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Article

# Securing white democracy: Guns and the politics of whiteness

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**Abstract** What does the open-carried gun tell us about the contemporary political structure of whiteness, and how do such objects operate to reinforce this structure? To work through these questions, this article brings together political theories of racialized democracy and political theoretical analyses of gun-rights debates with insights from interdisciplinary scholarship on guns to generate a political theoretical account of the relationship between guns and white democracy. To do so, we analyze two open-carry spectacles: recurring Second Amendment protests featuring the prominent display of open-carried weapons, and open-carrying protestors in Michigan demonstrating against stay-at-home orders in response to COVID-19 in 2020. Our analysis of these two cases illuminates our central arguments about guns and white democracy. We argue that guns operate to politically align white bodies amid the ongoing constitution of political whiteness: open-carried firearms work to reinforce and reproduce white democracy. We further claim that the force of open-carried guns in sustaining white democracy works through two linked dynamics: first, guns extend, generate, and secure the wages of whiteness; second, they protect and assert white dominion. Taken together, these dynamics explain how guns uphold white democracy, but also illuminate, we argue, the contingency of that political power. It is that contingency which suggests that the open-carried firearm might also help contest it in turn, a point illustrated by turning to scholarship on the relation of firearms to the civil rights movement.

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It has become nearly impossible to ignore the proliferation of gun-related spectacles in the U.S. These events fall into a number of overlapping and co-constitutive categories, including those that center deadly forms of violence that



firearms produce, those that place the symbolic threat of the weapon on display, and those that actively connect guns to nationalism and patriotism through rhetoric and visual representations. While linked through the consistent presence of guns, such instances of spectacular violence and/or displays of guns share additional characteristics that raise critical questions about the polity. For our purposes, the central question of this article asks after the processes, affects, and assertions of white political power—power as white democracy, as we argue below – that accompany the public display of firearms at these events. We locate these dynamics in both recurrent and spontaneous events, considering Second Amendment rallies alongside the COVID-19 protest at the Michigan State capitol as two opportunities to analyze the relationship between guns and white political power. This article is concerned with the visual spectacle of openly carrying guns at public political events, and above all, how guns secure white democracy through such spectacles.

We argue that a desire to secure white democracy lurks behind these events and their component dynamics, even as polyvalent meanings, symbols, and power relations attach themselves to guns and gun control politics throughout American history. In focusing specifically and directly on the relationship between guns and white democracy, we follow Joel Olson in *The Abolition of White Democracy* to understand race as ‘dynamic, historical, and relatively autonomous from other social structures. To this end, whiteness is a form of power that shapes the public sphere and is shaped by it,’ and establishes a privileged position of standing in a democratic society (Olson, 2004, p. 9). Similarly, Sara Ahmed considers whiteness as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orients bodies, and affects how they take up space and what they can efficaciously do (Ahmed, 2006, p. 149). Like Olson and Ahmed, Cristina Beltrán treats whiteness as a political project (2020, p. 12). In *Cruelty as Citizenship*, Beltrán elaborates the range of affective practices, access to public accommodations, and laws that function together to establish and perpetuate this project. As these scholars show, whiteness, then, is a structure of power, but one that must be continuously reconstituted within American society. On our view, this reconstitution requires the production and reproduction of alliances that secure the position of whiteness within that society. White democracy names a political system through which such reconstitution, production and reproduction take shape. In considering what objects might work to generate and channel the processes and attachments central to this process, this article asks what the open-carried gun discloses about the contemporary political structure of whiteness, and how open-carried guns operate to reinforce that structure.

To work through these questions, this article brings together political theories of whiteness (Beltrán, 2020; Du Bois, 1997 [1935], 1999 [1920]; Olson, 2004; Hooker, 2017; Myers, 2019) and political theoretical analyses of gun-rights debates (Anker, 2018; DeBrabander, 2015; Kautzer, 2020; Liebell, 2020, 2021; Obert et al., 2018a) with critical scholarship on guns from anthropology, performance studies and qualitative sociology about guns (Carlson, 2015; Livingston, 2018; Livingston



& Young, 2020; Melzer, 2009; Shapira & Simon, 2018). By turning to this range of interdisciplinary scholarship that illuminates a set of relationships between guns and whiteness, we work to transpose those ideas into insights for political theory. This article generates a political theoretical account of the relationship between guns and white democracy through an analysis of two open-carry spectacles: Second Amendment protests featuring the prominent display of open-carried weapons, and open-carrying protestors in Michigan demonstrating against their Governor's stay-at-home orders in response to COVID-19 in 2020.

First, we argue that in current conditions guns operate to politically align white bodies amid the ongoing (re)constitution of political whiteness – a formation that incorporates but is not reducible to white masculinity<sup>1</sup> – and further act to bind whiteness as a power structure to particular notions of publicity, (un)freedom and sovereignty. While hostility to gun control and prominent open-carrying has buttressed a variety of political projects throughout American history (Winkler, 2013), our claim in this article focuses on the contemporary work of guns to shore up white democracy. We build on the idea that ‘guns transform those who choose to use them,’ helpfully articulated by Poe, Obert, and Sarat in the introduction to *Lives of Guns* (2018b), in order to elaborate the political stakes of the spectacle. Second, we claim that the force of open-carried guns in sustaining white democracy works through two linked dynamics: first, guns extend, generate and secure the wages of whiteness; second, they protect and assert white dominion. As the events we analyze suggest, guns do so precisely in a moment when whiteness is perceived as under attack (Hooker, 2017) by the very people seeking to invoke its power. In response, guns threaten violence in order to defend the political power of whiteness against its supposed decline. As such, open-carried guns operate as a relay, in the Foucauldian sense as a node in a network of power,<sup>2</sup> which facilitates the deployment and circulation of racialized political power in a white democracy. Those dynamics, taken together, explain how guns uphold white democracy by cloaking a defense of whiteness in rhetorics of rights, tyranny and rebellion.

We begin by developing a theoretical account of white democracy, drawing on scholarship from Olson, W.E.B. Du Bois and Ella Myers to link the wages of whiteness to white dominion as modes of exercising and defending the white political power encoded in white democracy. In the next section, we apply this theoretical vocabulary and conceptual linkage to analyze the racialized political work of open-carried guns at protests in favor of Second Amendment rights. We argue that guns exercise and reproduce white democracy as they work to extend the wages of whiteness and assert white dominion – here, the open-carry of firearms is at once an expression of individual right and simultaneously an assertion of white political power. The next section interrogates the escalation of this dynamic with open-carried guns at protests against stay-at-home orders at the Michigan State capitol in 2020. We argue that in these spectacles, guns shore up white democracy as the wages of whiteness and its dominion work in tandem to combat a perceived



decline in the political and social status of whiteness. We then turn briefly to the tradition of Black armed self-defense during the 1950s and 1960s to consider the instability of the circuit between wages, dominion and white democracy – and to articulate how guns might also offer the possibility of resisting white democracy. In conclusion, we revisit our theoretical vocabulary and consider how our analysis of open-carried guns raises questions for political theory about the dynamics that secure and defend white democracy more broadly.

## **Guns and White Democracy: Wages of Whiteness and White Dominion**

Conceptually, this article elaborates the functioning of what Olson analyzes as white democracy, by articulating how the wages of whiteness and white dominion work in tandem to defend, protect and secure whiteness's power within the polity. This theoretical work also generates the conceptual resources for analyzing how guns exercise and reproduce white democracy. In this section, we elaborate this more general theoretical account through work by Olson, Du Bois, and Myers before turning more concretely to the political work of the open-carried firearm in the subsequent section.

Olson (2004, p. 62) theorizes whiteness as a cross-class political phenomenon that 'produces a particular conception of democracy which not only denies active participation and social equality [for non-whites] but cannot even imagine them.' This white or *Herrenvolk* democracy encompasses a notion of citizenship that 'builds white domination into democracy' through incorporating rights and privileges such as voting, bearing arms and rioting into whiteness as a badge of status; in this way, something like antiblack mob violence and rioting in Jacksonian America becomes an enactment of (white) democracy (Olson, 2004, pp. 44–45; 31–32). That is to say, vigorous white 'democratic' activity becomes part of the subjugation of non-whites. Moreover, whiteness must be constantly normalized and reproduced as its political power expresses itself across different material political and economic conditions, a necessity that generates a kind of instability (Olson, 2004, pp. 71–76). Our general claim is that two dynamics emerging from the thought of Du Bois – the wages of whiteness and white dominion – operate in service of this reproduction of white democracy, and our more specific claim is that the visible or spectacular carry of guns by masses of mostly white people provides a conduit for attempting to re-secure the power of white democracy.

Olson draws on Du Bois' (1997 [1935], p. 700) notion of the wages of whiteness in his analysis of white democracy: as Olson discusses, these wages are public, psychological and material as they 'shape how the white citizen understands democracy' and reveal how the 'political values and vision of the white citizen bundle racial privilege with democratic ideals' (2004, p. xxi). Olson (pp. 14–16) analyzes how, in *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois argues that racial



oppression does not just exclude, but also facilitates social stability: whiteness is produced through a cross-class alliance, where white workers side with the capitalist class, perpetuating their own economic exploitation, while also affording the dominant citizenly racial standing of whiteness to those workers. As a concept, the wages of whiteness reveals the contestability of whiteness, naming a structural safeguard operating to secure its power. Building on this account, we theorize guns as a material object in which the public, psychological and material dimensions of the wages of whiteness congeal to generate and circulate a felt sense of attachment, power, status and domination. In Olson's mobilization of Du Bois, where he interrogates racial standing in white democracy, the wages of whiteness are psychological payment for economic subordination at the same time that they bestow material benefits associated with whiteness. For Olson, the very standing necessary to take part in American democracy is one such privilege. Our account expands upon Olson and Du Bois to consider the relationship between the materiality of guns – a materiality linked to but conceptually distinct from the material benefits of whiteness – and the enactment and reproduction of white democracy. Gesturally democratic phenomena can and do reproduce white democracy generally, and indeed in the next section we will examine how the open-carry of guns at political events enables further conceptualization of the material and affective workings of whiteness's wages in a white democracy.

White democracy requires more, however, than the performance or granting of a status afforded to those who wield it. White democracy also secures itself through whiteness as dominion, as theorized by Du Bois and further developed by Myers. Open-carried guns at political events enact this dominion in the way they visibly threaten the violent assertion of that dominion. In a noted passage from the 'Souls of White Folk' essay, Du Bois imagines himself as narrator and expert on whiteness, and when asked in a rhetorical question about why people desire whiteness, he replies that whiteness constructs itself as 'the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!', endowing itself with a 'title to the universe claimed by White Folk' (1999 [1920], p. 18). Myers re-articulates this idea as whiteness as dominion, writing that, according to Du Bois, to be white 'is to inhabit a possessive, proprietary orientation' both towards the planet and towards those with darker skin (2019, p. 2). This moves beyond the more 'transactional' character of the wages of whiteness, operating on a different, less class-specific register. Whiteness as dominion captures the way in which 'white souls' think and act 'in accordance with the conviction that racialized others are their property' (p. 8). This conviction is also reflected in and formalized by US law: in her famous essay 'Whiteness as Property,' Cheryl Harris captures this point:

Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of



controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination...Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law (1993, p. 1713).

Within this conception of whiteness as dominion there exists a constant threat of violence buttressing the possessive claim, which itself has roots in the legal underpinnings of white political power that Harris interrogates. The dominion of whiteness is not a quiet one, but one that takes by force against the embodied existence of others, in the name, we contend, of reproducing white democracy. And, as we demonstrate in the next section, guns circulate and materialize the threat of violence.

Because guns are imbued with the affective attachment to power, as well as the threat of violence, they link wage, dominion, and white democracy. We claim they are especially prone to be used in this way when white democracy is perceived to be in decline and when white grievance conspicuously asserts itself. In her recent work on Black protest and white grievance, Juliet Hooker identifies a tension between Black political radicalization enacted by the active dismantling of pillars of white supremacy, and the activation of white grievance (2017, pp. 483–484). In her analysis, politics in the United States is driven by the white inability to cope with (often symbolic) losses, and the radical resentment this engenders. That resentment can also be understood under a rubric of dominion, as it both exposes the contingency of white democracy alongside the need to have it. Though Hooker's analysis prioritizes the relationship between Black protest and white grievance, her discussion of empathy, solidarity and resentment illuminates the conditions to which the wages of whiteness and white dominion can respond in an attempt to regenerate the supposed loss of white democratic power.

Of course, our analysis focuses on the political implications of open-carry weapons, with a specific focus on the political structures of whiteness and white democracy. As we examine this relationship, we recognize that there are additional alignments of power at work in relation to both guns and whiteness. In particular, there is substantial scholarship that explores the link between gun ownership and masculinity (e.g., Carlson, 2015; Gibson, 1994; Melzer, 2009). By focusing instead on the link between perceived loss and white political power, we follow both Hooker and Elisabeth Anker (2018) to center an analysis of white political power in the spectacle of open-carry, and the political instability it works to shore up even as this analysis gestures towards additional further work on gun masculinities and white democracy. We turn now to consider how symbolic losses to white political power are rendered into threats, illustrating how acts that fall under the rubric of democracy provoke possessive responses from white populations about the kinds of behavior that count as democratic, or rather, those that enable the possessive exercise of whiteness.



## Second Amendment Rallies and White Democracy

In our analysis, the open-carried gun performs the work of shoring up white democracy. It does so by both extending the wages of whiteness and asserting white dominion against perceived threats to white political and social power. Through an analysis of both Second Amendment rallies and the Michigan capitol COVID-19 protests in May 2020, we demonstrate how the open-carried firearm performs this political work, as it gathers and aligns (mostly) white bodies. While the Second Amendment rallies are explicitly about guns, and the right to wield these objects so tightly bound up with a particular form of patriotic affect, the COVID-19 protests do not center the guns themselves. Instead, they are a spectacle at which the guns perform a particular role: they threaten a violence that always already lurks in whiteness, and is enacted by white patriots in order to defend the political power of whiteness against its supposed decline. Reading these two forms of open-carry spectacles together illustrates how wages and dominion work in tandem to assert and protect white democracy with the gun as relay between these multiple significations.

What political work does the open-carried gun do at Second Amendment rallies? How do discourses of freedom invoked via guns both depend on and mask anti-democratic unfreedom? We theorize the open-carried firearms at Second Amendment rallies as a collective object that aligns white bodies together to generate solidarity by operating as a relay that facilitates and sustains material, discursive, and/or affective power relations between conflicting political phenomena; in doing so, the collective object both performs and attempts to secure white democracy. The gun becomes a material object through which freedom and patriotism are brandished; it operates as a physical representation of the structurally privileged citizenship and gesturally democratic while circulating material and affective wages of whiteness. In addition, guns carried publicly at these rallies intensify both the threat of violence and the claim to protection; both a supposed democratic public agency and a privatizing, isolating, anti-democratic mode of individual sovereignty; both life and death. White bodies aligned together in solidarity at Second Amendment rallies with prominent displays of open-carry weapons suture such conflicts and contradictions, which cohere only in a framework of white democracy.

At the moment of coming together in public space for a powerful visual display, guns at Second Amendment rallies function as the mediating relay between political processes that make public and collective and those that privatize and isolate. At these rallies, bodies come together in politically salient spaces to collectively exercise democratic agency, as participatory collective action by the *demos*. However, the peculiar work of the guns at rallies in the context of the history of the Second Amendment is to heighten tension between that mode of



participation – an example of how the attachment structures generated by guns can bring bodies together in space – and what we understand as their atomizing work. Guns, especially when massed together in a visual, public act, may ‘function as performances of belonging,’ but such performances ‘demonstrate one’s claim to a position of relative power in the body politic’ through the ‘continued violent reverberations’ that the guns script by their presence (Livingston, 2018, p. 346). At the level of their open presence at a political rally, guns belie a collective democratic participation, but a kind of ‘ugly freedom,’ to borrow from Anker’s recent work (2022), where the exercise of right is simultaneously a kind of domination, as where the affective and material wages of whiteness make possible its dominion.

Even when rallying collectively, Second Amendment absolutism ‘advances’ nothing like ‘a collective right or concern,’ instead demanding ‘the individual citizen’s right to amass a colossal private arsenal’ that suspends any sense of a collective project and ends up viewing any collective as suspicious, weak, corruptible, obedient, timid, and ‘sheeplike’ (DeBrabander, 2015, pp. 98-100). Expansive, NRA-supported visions of the Second Amendment construct a hyper-individualism that precludes the kind of collectivity or solidarity necessary for any kind of democratic polity – the attachment to firearms articulated in these visions employs the language of rights, but more readily communicates an emphasis on power. Moreover, as Scott Melzer (2009, chs 4-5) documents in his ethnography of the NRA, perceived opponents of gun rights are denigrated as weak, emotional, and thus, insufficiently masculine in their opposition to a warrior-protector-frontier ethos. While such treatments of gun-rights focus on the link to masculinity, they also demonstrate a link to protection and, thus, dominion that lurks with the wielded gun at Second Amendment rallies, where right becomes privilege, and protection threatens violence.

At Second Amendment rallies, the juxtaposition of hyper-individualism and potential political collectivity come into view. The guns themselves facilitate an aggregation of individuals. Even when sharing the same space, the armed Second Amendment enthusiast politically ‘produces a highly agitated and vigilant disposition that is perpetually suspicious of others’ – where ‘shared norms are rejected as unwelcome constraints’ – culminating in a condition in which ‘the boundaries of the political community extend no further than one’s silhouette’ (Kautzer, 2020). Guns are the relay or nodal point between these two possibilities of democratic collectivity and political atomization, providing the salient object through and around which bodies come together.

Even while Second Amendment rallies bring together people to agitate in an apparently collective democratic way, they do so not as bodies forming a *demos* but rather as a series of atomized bodies retreated into their individualized mini-sovereignties that converge to show force and then disperse to those sovereignties. Pro-gun advocacy marks a form of ‘mobile sovereignty’ that displaces felt





powerlessness onto racialized others while heroizing the armed sovereign white man who determines the content of law and justice for themselves (Anker, 2018, pp. 41-42). This is often analyzed through the lens of masculinity. As Susan Liebell (2021) points out, in the landmark case *District of Columbia v. Heller* (554 US 570 (2008)), the Supreme Court endorsed a patriarchal theory of self-defense in the home that emphasized individual men as protectors and defenders of women and domestic property. Guns, linked to self-defense and masculinity, bring this hyper-individualism to bear on public spaces. While here masculinity and whiteness are undoubtedly intertwined, we follow more intensively the thread that connects individualism to white democracy through gun ownership that transforms the public space. Mobile sovereignty illustrates the way discourses of freedom can also function as enactments of power, where guns are at once a marker of privileged citizenship enjoyed by the gun owner in white democracy, and an exercise of power against threats to it.

The NRA frames its activity on behalf of the Second Amendment as upholding individual freedom and, ultimately, all other rights. In its narrative the Second Amendment is both ‘America’s First Freedom’ and the foundation without which the rest of the Bill of Rights will be lost, at the same time that they appropriate language from the Black Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century (Melzer, 2009, pp. 104-106). In actuality, the assertion of absolute freedom made by Second Amendment protesters leaves both the gun-carrying isolated self, and the racialized others who constitute the supposed threat, profoundly unfree, the very dynamic that Du Bois and Olsen link to the wages of whiteness. Daniel Cryer argues that the concealed carry subject embedded in a broader gun culture ends up in a relationship of submission to the gun itself, ‘giv[ing] over one’s freedom of thought and movement’, in part because ‘to be constantly armed is to be tightly constricted both mentally and physically as one bears the responsibility of constant vigilance’ (Cryer, 2020, p. 4). Building on this idea, giving oneself over to the gun operates under the guise of freedom yet fundamentally opposes a collective, democratic order because of the dominion the gun asserts.

In *The Lives of Guns*, Obert, Poe and Sarat emphasize how the appearance of a gun in a social situation can reshape the human actors who share the stage with this object (2018b, p. 4). Against the idea that guns, as objects, are neutral, the authors consider the political work firearms perform as they rewrite sovereignty, emphasizing how guns alter the perceived sovereignty of the gun owner (2018b, p. 7). This physical, material and affective experience of sovereignty is often collapsed into discourses of freedom. When gun carriers perform their sovereign freedom, it becomes a reenactment of ‘white sovereignty as social domination,’ in which the ‘attempt to achieve inviolability through detachment thus turns into the construction of a private form of rule performed upon and through the bodies of others,’ especially Black and Indigenous people (Kautzer, 2020). The materiality of the gun is critical here; the wages of whiteness cohere to the object, and so it not



only reshapes the human actors, but the political field in turn. This is most readily evident, perhaps, in events that spotlight armed white people open-carrying firearms today – like both Second Amendment rallies and COVID-19 protests – which weave together actual and imagined pasts of the American frontier, such that the guns themselves ‘not only perform their meaning but also carry with them the history of the legal, physical, and cultural disenfranchisement of Indigenous and Black Americans’ (Livingston, 2018, p. 351).

Reading armed Second Amendment rallies as exercises of and for white democracy productively navigates how large groups of (mostly) white people carrying guns to affirm their rights keeps with the traditions upholding white political power codified as so-called democracy. Indeed, the only way that open-carry rallies – so often armed white mobs, that is – could be citizenly or democratic amid such tensions is if they are wielded on behalf of white citizenship and white democracy. Removed from this, they would be too privatizing, individualizing, violent, fearful and dominating to contribute to any kind of genuinely democratic project. As a saturated object aligning white bodies together in public space in order to affirm a certain kind of political subjectivity, guns facilitate a white solidarity that forms under purported threat and moves through relay points of (potential) violence and affective amplification. In affirming white democracy, these Second Amendment rallies enact a politics that, as the next section argues, sets the stage for the performed protection of political whiteness itself at protests against stay-at-home orders during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **COVID-19, Guns, and Securing White Democracy**

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the place of guns in the US shifted from frequent and expected display at Second Amendment rallies to incorporation into COVID-related protests. What is specific to the gun carried at protests against stay-at-home orders? What political performance does the spectacular display of guns – seemingly disconnected from the ostensible purpose of the protests – enact in the context of public health crisis and of white democracy? The COVID protests were not focused on the guns themselves, but instead operate as a spectacle at which guns perform the threat of the violence lurking within white political power. In this case, power enacted by white patriots in order to defend the political power of whiteness against its supposed decline and against the state’s supposed failure to uphold it. Because firearms act as lively objects brought to the event, instead of its focus as at the Second Amendment rallies, they take on a different political salience as they relay the significations discussed in the preceding section in a new context and to a different effect. The COVID-19 protests demonstrate how the wages of



whiteness and its dominion work in tandem to bolster white democracy against perceived threats.

While protests related to COVID-19 restrictions swept through the US, the most notorious are those that took place at the Michigan capitol on 15 April 2020. This protest, like many others, occurred in response to lockdown measures put into place by the state government. States like Michigan issued stay-at-home orders and initiated business closures in an effort to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus. In the wake of these orders and closures, demonstrators assembled in public spaces, including city streets and government offices. Protests in Michigan proved to be the most spectacular. While initial orders were reacted to by protestors sitting in their cars to block traffic around the statehouse in mid-April, Governor Gretchen Whitmer's announcement that she would extend the stay-at-home order saw an escalation in protest tactics, including armed protestors on capitol grounds (BBC News, 2020). The fact that the protestors were armed was not only newsworthy, but also marks an escalation and an amplification of the dynamics at work in the Second Amendment rallies: at the COVID-19 protests, a demand to uphold freedom also actively circulates the threat of violence. The capitol steps were transformed into a space threatened by and then comes to house white political power and its claim to masculinized sovereignty, instead of its status as a public space where members of the *demos* might gather to debate and enact laws. The guns brandished by the protestors are neither accident nor accessory; they circulate white political power and the types of violence intimately tied to it.

It is significant that the protests occurred at the Michigan capitol building, and that the gun-wielding protestors entered the building. The building is a public space with a collective function. It is legal under Michigan state law to bear firearms inside the statehouse, and while demonstrators were permitted to enter the senate gallery, they were blocked by police from entering the floor of the chamber (BBC News, 2020). The images from these events are striking; in one photo, taken from the floor, there are men standing in the gallery above the legislators, guns in hand, posed in a way that dramatizes the state of constant embodied high-alertness that characterizes those who wield guns on a daily basis (Cryer, 2020). In others, men with fully stocked vests carrying extra ammunition assemble on the statehouse lawn. In another widely circulated photograph, a mask-less man screams in the face of a masked officer, with other mask-less men and masked officers repeating the dynamic in the background. In each of these images, men take center stage, though women are sometimes present in the background of certain shots. Prevented from entering the senate's chambers, protestors began to chant, 'This is the people's house, you cannot lock us out' (BBC News, 2020). In staging a gun-filled rally at what is imagined to be the people's house, the protestors make an assertion about the kind of people whose house this is; they are making a claim about dominion. Because guns are linked to violence and whiteness – to its threat and its performance – this changes the character of the protests from one about



government action (or inaction, or both) to one about the potential consequences for that action. The materiality of the gun itself transforms the spaces in which it is carried.

Through the open display of weapons, protestors at Michigan's capitol building invoked the whiteness bound up in their guns, in their right to bear arms. Michigan's capitol becomes the site of a standing militia, but one amassed in response to the ascribed tyrannical overreach of government, instead of to protect the government itself. The supposed tyranny, as evidenced by the language of the protests, and the demands to open the state and businesses, triggers a defense of whiteness: when the state purportedly fails to protect or assert white dominion, the mob of white democracy must assert itself as the armed defender of this status. This overstepping encroaches upon the exercise of freedom that is bound up in gun ownership, as the refrain of Second Amendment rallies consistently articulates through its rejection of shared norms as unwelcome constraints.

The weapons transform this debate over the reach of government into a defense of whiteness. They demonstrate how the congealed wages of whiteness work in tandem with its claim for dominion by threatening violence in public spaces to forestall the supposed decline of white democracy. Once allowed free movement and control over the quotidian happenings within the polity, the government has stepped in to limit that movement and exert control in a way that is perceived to restrict whiteness. Whitmer's stay-at-home orders were perceived by protestors to exist in direct contrast to dominion over space. Popular imaginaries of race and space shape the mainstream understanding of who is and is not entitled to rites of habituated safety, who is and is not entitled to threaten violence, and which violences are legible as violence (Leonard, 2017). At this particular protest, guns render this dynamic of whiteness legible, and re-exert its dominion over the public space. While, of course, the stay-at-home order limits the behavior and movement of all, regardless of race, in effect, the protest illustrates that it is perceived as a move against whiteness, perhaps by subjecting a genuinely uniform standard on all persons. Such a move triggers a powerful defense mechanism. The wielding of guns at the statehouse promises to reclaim this space as a white space, for a white democracy, as part of white dominion.

Jennifer Carlson's research on gun owners in Michigan elucidates a set of long-term dynamics that are thrown into sharp relief in the context of COVID-19. Her work analyzes how guns acquire a social meaning of individualized self-protection amid narratives of socioeconomic decline, attempts to navigate precariousness, and perceived attacks on white masculinity (Carlson, 2015, ch. 1). Even if these protests are not expressly about masculinity, they necessarily operate in its register, and more specifically illustrate its close proximity to concerns over white political power. In our analysis, open-carry at COVID protests demonstrates once more how a pandemic with a limited set of containment mechanisms may intensify any sense of perceived vulnerability, particularly those connected to white masculine



protection and sovereignty. Guns offer a sort of double reclamation of masculinity here – demanding a right to self-defense and claiming a duty to protect – that functions to repudiate dependence on the state (that is perceived to be failing) and assert a radically individualistic notion of responsibility (Carlson, 2015, p. 87). If that is the case, then we argue that white individuals redouble their commitment to these guns and their public–private performance, asserting a heightened individualized white masculine freedom and self-sovereignty at a moment of increased precarity.

Though different in shape and purpose, the presence of guns at both Second Amendment rallies and this recent wave of protests connects these events. At Second Amendment rallies, they operate as the object around which the attendees congregate. At the COVID protests, they are instead brought along as a symbol and a relay of power, patriotism, and whiteness. They invoke the collective gathered at the Second Amendment rallies, but their presence suggests something more – and much less public – at work. They transform a public space central to gathering, the statehouse, into a space dominated by white political power, in a time of crisis. The guns threaten violence, and exert the dominion of whiteness over this space, supposed to be for all, but now visibly marked through the white bodies carrying weapons to be space only for those whose whiteness, a whiteness they understand to be under threat. Purportedly a space for all, in part through the wielding of guns, the statehouse becomes a white space, a space reclaimed by whiteness as the rest of the state is perceived as hostile to its spread. This reclamation illustrates how claims to citizenship, when communicated through the open-carry of firearms, easily shift into the production and protection of spaces of white democracy.

Our discussion of the political work of guns at open-carry spectacles highlights an additional dynamic at work across these events: the instability of whiteness that lurks behind the way guns are wielded. Its decline necessitates protection and generates backlash. Within scholarship on US gun culture, there is substantial attention paid to the connection between guns as protection mechanisms against racial others (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; Livingston & Young, 2020; Metzl, 2020). Michael Feola's recent article on white nationalism similarly diagnoses and theorizes the decline of whiteness. Focusing on irreplaceability, the narrative of white nationalism ('you will not replace us') attempts to discursively secure the dominance of the white subject into the future (Feola, 2020). In our analysis, guns perform this protection in the present, by politically aligning white bodies in such a way that reconstitutes the white power structure. White political power exerts control over the institutions of government; it is not controlled by them. White political power moves around freely; it is not confined to particular spaces but exerts its power in and over these spaces. White political power is sovereign; it controls the land, by being the law of the land. Wielding guns in public spaces reconstitutes white political power by proclaiming these points, bringing bodies together to enact the privilege attached to whiteness and the dominion such



whiteness affords to those who possess it (and to those who must protect it, at all costs).

In these ways, the open-carry of guns at demonstrations – through their generation of the wages of whiteness and white dominion – facilitates a heightened form of white citizenship. Carrying guns deputizes the white carrier subject as an intensified sovereign subject of white democracy, in turn shoring up the political force of whiteness itself amid its insecurity. Guns operate as the relay or node in a feedback loop between white democracy and its white citizen: white democracy authorizes and insulates the wages of whiteness and white dominion that accrue to the citizen-carrier, while the citizen-carrier enlists himself in defense of white democracy. If ‘the modern (white) subject is initiated in its subjecthood through its capacity *to affect*, and *not to be affected*’ (Gorman, 2017, p. 311; italics in original), then guns can be grasped as a material extension and manifestation of that power to affect others – a power that white democracy authorizes and relies upon. The wages of whiteness help constitute the attachment of whiteness, while its as dominion addresses the violent means of defense employed to protect the object of our attachment. Guns present and perform a concatenation of violence, protection, attachment, and power, at the same time that they grant wages of whiteness and white dominion to some of their bearers. The open-carry of those guns in public space mobilizes these forces to animate and secure white democracy. Importantly, the instability of whiteness and the contingency of the wages-to-dominion circuit that we locate in the open-carried firearm suggests an opening for contestation of these very dynamics. While we theorize the threat to white political power as part of the mechanism that generates the wages-to-dominion circuit, white democracy itself is open to contestation by the very objects that typically secure its expanse: the open-carried weapon. As we stated above, guns grant wages and white dominion to only *some* of their bearers; when the open-carried weapon is displaced from the white body, what political work, if any, does it perform? How might this displacement function to contest or undermine the relay between white democracy and open-carried firearms? We take up these questions briefly below to elaborate the possibility of this contestation from the tradition of Black armed self-defense.

### **Black Armed Self-Defense: A Contestation of White Democracy?**

The contingency of white democracy is the very thing that constitutes the supposed threat that visually displayed firearms combat, but that contingency also enables real challenges to white democracy. We find an alternative to the wages of whiteness-white dominion circuit of white democracy in the tradition of Black armed self-defense as it is taken up by Black activists orthogonal to the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) in the 1950s and 1960s. Scholars of this tradition (Hill, 2004; Williams, 2013 [1962]; Johnson, 2014; Cobb, Jr., 2015)<sup>3</sup> contend that Black armed



self-defense operated in productive tension with the nonviolent project of the mainstream CRM, instead of in opposition to it. At times, armed self-defense enabled or secured the civil rights project, at others dissented from the mainstream CRM, and at others still offered a rural grassroots and potentially more democratic alternative. The complexity – not contradiction – of the relationship between armed self-defense and civil rights is perhaps best encapsulated by Hartman Turnbow, a ‘black farmer active with the movement’ in Holmes County, Mississippi, who used his rifle to drive off Ku Klux Klan night riders attacking his farm and subsequently told ‘movement organizers’ that he “‘wasn’t being non-violent,’” he “‘was just protecting [his] family’” (as cited in Cobb, Jr., 2015, p. 138). More broadly, these scholars analyze Black armed self-defense in the period as an available and necessary mechanism for individual and collective safety that the state would not offer, for political gains, and for the pursuit of justice and equality. Here, we claim that trajectories of Black armed self-defense have historically generated the possibility of resisting white democracy by breaking the relay between white political power, the wages of whiteness, and white dominion.

At the level of political subjectivity, we read the firearm in Black self-defense as a politicizing agent. In his book on the Deacons for Defense and Justice, Lance Hill argues that the political ethos motivating the grassroots organizers that became the Deacons was that ‘to be free blacks had to act free,’ and that the strong assertion of armed self-defense would foment ‘a new black consciousness’ rooted in (individual and collective) self-reliance winning freedom through ‘fear and respect’ (Hill, 2004, p. 8). Armed self-defense politicizes through the development of consciousness and the formation of collectivities. Individual acts of self-defense initiate a politicizing and collectivizing process – often among working-class Black men – that knits together individual self-defenders into grassroots communal forms of self-defense and, in the case of the Deacons, into a larger-scale movement. That armed self-defense frequently functioned as a local, grassroots, and folk organizing method rooted in Black traditions of armed self-defense contributed to this dynamic (Cobb, Jr., 2015, chs 3-4; Hill, 2004). Indeed, Hill explicitly frames the precursor activity to the Deacons, rooted in an ‘implicit unarticulated strategy’ from ‘the community itself’ as developing a ‘grassroots “participatory democracy”’ more responsive to ‘the capacity of local communities to lead their own movements’ than a formal program of nonviolence more affiliated with civil rights activists arriving in communities from the outside (Hill, 2004, pp. 44, 48). Here, the gun functions as a relay not for mobile sovereigns of affective domination or the wages of whiteness, dominion, and political violence, but instead as a relay around which rights- and freedom-claiming political subjectivities cohere on both individual and collective levels. Such a dynamic combats the political ideas enacted by the open-carried gun of white democracy.

Two tensions strain the potential of armed self-defense during the height of the CRM, tensions that heighten during the rise of the Black Power movements. The first is the inherent tension between armed self-defense and the possibility of



political violence. For Nicholas Johnson, ‘marking and maintaining the boundary between self-defense and political violence has been the central challenge of the black tradition of arms,’ most prominently so in the 1950s and 60s (Johnson, 2014, ch. 7). Both tactically and strategically, this boundary ‘is not a bright line’ but a ‘contestable zone of action and rhetoric’ (Johnson, 2014, p. 211), and raises a series of political-ethical dilemmas for self-defense organizers (Cobb, Jr., 2015, p. 11). White democracy intensifies this boundary issue: open-carrying whites do not face the same political challenges or threats of violence when navigating such a tension. In broadest terms, the act of visibly carrying firearms can easily be interpreted by white democracy as *de facto* political violence attaching itself to all Black political action. This tension connects to the relationship – not incompatibility – between armed self-defense and nonviolence. Grassroots armed self-defense often proved vital for the survival and successes of the nonviolent movement and the people who composed the movement, such that self-defense and nonviolence posed not an impossible contradiction but rather a set of tactical choices and political decisions (Cobb, Jr., 2015, pp. 1–2, 144–148, 239–240).

In these regards, armed self-defense operated as a (fraught, to be sure) mode of contesting white democracy, demonstrating that while the potency of the open-carried firearm may be predisposed to secure oppressive political power in a white democracy, its material and symbolic force can be rearticulated for other modes of politics. There is no guarantee that Black gun politics will contest the relay between white democracy and open-carried firearms. Such a politics that incorporates a counter-hegemonic program and/or forms of a grassroots democratic ethos, however, have the potential to challenge this violent relay. The multivalent politics of Black gun ownership ultimately demonstrate both the instability of political whiteness and the difficulties through which contesting it might take shape.

## **Conclusion: Public Orders and White Democracy**

Phenomena like the Second Amendment rallies across various states, and the protest at the Michigan State capitol against the COVID-induced public orders unfold within the context of the contestability of whiteness as political power. Christina Sharpe writes, ‘Whiteness, then, is a political project. It is distinct from, but often acts in concert with, the political projects of making and sustaining nation, ethnicity, and ethnic nationalisms’ (Sharpe, 2016). By naming the political project of whiteness, Sharpe identifies a similar dynamic to the one at work in and through the circulation of guns. She goes on to describe whiteness as ‘also a logic...a way of sorting oneself and others into categories of those who must be protected and those who are, or soon will be, expendable.’ Examining the work of guns in relation to whiteness as they align white bodies together in the ways they are triggered as a defense of the very categories they help create, exposes a





vulnerability of whiteness. The circulation of guns helps delineate the protected from the expendable, the free from the unfree, the dominant from the dominated. But these categories are not immutable; whiteness' instability is made manifest by the constant defense its perceived decline provokes, and by the resignification of firearms in the tradition of Black armed self-defense discussed above. Characterized by the relation guns foster between the wages of whiteness and whiteness as dominion, we have argued that white democracy requires constant vigilance to perform and re-constitute its existence, through the visible, public carrying of guns.

This claim and the conceptual work that underpins it can and should, we think, travel to other scholarship on racism, guns, and democracy, just as we ourselves build on interdisciplinary scholarship across these areas. This article is not, as we have noted, an exhaustive account of the politics of guns and whiteness, but rather theoretical development of white democracy, the wages of whiteness, and white dominion in the context of critically examining the political work of open-carried firearms in white democracy. To conclude, we briefly highlight some salient future directions for analysis of the relay between guns, white political power, and democracy, in order to demonstrate the possible future ambit of our theoretical work in this article.

Alice Ristoph's (2021) work to theorize the carceral state as a political system, specifically in the context of the *Heller* decision, raises questions about what analytical distinction – if any – might hold between carceral democracy and white democracy, and how guns operate within that possible distinction. Building from Ristoph's discussion of white vigilantism in a carceral state raises further questions about how firearms as wages of whiteness and white dominion underlie what Jennifer Carlson conceptualizes as gun populism (2020). In a slightly different register, it is worth disaggregating the political and affective force of guns in white democracy and in what Bertrall Ross examines as white political violence *qua* 'deeply anti-republican embrace of inequality that throughout American history has served to trigger and inflame racial divisions' (2021, p. 3). In addition to such conceptual elaborations, the work in this article could also travel to examine school shootings – usually perpetrated by white men – in the context of white democracy, in conversation with insights from social work (Gregory, 2020) and critical humanities (Balthasar, 2018). The channeling of the wages of whiteness and white dominion through visibly carried firearms could also enrich emerging scholarship on the 6 January 2021 riot at the Capitol, for instance the Brennan Center for Justice's series on Protests, Insurrection, and the Second Amendment (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021).

We view the framework developed in this article especially salient for clarifying recent legal scholarship on the Second Amendment and democracy following *Heller* (and now also *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*). To take one particular example, it is worth considering Blocher and Siegel's (2021) articulation of a public interest and public safety justification for gun regulations within the jurisprudential possibilities left following *Heller*. Focusing on threats of



publicly armed individuals to public safety, they argue that even under the *Heller* doctrine:

the government interest in regulating arms to promote public safety extends beyond injury prevention to protecting the constitutional order and building a community in which citizens have an equal claim to security and to the exercise of liberties, whether or not they are armed, and however, they differ by sex, race, or political viewpoint (Blocher & Siegel, 2021, p. 143).

They further contend that gun laws are selectively enforced in a way that disproportionately supports white gun owners and carriers (p. 162) and that, relatedly, an exclusive focus on direct physical injury misses the harms of open-carry (pp. 154-156, 193-197), often using the armed protests at the Michigan capitol as an illustrative example.

While we generally agree with Blocher and Siegel's legal and political claims, their article does not push the critique of racialized gun law enforcement far enough, and in so doing illustrates why theorizing the relay between guns and white democracy – in the form of the wages of whiteness and white dominion – is necessary. That is, the article usefully identifies the way that the application of firearm jurisprudence has legally encoded what we would call white democracy, but does not sufficiently interrogate white democracy itself, either on its own general terms or in relation to guns. Their account identifies the way that the evolving practice of open-carry at political protests further 'authoriz[es] two-tiered racialized forms of citizenship' (p. 158) as a primary example of the harms caused by publicly carried weapons beyond direct physical injury. The response within the framework of constitutional democracy is to insist that (including under *Heller*) government has 'a public safety interest in regulating guns to preserve the peace and to protect against weapons threats and intimidation' (p. 144) and also has a legal imperative to uphold 'public order, which enables it to secure the equal freedom of all members of the public' (p. 141).

Our analysis of guns in white democracy, however, raises the more foundational issue of whether public safety, constitutional democracy and public order are themselves premised upon the deployment of firearms to secure and defend the white democracy generating the notions of public order and safety in the first place. That is, the problem may not operate primarily at the level of doctrine and selective enforcement, but at the very roots of constitutional (white) democracy. Two-tiered citizenship with regards to guns is a wage of whiteness, and threats to public security exemplify white dominion. If this is the case, then better doctrine and more even enforcement of gun laws, while likely to have relatively beneficial effects, would be unlikely to contest the broader racialized political structure that undergirds those laws and their enforcement. Moreover, while more scholarship is necessary in the area, our brief engagement with research on Black armed self-defense suggests that a more fundamental challenge to white democracy may



indeed necessitate selective and strategic use of visibly carried weapons at political events and for political purposes. Indeed, whatever gains that the Deacons or grassroots armed defenders helped secure came directly in the face of armed white vigilantism supported by a drastically uneven enforcement of gun regulations by law enforcement.

We spotlight Blocher and Siegel's article here in the conclusion not because we find it wrong – in fact, we largely agree with its claims – but because it proves illustrative of how our conceptual and applied theoretical work can intensify the analytical focus even of critical scholarship on the racialization of Second Amendment jurisprudence and its enforcement. Building on the ideas of Du Bois, Olson, Myers, and the other thinkers we draw on for our analysis creates frameworks useful for pushing such critical scholarship across disciplines to more intensively and foundationally examine how guns operate to defend white political power, as both wages of whiteness and as white dominion. Such engagement with white democracy itself is necessary for grappling with the depth and the force of visibly displayed guns in a racially hierarchal polity.

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## Notes

1. In this article, we choose to focus primarily on whiteness instead of masculinity, which we also see as a structure of power that is reinforced by and connected to violent spectacles. We understand whiteness and masculinity as overlapping categories that delineate structures of authority, and a full treatment of the relationship between these categories is outside the scope of this essay. For further elaboration on the relationship between whiteness and masculinity when it comes to guns, see for example Carlson (2015), Shapira and Simon (2018), and Stroud (2016).
2. As Foucault writes, 'Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. ... [T]he individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted' (Foucault, 2003, pp. 29-30).
3. These accounts generally classify the Black Panther Party as operating in a somewhat different mode of armed self-defense; see, for instance, Johnson, 2014, ch. 8. Our brief point here focuses on the relationship between grassroots self-defense in the height of the CRM, but further work ought to more deeply engage the Black Panthers as a potential challenge to the guns-white democracy relay.



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