UNPACKING HEAT: WOMEN AND GUNS IN POPULAR CULTURE

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I analyse the increasingly popular figure of the gun-wielding woman in written and visual popular texts from the late nineteenth-century to the present. My methodology is primarily indebted to gender theory, and melds the attention to form and narrative characteristic of literary analysis with the ideological critique that is a hallmark of cultural studies. What distinguishes my project from previous scholarship on female "action heroes" is my interest in the broad historical and cultural themes of genre, as well as my particular and sustained attention to the gun.

Much of the critical attention paid to the female action hero is concerned exclusively with her challenge to traditional binary understandings of gender and sexuality. As a part of this type of gender-focused reading, the gun, when it is discussed at all, tends to be read simply as a "phallic" object. While I do not dispute the phallic symbolism of the gun, I argue in this dissertation that to read the gun *only* or purely in this way is to both unproblematically reproduce essential gender categories and also to ignore the complex material and mythological history of the weapon. I trace this history and symbolism through an analysis of the woman with a gun in three genres: westerns, crime narratives, and science fiction. Along with considering how the woman with a gun challenges gender conventions and engages with generic themes, my analysis of the figure addresses the crucial question of how she reworks and/or revitalises liberal myths of heroic agency.

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Introduction

Action Hero(ine)ism: Genre, Gender, and Violence

French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard is famously quoted as saying "all you need for a movie is a girl and a gun." The producers of contemporary popular narratives, and their audiences, seem to agree, as an increasing array of best-selling fiction, blockbuster films, and prime-time television series feature not only girls and guns, but girls *with* guns. This atypical combination works to drive plots, and it has an enormous visual impact—as evidenced by the images of gun-wielding female heroes that circulate in excess of their narrative contexts. *Aliens*' Ellen Ripley cradling a "pulse rifle" in one arm and a young girl in the other is one of the more recognisable of these. But there are many more: Nikita (of the original French film) crouched behind a desk sporting a little black dress and a great big handgun; the ripped Sarah Connor (from *Terminator 2*), decked out in a black tank-top, combat pants, aviator sunglasses and a rifle; or the fantastically stacked Lara Croft with her trade-mark thigh holsters. Unlike the women with guns who might be found in mainstream "action-adventure" narratives of the past (female side-kicks, villains, or femme fatales), figures like Nikita and Ripley combine a sustained and defining association with the gun with a starring role. Contemporary representations of the woman with a gun thus bring together a heady mix of traditional-gender-role subversion, erotic spectacle, violence, and

old-fashioned heroics. It is the purpose of this project to investigate the implications and possibilities of this spectacular confluence.

Whatever her incarnation—anarchist punk, detective, cowgirl, military hero(ine), saviour of the human race, revenge-seeking waitress—the woman with a gun presents a provocative challenge to traditional gender conventions. And so when "female action heroes" began to enter mainstream popular culture in the 1980s (with the hardboiled PIs of Sarah Paretsky and Sue Grafton) and especially in the 1990s (with the *Aliens* and *Terminator* series, *Thelma and Louise*, etc.) feminists inside and outside of the academy understandably took note. Indeed, the juxtaposition of femininity and firepower is not only visually appealing, it makes for catchy headlines (along the lines of "Girls Just Wanna Have Guns"), as well as academic article titles (for example Barbara L. Miller's "The Gun-in-the-Handbag, a Critical Controversy, and a Primal Scene") and book covers.[1] Yvonne Tasker's ground-breaking book on the action hero and genre, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema*, which primarily focuses on male action heroes, contains ten film stills, four of which depict women with guns. Given the clear cultural force of these images, and the critical scrutiny that the active, violent female hero has received from feminists, when I began my research for this project I expected to discover a range of analyses of the implications of the

[1] See Read's *The New Avengers*, the cover of which features a photograph of a mini-skirted woman brandishing a revolver (from a film poster); Tasker's *Working Girls*, which features a still of a rifle and pistol packing Geena Davis from the film *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996); and McCaughey & King's *Reel Knockouts*, which superimposes a the silhouette of a stylized, curvaceous, pistol-wielding woman over a background of flames.

girl and gun combo. But though titles and cover images often capitalise on the gun-toting gal's provocative impact, the analysis in these texts very rarely addresses the woman's relation to or interaction with her weapon(s) in any detail. If the gun is, as Jeffrey Brown suggests, a "particularly powerful phallic means of power," ("Gender" 61) it seems important that feminists pay close attention to how popular texts negotiate their female protagonists' use and possession of it. This is therefore the first goal of my dissertation—to provide a feminist reading of key popular texts that focuses on the relationship between woman and gun.

Feminist response to the new collection of "active" female heroes has been ambivalent. Can these figures be embraced as representations of female power and agency, or do they reduce female power to an erotic spectacle? Are they, as Carol Clover implies, ultimately "men in drag" (see *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* 18, 40, 52, 59-61) or more complex performances of gender ambiguity? As most critics recognise, the woman with a gun is a figure of such excessiveness that it becomes impossible to ultimately fix her political import, either on a general or specific level. Claudia Springer, for example, notes that because of the ambiguities and contradictions of her presentation, the "angry" woman of popular culture "can neither be hailed as a feminist paragon nor repudiated as a mere sex object; she incorporates aspects of both but fully embodies neither" (344). Springer's reading reflects the important theoretical acknowledgement—articulated most clearly by Stuart Hall in "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'"—that popular cultural texts and symbols are

always inevitably both recuperative and resistant to dominant discourses. My analysis of the woman with a gun shares this commitment to complicating views of agency, resistance, and sexuality that operate via an either/or rubric of masculine/feminine, recuperative/subversive. Tasker, who notes that popular culture "is routinely able to bring together . . . sets of seemingly contradictory qualities" (*Spectacular* 106), suggests that the cinema represents a social space "in which we can make seemingly perverse identifications, structured by an utopian both/and rather than a repressive gendered binary" (*Spectacular* 117). The woman with a gun—in fiction as well as in film—represents I think an exemplary model of the "both/and" operations of subjectivity and resistance. With this both/and methodological framework as my starting place, my aim in this dissertation is to consider a variety of incarnations of the woman with a gun in order to ask questions like: what can this volatile figure reveal about contemporary gender relations? What space might she open up—as a figure of fantasy—in the attempt to (re)imagine female agency? How does she effect or inflect popular notions of heroism?

This last question is central for my analysis, and is crucially linked to my interest in the gun. While building upon existing studies of the violent, active woman, my goal in this investigation is to extend the both/and model to the gun itself. Cultural critics may acknowledge the dangers and limitations of viewing agency, resistance, and sexuality via an either/or rubric, but most studies of the

armed woman continue to read the gun itself as a stable and transparent object.[2] While I do not dispute the phallic symbolism of the gun (which I will address further below), I argue that to read the gun *only* or purely in this way is to both unproblematically reproduce essential gender categories and also to ignore the history of the weapon as a complex material object and force, and mythological cultural trope (the two are hard to separate).

In the wake of the work of Judith Butler, much contemporary criticism of the female action hero reads gender and sexuality as culturally constructed and "performative" rather than essential, and many critics even read that performance as responding to or reflecting historically-specific gender-anxieties. But the lack of interest in the gun in these critiques seems to be symptomatic of a limited attention to the functions and meanings of violence and heroism—and the connection between the two—in popular genres with female protagonists. Few analysts of the woman with the gun thus consider how the female hero's performance of gender intersects with cultural concerns and anxieties—about, for example, the repercussions of the processes of Western-style industrial-capitalist "civilisation" for the environment, the community/nation, and individual subjects—that are more routinely regarded as an essential aspect of popular heroic narratives when a protagonist is male.

I think it is in part the tendency to examine issues of gender in isolation

[2] See for example Brown "Gender" 60-61; Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* 139 and *Working Girls* 57; Read 134; Carole M. Dole 23; Ona Russel 28; and Wood "Returning" 85.

from genre and its broader historical backdrop that leads to a too-narrow reading of this new breed of popular female hero, and so my own analysis will pay explicit attention to the function and meaning of the woman with a gun in her particular generic context. Their fundamental association with the gun and the violence it represents means that all of my chosen figures function as "action" heroes in action-adventure narratives of various forms.[3] I have divided my analysis into three broad generic categories that offer some of the most popular visions of the gun-wielding woman: namely westerns, crime narratives, and science fiction. While all my texts can be characterised as action-adventure stories, what an attention to the gun in these narratives reveals is that, despite their various thematic emphases, tropes, and settings (which I will discuss at the beginning of each chapter), the western genre remains central to their structure and visions of heroism.

The qualities that mark the protagonists of contemporary action-adventure narratives as "heroic" have in fact been codified primarily in and by the western and its mythologized history of American expansion—and it is for this reason that the vast majority of my chosen texts are products of the US. As Will Wright contends in his recent study of the "mythical cowboy," most contemporary American popular stories

[3] While "action films" have been discussed as comprising a distinct genre—most substantively by Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies*—in examining the proliferation of the armed, violent woman in popular culture the action genre as it is conventionally understood fails to encompass the range of texts and media in which she appears. My use of the term "action-adventure" narrative thus signifies a type of violence and heroism (indebted, as I will discuss, to the western) that can be found in and across a variety of generic forms.

> are in some sense versions of Westerns, because they are always versions of individualism. George Lucas, for example, has said that *Star Wars* is essentially 'a fast-paced action-adventure film in the tradition of the American Western' (Rogers, 1997 4D). Also, and perhaps most significantly, the heroes of our modern urban action films—the films of Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, and others—are usually denounced as 'cowboys' by their bureaucratic superiors. These action films have replaced the Western as our most popular genre, and while they are not set in the Wild West, they are still focused on the mythical image of the cowboy as someone who acts independently, defies authorities, and 'shoots from the hip'. In effect, these are our modern versions of the Western, only now they show the 'cowboy' trapped in the urban East, where industry, technology, and bureaucracy have triumphed and frontier freedom is gone. (*Wild West* 9)

The western genre thus helps establish the themes that, with some revision, lie at the heart of contemporary science fiction and detective/crime narratives: the relationship (and conflict) between the individual and society, as well as between nature and culture; an exploration and spectacularization of gender, sexuality, and the body; and a fascination with violence and death. These tensions will be my focus as I analyse the woman with a gun in the three different generic contexts, but most crucial will be the relationship between the individual and society, which to some extent contains and defines the others—as Wright's noting of the centrality of individualism to the western reveals. The western hero, like the hero of all popular genres, can be read as the epitome of the liberal subject. Feminist political theorist Wendy Brown notes that: "[l]iberal individuals are conceived as bundles of power, as origins of power, rather than as effects of power; socialized, rather than socially constructed; divided by reason (objectivity) and passion (subjectivity), rather than as interpellated or subjected by discourses of 'truth'"

(145). Feminists, Marxists, queer theorists, and post-colonial/race theorists have worked to expose the exclusions and hierarchies that underlie *this* "universal" and a-historical subject—exclusions and hierarchies that in part explain "the persistent historical failure of liberal democracies to achieve anything more than token inclusion in power structures for members of marginalized groups" (Heyes, para 10). While most popular narratives ultimately privilege liberal values and reproduce the liberal subject, these texts also clearly engage with and reflect the anxieties, instabilities, and criticisms that are an inherent aspect of any dominant discursive system.

The gun—which every American citizen is entitled to possess—functions as a material sign of the US commitment to individual rights. This right was guaranteed by the Second Amendment to the US Constitution (as part of the Bill of Rights) in 1791, and acquired symbolic resonance a century later as a vital, and sexy, accoutrement of the hero in western genre pulp fiction (indeed, it is almost impossible to talk about the gun as a cultural sign in an American context without referencing this prototypical genre). Wright's attention to the "cowboy" protagonist's ability to 'shoot from the hip' above highlights how central the gun has become to popular models of heroism in all "action" genres. A particularly fantastic example of this occurs in the climactic scene of the sci-fi blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999), in which the heroic Neo (Keanu Reeves) has been downed by a hail of bullets as he battles the computer-generated villains who police the film's dystopic, computer-generated reality. He (or at least the computer-generated

version of him that exists in the matrix) lies lifeless in a grim hallway. Back on the resistance fighters' ship, Neo's body also appears to be dead. But Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss)—the love interest—leans over him and whispers: "you can't be dead, because I love you and you're *the one*." Neo has been defeated before, and members of the resistance have even questioned his status as "the one." But now he shudders back to life. He has finally realised his prophesied power: he can no longer be harmed by/within the matrix. He stands up and walks towards the bad guys, who have turned away, considering him beaten. Shocked, they fire at him again. But—in the now often imitated *Matrix* style—the bullets seem to move in slow motion. Neo first effortlessly dodges or limbos under them, and then simply halts them in mid-air (with a commanding hand-gesture) so they gather motionless around him. He selects one, studies it, and the rest fall harmlessly to the ground. The bad guys run, while the resistance folks cheer. *The Matrix* is a film about escaping and destroying a computer-generated "false reality," but even in the world of binary code the means of effecting this overthrow is the gun—or rather, as Neo says at one point, "lots of guns." And as the scene above demonstrates, Neo's special, most impressive, supreme messianic gift is his ability *not* to have to dodge bullets.

Moments like these serve as indications of the gun's long-standing symbolic and material force, but there is in fact surprisingly little study of the representation of the weapon within cultural theory. In a sociological context, most works about "gun-culture" or studies of violence (the majority of which are

products of the US) revolve around the issue of gun control (Dizard; Homsher; Ziess Stange). And even in investigations of traditional male heroes and the genres they appear in (like the western or the war narrative) the gun tends to be invoked but not elaborated upon.[4] One seminal exception to this is John G. Cawelti's classic 1971 study of western genre film and fiction, *The Six Gun Mystique*, which spends some time tracing the history of the gun's symbolic status. Cawelti writes that in the face of late nineteenth-century social trends such as "the tendency of industrial work to depend increasingly on the superior potency of machines, the increasing importance of women in the industrial economy, [and] the nationalizing trend of American life which has eroded local communities and the individual's sense of control over his life and family," the combination of man and gun became crucial to the definition of American masculinity (58):

> the American tradition has always emphasized individual masculine force; Americans love to think of themselves as pioneers, men who have conquered a continent and sired on it a new society. This radical discrepancy between the sense of eroding masculinity and the view of America as a great history of men against the wilderness has created the need for a means of symbolic expression of masculine potency in an unmistakable way. This means is the gun. (58)

Again, the individualism of mythic American history is highlighted here, as is that history's connection to a gendered and sexualised violence. The gun does have a

[4] In Helen Cooper's *Arms & the Woman: War, Gender, & Literary Representation*; Sherrie Innes's *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* and her recent *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*; Kathleen G. Klein's *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, Read's *The New Avengers*, and both of Tasker's books, for example, "gun" does not even appear as an index entry.

long history of masculine association (even if that masculinity is compensatory and anxious), and situating the gun as a phallic symbol is of course a compelling reading of the weapon. It works visually and mechanically: the chamber/scrotum holds the bullets/sperm, the shaft ejaculates in a orgasmic shot or spray. The gun is also tucked in a protective holster, or hidden down pants—it bulges (i.e. "is that a gun in your pocket..."), is flashed, and it requires skill to "handle." While an attention to the clear phallic associations of the gun can thus be fruitful, this reading can also work to reduce or limit the complexity of the gun as a cultural sign. In the quotation above, Cawelti situates the gun's gender signification in an economic, technological, and social context. This is the rich cultural history and set of connections in and through which I attempt to consider the gun-wielding female protagonist. As I attempt to build upon feminist analyses of the female action hero, I thus rely upon foundational genre theorists like Cawelti and Wright, who chart the pliability as well as the structural coherence of generic conventions, and particularly the ability of popular genres not only to adapt to and/or reflect various historical moments, but to encompass a wide range of political responses to those moments. Given the centrality of the western myth to popular visions of heroism, I also depend upon Richard Slotkin's exhaustive cultural-historical analysis of this vision of violence to the nation-building of the US in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992).

As Cawelti notes, the emergence of the cowboy hero can be read as a response to the erosion of traditional definitions and expressions of masculinity

that are associated with industrialisation and urbanisation. It is ironic that the antidote to this erosion of agency—the gun—is an industrial, commercial product. But this paradox in fact is representative of the gun's shifting symbolic potential. Even in the western the gun is an ambiguous object, invested with a multitude of contradictory meanings (and this arguably to a greater extent than any other weapon). As a tool of the hunter, the gun is aligned with nature, and so can be savage and nostalgic, but it is also a technological object, and one that through aggressive colonisation as well as through "peacekeeping," enables the establishment of "civilisation." Most weapons have phallic associations, but the gun signifies the "law of the father" in a very "real" way—it is not just a symbol but also a part of the material action and force of the law in most contemporary societies. But still, while the gun is clearly an important instrument of the state, it is also the defender of dissent, representing (especially in the United States) the theoretical power of "the people" to counter and hold accountable their elected governments. The gun thus embodies the paradoxical inter-relations of order and chaos, justice and criminality, culture and nature, self and other that are fundamental to the construction of civilisation under liberalism.[5]

As an indication of this rich mediation, the particular mechanics and technology of the gun also signify well beyond simple phallic imagery. The distance between the gun and the target (versus the intimacy of the knife), for

[5] For a brief but fascinating discussion of the "economic" gun's function in the mythic West that draws upon Deleuze and Guattari's theories of machinic assemblages, see Grayson Cook's "Willing to Explode: The American Western as Apocalypse Machine."

example, makes the extinguishing of a life almost a miraculous event. The bullet is practically imperceptible as it makes its way toward its victim: the trigger is pulled here, the wound—or rather blood—appears there: magic! (This perhaps explains the appeal of the Hollywood slow-motion tracking of the bullet's trajectory—as well as the divine status afforded to the bullet-defying Neo). But as the title of Laurie Anderson's 1977 single notes: "It's not the bullet that kills you, it's the hole." This observation can work to remind us that the tiny phallic bullet is less important than the orifice/vagina-like wound. Equating the female genitals with a gory injury, though, seems also to reaffirm misogynist horror at female "lack," positioning the wound as one more death-bringing *vagina dentata*. Still, it is true that the bullet itself matters less than what that bullet does: it makes, changes, and/or opens something. The gun is a powerful agent, and not always just vis-à-vis the body—the gun-toting hero often displays his or her prowess with the gun by shooting at an inanimate but important target (in *The Quick and the Dead*, for example, Sharon Stone first draws her gun to save Russell Crowe, using a volley of well-aimed shots to sever the rope from which he's about to be hanged.) The gun, the bullet, the aim and skill of the gun-wielder *affects* and alters the narrative.

However magical and frightening the gun's ability to kill or wound at a distance may be, the intimacy of its violence can not be denied. For whether real or symbolic, the gun equips its possessor with the authority to expel its target from the realm of intelligibility. The power of the gun is the power of the eye, the

finger—the power of the look and of the hand that can beckon and single out: you! The gun hails us—and with its threat of death, it calls us into life. This is an "event" that I think can be usefully considered in light of Althusser's famous scene of interpellation. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser writes,

> [I]deology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. (47)

In the popular narratives that have been inspired by the western we are presented with this transformative (climatic) moment on the dusty main-street of the frontier town, or grimy pavement of the metropolis, or the landing pad of outer-space. On the one hand, these popular narratives make the violence of the process of subjectification and the law visible, as "hailing" here (usually) dispatches as it subjects. On the other hand though, the gunfight also is thrilling because it presents the workings of power and of "discipline" as a struggle between *equals*. In this the associations with personal "honour" that surrounded the duel are inflected with the political (liberal) guarantee of the American Second Amendment. Authority at this moment and in this space rests not solely in the state or institution or its representative—it rests in every gun-wielding individual's holster. In this mythic space, you can turn around when hailed on the

street and challenge the one who calls you. The gun is thus the law but also the law outside the law—indeed, a phallic substitute to replace the loss that, according to psychoanalytic theory, is the price of our entry (as "individual" subjects) into the symbolic realm. In the profoundly appealing fantasy of agency represented by the gunfight, in which you actually have the ability to face and even defeat your accuser/interpellater/death, the gun-wielding hero becomes the apotheosis of the individual as "pure" agent in a radically free space. (This is what Neo represents in *The Matrix*).

But the highly ritualised space of the gun duel also stages a "performance" of subjectivity that fits with Judith Butler's insistence that neither power nor subjectivity can be understood outside of a process of iterability. Performativity, as she argues, is "not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualised production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not . . . determining it fully in advance" (*BTM* 95). As Butler's model suggests, to step outside the dominant rituals of this "production" of subjectivity is to risk death. Though in the fantasy staged by the action genre gun battle there is clearly a pleasure and a thrill to this risk (at least for the audience), the gun duel is also a warning. In most popular narratives the only justification for the hero's insurrection is the fact that his "lawless" violence works towards the ultimate restitution of dominant values and norms. The brand of heroism that usually accompanies the gun privileges individual strength,

ingenuity, and rebellion, and necessarily works to divide the hero from both his evil enemies and his good but weak(er) allies and dependants. An illustration of this is the fact that the enemies of this hero do not necessarily possess or need the gun—many times (especially in the sci-fi genre, as I will discuss) in fact they are *more monstrously* "armed." What is important is that the institutions, the community, the other "good" subjects in the narrative, *don't* have the gun, or they don't know how to use it like the hero does. They don't understand the enemy well enough to know to defeat him/her/it. The hero is thus alone, and only he or she is capable of meeting the villain on his/her terms. Ultimately this is a model of progress or change that, though it may critique the government or other official institutions, is not at all at odds with the "be all that you can be" American Dream ethos. Capitalist democracies depend, in fact, on this myth of individual strength, choice and freedom, and on the macho posturing that can work to cover over the absence of real independence, self-determination, or fulfilment available to the subjects in an industrial (or post-industrial) economy.

A central concern in this project is the question of how the gun-wielding woman enters into, alters, and/or revitalises these narratives of violence and individual heroic action. "The individual" that traditional heroic models champion is constitutionally male, and so it seems difficult for a female hero to "represent" here confidently and unproblematically. Indeed, "women" are what "individuals" work to protect, to save, or to "win." The gun-wielding female hero simply cannot signify in exactly the same way that the violent, independent man does—she

always, to some extent, disturbs the status quo. In responding to this "disturbance," there are many ways an action narrative can work to explain or excuse female violence. If, as I discussed earlier, the gun straddles the binaries of order and transgression, nature and civilization, in this the gun is in fact very much like "woman," who has historically also been symbolically figured as both Mary and Eve, mother and whore. In this way "femininity" has come to embody the moral, the domestic, the maternal, and "civilisation" in general. But femininity has also paradoxically been figured as irrational, unpredictable, wild, and *un*civilised—this fundamental instability has been the justification for women's inequality and status as "property" that needs to be managed. Visions of feminine savagery, hysteria, maternal rage, or scorned-woman-fury thus often feature in the characterisation of armed women from the *Alien* series' Ripley to *Silence of the Lambs*' Clarice Starling.

In other texts that feature action-hero women—or in the same ones!—the challenges the figure presents are also minimized (to some extent) by de-sexualizing her to underplay her femininity, or by containing that sexuality and domesticating her/it in a traditional heterosexual, maternal, and/or father-daughter relationship. Tasker makes the general assertion that "[i]n action films, the heroine is presented as either motivated by her maternal instincts or as inheriting her father's position. This suggests very little space for the heroine as articulating an identity for herself, one that is beyond the terms of the masculine, mother or Other" (*Working* 102). A quick survey of gun-wielding women supports this

argument: from Ripley (in the *Alien* series) and Sarah Connor (*The Terminator* and *T2*), who are complexly associated with motherhood and reproduction, as well as being guardians of the entire human species; to more recent action-women such as Trinity in *The Matrix* (1999), who remains subordinate to both Morpheus and Neo (male characters), and whose most important role is to love the hero; and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*'s (2001) hero, who, while not maternal, is, like Clarice Starling (in Harris's novel more than in the films), strongly identified as the traumatized daughter of an absent father. Narratives with aggressive female leads thus usually provide the audience with an answer to the question: Why is a woman acting this way—why has she taken up the gun? This question is often posed to the heroine in the text itself, as in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990) when Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) is repeatedly asked—by men—why she has chosen to become a police officer. Though Megan responds with a playful self-consciousness to these questions (she tells one fellow that she "wanted to shoot people"), the film nevertheless provides an answer that comfortably situates Megan's actions in a personal, domestic context: her father's abuse of her mother.

While their narratives may attempt to contain the disturbing spectre of female rage and power, they cannot mitigate the fact that—in the texts I consider—the woman with a gun performs as protagonist. This performance has been discussed or presented as one that necessarily troubles or overturns genre conventions. Action narratives (from hardboiled detective fiction to western shoot-em-ups) have admittedly been a very visibly male preserve. While I am

certainly interested in exploring the way that gender is presented, troubled, and recuperated in the particular texts I examine, as well as in exploring the effects that having a female hero has on generic plots and themes, I also recognise that tensions around gender, sexuality, and agency are fundamental to these popular narratives. Action heroes like those played by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, as Tasker argues, can be read as simultaneously reasserting, mourning, and hysterically stating "a lost male power" (*Spectacular* 109). If, in the tradition of gender studies, we recognise that popular genres have *always* articulated anxieties and concerns around issues of gender (rather than simply forwarding a stable and strong masculine agent), the insertion of a female hero remains within the genres' usual thematic range.

Rather than reading the woman with a gun as automatically "troubling" genre conventions, in fact, I argue that in many ways she can function as a more ideal representation of "the individual" in a contemporary post-industrial society. The spread of feminist discourse into popular culture in the 1980s (in the wake of second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s) and the excesses of the post-Rambo action hero made the recuperative politics—gender and otherwise—of the classic tough-guy hero too obvious, turning him into a joke (hence *The Last Action Hero* and other spoofs). While the woman with a gun can also be read as responding to challenges and shifts in the definitions of femininity (again a product of feminism and changing economies), this figure necessarily seems "emergent." As much as the female action hero responds to or attempts to account

for the "loss" of traditional femininity, the figure also represents an attempt to grasp or work through women's assumption of more and different power(s). This assumption of power is figured popularly as political and social "progress"—and many feminist critics would agree. Also, because, in part, they have traditionally been coded as masculine, characteristics such as independence, assertion, and physical prowess have positive cultural associations. In contrast, as mentioned above, the male action hero is surrounded by an aura of loss, nostalgia, or anxiety that comes from the perceived threat (from feminism or simply from the "feminising" processes of industrial and post-industrial culture) to male "ownership" of those qualities and powers. The female action hero can thus move in to revitalise the position more problematically occupied by the male. She is emergent, she must straddle work and the private sphere, and she is conflicted regarding her gender role, but this conflict can be coded as progressive, as can—as I will argue—her violence.

I trace and examine this violence in each chapter of the dissertation, moving through my chosen popular genres in a "chronological" order: from the mythic past of the western, to the (usually) "contemporary" and urban crime narratives, and finally to the imagined futures of science fiction. Because the models of heroism in the action-adventure texts I consider under these generic categories are clearly indebted to the western, there is a great deal of continuity between these genres (there is at least as much variety in the narratives that make up one particular genre as there is between different action-adventure categories).

The different temporal settings and preoccupations that characterise each genre do however clearly inflect the operations of their plots and themes—and so guide my consideration of different aspects of the gun-wielding woman within each category. The western chapter begins with the legendary Western gun-toting gals Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane, and the "biographical" narratives they appear in (two films from 1930s, *Annie Oakley* and *The Plainsman*; and two musical comedies from the 1950s, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane*). I also explore fictional versions of the sharp-shooting western girl that appear in the novels of Zane Grey (particularly *Horse Heaven Hill*), and finally in two contemporary western films with female leads, *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead.* In my analysis of these characters I consider not only the way the woman's possession and use of the gun affects her gendered identity, but also the way that the gun-toting western woman participates in the negotiating, explaining, and eroticising of violence that is a crucial aspect of the American mythos. Where the western chapter focuses primarily on colonial history and the divide between nature and civilisation, in the crime chapter I focus on the separation of public and private spheres within liberalism. The gun-wielding female character in this genre, whether she be criminal, private eye, or agent of the law (the three categories I use to structure my discussion of a wide range of fiction and films) enters into a "public" space that has traditionally marginalised women. With this entry these characters necessarily (re)negotiate the meaning and place of violence—and the laws which are meant to contain it—in "civil" society. In the final, science fiction

chapter, I address how the woman with a gun engages with and problematises the mind/body split. Both sides of this binary are the source of hope as well as anxiety in the sci-fi films I focus on here: the *Alien* and *Terminator* series, the Pamela Anderson vehicle *Barb Wire* and the cult hit *Tank Girl*. In these films, female action-heroes battle a host of monstrous alien beings and/or lethally invasive "alien" technologies. Science fiction's (and particularly the sci-fi-action hybrid's) interest in the body and in technology results in these narratives' presentations of a female agency that is strongly and complexly connected to issues of "reproduction." In this chapter I thus explore how the "technology" represented by the maternal and/or sexually objectified woman with a gun effects the violence of classic (western-style) heroic narratives.

The enormous popularity of action-adventure narratives illustrates the appeal of the fantasies of agency they represent. But gun-wielding women do more than simply adopt masculine forms of power and agency. To take up the gun—as a critic or a character—is to take up a complex and vital collection of significations that intersects fruitfully in the debates and theorisings of feminists and other counter-hegemonic groups. However a given text or female hero or critic negotiates the difficult relationship of violence and agency in pop-culture (and this relationship will be one that I continue to discuss in the following chapters) in picking up the gun, active female heroes enter into and effect popular narratives about what constitutes the "heroic" citizen—especially as that category is tied to the slippery, gendered notions of public and private, and the gendered

and racialised categories of civilisation and nature. For the most part, however, feminist debate about the female action hero continues to focus on the degree to which such figures (in general or in particular instances) reproduce, subvert, straddle, or blend traditional gender binaries. By exploring the gun-wielding woman's function as hero in particular generic contexts, this dissertation sets out to expand and contextualise this binary focus.

Chapter One

Trifles with Rifles

I begin this chapter with a consideration of two prototypical women with guns: Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane. Though their lives and the fictional narratives that have been built up around them usually fall outside of traditional western generic formulas, as cultural icons Annie and Calamity were instrumental in building the mythological American frontier. Both women achieved their fame at the time of (and in Annie Oakley's case, while in the employ of) Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and they are central—if, in recent years, somewhat vaguely remembered—touchstones for popular conceptions of western femininity and specifically of armed female heroism. Annie and Calamity are important not only because they represent particularly spectacular and legendary embodiments of the gal n' gun motif, but because the idea of "the West," and the tough, iconoclastic individuals this landscape was imagined to produce, have played such a critical role in defining the idea of American heroism in popular culture. The unconventional gender performances enacted by Annie and Calamity—in "history" and in fiction and film—are regularly acknowledged by critics. My goal in this chapter is to also consider how gun-wielding women like Annie and Calamity—and the figures who follow them—engage with these powerful western myths.

While there has been some historical analysis of the biographical narratives of these early American celebrities, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the fictional narratives that concern their lives. Of the four films I consider here, *Annie Oakley* (1935), *The Plainsman* (1935), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950), and *Calamity Jane* (1953), only *Calamity Jane* has been the subject of any detailed contemporary film criticism. This neglect is especially surprising in the case of *Annie Get Your Gun*, given its huge popularity as a play (the film was also one of the highest grossing musical production of its day). When Calamity and Annie (historical or fictional) *are* discussed, the focus is usually on their "masculine" qualities, as in Rebecca Bell-Metereau's figuring of Calamity and Annie in her brief discussion of the films *The Plainsman, Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane* as examples of the "masculine woman" (82-84, 89-90) who possesses a "mixture of tomboy features and stereotypically feminine attributes" (82). This kind of analysis, which focuses on issues of "gender performance" and an evaluation of the degree to which texts and figures challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles, also dominates the limited critical analysis of the two contemporary western films I consider in my conclusion: *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead*, which feature particularly "active" gun-toting women. Yvonne Tasker brackets off a historically contextualised reading of the woman with a gun at the beginning of her section on the western in *Working Girls*: "The Western as a cinematic genre has been understood as a set of fictions articulating discourses of American history," she notes. "Yet," she continues, indicating her

particular focus in the chapter to follow, "it is also rather camp and is centrally concerned with the activities (however earnest) of dressing up and putting on a show" (53). My analysis in this chapter attempts to bring together the two readings/spheres articulated here, grounding an investigation of the woman with a gun's gender performance in the western genre's broader, mythologising historical fictions.

Susan Lee Johnson writes that we can "learn something new about gender from studying an imagined place like the American West—a place where customary gender relations were disrupted for many years by unusual sex ratios and a place around which cultural meanings have collected until it has become a sort of preserve for white masculinity" (495-96). A crucial, or rather as I argue *the* crucial, element of the imagined masculine "preserve" of the western is the gun, which informs and symbolises the gendered and racialised ideologies of progress and civilisation that underpin the genre and Western culture in general. Feminists and other resistant groups continue to struggle both to deconstruct and to offer alternatives to the oppressive inequalities and injustices of the violent narratives mythologised in westerns, and so it seems of vital importance that cultural analysis of the woman with a gun in the genre reflect and attempt to further this project. But in most analyses of these narratives the gun—when it is discussed at all—usually functions simply as one symbolic representation of the gun-wielding

woman's unusual "masculine" identifications or behaviours or powers.[6] Ona Russell provides an example of this in her discussion of the historical Calamity's disruptively "calamitous" gender performance: "a woman with a gun was threatening not only because she was physically dangerous, but because she was emasculating, because in taking up arms, she took control of the very object that made a man a 'man'" (28). The western woman with a gun can clearly be read as an "exceptional" female figure who has adopted a traditionally male form of violent power, and an analysis of the repercussions of that assumption of power for traditional binary understandings of gender is important theoretical work. But as I detail in the introduction, the gun is also materially and symbolically tied to the historical narratives of American civilisation and to the related construction of the heroic American citizen. What should be equally evident in feminist analysis of this genre is the scope of women's participation in the construction of national cultures and the historical narratives that help build and define them. What I set out to demonstrate in this chapter, then, is that gun-wielding women do more than simply adopt masculine forms of power and agency: they engage with and construct the Western "past" in ways that are useful and important for their particular historical moment, whether it be the domestication of colonial violence, the representation of the necessary "other" of repressive "civilizing" processes and systems, and/or the displacement of

[6] See the chapter "Frontier Femmes," in Read's *The New Avengers*, and Tasker's "Cowgirl Tales" in *Working Girls*.

contemporary anxieties about violence, power, and resistance into a "safe" and also morally justified space.

Westerns and the Culture of Violence

At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago—an enormous fair celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America—historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered the paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." In this influential essay Turner argued for the centrality of the frontier experience, which he described as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner, para. 3), in the shaping of the American nation. Turner's "frontier thesis" would become the basis of the school of American historical interpretation that was dominant until the mid-twentieth century (Slotkin 5). Though he made some acknowledgement of the existence of Native peoples at the border of his "frontier thesis," in the paper he delivered at the Exposition in Chicago Turner nevertheless figured American westward expansion as having moved forward into "free land" (para. 1 ff.) and so positioned the farmer/homesteader as the foundational figure of US development.[7]

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[7] Turner in fact *replaces* the Indian with the settler—the "wilderness" subjugates the settler, forcing him to live and act like an Indian, until, by the force of his civilising processes, the settler ultimately manages to transform himself and his environment:

> The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first

As Linnie Blake notes, Turner, like the Exposition—which celebrated the cultural and material products of an urban-industrial capitalism made possible by the colonisation and exploitation of land, animals, and Native as well as "imported" peoples—thus effectively expunged "the mass slaughter that had facilitated the birth of the nation." With Turner, Blake continues,

> the figure of the murderer-as-frontier-hero was erased from the official account of the nation's coming-into-being. He survived, though, in the realm of popular culture produced on a mass scale for a mass audience and, in the act of surviving, continued to articulate a popular American sense that acts of murderous violence were an intrinsic component of American experience. (199)

One of the earliest and most powerful articulations of this popularised frontier gunman was in the extravaganzas of violence presented in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. From 1883 until 1908 Buffalo Bill's show toured North America and Europe, amazing audiences with its open-air staging of "authentic" Western experiences such as Indian battles, attacks on settler cabins or on the Deadwood stage, bison hunts, sharp-shooting demonstrations, equestrian feats, and rodeo-style events. The Wild West was the most important commercial vehicle for the fabrication and transmission of the myth of the frontier (Slotkin 87), and "the West" as it exists in popular imagination today is in fact a landscape and a history created in great part by this show. Replacing the banal brutality of US history with a more thrilling and glamorous popular narrative, The Wild West helped

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phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American (para. 5).

establish the sharp-shooting cowboy as hero,[8] a figure who would then be taken up by pulp novelists and Hollywood film.[9]

As evidenced in the enormous and longstanding popularity of western genre fiction, film, and television, the "idea of the West"—complete with its associations with hard work, rugged self-sufficiency, and liberal democracy—became seminal not only to historians, but to the general American population. Until the 1970s, the western genre dominated sales (or in the case of television, ratings) in all popular media (Tompkins 5).

After falling into neglect, the genre made a come-back in the late 1980s and mid-1990s, with Larry McMurtry's novels appearing on the bestsellers lists (and his *Lonesome Dove* and *Buffalo Girls* even being made into television series), and films like Christopher Cain's *Young Guns* (1988), Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), and Mario Van Peeble's *Posse* (1993) (among others) updating and revising the genre once again. Though eclipsed in the decade since then by the crime and science fiction genre, westerns still capture large audiences in the highly popular speciality cable channel, Lonestar.

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[8] The Wild West itself built upon the western heroes popularized in the dime novels of the 1860s, which, as Christine Bold notes, "articulated the West in the optimistic, patriarchal terms of Manifest Destiny then in ascendancy in public rhetoric . . . [drawing upon] the same fund of triumphant images and nationalistic narratives as did newspapers and politicians" (24).

[9] This narrative found audiences with "official" as well as popular culture audiences, as evidenced by the fact that western film heroes like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood were felt to define American values to such an extent that after WW2 Wayne was awarded a medal, authorised by Congress, that honoured him as the embodiment of military heroism—even though he had never served a day in uniform (Slotkin 243). American presidents have also capitalised on the cowboy mystique: John F. Kennedy made the "New Frontier" the motto of his administration's domestic policy, and—in a reversal of the de-fictionalising of figures like John Wayne—film cowboy

If official accounts like Turner's erase or transform the history of colonial violence into a civilised and civilising process, popular narratives—from the Wild West on—also usually fail to address the ideological or material workings of American expansionist policies. In the stories it tells of itself—whatever their intended audience—America celebrates the values of "civilisation" (democracy, justice, stability, property etc.) at the same time that it revels in the excitement, challenge, and danger of the "wilderness." But if peaceful civilisation and violent wilderness are both embraced in these narratives, they also both must be overcome—especially by the western hero. As Slotkin argues, the "complete American of the [frontier] Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege" (11). The western's exploration of the wilderness/civilisation antinomy is thus marked by a profound ambivalence, in that both sides of the opposition are simultaneously valued and deplored (Woods, "Duel" 191).[10] And there is a similar, and connected, celebration and disavowal that occurs in the western—and in American culture in general—around the violence that the "frontier" generates and allows. Western genre stories, as Blake

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Ronald Regan won the presidency in 1981. The Bushes continue in this tradition, drawing upon the hard-working and rough-riding associations of Texas ranching for cultural credibility.

[10] The constitutional ambivalence about both nature and civilisation means that despite their apparently rigid and predictable generic code westerns are in fact highly flexible narratives. The import and outcome of the (violent) meeting between nature and culture varies widely both in individual texts and throughout the history of the genre, with the positive integration of the hero into society being more prevalent in early Westerns (like *The Virginian* and the films of the 1930's), and cynical dysfunction reigning in the 1970s spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone or the films of Sam Peckinpah (*Wild Bunch*, etc.).

notes, certainly prominently feature violence and death (Jane Tompkins calls this one of the genre's "most essential features" [24]), ritualising, even eroticising, the shoot-out and the pivotal and often fatal final duel. But since, even in pop-culture fantasies, violence cannot be celebrated or embraced in a "civilised" society without reservation, the great appeal of the West is that the violence takes place at a temporal, social, and geographical remove. The frontier—this uniquely generative space—becomes in popular narratives a liminal zone in which "civilising" forces are (thrillingly) permitted to take uncivilised action in order to ensure the comfort and safety of the future generation (which includes the reader/spectator). As William Luhr explains, in this way the audience for these mythological tales get to "have it both ways": "the presumption is . . . that the rule of the law requires the rule of the gun to make it possible, and, when the rule of the law is established, it will then invalidate the rule of the gun" (Luhr 39).

The western's paradoxical celebration and critique of both sides of the wilderness/civilisation binary inflects and informs the genre's particularly rich presentations of gender, as the traditional male hero (violently) negotiates his place in or outside of civilised, domestic space. Western protagonists are notoriously stoic, taciturn creatures, but as Tasker (as well as other critics) notes, their masculinity is also manifestly "performed," both on the level of behaviour and of dress. The movie cowboy's traditional outfit is made up of an eclectic mix of the showiest gear worn on the range (Gaines, "Costume" 99). Indeed, as Gaines and Herzog note, it is difficult to imagine a wardrobe that lends itself more to

eroticisation than the fringed, buckled, and embroidered "costume" of the classic western hero, with its "low-slung, skin tight trousers," "cocked hat," and the "texturing of raw and smooth cowhide" ("Fantasy" 179). The most essential element of the western hero's "rig" is of course his gun. With its special holster of tooled leather, its polished steel and ornamental butt, the gun (or guns, if the hero happens to carry two) is a kind of fabulous male jewellery. As Gaines also contends, it is important for the "intrinsic" violence of the genre that the western's hero's weapon of choice is the hand-gun—the Colt or other revolver. She writes,

> One reason, surely, why the cowboy reigns supreme in the cinema's primary genre of violence, the Western, is that because his gun is attached to his body, in the way that the mountain man's Kentucky rifle was not, it becomes more truly a part of his nature. The gun is for the cowboy the physical, corporeal expression of his moral nature, his 'code'. This means that in the cinema 'action' (i.e. violence) can be guaranteed; sooner or later in the narrative the hero must show himself for what he is; then he will shoot." ("Costume" 103)

In his seminal article on masculinity as spectacle, Steve Neale argues that since it cannot be acknowledged explicitly in filmic texts, eroticism around the displayed male body is displaced into ritualised scenes of conflict (14-15). The potency and toughness of this ornament (the gun) thus not only promises violence, but in so doing it also holds the potentially emasculating spectacle of the eroticised male body in check.

Like the classic male gunslinger, the female western hero mediates between nature and civilisation, but she is an even more complexly ambivalent agent. Femininity has conventionally been understood as being less rational and more unpredictable—and so less civilised—than masculinity. But "woman" also

represents civilisation; she *is* civilisation (or "the town") in the western, and it is the protection of her and the community values that she signifies that justifies the hero's violence. The woman with a gun in the western is capable of stronger or more complete affiliations with both the world of the town and of the wilderness, and she therefore occupies a much more precarious narrative position than her masculine counterpart, as she must negotiate both her "proper" feminine passivity and the "inherent" unpredictability of female emotions and desires. In responding to this crisis, the stories (fictional and historical) in which gun-toting gals appear construct a range of explanations, rehabilitations, or punishments for their gun-wielding heroines. In the case of Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane, the two women/characters possess diametrically opposed personas and reputations: Annie is the virtuous, proper, civilised Victorian lady, while the wild Calamity, as her name suggests, is usually "deviant" and dissolute. This divide between the good and the bad woman with a gun is indicative of both traditional binary representations of femininity and of the symbolic potential of the gun itself (both women and guns can be deviant agents of chaos, both can be agents of order and civilisation).

Whether figured as "good" or "bad"—and in fact few gun-toting protagonists can be slotted so simply—these provocative figures exist in the troubling gaps that the signifiers "woman" and "gun" create when they conjoin. Most clearly and consistently, the woman with a gun represents a crisis of *femininity*, of virtue and transgression, and the gun-wielding woman, whether

represented by Annie, Calamity, or later female gunslingers, inevitably challenges and exposes patriarchal social structures and gender definitions. As Tasker notes, however, "if images of men have often needed to compensate for the sexual presentation of the hero's body through emphasising his activity, then images of women seem to need to compensate for the figure of the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality, her availability within traditional feminine terms" (*Spectacular* 19). This sexualisation—whether Annie Oakley's girlish charm or Hannie Caulder's long, naked expanse of leg—is certainly apparent in representations of the armed western woman. But even this sexualisation can redound upon dominant power structures, for as Tasker appends, if "active" female heroes are "excessively sexualised, then so is the violence to which they are subject" (*Spectacular* 152). While paying attention to the sexualised violence that affects characters like Annie, Calamity, and the later western female gunslingers like the "Bad Girls," I am also interested in extending Tasker's observation—by paying attention to the broader cultural and generic significations of the woman and gun combo—in order to consider the way that the gender of the gun-wielding women *participates* in the negotiating, explaining, and eroticising of violence that is a necessary part of the American mythos.

Annie Oakley and the "Civilised/Civilising" Woman with a Gun

At the height of her career as a competitive and "trick" marksperson, "Little Miss Sure Shot" Annie Oakley was the most famous woman in America

(some biographers even claim the world). Oakely was born as Phoebe Anne Moses in 1860, to humble Quaker parents in Darke County, Ohio. There are a number of different versions of the early life of this shooting sensation. The most common account[11] of her first experience with a firearm firmly positions Annie's unusual skill as domestic and nurturing: the 6-8 year old Annie is said to have picked up her deceased father's gun in order to hunt for food for her impoverished mother and six siblings. Annie was the fifth child in the family, with four older sisters, one younger brother and one younger sister. The fact that she had no older brother increases the acceptability of Annie's hunting, since the absence of adult men in the family allows it to be positioned as a physical necessity, and thus lessens the threat that her behaviour represents to traditional patriarchal gender norms. Indeed, this standing in for a deceased or absent father is, as we will see, one of the more common explanation for "masculine" behaviour in otherwise "good" women. As a sharp-shooting adolescent, Annie is said to have supported her family by selling her game—prized, according to the legend, because the fact that Annie shot birds through the head meant that their flesh was not riddled with buckshot—to local grocers. This anecdote regularly surfaces in narrative accounts of her life, and it is compelling: the supreme accuracy of her shooting, captured so succinctly in the image of a diminutive bird's diminutive head pierced with a

[11] In my discussion of both Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane, I make little real distinction between "biographical" information and fictional/filmic texts. The information available about the "real" Annie and Calamity—now as well as during their lifetime—is inextricably woven with their performance as mythic "Western" figures in spectacularising popular culture forms from journalism to live performance to pulp fiction to film.

single bullet, seems simultaneously humane (because quick) and frighteningly deadly.

Annie's public life began around 1881, when she defeated a touring marksman named Frank Butler—the man she would marry a year later. By 1882, Annie had become Frank's performing partner (and again the "absent male" explanation appears: she is said to have taken to the stage to assist Frank when his male partner was ill), and had assumed the stage name Oakley. When Frank and Annie joined Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show in 1885, Frank stepped out of the performance and dedicated himself to promoting and assisting his wife. For seventeen years Annie performed as a top billed act in the Wild West, with Frank as her unbilled and unpaid assistant (Davis 144). Though there were other female sharp-shooters who played in various shows at the time Annie joined Buffalo Bill, her work with a shotgun—in addition to the more common pistol or rifle (Kaspar 33)—was rare. Indeed, when Annie signed on with the show, replacing the retired famous marksman Captain Bogardus, Cody's primary concern was that she would not have the strength and endurance to handle the Captain's ten-pound Scott shotguns. Years later Annie, who became a celebrated trapshooter (the shotgun was used to fire at round clay "birds" catapulted into the air), reportedly asserted "I think that I have pretty successfully demonstrated . . . that I have been able to bear up against it" (qtd. in Kaspar, 32).

The petite Annie always presented herself as a modest and respectable Victorian woman. She refused to wear the revealing costumes adopted by other

female performers, and instead sported calf-length skirts, tan leggings, and loose-fitting and demure blouses. Her prim outfits were softened somewhat by her long, loose hair, and her "girlishness" was also played up in her act: she would run into the arena, stamp her foot and pout if she missed a shot, and give a small trademark kick after a good performance. But the shotgun is the workhorse of weapons: heavier and less precise than the rifle or pistol (the shotgun fires a spray of buckshot rather than a single bullet), it is in some ways the most masculine of early firearms. To counter the "masculine" force and size of the weapon is, however, the shotgun's association with homesteading. The fact that shotgun was the cheapest and most common gun of the west, and was used for food (rather than sport) hunting and for protecting property in isolated areas also surrounds the weapon with an aura of "virtue." It is the primary gun of the family, rather than of the upper classes, the showman, the law, or the criminal: the shotgun is the honest, "authentic" tool of hardworking, clean-living rural Americans—like the pioneer homesteader of Turner's paper. Though she had never actually been west of Kansas, Annie's persona was thus an obvious product of "frontier" ideals—ideals that, in the face of an increasing industrialisation and the routines and uncertainties of urban living, were eagerly embraced by an American population seeking relief from the present.

Annie's combining of traditional male and female gender characteristics was not unique, for by the end of the nineteenth century the "spunky" American girl had become a popular symbol for the strength and promise of the United

States. As Candace Savage outlines in her book *Cowgirls*, travel writers and cultural commentators at the time (from Alexis de Tocqueville to the Norwegian scholar Hjamar Boyesen) noted the "happy boldness" and "mixture of feminine delicacy and masculine will" of the Western American woman (55). "Observers have usually found it possible to write books on the social and economical traits" of a nation "without a parade of petticoats in the headlines," British writer James Muirhead wrote in 1898. But because American women (especially those from the West) embodied the "intangible quality of Americanism," Muirhead found himself "irresistibly compelled" to devote whole chapters to the country's female citizens (qtd in Savage, 55). As Savage concludes, "Charming, outdoorsy, independent and determined, The Girl was proof of America's passion for democracy, the product of its dauntless frontier spirit and the promise of bold generations still unborn. In Annie Oakley's performances, this image came energetically to life" (55). It was this ideal Western image—of honesty, virtue, hard work, and natural charm—cultivated by Annie in her many years in the ring, that helped establish her fame, and enabled her (and the Wild West show) to negotiate the suggestions of deviance that might otherwise surround the woman with the gun.

In her article "Shotgun Wedlock: Annie Oakley's Power Politics in the Wild West," Tracy C. Davis situates Annie's performances in the "entertainment" traditions of her day (magic shows and circus acts). Davis pays particular attention to the role of Frank Butler in Annie's act, which defied a wide array of

gender norms. Not only did Frank give up his career to follow and manage Annie's, as her assistant, he also functioned as her target (a role usually played by women—whether they were being sawed in half by magicians or outlined by blade-throwers). This relationship adds another dimension to Annie's negotiation of traditional gender roles, but Frank's identity was not a stated element of Annie's show or her public persona—certainly the Wild West promotional material made no mention of the fact that "Miss Annie Oakley" was in fact married. But Davis also comments on the role or place of Annie's act in the broader project of the Wild West show:

> The elaborate fiction of western life in the acts surrounding Oakley's and Butler's performance included what was presented as the "victimization" of Caucasian women and the slaughter of natives in scenarios such as "The Attack on the Settler's Cabin." Like Oakley, other women in the company also demonstrated skills, but it was up to the men to carry out the prerogatives of Manifest Destiny—including explicit "historicized" acts of genocide and chivalry amid the smoke and noise of gunpowder. . . . Women had a place in the Wild West milieu but no agency upon the course of history. The gender *mentalité* of late nineteenth-century American culture . . . allowed Oakley to be an iconoclast and a prodigy, but other cultural and social traditions prevented her from embodying violence or from playing out a script of domination.

Davis offers valuable insights here into the distinctions between male and female performers in spectacles like the Wild West, as well as into the dimensions and limits of Annie's challenge to traditional gender roles. But it seems to me that—in a gesture common in critical analysis of the woman with a gun—in arguing that women had "no agency upon the course of history" Davis also reproduces a patriarchal marginalisation of women as she decisively separates Annie and the

other female performers from the political work of the Wild West show and from the violent symbolism of its "historical" acts and narratives. Annie's performance may not in itself have enacted a script of domination, but her centrality and fame as a Wild West figure indicates that her presence there served an important cultural purpose.

Annie's gender politics were reported to be quite conservative—she was not in favour of women gaining the vote, and was offended if she was mistaken for a "New Woman"—but throughout her career, she also spoke in favour of women shooting (though not at the expense of their domestic duties) and she generally encouraged women to be more physically active. Annie's act's power, like her persona's, can be viewed as deriving from its combination of authentic western thrills and danger with a guarantee of morality and safety—a guarantee essential both to Annie's widespread popularity and to the transformation of frontier savagery into a dramatic history that could be embraced by the entire American population. Annie's importance in this regard is evidenced by the fact that her act, coming early on in the programme, apparently helped to set urban audiences (unused to the explosions of firearms) at ease: one patron at the time commented, "Women and children see a harmless woman there, and they do not get worried" (qtd. in Savage, 47). This reference to women and children suggests that as Annie's femininity works to "dress up" and "tame" the violence of US history, she opens up a space for the whole of "civilised society" to be brought in

to the mythological narrative of American nationhood (as defined around and through the West).

This process is detailed in director George Stevens' 1935 bio-pic *Annie Oakley*, which was produced less than a decade after Oakley's death (in 1926), and stars a young Barbara Stanwyck in her first western role. When the film's Buffalo Bill (Moroni Olsen) agrees to hire Annie, he remarks that "what this outfit really needs is an uplifting influence. And what could be more uplifting than the presence among us of a fine, high-minded little woman." When Bill first introduces Annie to the rest of the troupe, the men grumble about having a woman in the show, but by the evening meal that "uplifting" influence is already at work: the scruffy cowboys have dressed, shaved, and even applied cologne, and they burst into applause when Annie enters the dining tent. In the scene which precedes Bill's hiring of Annie, he insists upon the "authenticity" of his show, and warns his agent about the danger of hiring fancy Eastern shooters. Bill wants, he says, "he-men doing the things they did on the plains. I want the real, genuine article or nothing." With Annie's presence in the show, the "he-men of the west" are brought under a domesticating influence—very much in the way that the west itself was made "safe," while still acting as a symbol of rugged American independence.

The Wild West show was meant to capture and celebrate a dying way of life: the cowboys, the pioneer settlers, the lawless towns, the buffalo, and, most importantly, the Indians. An integral aspect of Annie Oakley's legendary

biography is her association with the Lakota Sioux Chief, Sitting Bull. In 1884, before Annie joined the Wild West, Sitting Bull—a kind of celebrity prisoner of war who led the Native Americans in their victory at the battle of Little Bighorn—attended one of her performances and was reported to be so impressed with her skills that he decided to adopt her as a daughter and honorary Sioux, christening her "Watanya Cicilla," or Little Sure Shot. This adoption made for good publicity, as Frank Butler (in the role of manager/publicist) recognised, and it became a part of the Annie Oakley persona, helping establish her as a "western" figure. During Annie's first season with the Wild West, promoter John Burke convinced Sitting Bull to join the troupe, and the Chief became (for the four months he toured with them) a star attraction of the show, his ride around the ring far out-shadowing the feats of the still relatively unknown Annie. In *Annie Oakley* Chief Sitting Bull's "otherness" plays for comedy: Sitting Bull (played by Chief Thunderbird) struggles with "modern" conveniences in the film, losing his Murphy bed and shooting out the lights the one night the troupe stays in a hotel. In winking tribute to its audiences' own modernity, *Annie Oakley* plays up the difficulties many of the film's characters have with burgeoning modern culture, from telephones to poster-bills to women who smoke. Sitting Bull's characterisation in this instance is a racialised (and racist) version of the film's general mockery of the backwardness of the citizens of the past (the film is set in the late 1880s, almost fifty years previous to its production date). But in the specific instance of Sitting Bull, this mockery also participates in the broader

work of the "historical" settings of western narratives, which, as Virginia Wright Wexman observes, "function ideologically to displace the issue of racial difference onto the past, thereby eliding the ongoing—and remediable—oppression of native peoples that continues to this day" (131). If, as audiences know, billboards, telephones, and smoking ladies are no longer sources of frustration and amazement to contemporary citizens, Sitting Bull's difficulties with "civilised" life can also be viewed as a problem of the past—because via either assimilation or the unfortunate (bloody) necessities of progress, the "Indian" no longer exists.

As a representation of the "natural" instincts and emotions that can be overshadowed by the conveniences and progressiveness of the present, however, the mythological Indian remains (to this day) a useful cultural figure. Beyond his comedic potential, Sitting Bull thus plays a key, if limited, role in the film's depiction of the romance between Annie and her future husband "Toby." It is Sitting Bull who first suggests to Annie and Toby that they live in "one tepee," and it is with his assistance that the two are reunited after Annie's European trip: Sitting Bull sees Toby in New York, "tracks" him, and then brings Annie (who has wanted to see him) to Toby's shop. Sitting Bull plays the "noble savage" in the film, as well as an "Indian" version of the classic Hollywood staple—the devoted servant who, naturally inferior to the white race, loves his/her master/mistress, serves as comic relief, and offers sage advice (the character of Sitting Bull plays

this role again in the 1950s musical version of Annie Oakley's life, *Annie Get Your Gun*—see below).

Buffalo Bill's fame—for his slaughter of approximately 4280 buffalo in Kansas in the 1860s—was an integral aspect of the Wild West show. The ostensible purpose of this hunting of the buffalo was to feed railroad crews (Blake 205), but the elimination of the buffalo was also the linchpin of the U.S. government's genocidal strategy for making the west "safe" (by slaughtering, ousting and/or subduing Native Americans). The Wild West's suspenseful reproductions of the battles that took place between the government and the Indians, as well as colourful "traditional" Indian dances, was one of the most effective vehicles of marketing the image of Native Americans as a brave but primitive and therefore doomed people (Broad 12). The Wild West thus crucially participated in the ongoing negotiation of dominant US culture's simultaneous fear of and desire for the "Indian" other. The liminal position of "woman" enables a gun-wielding figure like Annie Oakley—especially given her friendship with Sitting Bull, and her honorary Sioux status—to act as a mediator between civilised society and the natural native world. In this position, Annie can both represent (in her own mix of qualities) and re-present (in "encounters" with the Indian that demonstrate his harmlessness) the domestication of Native Americans. Annie thus becomes a fitting embodiment of the strong, lively, but still secure (white and civilised) frontier.

And "Annie Oakley," at least until before the Second World War, could exist in a general sense as an ideal representation of the American character, bringing together some of the positive values embodied in "the gun" (natural energy and independence) with the qualities associated with a "lady" (propriety, morality). But the historical specificity of Annie's persona, and of the gun itself, add another dimension to her position as a spunky American girl. With her combination of a cultured but youthfully "girlish" propriety and mechanical precision, strength, and deadly determination Annie is able to bring together the ideals represented by the gunslinger and Turner's homesteader—while avoiding the pitfalls of both (disturbing and violent iconoclasm for the one, simple dreariness for the other). Annie thus aids in the presentation of American history as moral, progressive, and civilised, while still exciting and adventurous enough to be worthy of myth.

At the same time that the Wild West show brought the West to life in live performance, dime novel authors had begun peddling western yarns in print. And with the birth of cinema at the turn of the century, film westerns became the dominant cultural form—with novels also maintaining a good share of the popular market. A key figure in this on-going articulation of the mythic West was the prolific and popular author Zane Grey. Grey's importance to the western genre cannot be underestimated. The forty-plus novels that he wrote before his death in 1939, many of which became best-sellers, were repeatedly adapted by Hollywood—in fact, his fiction has been the source of more films than any other

author (Tompkins 164). Grey's stoic gunfighters, moral cowboys, heroic women, trusty dance-hall girls, and especially his lush, passionate descriptions of the Western landscape, as well as the gritty frontier towns and mining camps, have become iconic staples of western narratives.

In her discussion of gender as it relates to the mythic Western landscape, Ona Russell notes that the appeal of "going West"

> often rested on a magnification of the standard distinctions between men and women. Specifically, the West, and, even more specifically, what Henry Nash Smith calls the 'Wild West,' 'an exhilarating region of adventure and comradeship in the open air,' was constructed as a place where 'men could be men,' and, by extension, where women would *have* to be women; as a place where men went to become strong and independent, to regain the masculinity lost in a supposedly feminized East. (Russell 24)

Grey certainly participated in and promulgated the view of the West as a place and space in which men could recover their lost masculinity. As Gary Topping writes, Grey, who held "philosophical and literary positions rooted in the nineteenth century" (52), "saw the American West as a primitive, Darwinian social environment that nourished fundamental virtues and physical capabilities that were basic ingredients in all vital civilizations and that were especially needed in twentieth century America, which he regarded as increasingly and dangerously effeminate, superficial, and over-civilized" (55).

But while both Russell and Topping present a view of the West as an antidote to Eastern effeminacy as politically regressive, Grey's narratives and characters cannot simply be dismissed as conservative or even anti-feminist. In the quotation above Russell locates the West's allure in its "magnification" of traditional gender

role, but Grey's novels (see for example his 1921 *Call of the Canyon*) illustrate that the journey West was desirable for women, as well as for men. For Grey's female characters, the trip West meant neither a retention of passive femininity nor a return to wild, untamed nature, but instead the development of a harmonious society based on the simple values and healthy physical industry of the country, rather than the idleness and empty propriety of the city. Though coded as "emasculating," the dangers of the East (superficiality, inactivity, self-centredness, purposelessness, weakness) are presented by Grey as negatively effecting *both* women and men. And as the persona of Annie Oakley demonstrates, the West's vision of femininity, despite the cliché, did accommodate more complex versions of femininity than a simple binary of schoolmarm and dance hall girl.

A number of Grey's novels, or romances, as he himself preferred to call them, were written as serials for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and Grey has (for a western novelist) a larger than average proportion of female protagonists. *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) was Grey's first popular success—Jane Tompkins still labels it "the most famous of all Western novels" (164). *Riders* introduced readers to Lassiter, a quintessential western gunman, but its primary plot concerns the struggles of the independently wealthy Jane Withersteen with the tyrannical men of her Mormon community. As a determined and independent but still devoutly Mormon woman, Jane is a pacifist. She thus spends the bulk of the novel resisting the revenge-seeking gunslinger Lassiter's form of violent retribution and self-protection—and for a short time she even succeeds in convincing Lassiter to give

up, or rather give her, his guns. Jane ultimately comes to accept the necessity of using violence to oppose injustice and tyranny, though not before her Mormon brethren have deprived her of her property. The relationship between Jane and Lassiter, while grounded in traditional gender roles, is also complexly presented, with Jane consciously seducing and "humanising" Lassiter through her intellect, her cultured life, and her powerful—and though chaste, still adult—sensual allure. Many of Grey's female characters can be divided according to the Eve/Mary binary, with dark-haired sexual temptresses losing out eventually to fair, innocent maidens (see, for example, *The Maverick Queen* and *Captives of the Desert*). But as his portrayal of Jane Withersteen demonstrates, Grey also developed nuanced and complicated female characters, whose qualification as good or bad, while never under serious dispute, nevertheless challenges traditional depictions of the good woman as passive, dependent, and "pure." In Grey's *Thunder Mountain*, for example, a priest makes the following speech as he is about to marry the cowboy protagonist and his former dance-hall girl sweetheart:

> Women are scarce on the frontier. A few pioneer women with their daughters, and the rest a horde of Indian squaws, adventuresses, prostitutes — and dance-hall girls. From these westerners must choose their wives. And they have done so for years, are doing it now, and will continue to do so. Man must have woman. It is a hard country, this glorious West of ours. It takes big women to stand it. And bad women, if there are any bad women, have turned out big and good. They are making the West. (181)

In this passage, the priest complicates the meaning of "bad women," exempting even prostitutes from its conventional usage. In implied opposition to the physical and emotional "delicacy," of their Eastern sisters, it seems here that "bad" women

might be uniquely qualified for the "bigness"—which suggests a kind of maternal largesse as well as a masculine toughness—that is a true requisite for frontier living. Rather than simply demanding that women be women, the West is thus a place that allows for a revision or refiguring of gender roles.

This gender play is especially evident in Grey's novel *Horse Heaven Hill*, which features the most fully developed of Grey's gun-toting "Western girl" heroines, Lark Burrell. *Horse Heaven Hill* was written during the mid-1930s—around the same time as Stevens' film *Annie Oakley*—and Lark's character owes much to Annie's persona. Lark's life, as she tersely describes it at the beginning of the novel, has been one of "Ranch life. Work. Horses. Cattle." Like Annie, Lark's proficiency at traditionally masculine skills has come as a result of the absence of a father or brother figure (the orphaned Lark has in fact lived alone—save one old farm hand—on her ranch in Idaho from the time she was fifteen years old, and *Horse Heaven Hill* narrates the impoverished Lark's necessary relocation to her Uncle's ranch in northern Washington state, her romance with her flighty cousin Marigold's fiancé, Stanley, and her thwarting of a "dastardly" cowboy's plan to sell the area's wild horses as chicken feed). The ambiguity around Lark's femininity is made explicit several times in the text: in her riding outfit, for example, the narrator describes her as "a boy once more" (15), and in that outfit she is in fact mistaken for a boy by the ranch hands. Later in the novel, after Lark has guilelessly confessed her love for him, Stanley recognises that "There was no telling what Lark might say or do. She had never been used to regarding herself as

a feminine creature" (107). Lark's daring rescue of the wild horses at the novel's close also marks her as masculine. She is confronted by Stanley in the dark as she flees after her sabotage of the round-up: "'I think you've been idiot enough to burn Blanding's fence,'" he accuses. But Lark responds, "'You've got me wrong, Stanley. I've been *man* enough to let those wild horses out and then burn the fence'" (151).

A key marker of Lark's atypical femininity is of course her proficiency with a gun. In Grey's nostalgic longing for a pre-industrial society, the gun plays a central (if paradoxical) role, as a machine that connotes (for male as well as female characters) rugged idyllicism and rural self-sufficiency. It is Lark's association with guns that seems to first attract Stanley's serious interest. Early on in the novel, Lark exclaims that if "any cowpunchers [cruelly rounded up the wild horses] on my range I'd shoot them." It is at this moment, "with the bell-like ring of her voice in his ear,"" that Stanley realises he has "passed the stage of interest in Lark Burrell." He is now "wholly fascinated" (32). Each of the climatic romantic scenes in the novel involves guns, as in the excerpt below, in which Stanley expresses his concern about Lark's independence:

> 'Lark, you can't ride around alone.'
> 'Why can't I?', she asked belligerently.
> 'Don't ask foolish questions.'
> 'I ride alone all over the range at home.'
> 'That's different. It's wild down there.'
> 'Of course it's wild. Enough for rustlers. They've kept me poor for years!'
> 'Rustlers!' You never told me that!' ejaculated Stanley. 'Lark, you don't mean to tell me you ride around alone where there're outlaws?'
> 'I've had to. Been chased more than once, too, Stanley. I always pack a rifle on my saddle.'

> 'Can you shoot?' He asked dubiously.
> 'I've a notion I can beat you,' she replied.
> 'You wouldn't have to be so good. How about a small gun—a revolver?'
> 'I can handle one.' (82-83)

Stanley's concern for Lark is motivated by her "female" vulnerability—a concern which seems so obvious to him that it does not need to be articulated. But Lark is apparently oblivious to threats to her virtue—her riding alone has been a matter of financial necessity, and her possession of the gun establishes her in the traditionally "masculine" position of protector/proprietor rather than the classic feminine role of victim/property.

Lark, like Annie Oakley, also bests her future husband in a test of shooting skill. The prelude to this test, in which Stanley bets Lark that she can't hit his sombrero as it dangles from a tree twenty steps away, is an erotically charged discussion of Lark's ability to protect herself from the advances of Blanding, the villain of the piece. Stanley, again concerned by Lark's desire to spend time alone in the wilds, interrogates her:

> 'Suppose, for instance, that Blanding happened upon you way up here. Suppose he jumped off his horse—made a grab for you!... Lark, you know he would.'
> 'You don't need to tell me that.'
> 'Well, what would you do?' asked Stanley, sure of her reaction, but desiring to hear her express it.
> 'I'd hold him up with a gun,' she said fiercely, and slipped the revolver he had given her from the pocket of her jeans.
> 'Ahuh. So you carry it there?'
> 'Yes, the belt was heavy, and besides—I'd rather the gun wasn't seen.'
> 'All right. Fine. And just to satisfy me, suppose Blanding disregarded that and laid hands on you?'
> 'I'd shoot him,' she replied, with a somber flash of eyes.
> 'You'd kill him!'

> 'Oh, no. I'd just blow an arm or a leg off.'
> 'Lark!' Stanley believed she had the spirit to do as she threatened. She was positively electrifying. (107-108)

During this conversation Lark evidences a clear awareness of the possibility that her person, like her possessions, may be the object of unwanted attention. But her imagined response to Blanding is little different than her response to the rustlers—she will ward both off with her gun. This prospect clearly excites Stanley, who questions her simply in order to enjoy the vision of the "electrifying" Lark brandishing her revolver. This exchange calls out for psychoanalytic scrutiny—the hidden genital-like gun tucked in Lark's pocket, and the spectacle of her shooting Blanding in an intimate and (at least for Stanley) sexually charged exchange.[12]

With Stanley's challenge that she can't hit his hat, the imagined sexual encounter described above becomes real, as the wager Stanley extracts from Lark—if she misses, she has to kiss him—"innocently" mimics the hypothetical scene with Blanding. But Lark

of course hits the hat with perfect accuracy, and thus avoids being forced into a sexual situation. The gun, as a symbol of her "good" Western girl status, thus helps to ensure and legitimate the female gun wielder's own virtue, even as it marks her entry into "dangerous" public spaces—an entry that would normally mark the woman as fallen and deviant. Still, the sexual aura that surrounds Lark's

[12] Though outside the scope of my present analysis, the romance between Lark and Stanley can also be read as homoerotic, with the text's many suggestions of Lark's boyishness, and Blanding's "ignoring" of Lark's phallic gun, serving as an invitation—taken up eagerly by Stanley—to imagine a sexual scene between Blanding and a young man.

possession of the gun indicates an important difference between her and Annie Oakley. While the narratives about Annie Oakley illustrate the virtuous woman with a gun's capacity to represent and/or participate in the symbolic domestication of Western violence, Lark here brings violence into the domestic sphere (of romance) and thus eroticises both the violence and her goodness. If the mythological West serves as an action-packed, nation-building gloss on the (interconnected) brutalities of colonialism and the banalities of industrialisation, the pairing of the "good" woman and gun can work to both domesticate the violence of the past (as with Annie Oakley), and vivify the boredom of the present (Annie and Lark).

The gun in the Western girl's hands—the two of them together—become a richly suggestive mythic symbol. As Annie and Lark illustrate, in the Western context the woman with a gun can become a national as well as a personal muse. The armed Western girl is down-to-earth and spunky, but as this muse-figure she can also be read as emblematic rather than "real." This is evidenced by the fact that Lark is presented in the novel as archaic, a thing from the past—Lark's great appeal is articulated and defined by an admiring cowboy, who tells her that she is "like the Western girls [his] mother tells about" (94). As in characterisations of Annie Oakley, the subversive potential of Lark's independence is also always tempered by reminders of her youth and femininity. For while Lark's independence and feistiness signal her tomboy status, her morality and her virtue mean that, like Annie's, her gender is never truly in question. These qualities

mean that, regardless of her skills and activities, Lark ultimately needs a protector like Stanley. Lark's shooting and possession of the gun is often linked by her to her need to support herself and maintain her ranch. When Stanley bets her that she can't hit his hat, for example, a miss means Lark pays a kiss, but a win means Lark receives two-hundred dollars from Stanley—enough money, she says, to purchase supplies to replenish her ranch. This wager highlights what each partner will bring to the relationship: sexual pleasure from the woman, economic protection from the man. Lark's marriage to Stanley, it is suggested, means that she, her guns, and her ranch, will be under "appropriate" masculine control (once Stanley is assured of Lark's familiarity with guns, he will "let" her carry one). Stanley's "proposal" makes this clear: "I love you," he says, "and I have my plans. It'll hardly be necessary for you to go and work for anybody but *me*. Love and honor and obey! Will you?" "I do," she replies.

In his recent book *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory*, Will Wright explains the significance and allure of the independent woman in popular narratives:

> According to the image of love, a man must conquer and tame an independent woman to prove his masculinity. She must become submissive to demonstrate her love, but her initial independence was what made her attractive. The hope for a civil society depends on separate spheres, so weak, dependent women must love strong men. But men need to retain their self-respect in the face of market pressures, and conquering an independent woman can reinforce self-respect (154).

Wright's analysis sheds some light on the recuperability and even the necessity of the strong, independent women like Lark in traditional, conservative western

heroic narratives, but he also overlooks the subversive possibility of the "Western Girl" as a protagonist (rather than just an object of desire for the male hero) and model of femininity. Though characters who achieve Annie Oakley's skill and success are marginal figures in the genre, many of these early western heroines—and especially Grey's—possess a combination of dependence and strength that, while always marked as "female," still serves to challenge restrictive gender norms. The climatic scene of *Horse Heaven Hill* does, after all, have Lark gun down Blanding not to protect her virtue, but to save Stanley's life. After incapacitating this horse-killing villain, Lark faces him with bravado, exclaiming "I let those horses out. I burned your fence. Stanley lied to protect me.... Now you get out of here, pronto!" She then, with gun extended, warns his gang to "Get him up—pack him away—or some of you'll get another dose of Idaho!" (170). Expertly wielding her gun in the service of good, Lark, like Annie Oakley, personifies more than just the state of Idaho—as a classic "Western Girl" she represents that combination of sincerity, virtue, and vigour celebrated by champions of "the West."

Even an emblem or a muse can set a precedent, and the figure of the Western Girl and particularly the famous Annie Oakley was certainly a powerful and independent role model for women. As proof of this is the fact that this image and mode of femininity had to be repositioned after the Second World War, when the West and its colonial violence became more distant and the domestic sphere began to be the new defining-ground of American society. The domestication of

Lark's economic and behavioural independence via her eventual marriage to Stanley is presented, in Grey's depression-era text, as "natural" and harmonious (Lark needs and wants his help), rather than retributive. The woman-with-a-gun's feisty independence and tomboyish style is not so cheerfully celebrated, nor so peacefully recuperated, in the highly popular1946 Rogers and Hammerstein Broadway musical romance version of Annie Oakley's life, *Annie Get Your Gun* (starring Ethel Merman, in its original theatrical run). A post-WWII production, *Annie Get Your Gun* (*AGYG*) seems intent on demonstrating the pitfalls of equality and/or competition between the sexes, as veterans returned home looking for employment in a recessive economy. This is equally true of the Academy Award winning film version of the play—adapted by MGM in 1950,[13] and starring comedienne Betty Hutton as Annie—which I will focus on here.

While *AGYG*'s Annie is genuine and kind, her strength is presented as a kind of childish boastfulness rather than as a demonstration of the self-sufficiency and cleverness that marked Annie Oakley as an archetypal Western girl in the 1935 Stevens film. In the scene in *AGYG* that marks the first meeting between Frank and Annie, the suave Frank (Howard Keel) is clearly in the position of power. Smitten and speechless due to her admiration of the Wild West star, Annie listens rapturously as he sings (the first number of the memorable Irving Berlin score), about the kind of girl he will marry: an infantalised "doll [he] can carry,"

[13] The film was unavailable on video or television from 1973 until the recent Warner Brothers 2000 video release.

who will "purr like a kitten" and be "soft and pink as a nursery" in her "satin and laces." Unlike the poor but proper Victorian Annie encountered in earlier accounts of her life, *AGYG's* version, though a loving caretaker of her younger siblings, is uncultured, grimy, and clad in rags. After Frank departs, Annie sings the famous "You Can't Get a Man with A Gun."

> Oh my mother was frightened by a rifle they say, that's why I'm such a wonderful shot.
> I'd be out in the cactus and I'd practice all day, but now tell me what have I got?
>
> I'm quick on the trigger, with targets not much bigger than a pin point, I'm number one!
> But my score with a feller, is lower than a cellar, oh you can't get a man with a gun.
> When I'm with a pistol, I sparkle like a crystal, yes I shine like the morning sun!
> But I lose all my lustre when I'm with a bronco-buster, oh you can't get a man with a gun.
> With a gun, with a gun, no you can't get a man with a gun!
>
> If I went to battle with someone's herd of cattle, you'd have steak when the job was done!
> But if I shot the herder, they'd lock me up for murder,
> 'Cause you can't shoot a male in the tail like a quail, no you can't get a man with a gun.
> If I shot a rabbit, some furrier would grab it, for a coat that would warm someone.
> But you can't shoot a lover, and wear him like a cover, no you can't get a man with a gun.
>
> The gals with umbrellas, are always out with fellas, in the rain or the blazing sun!
> But a man never trifles, with gals who carry rifles, oh you can't get a man with a gun.
> With a gun, with a gun, no you can't get a man with a gun!
>
> A Tom Dick or Harry, will build a house for Carrie, when the preacher has made them one.
> But he can't build you houses, with buckshot in his trousers
> 'Cause a man may be hot but he's not if he's shot, oh you can't get a man with a gun.

This song, and the film, does not suggest that Annie cannot master or possess the gun—she is in fact shown throughout to be Frank's superior, both as a marksperson and as a human being. The more insidious point seems to be that though women may be capable of doing anything a man can do (or doing it better, as another famous song in the play/film proposes), this success can only translate into domestic misery and social chaos. In the hands of a woman, the gun now signals deviance, the absence of proper femininity, and a lack of education.

True to the historical account, *AGYG*'s script allows Annie to best Frank in their first competition, but she remains an outsider—she is laughed at rather than cheered on by the crowd at their match, and she is ultimately offered a job in the Wild West show merely as Frank's assistant. Despite the jealousy and arrogance that marks Frank's character, he captures and retains Annie's heart, and it is Annie who must change and develop in order to win both the crowd and her man. Annie's gender transformation is in line with a tomboy-to-adult-woman trajectory common in popular narratives that feature "feisty" women, but the particular western context here adds an additional dimension to the process. Annie's ragged buckskin dress and dark skin colour at the beginning of the narrative work to establish her connection with the "Indians" in the film—in fact her first appearance, as she shoots a stuffed bird off a woman's hat, is met with a cry of "Indians!" In earlier versions of the Annie legend, Annie's association with Indians represents *their* "harmless" subjugation. But in providing its warning to the unconventional, economically independent women, this 1950's narrative "others" the woman with a gun by opposing *her* to dominant civilising processes of various sorts. From the example of the other performing women in the show, for instance, Annie learns how to look like a civilised white woman. She bleaches her tanned skin with lemons, polishes her nails, and transitions from rags to a plaid top and plain skirt and finally to fancy skirts and dresses. For her other

lessons in proper womanhood, Annie is instructed by Sitting Bull (J. Carroll Naish).[14]

The relationship between Annie and Sitting Bull is much more developed in *AGYG* than in the 1935 *Annie Oakley* film. The "adoption" of Oakely by Sitting Bull is played out in a blatantly racist number (expunged from contemporary productions of the play), that concludes with Annie singing "I'm an Indian Too." Via a collection of common stereotypes—which as Homi K. Bhabha notes are a "form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (66)—this deplorable song mocks Native American names and customs, and "humorously" considers, in order to hysterically disavow, the spectre of miscegenation raised by Oakley's "Indian" identification:

> Just like Battle Axe, Hatchet face, Eagle Nose
> Like those Indians, I'm an Indian too
> A Sioux, uhu, A Sioux, uhu
> Some Indian summer's day without a sound
> I may hide away with Big Chief in the ground
> I'll have totem poles, tomahawks, small papoose
> Which will go to prove, I'm an Indian too

In the execution of this number the Indians who accompany Sitting Bill and the Wild West show are reduced to cavorting apes, and Annie, who had reacted with exaggerated fear when Sitting Bull first approached her after her shooting display, now joins in the performance of various "primitive" customs with a child-like

[14] *It is notable that while the 1935 Annie Oakley* actually used a Native actor (Chief Thunderbird) to play Sitting Bull, this film, in which the Chief plays a central role—and is more intimate with Annie—employs Naish—a white actor who played many "ethnic" roles in Hollywood films.

exuberance. While the white Annie's participation in these rituals is clearly presented as a parodic performance that highlights her privileged status in the text, it also indicates the way dominant culture aligns the gendered and racialised other in order to demarcate their essential difference from, and inferiority to, civilised white masculinity.

Annie's whiteness may guarantee her ascendancy over *AGYG's* band of dancing Indians, but her femininity (and her class) means that her relationship with a "Chief" like Sitting Bull is more complex. As in Stevens's 1935 film, Sitting Bull performs as an ideal representation of traditional gender roles, with a timeless, "common sense" understanding of relationships between men and women. "Papa Bull," as Annie takes to calling him, actively assumes his "adoptive" role and becomes Annie's primary confidante and advisor in the film. He shares key moments with Annie after she joins the show, even reading her the letter left by Frank which informs her she has been jilted (for out-performing Frank in the ring). Our backwoods Annie is illiterate—this will be another aspect of her transformative education—and Sitting Bull, acting as a "primal" patriarchal figure, is her principle teacher. The "historical" narratives of Annie's life often claim that she taught Sitting Bull to read—an inversion of *AGYG's* narrative, and one that demonstrates the ideological function of the woman-Indian pairing in each context. Sitting Bull and Annie's relationship in *AGYG* can be read as a reflection of the comparably diminished threat of Native Americans by mid-century. But while the feisty Western woman could be celebrated as a symbol of

the democratic vigour of the US people at the turn and beginning of the twentieth century, by the 1950s, when "independent" women had become a much more prominent and disturbing challenge to patriarchal power (and to the culture's economic structure), any gender upstart will need to be taught the Indian's lesson. In the symbolic economy of *AGYG* it is thus highly fitting that this lesson can actually be taught by the Indians themselves.

The moment of crisis in the film comes with a final shootout between the feuding lovers. Annie's friends know that she will only win back Frank—and help save the show, which is in financial straits—by losing this contest. Sitting Bull appreciates the importance of "mergers," both financial and romantic, and, as in *Annie Oakley*, his character works here to reunite Annie and Frank. Sitting Bull tampers with Annie's rifle and, as she misses shot after shot, the usually competitive Frank becomes solicitous and affectionate. Sitting Bull eventually admits what he has done to the baffled and frustrated Annie, and tells her that she must lose this match and accept her role as "second best" to win Frank: "You tell me you can't get man with gun, remember? You get man with *this* gun." In the context of *AGYG* the woman with a gun is clearly unsafe—she is both domestic and savage, and so is especially threatening because she is "of the house" but also "outside" the confines of received notions of sex and decorum. Annie's gun therefore *needs* to be disabled—not only so that she can win Frank, but so that she can take her proper place in the domestic sphere. Annie quickly understands the Chief's plan and publicly admits her defeat. This is the final narrative scene of the

film, and it closes with the promise of a future of happy economic and romantic partnership—with Frank, like Stanley in *Horse Heaven Hill*, assuming the "proper" upper hand in both.

Sitting Bull's crucial lesson about the necessity of accepting a second best (or second class) position in relation to the white man (he calls his strategy with the defective gun "peace medicine") is a message that could apply to Native Americans (and any other minority group) as much as to women. In beating Annie, Frank wins all of Annie's medals, which constitute her bankroll and this assumption of Annie's financial independence also connects the woman and the Indian in *AGYG*. Both Annie and Sitting Bull are presented as precocious "children" playing with powers (weapons and/or money) that need to be properly controlled. When the audience is first presented to him, the Sitting Bull of this film is—in complete contradiction to the historical reality of the government's treatment of native peoples, and particularly of Sitting Bull—rich and apparently free to travel around the world with the show, with the income of the "50 000 barrels a day" of oil being produced on his land at his disposal. After joining the Wild West, he even begins to finance the show—until, he says, the government refuses to give him any more money.[15] As with Annie, Sitting Bull's "possession"

[15] The historical Sitting Bull in fact fled the US in the early 1870s, only returning (from Canada) when forced to by the lack of resources (i.e. food) there for his people. He was required to remain on a reserve for the rest of his life (he was eventually killed by government led Lakota police forces in 1890 when they attempted to arrest him because of his involvement with Ghost Dance, a new anti-white, retributive religion gaining popularity amongst Native peoples). His one short season with the Wild West show, it is speculated, was motivated by his desire to travel away from the reserve (in part with hopes that he would be able to meet President Cleveland and talk with him about improving the plight of his people), and by the substantial salary paid by the Wild West

of his rightful property and his independence must ultimately be sacrificed so that he will be allowed to exist within dominant culture. While Sitting Bull's historical complaints and sacrifices are repressed in *AGYG*, this narrative dramatises, with somewhat surprising forthrightness, the hegemonic workings of patriarchal power. The audience is shown, in scene after scene, that Annie is Frank's superior in everything except gender, but Annie must, and does, ultimately embrace her own subjugation (symbolised by her disabled gun). How completely this narrative resolution succeeds in harnessing or diffusing Annie's disruptive potential is open to debate, and indeed the repetition of her humiliation can be read as an indication of her terrifying ability to "return" from her marginal position.

The western answer to the spectre of this threat from the frontier is, of course, to civilise it, and a final symbolic (choreographic) attempt at this occurs in the final scene of the film—which repeats the singing of "There's No Business Like Show Business" (earlier, this song marked Annie's introduction to the world of performance). Annie rides into a huge outdoor dirt arena from the right, backed by hundreds of mounted Indians, while Frank, also mounted, enters from the left surrounded by cowboys. The two groups intersect, and perform some classic Busby Berkeley-style kaleidoscope effects around the stars that once more reiterate the suggestion that if, to preserve the safety of the West, Indians had to learn about boundaries, so too must women in post-war America learn to remain

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Show (he was paid fifty dollars a show to ride once around the ring, and also any royalties from the sale of his photograph).

in the sanctioned space of the family. Without everyone keeping in their proper sphere, the smooth and harmonious working of culture will be destroyed.

The Woman with the Gun and/in the Wilderness

Compared to Annie Oakley, fairly little is known about the "historical" Calamity Jane, whose fame came primarily from fiction rather than live performance. Accounts of her life must rely in part on her own brief autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Calamity Jane, By Herself*, which features many inconsistencies, as well as upon the *Letters to her Daughter* that were produced in 1941 by Jean Hickok McCormick, who claimed to be the daughter of Calamity and Wild Bill Hickok. The authenticity of these letters and the parentage of Jean Hickok is in great doubt. Still, most reports do agree that Calamity Jane was born Martha Jane Cannary in Missouri around 1852. As a young girl she journeyed west to Montana with her family, but with both parents dead by 1869, Martha was left to fend for herself, finding jobs—probably including prostitution—in boarding houses, bars, and dance halls (McLaird 27). Cannary also hit the trail with mining expeditions, claimed to have served as a military scout, and probably worked as a mule skinner. She was, according to all accounts, a drinker and teller of tall tales (in "rough" language). In her autobiography, Calamity calls the infamous killer/lawman Wild Bill Hickok her "friend," though the "Letters to Her Daughter" and other sources suggest that the two had a romantic relationship or even were married (Calamity asked to be—and

was—buried beside Hickok). It is this relationship with the famously deadly lawman that has dominated fictional accounts of her life and character. While this emphasis on her romantic life—or lack thereof—indicates the need to situate the woman with a gun in a domestic context, the fact that the nature of Calamity's relationship with Wild Bill is uncertain only reinforces her precarious social position.

As legendary figures Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane are about as far from each other as it is possible for two gun-toting women to be, and the narratives of why and how each woman picked up the gun are also markedly dissimilar. While Annie Oakley is presented first as a young, nurturing caregiver, and then a proper lady with extraordinary talents, Calamity Jane is from the beginning a "deviant" figure. In Calamity's autobiography, she notes that by the age of thirteen "the greater portion of my time was spent in hunting along with the men and hunters of the party, in fact I was at all times with the men when there was excitement and adventures to be had." Though Calamity's early gun use is also associated with hunting, unlike Annie, her primary motivation is here said to be a desire for action, rather than serving the needs of others. Her free association with "the men" immediately places her outside conventionally acceptable behaviour for a Victorian lady, and also bars her from representing—as a "Western Girl"—the best of American civilisation. Calamity can, however, still serve the purposes of that civilisation by acting as its opposite—and so demonstrating its necessity and morality.

In 1936, a year after Stanwyck starred in George Stevens' *Annie Oakley*, Cecil B. DeMille's epic *The Plainsman* featured Gary Cooper as Wild Bill Hickok and Jean Arthur as Calamity Jane. Calamity is said in this film to be a crack shot, but she never actually fires (or even seems to possess) a gun. Instead, she brandishes a whip. The gun is clearly marked in the film as a powerful economic and political product (rather than a tool of the individual), and thus is firmly situated in the world of (white) men that, throughout the film, overtly repudiates Calamity. Jean Arthur's twangy-voiced Calamity is barred as much from the world of women as from men. Calamity is loving, self-sufficient, and droll, but she is also uncultured—a marked contrast to Buffalo Bill's new wife Louise (Helen Burgess). Calamity is presented as loving Wild Bill, but Bill (though he clearly has feelings for her and carries a picture of the two of them around with him in his pocket watch) rejects her because, it is implied, she has been unfaithful to him. While Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill (the film takes place in the late 1860s, before Buffalo Bill—played here by James Ellison—has established the Wild West show) are scouts, and use their guns in the service of the Army, Calamity, with her whip, is aligned with the animals she drives. Calamity first appears in the film as she hitches her horses to a coach, and in one of her first scenes of dialogue, she is asked by a cowboy if she is "keeping company tonight," to which she responds "me and my six horses." Her horses and her whip thus take on explicitly sexual connotations—and establish the deviant behaviour that drives

Bill from her (in an early scene she even uses her whip to snatch Bill's hat from his head).

The Plainsman's unusual characterisation of Calamity Jane as a "gunless" woman can be connected with the cultural transformation of the gun that is charted in the film: the primary plot concerns unscrupulous arms manufacturers and dealers who, looking to maintain profits now that the war is over and Army demand has fallen, decide to sell their new repeating rifle to the Indians (the possession of a repeating rifle, which could fire seven to fifteen shots before reloading, was an advantage over the regulation Army single-shot rifle). The position of the gun in *The Plainsman* indicates that this narrative takes place at a moment—in the "progressive" transformation of the frontier—that is closer to civilisation than to nature, and that thus requires that the violence of the gun give way to the order of the law. Still, before this transformation can be totally complete, the West must be made safe—these are words spoken by President Lincoln in *The Plainsman*'s first scene (just before he is assassinated), and they serve as a kind of a mantra throughout the film.

As with narratives around Annie Oakley, Calamity's "masculine" behaviour inevitably links her, in a western context, with the Native American other. In a pivotal scene in the film, Calamity is modelling a dress she has been given by Louise in the Codys' cabin when it is invaded by Indians seeking information about the whereabouts of a wagon of ammunition (for the new guns). Calamity, who moments earlier had asked Louise for a hat to complete her outfit,

successfully distracts the intruders for a while with Louise's beribboned headgear. Rebecca Bell-Metereau suggests that "[t]he portrayal of the Indians as savage and ignorant is underscored by having them put on women's hats and wear them with delight. Jane is just as ridiculous for not wearing such finery as the Indians are for thinking they can wear it" (82). Beyond a simple critique of Jane and the Indians' failure to conform to conventional raced and gendered dress codes, this "dress-up" scene performs the ambiguity surrounding Jane's status: is she, like Louise, a woman who belongs inside civilised society, or is she, like the Indians, an outsider?[16] The dress Louise gives her is the first and only one Calamity has owned, she says, and this is also the first time she has been given anything by a woman. Annie Oakley takes up the gun because her father is absent, and remains a woman—Calamity, in this film and in the later musical version of her life (see below), takes up the gun (or in this case the whip) because she has had no feminine influence in her life. Louise's gift of the dress to Jane highlights the central role of women in the reproduction of "civilised" culture, specifically as they work to educate other women (their children) in proper female deportment. And before the entry of the Indians, the pretty, dressed-up Jane seemed to be poised—with Louise's help—for entry into civilised society.

But the Indians enter and "claim" Jane by kidnapping her. This abduction leads to Bill's own capture, and ultimately to Jane revealing the whereabouts of the ammunition for their new guns, and, it is implied, to the defeat of Custer at the

[16] My thanks to Susie O'Brien for this reading of the scene.

Battle of Little Big Horn. Jane, who has been resisting the Indian's demands for information, caves when the band threatens to kill Bill (once again, the natives evidence a "natural" understanding of romantic matters)—demonstrating once and for all the impossibility of woman's entry into the "political" world. Neither women nor Indians are allowed the power that the gun represents, and the film suggests that to give (or sell) these weapons to them is the height of corruption, one that holds the seeds of social disorder.

The fact that Buffalo Bill has settled down with an educated and peace-loving wife, and plans to establish a hotel (viewers know that he will eventually present a "safe" version of the West to audiences around the world through his production of the Wild West Show) means that he has successfully made the transition from frontier gunman to productive member of a peaceful society. But Calamity's ambiguous past will not allow her salvation—at least not in this film. While Jane, the Indians (whose grievance with the deceptive government the film to a certain extent acknowledges), and Wild Bill (who will meet his death at the end of the film), may be sympathetic, appealing, and even heroic creatures, their way of life is far enough "outside" the domestic economy that ultimately they must be rejected by civilised society.

As a follow-up to the success of MGM's *Annie Get Your Gun*, Warner Brothers produced *Calamity Jane* in 1953. Directed by David Butler, and starring Doris Day as "Calam," the narrative of this film has much in common with the earlier MGM musical—including the transformation of the wild gun woman into

a proper lady that is denied *The Plainsman*'s Calamity. From the original theatrical trailer in this film, however, it is clear that—unlike either the 1935 or the 1950 version of Annie Oakley's life—Calamity is still no match for her (eventual) romantic partner, Wild Bill Hickok (Howard Keel). The trailer proclaims that there has never been a "glibber fibber, or a cuter shooter, than Calamity Jane. She could out stalk, out draw, out ride any man in Deadwood City—*except Wild Bill*" (emphasis mine). This version of Calamity's life does actually present and allow her use of the gun, but her possession of that weapon is, from the outset, seriously compromised.

Calamity, like *AGYG's* Annie, is a comic figure, and one much in need of a makeover. Dressed in her grubby buckskin pantsuit and cradling her rifle, she rides singing into Deadwood on the stagecoach in the film's first scene. Arriving with the mail, Calamity hands out parcels and a cheerful ribbing to the eager townsfolk. But when Calamity hops off the stagecoach and enters the local saloon/theatre/hotel, The Golden Garter, it is she who becomes the object of fun. Calamity acts like one of the boys, shooting into the air to part the crowd of men in her way, gruffly ordering a drink at the bar, and throwing out friendly insults to the rest of the patrons. But Calamity's drink is "sasparilly" (a kind of root beer), she falls down when she reaches the bar, and the saloon's patrons respond to her boasting about the hoards of Indians she killed while bringing the mail with mock encouragement and behind-her-back mimicry. Calamity's boasting continues in the next saloon scene, after she has rescued her handsome lieutenant friend, and

crush, Danny (Philip Carey). Calamity once again returns to town claiming that she killed a score of Indians, when in fact she scattered four or five men by firing into the air. Her tale gets an especially sceptical reaction from Wild Bill, who wonders why, with Calamity out there "killing all the redskins," "the government bothered to send in the Army." Calamity shoots at Bill's feet as he walks away, and asks him in a tough drawl if he is calling her a liar again. But Calamity's attempt to perform in this classic showdown moment only serves to highlight what she "lacks." Bill whirls around and blasts her gun out of her hand—a symbolic castration that is underlined when he derisively asks "why don't you ever fix your hair" before turning his back on her. This shaming of Calamity will occur repeatedly in the film, until she learns proper feminine deportment. From these first scenes, like *AGYG*'s Annie, Calamity's possession of the gun both establishes her femininity and marks it as deviant: while something that "real" women do not have or should not use, the gun in Calamity's hand also reinforces woman's dangerous instability and irrationality—qualities they share with the Indians with whom they are inevitably linked in these western narratives.

Calamity's gender-norm-disrupting heroics are an essential aspect of her character in this film, and despite her repeated humiliations it is hard to deny that they are heroic: she brings the stagecoach's cargo and passengers in safely to Deadwood, she rescues Danny, alone, when his own men have given him up for dead, and she stands up—again alone—against an angry mob, twice, when she believes they are being ungenerous and unfair. The first of these show-downs

between Calam and the town occurs when she defends the hotel owner, Milly, after his tough patrons discover that the "actress" whose performance they have paid to see is really a man in disguise. To quiet the crowd, Calamity promises them that Milly will produce a real woman: the famous actress and singer Adelaid Adams.

From the first scenes of the film, a contrast is established between Calamity and this abundantly feminine performer, whose picture, which appears in select packages of "cigareets," is a sought after prize in Deadwood. When Calamity asks Wild Bill who Adams is at the beginning of the film, he responds with a description that is similar to Frank's "instructive" song to Annie in *AGYG* about the kind of girl he will marry: Adelaid Adams, Bill rhapsodises, is "a hope, a dream, a vision . . . She's charming, has a lovely figure, everything a woman *oughta* be." Calamity in this film is a departure from many fictional representations of Martha Cannary in that—whatever her behavioural quirks, she is never tainted by the hint of sexual impropriety. Like Hutton's Annie in *Annie Get Your Gun*, she is, in fact, characterised by sexual immaturity. Reflecting to some degree the traditional Annie/Calamity binary, however, Annie in *Annie Get Your Gun* is much more consistently and thoroughly "female" than Doris Day's "Calam"—Hutton's Annie always wants to be a woman, she just needs to learn how. Her staged loss to Frank can also be viewed as the kind of manipulative duplicity coded as essentially female for centuries by anti-feminist gender theorists. This is not to deny the disruptive potential of Annie's character—though

Frank may think he is the best shot in the world, the audience knows Annie is in fact both a better shot and a better person. The tragedy of the "show business" of gender though, at least in this film, is that this doesn't seem to matter—Annie still has to lose. Day's Calamity, who is vocally critical of "frilled up sides of beef" like Adelaid, and who scoffs at Bill's lessons in feminine deportment, is a much more ambiguous figure—her humiliations are more profound and shaming, but her challenge to gender conventions is also more disruptive.

Calamity's second act of bravery comes when she defends the woman she mistakenly brings back from Chicago: not the divine Adelaid, as she and Milly have promised, but Adelaid's maid, Katie Brown (Allyn McLerie), who wants to be on stage so badly that she has impersonated her mistress. In both of these scenes Calamity is allowed to use her gun with impunity, even shooting a wine bottle out of the hand of an irate and burly man who threatens to run her out of town for failing to produce Adelaid. Calamity can thus successfully possess the gun when it is used for feminine, moral, educative ends—when she, like the historical Annie Oakley, works to domesticate the unruly and uncivilised crowd. But while Calamity's gun use is presented as effective and positive in these instances, there is too much in her character that is not of a piece with civilised femininity (specifically the "decorum" necessary to offset any suggestion of a desire to upset the natural hierarchical relations between the sexes) for her to be able to perform in this role in any sustained manner.

A crucial indicator of Calamity's existence on the margins of civilised society is the association that is established between her and "Indians." Unlike the narratives that surround Annie Oakley's life, or even that of *The Plainsman*, there are in fact no named or individuated Native American characters in this film. Instead, Indians, in caricature, exist as a crucial aspect of the film's "Western" setting. But most prominently, they exist as a part of *Calamity's* West. Her repeated boasts about killing them, and her concern about them entering the town, are met with a bemused lack of interest by the rest of the townspeople—other than high-strung and nervous Eastern greenhorns like Francis Fryer (the male actor who pretended to be a woman) and Katie. Like Calamity, the Indians do not really exist in or for dominant society. They may be a threat, but this threat is both temporally and geographically local. For those in the know, this Indian business is all histrionics. The same is true of Calamity's hyper-western style of dress and her drawling talk, which seems outmoded even in Deadwood. When Calamity heads to Boston, her archaic position is even more apparent. As she saunters down the street other pedestrians stop and stare, and even here she is exposed for the excessiveness of her frontier vigilance. As she walks along, Calamity spies an Indian in full headgear. She pulls her gun and charges, only to find—to the urban spectators' amusement—that he is merely a life-sized wooden statue. Always on the lookout for disrupters of civilisation, Calamity has yet to learn that it is she herself who is out of step with the modern world.

When Calamity finally locates Adelaid Adam's dressing room in a swanky theatre in Chicago, she finds Adelaid's maid, Katie, dressed up in one of Adelaid's costumes and performing in front of the mirror. Calamity assumes this singing beauty is Adelaid, and Katie assumes that Calamity—decked out in a fatigue-style jump-suit with hat—is a man. Catching sight of Calamity watching her, Katie lets out a scream of terror. Calamity, drawing her gun once again and scanning the room, shouts in return: "What is it ma'am—where is the varmint?" There is some confusion and even a slap and a bit of a tussle (Calamity tells Katie that she's the purtiest thing she ever saw, and offers to help her undress) in this rich scene before Calamity and Katie establish that Calamity is a not a male intruder. "You're, you're a woman?" stutters the incredulous Katie. Calamity first has a hearty laugh at Katie's mistake, but then decides that it "ain't so funny." "Oh I'm sorry," Katie responds, "but those clothes, the gun and everything." In a civilised society, women don't dress or act like Calamity, and Indians are always already only cigar store props, their proper, commodified place established and inevitable.

Katie—this symbol of good Eastern femininity—becomes Calamity's educator though, and with her help, Calam's gender-troubling "everything" is eventually re-configured. Calamity (untainted by the hint of the sexual impropriety that indelibly marks *The Plainsman*'s Jane) becomes a pretty and feminine woman, and in her pink dress she wows all the men at the local ball. No longer a figure of fun, she is treated with respect and admiration, and for carrying a gender-appropriate arsenal: after giving her an approving glance, one of the men

at the ball quips, "looks like Calamity's been holding out on us—carrying concealed weapons." This is a many-layered metaphor—with one set of weapons (Calamity's guns and generally masculine behaviour and dress) interfering with the display of her equally dangerous but culturally sanctioned femininity. But Calamity hasn't quite learned her lesson yet, since when she discovers Katie and her long-time crush Danny kissing in the garden she puts back on her army overcoat and shoots a punch glass out of Katie's hand.

Before Calamity finally accepts and adopts her proper, feminine role, the two women have a final confrontation in The Golden Garter, where Calamity comes the next day to order Katie out of town. Reversing their positions from the previous evening, Katie requests a gun from the audience and aims to shoot Calamity's glass from her hand. The glass explodes, and Calamity, once more unmanned, slinks from the theatre/saloon as the crowd cheers for Katie. The erotic and symbolic potential of this woman-on-woman gunplay is diffused in the long-foreshadowed love scene between Bill and Calamity that follows, when Bill reveals that *he* in fact made the glass-shattering shot. Calamity needed to be taught a lesson, he says, because if she "hadn't lost in there" she "never would have won again." Like Annie in *AGYG*, Calamity is defeated in a fixed match, but her humiliation is more profound (because not intentional or willing on her part, at any stage), and she publicly loses to Katie as well as to Bill.

The "performative" aspects of gender in this film generate a proliferation of roles and desires that, despite the Shakespearean double wedding that will

occur at the film's close, cannot be completely resolved. The homoerotic tension that exists between Calamity and Katie especially seems to linger (as Eric Savoy convincingly argues in his essay "'That Ain't All She Ain't': Doris Day and Queer Performativity"). But when Bill admits that he in fact was the maker of Katie's shot, he figuratively steps between Calamity and Katie—to claim ownership both of the gun and of his woman. Bill will now take over Calamity's education, and Katie's missed shot works to confirm both Katie's appropriate feminine "lack" and Bill's casual natural potency. The woman's possession of the gun—her potential violence, her disruption of domestic harmony, her unpredictability—illustrates how necessary it is for the man to have the gun, so that he can maintain the smooth operations of civilisation. Calamity's shaming thus works to teach her the crucial lesson (without which she will be lost forever) about the "truth" of power relations in a civilised society. Both women and Indians are populations viewed by the liberal bourgeois power structure as incapable of self-government. As the wild woman with a gun (like Calamity Jane here and in *The Plainsman*) models Indian-like behaviour in a "familiar" locale, she allows for the rearticulation and rejustification of oppressive regimes: for if woman can behave so irrationally and childishly, just imagine what the Indians are (or rather were) like! At the same time, the woman's symbolic identification with the Indian affirms her own less-than-rational subject position.

Calamity Jane's audience is assured that Wild Bill will take care of Calamity, in the same way that the Army will take care of the Indians: for their

own, as well as our, ultimate good. In these narratives, which treat the woman as the other who needs to be domesticated, possession of the gun is a signal and symbol of the others' threat and a justification of dominant violence. But in order to police the boundary between "their" irrational violence and the necessary force of rational civilisation, the other cannot be viewed as actually or fully possessing the gun. It seems like Day's Calamity has the gun—she certainly thinks she has it—but the film shows us that this is a ridiculous fantasy on her part. She does not and can not have the gun, and she must accept this if she wants to be happy or even simply be allowed to remain "in town."

The impact of this lesson still has force in contemporary narratives about the wild Western woman. Calamity Jane is the primary narrator of Larry McMurtry's popular 1990 novel, *Buffalo Girls*, which intersperses first-person letters written by Jane to her daughter (these are clearly modelled after those produced by Jean Hickok McCormick) with omniscient narration. As with the other Calamity Jane narratives, McMurty's Jane is denied the full possession of her gun. McMurtry's Jane is a poor shot, and it is suggested that all of her tales *about scouting* are exaggerations. She cannot even drive mules (a skill which most accounts do grant her). She is kind-hearted and loyal, but she seems mostly an unconventional tag-along, following her mountain men friends about for decades as they hunt and make camp (this is not entirely an issue of gender—only one of the mountain men, Jim Ragg, is actually a competent outdoorsman). By the end of the novel, it is revealed that Jane's romance with Hickok, and the daughter

she writes to, are merely the inventions of a lonely woman. Even her femininity is dubious—throughout the novel characters wonder whether she is a man or a woman, and eventually Jane reveals that she is in fact a hermaphrodite. She dies miserable and basically alone. Biological gender confusion is thus used by McMurtry to help explain the uncharacteristic behaviour of the historical figure. Hermaphroditism can also be read as a "solution" for the persistent ambiguity of the gun-wielding woman. McMurtry solves her ambiguity by blanking her out—making her neutral. It is possible to imagine a text in which this could function as a radical critique of gender binaries, but in McMurtry's text Jane is a wholly pathetic figure—one who illustrates that the woman with a gun is less frightening if she possesses no "natural" markers of sexual identity, since she is then dismissable as a freak and aberration.

Gunfighting Gals and "Justifiable" Violence

To a much greater degree than with male heroes, a narrative with a gun-wielding, female protagonist (in any genre) must answer the question—why? Cowboy, sharpshooter, scout, or gunfighter are not conventional careers for girls, so what has caused the woman to pick up the gun? While for the male gunslinger the possession of the gun indicates a "heroic" position on the border of both wilderness and civilisation, personal trauma is much more likely to be the explanation for the woman's embrace of the gun, whether that trauma is familial (loss or absence of parents), economic (poverty), or sexual (rape or the admittedly

rare hermaphroditism). Many (of the few) westerns with female leads are thus revenge narratives of some variety. As "good woman" who has been violently expelled from the sanctity of the domestic sphere, the gun wielding woman who seeks revenge for her loss or trauma takes up a position that is somewhere between the civilisation represented by Annie Oakley and the deviance associated with Calamity Jane: she has been *driven* beyond the conventions of feminine behaviour.

The mid-1990s produced two popular—though critically panned—westerns featuring vengeance-seeking women whose connection with the gun is especially strong and central: Jonathan Kaplan's *Bad Girls* (1994) which stars Madeleine Stowe, Mary Stuart Masterson, Andie MacDowell, and Drew Barrymore, and Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), with Sharon Stone. In both these films, the answer to the question "why has the woman picked up the gun?" is a set of traumas that is particularly horrific and profound. As a young girl Sharon Stone's character, Ellen, was forced to shoot her father in a sadistic game played by John Herod (Gene Hackman), *The Quick and the Dead*'s creepy and powerful bad guy. In *Bad Girls* the four protagonists have all been forced to become prostitutes because various men and/or circumstances have left them no other alternative, and in the course of the film itself three out of the four women—as well as being robbed and ridiculed by the villainous Kid Jarrett and his gang—are raped or assaulted.

Richard Slotkin argues that the "revenger" western "replaces social with exclusively personal motives, insisting (in effect) that the private dimension determines the whole significance of the story" (382). But with a female avenger, the political dimensions of female vulnerability (physical, social, and/or legal) and isolation can be manifested as a critique of patriarchy, as contemporary women gunslinger films engage the Western "past" from a present that has been shaped by the social upheaval of the civil rights movement and the continued protests and criticisms of "minority" activist groups.

Bad Girls and *The Quick and the Dead* engage directly with, reflect, or respond to feminism both via their critiques of patriarchy and their presentation of powerful, "liberated" women as protagonists. *Bad Girls* offers one of the more explicitly vocalised examples of this, when the "girls" are denied, on the basis of gender, rights to property on which they hope to start a business. Anita (Mary Stuart Masterson) explains their position, as well as the rational for their rebellion, mid-way through the film, saying to the lawyer who informs her that her deceased husband's land claim is now worthless: "if your laws don't include me, well then, they don't apply to me either." *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead* also combine a critique with the institutional and social manifestations of patriarchy (banking, the law, prostitution) with a "psychological" investigation of its damaging personal affects—especially as evidenced in the relationship (the meaning of which is telegraphed by their names) between Herod and his son, Kid

(Leonardo DiCaprio) , and Kid Jarrett (James Russo) and his father, Frank (Robert Loggia).

Judith Halberstam argues that "Women, long identified as victims rather than perpetrators of violence, have much to gain from new and different configurations of violence, horror, and fantasy" (McCaughey and King 251). *The Quick and the Dead*, as many critics have noted, ruthlessly—though also comically—exposes the psychotic macho posturing of Herod (who kills his own son as part of his contest) and the other gunfighters who have come to enter his competition. Both films particularly play with the gun's role in compensatory phallic displays like Herod's staged duels and Kid Jarrett's hold up of a Gatling-gun carrying train. But while the bad girls may mock Kid for wanting to "play with big guns" in order to earn his father's respect, their own gun use is not, in the end, presented much differently than their male enemies. After engaging in a extravagant *Wild Bunch*-style shoot out with the gang, the final duel between Kid and Cody takes place in the bedroom of the gang's hide-out (the ruins of a stone house)—the site of both Cody and Lily's (implied) rape. After an exchange of fire, Kid is cornered, but he laughingly claims to be out of bullets, suggesting that if Cody kills him it will not be a fair fight. Cody removes a bullet from her own gun, tosses it to Jarrett, and (in an oft-quoted line) sneers: "Pick it up, put it in, and die like a man" before blowing him away. This exchange is viscerally satisfying as it belittles the bad guy's "lack" and figures the woman as the agent of power and justice. But while they may critique their male oppressors' chauvinism, as Cody's

appropriation of the tough guy persona reveals, the bad girl's motivation and response is premised on a demand for "equality" that fails to engage with the more pervasive workings of gender and of violence.

In contrast to the bad girls' easy adoption of the "outlaw" role, Stone's Ellen is a fearful and tremulous gunfighter—she is especially nervous and prone to tears whenever she is in the presence of Herod—and is besieged by moral qualms about killing. And Ellen's status as hero of *The Quick and the Dead* could, in fact, be challenged by the character of Cort (Russell Crowe). A former member of Herod's gang, Cort has turned preacher and renounced violence. This defection has enraged Herod, both, it is suggested, because of his strong, sublimated attraction for Cort, and because Cort's transformation challenges and exposes Herod's own brutality, which he defends as being an essential (and therefore unchangeable) aspect of his nature. Along with narrating Ellen's trauma and ultimate revenge, the film thus revolves around Herod's attempt to break Cort's vow of pacifism and engage him in a duel. As a "good guy" in this revisionist narrative (and visual) exposure of male violence, however, Cort maintains—as he must—that "killing people is wrong" (though his "instincts" do lead him to kill a few men when his choice is either to shoot or be shot). It is thus Ellen who, qualms or no, faces Herod in the climatic final duel—and delivers her fatal bullet(s) in an act that "marshals" behind her the righteous force of her father, the former lawmaker of the town (aptly called Redemption), the townspeople themselves, who have pleaded with her to rescue them from Herod's tyranny, and

her own personal violation ("You stole my life!", she charges Herod before she shoots).

In his review of *Bad Girls*, Philip J. Deloria describes the film as one in which "a group of four women—already marginalized as prostitutes—move completely outside the boundaries of 'civilization.' This boundary crossing is crucial, for, as they become societal outlaws, the women are freed (and perhaps required) to become gender outlaws as well" (Deloria 1196). But while *Bad Girls*, like *The Quick and the Dead*, clearly articulates a critique of patriarchal values and social structures, this critique remains firmly grounded within the mores and values of "civilised" culture and (contemporary) gender roles. Though circumstances may remove Ellen and the girls from their traditional domestic space and force them to embrace the gun, their beauty, femininity, and essential "goodness" is never under serious dispute (Leslie Felperin Sharman quips that the title of *Bad Girls* ought to be "*Victimised Girls Who Are Quite Nice Really*" [38]). Even the violence that marks these women's revenge seems, in fact, fairly modest when compared with that to which they have been subjected. In their own ways, like classical westerns, which simultaneously revere and condemn the male gunfighter, both *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead* get (and allow their audience) to have it both ways. The bad girls can mockingly thwart the patriarchal social forces that both exploit and revile female sexuality (and thus prevent the girls from making an "honest" living). Kid Jarrett and his gang, who represent the extremes of this violent oppression, clearly *deserve* to be slaughtered. While *The*

Quick and the Dead's critique of patriarchal culture may be more subtle and profound, Ellen's femininity still allows the film to deliver its critique of violence via violence. If figures like Annie domesticate violence, and figures like Calamity "other" it, then we see here that heroes like Ellen and the bad girls *justify* it. Indeed, the very exposure and critique that dominant, masculine violence has sustained at the hands of feminists and other oppressed groups is used in these films as a pretext for a retributive violence that becomes, in the process, both erotic[17] and moral.

The traditional male gunslinger represents the past—and specifically an originary violence that can or will no longer be countenanced in a civilised society. In these female-led narratives, the past functions as an outlet or safe release for the anxieties and frustrations of a "post-feminist" culture. The patriarchal bad guys are "othered" by being sleazy, insane, and/or corrupt, but they are also part of a system that can be read as outmoded and temporally distant. This distancing can comfort the contemporary audience, who is assured that patriarchy is not "their" problem any more, at the same time that the presentation of easy, clear, and simple targets and solutions offers release and satisfaction for those frustrated by the difficulties of confronting continued systemic inequalities. Instead of the past, then, the contemporary woman-and-gun represents the future.

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[17] As Ben Thompson notes in his review of the film, in *The Quick and the Dead* Ellen has "a mysterious tendency, apparently common in the old west, to forget to do up her shirt buttons when she leaves the house" (59). And the bad girls—who Leslie Felperin Sharman describes as "about as politically correct as a L'Oreal hair mousse commercial" (38) model a variety of suitably revealing "Western" costumes throughout the film.

It is not she who will disappear, to be nostalgically remembered by a society no longer allowed to use their guns in the service of personal (or self-appointed) justice. Instead, if, like Ellen and (most of) the bad girls, the gun-wielding woman rides off into the sunset, it is to await the rise of the culture that will accommodate her—our culture, the audience can presume—and the fall of the outmoded patriarchal oppression that she has so righteously battled and wittily exposed. With the rise of this culture, it is suggested, the woman will no longer *need* the gun the patriarchal culture forced her to pick up in the first place.

In her discussion of *Hannie Caulder*, an early 1970s revenge western starring Raquel Welch, whose character turns bounty hunter but is always accompanied by a male "teacher," Pam Cook writes that there is a final boundary the female protagonist "can never cross. For women can never really be heroes in the Western: that would mean the end of the genre" ("Women" 242). The western genre is, I think, more flexible and varied than Cook allows, and while the exact role of earlier female protagonists can be debated, Ellen and the bad girls at least seem to have crossed that boundary in order to perform as "real" western heroes. The boundary that seems more difficult—in mainstream narratives, at least—to traverse is one of gender rather than genre. By this I mean that it is not generic norms or conventions that prevent the woman from being a hero, but that the woman's heroic performance is always complicated by her gender. This complication need not necessarily be viewed as negative, however: the woman's occupation of the action-hero role should be both exciting and troubling for

feminists. On the one hand, as in *The Quick and the Dead,* the woman with a gun's "marginal" femininity can work to expose the violence of patriarchal codes and thereby present possible alternatives to conventional, limited notions of heroism, resistance, and agency. But on the other hand, as we see in the Annie and Calamity narratives, as well as *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead,* the woman with a gun's femininity also domesticates, moralises, and justifies violence, thereby revitalising and reinvigorating the myths and values that have worked for centuries to produce as "natural" a culture dependant upon oppression and exploitation.

Chapter Two

Bullets and Badges

In her thorough critique of liberalism, and particularly of the public/private divide that sustains it, political theorist Wendy Brown notes that the "discursive construction of the private sphere as neither a realm of work nor of power but of nature, comfort, and regeneration is inherently bound to a socially male position within it; it parallels the privileging of class entailed in bourgeois characterisations of civil society as a place of universal freedom and equality" (182). Brown's observation highlights the oppressions and exclusions that are fundamental to liberalism's privileged values and spaces—"universal freedom and equality" can only be purchased under this system via an exploitation and marginalisation that is based not only on gender and class, but, as historical exclusions from "civil" society reveal, also upon race and sexuality.

In picking up the gun, a female protagonist not only embraces a potentially violent form of power, she also enters disruptively, with that power, into "public" life. Despite feminist reappraisal of the stability and coherence of the public/private binary, as historian Mary Ryan argues (in a recent special issue of *Journal of Women's History* that focuses on 'Public and Private'), "There is no gender ambiguity when it comes to participation in the formal public sphere: At the critical historical time and place that gave rise to democratic political institutions, male and female were both separated and made unequal" (20). Ryan

also notes that in the normative terms of Western philosophy, the public has always designated "a possibility of speaking back to power, of determining the common good, of acting in behalf of posterity [sic], and in Hannah Arendt's most lofty aspirations of reaching for immortality" (23). The possibilities and limitations of the public sphere are explored in the extreme situations of popular genre fiction, where action heroes do indeed speak back to power, attempt to determine the common good, act on behalf of posterity, and reach—with guns blazing—for immortality. The popularity of these fantasies of power (and subjection) indicate the complicated implications of the public/private divide in contemporary liberal democracy. Ryan sketches the transformation of the binary with specific reference to the women's movement:

> The formal political system that women entered after 1920 no longer resembled the idealized public sphere. It had become, in the terms of political science, an administrative state. The state was an institution that exercised power, whether configured as an eighteenth-century monarchy or an entrenched bureaucracy of the twentieth century: it was the very nemesis of the domain for open public debate accessible to all as honored by political philosophers. In fact, women Progressive reformers, who pioneered state expansion through agencies such as the Children's Bureau or such procedures as welfare case methods, were complicit in this kind of bureaucratization—and privatization—of the public realm. Any survey of the public and private in women's history must in the end confront the institution of the state. This mutation of the public may in fact prove to be the critical context of recent women's history, and of the future. (23)

The "mutation" of the public sphere is an issue for men as well as women, and the anxieties that it produces are foundational in popular generic myths. As Wright argues in his analysis of the western, the gun-wielding hero can be read as a

response to the industrial (and post-industrial) era's erosion of the traditional markers of masculine identity and agency. In the crime genre, these issues become even more pronounced, as contemporary urban settings highlight the limited possibilities for meaningful social action or connection in a contemporary liberal/capitalist society where systems of power (legal as well as criminal) are alienating and/or corrupt. The tension this produces (as in the western) is most regularly explored in crime narratives via a "hyper"—supreme but also anxious—masculine hero, whether he be hardboiled dick (à la Mike Hammer), renegade cop ('Dirty' Harry Callahan), or righteous outlaw (John Rambo). As the genre has responded to feminist critiques of both conventional gender roles and of the social structures which define them, the gritty urban landscapes of contemporary crime narratives—in the form of detective fiction (this itself is a very broad category), film noir, thrillers, and even cop/military movies—also present some of the most compelling and powerful images of the gun-wielding woman.

In her analysis of Patricia Cornwell's immensely popular series of forensic thrillers featuring Dr. Kay Scarpetta, Eluned Summers-Bremner notes that "[w]hile genre fictions, in their most commodious form, identify murderous impulses as the property of individuals, it has been one of feminism's chief claims that violence is systemic, and systemically learned" (Summers-Bremner 131). As gun-wielding women perform in narratives that explicitly address the place and meaning of violence in society, they can present visions of female agency that are playful, challenging and inspiring, and that even occasionally attempt to envision

collective models of resistance and critique to systemic structures of domination. But these narratives can also provide disturbing indications of the continued inequality and restrictions that face women's attempt to enter powerfully (rather than subserviently or as/in service) into the public sphere, as well as the "private" (in)security that their social marginalisation guarantees.

Heroes in crime narratives, as in other cultural myths, represent the range of conflicting responses and resolutions to power that exist under the dominant system (Slotkin 14). In the history of the genre, the hero in crime narratives has taken various positions vis-à-vis the law: from criminal to detective to official government agent. I have therefore used these three positions to structure my discussion in this chapter. The first section, which features genre-blurring films that stretch the "crime" categorisation as it is conventionally thought about today, explores the woman with a gun who is farthest removed from institutional power: the criminal heroine. The second section focuses on the more ambivalently positioned female private eye or secret agent: a figure who works in conjunction with and on the side of the law, but who is not completely identified with it (these are the most traditional "crime/detective" plots). Finally, I consider the gun-wielding woman who occupies a visible position as a government agent.[18] My goal in this crime chapter, as in my discussion of the western, is to consider some of the broader structures within which the articulations of gender in these female-

[18] While the texts I discuss here are united by their focus on the relation between and meaning of criminality and the law, the diversity of these three categories means that I have left the consideration of specific generic/thematic issues to the beginning of each sub-section.

led action narratives take place. While analyses like Summers-Bremner's do address some of these concerns, much feminist work on the female protagonist of the crime genre—especially on/in film—continues to look at gender as distinct from the social concerns of genre. In her chapter on "Investigating Women" in *Working Girls* Yvonne Tasker (uncritically) describes the transformation of crime narrative criticism in the wake of second wave feminism:

> If analyses of the crime series in the late 1970s had focused on the representation of relations between citizens, the law and the State, the entry of women into the genre transformed it into a different critical object with the primary concern shifting to gender, concerns which feminists critics had already foregrounded. (94)

As it separates gender and the state, minimising the centrality of issues of social formation in contemporary genre fictions, the a-historical focus (or rather a historicising that is exclusively/"primarily" interested in gender) of feminist theorising about female heroes in popular crime narratives becomes both critically limiting and politically troubling. On the one hand, the separation of gender and the state in analysis of these powerful cultural myths makes it more difficult to recognise and work through the ways that women and the "feminine" participate in and help reproduce structures of dominance and violence. On the other hand, given the way that a female hero necessarily reconfigures these myths, focusing primarily or only on gender can reduce the possibility that we might learn something about resistance and/or alternative social relations from these "new" models of agency. In order to address these issues, in the following chapter I explore the way the woman-with-a-gun in the crime genre, like her male

counterpart, reflects and engages with struggles to define and contain gender, agency, and community. How might the woman-with-a-gun's spectacular entry into an already mediated "masculine" public sphere reinforce and/or challenge the exclusions and limitations of the social as it is constructed in contemporary liberal capitalism?

The Criminal Woman

John G. Cawelti locates the birth of modern Western culture's fascination with the criminal hero in nineteenth-century melodrama. He writes, "following the earlier model of the folk figure of Robin Hood, [the melodrama] elaborated a heroic role for the criminal by showing him as victim of and rebel against an unjust or corrupt regime" (*Adventure* 56-7). There are a wide range of possible social injustices and corruptions for the rebel hero to battle in folk tale and on film: from Robin Hood's legendary vigilante tactics against the Sheriff of Nottingham and Prince John, to Paul Newman's resistance against a repressive prison system in *Cool Hand Luke*, or the teenage James Dean struggling against the boredom and meaninglessness of bourgeois adult life in *Rebel Without a Cause*. In stories with female protagonists, a critique of patriarchal systems of oppression inflects these social analyses. Given the characteristics that define "civilization" in a western patriarchal society, the assertion that women—

supposedly sheltered from "institutional" violence in the private sphere—are not in fact safe or valued can have considerable impact. As Wendy Brown observes, this critique has been central to the feminist movement:

> to the extent that the demand for rights by subordinated subjects signifies both the presence of an oppressive or threatening power and a desire for protection from such power, such a demand challenges the myth of the family as a non-violent sanctuary mutually cherished by all of its inhabitants. In short, the desire for rights on the part of women or children disrupts the myth of paternalism and protectionism that governs familial patriarchalism. (159)

In many of the "criminal-woman" narratives I consider here,[19] we witness the heroine undergoing a transformation as, after experiencing some trauma, she is alienated from conventional society—and the law—and begins to define herself through her possession of the gun. The issue of justice is thus central to these films, as they explore the limitations and hypocrisies of social structures that are founded on notions of equality and impartiality, and whose ostensible purpose is to "protect" citizens.

Since many separate crime-film sub-genres can present a criminal woman as protagonist, I have broken my discussion of the figure into three categories that include films which have achieved a degree of popular (if sometimes cult) success and academic attention. I begin with the rape revenge plot, in order to consider the rich symbolic potential of the gun, as well as some of the "performative" options available to the avenging woman. Though the rape-revenging woman tends to

[19] Because the female criminal as protagonist is rare in fiction, this section focuses primarily on film.

seek justice in isolation, as Jacinda Read argues in her recent book on these narratives, *The New Avengers*, the figure can also be viewed as articulating or attempting to define a "public femininity." The confounding or rearticulation of the traditionally gendered public/private divide that occurs with the angry, gun-wielding woman, however, also needs to be considered in the context of race and class. These issues, addressed in my discussion of the rape-revenge film *Deep in the Heart*, are elaborated on in my discussion of blaxploitation films. Blaxplotation films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* link an excessive and fantastic femininity with larger communities of resistance, for a depiction of violence that is not only sexualised but also potentially liberatory. Finally, the criminal female "folk heroes" of the road movies I consider explicitly investigate the public appeal of the spectacular righteous gun-wielding woman. The female folk hero undeniably engages and captivates her "community," but the mass cultural mediation of her resistance illustrates the difficulties of constituting public space within a culture of corporate and patriarchal commodification. While the narrative conventions and themes of these sub-genres clearly vary, the presence of the criminal woman generates clear connections between them. Whether through the intense friendship of *Thelma and Louise*, the community of kids in *The Legend of Billie Jean*, or the resistance movement in *Foxy Brown*, in justifying their heroines' aberrant behaviour, many of these films do attempt to envision forms of community and solidarity that exist outside of the traditional patriarchal/nuclear

family, as well as beyond "the public" as it is constrained/defined by the logic and history of capitalist exploitation.

Tomboys and Femme Fatales: Rape Revenge Movies

The transformation of the woman from good/passive to criminal/aggressive in these films often concludes with the woman with a gun assuming one of two roles: the hyper-feminine and highly sexualised femme fatale, or the androgynous (but also often sexualised) tomboy. This transformation is the opposite of what takes place in film noir—the original generic preserve of the criminal woman. Indeed, the femme fatale is perhaps the most familiar "deviant" woman of popular culture. As presented in the hardboiled detective fiction of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and the moody, melodramatic film noirs that were inspired by them, the seductive, deceptive, dangerous woman has become an easily recognised stereotype. Though the femme fatale does regularly use a gun (in, for example, *Double Indemnity* [1944], *Farewell My Lovely* [1944], *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946], *The Big Heat* [1953] etc.), in the hardboiled/noir tradition she is in fact rarely defined by or through her possession of it. Instead, markers of her femininity—her high heels, tailored clothing, cigarettes, coiffed hair and blood-red lips—are her fundamental characteristics and the source of her power.

The gun is a thus a tool the femme fatale may use, but it is not an essential aspect of her character. Instead, her stylised and excessive feminine sexuality

works to seduce and beguile the hero of the noir genre—the detective (professional or amateur) who will eventually expose or kill the fatal woman. Even in a neo-noir film like *The Last Seduction* (1994), in which Linda Fiorentino as Bridget Gregory/Wendy Croy is the clear protagonist/(anti)hero, in classic femme fatale style her key talent remains her ability to manipulate the men around her, rather than her prowess with a gun. Femme fatales, as they appear in traditional noir films, thus fall outside my scope of interest in this project, but the figure and the genre do establish a "character" that the deviant, gun-wielding woman can assume or "perform" (with various degrees of parody). But while in film noir the woman first appears innocent and then reveals her villainy, in the woman with a gun films I consider here the trajectory is nuanced, if not reversed: from "innocent" woman to powerful, deviant hero.

In films that position the gun-wielding woman as protagonist (rather than as villain), much more common than the transformation from innocent to femme fatale is that which sees the woman take up traditional markers of masculinity: short hair, "butch" outfits (leather, jeans), and a don't-mess-with-me attitude. Jacinda Read argues that "the rape-revenge film was perhaps the first to present overt displays of female violence as specifically eroticised" (48). Two rape revenge films from the early 1980s, Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981) and Tony Garnett's *Deep In the Heart* (1983) depict this sexualised femme fatale/tomboy binary, and the repercussions for the woman who assumes these roles.

The cult classic *Ms. 45*, while critical of patriarchal violence, also situates the feminine within the binary of private innocence, marginality, and vulnerability versus public sexuality and deviance. This trajectory keeps the narrative of the film—and my reading of it—primarily psychological rather than specifically historical. But the film seems important to address in my study, given the fact that its exploration of dangerous femininity also works to complicate the easy or simple association of the gun with phallic power that is so common in analyses of the active, violent woman.

Ms. 45's heroine, Thana (Zoe Tamerlis) is a mute seamstress living in New York. Unable to talk back to or even participate in the bustling social world around her, Thana's shyness and marginality are highlighted in the film's opening scenes, which follow her from her exit at work—a space devoted to the production of femininity—where she is patted on the head like a child by her patronising, egotistical male boss, and then cat-called and leered at by men as she walks down the street. Thana refuses to accompany the other (female) design company employees out for a drink, and instead shops for meagre provisions in the grocery store. Her isolation established, Thana is pulled into an alley as she walks home from the grocery store and raped by a masked man with a gun, who stumbles off afterwards saying "that was good, see you." This casual comment serves to demonstrate the everyday nature of the kind of violence and danger (especially to women) the film associates with contemporary urban environments.

To make this peril even more clear, when Thana returns to her apartment, traumatised and tattered, she finds she is in the process of being robbed. This man, frustrated but perhaps also turned on by her silence, interrogates Thana—"What's the matter with you? Talk. What happened to you? Don't be modest"—before also proceeding to rape her. When the man drops his gun as he orgasms, Thana brains him with a paperweight and then finishes off the job with the sharp end of her steam-iron. It is at this point (or just after she drags the body into her bathtub) that Thana must pick up the robber/rapist's .45 calibre pistol. The dropped gun is rich with symbolic resonance, with the rapist's point of brutal "ecstasy" also marking his most vital loss of power—a loss which—since Thana will appropriate it—highlights the instability of this kind of excessive/aggressive authority. Until this crucial moment, Thana's life, whether "public" or "private," is marked by the vulnerability that defines the feminine in patriarchal liberalism (the fact that it is her iron which she uses to kill the intruder is significant in this regard).

After she has killed the rapist we see Thana look at the gun lying on the floor where he dropped it, but we do not actually know immediately that she has taken possession of it. This revelation occurs only after she has returned to work and formulated a plan for disposing of the body: Thana cuts it up and stores the pieces in plastic bags, which she deposits one by one in various parts of the city on her way to work each day. The "return" of the violent offender to the streets also marks Thana's purposeful and active entry into the "public" sphere. The

nature of this entry is revealed when Thana attracts the attention of a small-time hustler on one of her trips, who follows her, picks up her dropped (body-part-containing) bag, and then chases after her. To escape Thana runs into an alley, but then, cornered, she turns and shoots the hustler. Rather than passively enduring the attacks (physical and verbal) that defined her existence in the contemporary urban public sphere before the murder, Thana here participates in its violence. Though her moral turmoil about this second murder is illustrated by the fact that when she goes home to her apartment afterward she throws up, from this moment on Thana has undoubtedly taken possession of the gun. While maintaining her appearance at work as a meek, modestly dressed woman, at night Thana takes to the streets as a heavily made-up, high-heel and short-skirt-wearing vigilante—killing off a sleazy photographer who attempts to lure her up to his studio, a pimp beating up a hooker, a rich sheik who propositions her, and an entire band of thugs looking for a gang-bang victim.

In her influential genre study *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover reads *Ms. 45* as a simple story of female empowerment, justice, and revenge (140-144). But Clover overlooks the fact that, as the film progresses, it is revealed that Thana is becoming less discriminating in her choice of targets. She attempts to kill one man whose only crime seems to be the fact that Thana saw him and his girlfriend kissing. Thana then chooses to target a man she hears criticising his wife in a bar. The man is a stereotypical jerk, who complains about the fact that his wife's job interferes with their sex life and her domestic responsibilities. As

the apparently attentive Thana listens, he relates that he discovered his wife sleeping with another woman and took his revenge by strangling her cat. Thana's gun, pointed at his head (as they sit alone outside), misfires, but the man takes it from her hand and shoots himself. While serving as a caricature of misogyny, this pathetic, suicidal victim cannot help but tarnish the righteous edge of Thana's murderous spree.

While Thana enters the street and the night, she is still in fact contained by/within her femininity—it is just a different version of the female stereotype that revolves around the mother/whore, Mary/Eve binary. The street—as emblematic of the public sphere of the metropolis—has always been defined by the prostitute, who represented a danger for women (of what could happen) as well as for men (temptation, disease, theft). Joan B. Landes writes that after the nineteenth century, "poverty and desperate working conditions led many urban working women to a life of prostitution. As a result, urban life was often associated in the public mind with unlicensed female sexuality" (9). In the hands of a femme fatale, the gun becomes a feminine rather than a masculine possession: an indication of woman's fundamental dangerousness, her *fatality*. It is carried in the purse, or bra, rather than directly (more masculinely) in the hip or shoulder holster. This is also the case with Thana, who carries her gun in her garter, and who, from that first encounter with the hustler, is an excellent shot. She apparently needs no training in wielding this violent instrument, and this ability, like her seductive night huntress alter-ego, thus seems an innate—if

previously hidden—aspect of her identity. In her femme fatale outfits, Thana *is* death—and as her name indicates, she always has been. Indeed, as the title, *Ms. 45*, suggests, Thana is *herself* a gun: her killings are robotic, mechanical, and in her "alluring" outfits she becomes a concealed/dangerous weapon.

The use of "Ms."—a more overtly uncommon and political designation in the early 1980s—in the title is also suggestive, as it positions Thana outside of any heteronormative pre or post marriage scenario. But rather than indicating a feminist desire to keep her sexuality or marital position private (the privilege Mr. affords to men), Ms. here can be seen to illustrate Thana's total exclusion from the world of adult sexuality (and its development—from Miss to Mrs.). Even before the rapes Thana is painfully shy and reclusive, and after them it is clear (and indeed unsurprising) that sexual relations of any sort fill her with horror. In one scene the office workers crowd around a window to watch a couple in the building across the street having sex. Thana's boss, who has just asked her to the Halloween party, gives Thana a suggestive look—foreshadowing his "warranted" murder.

In her final orgy of death at this Halloween party, Thana, dressed as a sexy nun (again representing the fear, underlying the binary definition of femininity, that mothers can become or are dangerous whores), shoots all the men in the room, deserving or not, before being stabbed by a female co-worker. Unlike a story such as *Thelma and Louise*, in which the death of the protagonists at the end is a moment of high pathos, the ending of *Ms. 45* is neither triumphant or tragic.

Thana's killing spree has become somewhat aimless and pathetic—difficult to justify even in the name of a campily extreme feminist fantasy. While the film establishes Thana as a sympathetic character,[20] and highlights the chauvinism and predatory nature of men in a patriarchal society, ultimately her transformation into the femme fatale suggests a latent deviance and madness that both reproduces patriarchal stereotypes (woman-as-monster or dark continent, as well as woman-as-hysterical-child) and robs Thana of a significant amount of agency. Thana's adoption of the femme fatale persona reflects her isolation and desperation as much as it signifies her power, and her transformation thus traces a trajectory from isolation and victimization to further isolation and revenge/insanity. The gun then here becomes—rather than a mark of phallic power—a key symbolic representation of the woman's fundamental (and dangerous) instability. This is certainly the case with Thana, who, we know, has gone mad—her death at the film's end seems therefore both inevitable and necessary.

In contrast to the "psychological" exploration of the gun-wielding woman in *Ms. .45*, *Deep in the Heart*, a 1983 picture directed and written by renowned BBC producer Tony Garnett (during his ten year stay in Hollywood), uses the rape-revenge narrative to explore the way traditional heroic narratives are

[20] The last shot of the film establishes that Thana, whom the audience has been led to believe had devolved to murdering even male *animals*, has not killed her landlady's dog. This dog, who is named Phil, has pestered Thana, barking and sniffing around her apartment in search of the "meat" he can smell. Thana's apparent shooting of this (male) dog was one of her later acts—in the series of "unjustified" (attempted) slayings. As with the Asian man and the bar suicide though (neither of whom Thana actually kills), Phil's return in the film's last scene maintains her position as a likeable crazy woman. It also lends a light-hearted closure to the otherwise grim scene of Thana's murderous rampage and then her own death.

informed by the history of patriarchal as well as colonial violence. In the beginning of the film, high-school history teacher Kathleen Sullivan (Karen Young) is a pretty, feminine young woman, with long blond hair and a penchant for strappy sundresses. She is also a good Catholic (or at least one who goes to mass), who has a close relationship with her parents and who insists to her girlfriend that she is not looking to be involved with any men. After she is date-raped at gunpoint by the smooth-talking attorney Larry (Clayton Day), Karen cuts off her hair and joins the local gun club (where Larry is also a member) in order to start preparing for her revenge. Kathleen not only cuts her hair; her clothes change too: from her sundresses she moves to shapeless, high-collared dresses, and then, as she becomes more proficient with her gun, to jeans and t-shirts. In her final confrontation with Larry, she wears a western-style shirt, pants, and boots.

While Karen has obviously been seriously traumatised by the rape, unlike Thana's transformation, Karen's re-birth as a gun-toting woman is not presented as simply a manifestation of that trauma. While Thana further retreats into (feminine) isolation and madness, Karen enters the community of men—the very one to which Larry belongs. In her analysis of the film, Read importantly situates *Deep in the Heart* within the context of the western genre,[21] and she also pays attention to the way the woman-with-a-gun who enters spaces that are traditionally defined as public and male necessitates the creation of new versions

[21] While I agree with Read that *Deep in the Heart* can fruitfully be read through/via the western, the contemporary, urban setting of the film to me situates it more firmly within a "crime" rape-revenge subgenre.

of "public femininity." Read writes that in the wake of the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, the western myth "became one of the arenas in which the changing relationship between men and women could be articulated and made sense of, in which stories of the west could become stories of feminism and femininity" (125). Like Tasker, Read here reduces social relations to questions of gender. Consequently her noteworthy investigation of "public femininity" pays little attention to issues of race—and specifically in this film, colonial violence—or to the possibilities that the construction of these new identities might have for necessitating or at least suggesting the possibility of redefining the "public" in general as a sphere (given that it offers few of its citizens space for healthy, productive, or fulfilling self-expression/community building).

Deep in the Heart is an overt and detailed investigation/critique of the gun culture of Texas, which Larry observes is "still the frontier." When they first start dating, Kathleen (a recent immigrant from Boston) invites Larry to her class to give a lesson in the role of firearms in Western (i.e. the American West) history. Throughout the film a number of references are made to the "settling" of the West and specifically to the fate of its decimated indigenous populations. In this way *Deep in the Heart* aligns Larry (as both firearms enthusiast and archetypal Texan) and the history of the gun with the brutality of America's past. Larry is also an avid hunter, and proclaims his love of meat repeatedly. On the night that he rapes her, Larry feeds Kathleen venison he shot the day before. He describes the hunt and kill in reverent tones, repeating how "special" the act is to him and how

important it is for him to share it with her. *Deep in the Heart* thus draws complex historical parallels between colonial/race oppression (as represented by Larry's veneration of the Colt .45 and its vital role in "settling" the West), the hunting/eating of animals, and gender violence/misogyny.

Rather than simply mapping Kathleen's entry into the "masculine" public sphere, *Deep in the Heart* details Kathleen's quest first to learn about these intersecting fields of power, and then to use that knowledge to "re-educate" and/or "introduce" Larry (as their ideal embodiment) to the reality of their violence and terror. Upsetting the conventional western plot, in which the "Eastern schoolteacher" must learn to accept the essential violence of the West, Kathleen's revenge on Larry becomes an empowering experience/process, increasing her confidence as well as her understanding of the contemporary Texas community. Kathleen joins Larry's gun-club and becomes an excellent shot, but she refuses to reproduce the myths and laws of domination represented by Larry and the kind but ignorantly paranoid and racist members of his club (who hone their "survival" skills in anticipation of race riots and social collapse). This refusal is demonstrated when Kathleen shoots extremely well at a competition, but throws her score by deliberately shooting at a "friendly" target—a cut-out policeman. As Read argues, Kathleen here "not only signals her rejection of society and its laws, but her refusal to play by the rules of masculinity (in this case competitiveness)" (134). I agree with Read's analysis here, but in maintaining "competitiveness" as a gendered characteristic rather than one that is

crucially interwoven into the narratives of capitalism and colonialism, Read again reproduces both gender binaries and the separation of gender from the social structures within which it operates.

Larry and his gun (as they are implicated in the domination of both lands and people) connote a terrible continuum of both male and American violence. When she finally lures Larry out to the gun range to "shoot it out" Kathleen knowingly unfolds her revenge-moment within the traditional tropes of the western, the fictional celebration and mythologisation of that history. In fact, Kathleen uses the template of the western showdown (and particularly that presented in the archetypal *Shane* [1953]) to intimidate and badger Larry, even instructing him to "be Jack Palance" to her "Alan Ladd." Importantly, Kathleen also refuses the "domestication" of violence represented by "good" western women like Annie Oakley (who no doubt would have won the gun-club's shooting competition!). It is thus not surprising that Larry is at first both unwilling to fight Kathleen and also simply *confused* by her theatrical genre/gender subversion—a confusion that ultimately turns to fear. "Aren't guns fun?," she asks the nervous Larry, and the audience at least is tipped off that—unlike Thana—Kathleen knows a hawk from a handgun. In her ironic reminder of the horror that guns represent, Kathleen again refuses and exposes, rather than embraces or refigures, the myth of heroic/regenerative violence. Kathleen plays cat and mouse with Larry, wounding him in the shoulder before finishing him off with a tranquilizer shot. In a significant departure from the machismo and bloodshed of

the classic Western and American history/policy, Kathleen's revenge is thus one that uses humour and irony, as well as fear and pain, to "educate" rather than simply punish Larry.

Kathleen adopts her avenger/educator persona because, as in *Ms. 45*, social and legal institutions fail to protect or assist her. In *Ms. 45* these institutions are totally absent: in this regard, Thana's muteness comes to symbolise the difficultly, for women, of speaking to (or being) the law. As we see in *Deep in the Heart*, though kind and well intentioned, both the police/lawyers and the religious leaders tell Kathleen that she has no real official recourse for justice: the priest counsels that she should leave the punishment up to God and forgive Larry, while the lawyer warns that she'll be called a whore in court if she prosecutes. In both films the woman is therefore—like all good western heroes—"forced" to take up the gun, which can represent justice as well as retribution. Again, however, there is a clear difference in how the gun signifies in each film and how the woman aligns herself with it—totally and psychotically with Thana, and provisionally with Kathleen, who abandons her weapon in a garbage dump in the end.

This abandonment is a crucial aspect of her re-incorporation into society. After she has taken her revenge on Larry, whom we see wounded and humiliated in the hospital, Kathleen appears in the final scene, happy and feminine again—wearing a dress and earrings with her starting-to-grow-out hair, and lifting a friend's baby into the air. The final scene has been read as re-positioning Kathleen in a "proper" and heteronormative gender role (see Read 138-39), but it might

also work to celebrate Kathleen's affirmative, life-preserving triumph over Larry. This vision of a joyful Kathleen, surrounded by love, friendship, and the promise of rebirth, surely represents a more productive figure than the traditional male gunfighter hero, who kills and remains himself ever-wounded and alone.

While both Kathleen and Thana represent an excitingly active, rather than passive, response to injustice and violence, Thana's appropriation of the gun ultimately seems to reproduce patriarchal fears and stereotypes about dangerously unstable femininity. Kathleen represents a more ambivalent, but also potentially radical, vision of agency that confounds the binaries—masculinity/femininity, victory/defeat, hero/victim, public/private—that underlie patriarchal and colonial narratives. Not simply due to her gender, but due to her critical revision of conventional models of justice and heroism (which we do not witness in contemporary female-led revenge westerns like *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead*), Kathleen can thus perhaps be read as the female protagonist whom Pam Cook asserts could never exist in a western, because she would spell the "end of the genre" ("Women" 242).

Blaxploitation Heroines

Along with tough male heroes like Shaft and Sweet Sweetback, the 1970s blaxploitation genre produced a range of tough, crime-fighting, gun-wielding women who take to the street in order to protect their loved ones from corrupt officials and gangsters. Pam Grier's roles in *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974)

are perhaps the most famous and powerful of these. Unlike the heroines of *Ms. 45* and *Deep in the Heart*, neither Coffy nor Foxy Brown undergoes a marked transformation when she picks up the gun. When *Coffy* opens, Coffy has already embarked upon her pursuit of the drug pushers she blames for her young sister's addiction. A nurse by day, Coffy spends her nights seducing and then blowing away drug lords, dirty cops, and corrupt politicians. Though it is the murder of her ex-cop boyfriend that sends Foxy on her retributive rampage, even before this traumatic event she packs a gun, and in the film's first scene comes to the aid of her trouble-making brother, picking him up in her car and eluding some gangsters in a car chase. These films thus provide the audience with a reason for their protagonists' criminal/aggressive/violent behaviour, but this behaviour is seen almost as a natural extension of the tough, street-smart, black woman's identity. On the one hand, this could problematically be read as reinforcing class and racial stereotypes in the sense that the black/lower-class woman is aligned with violence and deviance. Unlike middle-class white women, around whom the public/private binary is often articulated, black and lower class women are always already part of the public sphere (though they are still denied power in this realm). They thus are not figured as needing protection in and from "the public," since they are already viewed as compromised. Wendy Brown writes that

> Historically, the argument that women require protection by and from men has been critical in legitimating women's exclusion from some spheres of human endeavour and confinement within others. Operating simultaneously to link 'femininity' to privileged races and classes, protection codes are also markers and vehicles of such divisions among women, distinguishing those women constructed

> as violable and hence protectable from other women who are their own violation, who are logically unviolable because marked as sexual availability without sexual agency (169-70)

While this distinction between women can help explain the varying narrative strategies that surround women with guns from different racial and class backgrounds, it is still, in the case of blaxploitation films at least, difficult to read heroines like Coffy and Foxy Brown as "without sexual agency." Rather than signalling victimisation and powerlessness, the "naturalness" of their gun use and aggressive self-defence can thus also be seen as a more empowering/empowered response to the harsh realities of life in urban ghettos. These conflicting readings are characteristic of critical and audience response to the genre, at the time of their release as well as in the present. Blaxploitation films are and have been both celebrated for their depiction of black urban life and their creation of complex and charismatic black protagonists and critiqued for their stereotypical indulgences: excessive violence, explicit sex, and settings/plots that inevitably revolve around the drug/gambling/whoring trades.

This stereotypically "negative" milieu does have a progressive result, however. For though the losses Coffy and Foxy Brown experience are personal, as is the revenge that each character enacts, the narratives of these films engage overtly with the intersections of gender, class, race and violence. And Coffy and Foxy Brown (especially Foxy) are also presented as less isolated in their resistance, and their trauma, than the protagonists of *Deep in the Heart* or *Ms. 45*. In *Foxy Brown*, Foxy turns to a local community police organisation that has

taken it upon themselves to clean up the streets for help with her overthrow of the gang that killed her boyfriend. "You help me with the justice," she says, and "I'll deal with the revenge." This connection of revenge and social justice—and the recognition that the single individual cannot address both—politicises the classic lone hero. At the same time, Foxy's admission that she needs help illustrates the racial and gender supremacy upon which that ideal depends. In Walter Mosley's crime novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*, his detective, Easy, is reminded that rugged individualism is "just a myth propagated by white culture in order to falsely valorize its achievements" (Pepper 246): "Nigger can't pull his way out of the swamp wit'out no help, Easy . . . you gotta have somebody at yo' back, man. That's just a lie them white men give 'bout makin' it on they own. They always got they backs covered" (qtd in Pepper, 246). Unlike Thana and Kathleen, Foxy is presented as one part of a community of resistance fighters and protestors. Individual revenge/agency is thus tied to larger and (historically specific) social reform movements—a rare position for an action film of any genre.

Though blaxploitation films have been criticised for their abandonment of the black nationalism of early films like *Sweet Sweetback* (see for example Lyne's "No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office"), amidst the breasts and guns and sex in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* there is a clear critique of the limitations class and race place on both black men and women, a critique of the sexual exploitation of women, and of the corruption of power and money-hungry police and government officials. And unlike either *Ms. 45* or *Deep in the Heart*, both

Coffy and *Foxy Brown* can close without reincorporating their deviant, criminal heroines, either through death or through traditional symbols of "good" femininity. Instead, having performed their personal acts of vengeance, we can imagine Coffy and Foxy Brown taking up lives that are perhaps more law-abiding, but that nevertheless refuse to totally reject the resistance and cultural critique represented by their possession of the gun.

Still, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* have come under scrutiny for the sexualisation of their heroines: Grier bares her breasts—either at erotic moments or in the midst of fighting—in scene after scene in both films. The theme song of *Foxy Brown* tells us that Foxy is "A pinch of sugar and a kiss of spice . . . and she keeps a cold steel .38 in a nice warm place." The fact that Foxy and Coffy function as erotic spectacles is hard to deny, but so too is the independence and power that both characters represent as they engage directly in/with the politics and issues of black Americans in the metropolis. As with Thana and Kathleen, the dangerous, erotic potential of Foxy and Coffy is presented as an innate part of their "feminine" identities. But in the Blaxploitation films the heroines' aggression and sexuality are presented as wholly positive and politically radical powers, without the sinister/deranged aspects that necessitate Thana's death, or the associations with oppressive race and gender history that inform Kathleen's ultimate rejection of the gun.

In claiming the power of the gun in this way though, a distinction needs to be made between these blaxploitation films and revisionist westerns like *Bad*

Girls and *The Quick and the Dead*. The western narratives' temporal setting—the past, rather than the present—seriously undercuts the force of their parodic political critique, given the fact that the patriarchal bad guys are figured as representing an archaic institution. The fantasy of power that the western films enact thus becomes, in my reading, little different from that which informs conventional heroic violence. Coffy and Foxy, fighting racism and patriarchy in the 1970s, represent fantasies of agency with more immediately relevant (if still ambiguous) political potential. Pam Grier discusses this aspect of *Foxy Brown* in a 2002 interview:

> I did my best work in the movie and it made a difference. It made people feel confident in themselves. It made them feel, "I'm not going to be a victim anymore." Because women were victims. Their husbands could beat them up when they wanted to. They couldn't work. They could be maimed and killed by their husbands. The law would let them, and Foxy Brown said, "No more." She reflected the women's movement—not only tongue-in-cheek, but in fantasy and exaggeration.

Grier's assertion that Foxy reflected the women's movement in "fantasy and exaggeration" is important here, as it raises issues regarding "realism" and political efficacy that are crucial for the analysis of gun-welding women in fictional narratives. In his analysis of exploitation films, Henry Jenkins points out that "[f]eminist critics in Mulvey's tradition sometimes assume that erotic fascination is open to simple ideological analysis and is necessarily complicit with the patriarchal order. Increasingly, we have come to see spectacle as more polyvalent, as holding radically divergent potentials for pleasure and fantasy" ("Exploiting" para. 47). Jenkins specifically notes feminist film critic Pam Cook's

view that the foregrounding of stereotypes is an important aspect of the exploitation cinema, since it rejects the "naturalization" of ideological norms that is characteristic of more classical films. As Cook argues, "the overt manipulation of stereotypes and gender conventions allows us to see that language is at work; myths are revealed as ideological structures embedded in form itself" (Exploitation 125). It is difficult to divorce sexuality from the pleasures of display, in the same way that resistance—in fantasy and exaggeration—seems inevitably connected to the thrill of violence. And so while Kathleen's rejection of guns and violence can be viewed a more "productive" feminist response to the brutalities of American history and mythology (that continue to inform social structures and gender roles in the present), it seems limiting to dismiss the fantastic potential of Foxy and Coffy's exaggeratedly aggressive self-defence. The "polyvalent" pleasures of the bad-ass woman with a gun, as Grier insists, can still engage with and address substantive political issues.

Tasker points out the dangers of forwarding or reproducing a hierarchical critical opposition between "social realism as good object [and] fantasy as bad object" in the analysis of popular culture (*Working* 103). Here, as with the majority of her analysis in *Working Girls*, Tasker's emphasis is on gender (what she means by these designations is socially realist *versions of gender* versus fantasies *of gender and sexuality*), but what is exciting about blaxploitation films is the way that they also work through fantasies about contemporary social reality, which necessarily situate gender in a complex field of power and desire. This

combination of fantasy and contemporary social critique also informs road movies, which make the popular appeal of the women-with-guns an explicit aspect of their narratives.

Road Movies

Given the radical transgression that her assault on conventional society and its laws/values represents, it is not surprising that many films take the criminal woman out of that society and on the road. Films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985), *Wisdom* (1986), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) offer the profoundly affective/powerful cowboy hero of the western film in a contemporary setting, but in this version the road, rather than the metropolis, replaces the frontier. Indeed, as Shari Roberts argues, with the road movie "what was first a theme [in the western] becomes a genre in its own right" (50).Though post-1970 (specifically post-*Easy Rider)* there has been a tendency to view the road film as a "masculine" genre populated by male "buddies," the form in fact has been regularly populated by a sexually and racially diverse range of loners, friends, siblings, and couples. The protagonist of the road film may be some combination of cowboy, gangster/fugitive, crusader, and adventurer, but unlike the gunfighter heroes of westerns or the street-smart urban criminal or detective, s/he is not necessarily distinguished by exceptional physical and/or mental skills. The road movie is thus a particularly open and democratic genre, in that its heroes require only one thing:

that beckoning stretch of gravel, track, pavement or dirt. A vintage mustang convertible helps, or a custom Harley, but a thumb (small or preternaturally long) will also do quite nicely.

While there are examples of non-criminal road movies (like *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* [1993]), the films that are usually taken as canonical within the genre (*Gun Crazy* [1949], *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* [1969], *Easy Rider* [1969] etc.) tend to either begin with or lead to a violence that is outside the law. Given this fact, Michael Atkinson's argument that the road movie genre is about rage (16) is quite convincing. But even in these "criminal" tales the genre is just as much about community, about escaping the artificial, the routine, the unfulfilling, for the (however ephemeral) authentic, the exciting, the meaningful. There is, too, the romance of the road itself, and the intense bond that the travellers and fellow outlaws enjoy: a kind of community and intimacy that is rarely achieved in "real"/regular life. It is thus not only or primarily the domestic that is escaped from in the road movie, it can be any aspect or range of aspects that define civilised life in the post-industrial age, including boredom, isolation, and the "alienation" of meaningless physical, or (as represented by the "poets of the road," the Beats) institutionalised intellectual labour. Road movies are thus not usually just about avoiding "civilisation" in favour of some more "pure" male domain (wilderness, war, etc.). The road and what one encounters on it are unpredictable, and given that such tracks, paved or gravel, usually travel to or through towns, cities, and communities of various sizes, women are inevitably a

part of the surrounding landscape. The road film has a history of including women in its journey, and produces a range of strong, unconventional female figures who are not just "appendages to masculinist fantasies" (Roberts 62) but integral to their narratives.

A major theme of the road movie is indisputably the escape from the domestic sphere, but in narratives with female protagonists this sphere is shown to contain and restrict women as much—or more—than men. This is certainly the case with *Bonnie and Clyde*, where the simple boredom of her life, her small town, and her family drives the young Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) away with the dangerous Clyde (Warren Beatty). Bonnie is much more impatient with their return to a domestic situation at the film's end, when they stay in a house with Clyde's brother and his wife. For women, of course, work and the domestic can often be the same thing. *Thelma and Louise* depicts not only the back-breaking and mind-numbing labour of waitressing in a diner (Susan Sarandon's Louise) but also the equivalent drudgery and oppression of unappreciated housework for Thelma (Geena Davis). Indeed, while feminism has worked to bring "private" work (around the home and children) "public" recognition, the transformation of the public/private divide as capitalism develops has also meant that women now "service" the public, as well as their private homes/families. As Brown observes, "While much work historically undertaken in the household is now available for purchase in the market, women follow this work out into the economy—the labour force of the service sector is overwhelmingly female" (185).

Significantly, as these "domestic" women make their escape from their domestic routines and roles (in either the public or private sphere), they also begin to rethink the traditional signifiers of sexual identity. Thelma abandons her dresses for a man's jeans and shirt, Billie Jean (Helen Slater) crops her hair and assumes a classically 80s military-punk look, and Bonnie adopts a cigar, wears masculine clothes and poses provocatively with a pistol. Bonnie even sexually "out-shoots" Clyde, who is unable to perform in bed—leaving the unsatisfied Bonnie stroking his gun instead. While the infamous Brad Pitt character, JD, in *Thelma and Louise* has no such failings (as if!), Thelma too gains a power and confidence from the gun, moving it from her purse to her pants in a signal of her transition from timorous wifey to socially and sexually rebellious outlaw. The gun thus clearly functions here in its critically accepted role as erotic, and specifically phallic, symbol—connoting power and desire as well as guaranteeing Bonnie's and Thelma's (fleeting) freedom from the mortal boredom and confinement of a traditional small-town/suburban domestic life. But my interest here is also in the way that, as the criminal woman embraces the gun and the road, she enters into discourses about community and resistance in contemporary society.

A key trope of the road movie is of course the road. The road represents the liminal space between the outside/wilderness and the inside/town: it is the way you get in and the way you get out. The road is a crucial aspect of the American dream, participating in the illusion that escape and adventure are possible for all. It is thus a symbol of independence and freedom, but also, in contemporary

society especially, it is the cleared and paved marker of industrial civilisation, suburban sprawl, and urban congestion. To utilise the road, the hero must have a means of transportation. Thus, another crucial element of the road film is the car. This, like the road it drives on, the woman behind the wheel, and the gun in the glove-box, is a fraught cultural symbol. It represents (as countless commercials insist) mobility, liberty, and adventure. In reality, however, it is the routine trips to work or the grocery store, the tedium of rush-hour gridlock and "road rage" that more accurately represent most in-car experiences. The car is the key/representative product of modern corporate/industrial society (and so entrenched that it continues to dominate even post-industrial society, despite predictions that we would all be working at home in or by the new millennium).

Ian Leong, Mike Sell and Kelly Thomas point out that "[t]he road is the möbius strip of American capitalism: despite the thrill of acceleration, escape is illusory, and the drive into the sunset takes you right back where you started" (72). This is a compelling image, and it may be true for male road-adventures, but in fact few of the gun-wielding women who take to the road seem to return to exactly where they began. While simple rebellion or longing for adventure is enough to explain a man/boy's expedition/escape from a settled, stable life, in order to justify the escape of the woman from her assigned space, issues of trauma or oppression continue to be prevalent in road movies that feature gun-toting criminal women. Thus in *Guncrazy* (1992) Drew Barrymore's character is sexually abused by her stepfather, as is Juliette Lewis's Mallory by her father in

Natural Born Killers. And Billie Jean is assaulted by that film's villain, Mr. Pyatt. All three of these eventual gun-toters are also poor or working class, and—particularly in *Billie Jean* and *Guncrazy*—this, as much as their gender, is a motive for the abuse/disrespect they endure. The woman is thus often a marginal, disempowered figure before her journey, and the narratives that these films construct follow the discovery of strength on the road as well as of revenge.

What is significant here is that the criminal woman's marginalisation exposes the way that the traditional public/private divide works to erode or make difficult community, privacy, or protection—values that are supposedly foundational for contemporary liberal society. The historical Bonnie and Clyde, for example, embody the nihilism of the disenfranchised, and their exploits thrilled their depression-era contemporaries (as well as—in Arthur Penn's film—tapped into the civil unrest of the 1960's counterculture). In *Wisdom*, John (Emilio Estevez) and Karen (Demi Moore) torch banks to give some respite to farmers whose mortgaged properties are being repossessed. As their fame spreads, customers applaud while their banks are being robbed. In both *The Legend of Billie Jean* and *Wisdom*, the community gives practical support as well, offering food, rides, and even obstructing police efforts to capture the criminals.

What distinguishes these films from the blaxploitation or rape revenge narratives I consider above, however, is the fact that in the road movie the woman with a gun becomes a "folk hero." While these criminal heroes do perform some legitimate social critique, the subversive possibilities of their "folk" status are

problematised by the fact that their fame is shown to be mediated by mass culture, which is by definition a culture *for* rather than *of* the people.[22] This media attention works to mythologise the criminal hero rather than seriously engage with their social/local critique. *Natural Born Killers* is the most notoriously excessive consideration of violence and mass media, but each of my above-mentioned road films is preoccupied (or at least concerned) with the possibilities and limitations of spectacularly public agency. Particularly in *The Legend of Billie Jean* and *Wisdom*, it becomes apparent that, while the protagonists' cultural reputations grow, these reputations—dependent on the mass media infrastructure—work in fact to sever the pop-culture hero(es) from their critical acts/impetus.

This severing of agent from agency, and even from identity (Billie Jean remarks at the height of her "legendary" status that she doesn't know who she is anymore), is the result of a capitalist logic under which the counter-cultural gesture is invariably predestined for commodification. As Guy Debord explains in *The Society of the Spectacle*,

> The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom's spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a mode to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things. (Section 61, n.p.)

[22] See, for example, Richard Ohmann's definition of mass culture: "Voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists, for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so; with dependable frequency; mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit" (14).

Still, while the spectacularising effect on the criminal hero's resistant potential cannot be dismissed, what is unique in the films I consider here is the road journey. The road, unlike the media, is a (literally) grounded and therefore potentially "authentic" public space, one that, while it may be policed and paved and dotted with fast-food franchises, still houses independent greasy spoons and motels, and provides the opportunity for face-to-face encounters and exchanges that bring the "celebrity" directly into the personal space and everyday life of the folks who are her fans and followers. And as much as it serves the interests of the capitalist/corporate market, the road is also a liminal space, between public and private spaces and realms, where the community can gather (however briefly) to support each other and applaud dissent.

This mediation of public and private—the journey back and forth and in between these realms—is especially resonant for the woman with a gun. Given the novelty of her aggressive behaviour and the erotic allure of her deviance, the criminal woman represents a particularly titillating combination of news story and celebrity. In the films with couple-heroes (such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Wisdom*), while the male partner may be the primary criminal agent, the women inspire the most intense community support and admiration/identification, as well as media interest and speculation. The complicated workings of this nexus of woman, community, and commodification are powerfully explored in the climatic scene of *The Legend of Billie Jean*.

The Legend of Billie Jean opens in the sweltering heat of a Texas summer, with seventeen year old Billie Jean and her younger brother Binx (Christian Slater) heading out on Binx's new scooter for some ice-cream and swimming. Billie Jean and Binx, whose recently-deceased father's paltry life-insurance money enabled the scooter purchase, live with their mother in a trailer park, and their class, as well as Billie-Jean's beauty, make them a target for the local rich boys. Binx's scooter gets stolen as the brother and sister swim, and though Binx gets it back, both he and the bike are trashed. Attempting to enact some community-style justice, Billie Jean approaches the culprit's father, a local store owner, and demands repair money. But Mr. Pyatt (Richard Bradford), who knowingly cites Billie Jean's residence as a signal of her sexual status, attempts to force Billie Jean to trade sex for instalments of money. A ruckus ensues and Pyatt is accidentally wounded by Binx with a gun he finds in the store till. When Pyatt's son enters the scene, Pyatt claims that Billie Jean and Binx came in to rob the store and shot him when he resisted. Disadvantaged by age and class, Billie Jean and her brother quite reasonably fear that their word will not stand against Mr. Pyatt's, and so they hit the road (with a couple of friends in tow). Along the way, they meet up with a rich movie-buff and technophile teen Lloyd (Keith Gordon), who suggests that the group pretend to kidnap him and send a video outlining their demands to the media.

Lloyd has been watching Otto Preminger's version of *Saint Joan*, and, inspired by Jean Seberg's portrayal of Joan of Arc, Billie Jean crops her hair in the

bathroom and emerges—to the awe of her friends—as a newly militant crusader for the rights of the young and powerless. With her striking new look, her (fingerless-glove clad) raised fist and "fair is fair" mantra captured on tape, Billie Jean is broadcast across the state and becomes an instant star. Her cry for justice and equal treatment (regardless of age, gender, or class) is taken up by kids and women throughout the community, who rally around her when she is recognised in public and express their approval in television and radio interviews. At one point Billie Jean is even called upon by a group of children to intervene in a case of child abuse. But the charisma that gets Billie Jean's message heard takes on a life of its own, as fans mimic her style and flock to the hairdressers for a "Billie Jean" cut. As indication of the ability of market capitalism to subsume politics, Mr. Pyatt is ironically the primary beneficiary of the Billie Jean "legend" since he quickly realises that he can make a fortune selling posters, tee-shirts, and other paraphernalia emblazoned with Billie Jean's image or her fair-is-fair slogan.

While Billie Jean never actually fires or even holds a gun in the film, in the items that are sold by the entrepreneurial Mr. Pyatt there is an abundance of gun/target imagery. Most spectacularly, Pyatt commissions an enormous papier-mâché figure of Billie Jean pointing a gun, which towers over his beach-side stall. This insertion of the gun into the criminal woman's hand indicates the degree to which it signifies her deviance and allure, especially in the public imagination. *The Legend of Billie Jean* (like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Wisdom*) thus enacts or considers within its very narrative the kind of vicarious thrill an audience gets

while watching the righteous, violent hero. For while the community is supportive, it still seems incapable of actually participating in the active resistance symbolised by Billie Jean (or the *Wisdom* duo).

This reality is directly engaged in *The Legend of Billie Jean*'s conclusion. In the commodified but still unruly public space of the beach, Billie Jean effects a resolution with Mr. Pyatt that, while observed by official forces, the media, and her fans, is satisfyingly intimate/personal. In the after-shock of Binx being shot and wounded by state-troopers, Billie Jean confronts Pyatt and sets his stall alight, throwing the money he (finally) proffers into the flames. Hundreds of her fans and supporters, who have gathered on the beach to await her return to the community, solemnly add fuel to this fire, removing their Billie Jean tee-shirts and throwing in their placards and posters. The dominant image in this conflagration is of course the enormous papier-mâché figure, which smoulders above the fire like the doomed Joan of Arc. The incendiary nature of public celebrity, as the film, Billie Jean, and her fans seem to recognise, is both its power and its danger. *The Legend of Billie Jean* addresses the limitations of consumption, appropriation, and spectacle as resistant activities, but it also highlights the contradictory pleasures of fantasy and identification with the pop-culture hero. Like her fans on the beach, audiences of this film are left to consider the implications of our own veneration of the spectacular, deviant hero.

While figures like Billie Jean, Foxy Brown, and *Deep in the Heart*'s Kathleen may help us investigate and celebrate women's entry into and critique of

the public sphere, their narratives also address the very real difficulties of imagining alternatives to the violence that has been essential to the construction of our gendered, racialized, and class-bound identities and social structures. These films thus usefully set up the challenges of producing a space where these power imbalances can be righted and/or addressed.

Female PIs and Secret Agents

Unlike those that feature her criminal counterpart, narratives about the female private investigator or secret agent tend not to trace the trajectory from the "inside" to the "outside" (and sometimes back again) of dominant culture. Instead, female detectives or undercover agents are often presented as habitually on the edge of society (orphans, rebels, misfits). These narratives are thus less interested in exploring the potentials of active resistance to dominant structures than they are in negotiating the (perceived) conflicts between "freedom/independence/deviance" and "safety/security/normalcy." As in the western, by virtue of the traditional symbolic positioning of "the feminine," the female PI or secret agent is particularly suited for this marginal role. In addition to her always-already liminal position in dominant systems of identity, traditional associations between femininity and emotive expression means that, compared to the classically taciturn hard-boiled detective, the female detective or secret agent is often used as a vehicle to more openly and thoroughly consider the meanings and effects of both personal and social conflicts. These tend, in particular, to

centre on dilemmas around the difficulties of finding security and love while remaining independent, and of serving the community/aiding justice while maintaining a moral stance and avoiding bureaucracy. Perhaps because of their combination of "criminal" investigation and psychological self-discovery, female writers and protagonists of detective fiction, as well as films and television series about the female secret agent, have proven enormously popular. In this section I will discuss the bestselling novels of Sue Grafton and Sarah Paretsky (whose hardboiled feminist heroes dominate the detective fiction genre), as well as the various film and television incarnations of the rebel secret agent "Nikita," and the hit show *Alias*, featuring CIA agent Sydney Bristow. In different ways, these narratives—in which isolated female heroes enter into the world of law and government—engage with the feminist critique of the patriarchal foundations of the public/private divide. With their idealistic, rebellious, and angst-ridden heroines, the narratives I consider here not only investigate the violence to be found in the public and private realms, but also trace that which inheres in the very constitution of those realms as separate spaces.

Private Investigators

Instead of exploring the western "frontier"—situated in a mythic past and characterised by aggressive "development"/ management (of the new town, the land, animals, and indigenous population)—detective narratives take place in a modern metropolitan landscape marked, and threatened, by decay and corruption.

Detective fiction, as with westerns, is thus concerned with recognising and responding to the outside or others of civilization. While in the western this "outside" is primarily associated with "savagery," in the crime genre "deviance" is the better descriptor—though the distinction between the two is blurry, with deviance often representing the intrusion or existence of savagery "inside" civilisation. On the one hand the classic detective genre represents the fantasy of total and absolute law—the ingenious sleuth symbolising the omniscience and "naturalness" of order—and, on the other, and especially in the hard-boiled tradition, it documents the nebulousness of legality, illustrating how crime and law are often indistinguishable. Frank Krutnik, acknowledging the continuity between the model of heroism popularised in the western and that found in hard-boiled narratives, writes that the world through which the detective moves

> is comparable to the mythologised 'Frontier' of the Western, a world of violence and lawlessness, lacking any intrinsically effective machinery of civilised order, and dominated by assertive masculine figures of self-appointed authority. The lawless context of the 'mean-streets' world legitimises the private eye's own aggressiveness in pursuit of his mission to establish a regime of truth. (93)

Unlike the classic Holmesian sleuth, the "Americanised" and "masculinised" hard-boiled detective does not exist comfortably apart from "the world of mean streets, violence, dangerous sexuality and the double cross; something in him gravitates towards humanity's underside" (Summers-Bremner 134). The heroines of the best-selling detective series I consider here—Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and Sarah Paretsky's VI Warshawski—are of the hard-boiled variety,

and they share this ability to blur the divide between outlaw and citizen. In both series the deviance always associated with femininity grants the PI a rare understanding of and/or access to the criminal's world, while simultaneously woman's "innate" morality means the figures are not tainted by either that world or by the possibility of corruption that afflicts the law/government. The continuity of the "marginal" model of heroism as formulated within the western genre is important to observe when considering detective stories—with either male or female heroes—but a notable difference in the genres is the detective novel's interest in the domestic/"private" sphere, and this sphere's characterisation as a space just as fraught and dangerous as the street. Traditional hardboiled narratives thus explore the corruption and violence of both the "private" and the "public" worlds, which are the site of murder and intrigue as well as peril for the hardboiled dick.

In the private realm, the traditional (male) hardboiled detective regularly and infamously encounters deviant feminine sexuality—a sexuality which is often also connected with the "public" crime of an inevitably economically motivated murder. Christine Gledhill suggests that the hardboiled narratives' pitting of male heroism against female deception expressed the post-war drive to return the woman to the home and reassert male economic identity and supremacy (Gledhill, "Klute" 25-26). These gendered economic power relations tend to be exposed, or at least problematised, when the detective is a woman—especially in the wake of the critiques of these issues that entered the popular culture with "second-wave"

feminism. Indeed, despite the traditional association of femininity with the private sphere, women's relative lack of power—inside and out of the home—means that in fact they exist on the margins of both:

> The public, in its political and governmental guise, is not just one point on a seamless spatial continuum nor is it merely one half of a reciprocal functional relationship with the private. Rather, it is situated analytically so as to exercise decisive authority over the private world and over its female inhabitants in particular. . . . The public in this explicitly political and hierarchical apparition monitors the entire social continuum including the structural divisions between the genders. It is within these institutions that political power is concentrated and in which feminist "goods" are won and lost. It is to this domain of the public that women turn to achieve and protect their private as well as public objectives. (Ryan 15-16)

As female detectives engage with and investigate the world of the law, government, family, and corporations, they necessarily confront the patriarchal workings of these institutions. This "patriarchal" corruption thus becomes an extension of and/or replacement for the more general greed and criminality of those in power uncovered by the male detective.

Both Grafton and Paretsky define themselves, and are defined by critics, as feminist writers (Johnson 97). Grafton says she is "a feminist from way back" (qtd in Christianson 128). Paretsky states that she was unsatisfied with the roles assigned to women in conventional detective fiction, but confesses, "My agent worked nearly a year before he found a publisher willing to take a chance on a female private eye in America's heartland" ("Truth"). As these texts address the frustrations and anxieties of their own protagonists' attempts to define a healthy and fulfilling life for themselves within the public and private realms as they have

traditionally been conceived, as well as their encounters with the frustrations of other characters, male and female, struggling with these same issues, the violence that inheres in the very separation of public and private is powerfully exposed. Because of this critique of violence—which is an essential aspect of the feminist analysis of apparently egalitarian liberal social structures—the justice-seeking hardboiled female detective's position on the margins of society both necessitates and makes problematic her own use of violence, as is most clearly symbolised by her relationship with the gun.

Unlike the cowboy hero, or his male detective counterpart, the female detective's ability to straddle the criminal underworld/civilization divide is not primarily a source of empowerment. Instead, and her relationship to the gun is the clearest representation of this, her position is always precarious. In her "public" role as detective, this ambivalence is manifested in fears and doubts about not being able to possess and embody the violence and authority that the gun represents—fears that are validated by the scepticism of family, friends, the suspects she investigates, and the "real" officers whose support she needs. The very separation of the public sphere as a realm in which justice can be meted out—if not by institutions than at least by heroic individuals—from the "private" realm, is, however, complicated by the feminist critique of the patriarchal-liberal domination it is founded on. Because of their inevitable association with this violence, these female detectives are (in a way uncommon if not unheard of with

the traditional male hardboiled hero) also troubled by self-doubt and worry, both about their competence and their ethical stance.

> Eluned Summers-Bremner writes that the hard-boiled hero's
>
> > anti-hero status arises from his failure to completely live up to the requirements of 'normal' masculinity, even though, paradoxically, all his faults are quintessentially masculine ones. He is a loner; unable to sustain relationships, has no family, [and] nurses some inner wound or deep-rooted anxiety which disables him from connecting with others. (134)

In addition to these "weaknesses," the hardboiled PI is also often depressive/melancholy, and engages in drinking, fist-fights, back-talk, and generally rebellious posturing. The "flaws" of the male detective may very much resemble those of a teenaged boy, but the fact that the core of this "dysfunction" is understood as natural masculine aggression and energy—a form of agency compromised (i.e. feminised) by adult roles and responsibilities—means that the hardboiled hero remains a figure (a dick?) of strength and power. The female detective shares the male PI's defining traits, and so it is not generically unique that Millhone and Warshawski (who are both in their thirties when their respective series begin) live, and often act and sound, like adolescents. What is unusual is the fact that they are actually coded this way in the text—and they are also received this way by their readers. Paretsky and Grafton have been applauded for the strength of their protagonists, but the descriptions of Millhone and Warshawski in the popular press nevertheless describe the PIs with terms that would never be applied to an adult male. For example, in V.I. Warshawski, a reviewer notes, Paretsky has created "a scrappy, entertaining, idiosyncratic

fictional character who is a woman, so hooray for her" (*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Paretsky website). Grafton's Kinsey Millhone demonstrates "spunky aplomb" (from *Entertainment Weekly*, as quoted in the promotional blurbs in *M is for Malice*), and is "smart and sassy" (from *The New York Times*, as quoted in the promo blurbs in *N is for Noose*).[23] These infantalising compliments—scrappy, spunky, sassy—of the tough female hero make sense given traditional gender designations: boyish games and aggressions are culturally valued, and so remain the property of adult masculinity, while the figuring of women as needing male protection means that all that is feminine becomes associated with childishness.

Sue Johnson writes that "Detectives Kinsey Millhone and V.I. Warshawski have deliberately defined themselves against most cultural norms of the feminine" (99). As well as being physically fit and physically aggressive when necessary, both PIs are "tough talkers"—witty, sarcastic loners and rule breakers, in the best Philip Marlow tradition. Both women describe themselves as not conventionally beautiful, though they consider themselves "passable," and neither spends much time on clothing and make-up. (Though Warshawski's professed amateurism regarding her appearance does not go to Millhone's extreme:

[23] Grafton and Paretsky's novels and heroines have much in common. Grafton's first Millhone mystery, *A is for Alibi*, was published to critical acclaim in 1982. In the same year, and with similar acclaim, Paretsky published the first of her VI Warshawski novels, *Indemnity Only*. Grafton has, however, been both the most prolific and more popular. Proceeding through the alphabet (*B is for Burglar*, *C is for Corpse* etc.), Grafton has produced a new Millhone novel approximately every year for the past two decades, while Paretsky has published another ten Warshawski novels. The detectives they created are also both single (both having been married and divorced) and in their early thirties when the series begin, they are both parentless, and both have an elderly neighbour as their most significant and enduring male friend.

Grafton's PI cuts her short hair herself with nail scissors, and her regular outfit consists of jeans, a turtleneck, boots, and a tweed jacket. For more formal occasions, she resorts to her one all-purpose black dress). At the same time, as Johnson also notes, the authors of these PIs illustrate that both PIs "are feminine and not only feminine but (hetero)sexually desirable and active" (99). Like their male hard-boiled counterparts, these female PIs are thus paradoxically both archetypically and unsuccessfully feminine. The female PI is a loner and unable to sustain relationships because she is untameable and fickle. The male hardboiled detective's absent family is rarely the subject of comment, and the mysterious inner wound of his past—as we can surmise from his sceptical/cynical response to "dames"—is most likely caused by a deceptive woman. While Millhone and Warshawski have their share of heartbreak, the loss of their parents is clearly presented as the trauma that makes connecting with others difficult for both. Again, the overt figuring of the female PI as "immature" is thus crucial in negotiating the archetypal/unsuccessful gender bind. However alternative or resistant Millhone's (lack of) style may seem, for example, it is made clear that not only, like Warshawski, can she continue to attract men, but her unconventional and unfeminine appearance is not a deliberate renouncing of the traditional sexual objectification of women. Instead, as Millhone often relates, it is the result of being raised by a "maiden" Aunt, who failed to teach her traditional "female" ways and skills. Thus Millhone's femininity is simply "undeveloped,"

and both PIs can be presented, and to some extent explained, as rebellious but also lost little girls, who have missed out on proper feminine socialisation.

To counteract her associations with childish femininity the female PI has recourse to the gun, which is the crucial symbolic marker of her hard-boiled authenticity. There are some differences between Millhone's and Warshawski's attitude towards firepower, but also marked similarities in their use (or lack of use) of the weapon. The gun, despite its admittedly low profile in these novels, plays a significant role in constituting Warshawski's and Millhone's identity as a public figures. Grafton's and Paretsky's series repeatedly remind us of her possession of it—as in this instance from *Guardian Angel*, in which V.I. prepares a smear campaign in an attempt to expose a corrupt lawyer: "[I] pulled the cover from my mother's old Olivetti, the obsolete machine I use for bills and correspondence. It was one of my few tangible legacies from her; its presence comforted me through my six years at the University of Chicago. Even now I can't bear to turn it in for a computer, let alone an electric typewriter. Besides, using it keeps my gun wrist strong" (103). Not only does this machine connect V.I. to her mother, the comment on the force needed to operate the typewriter also demonstrates V.I.'s combination of emotional depth with physical and mental toughness—as she concludes a potentially painful mention of the loss of her mother with a flip reminder of the realities of her present-day occupation.[24] This

[24] The manual typewriter—which both Warshawski and Millhone use to complete their reports—also helps to establish their connections with their hardboiled predecessors and their industrial landscapes. Like the gun then, these typewriters can be read as a nostalgic symbol of an older and more "authentic" form of heroism and identity.

passage also highlights the centrality of the gun to V.I.'s PI persona—she is a woman who has a "gun wrist" that needs to be kept in shape, even though she does not actually fire the gun very often in her work.

The gun is also a significant aspect of Millhone's character. For while her Aunt failed to instruct her about clothes and makeup, she did give Kinsey her first gun—a "little semi-automatic"—and taught her to shoot when she was eight so that she would learn to "appreciate both safety and accuracy" ("D" 101-102). As a further sign of the gun's centrality here, Grafton appears in the author photographs on the back cover of the novels (particularly in the early books of the series) in a variety of "Kinsey-identified" poses. The most overt of these, which appears on the back of *C is for Corpse*, features Grafton crouched behind a Volkswagen bug which sports a personalized "KINSEY" license plate (Kinsey does drive a VW, though there is no mention in the novels that the car has personalized plates—this would probably not be a good idea for a PI!), loosely dangling a pistol in her hand. Grafton also appears with a gun, in different poses and locales, in *E is for Evidence* and *G is for Gumshoe*. These photos demonstrate Grafton's investment in or identification with her protagonist (which she does admit to in interviews), but more centrally they indicate the degree to which the idea or image of the gun works to signify the detective. As in Paretsky's series, Kinsey does not, in fact, regularly carry or use her gun. But "detective" and "gun" are repeatedly equated when Kinsey is asked about her profession. Character after character first expresses surprise about her occupation, and then, as in the recent *P*

is for Peril, follows up with the question "You carry a gun?" (65). The linking of these two queries suggests that it is the fact that a woman might possess a gun as much as the anomaly of the job itself that surprises and intrigues people.

The gun marks the woman as a "real" PI, while simultaneously generating an ambivalence that is less pronounced or even absent in the traditional male hardboiled narrative. The gun is the marker of the female detective's "special" status—but, unlike the male PI, that marginality can be read as deviance and aberration as well as power. While a gun is "natural" in the hands of Philip Marlow or Sam Spade, for Warshawski and Millhone it also regularly signals femininity and vulnerability. In *Guardian Angel*, Warshawski narrates a not-out-of-character illegal entry:

> When I unlocked my ex-husband's office, I felt a kind of guilty thrill. It reminded my of the times when I was small and hunted out the drawer where my dad hid his police revolver. I knew I wasn't supposed to touch it, or even know where it was, and excitement and shame would get me so wound up I'd have to put on my skates and race around the block a few times. With an uneasy twinge I wondered if those feelings were what led me into detective work. (363)

The phallic equivalences here are hardly subtle, and the feelings of excitement and shame do seem apt characterisations of Warshawski's and Millhone's simultaneous pleasure in their capability and difference as PI's, and their sense of inadequacy and insecurity as women who—like the little girls they often seem to be—aren't supposed to "touch" or "even know about" guns and their symbolic agency.

In Grafton's series' first novel, Millhone is pursued by the knife-wielding bad guy (whom she has been sexually involved with) down the beach. She hides in a garbage can, and when discovered shoots him point blank. This, her first killing, causes Millhone some anguish. She wonders at the time, as well as at the beginning of the second novel, if she is still a "good person." This moral dilemma is less prominent as the series progresses, as the tough-talking Millhone "blows away" several bad guys without flinching or expressing any qualms or self-doubts after the fact.[25] Still, these encounters happen only at the final, climatic scenes, and always involve Millhone defending herself. She does not regularly carry the weapon, and its function thus remains primarily symbolic. Warshawski, on the other hand, is both tougher (physically and psychologically) than Kinsey and more directly ambivalent about violence and her use of the gun. In *Killing Orders*, for example, Warshawski even berates herself for shooting a thug—who was waiting to kill or at least beat her up—in the knee (160). In fact, though Paretsky does have Warshawski carry and use her gun, in the ten novels that have been published to date the PI has wounded but never killed anyone with the weapon (Décuré 182). As Ann Wilson points out, Warshawski only uses violence in response to male violence (149). In a particularly rich example of this in *Blood Shot*, Warshawski punches a man who has slapped his wife for admitting that he sexually assaulted their daughter. A fight ensues, with Warshawski quickly taking the upper hand: "I stood over him in a fury, my gun in my hand barrel-first, ready

[25] See for example *I is for Innocent*, pages 282ff.

to smash it into him if he started to get up. His face was glazed—none of his women-folk had ever fought back against him" (77). A force of feminist retribution, Warshawski here (like Kathleen in *Deep in the Heart*) nevertheless uses non-deadly violence to "educate" rather than simply eradicate the "villain."

In refusing to make the gun an actual extension of their PIs, the way it is for cowboys and hardboiled detectives, these narratives can be read as reinforcing the traditional separation between femininity and the public, "adult" world of violence. On the other hand though, the fact that Kinsey and Millhone's association with the gun is mediated can be read as an important feminist step in the reworking of the genre and its hardboiled hero. This is especially true of Paretsky's series, in which Warshawski is able to possess the gun without habitually making use of its destructive power. More complexly even than this, Warshawski, as in the scene above, turns that destructive power around, so that, barrel-first, it can symbolise authority and resistance as well as restraint and a respect for life. The woman with a gun here might then be read as a positive negotiation of traditional male and female values, combining what is conventionally coded as masculine "public" agency and feminine "private" morality into a kind of public ethical agency.

Secret Agents

Despite Ian Fleming's (and his filmic adapters') success with the James Bond franchise, there are few other popular contemporary fiction serials with

secret agents, either male or female, as protagonists. Instead, the female secret agent appears most often and most popularly in visual media. In contrast to this, the female PI has been more successfully portrayed in fiction, with film/television versions failing to capture a wide North American audience. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the PI is traditionally a tough, independent figure, who is not involved in any sustained romantic relationship—characteristics that only add to the appeal and masculinity of the protagonists of series popular in the 80s and 90s: *Magnum PI, Crazy Like a Fox*, and *Remington Steele* (female investigators do appear in series with a joint or ensemble cast, as in *Moonlighting* or *Charlie's Angels*). But successful fictional "hardboiled" female PI's like Grafton's and Paretsky's are not conventionally feminine, and with their unusual career choice, they become difficult to "translate" into traditional mainstream film or television narratives, as evidenced by the dismal failure of the one adaptation of Paretsky's successful series: the 1991 film *VI Warshawski*, starring Kathleen Turner. The female secret agent, however, is an increasingly popular film and TV protagonist, appearing in films such as *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), the film and television series *La Femme Nikita*, and most recently in the hit television series *Alias*. This popularity, as I will elaborate below, can be attributed in part to the fact that the secret agent tends to be a more conventionally "feminine" figure than her PI counterpart. My discussion of the female secret agent will focus on the decade long career of the character Nikita, who first appeared in Luc Besson's 1990 film *La Femme Nikita*, and then (as "Maggie") in the 1993 American

remake *Point of No Return*, and will compare these filmic texts to the *Nikita* television series, which aired from 1997 to 2002 (with some reference to *Alias*, which debuted in 2001 and has run for four seasons). Directly through the interaction of woman and gun, the narratives in which this highly compelling character appear highlight the violence that inheres in the public/private divide.

The female secret agent straddles the law/crime divide in a slightly different manner than the female PI. The wealthy, well-adjusted, jet-setting James Bond would hardly be considered a "marginal" figure (indeed he is the top agent of the British Secret Service, and has a considerable amount of control/power in his work and life). But it is revealing that in popular series and films that feature a female secret agent her position tends to be much more ambivalent. Unlike James Bond, female secret agents from Nikita to *Alias*'s Sydney, to *The Long Kiss Goodnight*'s Charlie/Samantha appear in narratives which foreground the dilemmas and turmoil that accompany both the woman's identification with the government body which employs her, and her reaction to the deception and violence that necessarily accompanies her assignment(s).[26] Rather than the criminal/law enforcement divide, the binary that the female secret agent straddles is more explicitly linked to the public/private split, particularly as this is translated into tension between individual freedom/institutional power. As in the western genre, which simultaneously celebrates and disavows both sides of the

[26] This profound ambivalence is the reason that the female secret agent is discussed in this section of my crime chapter, rather than in the following one, which considers the gun-wielding woman who is more fully identified with the official forces of the law.

wilderness/civilisation binary, there are negative and positive aspects associated with each half of the individual/institutional pair. Individual freedom represents both a positive self-determination and—taken to extremes—the possibility of jeopardizing the community (it is thus not so far removed from the "criminal"). Institutional power represents both oppression and public safety/action. Of course, as with the PI narratives I consider above, the fact that these texts focus on a female agent mean that the gendered nature of this split is paramount. On the one hand, this gendering means that violence in these narratives can be presented as particularly traumatic—since unlike in the situation of the female PI, violent action is not usually something the secret agent has *chosen* to embrace. On the other hand though, the very fact that the female figure has not chosen this path/identity means that their association with violence and violent institutional machinations can be much more profound and bloody, while leaving their femininity intact.

The three Nikita narratives have much in common, and indeed the American remake has been described as a "carbon copy" of the French original, but there is nevertheless some interesting divergence in the three texts' heroines' relationship to violence and specifically to the gun. Perhaps in response to the presumed biases of increasingly "mainstream" audiences, each successive remake distances the Nikita figure from the weapon and from the violent power that it represents. The original French film's director, Luc Besson, who is frequently described as the Stephen Spielberg of France, has the reputation of creating ultra-

hip, big-budget action films that "combine France's fetish for style with Hollywood's lust for excess" (Grindstaff 145). Besson's film opens with Nikita (Anne Parillaud) and her (male) friends breaking into a pharmacy in search of drugs. The gang trashes the place while the owner, who lives upstairs, calls the cops. When the police arrive a gun battle erupts, with the stoned punks firing with abandon. The spaced-out Nikita, who has been sitting on the floor behind a counter waiting for her hit, picks up a gun dropped by one of her pals after he is shot by the police. When the police have killed all her friends, a young officer approaches Nikita as she sits listening to her walkman. (The walkman, an icon of late twentieth century youth culture, signals Nikita's "juvenility," as well as her isolation and perhaps even the fact that she is/has been influenced by outside/popular forces.) The cop crouches down and gently removes her earphones. "No more?", Nikita asks him quietly. "No," he replies in the same tone, at which point Nikita thrusts her gun under his chin. Though he pleads with her not to shoot, she pulls the trigger and blows him away.

In John Badham's *Point of No Return*, Besson's opening is repeated almost scene for scene, but the exchange between Nikita (named Maggie in this version) and the cop, which is disturbingly gentle and intimate in the original, is here presented in a manner that makes Maggie's crime far less shocking. Rather than Nikita's somewhat ambiguous "No more?", which could refer to drugs, to the shooting, to the death of her friends, or generally to Nikita's street-punk lifestyle, Maggie asks "Did you find any?" This clear and direct reference to drugs, which

both Maggie and Nikita beg for before the gang robs the pharmacy, helps establish Maggie's desperate/inebriated state, and locates a clear culprit (a favourite in American popular discourse) and rationale for her wanton use of violence. The film gives her one more excuse though—making her killing of the cop almost a case of self-defence. After she pulls the gun (again dropped by one of her companions) on the cop, who is neither sympathetic nor gentle, he says nothing to her (there is no pleading) but instead begins to reach for his own weapon before Maggie shoots him. As Pauline MacRory argues, in *Point of No Return*, "[t]rue to Hollywood conceptions of violent women, [Maggie's] violence has to be accounted for" (52). While I agree with MacRory's distinction between the French and American films, Nikita's more pronouncedly childlike behaviour in the French film ultimately serves a similar, and similarly disturbing, explanatory purpose. But in the French film, the "explanation" of violence does not need to be overt or external (i.e. drugs), since, rather than viewing femininity as passive, it relies upon stereotypes of innate female irrationality and "wildness." Both of these views—which represent the contradictory poles of the mythological feminine—are equally pervasive and limiting.

Each *Nikita* narrative charts the recruitment and training of an imprisoned young street punk by a covert government agency. Because, according to traditional gender designations, women are inherently free and uncontrollable (a woman is like an animal), the injustice of the female secret agent's "capture" and "training" by the government institution is a particularly compelling and affecting

part of these stories. Since "the woman" is also innately obedient, trainable, and vulnerable, she also makes a perfect and highly successful institutional constituent/pawn. When they are first brought into "Section" in order to be trained as government agents, Nikita and Maggie are promised a rebirth through education and training. Nikita is told that she will "be taught reading, smiling, speaking, walking, even how to fight." Maggie gets a similar list—minus the fighting—that is even more overt in its parental tone: "[You have to] learn, Maggie. Learn to speak properly, stand up straight, for a start, then languages, computers, and so on." The press release for *Point of No Return* clearly reveals the gender and class implications of the transformation from "scruffy, ferocious, drug-addicted misfit" into an "intelligent, curious, lovely woman of elegance and refinement" (quoted in J. Brown, "Gender" 63). Her "education" will expose Nikita/Maggie to "culture" (art and music), and provide her with skills (computer, martial), confidence, and a sense of self-worth. These films thus (re)present the centrality of education to liberalism, which developed the enlightenment project's belief that if you educated "the masses" you could transform them into individual subjects, but also thereby *subject* them to bourgeois models of work and propriety.[27]

The position of the female secret agent—her gender and her association with violence—complicates this educative process, however. For, ironically, the

[27] For a succinct summary of this process as it has operated in the American public school system, see John Taylor Gatto's "Against School" in *Harper's Magazine* (Sept. 2003), 33-38.

institution also seeks to capitalise on the mysterious, dangerous, and "uncivilized" aspects of the traditional "feminine" (or femme fatale)—harnessing and then unleashing them on "the enemy." Fighting is a part of the training in both films, and Nikita and Maggie are shown to be "naturally" excellent shots, as well as generally uncontainable and violent. But the character's most significant schooling—and important skill, she is told—is her beauty. Under the tutelage of Jeanne Moreau/Anne Bancroft, Nikita/Maggie learns how to control others with her mysterious and powerful sexual presence. Transformed by glossy coiffed hair, make-up, and evening wear, Nikita/Maggie is rewarded with her first trip outside of the compound—a birthday dinner with "Bob," the father figure/mentor who recruited her (and is in love with her). But instead of a romantic evening, Nikita/Maggie's "present" turns out to be a beautifully wrapped loaded gun, accompanied by an assignment to assassinate a fellow diner. This is a profoundly affecting scene, as it traces the transition from Nikita's nervous pleasure in entering the real/outside world with her newly elegant feminine skills and identity, to the deflation and pathos of her recognition that evening is, in fact, just one more training session, and finally to the adrenaline rush and spectacle of her tenacious completion of the assignment (complete with a shoot-out and climatic explosion) in her little black dress. The new Nikita is thus here simultaneously hemmed in/contained and spectacularly "launched." The "gift" of the gun from "Uncle" Bob repositions Nikita/Maggie as government agent, government *property*. This scene highlights the fact that, as Laura Grindstaff writes,

> Like men, women are subjected to, as well as subjects of, discourses of surveillance and social control. Unlike men, however (and white men in particular), women are not the primary authors of these discourses, thus their perception of themselves as free agents is doubly fraught with contradiction—and becomes a rich site for cinematic investigation into the bounds and limits of patriarchal power. (166)

At the beginning of the narratives, Nikita/Maggie's possession (or at least her use) of the gun signals her deviance and power, and it is why the government agency recruits and attempts to tame/harness her. The gun then also represents both institutional power and subjectification. From an unkempt, uncouth tomboy (who runs with a male gang) the Section attempts to remodel Nikita/Maggie into a femme fatale, whose mystery and destructive potential they both tap and engineer. As the date (assignment) and the gift (the gun) indicate, Nikita/Maggie is, like the femme fatale, isolated—cut off from regular social and personal interactions and events. She has thus been transformed from a public figure of difference and deviance into a private, secret menace—but of course, the fact that this private figure is in the employ of the government complicates these traditional divisions.

The slippery border between public and private is highlighted by the nature and context of Maggie/Nikita's assignments, and particularly the role and place of the gun within them. After passing the test in the restaurant, Nikita/Maggie's first assignment does not, in fact, involve the gun at all. Instead, she delivers a bomb to a hotel room in the (French-maid-costumed) guise of a room service deliverer. The job is incredibly quick and simple, but—as the shot of a hotel room exploding behind her as she heads home make clear—also extremely

destructive. This event presages the way that violence will continue to interrupt or define Nikita/Maggie's private life, as well as the way that her "private" femininity will inflect her secret-agent role.

While the institution subjects the female secret agent, it also privileges her with unusual (especially for women) and extreme kinds of power: to give and take life, to access forbidden places/people, and to participate in and affect national and international affairs. This power is at odds, however, with the "natural" maternal qualities that define the woman as the essence of civilization, and significant amounts of tension in these narratives revolves around the woman's difficulty with her isolation and with the violence and deception her position necessitate (in this regard the secret-agent-narrative makes more overt many of the tensions/issues that also confront the female private investigator).

Nikita/Maggie's second assignment provides the richest gun-related imagery: on a romantic trip (to Venice in the original, New Orleans in the remake) that Nikita/Maggie and her new boyfriend take as a gift from Bob, Nikita/Maggie is interrupted by the phone (the Section's usual method of informing her she has an assignment) as she and her partner embrace. Ordered into the bathroom of her suite, Nikita/Maggie is instructed to remove and assemble a rifle that is hidden behind the wall panels. She then must assassinate a female foreign government official who is exiting a building across the street. As her boyfriend, long frustrated by Nikita/Maggie's emotional distance and secretiveness, calls and complains from the other side of the door, the scantily

clad Nikita/Maggie breaks the bathroom window and takes aim with the huge gun, tears running down her face. She barely completes the job when her worried boyfriend pushes through the bathroom door. It is a highly suspenseful moment, with the audience wondering if he will discover her with the gun in her hands. But he finds her, instead, perched in a kind of demure despondency on the edge of the half-filled bathtub. Mollified by her claims that she just needs him to be patient, he leaves her alone—at which point she removes the gun from the tub behind her. From her first test in the restaurant, when she lifts the pistol from its gift-wrapped package and stores the extra clip down her cleavage, to this bizarre image of a bubble-covered rifle occupying/displacing woman's "proper" passive erotic space, these films illustrate the intimate connections between the workings of "public" life/authority and the supposedly "private" realm of sexuality and desire.

As much as the films foreground the mutually violent construction of the public/private divide, they also can be viewed as anxiously working to maintain the traditional separation between them. The publicly disruptive woman is transformed/educated into a stereotypical femininity that is increasingly uncomfortable with violence (in every version of the narrative Nikita/Maggie is in fact unwilling to use the gun after her training). Now cultured and enlightened, the women want the private, safe, and non-violent world this femininity promises. On the one hand the state's influence in this sphere, as illustrated in the films, affirms the feminist challenge to the construction of the private as a space unaffected by and unrelated to the political/public world (as made popular in the

slogan the personal is political). At times the films seem to present this interference and violence as an anomaly and aberration, as Nikita/Maggie becomes involved in a conventional romance marred only by her enforced double-life. But given the fact that Nikita/Maggie, after completing a particularly harrowing final job, rejects both the deviance of her past, the deceptive institutional power that is her pre-scripted future, and the conventional domestic relationship with her loving boyfriend, the ambiguity of her position lingers. Has she been returned to the private sphere? Or has her experience so shattered the illusion that such divisions exist—and that women might have a safe space within them—that Nikita/Maggie must take her hard-won knowledge back out into the street in an attempt to imagine or begin a life outside of these artificial distinctions? Feminists can hope the latter, but a more traditional future could also await Nikita/Maggie once she moves through the fog that marks her escape into the street.

While in *La Femme Nikita* and *Point of No Return* the education process fails to align Nikita and Maggie's "disruptive" femininity with the force of the law, in the television version, as in the series *Alias*, the female protagonist, while conflicted, continues to operate within this most violent arm of the body politic. Joel Surnow, the television series's original producer and executive consultant, has stated in interviews that his *Nikita* was modeled after the original French film, and not the American remake (Grindstaff 143). But in the television series, Nikita's "originary" violence is removed from even the American film's form of

"understandable" (drug-induced) criminal behaviour. In the series' opening montage, we hear of Nikita's imprisonment—for a crime we are immediately told that she did not commit. The top-secret anti-terrorist organisation "Section One" wants Nikita, she is informed in the first episode, because she is a stunningly beautiful woman "who can kill in cold blood." But because Nikita did not commit the crime for which she was imprisoned (as in the other films, murdering a police officer) she insists that she "can't do what [they] want [her] to do": "I can't pull the trigger." Nikita here metonymically disavows her status as "killer"—an identity and an act that is crucially linked to the gun. Though she does go on to perform successfully in the role of government operative and assassin, the fact that as a "private" citizen she had not killed is used to explain in part why she repeatedly resists the Section's insistence that she be emotionless and ruthless—as if, had she indeed "pulled the trigger" in the past (like the other Nikitas), her moral sense would already have been diminished or tainted.

In *Alias*, graduate student Sydney Bristow works as an intelligence gathering operative for a secret CIA division known as SD-6. Unlike Nikita, Sydney's position as secret agent is one she has chosen, but this choice is complicated and undermined from the series' pilot episode. In this episode, Sydney is proposed to by her boyfriend and decides that she must tell him the truth about her identity before she can agree to marry and start a family (which her fiancé repeatedly stresses his desire for). Due to her breach of security protocol, the fiancé is killed by SD-6: Sydney returns home to discover him

butchered in her bathtub. Sydney attempts to withdraw from SD-6, only to have her own life threatened. At the same time, Sydney learns that SD-6 is in fact not associated with the CIA, but is rather part of a rogue terrorist cell. In order to protect her life as well as revenge her fiancé, Sidney decides to continue to working for SD-6 (as a double-agent for the CIA) in order to help bring them to justice. Sydney's position and her success as an agent demonstrate a rare kind of power for a female character. Both she and Nikita, who in the television series actually ends up taking over as head of Section One, are represented as emotional and moral but still strong and motivated by "public" duty.

As in many narratives with strong female characters, however, both Nikita and Sydney are "explained" and made exceptional by positioning them as the daughters of influential men in their respective agencies. Sydney, we learn, is the daughter of a CIA agent (her father) and KGB operative (her mother, variously coded as deceptive and heroic over the course of the program). Sydney was even secretly subjected by her father to a special training program designed for children, called "Project Christmas," that is used to explain her impressive physical and psychological resilience.

Nikita and Sydney perform in the roles they have been assigned in a manner that Nikita/Maggie never become comfortable with, using their exceptional beauty and training as killers to infiltrate and distract various maniacal bad guys who threaten the safety of the US (or of the world). While—as in all good soaps and suspense/mystery narratives—these bad guys are at times

found to be masquerading as "us," in both series the fathers, who have at times been viewed with suspicion, are ultimately revealed to be both "good" and properly caring. Nikita's father even sacrifices his life for the sake of the man who Nikita loves—ensuring at the same time that Nikita will take over "Section" in his place, as he "had always planned." "Always trust your father" are his last words to her. *Alias*—still running at the time of this writing—has not completely resolved the mysteries and ambiguities of the parent/child relationship, but Sydney's father also repeatedly reminds his daughter that he works with her best interests in mind. As power is figured as paternal here, its violence is transformed—as in the liberal paradigm—to purely self-defensive and necessary protectiveness. Still, their identification with the violence of the law—and of the father—remains a source of tension and anguish for these female figures, who demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling the ethical critique of dominant power structures with agency within its institutions.

Women of/in the Law

Gun-wielding women who are publicly recognised agents of the law or government, like their criminal and liminal counterparts, work to explore the crime genre's fascination with the tensions between civilisation and its outsides/others. While police procedurals featuring female police officers have had success on television (*Hill Street Blues*, *Cagney and Lacey*, and the UK's

Prime Suspect) as have a number of women-in-the-military movies (*Private Benjamin*, *GI Jane*), some of the most popular contemporary mainstream narratives in this category pit the armed female agent of the law against a serial-killing psychopath, in stories that thus also present detailed investigations of the extremes of the deviance/ civilization binary. It is these narratives—particularly Patricia Cornwell's bestselling series of forensic thrillers and the novel and film versions of Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*—that I will take as my focus in this section.

The protagonists of these texts, Dr. Kay Scarpetta and Clarice Starling, are both agents for, or associated with, the FBI and so can be described as using the tools of "forensic pathology and behaviourist psychology to reinscribe social order at the heart of the filmic or literary text" (Blake 204). But the American hero in these popular narratives inevitably engages with the mythic West, and so, for both Scarpetta and Starling, the gun takes its place alongside forensic pathology and behaviourist psychology as an important tool in the (potential) reinstitution of order. Unlike more "intellectual" methods for apprehending the deviant—methods which recall the magical ratiocinations of the classical detective—the gun in these texts signals the unstable divide that separates criminal from crime-fighter. Both the agent of the law and the criminal are compelled and defined by violence, and so the criminal's position as substitute for more systemic ills becomes, in these stories, somewhat precarious. This is especially true, of course, when the official government agent is a woman, and so

always already ambiguously positioned vis-à-vis issues of deviance and the law. The PIs I examined in the last section also possessed and were identified with their guns, but they were characterised by an ambivalent relationship to the weapon and their use of it. This ambivalence can be read as an indication of the PIs'—oft-noted—marginal social status: an outsider to both the law and to the deviant world she investigates, the female PI is able to maintain a certain degree of power without seriously compromising her idealistic moral stance. The much more encompassing and defining association with the gun—as well as with the exceptionally gruesome types of crime they investigate—that occurs with female agents of the law like Scarpetta and Starling proves more difficult to negotiate, as they both acknowledge and disavow the feminist challenge to the violence and oppressiveness of dominant liberal-capitalist institutions.

Harris's 1988 novel *The Silence of the Lambs* opens with a description of Academy trainee Starling responding to a summons to a meeting on the FBI grounds. She is "flushed after a fast walk from Hogan's Alley on the firing range" (1). "Her hands smelled of gunsmoke, but there was no time to wash" (1), so Starling simply "fluffs" briefly in the outer office—she knows she can "look alright without primping" (1). The uncommon use of third person narration in Harris's fiction—versus the first person that dominates hardboiled-style narratives, including Cornwell's—aids in the establishment here of Starling as a sexual "object." The common eroticisation of the woman with a gun is both reproduced and critiqued in Harris's text (as well as in the film versions of his

novel): Starling is active but to be looked at, powerful but under scrutiny, and her sexual appeal is only heightened by the flush of exercise and the smell of gunsmoke. In the next chapter, Clarice is again practising her shooting, this time indoors. Her male firearms instructor, an ex-marine named John Brigham, tests Starling's hand strength in front of the class by "seeing how many times she could pull the trigger of a model 19 Smith and Wesson in sixty seconds" (34). Starling does very well, and Brigham suggests that some of the "gentlemen" in the class would be well justified in worrying about being called upon to perform the same test after her performance. The instructor informs the class that Starling is "well above average" with both hands because she works at it with "the little squeezy things [they] all have access to" (34). "Most of you," he continues, groping for a "polite simile," "are not used to squeezing anything harder than your . . . zits" (34). The gun is clearly figured as a kind of penis here, but one that is in fact "harder" than the men's physical "equipment." Mastering this penis is also presented as work and skill, in contrast to the laziness and ineffectuality of masturbation. Starling, minus the distractions of a real penis, and with a well-established (working-class) work ethic, is able to best these gentlemen, while, once again, being situated in/as a context of sexual display/innuendo.

In both *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* Harris highlights Starling's connection with the gun in such scenes, and this association with violence becomes a symbol of her power as well as her vulnerability. The juxtaposition of power and vulnerability will be most disturbingly replicated in

Starling's dealings with Harris's infamous cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter, who will both desire and admire her. "I can smell your cunt" (14) hisses the inmate Briggs, a few pages into the novel, as Starling walks by his cell on the way to visit the incarcerated Hannibal. Starling ignores this, but knows that "her heels announce" her as she approaches Hannibal. Like the mention of "primping" in the first scene, this cunt and heels combo reminds the reader that Starling faces Hannibal as a *female* agent of the law, and the power that accompanies her position can be viewed as simply one more aphrodisiac. Hannibal, who we learn has a highly developed sense of smell—being able to name the perfume Starling wore the day *before* their meeting—it can be inferred not only must also be able to smell her cunt, but her ambition. He critiques her style, her aspirations, her class background, and facetiously empathises with her regarding the difficulties of being a smart woman in a small town, impatient with and now embarrassed by the local rubes she dated (291). Though she is associated with the FBI, Starling's position within the law is still precarious, and the splat of semen that Briggs throws in her face as she leaves is simply a cruder attempt (than Hannibal's) to remind her of her proper "feminine" place. The distinction between these attempts is nevertheless important. Hannibal, like Starling's boss, who sends her to Hannibal in a deliberate attempt to pique the criminal's interest—engages with Starling with a "paternal" blend of solicitation, degradation, and desire. She is a protégé, a novice, "performing" as well as she can in an attempt to please and impress the men who dominate her world. As indicated by her relation with her

gun, her power (as a smart, attractive, successful young woman) is alluring but—because it is still contained and subordinate—not, at this point, threatening.

In Patricia Cornwell's fictions, Dr. Kay Scarpetta's association with the gun is also, at first, mediated via recourse to a traditional figuring of femininity. Like many gun-toting women, both Starling and Scarpetta had childhoods marked by trauma and loss. Both characters are from working-class families, and both experienced the death of their fathers at an early age. In an effort to make these absent paternal figures proud, both women are ambitious when it comes to work and to lifestyle. While Starling and Scarpetta are shown to be driven by a desire to protect the helpless, they also share a degree of disdain for the "vulgar" masses, and desire to distinguish themselves from these masses (from whom they come) through accruing cultural capital. Scarpetta, forty years old at the beginning of the novel-series, is the elder of the two heroines, and is far more successful in this quest than the young Starling. Cornwell's protagonist lives in an exclusive "gated" neighbourhood and she prides herself on her appreciation for and knowledge of architecture, fine food and wine, art, literature, and fashion. When Cornwell's series begins, Scarpetta has been the Chief Medical Examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia for just under two years. Scarpetta is thus responsible for performing the autopsies and determining the cause of the death for every victim of violence (or possible violence) in the state. Scarpetta is, in fact, the most powerful—in terms of personal wealth and social position—of any of the female protagonists I consider in this crime chapter, and, given her need to defend the

structures that have afforded her these privileges, it is perhaps not surprising that she, and the narrative she appears in, is the most conservative in its representations of gender, sexuality, and class.

Given her age and her established position, Scarpetta's association with the gun cannot be tempered by figuring her as a "daughter"/ingénue figure. Instead, Scarpetta's use/possession of the gun—introduced in the first novel of the series, *Postmortem*—is explained via a rhetoric of self-defence. Scarpetta tells her young niece Lucy that she only keeps a gun in the house because she lives alone (276). "You have it so you can kill somebody," Lucy clarifies with literal precision. Scarpetta responds that she doesn't like to think about this, but the dialogue continues: "Well, it's true," "That's why you keep it. Because of bad people. That's why." In response to this assertion, Scarpetta picks up the remote control and switches on the television (277). Scarpetta doesn't answer Lucy because she does, in fact, agree with her. This ambivalence can be viewed as an example of the liberal humanist disavowal of the violence that inheres in a social system founded upon "merit" and competition. What takes the place of this constitutional violence is an "evil" which preys, most often, upon women. In a later novel, the rapidly aged Lucy, now seventeen, asks for shooting lessons for Christmas because she has been scarred by a rapist/killer's invasion of her aunt's home years ago (*Cruel* 345). Scarpetta tries to reassure her niece: "That man is dead, Lucy. He can't hurt anyone now." But Lucy responds, "There are others just as bad, maybe worse than him." Scarpetta's reply echoes a sentiment repeatedly expressed

in the series: "I'm not going to tell you there aren't" (346). While encouraging women to defend themselves (physically and socially) has been an important aspect of the feminist movement—and one that Cornwell clearly plays on in her portrayal of the Scarpetta's tough, "realistic" view of the dangers of the world—this "explanation" of the gun's place in Scarpetta's life also highlights stereotypical notions of female vulnerability: she needs the gun because she lives alone (i.e. without a man who would offer her the protection she must find in the gun).

In the first novel's climatic showdown with the psychotic serial killer/rapist, who has chosen her as his (final) victim, Scarpetta pulls this gun from under her pillow and is ready to pull the trigger. "I would have done it," she recalls later. "I know I would have done it. I never wanted to do anything so badly in my life as I wanted to squeeze that trigger" (313). But her macho police-sergeant buddy Pete Marino claims that Scarpetta in fact didn't have time to pull her gun on the killer, because Marino had himself been following the man, and gunned him down seconds after he entered Scarpetta's bedroom. Despite her stated desire to squeeze the trigger, it is significant that at the end of this first novel Scarpetta has, in fact, killed no one. The gun remains in its domestic (under the pillow!), defensive role (again unnecessary when a man is around) and Scarpetta's position as a "private citizen"—distinct from both the criminals she investigates and the institution on whose behalf she works—is maintained.

After this attack, however, Scarpetta's identification with the gun begins to change. In the second novel of Cornwell's series, *Body of Evidence,* Scarpetta is in the home of a female murder victim who, despite the fact that she had a loaded gun on the premises, did not attempt to defend herself against her attacker. In another clear invocation of liberal feminist notions of "self-defence," Scarpetta explains to Marino that "Defending herself was not a reflex. Her only reflex was to run" (23). Scarpetta is unlike this woman. She thinks to herself: "I had a Ruger .38 revolver loaded with Silvertips, one of the most destructive cartridges money could buy. The only reason it would occur to me to arm myself with the handgun was I practised, took it down to the range inside my [office] building several times a month. When I was home alone, I was more comfortable with the handgun than without it" (22). Like Starling, Scarpetta's association with the gun here is a matter of discipline and work ethic. And by this second novel, Scarpetta's gun—now not only kept loaded, but with the most destructive cartridges money could buy—has become an essential part of her personal/private identity. As in the rhetoric of the National Rifle Association, the possession of the gun becomes a marker not only of self-sufficiency, but of personal responsibility, and the home is even more clearly marked as a site of fearful isolation and potential invasion.

At the beginning of their series then, both Scarpetta and Starling are marked as strong women who possess the gun, but also as women whose gender marginalisation undercuts and/or explains that possession in a way that mediates

the threat that this possession might represent. Thus while in *The Silence of the Lambs* Harris may point to the obstacles that Starling's gender represents in her attempt to do the "good work" of the law, Starling's association with violence and the gun are generally positive. The final climatic scene with "Buffalo Bill" highlights Starling's femininity, her vulnerability, and her position as spectacle—but it also allows her to "get her man" in the usual heroic fashion (the fact that the killer she pursues has been dubbed "Buffalo Bill" indicates the generic ancestry of this battle between good and evil). Over the course of her investigation into Buffalo Bill, Starling finally gathers the information necessary to locate the killer, only to be told the job has already been done—the FBI are on their way to his house. Sent to do some follow-up (secretarial?) paperwork instead, while the men make the arrest, Starling of course happens upon the killer herself, alone. Jame Gumb—a.k.a. Buffalo Bill—ends up stalking her in his darkened basement with his night goggles.

In the film we see Starling from Gumb's perspective, though the familiar film gimmick of the black binocular circles (in this case with the visible portion of the screen illuminated with the night goggles' eerie green glow). Starling operates here within the "final-girl" horror convention detailed by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (36-39). Highlighting her innocence and youth (necessary aspects of the monster-defeating final girl), Starling is sightless, shaking, terrified. Gumb follows her, and at one point reaches out to touch her hair and then her face (as Hannibal will do to Julianne Moore's Starling in the

second film). Starling's gun is no match for the male gaze—she can be objectified and has no recourse. But when Gumb cocks his gun, Starling turns and fires back, killing him almost instantly. "The regaining of sight," as critic Robin Wood puts it, "represents the renunciation of the passivity into which she had withdrawn: immediately, the power of the look is transferred to the power of the gun with which she shoots the murderer, the reappropriation of the phallus" (85). Starling may be allowed to possess and use the "phallic" power of the gun here, but such possession and identification—as for most popular genre heroes, and especially for female ones—is never in fact stable or unambiguous. And indeed, if this moment can be viewed as Starling's coming into full possession of that phallic weapon and the violence it represents, we see in Harris's next text the transformation such possession enacts upon the woman with a gun's characterisation.

Harris's novel *Hannibal*, set seven years later than *Silence of the Lambs*, like the earlier novel opens with a description of Starling which juxtaposes a "masculine" strength and power with reminders of her "feminine" appearance. Rather than walking from the firing range, Starling drives (or rather "booms") up to the FBI office (this time the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) in her Mustang (3): "Through the open back doors of the van, four men watched Starling coming. She was slender in her fatigues and moving fast under the weight of her equipment, her hair shining in the ghastly fluorescent lights. 'Women. Always late,' A D.C. police officer said" (3). But John Brigham, the agent in charge,

corrects him, saying that he only just summoned Starling, and that she "must have hauled ass from Quantico" (4). Harris again here deliberately foregrounds (and arguably exploits) the woman-as-object, as well as highlights the discrimination that women face, and Brigham's correction of the officer repositions Starling as an "equal" tough-guy/gal. The scene continues, with Starling providing information about the drug bust they are about to make, and particularly about Evelda, the woman in charge of the operation (the feisty drug-lord-widow who Starling has arrested twice before). Starling warns the cops not to underestimate Evelda, who will be armed and willing to fight. When an officer questions her about the safety of wearing her "main sidearm, a well-worn Colt .45 Governmental Model with a strip of skateboard tape on the grip, riding in a Yaqui slide behind her right hip," cocked all the time, Starling challenges him to come out to the range so she can explain it to him. Brigham "breaks it up" by informing the Officer he should not worry about Starling's weapon because she was "interservice combat pistol champion three years straight." A group of male competitors (whom she beat), he adds, gave her the nickname Annie Oakley (7). This nickname positions Starling as an inheritor of the "good" mythological Western sharpshooting gal—of the sort who was able to catch "Buffalo Bill" in the first novel. But this positive association, which is possible in *Silence of the Lambs* when Starling is a novice (a "girl"), does not seem to carry in *Hannibal*, now that she is a "woman" with a proven track-record. "Poison Oakley," corrects Starling (7). From all American girl, able to bring together morality and violence in an erotic and sharp but

ultimately unthreatening package, Starling has been transformed into a sinister (un)natural (i.e. poison oak) deviant.

When they attempt to make their bust, Starling ends up shooting Evelda, who was holding her baby (in front of her gun) at the time, as well as two of Evelda's men, and so gets written up in the paper. The story concludes with a statement about Starling's gun from Evelda's family's attorney. He alleges that Starling's modified Colt .45 semiautomatic pistol, "is a deadly and dangerous instrument not suitable for use in law enforcement . . . Its very use constitutes reckless endangerment of human life" (25). The gun, we learn later in the novel, was John Brigham's (500), but clearly it does not signify in the same way in Starling's hands. The focus on Starling's gun, and the 'unsuitability' of its use, is a not-too-subtle sexist comment—clearly set up for critique by Harris—on the place of women in law enforcement. Harris shows the operation and power of these prejudices within the media as well as in the government: though her actions are blameless, to appease the public furor Starling is suspended from duty in the aftermath of this shooting. Starling's status as agent of the law is in doubt, and even her function as titillating spectacle alters slightly: the only piece of mail she receives after this suspension, Harris lets us know (the film also reproduces this scene), is a questionnaire from the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which is prepared to list her as "having killed more criminals than any other female law enforcement officer in United States history" (107). Rather than being associated with hard work and youthful vigour (à la Annie Oakley), Starling's possession of

the gun is now unequivocally linked with death and crime. The ambiguity that surrounds the woman with a gun is evidenced by the fact that, as with the filmic adaptation of Harris's earlier novel,[28] Ridley Scott's 2001 film *Hannibal* significantly reduces and underplays the centrality of Starling's proficiency with a gun (there is no mention of the type or origin of Starling's weapon, or her status as "interservice combat pistol champion"). This distancing of woman and weapon works to make the big-screen Starling a less threatening and "unusual" female character. Given the powerful visual impact of the woman with a gun, the minimising of this aspect of Starling's identity can also work to limit her reduction to sexual spectacle—of the very sort the *Guinness Book* attempts to position her in.

These issues continue to be central in Cornwell's series, which, like Harris's text, trace the transformation of the female character as her connection to the gun becomes more pronounced. In the series' second novel, Scarpetta and her cop friend Marino practice together in her office building's range. Before they have taken any shots, Marino presents Scarpetta with a 9-millimeter pistol—a Christmas present, he says. Scarpetta refuses the gift, defending her choice of the

[28] In Jonathan Demme's film version of *Silence of the Lambs*, which is fairly faithful to the novel, Starling's skill with a gun is minimised/reduced. Instead of opening with Starling at (or returning from) the firing range, the film has her running an obstacle course, alone. After her interview with Hannibal, instead of the scene in which Starling demonstrates her hand strength in the trigger-pulling test—out performing the men—we see a demonstration of her weakness: Starling being "killed" in a mock raid because she fails to check the corner behind her. Amy Taubin writes that the film version makes Starling "even more central (and more isolated) than she was in the novel" (130), and I would add that she is also more inexperienced and more traditionally feminine. All of these traits are also tied into her relationship (or lack thereof) with the gun.

less powerful revolver by saying that she prefers "a few well placed shots" to the pistol's tendency to "spray lead." "You only need one shot" Scarpetta says to Marino. "Yeah," he responds, "If it's between the damn eyes" (267). Scarpetta then proceeds to shoot a practice manikin "in the head once, the chest three times" (267). Marino's feelings are hurt, ostensibly because Scarpetta has refused his gift, but possibly also because of her skill with the revolver. Both illustrate Scarpetta's independence and "possession of the phallus": the conventional gift of the gun from man to woman that is repeated in so many woman-with-a-gun scripts is subverted or sidestepped here. But before they leave the building, Marino presents Scarpetta with a license to carry a concealed weapon—something Scarpetta had not applied for, but that Marino was able to obtain, he says, because a judge owed him a favour. Scarpetta thanks him, and relates that Marino "smiled as he held open the door for [her]" (269). Despite her refusal of Marino's gun-gift, traditional gender positions—as Cornwell/Scarpetta seems to be aware—are thus here reinstated. Scarpetta may choose/possess her own weapon, but this activity has up until this point been contained to the domestic sphere as a "private" means of defence. With Marino's gift of the permit, Scarpetta is invited or "permitted" (by two men, Marino and the Judge, who work together in the tradition of the old-boys network) to enter into the public realm as an active (though hidden) force. Scarpetta's use of the gun at home signalled the incursion of private space by her public job—or more simply by the menace of evil. Bringing the gun "out" as an

intimate and integrated element of her public identity signals that this division no longer exists.

In the fifth novel of the series, *The Body Farm*, Scarpetta must use this power to save Marino from a woman who suffers from Munchausen's syndrome by proxy (a syndrome in which primary caregivers abuse their children to get attention). The woman, who has already murdered her daughter, seduces Marino and begins to simultaneously care-take and harm him. In the climatic scene of the novel, Scarpetta locates the rifle that Marino keeps in his car and breaks into the woman's house to find her friend near death in the murdered little girl's bedroom, with a plastic bag taped over his head. Scarpetta narrates: "What happened next was simultaneous. I released the safety and racked the shotgun as she grabbed his pistol off the table and stood. Our guns raised together and I fired. The deafening blast hit her like a fierce gust of wind, and she fell back against the wall as I pumped and fired and pumped and fired again and again" (*Body Farm* 320). In this fascinating scene, both women have taken possession of Marino's guns. But Scarpetta has the rifle: a particularly large, public weapon—it is appropriate that she gets it from inside the car—that is associated with masculine pursuits such as hunting. Even the pump and spray action of this gun is powerfully and physically phallic. Marino, on the other hand, who has abandoned his public role by getting involved with a suspect, has clearly been unmanned. His discarded little pistol, lying in the feminised zone of the little girl's bedroom, will prove to be no match

for Scarpetta, who is here allowed to represent all the force of the state as she enters into this deviant domestic space and blasts evil away.

Scarpetta eventually becomes involved with a married FBI agent, Benton Wesley, and they share a rare night alone together as they work on a grisly case in New York. In Scarpetta's hotel room, Wesley offers to find ice to accompany their scotch. Straight up and neat is fine, Scarpetta tells him, and Wesley responds, "You drink like a man" (*From Potter's Field* 40). Wesley's remark in the hotel room is followed by a description of him removing his jacket, shoulder holster, and pistol. In the next line of dialogue, which can be read as a kind of reply to Wesley's comment regarding her "masculine" no-nonsense drinking style, Scarpetta, who is constrained from carrying a weapon by New York gun laws, comments that "It's strange to be without a gun" (*From Potter's Field* 40). By this, the sixth novel, not only has Scarpetta considerably increased her cache of weapons—she keeps many guns around the house in places she can access easily, she says (169), and also has a small arsenal of hand and shotguns in a garage safe (247)—the gun has become a part of Scarpetta's "everyday" identity. Following on the heels of Wesley's comment about her drinking style, Scarpetta's comment associates her possession of the gun with her "masculine" qualities. Any lover of hers, she acknowledges, must come to terms with these qualities: "I was a woman who was not a woman." says Scarpetta "I was the body and sensibilities of a woman with the power and drive of a man" (*Body Farm* 298). Scarpetta's

identification with the gun here is figured as positive, as she becomes a kind of ideal citizen who captures the best of both genders.

But in order for this positive configuration of the woman with a gun to work, Scarpetta needs a female foil. In her series, Cornwell actually presents readers with two central female figures who work as government agents. Scarpetta's niece Lucy, who is the female character with whom she has her most intense relationship in the series, is ten years old in the first novel. As she matures, Lucy will have a fraught and intense connection with guns—they and computers are her two passions. It is telling that in the first novel Lucy informs Scarpetta, who has tried to keep her from tampering with her sensitive computer files, that she has found the modem hidden in the closet "right next to [Scarpetta's] .38" (*Postmortem* 168). When Kay inquires how Lucy knows that the gun is a .38, Lucy responds that this is the type of gun one of her mother's boyfriends carried: "He used to show it to me and how it works. He'd take all the bullets out and let me shoot it at the TV. Bang! Bang! It's really neat! Bang! Bang!" (*Postmortem* 168). This tale of the boyfriend and his gun highlights Lucy's lack of parental guidance (her father is absent and her mother neglectful), and so sets Scarpetta up to assume the traditional role of both mother and father for her niece: she will provide Lucy with love and attention, as well as with a more purposeful and serious introduction to the world of violence and self-defence. But the associations that are established around the gun here are also significant. Both the gun and the modem are hidden from Lucy as forms of public and potentially

dangerous/disruptive power that are connected with Scarpetta's work. At the same time that the gun is positioned as "technology of the state," the tale of Lucy's mother's boyfriend allowing her to shoot at the TV (participating, we can imagine, in its stories of "cops and robbers" or "cowboys and Indians") highlights the mythological popular/populist allure of the weapon, which cannot be separated from its official alignment. This dialogue in fact foreshadows Lucy's fraught relationship with the power that the gun represents: as the image of the little girl firing an empty gun at the TV suggests, Lucy will in fact be barred from full participation in the heroic narratives that mark her civilization, her ownership of the gun being neither sanctioned by gender or by public/official approbation.

Lucy and Clarice Starling thus have much in common—Lucy's love of guns and computers as a young girl ultimately translates into a career in the FBI, and like Starling Lucy becomes involved with a serial killer case as a student at Quantico, home of the FBI's behavioural science unit. As with the Starling-Hannibal connection, the erotic potential of the relationship between killer and investigator is explored by Cornwell, as Lucy becomes involved with Carrie Gresham, an "evil" woman who is working in tandem with the series' most horrific serial killer, Temple Gault. After the fact that Lucy was being used as a source of information by Carrie and Gault comes to light, Lucy is suspended by the FBI. Scarpetta, whose increasing power is reflected in the fact that she has become of member of the FBI's special task force, promises Lucy that she will

help her case in any way that she can. Ultimately she meets with Lucy to tell her that her name has been cleared:

> "You got me my big gun."
> "I said I would."
> "You're the big gun, aren't you, Aunt Kay?" she whispered, looking away. "The Bureau has accepted that it was Carrie who did this to you." (*Body Farm* 337).

Like the criminal woman of the rape-revenge films, Scarpetta's relationship with the gun has moved from ownership to identification—she *is* the gun. But instead of being a force of private retribution, Scarpetta is a "big," public gun, working now in the nebulous network of power that characterised Marino's relationship with the permit-giving judge. This public position it seems, however, can only be purchased by projecting all the negative associations that accrue around the woman with a gun on to Lucy.

In her article on the function of the corpse in Cornwell's fiction, Eluned Summers-Bremner refers to Lucy as Scarpetta's "lesbian alter-ego" (140), and Lucy's trials clearly indicate the lines which the gun-wielding woman should not cross. Scarpetta describes Lucy's zeal for her work as a disease, a primary symptom of which is her love of guns: "Lucy had been infected and would succumb from her exposure to law enforcement. Beneath her jacket she wore a Sig Sauer nine-millimetre pistol in a leather holster with extra magazines. She probably had brass knuckles in her pocket" (*Unnatural Exposure* 326). It is significant here that Scarpetta describes Lucy's work as "law enforcement"—distinguishing it from her own, at least superficially, less physical/violent and

more acceptably "feminine" (as well as more prestigious) work. Scarpetta also claims to arm herself for reasons of self-defence, and it is suggested that Lucy's more proactive approach is dangerous, as well as being symptomatic of deeper psychological trauma and rage.

Despite Scarpetta's intervention on her behalf, Lucy continues to get into trouble. While working undercover in a drug case, she ends up shooting her girlfriend and another agent when they come to make a bust. Marino explodes when he hears about it: "Lucy just had to go slug it out with somebody, didn't she? They shouldn't have even had her in a takedown like this! I coulda told them that! She's been waiting to shoot the shit out of someone, to go in like a damn cowboy with pistols blazing to pay back everyone she hates in life . . . !" (*Black Notice* 176). Marino continues,

> She killed two people in the line of duty barely a year ago, and now she's just done it again. Most guys go their entire careers and don't even take a shot at somebody. That's why I'm trying to make you understand it's going to be viewed differently this time. The big guys in Washington are gonna consider that maybe they got a gunslinger on their hands, someone who's a problem. (*Black Notice* 177)

Lucy almost kills again at the end of the next novel, and Marino expresses the same opinion, this time making the connection between the agent of the law and the deviant criminal explicit: "Sometimes people get too close to the bad guys and start identifying with them. Lucy's in a kill mode. She's gotten trigger-happy, Doc" (*Last Precinct* 10). Lucy represents Scarpetta "gone too far"—someone who will alienate rather than impress the "big guys" in power. Her use of the gun is

coded as aggressive and emotional rather than defensive and rational, and her "blending" of gender becomes a "dangerous" homosexuality rather than a "balanced" but still hetero-normative ideal.

Scarpetta's sister (Lucy's mother) complains that it is not fair that Scarpetta, the "man" in the family, "got the tits" (*Black Notice* 280). While this accusation serves to comment on Scarpetta's sister's bitterness and insecurity, it also—like the demonstrations of the female PI's attractiveness and desirability—shores up Scarpetta's own femininity. The dynamics of Scarpetta's relationship with her lover Wesley are reflected in the fact that she can't carry her gun in New York but he can: he is still in the superior, more powerful position—both publicly and privately, since he is married (to a sick wife), and Scarpetta must accept a role as "mistress." However strong Scarpetta is, perhaps as an indication of her "feminine" sensibilities, she thus remains conventionally "lacking" in comparison to her romantic partner. With the working class cop Marino, whom Scarpetta would (and does) disdain as a romantic partner, the gender—and gun—play is more ambivalent, but it seems significant that in the rescue of him I discuss above she can represent state power, but only when rescuing (like a "good" mother) the infantalised male from another woman in a domestic space. This femininity is also maintained through the series' projection of female anger onto the "unstable" Lucy, while Scarpetta's motives and methods remain grounded in her pursuit of privacy, dignity, and justice. Even Scarpetta's function as a "big gun" for (the younger and less powerful) Lucy can be coded as

maternally protective. Thus Lucy is repeatedly punished, while Scarpetta wields the gun and/but retains her position "inside" the law. Despite—or perhaps because of—her unusually powerful female protagonist, Cornwell's novels fail to examine the violence that persists in and defines both social institutions and individual identity in contemporary democracy. Instead, as Summers-Bremner writes, femininity is here recuperated as a "reifying fiction" by which violence is rendered evil and placed "outside," "an operation whose own aggression ensures that further violence (and further Cornwell fictions) will result" (Summers-Bremner 132).

The division between violence and "civilisation" is not so clear cut in Harris's fictions. Jonathan Demme's 1991 Academy Award winning film adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* cuts the dying serial killer Jame Gumb's final words in the book: "how does it feel to be so beautiful?" (348). This reference to beauty signals the continued operation of gender as a troubling aspect of Starling's attempt to function as agent of the law. It is Starling's beauty which also attracts Hannibal, who in the second novel is much more successful in capturing his prey than the crude and archaic "Buffalo Bill." Towards the end of this novel's spectacularly violent and grotesque series of killings, attempted killings, and rescues (which at their apex involve a herd of ravenous "man-eating" pigs), Hannibal walks away with a wounded Starling in his arms. Ridley Scott's film version has Starling soon revive from her drug-induced stupor to do battle with Hannibal once more. He ultimately escapes, but Starling—who again, in this film,

is distanced from the violence of the gun—possesses a moral determination to apprehend him that never falters. The novel, however, provides no such comfortable ending.

Starling killed a corrupt police officer while rescuing Hannibal from the bizarre (pig-involving) private-revenge scenario, and Hannibal sees this as the one "hopeful sign" in his attempt to break her: "Though she was imprinted with the badge, she could still shoot the wearer. Why? Because she had committed to action, identified the wearer as a criminal and made the judgement ahead of time, overruling the imprinted icon of the star. Potential flexibility" (511). Hannibal succeeds in "bending" Starling, as they trade intimate memories of family trauma while Starling recovers from her wound. In the scene of their ultimate union, a "new" Starling becomes a replacement for both Lecter's mother and his beloved murdered younger sister, Mischa. After asking Lecter if he was breastfed, and if he ever felt he had to give up the breast for/to Mischa,

> Clarice Starling reached her cupped hand into the deep neckline of her gown and freed her breast, quickly peaky in the open air. 'You don't have to give up this one,' she said. Looking always into his eyes, with her trigger finger she took warm Chateau d'Yquem from her mouth and a thick sweet drop suspended from her nipple like a golden cabochon and trembled with her breathing. (536-37)

This bizarre and unexpected scene finds a highly eroticised Starling "loading" her breast rather than her gun, in order to finally "capture" Hannibal (who needless to say accepts the proffered breast). Harris then concludes his second novel as he began the first: with a combination of sexual display and firepower that highlights

the precarious position of the woman within the law. The feminist critique of the public sphere here too becomes an alibi for violence, though in a more sophisticated way than in films like *Bad Girls* or in narratives like Cornwell's. In charting Starling's betrayal by her superiors and her eventual turn to Hannibal (and to cannibalism?) Harris reveals the degree to which the government of the state and the apprehension of criminals are corrupt—inseparable from greed, competition, and even perversion.

Though his criminality and psychopathy excludes him from "civilisation" as much as Starling's gender and morality, Hannibal becomes the liberal/capitalist/ imperialist systems' apotheosis—he epitomises self-interestedness, righteousness, acquisitiveness, and a love of "beautiful" violence. Serial killing, Richard Dyer argues, can be described as "the crime of our age," "facilitated by the anonymity of mass societies, and the ease and rapidity of modern transport," and "bred from the dissolution of the affective bonds of the community and lifelong families and fomented by the routinisation of the sexual objectification of women in the media" (146).[29] While the serial killer can be read as embodying (pardon the pun) the ills of contemporary life under capitalism, he is more popularly presented, as Linnie Blake argues, as the "enemy of social cohesiveness, familiar from popular culture as the Indian, the black-hatted gunslinger, the urban gangster of European origin" (204). Opposing him are the agents of the state, "defenders of American civilization establishment-style,

themselves modelled on the Seventh Cavalry, the white-hatted or star-emblazoned sheriffs of the frontier era." As Blake asserts, the fight between these agents and the serial killer is "not simply an issue of public safety, but a fight to the death over the nature and meaning of America itself" (204). For Blake, as for Dyer, that meaning is profoundly disturbed and disturbing, as she too argues that the serial killer has come to represent or replace the archetypal American hero. This new hero may be a monster, "[b]ut he is a monster who evokes the complicity of the American people with the nation's history of genocidal slaughter whilst retaining a certain aura of individual freedom existing putatively beyond the bounds of civilized life" (Blake 206). Amy Taubin similarly reads the serial killer as a signal of profound social evils. She writes, "institutionalised violence—the destruction of millions of lives through poverty and neglect, the abuse practiced against women and children, the slaughter of 100,000 Iraqis—has no easy representation. The image of the serial killer acts as a substitute and a shield for a situation so incomprehensible and threatening it must be disavowed" (Taubin "Grabbing" 124). As Taubin, Blake, and Dyer point out, the "evil" represented by the serial killer can thus displace/contain the more pervasive violence and perversity of both colonial history and contemporary global capitalism.

The tension between Starling and Hannibal has always been central to the story's appeal, and in the narration of their eventual partnering, Starling, though

[29] With just five percent of the world's population, the United States is believed to have seventy-five percent of the world's serial killers (Taubin "Grabbing" 124).

she is the "younger" of the two, can be viewed as representing an earlier vision of these classically American values—which as they are embodied by Annie Oakley, are coded as morality, justice, and civilization. But feminism, which texts like Cornwell's and Harris's necessarily, if only partially, engage, has exposed the ruse of icons like Annie Oakley being held up as emblematic of "virtuous" American vigour. In focusing on the inequalities and exclusions that shore up the public/private divide, feminism has been somewhat successful in granting "special" women like Scarpetta, Starling, and Lucy access to public power. But as Starling's trials, and (d)evolution from Annie to Poison Oakley, illustrate, though they can enter this sphere, it is in these texts only to demonstrate once again (in a kind of useless cycle) the merit and necessity of the feminist critique. Starling's alignment with Hannibal is a nihilistic and pessimistic response to this impasse—the critique of the system is there, but it seems[30] to offer no hope, and acts both as a warning to women who seek, idealistically, to enter this world, and as a (familiar) sign/repetition of women's susceptibility and instability.

Liberal feminism may gain certain women access to power, but the "public" in a patriarchal/capitalist system is necessarily defined and motivated by a violence that must seek justification in the necessary destruction of "others." Despite what seems like overtly conservative intentions around issues of gender, class, sexuality and the definitions of deviance in both Cornwell and Harris's texts, the female agent of the law ultimately works to expose the criminality of the

[30] Until the next novel?

law—which cannot be separated from the violence it seeks to eradicate. Both Scarpetta and Starling illustrate the fundamental instability and vulnerability of a capitalist system founded upon competition and inequality. As soon as the woman associates herself with the violent power of the law—in what can be coded, according to liberal feminism at least, as empowering—she becomes vulnerable. As we see in these texts, a more comprehensive identification with the gun as force of the law means a more entangled identification with the criminal world and acts the violence of the gun is meant to contain. Hence the need for a character like Scarpetta to draw such emphatic lines between good and "evil"—lines that keep breaking down, and that, like the serial killer's own acts (and all cultural acts of violent separation: of people from land, of people from politics, of workers from production and labour, etc.) thus need to be repeatedly re-drawn. Female agents of the law like Starling and Scarpetta continue to battle sexism and discrimination in the public sphere. But they also become enmeshed in a system that sets both themselves and the criminals they battle outside of the laws of "human decency" and community. For under capitalism there is no truly "public" sphere—the public is instead not only discriminatory (in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality etc.) but disciplinary and bureaucratic. The gun becomes the signal and sign of the power and this anxiety (that to some extent all subjects under capitalism share).

Concerns about the definitions and workings of "public" power in a liberal democracy have always been a part of the crime genre, but a female hero makes

these concerns more explicit and palpable. The shared vulnerability of the criminal, liminal, and law-identified characters I have explored throughout this chapter—around issues of gender, of personal and public security and respect, of justice and of morality—illustrate the difficulties and problems that face women who attempt to function actively within and under the governance of the institutions that have traditionally defined the public sphere. The gun is a crucial symbol in these texts' negotiations of feminism and gender roles, as well as of questions of deviance and power, as it signifies in a very material way their female protagonists' "empowerment." The woman's possession of the gun is a visible illustration of the fact that she has achieved success in a traditionally male-dominated field, and/or more simply that she is able to defend (or avenge) herself—two essential accomplishments/goals of liberal feminism. But these texts also address—either explicitly or by implication—the limitations of this liberal paradigm, the individualism and bifurcating structures of which (male/female, public/private, savage/civilised) remain rooted in a fundamental violence.

Chapter Three

Cyborgs and Six-Guns

Sigourney Weaver's 1984 portrayal of Ripley in *Aliens*, the second instalment in the *Alien* series, was key in the entry of the female action hero into mainstream culture. Linda Hamilton's role as a pumped up Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991) also revolutionised the image of the female protagonist. Along with the more marginally positioned 1990s films *Tank Girl* and *Barb Wire*, these films, and their gun-toting female heroes, will be my focus in this chapter. As sci-fi-action hybrids, all four narratives reflect a fascination with the meanings, limits, and potentials of the human body.[31] William Warner observes that the action protagonist, "almost entirely cut off from others, endures the most insidious from of manipulation and pain, reaches into the primordial levels of the self, and emerges as a hero with power sufficient to fight the System to the point of its catastrophe" (675). The action hero in science fiction thus represents an individual, "bodily" power that is opposed to the state/alien/evil other. The female protagonist, whose culturally valuable, marketable and/or productive body is always-already coded for display/exposure, spectacularly models the vulnerability-versus-invincibility opposition that (literally) marks the action hero

[31] While guns and violence are central to most westerns and (hardboiled) crime narratives, the wide variety of "futures" and fantastic presents that are imagined in science fiction texts mean that the gun is a much less predictable generic feature. It is therefore particularly sci-fi-action hybrid films that will be my focus in this section. While just one—relatively small—sub-category of the larger sci-fi genre, filmic action-sci-fi hybrids have been central to the development of the female "action hero" as a mainstream figure.

body.[32] As with the western and crime genres, then, rather than troubling the genre, a female hero is thus in fact especially well-suited to her role as protagonist in sci-fi-action texts—and this perhaps explains her predominance as a cultural icon. In keeping with my desire to situate the gun-wielding woman's challenge to traditional gender boundaries in its generic and social context, my analysis in this chapter will consider the way that the protagonists of these post-apocalyptic films negotiate or imagine the place of violence in defining individual (bodily) subjectivity and/within community.

The sci-fi action hybrid situates the action narrative's interest in exploring the limits (via pain/vulnerability) and potential (via violence/agency) of the human body and its relation to "the other" in the context of fears and hopes about technology. As Hugh Ruppersberg writes, "[o]n the one hand, [science fiction] views [science and technology] as redemptive forces that can lift humanity out of the muck and mire of its own biological imperfections. On the other, it sees them as potentially destructive forces, inimical to humanity" (qtd in Kuhn, *Power* 32). The characterisation of "biology" as "muck and mire" does not of course originate with science fiction. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz notes in *Volatile Bodies*, from the "threshold of Western reason" (Plato), subjectivity has been conceived via a hierarchised mind/body division: "body" is "what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term. It is what the mind must expel in order to

[32] For more on the body of the action hero, see Neale; Warner; and Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* (especially chapter 6: "The Body in Crisis or the Body Triumphant," 109-131).

retain its 'integrity.' It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgement, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity" (3). While the action genre's punishment and ultimate transcendence of the scarred/pained body can be read as another instance of the privileging of the mind, both science-fiction and the action genre also explore the fear and dangers of losing touch with our material selves. If the escape from the corporeal in science-fiction is troubled, as Ruppersberg suggests, by the threat of human annihilation, a more mundane consequence is simple physical alienation. For in the process of bodily transcendence, technologies (medicinal, military, cosmetic, transportational, domestic, informational) can work to "make strange" our own materiality. Technology (whether viewed as leading to annihilation or alienation) thus provides us with a model or metaphor for our always-already "other" physical selves. In the science fiction genre in general, and especially in the sci-fi-action hybrid, questions about the meanings and limits of the human body in a technological world are most clearly explored through the cyborg: the fusion of body and machine into one "living" organism. As an indication of the impossibility of separating technology from the body, Adam Roberts calls the cyborg "both a special instance of technology and the emblem for all of it" (147).

Given the genre's interest in the body—which in the traditional dualism is invariably coded as female—and "the other," it is not surprising that science-fiction narratives have been read as explorations of the "unknowns" of gender,

and particularly of femininity. Mary Anne Doane argues that whenever the sci-fi genre "envisages a new, revised body as a direct outcome of the advance of science" we can expect a focus on the construction of gender, since cultural definitions of the feminine and the maternal are "inevitably involved" (163). Sarah Lefanu positions the investigation of gender even more centrally in the genre, suggesting that "[t]he stock conventions of science fiction—time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism, the search for a unified field theory—can be used metaphorically and metonymically as powerful ways of exploring the construction of 'woman'" (4-5). The conflation of gender and technology is most obvious in those sci-fi narratives that feature cyborg women—one early, seminal example is Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), which concerns a feminized, seductive android bent on sacrificing "humanity" to the techno-industrial matrix that has produced her. More recent cyborg creations include the acrobatic Pris in *Blade Runner* (1982), and the titillatingly (!) deadly femme-bots of *Austin Powers* (1997)—the "alien" status of femininity is evidenced in the fact that these memorable cyborg examples are all "bad" or dangerous creatures.

Though their protagonists may not qualify as cyborgs in the technical sense, figures such as Sarah Connor, Ellen Ripley, Barb Wire, and Tank Girl, who are both physically "machined" and technologically armed, can still function—in this genre especially—as cybernetic creatures. Along with considering how and what the female body—sexualised, reproductive, maternal—means or might mean when it is associated with power and technology, I am interested in exploring how

the gun-wielding, female sci-fi protagonist engages with and effects notions of agency. What kind of future female subject do these texts imagine? The sci-fi action heroine clearly challenges conventional gender norms, but at the same time—and this is most evident if we study her relationship with the gun—I will argue that this gender play often in fact works to (re)integrate and recuperate technology (organic and mechanical) and violence into a classic model of liberal humanist individualism.

Aliens and Terminators

"The Company," as much as the extraterrestrial lifeform(s), is the enemy in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). In the hands of a militaristic and capitalist state, science and technology become just as dangerously inhuman, immoral, and destructive as the terrifying beast that threatens to consume the individuals/community of the spaceship Nostromo. Ash, the android medical officer, and Mother, the ship's computer, will, as Ellen Ripley discovers, coldly sacrifice the crew to bring back the alien as an object of scientific/military study. In James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) technology is not only intimately connected with a capitalist-military state—it has in fact overthrown that state, and is attempting to eliminate the few humans who have managed to survive a computer-instigated nuclear war (we are told in *T2* that this holocaust will take—or has taken—place in 1997). Like the Company's desire to harness the

power of the aliens, the scientific drive in the *Terminator* series is presented as being dangerously oblivious to the implications of the new technology (or more specifically the technological life forms) they create. In both series the scientists/engineers, like the police and the medical establishment, proceed according to their own established conventions and discourse, naively (it is proven) confident that they can understand the human mind, contain violence, and control the technological or alien other(s). As the name of the ship's computer in *Alien* suggests, these structures—and the men who control them, are "bad/unnatural" mothers—and it is thus appropriate that they are opposed by the female hero/mother, who is (in comparison at least!) "natural" and "moral."

In each of the four films in the *Alien* series, Ripley continues her battle against the state and the aliens, with both becoming more horrific and more invasive (particularly in regards to Ripley's own life/body), as the series progresses. The Company and the alien represent extremes of power. The Company manages to control and consume from a distance; it is disembodied, pervasive. As Ripley learns, the Company, like the alien babies, can "infect" people—you never know who is working for whom/what. The Company is presented in each film as a sophisticated economic/military/scientific complex—its power and influence are strong enough, in fact, that it operates basically without weapons. The alien represents a more "natural" power/force, but one that is also terrifyingly mysterious and seemingly immune to containment or control. With its acid-blood, vicious teeth and claws, and superior speed and stealth, the

alien is itself a weapon. The android medical officer Ash (an agent of "The Company") clarifies the connections between The Company and the alien lifeform: he calls the alien a "perfect organism," its "structural perfection matched only by its hostility." He continues: "I admire its purity. It's a survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality." In its drive for profit and military supremacy, the company (a microcosm of capitalism itself) is just as remorseless. Ripley discovers a message transmitted from The Company to Ash and the ship's computer:

> PRIORITY ONE
> INSURE RETURN OF ORGANISM
> FOR ANALYSIS
> ALL OTHER CONSIDERATIONS SECONDARY
> CREW EXPENDABLE

The parallels between the alien and the Company can be viewed as reflecting populist concerns about the power of the (increasingly corporate) state. Both "machines" are technologies that transcend the grit and grime of work, of life, of personal accountability/identity or even visibility—and hence the tendency in all the *Alien* films to contrast/combat the aliens and the Company with the "working class" labourers, soldiers, inmates, and scavengers/bounty-hunters with whom Ripley inevitably (if provisionally) is aligned.

In the *Terminator* series, the evil threat (the AI system that takes over the planet) and the more mundane human power structures (medical, scientific, legal) also exert their authority in a deceptive and disturbingly pervasive manner. Sarah's doctor/psychologist (played by Earl Boen in both films) is revoltingly

condescending, and while she is institutionalised in *T2* she is objectified and humiliated—a guard is even shown licking her face as she is bound in her bed. While the company responsible for the development of the AI system in the *Terminator* films, Cyberdyne, is less deliberately immoral than the *Alien* series' "Company," even the "innocent" computer scientist responsible for the development of the AI system, Miles Dyson (Joe Morton), is shown in *T2* to be conducting his research without considering the uses to which it will be put. In the *Terminator* series, then, the "human" menace is presented as emanating from the disconnection between discourses of science and "progress" and social responsibility. While not deliberately malevolent, these systems are nevertheless pervasive—both ideologically and technologically (the centrality of computers to the social system is an essential aspect of the films' "AI takeover" narrative). In *Aliens* (1986), Ripley has understandably been traumatised by her first encounter with the aliens (in the original film), but the medical establishment, like the government/military (the distinctions between them are blurry) patronises and denounces her, even revoking her flight license. All of these spheres of social control—scientific, medical, legal, corporate, governmental—are thus presented in both series as particularly "masculine": not only controlled by men, but also paternal, predatorily sexual, and irresponsible. The invisible (until unleashed) power of these forces serves to isolate Ripley and Sarah, who must battle "internal" patriarchal/capitalist power structures as they attempt to defeat the "external" (non-human) menace.

In both series, despite the scepticism of male authority figures, the woman's "hysteria" is of course proven to be rational after all, and the gun can be read as a sign of that rationality. In a genre both enamoured and wary of technology, the gun—which, regardless of futuristic settings that feature "advanced" technologies, continues to define sci-fi action heroes of both genders—becomes a highly appropriate weapon. While undoubtedly a (*the*?) mechanical instrument, the gun nostalgically hearkens back to the American West. Also, and especially in the context of AI and other potentially monstrous technologies, it is in fact reassuringly simple and controllable. This does not mean, however, that the gun is powerful or productive in *anyone's* hands. In both the *Alien* and the *Terminator* series the police and the army, who cockily attempt to use traditional combat skills to defeat the enemy, are proven ineffectual. The police, for example, confidently assure Sarah that she will be safe in the precinct in *The Terminator*, only to be decimated by Schwarzenegger's T101 killer cyborg. Both series present powerful moments (for the "knowing" audience) during which Sarah or Ripley (or Ripley's daughter-substitute, Newt) counter assertions regarding masculine prowess as defenders or attackers with a grave "it won't matter." These men may be armed, but it is not the gun alone that is capable of defeating the "alien" other. Such vanquishing requires not only martial skill, but "knowledge" of the alien—just as the successful cowboy hero is a "man who knows Indians." What distinguishes these women from their cowboy predecessors, however, is that it is not simply their "experience" of/with the

"other" (which, compared to the cowboy's history on the plains, is in fact quite limited) that uniquely qualifies them with or explains the possession of their specialised knowledge. Equally important is their femininity—which, as *Aliens* especially makes clear, gives them a unique combination of moral clarity and insight/intuition into the workings of "the other." Only in the hands of a woman, then, does the gun begin to "know" and have the power to overthrow the alien or technological menace.

As I have noted in earlier chapters, "femininity" has traditionally functioned as a representation of morality, domesticity, and civilization, while at the same time it is associated with wild, uncivilized, and even "alien" nature. Woman's positioning via both halves of this binary can be attributed to her reproductive capabilities: she is simultaneously nurturer and uncanny creature/creator. She thus exists in a patriarchal and patrilineal society (given the impossibility, in the past, of guaranteeing a child's paternity) as an object of fear. A great deal of academic scholarship has thus focused on the feminine iconography of the "monsters" of the *Alien* series, particularly as they conjure up images of reproduction ("foetal" aliens bursting from the chest/mouth, gestating, laying eggs, metamorphosing) and of cavernous wombs, and oozy vaginas. The female genitals, menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth have been surrounded with taboos, superstition, and medical regulation in an attempt to assert patriarchal control over these "mysterious" but culturally/biologically crucial phenomenon. Despite "woman's" stereotypical squeamishness and weakness, the

acts of childbirth and even sexual intercourse, with their visions of expulsion and penetration, mean that her body seems disturbingly "open," resilient, and pain-ready. As Barbara Creed argues in *The Monstrous Feminine*, the womb particularly is "viewed as horrifying" because it "houses an alien life form, it causes alterations in the body, it leads to the act of birth" (49).

While the reproductive aspects of female biology work to situate women as closer to nature (as Sherri Ortner argues in her seminal essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture"), they also figure her as a kind of technology. When associated with benevolent motherhood, this "technology" can serve as the primary example of a "good," "moral" cultural process and method of (re)generation, and thus can work in sci-fi narratives as an opposition to "bad," "unnatural," "man-made" technology. Because of the fear that surrounds the feminine domain, however, female sexuality and reproduction can also work metaphorically to symbolize out-of-control proliferation, cultural usurpation, and general malevolence—the stock and trade of sci-fi villains, be they aliens or AIs. This ambivalence surrounding female sexuality and identity means that, while she can represent the best and most precious aspects of civilization, "woman" is also "scary" and mysterious enough that she can match and understand the "alien" threat. This gendered positioning is highlighted in *A3* (1992), during which Ripley, marooned in a prison outpost, responds to one inmate's challenge that he is a raper and murderer of women with a cool: "I guess I must make you nervous."

At the same time that patriarchal culture negatively "others" femininity and reproduction, it more positively privileges (while still "othering") the maternal. "Natural" maternal protectiveness is a perennial explanation for "unnatural" female violence. In *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare*, Joanna Bourke notes that when women kill, their ability to do so has historically been explained by invoking either "psychosexual confusion" or maternal instincts (318). It therefore seems more than coincidental that the *Alien* series films that feature guns the most prominently are *Aliens* and *Alien Resurrection*—the two entries that most directly address Ripley's femininity and maternal qualities. In *Aliens*, the film that "invented" Ripley as an action hero, Ripley's battle to defeat the aliens is motivated by her attempt to save the little girl Newt (Carrie Henn). Similarly, in the *Terminator* films, as the "mother of the future" Sarah is compelled to violence in order to protect her future-leader son, John Connor and, through him, the human race.

In the first instalments of both series, though they are strong female leads, neither Sarah or Ripley performs as a full-fledged action hero. Instead, both women function more as the "final girl" of the horror genre (see Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*), and are not fully associated with the gun. As in Will Wright's description of the classic western narrative and the genesis of the cowboy hero, these first films trace the woman's expulsion from the comforts and confines of civilization. Challenged by government irresponsibility and/or ignorance and the dangers of an "alien" species, as the series progress Ripley and

Sarah must—like all cowboys—use their toughness and their limited and technologically simple weapons to save the world. And so while Sarah is a novice and rare gun user in the first film, the revolver that sits in her lap in the passenger seat of her Jeep in *The Terminator*'s final scene will become a crucial aspect of her character in the second film. Similarly, Ripley, whose primary weapon in *Alien* is a forklift-suit, will in *Aliens* adopt a more conventional action-hero arsenal.

J.P. Tellote points out that the transformation of Sarah in the *Terminator* films represents a shift from a stereotypical disempowered female in the first to an "ultra feminist" in the second ("Exposed Body" 31). The gun plays a crucial role in demarcating this transformation—but it too must be transformed in order that it can be aligned with the forces of good. In the first *Terminator* film, guns are primarily and negatively associated with Schwarzenegger's T101 Terminator, who—though he arrives from the future naked—quickly assumes the style of a punk. In the second film, the now "good" T101 (still played by Schwarzenegger) instead adopts the wardrobe of a biker (in both films he steals the outfit from an initially aggressive and then suitably cowed—or killed—"outlaw" type). In his article on the representation of politics and technology in the two *Terminator* films Doran Larson argues that, unlike the Euro-inflected punk, this biker pose is "figurally familiar as a descendant of the wilderness-taming frontiersman and cowboy" (61). In line with the classic "civilising" western narrative, the gun in this cowboy-biker Terminator's hands, rather than being the agent of wholesale

and terrible violence it was in his earlier punk incarnation, becomes—after some lessons from his young instructor, John Connor—an agent of non-lethal correction and persuasion. Operating as a nostalgic, industrial symbol, the gun in *T2* is thus much more clearly aligned with Sarah and the friendly new Terminator than with the T1000, who is most deadly (and horrifying) when he turns his appendages into a more "primal" arsenal of knives and skewers.

The representation of technology in general undergoes a shift in the two films. The physical/mental structure of the T101 terminator-cyborg, with its obvious correlation to the human, also turns out to be comfortingly archaic when compared to the "bad" terminator of the second film. The T101 (Schwarzenegger) is a conventional cyborg: actual flesh covers a mechanical metal skeleton, which is controlled by a computer located in his "skull." The T1000 (played by Robert Patrick), on the other hand, is entirely "alien"—a blob of liquid metal that can assume any shape.[33] Many critics have commented on the differences between the T101 and the T1000 as technological creations. The protean T1000 has been read as embodying a de-centred post-modern identity (Larson), a homosexual "other" whose "fluid" gender reflects contemporary fears of AIDS (Byers 16), or as the "facelessness of retail consumerism" (Tellote). In each of these (quite convincing)

[33] The T1000's total inhumanity (there is no chance of *him* coming back next time as the good guy) is evidenced by the fact that the film never presents any shots from his perspective—unlike Schwarzenegger's cyborg, whose computerised video-viewfinder-vision is in both films presented "first-person" to the audience, who thus literally "get inside" his big mechanical head. Indeed, the new terminator, as JP Tellote argues, is a machine "whose covering will not come off, whose surface we can never see beneath, in fact, a figure that finally seems to be *all* surface, with no real 'inside'" ("Exposed Body" 29).

readings, the T101, in contrast, represents an older, more familiar stable/masculine/"producer" subject. Despite the fact that the T101 is recuperated as a feel-good technological pet-cum-father for John Connor in the second film, according to Tellote the existence of *T2*'s shape-shifting, alien T1000 nevertheless "suggests not a more manageable situation or a greater, if false, comfort we might feel over technology's increasing hegemony over our lives, but a sense of how complex the problem has become, even as we become more accommodated to the technological" (29). Technology here could easily be replaced here with the continued revision of gender roles (and especially the erosion of traditional, centered, masculine subjectivity) or the continuing development and expansion of consumer capitalism, and in fact, it is the interconnections of all of these areas—technology, the body, gender, and our social/economic structures—that the sci-fi action hybrid so compellingly explores. A close analysis of Ripley and Sarah's interaction with the gun can help highlight the problematic but also productive results of the traditional othering of the woman and particularly—in these sci-fi films—the maternal female body. On the one hand this othering leads to a fraught relationship with spheres of power and agency traditionally coded as masculine; this is evidenced in the positioning of the gun as male property and "phallic" power. On the other hand though, the association of the gun with the western narrative and particularly the always "marginal" cowboy hero means that the gun can be quite "natural" in the woman's hand. This gives her certain kinds of exciting power, but also works to revivify troubling liberal humanist notions of

agency and heroism, which both separate the individual from the community and celebrate "universals" over specific historical situations and political responses to them.

To a greater extent than most of the other woman-with-a-gun narratives I have looked at thus far, Sarah and Ripley are androgynous in appearance and behaviour. Their emotional toughness and traditional male signifiers (Sarah's "hard-body," Ripley's shaved head) work to suggest the possibility of these figures modelling the "psychosexually confused" stereotype/explanation of the violent women (exemplified by narratives about Calamity Jane). *Aliens* engages directly with issues of the "masculine" active woman, with Jenette Goldstein playing the muscular solider "Vasquez." The often quoted exchange between a male comrade and Vasquez—"'Have you ever been mistaken for a man?', he asks; 'No, have you?'" she replies—clearly challenges conventional gender designations (within the familiar context of military machismo). Despite the film's positive positioning of Vasquez, she is not the hero, and she gets killed off (like the rest of her platoon, admittedly). The distinction between a version of femininity that ensures that Vasquez remains on the margins of this narrative, and Ripley's more palatable adoption of masculine signifiers is highlighted in the two women's interactions with weaponry. Vasquez (after performing a few one-armed push-ups) is shown masterfully handling her gun, while Ripley must get lessons from a handsome military corporal, Hicks (Michael Biehn), on how to use hers. "Show me everything," she says to him, indicating her willingness to take on the

knowledge and power that the gun represents. Importantly, however, this knowledge and power is still presented as male "property"—Hicks in fact offers to "introduce" Ripley to "a close personal friend": his "M41A 10mm pulse-rifle with a 30mm pump-action grenade launcher." Ripley here takes up—or even is "given"—the gun as a matter of necessity in a specific situation of extreme danger, rather than as a career choice. Most crucially, this passing on of knowledge has an erotic undercurrent, as this scene marks the couple's burgeoning romantic interest. Ripley's lesson about the (suggestively named) "pulse-rifle" thus becomes a kind of sexual initiation. Ripley will eventually take on Vasquez's aggression and toughness, as well as Hick's position of authority (after he is injured). But the fact that—in a set of associations common to the production of the "good" gun-toting woman—Ripley has been, and continues to be, established as heterosexual lover and eventually as mother (to the orphaned girl, Newt) explains and makes acceptable her possession of the gun.

It is interesting that these most masculine of women are also (compared to many of the other films I've explored) the most maternal—as if the one produced or necessitated the other. As *T2* demonstrates, however, even the maternal woman cannot always employ the gun with impunity. While the maternal role—grounded according to conventional discourse in "nature"—is a crucial "explanation" for a woman's heroic behaviour, it provides just as likely an explanation for her "unacceptable" excesses. Early twentieth-century "instinct theorists" such as Clyde B. Moore, for example, argued that while men have a "killer instinct" that

is exorcised through hunting and fighting, in women the maternal impulses "facilitate killing" (Bourke 321-22). As late as 1968, anthropologist Margaret Mead elaborated on the maternal instinct theory to articulate doubts about women's role in the military. Mead suggests that because "the female characteristically fights for food and in defence of her young, she fights to kill," and so perhaps lacks "the built in checks" around murder that are "either socially or biologically present in men" (quoted in Bourke 340). As Bourke concludes, this anxiety surrounding female sexuality and reproductive powers meant that well into the 1970s female soldiers were believed to be "uncontrollable, more ferocious, and more deceitful than their male counterparts" (340). While in the *Alien* series the aliens themselves become the "bad" mothers in contrast to Ripley's portrayal of the good, Sarah must play both roles in *T2*.

In the inverse of the T101's "humanising" trajectory over the course of the two films, Sarah's identification with the gun in *T2* signals her transformation from human into a feeling-less cyborg. Sarah's maternal protectiveness has in fact interfered with her rationality and her emotional stability. In defence of her child, and "the future" whose mother she has become, Sarah will become a driven, cold-blooded killer. In the emotional climax of *T2*, Sarah attempts to assassinate Miles Dyson, the scientist whose work will lead to the creation of the computer that will ultimately become self-aware and attempt to destroy all human life (Skynet). When the heavily armed, militarised Sarah heads off alone to kill Dyson, she is in fact shown to be destroying the family (as feminists are so often accused of

doing). Poised outside the scientist's home office with her rifle, Sarah misses her first shot when Dyson is distracted by his young son. After blasting away ineffectually at the office, Sarah is forced to abandon her sniper pose and enter their house with her pistol. Wounded, the terrified Dyson weeps as Sarah aims her gun at his head while his son (who had bravely attempted to block Sarah's access to "daddy") and wife cower in the background. Face to face with Dyson and his family, Sarah starts to shake and cry, and eventually backs up and huddles, weeping, against a wall. At this point, John and the T101, who have at John's insistence been pursuing her in order to prevent her from killing Dyson, enter the scene to comfort Sarah and "enlighten" Dyson.

While the gun can thus signal righteous maternal protectiveness, it can also symbolise out-of-place and out-of-control female rage (the former ultimately over-rides the latter in Sarah). But Sarah's relationship with the gun, especially as it is contrasted with the Terminator's, indicates that her "uncontrollable" female instincts and emotions (which the film does present in part as a defensive reaction to the horror of the future and to the abuses she suffers as a mental patient) represent only one explanation for her behaviour. The scene at Dyson's house is bracketed by two exchanges that provide more detailed insight into Sarah's problematic identity. After John and the T101 help Sarah escape from the mental hospital, Sarah instructs the T101, who is driving, to "just head south." This is the same direction that Sarah is heading at the end of the first film (she is, in fact, already in Mexico in *The Terminator*'s last scene). The Sarah of the first film

combines femininity—she is pregnant, wearing a dress, and is in the process of making some pensive, but loving and soft-voiced taped records for her son—with the marker of her new social outcast/loner/hero/cowboy status, the revolver in her lap. *T2* presents a much less conventionally feminine Sarah. To accompany her ripped new physique, Sarah has developed a harsh voice and a foul mouth. Once John, the T101 and Sarah get to their destination—a kind of rebel outpost in the desert—we learn how Sarah spent the years before she was incarcerated/committed. She and John, as John tells the T101, spent time in "Nicaragua and places like that," where Sarah "shacked-up" with any one who could teach her skills that could pass on to her son, including an ex-green beret gun-runner and "a bunch of other guys." When Sarah reclaims her clothes from the outpost, we see that her garb of choice is an all-black outfit of military pants, tank-top, and mirrored aviator sunglasses. As the now "good" T101, Schwarzenegger is a cowboy; while Sarah instead is here positioned as political dissident and guerrilla warrior. After her breakdown at Dyson's house, Sarah's identifications are even further clarified. When Dyson, informed of the results of his research, asks "how were we supposed to know?", Sarah snorts. "How were you supposed to know? Men like you built the atom bomb," she says with disgust. "Men like you thought it up. You think you're so creative. You don't know what it's like to really create life, to feel it growing inside you. You only know how to create death." John cuts his mother off, reminding her that they need to be "more constructive." The silencing of Sarah's critique is not I think an outright dismissal

of feminism, as some critics (see Byers 20-21; Jeffords 164) propose. More insidiously, the film suggests that while Sarah's point—especially in the film's context of imminent nuclear war—may be valid, it is not, in the "larger" liberal humanist scheme, *productive*. While the film may sympathise with the abuses she has suffered, Sarah's viewpoint—informed by "marginal" issues of race and gender—is too narrow, too "special-interest," for her to function as the liberal humanist ideal. The film thus displaces politics onto Sarah, who is allowed to voice anger and criticisms about dominant social structures (specifically patriarchy), only to have these contrasted or overridden by John's "universal" vision and dedication to human life.

Thomas Byers details the erosion of traditional gender roles that accompanies post-industrial economic shifts, writing that the myths of the

> coherence, solidity, and power of the subject, especially the masculine subject, prevail under capitalism and come apart under late capitalism. The producer-based economy of industrial capitalism requires subjects (at least among the classes that are not rich) who are oriented toward production more than consumption. Such an economy thrives on thrift—on delayed gratification. (12-13)

But in late capitalism, he continues, the individual, "now most important not as producer or accumulator but as consumer, is neither mandated nor trained to delay or interrupt" gratification (13). Though Byers does not make this suggestion explicit, the values of the "new" economy/subject have traditionally been coded as feminine. It seems to me that this shift is thus partly responsible for the increased mainstream popularity of the female action hero. In the same way that

the male action hero both epitomises and troubles (or represents the troubled status of) masculine subjectivity in industrial and post-industrial capitalism, the female action hero can epitomise and trouble (or at least signal the troubles of) a globalised, information-based consumer capitalism. If the female action hero is a response to the decline of the traditional values espoused by her male counterpart and the rise of new gender/cultural/economic systems, *T2* can be read as signalling this decline as it both presents and punishes the female hero while attempting to recoup the rational, enlightened, liberal humanist masculine subject. John and the T101, like Sarah, seek to resist and challenge the dangers and excesses of the a- (if not im-) moral social processes of late-capitalism. But the cowboy vs. political dissident characterisation of their dissent serves to indicate the film's valuing of nostalgia rather than revolutionary critique as the correct responses to the anxieties of the present: the gun in *T2* becomes/remains the preserve of the men and "good" mechanical/controllable technologies (like the T101), while in the hands of the woman it represents excess and social fragmentation.

It is perhaps inevitable then that Sarah is killed off in Jonathan Mostow's *Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines* (2003). Her character's only real appearance in the film is when Connor arms himself with a cache of weapons he finds in her grave. Again, the woman here *becomes* the gun—but in this film, safely dead, Sarah and/as the gun is allowed to function as a nostalgic and "safe" technology. While Sarah in *T2* performed as both mother and other, these

conflicting but connected symbolic roles are simplified and separated in *T3*. The primary female role in *T3* is that of villain: the rise of the machines is also the rise of the female terminator, or the Terminatrix (T-X). John (Nick Stahl), now in his twenties, exchanges his phallic mother for a sweet, traditionally feminine (and animal/nature associated) veterinarian love interest, Kate Brewster (Clare Danes). Though Danes's character does pick up a gun and blow away one of the machines, this is an "uncharacteristic" moment that seems to surprise everyone. Following the pattern of the earlier films, *T3* begins with the arrival of the terminator(s) in the "present day" of the filmic narrative. The terminatrix (Kristanna Loken) appears in a boutique/store window display, and is thus immediately identified as a consumer as well as an erotic commodity, while the newest version of the T101 (Schwarzenegger) beams down into the desert (rattlesnake, cactus and other phallic symbols abound). While the T101 clothes himself again as a biker, the T-X targets a woman driving an expensive convertible sports-car. Pulled over for speeding in this car as she begins her search for John Connor, the Terminatrix notices a Victoria's Secret billboard that asks "What's Sexy," and depicts a large busted woman in a bra. The android puffs up her chest accordingly and says "I like your gun" seductively to the officer (we don't see what happens, but must assume that she kills him). Though she professes her admiration for his firearm, the T-X does not in fact seem to need one. Like the T1000 in *T2* she *is* a weapon—though, as with the T1000, this weapon is rarely gun-like. At first the T-X seems to prefer to turn her arm into a ball-of-light-throwing laser device, which

by the end of the film resembles a simple flame-thrower. As critics and viewers complained, compared to the power and terror of the T101, and the alien horror of the T1000, the T-X is hardly frightening at all. Her most potent and "original" destructive talent is the take-over of other mechanised/computerised technology (she is a cyborg to kill other cyborgs, the T101 says). She accomplishes this take-over by "growing/extending" her metallic-looking index finger and inserting it into the ignition (or other entry point) of her chosen device. While her growing appendage can clearly be read as phallic, the symbolic associations of Terminatrix's narrow, wriggly long finger—which looks like an insect, a worm, a snake, or even a whip—are with the familiar anti-feminist representation of appropriation of that power by the "evil woman." In fact the way the T-X moves her head and her body is reptilian rather than robotic. This is especially clear at the end of the film when the T101 finally kills her—her head writhes forward in rage like a snake and/or medusa.

Furthering the connection that was drawn in *T2*, the Terminatrix illustrates the dangers that come with the alignment or combination of technology and femininity. As in *T2* this critique is clearly—if still problematically—connected to the "emasculating" aspects of contemporary consumer-capitalism. But in *T3* more radical forms of political critique of this system are not just displaced or discredited—they disappear. With the philosophical adage of "There's no fate but what we make," *The Terminator* and *T2* performed at least a general warning about the destructive potentials of humanity and the technologies we create. *T3's*

suggestion that "it was never our destiny to stop judgement day—merely to survive it, together," is a frighteningly laissez-faire response to the dangers of a society founded upon competition and violence as well as consumption.

The villainous cyborg of *T3* can be contrasted to the hybrid protagonist of the fourth Alien film, *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), which was directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet and written by Joss Whedon. While *A4* presents the same dysfunctional and or even insane military/medical complex of the earlier Alien films, and positions Ripley once again as a heroic mother-figure, the Ripley of *Resurrection* is another breed of woman. "Resurrected" from the corpse of Ripley, who killed herself at the end of the third film in order to prevent the Company from getting its hands on the alien queen she knew was growing inside of her, "Number 8" is Ripley with a difference (or two). This new Ripley, who is a "product" of both the company and the alien, has black fingernails, is sinewy, unnaturally strong, and dresses in tight-fitting black clothing. She has developed an acerbic wit and a cynical disdain for the people around her. She is almost reptilian in her movements, and is capable of "sensing" or smelling the presence of aliens.

The "cold" Ripley of this film is reminiscent of Sarah in *T2*, but unlike Sarah, as well as the primarily asexual (while still clearly female) "working-hero" mode of Ripley's character in the first three films in the series, this new Ripley is an assertively sexual being: a woman, an animal, even a dominatrix (more on this in my discussion of *Barb Wire* below). Most compellingly, it is not clear who this

(somewhat slithery) sexual energy is directed at. The earlier films worked to demonstrate Ripley's hetero-normative status by including at least one feminizing/love scene per film (the conclusion of *Alien*, the romance with captain in *Aliens*, the liaison with the doctor in *A3*). But in *A4* Ripley interacts provocatively (if disdainfully) with all the men, as well as with Wynona Rider's character, Call, whom she caresses with an aggressive affection. It is perhaps disturbing that this fourth film indicates Ripley's hybrid human-alien status by having her perform as a bi/sexual being. As Jackie Stacey notes, the encounter in the cell between Ripley and Call is "structured like a sadomasochistic seduction scene in which the two shift roles and power" (270). On the other hand, Ripley—unlike Sarah—is the undisputed hero of this text, and she and Call are the only characters to survive at its conclusion.

Stacey argues that in *A4* "the distinctions between human and non-human, human and animal, human and machine have collapsed entirely" (263). Ripley's hybrid status means that, like the Terminatrix, she could be an evil technological/cyborg woman. And this is a possibility the film plays with, demonstrating Ripley's new affinity with the aliens, as well as her bitterness and cynical attitude. In this exchange, for example, Ripley responds to a man awoken from a cryogenic sleep only to find himself on a strange ship and apparently "infected" with something:

> Purvis: WHAT'S IN-FUCKING-SIDE ME?
> Ripley: [calmly] There's a monster in your chest. These guys hijacked your ship,

> and they sold your cryotube to this... human, and he put an alien inside of you. It's a really nasty one. And in a few hours, it's gonna burst its way through your rib cage, and you're gonna die. Any questions?"
> Purvis: Who are you?
> Ripley: I'm the monster's mother.

While Ripley positions herself here as "the monster's mother," and seems detached and even unfeeling, her brutal honesty can also be viewed as a form of respect. Ripley's melding of human and alien is presented here as possibly less "monstrous" than the behaviour of both the Betty's crew and the military doctors who have participated in "feeding" human beings to the aliens for money and/or "scientific" knowledge.

Given her heroic position, the new Ripley has thus been read by critics like Stacey as more positively modelling the radical cyborg subjectivity imagined by Donna Haraway in her ground-breaking "Manifesto for Cyborgs." In her Manifesto, Haraway contends that the cyborg can represent border transgression and discoherence:

> A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. (196)

The cyborg, as Haraway argues, is a potentially powerful political force as it negotiates the double-perspectives of a radically hybrid identity. Both man and woman, animal and machine, hero and deviant, the gun-wielding woman similarly resists stability and singularity. A figure like Ripley thus might represent an ideal

future "self," one that combines the fantasy of independence and action which characterises the western gunfighter with the radical creative power and redemptive force of Haraway's post-human subject.

It is appealing and even fruitful to read Ripley as a popular example of Haraway's radical vision. But it seems to me here, again, that in order to consider how the cyborg subject can and will actually be *mobilised* in popular culture, we also need to be attentive to the generic conventions within which heroes like Ripley are constructed. In this film, what prevents the snake-like Ripley from ultimately being coded as evil—what signals her heroic rather than villainous status—is not I think her cyborg-like hybridity, but rather the fact that, like the cowboy's, her hybridity operates according to, and in the service of, liberal humanist ideals. Stacey argues that "Ripley defies the logic of individuality and singularity by combining two species and by being a clone who is both herself and not herself" (265). Like all cowboys, in order to act as mediator and saviour, Ripley occupies a middle ground between nature and culture, man and woman. But while Ripley may defy the logic of individuality, the Ripley of *A4* is perhaps the most overtly "individualistic" of all the character's filmic incarnations. The gun provides a key symbolic marker for this individualism. Ripley's association with the gun is more pronounced in this film than in any other, as it becomes an essential aspect of her "outfit" and persona.

Despite the fact that Sarah tends to be read as being conservatively undermined and punished in *T2*, while Ripley in *A4* is hailed as

progressive/radical, there are in fact many similarities between the two heroines. Both have been psychologically and physically altered by their ordeals, and both have become bitter and "alienated." They both look and act like dominatrices, but are both "redeemed" via their feminine empathy, maternal protectiveness, and innate morality. With Ripley, it is her relationship with Call that seems to have a (re)humanising affect. When Call—a revolutionary intent on disrupting the research into the aliens—first discovers Ripley in the cell in which the scientists have placed her, Ripley evidences little concern for Call's idealistic drive to save the human race. "What are you?" Call asks in disbelief. Ripley answers with her name and id number, but Call insists: "I've read Morse—I've read all the banned histories. She gave her life to protect us from the beast. You're not her." It is later revealed that Call's radical status goes beyond ideology: she is herself an android, one of the few "second generation" robots (designed by robots) to survive government recall after it became clear that they were "more human than humans" and resisted taking orders. With her combination of emotional femininity (she is an android, but "severely fuckable") and militant views, Call thus functions in this film similarly to Sarah, whose "valid, but too political" views were distinguished from John Connor's. The cowboy role is most crucial to Ripley's status as successful action hero: she is distant, an observer, and she does not appear to represent a particular interest. It is Call who brings out Ripley's "human" qualities, but in contrast to Call's naïve dogmatism (Ripley mocks her "born-again" zealousness), Ripley represents a morality that is

"beyond" politics. And just as Ripley is resistance and agency seemingly stripped of politics, in the cowboy/gunslinger's hands technology also becomes not only nostalgic but comfortably neutral. In the righteous female hero's hands, technology is reduced to a controllable product of objective, individual morality. It can thus be distinguished both from the esoteric, earnest, and marginal radicality of political activism, as well as from the mysterious and frightening machinations of the state.

The similarities between Sarah at the end of *T2* and Ripley in *A4* are especially highlighted by their positions at the end of the films. However much she may be punished or re-educated/humiliated in *T2*, Sarah understands the dangerous threat that scientific and economic progress (and the conflation of those two spheres) represents to the human race, and the planet. She is the conscience and voice of the future, and despite her "extreme" politics, she paradoxically represents the "everyman" of the film. The Terminator is the dad we wish we had (or an explanation for the failures of the dads we do), and John Connor is a leader for an apocalyptic future, but Sarah represents fear and defensiveness and hope for/of today. As *T2* demonstrates, a killer cyborg is capable of being educated and reprogrammed by John Connor's simple humanist vision, and so too then is the radical—negative, critical, dire—feminist Sarah. As highway blacktop rolls past in *T2*'s final scene, this "gentler" Sarah, in a voice-over, says "the future, always so clear to me, stretched out like an uncharted highway." A similar sense of new beginnings and potential closes *A4*. The film's

final words are spoken as Ripley and Call enter the golden light of a sunrise on Earth's atmosphere:

> Call: It's beautiful.
> Ripley: Yeah.
> Call: I didn't expect it to be. What happens now?
> Ripley: I don't know. I'm a stranger here myself.

As Ripley and Sarah look musingly to the future, having successfully saved the world via their cowboy-style heroics, these films suggest that the "answer" to the violence and horror of the past is neither brute force or aggression (as practiced by the aliens/AIs and the state), nor a radical political critique or revolution. Instead it is the individualist ideal that in fact generates and necessitates both of the positions it attempts to transcend. The policies and practices of liberal humanism—grounded as they are in imperialist, capitalist, and patriarchal discourse—must deny the intractable social inequality upon which they are founded. And thus, while it is exciting at the level of gender that Ripley and Sarah can perform as this kind of hero, the gunslinger-style use of weapons in these sci-fi narratives helps situate technology and violence as "possessions" of the independent individual. This is a compelling but troubling fantasy, as it (re)produces heroic leadership rather than collective responsibility as the "answer" to the problems of both the present and the future.

Barb Wire and *Tank Girl*

While Sarah Connor and Ellen Ripley represent female heroes whose power is explored and explained through a combination of "masculine" and

maternal signifiers, in *Tank Girl* (1995) and *Barb Wire* (1996), it is rather the excessively "feminine" and sexualised female body that becomes the locus of the woman-with-a-gun's power. While achieving a certain cult-following, unlike the *Terminator* and *Alien* series, both *Tank Girl* and *Barb Wire* were box-office failures. Faulted for silly plot lines, poor acting, and the overt objectification of their heroes, the films have also been largely overlooked by critics (this is especially the case with *Barb Wire*). Their protagonists' erotic (rather than maternal) position helps explain the critical and popular neglect that met both of these films, as the "problems" of a sexualised female figure are much more easily recognised and dismissed in the wake of feminist critiques of the representation of women in mass media.

These films raise the question of the possibility of integrating sexuality and desire into models of feminist (and more general political) agency and resistance. A femininity figured as "maternally" heroic is in many ways easier to recoup into traditional representational and narrative models: "protectiveness"—though usually paternal—has always been a staple motivator for violent action. Though the male action hero's body has functioned as an object on display, an erotic femininity is less easily associated with agency and heroism. At the same time, the "power" of sex, which, associated with women, has always been a source of fear as well as desire—cannot be overlooked, especially in today's visual economy. Figures like Barb and Tank Girl, as they meld objectification

with (super)heroism, invite us to consider the place of the desired and desiring body in fantasies of resistance.

It is perhaps not coincidental that both of these spectacular figures originate as comic book heroes. Comic books and b-movies, with their preponderance of explosions and violence, strong visual impact, and archetypal characterization (brawny larger-than-life heroes and scantily clad, busty villainesses or damsels in distress) represent the foundations of the blockbuster action film. But while the excesses of b-narratives distinguish them from the more realistic and/or "well rounded" mainstream successes, they have also been recognized[34] as exploring issues of gender, sexuality, and violence with a "performative" playfulness and freedom rarely ventured in mainstream cinema (always intent on securing box office profits large enough to cover enormous production costs). This performativity is certainly evident in both *Barb Wire* and *Tank Girl*, the plots of which—since they are less well know than most of my chosen texts—I will briefly detail here.

On the level of narrative, as well as on the level of spectacle, *Barb Wire* (directed by David Hogan) is unabashedly excessive. But while incorporating some elements from the comic book from which it is adapted,[35] the primary source for the plot of this 1996 film is *Casablanca* (1942), with Pamela Anderson Lee playing "Rick" with campy aplomb. The year is 2017 (the worst year of

[34] See P. Cook "Exploitation Films and Feminism, " and Jenkins.
[35] In the comic, Barb also runs a bar (the Hammer Head), moonlights as a bounty hunter, and has a blind brother, Charlie. But despite her title role, this Barb is essentially just one player in a somewhat jumbled ensemble cast of paranormal superheroes/super-villains.

Barb's life, she tells us in the opening voice-over), and a second civil war has left the United States under a regime of extreme, right-wing federalists called the Congressional Directorate. The film's setting, Steel Harbor, like Casablanca, is an isolated "free" city in the midst of a war between "democracy" and "fascism." And Anderson's Barb Wire, like Humphrey Bogart's Rick, is a hard-boiled, bitter, officially apolitical bar-owing toughie who has to deal with the painful return of a freedom-fighting lover from the past, and that lover's new spouse (who is a leader in the resistance movement). While the plot of *Casablanca* revolves around Rick's procuring of passports/papers for Ilsa and her husband, in *Barb Wire* a pair of retina-disguising contact lenses is necessary to allow the freedom fighters to board the plane to neutral territory in that famously foggy final scene.

While also manifesting the visual and narratives extremes that signal its comic book roots, *Tank Girl*, starring the squeaky-voiced Lori Petti, also differs significantly from its source (a fact which outraged fans of the original anarchic cult-hit creation of Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin). Set in the Australian outback in a post-apocalyptic 2033—a comet strike has left most of the world a vast, ruined desert—the film tells the story of Tank Girl's battle with the Department of Water and Power (DWP), which controls the planet's scarce resources. At the beginning of the film, the irreverent and punky Tank Girl, also known as "Rebecca," lives in a kind of radical communal bliss at "Renegade Headquarters." But the bunker is raided by DWP (for stealing water), and Rebecca is captured after she witnesses the slaughter of her boyfriend, comrades, and the abduction of

her young friend Sam. The evil henchman of DWP, Kesslee (Malcolm McDowell), is impressed by Rebecca's destructiveness (she kills eight of his men while she is being captured) and attempts to bring her on-side. This she of course resists, and the two engage in a battle of wills (he sadistically tortures her, she mocks him). While Kesslee attempts to "break" her, Tank Girl sets out to overthrow him, and also rescue Sam, with the help of a considerable arsenal (most notably a funky tricked-out tank), and some new friends, including a side-kick, "Jet Girl," and a band of mutant kangaroo/man hybrids known as "Rippers."

While criticised for the highly sexualised presentation of its protagonist, *Tank Girl* has received some attention from feminists (Helford; Manners & Rutsky) who celebrate Tank Girl's "post-human" hero status, and/or appreciate the film's critique of traditional Hollywood action/adventure and romance conventions. *Barb Wire*'s reception has been more uniformly negative. Like *Tank Girl*, *Barb Wire* performs a complex and rich mix of genres and media. The *Casablanca* plot and cast of characters add a decidedly noir-ish feel to the film, and the comic-book source provides an over-the-top, parodic characterization of its hero and the villains she faces. But despite this ground for analysis, which is at least as fertile as *Tank Girl*'s, the conventionally objectified appearance of its protagonist (and star) has led to *Barb Wire* being routinely dismissed by feminist critics. For example, in *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Sherrie A. Inness writes that Barb Wire is "primarily a sex kitten," while Elyce Rae Helford concludes her nuanced reading of *Tank Girl* with

a complaint about Dark Horse's "next filmic excursion": "*Barb Wire*, a rock-me/antifeminist action-adventure flick without even the subversive moments of *Tank Girl*, starring *Baywatch* T&A queen Pamela Anderson" (306). Yvonne Tasker includes a brief discussion of *Barb Wire* in *Working Girls*. She points out the problems that surround the transition of a static or "posed" fantasy-image of the strong woman into action or narrative, and notes specifically the difficulty in reconciling the heroine's "don't call me babe" tagline with the images of Barb Wire/Pamela Anderson herself in the movie. She writes: "Barb Wire, as her name suggests, exhibits an eroticised toughness, both inviting and returning a sexual gaze." But, she continues, "An aggressive, pouting version of female sexuality, familiar from fashion spreads and magazines, both mainstream and pornographic, seems less plausible within the context of narrative" (70).

In analyses like Tasker's and Inness's, the female action hero becomes another very visible example of Stuart Hall's double stake, with activity/agency coded as resistant, and eroticism coded as passive and thus recuperative. What I would like to consider in my analysis of these films—and particularly of *Barb Wire*—is the extent to which a totalizing view of the sexualized female body as regressive denies, or at least overlooks, the potential for alternative, forward-looking female subjectivities. While I agree to some extent with Tasker's characterization of Barb, for example, it is precisely the tension that is produced as a result of the "tough" female action hero's narrative implausibility that makes her such an exciting figure. The positioning of a character—especially a

protagonist—as an erotic object need not always function as a completely "containing" gesture. Indeed, the sexual objectification of a powerful woman can sometimes paradoxically work to trouble patriarchal logic. In the same way that the hybridity of a character like Ripley in *A4* need not signal progressiveness, then, I submit that the sexualisation of a character like Barb Wire or Tank Girl need not signal regressiveness. In both, our attention as critics should be focused on the way that hybridity or sexualisation is actually mobilised in the narrative.

This to me means paying at least some attention to conventions of genre. It is not surprising that the protagonists of sci-fi narratives like *Barb Wire* and *Tank Girl* work to mediate between and comment upon the relations between "humanity" and "technology." And as is common in both science fiction and action narratives, the tensions and productivity of this binary pair are worked over and through the protagonist's body. In his essay "Gender and the Action Heroine" Jeffrey Brown writes that "While the well-toned, muscular female body is obviously an ideal in this age of physical fitness, it is presented in these films as first and foremost a functional body, a weapon" (56). The "bodily" aspect of Barb's and Tank Girl's identity, in fact, helps distinguish, as in the *Terminator* films, between good and bad technology. Barb's reticence, disdain for authority, and privileged position in the city mark her very clearly as a (hard-boiled style) 'cowboy': she rides around the city on her bike, earning money by rounding up stray girls and bail jumpers. Barb is always associated with pre-virtual technology, and in the film's dystopian future world, her weaponry, and

especially her guns, exist as nostalgic symbols. Barb Wire and Tank Girl, as their names suggest, are implicitly identified with military hardware. Beyond the "killer bodies," they both possess, Tank Girl, like Barb Wire, not only uses knives and guns, she also literally "enjoys" (by caressing and suggestively straddling the barrel of) her namesake uber-weapon, the mighty-shafted tank. Like Barb's though, Tank Girl's weapons are messy, low tech, and industrial (her tank is a WWII model). Both films also begin with the first-person voice-over narration characteristic of the hard-boiled/noir genre, but while Barb represents the "good" technology of the urban rebel-cowboy, Tank Girl is aligned with a more agrarian vision: she is, on our introduction to her, riding a water buffalo (the voice-over encourages a brief confusion regarding the identity of the "me" narrating this tale: the woman or the buffalo?). Instead of the metropolitan underbelly, Rebecca's commune is clearly recognizable as a hippy-ish space, complete with greenhouse and art studio.

As with *T2* and the *Alien* series then, older forms of technology are valorised and contrasted with new, more insidious and mysterious post-industrial mechanics. While Barb's arsenal is decidedly low-tech, *Barb Wire*'s bad guys, the Congressional Directorate (CD), are associated early on in the film with "advanced" technology and the evil uses to which it can be put. Colonel Pryzer (the head of the CD) and his troops—who are strongly paralleled with Nazis in their dress and bearing—maintain control with a mass network of technological terrors that invade minds and bodies, including retinal scanners, memory reading

devices, germ warfare, and sophisticated computerised torture machines. Other than her cache of guns, Barb's technologies are in fact hardly even technological: shoes, blow darts, motorcycles and a (home-made) armoured truck: like the hard-boiled detective's sharp tongue, fists, and pistols, these are "defensive" mechanisms meant to protect the individual in a world of corruption and surveillance.

Both surveillance and evasion in this film—as in most sci-fi texts—are centred around the human body (for example the leader of the resistance, Cora D, has had to alter her appearance through plastic surgery). In his seminal *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* Darko Suvin explains that most science fiction texts are distinguished by the presence of novum (63) (the new, usually technological, thing) and it is thus fitting that the crucial technology in a film obsessed with identity, surveillance, memory and vision is a set of contact lenses that disguise the identity of their wearer. In *Barb Wire* private space and individual freedom—the mind, the body—are threatened by the corporate-fascist technology of the Directorate (technology which includes a device that can capture visual "memories" from subjects who need not be willing or even alive).

The DWP, in *Tank Girl*, is a sterile, hi-tech corporate space in which Kesslee, the department's maniacal leader, "disciplines" his elite commanders by executing one of them during a meeting with a gadget that sucks the water out of the human body. Again, even in this furturistic space the body is what is at stake in the question of technological development. The "battle" over the meanings and

uses of technology will be played out between Tank Girl's "natural" and productively exuberant sexuality and Kesslee's destructive and "perverted" sadism. Like many "evil" men in popular narratives, Kesslee's masculinity is simultaneously excessive and ambiguous, and, as it is identified with him, technology becomes both a symbol of patriarchal/capitalist oppression and a representation of emasculization/lack. In the first scene at the DWP, Kesslee smashes the large computerized maps that represent his domain in rage (because he does not control the entire area), and then forces the commander, whom he blames for this loss, to walk across the broken glass in his bare feet. As Kesslee takes the suffering man into his arms for an ostensibly forgiving paternal hug, he mocks the captain's subservience, saying that he would have killed before he followed such an order. He then stabs the man in the back with the water-sucking device.[36] Kesslee, who is bizarrely revealed to be barefoot himself, willingly walks through the broken glass before the rest of his troops with a satisfied smile, sipping freshly extracted water from the (removable) container-end of the dehydrating device like a body-fluid connoisseur. For Kesslee, technology, like the human body, is something to be dominated and exploited. This drive, however, as Kesslee's rage about his incomplete domain highlights, is always predicated on absence. In a feminist inversion of patriarchal psychoanalytic theories of lack, in *Tank Girl*'s economy "natural" feminine abundance and

[36] This device is, I think, one of most effective and disturbingly memorable of the film's inventions. It consists of a plug-like prong attached to a plastic accordioned bottle that expands (with gurgles and pops) as water is extracted from a body (the flesh of which immediately shrinks and shrivels).

plenitude are demonstrated to be more successful in harnessing both bodily and technological power.

In opposition to Kesslee's sterility and repressed sadism, technology in Tank Girl's hands becomes overtly, joyfully sexual: breasts become bombs (or bombs become breasts), and her tank is animated, both through decor (it is painted, ornamented, and improved through the addition of a recliner, outdoor barbeque, and patio umbrella) and in actuality: it comes when she calls, and communicates with her by nodding its gun barrel. In *Barb Wire*, the association between femininity, sexuality, and technology also of course centres around the transformative potential of the body of its protagonist. The contacts may be a crucial symbol in *Barb Wire*, but it is hard not to see the film's obsession with sight and identity accruing most spectacularly around, if not originating directly from, the image of Barb Wire herself. Barb is ever-seeable, independent, sexual, dangerous and street-smart: an erotic vision of transgression. This fact is made quite clear in a fascinating scene in which the Directorate, probing the memory of a recently murdered man thought to have Resistance connections, discover a residual image of Barb. The Directorate officers are encouraged by their mental-find, but Chief Willis explains that discovering this image in a dead man's mind means little since "every man in Steel Harbor dreams of Barb Wire." The moment confirms Barb's status as both ubiquitous and uncontainable, at least on the level of the imaginary. Barb's image—her power to reside in consciousnesses—exists radically beyond the grasp of Directorate technology. Barb (erotic object, action

hero) is here figured as a particularly dangerous (potential) member of the "resistance" movement, as she is already *inside* the system: as a kind of erotic ghost that paradoxically works to undercut oppressive patriarchal force.

Before returning to a consideration of the connections between the erotics of gender and technology in *Barb Wire* and *Tank Girl*, I would like to spend some time discussing the particular operation of Barb as a spectacularly sexualised female action hero in order to (re)consider the operations of this process.

In *Barb Wire*'s opening scene (I refer here to the unrated version, which reveals more nipple than the theatrical release) its protagonist is in the process of being hosed down with water in a long, tight fitting black rubber or leather dress that can't seem to contain her breasts. After several minutes of hosing, which features wet, whipping hair and erotic writhing in time with the pounding of a Tommy Lee song—for an effect very much like a soft-porn rock video—the perspective shifts and the audience discovers that the setting is a strip club. The camera starts to give more time to the bar scene—more time to the view from Barb's perspective—until finally, after repeated calls to "take it all off," Barb seductively removes her black, impossibly high-heeled shoe. Barb then whips the shoe across the stage, impaling the cat-calling spectator in the head (the toe of the shoe may even be in his mouth). The implications of this scene for a salivating viewer—who, like the unfortunate heckler, longs for this babe to take it all off—are, as I will address below, somewhat problematic. But the attack does not seem

to faze the other bar patrons, one of whom expresses an interest in "the blond with the guns" to the manager as Barb saunters lopsidedly off the stage.

Tasker reads Barb's name as an indication of her erotic positioning, but it is hard to associate barbed wire with any comfortable sexual exchange. The conflation of weapon and breast in the opening scene could be read as diminishing Barb's heroism by revealing its dependence on her sexual exploitation. But this "blond with the guns" line, variations of which appear in numerous popular narratives, is also a metonymic pun that reveals the female action hero to be infinitely "loaded." Barb's power—like many a female action hero—lies, in this instance, in the failure of her enemies to *see* her hybridity (they wonder only about one kind of gun). This is true of critical analysis of the film, which insists that we remember this: our hero is Pamela Anderson, and Barb is inescapably, abundantly, feminine. Beyond her obvious silicone enhanced "assets" and her skimpy outfits, beyond the peroxide and the hair-spray, audiences learn that Barb hates to chip a nail. Barb's/Anderson's waist measured a mere 17 inches in the film, thanks to a constrictive leather corset. In a look that Tasker characterizes as "butch femme" (*Working* 68), that corset functions as Barb's costume for most of the film—accessorised by a pair of heels so high the actress confesses that she had trouble walking in them.

These highly recognizable accouterments of the woman-on-display need, however, to be situated in their context: *Barb Wire* is, like many contemporary action films, comic, even parodic (though most commentators overlook or dismiss

this). Indeed, *Barb Wire* simultaneously celebrates and mocks the classic Hollywood film, the action and science fictions genres, and the erotic commodity that is Pamela Anderson. Early on in the film, for example, Barb prepares to leave The Hammerhead (her bar). Removing some intimidating weapons from her gun closet, she tells her bar manager Curly (Udo Kier) that she is going out, but also instructs him to deny that she has left the premises. "This isn't happening," she reminds him as she straps on her holsters; "if anyone asks, tell them I'm taking a bubble bath." This juxtaposition of active, gun-toting hero and passive, "gun"-toting bubble bathing spectacle is one that Barb, and the film, actively and repeatedly manipulates.

Barb's comic-book hero qualities are borne out by her machined (silicone-enhanced), doll-like body. Like her inflated male hero/actor counterparts—Rambo/Stallone, Terminator/Schwarzenegger, etc.—Barb is utterly inseparable from Pamela Anderson's famous, ultra-constructed physique. And also like these male actors/characters, Barb/Pam is unreal, engineered: a truly implausible "imaginary" being. But despite her appearance, Barb takes offence when she is reduced to a cipher on screen. As Tasker notes, her easily mocked tag-line is "don't call me babe" (the man who is impaled with the shoe actually yells "take it all off, babe"). Though this tag-line may be difficult to reconcile with Barb's ludicrously sexualized appearance, *Barb Wire* is fascinating because it's *narrative* actually does very little to "feminize" its action-hero protagonist. Unlike many films that feature active female protagonists (from *Alien*(s) or the *Terminator*

series to *Thelma and Louise*), not only does Barb fail to be "domesticated" (in either a romantic or familial relationship), there are also no overt explanations given for her unfeminine behavior—no rape, no world to save, no children or husband to defend or avenge. Unlike *Casablanca*'s sullen but emotional Rick, Barb has few intimate relationships (she has a brother, but there is no mention of parents), and no developed romantic interests. Though Barb's time-gone-by lover, Axel (Temuera Morrison), walks into her gin joint one night, the connection between the two within the film seems negligible (especially compared to the relationship between Rick and Ilsa—famously presented in *Casablanca*'s soft-focus close-ups and longing glances). The pivotal tension of *Casablanca*—will Rick abandon Laszlo to his fate and fly to Lisbon with Ilsa?—is absent in *Barb Wire*, which never suggests that Barb and Axel might reunite and run away together. Barb's bitterness and her initial rejection of the resistance-movement may be attributed in the film to her broken heart, but this trauma works to explain her politics, not her existence. There is no scene in this film which marks the transformation of Barb from "normal woman" into gun-wielding aberration.[37] During *Barb Wire*'s requisite flash-back to our heroine's abandonment in Seattle (this film's version of Rick and Ilsa's Paris), we do witness Barb, minus the hairspray and makeup, looking young and pretty. But she is still wearing army

[37] A particularly memorable example of such a scene occurs in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, in which the frumpy girl-next-door Samantha (Geena Davis) is overtaken by her secret agent alter-ego and emerges from the bathroom with cropped bleached-blond hair and heavy black eye-makeup. She also now wears tight fitting black clothes, swears, smokes, drinks, and has a newly aggressive sexual energy.

fatigues, and ultimately it's hard to view the rifle-toting resistance fighter as a much more conventional feminine role than bar-owning bounty hunter.

Not only is the relationship between the lovers more intense in *Casablanca*, Rick (after giving up his love for Ilsa because of his morals and sending her and Laszlo off on the plane) walks off into that dark and rainy night with Captain Renault: it's the beginning of a beautiful friendship, and one with clear homoerotic potential. The relationship between Rick and Capt. Renault is made explicitly sexual (or at least its potential sexuality is allowed to function explicitly) with *Barb Wire*'s heteronormative coupling of Barb and Steel Harbor's male police chief, Alexander Willis (Xander Berkeley). But this is a one-sided relationship, and Barb turns down Chief Willis's assertion of love. He says, as the plane to Canada takes off in the background, "Well I do believe I'm falling in love." Barb's response: "Get in line," is the punchy closer of the film. The audience can imagine Barb, riding off (on her Triumph motorcycle) into the sunset (or to Paris) like all good heroes: alone.

Action films with female protagonists are regularly critiqued for offering up a display of sexualised "femininity" in order to mitigate the threat to traditional gender roles posed by the aggressive/violent woman (the final scene of *Alien*, in which Ripley strips down to her underwear before her climatic final encounter with the monster, is an often-analyzed example of this), but, as Tasker notes in *Spectacular Bodies*, the objectification of the hero is in fact an integral aspect of the action genre:

> Unlike the active/passive division of labour discussed by Laura Mulvey in relation to the classic Hollywood film, in which the male figure advances the narrative whilst 'woman' functions as spectacle, the male figure in the contemporary action picture often functions in both capacities. He controls the action at the same time he is offered up to the audience as a sexual spectacle. (16)

Thus, as Jeffrey Brown comments, action cinema can be seen in this regard as an "equal opportunity offender" in that "the more progressive depictions of the action heroine place her at the same level of erotic portrayal as the male icons of the screen, as primarily subject and secondarily object" ("Gender" 68). Barb's functioning as erotic object is not even, in fact, a departure from the iconically heroic role of Rick in *Casablanca*. Rick is a figure of mystery and attraction for both sexes on screen, and he (especially his face) is as much an object of the camera's gaze outside of the diegesis of the film as Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa. Rick's erotically charged presence illustrates the always-present filmic connections between active subject and erotic object. At an early point in the narrative, Rick's friend Captain Renault describes Rick to Ilsa as "the kind of a man that, well, if I were a woman, and *I* weren't around, I should be in love with Rick." Renault here makes the erotic appeal of Bogart's character overt, speaking a viewer's desire both to *be* and to *have* Rick. But in the context of a patriarchal culture, the objectification of the male and the female body cannot be assumed to signify in the same way. The spectacle of the male body, while it may engage with a repressed homoeroticism and/or anxiety about the meaning of "masculinity" in a bureaucratic, post-feminist culture, and/or issues around work, class, and physical vulnerability, does not reproduce an image of the male that has worked to

maintain a gendered power imbalance. Tasker's discussion of advertising and pornography in reference to *Barb Wire* thus draws attention to the important fact that, as an image, Barb is not new, and this is what makes depictions of her kind of aggressive sexuality problematic for feminists.

Barb Wire's post-modern self-consciousness gives the film a potentially radical edge, but it can also be seen as disempowering its heroine by ultimately demonstrating that, unlike her male counterparts, a "real" female action hero is *only* possible as a (sexual) joke. If this tough woman is a joke though, it seems worth asking: what does it mean? How and why does a figure like Barb becomes a "fantasy" in the first place? Beyond or along with a fearful, distant, and/or containing eroticization of a female "other" could the fantasy (or joke) of a strong and violent woman represent a kind of longing—for gender revolution, for salvation, for equality? Though few feminist critiques actually characterize her in this way, Barb is performing—sometimes explicitly, but basically throughout the entire film—as a dominatrix.[38] This role accounts both for Barb's fetishistic leather & heels outfits, as well as her haughty demeanour and emotional distance from other characters. In *The Power of the Image*, Annette Kuhn writes that sadomasochistic pornography "participates in pornography's more routine insistence on sexual difference, except in this case sexual difference is reduced to

[38] A recent exception to this is Jeffrey Brown's article "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls and Action Film and Comic Books." Brown argues that all action heroines function, to some degree, as dominatrices (50), and points to Barb as a particularly "obvious" example of this. While Brown importantly acknowledges the disruptive potential of the dominatrix's performance of gender, his emphasis on the figure's ability to "straddle" masculine and feminine attributes (52) seems to reproduce those binary categories even as it challenges them.

relations of power rather than, or as well as, to bodily attributes" (46). As it "insists that sexuality and power are inseparable" (47) SM pornography can thus be useful in the exposure of the way that power inflects gender categories. Kuhn is discussing male-dominant sadomasochism in the quotations above—but this attention to questions of power seems especially significant and potentially disruptive in the less-common female dominant (i.e. dominatrix) pornographic images/scenarios. In "A Whip of One's Own: Dominatrix Pornography and the Construction of a Post-Modern (Female) Subjectivity," Thaïs E. Morgan argues that dominatrix pornography, which she calls "the single type of heterosexual pornography which moves against the grain of sexual difference" (126), can stage a reversal of 'real' social relations between the sexes that is self-consciously critical, even satirical (113). She writes,

> The disruptive potential of dominatrix pornography may be deduced from the fact that it elicits considerable discomfort as well as pleasure from female and male viewers alike. Such ambivalence is a response to the way in which the representation of a sexually powerful female subject contradicts the most fundamental and unconsciously assimilated codes of gender, those based on the body and 'body language.' (115)

Other feminist critics have, however, pointed out that though the dominatrix appears to wield power over men, she is nevertheless predominantly a male fantasy, and the power or sexuality she possesses is most often mobilized in the service of the submissive male's pleasure, not her own. This selfless existence seems reinforced in the depiction of Barb, who, despite her highly sexualized appearance, seems to experience little pleasure in the film. Conversely though,

Barb is also not presented as *giving* pleasure, at least on screen. This contradicts Tasker's assertion (quoted above) that Barb "exhibits an eroticised toughness, both inviting and returning a sexual gaze" (*Working Girls* 70), since while Barb clearly invites an erotic gaze, other than during brief moments with Axel, it is in fact difficult to find instances of her returning one. As one reviewer notes, "Barb Wire is a symbol of undiluted feminine power and abundance. And yet she's not about sex. Though she uses her body to bait and distract men, she never gives it up" (Hinson).

One could argue that though the SM exchange suggested by Barb does not play out explicitly on the screen, the film's audience is the happy masochistic recipient of Barb's erotic "punishment." But *Barb Wire* also makes any direct rapport between an objectifying audience and Barb, the on-screen fetish, problematic. There are too many moments in the film during which Barb seems to overtly threaten, or at least mock, her off-screen viewers. The opening strip-club scene, for example, plays with audience expectations regarding this film starring the "*Baywatch* T&A queen"—the film immediately presents the viewer with a sexy, wet, breasty "Pam," offered up for ogling in the kind of overt erotic display famously suggested (but not actually delivered) in the television series. The shoe-throwing obviously complicates and disturbingly interrupts this spectacle, and sets the tone for the rest of the narrative. *Barb Wire* even directly invokes and renders comic the sadomasochistic scene that Barb's outfits seem to prepare her for. Posed at one point as a prostitute (she wears a black trench coat

over her corset), Barb picks up a man who "likes to play rough." At his apartment, after dumping a bag full of porn magazines (perhaps featuring Anderson herself?) on the bed, he emerges from the bathroom clothed in a black rubber suit and carrying a large wooden paddle. Barb knocks him out with this paddle before retrieving a bail jumper (in a spectacular shoot-out) from the apartment next-door. In an earlier scene, after she has impaled the strip-club spectator with her shoe, Barb—turning yet another fetishized ornament into a weapon—requests a light for her cigarette from the club manager, only to blow a poisoned dart in his face. This series of encounters demonstrates the parodic force of dominatrix imagery which "defetishizes the female body precisely by revealing 'femininity' itself to be an excess of 'phallic symbols' or fetishes" (Morgan 130). Barb is never simply an erotic spectacle—indeed, given the fates of so many men in the film, a viewer is in a much more comfortable position identifying with Barb than desiring her. Barb Wire can thus function as that rare kind of visual representation that Annette Kuhn describes as "combin[ing] pleasure and unease—perhaps even at moments threatening to disrupt, rather than confirm, the spectator's masculinity" (35).

Even if the audience (or the men Barb trounces on screen) can be viewed as enjoying being dominated, the male masochist's pleasure is not easily recuperated by dominant discourse. As Kaja Silverman argues, "[m]asochism works insistently to negate paternal power and privilege" (211). Masochism, she writes, "is an accepted—indeed a requisite—element of 'normal' female

subjectivity, providing a crucial mechanism for eroticizing lack and subordination. The male subject, on the contrary, cannot avow feminine masochism without calling into question his identification with the masculine position" (189-90).

Barb Wire makes visible the way that power works itself through and on the body—a volatile and therefore susceptible process, given the polymorphous workings of sexuality and desire. The very existence of "perverse" female figures like the dominatrix in traditional representations of femininity points to the inherent instability of binary categories of gender. But it is precisely Barb's recognizability and familiarity—her ubiquity as a mental image—that has served to exclude her from serious consideration by feminists. Because women are (and have historically been) defined within patriarchy as primarily "sexual" beings, it continues to be difficult to incorporate sexual desire and specifically traditional markers of "desirability" into feminist models of female agency. Barb Wire's appearance/performance in the film—and her position as a character portrayed by Pamela Anderson—thus causes her to be dismissed categorically. Like that strip-club patron, feminist critics have viewed Barb's breasts (the most obvious symbols of her desirability) as though they have a singular, stable meaning. This automatic response prevents Barb Wire—the character and the film—from actually being *read* at the level of narrative (she is an unusually powerful and active hero, in a fascinatingly intertextual film) or in terms of her specific visual signification (dominatrix, not sex kitten). Analyses of the female action hero thus

need to consider *how* "desirability" functions vis-à-vis dominant power structures within particular filmic contexts.

Many science fiction films (and especially those with female protagonists) invoke nature and/or the family as a counterpoint to the dangers of science/technology, and it is interesting that the opening scene of *Barb Wire*, which involves the rescue of a young girl from a strip club/bordello (hence the necessity of Barb's dance/hose-down), seems to introduce these themes. This scene, in fact, resonates strongly with an identical rescue in *Tank Girl*, and it works I think to highlight the kinds of work that a film and character like Barb Wire can do in critically exposing the interconnections of sex and power in a patriarchal-capitalist system.

The rescue of Tank Girl's young friend Samantha (Stacy Linn Ramsower)—abducted by the DWP during their raid on the rebel bunker—is an integral motivator of the plot in the film (we thus know why "Rebecca" becomes "Tank Girl"). The eleven-year old Sam has already been established for viewers as an innocent—early on in the film she walks in on Rebecca and her boyfriend while they are engaged in some sexual role-playing (Rebecca is holding a gun on him and ordering him to strip). Sam is "grossed out," while Rebecca is sheepish and embarrassed. After her abduction Sam is taken to Liquid Silver, a lavish brothel, where, shortly before her rescue, we learn that she is to be offered up by the Madam (Ann Magnuson) to a customer who wants the "school girl thing—for *real*." This request, and the Madam's willingness to cater to it, shocks even the

Liquid Silver whores, who exclaim: "but she's just a little girl"! We next see Sam, dressed in the classic "sexy school girl" outfit: short kilt, white blouse, and knee high socks, struggling as she is handed over to "Rat Face" (Iggy Pop!), the evil john. Tank Girl must infiltrate this bordello, and so, like Barb, she goes undercover. Tank Girl mocks the computerized tutorial on the "Liquid Silver look" she receives in the female employee dressing room, putting together her own classically punk (but still sexy) look. Instead of stripping she infuses the club with nostalgia, forcing the Madam and the rest of the guests to perform Cole Porter's "Let's Fall in Love" in the style of a Busby Berkley musical number. The utopian promise of this scene—bordello turned into site of emotional connection, revenge enacted via choreography—is compelling, but it also points to a difficulty in Tank Girl's presentation of female resistance. Like Kesslee's "inhuman" technologies, the "objectified" Liquid Silver whores are contrasted with Tank Girl, who is both "naturally" sexual and "naturally" violent.

These characteristics are highlighted in Tank Girl's association with the Rippers. As with the *Terminator* and *Alien* series (as well as the "criminal" women of my crime section), both Barb and Tank Girl ultimately associate themselves with a larger group of "resistance" fighters (whether they are politically motivated or simply seeking to survive) who also tend to be coded as "marginal" by class and/or race. In *Barb Wire*, in contrast to the uniformly white and male members of the Congressional Directorate, the resistance movement is made up of an array of "non-normative" characters. The local leader, "Spike"

(Jennifer Banko), for example, is another tough woman, and one who—whether due to injury or ailment—speaks through an electronic voice box. *Barb Wire*'s version of Laszlo in *Casablanca* is the legendary doctor turned resistance fighter "Cora D," played by the African American actress Victoria Rowell, and her husband—Barb's ex-lover, is played by the Maori *Once Were Warriors* star Temuera Morrison. In *Tank Girl*, the Rippers—kangaroo and human hybrids—though all male, are "othered" by species as well as by race and class. The Rippers are a dread-locked, dope-smoking, beat-poetry spouting, bongo-drumming, "tribal"-dancing group, and though they are intent on murderously decimating the DWP, they make their decisions democratically, and their hideout is a mural-painted cave awash in hippie-ish "peace" and "mother-earth" type signifiers. The Ripper leader, played by rapper/actor Ice-T, is eloquent and philosophical, but most of the other Rippers are represented as straight-talking, "down-to earth" sorts. They are all also hyper, if humorously, masculine and sex-obsessed.[39]

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[39] See, for example, these exchanges between the gang and the girls. The first, from when the Rippers (T-Saint, who is the leader, Donner, Deetee, and Booga) are deciding what they should do with Tank Girl and Jet Girl, who have stumbled into their cave:

T-Saint: I say we kill 'em!
Donner: I say we hump 'em.

Later in the scene:

Deetee : Okay, we're gonna give you babes a chance to prove yourselves. Call it an initiation.
T-Saint: You fail, you die!
Donner: Yeah, but first, you gotta strip.
Booga: That's not in the plan.
Deetee, T-Saint, Donner: Why not?

And finally, when they are all hanging out:

Donner: Wanna dance?
Jet Girl: I don't know how.
Donner: It's okay, I brought the condoms!

The Rippers then, like Tank Girl, serve as an alternative to Kesslee's sterile patriarchy and perversity. Technology (and specifically weaponry) is again key here: though the Rippers are products of science (transgenetic man/kangaroo hybrids), they are explicitly anti-technological and refuse to use weapons—they *are* weapons, leaving shredded corpses in their wake. The evaluative binary here is fairly predictable: on the one hand, *Tank Girl* celebrates and aims to recoup traditionally marginalised signifiers of race, gender, and even species. And on the other, the reproduction of the alignment of women and African-Americans with sexuality and nature is somewhat problematic. What is most disturbing in this narrative, however, is the place of violence, which becomes "healthily" erotic and acceptable/natural when mobilised by women and racial "others." This is evidenced not only in the Rippers' inherent destructiveness, but in the "de-technologising" of Tank Girl's arsenal, which not only becomes animate (as in her tank), but is from the film's opening scenes situated in the context of "wholesome" erotic play.

In contrast to this, *Barb Wire*'s dystopian social context seems to have little space for "play" or utopian fantasy. There is humour in *Barb Wire*, but it is grim—satiric?—rather than parodic, and nothing "natural" seems to have survived the post-war fascist ascension. While Sam's innocence and value as a "girl" is assumed in *Tank Girl*, Barb is impatient with the unnamed young victim she rescues from the strip club in the scenario the two films have in common. After killing the club manager with her shoe, Barb breaks into the unused meat

locker in the club kitchen where the girl—who, like Sam in *Tank Girl*, is dressed in a short kilt and knee-highs—has been locked up. Barb hauls the girl unceremoniously out of the locker and shoves her down the hall, swearing as various escape routes are cut off by pursuers. Barb also tells the screaming girl to "shut up" as they descend from a window via a Batman-style rope. Barb meets up with the girl's upper-class (they are driving a Porsche), middle-aged parents under a bridge, and produces the girl with the sarcastic line: "here's your little pride and joy." When the girl's father announces that he has only managed to raise half the money agreed upon for the rescue, Barb, to make up the difference (after offering to return "half" their daughter), takes their car and drives away, leaving the family stranded on the street in her wake. "The money, the car: not a bad night's work," the disaffected Barb concludes in a voice-over as she drives into the sunrise.

Despite Barb's apparent lack of sympathy for the girl she rescues, in these rescue scenes both *Tank Girl* and *Barb Wire* expose the dangers of the objectification of women in a patriarchal culture. The same man who asks about Barb—the "blond with the guns"—has placed a "special order" for the girl, who is described by the manager as a package that has arrived and is "as tender as Tuscan veal" (it is perhaps not coincidental that she is being held in a meat locker). But given the active and sexual nature of the protagonists in these films, it can also be argued that in the case of *Tank Girl* the positioning of Sam as "innocent child" works to bracket off Tank Girl's disruptive potential. In her punky way, Tank Girl is as much a sexual object as Barb Wire. Her exuberant

energy and overt eroticism, however, continue to work in the service of the family—which is positioned as outside of economic/patriarchal power systems—and femininity remains sacred and vulnerable. Barb's disdainful rescue of the little girl, on the other hand, not only indicates her distance from a traditional maternal role, it also highlights the connections between economic and familial structures in a patriarchal culture (the daughter has her price and she is a possession of the father), and even suggests that traditional familial bonds are themselves inseparable from the "perverse" sexual world of the strip club. While this is admittedly a bleak and pessimistic vision, it also seems a more suggestive critique of the pervasive workings of power than *Tank Girl*'s irreverent utopian dystopia, in which all will be well with the world once our heroine defeats the clearly mad/evil bad guy.

Both *Tank Girl* and *Barb Wire*, like the *Alien* and *Terminator* series, effectively utilise feminism's critique of patriarchy and capitalism in their presentation of dystopian future worlds—producing at times some trenchant exposés of those systems. There are, however, not only variations in the subtlety of the films' critiques, but important differences in how their critiques are delivered. *Tank Girl* and *Alien Resurrection*, though boasting the most apparently "radical" heroines, like the contemporary films I examined in the western section, use comedy and parody to expose violence, while at the same time delivering their critiques of dominant structures via a violence that is—due to its protagonist's gender—presented as different/positive/moral/erotic. Along with

this moralising function, the sci-fi woman-with-a-gun's association with "cowboy" technologies and methodologies helps to ensure that feminist politics—and/or any overtly political ideology—is bracketed off as too marginal to be useful or productive in addressing the world's "big" problems and issues. *Barb Wire*'s bleaker satiric vision does not seem to present such clear-cut distinctions—between "good" and "bad" violence, between "universal" or "marginal" politics, or between "sex object" and "hero" ("guns" or guns). The technology and weaponry that Barb utilises are indeed defensive, rather than aggressive, but in the end the violence and sexuality that Barb so spectacularly embodies represents a *disruption* to the system that contains and has created her/them, rather than being presented as an *alternative* to that system. While alternative visions are obviously important in the struggle to produce and/or work towards more just and equitable social structures, "alternatives" such as those modeled by Tank Girl and *A4's* Ripley ultimately work to reproduce and revitalise violence as "radical" pleasure. *Barb Wire* clearly takes a cynical enjoyment in the violence it/she traffics in, but in the process it/she draws attention to the difficult, pervasive, and perhaps more truly "cyborg" interconnections of sexuality, desire, technology, and power.

Conclusion

Either/Or, Both/And, Woman/Gun

The purpose of this dissertation has not been to come to either/or conclusions about the political implications of the woman with a gun. Instead, accepting that the figure will inevitably be both subversive and regressive, I have tried to foreground the importance of the figure's functioning within the popular genres which contain and define her. In *Working Girls*, Yvonne Tasker writes about the difficulties of translating representations of the powerful, independent woman that are familiar from a medium like advertising and/or pornography to the more complex and storylines that operate in mainstream film (70). But when responding to the active female hero, critics—even Tasker herself—seem to read the specific pairing of woman and gun as a "still." In neglecting to address the narratives that produce and are produced by this pairing, these accounts thus fail, first, to read how and what the gun means in its generic context, and, second, how and what it means as a possession of the woman in that context. Thus in much analysis of this figure, either the gun is such an essential and expected accoutrement of the action hero that it becomes invisible, or it is so spectacular in the woman's hand that it becomes frozen (hardened?), iconic, and a-historical. What the gun in the woman's possession indicates, I have argued, is her necessary engagement with and embodiment of a particular narrative—codified in the western—about heroism. And this is what makes the woman with a gun in her

contemporary form unique and exciting: her function as a *hero*. But this assertion still begs the question of whether it is possible, in the end, and at the end, to come to any general conclusions about what this performance might mean for feminism, and/or what kind of hero the woman with a gun tends to be.

When her representation of gender is considered, the woman with a gun's position as hero means that, for me, the balance of the subversive/regressive binary usually tilts towards subversive. The woman with a gun's violence—in all generic contexts—clearly challenges the traditional positioning of women as passive, weak victims. The flip side of this, as I note in the introduction, is that at the same time that women have been characterised as passive, dependent, nurturers, they have also been figured as wild, devious, and untameable. In her landmark feminist treatise *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir sketches out this pervasive Eve/Mary binary:

> [W]oman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'être*. (143)

As de Beauvoir's analysis details, for centuries Western cultural texts and myths have worked to faithfully (re)produce a vision that alternately (or often simultaneously) deifies and disdains women. The force and longevity of this dualistic construction of the feminine speak to the effectiveness of its function in establishing patriarchal dominance and addressing patriarchal fears—containing and controlling female behaviour through the employment of an aggressively

critical misogyny and/or a more seemingly benign gallantry. Popular narratives must rely on recognisable conventions in their attempts to craft believable characters, and so, unsurprisingly, they draw upon patriarchal stereotypes when creating the female action hero. Critics have thus argued that the woman with a gun's sexualization fetishises and so undermines the resistant aspects of her characterisation—including her possession of the gun (see Brown, "If Looks Could Kill," 63).

As Tasker notes, "In responding to feminism, image-makers sought to present women as active and powerful, mobilising already-existing types and conventions, images that were an established part of popular culture, such as the leather-clad dominatrix" (*Spectacular* 19). Deviant, dangerous, or monstrous female stereotypes are, however, not totally demeaning or restricting. They have arisen in patriarchal culture as a response to women's power, and have afforded women power at the same time that they have reproduced their subordinate status. And the narratives I look at here do not position women as villains or simply as out of control, hysterical, or savage. While woman's "natural" propensity to violence may be used as an explanation for their behaviour in these texts, these women with guns perform as central protagonists, with whom audiences are expected to identify. The female action hero's position at the centre of her generic narrative thus challenges attempts to reduce her to a simple "to-be-looked-at" object—as my reading of the rich potential of the uber-fetishised Pamela Anderson's role in the film *Barb Wire* works to demonstrate.

It is also undeniable that these figures of eroticised power—who seemed challenging even as they were—have been modified as they have moved into the role of heroes (rather than sidekicks or villains) in the contemporary mainstream of popular culture. In placing her at the centre of their narratives, the novels, films, and television programs I have discussed here claim the status of hero for women in action-adventure fantasies that present gun-wielding women expressing anger in public ways and public spaces that have historically been denied to them. In a patriarchal cultural framework, a violent, independent woman clearly does not signify in the same way that a violent, independent man does. Judith Halberstam argues that

> role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing violence against men does not simply use 'male' tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right with masculinity ("Imagined Violence" 251).

I agree with Halberstam, as with other feminist critics, that the female action-hero challenges patriarchal representations of gender and power. And so, for a while anyway, it's hard not to take a certain pleasure in the spectacle (on screen or on the page) of women kicking butt.

Halberstam's discussion of the implications of a female character's use of violence is concerned—like much of the critical attention paid to female action heroes—exclusively with questions of gender and sexuality. But a key goal of my dissertation has been to demonstrate that as a hero in action-adventure narratives,

the gun wielding woman does not just use or appropriate or even transform violence, she tells a story about the place and meaning of violence in our society. Given the fact that these figures are performing in a visibly and powerfully "resistant" way, it does seem crucial to ask if the fact that they represent a new kind of female agent means that the model of agency they embody should or can be embraced, even provisionally, by those desiring not just sexual equality, but a more radically just future. For butt-kicking—even patriarchal butt kicking—does not necessarily translate into a critique of the inherent inequality and violence of liberal-capitalist domination. More complicated and challenging, then, than the question of the implications of the woman with a gun's subversion or recuperation of traditional gender stereotypes is the idea that these "feminist" figures might represent ways of patching over, disguising, or distracting from the continued injustices of contemporary society.

Thus my attention to the female action hero—as in, for example, *Bad Girls* and *Tank Girl*—who battles evil/mad/sleazy individuals whom she is shown to overthrow. The othering of these "bad guys" can be read as allowing the audience to imagine or believe that they themselves are not implicated in systems of domination, and that these systems of domination do not continue to operate and control our own social spaces and identities. The gun-wielding female hero, as popular fiction like Patricia Cornwell's or films like *Tomb Raider* indicate, can in this way function as novel, contemporary packaging of the most conservative generic formulas. In an almost pernicious way the figure allows feminists (like

me) to enjoy nasty violent displays without feeling guilty or self-conscious: things are blowing up and people are getting killed but it's okay because it's a gender revolution!

A figure like Barb Wire or Ripley may challenge and expose the workings of gender and power, but the traditional pattern of the action narrative still tends to create a division between grounded, oppositional "politics" and heroism. This is, I think, one of the questions that a film *Barb Wire* so productively provokes: women-with-guns in various narratives and genres seem to have demonstrated that it is possible to reconcile heroic agency and femininity, even a sexualised femininity, but is it possible, even in fantasy, to separate heroism and liberalism? This dissertation only begins to address this question, but without an attention to genre and to the signification of the gun, it is one that often fails to even be posed when considering the female action hero.

While action-hero style rebellion can perform a critique of dominant culture, it is hard to view this violent figure as a positive role model for feminists or other "resistant" groups. Still, this does not mean that these heroic female figures do not do important cultural work. Even those that seem the most enmeshed in traditional gender, sexuality, race, and class divisions introduce troubling critiques of social inequalities (especially gender inequalities) that they cannot contain, and so work to increase the fissures and weaknesses that are an inevitable aspect of dominant cultural discourse. And as she blurs the boundaries between nature and civilization, public and private, the body and technology, the

woman with a gun (like *Deep in the Heart*'s Kathleen, or Sarah Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski) might even represent an ideal future "self," one who combines the fantasy of independence and action that characterises the western gunfighter with the radical creative power and redemptive force of Donnna Haraway's post-human subject. This is admittedly a very idealistic reading of a fundamentally problematic figure. At the level of fantasy, however, I don't think we can or should foreclose the female action hero's power to inspire, and even embody, questions of justice, agency, and change. As Tasker notes, "If the narratives and images of the popular action cinema rarely address the specificity of particular struggles, they nonetheless powerfully dramatise the fact of struggle" (*Spectacular* 166). Popular action genres may privilege an ostensibly neutral individualism that in fact reproduces dominant power structures, but they can also speak to the issues that trouble liberalism and advanced capitalism: inequality, corruption, injustice, and alienation. The woman with a gun must similarly be read in a manner which acknowledges her potential as a fantastic figure of resistance for and of the future, while also addressing the complex cultural narratives that continue to contain her action(s) in the present.

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