

Up in Arms: Gun Imaginaries in Texas

Edited by

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Triggered: The Imaginary Realities of Campus Carry in Texas

Benita Heiskanen

It isn't about the gun itself, but *who* is the owner/holder of such a weapon!

Student testimonial on Campus Carry¹



1 Introduction

Imaginations about gun culture are intrinsically tied to implicit assumptions about social power. On a national scale, debates about gun rights reveal deep-seated assumptions about nationhood, American-ness, and shared identity. On a state level, as in the case of Texas, gun debates assume very specific place-based meanings. Further still, individuals' sense of security and insecurity related to firearms speak to racial/ethnic, gender, and class relations in various spatial settings. In this chapter, I want to call attention to the interrelated ways in which imaginations about guns reveal assumptions about social power relations and how both serve—and are used in service of—the other. I organize my discussion of the imaginary-social power dynamic related to gun debates around a *who/what/where* triad: Who is and who is not a part of shared local and national imaginations of gun carriers? What do images and stories about guns tell us about perceptions of security and insecurity? Where do images and stories about gun culture assume meaning and become relevant? I will probe the debates, imaginations, and tropes surrounding the Senate Bill 11 legislation before its implementation in Texas in August 2016. Drawing on

¹ Testimonial #9, February 20, 2019, notes in possession of author. As a part of the research, the author collected 124 testimonials written by undergraduate students at UT Austin, Austin Community College, and St. Edward's University to reflect on student experiences at different types of educational establishments in Austin.

newspaper reporting from the *Austin American-Statesman*, two town hall-style public debates organized at UT Austin, and internet responses related to them, as well as firsthand experiences from students, faculty, and administrators, my discussion reveals a multiplicity of “imaginary realities” that the parties involved attached to the prospect of Campus Carry implementation.²

When Senate Bill 11, authored by State Senator Brian Birdwell (R-Granbury), was filed in the Texas legislature in January 2015, the talk in Austin was that this time around, it had a good shot at passing. Similar attempts had been made by previous legislatures, but they had all fallen short. SB 11, however, was coauthored by 19 of the Senate’s 20 Republicans, giving it enough support to force a floor vote and leaving the 11 Democrats with few tools to block it.³ If successful, the bill—better known as “Campus Carry”—would permit students, faculty, and staff to carry handguns on public university campuses, yet allow private schools to opt out of the law based on private property rights.⁴ After the filing of the bill hit the news, the UT community, local newspapers, and activist groups tried to make sense of the prospect and ramifications of allowing firearms inside university buildings. While public discourse in the capital city surrounding the Campus Carry legislation was interpreted through diverse ideological lenses, contemplation of the prospect of an armed campus prompted visceral personal reactions in some individuals. The cognitive, sensory, and bodily responses to the prospect of an armed campus were triggered by perceptions of the impact of guns on personal security or insecurity.

The imaginaries of the hypothetical realities of Campus Carry were loaded: on the one hand, they were catalyzed by a whole host of preconceived notions,

2 At the time of the debates over Campus Carry, Senate Bill 342, authored by State Sen. Don Huffines (R-Dallas), advocated for legalizing “Constitutional Carry” (i.e., Open Carry without any permit or training). See, for example, Chuck Lindell, “Hearing Set on Gun Bills,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 10, 2015, A7. As the discussion of Constitutional Carry falls within the parameters of the discussion by Pekka M. Kolehmainen in this volume, I will not treat it here.

3 In comparison to the three previous legislatures, the Senate Republicans modified the rules to require only 19 votes (as opposed to 21) to bring a measure to a floor vote. See Chuck Lindell, “Early Senate Vote OKs Campus Carry Measure,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 19, 2015, A1 and Jonathan Tilove, “Tea Party Hopes Dashed,” *Austin American-Statesman*, May 31, 2015, A1.

4 In 1995, SB 60 allowed Texans to carry firearms contingent upon a safety training course required for a handgun license, but it excluded campus buildings from the law. Up until 2015, Texas law allowed shotguns, rifles, and other long guns to be carried in public, but not handguns. SB 11 sought to allow concealed firearms to be carried on all public college and university campuses. See Nate G. Hummel, “Where Do I Put My Gun? Understanding the Texas Concealed Handgun Law and the Licensed Owner’s Right-To-Carry,” *Texas Tech Administrative Law Journal* 6 (Spring 2005): 139–63.

but on the other hand they hid key consequences brought by the presence of guns in various spatial contexts. Discussions about firearm legislation rarely seem to deal with the function or consequences of firearms—that their purpose is to shoot and kill—or gun violence in society more broadly. Rather, the gun question is frequently used to negotiate various implicit expectations about imaginaries related to “*who* is the owner/holder of such a weapon,” as stated in the epigraph of this chapter. And therein, I would argue, lies its power. In contextualizing the public debates on the Campus Carry legislation, I draw on Charles Taylor’s notion of *social imaginary*, defined as that through which “people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”⁵ Taylor’s approach is particularly relevant for my consideration, as it underscores the ways in which so-called ordinary people imagine their social reality, surroundings, and interactions with others, as well as how such imaginaries are maintained and shared through images and storytelling.⁶ On the face of it, the debates surrounding firearms on campuses have to do with the right to keep and bear firearms for self-protection in shared space. However, disentangling the layers beneath the various imaginaries used by the multiple players involved, we not only encounter a discordant campus community arguing about firearms but also the charged social power relations amplified within the armed campus space.⁷

2 “Hot as the Barrel of a 9mm Glock”: Between the Good Guy and the Bad Guy

In 2015, Texas was looking to become the eighth state to allow some form of gun legislation on campuses. Colorado—the first state to experiment with Campus Carry—was often used as an example to argue for a smooth transition

5 Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 106.

6 Taylor, 106.

7 For a discussion on the spatial aspect of Campus Carry, see Benita Heiskanen, “Un/Seeing Campus Carry: Experiencing Gun Culture in Texas,” *European Journal of American Studies* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2020), <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15817>, accessed December 8, 2020. See also Heiskanen, “Not in My Office: Rights in an Armed Campus Space,” *Journal of American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2021): 252–61, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-american-studies/article/not-in-my-office-rights-in-an-armed-campus-space/2C2EB91FF3CBF0DB297FAFF4140FA931>, accessed May 2, 2021.

to an armed campus.⁸ While the legislation process did not raise heated opposition in Colorado, “passions over a new campus carry law” in Texas were “running as hot as the barrel of a 9mm Glock after target practice,” as the *Austin American-Statesman* put it.⁹ “No one,” pleaded Senator Charles Schwertner (R-Georgetown), “should be forced to surrender their God-given, constitutional right to self-defense just because they set foot on a college campus.”¹⁰ Notwithstanding the support among the Republican majority in the legislature, SB 11 was met with vigorous opposition from law enforcement, university officials, and most of the faculty and students.

The key question posed by the parties involved boiled down to whether guns on campus would reduce or increase safety on campus. Both Austin and UT Austin police chiefs publicly opposed the bill on the grounds that weapons in the “emotionally charged social atmosphere” would increase the potential for violence.¹¹ Chancellor William McRaven of the University of Texas System was quoted in favor of tightening—rather than loosening—gun laws.¹² The *American-Statesman* also took a particularly strong stance against the legislation: “lawmakers should be looking for ways to prevent threatening situations on college premises, not arming more people.”¹³ Urging legislators to leave the decision-making about firearms to the discretion of the leaders of educational institutions, the *American-Statesman* forewarned: “The pursuit of an agenda that is 100 percent ideology-based bodes ill for Texas’ future. True representation means doing what’s in the best interest of the state and listening to the will of all the people.”¹⁴ Even so, as reported in an editorial to the paper, “the Texas Capitol saw a steady march of gun rights bills from the Senate to the House catering to small-but-vocal portions of the electorate, with a disregard for the voices of those that these new laws might affect. Measures for both campus

8 There is some disagreement between scholars whether Colorado or Utah was the first state to pass Campus Carry. A campus in Colorado did allow guns based on the state’s concealed carry legislation in 2003, but Utah was the first state to have a Supreme Court ruling in 2004 that higher education institutions could not ban firearms. Mississippi, Oregon, and Wisconsin passed similar laws in 2011, Kansas in 2013, and Idaho in 2014.

9 Ralph K. M. Haurwitz, “Colorado University Lives with Gun Law,” *Austin American-Statesman*, November 22, 2015, A1.

10 Haurwitz.

11 “Colleges Need Last Say on Campus Carry,” *Austin American-Statesman*, January 29, 2015, A10.

12 Tim Eaton, “Straus Takes Positions at Odds with Patrick,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 12, 2015, A8.

13 Eaton.

14 “Listen to all Texans on Gun Rights Bills,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 20, 2015, A14.

carry and open carry were passed out of the Senate over the objections of law enforcement.”¹⁵

Senator Schwertner objected, claiming that the uproar was much ado about nothing. In his words, the bill was “simply about ensuring that licensed, responsible and law-abiding adults have the right to protect themselves on the campuses of public colleges and universities.”¹⁶ The pro-gun rationale was that an armed campus would be a safe campus, “allowing otherwise helpless students and teachers to face down threats in the classroom or after class while walking home or to their cars.”¹⁷ The presence of concealed handgun license holders, the argument went, would benefit everybody, as gun carriers were in a position to take down a potential shooter; therefore, the passing of Campus Carry would serve as a deterrent against acts of violence. The *American-Statesman*, however, fiercely opposed this viewpoint. Citing the burden the law would impose on UTPD, the campus’s main law enforcement arm, the paper argued that “more guns on campuses would make the job of law enforcement officers more difficult. And the threat of having to identify the ‘good guy’ from the ‘bad’ sets up the makings of potentially deadly errors.”¹⁸ In a similar vein, in a letter to Governor Greg Abbott, Chancellor McRaven of UT Austin made a case against Campus Carry based on the fact that the campus police might have difficulty distinguishing between “the bad actor and persons seeking to defend themselves and others when both have guns drawn.”¹⁹ While the opponents of the legislation were making the case that “stopping a bad guy with a gun requires more than a good guy with a gun” and “requires a lot of well-trained good guys coordinating with each other,” proponents of the law insisted that that “the answer to the gun control debate is not in disarming legal gun owners.”²⁰

The dichotomy between the “good guy” and the “bad guy” with a gun is a fascinating social imaginary that is perpetuated in public discourses about gun rights. The widespread appropriation of the term originated in a statement made by Wayne LaPierre, the Executive President of the NRA, in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in

15 “It’s a Wrap: Editorials for the Week of March 15–21,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 22, 2015, E5.

16 Haurwitz, “Colorado University,” A1.

17 Chuck Lindell, “Open Carry, Campus Carry Bills Move ahead in Senate,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 13, 2015, A1.

18 “Colleges Need.”

19 Ralph K. M. Haurwitz, “UT Leader Opposes Guns on Campus,” *Austin American-Statesman*, January 30, 2015, A14.

20 “It’s a Wrap: Editorials for the Week of Oct. 11–17,” *Austin American-Statesman*, October 18, 2015, E5.

2012. After the tragedy that killed 26 people, most of them children, LaPierre offered a statement to the press, proclaiming that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”²¹ In debates surrounding Campus Carry, “the good guy with a gun” was assumed to be a licensed—and therefore law-abiding—person who, by default, would be a capable force against “bad guys” posing a threat to community safety. The anti-gun activist groups at UT Austin vocally challenged the notion of “the good guy with a gun” with a provocative question about such preconceived identities: “Who is the bad guy with a gun?”

Although the right to keep and bear firearms ought to be applicable to every citizen in principle, the debates surrounding Campus Carry demonstrated that the question of *who* carries firearms was at the crux of the issue. The following excerpt by an African American Texan interviewed by the *American-Statesman* exemplifies the charged issue: “I know that I will never carry a firearm any further than a gun range. I also know that I will tell my daughters to never ride in a car with a firearm, whether the owner is licensed or not. Why? Because the ‘hero’ image in the fight for open carry and gun rights in Texas is a white man in boots, not a black man in a hoodie.”²² A UT professor elaborates on the racial power dynamics further: “We know that black people in this country who have gun rights don’t have the same rights as white people. Ask Philando Castile, who very calmly said, ‘I have a permit. It is in my glove compartment.’ And he was executed in his own car for being a legally permitted gun owner. So, we know there’s complexities for black gun owners.”²³

The “good guy with a gun” as a distinctly white imaginary is rooted in history.²⁴ An interviewee supporting Campus Carry ties views on gun carrying to a racialized issue of social control:

When I look at the long arc of restrictions on firearms possession, it strikes me that gun control, as it’s often called, is really about social con-

21 “NRA: ‘Only Thing That Stops A Bad Guy With A Gun Is A Good Guy With A Gun,’” NPR, December 21, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/12/21/167824766/nra-only-thing-that-stops-a-bad-guy-with-a-gun-is-a-good-guy-with-a-gun>, accessed December 6, 2020.

22 Tara Trower Doolittle, “America Must Emerge from Dallas Police Shooting United,” *Austin American-Statesman*, July 9, 2016, A14.

23 Interview #1 with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 17, 2018, notes in possession of author.

24 The 1792 and 1795 Militia Acts enacted by Congress specified that “free able-bodied white male citizens” alone could carry a gun, signifying that gun ownership, alongside other civic freedoms, was a racialized matter. See also Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2018), which links gun ownership to settler colonialism, capitalism, and racial relations.

trol. And gun control measures... In this country, you go all the way back to colonial times, when they start out restricting access to firearms. You couldn't trade firearms to Native Americans. Indentured servants and slaves weren't supposed to have access to firearms. In the Reconstruction era, again, the Southern states immediately tried to pass laws restricting access to firearms by non-whites.²⁵

While imaginaries of a white man, standing four-square on his land with a rifle in his hand, protecting his country and property, became widespread in the national mythos and cultural representations of the United States, this source also makes the case that because of the troubled racial past of the country, guns should be made available to all:

If you look at the majority of concealed carriers, it's white males, right? Why is that? It's not like African Americans don't have a need to carry concealed or don't have a firearms culture. It costs a lot of money. It's money and time. For the kind of populations that are aggregated lower on the socioeconomic scale, the argument that I would make is, really you are impinging on people's ability to exercise this right to self-defense by making them cough up all this money and go through all this stuff to carry. That works great for some suburban guy who has a stable job and everything. For someone who lives in a rough part of Houston, they may just wind up carrying illegally because they can't afford to go through all that stuff. So again, I think that ... it democratizes it. It makes it more available to more people.²⁶

The imaginary here is paradoxical, for while it ostensibly calls for "democratizing" social power, embedded in it are a set of stereotypical assumptions. Not only are white people envisioned as being comfortably ensconced in suburbia, enjoying the fruits of a socioeconomic status that allows for gun carrying, but there is an implicit assumption that a black man would by default be stuck in a "rough part of Houston" and, therefore, predisposed to acquiring firearms unlawfully.

When on August 1, 1966, UT Austin became the site of the first mass-scale college shooting, leaving 14 dead and dozens injured, one explanation for the shooter's ability to move ahead with his plan unnoticed was, according

25 Interview #2 with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 17, 2018, notes in possession of author.

26 April 17, 2018, interview #2.

to author Gary Lavergne, that he was a “blond, blue-eyed, all-American boy.”²⁷ Charles Whitman, a 25-year-old student and former Marine, managed to haul a sack full of firearms to the University Tower, from which he fired for 96 minutes down on the main mall of the campus and its environs.²⁸ A graduate student interviewed for this research explains the intersecting social power dynamic further: “There’s such a racial and class issue with gun ownership that if you look like him, then people give you more credit and are more willing to let you be the good guy with the gun than a black person, essentially.”²⁹ In *Good Guys with Guns*, Angela Stroud makes the point that “the image of the ideal gun user that is constructed by the National Rifle Association (NRA) emerges alongside controlling images of black masculinity that frame black males as ‘threats to white society.’”³⁰ Even though the “good guy with a gun” is perpetuated as a white imaginary, according to statistics, 55 percent of school shootings from 1982 to 2020 were carried out by white men. Comparatively, African Americans constituted 18 percent, Latinos 10 percent, Asian Americans 8 percent, and Native Americans 3 percent; 5 percent were listed as “other” and 6 percent as “unknown.”³¹ Based on this data, associations of whiteness with the “good guy with a gun” imaginary are just that—imagined constructs that, although widespread, have little bearing on reality. Even so, “like all binary constructs,” Stroud aptly points out, “those who see themselves as good guys rely on bad guys to make sense of themselves; to that extent good guys need the racialized and classed specter of the bad guys.”³²

In the case of SB 11, then, an ostensible debate about “licensed, responsible and law-abiding adults” carrying guns on campus turned explicitly into a racialized, gendered, and class-based argument. The more heated the discussion became, the more the question of social power was linked to gun carrying. As a UT faculty member interviewed for this research put it:

27 Michael Barnes, “Sniper Attack Chronieler Finds Story Still ‘Resilient,’” *Austin American-Statesman*, July 10, 2016, E1.

28 For a detailed study of the Tower shooting, see Gary Lavergne, *Sniper in the Tower: The Charles Whitman Murders* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997).

29 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 25, 2018, notes in possession of author.

30 Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 84.

31 “Mass Shootings in the U.S. by Shooter’s Race/Ethnicity as of Feb 2020,” Statista Research Department, November 9, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-s-race/>, accessed December 6, 2020.

32 Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 110.

When we started talking about things like the connection between guns and white supremacy or the increased dangers that many people of sexual and racial minorities felt, that they were multiplied for them, we got a lot of pushback, even from our own people... But my colleagues who are people of color got death threats. So, you know, this is a racial issue.³³

Responses to the legislation were also split along racial/ethnic lines. According to a poll of Austinites on the gun issue, 79 percent of African American and 66 percent of Latino respondents opposed SB 11, while 49 percent of Anglos were against it.³⁴ At UT, where the majority of students opposed SB 11, a survey conducted for this study had 88 percent of African American, 77 percent of Latinos, and 66 percent of white students opposing the legislation.³⁵ At the height of the debates surrounding SB 11 in 2015, 71 graduate students working as teaching assistants signed a petition against the implementation of the bill, arguing that the presence of firearms would hinder classroom discussions on “institutional racism, prejudice and violence toward non-white bodies in recent U.S. and global history.”³⁶ In the appeals of the faculty against SB 11, African and African Diaspora Studies specifically insisted on writing their own petition because “they felt that they had different issues than the white community had at UT.”³⁷

Groups advocating for and against the legislation resorted to the issue of social power as a key strategy for argumentation. In addition to using race to make a case against the bill, there were African Americans, both men and women, who argued for their unequivocal right to defend themselves against crime, echoing the viewpoint that SB 11 served as an equalizer for people of color. In a public debate, a UT faculty member opposing the legislation took issue with such a position, invoking her own Jewish background:

33 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, March 27, 2018, notes in possession of author.

34 Marlon Sorto, “Campus Carry Opposition Varies by Race, Ethnicity,” *Austin American-Statesman*, August 7, 2016, B2. For the entire report, see Richa Gupta, “Fall 2016 & Spring 2017 IUPRA Poll Criminal Justice Report,” Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis, The University of Texas at Austin, <https://utexas.app.box.com/v/cj-iupra-poll-16-17>, accessed December 12, 2020.

35 John Morton Center for North American Studies, “UT Austin Student Survey on the Campus Carry Law,” 2019.

36 Ralph K. M. Haurwitz, “UT Grad Students Petition for Ban on Classroom Guns,” *Austin American-Statesman*, December 3, 2015, B3.

37 March 27, 2018 interview.

He basically kept using his own position as an African American male to say “I as a potentially targeted minority should be able to own a gun to defend myself.” ... So what I did, which I had absolutely not planned to do and had not done publicly anywhere else, I was like, “Look, if we are going to do that, I come from a family of Holocaust survivors. My mother thinks it is absolutely mortifying that I teach at a university where guns can be carried and that her grandson is at a university where guns can be carried.”³⁸

Weighing in on the pros and cons of the Campus Carry legislation brought up broader questions about social organization in U.S. society and the differentiation of members of the campus community in particular. The interviewees cited here respond to stories that they are accustomed to hearing about guns and gun carrying. The powerful reactions are prompted precisely by the question of *who* is assumed to carry guns and the perceptions attached to the ramifications of gun carrying.

While the rhetoric of the pro-gun groups depicts individual gun carrying as leveling the playing field for minorities and people of color, the debates over SB 11 reveal the intrinsically hierarchical understanding of social order on campus. Here I return to Charles Taylor’s notion of people “imagining” their social existence together in light of the notions and images underlying people’s expectations:

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice.³⁹

Even if guns are offered as a solution for the imbalance in existing social hierarchies, the examples cited in this discussion suggest that they deepen the divides between individuals and members of the community. Moreover, the visceral reactions resulting from the prospect of an armed campus point to the cognitive, sensory, and bodily aspects that interviewees view as part of their perceptions of personal security or insecurity. Ultimately, the penetration of guns into the educational context reveals an intrinsic conflict in the ways

38 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 24, 2020, notes in possession of author.

39 Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” 106.

in which individuals understand their expectations, ideals, and roles in the shared space of a publicly funded university and their maneuvering within it. Whereas the dichotomy between the “good guy” and the “bad guy” with a gun played out as a debate primarily about imaginaries of racialized men, women were also central to the argumentation and rhetoric of both groups promoting and opposing SB 11.

3 “Hook ‘Em, Don’t Shoot ‘Em!”: The Right to Bear and/or Bare Arms

One of the principal arguments made by the groups advocating for SB 11 was that, in addition to minorities, guns would keep women safe. An interviewee at UT who was involved in the debates on campus explains the gendered rationale of the groups advocating for SB 11:

Suppose you’ve got some young woman. I don’t know why they [pro-gun advocates] picked a nursing student. She has a class at night, so she’s leaving class at 8:30 at night. Parking on campus is terrible, so she has to walk blocks and blocks and blocks just to get to her car. Why shouldn’t she be allowed to carry a concealed handgun? That’s what makes her feel safer. Why shouldn’t she be able to do that while she’s off-campus? If she can’t have the concealed handgun on campus, then she can’t have it off-campus.⁴⁰

As per the pro-gun viewpoint, women with a concealed carry license would not need to depend on the protection of a good guy with a gun, since they could take charge of their own security. Such thinking was not specific to the Campus Carry legislation. As an interviewee for this research explains, there is a distinct history of women and guns in Texas, evidenced by the following anecdote: “My wife, who is a fifth-generation Texan—when she came to UT in the 1980s, her friends from Midland High School in West Texas were given purse-sized guns by their grandmothers. You know, ‘You are going to the big city now. You’ve got to protect yourself.’”⁴¹ The point here is that the physical presence of guns on campuses per se is not a novel issue; rather, the novel aspect of the debate is over whether “they belong here or not from the point of

40 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 20, 2018, notes in possession of author.

41 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 27, 2018, notes in possession of author.

view of the institution itself... That, I think, is a huge cultural change, because the University has been and needs to be a place that's different from other places in Texas."⁴² As in the previous section, where gun discourses were conflated with racial/ethnic identity formation, this gender discussion brings to light negotiations of notions of manhood and womanhood.

Yet, even as the presented available choices were "that you can only be safe with a gun or you need to be protected by a good guy with a gun," various groups of activist women on and off campus pushed beyond the good guy-bad guy dichotomy.⁴³ While contextualizing their opposition against guns as a feminist issue, faculty activists particularly linked debates on SB 11 to broader issues about violence in society:

I think as feminists we have a context for understanding the social and political dimension of violence and its systematic nature, that this kind of slots into. We do see gun violence as part of a bigger picture of oppression and denial of rights that's backed by violence that we call patriarchy. And I think many, many women have been victims of violence, and so we understand that this is not something that will never happen. This is something that has already happened and something that we already have a vocabulary for contesting and a personal stake in, trying to minimize or push back against it.⁴⁴

Indeed, the most vocal opposition to SB 11 came from various activist groups of women, both on and off campus. The activist groups resorted to a range of verbal and visual statements that called into question the arguments for allowing guns on campus. Whereas the pro-gun point was that guns have been allowed on campus grounds—but not inside buildings—since 1995, and that people would soon get used to guns in the classroom, the women specifically fought against the "normalization of loaded lethal weapons in the classroom."⁴⁵

Gun-Free UT, the largest antigun activist group on campus, launched a grass-roots visual campaign centered around bright orange-colored "GUN-FREE UT" signs and "ARMED WITH REASON" graphics on campus. The choice of color is significant, as UT's official color is burnt orange, only a shade different from the bright orange shirts worn by the activists. A founding member of the group explains the rationale as follows:

42 April 27, 2018 interview.

43 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 17, 2018, notes in possession of author.

44 April 27, 2018 interview.

45 April 17, 2018 interview.

You know, our Gun-Free UT T-shirts, they say “Armed with Reason” on the back. That’s because we actually do research and know the data, and we know that if there’s a gun in a situation, the chances that a woman will be harmed or injured are much greater than if there is not a gun in the situation. There are many, much more effective ways of protecting yourself from gun violence than arming yourself. When there are more guns, there are more gun injuries and more gun deaths.⁴⁶

Gun-Free UT began as an ad hoc organization that was meant to serve as a platform for faculty dissent: “What if we just have a very simple rally, like on the first day of class? Just so that we have said, ‘No, we don’t agree to this. We don’t consent to this. This is happening against our objections.’ So, I really had in mind just one event.”⁴⁷ Later on, the group formally organized as an online and grassroots movement to “educate the community about the realities of gun violence and gun safety in the hopes of overturning SB 11 and all other laws that permit weapons on campus.”⁴⁸ Comprising UT faculty, staff, students, alumni, and family, the group modified the UT sports team mascot, the Texas Longhorn Bevo’s playful slogan—“Hook ’em Horns” or just “Hook ’em”—into “Hook ’em, don’t shoot ’em!”⁴⁹

Another example of wordplay by the anti-gun activists involved moving the letters in the expression “right to *bear* arms” of the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to turn it into “the right to *bare* arms.” The slogan was often accompanied by images resembling a modern-day Rosie the Riveter with bulging arm muscles, evoking women’s physical prowess (see Figure 5.1 below).⁵⁰ The juxtaposing of “bear” and “bare” exemplified the way in which guns, as the editors of *The Lives of Guns* point out, “connect the private sphere of the

46 April 27, 2018 interview.

47 April 27, 2018 interview.

48 See Gun Free UT, “Who We Are: Gun Free UT – Pushing Back against Campus Carry,” <https://gunfreeut.org/who-we-are/>, accessed December 12, 2020. The activism of Gun-Free UT was inspired by a national organization, The Campaign to Keep Guns off Campus, <http://keepgunsoffcampus.org/>.

49 Bevo’s home turf, the Texas Memorial Stadium with a seating capacity of over 100,000, brings together Longhorn fans from different walks of life and ends of the political spectrum for a common cause for the duration of a sporting event. In public debates about SB 11, most parties agreed that guns do not belong at sporting events and should not be brought to the premises of the stadium while games are in progress.

50 Rosie the Riveter is a media and cultural icon associated with women workers during World War II. Represented in a popular poster with her arm raised in strength, she stands for women’s independence.

individual's body to the political sphere of collective friends and enemies."⁵¹ Even as the broad discussion of Campus Carry revolved around the pairing of the "good guy" and the "bad guy" with a gun, underscoring firearms as an embodiment of masculinity,⁵² in these images women's muscular strength has liberating potential rarely seen outside of sporting contexts. Indeed, Angela Stroud discusses the ways in which women are habitually socialized into seeing themselves as victims.⁵³ To this mentality a faculty activist responds: "Whether or not you've personally been victimized, walking around as a woman in this culture you are constantly on your guard. I think that's what we say no to. We don't want more of that. We want less of that."⁵⁴ Thus, contestations surrounding the SB 11 legislation were tightly connected to questions of women's agency in broader societal affairs.

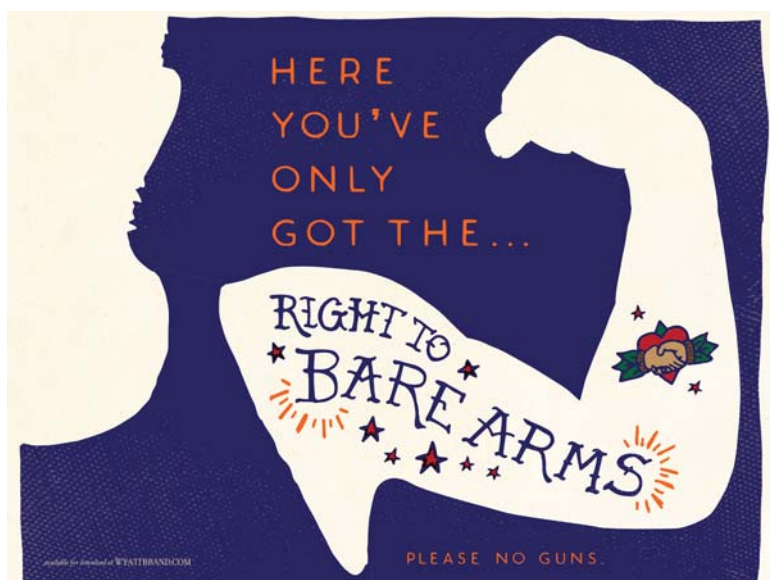


FIGURE 5.1 "The Right to Bare Arms"

The "right to bare arms" trope effectively enabled the activist women to reclaim the discursive space surrounding the Campus Carry bill: in such

51 Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat, eds., *The Lives of Guns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

52 For a discussion of gun owners' corporeal relationships with their weapons, see Charles Fruehling Springwood, "Gun Concealment, Display, and Other Magical Habits of the Body," *Critique of Anthropology* 34, no. 4 (2014): 450–71.

53 Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, especially Chapter 3.

54 April 27, 2018 interview.

anti-gun visual statements, the women also displayed an alternative imaginary of womanhood.⁵⁵ By highlighting women's physical strength, the images promoted women's agency in taking a stand on the Campus Carry bill.

Alongside striking imagery, the Gun-Free UT activists advanced their agenda by organizing a series of workshops dealing with de facto safety issues on campus. In what they referred to as a "Peace Zone," the group organized voluntary self-defense and de-escalation training for personal safety. "We have never had any training from the University for dealing with these issues in the classroom, except for how to comply with the law," a faculty member recalls, "So, Gun-Free UT really stepped into that chasm, where the University was hoping it would all go away."⁵⁶ The attitude among the UT leadership, as experienced by the woman faculty member, was "You'll calm down, don't worry. You're a little hysterical right now, but you'll be okay."⁵⁷ Individual experiences depended on where one worked, though, as revealed by the following staff member's account: "Our dean was very conciliatory. I wrote him an email and said, 'Here's what we need to do. I want a walk-through. I want UTPD to come do a walk-through of our offices to tell us what could be done to improve safety.' I wanted trauma first-aid kits for all the offices ... and we got our first-aid supplies."⁵⁸ The pro-gun advocates responded to the growing demands and concerns raised by the women with a retort that "The Bill of Rights is a bill of *rights*; not a bill of needs,"⁵⁹ implicitly questioning the legitimacy of the claims.

The anti-gun women activists on campus stepped up their argument further by calling attention to the intersection of gun violence and domestic violence, sexual assault, and rape. This linkage came to be heavily criticized by the pro-Campus Carry contingency:

I just think that's remarkable, given this is a university where you have social scientists and people who are interested in working out problems from a basis of factual information and sound reasoning, that it would be met with such an emotional response is the way that I saw it... Some of this stuff got really far-fetched. They were trying to link concealed carry

55 A similar argument can be made about the student group "Cocks Not Glocks," discussed by Mila Seppälä in this volume.

56 April 27, 2018 interview.

57 April 27, 2018 interview.

58 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 9, 2018, notes in possession of author.

59 See, for example, Open Carry Texas, "Moms Demand Someone Tell Them What To Think," YouTube video, 10:42, May 11, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLGKzCFB0nU>, accessed December 14, 2020.

to violence against women—which is interesting, considering that a lot of women rely upon concealed carry for self-defense.⁶⁰

There was also much stronger backlash, in which invocations of physical and sexual violence were used, both online and at activist events, to argue for the necessity of guns. Individual activists became targets of harassment, too:

I had to change the locks on my door twice. I currently have a restraining order. I still have one guy on Instagram who has created an account just to follow me, and he writes, “This Jewess needs to go to hell.” Like half of them are about me being a woman and half are [about me] being a Jew.⁶¹

A member of the teaching staff describes being a target of violent innuendo that was too subtle to prompt action by law enforcement, yet forceful enough to have insidious psychological consequences: “There are some people who, I think, could fairly be called extremists in their perspective on gun rights, who have expressed hostility toward me. [Law enforcement deem it] not actionable. They don’t say, ‘I am going to kill you.’ They say things like, ‘Someone should kill you.’”⁶² As discussed by Juha A. Vuori in this volume, one gun rights group went so far as to stage a mock mass shooting, using the UT Austin campus as a backdrop, in an effort to convey the following message: “We want criminals to fear the public being armed. An armed society is a polite society.”⁶³ Although the demonstrators claimed to use cardboard guns and fake blood for their demonstration, some eyewitnesses were convinced that real guns were also present.

Meanwhile off campus, the anti-gun groups found a steadfast ally in local and national advocates, such as Everytown for Gun Safety and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. A member of the Texas chapter of Moms Demand Action described the attempts to restrict gun legislation as “an alarming show of politicking that caters to a gun lobby agenda rather than listening to the majority of Texans.”⁶⁴ The off-campus groups bankrolled a series

60 April 17, 2018 interview.

61 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 4, 2018, notes in possession of author.

62 Interview with author, University of Texas at Austin, April 23, 2018, notes in possession of author.

63 Asher Price, “Mock Mass Shooting Planned,” *Austin American-Statesman*, December 10, 2015, A1.

64 Chuck Lindell, “Open Carry Gun Bill Sent to a Welcoming Abbott,” *Austin American-Statesman*, May 30, 2015, A10.

of ads that aired in Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, as well as on Facebook and Twitter. The 30-second ads were meant to appeal to people's commonsense: "It doesn't take a genius to know that guns don't belong in college classrooms, dorm rooms, football stadiums or frat parties."⁶⁵ Akin to the anti-gun activists at UT, Moms Demand Action argued that guns add an element of danger to an already stressful college life. Appealing to local sensibilities toward the Lone Star State, one ad pleaded: "72% of Texans agree. But Texas politicians would force colleges to allow guns in those places. Don't mess with common sense. Tell your legislators. Texas is better than this."⁶⁶ Despite all this, however, the women activists were facing a formidable, well-funded, and relentless opposition, with the symbolic arsenal of the entire U.S. gun lobby directed against them.

One of the wins of the Gun-Free UT movement, ultimately, was to connect the debates beyond the spatial context of the campus space to broader questions of violence in society. Beyond the *who* question that the discussion largely revolved around, the groups opposing guns were able to underscore also *what* guns are actually meant to do. As a faculty activist puts it:

I think that probably the main success is in the long term of showing to the city and the state and the country that we are not this mute, compliant group of people who are willing to just sort of take this lying down. Even though we weren't able to overturn it or even put into place an opt-out provision to let UT opt out of the law, like the private schools are [doing], I think that probably the biggest success is a signal.⁶⁷

By holding vigils at the Martin Luther King, Jr. statue on campus to commemorate victims of gun violence throughout the United States, the activist groups made the gun rights restriction issue relevant on a national scale beyond UT:

What I think has happened with guns is, gun advocates and gun marketers have colonized more and more and more of the space in civil society to the point where now I have a gun pressed up against my face in my class. So, we just have to reclaim that space for common sense, for peace,

65 Chuck Lindell, "Groups to Use TV, Internet Ads to Fight Campus Carry," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 9, 2015, A9.

66 Everytown for Gun Safety, "Guns on Texas Campuses," YouTube video, 0:30, May 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RouDUpoTzOM>, accessed December 13, 2020.

67 April 25, 2018 interview.

for safety, and for mutual respectful engagement that's not backed by violence.⁶⁸

Yet, the fundamental clash between the groups supporting and opposing the legislation was a philosophical one: while the pro-gun groups viewed violence as acts performed by an identifiable agent, the anti-gun groups emphasized what Slavoj Žižek describes as “systemic violence,” subtle forms of coercion that sustain “relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.”⁶⁹ As an irreconcilable difference in delineating subjective and systemic violence, the groups promoting and opposing Campus Carry were not in a position to even begin to see eye-to-eye.

4 “A Gun Would Not Be the Most Reckless Decision I Could Make”: Beyond Black and White Imaginaries

My focus on the debates surrounding the Campus Carry legislation before its implementation has underscored the ways in which the local communities on and off campus imagined an armed campus before it became a reality, simultaneously revealing implicit assumptions about social power in Texas. I will conclude by reflecting on the *who/what/where* triad and the key questions posed at the outset of my discussion. My conclusions suggest that the imaginaries of who is and who is not a part of shared local and national imaginaries of gun carriers are, albeit deep-seated, never clear-cut but strongly dependent on the specific contexts of the debates. The imaginaries of Campus Carry before the law actually went into effect reveal the conspicuous ways in which the racialized, gendered, and class-based individuals were connected with threats or vulnerability by groups taking a stance on the legislation. Notwithstanding this surface-level dichotomy, activists also resorted to seemingly paradoxical statements—ostensibly to benefit groups considered to be in vulnerable positions—for strategic purposes. Consequently, even though the division between the pro- and anti-gun sides may have initially seemed to involve unambiguous either/or issues, a closer examination reveals grey areas. Specifically taking into account existing social power relations in light of the troubled history of the nation within particular spatial contexts, I will close this chapter by turning to the ways in which some of those complexities emerged in conversations with the sources.

68 April 27, 2018 interview.

69 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 8.

Even though many of the interviewees for this research were of the opinion before the law's implementation that Campus Carry would present a particularly strong threat to minority groups on campus, discussions of the broader debate of whether the law should be repealed bring up multiple nuances embedded in the *who/what/where* triad. Consider, for example, the following viewpoints, which call attention to the complexity of the gun question beyond an either/or delineation. Complicating the left-right ideological division of the pro- and anti-gun groups, a graduate student and vocal opponent of Campus Carry takes her in-group to task: "A lot of people to the left, especially at that point [when the debates were strong], they don't have much of an argument [other] than 'Guns are bad. Let's ban all guns. I saw some legitimacy in having rifles for hunting. Like, is it legit to use a legitimate thing?'"⁷⁰ Similarly, a member of the teaching staff opposing Campus Carry sheds light on his experience with guns beyond the university:

I'm not uncomfortable with guns in some circumstances. I own some firearms. I come from a family that has owned firearms for generations, but I've never had the desire to bring a gun to campus. And I have some discomfort with the notion that there are people in the campus community that might be carrying firearms.⁷¹

Moreover, several interviewees who positioned themselves as being against Campus Carry reveal that they were either former or current members of the NRA. In the words of a student activist:

It's because I do believe shooting guns is fun, and I understand the mindset behind it. Especially because I'm somebody that does like to look at both sides. I think if you stay in one side, then your argument isn't as strong and, two, you don't really know what you are arguing. So, I became a member because I constantly criticize the NRA and I constantly criticize the pro-gun movement.⁷²

Analogously, in discussing the social power aspect of the *who* question beyond the spatial context of the campus, one begins to see nuances beyond the black-white dichotomy, as in the following reflection by an African American faculty member at UT Austin who was in opposition to the Campus Carry legislation:

⁷⁰ April 25, 2018 interview.

⁷¹ April 23, 2018 interview.

⁷² April 17, 2018 interview #2.

As a black person in this country, might there be periods during which I would want to have a gun? ... I would never want one in my household, but I wouldn't want to rule [it] out... I think I've seen enough of dystopia in America in the twenty-first century that, I don't know, there might be a point in time where having a gun would not be the most reckless decision I could make.⁷³

Complicating the *who* question beyond the educational context of the university and in light of twenty-first century gun imaginaries as dystopic, the interviewee here underscores the grey areas that come up in the pros and cons of the gun debates, which are contingent upon the specific historical contexts within which they are discussed. In turn, an undergraduate student opposing Campus Carry brought up the manner in which *class* could be used to make an argument to support gun carrying: "I consider myself to be fairly progressive and farther to the left than most people I know. But even I acknowledge cases to be made for civilians to own and operate guns. How else can the working class compete in the revolution?"⁷⁴ During the fieldwork conducted for this research, other students made similar arguments, going as far back as the Revolutionary War to justify carrying as the ultimate means for individuals to protect themselves against a tyrannical government.

An underlying ideological question that surfaced in discussions with the research participants—be they pro- or anti-gun—concerns *what* they consider as being central to imaginaries of security and insecurity regarding Campus Carry. Across the spectrum, the question boils down to individual versus collective rights, at both the level of the state and the federal government. Irrespective of whether guns are viewed as a threat or means of protection—and whatever cognitive, sensory, and bodily responses they may trigger—the issue at stake is whether the individual is to be in charge of their self-protection. In addition, there are multiple intersectional questions that complicate individual responses to questions of in/security. One aspect frequently brought up by students, adjunct faculty, and staff is the question of *rank*. The possibility to take issue with university policy is contingent upon one's position within the overarching social hierarchy, as evidenced in the following viewpoint:

The faculty argument has been about being able to have free and open discussion in the classroom without the threat of deadly violence. For staff, it's a slightly different issue. It's about safety in our workplace. It's very often now about dealing with students who are upset and having

73 April 17, 2018 interview #1.

74 Testimonial #3, February 14, 2019, notes in possession of author.

trouble controlling their emotions, having access to deadly weapons in our workspaces, having co-workers who may not have good anger management, who have access to deadly weapons. So, those are different issues. I mean, faculty face those to some extent but they are primarily concerned with the pedagogical impact of Campus Carry.⁷⁵

A senior faculty member underscores generational experiences and shared sociohistorical events as related to collective issues of in/security:

The generation before me was duck and cover in the atomic bomb scare and then the generation after me has been in school shooting drills and I feel like my generation has a responsibility to fight for a gun-free education and the kind of educational comfort and safety that I experienced as a student of public schools in this country... I think it's obscene that children are being encouraged to buy Kevlar sleeping mats and backpacks with Kevlar in them. It's just horrifying to me that they're taught how to respond to an active shooter.⁷⁶

Finally, the *where* aspect of my examination of the social imaginary-social power dynamic related to gun debates is centered on the multiple spatial aspects of the armed campus. Although imaginaries of guns are pervasive in Texas history, culture, and mythology, as pointed out in the chapter by Laura Hernández-Ehrisman in this volume, it is largely because of the educational context that the gun question galvanized various groups of people to take a vocal stand on the imaginary ramifications of Campus Carry in unprecedented ways. Although mass shootings in different types of educational establishments in the United States are not uncommon occurrences, on an everyday level they are classified as out of the ordinary, rather than likely. As a UT faculty member put it, "high-risk, low-probability events, who thinks about them, right? Until there's an earthquake or, you know, an airplane crash or whatever. People don't think about it, and they are right."⁷⁷ Even though UT Austin became infamous for the Tower shooting and the campus has sporadically had other deadly incidents, the fact that mass shootings do not take place daily turns them into "low-probability" occurrences.

Even as mass shootings *as* imaginaries get downplayed in the *where* of the campus context, the interviewees for this research recall minor incidents of violence that had a chilling effect on the campus community, even without

75 April 9, 2018 interview.

76 April 17, 2018 interview #1.

77 April 4, 2018 interview.

mass casualties. Such an event, for example, occurred on September 28, 2010, when a 19-year-old sophomore brought an AK-47 rifle to the Perry-Castañeda Library and killed himself.⁷⁸ The incident, even if not deadly to others, was an eerie reminder of the UT Tower shooting almost a half a century earlier. Another event that shook the community was the murder of an 18-year-old freshman woman, whose body was found in a creek on campus on April 5, 2016.⁷⁹ Again, while not a mass casualty incident, it served as a reminder of the implicit reality of violence, which both groups—advocating or opposing gun carrying—appropriated for the purposes of their own argumentation. Furthermore, incidents of gun violence at other educational establishments in the United States while the debates were going on prompted reflections on the issue of the growing number of school shootings in the twenty-first century. In the words of the *American-Statesman*, “that kind of killing and the communal grief that follows has become an awful routine. Seven of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history have occurred in the past 10 years, as the number of mass shootings as defined by the FBI has also risen sharply.”⁸⁰

The imaginaries of gun violence discussed in this chapter reveal the ways in which firearms are frequently conflated with issues of social power relations. The hypothetical realities of SB 11 triggered a range of *who/what/where* imaginaries, exposing dreams, fears, and hopes that point to various unresolved issues and hierarchies that the community continues to grapple with. The cognitive, sensory, and bodily responses to the prospect of an armed campus in Texas were triggered more often by *who* the perceived carrier of a gun might be, resulting in a range of racialized, gendered, and class-based argumentation. Yet the reality of gun violence in U.S. society suggests that both the groups advocating and opposing Campus Carry are ultimately in the same boat in many ways, sharing the predicament of having to deal with the issue of firearms in shared public and private space. Moreover, both groups are largely bound to broader state and federal legislation and policymaking, even if not sharing mutual interpretation of them. Consequently, while imaginaries have distinct performative power as a gateway between the real world and abstractions, in the Texas case, they also sidestep the fundamental issue at stake. For, ultimately, the main point is *not* about who carries the gun; the actual trigger

78 “UT Austin Shooting Rampage Ends Tragically in the Library,” *American Libraries*, September 28, 2010, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2010/09/28/ut-austin-shooting-rampage-ends-tragically-in-the-library/>, accessed February 16, 2021.

79 Chuck Lindell, “Slaying Proves Point, UT Gun Group Argues,” *Austin American-Statesman*, April 12, 2016, A1.

80 Philip Jankowski, “Sniper Attack Helped Define ‘Mass Shooting,’” *Austin American-Statesman*, July 3, 2016, A1.

point is the gun itself. When all is said and done, the reality of power relations is not merely determined by racial/ethnic, gender, or class hierarchies, but who packs the most firepower. That fact is what all parties involved would do well to stop and think about.

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