Ladies in Arms. An Introduction

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1. Frida Kahlo at the Gun Shop

Fig. 1: Frida Kahlo mural by JEKS
Greensboro July 2019; courtesy of photographer Sayaka Matsuoka

In 2019, a graffiti artist sprayed a mural of Frida Kahlo on the back of a gun shop in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Mexican artist is shown with an ammunition belt around her hips, leaning back against the wall. In her hand, she holds a gun pointing downward, as if ready to lift her arms and shoot at the viewer.

The mural copied a photograph of Kahlo which has long become a commodity. Its depiction of »Frida« reiterates her imagined persona as self-confident, powerful, and impressive woman artist. It bears witness to her transformation into a secular icon, building on her status as a quasi-martyr on the one hand, and on the other

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hand on her artistic self-expression, for instance with her surrealist self-portraits (Sanchez 2012). The production of Frida Kahlo »as material culture« began in her lifetime and continues full throttle (Pankl/Blake 2012); today she can be found on t-shirts, decorative pillows, and as heroine of children's books celebrating women trailblazers. Hence, her rebel woman portrait comes in handy for ornamenting and branding an American gun store. But there is a catch: This image of Frida with the gun is a montage. It was fabricated in the early 2010s by photographer Robert Toren, who stated that »Frida was the cute Communist we leftists most wanted to see nude« (quoted in Matsuoka 2019). Next to fetishizing Kahlo for the male gaze, Toren's montage is also blatantly anachronistic: Kahlo's self-portraits as well as historic photographs show that she didn't dress erotically, and 1930s Mexican ladies' fashion did not include breezy blouses and chunky jewelry. The image also sexes up the artist's broken body: at age 23, Kahlo was immobilized by a bus accident and tied to the bed for the rest of her life, her torso upheld by a steel corset. Toren's montage galvanizes her professional struggle for recognition as an artist, her political vision for a new political order in Mexico, and her personal battle with disability and pain into a contemporary rebel girl image tied to the beauty norm-conforming body in a sexy pose, and to the gun she holds in her hands. The key signifier of this image seems to be the gun. Placed prominently before her lower body, the revolver can be seen as a tool for female self-defense and resistance against any oppressive system that may range, depending on the viewer's taste, from street gangs to capitalism or patriarchy at large. At the same time, the firearm marks her difference from normative scripts of womanhood, rendering her a *femme fatale* who pleasures and threatens the onlooker. In this new commodification of »Frida« for the gun store, the firearm reconfigures its carrier persona, reinscribing her into the (local) public sphere, into consumer practice, and into the gendered politics of gun culture.

In Greensboro, the mural quickly fuelled a controversy. When Triad City Magazine's contributor Sayaka Matsuoka published a review entitled »Thanks, I Hate it« that exposed the photomontage, the graffiti artist JEKS stated his motivation to »do[ing] a piece that shows female empowerment […]. A lot of times I get asked to paint men. I was thinking it would be a positive thing« (quoted in Clarey 2019). His interest in visual empowerment shows in the iconizing composition, with the gun-toting woman postured in the center of a circle of dark beams that recall a halo or Buddha figure: JEKS's gunwoman is larger than life, looking down calmly at customers arriving to get their guns. And yet, when the news about the fake photomontage broke, Frida had to go. JEKS talked to the original model in the photograph, Donnette Thayer, and edited his mural: In an effort to preserve the empowerment sans the secular icon, the artist painted Thayer's head and blonde hair over Kahlo's. From his artist's point of view, his original artistic drive thus prevailed: he said about Thayer that, with his alteration, »I'm giving her her body back« (ibid.).

2. Armed Women and Popular Feminism

The story of Frida at the gun shop captures this essay collection's focus on the proliferation of female figures with firearms and the debates about their meanings in contemporary popular culture. Ladies in arms, girls with guns, and warrior women have recently started surfacing as commodities in manifold forms and narratives, both fictional and historic, covering military and civic gun cultures. Super heroines brandish their weapons in movies, comics, and novels, complemented by toy and department store merchandise. Stories of cowgirls, huntresses, female police officers, and soldiers receive increased attention and engage critical debates about intersectionality and politics.[2] Roughly since the 1990s, with the turn of Anglo-feminism towards performativity and intersectionality, and the arrival of post-victim feminism, which embraces an affective politics of »entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, gumption« (Banet-Weiser 2018: 20), armed women have become predestined identification figures. Gunwomen jar with gender scripts of female softness, care, and motherhood and challenge or subvert patriarchal hierarchies. The gunwoman has to be either contained or deployed as legitimate fighter for a better world. At the same time, the female shooter's iconicity routinely links her to contemporary beauty ideals and to heternormative desireability. In this sense, gunwomanship is often entangled with accommodationist feminist ideals of empowerment and agency, while perpetuating feel-good narratives of the neoliberal order: after all, when women get to take up arms, it means they can have it all.

Ladies in Arms: Women, Guns, and Feminisms in Contemporary Popular Culture takes aim at the figure of the gunwoman through the lens of feminism and popular culture representations in media, visual art, and literature. The contributions assembled here show her as ambiguous and reversible figure, caught between objectification and feminist empowerment. They offer a caleidoscopic view from different cultural and historical contexts through a focus on the two components that constitute the gun woman: the figure and the firearm.

In this push and pull of the gunwoman's knowledge production, she answers to the new popularity of feminist debates. Read through the work of feminist media critic Angela McRobbie, she impersonates the post-millenial undoing of »fem-

2 For shooting women in the US, see Laura Browder's foundational work (Browder 2009; Browder/Pflaeging 2010) for women heroines in popular culture in general, see Brown (2015), Inness (2018) and Minowa, Maclaran and Stevens (2014); Cocca (2016), Frankel and Robbins (2014), Stuller (2010) and Waites (2008) address super heroines in comics and film; on rodeo and cowgirls see Patton and Schedlock (2012); on black women gun carriers in popular culture, see for instance Roman (2020); Thames Copeland (2021); Watanabe-O'Kelly (2010) or Schäfer (2018).

inist gains of the 1970s and 80s« (McRobbie 2004: 254) by popular cultural narratives that view feminism as a past movement that has come to a successful ending, since, in Western society, women have equal access to all stations of life (ibid.: 255). McRobbie cautions against such post-feminist camouflage and pop culture's complicity in writing feminism off the political agenda and into narratives that allegedly already take feminist struggles into account. As Beatriz Revelles Benavente and Sandra Jiménez Arroyo (2019: 30–40) argue, in public debates, feminist themes visualize inequality but are also taken as an occasion to scandalize and hypersexualize women. Similarly, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018: 2) describes contemporary popular feminism as Janus-faced: Empowerment, she writes, »battles it out« with its counterforce, misogynist backlash. Banet-Weiser describes feminism's popularity in three ways: as being visible and accessible, as being likeable and endowed with affective dimensions, and as being contentious about what makes a feminist argument. US historian Emily Westkaemper, in her overview of popular culture's interactions with feminist activism in America, observes that popular culture of the early 20th century has »promote[d] gender ideology that assigned domestic responsibility to women and […] publicize[d] activism in order to expand women's public influence« (Westkaemper 2021: 225). The »selling« of women's history and feminism in popular culture products, Westkaemper shows, was entangled with social changes and political feminist struggles (ibid.: 226; see also Westkaemper 2017).

3. Theorizing the Gunwoman: The Firearm between Prosthesis and Accessory

Building on the observations of feminist media studies and women's history, *Ladies in Arms* shifts the focus to a wider cultural studies perspective on the gunwoman. In many Western cultures with binary gender norms, gun violence and gun culture (civil and military) are intricately tied to scripts of (toxic) masculinity and patriarchy. The story of Frida's (dis)appearance at the gun shop pinpoints this conflicting notion of the gunwoman's »tough girl« popular feminism (Inness 2018): in the commissioned graffiti, the secular icon Frida Kahlo was enlisted in the marketing of guns to projected consumers who would not mind a little feminist empowerment if it came with pleasuring of the male gaze. At the same time, the deformation of Kahlo's already popular feminist artist persona and imposition of Thayer's sexy pose functioned as a misogynist backlash, and the graffiti artist's ›correction‹ that edited Frida out of the picture gestures towards empowerment feminism while keeping the misogynist logic of ›sex sells‹ firmly in place.

Regarding the gun, the Greensboro mural illustrates how the object constitutes the ambiguous meanings of the woman shooter: On the one hand, the firearm, as paragon of modernity and modern warfare, puts women on a par with male oppres-

sors and with patriarchy, enabling them to be soldiers, launch revolutions and anti-imperialist resistance, or ascertain self-defense in the domestic and public sphere.[3] On the other hand, the display of a firearm also alters enables misogynist portrayals of women as deviant or diabolic, such as in the representation of famous murderess and their treatment in criminal law.[4] In this sense, the violent woman is rendered »occult« (Cardi/Pruvost 2011): She becomes a *fascinosum tremendum* that sacralizes female beauty and permits her transgressive eroticization and sexualization at the same time.

Beyond the distinct cultural gender scripts and performance scenarios for gunwomen discussed in the contributions to his volume, we propose to read the gunwoman as a material semiotics with actor-network theory (Farías/Blok/Roberts 2019), in which the gun forms a network with the carrier and constitutes her new/different/networked meaning. As commodity and fetishized object, the gun functions as prosthesis and as accessory. Reading the gun as prosthesis asserts its potential to exert physical power, a »technology or an artefact used to ›fix‹ or ›make whole‹« a body perceived as deficient, but also a means for contesting normative body narratives and exposing their fluidity (Christensen-Stryno/Bruun Eriksen 2021: 41). The woman with a weapon thus becomes the woman-as-weapon (Agra Romero 2012). The gun as prosthesis carries a paradox: it can be a source of power (as »great equalizer« that mitigates physical strength) but also a crutch, the tool that covers for a perceived inadequacy and that upholds its carrier's position on a par with other, presumably armed, contemporaries (Blanchfield 2018: 201). This is particularly relevant for US culture, where firearms are enshrined in national myths and racial inequality, »tied to the machinery of white supremacy« (Westlake 2021): If gun carriers assume everyone else is also carrying a gun, the feeling of power might tip into a constant fear of disarmament. In a society where the gun is everyone's everyday prosthesis, gun legislation is perceived as a threat to the social order.

Next to its prosthetic meanings, the gun is also a source of pleasure and marvel (Blanchfield 2018: 200) to its carrier. In this context, it is striking that the network formed by the female figure and the firearm functions is iconc, with less interest in action than in the image itself. The gun is displayed as accessory rather than as tool in combat. Turning first to what seems the most common association with guns, the phallus in the Freudian sense, it bears noting that Sigmund Freud makes next to

3 For a sociological perspective on feminism and firearms, see Kelley (2022); on women as soldiers and the meanings of firearms, see Ellerbrock (2013) or Latzel, Maubach, and Satjukow (2011), Deckman (2016) analyzes armed women in conservative US politics, while women in armed resistance and political struggle and transatlantic entanglements have been discussed by Boutron (2016), Johnson (2014), Ledesma Prietto (2017), and Ramirez Chicharro (2019).

4 On female killers and violent women, see e.g. Beardsley (2010), Birch (2015), Chauvaud and Malandain (2009), or Simpson (2010).

no mention of firearms (German »Feuerwaffe«) in his equation of weapons (swords, daggers) with the phallus in the *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920, quoted in Blanchfield 2018: 126–127). In her study of representations of armed women in internet subcultures, Connie Hassett-Walker (2019) observes the need to affirm the gunwoman's femininity *despite* the gun, as non-threatening, as victim and/or mother tasked with care work.

Hence, the gun as commodity also works as an accessory and expression of the self-fashioned female body. Roland Barthes's analysis of the fashionable accessory though the ages, from gold and diamonds to rhinestones, faux pearls and sequins, traces the emancipation of women, from fetishized wives (who exhibited the golden signs of her husband's wealth) to composers of their own outfit. By the 19th century, Barthes argues, accessories like rhinestones mark the choice of dress and make it readable as an ensemble. Monetary worth is replaced by the accessory's reference to dressing oneself as means for self-expression; the accessory »make[s] clothing mean something« (Barthes 2013: 59). Reading the gun as accessory recaptures the figure of the gunwoman as network: While her dress might otherwise by nondescript, the gun on display changes the way she is read and adds new, and different meanings that may range from empowered femininity to misogynistic threat of patriarchy. The gun, we argue, functions as empowering prosthesis and as self-fashioning accessory. It ascribes agency onto her persona by signifying the capacity of self-armament and battle-readiness, it visualizes her potential for negotiating and transgressing gender scripts, and it puts her in conversation with (popular) feminist debates.

4. Representations of Shooting Women in Contemporary Popular Culture

The contributions in this collection analyze the proliferation of gunwomen and their feminist meanings in different cultures and media. Section I »History Reloaded? Reinventing Military and Paramilitary Shooters« takes stock of the return of historical figures in contemporary culture as (suddenly or newly) armed women and discusses the meanings of female soldiers in national memory cultures. Teresa Hiergeist's article »The Difference between a Shooting and an Armed Woman. Representations of Louise Michel's Militancy in Contemporary French Biographies« traces the transformation of the Paris commune revolutionary Louise Michel from public enemy to representative figure of French national history in biographies. In »Re-Arming an American Heroine: Harriet Tubman in Contemporary U.S. Popular Culture«, Katharina Gerund examines the (dis-)arming of Harriet Tubman in popular culture and her subsequent enlistment in debates that range from feminism to black liberation and second amendment rights. Lena Seauve's »Armed Resistance and Femininity. The (Self)Representation of Chilean Gunwomen

in Testimonial Narratives and Fiction about Pinochet's Regime (1973–1990)« delves into the reckoning of Chilean leftist resistance fighters with gun violence in their autobiographical testimonies. Martin Holtz's »The Limits of Empowerment: The Woman Soldier in Kayla Williams's Memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005)« takes a look at a woman's soldier memoir of the Iraq war, exploring the rifle as a tool of a simultaneous empowerment and compensation of powerlessness in a patriarchal military context.

Section II »Violent Societies: Civic Gun Cultures, Gender and Politics« looks at gun subcultures, with case studies from US populist political campaigns, Colombian *narcocultura*, and American gangsta rap. In »›Don't Retreat, Reload‹: Guns, Rugged Femininity, and Insurrection in Republican Women Candidates' 2022 Midterm Political Advertisements«, Axelle Germanaz interrogates the cultural work of shooting female ›soldier-politicians‹ who perform toughness and patriotism, female empowerment and rage at the same time. In »Revenge is ›Beautiful‹? Women's Vengeance in ›Colombian‹ *Narconarrativa*«, Stefanie Mayer points out how the violence of the drug wars in Colombian movies and thrillers forms the national identity and how the modelling of violent female protagonists oscillates between victimization and empowerment. Hana Vrdoljak's »›My Palm and My Trigger Finger Itch, Bitch‹: Gangsterism and Female Hustling in Contemporary U.S. Hip Hop Culture« illuminates how the black female artist Cardi B challenges patriarchal hip hop culture by employing the gangsta code to express self-confidence and independence.

Section III »Firearm Fictions: Media, Genre, and the Making of the Armed Heroine« discusses gunwomen in distinct narratives and media, spanning the romance novel, popular German TV and French and Bollywood cinematic traditions, and mythic superhero revivals in comics and film. With »›On Thursdays We Shoot‹: Guns and Gender Binaries in Regency Romances Novels«, Johanna Kluger reveals how the shooting woman breaks down the strict division between men's and women's spheres in the gendered world of the British Regency romance novel. Stefanie Schäfer's »Cowgirling in Thuringia: The German Police Procedural *Tatort* goes Western« examines the evolution of the female police detective in the *Tatort* series with a special eye on (East) German pop culture adaptations of the US Western myth. Hridaya Ajgaonkar's »Violence and the Good Women of Bollywood« identifies a new type of female figure in Bollywood cinema that unifies moral integrity and sexiness, independent but restricted in her agency. Jörg Türschmann's »Ladies and Arms: Quasi-Objects in Luc Besson's Cinema« explores how armed women in French cinema negotiate the threshold to posthumanism. Mareike Spychala's »Not Citizen-Soldiers but Vigilantes: Superheroines in *The Old Guard*« turns to women saviors in post-9/11 popular culture and to their potential for a feminist interrogation of nation states and their military institutions.

Section IV »Shooting to Kill (Patriarchy):Feminist Gunwomen« examines how representations of shooting women crystallize feminist movements and ideals at

different times. Andrea Feldman's »What is a Painter without a Gun? Nasta Rojc:A Legend for Our Time« reads the Croatian painter's Nasta Rojc's »Self-Portrait with a Rifle« (1912) as modernist feminist rebellion. In »Unpopular Feminism: The Shooting Woman in Irving's *The World According to Garp*«, Simon Dickel discusses the popular narrative's meanings against the backdrop of TERFS and queer theory. Dagmar Ellerbrock's »Armed Women as *Fascinosum Tremendum*: Icons, Structures, and Transformations of Gunwomanship in Western Culture« reviews gunwomanship from a historical perspective and reminds us that civilian and military gun cultures frame the guntoting woman in opposite ways. The volume concludes with Ganna Kolesnyk's »Warrior of the Light: Female Personifications of Ukraine on Mass Media during the Russo-Ukrainian War«, which turns to depictions of the Ukrainian nation state as armed allegory, thus pinpointing the gunwoman's use in art as a pleasuring tool for resistance.

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