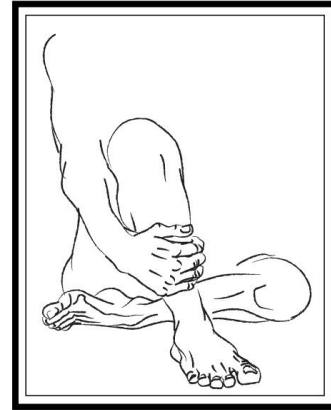


Exploring Human Stories of Illness
The Health Humanities Portrait Project

PI: Sandy Sufian, PhD, MPH
University of Illinois-Chicago
College of Medicine



Reading the Racial Politics of Guns in America

Teaching Guide

Creator:

Jonathan Metzl, MD, MPH

jonathan.metzl@vanderbilt.edu

Reading List

First-Person Narratives:

- Metzl Interview Excerpt “We Gotta Take Up Arms” from (2019) *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland*. New York: Basic Books, 79-82.
- French D. (February 27, 2018). What Critics Don’t Understand About Gun Culture. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/gun-culture/554351/>.

Scholarly Readings:

Williams RF. (2013). *Negroes with Guns*: King Intro, and Chapter 1. *Martino Fine Books*, Ebook at [Black Thought and Culture | Alexander Street](#). Alexander Street (1962 edition).

Metzl J. (2019) The Cape in *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland*. New York: Basic Books, 23-33. ISBN: 1541644972

Smith JA. (March 14, 2018). Why Are White Men Stockpiling Guns? *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/why-are-white-men-stockpiling-guns/>

Summary

This portrait explores the contested politics of American firearms. It addresses the complex tensions of race relations, health and injury, and the lethal consequences of gun ownership. The portrait allows students to think critically about the various justifications for gun ownership, the role stereotypes play in those justifications, and the larger implications gun policies have on public health and individual health.

Learning Objectives

After this session, learners will be able to:

- Discuss the larger “meanings” of firearms in American society
- Analyze spoken narratives, and written records surrounding guns in the United States
- Identify challenges and differences related to talking about guns
- Understand the role of stereotypes deployed in gun culture

Session Plan: 75 minutes

- Introduce the topic (5 min)
 - Facets of the firearms debate in America
 - Role of historical and political context

- Economic and social interests of various actors
 - Racial underpinnings (whiteness, blackness, etc.)
 - Rural/urban divide
- Personal vs political aspects of owning guns
- Discuss sub- themes with questions/unpack first-person narratives and scholarly readings (50 min. total).
- Concluding thoughts: Where do we go from here? (20 min.)
 - Exercise: New rhetorics to disrupt entrenched firearm debate in America

Background

The so-called Dickey Amendment in 1996 blocked research on firearms and their public health implications. But after years of relative silence about this blockade, many leading American public health organizations, medical groups, and research universities have now come out against it. Each additional mass shooting highlights the untenable tensions between public demand for expert knowledge to prevent gun death on the one hand, and a government actively engaged in squelching this exact expert knowledge on the other. In response, growing numbers of medical and public health journals have been publishing research articles and special issues that address the health effects of guns and bullets.

To date, however, scholars have paid relatively little attention to larger questions of what guns mean, and how firearms emerge as powerful symbols whose connotations are shaped by history, politics, race, and culture. This Health Humanities Portrait explores the latter associations by looking in depth at guns particularly charged, cultural and political symbols.

The portrait uses first- person narratives to talk about the relationships between race, gun ownership, and their peril.

Discussion Questions/Activity

1. Sub-Theme 1: Contested Meanings of Guns and Implications for Health

- How are illness and health, and race, wrapped up in politics and mythologies about guns?
 - How does the rhetoric of protection and threat function in these first person narratives? How does the perception of societal instability factor into this rhetoric?

- How do different actors in these readings explain and refuse the link between death by guns and gun ownership? What language do they use and why? How does the language change when Metzl asks in “The Cape” about gun ownership and contributions to the support group participants’ loss?
 - Recount passages in the text (bottom of p. 31).
- How are the relative risks between restricting the use of guns and protecting public and individual health explained by the support group participants in “The Cape”? What is the looming threat they perceive that overpowers the recognition of death by guns and the loss of their loved ones?
 - Read out loud passages in the text (bottom of p. 31).
 - Point out the politics of denial (who is implicated if these politics and what are their respective interests i.e. firearm manufacturers, NRA, legislators, participants, etc.), what are the dynamics involved in the process of denial and what are the consequences)?
- How does gun culture give access to a community? How does it offer support rather than destruction? [See French] How then does gun ownership become something to protect?

2. Sub-Theme 2: Gun culture and Stereotypes

- What are the dominant stereotypes related to gun violence? How are they perpetuated?
 - One connection is white (hyper)masculinity...
 - Connection is to protect whites from minorities, criminals, mentally ill (i.e. Black men, dangerous criminals, etc.)
 - Connection with other stereotypes and threats are these men defining their masculinity?
 - Discuss dichotomy between a clearly defined distinction between “good” and “bad.”
- What role does death by whiteness play in perpetuating these stereotypes, if any?
- How does the history of a particular place deepen our understanding of racialized, gendered, or socioeconomic associations as they are tied to firearms?

- The Cape and Interview get at how deeply rooted guns connect with identity. (race is entangled here; racial divides are clearly at work in perception of guns and who gets to own them and show them). Shows one is proud of being white; language is around “protect yourself” from intruders (racially inflected).
- Williams’ piece on self-defense: How are notions of self-defense racialized? [point out double standards in Williams piece or currently]
- How does historical context shape the understanding of this concept and its actualization?

Sub-Theme 3: Larger politics and cultural tensions

- In what ways are gun “debates” symbolic of larger tensions or politics? Which ones? [optional: invoke irony of necropolitics, where appropriate]
- How does social protest factor into the gun rights debate (i.e. Ferguson, Black Lives Matter movement)?
- How does urban/rural divide in America function in the politics of gun ownership?
- How might distrust or disillusionment with the institutions (i.e. government, police) that are supposed to protect communities play into the reasoning behind gun ownership? Why?
- How do gun laws or policies affect the frequency of mass shootings in the US? the influence of the corporate gun lobby? and Americans’ everyday life?
- How do these policies affect research on gun violence and what ramifications does this have on our understanding of the problem?

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

Exercise: Using tools of textual and historical analysis, imagine new rhetorics to break the seemingly intractable politics surrounding firearms in the US. What would that look like? Is it possible? What larger, structural changes need to take place to allow for a new rhetoric?