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Women in the NRA and the gun rights debate

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Armed & Fabulous is the result of curiosity and hard work. My multiple visits to the United States stirred questions about how it is possible for my American peers to own firearms and feel completely normal in doing so. The idea that pro gun mothers actively advocate gun ownership made me decide to dedicate my thesis to this particular topic. I owe special gratitude to some people that, in their own way, encouraged me during the writing process of the thesis. My American studies peer-group members; Iddo and Lisa were good listeners and provided me with valuable insights during the first weeks of the project. I want to thank my roommates and my colleagues of the board of Vereniging MUST for supporting me during the last weeks of writing. My friends Vera and Ike provided me with pep-talks at times when I most needed it. Above all, I want to thank Rik. You are my friend, my love and my rock. Thank you for putting up with my thesis-frustration, for being there for me through the writing process, and for encouraging me during the months that prepared me for this task.



Introduction

She is introduced while she explains how she can ‘fast-load’ her shotgun with a new type of tool. Her nails are perfectly manicured and she wears pink ear-protection. Her ponytail slowly waves when the shot is fired and the image plays in slow-motion. Maggie Reese is a professional shooter. She is very passionate about her right to own a gun. She wants to encourage more women to become shooters. According to Maggie the sport is exciting and challenging and it helps you learn about yourself and develop your skills. The notion that guns are dangerous and should be banned is something that she strongly disagrees with. Guns are not scary and lawful owners will not abuse the power that a gun has. The idea that more and more women are becoming shooters is something that Maggie sees as a positive development. They bring their husbands and children to the shooting range and this way shooting can become more and more of a family-thing that can be shared. Maggie strongly believes that shooting has great benefits for women and that people who disagree with her desperately need an education, because shooting is a sport like anything else.¹

Recently, the National Rifle Association re-launched its online women’s channel. It is called Armed & Fabulous and every week a “new face” is presented to the viewer. Even though the women’s channel was first launched in the spring of 2012, it lacked the power and appeal that Armed & Fabulous has.² In the “New Energy” trailer that was used to promote the renewed channel several young attractive and educated women talk about how important it is for them to own a gun. They point at the incorrect use of terminology for guns used by the media and the importance of education about weapons. They urge other women to become engaged and to share the passion of shooting sports. Owning a gun and shooting in this trailer is promoted as a fun recreational activity that can also function as a way of protecting yourself as a woman. Women seem to claim a right to be independent and self-reliant in a time where stories about the dangers of a declining moral culture are all around them. The video ends with a strong statement: “*we are competitors, we are mothers, we are business*”

¹ NRA Women, ‘Maggie Reese’ <http://nrawomen.tv/new-energy/video/maggie-reese-new-energy/list/profiles> (11 July 2013).

² NRA Women, ‘Armed & Fabulous’, (3 May 2012) <http://www.thetruthaboutguns.com/2012/05/daniel-zimmerman/armed-and-fabulous-nra-shoots-for-more-women/> (16 July 2013).

owners, we are hunters, we are enthusiasts, we are teachers, we are the face of the American gun owner, we are the NRA.”³

In the last twenty years, guns have been subject to immense debate because of the violent shootings that occurred in schools and other public places in the United States. On April 20th 1999 two white young men walked into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, injured 21 people, and killed 15 including themselves. The massacre instigated the debate over gun control laws. Questions about violent films and games were posed to clarify how this could have happened. While the 1990’s were times of increased wealth and a growing economy, times grew darker in the eyes of the American public. Less than ten years later, 33 students of Virginia Tech found their death at the hands of a mentally ill senior student who after his crime committed suicide. More recently, in July 2012 a man fired multiple guns in a Colorado cinema in Aurora, killing 12 people and injuring 58. In December 2012 a twenty year old man shot 27 people at Sandy Hook Primary School Newtown, Connecticut, before killing himself. Since Columbine, discussions about the causes of and solutions for gun violence have continued. The conclusion for gun rights activists is strangely enough always the same, the world is again a savage place that people need to protect themselves from. Women need to be able to do so without the help of men or the government. As mothers of the next generation they have to join the fight against gun control and the protection of their Second Amendment⁴ rights because *“the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”⁵* This is their battle, this is their frontier. That is the emancipatory rhetoric that the NRA employs to urge women to participate in the organization. Because female gun owners are greatly outnumbered.

A 2013 Gallup poll showed that 45 % of the American men are gun owners only 15% of American women own guns.⁶ Even though men more often own guns, the number of women that own a gun seems to be increasing. At least according to the NRA it is, even

³ NRA Women, ‘New Energy’, <http://nrawomen.tv/new-energy/video/new-energy-preview/list/profiles> (10 July 2013).

⁴ McKay, D. American Politics and Society. (Malden 2009) 468.

⁵ NRA News Conference. (21 December 2012) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHK22TkdKv4> (16 July 2013).

⁶ Jones, J.M., ‘Men, Married, Southerners Most Likely to Be Gun Owners. Nearly Two-Thirds of Southern Married Men Own Guns.’ (1 February 2013) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/160223/men-married-southerners-likely-gun-owners.aspx#1> (29 April 2013).

though it is hard to determine the exact number of women that own a gun. The women's channel on the NRA website promotes gun use by women. The women that are part of this women's channel display great dismay with the assumption that guns are only for men. They often volunteer to teach other women and many keep blogs to educate the other American women. There is even a thriving market for women gun owners. The women in the New Energy video state that they want to be taken seriously. Simply adding pink to a gun does not make it a women's product, these women want more. They identify themselves as intelligent and they want to take part in the "fight". If women are such a large group of gun owners, then what is their part in the debate? The NRA website offers some insight in what type of arguments the women themselves use to promote owning a gun; the need to protect themselves.

But is protection the only thing that made women advocate Second Amendment rights? Is there an answer that goes deeper than that? Women do not potentially seem allies to the NRA for a number of reasons. The NRA has been viewed as a male chauvinist organization that has no place for women. Above all, it is odd to see women support pro gun groups after the violent shootings that occurred in for example schools in the past fifteen years. How have women developed the desire to take a stand against gun control? What changed in feminist ideology that they would join forces with the NRA? Is it solely the safety of their children or is there more to it? What has the NRA done to appeal to women? How has American gun culture developed that makes women eligible for participation?

America's gun culture has been a topic for academic research for decades. Richard Slotkin analyzes how the American frontier became a myth in American culture and describes how a *Gunfighter Nation* was born⁷. Slotkin is a cultural critic and a historian. *Gunfighter Nation* is the concluding volume in an award-winning trilogy on the myth of the American frontier. *Gunfighter Nation* examines the effects of the frontier myth on American culture and politics through a variety of resources. Slotkin explains in the introduction of *Gunfighter Nation* the general value of myth. It expresses ideology in a narrative.⁸ He states that myth complements the identity of a country, because it is '*the language in which a society*

⁷ R. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York 1992).

⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 6.

remembers its history'.⁹ The frontier myth, according to Slotkin, is determinative for American society. The nostalgic notion of people hardened by the harsh living conditions of the frontier, and overcoming the challenges without help from the government, has never truly left the exceptionalist ideal of self-reliance and independence. However, when frontier life is mentioned nobody seems to think about the women. The image of the frontier and possibly that of the Old West is engraved in the memories through the representation of a heroic, rugged, bearded man, armed to the teeth, riding a horse and living a free and independent life. This is an image that proliferates in Slotkin's analysis of the frontier myth. The masculine associations that seem evident about the frontier are not representative of the reality. Women have used arms longer than is often perceived. Slotkin admits in his conclusion that the original myth, about the white triumphant male, needs revising. Myths are always changing to fit the modern ideology of a culture.¹⁰ The implied revision could possibly concern gender, but this is not specified by Slotkin.

Deborah Homsher points out that the current reality of women shooters requires a reevaluation of the frontier myth as originally portrayed by Slotkin. Homsher is a non-fictional novelist. *Women and Guns* is her second book in which she aims to bring insight to the American public opinion of gun ownership among women. Homsher is not clear about her personal opinion on the issue. She emphasizes that the narratives in her book are based on the stories of the women that she interviewed and that these narratives are meant to '*illuminate the varied interactions of American women and their country and its peculiar traditions*'.¹¹ The book clearly connects American identity and gun ownership among American women. Homsher describes in the introduction of her book that the image of the white ideal hero from the frontier myth, a white male with a gun, was suddenly challenged during the 1960's. '*The rebellious political moments of the last forty years advocating the rights of minorities, women, and gays and opposing the Vietnam War have also demanded a reevaluation of our white male forefathers, a reevaluation commonly tagged as "liberal" and "politically correct"*'.¹² Homsher makes hardly any references to the NRA. She concludes that the controversy of gun ownership is not necessarily partisan or affiliated with groups such as

⁹ Ibidem, 655.

¹⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 655.

¹¹ D. Homsher, *Women and Guns. Politics and the Culture of Firearms in America* (New York 2001) 232.

¹² Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 14.

the NRA.¹³ Her work is aimed mainly at the women she spoke with and their personal experiences and associations with guns, not gun rights.

The NRA and its view on the gun debate is more closely analyzed in Scott Melzer's *Gun Crusaders*. Scott Melzer is a professor of sociology and his interests are mostly in the area of gender and psychology. He writes about how the NRA has changed from a club for shooters into a Social Movement Organization since the 1960's and how the NRA ended up in a culture war through interviewing NRA members. Melzer states that the NRA is having trouble adapting to the new social circumstances that originated in the 1960's. Melzer argues that the NRA '*prefers to think of itself as a gender – and race – neutral organization*' but that it mainly portrays a masculine ideal.¹⁴ Feminine influences, such as emotions, in politics threaten gun rights and therefore the NRA. According to Melzer, emotions are considered by the NRA as the opposite of rational thought. Rationality would certainly contribute to the conviction that gun rights are absolutely necessary. Melzer may be biased. Though the NRA has had some trouble appealing to women, Melzer bases his conclusion on less than thirty interviews with NRA members. And for a scholar who is interested in gender, Melzer's focus is predominantly on the role of men and their masculinity. Is the NRA truly as masculine as Melzer argues in his book? The recent expressions of the New Energy women on the Armed & Fabulous NRA channel seem to strongly contradict his views. What can be expected from female shooters? What are they like? Are they truly as emotional as Melzer describes them?

Laura Browder's *Her Best Shot* explores the function of iconic gun women from 1875 to today. Browder is an associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she teaches a creative writing program. Her books often discuss female gender or ethnic identity. In *Her Best Shot* she explores the notion of gun women that have contested the female stereotype. She wonders how women and guns go together in the American culture. She argues that historic gun women have challenged the standards about women's capacities for violence. Armed women, Browder finds, have both challenged and reinforced the '*masculinist ideal of America*' through time.¹⁵ Even though it may be strange that women are more often becoming gun owners, Browder appoints that the armed woman always has

¹³ Homher, *Women and Guns*, 230.

¹⁴ S. Melzer, *Gun Crusaders. The NRA's Culture War* (New York 2009) 27.

¹⁵ L. Browder, *Her Best Shot. Women and Guns in America* (Chapel Hill 2006) 1.

had some sort of attraction, because she is *'the expression of our societal ambivalence about women's equity with men: we are titillated, but afraid.'*¹⁶ Browder recognizes the appeal that guns may have. She shows this through the narratives of iconic gun women that have lived over the years. Feminism, according to Browder, played a large part in how women perceive guns.

What type of feminism would drive women to become gun owners? In *Gun Women* Mary Zeiss-Stange and Carol K. Oyster attempt to clarify this question.¹⁷ Zeiss-Stange is an associate professor of religion and women's studies and Oyster is a professor of psychology. Both authors are gun owners and enjoy shooting. Their own opinion about gun control measures is clear. Although the introduction states that their book is not a tool to defend gun rights, the book however, presents a rather one-sided view. Zeiss-Stange and Oyster set out to show why guns can be positive in the lives of women. They also intend to raise questions about the feminist motives of gun women rather than to answer them. What is striking is that there is no mention of the violent tragedy that occurred in Columbine, Colorado, a little over a year before the book was published. There is no mention of any of the other tragedies either. Zeiss-Stange and Oyster avoid the matter entirely. The premise to 'tell the truth' about guns is hereby not as complete as would be expected. This makes their work less reliable for analysis, but it gives great insight in women's opinion in favor of gun ownership.

The question remains: what could cause women to become gun owners? How many of them are there and what do they think of the Columbine tragedy? These questions of current developments can only be examined through the lens of time. Naturally, these matters did not suddenly exist, there has to be a starting point. The closing of the frontier, the World Wars and the years that followed have had an important influence on the current debate. This research is chronologically divided into four chapters. The first chapter starts in 1890 and ends in 1963. This period can be marked as conservative, in the sense that even though feminism existed, women were considered inferior to men. This conservative outlook was challenged during the years that the first chapter comprises. In this period the change in women's positions can be marked by three iconic gun women. Frontier icon Annie Oakley,

¹⁶ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 232.

¹⁷ M. Zeiss-Stange & C.K. Oyster, *Gun women. Firearms and feminism in contemporary America* (New York 2000).

gangster girl Bonnie Parker and sex symbol Wonder Woman. Though possibly not entirely representative for all women, these iconic figures provide a visible change in the perception of armed women. This chapter argues that the World Wars played a significant role in the emancipation of women through taking up a role in the workforce. This was a turning point. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made women legally equal to men. The traditional roles for women were about to change even more.

The second chapter starts in 1963 and ends in 1981. Even though women were legally equal to men, in reality they were not. After the Equal Pay Act was signed and the taste of freedom during WWII was experienced, women could no longer allow themselves to be oppressed by men. In 1968, Kate Millet wrote her essay 'Sexual Politics' in which she voiced this resistance to male oppression. Radical militant groups like the Black Panther Party and The Weathermen displayed violence on occasion and the women in those groups were seemingly not oppressed by the men. Despite the idea that these movements had achieved a situation that may close the 'gender gap', they were too extreme to remain existent. The use of guns by extreme groups and the deaths of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and others had led to the Gun Control Act of 1968. The Act threatened gun ownership even more. While the NRA had mostly been a "hunters' club", in the light of the threat of more gun legislation it became more politically active. The ILA (Institute for Legislative Action) was established in 1975. It served as an institute that provided the NRA membership with information about pending legislation and it motivated them to actively participate in lobbying activities against such stricter legislation. Establishing the ILA was not enough for the more politically active membership; in 1977 a coup staged by the more conservative membership put new board members in place. Other events changed the NRA severely when in 1981 the failed attempt to kill President Ronald Reagan permanently injured James Brady, assistant to the president. This spurred the debate even more and threatened the NRA as an organization.

From 1981 to 2000 the NRA had to change its tactics. Chapter three is characterized by the way in which the NRA attempted to change its framing strategies and appeal more to women after the attempt on President Reagan's life. However during the 1990's some violent events aimed at Americans threatened the NRA again. When in 1999 a dozen people were killed in the shootings at Columbine High School, America had had enough. This type of

violence elicited women to get involved in the issue concerning gun legislation. In May 2000 750,000 women gathered in Washington to advocate gun control. It was called the Million Mom March. This seriously urged the NRA to change its strategy. If this amount of mothers advocated an anti-gun message the NRA had to be able to explain the opposite.

The fourth and final chapter shows how the Million Mom March sparked the debate again. By applying maternal language the debate was no longer solely about the rights of owning a gun, but also about the characteristics of a gun. Feminist rhetoric did not suffice once confronted with mothers. The first women's channel that was launched by the NRA in 2012 was not convincing enough. The NRA women's channel was re-launched a year later. The women portrayed here are not only independent, but also mothers, family women, gun owners, hunters, successful, and intelligent. The NRA deployed mothers to soften its image and strengthen it at the same time. The fight is up to the mothers now, both in favor and against guns.

How does the history of women and guns relate to the questions that some of the aforementioned authors have tried to answer in their books? None of them explains the unlikely collaboration between highly educated women and mothers and supposed 'chauvinist gun nuts'.

How is it possible that feminist women and the NRA have embraced each other as allies in the pro gun lobby even after the gun violence tragedies that have occurred in the past fifteen years in schools and other public places in America?

This research is founded on the idea that after second wave feminism women no longer needed to struggle as much for equality as they had before, but that the NRA used feminist and frontier nostalgia in their framing strategies to appeal to women in order to improve the image of the organization. The New Energy women have internalized this rhetoric. They fight against gun control because it is their right to own guns, because they want to protect their family and because they want to feel empowered through owning a gun. They are competitors, mothers, business owners, hunters, enthusiasts, teachers, they are the face of

the American gun owner, and they are the NRA.¹⁸ They are here to teach 'ignorant anti gun activists' a lesson about the numerous benefits of owning a gun for women.

¹⁸ NRA Women, 'New Energy' <http://nrawomen.tv/new-energy/video/new-energy-preview/list/profiles> (10 July 2013).

Chapter 1. From “frontier mother” to Bonnie to Wonder Woman

Former governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin spoke at the NRA-ILA Conference (National Rifle Association – Institute for Legislative Action) at the beginning of 2013. She ran for vice-president in the elections of 2008. She portrayed herself as a mother, a hunter and as a politician. Unlike the other female speakers at the conference, Sarah Palin wore jeans, a tight t-shirt and heels instead of a slim fitted dress. Her emphasis on her femininity, but not in a girlish matter was clear. Sarah Palin is portrayed as the ideal gun woman. She is feminine, a shooter, a mother, and she wanted to represent the American people in Washington and fight the good fight for gun rights. Sarah Palin could be seen as the sum of ideal or iconic gun women that have existed over time. One of these characteristics is that of the independent female shooter expert, Annie Oakley. From the moment that the frontier closed to the moment that women obtained legal rights in 1963 the role of women in society and the perception of femininity changed. Their relationship with guns changed as well. Iconic women of the years that lead the way to the Equal Pay Act, and the events that followed, are at the core of what gun women today represent.

Mothers & Nostalgia

Since the frontier was officially closed by the US government in 1890 the use of guns by women was no longer meant to protect themselves from "the uncivilized". The closing of the frontier did not mean that “the uncivilized” no longer existed, the need for protection remained and therefore women still owned guns. Sentiments about the days of “free (white) men” roaming the land were kept alive through Wild West Shows and later Western Films. The emphasis on white men is important to realize, because the same goes for white women. Nostalgia kept the idea of the frontier close. Women that knew how to shoot were rare, but they were there. Annie Oakley was a sharp shooter in Buffalo Bill’s show. Her name is often mentioned when gun ownership and women in America are discussed. Annie Oakley was, and still is, the paragon of women shooters. She is however not an example of feminism. Although the general assumption is that all female shooters, or at least the majority of them, owned guns for feminist reasons, the reality is that Oakley was openly opposed to women’s suffrage. She did not behave like the women from the early twentieth

century that supported the struggle for equality. This does not mean that her shooting skills were never challenging her womanhood and vice versa.

In *Her best shot* Laura Browder researches how women's identities and gun ownership are negotiated with their gender and capacity for violence.¹⁹ Browder theorizes that these issues are determinant for the role women play as American citizens. In order to be eligible for full citizenship, these women like Annie Oakley still had to measure up to the ideals of (white) womanhood.

*Paradoxically, to succeed with the public, these famous women have had to embrace female stereotypes and expectations. Iconic women with guns have challenged and yet reinforced the masculinist ideal of America – that guns are inextricably tied to both masculinity and American identity.*²⁰

Annie Oakley, in Browder's theory, functioned as an example of the ideal mix of the "masculinist ideal of America" and white womanhood. In *Girls with Guns*, France Twine describes Oakley's beliefs and behaviors.²¹ Oakley was married and supported traditional gender roles. She performed in a dress and not in pants like other female shooters sometimes did. Her femininity did not threaten the ideals that Browder described, and Oakley was a white woman. By granting her status of fame, the notion that citizenship was only meant for whites was perpetuated.

Even though it is known that women shooters existed in the beginning of the twentieth century, most of them are never known by name except for Annie Oakley. She might not represent the average women of the beginning of the 20th century, but her skills and personality can be used to identify some of the iconic characteristics that Annie got assigned to her name even until long after she died. Deborah Homsher states that the history of heroes should be expanded by female heroes.²² Homsher indicates that not just shooting is subject to gendering, but that in maintaining the myth of the West women are completely left out. Homsher poses another problem. Not only are women supposed to live up to a

¹⁹ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 1.

²⁰ Ibidem, 1.

²¹ F. Twine, *Girls with Guns. Feminism and Militarism* (New York 2013) 2.

²² Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 44.

standard of American womanhood, but she is also supposed to be civil while the boys and the men go off in the wild and misbehave. Homsher states this quite strongly.

*“Again and again in our stories women are asked to take their positions as the pious, hypocritical lawmakers, while true-hearted, even tormented, men and boys rebel against the status quo”.*²³

Homsher interprets that men during and right after the frontier had this ideal that they lived independently from women who were to maintain the civilized ideal which they as men tried to uphold through violence and savagery. Women remained responsible for society while they did not have political power. Homsher argues that women despite this were still blamed for injustice.²⁴ If women were responsible for upholding the civilized ideal, they were also responsible for men that diverged from that same ideal. With this social expectation, women walked a thin line. The role of women in the days after the frontier closed was a balanced role they were forced to play. Femininity was to be maintained. What is then their femininity? Gender specialists David Glover and Cora Kaplan urge

*“to think of femininity in the plural – femininities – and to see femininity both as an umbrella for all the different ways in which women are defined by others and by themselves, and as semi-detached property of the self, not identical with the biologically sexed body.”*²⁵

This shows that femininity, like race and identity, is not a fixed category. Annie Oakley was defined as a woman by her environment, but to restrain from any feminist or masculine associations that there may have been about her, she had to present herself in a way that was unquestionably female. Her portrayal of white womanhood secured her respected position.

Glamorous gangster girls?

The position of women changed when in 1923 the Equal Rights Amendment was passed and they were given the vote. Women could now participate in the political process. However, women’s roles would soon become more challenged when after the crash of Wall Street in

²³ Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 34.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 35.

²⁵ D. Glover & C. Kaplan, *Genders. The New Critical Idiom* (New York 2009) 28.

1929 the Great Depression started and the country slid into a grave economical and social crisis. Because of the drought in the Mid-West and great economical despair in the rest of the country, America was having a particularly hard time.

Laura Browder explains that the years of the Depression were not just a time of desperation in an economic sense. Browder speaks of the 'crisis of gender' caused by the public debate followed by the role of female criminals that were frequently depicted in the media in a glamorous way. The use of violence by these women was something that both fascinated and daunted the American people. The women that were portrayed regularly are still famous, but not for what they did. These women became famous for what other people thought they did. Women such as: the wife of "Machine Gun" Kelly, Kathryn, Ma Barker and Bonnie Parker. The story of Bonnie and Clyde is often told and re-told as a story of star-crossed lovers that died a dramatic death after two years of bloody crime. The circumstances in which they lived were not as glamorous. They were constantly on the run, traveling thousands of miles by car without stopping and they were cast away by their families.

The economic depression inherently caused an increase in the crime rate among young women. According to Francis Twine, crime was a means of escape from the peril of the depression into the presumption of a better life through a life with gangs.²⁶ Twine's profile of women that joined gangs in these years is a long way from glamour. The young women were often from rural areas and from a working-class background. They romanticized the gang life. Bonnie and Clyde were sometimes seen as a modern-day Robin Hood. This comparison could have sparked the notion that a criminal life would support their family in a way that an "honest job" during the Depression never could.

Twine cites Claire Potter who researched the lives of twenty women in the Dillinger gang that was also active in the 1930's. According to Potter the criminal women were often of European descent, they lived alone or were married to a man that was often absent, and they worked jobs in which they were able to meet men with money. These women worked in nightclubs, retail and food service.²⁷ It is not surprising that they were depicted as

²⁶ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 13.

²⁷ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 12.

promiscuous and manly. Even though these 'gun molls', as Twine calls them, were seen as "*a symbol of new womanhood, and an example of great romance*", they were also faulted for the moral decline of the American culture.²⁸ Women were still burdened with the task of upholding a moral society. They were not supposed to rebel. This shows that even though women had the legal means to participate in the political process, they were still considered inferior to men.

Browder takes the analysis further. Not only were 'gun molls' considered promiscuous, Browder states that women that led a life of crime and violence were racialized. Until the 1920's and 1930's criminals were often referred to as ethnic but now the criminals were also all American girls. The excuse for ethnicity was no longer available. J. Edgar Hoover used this argument to point out what was wrong with America.²⁹ The same argument that black men had uncontrollable sex drive was now used to describe the 'gun molls'. Although these women were portrayed as women without morals, it is interesting to see that they recreated the conservative gender roles they had fled from within the culture of the gang. They were submissive to the men and only by their say-so they were allowed to live and stay. A striking example is evident from the way in which the story of Bonnie and Clyde is told. Clyde is depicted as the brains of the operation and the criminal with a troubled past. Bonnie was a mere victim of love and her blind admiration of Clyde and followed his every step. Bonnie is depicted in modern culture as an ignorant damsel that was under love's spell as women from the past in modern depictions often are.³⁰ The "gun molls" were portrayed as helpless girls but also as terrible criminals that challenged the traditional female roles at the same time. This paradox shows that society did not know what to think of them. What was their female role to be?

The difference with Annie Oakley and the 'gun molls' is that Oakley emphasized her femininity through her lawful and skilled gun ownership. The gun molls used crime and violence to escape a life that did not satisfy them. The similarities are however, that in both situations the women were still inferior to the men. Most importantly, both images would continue to captivate the ideas about female gun ownership and the roles of women in

²⁸ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 101.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 121.

³⁰ BBC TWO, 'The Real Bonnie and Clyde' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/timewatch/bonnie.shtml> (26 juni 2013).

respect to men's despite the efforts of law enforcement to deglamorize the stories of the 'gun molls'.³¹

Women in World Wars

The established ideas about women owning guns were greatly impacted by the World Wars, in particular by the Second World War. During the World Wars, women were necessary to perform jobs that normally the men would do, but since the draft ensured that most of the men were working for the U.S. Armed Forces, the women had to step in. In these years several developments influenced women's positions. Not only did they gain access to the workforce, they were also granted their own permanent place in the Armed Forces. And in 1949 competitive shooter Alice Bull, the first female member, was elected to the board of directors of the NRA.³² Although this may sound as a step closer to equality, the stereotyping of women or more specifically the gender ideal of women became conflicted during the war. The sexualization of women through popular culture became more evident during the last years of the war, a great leap away from motherhood and modest women.

During the beginning of the Second World War the NRA provided weapons to British Army and afterwards they offered weapons training to the soldiers that returned from the battlefield. Women were not among those troops. The women that took up a role in the Armed Forces were in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps which was founded in 1942. Before this, women were only given temporary placements in jobs such as "*administrative, clerical, secretaries, nurses or cooks.*"³³ In 1948 President Harry Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Act. It was meant to give women recognition for their contribution in the Second World War. These developments were considered great victories for the feminist movement. The public was greatly divided over the images of armed women in the news. Women had always been assigned to the role of the supporter, the cheerleader, the wife. Now they had weapons and they could take part in battle. These privileges were not easily taken away. In practice the women in the WAC (Women's Auxiliary Corps) hardly took part in battle. Heroism was claimed by men. This is part of the gender ideology as Twine states. Women had always been defined as "the ones that had to be protected" not as the heroes.³⁴

³¹ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 135.

³² Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 139.

³³ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 38.

³⁴ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 37.

Even though women had reached the ranks of the military, they were still oppressed by ideas that placed them in service of men. They were only to be heroes in a fantasy.

Besides that women were supposed to fulfill the role of the supportive wife, they were also meant to entertain men. During the World Wars this entertainment went through a new phase as well. Dancers, singers, actresses and prostitutes were already known in this category, but this time attractive armed women made their introduction to the entertainment of men. While women in the military posed a threat to the male institution, the invention of Wonder Woman in 1941 did not. A woman not armed with a gun but a heroine nonetheless. She is attractive, smart, a pacifist and maternal. She wears very little clothing and she has an undeniably large bust. She was everything that a woman was supposed to be but could not be in reality. Her character is an example of what position women were put into during the war. Wonder Woman was the perfect imagined balance of a woman that maintained her femininity while being capable of violence, she was the unachievable goal. Her wisdom and her magical lasso kept the world safe. What is surprising is that her creator, a man named William Moulton Marston, explained that "*Wonder Woman is a psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.*"³⁵ This suggests that Marston supports that women should not be inferior to men. It is striking how even with his intention the outcome could seem so contradictory. In designing a sex symbol he merely changed the gender ideology that was first focused on submissive wives into the sexualization of women for men to benefit from. The contradiction between the submissive wives and Wonder Woman only emerges through sexualization of women, when it concerns women's position towards men, they are still inferior.

Melzer explains that men reclaimed their masculinity through this sexualized entertainment. Bachelorhood and one-night-stands were promoted as a way to do so. The launch of *Playboy Magazine* in 1953 was a sign that from now on women were no longer propagated as partners for life, but as sexual partners.³⁶ This changing perspective on the role of women through the eyes of men helped change feminist rhetoric. Melzer calls the fifties a time of

³⁵ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 143.

³⁶ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 52.

'anti-feminist backlash', this characterization of the decade should be taken into account when social developments take a peak in the following twenty years.³⁷

The "icon cocktail"

Feminism and its development through the First and Second World War plays a determining role in the way women and guns are portrayed by the NRA today. Since the frontier was officially closed by the US government in 1890 the use of guns by women was no longer meant to protect themselves from "the uncivilized". The National Rifle Association (NRA) was founded in 1871 to promote and teach rifle shooting. Because the Civil War was over and the frontier was closed, target practice was their prime occupation. Until the 1960's the NRA and women had not much to do with each other apart from the notion that women were supposed to encourage their husbands.

From the closing of the frontier until the end of the Second World War, women's roles have radically changed. The way women portrayed themselves and the reasons for it, the way society, primarily men, portrayed them was greatly determined by the standard gender ideologies that were evident during those years of change. Wars, economic depression and legislation are of great influence on changes in ideology. Feminism and women's suffrage greatly rigged the debate about women owning guns and taking part in acts of violence. However, each icon from the frontier until today has its merits. Annie Oakley is romanticized for her marksmanship and her femininity, Bonnie Parker as the perfect character of a romance, and Wonder Woman as the empowered sexual woman that saved the world. All of them carry elements of femininity that are still prevalent today.

Each nostalgic character from this chapter has passed on a feminine ideal that the NRA and the women of the NRA perpetuate.³⁸ Sarah Palin can be seen as an example of this "icon cocktail". According to a wild life specialist, Nick Jans, Sarah Palin is not a marksman of the Annie Oakley standard. In a review of the series *Sarah Palin's Alaska* he argues the misconception about Palin's skills.³⁹ Reality does not matter, the associations that people have with the image that Palin shows is what matters. The reality of women's oppression by

³⁷ Ibidem, 52.

³⁸ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 5.

³⁹ Ibidem, 5.

men was ignored until 1963, often only the nostalgic and romantic associations of these women are remembered

NRA rhetoric and women's rhetoric about female gun owners borrows from an ideal of the history of armed women in America. These narratives that these histories have become are not reality either. They serve the purpose of persuasion. The emotional connection that Americans have with this history helps them to make sense of today. History did not stop after the Second World War though. Oppression of women by men was still to be conquered; one way or the other. Up until the 1960's the gender roles of women in relation to gun ownership and citizenship had been negotiated, the changes through which these developed are evident through several sociological changes that laid the foundation for feminist and NRA rhetoric by women in the 1960's and the 1970's.

Chapter 2. The gun as a tool for equality. Radical transformation.

The twenty years that followed 1963 formed a basis in which the role of women, gender equality, the perception of government and the politicization of the NRA radically changed. The turbulent years of social change had brought about a new way of looking at gender roles and gender ideology. Gun women and their emancipation went through a major transformation during the 1960's and 1970's. Even though women were legally equal to men, in reality they were not. In most institutions men were still superior to women. This contrast with the legal opportunities that women had and the present facts partly caused the changes in women's positions in during the 1960's and 1970's.

The NRA, during this time, was not occupied with the emancipation of women. From the end of the Second World War they were mainly concerned with the education and training of the hunter community.⁴⁰ The organization had not yet formed a formal opinion about the position of women. Even though the wars had given women a chance to become part of the workforce, it had also strengthened the masculine ideal that the returning soldiers had given the men through their victory of evil in WWII.⁴¹ However, violent events such as the murders of Martin Luther King, President Kennedy and Malcolm X forced the government to take measures that restricted gun ownership. In 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Gun Control Act. New legislation was considered to be a threat against gun control by the NRA. These developments also caused a change in course for the NRA. The 1960's and 1970's therefore signify an era of radical transformation for the NRA but also for armed women.

Redefining genders

In 1979 Michel Foucault argued that the sexual revolution that had been taking place in the 1970's was not brought on by sex being around people more often, but the way in which *'ideas about sexuality began to spread out and touch every aspect of modern social life.'*⁴² He was convinced that all decisions in a person's life were brought on by experiences in their sexual lives and that this theory was not just applicable to individuals but to groups and

⁴⁰ NRA, 'A Brief History of the NRA' <http://www.nra.org/Aboutus.aspx> (24 June 2013).

⁴¹ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 51.

⁴² Glover & Kaplan, *Genders*, 4.

generations of people. People's ideas about sexuality influenced culture. If what Foucault said is true, it would mean that the 1960's and 1970's may have been a period of the most influence on all of American culture. Besides the Civil Rights Movement and race issues, other developments in those years were driven by sexuality and gender issues, for example: the right to have an abortion (Roe vs. Wade, 1973), the sexual revolution and the question whether or not women were allowed to fight in Vietnam. In the book *Genders* Cora Kaplan and David Glover, both professors of English at the University of South Hampton, offer an introduction to the concept of gender. They illuminate why it has been such a central issue through history and other areas. They explain how concepts like gender were no longer just biological categories but that they were also part of a social construct that defined human relations and cultures. The insight that Foucault concluded at the end of the 1970's was of course already applicable before that. Sex had influenced established traditions and gender roles for decades. Homsher asks why the 1960's were so decisive in these issues and why the ideas about gender were of such influence on the gun debate in these years. She argues that

*"[T]he gun debates do offer citizens an excellent stage for debating the transformation of the United States since the 1960's, a transformation that began with challenges to traditional assumptions about what constitutes American heroism, individuality, citizenship, culture, history, manhood, and womanhood."*⁴³

The gun debate, according to Homsher, covers many aspects in American culture and therefore affects many people even those that do not own guns. The combination of gun ownership and the wide scope of the gender issue that Foucault assumes may help explain why the 1960's and 1970's are of such great relevance. If sexuality and gender are not just biological categories but also cultural categories and gun ownership is an issue that is tied into a wide spectrum of issues that were subject to changes in these years, then it is conceivable that the issue of women owning guns and using violence would be shocking. Homsher briefly elaborates on the idea that guns are associated with penises. They are phallic symbols, *'they point, they ejaculate, they penetrate, they can be shocking when exposed, and they usually can be found adorning men.'*⁴⁴ The fact that a woman would use a gun can be interpreted as her assuming a masculine identity; however a woman cannot be

⁴³ Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 31.

transformed into a man when she uses a gun. Her identity does not depend on the use of the gun or ownership of the gun, but on the way in which society perceives her in this context.

Black Panther women, an example?

Black women were oppressed because of their gender, but also because of their race. Since the abolition of slavery, black man had been banned from owning guns. Preventing blacks from owning guns dates further back. Browder refers to the Uniform Militia Act of 1792 which required

“free able-bodied white males between the ages of eighteen and forty-five to enroll in a militia, bearing their own arms and equipment, but it banned from service all slaves, freed blacks and Indians... the politics of white supremacy in the South both before and after the Civil War, mandated that whites use guns as instruments of terror to control blacks and that blacks be forbidden from using firearms.”⁴⁵

The fact that blacks had been kept from owning firearms was still evident. It may not have persisted through laws, but the stigma was still existent. The use of violence and armed self-defense was a response to the violence that was directed at the Civil Rights Movement. According to California statute in 1966 it was allowed to carry guns openly when they were not loaded. The Black Panther Party carried guns to educate the police and the public about their right to bear arms.⁴⁶

The Black Panthers were an exception to the “regular” gender ideology. Women carried guns openly and they took part in the violence that the Panthers displayed. They were not held back and received the same training as the men. Linda Lumsden researched women in the Black Panther movement and the framing of motherhood in connection to the use of violence. She argues that the use of guns by women in the Black Panther movement did not suggest criminality. Black Power, Black Pride and femininity were celebrated through the display of gun ownership; it was a way to show their identity, their American identity.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 58.

⁴⁶ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 17.

Lumsden also explains that Black Panthers used a very radical type of framing through the image of mothers with guns.

*"[The Black Panther Party] never portrayed women as sex objects or as consumers. The newspaper's verbal and visual rhetoric offered a paradoxical blend of traditional and radical frames of womanhood. Its most provocative imagery of mothers with guns fused militant Panther rhetoric advocating armed self-defense with the traditional image of woman as guardian of the home."*⁴⁸

This image of an armed mother carrying a child shocked the nation. The radical nature of this picture went further than just pictures. Panther women wanted to pass on their ideology through having children. Their womanhood was celebrated through becoming mothers. This was very different from feminist invoked armed self-defense as can be seen among white women. The Panther women did not reject their femininity and neither did the movement. Men and women were considered equal human beings, both capable and in their right to defend themselves with a gun. Gender was not considered an issue. The gun, for Panther women was a tool to become equal to men through the revolution of the Civil Rights Movement.

White radical women on the Left

In contrast to the celebration of femininity among black women in the Black Panther Party, white feminists did not celebrate their femininity through motherhood and 'traditional girliness'. They resisted it. Through behaving more masculine and proving their worth through the use of guns, it can be concluded that they were achieving the opposite of what they set out to do. They aimed to become equal as women, but they had to do so by behaving in a masculine manner. This masculine behavior is described by Melzer as undesirable. *'Both masculine women and feminine men threaten the gender status quo and promote feminist goals, members say, which include anti-freedom policies like gun control and group rights.'*⁴⁹

An example of feminists that resisted their womanhood can be found in the radical New Left political group: The Weathermen. This group did not consist of only women, but women did

⁴⁸ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 18.

⁴⁹ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 135.

play a part in the violence that the movement used as a political strategy. The government used violence against civil rights groups and so, they decided, they were allowed to do so as well. The Weathermen fought for rights for blacks and demonstrated against the Vietnam War. They saw guns as a means to defend themselves from an oppressive state.⁵⁰ The women in the movement ‘sometimes defined the use of the gun as inherently feminist when it entailed destroying a system they defined as male in its violence.’⁵¹ The resistance went further than against men. The feminist white women of the New Left rebelled against masculinity and male institutions. Revolution was the main focus of the resistance; feminism was considered a positive effect of that revolution.⁵² In 1968, feminist writer, Kate Millet wrote an essay “Sexual Politics” in which she stated that it is time that male oppression in all aspects of life should be over. The ‘(white) male race’, as she calls it, should share its position and become a human race in which there is room for both genders and all races.

“[T]his arrangement of male rule and control of our society is so obvious – why is it never acknowledged or discussed? Partly, I suspect because such discussion is regarded as dangerous in the extreme and because a culture does not discuss its most basic assumptions and most cherished bigotries. Why does no one ever remark that the military, industry, the universities, the sciences, political office and finance[...] every avenue of power in our culture including the repressive forces of the police – entirely in male hands? Money, guns, authority itself, are male provinces.”⁵³

Millet points out that the notion that men rule all of society is not discussed or even noticed. She argues that, apparently, it is the standard that society accepted. She argues that this standard is unacceptable and that it should change. Her essay became the center piece of a book that she wrote and it became a classic in second-wave feminist literature. Millet did not promote gun use for women, but her focus is not gun ownership, it is feminism. Owning guns in her essay is a possible means of reaching equality, but not the solution. That is also why it can be concluded that guns were not always deliberately chosen by women to become independent from men.

⁵⁰ Browder, *Her best shot*, 168.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 165.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 72.

⁵³ K. Millet, ‘Sexual Politics’ (1968).

A perfect example of a woman that became the epitome of the armed woman in the 1970's is Patty Hearst. She was kidnapped in 1974. She was a student and she was from a well-to-do background. A year later, Patty's childlike face was seen on the tapes of a bank robbery. She had joined a radical militant group and had changed her name to 'Tania'. From her autobiography we understand that Patty was raped multiple times during her kidnapping. Browder argues that the violence, the sexualized violence, could make her a woman while she appeared to be a child. *'Patty Hearst, thus, embodied a cultural nightmare about the violence potential inherent in all women and the power of promiscuous sex to unleash that violence.'*⁵⁴ Many women on the Radical Left had no children. They considered the power over their bodies to be another expression of their equality to men. They could decide whether or not they would exercise their 'maternal gifts'. These facts enraged the American public. These sexually liberal feminists were going to destroy American culture by denying it their children. By the end of the 1970's the shocking notion of these women instigated a new generation on the right.

Radical changes

What changed in the years between 1960 and 1981 is that women from both sides of the political spectrum had achieved a new sense of womanhood, womanhood in which women were not automatically inferior to men in society. Legal equality for women was not enough to ensure factual equality. The radical movements had shown different ways in which women were equal to men. The radical groups in the Civil Rights movement had used guns to make their point and to command respect and attention. The women in those groups and women in feminist groups achieved a renewed perspective on women and introduced the notion that women could and should be more than potential wives and mothers.

Guns were not only used by women to become equal, but they were also used by radical political movements. The use of guns by extreme groups and the murders of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and others led to the Gun Control Act of 1968. The Act threatened gun ownership in the eyes of the NRA. It was during these years when the NRA became more and more politically active. The social circumstances and the political situation forced the NRA to shift its attention from solely educating shooters to becoming involved in politics. In 1975 the Institute for Legislative Action was established. The ILA was

⁵⁴ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 185.

meant to serve as a platform that would inform the membership of pending gun legislation and advise members about the possible consequences. However, the more conservative membership deemed this development insufficient to ensure the NRA's survival. In 1977 a coup was staged by a group of conservative members that replaced the board of directors with a new board that they considered competent to defy the threats that were posed to gun rights. Melzer considers this moment as the origin of the NRA's identity as a Social Movement Organization.⁵⁵ Although the NRA had taken rigorous steps to ensure the existence of the organization, they could not control what happened a few years later. On 30 March 1981, John Hinckley approached President Reagan on a sidewalk just as the President was escorted to his car and fired five rounds. Hinckley failed to shoot the president, but wounded three other people, one of which sustained a permanent brain injury, the President's press secretary, James Brady. From this moment on the NRA would have to defend gun ownership, its own existence and find allies to join the fight.

⁵⁵ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 66.

Chapter 3. Maintaining myths in the face of reality

The years leading up to the turn of the century seem very quiet compared to the radical 1960's and 1970's. They are however crucial to the developments in gun ownership and especially among women. The failed attempt on President Reagan's life in 1981 spurred more debate about the dangers of civilians owning guns. The memories of the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King were still fresh in people's minds and now another president had almost been killed. These negative memories and associations with guns threatened the image of the NRA and it became necessary to change the image of guns and gun ownership. This chapter shows how the NRA tried to increase its appeal to women starting in the 1980's by approaching them as new consumers. Women had never been targeted by the NRA before and the organization needed to slowly introduce women to the gun market. It did so by changing society's perception of safety for women through numbers.

The 1980's can be seen as a period in which the NRA meticulously prepared a shift towards women in their rhetoric through the misinterpretation of statistics and creating a belief that women could no longer refrain from owning guns. Throughout the 1990's however this rhetoric was challenged, especially during the Clinton administration in which numerous gun control measures were taken. What shook the NRA the most were the violent events and the aftermath of the Columbine shooting that took place in Littleton, Colorado, were thirteen young Americans found their death at the hands of two of their classmates who had shot them in cold blood with semi automatic guns. The Columbine shooting was the considered the first and worst school massacre. The tragedy shocked the nation. Less than a week after the shooting, the NRA held a gun rally in Littleton, by which the NRA ignored the families' requests to cancel the event out of respect for the Columbine victims. In the light of the violent events of the last years, Donna Dees-Thomases, a mother, initiated the Million Mom March to show America that mothers had had enough tragedy and that the government would have to do something. Even though the NRA's strategy to appeal to women seemed successful, the tragedies that occurred at Columbine and other schools were more powerful. The 1990's can therefore be considered as the years that helped define the NRA the most.

An elaborate trick to domesticate the gun?

America did not have recent positive experiences with guns that could outweigh the negative ones and those experiences fed the fear of guns and the inclination towards supporting gun control measures. The gun industry could use the boost. The necessity for more gun owners sparked Smith & Wesson to commission Gallup to do a series of polls from 1983 until 1988 that showed increased gun ownership among women.⁵⁶ The reason for an increase in the number of women that owned guns according to this poll was that women felt the need to protect themselves since the world supposedly had become more dangerous. Other reasons for this sudden increase was that women lived alone more than they used to and that they had to protect themselves. Also the premise that the gender gap was closing was posed as an argument for the increase in the number of gun women.

Historian and director of NORC,⁵⁷ Thomas W. Smith and his associate, Robert J. Smith explore the findings in their article 'Changes in Firearms Among Women' and they conclude that the numbers in the Gallup research were highly exaggerated by the media and pro-gun groups.⁵⁸ They explain in their article that statistics on the topic of gun ownership among women is often based on unreliable data, but that the conclusions had already been adopted by the media. The Gallup survey revealed that from 1983 until 1988 a 100 percent increase of women owning guns had taken place.⁵⁹ These numbers were highly exaggerated. The authors of the articles explain how these numbers were fabricated. The authors distinguish different types of gun ownership; having a gun in the home that is shared with a spouse, carrying a gun away from home and actively using a gun in a shooting range, and possible interest to own a gun. These different types were all considered to be part of one category of gun ownership. These faulty estimates implied that on average twenty million women in America owned a gun.⁶⁰ According to Smith and Smith that number would indicate that there were more guns than America had produced or imported that year.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 16.

⁵⁷ National Opinion Research Centre at the University of Chicago.

⁵⁸ T.W. Smith & R. J. Smith, 'Changes in Firearms Ownership Among Women, 1980-1994', *Journal of criminal law and criminology* (1995)144.

⁵⁹ Smith & Smith, 'Changes in Firearms Ownership Among Women', 136.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 138.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 142.

Other estimates based on surveys that were done by researchers were also influenced by the Gallup poll that Smith & Wesson had done. In the early 1990's Gallup corrected Smith & Wesson *'for misusing the data on potential gun purchases from these same surveys'*.⁶²

The poll turned out to be misused. The media however had already taken up the same rhetoric. This rhetoric paved the way for some of the other initiatives that were taken by the NRA to appeal more to women. In 1989 the first NRA women's magazine *Women and Guns* was launched. It was only 16 pages long and all the pictures were in black and white.⁶³ The first issues covered Gun Rights conferences, information about gun legislation, and concealed carry options for women. That same year the Lady Smith Handgun was presented and ready for sale. It was a revolver that fitted women's hands better and it looked like a real weapon unlike the pink and golden "toys" from the 1950's that women's weapons had had. *Women and Guns* mentioned the Lady Handgun in the first issue of the magazine that was published. The same rhetoric that had been sparked by the Gallup poll was used in the magazine. Novelist Naomi Wolf spoke approvingly of the magazine *'In the voices of women's letters to the magazine, one can hear the pioneer voices of women who know that no one will take care of them but themselves.'*⁶⁴ Women were encouraged to take care of themselves in the time of danger and high crime rates that they presumably lived in.

In 1989 it was not just a magazine and a new type of gun that were launched. Laura Browder shows in her book that this was the moment where women were not only granted access to the gun industry, but they were seen as the salvation of the gun industry. To affirm this image, feminist ideals were used by the gun industry's advocates. Gun owning women were portrayed as feminist pioneers. *'It's like the bumper sticker says: God didn't create men and women equal. Samuel Colt did.'*⁶⁵ The nostalgia of frontier self-reliance and feminist rhetoric were woven into a message that pushed women to become consumers of the gun industry. The belief that women had to protect themselves and the opportunity to do so created a new era in which women began to have a serious role in pro-gun groups.

⁶² Ibidem, 138.

⁶³ Second Amendment Foundation, 'It was Twenty Years Ago Today' (June 2009) <http://www.womensshooters.com/historyincovers.html> (3 July 2013).

⁶⁴ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 213.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 213.

American identity and gun ownership among women

Browder points out a crucial realization. The magazine, *Women and Guns*, would not be effective when its sole purpose was to sell more guns. *'They must create an imagined community of armed women.'*⁶⁶ The way to reach women that are not yet part of a community of armed women is not through convincing them to purchase a gun, but to make them part of a community. They can arm themselves later. Browder wonders what this community must be like. How do these women see themselves? The combination of frontier Annie Oakley and the independent militia women of the 1980's make up an interesting "new armed woman" that can speak to a variety of women that are not yet part of the community but will most certainly not be scared away through advertising for guns. In *Women & Guns* women were often portrayed as women who had successfully fought off an assailant or prevented a crime with their guns. Browder even uses the word "*mother lioness*" rhetoric to describe the tone of the magazine.⁶⁷ The female gun owner became accepted in the gun community and that was worth much more than gun sales going up for a little while. *'Women's rage and power, celebrated in the early days of Women & Guns, have been tamed, and the armed woman has been made palatable for non-gun owners and conservatives alike.'*⁶⁸ Browder means to say that the frightening idea of a woman owning a gun was slowly diminished through the apparent normalcy that was presented by *Women and Guns* but also by other media. To make women part of the gun community was one of the best ways to preserve the so-called gun culture in America.

Making women part of a community was not only realized by the launch of an NRA magazine or the misrepresentation of statistics. It was part of a natural development that had been set into motion since the second wave of feminism. Women aspired to be equal to men. Abigail Kohn writes in her book *Shooters* about gun ownership and its meaning. She connects gun ownership to American citizenship and personhood.⁶⁹ She also explicates that *'being able to own a gun is synonymous with being recognized as a full-status person in the eyes of the state'*.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 214.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 219.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 221.

⁶⁹ A. A. Kohn, *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures* (New York 2004) 67.

⁷⁰ Kohn, *Shooters*, 69.

Citizenship in American literature has been researched extensively and it is recognized as a complex combination of race, gender and nationhood. Browder uses gender, citizenship and the American symbol of the gun for her research. She states that citizenship is more than how a person is perceived by the state.

*“Citizenship, after all, entails more than the rights and obligations of full political participation in the nation. It also involves the chance to partake in the imagined life of the nation – to enter into the mythologies of nation making and nation building.”*⁷¹

The myths that Browder is referring to are the frontier narratives that were used in *Women and Guns* but also in the general rhetoric that was deployed to appeal to women. American values such as self-reliance and independence are key concepts to American identity. The icons in Browder’s book play a part in these myths. They represent an ideal that should be revived. They represent what could be called: do it yourself citizenship. The notion that the government would not always be there to protect its citizens and that responsible citizens would have to be able to take care of themselves. This was also what *Women and Guns* derived from the frontier mythology. Women needed to learn to be independent from men.

In 1994, the NRA launched its ‘Refuse to be a victim’ program.⁷² It promoted the notion that women were victors instead of victims. The program was initially designed to repeat the empowerment rhetoric of the NRA and to encourage women to become gun owners who know what they are doing. Today the program is no longer promoted as a gun owner program, but just to make women aware of the dangers that they are possibly subject to when they are alone. It can be concluded that this is not necessarily different from how the program started out. When women are told how to protect themselves from rapists and murderers with the help of self-defense classes and pepper spray, they may find themselves ill-prepared against a perpetrator that is much stronger than they are. There is a big chance that women that follow the ‘Refuse to be a victim program’ are more likely to purchase a hand gun than women who do not follow the classes at all. The women that attend are often already involved with the NRA at a certain level; either through their employer who offers the course to female employees or through friends who have recommended the course.

⁷¹ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 19.

⁷² Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 16.

Melzer calls these people ‘peripheral membership’.⁷³ He has not included them in his book because these members do not greatly support the NRA’s politics.⁷⁴ Women that attend ‘Refuse to be a victim’ can be placed in that same category. They are not particularly pro-gun in the sense that they feel the need to fight for gun rights, but they just want to protect themselves and their family through the use of a gun, preferably in a safe way. These are probably not the women that actively participate in the gun lobby but they might not oppose gun rights either. They find themselves between two camps.

Gun control threats and moms

The mythology of owning a gun can only be maintained when guns are legal and available. Since the early 1990’s several bans had been passed that restricted gun ownership. President George Bush passed the “Gun free school zones act” of 1990 and it was meant to keep schools safer by banning guns from school property. In 1993, President Clinton passed the Brady Bill, which required criminal background checks to purchase a gun. These restrictions to own a gun conflicted with the ideals that the NRA presented. The government should not intervene or impede an American’s Second Amendment rights. In Melzer’s book *Gun Crusaders* this interference by the government is seen as ‘an overbearing nanny’. This ‘nanny-state’ is exactly what America tried to escape from through the revolutionary war.⁷⁵ This drive for independence resonates in the way the government is depicted within the notion of a “nanny-state”. “Nanny-state” implies that a feminine government is not welcome; at least not when it tells its citizens what they can or cannot do.

The NRA entered into crisis during the 1990’s. Melzer argues that this crisis had to do with the recent legislation, and the way the organization reacted to the Oklahoma City bombing that took place on 15 April 1995.⁷⁶ Timothy McVeigh, a former NRA member and an ex-Army soldier, bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people.⁷⁷ Vice-president of the NRA, Wayne LaPierre, sent an ‘unrelated fundraising letter’ in which he called American law enforcement ‘*jack-booted thugs*’, names that are commonly associated with fascism and

⁷³ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 17.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, 174.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 135.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 40.

⁷⁷ FBI, ‘Terror hits home: The Oklahoma City Bombing’ <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/oklahoma-city-bombing> (3 July 2013).

Nazi SS soldiers. La Pierre disagreed with the way in which federal agents were conducting their investigation. In his opinion they limited the American citizen's freedom. Former President George Bush resigned his lifetime membership and so did many other important key figures.⁷⁸ The drop in NRA membership became worse and according to Melzer the only thing that could save the organization now was the presidency of Charlton Heston in 1998. He renewed the frontier rhetoric and even said that gun owners were about to be extinct. The battle was not over yet. Heston ignited the NRA pro gun fire again.

One of the most tragic events in the history of violent acts in America took place at a school. On 20 April 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School and killed 13 people (12 students and 1 teacher) with semi automatic weapons before taking their own lives. They had also placed explosives in the parking area around the school. The 18 year-old boys had gotten some of the guns through a friend and some from a gun show. Eric Harris was even under the treatment of a psychiatrist. The security video with the 911 operator's voice can easily be found on the internet and even though the Columbine massacre took place almost fifteen years ago it is extremely shocking to see and hear what these boys have done.⁷⁹ Their acts were horrifying and shocked America. What happened in April that year sparked the gun debate and the availability of guns even more. Apparently, it was still much too easy to obtain guns. In his documentary, *Bowling for Columbine* (2003), Michael Moore says that the guns were all legally purchased and the bullets came from their local Kmart.⁸⁰ The FBI investigation that followed showed that the boys had written blogs about other acts of violence such as hijacking a plane and crashing it into New York City. Their blogs stated that they wanted to exceed McVeigh's bombing. These revelations added to the disbelief and shock that had already been caused by the shooting. In his documentary, Michael Moore attributes gun violence in America to socio-economic inequality and he also claims that the American people find themselves in a constant state of fear instilled by the deluding coverage of violence and tragedy by the media.⁸¹ Moore's documentary has a very one-sided tone, but the feeling of fear is clear from the interviews with people that lived in Littleton at the time of the Columbine shooting.

⁷⁸ New York Times, (3 May 1995) <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/05/11/us/letter-of-resignation-sent-by-bush-to-rifle-association.html> (17 July 2013).

⁷⁹ Columbine Massacre, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zp-BeywDvLI> (18 July 2013)

⁸⁰ Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine* (2003).

⁸¹ Ibidem.

In reaction to the unbelievably violent events that had occurred, on Mother's Day 15 April 2000, 750.000 people held their Million Mom March to protest against guns. The Million Mom March was a grass root initiative that was started by Donna Dees-Thomases. Her reason for starting the movement was to get average Americans to convince their legislators and their congressmen to vote for 'sensible' gun laws. TIME Magazine lists the Million Mom March in their top-ten of *'feminism's most 'formidable protests'*.⁸² On Mother's day in 2000, 750.000 people gathered in front of the Washington National Mall to protest. The fact that at that specific day there were not precisely one million moms is something that the pro gun movements have held against them. The argument of the Million Mom March as voiced by Dees-Thomases in an interview with CBS News is that the ownership of firearms will be regulated. *'We're looking for basic policies like licensing and registration. You need to treat guns with the same respect as you treat automobiles [...] What we're looking for is to make sure a person has a license for a handgun that can be revoked if he abuses those privileges as well as having their handgun taken away.'*⁸³ The Million Mom March and the Brady campaign, that supported the March, did not advocate a message that supported to delete the Second Amendment or ban all guns, but despite their message they were seen as the enemy in the eyes of those who opposed gun control in any form.

The rhetoric of the Million Mom March was marked by maternal language. Similar to the NRA the speakers promoted family values to support gun control measures. The rhetoric that was used by the speakers that attended the March was not only aimed at Congress, but also at the NRA. Famous speakers such as talk show host Rosie O'Donnell and Courtney Love were present to underline the importance of stricter gun control. Rosie O'Donnell even stated that *'the NRA is buying votes with blood money'*.⁸⁴ She argued that the NRA cannot invest in sensible legislation because they have a financial interest. Their speeches clearly defined 'good and bad guys'. The founder of the Million Mom March describes the empowerment she felt when she started the MMM in her book *Looking for a few good moms. 'In my mind, these MMM women were lifting an 18-wheeler off the many children*

⁸² M. Gibson, 'A Brief History of Women's Protests' (12 August 2011) http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088114_2087975_2087974,00.html (9 July 2013).

⁸³ B. Plante, 'Archive: Donna Dees-Thomases' (11 February 2009) http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250_162-194072.html (9 July 2013).

⁸⁴ Brady Campaign, 'Rosie O'Donnell Speaks at the Million Mom March' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeaT0V9yCV4> (4 July 2013).

*pinned underneath. The massive truck was the gun lobby, and its weight was crushing our children's hope of a future free of violence.*⁸⁵ From that moment on, mothers were the new competing force opposing guns. They were in large numbers and had a powerful voice. Ben McIntyre, columnist for *The Times*, characterized the mothers in the following way:

*"Mothers are the most revered demographic in American life, and the "soccer moms", once considered the key to election success, have been elbowed aside this year by gun-concerned Moms. Some 72 percent of American women favor greater regulation of guns compared to just 22 percent of men – that is a statistic, politicians anxious to get elected in 2000 will ignore at their peril."*⁸⁶

McIntyre based his statement on a Gallup poll in 2000. New polls show that since 2000 the rate of people that favor stricter gun control has increased.⁸⁷ The number of women that favor control are still a large majority.⁸⁸ This statistic emphasizes the unexpected alliance between women and the NRA. Although statistics may not always be reliable, the odds of women joining the pro gun fight do not seem to be in the NRA's favor. The idea of tricking women into becoming gun owners had not worked as well as the organization had hoped. However, the Armed & Fabulous channel seems to portray the opposite. How is that possible?

Since the radical changes in women's positions during the 1960's and 1970's women were given more room to develop themselves in ways other than in the role of housewives and supporting complementary companions. They were seen as the solution for the NRA's membership problem and soon became the target of gun promotion in the form of feminine merchandize, a new women's magazine and self defense programs. The notion that women were bound to become victims of violent crime duped them into becoming gun owners.

The 1980's and 1990's display a great change in perception of guns. In the mid 1980's pro-gun groups were getting ready to pursue women as a new group of consumers and members of the gun owner community in order to protect their families. At the end of the millennium women had become gun control activists for that same reason, protect their families.

⁸⁵ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 224.

⁸⁶ Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 27.

⁸⁷ Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx> (17 July 2013).

⁸⁸ Gallup, <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/gun-control-key-data-points-from-pew-research/> (17 July 2013).

Notions that the gun was a useful tool for women's protection were challenged by the gun control laws of the early 1990's and the violent shootings such as occurred in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. Reality had come knocking on America's door. Guns were not only tools that could be used in a domestic situation, but they also posed a potential threat to all members of the family. The NRA had created and used rhetoric to increase the appeal of guns to women, but now learned that appeal to women in general would not do the trick once mothers all over the country were uniting against guns. The situation had to get back under control, and even though Charlton Heston was seen as one of the saviors of the NRA, the organization needed to refine its approach towards women and show America that the NRA really was there to protect their family's rights. The NRA needed to thoroughly redefine its face.

Chapter 4. It's up to the mothers

The Million Mom March stirred the gun debate in a profound way. The notion that all American mothers were against guns and wanted gun control measures was highly contested by pro gun women. The Million Mom response against the violent events of the past years was to speak out for 'sensible' gun reform.⁸⁹ Gun reform could be interpreted as a call for stricter gun laws and that was exactly what the opposition did not want. NRA Executive Vice President Wayne La Pierre called the march the "Misled Mothers March" and asserted that it was a trick to benefit Al Gore's presidential campaign. His solution to the debate about guns and gun legislation would be to educate these women more about how safe guns really are.⁹⁰

The causes of the gun violence, according to the Brady Campaign that supported the March, were the current gun laws and the poor reinforcement of those laws. There were, however multiple causes of gun violence according to different people. Michael Moore blamed the fearful mind of the American people. Pro gunners blamed violent videogames and bad parenting. Women that supported guns started their own movements. One of these movements is the called "The Second Amendment Sisters'. They were infuriated by the Million Mom March. On their website it is stated that they did not want these women to speak for them. '*Guns do not kill people, (bad) people kill people*', a familiar creed.⁹¹ What is most striking is that the NRA took up maternal rhetoric in the years after the Million Mom March as well. In 2005 Sandy Froman was elected president of the NRA and she pleaded that women and children needed to be educated more about guns.⁹² Also the NRA propagated the ideal that women are responsible for the safety of their family. Mothers have a duty protect their children and loved ones. In 2013 the NRA re-launched its women's channel

⁸⁹ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 79.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, 80.

⁹¹ Second Amendment Sisters, 'Our Mission'

http://www.2asisters.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47:mission&catid=31:about&Itemid=41 (8 July 2013).

⁹² NRA Women, 'Meet a Past NRA president – Sandy Froman' <http://nrawomen.tv/armed-and-fabulous/video/meet-a-past-nra-president-sandy-froman/list/leading-the-pack-coming-soon> (9 July 2013).

“Armed and Fabulous” where monthly “New Energy women” tell the world what being a gun owner is all about.⁹³

A multitude of voices both in favor and against gun control can be distinguished after the Million Mom March took place. This chapter attempts to analyze their rhetoric and their biases, both from grassroots organizations and the NRA. Also the gun debate was no longer just about whether owning guns was a right that needed to be exercised. Twine states that after the March the “social life” of the gun had also become part of the debate. *‘In other words, different types of guns were described as having social characteristics, personalities, and were classified as “good” or “bad” – qualities that we often associated with living beings.’* The mothers that took part in the march, but also the New Energy women of the NRA now not only defended their opinions based on legislative arguments, but also based on the associations that Americans have concerning guns. Deborah Homsher clearly summarized the opposite sides of the argument and its implications.

“Partisan political groups in the United States have identified two essential, but contradictory aspects of a gun: pro-gunners insist that guns are inert tools... while anti-gunners maintain that they are active, alluring agents. This disagreement raises questions not only about the real identity of a gun, but about the composition of the American people.”⁹⁴

Homsher implies that the identity of the gun is intertwined with American identity to such an extent that this polarized debate reflects the construction of American identity and the American people. This polarization is reflected in all the different statements that are given concerning gun ownership especially among women.

Third wave feminism and guns

Women have used guns as an equalizer. Equality was a feminist goal. Legally, and mostly socio-economically, women in western society are considered equal to men. Feminism has changed throughout the last century. Equality in the legal sense is no longer the objective. Experts in the field of gender studies and social studies have determined that today third wave feminism is the latest form of feminism. In their introduction to gender studies, Jane

⁹³ J. Howerton, ‘Meet the Fresh Faces of the NRA Who Are Fighting for America’s Gun Rights’ (29 April 2013) <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/04/29/meet-the-fresh-female-faces-of-the-nra-who-are-fighting-for-americas-gun-rights/> (8 July 2013).

⁹⁴ Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 10.

Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan define third wave feminism as *'the feminism of a younger generation of women who acknowledge the legacy of the second wave feminism, but also identify what they see as its limitations.'*⁹⁵ They mean by this that third wave feminists employ a more post-modern view towards feminism; today's circumstances greatly differ from those that occurred during second wave feminism and therefore it is no longer applicable. Judy Lattas applies the concept of third wave feminism to gun ownership among women. Her work mainly focuses on Australian women, but her conclusions can still be used in American context.

Lattas states that *'shooting women have seized the moment on behalf of feminism'*.⁹⁶ In her article she attempts to explore what 21st century, or third wave, feminism is and what women drives to become gun owners. She concludes that third wave feminists are individualist feminists and that a characteristic of this type of feminism is that these young women will reject *'collective solidarity'* to benefit the individual.⁹⁷ Guns are a prime example of this characteristic. The argument that guns might harm other people or children, for some, does not compensate the possibility that the same gun may protect them from 'bad guys'. Guns can protect, empower and bond but they can also threaten, kill and injure people for life. Shooting women benefit from guns in the way that it is an absolute power they are willing to be responsible for. The difference with second wave feminism here is that it is considered *'victim feminism'*. Shooting women chose to become 'power feminists' and take matters into their own hands. They possess the power to fend off an attacker by themselves instead of having to wait for the authorities. The mothers that participated in the Million Mom March do not agree with this type of *'power feminism'*. They find that a gun is not the solution to keep people from becoming a victim.

Grass root activist mothers

Donna Dees-Thomases was criticized for her role as the initiator of the Million Mom March. She had previously worked for CBS as a publisher and her involvement with the March was seen by some as a trick to benefit the Democratic Party during the elections. The speakers at the event spoke out strongly against guns and gun ownership. It can be expected that this did not fare well with the opposition. Some of the pro gun grass root initiatives were existent

⁹⁵ J. Pilcher & I. Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London 2004) 169.

⁹⁶ J. Lattas, '21st Century Feminism, Armed and Ready?' *Social alternatives* April (2005) 55.

⁹⁷ Lattas, '21st Century Feminism, armed and ready?' 55.

long before the March took place, but they certainly responded with great resistance to the message that the Million Mom March and the Brady Campaign advocated. The Women Against Gun Control (WAGC), which was founded in 1994, and the Second Amendment Sisters, who were founded in January 2000, greatly disagreed with the March. The Second Amendment Sisters even organized their own march on the same day to advocate gun ownership for women, people short of stature, handicapped and elderly, because, they argue *'self-defense is a basic human right'*.⁹⁸ About 5000 people attended the pro gun rally. With the pro gunners outnumbered 150 to one, one wonders about representation of pro gun women.

The language that pro gun groups use is similar to that of the language deployed at the Million Mom March, but they differ in various ways as well. The similarities are that they all seem to agree that family comes first and that children need to be safe. The difference can be found on all the official websites, in-official blogs and even on social media. The website of WAGC stated on 1 January 2000 that when you are face-to-face with an attacker, screaming for help, running away or calling the police is not an option since *'the Supreme Court has rules that the police do not have a Constitutional duty to protect you as an individual'*. They also claim that *'[g]uns are a girl's best friend'* because *'guns are the great equalizer. Guns give women a fighting chance.'*⁹⁹ Also some of their creeds are *'Not all women want to be victims.'*¹⁰⁰ WAGC is very clear about its message. The WAGC does not want to be considered part of the message that the Million Mom March advocated in 2000. The same resistance can be found among the Second Amendment Sisters, which was founded in reaction to the Million Mom March. SAS' arguments to support gun ownership are very similar to what WAGC stated on its website. The Second Amendment Sisters deny that guns are too easy to access and they reject the notion of *'proliferation of the "gun culture" in America'* that the Million Moms state.¹⁰¹ SAS states that guns save lives rather than endanger them and that millions of deaths and injuries are prevented each year using

⁹⁸ SAS,

http://www.2asisters.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47:mission&catid=31:about&Itemid=41 (17 July 2013).

⁹⁹ WAGC, 'About WAGC' (1 January 2000)

<http://wayback.archive.org/web/20000601204258/http://www.wagc.com/about.html> (9 July 2013).

¹⁰⁰ WAGC, <http://www.wagc.com/> (9 July 2013).

¹⁰¹ Second Amendment Sisters, 'Our Mission'

http://www.2asisters.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47:mission&catid=31:about&Itemid=41 (9 July 2013).

guns. They deny that guns cause crime and they argue that *'good parenting makes good kids.'* The Second Amendment Sisters do not believe that more regulation will solve the problem of gun violence because criminals will not obey the law and find a way around it. Above all, owning a gun is a constitutional right that they wish to maintain.

The pro gun groups clearly display an ideal of frontier independence, self reliance and distrust of government. They focus on the personal responsibility that gun owners have and do not support the notion that the government gets involved in this matter, as opposed to the people that took part in the Million Mom March who want the government to step in and regulate guns. Safety seems to be the key in this debate. A gun can endanger the safety of people, but it can also function as a tool to maintain safety. Twine argues that if a gun is necessary to protect women from home burglaries, domestic violence, a home intruder or potential rapist that there should be some kind of motive through which can be assumed that these women are really in danger in their homes. Twine states that women in the most dangerous neighborhoods cannot afford the type of protection that a gun is supposed to offer and the women who can, live in neighborhoods that are hardly ever subject to violence other than intimate partner violence.¹⁰²

Deborah Homsher complements this remarkable statement in her book by reporting about her visits to predominantly black neighborhoods in Camden, New Jersey. This area has a very high crime rate, but the women she spoke were not interested in owning a gun. Their children are subject to danger and violence every day, but they do not believe that owning a gun as a law-abiding citizen would solve the problems in the neighborhood or scare off a burglar.

*"[T]hey lived divided from the men one would expect to husband and help them over time [...] In a way, this meant that they lived in an exaggerated version of an old American dream that directs men out into the wilderness with their guns and instructs the women to stay at home with the children."*¹⁰³

The Camden women live alone in a dangerous place, without their husbands. Homsher hints at a different type of frontier than the pro gun groups do. It is not romantic or an ideal. It is a harsh reality for many and hard to overcome. The values of self-reliance and independence

¹⁰² Twine, *Girls with Guns*, 34.

¹⁰³ Homsher, *Women and Guns*, 183.

are not derived from possessing a fire arm, but from living apart from family and making the best of circumstances.

NRA ladies

The NRA is over a hundred years old and experienced with debates that question its position, its interests and the organization in general. Since the Million Mom March, more shootings took place in which many young people died. In Flint, Michigan at Buel Elementary in 2000 a 6 year-old boy took a gun from his uncle's house and accidentally shot another 6 year-old at his school. The shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 and more recently the shooting in Newtown are only two more examples of violent shootings. During the past ten years many more violent incidents took place in the United States. Of course these events also had an impact on the NRA image.

In an article about the Second Amendment Sisters, one of the founders Julie Bednarzyk, stated that *'Organizations like the NRA have a negative media image. They are portrayed as extremist and militant, and that turns off a lot of women. But we are non-compromising.'*¹⁰⁴ The Second Amendment Sisters do not reject men to become members, but the emphasis of the organization is on women. They qualified the NRA as an organization that is not accessible or suitable for women. However, in 2005 Sandy Froman was elected NRA President, she had served on the board of directors since 1992 and in 1998 she had been voted second vice president. She was one of the co-creators of the 'Refuse to be a victim program'. She stated that education about firearms is indispensable in America.¹⁰⁵ Her message as president of the NRA was that people should not be afraid of guns. They are part of the American culture; part of *'the legacy of American freedom'*. Sandy Froman underlined the importance of women's participation in the organization but also in the gun lobby. Her work paid off, because today the NRA has built a large community of women that take part in the programs that they offer and participate in the political activities that the NRA undertakes.

In the spring of 2013 the NRA women's channel was re-launched with the New Energy women of the NRA. These women are supposed to reflect the ideal of NRA gun women. Each

¹⁰⁴ J.A. d'Agostino, 'Second Amendment Sisters' 57 *Human Events* (2001).

¹⁰⁵ NRA Women, 'Meet a Past NRA President – Sandy Froman' <http://nrwomen.tv/armed-and-fabulous/video/meet-a-past-nra-president-sandy-froman/list/leading-the-pack-coming-soon> (9 July 2013).

of the women underlines the importance of their Second Amendment rights in the videos in which they share their experiences with guns. The women vary in age, but they are all presented as successful and smart women. They advocate the benefits of owning a gun. The New Energy trailer shows multiple women who speak of their right to own a fire arm, *'this right is a civil right and if people are willing to give it up, they will give up other rights as well.'*¹⁰⁶ A highly pregnant woman at a gun show at the start of the trailer states that she wants women who support the cause of the Second Amendment right to write to their elected officials to let them know how important owning a gun is for them as women. She refuses to be *'pigeon-holed into one category, gun-owner.'* She sees herself as a diverse and educated woman, who has a voice that she wants to use in this fight for her gun rights. The arguments of the women in the New Energy videos for owning a gun, are that fire arms are closely related to their ideals of American identity.

Il Ling, a middle-aged gun site range master, thinks back about the times that she and her father hunted together.¹⁰⁷ She attributes her life lessons and the close relationship with her father to hunting. She is convinced that giving women the chance to use and own fire arms gives them a profound feeling of independence. After a career in commercial marketing for twenty years she decided to dedicate the rest of her career to teach women how to shoot guns. She states that self-defense is a responsibility that every human being has. The image of women in the role of the victim in the media is something she dislikes. Women are strong and capable not weak and potential victims. One of the youngest women is Katie Francis, she is thirteen years old and a rising star shooter.¹⁰⁸ She started shooting when she was five. Her experience with shooting is closely related to the relationship with her father. She is portrayed as a mature girl that can handle herself. She seems to be a model of what the next generation of shooters should be like, start young and be an example. Her father wanted to teach his daughter to have a healthy respect for guns and learn how to use them responsibly from an early age. Today she sometimes serves as a range officer at shooting events.

¹⁰⁶ NRA Women, 'We are New Energy' (29 April 2013) <http://nraw.videodigm.com/new-energy/video/new-energy-preview/list/profiles> (9 July 2013).

¹⁰⁷ NRA New Energy, 'Il Ling' <http://nraw.videodigm.com/new-energy/video/il-ling-new-new-energy/list/profiles> (9 July 2013).

¹⁰⁸ NRA Armed and Fabulous, 'Rising Through the Ranks' <http://nraw.videodigm.com/armed-and-fabulous/video/rising-through-the-ranks/list/leading-the-pack-coming-soon> (9 July 2013).

Il Ling's point of view is similar to what the other New Energy women advocate. The feeling of accomplishment and empowerment after learning how to shoot and the feeling of security that the weapon brings to them are mentioned by virtually all of the women that share their story on the online NRA women's channel. Young Katie mainly expresses the fun she experiences with shooting, she does not practice the same language as that of the other women. Her story seems to reflect a "feel-good" story about guns. The New Energy women and all the other women featuring in the online women's channel send a different message than what the NRA used to emit. The need to appeal to women is possibly answered through this new approach. All the women seem to be sympathetic their stories make them average, responsible and trustworthy women instead of 'crazy gun nuts'. By explicitly saying that they are the NRA and the face of the NRA, the message is unmistakably clear. Guns are not the enemy when you take the chance to get to know them, and yourself.

The rhetoric of all the women in this chapter goes back to basic American values that are interpreted differently depending on their viewpoint regarding fire arms. Also in both camps evidence of feminist and maternal language can be found. The Million Moms call upon American women to stand up and become active in approaching their legislators to plea for sensible gun control reform, be responsible and take control over the safety of your children, is their message. The pro gun women express a similar wish, do not stand by while your Second Amendment rights are being taken away and you cannot protect your family with a gun anymore. This language can be interpreted as feminist, but also as a reference to frontier nostalgia. The women of frontier times have a romantic appeal of self-reliance, independence and strength. The same values are evident from the New Energy videos on the NRA women's channel. The bias in this language is that the frontier was not romantic. Deborah Homsher has already proven that in her illustration of the women that live in Camden, New Jersey. The problem does not seem to be the notion of independence, but the notion that a gun can provide such independence.

The statement that guns are potential destructive agents is ignored through the answer that 'guns do not kill people, but people kill people' and that proper gun safety can be achieved through taking shooting classes. This argument is reflective of what Judy Lattas pointed out as an individualist outlook on citizenship. The New Energy women propagate a personal responsibility that is supposed to overcome tragedy. The statement on the Second

Amendment Sisters' website illustrates this quite obviously: *'good parenting, makes good children.'* If people do not take their responsibilities as parents seriously: they will suffer the consequences. The *'rejection of collective solidarity, in favour of a privileging of the individual'*, is what Lattas calls it.¹⁰⁹ It suggests that as parents and as individuals you are responsible for how your children turn out, not their environment.

This persistent notion of owning a gun being equal to American values is what makes the debate so complicated. The mothers in both camps put emphasis on the same ideals of protecting their families but advocate different ways to achieve them. Besides that, frontier rhetoric is a lot stronger embedded in American identity and gun culture than the reality of gun violence. However, the fact that the women in Camden, New Jersey, reject owning guns to secure the safety of their family shows an interesting development. Apparently, to some the reality is more important than nostalgic frontier ideals. The frontier that Homsher detected in Camden is being redefined by the facts of life of these women. The arguments indicate that groups both in favor and against gun control use, denote a redefinition of the line, or frontier, between civilization and savagery. The problem is that there does not seem to be an agreement on what the notion of this line is. The pro gunners interpret 'the line' as gun ownership and to anti gunners 'the line' is the government and legislation that will protect their family from tragedy. These interpretations can be connected to both second and third wave feminism. The second wave feminists demands the government to change the current situation and therefore they are considered victims by the third wave feminists who are taking matters into their own hands and do not expect any help from the government. However, pro gun women are still a minority and frontier ideology and third wave feminism might prove not to be enough to help them achieve their goal: convincing American mothers that guns are certainly the solution to danger and tragedy.

¹⁰⁹ Lattas, *'21st Century Feminism, Armed and Ready?'* 56.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explain the strange relationship between women and the NRA. The answer lies in a series of developments that took place all through history. During the years that followed the closing of the frontier, after women were completely uninvolved with the NRA and gun rights until today where they are actively involved in the gun lobby, there were certain historical developments that determined the future course for the NRA and women. Since the establishment of the NRA as a hunter's club 1871, women had no significant position in the organization. However, changes that occurred in the uproarious years of the 1960's and 1970's started a new course for both women and the NRA. Women had gained legal equality that they wanted to experience in social interactions as well and the NRA had become more politicized in reaction to increased gun legislation. During the 1980's the NRA made its first move towards women by targeting them as potential consumers. Guns were presented as useful tools and women were encouraged to become more independent through becoming gun owners. This trend continued throughout the early 1990's, and because the Clinton administration pushed more gun control legislation, and membership was decreasing the NRA needed to promote its feminine side even more. Self defense programs and gun safety classes especially aimed at women were promoted as means to become a 'victor' instead of a 'victim'. The NRA was heavily criticized for its viewpoints after the shooting tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999. The characteristics of the gun were suddenly questioned and the organization needed to redefine its image of 'gun nuts' into a more acceptable concept. The Million Mom March for 'sensible' gun legislation that took place in Washington in 2000 spurred pro gun women to take a stand and show America that these 'Million' women did not speak for them. How could especially women disagree with gun control legislation that could potentially protect their children from getting killed at school?

The highly unlikely alliance between women, particularly mothers, and an overall masculinist organization such as the NRA can be explained through the course of historic events that forced collaboration between these two parties. The apparent improbability that women would advocate gun ownership as a means of protection against danger became a reality through events that mainly took place through the last fifteen to twenty years. Before that

the NRA and women separately went through developments that laid the foundations for the current situation, a fiercely polarized debate about gun ownership in America. Pro gun women, through third wave feminism, have reached an ideal that the NRA also aspires: individuality transcends solidarity and self protection is more important than reliance on the government or other authority figures, men for example. This is where pro gun women and the NRA have developed overlapping ideals.

The fact that the NRA and women have found common ground remains striking, especially when the violent events that took place at for example Columbine High School in 1999, Virginia Tech in 2007 and in Newtown in 2012 are taken into account. The aftermath of these tragedies seem forgotten when the New Energy women argue for the protection of their Second Amendment rights on the NRA women's channel Armed & Fabulous. These beliefs that the New Energy women display are characterized by third wave feminist rhetoric. The women refuse to become victims and want to take matters into their own hands. They justify this argument not through obvious feminist language, but through defining guns as an inherently American characteristic that is founded in their perception of the frontier myth. The reason for this concept is that the NRA, over time, has exerted both feminist language and the frontier myth to appeal to American women and to introduce guns and shooting to them as a tradition as well as an invaluable tool for independent women. It is the meaning that the NRA created for guns.

The meaning of guns for the NRA women varies but it is mostly seen as a tool for equality. The women say they feel empowered and challenged by wielding an instrument that is originally masculine for its shape and its practice. They have entered into the mythology of an American heritage that for a long time was almost exclusively designated to men. Also, the New Energy women believe that guns are part of their American heritage. They consider themselves defenders of civilization. They argue that if they do not defend the Second Amendment, all the other civil rights will be in danger. They consider themselves patriots. This fairly new role for women will not easily be abandoned. The emotional connection with American ideology rooted in the frontier myth is almost impossible to break.

Both gun control activists and pro gun groups participate in the debate to protect their family, either from 'ignorant gun control nanny's' or from 'crazy gun nuts'. By putting

emphasis on different ideals of frontier rhetoric a paradox is created. The dual meaning that a gun can have, potentially lifesaving tool or destructive agent, makes the debate about guns so complicated. The fact that today women advocate Second Amendment rights and are shooters themselves challenges the traditional maternal role that women are often given by society. This apparent paradox creates friction and adds more complexity to the debate.

What complicates this paradox even more is the notion that the black women of Camden, New Jersey, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in America, reject guns as a tool for protection. The situation of these women is similar to that of the real frontier women that took care of their families without their husbands near. These Camden women redefine the frontier myth by not resorting to guns. They believe that it will worsen their situation. This contrasts greatly with the predominantly white New Energy women that live in fairly safe environments but are convinced they need protection from such a powerful tool as a gun.

Based on the same values both gun right advocates and gun control activists pursue completely opposite goals. The highly polarized gun debate has become the battlefield in which women are invited to join either camp. Although statistics show that more than 70 percent of American women are in favor of stricter gun laws, the pro gun women strongly resist the notion that guns are dangerous and should be controlled more by the government. While statistics about gun ownership and opinions about guns are not always reliable, these numbers indicate a great divide between the ideal that is portrayed by the Armed & Fabulous channel and what gun control activists state. The effect of the New Energy women and the online women's channel is not possible to discern, it is simply too early to tell. However, it is clear that as a minority it is necessary and logical for pro gun women to attempt to control their image through modern media.

When a debate such as this enters the realm of American identity and American values it is to be expected that it will not be solved in the near future. Apart from the unfavorable statistics for pro gun groups, American politics are not in the position at the moment to solve this issue. The linchpin in this debate is identity. The debate touches upon American identity, feminine identity, and the identity of firearms. Identity is not a fixed category and therefore the gun debate cannot be solved any time soon. Framing strategies by both the NRA and affiliated pro gun groups but also popular culture have always had great influence on the identity of firearms. The sex appeal that an armed woman has in films is hard to withstand,

even with the stories of mothers opposing that image. The reality of guns is often not recognized; the ideology of guns however is. The symbolism of guns is more persistent and ingrained in the American mind than the harsh reality of Columbine and with that the NRA women can, for the time being, maintain their armed and fabulous image.

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