Brandishing Guns: Performing Race and Belonging in the American West

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Abstract
This article examines the racial dynamics and performative nature of US gun culture by analyzing the 2014 standoff between Cliven Bundy and the Bureau of Land Management. The standoff followed discernible scripts of white masculine privilege and drew on scenarios of conquest in the US American West, as Bundy’s supporters gathered at his ranch and brandished their weapons in open defiance of the federal government. The act of brandishing their guns was a ‘performance of belonging’, a public, theatrical gesture that marks the bearer as a full participant in civic life and all its attendant rights and privileges. This belonging, however, is predicated on histories of white supremacist laws and settler colonialist violence. By reading gun culture in the United States through the lens of performance, this article traces the profound discrepancies between legal and practical gun rights and illuminates one of the most intractable debates at the center of US American life.

Keywords
American West • Cliven Bundy • gun culture • guns • militias • performance • race • theatricality

Perched on an overpass in the southwestern desert, civilian snipers took aim at the crowd of people below. In the days leading up to this moment, the gunmen had arrived from all over the United States, answering a call that had gone out in early April 2014 from several right-wing websites and
radio programs which began circulating stories about Cliven Bundy, a white rancher in southern Nevada whose decades-long fight with the Bureau of Land Management was coming to a head. Positioning the upcoming battle with the Bureau as the descendant of previous armed standoffs with law enforcement at Ruby Ridge and, as the rhetoric escalated, Waco, Bundy and his interlocutors implored patriotic Americans to come to the Bundy Ranch in Bunkerville, Nevada, to protest the Bureau’s planned roundup of his cattle, which had been trespassing on protected federal lands. Bundy legitimized his flouting of federal law by arguing that his cattle could roam where they liked because he had ‘raised cattle on that land, which is public land for the people of Clark County, all my life … I have preemptive rights’ (Mercer, 2014). Bundy’s claims drew on white, masculinist tropes of settler colonialism that erased the centuries of caretaking performed by the Moapa Paiute, who had long resided in the area now occupied by the Bundy Ranch. Hundreds heeded Bundy’s call, assembling at the ranch to protest the Bureau’s planned cattle roundup. Dressing his protest in the language of revolution, Bundy appealed to militia members who were already suspicious of governmental incursion in the West:

‘With all these rangers and all this force that is out here, they are only after one man right now. They are after Cliven Bundy. Whether they want to incarcerate me or whether they want to shoot me in the back, they are after me. But that is not all that is at stake here. Your liberty and freedom is at stake,’ Bundy said. (Watson, 2017, emphasis added)

Bundy’s claim that more than just his interests were at stake – indeed, that a generalized individual liberty was under threat from the federal government – was a signal to militia groups that their opportunity to stand against governmental tyranny was now. Those who came to the Bundy ranch in 2014 had rehearsed for just such a performance of white preemptive rights (Tolley, 2014; Woods, 2014). In imagining the events that took place decades earlier at Ruby Ridge and Waco, militia members planned for a different outcome this time – an altered scenario wherein law enforcement officers were overwhelmed by militia strength and forced to stand down.¹ As tensions escalated at the ranch, militia members assumed tactical positions and trained their guns on the armed Bureau officers.

Bundy and his followers’ spectacular performances of gun ownership during the so-called ‘Battle of Bunkerville’ – an alliterative and thematic reference to the Revolutionary War’s Battle of Bunker Hill – pushed them and the resurgent US militia movement onto an international stage and positioned them as performers in a national drama that presented an interplay of popular and state sovereignty refracted through the lens of the gun-rights movement in the United States. Responses to the protest were polarized: while the striking image of armed, white men standing up to other armed, white men acting at the behest of the federal government inspired patriotic effusions of
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support from their defenders, it elicited mockery and anxiety from others. The planned performance, an open-ended standoff to be broadcast through social media and mainstream news, was accompanied by a less controllable one: the guns themselves actually performed.

Unlike other objects that remain basically inert or obtain meaning only through humans’ psychological and cultural investment in them, guns are inherently performative in that they alter the behavior of both those who wield them and those who are confronted by them in public spaces. This is not to argue that guns are agential or have free will, but rather to articulate how guns, as theatrical things, telegraph subconscious histories of violence and condition embodied behaviors. This article rethinks gun culture in the United States through the lens of performance, revealing that displays of gun ownership are inevitably tied to long and well-documented histories of white supremacy and settler colonialism.2

The Bundy militants’ performances of gun ownership are both citational and historically conditioned, inculcating histories of settler colonialist, proslavery, and police violence meant to bolster and secure a white supremacist system of citizenship and belonging, all tied to generalized concepts of white, masculine individualism and imagined landscapes of the American West. The Bundys and their armed supporters used guns to, as Ammon Bundy explained in his 2016 trial, ‘get [their] message out’ – a message of government overreach and local, citizen-driven protest in the mode of (imagined) colonial revolutionaries (Wilson et al., 2016). The message that the guns conveyed, however, was an unstable one. Within the context of the United States’ capricious gun culture, publicly visible firearms communicate in unpredictable ways and unleash multiple messages that exceed the guns’ function as tools or even as symbolically potent metaphors. Brandishing a gun, then, becomes a theatrical gesture that I am calling a ‘performance of belonging’, a public action that marks the bearer as a full participant in civic life and all its attendant rights and privileges. Analyzing gun culture in the United States as theatrically constituted reveals profound discrepancies between legal and practical rights, and illuminates one of the most intractable debates at the center of American life.

The Theatrical in the Everyday

Using theatricality as a paradigm for understanding how and why people perform themselves the ways that they do can be particularly helpful in explicating the complicated politics and rituals surrounding gun ownership and display, and the afterlives of these actions, in the United States. Theatricality forces us to confront the fact that all embodied behavior, just like all language, is a performance involving repetition or citation. Unraveling the citationality of performances of gun ownership – the ways in which owning, displaying, brandishing, and firing a gun are influenced and conditioned by theatrical reproduction – reveals how guns function as potent transmitters of both real and representational violence. In this way, gun ownership and
display function as performances of belonging, a type of public performance that is meant to demonstrate one’s claim to a position of relative power in the body politic. An emphasis on performance (and particularly performances of belonging) as the very condition of gun ownership exposes US gun culture as a system by which participants enact identity through the repetition of previous performances, both embodied and witnessed.

Within the pervasive culture of guns in the United States, brandishing a gun is real violence, in spite of the gun (hopefully) never discharging. Here, I take brandishing or displaying a gun to mean making a gun visible in a public space in which the gun has the potential to do intentional violence to another person. In this definition, displaying a gun functions differently when it is done in a hunting camp, an urban park, a college green, or a standoff with law enforcement officers. Through the lens of theatricality, each of these real behaviors is also a performed behavior that references or calls forth violence. As such, threatening, embodied behaviors cannot be dismissed as ‘mere theatrics’. Likewise, emphasizing the quotidian nature of theatricality reveals the vital point that all violence is performative – it is meant to do something not just to those who are on the receiving end of the violence but also to those who see it or hear about it later. In this way, attention to the theatricality of gun ownership also helps explain the continued violent reverberations that follow threatened and enacted violence.

Public attitudes towards guns have shaped the lived experience in the United States since before the signing of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Just as theatricality challenges the linearity and originality of embodied behaviors, it also challenges the linearity and presumed unrepeatability of time. In the theatre, time repeats, restarts, zigzags, and skips. In everyday life, though it may feel like time continuously progresses, the citational nature of our embodied behaviors creates a ‘syncopated time’ – time that also flips, doubles back on itself, and compounds (Schneider, 2011: 6). This is not memory; not exactly. Instead, it is a kind of embodied mimesis, a ‘recollection of what has not yet come – a memory of the future’ (Massumi, 2010). Theatricality invites a reassessment of time and how cultural values are transmitted intergenerationally – a folding of time that allows for cultural sentiment to strengthen rather than weaken (Serres and Latour, 1995: 58).

Furthermore, firearms are not just generally theatrical, but more specifically scriptive. Robin Bernstein (2011) explains scriptive things as objects that,

like a play script, broadly [structure] a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable ... Things are citational in that they arrange and propel bodies in recognizable ways, through paths of evocative movement that have been traveled before. (pp. 12, 73)

In the case of the Bunkerville standoff, militants brandished their weapons in ways that they had seen and experienced before (Figure 1). Some
militants, such as Ryan Payne, were veterans, and brought their embodied weapons training to their tactical performances (Brosseau, 2016). Others’ movements, including ‘gun enthusiast’ Eric Parker’s, were influenced by mediatized portrayals of gun violence such as Westerns and military movies as well as extensive documentary coverage of events such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were, in that moment, becoming soldier by performing soldier, wielding their weapons in recognizable embodied ways. One photograph that circulated widely on social and traditional media shows Parker taking aim at Bureau agents from a tactical position on a bridge that gave him a clear view of the landscape and offered cover should Bureau agents fire. Photographer Jim Urquhart overheard Parker’s conversation with other militants: ‘I’ve got a clear shot at four [Bureau agents]’, one man said. ‘I’m ready to pull the trigger if fired upon’, came the reply (Urquhart, 2014). Parker’s position, and Urquhart’s wide-angle photograph of him in that position, also represented what Albert Boime termed a ‘magisterial aesthetics’, or ‘the imperial point of view that is often expressed in American landscape painting of the nineteenth century and that remains deeply embedded in the national consciousness’ (Boime, 1991: 143–144). As Iyko Day (2013) clearly explicates, this ‘magisterial view’ of the US American landscape is inextricably tied to whiteness and its claims of inherent ownership of the land. Or, in Cliven Bundy’s words, his ‘preemptive right’ to the Nevadan desert.

The photograph, and the moment it captures, communicates theatrically. By brandishing their guns, the Bundys and their supporters were enacting ownership of land that was coded by white, masculinist tropes of possession
and the right to use implied or actual violence to defend that possession. In this moment, Parker was performing a script that represents the US American frontier as a conflict zone, and one in which superior force (more guns) determines ownership. The photograph itself performs as well, circulating yet another image of white grievance carried out through (potential) gun violence. The photograph thus joins in a long-historied and ever-growing network of gun violence ‘afterlives’ – the circulation of media that reinforces accepted and expected enactments of firearm ownership and brandishment.

When the Bundys and their supporters publicly brandished their firearms in the standoff with federal law enforcement officials, they expected the guns to communicate the possibility and even potential for violence in the encounter, to ‘get [the] message out’, as Ammon Bundy argued (Wilson et al., 2016). Seemingly without realizing it, Bundy was drawing on histories of armed community resistance against a racist, white supremacist US federal government. Bundy’s language even echoed that of Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, who argued that the Panthers’ 1967 armed protest at the California State Capitol was a ‘success’ because ‘even those who did not hear the complete message saw the arms, and this conveyed enough’ (Newton, 1973: 150; also see Livingston, 2018). Bundy’s rhetoric recalled other armed resistance to the US government, including the American Indian Movement’s occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, where ‘guns actually strengthened [their] positions whenever [they] went to negotiate’ (Banks and Crow, 2018: 187). If the Bundys knew that they were drawing on these histories of Black and indigenous resistance, they did not indicate it in public comments. Their claims, both to the land and to the right to publicly brandish a gun, were saturated in a presumptive whiteness.

No matter who brandishes them, guns, particularly when owners display them in public confrontations, are in a state of performative becoming, balancing between the promise of violence to come and an insistence on violence past. The gun evokes violence because we know it has so effectively meted out that violence before. At this moment of recalling the past while promising a future outcome, the brandished gun seethes with an ‘indefinite or nonpurposive suspense’ (Bennett, 2010: 55). In an instant of performed duality, the gun becomes not just a thing, but a theatrical thing, containing both its past and potential future(s).

The potential future of the brandished gun is the shot meant to end or at least enervate life. But US law recognizes the terror in the anticipation as well as in the aftermath of the shot. When the Bundys and their fellow militants trained their high-powered rifles on Bureau officers sent to gather up Cliven Bundy’s trespassing cattle, charges against them alleged, the militants committed assault against those officers by pointing a gun at them.3 No one had to pull the trigger or use the gun as a blunt object – the act of brandishing a gun, pointed directly at law enforcement, was itself assault. In this instance, the gun, more than just the bearer of a message, became the message. It did something, according to the indictment.
When Cliven Bundy made his public plea for fellow ‘patriots’ to come join his fight against the Bureau, he did not request guns, exactly. According to Payne, Bundy invited him to the ranch, but told him,

I’m not going to tell you what to bring, I’m not going to tell you to bring guns or any of that type of stuff. All I’m going to say is we need help, and you use your own discernment and decide what needs to be brought. (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014: 11)

In spite of his veiled language, Bundy must have known what he was asking for; the scene was set and the script was clear. As evidenced by the hundreds of other militia members who arrived at the ranch fully armed, all understood the role of gun-brandishing in this white populist uprising.

Guns and the West

As the Bunkerville standoff generated meaning through theatricality, it also functioned archivally. It was an example of a ‘scenario’, a ‘meaning-making structure’ defined by performance theorist Diana Taylor (2003: 28, 54) as the repeated, embodied behaviors that communicate values, desires, and privileges and position people in certain roles that ‘[encourage] fantasies of participation’. It is through the scenario of the US frontier that Cliven Bundy placed himself in a long line of revolutionary actors and Western heroes. On his family’s blog, Bundy vowed retribution for federal incursions. ‘They have my cattle and now they have one of my boys’, Bundy wrote. ‘Range War begins tomorrow at Bundy Ranch’ (Feldman, 2014). Later, after militants and unarmed supporters had gathered at the ranch, Bundy issued a set of demands to the Bureau, as detailed in a report issued by the Southern Poverty Law Center:

the federal government [must] open up all restricted public lands, remove [Bureau] equipment from the area, and end its tyrannical campaign of harassment against his family and other ranchers in the area by returning his cows. Lastly, the [Bureau] would disarm federal agents. (p. 14)

When the Bureau did not meet his demands, Bundy ‘ordered [his supporters to block] the freeway’ and said ‘let’s go get those cattle’. His final words before turning his supporters out were ominous: ‘We’re about to take our country back by force’ (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014: 14).

When federal agents backed down at Bunkerville and refused to engage in Bundy’s ‘Range War’, the rancher’s supporters unfurled a banner from a freeway overpass that read ‘The West Has Now Been Won’. The scenario of the West as a constant zone of conflict has influenced contemporary conceptions of US–Western identity and conditioned how we understand the
past. In this version of the scenario, the enemies were federal agents. In the past, the enemies were the indigenous tribes whose presence complicated white visions of the West as empty land available for the taking.

Bundy’s rhetoric was at home in the discourse of white masculinity that has built its legitimacy on the vision of a country that was rightfully settled by Europeans and now is rightfully owned by their descendants. It replayed a scenario of discovery and conquest. This time, Bundy associated the federal government with non-legitimate ‘Others’ who are not part of the body politic that comprises the owners of ‘our’ country. This discourse relies on a belief in one’s right not only to bear arms, but also to inhabit space and brandish those arms publicly with few or no repercussions, a right that is not equally extended in the US, particularly to people of color.

Cliven Bundy’s views on private and public property exist on a foundation of white supremacy, one that implies, if not explicitly states, that white-owned property is as valuable as some people’s lives. This relational logic – that the right to own property and defend that property with force is fundamental to being American – is rooted in the dehumanization of people of color, particularly Black and Indigenous people, throughout US history. Bundy’s racist views moved from implicit to explicit shortly after the standoff at Bunkerville, when he gave a rambling news conference articulating his views on ‘the Negro’. Blissfully untroubled by the deep hypocrisy, not to mention hateful racism, of such views, Bundy opined:

they [Black Americans] abort their young children, they put their young men in jail because they never learned how to pick cotton. And I’ve often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn’t get no more freedom. They got less freedom. (Nagourney, 2014)

Such rhetoric makes plain the racial calculus that underlies the entire white supremacist security state: securing white-owned property and making white people feel safe is more important than the right of people of color to engage freely in public spaces without the threat of state or vigilante violence.

As a number of scholars have shown, the formation of the United States, both as a geographical nation and as a liberalist ideal, relied on violence to legitimize settlers’ claims of land ownership through the subjugation of indigenous peoples (Blackhawk, 2006: 9). Bundy’s language in particular draws on the tropes of the ‘wild’ West of the 19th century, which privilege white, masculine, individualistic ideals. These tropes have been perpetuated by aesthetic representations of the US West in film, novels, television, painting, and theatre, as well as in historical writing. As Joyce Appleby (1992: 9) argues, ‘for a long time American historical writing simply explained how the United States became the territorial embodiment of liberal truths’ – the
‘inevitable’ expansion of white settlers into the Western territories became a metaphor for the ‘inevitable’ expansion of liberalism. This rhetorical sleight of hand influenced conceptions of the West through a theatricalized process whereby the ‘West’ became simultaneously a real, physical place and also an imaginary ideal: an ever-regenerating frontier that was provided, providentially, for white settlement.

Much of the violence that scholars have identified as a constitutive force in the creation of the nation was carried out with guns, and firearms were understood as the most necessary tool in a settler’s arsenal of survival. Though the Second Amendment continues to engender virulent debates over its meaning, one clear impetus for the inclusion of that provision in the Constitution was to ensure white settlers had the means to instantiate their claims to indigenous lands with violence if necessary. In a 1789 letter to the Senate, George Washington reaffirmed this connection, describing an order to raise a militia force to, among other things, ‘protect the frontiers from the depredations of the hostile Indians’ (1905: 60). Guns were not only used to subjugate indigenous populations, however; gun law was also used to produce and reinforce notions of Indigenous people as ‘outsiders’, non-citizens whose access to firearms had to be tightly controlled (Riley, 2012: 1683).

At the same time that guns and gun laws were being used to oppress and control Indigenous communities, they were also being used to oppress and control Black Americans, both enslaved and free. Scholars have argued that a primary purpose of the Second Amendment was to reassure slaveholders that they could maintain their own small arms in order to prevent slave uprisings (see Bogus, 1998; Cornell, 2006; Hadden, 2001). Meanwhile, Supreme Court rulings such as the Dred Scott decision in 1857 and the Cruikshank decision in 1872 curtailed the citizenship rights of Black Americans, including their right to own and carry firearms. In the decades following emancipation and Reconstruction, black codes, Jim Crow laws, and other legal measures put in place to maintain a white supremacist system of government kept Black Americans unarmed and exiled from public life (Blackmon, 2008). Nearly all early gun control, including gun control measures supported by Ronald Reagan in the 1960s and 1970s, was brought about by white panic in the face of increasing gun ownership and performances of resistance by Black Americans.

In the current open carry movement, particularly as performed in the imaginative spaces of the West, guns not only perform their meaning but also carry with them the history of the legal, physical, and cultural disenfranchisement of Indigenous and Black Americans. The Bundys, by infiltrating public spaces and openly wielding their firearms, tap into a strain of American vigilantism that has almost always targeted racialized others – particularly in moments of ‘self-mobilization on the frontier’, both that of homesteaders against Indigenous communities and of the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante violence against Black Americans in the years following Reconstruction (Purdy, 2016). Performance requires a certain
attention to the body of the performer, and the Bundys fit the role as white, rural Americans. Black and Indigenous subjects, on the other hand, are not permitted the same access to such performances. In these scenarios, armed protestors are coded as enemies and their protests as threats. This is evidenced by the fact that, when the Black Panthers openly displayed their firearms in protest, first California and then the federal government swiftly passed bills designed to curtail the right to own and display firearms, and is echoed by governmental responses to Indigenous armed protest, such as that at Wounded Knee in 1973. In the Bundys’ case, however, no laws have been passed, and the Bundys themselves have escaped legal punishment. The history of settlement and the perpetuation of white supremacy throughout US history has pushed the imaginative West toward an absolute of violence, but one that continues to position white grievances as legitimate, while delegitimizing others.5 Brandishing a gun, as a performance of belonging, is an exceptionalism afforded to only a very specific subset of US Americans. Analyzing guns as theatrical things and material archives invites us to reinvestigate the racialized histories of gun use and performed violence that underpin a performance event such as the Bunkerville standoff and confront the deadly seriousness of theatricality.

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Notes

1. In 1992, federal agents engaged in an 11-day standoff in Ruby Ridge, Idaho with Randy Weaver, an apocalyptic Christian separatist with ties to the Aryan Nations, and his family. During the standoff, a federal marshal, Randy’s wife, Vicki, and his son, Sammy, were all killed. Less than a year later, government agents led a siege against the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. A 51-day siege ended when ATF agents used tear gas to try to force the Branch Davidians out of their compound and the building was engulfed with flames. Both the standoff at Ruby Ridge and the Waco siege have served as rallying cries for white anti-government groups such as sovereign citizens and militias since 1993. Many Americans, including members of the Bundy family, identify these events as an example of the government’s willingness to target US citizens in order to ‘control’ them (Haberman, 2015; Sottile, 2018).

2. Recently, scholars have begun to more thoroughly analyze the intertwined nature of gun culture, white supremacy, and settler colonialism in the United States. See, for example, Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018) and Stand Your Ground: A History of America’s Love Affair with Lethal Self-Defense (Light, 2017).

3. In December 2017, federal judge Gloria M Navarro declared a mistrial in the case against Cliven, Ammon, and Ryan Bundy and Ryan Payne. Two previous trials against other defendants associated with the Bunkerville standoff ended in hung juries (Pérez-Peña and Turkewitz, 2017).
4. Justice Anthony Kennedy, in oral arguments for the landmark Supreme Court case *DC v. Heller* in 2008, which affirmed an individual’s right to bear arms, reasserted the necessity for interpersonal violence against indigenous people, and the Second Amendment’s reassurance that such violence is constitutionally protected. The Second Amendment, he argued, came about as a result of ‘the concern of the remote settler to defend himself and his family against hostile Indian tribes and outlaws, wolves and bears and grizzlies and things like that’ (cited in Winkler, 2011: 157).

5. The land that Bundy is fighting over has long been inhabited by the Moapa Paiute and, since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, has been continuously owned by the US government (Ralston, 2014).

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