibits them from ever using their firearms for anything but self-defence.

Moral landscapes: from the safe neighbourhood to the dangerous city

Kennesaw is a small city an hour’s drive from Atlanta. In 1982, this small county made national and international headlines by passing a law that required each home to possess at least one firearm. Despite the law being largely symbolic,³⁷ it is used by many gun owners as proof that more guns in the hands of good gun owners equates to less crime and, conversely, will not lead to gun fights or gun play. During our interview, Billy, a Kennesaw resident himself, told me that since the law was passed there has only been one firearm related homicide which involved “two drunk cousins from out of town staying in an extended stay motel.” While at the hotel, the

³⁷ No one has ever been charged the relatively small fine for not owning a firearm and if the police or county employees *were* to begin searching houses to ensure that each one did indeed have a gun, such a search would surely be interpreted as unconstitutional.

drunk cousins went out into the parking lots and “did the ‘bet you can’t shoot this beer can off my head’ thing.” One of the cousins missed the beer can on the other’s head, killing him.

It is not only the mandatory firearms bill that makes Kennesaw seem safe, but the small town, suburban ethos it exudes. In learning to become a good gun owner, space itself is reconceptualised by gun owners both physically and symbolically; remodeled through a perspective of potential threats. In this analysis, I draw on Agnar Helgason and Gísli Pálsson’s use of “moral landscapes” as a concept in which behaviour and practices are seen through spatial metaphors “intersected by path-ways, boundaries, and spheres” (1997: 453). These spatial metaphors help understand how, in this case, threats are seen to exist in a landscape and, conversely, these threats take on a moral quality. However, in the use of this concept I would also like to highlight that, in the context of gun owners, the moral landscape is not strictly metaphorical but includes a level of physicality where alleyways, corners, and back exists become potential hiding places or entry points for human threats.

Very few gun owners I met lived in or enjoyed spending time in Atlanta because of its high density and potential for crime. When I asked Tony and Jacob what parts of Atlanta they found more and less safe the two explained that suburbs are unequivocally safer than the downtown core and that neither of them will visit Atlanta unless heavily armed. As Tony remarked,

If I’m going downtown and I’m going to walk through the streets I will open carry a 9mm, [keep] a .45 in my pocket, and a 9mm on my ankle. And I will probably have a couple extra magazines for them because it’s a high crime area. And I generally don’t do it unless I have someone else carrying with me in the same way. Because I don’t want to be a victim.

On another occasion, Tony told me that when he visits East Atlanta he may go so far as to be holding a loaded handgun in one hand as he is driving with the other. East Atlanta is one of the

notorious “bad parts of town”: a predominately African-American neighbourhood often associated with gang violence.

Within this moral landscape, gun owners understand low density suburban neighbourhoods to be not just safe but morally good. As Daryl, who is a resident of Kennesaw, told me,

I've had nothing happen to me [in Kennesaw]. I've never even been in an accident there, I've never even had a neighbour get their house broken into. I've heard of nothing wrong up there. So yeah I feel safe there, I've left my garage door open and have been gone for 12 hours and I have thousands of dollars' worth of tools in there, nothing was touched. I left my door unlocked, nobody went in there. And that's how it should be. You shouldn't have to feel that if you're not careful then you're going to be taken advantage of. Think of the good old days where people left their doors unlocked and people would come and go. Great. You trusted your neighbours, your neighbours trusted you; you borrowed a tool, you brought it back. But I mean not everywhere is like that.

Here, being safe also evokes a nostalgic sense of community. Not only will your neighbours not attack you, but they will lend you tools. This moral landscape reflects the presumed kinds of people who inhabit them, where the safe, low density parts of town imply friendly people. High density, urban areas, on the other hand, are understood as a kind of “jungle” containing many hiding places in which “predators” could potentially utilize. To journey into a bad part of town, being armed is a must.

This moral landscape between the safe suburbs and the dangerous urban centers is nicely summarized in a NRA-sponsored rewrite of Little Red Riding Hood. *NRA Family*, the family-friendly wing of the NRA, partnered with Amelia Hamilton, a self-described conservative blogger, to create renditions of classic fairy tales where the previously vulnerable protagonists are now armed. In “Little Red Riding Hood (Has a Gun),” Red is on her way to see her grandmother, walking through the dangerous forest when she spots signs of the evil wolf.

Those footprints cast in snow were undeniably the tracks of a wolf. They were fresh, so Red knew the wolf couldn't have gotten far. Red felt the reassuring weight of the rifle on

her shoulder and continued down the path, scanning the trees, knowing that their shadows could provide a hiding place (Hamilton, 2016, January 14).

To venture off into the woods is to risk the viciousness of the beasts that wait within its confines, what protects one, now, is the reassuring weight of the rifle. The moral landscape shows suburbs in simple kindness and openness and the urban center as being particularly full of hiding places for bad people. “Bad” parts of town are full of “bad” people and the dangerousness of the people who live there is reflected in the danger and complexity of the landscape; whereas, the moral purity of the suburbs is visualized in their relative simplicity to navigate.

What if a villain from the city sneaks into the relatively safe suburbs? Many gun owners I met have practiced defensive strategies for the home or have firearms hidden throughout their home in strategic locations to anticipate someone breaking in at various vantage points (a topic covered in depth in Chapter Three). Readyng oneself in this manner – whether through fortifying one’s home or staying vigilant – makes one’s home and body legible as safely existing within a wider morally good world which has to be protected from the evil of the world trying to, literally and figuratively, break in.

Nowhere was this sense that evil lived elsewhere and had to be defended against more pronounced than in a NRA designed course I attended titled “Refuse to be a Victim.” The Refuse to be a Victim course was developed by the NRA in 1993 and was originally intended only for women but was opened up in 1997 as a co-ed training program for those uncomfortable with owning and carrying firearms. The course is the only training program created by the NRA that is not centered on gun use – though the instructors did recommend that, ultimately, the best way to prevent oneself from being victimized is by carrying a gun. Out of the six attendees and two instructors of the seminar, I am the only one who is not a gun owner.

The “Refuse to be a Victim” course is held in a small firearms training room attached to a larger strip mall in Stone Mountain, Georgia. The two instructors, both wearing matching NRA embroidered polo shirts, introduce themselves and hand out pads of paper, pencils, and lecture slides which corresponded to what they will soon present so that we could follow along. The presentation slides are issued by the NRA and uniformly used for all Refuse to be a Victim classes across the United States.

There is a delay and the main instructor, wearing a white polo shirt, apologizes. He explains that he is waiting for one more attendee to arrive and that he will give the man five more minutes. The instructor then walks outside to wait for the latecomer in the parking lot, explaining that, “You don’t have to look too far to see danger, it comes unexpectedly.” One of the attendees wonders aloud why the instructor was postponing the seminar a further five minutes (at this point the class is ten minutes past its official start time).

The latecomer arrives and the instructor turns on the overhead projector which is situated in between two American flags. The final attendee apologizes to the group, explaining that he has arrived from Chattanooga. Any annoyance at his tardiness vanishes.

“How’s everything going up there?” The instructor asks.

“It’s a mess. It’s a total mess.” The man responds.

On July 16, 2015, a gunman committed a drive-by shooting of a military recruiting center attached to a strip mall and continued onto a local U.S. Navy Reserves center where he killed four marines and left a sailor in critical condition before being killed by police. Recruiting centers prohibit military personnel from carrying firearms as they are considered to be civilian spaces. The instructor gives the late comer an empathetic look and expresses disgust that the military recruitment site was a “gun free zone.” He tells the class that he had seen a great photo

of the site where the glass walls of the recruitment center were riddled with bullet holes and in the foreground a sign that said “Gun Free Zone” was displayed. The main instructor prepares his notes but then stops and walks over to the attendee from Chattanooga, showing him his cell phone. The other instructor asks what happened and the principle instructor announces that the sailor in critical condition from the attack has just died, marking the fifth casualty of the shooter’s rampage.

“It’s terrible, it’s just terrible” the second instructor, wearing a red polo shirt, says, shaking his head.

The principle instructor then begins the presentation.

The first slide invites the audience to imagine their daily routine and try to pick out the moments in which we are most susceptible to being a victim. We are then shown three different photos which are meant to encapsulate our varying levels of vulnerability. The first image shows a nuclear family sitting on a couch about to turn on the television, the second photo is of a woman in front of a shopping cart in the produce section of a grocery store, and the third photo displays a large indoor concert full of people dancing and moving their arms in the air. The man in the red polo shirt comments on the levels of mental preparedness one needs to have in each situation to minimize the likelihood of becoming a victim. The presenters explain that the third photo of the concert is the situation in which a person is most vulnerable as they are surrounded by strangers with loud music which makes it difficult to keep one’s sensory abilities focused and therefore necessitated heightened awareness. The second photo of a woman shopping (presumably in a location in which she visited habitually) necessitates awareness but with less people around her it would be easier to maintain a level of casual situational awareness. The third photo depicting the family watching a movie in their (hopefully locked) home presents the

situation in which one would be most familiar with one's surroundings and therefore could maintain a slightly relaxed level of mental preparedness; however, the principle presenter insists that even in the comfort of home, one must remain alert and be ready for a potential attack.

“What would happen,” the presenter asks, “if a criminal broke into your house at the very moment you sat down to watch a movie with your family?”

The speaker segues this into a discussion about home security. To emphasize the importance of securing one's home, he tells the room that it is a fact that most sexual assaults occur in the home (though he failed to mention that, from 2005-2010, 78% of *reported*³⁸ sexual violence involved “an offender who was a family member, intimate partner, friend, or acquaintance” – someone who would probably be invited into most fortified homes [Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013:1]). The presenter then reads through a long list of ways in which houses are not secure and how these weak spots can be fortified: locks on doors need be sturdy; deadbolts and the screws joining a door to the structure of a house should be long and go directly into the foundation so a criminal cannot kick the door in; doors should be made of metal or hardwood and should never have window panes that can be broken; windows in general should be double paned, even small windows (“there's some skinny criminals out there”); ensure that windows have proper blinds so that a criminal cannot casually look in and see what sorts of consumer goods are in the house; do not brag about new consumer products recently purchased on social media; all doggy doors should have locks just as sturdy as doors (though it is better to just not have doggy doors); locks should be changed every five years or so and spare keys should always be skillfully hidden; if a house cleaner or renovator comes to your house regularly buy a small code-operated box next to the door and change the code often so that said employee or service provider is not given the opportunity to make a double of the key; designate a safe room

³⁸ Instances of sexual violence and assault are grossly underreported (Thomas, 2013 November 21).

in the house so that if a break and entry occurs the family has a predestinated meeting place with a basic amount of food, a flashlight, and a cell phone that can call 911; diversify your morning routine so that you are not in the same room every day at the same time and leave alternating lights on when you leave the house; garage doors need more reinforcement because many of the electronic opening devices work on similar frequencies and a criminal may be driving in your neighbourhood with an assortment of generic garage openers, clicking them all until a garage door opens; the types of plants, shrubs, and other sorts of domestic flora that homeowners use to decorate their front and back lawns should be strategically chosen and placed so as to not provide hiding spots for criminals – it is better to plant “defensive shrubs” like rosebushes near windows and front doors.

This last tip in a dizzying list of precautions in particular caught my attention. When the largest pro-gun lobbying group in America is giving gardening advice, urging individuals to plant “defensive shrubs,” the preoccupation with being properly defended surely becomes a primary mode of inhabiting one’s environment. And indeed, the list of ways to secure one’s home continued and was complimented by numerous ways in which one can take extra precautions in all acts of seemingly mundane activity, whether it be buying gas, interacting with coworkers, or going on vacation. It would be easy for someone not present at this workshop to see this long list of the “dos and don’ts of safety” as irrefutable proof of fear or paranoia. The cautions, however, are not treated with more fear than one possesses when remembering to buckle in a seatbelt; securing one’s home is explained casually though exhaustively, and in a programmatic, check list style. What these cautionary tips do create, though, is a refusal to be a specific victim, a victim to another human being’s power or agency, and situate those who may become victimizers as existing outside of the immediate world of the attendees. In working on

becoming safe and secure, gun owners are learning specific practise of securing themselves against a very specific (and often times rare) kind of crime: anonymous attacks which threaten the integrity of one's self.

“Refuse to be a Victim” and the emphasis of anonymous crime

Within the understanding of this moral landscape, the emphasis on what a threat is or could become is always an anonymous person who singles one out for no specific reason. While the gun owners I met would not deny that violence occurs within families, social circles, and communities, a primary concern is not only not to be victimized but not to be victimized by a stranger.

Even at the refuse to be a victim class, the instructors described criminals and potential threats almost exclusively in terms of someone the victim knew only peripherally or not at all. The Refuse to be a Victim course describes the “Psychology of Criminal Predators” as including the following:

Low self-esteem; Viewing niceness as a weakness; Constantly seeking criminal opportunities; Overconfidence; Constantly trying to beat the system; Demeaning their victims to increase their sense of self-worth; Masking themselves with a façade of conformity. (By blending in with everyone else, they can appear non-threatening and innocent.); They often work in pairs. One will engage you or distract you while the other one will commit a crime (NRA, 2013: 6).

The image of a criminal here is one that a would-be-victim has no social ties to or knowledge of. This does not just distance the “world of crime” which criminals are seen to inhabit away, fundamentally, from innocent people³⁹ but also paints a distinct picture of what kind of criminal gun owners are preparing for. The criminal here is anonymous and the attack is anonymous.

³⁹ Inferring that those who live in crime prone neighbourhoods are somehow less innocent.

While the instructors of the seminar stressed that a criminal could be anyone, it was always implied that that someone was unknown to you.

Gun owners I met shared this emphasis on defending themselves against anonymous criminals as opposed to any other kind of threat, whether it be caused by human action or otherwise. A popular saying amongst gun owners is that a gun, like a fire extinguisher, is better to have and not need than to need and not have. One evening, during a discussion on carrying, Patrick made this very remark. We had been speaking about fear and whether it was a level of fear that motivated gun owners to carry regularly. Patrick argued that fear had nothing to do with carrying; gun owners knew that violent people exist and wanted to be ready for them, for the small chance that they did materialize. Patrick said that keeping a fire extinguisher in one's home does not imply a fear of fires but an awareness that fires could occur; in that same way, owning and carrying a gun does not imply a fear of crime but an awareness that crime could occur and that steps can be taken in advance to prevent such occurrences.

I paused for a moment, thinking Patrick's response over and then asked him if he owns a fire extinguisher in his apartment. Patrick smiled knowingly and admitted that he did not, adding that he lives in a rental house. I countered that living in a rented house did not prevent him from bringing in his rather heavy gun safe. Patrick then admitted that there is something more disturbing about human violence, that humans who use their own agency to inflict violence on someone anonymously is more disturbing than an accidental fire.

That humans have the agency to inflict pain on another human being is understood to be the most common and disturbing threat which gun owners face, even if such an acknowledgement obscures other kinds of threats. In *Gun Show Nation*, Joan Burbick recounts the legal seminars she attended at the 2002 NRA annual convention where “subdued

discussions” took place on the legal problems of trying to keep or reclaim one’s firearm(s) when facing a restraining order or after a misdemeanor conviction related to domestic violence.

Burbick notes how neither the audience nor the presenters “lingered” on why domestic assault occurs or how to stop it but focused more on what to do once it occurs (2006: 149). These observations led Burbick to write that,

Overall, domestic violence took the glamour out of the crime scene that pro-gun activists loved to describe. Husbands and wives shooting it out in the living room didn’t have the same appeal as the brave homeowner gunning down a crazed burglar. And what about all those ad campaigns to get me to buy guns? The magazine and book tales of masked young predators generated gun sales. How do you advertise buying guns when the criminal was an ex-husband, a boyfriend, or a guy you dated a couple weeks ago? (2006: 153).

By focusing on random, anonymous threats, gun owners fetishize this kind of crime at the expense of violence between individuals who know each other intimately, situations where the potential for violence may be intensified with the presence of a firearm.

Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs

By prioritizing anonymous attacks above all other kinds of threat, gun owners come to understand themselves, would be attackers, and the public in relation to the possibility of this specific kind of threat. A common, though simplistic, categorization of these types of people mentioned by gun owners I met and discussed in NRA related training material is that of wolves, sheep, and sheepdogs. Wolves are criminals who think and act in an almost animalistic manner: willing to find “a free lunch” at anyone’s expense and without concern for that person’s wellbeing. Sheep are those individuals who do not take any precautions (or take inadequate ones) to be ready for the wolves. Sheepdogs are the gun owners who acknowledge the existence of wolves (seeing what the sheep cannot) and ready themselves for the possibility of a wolf to

materialize. To illustrate how these categories work and inform a way of seeing the world I will use the example of Ray, a gun owner I met in Georgia.

Ray, well into his thirties, had only been a Georgia Carry member for a week and had only been a gun owner for two years. We met at a Georgia Carry event (his first) a week after the Chattanooga shooting in Tennessee. Many gun owners were furious in the aftermath of the attacks that soldiers were not able to defend themselves. In an act of protest and solidarity, gun owners in states neighbouring Tennessee took it upon themselves to begin guarding recruitment centers, openly carrying their own firearms. Ray offhandedly mentioned that a few days earlier he had volunteered to protect a recruitment center in Woodstock, Georgia. When asked why, he explained that if terrorists were planning on striking again, they would choose a different recruitment center. The Georgia Carry event was drawing to an end and I asked Ray if he would be willing to meet with me at a later time. He told me that he lived a two hour's drive from the event but would be happy to talk to me on the phone the following week.

With the background noise of Ray's two children competing for his attention a week later on the phone, Ray continued to explain why he had volunteered to protect the recruiting station. Growing up in California (colloquially known as anti-gun-fornia), his family had a tradition of military service and when Ray opted not to enlist himself it created splinters between him and his parents. Before retiring, Ray's father would be away from home for six months at a time, absent for the formative moments in Ray's childhood. Ray was unwilling to sacrifice being a present father for his future children but promised his mother that if the United States ever called on its citizens to fight he would be the first person in line. For Ray, the shooting at the recruitment center in Chattanooga was such a call and he began volunteering in shifts with other gun owners to protect recruiting stations in Georgia.

“It takes a special kind of person to stand guard at recruiting stations,” Ray said. To stand in Georgia summer heat with a heavy long gun and a holstered handgun is physically demanding. Volunteers also make themselves vulnerable to not just potential terrorist attacks but to the more mundane verbal abuse from pedestrians and even legal repercussions. Ray admitted that public opinion concerning his and others’ volunteering efforts were not overly positive. However, it is still something he can do for his country.

It was not until the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in Connecticut where a shooter murdered 20 school children and six school personnel that Ray began thinking about purchasing and learning to use a gun.⁴⁰ A few days after the shooting, his home protection system was triggered at 2:30 am. While it was a false alarm, the incident made Ray realize that in the event of a threat, he would be unable to protect himself and more importantly his family. Shortly after Ray bought his first handgun.

Though he took a few classes on basic safety measures, Ray found the most useful way to learn was to surround himself with “gun nuts” and through video demonstrations uploaded onto YouTube. He met and spent time with people at shooting ranges whose entire lives are predicated on firearms. After becoming competent in shooting, Ray became fascinated with the mechanics of firearms, watching countless YouTube videos on how to build guns from scratch and ultimately building his own AR-15.⁴¹ “I felt a huge sense of achievement, like – Wow! I created this!” He named his newly made firearm “crowbar.” Ray told me that becoming a gun owner was a new way of life. Regardless of where he is, he is constantly scanning men’s right

⁴⁰ Concurrent to the calls for tighter and more comprehensive gun regulation in the U.S. following the Sandy Hook shooting (and all shootings for that matter) are surges in gun sales by both existing gun owners concerned that the government will tighten gun regulations and by new gun owners with new or heightened concerns about self-defence.

⁴¹ An AR-15 is a semi-automatic rifle. Because of its name, many confuse it to be an automatic rifle – which it is not.

side – especially men with untucked shirts – for a slight budge that may indicate a gun. While emphasizing that he hopes nothing will ever precipitate him using his firearm, Ray always identifies exits in any room he enters.

Becoming involved in Georgia Carry fell in line with what it meant to be a gun owner for Ray. “It’s more than just owning a gun that makes someone a responsible gun owner,” he explained, meaning that responsibility as a gun owner here also means supporting gun rights and making sure that these rights are not pushed back by anti-gun politicians. When I asked him if he planned on teaching his two young kids how to shoot he replied that to not teach his children to shoot and respect firearms would be to put their lives at risk. Ray explained that when his daughter turns eight in a year he will first buy her a BB gun to practice with and become well versed in rules of safety. Then, he plans on buying his daughter a .22 calibre rifle and gradually progress to more powerful firearms so that she will grow up being a responsible and safe gun owner.

Ray explained that in this world, there are “sheep” and there are “wolves.” Sheep comprise the majority of people; the wolves are a smaller segment, “looking for dinner.” Then, there are the shepherders⁴² who carry guns to protect themselves and the sheep around them from the wolves. I asked him if that meant he would intervene in a situation where an innocent person was being attacked. Ray replied that so long as he could ensure the safety of his family first he would – but not “stupidly.” Ray would take a deep breath, stop starrng at the criminal’s gun, and assess the situation – noting if he thought there were any chance the bad guy has back up somewhere or if there are any innocent people in the vicinity. “These are the filters you need to learn,” Ray added.

⁴² Most gun owners I met used the term ‘sheepdog’ instead of ‘shepherd’ but both imply the same notion.

As our conversation came to an end Ray told me that the questions I asked were interesting but safe. “You should add some edge” he advised, adding that by asking gun owners if they would be willing to “trade lives” with a bad guy to save an innocent, I could know their motives for carrying and decipher whether the gun owner in question was a sheep or a shepherd. For Ray, being a sheepdog (or shepherd) went beyond possessing an awareness of and readiness for wolves but also signified a willingness to protect the sheep: those unaware and ill prepared for the human danger that exists in the world.

I take Ray as an extreme example of how one’s worldview changes in learning to be a good gun owner. Ray’s sense of duty to his country and to his family were already strongly present in his discussion before he became a gun owner: the only reason he did not join the military himself was, he claims, so that he could be a present father in his children’s early years. What changed in Ray’s worldview was the almost imminent potential and omnipresence of violence and evil. It was only after Ray became a (good) gun owner that he began scanning men’s beltlines to see if they were carrying a gun and keeping an eye to all exits while enjoying a recreational activity with his family. Certainly, Ray had always been concerned with his family’s wellbeing, but following the Sandy Hook shooting, that wellbeing became tied to the possibility of a very specific kind of threat actualizing itself in any place and at any moment.

Ray is an excellent example of what Jennifer Carlson terms the “citizen-protector.” She explains that,

Citizen-protectors consider using deadly force against another human being, under circumstances, to be a morally upstanding response to a violent threat. They view their decision to carry a gun as a commitment to this moral politics and, by extension, a celebration of life. They probably will never use their gun in a defensive or protective situation, but they see their willingness to do so as placing themselves on a different moral plane than victims or criminals. When faced with the threat of violence, citizen-protectors believe themselves to be capable of making and executing a courageous moral call about life and death – all in the name of protecting innocent life (2015: 66).

In some ways, Ray goes beyond Carlson's concept of the citizen-protector, standing on guard in front of military recruiting sites, ready not just for perceived criminals but for terrorists. It is not that Ray's politics radically changed after he became a gun owner but that his relationship with them changed in terms of how he perceived and engaged strangers. Now, everyone is a potential wolf looking for a free dinner in moral landscapes of safe (good) and dangerous (bad) terrains where a wolf can still slip into a good neighbourhood. What could have before been a fun way to spend family time – an outing to a restaurant or a movie theatre – turns into a site to be enjoyed cautiously; a place with hiding spots for wolves that Ray must monitor in order to protect his family and the other “innocents” around him.

What counts as an innocent person takes on a paradoxically paternalistic and patronizing dimension. People are innocent, morally neutral but below the level of someone – a gun owner – morally positive in their proactiveness to keep themselves and others protected. It is in their assumed will to ignorance that people become innocent; sheep are morally virtuous in their obliviousness to the wolf hiding nearby. Gun owners are claiming an ethical strength which “sheep” do not have in their very acknowledgement that “wolves” exist: gun owners can see both innocence and experience. In her work on queer activism in India, Dave critically reflects on how, by valorizing poverty and treating it as a moral virtue, the mainstream woman's movement in India excludes the voices of lesbian activists considered decadently middle class. Dave writes that the woman's movement represented poor women in India as “lacking in complexity,” where, “the poor, because they are poor, can think only of what is materially necessary to survive. Oppression is the source of simplicity, and simplicity the source of virtue” (2012: 123). Similarly, sheep, in Ray's and others' accounts were considered more virtuous because of their perceived vulnerability and ignorance towards the threats which exist in the world they inhabit.

Furthermore, one's innocence is often understood based on how powerless the person appears. Among the gun owners I met, Ray was the most vocal about his willingness to "trade lives" with a criminal if it meant that innocent people were saved. Most other gun owners provided more nuanced responses to the question of intervention. While – as we will see in the next section – some gun owners are explicit that they carry solely for self-defence and not the defence of others, most gun owners I met stated that the decision to intervene in a situation would be completely dependent on that situation; providing a blanket response was impossible. The only hypothetical situation that nearly all gun owners agreed would merit decisive interaction was one in which a woman was being attacked by a man. Daryl, for instance, recounted to me an incident he experienced where, as he was entering a club and therefore was not armed, he saw a large man push his girlfriend across the sidewalk; and, as he was about to confront the man, remembered that he was unarmed. Daryl reflected on his inability to defend the woman and his own sudden vulnerability to the man twice his size. "Some big guy pushing a little girl, her life to me is more valuable; she's innocent. She may have told him something he didn't like but that's just words, that's just words. You don't cross that line."

Women's heightened vulnerability towards threats – as perceived by male gun owners – make them more innocent than other members of the public: the more defenceless, the more innocent. In making this claim, gun owners are drawing on patriarchal notions of gender and strength as a moral resource which shapes what ethical action can and should look like. Jackson, one of the employees at a local shooting range, went so far as to name this trope, saying, "If it's a damsel in distress, so to speak, of course I would want to intervene to a certain extent. I'm not going to put myself in danger but I certainly don't want any harm to someone who's innocent." The easier it is to categorize individuals into categories such as "sheep" and "wolf," the easier it

is for a gun owner to feel justified in understanding themselves as an intervener – at times even a sheepdog.

The wolf, furthermore, by willfully wanting or attempting to inflict pain on someone else becomes dehumanized. In his book, *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships*, Robert Brightman describes a kind of demon which exist in Cree mythology called *witikos*. The *witiko* was once human but changed into a monster after eating human flesh (often out of necessity) and consequently exists in a state of “chronic ravenousness evocative of the famine tragedies said to induce the condition” (2002: 141). The *witiko* loses its human identity or essence as soon as it consumes human flesh, transforming into what becomes – paradoxically – a beastly creature constantly hungry. Similarly, a criminal becomes a criminal and therefore loses all their humanity as soon as an act of harm is carried out (or attempted) on an innocent life. Even though some gun owners will admit that the criminal may be in social circumstances outside of their control which prompted them to commit the crime out of a kind of necessity, their humanity is lost once an innocent is harmed. Thereafter, that person exists in a state of perpetual violence, looming in the minds of gun owners the way a *witiko* haunts Cree stories. As Tony told me,

Carrying a gun does not stop crime, carrying it openly does not stop crime. At best it’s going to defer it. Someone whose intent is committing a crime is probably going to commit one. If he sees me as being able to resist him, be it from carrying open or just the way I’m carrying myself. Maybe that lump in my pocket. Then at least I’m not the victim. It’s for someone else who’s his next victim to protect themselves.

The real bad guy, like the mythic *witiko*, cannot be stopped (unless killed) but only deterred. *He* hovers in the background, ready to prey on anyone possible, taking on an almost mythic stature. The only chance that such a criminal would cease to prey on the innocent sheep is if caught by the sheepdog.

“The life you save might be your own”: self-defence is for *self*-defence

While many gun owners I met ascribe to the identity of a sheepdog either openly or indirectly through their behaviour and practices, there is a sizeable number of gun owners who are vocal that they carry exclusively for their own protection and safety. Out of the gun owners I met who do not fit into the category of a sheepdog or citizen-protector, Patrick was the most vocal. While writing this thesis, Patrick visited Ottawa from Atlanta to take part in a roundtable I was organizing about gun ownership. While he was in the city I presented some of my early writing to an undergraduate class in anthropology and decided to invite Patrick, present the research, and give him a space to respond to my presentation. When I described the categories imagined through the wolf, the sheep, and the sheepdog, Patrick quickly (and adamantly) explained that, while those are real categories in the gun community, they do not apply to his own way of understanding himself as a gun owner. Somewhat sarcastically, the professor of the class asked Patrick what kind of animal he would be if not a sheepdog. Patrick, taking the question seriously, thought a moment and replied that he would be a bird that flies away.

During my fieldwork, Patrick told me that he abides by the “‘Screw you guys I’m going home’ policy.” This policy, which Patrick invented, takes its inspiration from the character Cartman of the popular animated television show *South Park*; whenever Cartman, a highly opinionated and regularly belittled child, becomes too frustrated with his current surroundings, he throws his arms in the air and declares “Screw you guys, I’m going home.” For Patrick, this policy meant actively taking himself out of any situation which could escalate to violence.

Patrick’s policy exists for two reasons: Patrick did not want to put himself in harm’s way but he also did not want to harm or kill anyone else unless his life was in direct danger. Patrick recounted an anecdote to me where, at a Libertarian event, one of the organizers noticed Patrick

was open carrying and mentioned it to the politician the event was centered around. The politician nodded approvingly and said he was happy that someone would be around to protect the group if anything happened. Patrick awkwardly nodded at the event but confided to me that he had no intention of protecting anyone but himself. Even when pushed by a fellow gun owner at a Georgia Carry event Patrick was unrelenting in his ““screw you guys I’m going home’ policy.” The other gun owner asked Patrick if he really would not intervene if he heard the sound of gunfire coming out of an elementary school and to the frustration of the man, Patrick only reaffirmed that he carried for self-defence alone.⁴³ For Patrick, a vocal Libertarian, carrying a gun is an individual choice. If another individual chooses not to carry a firearm (or some other kind of protection) and is attacked, Patrick does not feel any responsibility on his part to protect them as they could have protected themselves by doing what he, and many others, practice: carrying a gun.

Moral and natural rights to self-defence

In the middle of a now empty parking lot, in front of the closed restaurant which had housed a Georgia Carry chapter meeting, I am standing with Tony beside his car as the time approaches midnight. “If a man was running towards you from over there,” he says, pointing to the highway, “and he was armed and yelling that he was going to kill you, would you not draw a weapon and defend your own life?” Tony had grown tired of our conversation about criminality

⁴³ Such hypothetical scenarios were often posed to me in rebuttal to my own questions about gun ownership. I would be asked whether I would intervene to protect innocent lives if I were to witness a violent incident began. A few times, when I responded that I would try to intervene, I was told that since I was unarmed I would be killed in my attempts and the act would go on. The unarmed teachers at the Sandy Hook School who were killed while trying to attack the shooter were typically referenced as evidence of this. Such though experiments present examples of how gun owners understand themselves as relating to safety and security as an ethical substance where questions about the best way to ensure the safety of themselves and security of other “innocents” is actively and critically engaged with.

and reform, frustrated that I did not seem to understand the bottom line of his argument – that it takes a bad person to kill someone, especially at random – he rephrased the question as an ultimatum: would I kill the man running towards me or let him kill me?

I grew uncomfortable and gazed out at the empty spot Tony had motioned towards where the hypothetical bad guy was gaining ground on me. “Honestly, I don’t think I could murder someone.” I said.

“There is a fundamental difference,” Tony responded growing increasingly frustrated at my lack of understanding, “between murder and killing. And if you don’t understand that you haven’t understood anything I’ve been talking about this whole time.” Tony asked me if this hypothetical criminal really deserved “to go home tonight” more than I did; if my own life was truly less valuable than someone’s who was willing to kill and potentially even rape me. “You have a moral responsibility to yourself and to those who care about you to protect yourself.”

The United States has high annual levels of fatalities from incidents involving a gun and while all of the gun owners I met are impressively responsible and safe with their firearms, many others are not. When questioned about the number of deaths and injuries which occur with the use of firearms, gun owners counter that the gun was simply the tool in which to carry out an attack or accident, one that could have easily happened with another tool. In understanding and negotiating responsibility, gun owners are also working to understand how they see themselves and others. As Laidlaw notes, “claims by means of which responsibility is embraced or repudiated, and attributed or refused to others, work in part by means of claims about the constitution of the self” (2014: 194). For instance, if a child injures one of her parents after attaining access to her parent’s firearm, responsibility and therefore blame for the shooting is attributed to the parent: the child is not seen to have the capacity to understand the power of a

gun whereas the parent who owns the gun should. To say that the parent and not the child is responsible for the accidental shooting is to say that the parent has the capacity to understand the potentially fatal consequences of owning a firearm whereas the child does not.

The slogan “guns don’t kill people, people kill people” is best understood in a critical look at gun owners’ perception of responsibility. When a violent crime occurs with the use of a gun or when accidental gun use results in injury or death, gun owners understand the responsibility for the violence to be on the humans who used the guns and not on the gun itself. In conversation with Tony that evening in the parking lot, he reiterated to me that guns are not “talismans” which change the behaviour of people but are simply one of many “tools” which individuals can use to fulfill whatever plans they may have. The evil or incompetency of a person who uses a gun for violence is understood by gun owners to be a fundamental part of who those people are and, consequently, yet another reason to be well armed. That gun owners see violent acts carried out with the use of firearms to be indicative of an individual’s evilness or incompetency brings to mind the moral philosopher Bernard Williams’ argument that in attempts to deepen or make more profound the concept of human voluntariness, the reasons and sometimes necessity for such actions or decisions to be made are obscured or forgotten (1993: 139). As Laidlaw elaborates, Williams maintained “that an overemphasis on and attempt to radically deepen the notion of the voluntary (encapsulated in the idea of ‘free will’) is one of the deformities of the particular and largely modern ethical life” (2014: 188). By overly prioritizing notions of free will in how we understand responsibility, guns can further dehumanize criminals, ignoring the wider context in which crime is committed, and – paradoxically – see criminal acts as almost “instinctual” to criminals who commit them.

Those who carry a firearm on a regular basis and train themselves to be ready for the realization of a threat do so because they feel that their lives – and often the lives of their family’s – are worth protecting. Though the anecdote above was perhaps the only time that I was told that I had a *responsibility* to protect myself, the anecdote is useful in illuminating how a moral right to self-defence is often imagined. In interviews and in passing conversations I frequently heard gun owners tell me they had a right to self-defence. In these remarks, the right to self-defence, went beyond the 2nd Amendment and legal arguments and was considered a natural right.

The right to defend with whatever tool best served one’s purpose – in most cases a firearm – was predicated on being human: a vulnerable yet dexterous member of dangerous species. The right to defend oneself meant that there are human beings out there that want to cause harm and, as humans, we do not have built in mechanisms to defend ourselves. As Daryl told me, “There are predators out there. You have to be able to defend yourself. As humans we don’t have antlers like deer, we can’t run like a cheetah. We’re slow and squishy.”

Animal analogies were frequent and in making them, gun owners are arguing that humans, as opposed to other animals, require tools in being able to defend themselves. In an early interview conducted with Tony he explained that, as a young child, his father gave him a knife. The reason for that and the subsequent impetus for arming himself was because,

We, as a species, don’t have claws, we don’t have fangs. We’re not overly muscular. We’re not bears. We’re not mountain lions. We cannot compete as predators. What we do have is intelligence. We have the ability to use tools to enhance our natural abilities and achieve the same ends as these larger predators can. We’re able to modify our environment, we’re able to use these tools to *enhance* our natural abilities. To not do so, to be at the mercy of someone else who is larger and stronger when one has the option of doing something else is stupid. It’s just stupid.

The first time I met Tony he argued that what I was studying was not actually gun ownership but how human beings learn to defend themselves: how human beings understand and work with what it means to be safe. In this case, a firearm just happens to be the most effective means of defense.

As gun owners continually practice shooting with particular guns they own, a familiarity arises between these firearms and the people who carry them; a gun owner can move with more ease, can draw quicker, and can shoot more accurately with a gun they are accustomed too, that to many, seems natural. Even the metaphors commonly used to compare firearms with the natural abilities of defence in animals implies a naturalness both to the necessity of self-defence and the use of firearms to enhance self-defence abilities. To picture a gun owner moving naturally with their firearms brings to mind the conceptual image of a cyborg pioneered by Donna Haraway in her cyborg manifesto (1991). But is the modification gun owners give to their “natural” abilities through firearm possession a blurring between machines and human organisms?

In his essay, “Canguilhem amid the cyborgs,” Ian Hacking celebrates the way philosopher Georges Canguilhem understood the relationship between machines and human beings while casting suspicion on the conceptual image of a cyborg, where there exists not a relationship but a blending together of humans and machines. Hacking writes that Canguilhem was unconcerned with whatever the difference may have been between the organic and the mechanical because “whether there is a sharp distinction between the made and the born or not, tools and machines are extensions of the body. They are part of life” (1998: 205). Hacking goes on to wonder what exactly the category of “tools and machines” comprises. He argues that while a bicycle does not necessarily fit into the traditional understanding of a machine it is still very

much one in the way that it becomes an extension of the rider's body. A bicycle when in motion "is so much part of my bodily equilibrium system when I am riding. I do not just use it. Without knowing how, I am able to correct for all but the worst eventualities" (1998: 206). Here, I would like to add that the equilibrium Hacking has with his bicycle is attained only at a specific skill level one attains by using the bike regularly to create individualized knowledge pertaining to it.

In the same way, while learning to shoot a gun becomes a skill applicable to all sorts of makes and models of firearms, it is also a skill personalized to the specific gun(s) each gun owner possesses, trains with, and carries. That these guns become an extension of their bodies makes more sense when the guns are personalized, and mean something specific to them. In Canguilhem's speech "Machine and Organism," which Hacking takes as his own starting point, Canguilhem argues that a machine attains its organic property when the function designed for it is carried out exactly as imagined; the hands of a watch properly working in a way that realizes the dream of the watch maker to track time becomes as organic as a tree bringing forth fruit in the sense that both are functioning as imagined and designed (2008[1965]: 92). When the gun functions as desired – which entails a certain amount of comfort and knowledge between the gun and the user – it has the organic quality of doing what it is supposed to do: defend.⁴⁴

Imagining guns as tools is not just part of a political project that gun owners embark upon in order to shift the coupling of *gun* and *weapon* in the popular imagination. To see the gun as a tool, and a very specific kind of tool at that, is to understand a firearm as being neither an object without any meaning aside from the pure utility it has for humans nor as an object inherently hostile to the human species, what Gilbert Simondon terms "the technical object" (1958: 3). For

⁴⁴ Interestingly, Canguilhem seems surprised that Descartes, in his own work on machines, was more interested in clocks and "hoisting machines" than he was with a new kind of machine which "modified man's relationship to nature before Descartes, giving birth to a hope unknown to the ancients and calling for the justification and the rationalization of this hope": the firearm (2008[1965]: 83).

Simondon, the technical object does not exist for the pure benefit or destruction of humans but as an object which humans cultivate a relationship with. Writing on the technical object, Thomas LaMarre argues that “humans and machines are different; they can even be said to be ontologically different, but within an ontology that methodologically avoids dualism and substantialism, which is indeed more precisely called *ontogenesis*” (2013: 80). Though the gun and the gun owner are separate entities, gun owners form relationships with their firearms which constitute a fundamental aspect of who they as humans.

For gun owners, firearms take on this status as an organic entity when they function as expected: when they are being used in responsible, self-defence situations by good gun owners. The gun is not part of the gun owner but the relationship the gun owner has with a particular firearm is one of movement where gun owners are constantly tweaking their relationship with a particular gun by cleaning and practicing with them and in doing so are continuously becoming good gun owners by working on themselves. Furthermore, as gun owners see their firearms working exactly as they were designed (and by an individual who can comprehend this design) not only does the gun, as a mechanical entity, take on an organic form in the way Canguilhem described the watch, organic in its functioning, but the purpose of the gun – that of defence – is also understood to be an organic, natural action.

However, for gun owners to understand the act of defence as natural, then they must also be able to comprehend an equally natural threat; if self-defence is naturalized than so too are the predators which create a potential need for self-defence. When I asked Daryl, hypothetically, if he would still carry a firearm even if he lived in a small community where he knew and trusted everyone he said yes.

Even in that perfect environment, people can still come in. That perfect village in a jungle, okay all your neighbours are great but that puma is going to come in and take

something that it wants. That predator is going to come in whether you want him there or not. And in your perfect little world, everything's great and fine and dandy but there's the outside that you can't affect, you can't change them. People come into your perfect little world and you stop them. You need to stop them.

Bad guys or criminals become naturalized as predators the way animals have predators in the animal kingdom and to be able and willing to defend oneself is understood by gun owners to be a fundamental part of what it means to be human. But whereas frogs explode and poison a snake, or squirrels quickly scale a tree to avoid a cat, humans, here, pull out their holstered .45 calibre handgun and unload three rounds into the center-mass of a criminal.

The consequence of understanding this particular kind of self-defence as moral and natural is that it reinforces the notion that criminals are simply evil and immoral as if because of their "natural" genetic make-up. In extreme cases this can lead to off handed remarks about certain "races" being more or less criminal than others, repurposing older racist-biological explanations of criminality. To go back to Tony's statement in Chapter One: "until we are willing to face up to the fact that people with the wrong colour skin and the wrong accent are over represented in these [criminal] groups we're spinning our wheels." To liken criminals to predators peels away the complex reasons for which crime is committed and invites racist explanations of criminality.

To see criminals as predators decontextualized from their social realities can also lend moral virtue to the killing of these alleged predators – placing some of the most marginalized groups of people in American society into a category of being permissible to kill. As Carlson notes in her discussion on the NRA's training, the narrative of criminality is imagined through an allegedly colour-blind way which ignores all reasons for crime but immorality and "individualizes the problem of criminal and moves killing – in some circumstances – from an

immoral act to a moral act. It spells out who is worthy and unworthy of life” (2015: 76).

With great responsibility, comes great power

Gun owners I met who understand themselves to be responsible with firearm see themselves as having a kind of self-mastery over more violent emotions and tendencies. Interestingly, this sense of control can lead gun owners to seeing themselves as possessing an incredible power – a power they can enjoy possessing precisely because they will never exercise it. In an interview at a Red Lobster with Jerry Henry, the Executive Director of Georgia Carry, I asked him what it was like to first start carrying once the laws changed in Georgia. “I think you’ll find when most people start carrying they feel two things,” Jerry said.

One of them was a sense of responsibility because you’ve got something on your hip that can end somebody’s life so you’ve got to be responsible for how you handle it and if you have to use it. And don’t just pull it out and show somebody you’ve got a gun. When you pull it out you use it. I pulled my gun out to put it on, to take it off, and to clean it. And the other thing is, it calmed me down. I’ve always been a little high-strung. When somebody cut me off in traffic I used to get all upset with them. Now I just kinda look at them and say “you’re so silly” [laughs] and just keep on going. “You don’t realize who you just cut off in traffic.” And when they wanna give you the finger and things like that I just smile and say, “you’re lucky.”

In fact, many gun owners I spoke with did tell me that carrying a gun calmed them down or at least kept their sense of pride or ego in check. This is because if someone is carrying a gun they are, by default, bringing a gun into any kind of interaction they participate in. Every gun owner I met echoed Jerry’s commitment to not provoke or engage with a stranger in response to any of the everyday ways people casually frustrate and enrage other people, whether by making a rude or profane comment, cutting them off in traffic, or tempting them into a fist fight. Gun owners train themselves to restrain their own pride or tempers in these situations and to “turn the other cheek”– yet another way gun owners critically relate to their own ethical relationship with safety.

If they did respond to a passing insult and the situation escalated into a fist fight, the gun owner would know that they are armed. The gun owners I did research with are always bringing a gun to any kind of verbal or physical fight and therefore attempts to keep themselves away from such a situation.

But what does Jerry mean when he says that a driver who cuts him off is “silly” or “lucky?” He is saying that he knows that if he wanted to, he could indeed use that “thing” on his hip to end their lives. He can laugh about it only because he feels as though he has the restraint and is a good gun owner who would not revert to such a situation. Because Jerry is a good gun owner he can laugh about the power he has but would never use.

And while gun owners often remark that owning and carrying a gun has made them more responsible and served as a remind to practice a kind of self-control, it is still regularly argued that carrying a gun does not make them think in a radically different way. As Ethan told me,

I’m very conscious that I’m carrying and I keep aware of it. Mainly because I don’t want to lose track of where my gun is [laughs] but I don’t really think about it that much because I’ve carried enough. It’s secure, it’s not going anywhere. But I am aware of it. But it’s no more than you’re aware that you have your wallet with you; that you’re aware that you have your cell phone with you.

The argument is often made that carrying a gun does not change one’s worldview any more than carrying a cell phone. Not only does such a statement quickly forget how much individual worldviews *have* been changed by cell phones but also bellies a reminder that gun owners never forget that if something were to go wrong, they have a gun.⁴⁵

This point became most apparent to me through jokes made where gun owners lightheartedly and non-seriously discussed events in which they would have to shoot someone else. At the early stages of my fieldwork, while sitting with Tony at the Fourth of July celebrations at a biker bar, Tony (wrongly) thought I was checking out a bartender walking past

⁴⁵ I thank Neha Mahajan for this insight.

us. Tony warned me not to stare at women at this bar “for too long” as it may provoke one of the bikers. “And then I would have to shoot someone,” Tony jokingly said. Though Tony would never have actually shot another man because of a verbal confrontation, through the joke he made it apparent that he knew he *could*; Tony had the upper hand, holstered to his side.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at how learning the skills of being a good gun owner have specific moral implications for those gun owners’ worldviews. The change in worldview is not necessarily radical but forefronts anonymous human attacks as the most pressing and disturbing threat which could occur. The forefronting of anonymous threats, in turn, change how gun owners understand the chance of a threat as omnipresent, happening anywhere and at any moment and further changes how gun owners understand “innocent” people who do not acknowledge and properly prepare for such threats.

Human life has varying degrees of value and the right to self-defence with a firearm is understood to be as natural as an animal’s ability to defend itself with its own body. Criminals are understood to be instinctually predatory the way wolves instinctually hunt relatively weaker animals. Gun owners are, often, the only ones who can see a criminal for what *he* is: a wolf. Because gun owners feel as though they can handle the responsibility of carrying a firearm – unlike, say, a wolf – gun owners feel a sense of power paradoxically based on their self-perceived sense of control and responsibility.

We have gone from looking at the kinds of skills gun owners learn to how these skills change their own worldviews. In the final chapter we will look more closely at how gun owners inhabit this worldview through their everyday lives.

Chapter Three: The everyday and the (self-defence) moment

Colion Noir is a YouTube sensation among gun owners,⁴⁶ producing short videos about the everyday problems, questions, and anomalies that gun owners – and especially carriers – face.⁴⁷ In a video titled, “You know you’re a true concealed carry nut when...”⁴⁸ Noir stands in center frame in a grey T-shirt and New York Yankees hat and lists off all the situations and concerns serious concealed carriers find themselves in. “You have a drawer in your house dedicated to holsters,” Noir tells his viewers.

You have a day time calibre and a night time calibre. [...] She people watches, you watch people to see if they’re carrying. You carry a spare mag, a backup gun, a spare mag for the backup gun, and a knife. Just in case. [...] You automatically wished you had carried your full sized gun instead of your compact as soon as you drive through a bad neighbourhood. [...] Nothing pisses you off more than a bathroom that doesn’t have any place for you to keep your gun. [...] You suck at giving hugs. [...] You buy holsters like she buys shoes. [...] You laugh to yourself when you see a “no carry sign” that’s not legal (Noir, 2012, June 18).

Clearly tailored to men, Noir’s list-cum-description of what it is like to carry regularly resonates with many gun owners and aligns with the moralized worldviews gun owners develop. To make their own lives (more) defensible, gun owners reorganize their everyday routines so that they can be “ready” for a threat to materialize. These threats are imagined to be brief (though potentially fatal) interruptions of the everyday that the everyday is, paradoxically, anticipating. For instance, David (as discussed in Chapter Two) keeps a handgun ready and loaded on his bedside table in case a home invader were to crash in through the window or door. Everyday routines are structured around the possibility that these very routines may be disrupted by the presence of a human, leading to a self-defence moment.

⁴⁶ Recently, Noir was also hired by the NRA to be a media spokesperson.

⁴⁷ In addition, Noir makes short videos about his favorite firearms, carry techniques, and gun control.

⁴⁸ Which garnered over 500,000 views on YouTube.

In organizing their lives in a way that makes them defensible, gun owners I met are adamant that they are not afraid of a threat that may materialize. The suspicion gun owners work with to maintain their readiness has an interesting relationship with the enjoyment gun owners derive from buying and shooting guns. Both the defensive and recreational uses of guns constitute what Bernard Williams calls “ground projects”: sets of concerns and desires “which help to constitute a *character*” (1981: 5, emphasis original). Here, I argue that a fascination with what guns are and how they work is closely related to the concern of wanting to be able to defending oneself – constituting two interrelated projects which shape a gun owner’s “character.” Williams explains further that, “A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give meaning to his life” (1981:12, emphasis original).⁴⁹ To be able to defend one’s life in some way gives that very life meaning and drives the fascination with collecting, accumulating and recreationally using firearms.

Such ground projects unfold and become important in individuals’ everyday lives. Veena Das argues that ethics should not be understood as “judgements we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices,” but instead “as a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects” (2012: 134). The kinds of self-defence routines gun owners embark on is what contributes to a sense of living morally, by being ready for a threat to disrupt that everyday life.

In her book, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Das writes of the “intimacy between skepticism and the ordinary” where doubt and skepticism of others can unravel one’s social world and can threaten one’s everyday life (2007: 7). How these threats

⁴⁹ “Ground projects” which give one’s life meaning can also be compared to the modes of subjectivation and training or *askesis* individuals form and practice to make themselves into ethical subjects.

occur to ordinary life, however, depends on how the everyday is conceptualized. For instance, if the ordinary is located in familial relationships, then a husband's suspicions towards his wife's fidelity could become a threat to that ordinary life (Das, 2015: 71). What is interesting in the case of gun owners is that instead of this kind of suspicion constituting a threat to the everyday life, it becomes the basis *for* everyday life: gun owners prepare themselves for a potential self-defence moment through their routines and ordinary concerns that form a life that is understood by those living it as ethically good.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between the ordinary lives of gun owners and the potential for a threat to materialize and disrupt the everyday nature of those lives. "The event" and "the everyday" here do not exist in different worlds but are co-constructive through the *potential* that a self-defence moment may occur in the everyday life of a gun owner. I use the term "self-defence moment" because these situations are often talked about and conceptualized as taking place within the span of a few seconds. In these "moments," gun owners must prepare themselves extensively through routines of self-defence so as to be able to react immediately in a situation where every second counts. And while this encounter may hypothetically occur in only a moment, their existence continues before and after the actual act of self-defence occurs – inspiring a burgeoning industry of self-defence insurance companies and prompting these "moments" to circulate as stories. The constant concern and awareness of these self-defence moments creates a moral absolutism by and for gun owners and can even bring such a moment out of the realm of the potential and possible and into the actual.

"If I could, I'd be at the firing range every day": the relationship between firearm enthusiasm and defence.

At an Italian restaurant chain I find a seat on a long table next to members of a quail hunting conservation and lobby group and listen to strategies for fundraising and mobilizing potential members. “A lot of hunters I talk to complain that Georgia is past its glory days when it comes to quail hunting,” Tate, the organizer, remarks. “I always ask them: ‘what’re you doing to bring the quails back?’” Tate claims that the fragile number of quails currently in Georgia could rise, but first hunters would have to change their own mentality when it comes to what they hope for from the future. As the meeting wraps up, Tate turns to me and invites me to ask any questions I may have to the group. I first ask the men gathered around the table if they grew up hunting, to which nearly everyone says no: they had grown up fishing but became avid hunters later in life. Secondly, I ask them if they have any firearms specifically for self-defence purposes. Everyone began to laugh and says of course, as if the answer should have been obvious.

The quail hunters carry with varying degrees of frequency. One man says he only carries when he goes into the city but is more concerned with home defence. “If you don’t have a gun in *every* room, it’s not really good self-defence,” he explains. Another man adds that he only started carrying after he finished reading a novel about ISIS invading America.⁵⁰ A third man states that he carries wherever he goes, city or country, and that more people should carry too.⁵¹ Tate admits that he does not carry “as much as he should” but keeps an AR-15 in his vehicle at all times, just in case.

I was surprised to discover that all the hunters sitting around the table were concerned with self-defence (even if they did not carry as regularly as other gun owners I met). In all my time in Georgia, every gun owner I met who carried regularly also loved shooting and learning

⁵⁰ *Dies Irae: Day of Wrath* (2014) by William R. Forstchen

⁵¹ This man was also the only person at the table who did not have their shirt tucked in, something gun owners look for to see if someone else is conceal carrying.

more about guns; and, conversely, the hunting enthusiasts I met all shared concerns about being able to protect themselves from both animals and people.⁵²

Those who have self-defence concerns also express a pronounced enthusiasm for shooting and buying guns. Ray, the self-described shepherd from Chapter Two, became a gun owner after the Sandy Hook school shooting. He wanted to be able to defend himself and his family from what seemed to him to be an increasingly violent and dangerous America. Ray constantly carries a handgun on his person and trains himself to try and spot anyone who may also be carrying. He is, in his own words, someone who is willing to “trade lives” with a wolf if it means saving his family. Ray also learned how to build his own AR-15, an arduous task for anyone uninterested and one that contributes little to nothing in terms of being ready to defend oneself. When I asked Ray if he enjoys shooting he sighed and said “If I could, I’d be at the firing range every day.” For Ray, concerns for defence came before a love of firearms but, as he became a more proficient shooter, going out shooting, buying new guns, and even learning to build one himself became enjoyable uses of his time. And while there are surely Americans who own guns for self-defence and do not share my informants’ enjoyment for firearms, I doubt there are many who do not enjoy firearms who carry regularly.

In a small diner just out of Atlanta I posed a similar question to Catherine, the only female executive member of Georgia Carry. I asked “what came first? Really enjoying to shoot or more of a concern for self-defence and security?” Catherine responded by saying, “I enjoy life.”

I enjoy things that make me happy, I’m also in a way, somewhat of a perfectionist. If I can hit a bulls-eye: yay me. If I’m really close: I’ve gotta try harder. So that’s what it is for me. But I enjoy it. I don’t really know why, I guess maybe because I try to do, like I

⁵² I admit, however, that the time I spent with defensive gun owners far exceeds the time I spent with hunters. My exposure to hunters includes an extended visit to the GON – the largest hunting expo in Georgia, the quail conservation meeting, and several fleeting conversations with hunters at shooting ranges.

said, hit bulls-eyes and when I do, I feel great; I feel great about myself. I did an interview a few years back with a film crew from the Netherlands. They came over and they took me and another woman to the range and we were still mic-ed up afterwards. We were walking across the parking lot after doing our shooting and she and I were talking and she said “well, how many guns do you have?” “You know I really don’t know, but I know I have more guns than I have shoes.” And that’s probably still true [laughs]. I mean, most women like shoes. I’m sorry, I have a very expensive taste. I prefer guns.

Regardless as to whether a casual enjoyment of firearms or a serious concern about being able to defend oneself was the initial reason gun owners I met became interested in firearms, the two concerns eventually blend into each other. Once, while walking through downtown Atlanta, I asked Patrick what sort of criteria he prioritizes when buying a gun.⁵³ Patrick said his first level of criteria was “use” which would address questions such as whether the gun was to be concealed, whether it would be a carry gun, or whether it would be for home defence. I asked him if any kind of aesthetic consideration played into his choices and he responded saying that how a gun looked was part of its use and told me that he planned to buy a more expensive looking handgun soon once he had the money that he could feel comfortable open carrying at more prestigious gun-centric events.

Concerns for security and the enjoyment of owning, shooting, and buying guns constitute two interwoven “ground projects” of gun owners which help shape their own characters as good gun owners. To be ready to defend one’s life is also a large part of what gives meaning to that life. Furthermore, the enjoyment associated with having guns and carrying them around is more an explanation for why they are carried than fear. As Tony explains, carrying a gun is both an acknowledgement that the world is dangerous and a hobby. Carrying a gun, Tony told me, is,

a response to known events. We know crime occurs. There are people who do not carry and are willing to expose themselves to this threat and they’re willing to die saying “I

⁵³ Thanks to Mathias MacPhee for bringing my attention to the aesthetic considerations factored into buying a new firearm.

won this time, I won this time, I won this time. Look at how often I won.” I look at it and say, “Yeah but there’s a time when you’re not going to win. You’re going to get mugged, you’re going to get assaulted, you’re gonna get raped, you might get murdered.” I’m not willing to accept that level of risk. There’s a very, very, very small risk – but, I like guns anyway. I’m going to carry guns anyway.

These two intertwining ground projects – the love of firearms and the concern for self-defence – help reinforce and normalize the other: buying more guns, for instance, becomes acceptable in part because it may help prevent an attack and carrying a gun at all times becomes tolerable in part because one perceives firearms in a way that is not unlike a car hobbyist.

The enjoyment from all things gun related and the concern of an assailant work to justify and normalize practice associated with the alternate “ground project,” with both these projects helping to establish a character of a gun owner as someone who understands concerns for security and love for firearms. Patrick, who is often critical of some of the conservative politics frequently associated with gun rights, told me once that despite having fundamental political and ideological differences with fellow Georgia Carry members, he still understands them and can relate to them as people who share his own concerns for security as well as people who can also appreciate “nice” guns. Patrick then recounted to me how he had redirected a conversation with a fellow gun owner and Georgia Carry member from a xenophobic rant to a conversation about the new rifle this gun owner had recently purchased.

This heightened concern for defence and security does not come from a sense of fear but a suspicion of other human beings and an enjoyment of using guns and securing one’s self and home. We will now turn to a more descriptive account of the various routines in which gun owners keep themselves ready for a possible attack.

Self-Defence Routines

Gun owners prepare themselves for the possibility of a threat by striving to be constantly ready if a threat should emerge. Gun owners understand themselves as having very little time to respond if such a threat does materialize. The actual amount of time – usually imagined in seconds – is constantly attempted to be trimmed as it is understood that “seconds count”⁵⁴ in any sort of self-defence moment. When David, for instance, keeps his handgun loaded on his bedside table, it is this concern that drives him – that the small amount of time it would take to load and cock his gun would be the amount of time an assailant would need to victimize him. Such preparations for a brief period of time falls in line with how French philosopher Henri Bergson understood time to be qualitative, not quantitative, where the duration (*duré*) of time is felt differently based on what is happening.

“Duration is real time, it is the time of conscious experience. It is heterogeneous, qualitative, and dynamic. It is the difference between an hour spent by a condemned prisoner waiting to be executed, an hour spent by a child waiting for the start of their birthday party, an hour spent undergoing interrogation, an hour spent in a traffic jam, an hour spent in a traffic jam, an hour walking in the forest, an hour making love”
(Lindstead and Mullarkey, 2003: 6).

Gun owners, here, are not trying to interpret how time will feel in a defensive situation⁵⁵ but are acknowledging the unique feeling of time, where the time spent in a possible defense situation will feel much different than in that preparation – so much so that one’s time becomes spent creating repetitions of defence practices so that they will be ready for these very special seconds.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Taken from a popular saying in gun circles: “when seconds count, the police are only minutes away”. In trimming these seconds off an alleged response time, gun owners are also making the statement that they are the only ones who can protect themselves in the face of these unique threats.

⁵⁵ Though recall Tony’s discussion of being in Code Black in Chapter One.

⁵⁶ At this point, my informants could very fairly argue that only some self-defence situations are imagined as happening within a period of seconds and that the very reason they own semi-automatic weapons and extra

That time *does* feel different depending on the circumstances also implies that certain possible periods of time are considered more important than others, even if one period of time remains only hypothetical. In my conversation with Catherine we discussed the difficulty of maintaining a constant and heightened sense of awareness. Catherine said that she and her husband are able to rely on each other so that when she is being oblivious he is aware and vice versa. She went on to explain that,

I'm right handed and he's left handed so if we sit on opposite sides of a booth or something or a table, if I draw right handed I can go this way and if he draws left handed he can go that way so we get the whole room covered either way [laughs]. We just can't eat real well that way.

The duration of time spent eating at a restaurant matters less than those potential seconds of time that would occur if someone with malicious intent was to burst into said restaurant. Because time is understood to be felt differently, gun owners organize their routinized time around the potential that this new time may present itself.

While some gun owners told me that having a single handgun close by at all times is sufficient protection, others have multiple firearms strategically placed throughout their homes. Catherine explained that though she tries to carry at home there are only two rooms in her house that do not have a firearm strategically placed and that one of those room is a bathroom. "But one of them is definitely a bathroom that we do have firearms in," she added, laughing.

Similarly, Daryl keeps a handgun in between the cushions of his couch because, as he phrased it, "it doesn't make sense" to have to run upstairs to his gun safe and pass the criminal whose broken through his front door. "If it's not right there, it's not serving a purpose."

"When I go to bed" Daryl continued during our interview,

mazines is in case of a drawn out firefigt. While this is a valid critique, I would argue that the initial and critical moment of engagement (and corresponding readiness for it) is still imagined in terms of seconds.

I've got a little one [handgun] that's just strapped to my bed and yes I keep it loaded, I keep one in the chamber and I keep the safety off. Because if you grab the gun and you have to use it, it takes a second to take that safety off, it's one or two seconds to load in a round, if I'm going to go I want to be ready.

Bradley: So do you practice for those kinds of situational drawings?

Daryl: Yeah. It has to feel comfortable, so where I keep it on my bed, I put it so when I reach down it's right there. Because if you're laying down and you reach down your arm goes a certain way. If it was too far back and I had to do this [enacts putting out arm awkwardly], well. It's just like being in a car and adjusting your seatbelt. You want to make sure that it fits you and not anybody else. So you can be like, all right that's where it is and you can feel it in the dark with no lights, you still know where it is. It just doesn't make sense to realize too late that it's uncomfortable or it doesn't come out of the holster. If it can happen, it will happen.

Watching TV or generally relaxing on a couch and being asleep are two situations in which someone is particularly vulnerable (and also situations that make having a firearm holstered less comfortable). In being comfortable with how, for instance, the gun strapped to the bed feels when taken out, Daryl compares the need to adjust a seatbelt to accommodate individualized comfort. The comparison is not a rhetorical move to further normalize gun ownership but rather a claim that evil exists in the world (that a stranger could materialize seemingly out of nowhere with the intent of causing violence) and that one's everyday life has to take such realities into account. Guns are needed for self-defence in the same way that seatbelts are needed for cars: both traffic accidents and criminals exist and though the chances of either one occurring are not overly likely, the potential is there.

Daryl also mentioned a technique that nearly all gun owners I met employ: keeping a bullet chambered and having the safety off. As discussed in Chapter Two, most firearms have a safety, a switch that when "off" prevents the trigger from being pulled down. To have a gun with the safety off and a bullet chambered saves gun owners a few seconds of having to do this when potentially necessary. The way routines of preparedness and self-defence are intrinsically woven

into gun owners' everyday lives deeply connects the everyday not to an event but to the potential for an event to take place. There is no guarantee a threat will materialize in the lives of gun owners – in fact most gun owners openly acknowledge that there is a rare chance of such a threat occurring. Yet, it is the potential for that threat to materialize that the everyday lives of gun owners are prepared for (Massumi, 2002: 136).

This kind of threat is multilayered. For gun owners the threat does not stop at the would-be criminal's actions but spills over into the consequences of those actions. As we shall see in the next section, gun owners prepare themselves not just as “good guys” but also prepare themselves *to look like* “good guys” in the gaze of the criminal justice system.

The unbounded nature of a threat: wearing your “good guy” shirt

The presenter, slightly balding, is wearing an untucked plaid shirt and, after introducing himself as a representative of US Law Shield, tells the audience of 30 seated in booths at the back of a diner that he is a card carrying member of Georgia Carry and a huge 2nd Amendment supporter. He stresses that there are so many things that can go wrong in drawing a firearm beyond the actual and immediate need for self-defence that must be considered. The man uses “the Zimmerman example” to illuminate the unbounded nature of a threat. In Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman used his concealed handgun to kill Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American teenager. Zimmerman – the presenter argues – used his gun in self-defence but now has not only been villainized across the country but has had to pay an astronomical amount in legal fees despite the fact that he was acquitted. The presenter then brags

that US Law Shield has Zimmerman's lawyer working for them. Unfortunately, Zimmerman was not using the company's services, and as such, had to pay for those fees out of pocket.⁵⁷

US Law Shield is part of a burgeoning industry that provides insurance coverage for gun owners who use a firearm (or any legal weapon) in self-defence. For \$10.95 USD a month, US Law Shield provides lawyers who specialize in firearm related incidents and covers the lawyer fees for police investigations, pre-trial hearings, and trials in both civil in criminal courts. US Law Shield also runs a 24/7 attorney answered hotline for their clients. Georgia Carry officially endorses US Law Shield as their recommended self-defence insurance provider after undergoing a "thorough examination" of what they cover and what they offer to their clients. The evening's chapter meeting is an opportunity for the insurance company to make a sales pitch as well as a chance to offer gun owners tips on how to present oneself as a "good guy with a gun" to law enforcement after a self-defence situation has occurred.

The presentations at two separate US Shield events I attended are interesting for understanding the compounded meaning of a "threat" which many of the gun owners I met prepare themselves for. While we have already discussed how an *anonymous human threat* is emphasized over other possible encounters, the threat as understood by gun owners does not simply stop if the anonymous human is shot; the threat to a gun owner's well-being and sense of safety continues through the legal repercussions and potentially dangerous encounters with law enforcement. The insurance US Law Shields and others advertise is a "good guy insurance": it ensures good gun owners defending themselves are not further punished by exorbitant legal fees.

⁵⁷ Zimmerman's lawyer, Mark O'Mara, originally volunteered to represent Zimmerman pro bono but later attempted to regain some of his legal fees after finding out that Zimmerman had set up an online crowd funding page that generated over \$200,000 USD. Now that he is acquitted, Zimmerman is attempting to sue the State of Florida to recover funds spent during his trial on legal fees and, in a particularly repulsive cash grab, is now auctioning off the 9 mm Kel-Tec PF-9 pistol that was used to kill Trayvon Martin.

The second speaker of the night's presentation is a thin man in his late thirties wearing rimmed glasses, a black polo shirt, and deploys a sarcastic sense of humour the crowd is receptive towards. The man begins his presentation by explaining that his full time job is that of a police officer and that after spending thirteen years in the force he firmly believes that so long as an American citizen is not "stupid enough" to get convicted of a felony then it is their "God given right to own and carry a gun." The comment brings cheers from the room. The man further explains that he gives seminars to fellow police officers about gun laws in Georgia and that most officers in the state are not up to date on gun laws. However, the man warns, a gun owner telling cops that they know the law better than the officer is not going to help the gun owner's case. Furthermore, if someone open carrying is walking down the street and a police car approaches, there is a good chance that multiple people have already called the police and provided inaccurate descriptions or – even worse – simply stated that "a man with a gun" is walking down the street. "You want to be able to walk away from a situation like this with your body and your rights intact."

The speaker continues to explain that police officers fit into in four different categories: cops who care and know about the laws; cops who care but are ignorant of the laws; cops who know the laws but do not care; and cops who do not know the laws and do not care. At this point the man tells his audience that it is important not to give cops anything that can generate suspicion. He rhetorically tells the audience that they *can* put up a fight if they really want to, have some of their rights and even person violated and then sue the police officer. "It's trending to put cops in prison" he says, but adds that that certainly would not be the most pleasant route of action.

“Now,” the speaker continues, “how can you tell which kind of cop you’re going to get and what the most appropriate behaviour and response will be? It’s impossible to know so you need to be constantly reading their behaviour; just like they’re reading your behaviour.” He recommends treating police officers like dogs. As the audience laughs he adds that he is serious (he is a police officer himself). “If you saw a Rottweiler sitting on your property looking angry and agitated would you run up and pet it? There’s no law against it but that’s a pretty stupid thing to do.” The presenter adds that the most important thing when dealing with a police officer as a gun owner is to make the cop feel as in control as possible. “You want to make the cop think more and feel less so as to not escalate the situation.” He jokes that since the populace at large does not wear “bad guy” or “good guy” T-shirts, gun owners must make “your cop” know they are a good guy through body language – especially hand gestures. In the scenario of getting pulled over, the presenter suggests turning off one’s car so as to signal to the police officer that there is no intention of fleeing.

At this point someone in the audience suggests going as far as to taking the keys out of your car and placing them on the dashboard. The presenter sighs and explains that while that is not a bad idea, it reminds him of how he pulls people someone over and they “do the whole ‘hands up don’t shoot’ thing.”⁵⁸ The audience laughs. The cop presents a hypothetical yet common situation: a man is pulled over by a police officer. His licence is in the pocket of his pants and at his hip is a handgun. The police officer walks over to the driver’s window and asked for licence and registration. If the driver reaches down to get his wallet the cop may see the gun and think he is reaching for it. How can this situation be proactively deescalated?

⁵⁸ “Hands up, don’t shoot” had been a popular slogan in Black Lives Matter protests after the shooting of the Black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer. The slogan is meant to shed light on the phenomenon of police officers killing unarmed African-Americans. The event in which the joke above was made was disproportionately composed of white attendees.

First, the man should turn his in-car lights on so that the police officer can see clearly into the car, giving the officer a sense of control at the very beginning of their interaction. Once the officer reaches the driver's window, the man should keep his hands on the steering wheel and, speaking casually, say, "Hey man, I don't want to do anything that makes you feel threatened." That way, the cop will know he is complying. The man should then tell the officer his full name, birthday, and address and even offer to give him his car keys when he goes back to confirm his information. If the police officer asks why the man is not giving him his license, the hypothetical man should calmly say that he is *legally* carrying a firearm that is right beside his wallet and that he does not want to reach down and cause any confusion. If the cop insists that the man remove his gun the presenter recommends complying.

A lively discussion arises about whether one should be forced to violate their rights in such a situation. The presenter concedes that the arguments against his suggestions are valid but still not necessarily the best course of action. He reminds the audience that what you say and do in encounters with police encounters can be misinterpreted. "Police just want to go home to their families every night," he reminds the crowd. "And anything that's seen as a threat to that is going to be taken very seriously." At this point someone loudly remarks that this whole hypothetical situation could be avoided if men simply stop keeping their wallets in their back pockets beside their carry guns. The presenter agrees but adds that is what men are doing every day and most will forget not to. "Old habits die hard."

The presenter continues with a new hypothetical situation where you're talking to the police after force has been used.⁵⁹ "When someone breaks into your home, your plans go out the window." He tells the crowd that if they fire a gun in a defensive situation they will quickly

⁵⁹ The presenter took a moment here to apologize in advance to anyone in the room who has already gone through this process as he planned to explain it to the audience as if they had never had to use a gun in a self-defence situation.

develop “tunnel vision” and diminished hearing. Dialing the phone will be impossible. The human mind is in the midst of experiencing the most “primordial sensation of offence and defence.” The presenter tells the crowd that the next time they set an alarm at 3:00am to do a home defence exercise of clearing the house, they should first “take a dump” in their pants before starting because that is what will actually happen.

The audience laughs and the presenter pauses a moment for dramatic effect. He continues: “you’ll have crapped yourself because you weren’t woken up by an alarm but by your daughter screaming in her room. Then you’ll hear shots fired.” Silence from the crowd. “It’s no longer funny is it?” He asks the silent crowd. “I’m sorry, but that’s something you have to face.” He pauses again. “And then the police show up. You’re at your most primal state and the police arrive. Do you have your ‘good guy’ shirt on? No.”

The presenter continues, saying that someone had presumably already called the police and when the police arrive they will not immediately know that you are the home owner. “Who’s the good guy?” He asks. “The guy bleeding or the guy holding the gun?” Here, he pauses and reinforces the sentiment that anyone in such a circumstance should comply with the police no matter how difficult or confusing, even if they want to subdue you. “Does anyone want to be political?” He asks. “Does anyone want to end up fodder for a district attorney?”

The presenter tells the audience that a police officer will take 72 hours after shooting someone before making a public statement in order to ground themselves. But the detectives will insist on a statement from you immediately. “And in the current climate,” he adds, “your act of self-defence is going to come right in the middle of the media and national politics.” He pauses. “Who’s protecting you? And if you don’t have someone then you’re up the creek. And it doesn’t smell good.” The presenter encourages the audience to be as honest as possible with police in

such a situation. He presents the example of a cheating husband that had to protect himself on the way home from an affair with a woman. If the man tells the detectives that he had been having coffee “with a buddy” and they find out he is lying then the man who only protected himself suddenly looks a lot more suspicious. The presenter concludes his presentation by encouraging the audience to purchase this self-defence related insurance.

A few weeks later, at a second US Law Shield information session, a well-dressed lawyer presents similar information as the police officer. He adds, though, that the first thing to do after an attack is to make sure you are safe; that the threat is no longer a threat (which does not necessarily mean dead, he added). Then call 9-1-1. What is most important, the speaker stresses, is to say – before anything else – “I have been the victim of a crime.” That way, the first line that will be written on a police report will be that and not “Hey, I shot a guy.” Afterwards, give enough details to make oneself known to the police: what you are wearing and where in a building you are. This is the crucial time to make yourself look like the “good guy” to the police. Say for example, “I have been the victim of a crime. A burglar broke into my home and I neutralized the threat. I legally own a handgun which I’ve unloaded and have set on the dresser. I’m wearing a purple shirt and am sitting in the upstairs bedroom.” Then hang up. Do not stay on the phone long enough to say anything that can be used against you. Immediately after call your lawyer.

To be ready for a threat, here, means to be ready before, during, and after the threat materializes. The recommendations by the lawyer and police officer about how to make oneself *appear* as a “good guy” in front of the criminal justice system – as well as by the very fact that such an industry of self-defence insurance exists – acknowledges that, for all the ethical labour gun owners may be doing, the dichotomy between a “good guy with a gun” and a “bad guy with

a gun” is not necessarily readily evident. Gun owners do not just work on themselves but also prove their moral worth in encounters like these through their outward appearance and mannerisms – becoming and appearing ethical. The advice given in the summer of 2015 by US Law Shield was taking place amidst national conversations of the disproportionate amount of police brutality against African-American men. The advice given, that a gun owner should casually tell an officer that he⁶⁰ is carrying a gun and therefore cannot reach for his wallet, would most likely be received quite differently by the responding officer if that hypothetical gun owner was not assumed to be white. The police officer presenting at the US Law Shield event – *and* the audience – periodically made passing jokes about the police treatment of African-Americans. The “good” gun owner is taken to be a white man.

Despite the widespread acknowledgement that these self-defence situations are very unlikely, gun owners still build much of their everyday lives around the chance that one may occur, from strategically placing guns around their home to spending their evenings at an information session about whether to buy self-defence insurance. This preoccupation with self-defence moments lends these moments, when they do occur, a life of their own through storytelling where gun owners “collect” and “swap” self-defence stories they have heard of either from other gun owners or online.

Telling Stories, Making Norms

Joining a small procession of armed middle aged men I make my way into a large gun show taking place in Atlanta. I pass the police-run entry tables where gun owners are required to check their ammo, place plastic pins into the barrel of the gun to indicate that it is unloaded, and

⁶⁰ Despite a small number of women in attendance at this event, the hypothetical gun owner in all advice and stories given was always a man.

attach a zip tie on the trigger which renders the gun impossible to fire.⁶¹ I then make my way into an expansive room lined with rectangular tables stacked with used and new firearms, antique guns, gunsmiths, customized range targets, key chains, bronze cleaner, pain relevant, and even homemade honey.

As I began to navigate the maze of booths and independent buyers, sellers, and traders at the first gun show I had ever visited, I came across a table displaying self-described “politically incorrect” T-shirts for sale. The designer and merchant, a proud gun owner, travels in the Georgia area to gun shows selling his T-shirts which display pro-gun, pro-American, and candidly xenophobic messages. I told the vendor I was a researcher from Canada and immediately he recounted a brief story where an older woman living in Atlanta had been taking a shower when a burglar broke into her house. The woman tried wrestling him with the shower curtain but was overpowered. Still naked, she asked the man if she could just go to her bedroom and collect all the valuables for him. He agreed and followed her to the bedroom but instead of getting jewelry she produced a small pistol from her bedside drawer and unloaded a clip into the intruder, killing him. “Who knows what would’ve happened to this woman otherwise,” the T-shirt vendor remarked. “It just goes to show that if you have guns in the hands of law abiding citizens, people will be safer.”

Among gun owners I met everyone had a story: they knew someone who had used a gun in self-defence, a friend of a friend, a family member, or just someone they knew through stories they heard and retold. Whether it was a violent crime that the gun owner intervened in to save themselves or someone else, or if it was a situation in which crime was deterred by a legal gun owner open carrying. The anecdotes are recounted by gun owners as proof that owning and

⁶¹ There is a common pro-gun slogan: “If guns are so dangerous how does anyone get out of a gun show alive?” that I heard regularly in conversations with gun owners. However, at the majority of gun shows, any firearms being carried, sold, or swapped have to be emptied of ammunition and made impossible to use.

carrying firearms can and does save lives. They also work to remind gun owners of the moral virtue of owning a gun, that men and women living all over the country are routinely saving themselves and others from immoral violence. The message conveyed in these stories is that owning a gun becomes an equalizer in an amoral environment where “bad” individuals do not think twice about assaulting a stranger for their purse or wallet.

In a 2015 FOX News opinion piece, former CNN Headline News Anchor and Correspondent, Lynne Russell recounts how, while on a road trip with her husband, an armed man forced his way into their motel room. After acquiring a briefcase Russell hoped the intruder would leave; instead, he opened fire on her naked husband who had just emerged from the shower. Her husband – a member of the US Special Forces – was ready and fatally unloaded his handgun into the assailant. Both Russell and her husband survived (though the husband was hospitalized after receiving five gunshot wounds). In her article detailing the attack, Russell writes that,

The United States of America is a great country. You can debate absolutely anything, whether or not it has merit, and whether or not it's any of your business.

But guns? There's nothing to debate. Throw out all the numbers and expert opinions. I've got your expert right here, and it's called EXPERIENCE (Russell, 8 July, 2015).

Stories about self-defence moments circulate widely both online and offline. Much of the social world that occurs with gun owners happens online, and the online and offline worlds are tightly intermeshed.⁶² For example, gun owners in Georgia regularly buy and sell firearms online. A gun owner will post a picture, description, and price of a firearm for sale on a website like Reddit and then meet another gun owner in convenient location (often a parking lot) to make the sale.

Gun owners use blogs and YouTube channels to learn proper shooting techniques, tips on how to build firearms, and for reviews on new models of firearms. There is a proliferation of

⁶² In fact, the founding members of Georgia Carry first met on a gun forum.

blogs written and read by gun owners that serve as spaces to discuss politics and tactical work, where these self-defence stories are often discussed and shared. Dan Cannon is the founder of *GunsSaveLives.net*: a website which attempts to systematically chronicle as many instances of gun-related self-defence throughout the United States as possible.⁶³ The site offers several interactive features which allow users to view the content filtered based on the state in which the act of self-defence occurred or filtered by the specific type of gun(s) used in the self-defence moment. On the side of the webpage appears a “Self-Defence Counter” tracking the number of self-defence instances that have been chronicled by the site to date. A final way of engaging with the information on the site is through the “Self-Defence Map” which visualizes all recorded instances of self-defence by the site since 2011 spatially through Google Maps, with blue pins where each instance occurred that can be clicked on for more detail.

The details of each story are often simple and straight to the point. They start with a title and a small table detailing the “gun used,” “# of suspects,” “suspects killed,” “source,”⁶⁴ “location,” “shots fired,” “state,” and “archive.” The renditions can range from 100 to 300 words each and often include large amounts of quotations from news sources they have been taken from. A few examples of titles are “GA Woman Kills Would Be Rapist with .22 Pistol” and “Wheelchair Bound US Vet Draws Gun on Suspected Home Invader, Scares Him Off.” These titles give the reader an immediate understanding of the “story” with the content only complimenting it and providing specificity and legitimacy. The site’s Facebook page has (at the time of writing) 268 715 ‘likes’⁶⁵ and stories published on the site are often shared tens of

⁶³ At the time of writing the site had unceremoniously and without explanation been taken down. Luckily I had taken screen shots of each page and their corresponding comments.

⁶⁴ Most sources were local news sites.

⁶⁵ The facebook site is still active but does not contain the archive of self-defence moments. It can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/GunsSaveLives.net>

thousands of times (on Facebook). The comments underneath each story are not moderated and they can generate between zero to several hundred responses.

In chronicling these self-defence moments, the authors are tailoring them to those who are already – at the very least – sympathetic to guns and gun ownership. Each piece is easy and quick to read and has an obvious pro-gun leaning, finishing the piece on the “Wheelchair Bound US Vet” the author mentions that “Once again, another self defense story that probably won’t make it into the statistics or reports on such things because no shots were fired and no one was hurt” (Cannon, 2013, January 24). Such phrasing further reinforces an alleged disconnect between liberal media and ivory tower academics who write about gun ownership and the reality of gun owners’ everyday lives.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau makes the difference between stories and rumors. “Stories differ from *rumors* in that the latter are always injunctions, initiators and results of a levelling of space, creators of common movements that reinforce an order by adding an activity of making people believe things to that of making people do things. Stories diversify, rumors totalize” (1984: 107, emphasis original). Stories are positively constructed to be vehicles or platforms which give rise to change, collaboration, and the creation of meaning in “everyday lives.” Rumors circumscribe that human potential for change and meaning, giving guidance for what *should* be, not what can be. For De Certeau, stories are transformative and are told, challenging and engaging both their audience and the teller of the story. Rumors *spread*, totalizing in the sense that everything else must be in relation to them.

The anthropologist Michael Jackson has celebrated the act of storytelling as a “supplement” to action “when action is impossible or confounded” that restores the “viability” to human relationships (2013: 37). The spreading of rumors, on the other hand, helps create and

solidify social norms held within a community. The narrative moments of self-defence that move through both online and offline gun communities can be considered as existing in-between these conceptual definitions of story and rumor. The stories are individual in that they all occur in different context with different challenges. They may also hold differing levels of personal power if the story happened to a friend or loved one, the storyteller himself, a stranger, or a member of their social community (i.e. a member of Georgia Carry). The stories are still, however, totalizing in the sense that they have the same ends and purpose and everything must be in relation to the understanding that without a gun in the hands of innocent people, innocent people will be killed, robbed, and raped. Once the individualistic flare of the story fades, the moment narratives give way to the effect of a rumor: making people believe that guns are necessary to survive.

The comment sections of these articles have a similar totalizing effect to the rumor. In the comment sections of stories where an assailant was either shot at and survived or fled (and was captured later or who got away), comments abounded asking why the shooter was trying to “save ammo” by not unloading an entire clip or magazine into the criminal. Others wondered openly if the criminal would re-offend, answering their question in the positive, others still would start by saying that “if it had been me” the gun owner would have killed the “thug” or “punk” often because “keeping thugs in jail costs too much money.”

When an article states that the criminal in an encounter was killed, commenters applaud the work of the legal gun owner; some adding that they took another bad guy off the street. Many would say in parody that the killed assailant was “just about to turn his life around” and that it was a shame he was murdered. Other commenters discuss the tactical component of the narrated moments, whether the gun owner acted quickly enough or whether they had the right firearm.

These questions would always hit a peak in articles about women shooters. Commenters were routinely critical of women shooters' aim and often discussed, amongst themselves, the need of bringing women to shooting ranges to work on their accuracy.

These comments become particularly interesting when, periodically, a commenter challenges the good guy/bad guy dichotomy perpetuated by the self-defence moment narratives and subsequent moral norms being propagated. To illustrate this point I have chosen three articles from the *Guns Save Lives* website that each address different topics and include a large quantity of questions as well as a commenter trying to transgress the normative thinking surrounding gun ownership. These three examples are indicative of stories and articles that I read on the site.

Das writes that "Rumor occupies a region of language with the potential to make us experience events, not simply by pointing to them as to something external, but rather by producing them in the very act of telling" (2007: 108). By recounting these self-defence moments, a specific form of cultural knowledge is created which blends fantasy and reality. The actual self-defence moments are transformed into rumors of danger and evil, categorizing humans as ethically simple (either good or bad) and worthy or unworthy of life. Any challenges to the legitimacy of this cultural knowledge is reacted to with great hostility.

In the first article, two middle aged brothers are in a fight. The brother who does not reside at the premise has come, unexpected and drunk, and is attacking his brother, choking him with the intent to kill him (according to the article). The man's son, a fifteen year old boy, takes his father's .22 rifle and kills his uncle, practicing impressive marksmanship in not hitting his father (Cannon, 2014, August 3). The uncle is semi-paralyzed and is in the hospital at the time the article was written. Many of the comments celebrate the boy's great aim and the father's

presumed training of his son in firearm safety and marksmanship. Many others wish more of this youth's generation had the kind of knowledge and respect for guns that the son displayed: only going for the gun when needed and using it flawlessly. Others applaud the fact that the uncle is now dead, or at least no longer part of their society. A commentator emerges and claims that the uncle was his father and condemns the commenters for their vitriol remarks. A commentator quickly challenges the legitimacy of his claimed lineage and says that even if it is his father, his father is a "waste of skin" for being a criminal (figure one).

The second example is, incidentally, the same anecdote that the T-shirt vendor told me and one of the titles already referenced: "GA Woman Kills Would Be Rapist with .22 Pistol."

The writer of this article adds his own insights into the case, explaining that,

The man may have been planning on raping the woman, based on his criminal past. Fortunately the would-be-victim was fast thinking, fast acting and was able to turn the tables on her would be assailant. Even though the suspect was not armed with a firearm, this is clearly a case where a gun was used as an equalizer. A fully grown man with bad intentions could easily overpower an older female and commit deadly physical harm without even using a weapon (Cannon, 2012, May 11).

The specifics of the man's criminal past are left ambiguous but used as proof of his intention to rape the home owner. The post ends on the cautionary side, reminding readers of the asymmetrical physical force between a "fully grown man" and – here – an older woman. But the comment is made in a manner that adds a level of warning: get an equalizer: get a gun.⁶⁶

The comments on this article applaud the woman's quick acting at the moment the assailant came into her home. One woman, though, dared to question why the man was considered a "would-be rapist" without any further evidence. Some commentators answered that

⁶⁶ In his analysis of the NRA's "Armed Citizen" articles which also chronicle self-defence moments throughout the U.S., O'Neill finds that the NRA are very careful in their own retelling of self-defence moments, disproportionately highlighting stories where children, women, persons with disabilities, and the elderly fought off largely anonymous threats with the help of a firearm. According to O'Neill, such careful selection of stories give these stories a biblical nature that retells these self-defence moments through the lens of a David versus Goliath trope (2007:464). But of course, instead of these Davids having a rock, they have a gun.

the “criminal past” related above must refer to being charged with sexual assault prior to this attack. Others, however, were much more hostile, asking the commentator if she would prefer having her children or loved ones raped; asking if the woman should have really waited to find out; and calling her “stupid” and “arrogant.” At least 30 people responded to the woman’s question with anger and retaliation (figure two).

The last example is a story of an off duty National Guard who stops at a hold up at a fast-food restaurant. While outnumbered he is able to “win” against three armed robbers, killing one while the other two flee (Reagan, 2015, February 9).⁶⁷ Many comments abound acknowledging that the three robbers were young African American men (the National Guard is a white man). One commentator mentioned that someone needs to tell everyone in “the hood” that the public is armed and will fight back, others made racist references to the robbers as “Obama’s children.” After a wave of racist language one commenter told the others that they were being racist.

Immediately there was a huge backlash – the others started arguing that this has “nothing to do with race” and recommending him to look at statistics that African-American men are more likely to commit crimes than anyone else. When he responded asking if the commentators had heard of racial profiling in policing, someone countered that there are numerous predominately African-American neighbourhoods where a white person cannot walk through without being mugged yet no white neighbourhoods that would have the same repercussions for African-American pedestrians.⁶⁸

The comments to the three articles provided here show norms being made and reinforced. The moral force behind these self-defence stories are never to be questioned, the only thing that can be questioned is how the moment could have gone smoother, how the individual engaged in

⁶⁷ This article was not written by Dan Cannon but was linked onto the *Guns Save Lives* database. The commentator are the same as in other articles and would have engaged with the article through *GunsSaveLives.net*.

⁶⁸ The killing of Trayvon Martin suggests otherwise.

this moment could have been better prepared either with tactical practice, a better firearm, a better home defence strategy, more ammunition, or more guns. In completely dismissing any commenter who questions the moral importance of the self-defence moment, norms are being established through a spread of quasi-rumors or legends.

Conclusion: The moral absolution of a self-defence moment

In this Chapter I have tried to answer, in the case of gun owners' practices and everyday lives, Brian Massumi's question: "How could the nonexistence of what has not happened be *more* real than what is now observably over and done with?" (2010: 52). How can the potentiality of imagined events create so much concern in one's life that they help guide how one's life is organized? That gun owners mix their own love for guns with concerns for security creates a comfortable and casual way to constantly defend oneself that does not build itself out of fear but on a suspicion that is understood by gun owners as productive, that can be used to shape one's own character based on what one is not. Here, then, gun owners organize much of their time and energy into being ready for a self-defence moment to occur, anywhere and at any time. Stories of these moments existing are actively shared and circulated as a way to reinforce their actuality and the lack of grounded knowledge by those who argue against gun ownership.

The veneration of these stories, coupled with the importance these potential moments are given by gun owners, however, create a moral absolutism when it comes to a self-defence moment where, so long as the gun owner thought their life was in danger, the circumstances surrounding why their lives were in danger become irrelevant. The most poignant example of this moral absolutism in a self-defence moment is the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. Martin, an unarmed African-American teenager, was walking through a suburb

where Zimmerman was conducting a self-appointed community watch. Zimmerman saw Martin and called the police, reporting suspicious activity but then continued to follow him,⁶⁹ even getting out of his car. An altercation occurred between the two of them and Zimmerman produced the handgun he was carrying and fatally shot Martin. Martin would have had no way of discerning that Zimmerman was armed as he was conceal carrying though Zimmerman, of course, knew that no matter what happened in the situation he could use his gun. Zimmerman was originally allowed to leave the scene once the police arrived under the Stand Your Ground law in Florida. Though he was later charged in the crime following fierce public condemnation, Zimmerman was still acquitted.

Among the gun owners I met, some claimed that while Zimmerman certainly could have avoided being in that situation, when he pulled the trigger and killed Martin his life was in danger and therefore he was justified in doing so. These gun owners stated that Zimmerman is probably a “terrible person” but what he did in that moment was morally (and legally) justified because his life was in danger. Others were even more sympathetic to Zimmerman, arguing that he in fact did nothing wrong and everything right: he was protecting his community and was attacked in the process. The emphasis of “anonymous crime” becomes a justification for racial profiling where a Black youth walking through a suburb is assumed to not actually be residing there (and not inhabiting the moral landscapes described in Chapter Two) and so must be in this neighbourhood in order to commit a crime. Because of the emphasis on these self-defence moments, the factors leading up to their actualization become secondary.

⁶⁹ Against the 9-1-1 operator’s request.

The coupling of the importance gun owners place on these self-defence moments and the legality of these moments through Stand Your Ground laws⁷⁰ create a segment of the population who are taken to be expendable: alleged criminals – whether with any actual criminal intent or not – become those whose life can be killed (Agamben, 1998: 72). An alleged criminal’s life is seen as having no worth, their death is merited but without any kind of ritual. While the threat of an anonymous attack is often acknowledged as a “small risk,” this kind of threat is prepared for – to the extent of purchasing special insurance in the case of a self-defence situation. Massumi, writing on the *potential* for threat, argues that “Preemptive action can produce the object toward which its power is applied, and it can do so without contradicting its own logic, and without necessarily undermining its legitimation” (2010: 56). George Zimmerman took preemptive action in considering Trayvon Martin a threat. Zimmerman, an older and larger man carrying a concealed pistol, followed Martin, an unarmed teenager, until an altercation took place between them and Zimmerman could claim that his life was in danger; that the older and bigger man harbouring a concealed gun who had been following a teenager was suddenly about to be a victim. Zimmerman then killed Martin, stopping the “threat.”

That Zimmerman created this threat through his own preemptive action does not delegitimise – for many gun owners – Zimmerman’s role as a “good gun owner” nor does it undermine the logic of defensive gun carry. Because these self-defence moments are so valorized in the everyday lives of gun owners, how they happen or occur is secondary to that they *did* occur and become further evidence for the need to carry firearms and be properly prepared for

⁷⁰ “Stand your ground” laws exist in both Florida and Georgia. The laws make it legal for individuals to use or threaten to use force against someone else if they have “reasonable fear of imminent peril of death or great bodily harm” (Florida Legislature 776.013). Stand Your Ground laws differ from “Castle Laws” where Castle Laws make it legal for a homeowner to use force on anyone who breaks into their own home whereas Stand Your Ground laws are applicable for self-defence situations anywhere in the State – making these self-defence moments perfectly legal. Stories in States which have Castle Laws periodically surface of home owners mistaking a family member coming home late for a burglar and fatally shooting them (cf Cherney, 2015 December 30; Jacobson, 2015, June 6).

these self-defence moments to arise and the consequences they may bring. And as the presenter from US Law Shield told the Georgia Carry information session, if Zimmerman had been insured with the insurance company – fully preparing himself for the self-defence moment to arise – he would not have even had to pay for his legal expenses.

Conclusion

On the second day of Georgia Carry's seventh annual convention I found myself seated beside a man in his mid-50's wearing a generic unbuttoned lab coat that came down to his knees. He and his friend, matching Georgia Carry baseball hats, were discussing the workshops they had attended. After we finished eating I finally posed the question.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm sorry but I have to ask: why are you wearing a lab coat?"

The man smiled and casually pulled open each side of the coat to reveal two pistols holstered just below his underarms. The man in the lab coat explained to me that as he has grown older, he has lost a significant amount of weight which makes conceal carrying at the beltline difficult. Atlanta's summer heat would make wearing a sweater unbearable; the lab coat breathes better.

I imagined this man walking through Atlanta wearing a lab coat in order to conceal the guns he had snugly strapped to either side of him and wondered if bystanders ever took alarm with his appearance or if they just assumed he worked in a hospital. It occurred to me that this man did not see himself as a threat and may even be bemused as to why others could be frightened to know a fellow grocery shopper was wearing a lab coat for the explicit purpose of concealing two pistols.

In the previous chapters I have attempted to show the ways in which gun owners understand their lives as being ethically lived, the moral worldviews this kind of ethics opens up, and how these worldviews become actualized in the everyday lives of gun owners as well as the potential danger this actualization contains. To stash firearms strategically within one's home or to keep multiple guns on one's body with the safety off and a bullet chambered is to be ready for a very specific kind of threat. As described throughout the above chapters, this threat is one of

the total stranger: an anonymous attack prompted purely by greed, lust, or some kind of base wickedness. The prioritization of these threats above all the other calamities that may befall oneself allows for measures that would otherwise seem fantastical (such as wearing a lab coat in order to conceal two pistols while running errands) to be understood not only as a common sense precaution but as an ethical action.

An anthropological attention to the “ordinary ethics” of gun owners is important as it has allowed me to understand how preparing for imagined potential scenarios and moments contribute to what it means to be a good gun owner. That the current Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, has been able to tap into this concern for defense and utilize it to attain unimagined political success shows that the ethics described throughout this thesis are also fundamentally political. Gun owners, in working on themselves, are also creating a political framework for understanding what counts as “suspicious” behaviour, what another human’s life is worth, and the value of violence in controlling human action. In the everyday gestures and practices which make a “good guy” with a gun – whether keeping firearms in readily accessible locations or constantly scanning a locality for a possible threat to spontaneously emerge – gun owners are also creating political realities where certain lives are rendered unworthy of that very life; where otherness needs to be not only defended against but controlled through the spectre and actualization of violence.

Donald Trump has embraced and channeled this defensive violence in his rhetoric and promises as a presidential candidate. As his incendiary remarks continue, so too does his popularity. On June 16, 2015, when Trump announced that he was running for president, he promised to build a “great, great wall” between the United States and Mexico, arguing that America “has no protection” (Time, 2015, June 16). Trump further argued that the Mexicans

entering the U.S. are not “good people”: “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Time, 2015, June 16). Nearing the end of 2015, Trump also called for a “complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” ensuring Americans that, “If I win the election for President, we are going to Make America Great Again” (Trump, 2015, December 7). What begins as ethical reflection and labour become political frameworks for governing and controlling populations. When living a good life is intrinsically tied to being able to defend one’s life, actions that could otherwise appear as fantastical become not just understood as “common-sense” but as morally righteous. And the everyday day actions of the gun owners of this thesis, such as wearing a lab coat to hide two pistols while running errands, provides momentum for the macro-political calls to displace entire populations. To make America “safe” again means to make America “great” again.

A constant concern of mine in doing this research – both the fieldwork and the writing – is whether I have been fair to a group of people who are engaged in and often become representative of the “gun debate.” In this highly polemic space, gun owners, especially the gun owners found in this thesis, are frequently either being denounced or denouncing in a way which fetishizes divisions and makes dialogue difficult (to put it lightly). It was my goal not to denounce a group of people I did not understand but to deconstruct the ways in which they see and inhabit the world around them to better understand that world. In the writing of this thesis, I worried that I would unfairly highlight the stranger or “more intense” aspects of the gun owners I met and simply add to the already loud voices of condemnation.

Throughout my fieldwork I was left with serious moral deliberations and uneasiness as my own vaguely defined sense of ethical action was constantly questioned – often implicitly but other times explicitly. It was, and is, an ethical uneasiness I felt mentally and corporeally. As I learned to shoot a gun myself, the physical manifestation of fear and discomfort was always present. The moment of slowly squeezing down the trigger and waiting for the gun to fire followed by the sudden recoil of the object in my hand, the smell of gunpowder, and the frequent sensation of the still hot bullet casing bouncing off my neck or arm before falling to the ground left my body shaking and feeling distinctly out of place. Similarly, the questions of whether I owned a gun, the occasional offers to loan me a firearm, and the rarer challenges that I did not value my life because I was unwilling to protect it made me question whether perhaps I did not value my own life and made me wonder if my own sense of ethics were naïve and immature; perhaps I was just a sheep waiting obliviously for a wolf. I began to contemplate buying a knife or a bottle of pepper spray. At the time I was living in an extended-stay motel off the highway of Kennesaw, Georgia and followed my neighbours' habit of always keeping their blinds shut and rarely speaking to one another. I became suspicious of fellow pedestrians and spent much of my off time locked in the small, overly air-conditioned room.

Veena Das writes that, “creating a space of possibility for the other is itself a mode of living ethically” (2015: 75). Creating a space of possibility for “the other,” I would argue, implies making oneself vulnerable to the strangeness, beauty, and messiness of human relationships; it has been by making myself vulnerable to what has been unknown or “othered” to me that I have learned the most about what it means to be human. I do not mean to say that a person should regularly put themselves in potentially dangerous situations nor do I mean to gloss over the very real fact that violence is often carried out through racist and misogynistic

justifications which make certain kinds of “openness” also spaces of privilege. What I want to argue is that protecting oneself against a “space of possibility for the other” so intently dislocates both personal and collective spaces for understanding. For me, the gestures of suspicion I began to embody near the end of my fieldwork closed these spaces of possibility and left me feeling isolated and alone in a small motel room.

At the beginning of Carlson’s book, *Citizen-Protectors*, the author recounts a self-defence incident somewhat similar to the account I began this thesis with. Cory, a white man, kills a 19 year old African-American youth after the youth attempted to rob Cory’s corner store with what was later identified as a fake gun. Discussing the incident with Carlson, Cory explains that after about a dozen robberies to his store in Flint, Michigan he had decided to purchase a handgun to protect himself and his property. Elaborating on his choice to buy a gun instead of installing bulletproof glass around the cash register Cory says, “We don’t really want to get glass. It’s so impersonal. Who wants to talk to somebody behind glass? You can’t shake nobody’s hand, you can’t talk to nobody” (2015: 2). Many, if not all, of the gun owners I met in Georgia would sympathize with both Cory’s self-defence as well as his choice to opt for a handgun instead of the bulletproof glass. To opt for the handgun is to engage with life but on the gun owner’s terms, not giving “the other” a space of possibility but rather defending oneself against the space of potentiality an “other” may take. When an engagement with the unknown is mediated through the reassurance of a gun, the complexity of human life is simplified and otherness is understood in terms of potential threat levels, an over simplification which compounds misunderstandings and bears fatal consequences.

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Appendix

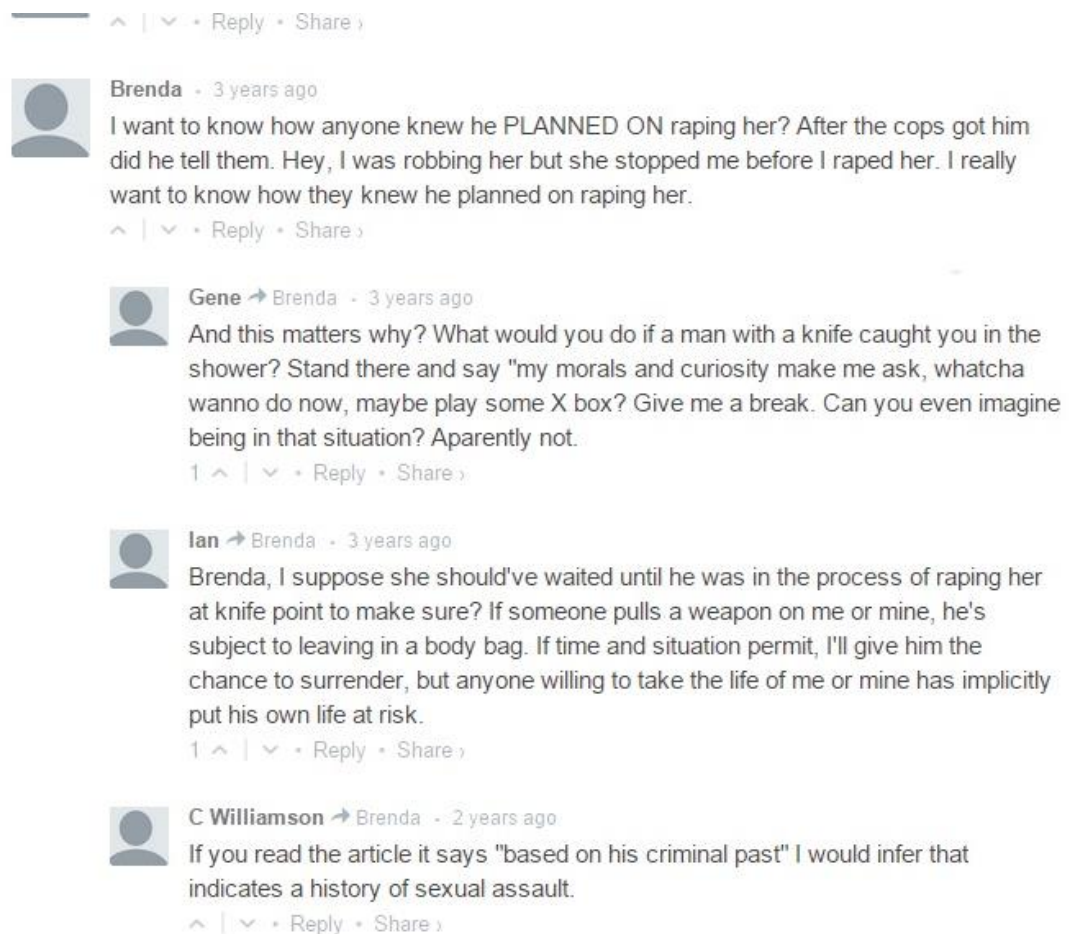
Figure 1




 **chevy** → RM Molon Labe · a year ago
that person that you said is a waste of skin well that person is my daddy. and he is a wonderful bright and good person the article above well that is not a fact. and it upsets me that you opened your mouth and said good shot only 1 hit.? really before you go commenting please know your facts
^ | v · Share ›


 **RM Molon Labe** → chevy · a year ago
I stand by my comments...Maybe you should take this as a learning experience...Don't act like a waste of skin...you won't get SHOT...I seriously doubt ...you are the son of this waste of skin...1 comment, REALLY? Molon Labe
4 ^ | v · Share ›


Figure 2



^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Brenda** · 3 years ago
I want to know how anyone knew he PLANNED ON raping her? After the cops got him did he tell them. Hey, I was robbing her but she stopped me before I raped her. I really want to know how they knew he planned on raping her.
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Gene** → Brenda · 3 years ago
And this matters why? What would you do if a man with a knife caught you in the shower? Stand there and say "my morals and curiosity make me ask, whatcha wanna do now, maybe play some X box? Give me a break. Can you even imagine being in that situation? Aparently not.
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Ian** → Brenda · 3 years ago
Brenda, I suppose she should've waited until he was in the process of raping her at knife point to make sure? If someone pulls a weapon on me or mine, he's subject to leaving in a body bag. If time and situation permit, I'll give him the chance to surrender, but anyone willing to take the life of me or mine has implicitly put his own life at risk.
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


 **C Williamson** → Brenda · 2 years ago
If you read the article it says "based on his criminal past" I would infer that indicates a history of sexual assault.
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Figure 3.

32 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



wing_ding → rust246 · 5 months ago

Guns are very dangerous-to the criminal and to the armed victim. We need more people carrying. You cannot depend upon the police to protect you when the moment arrives.

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



avlisk → rust246 · 5 months ago

They still are saying "There's not one documented case of a gun being used to stop a criminal or a terrorist." It's one of their talking points, and no amount of information, truth, or facts seems to put an end to them saying it. It sure makes me wonder what their real agenda is when truth is a pesky irritant that can't be spoken.

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



mark epperson → avlisk · 5 months ago

Because they won't put these stories on the mainstream news, like CBS,abc,fox,and the many other news outlets that Obama controls.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



avlisk → mark epperson · 5 months ago

Think about a news media that had a different agenda. These Guns Save Lives stories would be on every night. But because they aren't, their agenda is obvious to the observant. It's so nice to be awake and thinking. And free.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



RM Molon Labe · 5 months ago

Suspect hit and ultimately DIED. The other 2 escaped...for now. Good guy with a gun, defeats THREE punks...Thank you for making my day! I keep telling you punks, We the People have had ENOUGH. May that dead punk rest in pieces...the other two will be looking over their shoulders, until caught and tried for murder...Thank you for your service...Twice...Molon Labe

217 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Bob → RM Molon Labe · 5 months ago

the thugs name was probably "Dindu Nuffin"

90 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Dean McClelland → Bob · 5 months ago

or maybe "Heebee Gooboy"

62 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Jason Terry → Bob · 5 months ago

Or more like Hebee Gettin Lifetogever

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Jim Monk → Jason Terry · 5 months ago

I heard they were just accepted at Yale !!LMAO

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Dred Dormammu → Jim Monk · 5 months ago

They'll be writing "music" for Kanye West.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >