

2013

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Recommended Citation

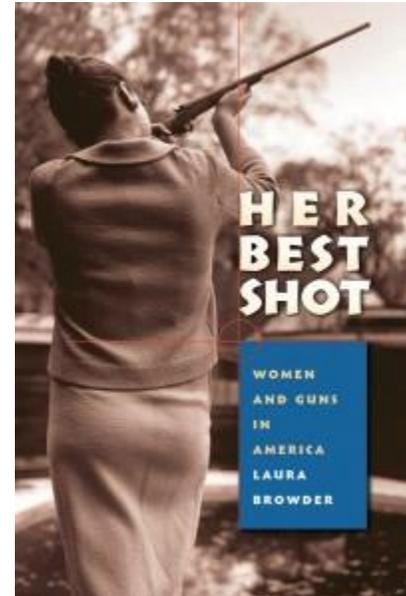
Browder, Laura. "Women's Gun Culture in America." *University of North Carolina Press Blog* (blog), February 15, 2013. <http://uncpressblog.com/2013/02/15/laura-browder-womens-gun-culture-in-america/>.

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Laura Browder: Women's Gun Culture in America

A recent article in the *New York Times* focused on the possible increase in female gun ownership in the United States. This “new” phenomenon of women and guns is of course far from new: as early as the 1870s, trapshooting for women was publicized by gun manufacturers as yet another feminine activity, not far removed from shopping or club work. The ultra-feminine Annie Oakley, who in the 1880s became an international star in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, personally taught fifteen thousand women to shoot. By the turn of the twentieth century, gun manufacturers were promoting hunting as a healthful activity for women.

Today, gun manufacturers and the National Rifle Association have made a point of welcoming women into the fold of gun owners. The gun companies now produce ads and even special guns designed for women. The NRA has developed its “Refuse to Be a Victim” program offering gun training for women, and in 2005 elected its first female president, Sandy Froman. These women help to undercut the image of the NRA as an organization of extremist gun-owners and provide the American public with an image of gun ownership that is non-threatening and normal-seeming. Yet the image of the armed woman presented in the *New York Times* article—white, suburban-looking, and thoroughly domesticated—is but one aspect of women’s gun culture, and women’s relationship to guns, in the United States.



I teach a first-year seminar at the University of Richmond called “Guns in America.” Many of the freshmen who take this course have grown up with guns, and a number of these students shared their stories in class last fall. One young woman talked about taking a nap on her parents’ bed one day in high school and waking up to find something hard against her ear: the loaded handgun her mom keeps under her pillow at night. Another young woman shared the story of her doctor father shooting an intruder in the family home. The class was engaged while we discussed the history of guns in America, and the reasons why Americans tie their citizenship rights to their rights to own guns. Yet they came most alive when we ventured out into the contemporary world of gun culture in order to see first-hand how Americans experienced their guns. I asked my students to bring along their cell phone cameras and create documentaries about their experiences going to the local firing range to shoot and visiting a gun show.

Close to our suburban campus is the Colonial Shooting Academy, which opened just last summer and which features a weekly 2-for-1 Ladies Night and a weekly Date Night. Colonial has the feeling of an upscale suburban store—spacious and clean, with polite, friendly staff who never make anyone feel stupid and a membership director, Tracie Haggerty, who facilitated our field trip. My students loved shooting and sent Instagrams of each other blasting away with their .22 semi-automatic handguns to their friends. The whole experience, from the safety videos they all watched before shooting to the snacks that were available in the store café, felt extremely normal. It was hard for my students to frame their safe, fun shooting field trip in a context of the heated debates over gun control that we had discussed during the course.

If anything, this cognitive dissonance deepened when we went on our field trip to the gun show. The first vendors we encountered were a couple of uniformed Girl Scouts, selling treats across from a booth featuring a WWII-era machine gun. We saw little girls walking by with pink rifles, and we also saw Nazi memorabilia. We ran into Vera Kononova Brown, one of my former graduate students, who spends weekends with her husband on the gun show circuit, selling gun accessories. “The fudge booth does best of anyone here,” said

Vera, and from seeing the crowds there we could believe it. Yet once again the students, once they got past the AK-47s and the neo-Confederate bumper stickers, couldn't get over how—well, how normal it all felt, right down to the trendy concealed carry purses and tee-shirt booth—with more of the shirts featuring jungle animals than gun slogans. Were those little girls with their cute pink rifles the face of guns in America?

I thought about that question this week as I watched President Obama's State of the Union

speech. Present as Michelle Obama's guest was Kaitlin Roig, a first grade teacher at Sandy Hook elementary school who on the day of the shootout had rushed her students into a bathroom and barricaded them in, thus sparing them the fate of twenty of their classmates and six women staff members. And President Obama, as he wound up his speech, made an impassioned plea on behalf of other women who had been affected by guns. He invoked "a young girl named Hadiya Pendleton. She was 15 years old. She loved Fig Newtons and lip gloss. She was a majorette. She was so good to her friends, they all thought they were her best friend. Just three weeks ago, she was here, in Washington, with her classmates, performing for her country at my inauguration. And a week later, she was shot and killed in a Chicago park after school, just a mile away from my house. Hadiya's parents, Nate and Cleo, are in this chamber tonight, along with more than two dozen Americans whose lives have been torn apart by gun violence. They deserve a vote. Gabby Giffords deserves a vote." These were families that had a very different relationship to guns than the families my students and I had seen at the gun show.

In the end, many of my students chose to focus their documentaries on the fudge booth, the tee shirts, and everything else that made the gun show seem so normal. But in the weeks after the class ended, I often wondered about how they fit Sandy Hook into their vision of guns and America—another safe-seeming suburban space that was forever changed by guns.

Laura Browder is the Tyler and Alice Haynes Professor in American Studies at the University of Richmond. She is author of [When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans](#) (with Sascha Pflaeging) and [Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America](#). She is writer and coproducer of the documentary film [Gone to Texas: The Lives of Forrest Carter](#), which is based on her book [Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities](#).