Teresa Hiergeist,
Stefanie Schäfer (eds.)

LADIES IN ARMS

Women, Guns, and Feminisms in Contemporary Popular Culture

[transcript] GenderStudies

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Ladies in Arms. An Introduction

Teresa Hiergeist and Stefanie Schäfer[1]

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.).

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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).

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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-

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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).

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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

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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

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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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Section I: History Reloaded?
Reinventing Military and Paramilitary Shooters

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The Difference between a Shooting and an Armed Woman

Representations of Louise Michel's Militancy in Contemporary French Biographical Portraits

Teresa Hiergeist

1. Faces of the Paris Commune

The year is 1871. In the aftermath of Paris' occupation through Prussian troops, the French government has surrendered into signing its own capitulation; resulting in a significant loss of territory and high reparation payments (Merriman 2014: 32). Demilitarization had just begun, when on 18th March radical left groupings took it upon themselves to pillage some cannons deployed within the city; attacking the army and forcing Napoleon III and his advisors to retreat to Versailles (Münchhausen 2002: 149). A Vigilance Committee is established for the purpose of restructuring public life in accordance to radical democratic principles: Political participation shall be possible for everybody, which is why public affairs are discussed in general assemblies, class boundaries shall disappear, and owners ought to be expropriated and factories collectivized (Grams 2014: 40). This alternative form of society lasts 72 days, before being overthrown by Versailles troops in a one-week bloody civil war; leading to the proclamation of the 3rd Republic (Sageman 2017: 149).

For a long time there was barely any room for this revolutionary intermezzo within the French collective memory: After its suppression the Commune is rather demonized and tabooed in the official discourse, it is ostracized as collective madness due to the context of war – an atrocity of degenerated extremists that must not be repeated (Godineau 2015: 126);[1] only communist, socialist and anarchist groups planning a similar subversion (e.g. Lenin organizing the Russian October Revolution in 1917, the seamen of Kronstadt in the Ukraine revolting against Bolshevism, the leftist Spaniards seeing the civil war 1936–39 as opportunity for a political turn)

1 This discursive marginalization is on the one hand due to the skepticism towards leftist projects of society, on the other hand to the experience of collective trauma provoked by the very visible massive killing that took place in the immediate proximity (Brown 2018: 216).

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refer affirmatively to it (Grams 2014: 82–88; Winock 1971: 974). It is only since the fall of the Iron Curtain, since the specter of a ›communist (world) revolution‹ has waned, that the alterization of Paris' Commune within political and media debates has somewhat subsided (Fournier 2013: 13). Paradoxically, the longer it lies back, the more present it is in journals, TV, and the Internet and recently even its instrumentalization for commemorative intentions can be observed. By the 1960s it was not remembered officially with an anniversary, archived material about the period was destroyed and it was rarely mentioned in history schoolbooks (Varley 2021: 240). Today it has become a site of memory: On its 150th anniversary in 2021, many reports and special issues dedicated to the Commune appear in the media, sometimes acquiring a nostalgic tone. Numerous historical novels and comics are released and even T-shirts and souvenirs are sold (Huppe/Saint-Amand 2021: 3). Measures such as the introduction of free, compulsory, secular school or the opening of crèches; controversial achievements of the 3rd Republic, are now steadily attributed to it (Ross 2016: 395). The Commune has arrived at the center of society (Hiergeist/Loy 2021: 9).

A person that embodies this discursive shift impressively, is Louise Michel, a Parisian primary school teacher, voluntary social worker, feminist and key figure of anarchist clubs of the time (Aubrun 2017: 50–53). She supports the Commune from the very beginning, is elected member of its administrative organization, the Vigilance Committee, takes part in the medical care of wounded soldiers (Stone 2020: 58–59), fights armed on the barricades (Gullickson 2014: 843) and is sent into exile in New Caledonia after the suppression, where she is subjected to forced labor until the amnesty in 1880 (Winock 2001: 535). In the period following 1871 she is often denounced in public debate as a dangerous terrorist and hysterical criminal; the bill of indictment, for instance, calls her a demagogue and warmonger, a »wolf greedy for blood« whose »infernal machinations« are to blame for the death of many persons (Michel 2014: 415).[2] However, in the context of the recent boom of memory she has become a sort-of role model, is celebrated in media (optionally as republican, feminist, humanist, federalist or anti-colonialist hero) and was even pantheonized by François Hollande in 2013 (Verhaeghe 2016: 7, 592, 598). This article traces the transformation of Louise Michel from public enemy to a representative figure of French history, it carves the discursive constructions of this process and in particular deals with her active role as a soldier in combat. Therefore, it begins with the reconstruction of the stereotype of Louise Michel as shooting woman; in order to then subsequently contrast it with different representations of her within three recently published biographical works.[3] The aim is to gain an insight into the specificities of the commemoration of women's violence.

2 »louve avide de sang«, »machinations infernales« (translation T.H.).

3 The biographical portrait is chosen, because it is a popular genre that ideally interlinks social and individual events in an objective and coherent way and is therefore predestined to satisfy

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2. The Stereotype of Louise Michel as »a Shooting Woman«

Louise Michel is known in France as the woman, who fought on the barricades during the Paris Commune. This topos makes it difficult to determine the factual degree of her armed engagement, as almost all historical documents about her are ideologically motivated and distorted in one way or another or turn out to be retroactive constructions. It is indisputable that Louise Michel was a highly active anarchist. She joined political debates almost every day (Casey 2015: 163), wrote numerous propagandistic texts and poems (Verhaeghe 2021: 4), took part in demonstrations against the government (Gullickson 2014: 837–852), called for strikes and at times has even been said to have had an assassination attempt in mind surrounding Napoleon III (Aubrun 2017: 57). During the occupation and the Commune, she was not only involved in humanitarian efforts (she accepted the children of refugees in her school, provided their families with food and clothes and cared for the wounded), but also in military operations; presiding over the Women's Vigilance Committee, that – among other things – debated combat strategy. She was sometimes seen wearing the uniform of the National Guard[4] and joined in in street battles (Kilian 2008: 152).

Imposing a radical democracy through violence seems to have been a matter of course for her. When she thematizes the years around 1871 in her *Mémoires*, her militant language pervaded by battle songs (Michel 2015: 109) and war metaphors (she speaks about »the supreme fight« and cries for »vengeance« (Michel 1981: 142, 87) and idealizing a fundamental subversion (Hart 2004: 170; Zékian 2015: 1112) (»my north, where my compass finally pointed, was the Revolution«, »I was consecrated to the Revolution, and it was true. All of us were its fanatics« (Michel 1981: 9)[5]) is striking. There is no bad conscience and no shame linked with the explicit promise to intransigently get conservative and bourgeois opponents out of the way, quite the contrary: »Don't make me out to be better than I am – or than you are. I am capable of anything, love, or hate, as you are« (ibid.: 197).[6] Precisely because she is a woman, this is stressed elsewhere, Louise Michel considers herself particularly appropriate for an uncompromising armed battle:

> A supposedly weak woman knows better than any man how to say: »It must be done.« She may feel ripped open to her very womb, but she remains unmoved.

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the demand for the confrontation with the own history, that is characteristic for the heritage-boom since the 2000s in a productive way (Korte/Paletschek 2009: 10–14).

4 According to her autobiography, she used different soldier uniforms in order to bypass the roadblocks flexibly (Michel 2015: 107).

5 »[L]e nord, c'était la Révolution«, »j'étais dévote de la Révolution. C'était vrai! n'en étions-nous pas tous fanatiques?« (Michel 2015: 55).

6 »Vous le voyez bien, amis, je suis capable de tout, amour ou haine; ne me faites pas meilleure que je ne suis, et que vous ne l'êtes!« (Michel 2015: 109).

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> Without hate, without anger, without pity for herself or others, whether her heart bleeds or not, she can say, »It must be done.« such were the women of the Commune (ibid.: 67).[7]

Two things may have influenced Louise Michel in her self-representation as a radical fighter: Firstly, the fact that she had already become a leftist legend in lifetime and wanted to motivate her companions through her determined example, and secondly, the fact that the struggle for gender equality was a lifelong central concern for her (Aubrun 2017: 57). By showcasing her intrepidity on the barricades she hoped to offer unmistakable proof of the aptitude of women for politics and, thereby, blow up the limitations of the patriarchal society – also with a view to the imminent new form of society.[8] Her description concerning the cooperation of the two Vigilance Committees is, accordingly, utopian:

> I was always at the men's [committee], because its members included some Russian revolutionaries. […] I belonged to both committees, and the leanings of the two groups were the same. Sometime in the future the women's committee should have its own history told. Or perhaps the two should be mingled, because people didn't worry about which sex they were before they did their duty. (Michel 1981: 58)[9]

The smooth cooperation between men and women evoked here is questioned by the existence of two separate committees and by the historical testimonies of male soldiers of the Commune who were perplexed to find women massively rising to speak in political debates and claiming to take part in the combats (Geber 2013: 120).[10] In their opinion, they should take care of the wounded, supply them with water, food

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7 »La femme, cette prétendue faible de cœur, sait plus que l'homme dire: Il le faut! Elle se sent déchirer jusqu'aux entrailles, mais elle reste impassible. Sans haine, sans colère, sans pitié pour elle-même ni pour les autres, il le faut, que le cœur saigne ou non. Ainsi furent les femmes de la Commune« (Michel 2015: 107).

8 Accordingly, she uses a militant rhetoric to bring up the hierarchy between men and women calling out the lack of women's education with strategical disarmament: »Jamais je n'ai compris qu'il y eût un sexe pour lequel on cherchât a atrophier l'intelligence comme s'il y en avait trop dans la race. Les filles, élevées dans la niaiserie, sont *désarmées* tout exprès pour être mieux trompées: c'est cela qu'on veut. C'est absolument comme si on vous jetait à l'eau après vous avoir *défendu* d'apprendre à nager, ou même lié les membres« (Michel 2015: 69, emphasis added).

9 »[J]'étais toujours à celui des hommes, parce que ceux-là tenaient des révolutionnaires russes. […] [J]e continuais d'appartenir aux deux comités dont les tendances étaient les mêmes. Celui des femmes aussi aura son histoire, peut-être seront-elles mêlées, car on ne s'inquiétait guère à quel sexe on appartenait pour faire son devoir« (Michel 2015: 102).

10 Some of them were even against the voting right or other forms of political participation for women (Boime 1995: 165).

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and munition, but preferably not carry and use weapons (Hart 2004). Women should be allowed to participate in the new society, but that was not to say that all male domains should be right open for them. Regarding this background, Louise Michel's self-representation as a soldier is part of her feminist concerns.

Aside from herself, French media and politics at that time were also very interested in the accentuation of her militancy. Following the Commune's passing, elites sought out to set themselves distinctly apart from it and the violence priorly exercised by communards was scandalized systematically (Merriman 2014: 60–63). Thus, Louise Michel's portrait appears in Cesare Lombroso's studies about revolutionary and political criminals, whereby a complete lack of morals is attested to her physiognomy (Verhaeghe 2018: 12–15). Others proclaim her mentally ill, arguing from a psychoanalytical viewpoint that her frustration about her unmarried and childless state had veered into political radicalism (Gullickson 2014: 845). It is inherently her sex that makes Louise Michel a predestined example of the undesirable Other, because it permits to kill two birds with one stone: Since back then, the conception of a female's tendency to moral weakness, criminality and psychopathology was widely spread, her stylization as an icon of the Commune permitted both to devaluate left-wing radicalism as erroneous and illogical and to stoke fears of the entry of women into the political field (Krakovitch 1997: 521–523).[11] It was particularly this discursive link with political and social power interests that has promoted Louise Michel's stereotyping as an armed fighter within collective imagination.

3. Contemporary Representations of Louise Michel as »an Armed Woman«

During the transformation of the commemoration of the Paris Commune within French contemporary culture – mentioned in the beginning; a significant contrast to this stereotype can be observed, as Louise Michel's armed engagement is increasingly tabooed. This will be exemplified by the analysis of three biographical portraits published since the year 2000, *George et Louise* (2000/2002), *Le temps des cerises* (2006)

11 Likewise, women having fought during the Commune, were brought to court more rarely than their male combatants and the tribunals judged them relatively mildly on the grounds that they were not fully responsible. Only the most revolutionary and active among them were condemned, invisibilizing their political engagement (Krakovitch 1997: 523). This also applies for Louise Michel who is sentenced to deportation, although she required her execution in court several times, because she wants to give her life for the revolution like her mal companions (Verhaeghe 2016: 194–195).

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and *Louise Michel. Non à l'exploitation* (2014).[12] The first text is a commemorative novel for adults, both other two narrations are addressed to juvenile readers and their history teachers.[13]

3.1 Louise Michel's Republicanization in *Georges et Louise*

Michel Ragon's *Georges et Louise* outlines Louise Michel's complete life story, her participation in the labor movement, her fight during the Paris Commune, her captivity in the New Caledonian penal colony, her return to France and her exile to London. The basic idea of the text is – as its title indicates – to show her life in intellectual and emotional relation to the prime minister of the 3rd Republic, Georges Clemenceau, putting her into direct moral conflict regarding the republican value system. She is portrayed in an exclusively positive, and sometimes even heroic manner; as a responsible citizen standing up for workers' rights and speaking out against impartial tribunals. When she passes out bread to the poor, helps marginalized women to become emancipated, when she is wrongfully[14] arrested and condemned because of unjust laws;[15] she embodies – so to speak – equality and fraternity and appeals to the representative democratic readers' sympathies. This culminates at the end of the text showing her funeral: The 2000 guests, the present politicians and the police escort do not present her as member of a destructive splinter group but rather make her out to being a national hero situated at the center of society.[16]

Regarding the representation of violence, *Georges et Louise* opts for a trivializing strategy. Louise's executions of reactionaries during the Commune are mentioned very briefly and stylized as acts of mercy à la Robin Hood. It is commented: »To prevent the killing, she killed…« (Ragon 2002: 27). Also, it is stressed that she supposedly rushed to help anyone she had wounded and provided medical care (Ragon 2002: 27).

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12 Since the effects of the changes in the commemorative culture on the representation of female violence are examined here, texts having a determined memorial intention have been chosen for the analysis.

13 Both narrations are followed by an annex that gives an overview about the historical facts, biographical references, and other auxiliary material.

14 According to the text, Louise Michel is innocently accused, because she has supported the robbery of bread in a bakery and is sent to jail for five years after a not very objective investigation and a tendentious process (Ragon 2002: 100).

15 It is said that the *lois scélérates*, the laws adopted in 1893 and 1894 in reaction to a serie of anarchist assassinations are »laws to suppress the anarchist and labor activity« or that »the London congress made an anarchist out of me« (»lois pour reprimer l'agitation anarchiste et syndicale« (Ragon 2002: 156), »le congrès parlementaire de Londres m'aurait fait anarchiste« (ibid.: 176).

16 It is underlined several times that socialists and anarchists of that time have not been so different, having followed the same intentions and having suffered the same repressions (Ragon 2002: 129, 176).

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The fact that Louise sympathizes with anarchist terrorists is mentioned, but directly relativized: »She idealizes the French anarchists, but at the same time she admits to adoring Queen Victoria of England« (Ragon 2002: 162), making her extremist attitudes appear rather accidental and less serious.[17] The intention of republicanization is so central, that it replaces her militancy completely.

3.2 Louise Michel's Goes Bourgeois in *Le temps des cerises*

Le temps des cerises. Journal de Mathilde (1870–1871), written by Christine Féret-Fleury, is part of the Gallimard collection *folio junior: mon histoire*, which presents biographies of both real and fictitious famous women at different points in world history. When Louise Michel is given a place next to canonical personalities such as Catherine de Medici, Catherine II of Russia, Empress Elisabeth of Austria and the wife of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, this is only accurate; primarily appearing in the charitable role of a teacher and children's nurse. Her life story is told in diary form from the perspective of the orphan child Mathilde, who is beaten, robbed, exploited, and disdained by her environment, before Louise gets her off the street, gives her shelter, food and clothes, and jollies and alphabetizes her. This act of kindness has resolute priority over Michel's political engagement. She, for example, puts off a planned revolutionary attempt, when Mathilde – who is significantly a little bit agoraphobic – faints during a demonstration (Féret-Fleury 2021: 11–12). Other moments also show her in no hurry to overturn the system with her maintaining: »There will be other occasions« (ibid.: 83).[18]

Louise is characterized as »good, generous, formed« (ibid.: 138),[19] she could have had a ›fulfilled life as a woman‹ if not for her most striking quality, her tendency to self-sacrifice – which she proves in many direct speeches: »Tidy myself up? Take care of myself? Sew a braid to my hat? While the people are suffering, hungry and groan under the oppression? […] I do not have time for that« (ibid.: 13).[20] These attributions and declarations may make clear that Louise is adapted to a bourgeois value system, whereby she is dissociated from the economic middle-class presented as superficial and egotistical, gravitating towards the more humane, informed and educated middle-class.[21] At this, she acts in concert with the members of the Bernard family, that out of charity gives free singing lessons to Mathilde, before they flee Paris during its

17 In the text, Louise is not a doer, but rather the static embodiment of republican values, particularly as her portrait is more a report than a narration.

18 »Il y aura d'autres occasions«.

19 »bonne, généreuse, instruite«.

20 »M'arranger? Prendre soin de moi? Coudre une garniture à mon chapeau? Alors que le peuple souffre, qu'il a faim, qu'il gémit sous l'oppression? […] [J]e n'ai pas le temps«.

21 This bourgeoisification matches with the diary form, which is a genre of the bourgeois culture, the plot, which tells the salvation of a destitute working-class girl by education and so-

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occupation, and even offer to adopt her. Thus, the narration instrumentalizes Louise Michel – following the tradition of the social novels of the 19th century –[22] to celebrate the virtues of the bourgeoisie.

But what about the compatibility between this representation and her stereotype of the armed soldier? The fact that Louise carries a gun during the occupation and the Commune, is explained by the novel as to being a requirement during the war situation at that time and a part of nationalist civic duties, after all, Paris is encircled by hostile Prussians (Féret-Fleury 2021: 99), and Louise stresses: »I will only use it to defend myself« (ibid.: 126).[23] She carries a weapon, without using it.[24] Consequently, there is no moral problem, when Mathilde begins to follow her example: giving soup to the soldiers (ibid.: 127), transporting the wounded to medical facilities, handing the gun of a killed soldier over to a fit one. These altruistic activities form the humanistic opposite pole to martial killing, which is presented as an unwanted exterior fatality. The battles of the Commune are only mentioned figuratively, when – in a letter to her friend Clara Bernhard – Mathilde states:

> I have discovered how elevating it can be to fight so that the children who will be born tomorrow will not suffer what I have suffered, hunger, cold, ignorance, dirt, shame… I have discovered the generosity of the people of this district, I have found friends. I have the impression to be useful – a little bit. (ibid.: 125–126)[25]

In this light, it comes as no surprise that Louise's arrest and banishment appear extremely unfair to Mathilde.[26] She sees her as victim of a malicious system, that tramples over the value of the philanthropic self-sacrifice. This simple dichotomy between good and bad obviously leads to the fact that the reflexive figure – and with

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cial advancement and with the accentuation of the regular contact that Louise maintained with Victor Hugo and George Sand, representants of the bourgeois literary canon.

22 Among the characteristics of the social novel rank the representation of the living circumstances of the poorer sections of the population from a bourgeois perspective, whereby the ›poor‹ are determined in their actions by adverse circumstances and middle-class heroes happen to appear, who free them from these adversities in a spirit of charity (Wolfzettel 1981: 4–12).

23 »Je ne m'en servirai que pour me défendre«.

24 Louise Michel is presented on the cover of the book according to the stereotype with a gun. However it is more an aesthetic accessory but a practical tool. Moreover Louise is placed in the background, while Mathilde in the foreground is shown with a hand put on her cardiac region.

25 »J'ai découvert combien il peut être exaltant de lutter pour que les enfants qui vont naître demain ne souffrent pas ce que j'ai souffert, la faim, le froid, l'ignorance, la crasse, la honte… J'ai découvert la générosité des gens de ce quartier, j'y ai trouvé des amis. J'ai l'impression d'être utile – un peu«.

26 Though the narrator is a child, there are no further hints in the texts that suggest an unreliable narration.

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her possibly also the readers – praises Louise and decides to entirely assume the mission had begun by her determination to improve the living conditions of the poor. The novel ends emphatically with the diary entry of December 24: »Miss Louise will come back – I want to believe it. One day, I will be an elementary teacher« (ibid.: 143).[27] Altogether, *Le temps des cerises* confines Louise Michel being, to nothing more than a middle-class moral code and a Christian salvation discourse; defusing her actual postures in many ways.

3.3 Louise Michel's Privatization in *Louise Michel. Non à l'exploitation*

Also Gérard Dhôtel's *Louise Michel. Non à l'exploitation*, a portrait published by *Actes Sud junior* in the collection *Ceux qui ont dit non*, where life stories of politicians, artists and freedom fighters committed to civil society are told, shifts away from the image of the armed soldier. The biography of Louise Michel is narrated from journalist Eugène Berton's point of view, who encounters her, while reporting for the conservative journal *L'instransigeant* – a process against her in 1883, condemning her to perennial imprisonment for having incited several persons to steal bread from a bakery. The text focusses on the personal contact with Louise, in attempt to disavow existing clichés. Contrary to her public image as a »dangerous agitator and ringleader« he perceives her – as he states on the first pages – as »in the first place, a pleasant woman, with a soft voice and eyes that sparkle with intelligence. I was under the spell. The so much feared violent anarchist had seduced me« (Dhôtel 2014, 13).[28] The amorous discourse (presented by the description of her physique and character and the isotopy of eroticism) refutes the atrocity of Louise and even transforms it into a vehicle of passion, since love draws her strength from the integration of spectacular contradictions – in this case the conservative bourgeois and the rebellious radical.[29] This enamored, fascinated gaze of the contemporary, is continued throughout the text. Eugène is not able to free himself from Louise, he follows her activities, arranges certainly sporadic but nonetheless intentional meetings with her at public speeches or in cafés, always presenting her with wordy excuses for not having contacted her more often without there being any signs that she would even have noticed it. Despite their ostensible naivety, both male gaze and male narration form gestures of control objectivizing Louise.

27 »Mlle Louise reviendra – je veux le croire. Un jour, je serai institutrice«.

28 »dangeureuse agitatrice et meneuse«, »femme à l'abord sympathique, à la voix douce, aux yeux pétillants d'intelligence. J'étais sous le charme. La violente anarchiste tant redoutée m'avait séduit«.

29 According to Niklas Luhmann, the incompatibility promotes the cohesive potential of love since the epoch of romanticism (Luhmann 1994: 172–188).

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This correlates to the fact that the qualities that Eugène highlights in his portrait belong to a set of common female attributions within patriarchal societies: he explains her constant rebellion against social inequality based on her exorbitant empathy, which in a way forces her to stand up for the marginalized (Dhôtel 2014: 28–29, 60). Her decision making comes from the heart and not the head; giving them an individual and momentary dimension and making them appear less social and universal. Furthermore, it is insinuated that Louise's love for anarchist Théophile Ferré had been crucial for her participation in the battles of the Commune,[30] whereby it is set out at large, how much she misses him after his death while in New Caledonian exile (ibid.: 44–46). This superiority of the sentimental over the political is also expressed by the framing of the meetings with Louise: They are confidential conversations tête-à-tête conducted in cafés (ibid.: 67).

It goes without saying that Louise Michel's militant engagement during the Commune is difficult to connect to this arrangement. Accordingly, the narration of the events of 1871 is kept extremely short: »Louise battles with her comrades of the Vigilance Committee of Montmartre. They see her, a gun in her hand, at the fortification of Issy, at the barricade of Clignancourt street. She takes care of the wounded, because she is also a nurse« (ibid.: 17).[31] In this sentence, Louise is only holding the gun, she does not use it, but still, the credibility of the image of the armed woman is mitigated additionally by »they see her« – quite contrary to her caring for the disabled soldier, who is easily remembered occupying the last position. Insofar the integration of Louise Michel in a heterosexual narration of courtly love puts attention on her sex, privatizes and devaluates her political engagement and marginalizes her armed activity.

4. Conclusion

Over the past years the commemorative practice – with respect to the Paris Commune – has changed, resulting in a tendency becoming perceptible in which Louise Michel is integrated more and more discursively into French national history. Linked to this approximation to the societal center her biography is not only republicanized, rendered bourgeois, and privatized in contemporary biographical portraits (for children), but also adapted to patriarchal gender roles, whereby the contradictions to her anarchist and feminist attitudes, that arise in this context,

30 This sexualization is a constant factor in the representation of Louise Michel (Marmo Mullaney 1990: 307).

31 »Louise se bat avec ses camarades du Comité de vigilance de Montmartre. On la voit, fusil à la main, au fort d'Issy, à la barricade de la chaussée de Clignancourt. Elle soigne les blessés car elle est aussi ambulancière«.

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are neglected. The biggest challenge in that respect represents the topos of Louise Michel as an armed soldier during the Paris Commune, highly present in the social imaginary since 1871. By presenting the Commune as a singular episode of her multifaceted life and by downgrading Louise Michel from a shooting to a gun-carrying woman, her radical character is smoothed. Thus, Louise Michel's commemorative rehabilitation mirrors rather nationalist and economic goals and in many ways corresponds to the discursive stigmatization that took place following the Commune. The fact that the analyzed texts predominantly refer to biographies and historical researches about Louise Michel in a more affirmative and less reflexive way, thereby reenacting circulating clichés, furthermore underlines prior statement.

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Re-Arming an American Heroine

Harriet Tubman in Contemporary Popular Culture

Katharina Gerund

1. Introduction

Harriet Tubman is firmly enshrined in the collective memory of the United States and generally embraced as an American heroine of mythical proportions. Through children's books, statues, and other products of memorial culture, she is predominantly known as a formerly enslaved activist, who was born Araminta »Minty« Ross in 1822 and successfully escaped to liberate and remake herself as Harriet Tubman. She became a prominent abolitionist, as well as one of the most effective ›conductors‹ on the Underground Railroad, i.e. the network of routes, safe houses, and anti-slavery activists that helped enslaved people escape from the US South. Known as »Moses« at the time, she led around 70 people into freedom, and she was turned into a heroine of biblical proportions and a powerful icon of resistance, defiance, and bravery. Despite her omnipresence in US culture, depictions frequently reiterate a standard narrative of her biography, centering on her abolitionist work. More recent discourses, however, have begun to turn to her later life in substantial ways, covering her activism for women's rights, her advocacy for disabled persons, as well as her involvement in the Civil War.

The Combahee River Raid (1863), for example, made her »the first woman to plan and execute an armed expedition during the Civil War« (Larson *Harriet* 2004: 212). This event inspired the name of the Combahee River Collective, an influential Black feminist organization active in the 1970s, and it offers a compelling historical origin narrative for Black feminism in the US. In contemporary culture, Tubman's role in the Civil War is broadly recognized: It is acknowledged in Arlington Cemetery's Military Women's Memorial, fictionalized in Elizabeth Cobbs' 2019 novel *The Tubman Command* (Arcade), and covered in scholarship such as Edda L. Fields-Black's forthcoming study *Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War* (Oxford UP 2024). Recent revisionist depictions of her life and work in popular culture may still resort to the well-known aspects of her life, but they significantly modify the way Tubman is remembered by re-arming her. In doing so,

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they not only work towards normalizing Black female (radical) agency within mainstream popular culture but also offer ambivalent, less sanitized portrayals of Tubman that seek to humanize the legend at the same that they affirm her (legendary) status as American heroine. Drawing on select case studies, I will analyze how exactly they instrumentalize firearms to re-negotiate the meanings of Tubman in US culture. These recent texts build on long-standing scholarly and activist efforts to provide an account of Tubman's life that does not merely re-hash the established narrative but rather indicates its full scope and complexity. In 2004, leading Tubman scholar Kate Clifford Larson asserted that

> [w]e all *believe* we know Harriet Tubman […]: slave, famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, abolitionist, spy, nurse, and soldier. Her dangerous, yet successful secret journeys into the slave states to rescue bondswomen, men, and children have immortalized her in the minds of Americans. […] Yet, very little is *really known* about Harriet Tubman. (»From« 45, emphases mine)

With only a few historical sources and studies dominating the discourse, Tubman's life and work have become shrouded in myth, and there has been »a need to rediscover Harriet Tubman, to separate reality from myth and to construct a richer historical account of her life« (»From« 2004: 50). Larson's own work as well as biographical studies by Jean M. Humez (*Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*, 2003), Catherine Clinton (*Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, 2004), or Kerry Walters (*Harriet Tubman: A Life in American History*, 2020), and the collection *Harriet's Legacies: Race, Historical Memory, and Futures in Canada* (ed. by Ronald Cummings and Natalee Caple, 2022) have been essential to this ongoing reassessment of Tubman's life and activism. Milton Sernett points out the magnitude of this endeavor even within the national context of the US as he explains that »by learning about Harriet Tubman and her place in the American memory, we learn about ourselves as American people«. Referencing David Blight, he argues that she »may be America's *most* malleable icon, with significance for much more than how we are to remember the nation's struggle with the issue of slavery« (2007: 3, emphasis mine). Walters elaborates that Tubman had, in fact, »disappeared for years from public memory after her death in 1913 – the first disremembrance – only to be further hidden from view, when she finally resurfaced as a heroine in children's books, by fanciful stories and charming legends that often have little grounding in fact – a second disremembrance« (2020: vii).[1]

As cherished and mostly uncontroversial heroine celebrated in countless children's books and in US memorial culture, she was literally and metaphorically dis-

1 Milton Sernett explains that, in fact, »Tubman is the subject of more children's books than any other African American historical figure« (2007: 22).

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armed: Juvenile literature tends to focus on her youth and her work on the Underground Railroad and, in this context, the pistol she actually used to carry is frequently substituted by a lantern, or she is even left empty-handed in order to make her into a decidedly non-violent role model ›appropriate‹ for young readers. Similarly, memorial culture works to minimize her radicalism and militancy as it turns her into a non-threatening symbol of Black liberation. Franco Barchiesi and Sheneese Thompson explain:

> [A]dding firearms to representation would harm the master's narrative, for which such details are specifically troubling to the extent they hint to the radical agency of Black people. Harriet Tubman cannot be, without disrupting America's white popular narrative, the palatable »Moses« of the Underground Railroad, and an armed fugitive who liberated other bonded people. […] Distance from Blackness and Black self-determination, and the exorcising of Black revolution […], is what makes Tubman legible enough to be memorialized. (2018: 423)

The symbolic disarmament denies parts of Tubman's identity, limits her agency, and molds her legacy into forms that avoid white discomfort by negating Black radicalism. It also risks distorting and whitewashing historical reality: It is well known, for example, that Tubman used to carry a pistol on her trips to the South (see, e.g. Walters 2020: 94) – for her own protection as well as allegedly to ›motivate‹ her fellow travelers if they would seem to give up during the challenging trip to the North. As a soldier and veteran of the Civil War, she was obviously familiar with the use of firearms *and* willing to fight for freedom. While there are only a few photographs of Tubman, early depictions also include an iconic image that served as frontispiece to Sarah H. Bradford's 1869 biography *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* and that shows her with a rifle prominently and symbolically displayed (fig. 1).

In recent years, and particularly around the 200th anniversary of her birth in 2022, Tubman's appeal as an all-American heroine has been evinced, for example by the efforts to place her statue in the US Capitol[2] and the plans to put her portrait on the $20 bill. Yet, so far, the statue has not been erected, and the plans for the redesign of the US paper currency announced by the then Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew, in 2016 were notoriously delayed under the Trump administration.[3]

2 See: https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7062/text?r=67&s=1. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

3 See: https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl0436. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

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Fig. 1: Frontispiece of Sarah H. Bradford's Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (1869)

Current Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told *The Washington Post* in 2022 that the new $20 bill is scheduled to be out in 2030.[4] Even if or when these new representations further consolidate the status of Harriet Tubman in the collective memory of the United States, they exclusively celebrate the limited, unthreatening, and ›disarmed‹ version of her life and work, a celebration that runs the risk of deflecting from the hardships Black women navigated and continue to face in a systemically racist society. Keisha N. Blain explains that

> [a]lthough Tubman's face will eventually grace the $20 bill, the irony is that her life story brings into bold relief the economic struggles Black women face in American society and the creative ways they have managed to use limited material resources to help – and indeed liberate – others. Harriet Tubman's lived experiences reflect the broader challenges that Black women endured in American society: often celebrated, but hardly ever protected. (2022)

4 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRZNp8IzNuY. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

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While the competing dynamics of sanitizing her image and emphasizing her radicality, mirrored in dis-arming and re-arming Tubman, have shaped the long history of her commemoration in the US, contemporary popular culture has offered a preferred venue to complicate the dominant representation of Tubman. *Ms.* magazine's 2022 Harriet Tubman Bicentennial Project, an online initiative celebrating the 200th anniversary of Tubman's birth, illustrates this trend. It seeks to »[shed] light on the history and legacy of this groundbreaking feminist icon through a history timeline; an essay series by scholars in diverse fields; conversations with Tubman descendants, creatives and experts; a slavery reparations calculator; and original art and poetry« (2022).[5] Similarly, Erica Armstrong Dunbar's popular 2019 biography marks Tubman's agency and determination already in its title: *She Came to Slay: The Life and Times of Harriet Tubman*. The cover art features Tubman with a pistol in hand, and the book is structured into parts entitled »Minty's Story«, »She Ain't Sorry«, »Bawss Lady«, and »Call Me Mrs. Davis«, all of which emphasize empowerment rather than accommodation. The following two case studies, as I will show, similarly intervene into the established narrative of Harriet Tubman's life and attempt to re-shape her public image. With their focus on the Underground Railroad, both the WGN series *Underground* (2016–2017) and Kasi Lemmons' 2019 feature film *Harriet* reiterate the well-known, abolitionist part of Tubman's biography. Both, however, also deliberately re-arm Harriet Tubman as they create a (visual) space for Black female agency on screen. By depicting Tubman as a complex individual, a militant activist, and a gun-carrying freedom fighter, the TV period drama and the Hollywood biopic revise her sanitized public image and, at the same time, bolster her status as historical figure of national importance and as representative of contested ›American‹ values and norms, such as freedom, self-reliance, and the right to bear arms.

2. Larger-than-Life? Harriet Tubman on *Underground*

The first season of the short-lived but critically acclaimed period drama *Underground* (created by Misha Green and Joe Pokaski) follows a group of enslaved people, who come to be known as the »Macon Seven«, on their escape from a Georgia plantation in 1857. It tells the story of the Underground Railroad as an action-packed suspense drama that connects its historical storyline with the viewer's present by, for instance, featuring a soundtrack that includes modern popular music. This extradiegetic music not only draws attention to the fictionality of the show but also comments on the action and connects it in implicit and explicit ways to the contemporary moment. The series' first season opens to Kanye West's »Black Skinhead«, for its second season Beyoncé's »Freedom« sets the tone. Episodes feature songs that cover a range

5 See: https://msmagazine.com/tubman200/. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

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of genres (hip hop, rock, pop) by artists such as The Weeknd, X Ambassadors, or John Legend, who serves as executive producer of the show. Legend also co-wrote the theme song »Heaven's Door« which epitomizes the mixture of traditional and contemporary music that is characteristic of the show's score (Butler »What's« 2016).

The music confirms what Legend proclaimed in terms of the connection between *Underground*'s historical setting and current discussions around systemic racism and anti-racist activism: »You can't divorce what's happening now in American race relations from the period of slavery because so much of the context for how the country thinks about race was established during slavery« (quoted in Butler »What's« 2016). Vann R. Newkirk II writes in *The Atlantic* that *Underground* constitutes »perhaps the most watchable and rewatchable media about slavery yet« that »[explores] America's most autobiographical apocalyptic quest story« (2016); and Mary McNamara states in the *Los Angeles Times* that the show »tells a story we have not seen, a story we need to see: how so many overcame such large obstacles to not just escape, but to also help others to escape« (2016). Combining elements of prison-break, heist, and quest stories as well as of action thriller, period drama, and soap opera, *Underground* indeed turns to a neglected aspect of the well-rehearsed story of enslavement as told through Hollywood films and television. It does feature the expected scenes depicting the cruelties of plantation life and chattel slavery and includes white supporters of the abolitionist cause as identificatory characters for white (liberal) viewers. Yet, the agency of the enslaved characters, their individual complexity, their community, as well as their plans to escape and fight for liberation take center stage.

Harriet Tubman appears as a character that is legendary and larger than life and, at the same time, firmly embedded in a community of mostly Black and female activists. This representation affirms her status as a historical figure of mythical proportions while also indicating the human being ›behind‹ the myth. Nominally a marginal member of the show's cast, Tubman's presence is frequently invoked by other characters and looms large over the narration. The show thus creates suspense, critically comments on the myths surrounding her, and asks viewers to interrogate their previous knowledge about the historical figure. The audience first encounters the fictional Tubman in the final scene of season one: Rosalee (played by Jurnee Smollett-Bell), a lead character and one of the Macon Seven, has successfully escaped and meets Tubman in a scene that links the two women and foreshadows that Rosalee will step into Tubman's shoes and become an infamous ›conductor‹ on the Underground Railroad in her own right in season two. The first appearance of the historical figure clearly marks Tubman's mythical dimensions (fig. 2). We only see her silhouette against the sun, in a low angle shot that has her towering over Rosalee (and us as viewers). As she promises Rosalee to teach her the abolitionist work of the Underground Railroad (»how to steal slaves«), her face cannot be seen. Tubman reaches out to Rosalee (and viewers) and invites her (and us) to join her in the Black liberation struggle. The camera shows the two women's hands locked into

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each other as Tubman helps Rosalee out of the carriage, in which she was hiding, and viewers only catch a quick glimpse of Harriet Tubman as it zooms out of this final scene. The rifle is crucial for viewers to identify Tubman even before she says her name; it makes her silhouette immediately recognizable. Her larger-than-life image literally precedes her introduction, her outreached hand, and her joining the recurring cast of characters in season two.

Fig. 2: Tubman's first appearance
Underground, S1 E10: »The White Whale« (43:42)

Tubman (played by Aisha Hinds) shows up in the very first episode of season two helping Rosalee escape with her »cargo« (S2 E1: »Contraband«). She is, again, heavily armed, pointing her gun at the slavecatcher; ultimately, in this stand-off scene, she negotiates the »sale« of the escapees (»ten dollars or two bullets – it's your choice« 05:34). The season is set in 1858 and focuses on women as agents of the Underground Railroad and as determined fighters for Black liberation: Rosalee takes on the dangerous task of guiding enslaved people to freedom. She seeks to free her family as well as her partner Noah (played by Aldis Hodge), who is charged with murder after he sacrificed himself for the sake of Rosalee's successful escape. The women of *Underground* are, in general, unafraid, determined – and armed. This is exemplified by the decoy sewing circle that white abolitionist Elizabeth Hawkes (played by Jessica De Gouw) joins and where women, Black and white, organize to promote abolitionism, assist enslaved people in their escape, steal from a church to aid the cause, and do shooting practices (for their protection and self-defense). The group allows for the show to imagine female solidarity across the color line, and it reveals how notions of respectable femininity and an ideology of separate spheres can provide a cover for political activism. Collectively and individually, the women use, but at the same time defy, such gendered logics as they lobby for the cause in public *and* in pri-

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vate as well as through emotional appeals *and* audacious actions. Female agency is further showcased in the notorious and ruthless slave catcher, Patty Cannon (played by Sadie Stratton), who is trying to capture »the most notorious runaway«, i.e. Harriet Tubman, to secure her own legacy (S2 E2: »Things Unsaid«). And, of course, it is epitomized by Rosalee, who gains notoriety as the »Black Rose«[6], and Harriet, who becomes her mentor, offers advice, and even guides her on a mission through voice-over (S2 E2). Especially in the (brief) interactions of these two characters, Tubman is humanized and depicted as a complex individual: The show, for example, references her marriage with John, who re-married after she escaped (S2 E1), it depicts her spells, caused by a head injury, which she reads as God-sent visions (S2 E2), and it makes explicit her resilience and her unwavering belief in God as well as her doubts and hesitations about be(com)ing a leader (S2 E9: »Citizen«).

Most importantly, in episode six entitled »Minty«, *Underground* digresses from its usual script and style and breaks with television's conventions. The highly theatrical episode leaves behind the fast-paced action and suspense-driven stories characteristic of *Underground*. The complete episode, which was labelled »Harriet Tubman's TED Talk« on set (Berman 2017), takes place in a single location, exudes an atmosphere of quiet and somberness, and consists of Tubman giving a speech in front of (mostly white) abolitionists, a crowd which we as television audience join. We listen to her almost hour-long account of her life, which offers a forceful abolitionist plea and takes on the myth-making that surrounds her (Berman 2017). In content and performance, the scene evokes the African American literary tradition of slave narratives as well as the oral testimonies often provided by speakers, who had experienced enslavement firsthand, on the anti-slavery lecture circuit. The episode's beginning already indicates that viewers will get an intimate perspective on Harriet: The camera comes up from behind her as she gets dressed for her appearance – we see her scarred back, witness her button up her jacket, her »armor for the battle ahead« (Framke 2017). The episode then turns into a long monologue that elaborates in a captivating way on Tubman's life journey from enslavement to freedom and its many disappointments. Symbolically, the room turns from gray monochrome to a golden hue as Tubman ends her story of how she escaped enslavement. She defends the controversial stance of John Brown and proclaims: »Slavery ain't just a sin. It's a state of war, profitin' off the bodies of others. Rapin' the bodies of others. Killin' the bodies of others. Those are all acts of war.« And, she ends with a call to arms directed at her audience in the room and in front of the TV sets:

6 The name »Black Rose« clearly evokes another African American female activist, organizer, and educator, Mary McLeod Bethune, for whom the black rose represented independence and beauty, and who herself was »a black rose in the midst of American racism« (Gates/West 2000: 45). Rosalee is thus even further positioned within a long history and genealogy of Black female activism.

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> You gotta find what it means for you to be a soldier. Beat back those that are trying to kill everything good and right in the world and call it ›making it great again.‹ We can't afford to just be citizens in a time of war. That would be surrender. That'd be giving up our future, and our souls. Ain't nobody get to sit this one out, you hear me? (53:23)

The reference to President Donald Trump's well-known rhetoric is obvious. It indicates the continuing systems of oppression that shape US society as well as the urgency to fight them in the present moment.

On *Underground*, a militant Tubman promotes a push for violent revolution. This is fleshed out by the series' presentation of Tubman's relation to white abolitionist John Brown, whose legacy and commemoration continues to be contested and who has also received renewed interest in contemporary popular culture, such as in James McBride's 2013 novel *The Good Lord Bird* that has also been turned into an eponymous 2020 drama mini-series (see, for example, Haase/Schäfer 2019). Brown was convicted and executed for treason and is still sometimes labelled a terrorist and madman. However, more often he is seen as a religious zealot and staunch abolitionist, who is at least partially recuperated as »America's Good Terrorist« who committed »patriotic treason« or celebrated as a hero, »the man who killed slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded Civil Rights«[7]. On *Underground*, Tubman endorses Brown's agenda and plans for violent insurrection, the capture of the arms depot at Harper's Ferry in 1859, which is often seen as a major prelude to the Civil War. This depiction of Tubman, which is characterized by militancy and militarization indicated through her pronounced use of firearms and her rhetoric of war, stands in stark contrast to the palatable image of her that is fashioned in children's stories and textbooks. She challenges the white privilege of her listeners as well as any comfort they may find in imagining themselves on the ›right side of history‹ – then and now. Actress Aisha Hinds explains the episode in an interview:

> The theme of this entire season is ›citizen versus soldier.‹ So while Harriet is talking to this intimate group of abolitionists, she's also talking to the […] audience outside the television screen. […] [S]he is talking to our entire nation, to this entire world, and challenging people to consider what their position is: Are you just going to be a citizen and observe the injustices that are rampant in our world, or are you going to be a soldier and engage in a way that is necessary for us to break down the systems that are trying to oppress us as a people? (Berman 2017)

7 See, for instance, Charles P. Poland's *America's Good Terrorist: John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Casemate 2020), Evan Carton's *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (Free Press 2006), and David S. Reynold's *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (Knopf 2009).

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Underground celebrates the actual heroes and heroines of the Underground Railroad and the fight for freedom, predominantly through its Black, female, armed protagonists. Laura Dubek argues that its »significance […], beyond its portrayal of black people actively resisting oppression, lies in its insistence that freedom is a choice and that slavery, and by extension all institutions of oppression, damages everyone« (2018: 73). Harriet is shown building a legacy as a fighter for Black freedom and mentor to Rosalee (and others), as the mastermind behind many abolitionist activities, and as the fabled target of slave hunters. With the exception of episode six and her mission to rescue Rosalee in the penultimate episode, she is a character with comparatively little screen time, which is also indicated by Aisha Hinds being credited as »guest star« rather than as part of the regular cast of the show. However, Tubman is frequently ›present‹ in the narration as looming spiritual leader even without actually appearing – e.g. as characters refer to her advice or recall her instructions while on a mission.

As a form of »resistance TV« (McFarland 2017) that shows »what revolution looks like« (Butler »Want« 2017), *Underground* carefully balances its representation of violence, and Tubman stands at the center of this dynamic: While the women of the sewing circle are initially portrayed as less militant than John Brown's men (see esp. S2 E3: »Ache« and S2 E4: »Nok Aaut«), Elizabeth, fueled by anger, slowly adopts a more radical and potentially violent stance. In »Citizen« (S2 E9), Tubman tells Noah: »This war we're fightin' need man [sic] like you« (34:58). And: »Ain't nothin' great ever happen based on fear or sense. You gotta be desperate and insane. You got to believe« (35:10). This statement resonates with John Brown's raid and the struggle to classify his actions, and it fits well with Tubman's endorsement of his plans as she advocates for setting what usually counts as good reason aside in a fight that requires firm belief. Following »Citizen«, the final episode of season two is entitled »Soldier«, marking the contrast between citizens and soldiers as well as the possible transformation of regular citizens into soldiers forced to fight for their freedom from oppression by any means necessary. It escalates the war rhetoric and narrative, especially as the resistance group picks up guns instead of trying to run in a desperate situation (»We ain't running. We got guns« 27:14). The episode is framed by John Brown's infamous raid on Harper's Ferry – Tubman learns about his plans at the very beginning through a messenger, but we do not see her response to Brown's request to join her. Instead, in the final flashforward of the season, it is Elizabeth who is placed at the scene of the raid. Tubman is depicted as a heroine of mythical proportions, but the show equally portrays her as a complex individual, a militant activist, and a gunwoman who follows her religious belief to save herself, her people, and core American values as enshrined in the »Declaration of Independence« and violently fought for in the revolution. Perhaps most importantly, the period drama places the historical figure within a community of fictive and fictionalized like-minded peo-

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ple. In doing so, *Underground* emphasizes the collective efforts to end enslavement in addition to celebrating the individual heroism of Harriet Tubman.

3. »To Be Young, Gifted, and Black«: *Harriet*

Kasi Lemmons' 2019 film is the first feature-length film to focus solely on Tubman. It casts its protagonist in a way that intervenes in mainstream depictions by humanizing the icon, providing her story with context and background, and emphasizing her inner life and revolutionary spirit. At the same time, as a fairly generic biopic, it lionizes its heroine as epitome of American values, and it rehashes the well-known highlights of her escape and her involvement in the Underground Railroad at the expense of depicting her later life in detail. Lemmons outlined her task in the following words: »One of the things that sometimes happens with African American heroes is that their edge gets taken off. They get kind of warm and fuzzy. My mission was to bring Harriet Tubman to life as a young woman when she's doing the most heroic work« (quoted in Hart 2019). Robert Ito notes along similar lines in *The New York Times* that Tubman is portrayed not as the »old woman in a kerchief« that many people might immediately associate with her name:

> Perhaps most jarring, this Tubman is armed and ready to start blasting, something you certainly don't see in all those children's books about her. »Those books defanged her, declawed her, to make her more palatable«, Kasi Lemmons […] said. »Because there's something quite terrifying about the image of a black woman with a rifle« (2019).

In contrast to *Underground*, *Harriet* refrains from »dramatic anachronism or frame-breaking« and »addresses more than the monstrous institution of slavery […]. It also addresses the underlying presumption of white supremacy and its ongoing influence in American politics and culture« (Brody 2019). *Harriet* employs some elements of the action film (esp. in the scenes when Harriet is running, chased by or confronted with slave catchers), but the film's story is mostly told in a melodramatic mode. This becomes obvious with regard to the centrality of music, the visual aesthetics, the depiction of emotions, and its focus on a heroine who fights against external forces and its emphasis on kinship and family (separation) as a venue to negotiate socio-political issues.

The narration hinges on Harriet's transformation from an illiterate slave to an activist and abolitionist leader. »General Tubman« – as John Brown famously called her (see Humez 2003: 34) – is depicted as a steadfast religious believer, an unwavering fighter, and revolutionary. The firearms that Tubman learns how to use, carries, and is clearly unafraid to shoot not only signal historical accuracy, but also

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Black female empowerment and radical militancy. Harriet Tubman (played by Cynthia Erivo) receives her first gun – almost 45 minutes into the film – from the free Black abolitionist Marie Buchanon (played by Janelle Monaé) in an etiquette lesson that really represents gendered spy training. This crucial scene features two empowered and empowering women: The free-born Marie initiates the young Tubman into approximating the ideal of mid-19th-century white, privileged womanhood; an ideal that Barbara Welter has aptly termed »True Womanhood«, the conglomerate of »attributes […] by which a woman judged herself and was judged« encompassing the »four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity« (1966: 152). The scene is revealing with regard to these respectability politics of white womanhood – and their exclusion of Black women. Black women's hyper- and invisibility in different spaces can offer a cover or add to their precariousness, and Tubman receives some hints at how to blend in. It is this appropriation of feminine-coded behavior deemed appropriate for a Black woman that promises to keep her safe during her travels. If she still encounters any problems, Tubman will be prepared by carrying the gun Marie puts into her hand. The firearm is immediately associated with power and freedom, and it provides a stark contrast to any performance of True Womanhood. Harriet's ›feminine‹ cover and the ›masculine‹ prop of the pistol emphasize the double standards and ambivalences in contemporaneous discourses on race and gender. Buchanon shows Tubman how to point the gun – first almost, but not quite at the camera (and thus at us as viewers) and then, as the camera cuts to a different perspective, to the mirror that frames the two women and, in standard melodramatic fashion, reflects Tubman's transformation from fugitive slave to activist liberator (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Harriet points a gun provided by Marie Buchanon
Harriet 2019 (00:44:21)

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It is significant that Tubman only *poses* with the gun here – we do not see her firing it or actually training how to shoot. When she departs on her first rescue mission to liberate her husband John, she is asked for her papers by a white man and puts her training into practice. She reaches for her firearm when he questions her about the information on her forged free papers, but ultimately manages to talk her way out of this situation without pulling the gun. Since John has re-married and started a new life without her, Tubman leaves Maryland without her husband, but instead takes a group of enslaved people, family and friends, with her on the way to the North. When some of them refuse to cross a river, she points her gun at her fellow travelers and lays out the options: »be free or die« (1:06:04).[8] It is not the gun, though, that makes the others follow her: She holds it up and over the water – almost in a gesture of surrender – and starts crossing the river alone, making it through with a prayer that implies God's guidance. Afterwards, she re-asserts her »freedom name« as well as her status as the leader of the group. The scene is crucial for establishing her as *the* Harriet Tubman of Underground Railroad fame. She had taken on this new name following the suggestion of William Still (played by Leslie Odom, Jr.), when he took down her information for his famous Underground Railroad records upon her first arrival at Philadelphia: The last name is her husband's, and the first name honors her mother. As many other formerly enslaved people before and after her, she thus symbolically leaves behind her enslaved self in order to forge a new and empowered identity.

This identity is also increasingly tied to her being armed, and Tubman is repeatedly shown carrying and using firearms to defend herself. In a key scene towards the end of the film, she seeks to facilitate her family's escape and confronts Gideon Brodess (played by Joe Alwyn), the son of her former master and a fictional character not based on a historical person. Harriet draws her pistol, shoots at, and successfully disarms Gideon. In a next step, she not only points his own rifle at him, but also makes him come off his white horse and kneel in front of her, a gesture that clearly has an emasculating effect. The firearms provide the means for Tubman to reverse the usual racialized and gendered social hierarchy between the two characters, and they symbolize this reversal as Tubman exchanges her pistol for the white man's shotgun (fig. 4).

8 This line invokes, of course, New Hampshire's state motto, a phrase that is assigned to General John Stark and conjures up the spirit of the American revolution. It contributes to the film's overall agenda to cement Tubman's status as a quintessential American heroine by aligning her radicalism and militancy with the well-known narrative of the nation's founding.

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Fig. 4: Harriet pointing a rifle at Gideon
Harriet 2019 (1:46:31)

Their dialogue, once again, picks up the question of Harriet's acceptance of social positions, structural oppression, and behavioral norms, such as respectability, when Gideon states: »You could have stayed with us if only you knew how to behave. But you are unruly and untamed« (1:46:39). He further claims not only Harriet as his property, but also fantasizes about their mutual attraction invoking what Christina Sharpe has aptly termed the »monstrous intimacies« (2010) of enslavement. Harriet contests his story, revealing his fantasy work for the distorted illusion that it is and reiterates the essential choice and right for her (and, by extension, other enslaved people) as being »liberty or death« (1:47:33). When he tries to get to her by imagining how she will be lynched for her presumed transgressions, she powerfully prophecies his death on the Civil War battlefield as he fights for the »Lost Cause« and the »sin of slavery«, before she rides away on his horse. The film straddles the difficult balancing acts that many slave authors and orators, including Tubman, also had to perform: telling an exceptional story that can still be seen as representative, emphasizing individual heroism without denying collective efforts, and appealing to a potentially white audience without compromising the efforts and agendas of the Black liberation struggle.

Throughout the film, Harriet's perspective dominates: Many of her visions or premonitions are visually depicted for the audience. The film begins with her lying in the grass before celebrating a moment of joy and hope with her husband when the papers arrive that promise to legally secure her freedom, and it ends not only with the formulaic text inserts that recount a substantial part of Tubman's life in a few sentences, but also with Harriet closing the door to her family home on us to live happily ever after before the closing credits start rolling. *Harriet* celebrates Tubman's determination, her religiosity, and her bravery, and it includes a powerful scene around the Combahee River raid that shows her as a military leader in the Civil War. Its protagonist is depicted as a »young superheroine« (Lemmons quoted in Ito

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2019) and a »militant radical« (Larson quoted in Ito 2019) who did not shy away from the use of guns and violence for the sake of liberation and self-defense.

Kasi Lemmons declared *Harriet* to be not a film about enslavement, but a »freedom film« (Sims 2019) – and the firearm is a central prop intimately connected to freedom. It places Tubman in a tradition of those armed Americans prominently commemorated in the foundational mythology of the US such as settler-colonialists, revolutionaries, and pioneers and within a discourse emphasizing their presumed God-given right to claim and to rule the land. Wielded by those who are chosen by God and represent ›true‹ American values, Harriet's use of arms seems to suggest, the gun or rifle does safeguard more than it endangers; it secures individual (and collective) liberty rather than destroying it. The film draws on the highly visible and straight-forward symbolism of the gun or rifle to mark its protagonist's empowerment, her determination, and her growing radicalism. In doing so, it normalizes female Black militancy and offers a fresh version of Tubman in popular culture, even though A. O. Scott compared it to »those biographies of historical figures intended for young readers: accessible, emotionally direct, and artfully simplified« (2019). While family-friendly in its depiction of enslavement's dehumanizing brutality and, at the same time, bold in its representation of a militant Tubman, *Harriet* also runs the risk of marking the use of firearms as a precondition and armament as a guarantor for freedom. However, showing Harriet Tubman as the precursor of »revolutionary divas« of the Black Power era such as Angela Davis is an important intervention into the way (19th-century) Black womanhood has figured in the cultural imaginary and how it has been constructed on screen (Brown 2010: 116). What Kimberly N. Brown states about Davis' negotiation of her public image also holds true to some degree for the depiction of Harriet Tubman in Lemmons' film:

> Davis enacts Diva Citizenship to achieve »expansive self-actualization« or a radical subjectivity. […] [S]he conceives of her public persona as a performative stance – one in which she not only models revolutionary behavior for women who might want to follow in her footsteps, but actively attempts to counter media portrayals that highlight her ›enigmatic‹ nature rather than show the connection between her personal life and her politics or depict all facets of her life as »inseparable from struggle.« (2010: 117–118)

The filmic representation of an armed, militant, and determined Tubman can easily be aligned with a long history of Black revolutionary womanhood, but it also connects her further with some of the foundational mythologies of the United States that claim violence as redemptive and armed resistance as essential to securing (white) freedom (e.g. with regard to American independence or the frontier, see Paul 2014). It affirms her status as an American heroine as much as it casts her as a radical fighter for Black freedom.

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4. Conclusion

Both *Underground* and *Harriet* serve as case studies from contemporary popular culture in this chapter to showcase Harriet Tubman's significance as American heroine, the ongoing challenges to her established iconography as (unarmed) conductor on the Underground Railroad, and the increasing recognition of her militant activist work and military service. These representations signal a shift from the mythmaking and the sanitized narratives of her life that have turned her into a powerful symbol yet have confined her life's story to her escape from enslavement and her abolitionist work and/or deprived her public image from her youthfulness, her militancy, and her radical social activism. While both case studies are part of an emerging discourse that provides a much-needed corrective to the dominant image of Tubman, their cultural work is more complicated: The gun-carrying female revolutionary in contemporary popular culture is also a sensationalist figure used to generate attention, and her story is still to a large degree safely contained within the genre of the Hollywood melodrama, the historical context of the mid-19th century, and those canonical stories of Black enslavement and freedom that white America tends to be comfortable with. Within these limits, the two case studies might indicate a growing acceptance of images of Black female radicalism and militancy on big and small screens, and they can be read as an emancipatory move from the controlling images and stereotypes that have dominated Black womanhood in popular culture.

And yet, the question remains how much the militarization of Harriet Tubman and Black womanhood can be viewed as emancipatory if it resonates with the militarization of everyday culture and the precarity of women's lives that – as many (feminist) scholars have shown (e.g. Enloe 2000) – has been ongoing for decades. Black women have recently become the fastest growing group of gun owners in the United States (Aning 2022); and Tubman is embraced by organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) or the Second Amendment Foundation (SAF) as a symbolic figurehead of second amendment rights. An official NRA outlet, for instance, argues that for freedom fighters like Tubman »the right to arms was part of the difference between slavery and freedom« (Kopel 2016), and the SAF, on their website, hailed her as an excellent choice for the $20 bill.[9] The ambivalent, less sanitized image of Tubman that is emerging not only in the scholarship on this important historical figure but that also begins to take hold in popular culture and political discourses reinforces her status as a celebrated American heroine. It also reveals her to be a symbolic figure that can be appropriated for quite different purposes, agendas, and ideologies – ranging from revolutionary heroism to militant protest and from Black (female) empowerment to gun rights.

9 See: https://www.saf.org/saf-says-image-of-gun-owner-harriet-tubman-on-20-bill-is-good-choice/. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

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Armed Resistance and Femininity

The (Self-)Representation of Chilean Gunwomen in Testimonial Narratives and Fiction about Pinochet's Regime (1973–1990)

Lena Seauve

Usted no es mujer, es militante,
¿de acuerdo?
Luz Arce, El infierno

1. Introduction

On September 11, 1973, Chile's democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende, committed suicide during the coup that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power. Agents of the illegitimate new regime immediately launched an extensive and extremely violent wave of political repression against its left-wing opponents as well as many others suspected of opposition. As has been detailed in subsequent truth commissions, abuses were particularly widespread in the first days and months after the coup. The most recent national commission estimates that more than forty thousand citizens were subjected to physical violence at the hands of the regime (Valech Aldunate et al. 2011: 51), a number that includes over three thousand dead and »disappeared« – the *desaparecidos*.

My essay examines three specific narratives centering on left-wing militant (gun-)women coerced into becoming right-wing collaborators: Luz Arce's *El infierno* (1993), Marcia Alejandra Merino's *Mi verdad* (1993), and Arturo Fontaine's *La doble vida* (2010).[1] The first two fall within the genre of the autobiographical *testimonio*, of which I will say more presently, while the third is a novel. Though Fontaine's text is fictional, it describes an author collecting an oral history from a protagonist whose biography bears many resemblances to the experiences of real people. Indeed, those

1 The books by Arce and Fontaine have been translated into English (see list of works cited), and my English citations are from these editions. Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations are my own.

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similarities go so far as to include passages drawn verbatim from the writings of Arce and Merino, among other sources (Blanes 2013: 53–54). Before turning to these works, a few words of historical context are in order.

Chile before the coup had been home to a lively if disparate left-wing scene. While many on the left supported the peaceful, gradual, and democratic shift to socialism (of the sort that Allende embraced at the time of his 1970 election), other leftist organizations had become increasingly more militant throughout the 1960s – a phenomenon that reflected the strong political currents running through Latin America at the time of the Cold War. Some Chilean groups were indeed armed and (at least theoretically) prepared to engage in violence (Donoso 2020: 112). These included branches of the communist *MIR* party (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*), whose members were targeted with particular ferocity by the junta's secret police and death squads from September 1973 on.

Despite the enormously bloody course that the Pinochet regime pursued against its opponents, and despite the stark division it brought to Chilean society, the civic-military dictatorship is considered to have ended peacefully. *La transición* – that is, Chile's gradual shift to democracy – began as early as 1988 when a referendum set a limit to Pinochet's term as president. The subsequent establishment of truth commissions to investigate the regime's human rights violations – the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in 1990 and the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture in 2003 (reopened in 2010) – marked further important steps in this process. Nevertheless, amnesty laws continue even today to hinder the judicial processing of the former regime's crimes. The 1978 amnesty law covering the period from September 11, 1973 to March 10, 1978 remains in effect, even if it is generally no longer applied in cases of human rights violations. One of the *transición*'s most serious flaws has thus been the failure to bring the country's former rulers and enforcers to justice.[2] Not even Pinochet – who led the country for seventeen years and thus bore supreme responsibility for the crimes of his regime – was ever convicted.

The far-reaching and in many cases ongoing impunity of the perpetrators places an enormous burden on their surviving victims. Perpetrators live among victims, and vice versa. Each day potentially brings victims into contact with their former torturers, even under the most banal of circumstances. In response, a very dynamic activist scene has emerged to pursue politics of remembrance; human rights groups actively investigate the fates of the *desaparecidos* and seek out the perpetrators in order to confront them at least publicly (if not legally) with the full extent of their crimes (see Guthrey 2021).

2 See the report of the Federación Internacional de los derechos humanos about impunity in Chile; for more information about the history of impunity in Chile, see also Lira (2015: 147–53).

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The narratives I examine center on women (two real, one fictional) who – as members of left-wing guerrilla organizations – initially resisted Chile's ruling junta but became its collaborators after being imprisoned and tortured. Succumbing to the pressure of extreme violence at the hands of the secret police (the notorious *DINA – Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional*), these women and others like them ultimately betrayed their former comrades.

In an essay exploring novels by Arturo Fontaine and Carlos Franz, Hans Lauge Hansen situates certain Chilean collaborators within the same »gray zone« that Primo Levi described in *The Drowned and the Saved*, his last set of essays on the Nazi concentration camps. It is indeed worth revisiting Levi's reflections on the morally ambiguous »space which separates…the victims from the persecutors« (Levi 1989: 40) in his consideration of the disturbing phenomenon of »privilege« among camp inmates (and the Kapos in particular). Levi stressed that imposed *complicity* and *shared guilt* are decisive factors in continuing all manner of crimes and criminal systems – not just in the camps. Namely, *complicity* and *shared guilt* prolong violence by pushing participants to the *point of no return*. In noting that the microcosm of the camps reflected »the macrocosm of totalitarian society« (ibid.: 48), Levi significantly invited the possibility of applying this observation to other systems as well, most notably to the Soviet Gulag but also to other social systems such as the mafia.[3] Levi also gave considerable attention to the »identification or imitation« (ibid.: 48) that muddies the distinction between victim and perpetrator and somehow places the victim on the same level as the perpetrator: »Many among the oppressed […] were contaminated by the oppressors and unconsciously strove to identify with them« (ibid.: 48). At the same time, he warned against confusing the murderers with their victims – a reading he likened to »a moral disease« and a »precious service […] to the negators of truth« (ibid.: 48–49).

The Chilean example, as an extremely violent inner-state conflict, offers a particularly broad swath of *gray zone*, a terrain riddled with ethical ambiguity. Some victims became perpetrators, and much as Levi described it, collaborators were – often against their will – inexorably bound to the ruling authority and its crimes:

> [C]ollaborators who originate in the adversary camp, ex-enemies, are untrustworthy by definition: they betrayed once and they can betray again. It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back. (ibid.: 43)

3 At the same time, Levi stressed the singularity of the Nazi camps, emphasizing the total absence of »some form of […] corrective« there: »Some form of reaction, a corrective of the total tyranny has never been lacking, not even in the Third Reich or Stalin's Soviet Union. […] Only in the Lager was the restraint from below non-existent and the power of these small satraps was absolute« (Levi 1989: 47).

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The *complicity* and *shared guilt* that Levi identified as the perpetrators' prime emotional (and juridical) tools of turning victims into collaborators utterly bar the path back to their own identities, forestalling any possible return to moral integrity.

Without detailing here the highly complex and controversial debates surrounding transitional justice in general and the Chilean government's handling of the past in particular, one thing must be noted: that the will to establish a functioning state as quickly as possible via peaceful *transición* involved suppressing many traumas associated with the dictatorship. These have not been sufficiently addressed, neither legally nor in any other respect. One especially fraught open question is how to interact with those who were both the regime's irrefutable victims and its (forced) collaborators. With these figures, it is less a matter of specific legal prosecution than of channeling violent emotional reactions and the strong subjective sense of injustice. As Mihaela Mihai states in her book *Negative Emotions and Transitional Justice*:

> Resentment is a reaction triggered by injustice committed *against oneself*, while indignation results from witnessing injustice *against another* [...]. As evaluative emotions, i.e. as emotions that presuppose a moral judgement, they bear normative weight and qualify as legitimate objects of concern for any democratic order. (Mihai 2016: 7)

In a fledgling democracy like Chile's, faced with inadequate transitional justice, the importance of finding an outlet for such emotions can hardly be overstated. Often the complex dynamics of the gray zone in particular cannot be addressed within a legal context. For this reason, emotional reactions and moral judgments are negotiated in other areas of society, for example in literature. (This of course does not apply to the impunity of those perpetrators in the Chilean military who could have been subject to legal persecution were it not for the protection of the aforementioned amnesty laws.)

2. Sincerity, Guilt, and Confession: The *Testimonios*

The three (real and fictional) female protagonists of the texts I analyze here were involved in armed underground resistance groups at the time of Pinochet's coup. Arce and Merino authored their narratives in 1993 within the specific context of the first National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (the Rettig Commission). Their reports fall within the scope of the narrative genre of the *testimonio*, which literary scholar John Beverley defines broadly as

> a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the

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> real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a »life« or a significant life experience. Testimonio may include…any of the following textual categories, some of which are considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or »factographic literature«. (Beverley 1989: 12)

Beverley specifies that »unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness« (ibid.: 14). This lack of »literary« quality is corroborated for example in the typography used for Merino's text; the abundance of names in bold print stresses the intent to provide as much information as possible about perpetrators and victims, making names easy to find even for readers who merely skim its pages. Both her text and Arce's aim to provide as sincere (if admittedly subjective) a report as possible.

A deeply Christian understanding of truth and forgiveness guides both accounts. Chile has traditionally been a Catholic country, despite the official separation of church and state in 1925. The role of the Catholic Church during Pinochet's dictatorship is considered ambivalent, because parts of the military appealed to a conservative Catholicism. However, large sections of the clergy more or less openly opposed the dictatorship, supported the politically persecuted, and made human rights violations public. Against this background, it is only consistent that after the transition, Bishop Sergio Valech headed the first of the government-appointed truth commissions. Considering the central role of the Catholic Church for the opposition in Chile, it is not surprising that it is specifically the confessional form that offers Arce and Merino the only possibility of restoring their shattered images of themselves. Drawing on this currency of the truth – sincerity – Arce and Merino seek to purge the shame associated with collaboration and betrayal. Arce describes how conversation with a Catholic priest made it possible for her to verbalize her shame for the first time:

> Aside from my husband and children, Father Gerardo was the first person I trusted at that time in my life. He is one of the few people with whom I can just be, without barriers or being fearful. He was the first person to hear my confession and accept my shame. (Arce 2004: 324)[4]

For the authors of both *testimonios*, the complete shattering of their identities was twofold: their experience on one hand as victims of extreme violence (of torture,

4 »El padre Gerardo fue la primera persona, además de mi esposo e hijos, en la cual confié en esa etapa de mi vida. El es una de las pocas personas frente a las cuales puedo simplemente ser, sin defensas ni temores, el primero en recoger mi confesión y mi vergüenza« (Arce 2004: 339–40).

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dread of reprisal, and the associated traumas) and their even more complex experience as perpetrators. For both women were forced to endure years of terrifying collaboration with those they had previously considered their mortal enemies, both ideologically and physically. To save their own lives, they committed acts of treason that included not only betraying their cause but also assisting in the arrest, torture, and murder of former comrades.

This much is clear: the life stories of Arce and Merino are hardly the clear-cut narratives of left-wing heroic resistance. Literary scholar Jaume Peris Blanes writes:

> [T]he cases of Luz Arce and Marcia Alejandra Merino do not, if anything, inspire identification, and a community or any collective project of political identity can hardly be built around their example. Let us not forget after all that they are survivors, but that in the mind of the Chilean left they stand above all as traitors, collaborators, and informers. (Peris Blanes 2006: 164)[5]

It is precisely to address the judgment of the modern Chilean left that Arce and Merino seek to address this largely unspoken accusation of complicity. The concept of complicity, in the aforementioned sense that Levi used it, has in recent years become increasingly popular in research contexts involving ambivalent relations of violence. In their edited volume on complicity, Cornelia Wächter and Robert Wirth distinguish the concept of complicity from that of compliance. The difference, they say, lies in how current norms are viewed; »compliance« implies a perspective of approval, whereas »complicity« is viewed more critically (Wächter/Wirth 2019: 3). The notion of complicity, understood as a rhetorical concept that can be used to calibrate political narratives, may be particularly useful in the context of the Chilean dictatorship. As Wächter and her colleagues note, it is a nuanced concept that allows for degrees and gradations (ibid.: 3). The moral evaluation of an actor involved in a violent process by the respective recipients of that violent event may differ according to the degree of complicity ascribed to them (by themselves or by others). In this light, we must pay special attention to the narrative purpose of the texts in question, both intradiegetic and extradiegetic.

5 »Porque los casos de Luz Arce y Marcia Alejandra Merino si algo no convocan es la identificación, y no es precisamente en torno a su ejemplo como puede construirse una comunidad o algún proyecto de identidad política colectiva. No olvidemos que, después de todo, son supervivientes, pero sobre todo sus figuras funcionan en el imaginario de la izquierda chilena como traidoras, colaboradoras y delatoras«.

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3. Fictionalization and Testimonio as Part of Memory Culture

As in many other countries emerging from totalitarianism, Chilean fiction processing the traumas of state-inflicted violence began to appear comparatively recently. Fontaine's *La doble vida* was first published in 2010, just a few years after Carlos Franz's acclaimed *El Desierto* (2005). A period of latency – the time that passes between a (violent) historical event and its fictionalization – often also allows for re-presentation or re-imagination of trauma within a framework that aesthetically and politically transcends the eyewitness account.

In a brief »documentary bibliography« at the end of *La doble vida*, Fontaine includes the *testimonios* of Luz Arce and Marcia Merino among the many texts and documentary sources he »made use of« in writing his novel. It is not my purpose to explore here the intertextuality of the novel as such.[6] Rather, I wish to examine the intersection of gun violence and femininity in these works against the backdrop formed by the dynamics of individual and collective guilt and confession.

In her influential work on »remembrance culture«, literary scholar Aleida Assmann notes that »remembering and forgetting are cognitive activities that can be attributed not only to individuals but also to collectives such as groups, societies, and states« (Assmann 2013: 16).[7] However, this current of collective memory is repeatedly exposed to criticism, which refers to the »identity-political use of memories on the part of minoritarian and disadvantaged groups« that »strengthen separatist tendencies and thus endanger national cohesion […]« (ibid.: 143).[8] For this reason, memory culture often becomes contested ground, pitting different interpretations of the past against each other.

In Chile, the continued impunity of those who served under Pinochet in the armed forces and intelligence services contrasts starkly with the ongoing trauma of the victims and their survivors. Memory culture – not only in Chile – is often much more concerned with violence *suffered* than with violence *perpetrated*: »The one-sided focus on negative reference points in the past«, writes Assmann, »is usually accompanied by a privileging of the victim experience that defends suffering as a precious possession and important symbolic capital« (ibid.: 143).[9] Violence that has been perpetrated, on the other hand (apart from violence that is presented as

6 Jaume Peris Blanes has done this in his essay (2013).

7 »Erinnern und Vergessen [sind] kognitive Tätigkeiten […], die nicht nur Individuen, sondern auch Kollektiven wie Gruppen, Gesellschaften und Staaten zuzurechnen sind«.

8 »[D]en identitätspolitischen Gebrauch von Erinnerungen seitens minoritärer und benachteiligter Gruppen, die separatistische Tendenzen stärken und damit den nationalen Zusammenhalt …] gefährden«.

9 »Die einseitige Konzentration auf negative Bezugspunkte in der Vergangenheit geht meist mit einer Privilegierung der Opfererfahrung einher, die Leiden als einen kostbaren Besitz und wichtiges symbolisches Kapital verteidigt«.

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heroic) is usually presented as a »necessary evil« and marginalized in the culture of remembrance.

One strategy for retrospectively marginalizing totalitarian violence is to construe it as individual excess. In the Chilean case, too, blame for the state-ordered, organized violence of the Pinochet era has (in some quarters) been redirected toward the criminalized, aberrant individual in an effort to preserve the continuity of the state and maintain its legitimacy.

The texts by Arce, Merino, and Fontaine are simultaneously testimonial accounts (bearing witness to violence suffered) and confessions (of violence inflicted and/or betrayal committed); this double function renders their respective narrative purposes difficult to grasp. Luz Arce's *El infierno*, the first of the three texts to be published, draws on the long tradition of Christian confession. Its last section describes in detail its author's turn to God, a focus reinforced by the framing of the text, which is introduced by a clergyman, José Luis de Miguel: »*The Inferno* is a confession that also seeks conversion, catharsis, reconciliation, and the triumph of truth…« (xv).[10] Arce wrote and published the text after she had already officially testified before the truth commission. Her legal testimony, which provided information about the *DINA*'s crimes and represented an important contribution to the potential legal persecution of the perpetrators, was therefore already complete at the time of publication. *El infierno* serves a different purpose: restoring its author's own identity and correcting the public's understanding of her as a traitor.

At the time of her arrest by the *DINA*, Arce had been a militant supporter of the Chilean Socialist Party, the SP. For her part Marcia Alejandra Merino was one of the few female leaders of Chile's *MIR* party of the revolutionary left. Her text, *Mi verdad*, is less extensive and detailed than Arce's account but it, too, shares the Christian confessional component that marks Arce's text – albeit in a less pronounced way. Merino describes her decision to tell the truth, despite her fear of revenge from the *DINA*'s successor organizations, as »mi camino hacia la libertad« (Merino 1993: 138) – her path to freedom. This »freedom« presumably has several layers: freedom from shame, freedom from fear, and freedom after years of imprisonment, both physical and psychological.

The narrative situation that unfolds in Fontaine's novel is based on altogether different premises. The protagonist, Lorena, declares that she cannot forgive herself, nor does she expect others to forgive her. Even though she, too, consents to tell her story, she rejects the Christian dimension of guilt and confession entirely, choosing as her point of reference a Dantean devil instead:

10 »El Infierno es una confesión que busca, además, conversión, catarsis, reconciliación, triunfo de la verdad« (Arce 1993: 17).

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> The Devil doesn't repent and yet he cries, he cries hopelessly. There is something undignified about repentance and the desire for forgiveness, something Christianoid that bothers me. The Devil, even in defeat, stays faithful to himself and to his own contradiction… He is the supreme traitor. (Fontaine Talavera 2014: 33)[11]

Fontaine structures his narrative around one long interview between an unnamed writer and the exiled protagonist, who is dying of cancer in a Stockholm hospice. Irene/Lorena recounts her life story so he can novelize it; in return she receives money from him that she intends to give to her estranged daughter in Chile.[12]

In her analysis of confessional texts, Johanna Schumm states, »Literary confessions […] are determined by three moments: Addressing, self-exposure, and healing« (Schumm 2013: 9).[13] These elements are present in all three texts, albeit in different forms. Merino and Arce clearly »address« the Chilean public, especially their former comrades on the Chilean left, even though the palpable Christian element in both texts makes God their ultimate addressee. For her part, the character of Irene/Lorena addresses a single interviewer but is aware that her story will ultimately reach a larger public. In all three texts, the »self-exposure« extends to intimate bodily details, for example in descriptions of rape; even though certain elements may remain hidden, the gesture of extreme exposure is evident. As for the »moment« of healing, it is conspicuously absent from Fontaine's novel, whereas for Merino and Arce, the writing of the texts themselves becomes part of the healing process. Irene/Lorena's character knows that she will not heal; cancer has already destroyed her body, and she harbors no hope that her account will promote any kind of spiritual healing.

4. The Depiction of Guns and Gun Violence

The violence in Fontaine's novel forms a sort of triptych: the protagonist is first introduced as an armed resistance fighter, engaged in the act of shooting; in the second phase she becomes a prisoner and a victim of torture; and in the third she (again) exerts (gun) violence, only now as a collaborator with the regime. The protagonist

11 »El Demonio no se arrepiente y sin embargo llora, llora sin esperanza. Hay algo indigno en el arrepentimiento y el deseo de perdón, algo christianoide que me molesta. El Demonio, incluso en la derrota, sigue siendo fiel a sí mismo y a su propria contradicción. […]. Es el traidor insuperable« (Fontaine Talavera 2010: 40).

12 The economic dimension of this trade as well as the central role of economic factors within the novel as a whole have been analyzed by Ksenia Bilbija.

13 »Literarische Bekenntnisse […] sind durch drei Momente bestimmt: Adressierung, Selbstentblößung und Heilung«.

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(or, more precisely, the narrator who interviews her) stages herself as an armed and thus powerful woman, both before and after she changes sides.

This contrasts markedly with the witness texts of Arce and Merino, who only very rarely present themselves bearing arms. Most of the instances Arce describes involving guns are indirect, for example a scene that took place just before the coup in which her lover gives her his gun as a farewell gift before he leaves for Cuba: »He gave me ›la negrita‹, which is what he called his CZ-635 pistol. He put it in my hands and said, ›Other than you, this is what I love most‹« (Arce 2004: 14).[14] The weapon is her male lover's token of love and a fetish object at the same time, as indicated by the gun's female name and its explicit type designation. At the time of the coup, Arce and a few comrades attempt – against party orders – to join the fight, but they soon realize that they have no chance: »If we had had more weapons, perhaps, but as it was, it would have been very irresponsible to take them along« (ibid.: 20).[15] After the coup, Arce hides weapons and documents in her house. The text even suggests that during her brief time among President Allende's personal bodyguards Arce received a kind of basic paramilitary training, which she describes as deficient. Likewise, she admits to having been involved in armed actions before the coup but claims that they were never directed against individuals: »It is true that I did participate in armed confrontations. I am not trying to defend this, but I do want to clarify that the GEA never tried to kill anyone« (ibid.: 11).[16]

Merino's much sparser account contains even less gun violence. At no point in her report does she comment on her own involvement in armed resistance. She describes her duties as purely administrative. Of being armed after the *DINA* forced her to defect, Merino tersely comments: »Finally, as a *DINA* officer, I was given a handgun, for my own defense against possible attack. I carried it for a while, but I never used it.«[17] Whether or not Arce's and Merino's statements are true – and their accounts have widely been deemed plausible – both authors downplay the aspect of militancy, and with it, their involvement in gun violence.

Both of the witness texts therefore omit a crucial (first) phase of violence: the violence perpetrated during the period of resistance, prior to arrest. Moreover (in contrast to the description in Fontaine's novel), Arce and Merino's narratives contain absolutely no account of any violence they themselves perpetrated during their time as *DINA* collaborators (which would correspond to the third phase of violence

14 »Me entregó ›la negrita‹, como llamaba a su pistola CZ-635. La puso en mis manos diciendo: Aparte de ti, es lo que más quiero« (Arce 1993: 33).

15 »Si hubiéramos tenido más armas, quizás, pero así habría sido muy irresponsable llevarlos« (Arce 1993: 39).

16 »Es efectivo que participé en acciones de propaganda armada, no es mi ánimo legitimarlas, sólo deseo dejar claro que el GEA nunca atentó en contra de personas« (Arce 1993: 30).

17 »Finalmente, siendo funcionaría *DINA* me entregaron un arma corta, para mi defensa frente a una eventual agresión. La llevé durante un tiempo, pero nunca la usé« (Merino 1993: 103).

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in Fontaine's novel). Rather, they report only on the violence they witnessed. As Arce and Merino describe them, their tasks in the *DINA* consisted first exclusively in identifying their former comrades so that they could be detained – and subsequently tortured and »disappeared«. (Although their violence is only indirect, these acts of betrayal did of course contribute to the crimes of torture and forced disappearance, something both authors acknowledge.) In later stages, their work for the *DINA* included political analysis and briefing intelligence officers on communism.[18]

The violence Arce and Merino describe focuses entirely on what corresponds to the »middle phase« in Fontaine's novel: their respective experiences as victims of torture and coercion. Fontaine flanks his protagonist's account of being victimized with descriptions of violence she perpetrated on either side of the torture divide – that is, both before and after Irene/Lorena switches sides. His tripartite presentation of the narrative of violence completely shifts the emphasis from the victim's experience to that of the perpetrator.

Like Arce and Merino, Fontaine's fictional character has also provided testimony before a judge, but later she explains to the novel's narrator that she had deliberately concealed her own involvement in violent acts in order to avoid prosecution. The implicit suggestion here is that Arce and Merino – two of Fontaine's acknowledged sources for the novel – did the same.

While Arce and Merino's *testimonios* are confessional texts focused on explaining the reasons for their acts of betrayal (namely, torture and fear), Fontaine's text works the other way around. It highlights the violence perpetrated by the protagonist. The very first pages of the novel offer a detailed description of her participation in a bank robbery leading up to her arrest.

> I knew I needed to draw my gun right away… and I found in my hand a trembling Beretta that was already threatening the cashier… I was pointing my gun at the cashier… she was unresolved. In spite of my Beretta, which was still shaking a little bit, not a lot, as I tried to keep it steady. Ridiculous, I told myself, in a well-trained combatant like me… I hit the woman in the teeth with the butt of

18 Other *testimonios* by female resistance fighters include accounts of receiving weapons training, especially in training camps in Cuba. While armed struggle was indeed part of the strategy of certain anti-Pinochet groups, and bank robberies took place as part of the so-called supply and expropriation operations, most of the fighters' work, even underground, consisted of organizational and political activities.

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> my Beretta. It made a loud noise. The sound of teeth. (Fontaine Talavera 2014: 109–10)[19]

Our perception of the protagonist is influenced by the fact that the first scene in which she appears features her as an armed, violent woman; the so-called primacy effect ensures that the first information a text gives is better remembered than details introduced later.

Weapons in general play an important role in Fontaine's novel. They are frequently named – with explicit type designations – and described in detail.

> Samuel had to… cover us with his Kalashnikov, which was easily capable of reaching a human target three hundred yards away. It's dependable, that gun. For rapid fire, it's the best. It's so easy to use. I know that gun by heart. The Polish AKMS, too, the one that has a folding stock and is a little lighter. (ibid.: 112)[20]

This description establishes the protagonist as a well-trained and experienced fighter with a fascination for weapons and violence. Fontaine also recounts her ideological and physical training, stressing her eagerness to be taught the use of arms from the very beginning. In Fontaine's text, guns exert an almost erotic fascination, especially among women, which corresponds to a stereotypical representation of guns as phallic symbols:

> [T]here were two long, black, brand-new 7.62-caliber AKMSs with collapsible stocks, made in Poland. »I'd like to pet them«, Pancha told me with a deliberately sensual smile… There are some guns that are beautiful, don't you think? And is it possible to separate their beauty from their function? (ibid.: 150)[21]

The phenomenon of a woman's desire to kill is also present here in the explicit linking of the beauty of the weapon to its purpose, killing. After her arrest, while awaiting

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19 »[P]ensaba que tenía que sacar mi arma sin demora… y encontré en mi mano una Beretta temblona que ya estaba amenazando a la cajera… Pero no se decidía. Pese a mi Beretta, que seguía temblando algo, no mucho, mientras yo intentaba estabilizarla. Algo absurdo, me decía, en una combatiente bien adiestrada, como yo… La golpeé los dientes con el cañón de la Beretta. Sonaron clarito. Sonido de dientes« (Fontaine Talavera 2010: 115–16).

20 »Samuel debía […] cubrirnos con su Kalashnikov, capaz de alcanzar con facilidad un blanco de humano situado a trescientos metros. Es confiable esa arma. Para disparar en ráfaga es lo mejor. Su manipulación es tan sencilla. Me conozco esa arma de memoria. También los AKMS polacos, los de culata plegable que son un poco más livianos« (Fontaine Talavera 2010: 118).

21 »[E]ran dos largos y oscuros y flamantes AKMS calibre 7,62 de culata plegable, fabricados en Polonia. Me dan ganas de acariciarlos, me dijo Pancha con una sonrisa buscadamente sensual… Hay armas que son bellas, ¿no encuentras tu? ¿Y sería posible separar esa belleza de su función?« (Fontaine Talavera 2010: 155).

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more torture in a secret detention center, the protagonist escapes into dreams of handling weapons. Later, once heavy torture has transformed »Irene« into »Lorena« – a torturer herself and an armed agent of the regime – it is merely the logical continuation of a suite of violence and counter-violence. She describes her involvement in armed operations as an exciting, positive emotional and physical experience:

> Once, an urgent mission had come down to our cell: clear out a safe house that had been marked… Agents of the repression were en route. It could be necessary to shoot. And this very Lorena was there. So you'll see… I went in disguise, and carrying my service weapon, my 9-mm CZ… I was pleased to hear my heart pounding again in anticipation of action. I was alive. It was an intense moment. I was consumed by *a thirst for enemies and opposition and triumph*. (ibid.: 192)[22]

The italics in the passage flag the inclusion of a quote from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*, namely the famous passage likening victims to lambs and birds of prey to perpetrators, where Nietzsche argues that birds of prey cannot be blamed for their natural inclination to snatch lambs. The reference makes clear that Lorena's motivations have less to do with the political justifications for violence than with the Nietzschean premise of the strong exerting power over the weak.

In the guise of a taboo-breaking novel that critically explores the *gray zones* of Chilean memory culture, Fontaine's book ultimately measures poorly against the sparse and comparatively restrained witness texts it acknowledges in its bibliography. Its notably intense descriptions of gun violence, much like its extensive descriptions of female sexuality (of which I will say more in the next section) betray an unfortunate – and I would argue *uniquely male* – tendency to lean on the worn and persistent cultural trope of the woman-at-arms. Where Arce and Merino (and arguably the other authors of the other first-person accounts Fontaine »made use of« for his novel) openly acknowledged that they were prepared to use violence for their political ideals but ultimately did not, Fontaine falls back on a long-lived, general stereotype: of the psychologically compromised, sexually promiscuous, and violent armed women.

Martina Thiele has examined this stereotype in a different historical context, pointing out that Nazi propaganda introduced the pejorative term *Flintenweib* (roughly, »machine-gun wench«) to demonize women serving in the Red Army. And negative portrayals of armed women have indeed persisted beyond the World War II context, for example, in the West German media's stigmatization of women involved

22 »Una vez nos tocó levantar una casa de seguridad que había sido marcada… Los agentes de la repre estaban en camino. Podía ser necesario disparar. Y esta Lorena estuvo ahí. Para que veas… Partí caracterizada y con mi pistola de servicio, mi CZ de 9mm… Me gustó de nuevo mis palpitaciones antes de la acción. Estaba viva. La intensidad repletaba el momento. Me recomía *una sed de enemigos y de resistencias y de triunfos*« (Fontaine Talavera 2010: 194–95).

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in the militant left-wing *RAF* (Red Army Faction) in the 1970s, as Clare Bielby has noted. There are interesting parallels between how *RAF* women were maligned in the German media of the day and Fontaine's fictional depiction of his (presumably Chilean) gunwoman – although the exact historical context and level of violence that the *RAF* women faced cannot be compared with the immense violence faced by members of the Chilean resistance. From a (male, establishment, conservative) perspective, the type of the left-wing woman as an armed revolutionary signifies a double threat, not only to the patriarchy but also to liberal consumerist society. For this reason, *La doble vida*'s orientation toward an international audience and the author's tendency to generalize beyond the specific Chilean context further justifies a comparison of Fontaine's mechanisms of representation with the German press's tendency in the 1970s to demonize the female members of *RAF*.

5. The Representation of Female Sexuality

Whereas Merino's testimonio contains a few (very discreet) references to love and sexuality, Arce comments quite openly on the subject:

> [T]he most frequent question was how I managed sexually, whether I masturbated or what. The truth is that if there was one thing I never felt, it was the desire to have a sexual relationship with someone. I needed affection, tenderness, companionship, to feel understood. That, yes, and a lot of it. (Merino 1993:149)[23]

Unlike the relationship the fictional character Lorena conducts with her supervisor, Luz Arce describes an intimate relationship a *DINA* officer later pursued with her as a forced liaison involving unequal partners. She openly mentions other affairs during her fifteen-year association with the *DINA* but emphasizes that those relationships were never about desire or sexuality – she even mentions suffering from anorgasmia. Rather, they were always connected to her need for affection and tenderness. She emphasizes following a principle of never selling herself (sexually) but only giving herself away when she felt so inclined (Arce 1993: 264). This attitude is in clear contrast to that of Fontaine's fictional protagonist, who repeatedly refers to herself as a prostitute. He portrays her as a sexually active woman both before and after she defects, a person defined primarily by her body, her desires, and her

23 »[L]a pregunta más frecuente era cómo me las arreglaba en el plano sexual, si me masturbaba o qué. La verdad es que si algo no sentí jamás fue deseo de relacionarme sexualmente con alguien. Necesidad de afecto, de cariño, de compañía, de sentirme entendida. Eso sí y mucha« (Merino 1993: 167).

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physique, which is repeatedly described.[24] The narrator's male gaze is only superficially (and not very convincingly) couched in Lorena's own voice: »[W]as I turning into a whore?… I looked at my breasts in the mirror as if they were my very being. I thought: If my soul existed it would be in my breast[s]« (Fontaine Talavera 2014: 143–44).[25] It is lustfulness in a traditionally negative sense that brings about her perfect and thorough incorporation into the *DINA*, for it enables her to become the mistress of one of the officers. Her only apparent power is the sexual desire she is able to trigger in others: »And he looks back and then lowers his gaze to my breasts and then returns to my eyes. I have him, I feel it… ›I have them‹, I think to myself… I look at Flaco and at Jerónimo. I've got these fuckers now« (ibid.: 158–159).[26] Her pseudo-power eventually gives way to total submission to the point of self-sacrifice and self dissolution: »I want to obey him and please him and them, to please them all until there is nothing left of me, just a stain…and something breaks inside me and I cross an invisible barrier…« (ibid.: 159).[27]

The protagonist's sexual promiscuity serves moreover as an entirely predictable metaphor for her political unreliability. Irene/Lorena is first introduced as a psychologically unstable, pleasure-seeking woman with father issues, a woman whose commitment to the revolution stems at best from her taste for (sexual) adventure. She repeatedly addresses the question of whether she has prostituted herself. She has one of the *DINA* agents buy her clothes, and in explicit contrast to her time in the leftist resistance, describes her pleasure in finding herself beautiful and seductive in the luxurious fabrics. Lorena's relationships with different intelligence officers are furthermore determined by material elements. She is given a Lancôme make-up set and new clothes; one of her lovers drives a brand-new Volvo and wears Ray-Bans; the other rides a Harley Davidson. She constantly drops brand names into her account. That she ultimately sells her life story is consistent with this logic and also betrays its protagonist's political convictions, completing the picture of her as a consumerist fetishist (Bilbija 2015: 305), not only but especially with regard to weapons.

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24 Paradoxically, her body also plays the decisive role in the torture scenes that stage her as a victim. The female body holding the firearm is simultaneously the locus of a series of extremely different discourses oscillating between female agency and the loss of female agency; female desire and female violence are juxtaposed with male voyeurism and male violence.

25 »¿Me estaría volviendo medio puta?… contemplaba mis pechos en el espejo como si fueron yo misma. Pensé: si existiera el alma, estaría en mis pechos« (Arce 1993: 148–49).

26 »Y él me mira pero baja la vista a mis pechos y vuelve a mis ojos. Lo tengo, siento… Los tengo, me digo… Miro al Flaco y a Jerónimo. ¡Como los tengo a estos carajos!« (Arce 1993: 163–64).

27 »[Y]o quiero obedecerle y complacerlo a él y a ellos, y complacerlos hasta que no quede nada de mí, salvo un borrón… y algo se rasga en mí y atravieso un cerco invisible« (Arce 1993: 164).

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6. Conclusion

The different (non)stagings of gunwomen in these three texts is rooted in their different narrative purpose and thus in their narrative strategies. While the *testimonios* of Arce and Merino are plainly intended to restore identities broken by torture and years of forced collaboration, Fontaine's novel tells a completely different story. His female protagonist's defection to the side of the enemy, though presented as a rupture, turns out on closer inspection to be consistent with her (fictional) character. Moral deficiencies mark her from the very beginning and continue uninterrupted through the novel: her (female) lustfulness, which goes hand in hand with masochistic inclinations; her uncritical fascination with luxury goods; her attraction to dominant men. The physical and psychological pressure of torture merely catalyzes a preordained development – betrayal – marked here with typically female traits. Viviana Plotnik has examined Fontaine's collaborator character in terms of Stockholm Syndrome. This psychologizing aligns with Fontaine's interpretation of the testimonies, for it too ultimately denies armed women any political agency. Plotnik concentrates her analysis on the violence suffered (and its individual psychological consequences) without addressing the deliberate pathologization, sexualization, and depoliticization in Fontaine's Lorena character.

Fontaine casts the type of the armed leftist resistance fighter as a traitor not only to her comrades but also to her values. By foregrounding her promiscuity and consumer fetishism so explicitly, he exposes her former political beliefs as mere pretext.

Fontaine is »making use« of the authentic experiences (and the actual words) of real women who were tortured and raped by the secret police in Chile merely in order to tell a general story about a violent, sexually depraved, politically dishonest woman. Specifically, he (ab)uses the accounts of real torture to make his description of a woman being (sexually) tortured more »authentic« and more interesting to (male) readers. And by this he (as an author) does much the same thing that his narrator does: engage in voyeurism. Already at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist confronts her unnamed interviewer with his voyeurism: »Enough, isn't it? Let's leave it at that. I don't want to go on. It's too much. I don't like your curious eyes, I don't like the corners of your mouth; there's something obscene about them« (Fontaine Talavera 2014: 16).[28] And indeed, the narrator's portrayal amply confirms the accusation. His gaze turns the protagonist into a victim after all, the victim of a voyeuristic *mise-en-scene* that treats her as a stereotypical Lady in Arms.

28 »¿Basta, no? Dejemos esto aquí. No quiero seguir. Es demasiado. No me gusta tu mirada curiosa los comisuras de tu boca no me gustan, un dejo obsceno« (Fontaine Talavera 2010: 24).

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The Limits of Empowerment

The Woman Soldier in Kayla Williams's Memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005)

Martin Holtz

1. Introduction

When thinking about guns and their potential for empowerment vs. their potential for destruction and suffering, one finds the most explicit and pronounced manifestation of this dialectic in war. War can provide profoundly diverse manifestations of agency, ranging from a notion of *disablement*, expressed in victimization, immobilization, traumatization, and death, to *enablement*, expressed in the perpetration of heroic, courageous, skillful, and powerful actions of assertion and dominance.[1] The US's recent wars in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and Iraq (2003–2011) have illustrated this range, starting out with a display of utmost military domination culminating in a quick and, as it turned out, farcically premature sense of George W. Bush's proclamation »mission accomplished«, only to grind on in a display of incompetence, military and moral failure, and ending in the catastrophic futility of abandoning the conflict after rekindling aggression. The conflicts showed that the destructive force of war lastingly sabotages a sense of empowerment, given the limitations of constructive interaction between the involved parties after the initial military victory. Hence this victory was a moment of pseudo-empowerment, as the very military superiority which made it happen also sowed the seeds for its quasi-defeat a grueling 20 years later, the destruction of the enemy resulting in the lasting destabilization that would consume victors and vanquished alike. This »grand narrative« of America's recent wars has a quasi-synecdochic relevance for the focus of this contribution, which aims to show how the gun as an icon of the military promises empowerment for a female soldier – only to end up signifying defeat.

1 For more on the negotiation of agency in war see Holtz (2019: 1–6, 33–46). See also Peebles, who describes the experience of military life in similarly dialectical terms of »freeing« and »limiting« (Peebles 2011: 20–21).

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While the amount of cultural responses to the wars in literature, film, and other media, have been steadily growing since 2003, there has been little academic recognition of these texts. Lockhurst, for instance, claims that there are »no definite literary texts [that] have emerged from the overlapping contexts of the invasion, the Iraqi civil war, or the occupation« (Lockhurst 2012: 713), which he explains, writing in 2012, by the war's »odd stage of incompletion« and its »intensely divisive« politics. Deer concurs that what hampered cultural response and contextualization was the wars' »lack of certainty« in the way the US tried to construct various conflicted narratives in its efforts to legitimize them while simultaneously other narratives emerged, which undid these very efforts: »Once the initial rationale for the invasion of Iraq (the country's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction) collapsed, it was replaced by the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda, which foundered in the face of the 2004 Abu Ghraib torture scandal and the failure of the occupation to provide security for the Iraqi civilian population« (Deer 2017: 314). To this assessment of narrative confusion can be added the enablement-narrative of the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 vs. the disablement-narrative of the inglorious departure of US troops from Afghanistan and the reestablishment of Taliban rule in 2021.

What Lockhurst and Deer overlook, though, is that despite this collapse of grand narratives (Deer 2017: 315), there has been a proliferation of small narratives emerging from the wars. Recent years have seen an immense boom in non-fiction writing about the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The numerous accounts by veterans, journalists, and external analysts are characterized by a »narrative drive«, the acute description of combat by means of »scrupulous observation and phrasing« and the urge to convey the exhilaration of the fight while stressing the professionalism of the soldiers (Dyer 2010). The focus is on the active and involved subject whose actions make a difference. Indeed, the memoir has emerged as a master genre in delineating literary discourses of the war. Focusing on three representative soldier memoirs[2], Kieran argues that they »celebrate the soldier [and the institution of the military], justify his

2 These are Nathaniel Fick's *One Bullet Away* (2005), Donovan Campbell's *Joker One* (2009), and Craig Mullaney's *The Unforgiving Minute* (2009). Additionally, starting in the 2000s, the ever-growing canon by male authors includes but is not limited to John Crawford's *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell* (2005), Jason Hartley's *Just Another Soldier* (2005), Colby Buzzell's *My War* (2006), Matthew Burden's *The Blog of War* (2006), Paul Rieckhoff's *Chasing Ghosts* (2006), Marcus Luttrell's *Lone Survivor* (2007), David Bellavia's *House to House* (2007), Matt Gallagher's *Kaboom* (2010), Rusty Bradley's *Lions of Kandahar* (2011), Jessica Goodell's *Shade It Black* (2011), Chris Kyle's *American Sniper* (2012), Sean Parnell's *Outlaw Platoon* (2012), Mark Owen's *No Easy Day* (2012), Brian Castner's *The Long Walk* (2013), Brain Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014), Michael Golembesky's *Level Hero Zero* (2014) and *Dagger 22* (2016), Kevin Lacz's *The Last Punisher* (2016), Nicholas Irving's *The Reaper* (2016), and Clinton Romesha's *Red Platoon* (2016). Though Kieran's arguments are valid for the majority of these texts, some develop a more complex and contradictory image of war and the military than he suggests.

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[sic] violence, define the loss of American lives as the war's only significant tragedy, and refuse to critique the war or the policies that enable it« (Kieran 2012: 66–67). The agency of soldiers is characterized by choice, a noble refusal of privilege in order to serve the country. Combat is non-traumatic, killing the enemy is rationalized as moral necessity and generally informed by carefully weighed moral choice. The military is portrayed not just as a provider of physical and moral education and testing ground for individual capabilities but even as an elite circle surpassing the moral integrity of the nation at large (Kieran 2012: 68–80). War in this narrative is often stripped down to a »classical« scenario of close combat which counters images of the button-pushing drone operator or the cog in a machine. Instead, memoirs play up an old-fashioned warrior image where the appropriate measure of courage, consideration, physicality, selflessness, discipline, and opportunist initiative prevail in heroic fashion, often in the form of rescue missions for fellow comrades, by which virtue is added to the uncompromising destruction of the enemy. In this way, war is salvaged from its perceived futility by constructing it as a showcase for small-scale heroism that is supposed to signify America at its best, and as a scenario of empowerment. If this is the dominant narrative in the soldier memoirs of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, it is certainly not the only one. In contrast, fictional narratives of the wars emanate in the 2010s and portray them in predominantly critical fashion as disabling the capacities of individual soldiers to act morally. Such texts include, for instance, Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011), Katy Schultz's flash fiction collection *Flashes of War* (2013), or Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* (2017).

Published in 2005, Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More than You* belongs to the first wave of non-fictional war memoirs and preemptively deconstructs the enabling narrative of more contemporary examples. Williams exposes the mechanisms of exploitation and corruption lurking behind the lure of empowerment that the military and its loaded icon of the gun, featured so prominently in her title, promises. The book is one of the few memoirs by female soldiers, even if recent years have seen more examples of the kind[3], and the aspect of gender is central to it, as the subtitle *Young and Female in the US Army* signals. The book initially suggests an emancipation narrative, as the military is portrayed as a challenge to prove oneself by joining a »masculine collective« and thereby transcending the limitations imposed upon women by society (Peebles 2011: 49). The military functions as a test of individual determination by overcoming adverse circumstances in an environment that by its very nature of constituting obstacles challenges one to become a »better«, »truer«

3 See Mareike Spychala's pioneering work on female soldier memoirs from the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars. Spychala shows how later memoirs show great diversity in their portrayals of war and the military, and while some of them exhibit a similar critique of entrenched sexist structures, they also follow the enabling narratives of their male soldier counterparts.

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self in order to be admitted into an elite circle. This meritocratic ideal of self-improvement is one that the US military has embraced repeatedly, for example in its official recruiting slogan between 1980 and 2001 and revived in 2023, »be all you can be«, suggesting a discourse of enablement and empowerment via disciplining the self.

The feminist discourse of entering and proving oneself in a masculine domain also partakes in the loaded symbolism of guns and rifles. Zeiss Stange/Oyster for example argue that »The gun is only the symbol of male power to the extent we let it be. And as some feminists are finally beginning to realize, it can function as a particularly potent symbol of female resistance to male aggression« as its levelling access to violence »def[ies] conventional gender stereotypes« and »may also open up for her new avenues of self-awareness, new and more truly empowered ways of relating to other people and the world around her« (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 23,28, 29). Similarly, Latzel et al. suggest that the female soldier by wielding a gun challenges »the dualism of male protection and female need for protection« (Latzel et al. 2011: 12, my translation) and gains »empowerment« by the »appropriation of a heretofore exclusively male authority of violence« (Latzel et al. 2011: 32, my translation).[4] Evert (2011) adds that in the military, the rifle and its predecessors, sword and spear, have traditionally been conceived as signifiers of »male autonomy«, demarcating male privileges from female limitations (72, 77), not least because of their phallic connotations as penetrative weapons (79–80), so that the assumption of the weapon in the context of its loaded cultural history becomes a transgressive, emancipatory gesture.

But Williams' memoir shows that the gun and the discursive realms of military and war it represents are pseudo-empowering. It is not just that the military effectively resists female intrusion and acceptance, but also that seeking the agency associated with the gun and the military turns out to be dubious in the first place. As a woman, Williams is confronted with a male backlash against her intrusion, as the military turns out not to replace society's misogyny with meritocratic equality, but to exacerbate it as a highly guarded privilege of male exclusivity. Female soldiers are a disturbance, whose presence requires an internal distanciation to uphold the idea of a realm in which a specifically male identity is acquired, performed, and guarded, which results in labelling, shunning, verbal, and ultimately physical abuse.[5] By de-

4 The originals read: »Dualismus von männlichem Schutz und weiblicher Schutzbedürftigkeit«; and »Das gesteigerte weibliche Selbstbewusstsein, ja die Selbstermächtigung, die hier vernehmbar werden, entstanden aus der Aneignung bis dato exklusiv männlicher Gewaltkompetenzen«.

5 Latzel et al. further explain this dynamic: »Wie sehr die institutionelle Aufnahme von Soldatinnen in die regulären wie ›irregulären‹ bewaffneten Formationen den ›virilen Kern‹ von deren professionellem Selbstverständnis bedrohte, zeigte sich insbesondere in der am weitesten verbreiteten Ausschlussstrategie: der Verschiebung der Herausforderung auf das Feld des Sexuellen. Dabei reichten die Praktiken von der verbalen Diffamierung etwa als soge-

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picting the military as denying the cultivation and fulfillment of individual potential, the book frames it as subverting the »American myth […] of self-realization«, a central narrative in American life writing (Smith/Watson 2002: 122). Instead, the military is shown as an »un-American« institution since it allows and fosters incompetence, mismanagement, and corruption, either keeping the individual from being »all you can be« or, turning the slogan on its head, turning them into a morally reprehensible person: a rapist, a torturer, a killer. The gun becomes the tool which simultaneously seduces the individual into a false sense of agency and turns them into a tool themselves, as its supposed bestowment of a power over life and death becomes a crippling corruptor of moral principles in favor of an automated hostile response, which uses rather than enables individuals for its nefarious purposes. In the context of war, the gun as a tool of exclusionary violence is shown to make matters worse.

Love my Rifle more than You expresses its frustration with this corrupting influence by showing how Williams, Othered herself as a woman in a male environment, exhibits a complex relationship with the local population Othered by the military discourse. She veers between adopting a stance of hostility and recognizing herself in the plight of the Other in moments of identification and empathy. It is in the interaction that Williams develops a sense of self, both in terms of eschewing the obvious identification with her fellow female (and male) soldiers and recognizing the humanity she has in common with the supposed enemy, thereby embedding her sense of identity in values of seeking a dialogue, understanding, and sameness with Others. This relationality emerges as a decisive counter-value to the hostility signified by the gun.[6] In this way, the gun becomes the icon of a misguided and coopted »feminism«, in Laura Browder's words a »shortcut feminism«, which only serves to uphold a destructive ideology instead of promoting structural change.[7] In Browder's argumentation female gun ownership perpetuates precisely those tendencies of harmful and hostile exclusivity which large portions of feminist activism have sought to

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nannte Offiziersmatratze über sexuelle Nötigung bis zur Vergewaltigung. Die weibliche Aneignung von Verletzungsmacht wurde hier mit der gewaltsamen männlichen Demonstration weiblicher Verletzungsoffenheit beantwortet« (Latzel et al. 2011: 34; cf. also Evert 2011: 93).

6 »Relationality« is a feature conventionally and controversially associated with the female autobiography in particular, the ability to encompass into a notion of self the presence of the Other because of a female tendency towards »fluid ego boundaries« (Smith/Watson 2002: 17). Drawing on Chodorow, Stanford Friedman writes that where male life writing tends towards establishing an identity of separation and exceptionality, female autobiographies show a »consciousness of self in which ›the individual does not oppose herself to all others,‹ nor ›feel herself to exist outside of others,‹ ›but very much with others in an interdependent existence‹« (Stanford Friedman 1998: 77). More recent scholarship has challenged the gendered conception of relationality though.

7 Browder analyzes how the gun lobby/NRA targeted women as gun customers in the 1980s with feminist slogans and how feminists resisted this sort of pandering (Browder 2006: 230–231).

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undermine. The gun is a pseudo-feminist key to a world of male privilege, an emancipation by emulation, which by embracing values of exclusionary identity politics only helps to sustain the injustices and inequalities that constitute patriarchy and its reliance on a binary Othering conception of the world in the first place. Williams's memoir illustrates these implications of the woman in arms and illustrates the »failure of the masculine collective« (Peebles 2011: 49) to serve as a sustainable model for the self, as I outline in the following.

2. The Lure of the Military

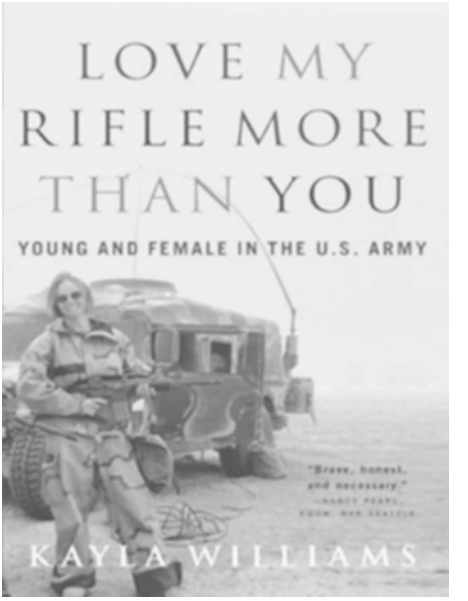

Fig. 1: Williams, Love My Rifle More than You, Cover image

Already the title of the book accentuates the centrality of the gun in relation to gender identity in the military. In connection with the front cover image, which shows Williams smiling in uniform posing with an assault rifle in front of a military vehicle (fig. 1), one could assume that the title suggests a cocky, defiant feminism, a sense of phallic swagger in which the assumption of the rifle has replaced the necessity of dependence on male protection along the lines of Zeiss Stange/Oyster's argu-

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mentation for female self-assertion by gun ownership (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 23–28).

When contextualized with the epigram that opens the book, however, this suggestion of empowerment is undermined. The title is taken from an »army marching cadence«, sung by thousands of men who have undergone basic training, and the full stanza goes:

> Cindy, Cindy, Cindy Lou/
> Love my rifle more than you/
> You used to be my beauty queen/
> Now I love my M-16. (Williams 2005: 9)

Hence the title is not about empowerment, on the contrary, it is about the replacement of the woman with the rifle, her relegation to an outsider status. The tool that appears to empower is in fact the icon signifying her absence. Evert confirms that the common practice of soldiers personifying their rifles by giving them female names »always contains the demarcation to the woman« (Evert 2011: 77): the maleness of the military space is constructed by projecting femininity onto the inanimate object that is under full compliance of the male soldier, arraying him with a (phallic) power to kill (Evert 2011: 82). As Zeiss Stange/Oyster confirm,

> American military culture has always prized stereotypically masculine characteristics like aggressiveness, independence, risk taking, and sexual bravado. […] The message is clear. To be a woman is to be inferior. And to be a female in the military is to be inferior. […] To the extent that it requires such misogyny to forge the warrior spirit, accepting women or gays into the ranks obviously disrupts the process. (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 51–53)

Hence the epigram conveys the military as a place in which the woman is an intrusion into a specifically male rite of passage, in which weakness and failure is equated with being female, and therefore not just »unloved« but potentially hated.

The first chapter of the book immediately addresses the constricting discourses that impose themselves on a woman in the military as well as the ambivalences and illusions of their empowering lure. Williams writes how female identity is rigorously reduced to a sexual availability for men. You are either a »slut« or a »bitch«: »A slut will fuck anyone, a bitch will fuck anyone but you« (Williams 2015: 13). There is no way, no matter how you act, to escape an unflattering male categorization. The attempt to escape this kind of external labelling is a trope that Peebles makes out as central not only to Williams's book but also to many recent soldier memoirs: writing becomes an attempt to regain control over one's identity (Peebles 2011: 2). Peebles also points out how the binary categorization according to (hetero)sexual availability

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is mirrored in the first chapter in relation to the military competence of the female soldier (ibid.: 77–79). Williams writes that part of her motivation to share her story is to counter the image of the female soldier in the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars as defined by Jessica Lynch, who was the subject of a widely publicized rescue mission, and Lynndie England, who became the face of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal (Williams 2015: 15), two figures who turned into representations of the twin poles of female stereotyping of the woman in arms: either incompetent victim and damsel in distress to be saved so as to celebrate male heroism, or a »violent, sexually out of control, and amoral […] embodiment of degenerate American womanhood« (Browder 2006: 18). Browder affirms how the image of the armed woman as either too incompetent to wield a weapon or too unhinged to control its violent potential powerfully affirm reservations against female presence in the military and its cultural enshrinement as a masculine space (ibid.: 18–19). By drawing a connection between the binary labelling of sexual availability and military competence (you are either too limited or too indiscriminate, in any event incapable), Williams makes clear how the military environment is informed by a continued structural discrimination against women, which has deep cultural roots, is pervasively present within and outside the institution and is severely limiting the potential for female soldiers. As opposed to the dominant discourse in other soldier memoirs, which paint the military as an idealized, elite circle, the military is a place in which the aberrations of society at large are not diminished but become painfully amplified. As Williams writes in the last chapter, »This [female self-assertion] is a struggle that is magnified in the military because it is still such a male environment – a weird little microcosm of society on steroids« (Williams 2005: 278).

At the same time, Williams makes clear how the mechanisms of stereotyping and discrimination have an alluring quality of pseudo-empowerment. She writes about so-called »Queens for a Year«, female soldiers who use their heightened sexual allure in a predominantly male environment to their advantage: »I don't like to say it – it cuts you inside – but the attention, the admiration, the *need*: they make you powerful« (ibid.: 14), because, »[y]ou could use your femaleness to great advantage. You could do less work, get more assistance, and receive more special favors« (ibid.: 20). Williams is altogether critical of »succumb[ing] to temptation« (ibid.) because she recognizes that such behavior only entrenches existing stereotypes of female inferiority, and she repeatedly criticizes female comrades in the book for falling into that trap. She essentially argues that the *individual* empowerment through sexuality is illusory because it affirms a *structural* diminishment. But this dynamic of illusory empowerment inadvertently contributing to institutional abuse is shown by the book to characterize the military as such.

The yearning for empowerment arises from a feeling of inferiority, from feeling like you have to prove something. Williams connects this feeling with a formative childhood incident in which she touched a hot stove and burned her hand. »I think

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this early encounter with fire left me deeply hesitant to take risks for fear of pain. As a consequence I've always believed that I have something to prove« (ibid.: 24). While she connects this sense of battling a feeling of risk-averseness, which is clearly identified as a weakness, to her personal psychological disposition, it is extrapolated as a signifier of a general quality which society assigns to women. In Williams's assessment, by chivalrously allowing them to sidestep the demands placed upon men and foster their compensation by pointing out their frailty and need for protection, women are kept in a state of inferiority. Her feminist impetus is to break out of this assigned inferiority by seeking out situations in which she can prove her mettle and her equality to men by facing challenges. As it turns out, this strategy leads her into further abuse, which intensifies rather than remedies a feeling of structural oppression. This is how she describes the dynamic in an abusive relationship with another man (of which there are a few because »historically I've dated a lot of guys who treated me like shit«, ibid.: 172): »Douglas turned it into this twisted deal where I was supposed to *like* that he was cruel to me – as a way to prove to him I could handle it« (ibid.: 40). So the desire to prove oneself becomes an excuse for exposure to more abuse. Yet it is exactly this desire to prove herself, specifically to Douglas, himself a wannabe Marine, that makes her join the army »to prove him wrong« (ibid.: 41). Thus, even if her decision to join the army is born out of feminist defiance of her abuser, she cannot escape making her decision in relation to a man's conception of her. And as it turns out, the army is a mere successor to the abusive partner, not an alternative.

What Williams hopes to find in the military is a levelled playing field, one in which opportunity and challenge is the same for everyone, in which structural inequalities of society at large disappear and one is judged purely on the basis of one's own merit. This is of course precisely an image the army likes to cultivate and it is a sentiment which is shared and occasionally also acknowledged as a welcome reality by some female soldiers (Browder/Pflaeging 2006: 142). Williams makes a point of not acquiescing to the lower physical fitness standards for women, but to accomplish exactly what males have to accomplish: »But guys couldn't bitch if we passed the male tests. That was my response. I was eventually able to surpass the male minimum standard for push-ups for my age group. I also worked hard to get my run to where I'd meet the male standards« (Williams 2005: 44). Initially, it seems as if this approach is indeed a way to empowerment and a »be all you can be« narrative: »But I discovered at Fort Jackson that I could do things I never knew I could do. Endurance, stamina, willpower. You name it. I found I was strong beyond all my prior understanding. I learned what I could do, because I had to do it« (ibid.: 46). Challenge brings improvement, and meeting male standards results in a feeling of equality. The gun contributes to this ideal: »At Fort Jackson, I fired a weapon again for the first time in more than ten years. I was surprised; it felt good. Empowering. I liked having a weapon in my hands again« (ibid.: 44). In this regard the function of the gun

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as an indicator of an acquired autonomy can be linked to the Second Amendment of the US constitution and to narratives of the American Revolution, in which the »obligations and rights of full citizenship« were connected to the ability to serve under arms, making the gun the »distinction between the freeman and the slave« (Browder 2006: 16), and to the related »refusing to be a victim« narrative of pro-gun feminism (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 23, 29; Browder 2006: 19). Without challenging the effectiveness of these narratives of empowerment, the book nonetheless points out the detriments of defining a feminist impetus as the effort of following male standards and seeking male approval, a feminism which does not challenge male norms and structures but reinforces them.

3. The Failure of the Military

The pitfalls and naiveté of Williams's idealism become evident in her deployment to Iraq, where she serves as a translator, having been trained in the Arab language, and goes out on missions with various units of her Military Intelligence battalion. With the other women in her unit, she has a strained relationship, which she describes as »catty« (Williams 2005: 46). Especially her immediate superiors, the female group leaders Moss and Simmons are regarded by her as not living up to leadership standards. Apart from their incompetence, which occasionally puts their subordinates in danger, Williams cannot tolerate their display of female weakness: Both of them are shown in moments when they cry, Moss out of frustration for not being able to establish a working relationship with Williams (ibid.: 91), Simmons in a moment of stress which she blames on PMS (ibid.: 268). Despite the fact that Williams herself vents her frustrations by having a quiet cry at some point in the book, she can only react to her superior's display of emotional vulnerability with utter disrespect, because they confirm the stereotypical image of femininity. »Because you still hear lots of stuff like, *Women should never be president, because they're too emotional to handle it. What if she got PMS, she'd start a nuclear war*« (ibid.: 268). By applying male standards, Williams is thus unable to empathize with her fellow female soldiers. Instead of showing understanding, the adherence to a masculine value of toughness makes her see everything that does not live up to this standard as weakness. Female-associated qualities of emotionality and vulnerability are looked down upon as her judgment is dictated by a male rendering of femininity as Other, which destroys the possibility of female solidarity.[8]

8 There is a significant exception to this rejection of female solidarity in the person of Williams's close friend Zoe, with whom she even shares an apartment. Yet, as Peebles points out, also this relationship is characterized by a male attitude and rhetoric: »She goes on to

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Instead, Williams seeks approval from the male group and in the male spirit of competitiveness. She proves herself by driving a truck up a dangerous hill, earning the respect of an outfit which prides itself on toughness and calls itself the FISTers[9] (ibid.: 161). She enjoys the »trash talk« with them, the competitive insult, which bespeaks a bond of mutual respect (ibid.: 181). But as a woman, this respect has its limitations, as she cannot escape being objectified, reduced to her body and her sexuality on numerous occasions. An innocuous conversation with another soldier turns into a verbally abusive come on, which Williams shrugs off as an »obnoxious ritual, some kind of compulsion to say anything – like dogs feel the need to piss on a tree and call it their own« (ibid.: 72). But it does not stay limited to verbal abuse. When she is with the FISTers, she is assaulted by a fellow soldier, who believes her to be fair game, a slut, despite her fierce resistance. This moment confronts her with the inescapability of her femininity: »The *shame* of being in a position where you might have to […] [y]ell for help. Like some damn damsel in distress« (ibid.: 208). No matter how she reacts in this situation, whether enduring a rape or yelling for help would mark her as female. So even if she desires to belong to a male group as an equal member, the group can never accept her as such.

This also becomes clear in the way the assault came to pass. Because of her sexual activity before her deployment, via rumors being blown out of proportion, she was regarded as a slut, and her attempts at making connections with guys were seen as sexual advances. After rejecting the soldier who assaulted her, she is shunned by the group and accordingly labelled a bitch.[10] So whether she experiences assault or respectful distance, she cannot escape an outsider status as a woman: »the guys I considered my friends were treating me like a *girl*. I was tits, a piece of ass, a bitch or a slut or whatever, but never really a *person*« (ibid.: 214). This dynamic is systemic, built into the very fabric of the institution and perpetuated by the very processes that are set up to protect women from sexual assault.

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describe Zoe in perfect patriarchal style, apparently unironically: ›Beautiful and amazing Zoe. Crazy and wild. Small tits. Great ass.‹ (Peebles 2011: 49)« (Williams 2005: 87).

9 The term stands for Fire Support Specialists. As Forward Observers they are routinely involved in frontline missions.

10 Peebles adds that the counterpart of respecting private space is similarly alienating. Where physical contact between guys contribute to a homosocial brotherhood, Williams writes that apart from sexualized assault »physical contact was more or less something I did not have during my deployment. Guys were extra careful not to touch me. As a female I was not really a part of the ›good game‹« (Williams 2005: 188). Hence »The men Williams describes presumably want to treat her with respect, but it is that very form of respect that dictates *not* touching her body, *not* treating her as an object-that also isolates her, excludes her from the all-male community of the good game« (Peebles 2011: 91).

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> Girls who file EO (equal opportunity) complaints are treated badly. […] Even girls don't like girls who file EO complaints – they don't want to rock the boat. Girls don't want to be perceived as filing a frivolous complaint. There's still the assumption that girls lie about harassment to get what they want – to advance their careers or to punish somebody they dislike. (ibid.: 209)

In other words, if you make use of the equal opportunity mechanisms that are in place to counter incidents of abuse, you forfeit your equality. The systemic imbalance regarding the status of male and female soldiers in the military is symptomatic for the book's judgment of the military as such by calling into question the very values of meritocratic opportunity and beneficial self-development it likes to champion itself for.

The military is presented not a forum of meritocracy, but as a mismanaged institution. It exacerbates injustices and imbalances and contributes to worsening conditions of and relations between people. As Williams writes, »Like death, like taxes, military incompetence is something you can bet on« (ibid.: 98). The list of dysfunctions Williams identifies is long and ranges from avoidable discomforts regarding the living and working conditions at the bases in Iraq (ibid.: 64–67) to bureaucratic red tape dismantling effectiveness and pragmatism, such as the waste of food rations (ibid.: 85), which is only alleviated by illicit bartering between units, endless communication problems which keep the soldiers from preparing accordingly because they don't know where and when they will be deployed, »little coordination and poor planning« (ibid.: 94) or »no maps« (ibid.: 97) for individual missions that require interaction with the local population, which Williams only alleviates by joining other units against regulations. A major cause for her frustration is the bad experience with her superiors. On numerous occasions, the incompetence of Sgt.s Moss and Simmons endanger her and her comrades or seriously hamper her unit's efficiency (ibid.: 79–81, 84, 89, 91, 103, 261, 268) while simultaneously disregarding her efforts and competences (ibid.: 154). Williams identifies the problem as systemic, because the system applies the wrong standards for assigning rank and promotions, not based on combat experience but on college education or prior job training without regard for leadership skills or military competence (ibid.: 92–93). In other words, the system demolishes the very idea of matching rank with merit. It forces merited soldiers into lower positions while bestowing rank upon the unmerited. In its defiance of presumably American values, Williams likens the military to a communist institution, after she has read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, sharing with the controversial author a disgust for a view of communism that »encouraged people to do as little as possible« (ibid.: 270). In this view, the army is an un-American system sabotaging a sense of work ethic and self-improvement by rewarding those who do least und punishing those who exhibit commitment to efficiency.

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This mismatch of invested effort and lack of purpose is a powerful theme in the book. It reverberates on many levels, as Williams not only encounters a personal powerlessness in making a difference due to military mismanagement and strategically wrong decisions, she ultimately feels that the war as such was a mistake. »The fact that the war was based on lies destroys some of the sense of purpose for me« (ibid.: 283). While she mentions small episodes of being able to help the population, of securing schools, of experiencing moments of bonding with team members and being recognized for her actions (not by an army medal but in the form of an improvised token from a unit she served with; ibid.: 228), there is no display of small scale heroism which characterizes more glorified depictions of the war in other soldier memoirs, no rescue missions or feats of survival or annihilation of evil forces. What dominates in *Love My Rifle More Than You* is a sense of failure and crucially of doing more harm than good, despite her best efforts.

4. The Gun as Corruptor

Her job as an interpreter illustrates the mismatch between the productive practice of seeking dialogue, which she is trained for, and the nefarious practices of creating division and aggression that the military and the war force the soldiers to engage in. Despite the fact that »the primary effort had been to build a bond with the locals, carefully nurturing relationships and building *trust*« (ibid.: 141), she repeatedly encounters situations in which she cannot build any trust because the military's hostile behavior undermines any sense of it. The iconic contrast here is between language and the gun, because it is the gun which manifests division. In one exceptional passage, the smallest woman in Williams's unit, the 4'11"« Lauren, wields »our most serious-looking weapon […] an M-249 squad automatic« (ibid.: 107) to instantly hush a throng of people crowding around their patrol car and facilitate communication. »The weapon says: *Respect me*« (ibid.: 107) and this moment encapsulates a perfect balance of force for order and dialogue for understanding as well as empowerment without corruption. But this moment only illustrates the illusory empowerment of the gun, particularly in its feminist potential of arraying the seemingly most powerless with the capacity to assert herself and to establish the basis for an equal communicational footing. Because it stands alone. Most of the time, Williams frames the gun as the element of volatility, not empowering but taking away agency precisely because of its destructive potential of exacerbating miscommunication whereas the ability to converse is the way to achieve clarity and control.

> Put yourself in the position of some eighteen-year-old infantry soldier with a loaded weapon in a country surrounded by people who don't speak his language. And these people come up to him and yell. They want to tell him something.

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> And he doesn't know what it is. They might be saying to him, *I love you, and I am so glad you are here to liberate my country*. Or they might be saying to him, *I'm about to fucking kill you*. So this kid is eighteen and he's got his loaded rifle – and he doesn't know what they're saying. (ibid.: 109)

The passage suggests that the gun is the problem, because most of the time it does not facilitate dialogue but sabotages any potential for fruitful interaction. It forces the individual into seeing the Other as a threat and in this way it controls action rather than facilitating agency whereas any »eighteen-year old kid« would be better equipped to handle the situation if they were trained in the language rather than in weapons-handling. Williams illustrates the simultaneous volatility and disempowering quality of guns in the following way:

> If you see someone heading toward you, he could be approaching to offer you information. He could have an explosive device strapped to his waist and be about to kill you. He might want to ask for food. You have to make that call – instantaneously. You have to decide whether or not you will allow this man anywhere near you. You have to decide whether you shoot him where he stands. Or whether you attempt to communicate with him from a distance and tell him to stop. […] You have to make that judgment call. Every single time. Every time you see any person anywhere close to you. […] Basically we all reach a point where we have to assume that everyone is friendly (and respond accordingly), or assume that everyone is a potential enemy (and treat them as such). It simply becomes too overwhelming to play that line at every single moment. […] So we make one choice: We come to assume the worst about everyone. And we stick with it. (ibid.: 238)

In other words, your gun is making the decision, because the individual is »overwhelmed by the situation« (ibid.: 238); the gun is a shortcut to aggression. It disables choice by enabling hostility.

Numerous episodes in the book confirm the disabling nature of guns or undermine the agenda of possessing them. Rules of engagement meant to reduce aggression in the country are repeatedly shown to increase tensions, such as when the soldiers are told to shoot at people when they refuse to put down a cell phone (ibid.: 236), or when a single rifle meant to protect a local Christian monastery is seized by an inspecting officer, with Williams present as a powerless interpreter (ibid.: 115–121). The episode illustrates how taking away the weapon from the perceived enemy actually worsens the situation. The officer makes a point of not talking to the head of the monastery directly even though he understands English, but uses Williams as a filter, avoiding bilateral communication in favor of a shortsighted execution of rules. So the urge to maintain control over weapons leads to a one-sided and detrimental domination, leaving the ones to be protected vulnerable to attack.

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Other episodes deal a lot with so-called UXO, unexploded ordnance, the lingering detritus of weapons in the country, encapsulating the uncontrollable side effects that the presence of arms causes as disabling baggage. The effects of the UXO are illustrated when Williams's unit arrives at a scene with several injured soldiers and locals, one of them dying, the result of an explosion of previously marked UXO, but »We don't bother to mark the UXOs in Arabic because it's usually the locals who call the unexploded mines to our attention« (ibid.: 131). The explosion was triggered by a clueless local who brought the soldiers to the scene to remove the threat. The man is thus a victim of a combination of miscommunication and leftover arms, and to add insult to injury, the officer suspects the dying man of leading the soldiers to the UXO out of malicious intention, forcing Williams to interrogate him instead of helping him (ibid.: 137). The combination of weapons and hampered communication sows mutual mistrust, victimizes innocents, and creates a climate of aggressive, volatile suspicion: »No respect for the customs of the people, for the rhythms of their lives, for the shit they've had to suffer. There was way too little attempt to communicate with the people. Too many soldiers acting like it was *shoot-em-up* time« (ibid.: 142). Instead of investing in the dialogue, the army deals in the aggressive division produced by weaponry and fortified army compounds. »It made no sense at all unless the goal was to lose the hearts and minds of the people. To make them stop thinking of us as *liberators* and start thinking of us as *occupiers*« (ibid.: 200).

With the strategy of division comes dehumanization and aggressive violence. The dehumanization of the enemy starts with the application of labels, akin to the labelling of women. In Iraq, the term is »*Hajji*« (ibid.: 200). On this basis, the enemy is reduced to an inferior being whose eradication is seen as an empowering act. Williams has one telling conversation with a teenage soldier in which he cannot stop bragging about having killed an enemy. »›Yeah,‹ the guy said, puffing himself up and stretching his arms. A little yawn. Casual-like. ›I got a kill just last week. Man, I gotta tell you. It was the coolest. To see what happens when this dude got it. I can't even begin to explain.‹ He looked at us to see how we were doing« (ibid.: 143). The absurdity of the repeated swagger is emphasized by the non-reaction of his listeners. The very insistence on being proud of having killed someone clearly masks the uncertainty over the moral dimension of the deed. »›But it's my job and all, y'know?‹ he said, a little shaky. ›I got a job to do. That's why I'm here. To get a job done. Y'know?‹« (ibid.: 144). This insecure defensiveness essentially illustrates how the army's questionable lure of empowerment is really an unsettling release of a potential for monstrosity. While Williams is able to reflect these mechanisms of hate and even empathize with corrupted soldiers, she cannot extricate herself from them. Even though »we [translators] had so much more understanding than the average soldier[…] even we reached the point where we were very close to hating the Iraqi people« (ibid.: 254).

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This creation of monstrousness expresses itself in various forms. Williams's observation of two soldiers torturing and killing a kitten for example (ibid.: 196) shows that the aggression the army fosters to cultivate an assertiveness against the enemy seeks release by targeting the innocent and powerless, manifesting in a sadistic joy. Clearly, there is no empowerment here, but a succumbing to destructive urges. Yet the suggestion of power is precisely what makes this cultivation of aggression so seductive. This becomes particularly apparent when Williams is involved in the abuse of a prisoner: »Yet yelling at this guy did also feel perversely good. Because it was not something I was allowed to do. No one does this in our society; we don't just decide we can scream at random people who have their hands tied and who have no power to resist. I don't like to admit it, but I enjoyed having power over this guy« (ibid.: 205). The »power« the army provides trades on repressed desires, which manifests in a release of pent-up destructive emotions, the worst of »all you can be«, and, as Williams astutely points out, this lure of power is dependent on the feeling of powerlessness the soldier can compensate by dominating others. »I wonder if my own creepy sense of pleasure at my power over this man had anything to do with being a woman in this situation – the rarity of that enormous power over the fate of another human being« (ibid.: 205).

The feminist impetus of empowerment, of escaping a condition of powerlessness as a woman in society, is used by the army to lure her into the position of the abuser when she becomes involved in systematic torture practices. It is precisely her femininity which makes her a »useful prop« (ibid.: 249) to humiliate a prisoner, as she is ordered to verbally degrade and mock him. More than anything, this episode elevates the personal abuse she experiences in the army to a structural level, because her degradation to a prop is elemental in the degradation of someone else, prompting her to ask the question »How morally culpable am I?« (ibid.: 252). This question highlights the perfidy of the system which is built upon degradation:

> All of us, guys and girls, were in a situation in Iraq where we were powerless much of the time. Powerless to change what we did. Powerless to go home. Powerless to make any real decisions about how we were living our lives while deployed. And then we found ourselves in this situation where we had all this power over another person. And suddenly we could do whatever the fuck we wanted to them. (ibid.: 206)

So the army not just lures the powerless into its narrative of empowerment, it also exacerbates this feeling of powerlessness by its strict hierarchies so as to generate the desire for compensation and consequently release the potential for abuse. Hence the very expression of power in this scenario of enemy mistreatment is not just expressive of the abuser's powerlessness, it also perpetuates the structures that cause

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this powerlessness in the first place. In fact, by making you complicit in inhuman actions, the system washes itself of responsibility.

The military's rejection of responsibility for turning its members into unstable killers, torturers, and rapists is nowhere more effectively illustrated than when at the funeral of a female soldier who killed herself, the battalion commander proclaims, »she caused this because she never reached out for help« (ibid.: 227). There is no recognition of systemic accountability or an assumption of care but the conferment of responsibility on the individual for their own failure. Fittingly, the episode that follows Williams's involvement in torture is the attempted rape by one of her fellow soldiers. In this way, the text connects the dynamic between her and the prisoner to that of her would-be rapist and herself. In this first case, she is the victimizer, in the second case the victim, but the cycle of powerlessness and compensation by victimization is the same. Accordingly, the text identifies her abuse as symptomatic of an abusive system, in which her would-be rapist and herself are similarly victimized and literally »perpetratorized«.

5. Solidarity with the Other

At the same time, being female in the army also fosters the awareness of these very processes of pseudo-empowerment and cyclic abuse by virtue of her Othering from the male collective. Williams is particularly attuned to the xenophobia that the military fosters. Even before she joins the army she has a relationship with an Arab man, Tariq, called Rick, which prompts her to learn about Arab culture and language. She is particularly enamored with the Arab sense of community. She writes, »It wasn't until I joined the military that I experienced anything like this again« (ibid.: 34). This fairly innocuous sentence points to a quality of the text that can be likened to what Smith/Watson call »relationality« (Smith/Watson 2002: 34): the awareness that »one's story is bound up with that of another« (86), »mobilized within life writing for the purposes of self-narrating and self-knowing« (ibid.: 86, 88). Williams recognizes the Other not as separate entity, against which she defines herself, but as a shifting signifier relating to her own identity in complex and changing ways, inviting her to reflect on herself and the environments she moves in. She sees a connection between the military and the Arab community, but not just in positive terms of group cohesion, she also critically reflects on her status as a woman in that community, noticing how Rick's friends treat her with respectful distance because they regard her as his property (Williams 2005: 110), akin to her treatment as »bitch« in the military. In this way, Williams sees different cultures as mutually illuminating each other, discovering similarity where the military only preaches difference.

This also means that she is able to see her own culture critically by assuming the view of the Other. One such instance is her encounter with Jimmy the Ice Man

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who shows a considerable entrepreneurship in providing the soldiers with fresh ice against the heat. He invests in the infrastructure (hires cars for a day to provide the ice, creates demand, controls the supply) and can finally jack up prices to make a profit. He represents »Capitalism in its purest form« (ibid.: 193) and by witnessing its mechanics provides the example to critically reflect on the values and pitfalls of exporting American values abroad. When Williams talks to Jimmy about living in America, she tempers his desire to go there and make a lot of money with the reality of the cost of living and the hassle of paying bills. In response, he »whose impoverished people have suffered for centuries at the hands of one oppressor or another, has taken pity on my small salary« (ibid.: 195) and offers her a free soda. By reversing the roles of oppressed and kind provider, Jimmy invites Williams to regard her own culture and her own understanding as liberator of Iraq critically. Through the Other she can interrogate and relativize her own position and identity. In this way she also recognizes a kinship between her own diminished status and that of women in Iraqi society.

In another scene, she makes a rare encounter with a Yezidi woman who barely speaks Arabic, which makes conversation difficult but not impossible:

> It was the first time I encountered a young local woman with whom I could spend some time talking. […] Her name was Leila, and we became friendly, if not friends. […] I noticed that all the girls in the family had tattoos on their faces, but none more than Leila. […] I tried to ask what these dots on her face meant, but there was too much of a language barrier. […] Besides my general interest in the locals, and my desire to get to know what the civilians were like, it was just great to see a girl. This was such a male environment otherwise. And even though our conversations were hobbled by our mutual inability to make ourselves easily understood, there was just a sense of relief. For me. And, I began to suspect, for Leila as well (ibid.: 189–190).

This moment demonstrates the potential for communication, even for female solidarity across cultures that is mostly happening on the level of an emotional empathy, the recognition of sameness. The unreadable tattoos (reminiscent of Ishmael's encounter with Queequeg in Melville's literary classic *Moby Dick*) constitute the superficial Otherness belying the common humanity underneath while presenting an unbreakable barrier of unknowability. Williams is drawn to the shared experience of having to deal with a »male environment«, yet in a sense the tattoos also signify how this male environment has imposed itself onto the female body and appropriated it, hampered its relationality by turning it into a signifier, just like Williams is turned into a label by her male environment. The two women thus recognize their sameness in the very fact that they are alienated from each other due to imposed patriarchal, linguistic, cultural barriers. The tragedy is that this moment of connection, of recog-

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nizing herself in the Other, is disrupted by precisely those dynamics that contribute to her oppression, but it is this reflectiveness which makes Williams turn her back on the institution after her tour in Iraq is over.

6. Conclusion

When summarizing the effect that the army had on her as a person, it becomes clear that if Williams has become more assertive, it is in spite, not because of the military, which punishes assertion (ibid.: 278). What dominates are feelings of powerlessness and purposelessness in an institution of mismanagement, waste, and corruption, sabotaging efforts of creating peace and stability, victimizing people by turning them into violent aggressors and afterwards refusing responsibility, and fighting a war without justification. The gun, used by the army as an icon of empowerment, is unmasked as the facilitator of abuse, forcing the individual into immoral actions by denying the potential for a productive dialogue between cultures. Instead it undermines agency by creating a climate of volatile aggression.

At the end of the book, Williams wonders if she »should go buy a handgun because I didn't have a weapon in my house. What if something happened?« (ibid.: 281). The gun has become a dependency, not an enabler. And the military has become a specter, threatening her with reenlisting. »I'm not completely safe until 2008. I could be in graduate school. I could have a job I love. And the letter could come. Tomorrow. Next week. Next month. Next year. No, it's not over. Not for a long while yet« (ibid.: 288). Since the publication of the memoir, Williams has become an advocate for the protection of veterans from the detrimental effects of their military careers, and she served as the Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs in Joe Biden's cabinet until June 2022. Williams's narrative runs counter to sociological studies which postulate the beneficial effects of women serving in the military for gender equality (Latzel et al. 2011: 48). As such, it is an important reminder that every opportunity for progressive development towards greater equality comes with its inbuilt pitfalls of regressive backlashes, and that rather than championing access to supposed privileges, it may sometimes pay to interrogate and question the structural inequalities and deficiencies upon which these privileges rest.

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Section II: Violent Societies: Civic Gun Cultures, Gender, and Politics

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›Don't Retreat, Reload‹

Guns, Rugged Femininity, and Insurrection in Republican Women Candidates' 2022 Midterm Political Advertisements

Axelle Germanaz

1. Introduction

In April 2022, former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin announced that she was running for Alaska's congressional seat, officially marking her return on the national political scene after a leave of thirteen years. In a statement released on her Twitter account, she depicted a nation in deep crisis, victimized by the »radical left« and its »America-last agenda«. She seemingly could not just stand by and needed to intervene: »America is at a tipping point. As I've watched the far left destroy the country, I knew I had to step up and join the fight« (Palin 04/02/2022). In the following months, Palin doubled down on the belligerent rhetoric in the political advertisements uploaded on her YouTube account. In an ad entitled »Girl Power!«, Palin appears in a quirky montage in various outfits and stances. She is, for instance, shown opposed to Democratic women accusingly pointing fingers or superposed onto an opaque US American flag waving in the wind – all playing out over a pastel pink background. The tone is playful, the pictures quickly pop up, slide up and down, and pop right out, and the upbeat music is, at times, interrupted by zany sound effects, like theatrical punches, a boxing bell, and a bald eagle screech. The voice-over is narrated by a young girl, who describes Palin as a »smart… fierce… patriot« and a »fighter… who stands up against the liberal left« and »who doesn't blink when the going gets tough« (Palin 10/17/2022 00:13–00:15; 00:03–00:10). She also tells us that »Sarah Palin isn't fueled by special interests; she runs on girl power« and that »she'll never back down… because you don't mess with a mama grizzly« (00:16–00:21; 00:24–00:29). A second ad, »Sarah Palin for Alaska«, is more somber in tone as a male narrator dramatically decries the demise of the nation and the lack of leadership in the US government, »until now« (Palin 08/01/20 22:00:18). The ad, which plays like a blockbuster film trailer, introduces Palin as a savior and backup, with pictures of the candidate solemnly smiling and looking ahead, a US flag waving in the background, and an uplifting piano song playing over, em-

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phasizing the sense of hope and change conjured by the ad. This photo montage is at times interrupted by segments of a speech Palin delivered at a rally for Donald J. Trump in Anchorage, AK, in July 2022, signaling here clearly to her viewers her allegiance to the former US president and his MAGA movement. In the extracts, she announces that she is »running because the good guys already serving in office, they need reinforcements« (00:44–00:49). Electrified by the cheering crowd, she insists that she will not just »fight even harder for Alaska's interests« but that she intends to »save this country« (00:19–00:24). To underscore her message, she delivers one of her infamous slogans, which is also the title for this contribution: »Don't retreat, reload« (00:35–00:37). One year after the January 6th, 2021, right-wing insurrection at the US Capitol, »Don't retreat, reload« taps in a discourse of national crisis and rightful insurgency. It encourages voters to take up arms and revolt – with their votes, but also, seemingly, their guns.[1] Taken together, the language, imagery, and tone of Palin's two ads are intriguing because they fuse (armed) insurrection with female empowerment to legitimize the political power, authority, and credibility of a female political candidate. As a trailblazer for conservative women's political participation and a precursor to Trump's type of conservatism, Sarah Palin's political brand was originally built around conservative feminism and especially a rhetoric of motherhood that rested on a set of useful metaphors: She often referred to herself as a ›hockey mom‹ and compared conservative women like her to »mama grizzly bears that rise up on their hind legs when somebody's coming to attack their cubs« (Pilkington 2010). The fact that Palin – probably one of the most popular reactionary Republican female politicians of the 21st century – decided to make a comeback in 2022 is also, I think, revealing of the current political mood, in which right-wing populist, anti-government, and ›civil war‹ rhetoric and imagery are flourishing and spilling well beyond the limits of far-right media and groups.

This article examines the representations and functions of gun-womanship in Republican women candidates' political advertisements during the 2022 US midterm elections.[2] More precisely, it questions the »cultural work« (Tompkins

1 To be sure, this insurrectionist rhetoric is not new. In 2010, for instance, Sharron Angle, another Tea Party-affiliated Republican female candidate to the Senate, sparked outrage during her campaign when she suggested that Congress might need »Second Amendment remedies« (Jaffe 2010). Similarly, in 2016, Donald J. Trump told a crowd at one of his campaign rallies in Wilmington, N.C., that »Second Amendment people« could take actions against Hillary Clinton if she were to be elected president and impose stricter gun laws (Corasaniti/Haberman 2016).

2 While I speak of Republican women throughout this article, I do not aim to homogenize this diverse group. I realize that there are important differences demarcating each female politician, particularly in terms of ideology but also of generation, geography, religion, race and ethnicity, and class, among other factors. Nonetheless, the candidates I analyze here share important traits: They all adhere to conservatism (traditional gender roles and family values,

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1986) that these shooting female fighter-politicians perform in contemporary US culture and politics in times of hyper-partisanship and -polarization. This article uncovers the meaningful patterns related to gender, race, citizenship, and nationhood deployed, reinforced, and/or contested in Republican political communication. Through the concept of (White) rugged femininity, I emphasize the complex gendered identity that Republican women perform in their political ads. This identity, I argue, rests on the reproduction of traditional gender norms and family values, rugged individualism, and US cultural scripts, and, in particular, Western expansion mythologies – of law and order, the gunfighter nation, and what American studies scholar Richard Slotkin has called »regeneration through violence« (book of the same title) – and masculine icons of the Wild West, like the cowboy, sheriff, and vigilante. Rugged femininity is pertinent in the case of Republican women's communication because female candidates need to fit the gender expectations of their party to appear legitimate to their electorate and male peers, while at the same time necessarily challenging them. In usually less than a minute, campaign ads need to clearly communicate that female candidates are tough and able to ›fight‹ for their country, that they are caring and motherly (»mom« and »mother« are recurring certifications in the ads I analyze), and that they are (extra-)conservative. The gun, prominently displayed and/or fired, is deployed to emphasize and interlink these traits. This article thus draws attention to the ways firearms in Republican women's political ads have a complex, if not contradictory, function: They at once challenge and reshuffle the patriarchal structures and politics of the GOP by signaling that women can hold the same guns and therefore the same offices as their male colleagues, but they also fortify masculinist ideals and expectations of political power, womanhood, and US citizenship, based on an assertion and performance of (armed) authority, strength, and violence.

Following an approach of ideology critique, this article examines closely the discursive and visual constructions of the armed (and, at times, shooting) Republican woman politician through an analysis of the TV and digital political advertising candidates produced and circulated during the 2022 election cycle. In terms of selection, I have chosen political ads that discuss and display firearms (in particular, handguns, shotguns, hunting rifles, semi-automatic rifles, and military-style assault weapons). I focus on the ads of new candidates, like Mallory Staples (GA-06) and Esther Joy King (IL-17), as well as representatives up for reelection, like Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14) and Lauren Boebert (CO-03), who first assumed office in

free market, *laissez-faire* politics), work with key Republican issues, and have identified as White (except for Anna Paulina Luna, Florida's 13th Congressional District candidate, who has identified as White/Latina). Most have also pledged allegiance to or been endorsed by former President Donald J. Trump during their campaigns (thus, they can also be considered ›pro-Trump‹).

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Congress in January 2021. First, I will provide a brief overview of the role of women politicians in the Republican Party and the impact of political advertisements in their political communication, contending that guns often make an appearance and represent both a masculine tool of power and a mark of conservative political credibility. Second, I will conduct a close reading of selected ads, suggesting that candidates rest on the performance of (White) rugged femininity through their appeal to US foundational myths and use of feminist discourse, specially of female empowerment, to advocate for the extension of (militarized) state power and neoliberal capitalism. Third, I will close this article with a discussion on the implications of the militantism and para-militarization of the Republican party that has risen in the past years, especially following Trump's presidency.

2. Gunning for Congress: Women of the Republican Party, Political Advertisements, and Guns

The 2022 US midterm elections marked a political turn for the Republican Party, with 42 female candidates winning seats in the House of Representatives (33) and the Senate (9) – a record number for the party (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP] 2022). There had been 299 Republican women candidates running for Congress, with 38 filled candidacies for Senate and 261 for the House of Representatives (an increase from 2020, with 23 filled candidacies for Senate and 227 for the House) (CAWP n.d.).[3] As of January 2023, Republican women represent 28 percent of all female members and 15.5 percent of all Republican members of the 118th Congress. In comparison, Democratic women currently hold 106 seats in Congress and represent 40.8 percent of Democrat members (Dittmar 2022), which reflects a stark (partisan) gender gap in Congress. As political scientist Kira Sanbonmatsu reminds us, there is also an important »gender gap [that] persists in the electorate in which women voters are more likely than men to prefer Democratic over Republican candidates« (2018: xiv).

Long designated by political pundits as a political party waging ›war on women‹ the GOP has, in the last decade, tried to appear more attractive to women and to recruit them amongst its ranks – both as voters and as officeholders. It has attempted to counter this deficit of women candidates and its image problem with women through the creation of political action committees, such as Project *GROW* (*Growing Republican Opportunities for Women*), *View PAC*, *RightNOW Women PAC*, *Susan B.*

3 These numbers do not include state legislature, in which a total of 1812 Republican women ran in 2022 (an increase from 1407 in 2020) and 1291 were nominated (compared to 1105 in 2020) (CAWP n.d.).

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Anthony List, and *Maggie's List*, among others, that aim to support female Republican candidates in their political campaigns and, more broadly, to galvanize women to participate further in the party's politics. Despite consequential gains, and especially in 2020 when Republican women outpaced Democratic women's electoral wins, they continue to be the minority of women and of Republican members in Congress, and parity with men, in terms of candidacy and officeholding representation, remains unachieved.[4]

During their campaigns and incumbencies, Republican women need not only to negotiate male-dominated political institutions, but also their own party's rooted patriarchal culture and expectations (Dittmar 2015; Deckman 2016; Wineinger 2018). In a 2020 study for the *Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP)* that examines the role of gender and gender stereotypes in US electoral campaigns, political scientist Kelly Dittmar argues that there are »dual demands that women candidates face to meet stereotypical expectations of both candidacy, which continue to align most often with men and masculinity, and their gender – which assume alignment with norms of femininity«. To match the stereotypically masculine expectations that the public associates with political leadership (see, for instance, Huddy/Terkildsen 1993; Lawless 2004), Republican women candidates often perform a »hegemonic masculinity« (Connell 1987), putting special emphasis on their (physical and moral) strength, authority, and entrepreneurship. At the same time, and supposedly so as to not alienate a conservative electorate that continues to believe strongly in traditional gender roles and hierarchies, they need to fit gendered norms and expectations and assert typical feminine traits, often through their appearances, behavior, and actions, as well as through a rhetoric of motherhood and care. This paradox manifests itself in stark ways in the political advertisements produced by and for Republican women candidates.

Political advertising, part of electoral campaigns since the beginning of federal elections (Thurber et al. 2001), continues to play a central role in the electoral process in the United States. Through newspapers and pamphlets, then the radio, television, and now the Internet (especially, via interactive social media platforms, like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook), candidates have sought to inform, appeal, and convince voters about their convictions, core values, and their capacity to govern. Political ads are also important affective tools that can influence viewers' perception of candidates (and their opponents), shape their impressions of a party and their understanding of key state or national issues, often by eliciting particular affective states and emotions, like fear, anxiety, enthusiasm, hope, etc. (Brader 2001; 2005). While there is a considerable amount of research done on the effectiveness and prevalence

4 Quite a lot has been written about this consistent under-representation of Republican women in Congress. For more on this topic, see Thomsen (2015); Kitchens/Swers (2016); Crowder-Meyer/Cooperman (2018); Och/Shames (2018).

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of political advertising to sway voters (see, for instance, Kahn/Geer 1994; Valentino et al. 2004; Kaid et al. 2011), I am less interested in their impact than in their construction. Indeed, political ads function as powerful ideological sites that can suggest compelling and affective narratives to viewers, for them to make sense of their social environment and to galvanize them to the voting booths. In often less than a minute, they tend to negotiate complex societal issues, like (individual and collective) identity, race, gender, class, citizenship, and power, and can reconfigure their meanings in striking visual terms. Interestingly, political ads often rest on popular genres and shared cultural scripts to appeal to voters and to generate public attention, quantified in terms of views and mentions. As political scientist David Schultz argues, »[p]olitics is thus in competition with the rest of popular culture for the attention of the American voter. It is a noisy, crowded competition, necessitating that candidates often ape themes from pop culture in order to cut through the crowd« (2004: xi).

The 2022 election cycle, branded as a major political event with cataclysmic consequences by both parties, broke records in terms of political advertising spending, reaching close to ten billion dollars (Gabbatt 2022). Clearly, political ads continue to be valued by politicians as an effective mean to connect with their audience and to stage themselves and their party's political positions. During this election cycle, Republican ads focused mainly on conservative hot button issues, such as COVID-19 measures, inflation and taxation, immigration, crime, and the so-called liberal culture war on US American values (denouncing, for instance, affirmative action policies, the supposed teaching of critical race theory in schools, the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights, etc.). Perhaps revealing of the current political climate, more than 100 ads by Republican (male and female) candidates featured and/or mentioned guns (Glueck et al. 2022).

This is not the first electoral cycle in which candidates, and in particular conservative ones, include firearms in their political ads. A 2018 report by the Wesleyan Media Project observed that references to guns in political ads by federal and gubernatorial candidates are increasing over time (from 1 percent of all ads in 2012 to 11.5 percent in 2018) and are, therefore, progressively being normalized in US political communication. Guns and gun imagery in Republican political ads can represent various things at once: They can signal a commitment to Second Amendment rights and a stark opposition to gun control policies, they can be sensational props used to captivate the public's attention and to gain precious visibility in a competitive election cycle, and they can instantly testify to a conservative political identity, conjuring up shared US cultural scripts and myths, particularly of the Wild West and the frontier – »the longest-lived of American myths« according to Richard Slotkin (1998: 15). As communication studies scholars Ryan Neville-Shepard and Casey Ryan Kelly have argued in their work on Republican men's use of guns in campaign advertising, they can also »evok[e] violence against government, established order, and the legal pro-

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cess that has made political and social change possible« (2020: 467). For the authors, guns in ads participate in a »spectacle of violence« that displays and justifies »White masculine identity politics« and patriarchy (2020: 469). As (gendered and racialized) symbolic and political objects steeped in, if not defining of, a foundational national mythology that continues to enact powerful cultural work in US society, guns have unsurprisingly made their appearance in Republican women candidates' political ads during the 2022 midterm elections.

3. Pearls, Pumps, and Pistols: Rugged Femininity in Republican Women Candidates' Political Ads

There are many ways in which guns are used in Republican women's political ads: They might be displayed as accessories, shown in the biographical slideshow of a candidate (particularly when she has served in the military), or used in action, for instance, at a shooting range, on a hunting land, field or garden. Candidates often follow popular scripts and generic patterns as they choose to carry firearms in their ads to appeal to their constituencies. Specifically, Republican women appear to perform a particular gendered identity to legitimate their political authority and power in what I would call ›rugged femininity‹. Rugged femininity encapsulates aspects of a traditionally hegemonic masculinity, rugged individualism, ›traditional‹ feminine traits (and, especially, motherhood and domesticity), and rests prominently on national gun mythologies and iconography. This complex gendered performance appears in two ways in Republican women candidates' ads.

First, Republican female candidates tend to appeal to a key cultural script of ›Americanness‹ and a core US foundational myth: the US American West. Their political ads often include the rhetoric and iconography of the frontier, and they tend to fashion themselves as masculinist, individualist, rural, classical Western heroes. Whether candidates are mimicking the cowboy, the sheriff, or the vigilante, what seems to matter is that they take on the role of a (violent) authority figure the public can recognize. This is done through a discourse of law and order, the opposition between rural authenticity and righteousness versus urban corruption and frivolity, and references to a form of social, moral, or political regeneration that presupposes acts of (symbolic or real) violence – what Richard Slotkin has called the »myth of regeneration through violence«.[5] Often, female candidates set their ads in emptied

5 In *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973: 5), Slotkin argues that violence played a defining role in the emergence of the US nation-state and describes the myth of regeneration through violence as »the structuring metaphor of the American experience«. He analyzes the creation and development of this myth in early American literature from the 17th to the 19th century. He examines, for instance, the »myth of the hunter« embodied by iconic figures like Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, as »one of self-renewal or

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landscapes like fields, paths, shooting ranges, and even cities, in which they are the only object of attention. The effect is interesting when considering the notion of rugged femininity because in those spaces, candidates are not only sole object of attention, but they are also sole figure of authority.[6] These emptied landscapes possibly allude to national mythologies, like the (emptied) frontier and its vastness, symbolic of self-reliance and solitude, freedom and opportunity, and signal a field of possibility in terms of social order. Furthermore, candidates rest on a rugged masculinity dress code that might include blue jeans, buckle belts, (leather) jackets, and behaviors such as tough-looking poses, usually with muscles and guns put in evidence. At the same time, this masculine representation of authority and power is often counterbalanced by references and appeals to dominant constructions of femininity, particularly based on a rhetoric of motherhood, care, and domesticity, and a play on the »seductive fantasy« of the armed, fierce woman (Browder 2006: 13).

In an ad called »Mallory Staples: MAGA Mom«, the candidate for Georgia's 6th District introduces herself as she descends the stairs of what appears to be her home: »I'm Mallory Staples, I'm a mom, and as my family can tell you, I won't put up with what the left is trying to do to our country« (01/27/2022 00:00–00:06). These introductory lines set the tone for the rest of the ad. Staples presents herself as a mother and, therefore, a tough dedicated Republican politician. The ad is punctuated by a quick, energetic music that, at times, stops abruptly for dramatic effects when Staples delivers a punchy statement. Throughout the video, the candidate invokes a set of narratives typically promoted by the Republican party, such as the so-called liberal indoctrination in education, a consistent loss of freedom, and the demise of religion at the hands of a Democratic government. »They want to indoctrinate our kids in school, replace our faith with fear, and mandate how we live«, Staples deplores, before defiantly adding, »Biden and the Democrats want to shut us down and shut us up; I'm a MAGA mom, I don't shut up and I won't sit on the sidelines« (00:07–00:20). While the ad begins inside an immaculate upper-class home, with her sons doing their homework on the kitchen's counter table and reciting Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* (»government of the people, by the people«), we then follow her outside through what appears to be her estate, first crossing the framework of a house in construction and then riding a horse on a bridle path. Staples performs a rugged femininity when she, for instance, displays her carefully blowout blond

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self-creation through violence« (1973: 556): The Western hero begins in a state of innocence and purity but is brought to extreme violence by corruptive forces (often embodied by the so-called wilderness of the American continent and its native inhabitants), which will result »in a figurative rebirth, the attainment of a new soul« (1973: 101). For Slotkin, the myth of regeneration through violence expands to US American society and culture, and popular cultural texts have long embraced the topos.

6 Thanks to Sarah Marak and Kerstin Schuster for pointing this out.

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hair, wears a khaki leather jacket, blue jeans, brown boots, and pearl earrings while riding the horse in a powerful pose. She stares straight in the camera and states her plan of attack: »I'm going to put an end to the lies and the lockdowns, stop the illegals, ban CRT [Critical Race Theory], and fight vaccine mandates« (00:43–00:48). In brief, she tells us that the sheriff has arrived in town and that she will, if elected, take strong actions against a government that is supposedly encroaching her constituencies' freedoms. The following scene is as telling of the role she aims to play: The camera is locked in a close-up of her hands on the grip and fore stock of a pump-action shotgun (also known as a ›riot shotgun‹) – nails freshly French-manicured. The music stops, Staples pulls back on the forearm, cocks the hammer of the gun, and solemnly claims: »I'll make sure we always have the right to protect ourselves; and our families« (00:49–00:53). Republican candidate Mallory Staples locks eyes with the audience and ensures them, shotgun in hand, that she will protect their Second Amendment right. As the camera pans, mother and children raise in synchronization their weapons at an imaginary enemy ahead of them. Visually striking here, rugged femininity ensures the reproduction of the gunslinger nation (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Stills from Staples's compaign spot
»Mallory Staples: MAGA Mom« (00:50; 00:53)

Seemingly embodying Sarah Palin's ethos of ›mama grizzly‹, Staples performs in her ad an armed and militant »Republican motherhood« (Kerber 1980). In this choreographed staging of (White) ideal feminine domesticity, the mother has borne armed citizens and secured the reproduction of the gunfighter nation. The gun – and the mimicked gesture of brandishing it – binds mother and children in their imagined role of ideal self-defending and ready-to-act citizens. It is, furthermore, interesting to note that Staples chose to present herself in her home, emphasizing the idealization of the domestic space as a site of self-realization (remember that she is »Mallory Staples« and that she is »a MAGA mom«) but also of empowerment, as she is ready to defend her home against potential threats. The ad closes on Staples stating that »now is the time, it's time to step up, to step into the arena«, while opening the door of a van for her children to jump into. The leather jacket, the guns, and

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the dominant attitude have been replaced by a warm light, a soft-pink down jacket, and smiles.

Second, and connected to the frontier and pioneer rhetoric, rugged femininity rests on a gendered reinterpretation of rugged individualism (the capacity for self-determination and self-making it promises often being understood to be usually available to men). Many Republican women candidates champion rugged individualism in their ads, mentioning self-determination, individual rights and freedoms, and entrepreneurship and describing their own successes (or hardships) in politics, in business, or at home. Their embrace of rugged individualism, which abominates state intervention, communicates awkwardly in their political ads, since they are, after all, running for office. Republican women candidates present themselves as staunchly patriotic and devoted to the nation, yet, in concordance with New Right discourses that reject federal and welfare-state power, they also tend to use a right-wing populist rhetoric, which casts the state as invasive, controlling, and corrupted. Republican women candidates, through their performance of armed rugged femininity, not only defend conservative, masculinist, and capitalist values but also participate in the extension of neoliberal state power (for example, in a rhetoric of national security and defense, through legal and regulatory intensifications, corporate expansion, privatization, etc.). Therefore, their discourse of limited government and individualism does not obstruct state power; it solely erodes its accountability to the public (Anker 2014).

In an ad published on her Twitter account one day after assuming office on January 3, 2021, representative Lauren Boebert (CO-03) exemplifies several traits of rugged femininity, such as the emphasis on (armed) self-determination and the reliance on a rhetoric of motherhood. Although not produced for the 2022 midterms per se, I argue that the following ad carefully constructs Boebert's main brand of Second Amendment ›protectress‹ that resonated during her bid for re-election.[7] The ad opens on a fake political ad in which the candidate states into the camera, smiling: »I'm Lauren Boebert and I approve this message« (Boebert 01/04/2021 00:01–00:03). Someone in the background shouts »cut« and the green screen disappears, letting the audience in on the backstage of the ad. A camera zooms in on Boebert as she loads a handgun in a determining and precisely choreographed way, before placing it in a leather holder at her hip. At the same moment, an energetic upbeat song begins as if to emphasize the supposed ›bad ass‹ character of the scene

7 Part of this tactical branding includes media posts of her and her family holding firearms and references to the fact that she used to own a gun-themed restaurant called »Shooters Grill« in Rifle, CO. She also often cites her comeback to rebuke Democrat Beto O'Rourke's gun control remarks, whom she confronted in Aurora, CO, in 2019 by telling him: »I was one of the gun owning Americans who heard you speak regarding your ›Hell yes I'm going to take your AR-15s and AK-47s. Well, I'm here to say hell no you're not‹« (CBS News Colorado 2019).

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we just witnessed. For the rest of the video, we follow Boebert as she walks fast-paced in high-heeled pumps through the emptied streets of Capitol Hill, Washington D.C., and provides arguments on why she is determined to carry her gun in congressional office buildings. Stressing on individual self-determination, she proudly claims: »I refuse to give up my rights, especially my Second Amendment rights. I will carry my firearm in DC and in Congress« (00:25–00:38). Efforts to regulate access to guns are, indeed, often framed in Republican ads in terms of existential threats to individual citizens, infringing on their freedoms and their pursuit of self-realization. In this context, Republican women candidates have deployed feminist arguments of gender equality and female empowerment to legitimize gun-ownership and armed self-defense as a constitutional right of citizenship and a mean towards self-determination. According to sociologist Jennifer Carlson,

> [t]he image of female frailty colors pro-gun discourse. The pro-gun lobby supports women's armed self-defense on the premise that women are incomplete and utterly vulnerable without guns. This is illustrated in the widespread narrative that dramatizes the gun as the solution to women's physical vulnerability to men: guns are figured as the »great equalizer« that put 100-pound women on the same footing as 200-pound rapists, muggers, and murderers. (Carlson 2014: 370–1)

Carlson's comment about guns as »great equalizers« is relevant when considering the role of firearms in Republican women candidates' ads because their performance of rugged femininity, which importantly rest on the touting of a gun, communicates to their audience that they are not only physically strong but also politically capable.

In Boebert's ad, rugged femininity fuses rugged individualism with ideals of femininity, specifically as it relates to motherhood and female fragility. Indeed, one of the reasons for which Boebert sees it imperative to openly carry her gun at work is that she is a »woman and a mother of four« and that she wants to protect herself and her »family with all the force the constitution provides« (01:02–01:07). As she delivers her line, a sentimental montage of Boebert's family portraits and the phrase »DEFEND MY FAMILY« surrounds her. Boebert goes on to paint a grim picture of Washington D.C., arguing that it is »one of the top ten most dangerous cities in our country« with »homicides rates and violent crimes… skyrocketing here« and is, therefore, not a safe place for a woman (01:09–01:16). »I walk to my office every morning by myself, so as a five-foot tall, one hundred-pound woman«, she continues, »I choose to protect myself legally because *I am my best security*« (01:26–01:35, emphasis mine). Boebert's assertion that her gun represents an efficient, legal mean of defense against potential threats finds resonance in a discourse of neoliberal rugged individualism, that demands that individuals be solely responsible for their bodily, social, and economic security. Self-defense can only be done through guns, and Boe-

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bert is fused with hers: Through special effects mimicking a scanner view, the audience is offered a peep of Rep. Lauren Boebert's CGI concealed handgun. The phrase »I AM MY BEST SECURITY« is being formed in the background (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Bobert with transparent gun
Boebert, »Let me tell you why…« (01:33)

The discourse of neoliberal individualism and self-reliance promoted by Boebert extends to self-defense and motherly protection, which can only be afforded by a firearm. The ad advances a discourse of responsibilization and private policing that is steeped in feminist rhetoric: Here, it is not the US government that defend women against aggressors, it is women with guns who do. In the rhetoric of rugged femininity, there is thus a refusal to depend on others for defense (especially on the state) and an emphasis on self-sufficiency, perseverance, as well as patriotism. The gun, through the independence it promises to offer its bearer, is depicted by Boebert as a material expression (and perhaps, expansion) of ›Americanness.‹ She confides in her audience: »[p]eople here [in Washington D.C.] don't understand how we live in real America. The Second Amendment is part of our lives. Gun ownership is cherished and it makes our little towns safer« (01:39–01:46). The reference to ›real America‹ – possibly a nod to Sarah Palin who used the phrase in 2008 to describe US small-towns – romanticizes rural peoples and spaces as authentic, and the plural first-person pronoun ›we‹ binds Boebert and her audience in an imagined (armed) community of righteous and ideal rural citizens.

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4. »Battle-Ready« Female Fighters: Insurgency in Republican Women Candidates' Ads

While guns have long been used as props in conservative political ads to communicate Republican values and the party's anti-gun control stance, there seems to be a current shift in their deployment. Guns are not only used as symbols of toughness, order, and ›Americanness,‹ they are also used as a political message to both sympathizers (to take up arms if needed) and opponents (to back off with gun control regulations). Indeed, they indicate the potential of a looming violent disruption, that has been framed as a ›(Second) civil war‹ in right-wing circles, and a readiness to combat that could overturn the current social and political order. Additionally, the rugged femininity deployed in Republican women political ads connects importantly to the US national icon of the lone vigilante. In an article entitled »Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture« (1975), literary studies scholar John Cawelti analyzes the vigilante as an archetype of US literature, a figure that is required to step in to protect the victimized and innocents when the state cannot do so anymore. Vigilante violence, according to Cawelti, stands for private security and is legitimized by a moral righteousness that opposes a necessary, just violence enacted by the hero vigilante against a gratuitous, nonsensical violence carried out by enemies.[8]

The trope of the vigilante appears in Republican women's political ads, for instance, in the militant rhetoric and the (para-)military imagery used – from the types of weapons fired (often automatic or semi-automatic guns) and vehicles (Humvees, Jeeps, or helicopters) to the outfits worn (cameo-prints and khaki reminiscent of the military uniform). Republican women candidates who use guns in their ads often do so to fashion themselves as modern vigilante, rebel ›fighters‹, and (para-)military ›pioneers‹, capable of defending themselves, their families, and, if elected, the nation.[9] While sport and war metaphors have long been used in political rhetoric, with, for instance, women candidates depicting themselves as

8 Cawelti perceptively noted the implication of vigilante violence in terms of class, writing that »the unrestrained use of personal and community security forces [embodied in the myth of the vigilante] has always played a significant role in protecting the American upper classes in their walled-off estates and housing developments« (1975: 534).

9 Many Republican women candidates, in fact, boast their military background in their political ads. This is the case for Rep. Jen Kiggans (VA-02), who in her campaign ad »The Difference«, is described by the narrator as a »navy pilot, nurse practitioner, and mom« (Kiggans 10/24/2022 00:02–00:04). Likewise, Jennifer Ruth-Green (IN-01), whose unofficial campaign slogan was »battle-proven leadership«, introduces herself in one of her ads as »not just a pilot or a combat veteran« but also »a proud conservative« who will »defend [in Congress] the 2nd amendment, protect life, and advance President Trump's America First policies«, it is implied like she »defended our country in combat, running counter-intelligence operations in Iraq« (Green 10/19/2022 00:01–00:04; 00:21–00:27; 00:17–00-21).

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›fighters‹ or ›warriors‹ in their campaign ads,[10] there seems to be a new dimension to this rhetoric in the post January 6 context. Candidates (male and female) for Congress, have framed, using a language of urgency and imminent threat, the 2022 elections as a turning point in US history, one that will be defining for the future of the nation.

In an ad called »Battle Ready Leadership«, candidate Esther Joy King (IL-17) can be heard talking over a montage of nostalgic clichés of rural small-town life, that includes aestheticized pictures of barns and lush green fields, factory workers and farmers, US flags on porches, flying in the wind, etc. As she narrates a story of rural authenticity and producerism, violins are playing in the background, soft at first, they are slowly building up until King proclaims herself »battle-ready for the fight of a generation« (King 01/04/2022 00:32). To emphasize her message and her militarized strength, she appears wearing an army uniform in front of a flying US American flag. Their seeming fusion conveys the notion that King, with her rural and military background, truly embodies an Ur-›Americanness.‹ Furthermore, the low angle shot in which the scene is filmed produces a particular power dynamic between the candidate and her audience, as it makes King look dominant and powerful. Further in the ad, King elaborates on the upcoming battle she is ready to face: »It's socialism against freedom. It's barely surviving versus boldly succeeding. Under leftists' control, we are less free.… The battle for the direction of our country is here. So, if you're ready to defend America, come, join me. Let's go« (00:35–00:43; 01:04–01:13). Here, the candidate fashions herself as a soldier-politician, apt at using military-style assault weapons, and ready to win the war against the ›left.‹: A still demonstrates the candidate's shooting skills as she fires an AR-15-style rifle at an empty shooting range (see fig. 3). Her final address to her audience, the motivational »let's go«, seems to actively engage her constituencies in the fight she builds up throughout the ad.

10 Examples are quite abundant here, and from both sides of the political spectrum. Hillary Clinton, for instance, ran a political ad during her presidential bid in 2015 entitled »Fighter« (Clinton 06/12/2015) and so did Elizabeth Warren in 2020 (Warren 02/21/2020). On the Republican side, Martha McSally (AZ-02), who served in the US Air Force, ran in 2020 an ad called »Your Fighter«, in which she is shown boarding a fighter jet in slow motion while announcing: »if you want a fighter, I'm your girl« (McSally 09/21/2020 00:27–00:29). More recently, candidate and »air force veteran« Anna Paulina Luna (FL-13), used in one of her ads quotes by President Donald J. Trump calling her a »warrior«, a »winner«, and ready to »fight the liberals« and displayed photos of herself in military uniform and with military-style weapons (Luna 08/11/2022 00:08; 00:24–00:26; 00:13).

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Fig. 3: Still from King, »Battle Ready Leadership« (00:53)

In another ad entitled »Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!«, representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14) not only seems to encourage voters to take up arms but goes even further by providing them the actual weapon. Indeed, she tells viewers to sign up on her website to win a sniper rifle that she prominently displays and fire-tests throughout the ad. According to the YouTube description below the video, the weapon (a Barrett M82A1) is »the same type of gun that TRIGGERS the Fake News Media and Democrats all across the country« and that »the hate-America gun-grabbers in DC would love to BAN if they ever get the votes« (Greene 09/16/2021).[11] In the ad, Greene compares the featured sniper to the military equipment left in Afghanistan after the pressed withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 and accuses President Joe Biden to have handed left-behind weapons to the Taliban. She paints Biden as a traitor and a coward, who »should be impeached« (00:28–00:29), before stepping up and presenting herself as a muscular, gun-toting, and ready-to-fight Republican candidate: In the clip, Greene holds up the rifle that she intends to give away to an audience member (and prospect voter). The pose and her attire are reminiscent of 1980s and 1990s action and science fiction blockbusters (fig. 4).

The ad implies that Greene is tougher, more authentic, and more masculine than Biden, and her massive-looking gun is here to emphasize this point. She suggests that she is »going to blow away the Democrats' socialist agenda« in 2022 (00:51–00:55), before firing the gun at a Toyota Prius labeled ›socialism,‹ which results in a dramatic explosion shot in multiple angles. »Target destroyed«, the ad concludes (see fig. 5).[12] The special effects (e.g., the sniper scope used to frame

11 Interestingly, the manufacturer characterizes the featured gun on its website as »[m]ore than just a rifle, the Model 82 is an *American icon*« (»Model 82A1«, my emphasis).

12 This trope of shooting at reified problems is prominent in Republican women's ads. Another example includes Katie Britt (AL)'s ad »Shoot Straight«, in which the candidate shoots at clay targets while narrating issues she blames on President Joe Biden and his government. She

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the hybrid electric car and the messages »target acquired« and »target destroyed« popping on the screen) not only mimic military gear and situations but they also bring to mind pop-cultural texts that have aestheticized this military imaginary and made the public familiar with military visuals.

Fig. 4: Still from Greene, »Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!« (00:31)

In channeling the figure of the ›badass‹ shooting heroine of science fiction and action films (through her ›tough-guy‹ attire, that comprises aviator-style sunglasses, a khaki jacket, silver chains, and her main props, a beige Humvee, and the sniper), Greene casts herself as a familiar protector and a rightful enactor of violence. In her ad, this righteous violence is legitimized by the supposed treason and cowardice of the sitting president and the Democrats that surround him – he »broke America's pledge to *never* leave a man behind«, she tells us, implying that retribution is necessary (00:43, italics original). From the energetic music which leaves room for the loud gunshot and even louder explosion, the flashy visuals, and Marjorie Taylor Greene's accusatory and aggressive tone, the ad clearly aims to produce strong emotional responses in viewers and to galvanize them towards action. Greene not only spectacularizes politics by using a gun in her ad, but she also

promises her audience, rifle in hand, that she will »stop Joe Biden's radical agenda dead in its tracks« (Britt 04/18/2022 00:09–00:13). Likewise, candidate Pamela Gordon (OK-02) shoots in her ad »Pamela Gordon for US Congress«, first a TV showing a White man in a suit dancing around money (which stands for lobbies controlling politicians), then a piggy bank (a symbol of import spending), then a barrel of oil (which stands for the reliance on foreign energy), and, finally, a sheet of paper with the marking »compromising with socialism« (Gordon 05/17/2022).

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gamifies political participation by promising prospect voters to win the featured gun. In fact, political support (i.e., signing up on her website) is here rewarded by the tactical capability (i.e., winning the military-style weapon) to enact violence against political enemies – enemies who are explicitly identified by name in the ad. Through her performance of rugged femininity, it appears that she invites her audience into fantasies of political violence and empowerment: Societal issues, it is argued, are not to be solved through debates and policymaking, they are to be »blow[n] away«.

Fig. 5: Stills from Greene, »Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!«, from left to right: 00:57; 01:01; 01:04; 01:13)

In their ads, Republican women tend to cast themselves as fighters and helpmates, in the conservative war supposedly waged against »socialism« and »leftists«. Contrary to their male counterparts, however, they are seemingly also expected to put priority on their home and, if they have some, their children. In fact, it appears that female candidates are supposed to fulfill their duties as caretakers from all levels of social organization: from the home to the state and, finally, the nation. It is also necessary to note that the (symbolic or actual) violence enacted in the political ads analyzed here is done on behalf of a militarized capitalist patriarchy. The ads not only showcase a politician and her political beliefs, but also a commercial good: the gun. Indeed, candidates exhibit firearms and sometimes even test their force for potential consumers. They, therefore, implicitly or not, mark their support for the US gun industry and, more broadly, for a powerful military-industrial complex.

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5. Conclusion

This article has examined how Republican women candidates deploy guns in their political communication during the US midterm elections of 2022. It has shown that many legitimate their place in the party through the performance of what I have called rugged femininity, which encapsulates elements of hegemonic masculinity, rugged individualism, and traits traditionally characterized as feminine (especially motherhood and domesticity). In the political ads analyzed, Republican women simultaneously re-imagine the role of conservative women in US society through, first and foremost, their political ambitions and activities, but also, and importantly, their loaded guns. At the same time, they nonetheless reinforce traditional gender roles and conventions, which expect women to be motherly, caring, and typically fit and attractive. In doing so, they articulate a conflicting discourse that aims both to dismantle the patriarchal order on which the Republican Party operates and to fix gender power hierarchies tightly in place, as they emphasize their role of mothers and caretakers. In other words, Republican women candidates to Congress frame their political agency and empowerment in and through the logics of (White) heteropatriarchy and neoliberal capitalism.

In a context of heightened political polarization in the US, the narrative strategies of the ads analyzed in this article seem to prepare spectators (i.e., prospect voters) to accept, and perhaps even, engage in (future) political violence – to not »retreat« but to »reload«. Indeed, this performance of rugged femininity by Republican women politicians is instrumental to a larger reactionary discourse currently promoted by many within the Republican Party (and, more broadly, by the US far right) – specifically through notions of insurgency, corruption, and ›war‹. Through the melodramatic mode, the GOP routinely depicts the United States as a victimized nation, brought to its demise by supposed enemies: sometimes domestic, like the Democratic party and the so-called liberal left, sometimes foreign, like China. In *Orgies of Feelings* (2014), Elisabeth Anker demonstrates that melodrama functions as a powerful national political discourse in the US. She argues that political melodramas construct the nation as »a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action« and justify the intensification of state power and violence as »expressions of virtue« (Anker 2014: 2) and as legitimate means of retribution against those considered hurting the nation. As Anker writes, »[t]he eradication of [I would add, real or felt] injustice in melodramatic political discourse… is about an aggressive performance of strength in the national political sphere« (3) that also, and importantly, requires the »melodramatic mobilization of a political subject« (4). In the political discourse analyzed in this contribution, voters are indeed encouraged to ›join arms‹ with Republican politicians (by proxy or not) to fight to save the United States from supposedly falling into socialism and authoritarianism. The guns displayed in the ads I analyzed are more than symbolic shortcuts to signal a staunch support to the Second

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Amendment: They are actively used to blow problems away. In conclusion, Republican women's guns in political ads stand paradoxically as female empowerment and (White) female rage, as right-wing fantasy of political violence and imminent conservative regeneration, and as tool of both nation-building and state-demolition. These political ads reflect, with their paranoid style of politics and armed patriotism, the radicalization of a party in quest of meaning and power in a post-Trump era.

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Revenge is »Beautiful«

Links between Female Violence, *colombianidad*, *narcocultura*, and the Revenge Theme

Stefanie Mayer

1. Introduction

Olivier Megaton's *Colombiana* (2011) movie poster, titled »Revenge is beautiful«, shows an armed tough-looking woman in front of a diminished urban setting, which is hardly recognizable in midst of the explosions and flames consuming it. Upon further studying, we get a more accurate summary on the films' plot: It is in fact a »scandalous blend of sex, action and violence« and the reasoning behind this blends »scandalousness« – I dare to claim – is the protagonist's gender. Although filmic conventions have changed and violent female heroines have become more representable characters over the last few decades (cf. Heldman et al. 2016: 2), most protagonists are still male. Also, certain conditions must be met to even show a sexually active and violent female protagonist on screen. Apart from a few exceptions, protagonists correspond to stereotyped visions of violent women. In this paper, I want to draw attention to the similarities and differences between three feature films showing Colombian heroines and their struggle in taking revenge: *Rosario Tijeras*, Colombia's biggest box office success of the year 2005, written by Marcelo Figueras and directed by Emilio Maillé; the already mentioned *Colombiana* (2011), which was based on a script from Luc Besson and should have initially been the sequel to *Leon: The Professional* (1994); and *Matar a Jesús* (2018) written and directed by Laura Mora. This analysis discloses how the protagonists' nationality – in connection with the revenge theme – are used to justify their then violent nature. Additionally, this paper will deliver insights on implied ideas about gender and the Colombian reality.

1.1 Revenge, a Useful Explanation

This chapter points out the similarities between the above mentioned movies and analyzes how each narration sheds light on its revenge motive. It starts with pro-

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motional material: all three movie posters present a subtitle referring to vengeance: *Rosario Tijeras:* »Mi justicia es mi venganza« (My justice is my vengeance); *Colombiana:* »Revenge is beautiful« and *Matar a Jesús*: »¿Hasta dónde llegarías por venganza?« (How far would you go for revenge?). In explicitly linking the protagonists' violence to revenge, their actions become readable as mere reactions, caused by prior actions of men. This tendency of presenting a woman's violent behaviour as a reaction to having been a victim in the first place has tradition (cf. Lord/Burfoot xiii) and helps in maintaining the conventional binary gender opposition of mainstream cinema:

> The images of fierce heroines on television reflect the fact that women are defying the male monopoly on power and aggression, a shift that has significant ramifications for how gender is constructed. Such a transformation of gender roles is somewhat mitigated in stories involving revenge, for a desire to retaliate to some degree explains – if not justifies – the acts typically attributable to men. (Pobutsky 2020: 204)

In all three movies the scene outlining the revenge and the heroine's incorporated violence, is shown – at least – to a certain extent. This lets the spectator relate to them, as well as understand their motives; and facilitates feeling sympathy towards them despite of their wrongdoings. Clover's term of the ›monstrous female victim-hero‹ fits our heroines perfectly: all of them are victims, but at the same time occupy an active role in the movie as heroines that eventually fight back in their monstrous quest for revenge[1] (cf. Clover 2015: 4).

In *Rosario Tijeras* we see Rosario as a child and her supposed stepfather, who insinuates having sex with her: as he sensuously touches his fried egg and then gently pops it open inserting his fingers in it, while she quietly continues to eat. The melancholic music extenuates the disturbing scene. The rape itself is not shown but affirmed in a later scene when Rosario talks to her mother. Furthermore, Rosario mentions having been raped a second time at the age of 11, which led to her seducing the rapist some years later and cutting off his testicles with a pair of scissors – hence her name. Through this, the movie aligns itself with the traditional Rape-Revenge genre.[2] One might not agree with Clover to call rape »the most quintessentially feminine of experiences« (Clover 2015: 145), nevertheless, rape and even more so, the Rape-Revenge-theme has a clearly feminine connotation within popular cinema, which makes it even more avengeable:

1 Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* focusses on horror movies, nonetheless, many of her statements also apply to other genres.

2 Rape-Revenge movies might have started to appear in the 70s, but are by no means specific to this time or to any filmic genre, but might rather be describable as a genre for itself given their numerous and ongoing occurrence (cf. Henry 2014: 1–4).

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> For revenge fantasies to work, there must be something worth avenging […] In the case of rape-revenge films, that something has to do not only with rape, but with the power dynamic between men and women that makes rape happen in the first place and, in the second, that makes it so eminently avengeable. (Clover 2015: 144)

Even though rape is already »a clean ticket for revenge« (Clover 2015: 154), the film offers an additional revenge motive: the death of a loved one. Rosario is repeatedly shown as a victim in reference to her brother's death, to whom she refers to as »the love of her life, the only one who loved her« (59:03–59:07) and the one who had been replacing her father. This makes her loss even more hurtful. The whole narrative construction of Rosario's identity is based on her decision to take revenge (cf. Skar 2007: 119).

Just like Rosario, *Colombiana*'s protagonist Cataleya is still a little girl when she is first confronted with violence: As both her parents try to shoot the attackers before being shot themselves, Cataleya sits perfectly still at the table, paralyzed and trembling. The scene shows certain similarities to the one between Rosario and her stepdad. Both girls sit at the kitchen tables of their homes and both scenes are shown in a yellowish light, which is either interpretable as a hint to the setting of the scene in the past or means to underline the coziness of the home, which is disturbed by the intruders. To put more emphasis on Cataleya's innocence she is dressed in her school uniform, her homework and a glass of milk are placed in front of her. The close-up of the actress, who is looking directy in the camera with tears in her eyes, as well as the extra-diegetic music augment the drama of the scene. Later in the movie, as if the writers had feared the memory of the first murder could have faded, Cataleya's uncle and aunt are killed. Again, they are »the last piece of her« as the protagonist points out herself (01:23:42).

In *Matar a Jesus*, Paula also witnesses the murder of her father. He is – just like in both above mentioned movies – Paula's most loved family member. Right before the shooting, she is joking around with her father, which contrasts with the tragic event that follows: The unsteady camera, abrupt cuts and disappearing sounds reflect Paula's emotional state and force the viewer not only to relate, but to identify with her.

In comparison to the other two heroines, Paula is rather old when the incident happens, although she herself can barely be called an adult. The young ages at which the protagonists experience these horrific acts, are a helpful detail to augment sympathy; as being a child correlates to being innocent and in need of protection to most spectators. The fact, that their innocence is taken away and, the persons, who might have kept them safe (in all three movies the most important person to be killed is a male in control, to whom the protagonist looks up to), are killed, increases the cruelty of shown acts and makes the heroines' sufferance and anger relatable.

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1.2 Colombia, a Violent Nation?

Another key element of the movies is the Colombian context, which, in the selected narrations is directly linked to violence and, therefore, helps in justifying the heroine's violent behaviour. Taking into account that in the last century millions of people have been forced to move, hundreds of thousands have been killed, threatened, kid-napped, ›disappeared‹ or forcefully recruited in armed forces (Ospina Pizano 2019: 20), it is hardly surprising that many movies establish a connection between Colombia and violence. Nevertheless, most movies that put emphasis on Colombia, especially foreign productions,[3] make it out to be a rather simplistic country. Both Colombia and Mexico share the problem of this one-sided representation:

> […] the preeminence of violence – mainly but not exclusively related to drug trafficking organizations – brings Colombia and Mexico together in the global imagination. Local, international, and transnational cultural production plays an important role in this process. Violence has become both the primary lens through which the two countries are seen by the international community, and what audiences most want to see about them. (Martínez/Aristizábal 2019: 10)

This valid equation between violence and Colombia might partially hold true and, even within the Colombian population, it is not rare to interpret violence as part of the national identity (cf. Ospina Pizano 2019: 34–35).[4] However, this way of ›naturalizing‹ Colombia's violence is problematic, not only because it permits to ignore its reasons, but also because it shifts attention from consequences and possible solutions and only allows it to be a mere observation of existence.

However violence might be conceived, it forms a recurrent theme in Colombian narratives (cf. Suárez 2010: 13). One specific form of narrative linked to violence and Colombia, which corresponds to the narrative style of the discussed movies, can be described as ›narco-narrative‹.[5] Zavala defines ›narco-narratives‹ as a »dispersed

3 Whereas *Colombiana* indisputably offers a foreign perspective on the country and *Matar a Jesús* might be described as a view from within, *Rosario Tijeras* is a combination of the two, as the book, on which the film is based on was written by Jorge Franco, but the script differs from the book in many crucial points.

4 Elevating violence to a feature of national identity, nevertheless, seems to be a phenomenon linked to a certain class, as some parts of the population, such as the one living in urban popular sectors, consider violence rather to be a product of personal confrontations with violent individuals (cf. Jimeno 1998: 44).

5 *Matar a Jesús* does not as clearly correspond to that term, but as there exists a strong connection between sicarixs and the ›narcoculture‹ and the *sicario* Jesus is a main character in the movie, the following statements can be attributed to the logic of its narration even if the focus of the film is not set on drug trafficking. ›Sicario‹ is the Spanish word for hitmen but has additional meaning in the Colombian context: »[…] in the 1980s a new generation of assas-

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but interrelated corpus of texts, films, music and conceptual art focusing on drug trade« (Zavala 2014: 341).

The global trend of narrating this specific type of violence is hardly ever describable as ›authentic‹ or informative, but rather seeks to entertain. Especially in global market mass culture, violence linked to the margins of society is almost always turned into a fetish; by being represented as either monstrous or erotic (cf. Kantaris 2008: 457). Needless to say, the ›monstrous‹ part is mostly male gendered, whereas the ›erotic‹ part is more associated with the female gender. This fetishization could also be described through the term ›porno-miseria‹, coined by Carlos Mayolo y Luis Ospina in 1978, originally referring to a new kind of documentary that had transformed Colombia's misery into an internationally sellable product (cf. Ospina/Mayolo 1978). ›Porno-miseria‹ is to be understood as a reaffirmation of the Western colonial gaze; illustrating racialized populations as perennially monstrous, dirty and ungovernable, designed for extermination and cultural contempt (cf. Valencia/Herrera Sánchez 2020: 9).

›Narcoculture‹ not only is – in certain cases – describable as racist, but also has a misogynous structure as the established hierarchy within puts people that best correspond to hegemonic masculinity at the top of the power pyramid, incorporated by the *capo* and women in the lowest position (cf. Jiménez Valdez 2014: 108–09). This is hardly surprising as the ›narco-world‹ is directly linked to violence, which is still considered to be »a fundamental signifier of masculinity« (Neroni 2005: 42). Discriminated and marginalized, women are forced into passive roles (cf. Ovalle/Giacomello 2006: 301) and are conventionally defined by male agents. Being a woman inherently means to be linked to the *narco*/*sicario* through family relations, to be objectified (›trophy women‹), to be exploited (working for narcos), to be arrested (mostly for minor crimes, functioning as scapegoats) or to be abused/harmed/killed (victim of violence) (cf. Ovalle/Giacomello 2006: 317).

Rosario embodies several of these conventional roles: being a trophy woman, getting exploited by working as a prostitute, being abused several times, arrested, and finally killed. Cataleya corresponds only to the first and the last category while Paula can simply be described as a victim of violence. Nevertheless, all three heroines arm themselves at some point in the movie and fight back. In all three movies, the gun plays a crucial role: It reinforces androcentrism, as it continues to function as a

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sins appeared. These were young men, coming from the shantytowns of Colombia's big cities, who were identified as the motorcycle assassins – like the ones who had killed Lara Bonilla [Minister of Justice, who was assassinated by orders of Pablo Escobar] – and whose actions were linked to the emergence of the traffic of illegal drugs. […] the word *sicario* was seldom used until the mid-1980s; it began to circulate widely once paid assassins were associated with the narcos« (Polit Dueñas 2013: 112–13). More on the Colombian sicariato in: Salazar's *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990).

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»cultural symbol of manliness« (Cox 2007: 152),[6] but also challenges this by handing the gun to female characters. Nonetheless, in all three narrations, the protagonists are implicitly or explicitly taught to shoot by a male character. Also, the movies lack female characters in comparison to male ones – once again accentuating the maleness of represented reality and narrations.

Curiously, it is precisely the fixed gender norms within the *narco*/violence context, which make its analysis and the corresponding narrations all more appealing for feminist studies:

> [T]he ›narco-world‹, as it constitutes a context that exposes the women who develop in it to a constant crisis, is presented as the ideal scenario to observe with particular clarity the spaces of struggle and resignification of the female subject. (Ovalle/Giacomello 2006: 314, translated by SM)

The representation of Colombia as a violent region, where only drugs and the loudest gun rule, therefore is many things at a time. There lies a hurtful truth in it, especially in retrospective on the country's past; a lot of mystification, such as the identity discourse, which established violence as a national identity trait, and of course, it is an internationally sellable story. Characterizing Colombia as a type of no-man's-land, without education, justice, functioning police and/or legal system within collective international memory, is not only a profitable simplified idea of the country, but also a brilliant way to legitimize violent women on screen.[7] Therefore, it seems logical that the movies tend to present violence like something ordinary within the Colombian context.

Under this aspect, the director's decision to set *Rosario Tijeras* in 1989 Medellin does not seem to be arbitrary. The place and time are explicitly shown to us in the opening sequence and refer to an especially bloody chapter in the country's history: In 1989 Pablo Escobar declared his war against the Colombian State, causing many civil victims, especially in his territorial base, Medellín (cf. Bello Albarracín 2013: 101–102). To make the ›Colombian setting‹ clearer – even for spectators unaware of the country's history – the movie normalizes drug use and violence within the first few minutes.

In *Colombiana*, the equation of Colombia and violence is particularly pronounced. The first few minutes of the movie, which ›show‹ Colombia, set the right mood, altering between footage of a city, that claims to be Medellín as well as drug or violence related photographs. Furthermore, almost every violent act shown on

6 Cox' article focusses on the USA, but I suggest that assuming the gun as a symbol for manliness holds true for Occidental culture in general.

7 One might draw a parallel between this hypothesis and Clover's observations on the rural setting of horror movies (cf. Clover 2015: pp. 124–37).

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screen is carried out by ›Colombians‹ (ironically, not one of the actors is Colombian) despite the movie being set in the US. The normalization of violence within Colombian context reaches an almost caricatural level, when nine-year-old Cataleya decides to become a killer and her uncle not only accepts her career choice, but even trains her. The title itself seems to confirm the connection between Cataleya's nationality and her violent behaviour, but the movie's trailer makes it even clearer replaying her father's voice repeatedly telling her not to forget where she came from while showing her fighting, shooting, and killing. The name ›Cataleya‹ is also a reference to Colombia, as it describes a flower from the Amazon region.

Matar a Jesús shows a more subtle version of Colombia's violence, which makes it appear more authentic than in the first two examples. The impotence and corruption of the police is more explicit than in *Colombiana* and *Rosario Tijeras* as Paula is the only protagonist, who even bothers to try resolving her ›victim situation‹ through the police, whereas in the other two movies the law enforcement units are presented as enemies of the heroines. Paula visits the police headquarters twice. The first time Paula visits the police station, the themes of incompetence and corruption appear, as the watch of her killed father seems to be missing and we hear a person in the corridor complaining about the police's inefficiency. Eventually – following Paula's second visit – the doubt is solidified when the responsible inspector denies having ever heard of a missing watch and admits to nothing new having been investigated. He also points out that each day five to ten homicides are reported: putting emphasis on the daily occurrence of violence and legitimizing its over-burdening. The interrelation between the incompetent police and the protagonist's violent behaviour is again highlighted when showing how the inactivity of the police raises Paula's anger, as she starts cursing, throwing documents on the floor, and attacking the officer.

2. Gender in the Context of Colombian Revenge Heroines

A narration that places a female protagonist into *narco* context and provides her with a fire arm has great potential for offering new social imaginaries concerning gender norms. Nevertheless, the films present the violent acts as mere reactions and draw on certain strategies legitimizing the heroines' violent behaviour. Two strategies have already been discussed, but each film offers specific approaches and, thereby, implicates different views on gender.

2.1 Rosario, the Victimized Masculine *femme fatale*

Rosario Tijeras tells the story of a homonymous heroine and attractive young woman of lower class, who is involved in the *sicario* subculture and makes her living through prostituting herself and killing people. Still, the main part of the story is shown from

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Antonio's perspective, a spoiled kid within Colombia's upper class, who throughout the story grows ›to be a man‹, whereas Rosario – in the beginning – corresponds more to male stereotypes but in the course of the film loses her ›masculinity‹[8].

As explained, the violent setting of *narcoculture* rarely allows active female characters, nevertheless *Rosario Tijeras* recurs to the tradition of the *femme fatale* to make the protagonist more acceptable. In fact, Rosario embodies the perfect representation of this type:

> Intelligent, witty, able to role-play and perform, deceptive, enraged, frustrated, mercenary, seductive, overtly sexual, fearless and tough as nails, physically self-confident with a striking appearance […] The figure is commonly understood as a beautiful woman who seduces a male protagonist into criminality and a web of deceit, causing his demise and, when film-industry production codes required, her own death too. (Grossman 2021: 1)

Rosario is presented as an independent, sexually active and, therefore – seen from a patriarchal perspective – problematic character. The trouble the protagonist brings with her is anticipated by both Antonio, when he points out that the people surrounding Rosario will kill Emilio for dating her, and outlined by the deteriorating state of Emilio and Antonio throughout the movie. The relationship between the two – supposedly inseparable – best friends also changes because of Rosario, as Antonio betrays his friend by sleeping with her and towards the end of the movie the two men hardly ever see each other anymore. Her embodiment as *femme fatale* begins in the very first scene (01:36–02:12); she dances with one of her victims, leans in for a kiss and then, her trademark, shoots him while intertwined. The scene focusses on her physical appearance, fragmenting her body in short extreme close-ups, which are finally replaced by a red screen at the sound of the shot. The fast cuts between the images of her body-parts reinforce the (sexual) tension of the scene and, in Mulvey's words, produce »the ultimate fetish« presenting the woman as »a perfect product« (Mulvey 1999: 65). Mulvey's theory on the male gaze has been widely discussed, declined, reaccepted, and modified over the years, but her observation on using fragmented close-ups to present women on screen in a fetishizing way holds true for *Rosario Tijeras* and so does her theory on the punishment of ›harmful‹ women, as will be elaborated later on. The scene additionally evokes the mystery the *femme fatale* figure implicates by omitting to show her face. The abrupt visual change from the scene to the red screen and the music being interrupted by the gunshot, underline the character's mercilessness.

8 I realize that the unspecified use of the terms ›masculinity‹ and ›femininity‹ reinforce a conventional, binary way of thinking genders; nonetheless, and as I will show, the movie itself suggests those readings of manliness and womanhood.

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In the following, Rosario is portrayed as sexy, unapproachable, and bossy, especially in scenes involving Emilio and Antonio. When they first see her, dancing yet again, the voyeurism is made even more explicit. Almost one whole minute (07:37–08:29) the camera switches between Rosario dancing in a short red dress with her eyes closed and mouth open, and the gazing Emilio and Antonio. Rosario's first few spoken lines also go hand in hand with her *femme fatale* image. She is repeatedly shown, but never speaks, guarding her secrets. When she speaks, she does it in imperatives. When Emilio tells Antonio about the steamy sexual encounter with Rosario, which of course is shown (12:40–13:18), he makes the mystery about Rosario even more explicit by telling his friend that he doesn't know anything about her (15:10–15:20). Almost perfectly, he describes the characteristics of a *femme fatale,* pointing out her mystery, but also her active role in the narration when answering Antonio's question about what he does with her (he would rather have to ask *her* what she does to *him*). Rosario's secrets are being kept from Emilio, nevertheless the spectators and eventually Antonio get background information on her, offering a different reading of her character.

As discussed earlier, the film shows Rosario's past, portraying her as a victim, which makes her violence relatable and lets her character appear more likeable despite its aggressiveness. The scenes showing her as a victim rather than as a hero increase in frequency and intensity throughout the movie. This is also shown through changes to her physical appearance. The best example for illustrating these changes might be the scene after her brother is killed, which is meaningfully placed almost in the exact middle of the movie. Whereas before, she tends to be dressed in rather ›sexy‹ clothes, wears make up and has her hair straightened, in this scene we see a crying woman with messy hair and no make-up, who in her pink shirt almost appears like a little girl (58:06–59:33). If »femmes fatales perform roles in order to survive« (cf. Grossman 2021: 6), then Rosario fails to ›perform‹ in this scene and we discover her true nature. The contrast between her appearance and the gun in her hand states the obvious: it should not be this way. Only when Antonio arrives is she free to let go and become what the narration needs her to be: a weeping woman in the arms of a male hero. The increasing focus on her role as a victim, rather than as a violent agent leads to a simple conclusion: Even if Rosario is initially portrayed as an independent woman who does not belong to anybody, as she herself makes clear while killing off the friend of her ex-partner (34:50–34:55), she still needs a hero to save her.

Antonio, nevertheless, fails to be hero-material, being shown as a rather ›unmanly male‹. Right from the beginning, it is clear that her salvation and the narration of the movie lie in his hands as he carries her bleeding body through the hospital doors (03:03–03:41). Unfortunately, he is not up to the task, which the first few scenes implicate, showing him as the least manly of all male figures. Especially in comparison with Emilio, Antonio comes across as rather juvenile, sensitive, and shy.

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In the first scene, when both characters appear (05:11–07:00), the camera follows Emilio, not Antonio: through a POV-shot we see how every woman he passes, looks at him. Emilio is taller than Antonio, dressed in a much more adult way and the movie portraits him as a charming, flirty guy who is surrounded and admired by a lot of women. On the other hand, Maria, the girl Antonio dates, does not call him back. Later in the same scene, the two characters discover Rosario. The positioning of the camera suggests that the three characters form a perfect triangle, but while Rosario and Emilio are directly facing the camera, Antonio's body is pointing sideways and he only turns to the camera after Rosario shifts her view from Emilio to him. Furthermore, he carries his and Emilio's glasses and, therefore, ›has his hands full‹ and stands still when Rosario leaves the dance floor, whereas Emilio immediately goes after her. Both Emilio and Antonio follow one of the typical narratives proposed by Mulvey, which is »investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery« (cf. Mulvey 1999: 65), but it is not in their hands to punish nor save her. Antonio succeeds in investigating her mysteries, but as he is not ›man enough‹ to possess her, Rosario *must* die. His lacking maleness is implicated by the fact that throughout the main part of the movie he is presented as rather fearful and is frequently shown crying and/or suffering. Even if Rosario seems to admire his empathy and sensitivity, she also points out, that »good ones« like Antonio »always suffer« (01:15:35–01:15:40), which quite adequately describes the whole narration. In a *narcoculture*, as which Colombia here is clearly presented; there is only space for manly men and feminine women. Interestingly enough Rosario seems to incorporate both of those roles; she is a cliché manly man in a stereotypically feminine body.

Not only is Rosario linked to violence and her gun (both markers for masculinity) and has a more demanding and aggressive way of speaking, but also Antonio mentions rumours about her being a man. Also, Rosario is repeatedly presented as ›incapable of love‹: when Antonio asks her if she has even fallen in love, she dodges the question, whenever Emilio tries to get to know her, she interrupts the conversation with sex and, as already stated, she makes it more than clear, that she cannot be possessed when killing Ferney's friend. The focus on sex and denial of love represents stereotypical male behaviour, that contradicts feminine stereotypes.

As mentioned before, the blurry gender boundaries, where Rosario is more of a man than Antonio will ever be, loosen up throughout the movie, until, finally, he carries the half dead Rosario into the hospital, where, of course, she cannot be saved. It is as if the movie tells us that even if Rosario decides to align with the predetermined gender patterns, she is already too far off and must be punished for the lines she has crossed. Her past haunts her and brings her to an early death, as the films ending leads us to understand. Different to the novel, it is Ferney, her ex-boyfriend, who kills her, and the scene is set in the exact same disco playing the exact same song we saw her dancing to in the first scene when she was the murderess.

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2.2 Cataleya, the Violent Unreal Other

The story of *Colombiana's* (2011) heroine shows similarities to Rosario's. As the daughter of a Colombian mafia boss, she is already confronted with violence at a young age. Her parents are killed in front of her eyes and she decides to avenge their death by killing everyone involved in it. As to gender norms, the heroine is similarly ›masculinized‹ and sexualized as in *Rosario Tijeras*, nevertheless the narrations judgement on her crossed gender boundaries is different as Cataleya does not get objectified as much nor is she as clearly punished as Rosario. The title of the movie might be the only Colombian thing about it, and it seems as if the focal point to making the protagonist Colombian, is to make her violent character explainable.

The preference for Latina protagonists in Hollywood action movies has been an ongoing trend since the late 1990s (cf. Beltrán 2004: 186–187), but Zoe Saldana represents an even more specific group of actresses which became popular in US cinema about one decade later:

> Mixed race actresses exist on the margins of whiteness and the margins of racial Other. They are just ethnic enough to bring to their roles a suggestion of different characteristics – in sexuality, physical skills, and temperament – but white enough to make these racially problematic traits palatable. Physically mixed race performers like Zoe Saldana, Maggie Q, and Jessica Alba are presented as traditionally beautiful with just enough of an exotic look to enhance their desirability. (Brown 2015: 113)

Both the actress's appearance and the characters nationality serve as an excuse to explain shown violence as a logical consequence of being the ›Other‹. ›Otherness‹, in this case, just as the science fiction or superhero genre, is the exception to the rule, as it is, »a space in which female physical power is permitted, but in a fantastical [othered] setting that (with or without comedy) underlines its real-world impossibilities« (Purse 2022: 81). Cataleya's otherness helps to »contain the threat embodied by the presence of the physically powerful woman« (ibid.).

Especially when comparing Cataleya to the other female characters present in the movie, her otherness becomes evident: the exaggeratedly stupid giggling bikini girls surrounding the drug lord, Cataleya takes out, form a clear counterpart to her smart, serious, and violent character. Even the friendly woman working in the police department is portrayed as rather simple-minded and unaware of her own actions.[9] Cataleya is different, as her name states, she is an exotic rare flower, which

9 It might not be a coincidence that the person, who inserts the photo of Cataleya into the police database and thereby reveals Cataleya's identity to the FBI, is a woman. Though the picture was taken by her lover and forwarded by his friend, in the end it is the woman who bears the guilt.

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only grows in the Amazonian region. Following the narrations logic, the dangerous violent woman exists, but only in ›a faraway land‹.

The movies ending might not evoke associations of any fairy tale, but it surely reminds of a stereotypical Western, yet again making clear that despite its urban surroundings, this narration is to be seen as a fictional construct set in the ›Wild West‹. The heroine hangs up the phone, on which she just bid farewell to her love, sheds a single tear, puts on her cowboy hat and sunglasses (because, of course, it is sunset) and walks off as the lone wolf she is. Only for a moment, she shows emotions, but then the close-up switches to a long shot from behind and Cataleya bravely walks away while Johnny Cash's *Hurt* sets the right mood.[10]

The portrayal of violent women as ›unrealistic characters‹ often goes hand in hand with illustrating them as almost immune to the physical consequences of their fights and reframing their toughness according to their gender by fighting with »fluid, flowing, more ›feminine‹ movements« and with »grace and dignity; perfect hair and make-up« (Purse 2022: 81–82). Cataleya corresponds perfectly to those claims, she is a »catlike killer for hire« (Brown 2015: 91). Even after the final battle (01:33:30–01:36:24), where she fights and kills several men (one of them being the right hand of the capo, Marco, whom she fights with her bare hands and – an almost caricatural choice of weapons – a towel and a toothbrush), apart from a little blood, she shows no signs of the fight (01:37:35). Her make-up and hair seem perfect and, in contrast to all the men she just killed, there is not one drop of sweat on her face and her breathing is perfectly calm. Preserving the female action heroines from bodily consequences, reinforces their »dual status as both active subjects and sexualized objects« (Purse 2022: 81). Cataleya's clothing during most of the fight scenes fulfils the same purpose – be it a skin-tight bodysuit, a swimsuit, or a pyjama.

Ironically, several scenes parody the limits for the female gender the movie itself implicates (at least for all women not corresponding to the ›other‹). The special agent of the case refuses to follow the lead on Cataleya, because he is »not looking for a woman«, regarding it as simply »not possible« that a woman could be behind the series of brutal murders he investigates (1:02:25–1:02:29). In the beginning of the movie, Cataleya herself indirectly makes use of these perceived gender limits, when crushing a police car and pretending to be drunk to be put in a cell, from which she accesses another cell and kills one of her nemeses (26:12–37:38). Sexily dressed and apparently not even able to walk by herself, nobody suspects the »crazy stupid bitch« (26:58) to have anything to do with the murder.

10 Not offering a »romantic union« is a typical way of reinforcing »the traumatic nature of the violent woman« in contemporary Hollywood action films featuring violent women (Neroni 2005: 93).

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2.3 Paula, the ›Real‹ Heroine?

Matar a Jesús (2018) also shows a young woman on her quest for revenge, as her father is killed by a *sicario*, whom she then befriends to find out more about the murder and avenge him. The movie is set in the same city as in *Rosario Tijeras*, Medellín, but in ›post-conflict‹ times and differs (regarding both the narrative construction and the production) from the other two movies. *Matar a Jesús* was written and directed by Laura Mora and therefore, unlike the other two films, offers both a ›female‹[11] and a ›Colombian‹[12] insight on gender and national problematics, which might explain the rather different viewing points the film offers – both on gender norms and on the topic of ›Colombian violence‹.

Contrary to the other protagonists, Paula is not sexualized, and her toughness is not describable as masculine, but rather as an individual trait of the heroine. She is shown as an independent character, which is highlighted by the cinematic decision of focussing the whole narration on her, not showing any scene without her, and using a lot of subjective camera and sound effects, which gives viewers even more chance to identify with her character. Especially in the first few scenes, Paula gives off the impression that she has everything under control and predominantly leads the narration. In each scene, she is the one to decide and the camera often follows her from behind, as if it had difficulties to follow her. In general, Paula is hardly ever shown from a frontal perspective; only in moments of confrontation, which are mostly linked to Jesús. Her violent acts are not as numerous and are always directly linked to the loss of her father, however when she finally faces Jesús with the gun in her hands, she kicks him and screams at him, but does not pull the trigger. Nevertheless, the decision of not shooting Jesús does not seem to be ascribable to her gender.

Even though the movie's violence is mostly male gendered, there is another violent female included in the narrative. The person from whom Paula tries to buy a weapon, is not only connected to the gun, but also kicks her in the stomach after stealing her camera. In the following scene, in contrast to the woman, Jesús is offering his immediate help and his friend borrows him his gun, no questions asked. As the narrative suggests, neither violence nor solidarity are questions of gender, but more so the circumstances you are confronted with.

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11 The existence of a specific ›feminine way‹ of filmmaking is controversial, nevertheless, especially in comparison to the other two movies, it is noticeable that the portrayal of the protagonist is freed from what Mulvey described as ›male gaze‹.

12 Not only did the director grow up in Medellín, but the movie's plot is also partly autobiographical. Additionally, Mora sees her own work as social realism, which might not say anything about the authentic quality of the film, but at least evidences an intention, that the other two directors lack.

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The biggest difference to the other two movies however is the characterization of the movie's ›bad guy‹. Jesús is not a simply ruthless, malicious man, whose actions are explained by being ›bad‹; throughout the movie we gain more and more background information on him, get to know his family and in the final scene he even raises an interesting question: »Do you think I live a happy life?« (1:32:30–1:33:33, translated by SM). The narration explains that Jesús is not the one to blame, he just does »what people tell him to do« (49:55–49:57, translated by SM). Killing him would not change anything, he merely functions as a scapegoat, just as his name suggests. This translates violence into a non-gender specific problem, that might be linked to powerful people, but mostly manifests its consequences within a less privileged social class.[13] Other scenes suggest similarities between Jesús and Paula; especially the comparisons between the gun and the camera are numerous, which is underlined by the slang of the *sicario* subculture, »where living fast is ›vivir a lo pel[í]cula‹, killing becomes ›tomar fotograf[í]a‹, ›montar videos‹ stands for inventing stories« (Pobutsky 2005: 23). At the same time, the parallels between the two characters clarify their differences: Paula, who represents the middle-class, can take pictures, whereas Jesús, representing the lower class, is forced to take up arms. This more empathetic view of the *sicario*, coincidences with a more realistic way of understanding the *sicariato*; not portraying its violence as a cause of itself, but rather as »the result of a mixture of a strong social exclusion experienced by the youth of the urban ghettos and the growth of a powerful globalized criminal industry« (Kantaris 2008: 457, translated by SM). Furthermore, there is yet another crucial difference between *Matar a Jesús* and the other mentioned productions.

In the first two movies, the protagonist herself is the *sicario* which therefore leads the spectatorship to identify with them and to a certain degree makes them out to be on ›the good side of the story‹; in *Matar a Jesús*, the *sicario* is placed on the opposite side, but the story's opposition between good and bad gets blurrier throughout the narration, and finally puts the spectators in a position to decide for themselves. This more complex narrative structure not only offers a more authentic insight on the *sicario*-phenomenon, but also fights the process of production of *narco* and *sicario* themed books, movies, and TV shows over the last few decades:

> In its passage through cinema, literature and the consequent trivialization by the mass media, a symptom of the seriousness of Colombian violence, such as the *sicariato*, becomes a kind of trend in youth cultures, thus smoothing out all the burden of conflicts it carries with it. (Walde 2001: 28, translated by SM)

13 In all three movies, there is a certain connection between poverty and violence, but whereas in *Rosario Tijeras* and in *Colombiana* there is no explanation to that connection, *Matar a Jesús* clarifies that it is the circumstances that force people to act violently.

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Contrary to other films, the sicariato is not glorified in any way and there is no fetishization of violence in *Matar a Jesús*. This is of great importance, especially, if we agree on the relation that sociologist Salazar establishes between the Colombian *sicarixs* and cinematic productions:

> Like the older generations of *sicarios*, the newer ones seem to share what Salazar summed up as the myth »of war, of spectacular action and super-heroes that many of these youths have adopted as their ideal« (J. Salazar, *Born to Die* 120). Salazar attributed this attitude to the impact of global visual culture and particularly to Hollywood cinema, which provided the gullible dispossessed with make-believe combat imagery. It does not matter how soon you die; what matters is that you instill fear and become a legend. (Pobutsky 2020: 201)

Matar a Jesús clearly goes a different way by showing that Jesús cannot live with his own family out of fear that they might pay for his crimes, is threatened by death various times, and does not even live a luxurious life in exchange. His choice to be a *sicario* is not so much a decision as a situation he is forced into. Paula, on the other hand, can choose to shoot or not to shoot and when she throws the gun away in the final scene, it can be interpreted both as a metaphor for putting an end to violence, but also as a privilege.

3. Conclusion: Subversive Gender Crossings – Potentials and Limits

In conclusion, even though all three movies share their subversive potential – handing out guns to their protagonists and including several suffering male characters – they use different strategies to restrain their potentially radical gender crossings. Let alone through the mere revenge genre, and the specific focus these films put on male actions in need of vengeful female reactions, the active role of the heroines is restricted and rooted within patriarchal patterns of reasoning. The recurrence to certain discursive and generic traditions, which are linked to patriarchy, such as the global imaginary equation of Colombia and violence, the *narco*-world, and the (rape)-revenge theme, helps to justify the portrayed female violence. *Rosario Tijeras* and *Colombiana* explicitly show shooting women but punish them with death and/or loneliness and both movies highlight their fictitious status via recurrence to the *femme fatale* figure and exoticization mechanisms. *Matar a Jesús*, on the other hand, offers a more complex visualization of violence and gender in the Colombian context, which might imply a more authentic portrayal of female violence, but at the same time makes it impossible for the heroine to pull the trigger due to reasons of class affiliation.

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»My Palm and My Trigger Finger Itch, Bitch«
Gangsterism and Female Hustling in Contemporary Hip Hop Culture

Hana Vrdoljak

1. Introduction: Guns, Gangs, and Hip Hop[1]

In the American cultural imaginary, hip hop, gangsterism, and gun culture have been intimately related since the movement's inception in the South Bronx of the 1970s. This, one could argue, is not surprising, given that firearms hold an important place in hip hop. In fact, none of the manifold elements that make up hip hop

1 As Alim, Chang, and Wong note in the preface of their publication *Freedom Moves*, to many hip hop enthusiasts, the year 2023 marks both the fiftieth birthday of hip hop (since DJ Kool Herc's legendary »Back to School« Jam took place on August 11, 1973 in the South Bronx) as well as roughly 30 years of hip hop scholarship (Alim et al. 2023: xiii). Throughout the past decades, Hip Hop Studies has become an ever-growing field of research that intersects and interacts with a multitude of different disciplines, including gender studies, critical race theory, popular culture studies, and ethnomusicology, to name a few examples (Miller et al. 2014: 8–9). While many hip hop scholars agree that Tricia Rose's 1994 monograph *Black Noise* »provided the original blueprint for studying Hip Hop« (Harris et al. 2022: 6), *That's the Joint!* – an edited volume published by Murray Forman and Mark A. Neal ten years later – is accredited with »[stamping] ›hip-hop studies‹ into history« (ibid.). Nevertheless, there have also been doubts as to whether bringing knowledge about hip hop into »the corridors of the ivy towers« (Gosa 2015: 67) bears the risk of endangering the art form's integrity: »What place, if any, will radical, counter-hegemonic thought, Afrocentrism, or street knowledge have in spaces that operate primarily for the reproduction of race-gender-social class advantage?« (ibid.). Considering that hip hop has evolved into an indispensable part of both US and international popular culture, in recent years there have been calls for a globalizing turn in hip hop scholarship. According to Travis Harris, »[s]cholars and Hip Hoppas must think about Hip Hop from a global perspective and consider the many areas that intersect with Hip Hop. Global Hip Hop Studies is Hip Hop Studies. Hip Hop Studies is Hip Hop. Global Hip Hop is Hip Hop« (Harris 2019: 18–19). Furthermore, voices have been raised that scholarship relies too much on analyzing rap lyrics, neglecting other elements and facets of hip hop which are just as important for the understanding of the art form (Harris et al. 2022: 6).

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– including rapping, deejaying, breakdancing, graffiti, and fashion – seem immune to the artistic incorporation of guns: they are continuously talked about in the lyrics, gunshot noises are used as the basis for beats, aestheticized depictions of them are emblazoned on house walls as well as on rappers' bodies, they are stylized as fashionable accessories, and they are also referenced in traditional breakdance moves (Banes 2004: 16). In short, firearms seem to be omnipresent in hip hop culture.

All this can be viewed as feeding into the persistent myth that hip hop culture emerged as part of New York City's gang scene (Aprahamian 2019: 299). Some scholars even suggest that these new »street anthems« (Jenkins 2011: 1232) in the form of rap songs served as an artistic »counter-proposition« (Lamotte 2014: 690) to criminal activities. As the »gang origin narrative« (Aprahamian 2019: 309) implies, hip hop as an art form is firmly rooted in violence. This association of hip hop's beginnings with delinquency and poverty (ibid.: 301) further contributes to the vilification of rap as »the black monster's music« (Rose, *Rap Music* 1994: 153). Ultimately, the societal (d)evaluation of music is simultaneously aimed at the group that creates it (Flores 2009: ix). This phenomenon is, for instance, reflected in the media coverage when it comes to hip hop: throughout the past decades, not only have numerous articles been written on the supposed connection between the consumption of rap music and juvenile delinquency, but various outlets have also shown a great deal of sensation-seeking interest in feuds between rivaling hip hop crews or individual rap artists.

That being said, through its open flirtation with gangsterism, the culture itself has also done its bit to strengthen and uphold the widespread correlation between hip hop and violence. Indeed, the glamorization of the heavily armed thug can be considered routine practice within hip hop culture, a tendency that is most notably expressed through the gangsta rap subgenre.[2] As pointed out by John Hagedorn, rap artists' constructions of a gangsta persona cater to the glorification of gang culture (Hagedorn 2009: xxvii), with gangsta rap offering an exaggerated depiction of street culture (ibid.: 94). In other words, gangsta rappers can be viewed as »dramatizing the street code« (Watts 2004: 598) in order to »sensationaliz[e] the gangster lifestyle« (Hagedorn 2009: 85). It seems, then, that both mainstream society as well

2 Arguably hip hop's most controversial subgenre, discussions and analyses of gangsta rap productions hold a firm place in hip hop studies, particularly when it comes to the art form's constructions of (Black) masculinity. While she does not conceal their problematic aspects, Rose's reading of works (including both lyrics and music videos) by groups such as N.W.A and Public Enemy in *Black Noise* (1994) demonstrated from the early years of the discipline that gangsta rap entails an important political dimension. This tenet has also been taken up in more recent publications, such as *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America* by Felicia Angeja Viator. First published in 2020, Angeja Viator's monograph traces the history of West Coast gangsta rap while highlighting the subgenre's crucial role in raising public awareness of the US urban crisis.

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as the hip hop – or, more precisely, gangsta rap – community share an interest in further advancing the mystification of gangsterism. Eric K. Watts sees the reason for this in the growing commodification of hip hop culture: once an underground art form, it now largely caters to the »spectacular consumption« (Watts 2004: 593) of the paying public. Consequently, gangsta rap »also attracts listeners for whom the ›ghetto‹ is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom« (Kelley 1997: 39). In this sense, it appeases societal voyeurism by supposedly giving its audience a glimpse of »the daily, gritty grind of inner-city living« (Watts 2004: 597).

For example, such a glamorized depiction of gangsterism can be found in *Yes* (2019), a bilingual rap song by Fat Joe, Cardi B, and Anuel AA:

> Murder and the money on my mind
> My palm and my trigger finger itch, bitch
> I been in my bag, hoppin' outta jets
> Been runnin' shit, and still ain't outta breath
> I can lay a verse, and lay these hoes to rest
> (ll. 5–9)

At first glance, the above lines seem like a classic example of traditional gangsta rap lyrics, given that they boast financial wealth as well as the willingness to use armed violence against one's adversaries. However, the fact that these lyrics are taken from Cardi B's part, meaning that the speaker is a *female* gangster, may not seem quite so typical. After all, »gangsta rap narratives« (Watts 2004: 593) usually rely heavily on the display of a specific gender identity which can be described as hip hop hypermasculinity. According to bell hooks, »gangsta culture is the essence of patriarchal masculinity«, further describing it as the »ultimate practice« (ibid.: 26, 25) of oppressive manhood (ibid.: 26, 25; see also Cooke/Puddifoot 2000: 424). Historically, the gangsta rap subgenre has long been dominated by male interpreters, with (Black) women mostly appearing as »visible nonspeakers« (Durham 2014: 7). Recent years, however, have seen the rise of several successful African American female artists who can be categorized as gangsta rappers, such as Asian Doll, Latto, the City Girls, and Cardi B. As a result, this increased depiction of women gangsters in US popular culture complicates and challenges traditional gender dynamics within hip hop. Moreover, »hip hop self-representations« (ibid.: 7) of female gangsterism arguably entail a special kind of fascination: »images of female kick-ass, shoot-to-kill power« (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 36) seem to bring about a particular appeal. Considering that gun culture is coded as hypermasculine, women handling firearms transgress certain ideas of femininity shaped by patriarchal gender norms, while at the same time transforming themselves into objects of allure and (male) fantasies (Agra Romero 2012: 58) – they are both feared and desired. In short, while depictions of female

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gangsters »continue to confound, arouse, and scare us« (Browder 2006: 232), associating women with violence seems to simultaneously maximize their sexual appeal in the public imagination (Inness 1999: 69).

In this essay, I propose that female rap artists' self-depictions as gun-carrying thugs have three main effects. First, such portrayals function as aestheticized – and usually strongly sexualized – demonstrations of opposition against different kinds of (white) patriarchal oppression. Put differently, the appropriation of the gangster figure entails a feminist dimension, moving in the gray area of what Samantha Pinto refers to as »agency/submission crisis in Black feminist studies« (Pinto 2020: 13). Second, posing as a »gangsta in a dress« (Cardi B, *I Do* II. 5) is glorified by depicting gangsterism as a form of hustling. According to this logic, engaging in unlawful activities is legitimized by the fact that the rapper sees it as her responsibility to take care of herself and ›her people‹, the end justifying the means. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the gangster figure serves as a platform for the rappers' self-fashioning. In this context, bearing arms is stylized as an expression of unapologetic self-confidence, independence, and a sexiness so great that it is intimidating – if not hazardous.

Although this trend can be observed extensively in the contemporary, transnational hip hop scene, for the sake of this piece I will focus in particular on works by the chart-topping, female (gangsta) rapper Cardi B. Bronx-raised and formerly gang-affiliated, the rap artist relies heavily on the image of the female gangster. In this context, her self-portrayal as an armed woman plays a vital role. For instance, in the intro of *Wish Wish* (2019), the rap artist introduces herself as »Cardi sendin' shots/Cardi, from the block/Cardi, with the Glock« (3–5). The present contribution explores the ways in which armed Black women are represented in the United States' contemporary hip hop culture, based on the case study of selected lyrics and music videos published between 2016 and 2022.

2. »Gangsta Bitch Music«: Gangsterism and Female Hustling in Works by Cardi B

»Bronx, New York, gangsta bitch« (Cardi B 2016: 4): the chorus of Cardi B's 2016 track *Lick* provides a neat summary of the artist's hip hop persona along with some biographical information. Born in 1992, Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar grew up under modest circumstances in the Highbridge neighborhood of the South Bronx. As a teenager, she joined the East Coast Bloods (also known as United Blood Nation), a street and prison gang operating primarily in New York City. Her gang involvement, which was initially only rumored about, was confirmed by the rapper in an interview in 2018:

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> »When I was 16 years old, I used to hang out with a lot of« – agonizing, cliff-diver pause – »Bloods. I used to pop off with my homies. And they'd say, ›Yo, you really get it poppin'. You should come home. You should turn Blood.‹ And I did. Yes, I did. And something that – it's not like, oh, you leave. You don't leave.« (Weaver 2018: n. pag.)

Although Cardi B distances herself from her past as a gang member in the same interview – »Because I wouldn't want a young person, a young girl, to think it's okay to join it« (Weaver 2018: n. pag.) – she still manages to maintain a certain ›gang mystique‹ in the way she formulates her answer, leaving the reader wondering if she ever *really* left the Bloods – and if that is even possible. Once a gang member, always a gang member? Why is the rapper often dressed in red, the United Blood Nation's signature color? And what exactly does she mean by »I make bloody moves« (8), the last line of the chorus in her breakthrough single *Bodak Yellow* (Cardi B 2017)? It could be argued that it is precisely this ambiguity that makes gangsta rap so appealing. The boundaries between a rapper's fictional hip hop alter ego and the private individual often become blurred, especially when the performing artist actually has some street credibility to show for it. Consequently, the distorting »folkloric myth of gangs« (Sánchez Jankowski 1991: 309) that figures prominently in mainstream media could be solidified in the eyes of the public.

As she further elaborates on why she would not recommend joining a gang, Cardi B states the following:

> Being in a gang don't make you not *one dollar*. […] You could talk to somebody that is considered Big Homie and they will tell you: ›Don't join a gang.‹ The person that I'm under, she would tell you, ›Don't join a gang.‹ It's not about violence. It's just like – it doesn't make your money. It doesn't make your money. (Weaver 2018: n. pag.; italics original)

Thus, according to the rap artist, one of the greatest disadvantages of being a gang member is the lack of financial profit. Indeed, Almánzar goes on to explain how her work as a striptease dancer was a major factor in her turning away from the Bloods: »stripping […] changed my life. When I was a stripper, I didn't give a fuck about gangs, because I was so focused on making money« (Weaver 2018: n. pag.).

Hence, the rapper apparently rules out a symbiosis between gangsterism and the attainment of great wealth through hard work, which is usually called ›hustling‹ in hip hop slang. Yet her music and visual material prove the interview wrong. Cardi B's ›gangsta bitch music‹ (the title of her first two mixtapes, her answer to conventional gangsta rap) and the accompanying visual material celebrate hustling and gangsterism in equal measure. Her artistic expression shows that the two are mutually dependent: as empowering acts, as a way to take care of her family and loved ones, and

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as a legitimation to pride herself as a »certified, real street bitch« (*Wish Wish*, I. 5) surrounded by luxury goods – the fruits of her hard, consistent labor. The following part takes a closer look at Cardi B's performance of the gangsta bitch figure in connection with feminism and gun culture.

2.1 Gangsta Feminism and Firearms? Cardi B's Gangsta Persona

In an African American context, guns have historically been accredited with the potential to end white supremacist oppression, supposedly promising »a self-sovereignty and individual power that had not been achieved by institutions of law« (Haag 2016: 196). This discourse also played a major role in the civil rights movement. As Laura Browder has shown, the Black Panthers considered »gun ownership for African Americans […] a necessary element of American identity« (Browder 2006: 14) and linked it to »successful black manhood« (ibid.). Still, many female civil rights activists viewed it as »the great equalizer«, both when it came to disrupting the larger framework of systemic racism and sexist dynamics within communities of color (ibid.: 150–151). As a matter of fact, to this day »guns remain a charged symbol of women's access to full citizenship, of women's capacity for violence, and of women's sexuality« (ibid.: 230). This notion along with the belief that »power ultimately comes only through violent capabilities« (ibid.: 231) constitute the fundamental principles of armed feminism. In this sense, weapons in the hands of (Black) women represent »symbolic and actual power« (Cooke/Puddifoot 2000: 424) alike.

Contemporary hip hop culture also comments on armed feminism, oftentimes in works that could be described as hip hop feminist productions. An extension of Black feminist thought, hip hop feminism seeks to create a »homeplace« (Durham 2014: 4) for women within the rap community where the art form is connected to emancipatory concepts in a productive, »functional« (Morgan 1999: 62) manner and critiques any kind of overly academicized »out-of-touch feminism« (Peoples 2008: 21). Considering hip hop's masculinist history, female (gangsta) rap artists make a feminist statement through their mere existence and persistence. As Tricia Rose reminds us, female contributions to hip hop culture »produced some of the most important contemporary Black feminist cultural criticism« (*Never Trust* 2001: 233). By actively contributing to the rap scene, women have the opportunity to speak for themselves and can thereby significantly shape the ways in which they are represented in hip hop culture. In the case of gangsta rap, these self-depictions commonly rely on the motif of the »sexually voracious killer woman« (Inness 1999: 70). After all, as noted by Greg Dimitriadis, the microphone is oftentimes »metaphorically referred to both as a gun and as a phallus« (Dimitriadis 2004: 430). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that feminist ideas are commonly linked to (armed) violence in such hip hop productions, resulting in a fusion between gangsterism and feminist

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thought that could perhaps be best described as »gangsta feminism« (Perkins 1996: 33). Arguably a subcategory of hip hop feminism, gangsta feminism understands both hustling and gangsterism as emancipatory acts, promoting an idealized imagination of tough womanhood. As pointed out by Abigail A. Kohn, this kind of feminine performance is based on the principle of »fighting fire with fire« (Kohn 2004: 114). Thus, following this logic, oppression by patriarchal systems should be opposed with violence.

That being said, (self-)depictions of gun-wielding African American women in hip hop culture bear the potential of reinforcing the harmful »controlling image« (Hill Collins 2008: 76) of the so-called ›angry Black woman‹. Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood define this stereotype, which is recurrent in American popular culture, as »the physical embodiment of some of the worst negative stereotypes of Black women – she is out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared« (Jones/Norwood 2017: 2049). Added to this is the dehumanizing effect of this controlling image (ibid.): legitimate emotional reactions like anger in the face of centuries of racist and sexist discrimination are represented as animal-like, almost bestial, and in need of control. Following this logic, Black women expressing rage are perceived as a threat, an imminent danger to be averted.

Even a short glance at Cardi B's discography reveals that it is significantly shaped by gangsta feminist narratives and its strong affective dimension. In much of her work, attacks against figures representing patriarchal structures come from a place of revenge and violence. Generally speaking, the gangsta feminism expressed in Cardi B's hip hop productions comes to pass both on a private and on a public level. When operating in the domestic sphere, it often involves violent revenge on an abusive and/or unfaithful ex-partner. For instance, the rapper's part in *Rodeo* (2019) by Lil Nas X goes as follows:

> Look, gunshot, gunshot
> Thought you heard about me, must not, must not
> Last [Black man] did me dirty, dirty
> Like a bathroom in a truck stop, truck stop
> Now my heart, it feels like Brillo, I'm hard like armadillo
> Can't be no [Black man's] ex, I could only be his widow
> That's a fact, dressed in black, my heart break, bones will crack
> I be chilling, watching Oxygen, my favorite show is Snapped
> Now you know how I get, every day, a foreign whip
> Rather see you in a hearse
> Than see you with some other bitch, huh (II. 1–11)

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The way she was mistreated in a former relationship has led to the speaker handling abusive situations differently: emotionally hardened by bad experiences in the past, she now counters such behavior with violence. In doing so, she not only references the popular image of the murderous ›black widow‹, but also combines death threats with the display of her wealth (II. 9), highlighting her financial independence. Representing herself as a cold-blooded gangster who is not afraid to stand up for herself, she actively refuses the role of the helpless victim. Rather, in accordance with the concept of tough womanhood, she chooses to take matters into her own hands, resorting to (armed) violence and thus eventually becoming a perpetrator herself – a fact that becomes evident in the first line. In this context, the gun can be viewed as protecting her not only on a bodily, but also on an emotional level, acknowledging the armed feminist guiding principle of female self-defense. Furthermore, it illustrates her newly found position of power in romantic relationships with men, thereby helping to subvert old-established heteropatriarchal hierarchies within the domestic sphere.

In a public setting, the rage is rather directed against persons – most notably elderly white men – in positions of obvious structural power. An example of this can be found in the music video to Cardi B's *Press* (2019). The entire clip is riddled with references to armed violence on different artistic levels. This includes the beat, which features gun sounds,[3] as well as the choreography, whose sequence of movements alludes to discharging a firearm. While performing it, Cardi B and the other dancers are all completely undressed; the rap artist, however, is the only one with blood-smeared arms and hands. Clearly, the scene heavily sexualizes the Black female body by depicting it as ›dangerously attractive‹, combining violence with eroticized aesthetics. This is also true for the beginning of the video, which is situated in a rather domestic setting. Here, Cardi B is shown having a threesome with a woman and a man, whereafter she allegedly shoots both of her lovers. The killing, however, is not pictured explicitly. Only wearing her underwear, the rapper first takes a few puffs from a cigarette and then proceeds to slowly run her fingers through her hair before reloading the gun; after that, the screen goes black, and two shots as well as human screams can be heard. The general serenity of these actions as well as the rapper's hyperfeminine styling and demeanor create a strong erotic tension, which is further enhanced by her careful, almost sensual, handling of the weapon (fig. 1).

3 Apart from that, the song might also serve as an example of how gun culture not only influences hip hop beats, but also rap artists' verbal delivery of the lyrics. Indeed, Cardi B's flow – a rap song's prosody composed of the acoustic interplay of beat, melody, rhymes and intonation – in *Press* is arguably reminiscent of the sound of gun shots being fired in rapid succession, particularly in the hook. This phenomenon, characterized by a certain staccato style, can also be detected in the rapper's parts in *Shake It* (2021) and *Yes*, both of which lyrically refer to firearms as well.

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Fig. 1: Cardi B reloading a gun
Cardi B *Press* 2019 (00:35)

The shots fired interrupt this sexually charged atmosphere and mark a transition to the public sphere, namely an interrogation room, a courthouse, and a prison. In all these spaces, the rapper is depicted as a merciless »killer woman« (Inness 1999: 70) who leaves a – sometimes quite literal – trail of blood behind her. A considerable number of her victims are elderly white people who, at least initially, seem to be in a clear position of power over her. In some cases, they can be classified as representatives of the US-American nation state, like the detectives. Others can rather be viewed as civilians who are accomplices in the system, such as, for instance, the witnesses who incriminate her in court. In fact, the courtroom seems to be where most of the aggression occurs over the course of the video. All ten judges are white and male; among the exclusively white witnesses there is only one woman. Even though their words cannot be heard, their faces express open contempt, even disgust, for the Black female defendant. After the rapper delivers her statement and briefly talks to her attorneys, the picture suddenly goes black again. The next scene shows the whole courtroom in turmoil, with people frantically trying to escape outside, while Cardi B is the only one who remains calmly seated. The reason for the tumult is revealed immediately: the witnesses are lying lifeless on the ground with stab and gunshot wounds. Again, while the killing is not shown directly, Cardi B's behavior hints at the fact that she is the murderer. At first glance, the *Press* music video might merely look like an elaborately produced clip whose brutal aesthetic is reminiscent of splatter horror movies. As is the case with many gangsta rap productions, its uncritical celebration and glamorization of killing can certainly be considered problematic, especially since the violent crimes serve as a platform for the rap artist's self-fashioning as a tough (gun)woman. Nevertheless, such artistic depictions of violence can also entail an important political dimension: they can be understood as a kind of gangsta feminist revenge fantasy against a white supremacist society. Indeed, most

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of the rage expressed in this work is not directed against the victims as individuals, but rather – on a symbolic level – against the discriminatory system they stand and work for. Thus, the rapper arguably succeeds in taking up a clear position of dominance with the help of (armed) violence, thereby subverting white patriarchal power structures.

Altogether, both in the private and the domestic sphere, Cardi B's works portray the gun as a potential great equalizer with the capability to overturn the prevailing societal structures of power. By fulfilling her desire for vengeance and standing up for herself, she can be seen as fitting the ideal of tough womanhood. This could also be regarded as an unapologetic expression of radical female autonomy and – in connection with the eroticized depictions of nudity and (armed) violence – sexual liberation. Therefore, Cardi B's hip hop productions can be viewed as creating »an alluring fantasy in a society where women are too commonly raped, assaulted, and murdered« (Inness 1999: 8) by drawing upon a »myth of invincibility« (ibid.: 8) that is based on a woman's »toughness of character« (ibid.: 8).

Nevertheless, the ›gangsta bitch narrative‹ also caters to the harmful image of the ›angry Black woman‹ by constructing and portraying a type of African American femininity that appears to be primarily characterized by rage and a profound desire for revenge, whereas other – perhaps what Rebecca Bedell calls »softer« (Bedell 2018: 6) – emotions fade into the background. Put differently, some of these works portray Black women as *so* tough that they are at times dehumanized in the process. In fact, many self-portrayals of female rap artists as ruthless thugs in contemporary gangsta rap do hinge on proudly flaunting their aggressiveness and readiness to use violence – either to defend themselves or to protect and provide for their loved ones.

2.2 »Baby Mommy with the Clip«:[4] Hustling for the Family?

In much popular culture, women are represented as nurturing caretakers of their family members, most notably in the role of the doting mother. Therefore, imagining a kind of »armed motherhood« (Browder 2006: 156) might seem irritating at first, true to the idea that women are supposed to give and protect life rather than take it away (Agra Romero 2012: 72). In activist contexts, however, bearing arms has been associated with femininity and motherhood. Historically, as Laura Browder points out,

> many women activists, as well as observers of all political viewpoints, linked their taking up of arms against the state to their gender identity. The female armed revolutionaries of the [1960s and 1970s] explicitly connected their use of

4 A clip is a device used to quickly load pistol magazines with cartridges.

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> arms to their sexuality and maternity, and they saw engaging in violence as a path to liberation. (Browder 2006: 44)

This also applies to African American activist movements and groups, such as the Black Panthers. By presenting themselves as weapon-carrying mothers, Panther women »redefined mothering« (Spencer 2008: 109) in a manner that would enable their activist work (ibid.). As such, female Black Panthers created images of belligerent African American motherhood »that valorized the armed, revolutionary black woman« (ibid.: 99). After all, in a society where Black lives are under constant threat, »bearing children for the revolution« (Browder 2006: 149), as well as raising and protecting them, can be considered a rebellious, empowering act. The image of the »guerrilla mother« (ibid.: 156) has been thus firmly linked to the notion of armed Black motherhood: »Panther women could clutch a gun in one hand and hold a baby with the other arm« (ibid.: 150). Clearly, such depictions clash with more recent concepts of Black motherhood. As observed by Jennifer C. Nash, African American mothers are commonly portrayed as grieving, tragic heroines (Nash 2021: 4). She further elaborates that crisis constitutes the primary lens through which their mothering is perceived (ibid.: 12), such as representations of grieving mothers in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Contemporary hip hop productions are no exception to this trend: songs like *Mama Cry* by YNW Melly or *Collect Calls* by Kendrick Lamar rely heavily on sentimentalized depictions of maternal sorrow. Contrastingly, works by female gangsta rappers like Cardi B oftentimes resort to portrayals of armed motherhood, presenting themselves as tough caretakers who always put the wellbeing of their families first – no matter the cost.

Generally speaking, just like the gangster, the figure of the (Black) mother is highly valued in hip hop culture. There are countless songs that can be understood as odes to the performing rappers' mothers (such as *Dear Mama* by 2Pac or *I Love My Momma* by Snoop Dogg); likewise, some tracks by female hip hop artists deal with their own motherhood (see, for example, *I Got You* by Ciara or *To Zion* by Lauryn Hill). Such family-oriented works sometimes contain certain narratives of success, relying on »imagined economic promises« (Paul 2014: 367). In fact, ›from rags to riches‹ storylines enjoy great popularity in almost all hip hop subgenres. The self-made (wo)men of gangsta rap add their own twist to such myths by merging it with the idealized figure of the gangsta and creating a gangsterized version of the American Dream. In this connection, hustling also plays a vital role, namely as a way to live a life full of luxury as well as to provide for one's family and loved ones – and that by all means necessary, including (gun) violence. While the core meaning of the term is based on making money through hard work, this does not necessarily have to be done legally. Hence, the figures of the hustler and the gangster share common ground in the gangsta rap imaginary and are used interchangeably in a number of hip hop productions.

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This is also true for Cardi B's works; in fact, her hip hop persona revolves around the ability to navigate the line between the contrasting images of the loving mother and the cold-blooded gangster, such as in *Money* (2018):

> I got a baby, I need some money, yeah
> I need cheese for my egg
> All y'all bitches in trouble
> Bring brass knuckles to the scuffle
> [...]
> I'm Dasani with the drip
> Baby mommy with the clip
> [...]
> Let a bitch try me, boom
> Hammer time, uh (II. 3–18)

Right at the beginning of the second verse, the speaker makes it clear that she needs money to take care of her child. Only a few lines later, however, she goes on to show off her ›drip‹, meaning her wealth, highlighting that she is still both a hustler and a gun-carrying gangster despite being a parent by calling herself a »baby mommy with the clip« (ibid.: 11). At the end of the verse, the artist states she is ready to resort to gun violence; a fact that is indicated on the one hand by the onomatopoetic interjection »boom« (ibid.: 17) and on the other hand by »hammer« (ibid.: 18), a slang term for pistol. Therefore, the femininity performed in *Money* can be located on the common ground between tough womanhood and armed motherhood. Likewise, in *Bodak Yellow* – a song that celebrates female gangsterism – the speaker presents herself as a caring daughter who works relentlessly in order to provide for her mother (»And I pay my mama bills, I ain't got no time to chill«, I. 19). In sum, both works imply that the rapper's hustling and gangsterism serve to take care of her loved ones. Just as in gangsta feminism, hustling narratives also portray firearms and other weapons as a means to protect and provide for one's family.

Notwithstanding, at the same time, this kind of gangster/hustler narrative can be regarded as running the risk of promoting the controlling image of the ›strong black woman‹, which Melissa Harris-Perry defines as follows:

> The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motived, hard-working breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection. (Harris-Perry 2011: 21)

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Interestingly, the latter shows obvious parallels to the concept of tough womanhood, the tough Black woman being a somewhat ›gangsterized‹ version of the ›strong Black woman‹ stereotype. Just as it is the case with the expression of Black female anger in contemporary gangsta rap, such hip hop self-representations bear the danger of having harmful, if not dehumanizing effects by letting depictions of great rage and unbreakable strength overshadow other qualities.

2.3 »Touch Me, I'll Shoot«: Female Self-Fashioning in Gangsta Rap

Overt self-fashioning, or ›flexing‹, can be easily considered an integral part of hip hop culture, particularly gangsta rap. This display of »overweening hubris« (Best/Kellner 1999: 13) is usually expressed by rappers flaunting their riches and luxury goods in their works. For example, this is the case in the chorus of Cardi B's *Money*:

> I was born to flex (Yes)
> Diamonds on my neck
> I like boardin' jets, I like mornin' sex (Woo)
> But nothing in this world that I like more than checks (Money)
> All I really wanna see is the (Money)
> I don't really need the D, I need the (Money)
> All a bad bitch need is the (Money flow)
> I got bands in the coupe (Coupe)
> Bustin' out the roof
> I got bands in the coupe (Coupe)
> Touch me, I'll shoot (Bow) (1–11)

Apart from showing off her wealth through expensive possessions like diamond jewelry and private jets, the speaker further prides herself with being a financially independent businesswoman who is ›all about the money‹, meaning that she does not need a man as a provider of (financial) care. At the same time, the flexing hinges on her self-portrayal as a tough, gun-carrying female gangster who is ready to violently defend herself at all times. In her work, Cardi B routinely uses weapons as tools for artistic self-fashioning.

Although the rapper usually presents herself (both publicly and in her art) with hyperfeminine styling, the womanhood performed in her works is decidedly not ›ladylike‹. See, for instance, the second verse of *I Do*: »I'm a gangsta in a dress, I'm a bully in the bed/Only time that I'm a lady's when I lay these hoes to rest« (5–6). Here, the speaker makes clear that her feminine demeanor does not diminish her gangsterism in the slightest. She does so by highlighting both her sexual dominance as well as her readiness to use lethal violence, defying the patriarchal image – not to say ideal – of the docile lady. In psychoanalysis, guns have commonly been consid-

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ered »phallic symbols of virility and power« (Cooke/Puddifoot 2000: 424). In works by female gangsta rappers, however, they rather seem to highlight, if not enhance, the artists' femininities. An example of this can be found in the music video to *Hot Shit* (2022) by Cardi B, more specifically in terms of her styling and the costumes she wears. In one of the clip's performance scenes, the rapper wears a brassiere modeled after two crossed golden colts (fig. 2). Since the (American) public imaginary is significantly shaped by heteropatriarchal norms, breasts are commonly considered epitomes of womanhood. Hence, the ›weaponized‹ garment can be regarded as merging the toughness and the hyperfemininity that characterize the rapper's hip hop persona, thereby accentuating the connection that her works establish between these two – supposedly opposite – concepts. As such, the firearm is »eroticized and fetishized as feminine« (Kohn 2004: 12), functioning as an »aesthetically pleasing [object] of figurative desire« (ibid.: 12).

Fig. 2: Cardi B wearing a brassiere modeled after two crossed golden colts
Cardi B, *Hot Shit* 2022 (03:32)

This weaponization of the Black female body is taken even one step further in the very same video. In another performance scene, the rapper is transformed into a type of posthuman combat machine, enabling her to emit flames from her palms and hair. As such, her body is rendered »dangerously superhuman« (Rose, *Rap Music* 1994: 153), its cyborg-like depiction feeding into the myth of invincibility that is ubiquitous in the pop-cultural representation of tough womanhood (Inness 1999: 8) while simultaneously alluding to the double-meanings of the terms ›hot‹ (sexy,

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attractive), ›lit‹ (exciting, fun), and ›fire‹ (amazing, great) in hip hop slang and contemporary colloquial language as a whole.

Fig. 3: Cardi B emitting flames from her palms and hair
Cardi B, *Hot Shit* 2022 (00:43)

Cardi B's *Hot Shit* features two male African American rappers as well, namely Lil Durk and Kanye West, who also appear in the song's music video. While their performance scenes are also staged in accordance with the clip's futurist aesthetics, Cardi B remains the only one portrayed with supernatural powers and gun-style accessories. Quite to the contrary, Lil Durk is even depicted as a literal target for armed attack, as his body is shown being pointed at by various laser gun sights. Thus, the video explicitly evokes the weaponization of the Black *female* body; a fact that becomes even more apparent when taking into account that Cardi B is the only one who is seen performing in revealing outfits and erotically charged poses. In other words, only she is depicted as being ›dangerously sexy‹. As noted by Sherrie A. Inness, »killer women« (Inness 1999: 69) in American popular culture »might wield a knife or shoot a gun but still remember the importance of appearing feminine and physically desirable to men« (ibid.: 69). Consequently, most of the times, they are portrayed as being »sex kittens first and killers second« (ibid.: 70). In this sense, Cardi B's self-glorification as a tough killer woman in the *Hot Shit* video hinges on the attempt to satisfy the male gaze by evoking a certain erotic tension that is linked to the depiction of armed women in male fantasies (Agra Romero 2012: 58).

When looking at hip hop productions by female (gangsta) rappers, it quickly becomes evident that a lot of their self-fashioning revolves around distancing themselves from – and, in this context, often depreciating – other women. This is also true for Cardi B; in fact, she often draws on the concepts of hustling and gangsterism for this purpose, as is the case in *Wish Wish*:

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> Now I be countin' money, buyin' jewelry, hoes be ridin' dick
> I just make my M's and mind my business, hoes be ridin' dick
> »I can see Cardi eat so much«, and that's what got 'em sick
> But I wonder how they still ain't pregnant, all that riding dick
> Y'all betta go ahead with that weak shit, I'm certified, real street bitch
> Won't be a song if I leak shit, we strapped up like defense (I. 6)

Here, the rap artist depicts herself as a successful hustler and heavily armed gangster who chooses to focus on her career in order to maximize her financial gain. Her adversaries, on the other hand, are presented as being both lazy and envious towards her, preferring to have sex rather than ›hustling‹ themselves. Interestingly, the opponents she refers to are all explicitly gendered female. Therefore, hip hop's figures of the gangsta and the hustler both seem to retain their patriarchal power and the concomitant misogynist dimension, even if appropriated by a woman.

3. Conclusion: Hip Hop's Female Gun Culture

US culture has a specific relation to firearms that has been described as American »gun exceptionalism« (Haag 2016: xii). Albeit somewhat clichéd, this myth and the concomitant »mystification of the gun« (ibid.: xxi) have become staples of the country's cultural imaginary, including also its ever-growing female rap scene. Thus, in hip hop and broader American popular culture alike, depictions of shooting women hold »enormous symbolical significance« (Browder 2006: 1).

When it comes to works by Black female rappers, I would argue, the representation of gun women is mostly located at the – not always clear-cut – intersection of three important hip hop figures, namely the gangsta, the hustler, and the mother. In this context, firearms fulfill different roles on several semantic levels, the most prominent, as I would like to suggest, being the following three: as a powerful equalizer in the struggle against white supremacist and patriarchal oppression; as a helpful tool enabling the armed woman and her family to lead a luxurious and (financially) carefree lifestyle; and finally as a means of female self-glorification as a tough, yet sexually appealing and successful woman gangster.

As so often, it is impossible to determine whether hip hop self-representations of this kind ultimately serve the feminist cause or rather counteract it. Indeed, their potentially empowering qualities as well as their problematic aspects appear to be more or less balanced. Nevertheless, considering that hip hop has historically brought together »a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society« (Rose, *Black Noise* 1994: 2), and functions as a »resistance identity« (Hagedorn 2009: 109), its figures of the armed female gangster and hustler will hopefully develop their emancipating potential.

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Section III: Firearm Fictions: Media, Genre, and the Making of the Armed Heroine

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»On Thursdays We Shoot«

Guns and Gender Binaries in Regency Romance Novels

Johanna Kluger

1. Introduction

As a genre, the romance novel and its offshoot, the Regency romance, differs from many other areas of popular culture on the simple basis that almost every stage of its life cycle is shaped exclusively by women. The demographics of both writers and readers of the romance novel skew overwhelmingly female, as do the people involved in acquisition and publishing. In a world in which especially prestige cultural production is dominated by men, the romance novel celebrates what could be termed a »feminist appropriation of the male gaze« (Allan 2016: 29). A gun-toting romance heroine is not intended to appeal to a male audience because, at only 16 percent in 2016, the male audience is almost negligible (»Romance Readers By the Numbers« 2016); she must appeal to the female reader instead. The goal of this analysis is to understand the function of a shooting heroine within the context of the historical romance novel, specifically with regards to how she is perceived both by the audience and intradiegetically by the hero. How does a genre that is so focused on the female perspective present a heroine with a gun? What are the implications of a heroine who shoots for the construction of gender roles within the historical romance?

Tessa Dare's *Spindle Cove* series of historical romance novels, which consists of five full-length novels and several novellas published between 2011 and 2016, centres on the fictional village of Spindle Cove on the southern coast of England. For the sake of investigating representations of women, guns, and women wielding guns, I will focus on three of the books and therefore three sets of paired protagonists specifically: *A Night to Surrender*'s Bram and Susanna, *A Week to Be Wicked*'s Colin and Minerva, and *Do You Want to Start a Scandal*'s Piers and Charlotte. Bram is an injured veteran who wants to set up a militia in Spindle Cove to prove himself still capable of active duty, a venture Susanna tries to prevent to protect the community. Colin, Bram's cousin, is a known rake (the Regency romance version of a playboy) and Minerva convinces him to take her to a geology conference in Scotland where she wants to present. Piers and Charlotte, Minerva's younger sister, are caught in what looks

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like a compromising position and although Piers immediately offers to marry her, Charlotte is determined to prove their innocence so she can marry for love instead. The books are loosely connected by the village of Spindle Cove and the characters' connections to each other, but while they could be read out of context and there is no overarching plot, most romance readers will read every single book by authors they like, so it is a reasonable assumption to say that a significant percentage of people who read the last book in the series would also have read the preceding ones.

The central premise of the series, and its relevance for a discussion of representations of shooting women, is this: Susanna, daughter of the local gentleman, has transformed Spindle Cove into a haven for young ladies who want or need to escape society, overeager suitors, or incompetent physicians. As a child, she suffered both psychological and medical abuse at the hands of relatives who intended to »make [her] ready for society« (Dare 2011: 155), leaving Susanna with not only physical scars from prolonged and repeated bloodletting but also a mission to prevent ordeals like this from happening to other young women. By virtue of its sheltered location on England's southern coast and Susanna's social status, she has established Spindle Cove as »the seaside destination of choice for a certain type of well-bred young lady: the sort no one knew what to do with« (ibid.: 5). The village is an almost exclusively female domain as a consequence, a tight-knit community of women who enjoy being left mostly to their own devices. The reader is first introduced to Susanna and her mission in the first chapter of the first book in the series, in which a concerned mother with three daughters (two of them being Minerva and Charlotte) tours the village to assess it as a suitable place for her oldest daughter with asthma. The family are clearly given a performance of respectability to entice them, and both the Highwoods and the reader are told that the ladies of Spindle Cove follow a very specific schedule to keep themselves healthy and active: »Mondays are country walks. Tuesdays, sea bathing. Wednesdays, you'd find us in the garden« (ibid.: 20). And as Bram, an Infantry officer sent home from the front due to a leg injury, realises about halfway through his book: »On Thursdays…they shoot« (ibid.: 220). Shooting appears as an extraordinary and somewhat scandalous activity for young ladies but, as I will show, the shooting heroine is part of a broader trend within the historical romance that is closely tied to the subgenre's balancing act between history and fantasy.

2. The Regency Romance Novel as Historical Fantasy

The historical romance novel, and the Regency romance in particular, remains one the most popular subcategories in the romance genre. When asked, readers say they appreciate the historical romance as a way to learn about history in a way that they usually do not encounter in school or non-fiction, especially when it comes to everyday subjects like fashion, food, or social niceties – the lived reality of the time rather

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than who was at war with whom and for how long (Hackett/Coghlan 2021: 2). There is a curiosity about the past as well as a nostalgia for a different time; in the days of online dating and hook-up culture, diving into a world where courtship consists of lavish balls and polite but charged conversation over tea satisfies a nostalgic longing for something the reader has never actually experienced, although, as I will show, the Regency period as depicted in Regency romance novels must more accurately be considered a fantasy world *based on* or inspired by the actual historical period (ibid.: 3). Additionally, the fact that the historical society depicted operates so differently to our own means that the characters and the story do, too; modern day protagonists do not share a Regency romance heroine's fear of being ruined because she was alone with a man or was seen to commit such unforgivable sins as showing her knees in public. Navigating the familiar romance plot in this foreign-to-us environment is appealing for the same reasons that people read other kinds of historical or even fantasy fiction.

Although readers say they value historical accuracy in the romance novels they enjoy (ibid.: 2), this statement must be taken with several grains of salt. Georgette Heyer, the writer generally seen as having invented and popularised the genre of the Regency romance in the 1920s, was and is often lauded for her dedication to research and authenticity in her novels, although in actuality the accuracy of historical depiction in her texts is incredibly biased (Duvezin-Caubet 2020: 249). Heyer created a fantasy version of the Regency period in which she only included or portrayed what aligned with her personal beliefs and ideology: The Heyer Regency is almost exclusively populated by white characters and people of colour are featured only in the form of racist stereotypes; it is viciously antisemitic and homophobic. Heyer omitted any reference to or discussion of slavery or abolition efforts or the wave of legislations disenfranchising the poor. Her reputation of historical accuracy is largely based on detailed and meticulously researched depictions of fashion and vernacular, but because of her success both in life and after her death, the Regency romance has been intrinsically and indelibly shaped by her beliefs about what English Regency society *should* have looked like (ibid.: 248).

The Regency romance is therefore, at its core, a fantasy genre; based on the historical period much in the same way that George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) is based on the War of the Roses, depicting a vicious struggle for the throne of a fictional kingdom that leads to war and widespread societal upheaval. The label »Regency romance« acts as a kind of shorthand to let the reader know what to expect and which rules to apply. Much of this has been born out of a shared mythology rather than historical fact, as a century of Regency romance writers have built upon and re-shaped the foundation introduced by Georgette Heyer. Jayashree Kamblé likens the way the romance genre has changed to a process evolution, with different traits acting as genes or alleles in a strand of DNA that determine the appearance of any given romance novel (Kamblé 2014: 14ff). Later authors would deviate

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further from the strict period language that Heyer used in her writing, creating a faux-historical yet inherently modern vernacular, and the genre now frequently features heroines as well as heroes who lead lives that would not have been feasible during the actual historical period (Hackett/Coghlan 2021: 5). There has been a growing push to diversify the historical romance, from including working-class protagonists to non-white and queer ones, and generally depicting a broader, less polished version of society (Nankervis 2022: 350). One of the most common ahistorical aspects of Regency romance novels these days is often the heroine, whose conspicuously modern opinions about women's status in the world makes her stand out from both the lived reality of the women of her time and, frequently, the other female characters surrounding her. All this to say that for the purposes of this chapter, it does not really matter whether gentlewomen in 1813 England *actually* learnt how to shoot but whether the readers of the *Spindle Cove* series *think* they did. Here, too, genre conventions outweigh historical accuracy. The point is not that a trope is common within the romance genre as a whole, but how it is presented in the story as different from the assumed norm.

When it comes to shooting heroines, there are all sorts of reasons for why they possess this ability; maybe they are simply wild and unruly hoydens, what we would now call tomboys, maybe they are secretly running a criminal empire, maybe they have indulgent brothers or fathers. What I am interested in here is how this is framed within the narrative and especially in relation to ideas of gender roles: One of the major changes in romance novels since the 1970s has been a shift to include not only the heroine's perspective but also the hero's (Regis 2003: 111). While the heroine as an autodiegetic narrator and focaliser has not disappeared especially from contemporary romances, historicals – *Spindle Cove* included – generally alternate between hero and heroine. The question of reader identification in romance is controversial. Janice Radway's reader response study in the early 1980s seems to imply that readers do not want to only relate to but identify with the heroine (Radway 1991: 64), while Laura Kinsale argues that the heroine is merely a placeholder, a space for the reader to project into and imagine herself in her position without actually feeling *with* her (Kinsale 1992: 32) The shift to both protagonists as internal focalisers additionally introduces the question of whether female heterosexual readers can and want to identify with the male heterosexual romance hero as he considers his attraction to and desire of the heroine, which raises the question of cross-gender and cross-sexuality identification (Modleski 2008: xviii, Moody 2015: 114). Newer studies suggest that the best – if vague and perhaps unsatisfying – answer might be that it depends on the reader, the book, and the protagonists (Moody 2015: 110–114). Either way, the reader has access to both characters' thoughts and perceptions both about themselves and their counterpart, and therefore has more information than either of the characters. This allows the narrative to contrast conflicting points of view directly; rather than having to wait until the climax of the novel for the hero

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to reveal his feelings and declare his love, the reader can follow his entire emotional arc in the same way she has access to the heroine's. The reader knows that the hero's coldness is a result of his loveless childhood, or that the heroine's reticence stems from a former unhappy relationship. This of course aids the anticipation of the inevitable Happily Ever After, but for the purposes of this analysis, it means that we can directly contrast the protagonists' reactions to deviations from the (artificially constructed) gender norms of the Regency romance.

3. The Shooting Heroine and The Disbelieving Hero

The *Spindle Cove* series is of course far from the only iteration of the shooting romance heroine. In the second season of *Bridgerton* (2022), Shonda Rhimes' high-budget Netflix adaptation of Julia Quinn's *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (2000), which is the second book in the cult-classic Regency romance novel series of the same name, the relationship between the two protagonists changes significantly because of Kate's prior experience hunting with her father. Kate responds to Anthony's dismissal of her shooting skills with indignity: does he think she would »have trouble managing« because she is a woman (»A Bee In Your Bonnet« 8:49)? Anthony's response, disbelieving, laughing as he says it: »Ladies do not hunt« (»A Bee In Your Bonnet« 9:00). Of course, now she has to prove herself to him, and the time they spend together gives them opportunity to see each other outside of strict Society manners (and also, for Anthony to »teach her« how to aim). This is what the scene communicates to the viewer: Ladies are not supposed to hunt, Kate is a lady who hunts anyway, and it brings them closer together. In an emulation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Kate and Anthony's relationship dynamic is largely based on mutual dislike; they both think the other is stuck-up and arrogant, rude, entirely unsuitable as a companion to anyone. They usually only encounter each other in formal settings, where they are constrained by etiquette and their respective need to fit into the roles that society has assigned to them. On their foray out into the woods to hunt, Anthony is reluctantly impressed by Kate's knowledge, and Kate is forced to admit that Anthony is not as haughty and respectable as he comes across in company. The hunt is a bonding moment for them, with intense sexual tension and the understanding that despite all their perceived differences, they have shared interests they could potentially bond over. The fact that Kate has been hunting is not what ultimately brings them together as a couple, but it does facilitate a significant shift in their relationship. Where, previously, they were entirely at odds – Anthony wanting to court and marry her younger sister, Kate determined to prevent this because she considers him unsuitable and unlikeable – the hunt gives them a common goal at least for the moment.

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Far more interesting, however, is the scene just preceding the actual hunt. It is Kate's sister Edwina who informs Anthony (and his brother Benedict) that Kate has been hunting before, and suggests that Kate should join the men on their excursion so she and Anthony can get to know one another better as potential future in-laws. In fact, she says that »Kate is an excellent shot« (»A Bee In Your Bonnet« 8:26) and asserts that she used to hunt frequently back in India, to which Anthony reacts with incredulity. He suggests that although she may have engaged in simple target practice, she would certainly be out of her depth on a stag hunt; Kate, immediately irritated, asks whether he thinks her incapable because of her gender and Anthony attempts to deflect, stating that ladies simply do not hunt as a matter of fact. There is an interesting duality in this scene: Although the audience and indeed the characters know that in this universe, a lady who hunts is indeed unusual and quite out of the ordinary, Anthony's disbelief and dismissive attitude are framed as sexist and unfair. By this logic, Kate *is* different, *and* the belief that a woman cannot shoot is wrong. Of course, it could be argued that Anthony's disbelief is indeed chauvinistic if he is of the general opinion that women cannot shoot because they are women, meaning he considers women as a group to be inferior in this regard. However, the fact that he remarks specifically that women simply *do not* hunt suggests that he is aware of a societal difference rather than a biological one, so he simply doubts that Kate, as a respectable young lady and daughter of a noblewoman, would have been taught to.

This apparent disconnect between the worldbuilding, which declares that women do not shoot, and the narrative positing that the assumption that women cannot shoot is silly and probably sexist is perhaps a symptom of just how artificial the Regency romance is. Despite the veneer of historicity, it is fundamentally a genre built on present-day ideas and expectations about women's gender roles, evolving over time to keep up with the time in which each novel is written to reflect the issues concerning women in their real lives, as a way to »observe one's own time historically« (Kamblé 2014: 42). A reviewer for *Vanity Fair* called the first season »wildly anachronistic« and »distinctly American in its conception of British mores« (Saraiya), which is an apt descIiption of not just this adaptation but perhaps also the appeal of the genre as a whole. Both seasons of *Bridgerton* sit firmly in the top 10 of most-watched seasons of Netflix originals series as of February 2023 (Solsman). *The Viscount Who Loved Me* does not contain the hunting scene; it was one of several changes made to update the source material and bring it to a new audience twenty years after the novel was originally written, such as the fact that the heroine's family is Indian in the show[1] but white English in the book (Valentini).

1 Despite the show's ostensibly »race-blind« casting and references to Indian culture in the second season, *Bridgerton* generally refuses to engage with the implications of colonialism;

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Tessa Dare's *Spindle Cove* series was published in the early 2010s, roughly midway between the publication of Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* books and the Netflix adaptation. In the world of Spindle Cove, when Bram finds out about Susanna's proficiency with a weapon in *A Night to Surrender*, he realises that they are not, in fact, complete opposites whose constant clashes are simply the natural consequence of their positions and genders. For one, he is immediately humbled. Although he knows that her father is a famous innovator of firearms, Bram expects her to be scared of handling one because she is a woman; he intends to humiliate and frighten her in public, and begins to explain how a flintlock pistol works in deliberately patronising tones. She plays along for the moment, feigning ignorance, and then proceeds to show off her proficiency with great effect to everyone watching:

> »›This is a flintlock,‹ he said, ladling out his words in slow, patronising increments. ›The ball shoots from this barrel, see? Here is the trigger, in the middle. And the other end fits against your shoulder, like this.‹
> ›Is that so?‹ she said wonderingly. She reached for the weapon. ›May I try?‹
> ›Slowly there.‹ He moved behind her. ›I'll show you how to hold it.‹
> ›That won't be necessary.‹ She smiled. ›Your instructions were so lucid and crisp.‹« (Dare 2011: 111)

She then proceeds to clean and load the gun in record time, leaving Bram not only reluctantly impressed but aroused by her competence, and he realises with annoyance that he feels closer to her now, knowing that they most likely shared the experience of being taught to shoot by their fathers (ibid.: 111f.). At this point the reader, like Bram, has no idea what Susanna is capable of, so the reveal comes as a surprise to both. The choice of point of view here emphasises that Bram is being deliberately cruel, rather than simply ignorant; while assuming that a woman would not know her way around a firearm would be reasonable within the framework of the genre, he is explicitly trying to humiliate her in public. Out of all the *Spindle Cove* novels, *A Night to Surrender* is the one that is most explicitly framed as a battle of the sexes. Bram and his male companions are trying to assemble a militia and find that the village is so completely run by women that the remaining men are seemingly hopelessly unmasculine, while Susanna desperately wants to protect the female sanctuary she has built. In the end, their success comes out of working together, the village ladies assisting the men in their efforts while Bram and Susanna settle their differences and fall in love.

What makes the *Spindle Cove* series stand out from other examples of the shooting heroine trope is that it is not just Susanna who knows her way around a pistol

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there are no references to the British occupation of India and the Sharmas are not shown to face racism within English society.

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but all the Spindle Cove ladies. The series has a running joke about the schedule they follow, repeating in each of the three books I discuss: »Mondays are country walks. Tuesdays, sea bathing. Wednesdays, you'd find us in the garden. ›And on Thursdays […] they shoot‹« (ibid.: 220). There is a whole community of women traipsing about in English society of this universe who have spent time in the village and therefore know how to handle all sorts of projectile weaponry. Susanna has »always believed a woman should know how to protect herself« (ibid.: 222), and as the daughter of the local nobleman who deliberately cultivated the village's reputation as a safe haven, she herself is fiercely protective of the women who come to her for refuge. So although, in the context of this series, shooting women are still presented as unusual, the audience, after this reveal in the first book, knows that this is the norm for Spindle Cove ladies, and so do some of the heroes. Colin, in *A Week to be Wicked*, uses this knowledge to win a bet at a fair when he presents Minerva as nothing more than a well-brought up young lady who is also half blind, although he knows very well that the proposed challenge is an easy game for her because he came to Spindle Cove with Bram.

> »The men had a good laugh amongst themselves as Colin drew her forward, to the shooter's mark.
> ›Colin, what were you thinking?‹ she whispered, trembling. ›What am I to do?‹
> ›You're going to shoot, of course. And you're going to hit the target, dead centre.‹« (Dare 2012: 249)

Here, the joke is not on either of the main characters but on everybody else, and the reader is in on it: how silly of these country folk to think a woman cannot shoot.

In *Do You Want to Start a Scandal*, the hero, Piers, is a spy attending a house party on a government mission, and his first encounter with the heroine leads to the two of them being caught in what looks like a compromising situation embracing behind a curtain, where in reality they were hiding from a pair of »mystery lovers« who entered the room just as Charlotte tried to explain to Piers that her mother was intent on encouraging a relationship between them. This book centres on a mystery plot, as Charlotte considers herself a rather good sleuth and is determined to uncover the identities of the »mystery lovers« to prove that nothing untoward happened between her and Pier, and Piers initially dismisses her assertions as the whims of a flighty young woman. He knows that she lived in Spindle Cove for a while but cut off his valet's account of the ladies' activities after Wednesday (Dare 2016: 27), and readers who have read the previous books in the series get to cackle knowingly at his moment of realisation when Charlotte recognises the model of his pistol and begins to talk shop. He quickly makes the connection between the village of Spindle Cove and her unexpected (to him) expertise when he realises that shooting is part of the Spindle Cove schedule (ibid.: 88). The moment is part of Piers' growing understand-

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ing that despite her youth and her gender, Charlotte is not only pretty and endearing but also smart and capable and would make an extremely valuable partner in his line of work.

For both Piers and Bram, learning that their heroines know their way around a firearm is part of learning to see them as equals, partners worth consulting and respecting, valuable allies as well as objects of desire. Although Piers is far less hostile to and dismissive of Charlotte from the beginning than Bram was with Susanna, he does not consider her an equal partner but, the morning after they were discovered behind the curtain, simply sweeps in and tells her to »[g]o upstairs and rest. […] I'll take care of everything« (ibid.: 32), declaring that they will be married and dismissing her concerns that neither of them would find happiness that way. He is surprised to find that she is determined to uncover the identity of the mystery lovers and even more surprised to realise that her methods have potential: »It wasn't a disapproving look. Piers was impressed. He knew she was clever, but he wouldn't have expected her skills of deduction to be quite this keen« (ibid.: 71).

Despite the gradual evolution that the romance novel genre has undergone over the last half-century, the gender roles, as these examples have demonstrated, are still quite firmly entrenched in the dynamic between hero and heroine. Although heroines are no longer simpering misses who cannot fend for themselves, and heroes have left their days of unbridled sexual aggression and animalistic possessiveness mostly behind, the majority of romance novels still position the hero as the more dominant and sexually experienced partner (Wendell/Tan 2009: 21, 37). The heroine, no matter how fiercely independent she presents as, is generally the nurturer in the relationship and usually not the pursu*er* but the pursued. There is more variation in this now than there used to be in the 1970s and 80s, and this dichotomy is less pronounced today than it was even ten years ago, but by and large these roles remain in place. But the historical romance novel inhabits that in-between space where it not only evolves with the times but is also firmly, inextricably linked to the past. No matter the advances made for women's rights or the latest discussion of gender inequality in the »real world«, the historical romance novel purports to portray a fixed moment in time; the Regency stays the Regency, and, as I explained earlier, much of the appeal of the subgenre comes from the opportunity to explore a society that functions differently than our own under the guise of historical accuracy, however flawed. It is one thing for a romance novel to feature a heroine who conquered the rules of that society against all odds because she is in some way special – often as a statement about the misogyny at the heart of them – but to remove or fundamentally alter those rules would reduce the setting of the Regency romance to an aesthetic backdrop only. So, although we now know, of course, that the only thing preventing a young woman from becoming a masterful shot or fabulously wealthy businesswoman is, bluntly put, the patriarchy, the fact remains that most women in

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Regency London were not either of those things, and aristocratic young ladies were much more likely to learn embroidery than artillery.

4. Bridging the Distance: Permissible Transgressions Against the Gender Binary

As such, within the Regency romance, there is an emphasis on the firm line between the male and female, based on both conceptions of the historical reality (Hughes 2015) and the genre's positioning of the marriage plot as the perfect union between idealised representations of a man and a woman. The primary conceit of the romance novel is that perfect femininity, represented by the nurturing heroine, will overcome and tame the hero's extreme masculinity so he can become the perfect romantic and sexual partner (Regis 2003: 112). The idea that the lives of men and women had few and specific overlaps is part of the worldbuilding; the restrictions of high society dictating who can talk to whom in what context, the thrill of characters taking the risk to break those rules, and the fantasy of what the lives of wealthy lords and ladies looked like are important aspects of the genre's appeal (Hackett/Coghlan 2021: 1). The codes and conventions in mainstream romance are intensely cis-heteronormative especially in their focus on marriage and reproduction (Duvezin-Caubet 2020: 244); although lesbian pulp romances have a similarly long history as Mills & Boon, the incorporation of queer romance novels into the catalogues of mainstream publishers, with authors such as Cat Sebastian writing exclusively queer historical romances, is a relatively recent phenomenon (ibid.: 244).

While the modern heroine is permitted to have »unfeminine« traits, such as a persistent desire to be considered a full human being or riding astride, she is not an unfeminine character (Vivanco/Kramer 2010: 6). For one, these traits no longer read as masculine or deviant by a modern audience; we recognise that they are remarkable within the frame of the historical romance, but our response is to criticise the system, not the heroine. If the heroine is considered an outsider because she spends her free time studying botany instead of watercolour painting, we, as modern, enlightened, feminist readers understand this to be a very silly reason to ostracise somebody, and that women should be able to pursue whatever hobbies or career paths they choose. Giving a heroine an »unfeminine« trait is only a challenge to the system within the narrative, but does not question or interrogate the *readers'* world because the parameters of permissible male and female behaviours that a 21st-century reader is familiar with do not align with those of the Regency romance. Masculine traits like shooting, fishing, and science therefore serve to make the heroine more attractive to the reader as a relatable character, because the feeling of being ostracised remains a common one, fuelled by patriarchal beauty standards and gender roles. A twenty-first-century woman would not be content to sit and embroider all

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day while her father decides she should marry a complete stranger, so the heroine shouldn't either (Kinsale 1992: 32) – which is not to say that *all* heroines have ahistorically modern attitudes to women's rights. However, especially when reading a cohesive series like *Spindle Cove* where the characters are all connected, it becomes apparent that while the heroine is not only allowed but encouraged to break out of perceived gender roles, both »historical« and modern, she is not *un*feminine. The hero never considers her to be too transgressively masculine and in fact often still specifically thinks of her womanly attributes when he considers his attraction to her – her figure, her softness, her submission to his strength or experience, while the heroine considers him in terms of both physical and sexual power. When a protagonist's appearance is described from the other sex's point of view, that description is »often overlaid by references to their socio-sexual bodies« (Vivanco/Kramer 2010: 4), emphasising their role in the heterosexual relationship the narrative is building towards, i.e. getting married and having children.

This is especially noticeable in scenes relating to kissing or sex. Here is a scene from *Scandal* in which Charlotte has just unsettled Piers by teasing at his hair, and he leans into her:

> He allowed every part of their bodies to meet – the bony prominences of hips, the softness of bellies, the resistance of breast against muscle. The pounding of hearts and the mingling of breath.
> He pressed the full length of his body to hers – every lean, hard, red-blooded, masculine inch of him. Wanting her to feel him, to know the size and shape and strength of his body. (Dare 2016: 103)

This scene exemplifies how male and female are portrayed as stereotypical opposites in romance novels: there is the masculine, which is »hard«, »masculine« and overall dominant, and the feminine, which is soft and malleable and submissive. Where romance heroes in the 1970s and 1980s were generally sex-crazed, domineering caricatures of hypermasculinity (now referred to as Alpha Heroes), the hero figure has mellowed out significantly since then (Wendell/Tan 2009: 24f), but although the heroines absolutely do hold power in these exchanges, the spectre of the Alpha Hero still haunts the genre. Although not as pronounced, the contrast between »stern, sexual man and nurturing, receptive woman« (Kamblé 2014: 111) manifests in the ways attraction and sexuality are framed as expressions of gender: Charlotte notes that Piers makes a »masculine sound« of approval at her scent (Dare 2016: 121), and perhaps there is no better encapsulation of the sexual dynamics at play than this scene from *A Week to be Wicked:*

> »Why would you do that with *me*? A simple kiss was enough. What could you be thinking?«

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> »What indeed.« He pushed a hand through his hair, more than a little offended at her accusatory tone. »I'm male. You rubbed your… femaleness all over me. I didn't think. I reacted.« (Dare 2012: 46)

The assumption here is that the mere fact that Minerva is a woman causes such a strong reaction in Colin that he simply had to escalate from a simple kiss to a passionate one, simply because he is a man. He did not assault her and the preceding exchange makes it clear that Minerva enjoyed the kiss, but biology took over and he just could not help himself. While Dare's heroes are not aggressive or violent in their sexuality, they are definitely *more* sexually aggressive than the heroines, usually the one to initiate or escalate intimacy, and the party with actual sexual experience where the heroines are appropriately unkissed or at the very least unbedded, as the genre conventions demand (Wendell/Tan 2009: 37). It is the hero's role to be assertive and strong and the heroine's to be at least a little overwhelmed, even if she is not cowed by him in other aspects of their interactions. The fact that the Spindle Cove heroines are in many respects unusual, in their confidence and self-assurance as well as their ability to shoot which they learned in the titular community of women, does not change their role in the pre-defined romance novel relationship structure.

5. Conclusion

A heroine who breaks out of the mould she is assigned by virtue of her gender and time period is appealing to modern audiences, who are comfortably disconnected from the perceived reality of 19th-century aristocracy, because although they enjoy the fantasy of it they cannot imagine being satisfied with the life the Regency romance heroine is supposed to have. At the same time the framework has to stay intact so as to maintain the fantasy, which is what leads to the phenomenon of ahistorical historical as described earlier. The emphasis on the differences between the sexes is a necessary characteristic of the genre because the central fantasy relies on the hero being a »spectacular representation of masculinity« (Radway 1991: 128) that appeals specifically to female readers, and yet it has to be disrupted in order to facilitate the actual story. Regency romances exist on a wide spectrum of how much the courtship between the characters deviates from the perceived norm, but of course a relationship that happens entirely the way it is »supposed to« does not make for a riveting novel. So the heroine goes on a hunt with the hero, or asks him to take her to a geology conference in Scotland which she has submitted a paper to under the guise of being a man (Dare 2012: 213), or promises to solve a mystery so they will not be forced to marry against their will, bringing the two of them together in ways not intended by the world they live in. In both *A Night to Surrender* and *Do You Want To Start A Scandal*, the heroine enters the hero's professional world: Susanna in-

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terferes with and then aides Bram's plans to return to military service and Charlotte proves herself a capable and keen detective to Piers, who is essentially a secret agent. *A Week to be Wicked* follows the protagonists' journey from Spindle Cove to Scotland, where Minerva desperately wants to present a fossil she has found – a deliberate reference to Mary Ann Mantell and Mary Anning, who discovered similar fossils in the 19th century (Dare 2012: 355, author's note) – at a geology conference which she, as a woman, would not ordinarily be allowed to attend. The heroes do not enter the heroine's world in return. Bram does not learn about medicinal plants for Susanna, Colin does not become a geologist, and a significant part of what makes Piers attractive is his way of taking charge and firmly pulling Charlotte into his control. Once again, the heroine is permitted and encouraged to enter the male sphere – for example, Minerva being turned away from the geology conference on the basis of her sex is presented as explicitly discriminatory and outrageous, although it would have been historically accurate (ibid.: 333ff.) – but the heroes do not interfere with the female domain in any way. They do not cook or do needlework or spend time raising children. They may hover over and nurse the heroine if she is ill or injured, and they certainly attend to her needs and strive to protect her, but this is the full extent of their venture from the masculine path. While the heroine is encouraged by the narrative and begrudgingly allowed by the hero to break out of the binary of Regency romance gender roles, the hero is not; his only real transgression against the image of ultimate masculinity is essentially a capability to feel deeply and care about the heroine. The boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine are not actually broken down, only made selectively permeable to the heroine so she can more effectively appeal to both the hero and the reader.

It must also be considered that Dare's style of romance novel is as much romantic comedy as it is period drama, so although guns and shooting do play a notable role in the series, guns are only ever fired at inanimate targets. A teenage boy is seriously injured in *Night to Surrender* when a cannon test goes wrong, but nobody actually gets shot. In *A Week to be Wicked*, Colin is briefly taken captive by highway robbers and Minerva rescues him by holding the man set to guard him at gunpoint; while she demonstrates competence and courage, it is Colin who directs her in what to do as she is clearly overwhelmed by adrenaline, and Colin who bashes his captor over the head (ibid.: 178ff.). Even tied to a tree and scared for his life, he takes charge of the situation and then admonishes Minerva for disobeying his orders and coming back to save him. In this instance the heroine's expertise does facilitate her saving the day, but she does not get to swoop in and take over.

However, it would be incorrect to claim that Dare's heroines are entirely under their heroes' control. The central appeal of the romance novel lies not only in finding a man to fall in love with but in that man falling in love with the heroine in return and, critically and crucially, explicitly acknowledging his love and the power that she has over him. The climax of the romance novel plot is the declaration that the protag-

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onists cannot and do not want to live without each other (Regis 2003: 30). All three of the heroes discussed in this analysis start their stories either not believing in love itself or believing that they specifically cannot attain or do not deserve it, and so the focus of their arc is realising that they not only care about their heroine but love her so fiercely they cannot live without her. The highway robbery forces Colin to acknowledge how much he cares about Minerva's safety (Dare 2012: 164), Piers experiences a moment of terror when he cannot wake Charlotte and is reminded of finding his mother's body as a child (Dare 2016: 293), Susanna suffers life-threatening complications after a fall and Bram begs her not to leave him (Dare 2011: 349). There is an exchange of power in this – the hero transfers his own happiness almost entirely to the heroine and her response to his declaration. If she rejects him then, the implication is that he will be crushed and spend the rest of his life pining after her. This is often referred to as the hero being »tamed« by the heroine; by virtue of her own superior womanhood, however it manifests, the heroine is so compelling and attractive to the hero that his inner alpha wolf wants nothing more than to wag his tail and curl up at her feet (Regis 2003: 112). This, and the emphasis on the male versus the female in passages relating to sexuality, should be considered in the context of what Wendell and Tan – with deliberately light-hearted crudeness – describe as the »Mighty Wang and Magic Hoo-Hoo«, a twin phenomenon in which the heroine's true sexual awakening can only be facilitated through contact with the hero's »Mighty Wang« (Wendell/Tan 2009: 86) and the hero's previously womanising ways will be immediately cured by the heroine's »Magic Hoo-Hoo« (ibid.: 45f). The purpose is twofold: one, to demonstrate that hero and heroine are truly made for each other and nobody else. Although they do need to undergo a certain amount of character development and overcome the barriers, both internal and external, that initially keep them apart (Regis 2003: 32), within the episteme of the romance novel there is never any real doubt that they will be in a happy, loving, and committed relationship by the end of the book and this is reaffirmed by narrative arcs both in the sexual and the non-sexual storyline (which can but do not have to run parallel to each other) which symbolise the protagonists' connection.

The second aspect of this narrative of taming is what Catherine Roach calls the »deep work« that romance novels do for their readers (Roach 2010: 2). By pairing a modern, independent heroine with a hero who is alpha enough to pose a threat and act as a representation of the oppressive force of the patriarchy but does not actually undermine her personhood, the reader gets to vicariously experience the fantasy of conquering the patriarchy by making the hero absolutely devoted to the heroine, who can be read as a reader insert (ibid.: 9). Even now that romance heroes have evolved to be downright fluffy compared to the Alpha Heroes of the 1970s and 1980s, the fantasy of conquering the patriarchy by conquering a man remains. Therefore the heroes have to make concessions if they want to attain and keep their heroines: much like *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr Darcy had to prove to Elizabeth Bennet that he was

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not as cold and arrogant as she thought him to be, Bram gives up on his fervent desire to return to active military duty and accepts a position in intelligence instead. For both Colin and Piers, this beat involves acknowledging the heroine's agency and expertise and throwing their weight behind her aspirations in support. This is part of the taming fantasy and another way in which the heroine does exert power over the hero, whether she makes explicit demands that he needs to fulfil in order to satisfy her or not. To become the partner she needs, wants, and deserves, the hero must acknowledge his shortcomings, affirm the heroine's agency, and demonstrate that he will do whatever it takes to be with her (Regis 2003: 112). Through all this, however, the hero never has to lose or compromise on his masculinity. In these three Spindle Cove novels, all three heroes suffer from weaknesses they consider unmanly – Bram with his disabling injury, Colin's night terrors, Piers' trauma related to his mother's addiction and death – but the heroines' help consists of validating their fears and anxieties and assuring them that they are no less of a man for having suffered. Taming the hero has nothing to do with unmanning or feminising him but instead shaping his masculinity into a less aggressive and more devoted version; we want masculine men, the romance novel says, but we want them to be kind and devoted partners who care about us as people. Because romance readers still live in a patriarchal world, they want to read stories that recognise the narrative imposed on them by the patriarchy while also in a way refusing to accept it (Roach 2010: 2), even though the genre falls short of actually challenging the institution of marriage as a patriarchal structure.

The *Spindle Cove* heroines and their expertise around firearms illustrate one of the shortcomings of the romance genre and its potential for feminist discourse. For all its value in centring women's experience, its potential for empowerment, and the efforts of small-press and independent writers to diversify and challenge the genre, in its current state popular romance remains at heart a conservative genre perpetuating cis-heteronormative ideals of marriage and family. While *Spindle Cove* is undoubtedly critical of the time it supposedly depicts and calls the reader's attention to many of the ways in which women in the early 19th century were disadvantaged, it does not extend this critique to the present in which it was written. The heroines know how to shoot but do not use this to reverse the power differential between them and the heroes and their ability to defend themselves remains largely abstract and symbolic. Dare portrays heroines with interests and skills considered unfeminine for the Regency period who do not challenge modern gender roles, and classically masculine heroes who appreciate the heroines' unconventional character traits because they contribute to the romantic relationship between them. In a way, the fact that they are proficient with guns but do not actually use them to defend themselves or attack anyone in this series is a metaphor, too: the series calls attention to the constraints and inequalities of a patriarchal society but stops short of interrogating the institution of heterosexual marriage and hegemonic ideas of male and female

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roles within heterosexual relationships that is still central to the genre of popular romance. The shooting woman thus remains a historical fantasy that caters to contemporary tastes for escapism, a palatable challenge to an ostensibly long-defeated system of patriarchy that romance readers in the 21st century can comfortably enjoy without having to confront the constraints of their own lived reality.

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Cowgirling in Thuringia

The German Police Procedural *Tatort* goes Western[1]

Stefanie Schäfer

1. Introduction

On Jan 1, 2019, German TV audiences were in for a New Year treat: The federal state TV station ARD aired a new episode of *Tatort*, a police procedural series with a 40-year tradition that has arguably become a mainstay in German popular television. *Tatort* kicked off the new year with a Western-style story from a Wild West amusement park called »El Doroda«. Tucked away in the Thuringian woods, a region eulogized as fly-over country or »Germany's green heart« (Rainald Grebe, »Das Grüne Herz Deutschlands«, 2007), El Doroda is a provincial and fantastic crime scene, replete with hobbyists and their utopian community designs. In this *Tatort*-episode, titled »Der Höllische Heinz« (dir. Dustin Loose, writ. Murmel Clausen, Andreas Pflüger), number 1078 of the series, the investigator Kira Dorn discards her policewoman's garb and joins the Western spectacle. As undercover cowgirl agent, she handles the big guns, the male egos, and the German Western myth before riding off victoriously into the sunset.

Tatort (which translates as »crime scene«) is a format which, on any given Sunday night and on national holidays, literally couches German media history as well as public memory and regionalisms: as a police procedural, it raises issues around societal changes as its investigators navigate criminal milieus, ethical issues, and individual challenges to their job and character. As a TV serial, it draws from contemporary popular culture trends and popular cinema aesthetics with reflections on social developments from a conservative bourgeois background (Speck 2023: 339, see also Buhl 2013). Its local detectives investigate in cities around Germany and encounter local color cultures, such as when the Munich team deals with an Oktoberfest-murder (»Die letzte Wiesn«, 2014), or the Frankfurt detectives investigate in a skyscraper among bankers (»Der Turm«, 2018). With outliers in Switzerland's Luzern (2011–19)

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and Zurich (since 2020), as well as Vienna (1990-), *Tatort* also covers German-speaking neighbor states and regions. In the history of the German crime series tradition, *Tatort* has been described as a flagship franchise that reflects and forms mainstream tastes, yet its reception beyond German-speaking academia is still lagging behind (Speck 2023: 339–340).

In view of this volume's interest in ladies in arms in popular culture, *Tatort* is particularly intriguing. While a systematic study of the gender dimensions in its long history is still lacking and goes beyond the scope of my article, I want to note the general trajectory of detective figures, which started out with white male lone-wolf types in the private eye tradition in the 1970s and gradually introduced all-male duos with bromance overtones (see the detective couples in Munich, Stuttgart, or Münster). After the first female investigator premiered in 1978, it took another 11 years for the tough cop figure Lena Odenthal to enter the scene in Ludwigshafen. Since the 1990s, more female detectives have been written for *Tatort* worlds. As working women, they are often tasked with feminist hot topics such as motherhood or care work (problems their male colleagues rarely face), next to being evaluated regarding beauty standards and romantic workplace entanglements. For instance, in Hannover and Göttingen, Charlotte Lindholm (2002-) is a single mother who has to rely on her mother for child care in odd hours, only in 2018 was Lindholm joined by the first Black *Tatort* investigator, Anais Schmitz. The first all-female team Karin Gorniak and Henni Sieland took up in Dresden in 2016, and their work is continuously subjected to notorious mansplaining and sexist humor by their misogynist boss.

In turning to *Tatort Weimar* and detective Kira Dorn's dress-up in »Der Höllische Heinz«, my analysis relates this episode to the serial narrative *Tatort* as well as to the carnivalesque of German Western myths, with a special interest in the meanings of Kira Dorn's re-armament as a cowgirl in the fictional German Western community. My argument expands two scholarly tenets on *Tatort* as a TV culture phenomenon, regarding the setting and the investigator figures: First, building on German Studies scholar Moritz Baßler's work, I read the Weimar *Tatort* as inhabitable diegetic world: Baßler (2014) argues that *Tatort's* driving force veers away from the individual whodunnit of the crime narrative towards the fictional world portrayed. In other words, viewers are less interested in the murder cases than in the investigator teams embroiled in local cultures and regional specifics.[2] The second premise for my assessment of Kira's cowgirling in Thuringia concerns the detective figures: Kira and her colleagues function as decoy for (re)staging and revisiting particular settings;

2 Baßler writes: »[W]elcher Ort ist es denn? Das *personal interest* für Personen des Teams, die wir, wie für Serien typisch, inzwischen schon lange und gut kennen, ist von den eigentlichen Kriminalnarrativen nahezu abgekoppelt. Zugespitzt formuliert wirken diese nurmehr amplifikatorisch bzw. als bloße Lizenz zur immer neuen Inszenierung der Diegese – in Umkehrung traditioneller epischer Verhältnisse«.

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they interlink the individual episodes of the serial narration and become potential identification figures (Baßler 2014; see also Stockinger et al. 2015: 321, 323).

Tatort Weimar functions as a specific locus of German (memory) culture that gets a special twist in »Der Höllische Heinz«, with its adaptation of the Western film in the Wild West town, as I explore in the first part of my argument. In the second part, I close read detective Kira Dorn's transition from professional gun carrier/working mom to cowgirl sleuth with a special eye to her performance as gun-crazy cowgirl.

2. Reading *Tatort Weimar: Weltliteratur* meets Local Color

Between 2013 and 2021, the *Tatort* franchise released 10 episodes set in Weimar featuring the (first and to date only!) romantic investigator couple, Lessing and Kira Dorn, who share their parenting duties for a young son. The episodes are characterized by a whimsical and absurd overall tone and a plethora of references to Weimar's literary and popular culture. In the sense of Baßler's diegetic habitat, *Tatort Weimar* is a space overloaded with German history and tradition. Weimar is an important German *lieu de mémoire* and has been attributed mythical status in German and international memory culture (Merseburger 2005, Bollenbeck 2001). It functions as a magnifying glass for history at large (Seemann 2012: 10) and entangles the venerated and appaling parts of German history and memory culture. It was home to the classical authors Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller and the origin of the Bauhaus movement; it is the founding place of the Weimar Republic and the neighboring town to Buchenwald, one of the largest Nazi concentration camps, and it was the treasure trove for the GDR regime. With its museums and parks, and its gables bearing quotes from world famous literati, Weimar today attracts visitors with the grandiloquent slogan »Visit Weimar. Discover the world«.[3]

The crime stories told in *Tatort Weimar* episodes engage the small town's historical and cultural eminence in the German cultural imaginary with a twist towards the absurd. This is tied to a focus on the popular, the mundane, or what might be called low culture; for instance, the crime plots evolve around trademark Thuringian foods, such as bratwurst (»Die fette Hoppe«, 2013) or potato dumplings (»Die robuste Roswitha«, 2018). The local police station is constantly under construction and run by largely incompetent or clueless personnel. Police inspector and side figures Stich (Thorsten Merten), the investigators' talkative boss, and deputy police office Ludwig Maria Pohl (Arndt Schwering-Sohnrey), or Lupo, often hinder Lessing's and Dorn's work. Lupo functions as as a clownish comic relief persona whose nickname puns on the GDR's »Vopo«, the people's police (»Volkspolizist«).

3 See: https://www.weimar.de/tourismus/weimar-erleben/welt-entdecken/. Accessed on 07.07.2023.

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The casting of the detective figures Lessing and Dorn adds another layer to the absurdity of the diegetic world of *Tatort Weimar*. Comic screenwriter Murmel Clausen (who wrote all 10 episodes) created investigator figures to suit the regionalist tropes and provide tongue-in-cheek commentary on the events and the place. They are played by renowned actors Christian Ulmen and Nora Tschirner, representatives of 1990s German popular culture who both started out as VJs for MTV Germany and worked as reality show hosts and actors in roles that affirmed their public images as witty and self-ironic. Both actor personas engage dominant gender scripts: Ulmen play-acts on tough masculinity while Tschirner is known for her criticism of female beauty norms (Hartwig and Kuehn 2017: n. pag.) and has responded humorously to winning second spot in Playboy's rating of the sexiest female *Tatort* detective – in her signature shapeless parka jacket (ibid.).

In *Tatort Weimar*, Tschirner's Kira Dorn is consistently cool and ironic. She navigates her professional and private life wittily, commenting on events and on her exhaustion as caregiver to a young child. Her romantic relation with her partner Lessing remains off-screen, and she is unfazed by Lupo, the police officer who is smitten with her and heroically throws himself into harm's way when he feels she is in need of saving. The opening of »Der Höllische Heinz« deviates from the previous portrayals of Kira Dorn as cool investigator, because it shows her at home: the audience finds her as happy housewife, listening to music on her Walkman (a nod to generation X) and scrubbing away at the underside of the kitchen sink with a toothbrush. When her partner Lessing asks her about this unnecessarily meticulous house cleaning effort, she reminds him of his mother's impending visit. The evil mother-in-law puts Kira's homemaking competence to the test, but she gleefully abandons this task when news of a murder victim arrives (00:03:54–00:04:58). The episode centers on her carnivalesque escape from working mother/investigator to undercover cowgirl sleuth.

After other episodes that dealt with Thuringian sausage and potato dumplings, »Der Höllische Heinz« adds another absurd spin to the diegesis of *Tatort Weimar*, regarding both the story and the discourse levels: the story of the murder investigation takes place in a Thuringian Wild West town, a utopian community for Western hobbyists and dropouts. It is presented in a cinematic Western aesthetic.[4] For instance, the crime plot focuses on a John Wayne look-alike villain with a soft heart, the »hellish Heinz« from the title, who is frequently shown in the iconizing cinematography of the classical John Ford Western. The Western town scenes are shot with a color filter that adds a sepia tint; the score features songs by country music icon Dolly Parton, and there is lots of tall talk and masculinist cowboy bravado. All

4 In the making-of video supplied by MDR, actress Nora Tschirner reports that she expressly asked for a Western town episode because she is a fan of this subculture. https://www.daserste.de/unterhaltung/krimi/tatort/videos/making-of_tatort_der_hoellische_heinz-100.html.

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this points to another layer of Weimar historiography: the Western myth in the former GDR. Hence, to frame my close reading of Kira Dorn's development from happy housewife to cowgirl, I will contextualize the European Western craze and its specific »Wild Eastern« overtones.

3. El Doroda's »Hippies in Tipis«: Hobbyism, Indianthusiasm, and Cowgirling in the Wild East

The crime scene investigation in »Der Höllische Heinz« kicks off with the discovery of the corpse of a middle-aged man in the local river Ilm described by police officials matter-of-factly as »Indian« (»Indianer« in German). Lessing's online research quickly uncovers the murder victim's chosen identity as »Indian Chief Lone Wolf« (»Einsamer Wolf«) in the local Western town of El Dorada. Looking over Lessing's shoulder at the screen (fig. 1), the TV audience encounters the hobbyist phenomenon »Indianthusiasm« (Lutz, Strzelczyk, and Watchman 2020; see also Perry 2019), a dress-up performance of cultural appropriation.

Fig. 1: Lessing researches El Doroda online and discovers the murder victim »Chief Lonely Wolf«
»Der Höllische Heinz« (00:11:10)

In German speaking cultures, playing Cowboys and Indians is a long-standing cultural practice that builds on carnival culture. Akin to an »invented tradition« (Hobsbawm and Granger 1983), it has very little to do with the historic reality of the North American West and loosely adapts an adventure steeped myth of the frontier. Hence, it is laced with the white supremacist and heteronormative settler colonial narrative of the US-Western frontier myth and its reception in Europe. The ever popular work of Dresden adventure writer Karl May, the creator of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, was adapted into the *Indianerfilme* phenomenon, which told

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ideologically opposed stories in the two Germanys respectively at the height of the Cold War. As film scholar Kathleen Loock (2019) has shown, post-unification filmmaking offered a reconciliatory version, in which »Winnetou becomes legible as distinctly German, which in turn foregrounds two competing politics: those of German nation building and Native American representation« (324).[5]

Beyond the German Western/*Indianerfilm* tradition, another reference post for »Der Höllische Heinz« is the Western town amusement park phenomenon. The fictional El Doroda emulates German cowboy clubs and civil gun cultures that mimick the American West and offered escapism from a modernizing and industrializing everyday routine. Germany's oldest among these hobbyist associations, Cowboy Club München (est. 1913), seeks to »link our dream of the Wild West to reality in ›living history‹: being a Cowboy Club member means more than ›playing cowboys and Indians‹. It's the special spirit, the camaraderie and the shared interest in the anthropological study of the North American West, specifically in the 19th century, that unites us« (Drexl 2013: 9). Munich's Cowboy Club' centennial brochure cites as its origin story the arrival of the »outside world to our German home« (Drexl 2013: 14)[6], naming Buffalo Bill's Wild West spectacle (BBWW), which toured all over Europe in the 1890s. BBWW's outreach and popularity have been described as pinnacle of the Americanization of popular culture (Christianson 2017: 18–21), and the awe it inspired as modern entertainment machine can hardly be overstated.

In small-town Weimar, conversely, the world-famous BBWW's performance in August 1906 inspired superlatives in the press. The *Allgemeine Thüringische Landeszeitung* for August 26 reported »traffic as has never been seen before«. The *Weimarische Zeitung* praised BBWW's execution of the »world famous English motto ›time is money‹« as seen par excellence in BBWW, where »one hundred brains have to combine and test beforehand, one thousand hands have to build, the cogwheels have to click«[7]. In short, the German version of the American Western myth is

5 It bears noting here that the debate around cultural appropriation in Indian dress-up reached a new hysteric high in 2019's carnival season, when it was linked to critiques around cancel culture and even white male German politicians felt compelled to defend their boyhood nostalgia for May's stories.

6 The German descriptions from Drexl's cowboy club brochure state: »unseren Traum vom Wilden Westen und die Realität können wir in Form von ›living history‹ verbinden. Ein Mitglied des Cowboy Clubs zu sein bedeutet für uns mehr als nur ›Cowboy und Indianer zu spielen‹. Es ist der besondere Spirit, die Kameradschaft und das gemeinsame Interesse am völkerkundlichen Studim des nordamerikanischen Westens, insbesondere des 19. Jahrhunderts, die uns verbinden« (9); and »die Welt {kam] von außen in die (deutsche) Heimat« (14).

7 The German original articles state: »ein in einem Grade gesteigerte[r] Verkehr, wie er hier wohl noch nie beobachtet worden ist«, and »Hundert Gehirne mussten da vorher kombinieren und probieren, tausend Hände sich mühen, ein Rad muss ins andere greifen«.

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intricately linked to buying into the spectacle and going »Western«, to escape into a carnivalesque world of dress-up and outdoor adventure.

For my analysis of Kira Dorn's cowgirling act in *Tatort Weimar,* the gendering of the Western narrative and its all-male *dramatis personae* is key. In the narrative world of the Western show (and the film, for that matter), women are confined to the domestic sphere while men wrestle with the threats of the wilderness, but both genders work hard to build settlements, infrastructure, and a public sphere, i.e. a civilization in the European sense. In the spectacle of BBWW, which sought to show European audiences the »drama of civilization« that was playing out in the US (see e.g. Blackstone 1986 or Christianson 2017), the figure of the cowgirl or lady sharpshooter had a special part. While the scenes of Western life staged in the program featured women only as damsels in distress, the sharpshooter Annie Oakley was a star in her own right and marked the beginning of American celebrity culture (McMurtry 2010). Traveling with BBWW on the European tour in 1887, she dazzled her European audiences by performing recreational target practice and competing with the best marksmen all over Europe. Oakley visited with local gun clubs, hobby associations which trained sharp shooting and were closely linked to European military and civil armament culture. Oakley's appearance at their marksmanship competitions was sensational due to the heteronormative and exclusionist culture of these associations, which persists in the present day (Hardt 2022). In the masculinist and conservative habitat of European gun hobbyists, Oakley performed the US Western myth in a transgressive gender role; show runner Buffalo Bill described her as representative of American womanhood and »wonder[s] of the world«.[8]

While Oakley arguably created the figure of the cowgirl (Riley 1995), her performance carefully navigated feminist gender transgression and Whiteness scripts at the turn of the 20th century. As Americanist Laura Browder has asserted, »[i]conic women with guns challenge and yet reinforce the connection between firearm and (masculine) American identity« (Browder 2006: 10). Oakley's stage persona was built on enacting girlhood. She performed a non-threatening version of the shooting woman that resonated with the image of the new girl in transatlantic Victorian culture (Rico 2017: 98) and »reinforced conservative ideas regarding the appropriate maturation of Anglo-Saxon women« (Henneman 2017: 113). In Oakley's well-marketed frontier biography, shooting small game for survival legitimized gun usage. Also, Oakley's reliance on a non-provocative girlish dress code endeared her girl shooter persona for admiring onlookers and male shooting competitors. At BBWW, she was placed as opening act because »audiences who felt nervous when confronted with the noise and smoke of gunfire felt reassured when they

8 Jones, Michaela: »Wonders of the World«, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, 19.08. 2017. https://centerofthewest.org/2017/08/19/wonders-of-the-world/. Accessed on 08.08.2018. Quoted in ibid.

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saw a petite, attractive woman shooting first« (Kasson 2000: 112). For European audiences, the American girl who called herself »Miss« (and in German »Fräulein«) and performed girlish pouts with her small gun was a curiosity from overseas. Her girl celebrity persona distinguished her from other women in show business whose image was linked to prostitution (Rico 2017: 104). It also venerated spectacle culture and the alleged ›taming‹ of a country girl to presentable and attractive femininity, as seen in the global success of the 1946 musical *Annie Get Your Gun* (translated into German as »Annie schiess los«) and the 1950 eponymous film version, which launched the song »There's No Business Like Show Business«.

Oakley's coinage of the cowgirl and female sharpshooter perpetuates the heteronormative and masculinist gender politics of the Western show, which resurfaces in »Der Höllische Heinz« through Kira Dorn's undercover cowgirl play. Kira's act works on both levels: as carnivalesque inversion of her everyday life as working mom on the one hand, and on the other hand as performative extension of her part as female detective in the diegetic world of *Tatort Weimar*. To access the Western community of El Dorada, Kira play-acts as would-be Westerner and trick rider. This includes an independent and self-assured femininity coupled with rebel girl fighting. Kira's grand entrance iconizes her as new Western heroine in an extended, one-minute scene (00:21:54–00:22:29) that recalls the classical Western film: She is shown by herself, singled out center frame and walking in slow-motion down main street towards the town villain Heinz, as the Western town characters look on silently from their porches; one dishevelled cowboy tips his hat in greeting. Just after Kira (now as Lotta the cowgirl) has cockily announced she is looking for a job to the town, her partner Lessing arrives by car. His arrival is filmed to mimick Kira/Lotta's entrance to the Western setting, but he is met with antipathy. He closes his window while driving, since the El Dorodans ogle him suspiciously, and to confirm his intruder role, Kira/Lotta walks up to him and kicks him in the crotch for professedly jailing her former boyfriend (»›Der Bulle hat meinen Ex eingebuchtet‹«, 00:24:24–00:24:31). In this scene, the camera gaze is doubled by an onlooker's perspective: we see the figures in extreme closeup and then from a distance with a wobbly camera from behind, through the looking glass of a Western character who grunts approvingly at Lotta's behavior (00:24:32).

Kira/Lotta's grand cowgirl entrance to El Doroda becomes a play in the play: her camouflage is known to all those who watch, including Lessing and the actual TV audience, but disparate audience expectations pinpoint the logic of playing Western: while to the El Dorodas, her performance attests to her anti-police mindset as cowgirl and to her fitness to join their community, the TV audience knows more. We may read her act as professional performance (she has to embody her cowgirl role!) and as retribution to the domestic gender script pressure she feels due to the impending arrival of Lessing's mother. The marketing poster for »Der Höllische Heinz« suggests as much to viewers familiar with the duo Dorn and Lessing (fig. 2): it shows Kira as

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strong cowgirl equipped with two guns before the red curtain of a stage, protecting Lessing from harm as both look into the distance theatrically.

Fig. 2: Advertisement poster for »Der Höllische Heinz«
MDR/Wiedemann&Berg/Anke Neugebauer

In the course of the episode, Lessing is ridiculed, beaten up and even tarred (1:01:47) while Kira's role play as undercover cowgirl affords her a double escape: from the job and from motherhood, into her girlhood role in the fantasy world of El Doroda's ›Wild East‹. Notably, »Der Höllische Heinz« does not merely represent the diegetic world of a German Western in which good »cowboys« battle evil »Indians«; instead, the episode interrogates the push and pull between marketing the Western town and protecting its dropout members from poverty. As with any utopian community, the aptly named El Doroda operates on seclusion from the mainstream, neighborly support, and suspicion towards newcomers. Its *spiritus rector* Weber is the murder victim. Weber's Pretendian persona »Lone Wolf« is noticed only by Lupo (»›Welcher Indianer heisst Herr Weber?‹«, 00:10:00), whose question is ignored. Weber's passing threatens the community's survival. In this

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constellation, Heinz Knapps, the John-Wayne lookalike and title character, is both a savior and exploiter of El Doroda, with business knack and hawking skills learned in the GDR's anti-capitalist system. Lessing and Dorn's boss, Stich, recalls that Knapps sold fake under-the-counter erotica photos and ran a swinger club. Upon stumbling on El Doroda and its delusional »Hippies in Tipis«, Knapps professes, he »saw the economic opportunity« (00:15:09–00:15:32).

Knapps's description of these »Hippies in Tipis« nods to the anti-capitalist and specific East German articulation of playing Western. The East German reception of this narrative articulated a stance that critiqued the »imperialist class enemy« (»imperialistischer Klassenfeind«, von Borries and Fischer 2008: 8) and embraced a pro-»Indian perspective in a problematic cultural appropriation strategy«. From the 1950s to the present day, East German hobbyists have been ‹going native› in clubs organized as »Indian tribes«, even though this Indianthusiasm was shaken with the demise of the GDR, when the concept of the literally »red reserve« gave way to an »capitalist Eldorado« (von Borries and Fischer 2008: 10, my translation), as sketched by *Tatort*'s fictional cowboy villain Knapps. Just as Knapps' pseudo-West German erotica, the hobbyists of the Wild East made do with the few resources they had, specifically improvising on guns: while private gun ownership was strictly limited in the GDR, the hobbyists had with self-made guns or US leftovers from WWII that were transformed into Wild West firearms such as Peacemakers, Colts or Winchester guns (von Borries and Fischer 2008: 33). »Der Höllische Heinz« therefore uncovers the politics of the Wild East as pop culture phenomenon: As safe haven for dropouts and hobbyists, El Doroda faces the challenges of economic survival. The hobbyists' dress-up is framed by the necessity to stage a Western spectacle and attract customers. Read in this context, Kira Dorn's cowgirling act gains an additional meaning: next to offering her liberation from her day job and domestic life with Lessing, her cowgirl persona also functions as cash cow-»Fräuleinwunder« in the destitute Western community. As my close reading of her encounter with a cowboy shows, Kira's engagement with a Western colt encapsulates the affordances of her cowgirling in Thuringia.

4. »There's a Cowgirl in Me«: Kira Gets her Gun

> »You can't go in old school. These people are Hobbyists! Fundamentalist Western fanatics. In a town full of lawless people, you can't go in without a costume, even as a visitor. […] Remember carnival three years ago; there's a cowgirl in me!« (Kira Dorn to Lessing, 00:20:02–00:20:29)

When Lessing tells Kira about the new crime investigation site El Doroda, she jumps to analysis mode and declares herself the best candidate for infiltrating the West-

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ern community. Her disguise as Lotta the cowgirl marks a transition from state-sanctioned gun carrier, police officer, and working woman to cowgirl hobbyist who deliberately flirts with Western culture. Next to her arrival scene in which she gets to knee-jerk her partner on El Doroda's main street, her self-invention as Lotta is staged in a more intimate encounter with the cowboy Tom Wörtche down by the stables (00:27:34–00:29:20).

In this scene, Tom has an informal job interview with her, checking out her professional riding skills (which Kira quickly invents) as well as her cowgirl mindset. She arrives at the stables drenched in golden light, surprising the half-naked cowboy Tom washing off the dust after a long workday. Throughout this scene, Lotta acts self-assured and in a commanding way, while Tom hastens to keep up his straight face. The atmosphere suggests sexual innuendo when Kira playfully explores Tom's gun. The camera shows her in a half close-up, looking down curiously at the lower part of Tom's body as he girds himself with the holster. »›Oh, this one is great‹« she says, »›may I [touch it]?‹« The cinematography plays with the ambivalence in this scene: »it« might refer to both Tom's penis (i.e. his sexual prowess) or his gun. When he reluctantly pulls his colt out of the holster and places it in her hands, he tells her it is an original American colt, »›Army single action from 1871‹«. We then see her handling the gun in extreme close-up and pointing it at him as she inquires, cheekily: »›Does it still shoot?‹« (00:28:06–00:28:27). Tom's response »›Well… Not officially.‹« brings the scene full circle: He acknowledges that in the Western town, guns (even if they are historical artifacts) are worn only for show, while the dress-up cowboys revel in shooting in secret. At the same time, as only the audience know, Lotta as undercover agent makes an important discovery: She might have found an illegal firearm, and the potential murder weapon. And on the symbolic level hinted at with the playful sexual innuendo and phallic gun talk, Tom's response also invites Lotta to engage in further, off-the-record exploration of his gun (fig. 3).

Contrary to Western film convention, Kira's undercover sleuthing in El Doroda does not come to a shoot-out duel on main street. Instead, her Western stint culminates with a singing performance in the saloon as the »new Lady in town« (my translation, 01:07:19–01:10:05). For a rowdy saloon audience, she sings Marlene Dietrich's song »See What the Boys in the Backroom Will Have« from the 1939 Western *Destry Rides Again*. Dietrich's performance in this Western Americanized her as showgirl in the »bad girl« movie cycle of the 1930s, while her song was also read as ironic commentary on her vamp woman roles in previous films such as *Der Blaue Engel* (Forshaw 2015). For Kira's showgirl performance, this song functions as a meta-narrative reminder of the entertainment industry and its gender scripts: Kira-as-cowgirl cheekily asks to »have the same [drink]« as the »boys in the back room«, claiming backroom access to power and participation in the German Western carnival, just as Dietrich did as German celebrity in the US Western film. Kira-as-detective indulges her professional skills and demonstrates there's more to her character than

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meets the eye, namely a cowgirl. For the diegetic world of *Tatort Weimar,* the saloon scene marks Kira Dorn's temporal liberation, and in the format as a whole, we are reminded of the challenges female detectives face on the job.

Fig. 3: Stills: Lotta holds Tom's gun
»Der Höllische Heinz« (28:16 and 28:22)

As the investigation plot thickens and the suspense mounts, Kira's cover is almost blown by the clownish Lupo, who arrives at the saloon in cowboy dress with a historical revolver from the police archives to protect her, but he quickly knocks himself out: He faints from a shot of hard liquor. Kira's cowgirl investigation thus encapsulates her status as sex symbol, horse worker, and feisty character. She indulges the sexual innuendo with cowboy Tom and single handedly does away with the male co-workers who cross her cowgirl path: she watches Lupo keel over and beats up Lessing, her partner in work and in life.

In the end, it is Kira who saves Lessing from a gas explosion, and again, the gun is key: upon arriving on horseback at Knapps' house, she finds Tom's colt in the car, takes it and enters the house to find Lessing bound and tied to the kitchen oven. This scene is a staple in *Tatort* episodes: towards the ending, we often see the detectives breaking and entering dangerous spaces to save other figures from being killed. They do this at their own risk, with their police guns held up to their faces, ready to shoot at villains and attackers. Kira's performance of the breaking-and-entering scene in »Der Höllische Heinz« represents a Western variation that is tied to her choice of firearm: In extreme closeup of her face, we see her brandishing the Army Single Action colt, also known as Peacemaker, as she playacts as cowgirl shooter but carries out her cop job. In the end of the episode, Kira has fused the two personas of detective and cowgirl and becomes the armed heroine who saves the day. Importantly, she achieves this without shooting the Peacemaker: both her cowgirl and detective personas make do with the weapon as object, but not as tool. The Peacemaker carries various meanings in this scene: as ornament or accessory, it completes her cowgirl costume; as prosthesis, it enables her to fight back attackers; as fetishized object, her play with the gun stages her taking over of the phallus and by implication masculine

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power. Finally, as symbol of popular culture narratives in the Western and in *Tatort*, the Peacemaker pinpoints the figure Kira Dorn's critical interrogation of these format's gender scripts and the entertainment offered to the audience by her girlish transgression.

5. Conclusion

How does »Der Höllische Heinz« link to *Tatort* as a whole? Cultural Studies scholar Julika Griem has explored the format's seriality to argue that the detective figures's social commentary extends beyond individual episodes, thus preventing narrative closure of the 90-minute films (Griem 2014: 404). In view of this collected volume's interest in the meanings of guntoting female figures, the detectives can be described as brandishing their weapons in response to the concrete murder case but also to the diegetic world they live in. *Tatort Weimar*, with its absurd figures and weird murder cases that link Goethe's and Schiller's abode to bratwurst capitalism, applies the social commentary to the medium. Weimar as cultural icon becomes a spectacle that only dazzles, as Moritz Baßler (2017: 352) has argued, when both performers and audience accrue meaning to the storyworld and return to *Tatort* Weimar, time and again, as a world they enjoy experiencing.

The carnivalesque world of El Doroda taps into German Western myths and offers nostalgic memories to its viewers, who might recall the playing cowboys and Indians and return to their inner cowgirl, as Kira did. »Der Höllische Heinz« suggests that, by indulging Kira's fantasy, we are allowed to take a long, hard look at the gun, but to solve the murder case and save the day in the world of *Tatort* Weimar, we don't even have to shoot to keep the fantasy alive.

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Violence and the Good Women of Bollywood

Hridaya Ajgaonkar

1. Introduction: Registering the Dual Pleasures of Sex and Violence in Mainstream Indian Cinema

Contemporary South Asian societies and their foundational narratives often share a turbulent relationship with the ›question of the female‹, where public expressions of femininity, and particularly female sexuality, are met with the constant ambivalence of desire and moral mortification. The female body, through its varied representations, is seen and used as a means of reifying ideology, captured most effectively in popular art that uses suitable subterfuges to control its morally disruptive potency while still depicting it to satisfy desire. In a 2006 documentary film, culture critic and cineaste Slavoj Žižek states that »[c]inema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you what you desire – it tells you how to desire« (00:30–00:38), pointing to the ideological malleability of the viewers' desire, and to its artificial means and modes. The ›teacher‹ or determiner of these desires is not the genre of cinema alone, but the ideological apparatuses at play behind the screen. In its dynamic contexts, South Asian cinema is particularly shaped by the pressures of a postcolonial society and producers of art and culture that cater to the economically, sexually, and politically demanding gaze(s) of its audience. It is this cinema, a robust cultural machine, that has emerged as one of the most powerful means of accessing mass ideology in contemporary India.

In popular Indian film, essentialised, archetypal and mythically recognisable figures are often a formulaic way of ensuring commercial success across class, caste, and linguistic lines. For over a century, these set formulae have been applied to the configurations of the filmic hero, the villain, and the heroine, tweaked to suit the demands of a particular era's typical performance of gender. The figure of the heroine, who is the specific quarry of my study here, is almost invariably constructed as a ›good‹ woman to buttress a nationally homogenous narrative of the patriarchal, heterosexual Indian family unit. Since the 1980s, owing to newer feminist sensibilities in the Indian audience as well as a growing discontent with sexual discrimination and crimes against women, the cinematic formula has been

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revisited to include a careful construction of a ›good‹ woman who turns violent due to her circumstance.

My contribution looks at the fraught construction of this new ›good‹ woman of Bollywood through three films – *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela* (2013), and *Darlings* (2022) – to demonstrate the variety of strategies used in her construction, and a sustained reliance on certain tropes of female violence. Through these films, I question the agency afforded to these female characters, as well as the factors that undercut or enhance this agency.

The commercial Hindi film industry, also known by its alias ›Bollywood‹, has long relied on the format of the melodrama to grapple with the hegemonic pressure of, on the one hand, upholding the figure of the ideal, respectable, and ›pure‹ Indian woman. On the other hand, Bollywood has recognised and included the aesthetic, scopophilic, and commercial requirements of its vast, heterogeneous audience – and the consequent variety of its sexual idiosyncrasies – that demand an erotic spectacle for visual pleasure in addition to the idealised moral universe. Karen Gabriel describes the format of the melodrama as »reliant on the organization and narrativization of the sexual – and thus on the family which is a crucial manifestation of the organization of sexuality« (Gabriel 2010: 67). The melodramatic mode registers simultaneously the anxieties and desires of the public and often ›resolves‹ them within the boundaries of the cinematic universe itself, allowing a coexistence of these diverse pressures.

The figure of ideal womanhood was initially constructed by reactionary nationalist discourses during India's Independence era, and calcified post-Independence through films such as *Mother India* (1957). In her essay »Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema«, Asha Kasbekar writes of the ›idealised moral universe‹ constructed by the Hindi film industry in order to uphold the modern state's vision of the Indian woman as muse rather than erotic spectacle, or in other words, to uphold an official definition of femininity (Kasbekar 2001: 293). The idealised moral universe registers the legitimate desire associated with the ideal mother or the ideal wife, the women who uphold the values of the traditional Indian family unit. The official and desirable men of this universe valiantly defend these values, often through exaggerated violence. At the same time, the formulaic film also makes a provision for the erotic spectacle through story-based circumstance (such as the hero's fantasy of the heroine or a peeping tom), or through stock female characters such as the vamp. The vamp often acts as a foil to the good heroine, and her overt immoral coding (through skin-show or a consistent, one-sided seduction of the hero for example) allows for her sexualisation without disturbing the moral universe of the film.

The unique melodramas of Bollywood are thus thoroughly inundated with paradoxes, held together in a fragile, indulgent plot. In other words, although the plots of these films protect the rhetorical narrative constructions of this idealised moral

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universe, we also see in them the paradoxical invitations to the dual visual pleasures of sex and violence.

These are often (over)loaded onto the typical Bollywood film poster; for instance, the poster of *Sholay* (see fig. 1) is framed by the two heroes and two other supporting male characters. The two heroes are seen carrying guns, thus promising violence. The female love interest of only one of the main heroes- she appears several times in the film but is not crucial to its main plot- is centred and in a state of vulnerability. Her still in the poster is from a scene in the movie where the villain *forces* her to dance erotically for him, thus creating in the plot the possibility of an erotic spectacle (which is duly promised to the audience through the poster) without compromising the morality of the ›good‹ woman and, subsequently, the idealised moral universe of the film.

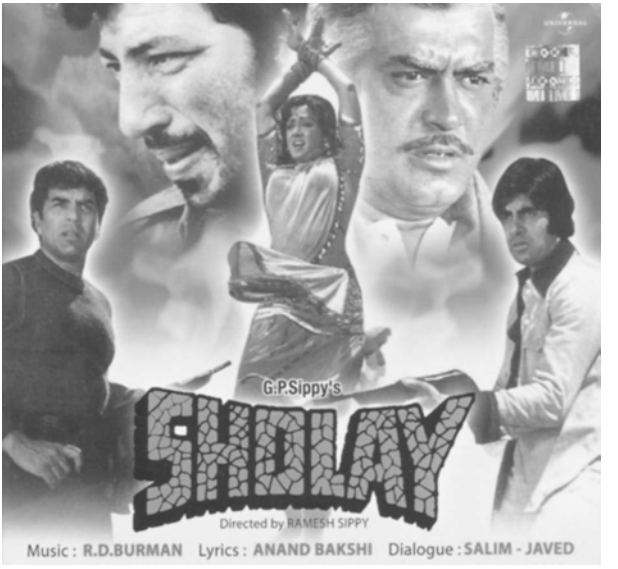

Fig. 1: Poster of Sholay (1975)

In *Sholay* and other films of the mid-20th century, thus, sex is often negotiated on the body of the woman, especially the aforementioned »good« woman. Films use strategies such as fantasy subplots, where the heroine's erotic activity, commonly in the form of a song-and-dance montage, is limited to the imagination of the hero or a »dream sequence« and thus not a part of her real-life femininity. Plot devices such as molestations by the villain, for instance, also ensure the show of skin while protecting the nationally constructed moral fabric of the film. Violence, on the contrary, is

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categorically given over to the agency of the men, both good and bad. Their violence is a show of their power and a reaffirmation of their manhood, as well as a means to the catharsis experienced by the audience. Even in settings defined by violence, such as the gangsters' lair, the closest most female characters come to a gun is by being a ›gun moll‹, the gangster's mistress, who is also at times the vamp. In the films of the 1950s and 1960s especially, the moll is relegated to a peripheral role and even when she is part of the »criminal« story, she fails to initiate any crimes and has little or no connection with firearms. This denial of firepower occurs despite the placement of the gun moll outside the respectable and official central narrative of the film (Yadav 2019: 149).

2. Angry Wives and Mothers: Violence and Melodrama in Bollywood

Closer to the turn of the 21st century, however, a new formula that fused the duality of the pleasures of sex and violence in the figure of the violent »good« woman emerged in Bollywood. The origins of this formula could be manifold – India stood at the brink of its global exposure, and its cinematic culture increasingly interacted with the trends of female-centric films that proliferated in the West. Indian film producers (both men and women) responded to the new post-Independence generations of mostly urban women who began renegotiating their position in society, who entered the workforce, and displayed more openly transformatory and malleable configurations of femininity (Datta 2000: 73, 79). Representations of women in cinema, thus, began to move beyond the popular tropes of the typecast mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. These new significations of woman, however, were never set and complete. Her carefully constructed identity on screen was built to balance between the pressures of the image of the new woman and the demands of the traditional one.

The violence that was now a possible part of the ›good‹ woman's repertoire was inserted into the melodramatic formula that had heretofore ensured commercial success for films. This synthesis resulted in a specific brand of violence for the ›good‹ women of Bollywood, a trend that Maithili Rao, and later Lalitha Gopalan, call ›lady avengers‹ or ›avenging women‹ (quoted in Gopalan 1997: 43). In this format, the emotionally charged, heightened instances of (often sexual) wrongdoing against the painstakingly constructed ›good‹ woman are followed by equally heightened resolutions in the form of defeating the villain and societal reconciliation. Starting in the 1980s, the anxious mass audience of a young, postcolonial country eagerly invested in these melodramas for a vicarious rectification on screen of the anxieties of violence and female powerlessness that evade any easy resolution in the non-diegetic ›real world‹.

Some early applications of this formula include B. R. Chopra's 1980 film *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (translation ›The Balance/Scales of Justice‹), starring Zeenat Aman and Raj

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Babbar. The film is loosely based on Lamont Johnson's 1976 Hollywood film *Lipstick*, pointing to a clear cultural synapse forming between the cinematic aesthetics of Hollywood and Bollywood in depicting the figure of the woman and the moral discourse surrounding her. Similar to the Hollywood original, the film revolves around a model who is raped and shoots her rapist. However, *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, like its successors, translates the narrative into the heroine's ›Indian‹ femininity (often visible in her sartorial choices) to suit the moral requirements of its audience. Lalitha Gopalan in her essay on »Avenging women in Indian cinema« adds that »any Indianness we attribute to these cinemas lies in the various ways censorship regulations of the Indian State shape and influence cinematic representations; we must acknowledge and theorize the presence of the State when discussing the relationship between films and spectators« (Gopalan 1997: 44). The 1985 film *Durgaa*, directed by Shibu Mitra, is named after the Hindu goddess Durga who is associated with strength and motherhood, as well as destruction. In the film, the eponymous Durgaa is tricked and jilted in love by her husband, who also abandons her, and she consequently faces social ostracism for being single and pregnant. At the end of the film, she seduces the men who have tricked her and shoots them. Remade in Hindi from the Telugu original, T. Krishna and N. Chandra's 1988 film *Pratighaat* (translation ›Counter-Attack‹) also follows the story of a housewife who is publicly disrobed by a corrupt local politician for testifying against him. She kills him in the end with an axe, in an image that references, once again, another Hindu goddess, Kali. In a similar vein, K. C. Bokadia's 1991 film *Phool Bane Angaare* has at its centre a housewife who is raped and whose husband is murdered. The violent heroine of the film is constructed using a reference to Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi, who is a historical icon for her resistance against the British Empire. In the climax of the film, she rides into a political rally on horseback, and kills the rapist-murderers with a sword. The new female figure, as seen in these films, is in a limbo between the paradoxical requisites of being an aggressive new-age sex symbol and being the keeper of the moral integrity of the traditional family unit.

2.1 *Khoon Bhari Maang*

The interstitial space between new and traditional womanhood is heavily foregrounded in Rakesh Roshan's 1988 film *Khoon Bhari Maang*. The film is particularly crucial in the genealogy of female-centric revenge films in Bollywood due to the considerable attention that it pays to the transition and build-up of the ›violent good woman‹, with a clear before-and-after sequence for the heroine who straddles the diegetic as well as the real past and present. The film is loosely based on the Australian mini-series *Return to Eden* (1983), and may be seen as another outcome of the aforementioned synaptic international cinematic discourse on the figure of the violent woman. Unlike the Australian series, the Indian adaptation ensures that

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the heroine's misfortunes are entirely circumstantial, where she is unexpectedly widowed for instance, and not someone with a ›failed‹ marriage like the Australian heroine.

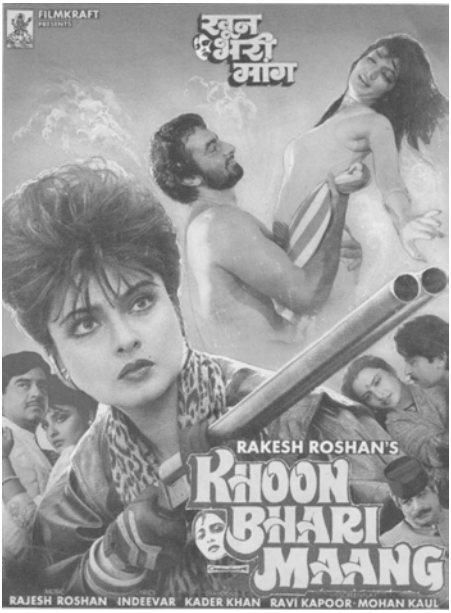

Fig. 2: Poster of Khoon Bhari Maang (1988)

The title *Khoon Bhari Maang* is a play of words that translates roughly to the parting of a woman's hair filled with blood or to a bloodthirsty demand. The title plays on the word ›maang‹, which is a homonym that denotes 1. The parting of a woman's hair and 2. A want, desire, or demand (Shabdakosh.com). The title of the film thus, on the one hand, refers to a lust or desire for blood, in line with the revenge plot of the film, and is highlighted by the central gunwoman in the film poster. On the other hand, the title could also be seen as referring to blood in the parting of a woman's hair and this semantic is seen in the small image of the central female character with a bloody forehead next to the title of the film in the poster (see fig.2). The second version of the title displays in its very construction an alliance between violence and the corporeal organisation of the Hindu woman. The *sindoor* or vermillion that is traditionally worn in the parting of a Hindu woman's hair codes the most immediately visible part of her body with her marital status, her femininity, and her connection to a man. This religio-gendered coding of her femininity is interrupted by the insertion of blood in

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the parting of her hair, much like the familial narrative of the ideal woman in the film is interrupted by her husband's sexual betrayal and her subsequent revenge on him. It seems to proclaim at its very outset that the violence of the ›good‹ woman in this film is powered by the institutions that underpin her identity constructions.

The film is easily recognisable as an early Indian feminist revenge film, part of the lineage of films that I have discussed before (see section ›Angry Wives and Mothers: Violence and Melodrama in Bollywood‹). Its background primarily unfolds around the central character Aarti, whose position in the traditional heterosexual family unit affirms her as the quintessential ›good‹ woman. Her identity is smoothly constructed through her morally cognizant wifely, filial and maternal roles, especially to her two young children and her numerous pet animals. This idyllic construction is interrupted by the death of Aarti's husband, which makes way for Sanjay, an ambitious young man, to hatch a plan to take over Aarti's wealth. This ploy against Aarti by Sanjay, whose villainy is external to Aarti's idealised moral construction, deepens the sacrificial goodness of Aarti's character as a model widow; she lives an extremely colourless life after the death of the husband, is almost completely desexualised through her purposefully dull clothing in comparison to the rest of the female characters, and smiles only for the sake of her children. Aarti's best friend Nandini, who is also Sanjay's lover, is a constant foil to Aarti's simplicity – she is ambitious and glamourous, and easily swayed by Sanjay into duping Aarti. Sanjay, in cahoots with Nandini, pretends to be in love with Aarti and promises her the safety of a »man«; he vows to look after her, be a father to her children, and multiply her wealth, all while pretending to be extremely wealthy himself and thus benevolent in his intentions. Shortly after they are married, Sanjay attempts to murder Aarti by pushing her into a river full of crocodiles. Aarti is attacked by a crocodile, and Sanjay additionally shoots at her. Thinking Aarti is dead, the couple leaves. Unbeknownst to Sanjay, Aarti survives and returns in a new avatar, under the name Jyoti, now seeking vengeance. She eventually pawns her jewellery to get plastic surgery to hide her wounds and returns for her revenge. The film culminates in a dramatic showdown between the characters, as Aarti rides in on her horse, armed with a lasso, a dog-belt and a gun. At the end of the film, after a scuffle with Sanjay, Aarti pushes him into the same river, where presumably the same crocodile attacks Sanjay, and his death poetically unfolds in the same fate that he had planned for Aarti.

The film's depiction of turn-of-the-century Indian feminism relies on the recognisable aesthetic valuation of the gunwoman as the good-woman-turned-avenging-angel. Aarti's femininity in the first half of the film is defined as largely submissive, and sartorially coded in a particularly modest version of the sari. The song-and-dance-sequences are all familial as well. The ›before‹ or the first half of the film, which I argue is an almost indispensable addition to the image of the gunwoman, revolves around the creation of a moral universe that is underpinned by a ›fetishiza-

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tion of chastity‹ (Kasbekar 2001: 293), thus resulting in a transition to the gunwoman in the ›after‹ or the second half of the film that is meandering and long-winded, devoid of any moral shock.

The moral and ethical credentials gathered by the fetishized chastity of Aarti in the first half enable a contrasting latter half that leads to her sexualisation and gunwomanship without sullying the nationally and familially coded narrative of the film. The second half of the film, where Aarti returns as Jyoti, ensures a visible modernisation of Aarti, leading also to a subsequent sexualisation of her appearance that stands in stark contrast to the desexualised widow of the first half of the film. For instance, her clothing becomes more 1980s ›Western‹ (although she does not show too much skin), she wears make-up, light-coloured contact lenses, urban hairstyles, and replaces her best friend at the modelling agency – all of which can be seen as facets in her transition into a gunwoman.

The female body's sartorial performance as the ›good‹ woman and gunwoman are an integral part of the film's narrative constructions. Aarti, before and after her transition into a gunwoman, shares an intricate and complex relationship with the clothing she wears, what it covers and what it doesn't, as well as in the play of colour and make up. Jane Garrity notes how »[c]lothes have the chameleonic ability to create character and to embody political and economic history. References to dress must be read with the understanding that fashion's social codes and political connotations are inseparable from their representations of gender« (Garrity 2014: 261). In the climactic scene of the film Jyoti takes off her light-coloured contact lenses to reveal her true identity as Aarti. However, sartorially speaking, she is still in »Western« clothing, and does not return to her plain, homely sari. As a gunwoman, her clothing is not glamourous either, but more functional. It is built for action, and her jacket and pants even resemble what Sanjay, the villain, is wearing. Given this, *Khoon Bhari Maang* and several other films (see section ›Angry Wives and Mothers: Violence and Melodrama in Bollywood‹) often seem to construct a (inter)culturally recognisable appearance, almost like a uniform, such as that of a mythological character or of a traditionally violent male character, for the violent gunwoman.

The visibility of Aarti's transition into a violent woman, in a way, also reasserts her original goodness at the same time that it conveys the circumstantial and ethical grounding for her violence. As she begins physically harming Sanjay, Aarti/Jyoti's violence is consistently intercut by flashbacks of her marginalisation, ensuring that the construction of Aarti's goodness stays intact through the violent dismantling of Sanjay's masculinity. In the final speech that Aarti delivers before she attacks Sanjay, she refers to Sita, Mother Mary, Durga, Kali and multiple other goddesses in Indian mythology, delivering not only an affirmation of herself as on the ›good‹ side of Indian moral systems, but also an archetypal ›good‹ woman who destroys evil, with full mythological legitimacy.

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In other words, the ›good‹ gunwoman in films such as *Khoon Bhari Maang* is almost invariably used as a means to feminist catharsis, which in turn relies on the idea that a woman *resorts* to violence as a result of her marginalisation. Her violence is necessarily hyphenated and prefixed with a ›counter‹. Her fetishized chastity lays the foundation on which her equally fetishized gunwomanship is built. This use of weapons of physical violence is rarely depicted as a product of her affinity – or even liking – for it, which begs the question (that I attempt to answer) of whether this mandatory filmic marginalisation of the violent woman undercuts her agency.

Another facet of this politics of ethical violence lies in the evolution of the ›bad‹ woman, as seen in the character of Nandini. Although she is not a ›good‹ woman, she still ends up as a victim of Sanjay's (almost one-dimensional) villainy. Nandini also becomes violent as a result of the marginalised position that she finds herself in. However, since she does not embody the ›good‹ femininity that Aarti does (she is an ambitious, glamourous model who betrays her best friend and has an affair with Sanjay) her violence is limited and restrained to her own body. She is shown getting drunk and threatening to harm and kill herself multiple times, without any access to a weapon or consequential action. In other words, Nandini's moral compromise in the cinematic narrative seems to rid her of the right to be an ethically violent woman. Nandini's helplessness in the final scenes of the film is once again a foil for Aarti's agency, although she briefly redeems herself by taking a bullet for her former friend.

2.2 *Ram-Leela*

A quarry of the morally charged and patriarchally infused constructions of the good woman and her fraught relationship with vengeance and violence can also be enriched by a study of *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela* (2013) (hereafter *Ram-Leela*), primarily because it is not a feminist revenge film formally, and yet falls back on the familiar tropes of the violent yet good Bollywood gunwoman.

The film, which is a culturally translated adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, is set in a (largely) fictionalised set of villages in present day India that run entirely on the manufacture and sale of weapons. The poster of the film depicts the star-crossed lovers standing on a mountain of guns (see fig. 3). Like more traditional Bollywood poster formats (fig. 1), the image of the heroine is centred and seemingly vulnerable, while the hero seems more menacing, and his line of vision is more directly towards that of the audience's gaze. The full title of the film, *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela*, translates as »A Celebration of Bullets: Ram-Leela«. It makes a reference to the popular and religiously connotative folk art form of the Ramleela, which is a theatrical performance of excerpts from the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana, and at the same time primes the violence of the film. The visual cues that inaugurate the film seem to stress that *even* women and children are involved in the gun business and always wear a gun on them. However, the space is not a neutral

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dystopia of gun-usage. As a ›bawaal‹ or small riot breaks out at the beginning of the film, the men all bring out their guns while the women are largely afraid of the guns or, at the very least, irritated by them. Here again, female characters are *reluctant* participants in the ›Goliyon ki Raasleela‹. In the busy marketplace, men deal guns, while the images of women largely include domestic chores like embroidery: they hold needles in their hands, which much like their guns, can draw blood, but are never used for that purpose.

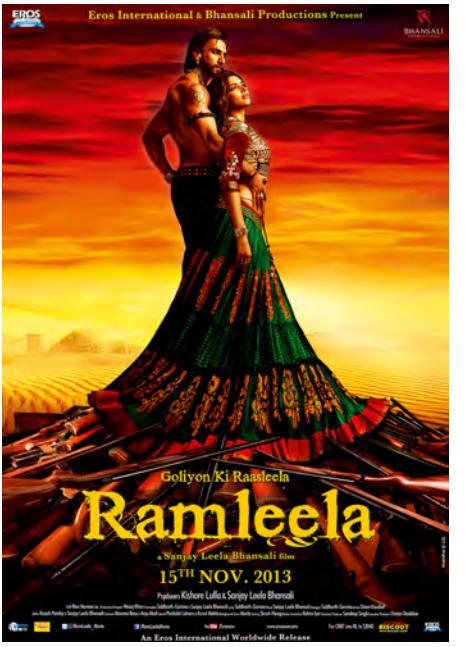

Fig. 3: Poster of Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela (2013)

The titular Leela (the ›Juliet‹ of the adaptation), in her very first shot and in her introduction to her titular Ram (the ›Romeo‹ of the adaptation), finds that Ram is pointing a gun at her, albeit a water-gun, during Holi[1] celebrations. However, she points a real gun at him. He, instead of taking it as a threat, and in a show of surrender and love, raises his hands in the air. He does fire the water gun, while Leela lifts the real gun up in the air and the sound of her bullet leads to more guns being

1 Holi is a South Asian spring festival characterised by people playing with colour and water. People often use water guns to spray coloured water on one another.

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fired and an intensification of the celebration. This exchange, although it involves shooting, successfully rids Leela of the violence and bloodshed that is associated with the firearm. The film is peppered with such instances, where the gun for the figure of the woman, be it Leela, or the matriarch Dhankor, often remains ornamental, used in dance and celebration. In spite of easy access to guns, when Dhankor says she is forced to punish Leela for eloping with Ram and refusing to marry a man of Dhankor's choice, she uses a type of nutcracker (used otherwise to cut betelnuts) to chop off Leela's ring finger. In this instance as well, Dhankor's violence against her daughter is almost an obligation to the traditions of the family. This violence is immediately followed by a scene where Ram has cut his own finger in solidarity with Leela, thus immediately overshadowing this violence between the women with the image of a lover's pain and sacrifice.

Due to the family business of bullets, the gun also becomes a source of wealth for the women, and a mundane part of their daily domestic labour. The bullets, for instance, are often stored in the inner courtyard of the traditional house, under piles of drying chillies. A particularly relevant scene in the film involves Raseela, a new widow, who is asked to pull out bullets from her husband's dead body with a knife. The clear association of weapon as ornament is particularly visible in this scene as it is often customary (and this image is used in Bollywood aplenty) for a woman who has just been widowed to cry and break the bangles in her hands to mourn her husband. The ornamental broken bangles are replaced here with the knife. Nevertheless, this knife is not shown or used in self-defence when the same widow is assaulted by a group of men later.

Guns and other weapons, thus, are economy and accessorizing jewellery for these women. They are sartorial rather than hostile or militaristic, and the women's bodies and gun usage are coded as such. Leela also points the gun at Ram multiple times in the course of the film, but fires at him only at the end, when they both shoot each other in an act of Shakespearean lovers' suicide. The peace treaty at the end of the film is also formulated by the women of the warring houses.

The evasion of unconditionally violent female characters in the Bollywood adaptation is also reminiscent of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 Hollywood adaptation titled *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, where the men perform the gang violence that forms the backdrop of the film, while the women continue to evade it. Across cultures and continents, and in translations that are deeply different contextually, there continues to be a tendency (or almost a requirement) for female characters and their association with violence and firearms to be morally and mythically coded and constrained. A more recent example of this codification can be found in the confrontation portrayed at the beginning of Patty Jenkins' 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, where the Amazons of Themyscira, the women who live in a single-sex utopia of sorts, are all adept warriors, all armed, but with traditional and mythologically legitimised weapons. Their weaponry is untouched by modern, ›masculine‹ war-

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fare. Their all-female utopia is, interestingly, penetrated and interrupted by male soldiers fighting World War I, who are all armed with guns.

Aside from Bollywood or Hollywood cinema, there have been several permutations of the violent woman in small-budget, parallel, or arthouse Hindi films of the last two decades, such as in *Lajja* (2001), *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011) and *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015). However, there is a common and striking absence in most mainstream and melodramatic Bollywood narratives of a commentary on widespread systems of caste-based or economic marginalisation of women. Apart from their conditional access to weapons, the gunwomen in these films, as seen in *Khoon Bhari Maang* and *Ram-Leela*, enjoy subscriptions to caste as well as class privileges. These subscriptions suggest that the trajectory of the Bollywood gunwoman often relies on a socio-economically neutralised plot, that is, a plot that allows the clash of the gunwoman only with an individual, an evil villain, or even a lover, rather than layered patriarchal systems or an intersection of oppressive structures. This neutralisation of the plot underlines the individually feminised and restrictively cathartic production intent of the ›good‹ gunwoman's conflict. Menka Ahlawat in her work on the angry young woman in the Bombay cinema of the 1970s, for instance, suggests that unlike the angry young man in 1970s Bollywood films, the enactment of the female protagonists' revenge and the rhetorical discourse framing it, render the legitimacy of her anger relatively suspect as compared to her male counterparts. Her quest for retribution is not couched in the laudatory language of social justice, and the injustice against her is not shown to be embedded within social structures (such as patriarchy), unlike the man's. Hence, it gets cast as an isolated incident of hurt/anger. This is ultimately resolved on an individual level, rather than being afforded a network of solidarity with other women/minor characters. When her trauma is the result of circumstances unique to her as a woman (and not, for example, as the member of an economic class) it is represented as ›merely‹ a private issue (Ahlawat 2019: 204).

Given this, I believe that Jasmeet K. Reen's film *Darlings* (2022) is particularly striking for its intersectional and renovated representation of the figure of the violent woman.

2.3 *Darlings*

Jasmeet K. Reen's dark comedy *Darlings* was released digitally on Netflix India in August 2022. Although the film did not have a conventional theatrical release, like several aforementioned Bollywood films, it was marketed heavily through billboards

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and digital advertisements, and unlike many small-budget undertakings was afforded a certain level of ›mainstream‹ value.[2]

Fig. 4: Poster of Darlings (2022)

The narrative follows the life of Badru, a young, newly married woman whose husband turns out to be abusive. Badru's husband Hamza is the clear villain of the film; he is an alcoholic who regularly beats up Badru, and emotionally blackmails her into forgiving him the day after. The recurring domestic and sexual violence in the film peaks when a suspicious Hamza beats Badru up and pushes her down a staircase, causing her to miscarry her pregnancy. After this incident, Badru struggles briefly with suicidal thoughts, but finally chooses revenge. She assaults and drugs Hamza, binds him, and begins assaulting him, often imitating the manner in which he would assault her. Badru's mother, Shamshu, and Shamshu's business partner

2 The film is also produced partially by Red Chillies Entertainment, a company owned by Shahrukh and Gauri Khan. Shahrukh Khan's brand name is heavily associated with mainstream Bollywood.

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Zulfi eventually get involved too, although Badru is not fully sure of her course of action with Hamza. She debates killing him, and decides on it. With the help of the others, she ties him to a train track to get run-over, but changes her mind at the end in order to not be ›haunted‹ by him. Hamza immediately begins speaking rudely to Badru when he realises that she does not intend to kill him. However, he is accidentally hit by a passing train and dies.

Badru's violence against Hamza in the film involves no firearms, but is still extremely relevant to any discussion of the violent yet ›good‹ gunwoman in Bollywood, not only because the plot of the film is formally a feminist revenge narrative, but because the narrative evades the clearly cathartic visibility of a large, powerful, and volatile gun in the hand of the woman.

It replaces the gun with the more unassuming, yet subtly incisive syringe, or the more domestic stove lighter. In the poster of the film (see fig. 4) these are, rather interestingly, held precisely in the way a gun would be held. It is with this syringe that Badru drugs and controls Hamza, while the stove lighter is used to cook food that contains substances to control his alcoholism. Badru is most definitely armed in the film with contextual weapons. Although she does not shoot bullets at him, she ›shoots‹ debilitating drugs into his system.

Much like the prototypical Indian feminist revenge film, *Darlings* is evenly divided into a first and second half that corresponds to the transformation of Badru into a violent woman. In the first half, Badru wishes to try for a child and purchases a red dress, red high heels and lipstick to seduce Hamza – here we see her sartorially self-coding for Hamza's pleasure. In the second half, however, she wears the entire outfit as planned earlier while she sits before Hamza to torture him. Her ›uniform‹ for violence, although it is not as constant as in *Khoon Bhari Maang*, is a reclaimed outfit of the old Badru. The sexiness of the outfit that initially contributes to Badru's wifely and maternal urges is repurposed to insert Badru into the image of a *femme fatale*. In a particularly intense scene post-transformation, Badru wears bright red lipstick, red nail paint, her red dress, and red high heels, a colour that would signify both blood and sexuality, as she begins aggressively bargaining with Hamza for a new house. Although Badru is dressed in an outfit that was originally intended for sexual expression and visual pleasure in Hamza and Badru's conventional heteronormative coupling, her body has unglamourous, realistic bruises in different stages of healing, which serve as a reminder of Hamza's violence and are a consistent disturbance in any perfected, cathartic image of the violent ›good‹ woman or avenging angel. Additionally, at multiple stages in this dressing up, Badru looks at herself in the mirror, cheating the male scopic drive and asserting, in some sense, an autoerotic self-hood.

The film eventually reveals that not only is Badru violent, but so is her mother. The climax suggests that Badru's father did not, in fact, leave the family, but was murdered by his wife. Badru recognises the violence in her mother and sees it differ-

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ently only after her own husband is dead, making her own violence part of a pattern, a system and a legacy. The construction of female violence in the film also crosses the line of control around age and violent female power. Badru's mother, a middle-aged woman, finds a young lover in the course of the film, and is eager, from the very outset of the story, to murder Badru's husband.

Unlike each of the films that I have looked at so far, however, the entire narrative of *Darlings*, is imbued with dark humour. Comedy has been critiqued as a male-identified genre (Gillooly 1991: 475) and, in many patriarchal cultures, coded as a masculine practice. Regina Barreca in her introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, presents a critique on »the inability of the critical tradition to deal with comedy by women rather than the inability of women to produce comedy that accounts for the absence of critical material on the subject« (Barreca 1988: 20). Eileen Gillooly in a review of *Women and Humour*, draws from Barreca and from Annette Kolodny's ideas of gendered reading and suggests that women's comic productions often radically undercut rather than ultimately affirm dominant cultural values (Gillooly 1991: 475). For Barreca, »Women's comedy is ›dangerous‹ because it refuses to accept the givens and because it refuses to stop at the point where comedy loses its integrative function. This comedy by women is about decentering, dislocating and de-stabilising the world… The fixed idea of women as ›the unlaughing at which men laugh‹ has been used as a weapon against both the ›pretty little girls‹ and the ›furious females‹ in order to negate whatever powers of humor they seem to possess« (Barreca 1988: 15).

The portrayal of female expressions that generate humour is then a deviation from more popular cultural practices, especially in patriarchally-informed Bollywood cinema. When this humour is created in collaboration with violence, as in *Darlings*, one might argue that its role becomes significantly subversive.

The women speak of violence and murder jokingly right from the start, thus first starting the dismantling of the idea that a woman, otherwise entirely innocent, opts for violence as a last resort. While the expression of female violence is in in itself recognisable as a special generic permutation or formula, such expression, when accompanied by humour that evokes laughter among other female characters and the audience, proves to be deeply unsettling. Hamza's death as well evokes a shocked laughter for the unexpected poetic justice that it brings. The film, in its depictions of violence, femininity, and female humour, thus threatens the meticulously created moral universe that forms an integral part of the mainstream cinematic narratives of Bollywood. In their laughter, the women seem to almost childishly enjoy the possibility of harming Hamza, and even when they do eventually harm him, they hardly resort to any grand speeches about womanhood, mythology or goddesses. One may say that they laugh to survive in their marginalisation, and at the same time make ridiculous the insurmountable systems that marginalise them. Their laughter, I would argue, is also a weapon.

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Hamza, however, is not the singular, lone villain of the film. In spite of a clear demarcation between heroine and villain, the film covers several intersections of marginalisation. Badru, her husband, as well as her mother Shamshu live in chawl, which is typical low-quality housing found in Mumbai, and thus largely consisting of socio-economically disadvantaged working-class populations. The floors are creaky, the walls are thin, and Badru's neighbours are privy to the domestic violence against Badru based on the sounds that travel through the halls. Shamshu's husband (and Badru's father) is shown to have mysteriously disappeared in Badru's childhood, and Badru grows up with a single mother. Additionally, the entire family is Muslim, and thus a marginalised religious minority in the urban Indian context. As a result, Hamza's accidental death at the end of the film does not cleanly wrap-up the problems that Badru faces. It highlights, instead, how she continues to survive. In other words, the insertion of other intersections of marginalisation in *Darlings* that affect both the female protagonist and her abusive husband, who is the villain, as well as her mother, who is seen as her ally, places their violence and counter-violence outside the idealised moral universe that numerous Bollywood films rely on. In their counter-violence, they are also enabled by other figures that, while they may not be central to the narrative of the film, accompany them on the margins of social spaces. The local Muslim butcher helps Badru and her mother in their final plan to kill Hamza, and is shown to have helped Badru's mother as well when she perceivably murders Badru's father. A working-class woman, who runs a small beauty parlour and sympathises with Badru when she is assaulted, later turns a blind eye to Badru and her mother suspiciously disposing of what appears to be Hamza's body. Their counter-violence does not destroy the system or the cause of their pain, such as in *Khoon Bhari Maang*, but is rather a localised subversion that they carry out collaboratively. Although unarmed, they are ladies in arms, since their violence is collaborative and snakes through the very systems that marginalise them.

3. Conclusion: Violent Collaborations

This brings me to an approximate answer of my original question, that is, does the mandatory filmic marginalisation of the violent woman undercut her agency? As seen in most mainstream Bollywood feminist revenge films from the 1980s onwards, a socio-economically neutralised plot, in combination with the fetishized chastity of the violent and armed woman, is seamlessly cathartic. It sets out to process and dispel the anxieties and desires of its audience while staying firmly within the glass boundaries of Indian moral systems. *In Khoon Bhari Maang*, Aarti's construction as the ideal Indian mother and wife, thus also leading to her morally pure gunwomanship, aims to play a reassuring role for the audience; the wrongs done to her are avenged (and thus fixed) within the plot of the film, while she is presented as a ›new‹

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Indian woman who straddles the divide between tradition and modernity without betraying the morals of her family-oriented cinematic universe.

In a similar vein, *Ram-Leela* places female characters at the centre of the plot, often in conflict with one another and resorting to violence. Yet, these characters are secondary to stories of the pain and pleasure of the titular lovers. Guns, in spite of their ample availability, are economy and accessorizing jewellery for the female characters. In the rare instance that they do become actively violent, such as in the case of Dhankor, the weapon used is actually a domestic tool. Although Leela fires at Ram at the end of the film, at the same time that he fires at her as part of the lovers' suicide, they are in an embrace, firing at one another consensually. One might even venture to say that it is the Shakespearean plot that demands Leela's violence in the story, rather than it being a choice springing from her agency.

Such narrative procedures curtail the subversive actions of female characters such as Aarti and Leela to the idealised moral universe of the film, thus considerably undercutting their agency.

A film such as *Darlings*, however, with a plot that includes socio-economic and political pressures, notably constructs complex, uncertain, and not definitively chaste characters. These characters navigate intricate ethical layers of the social margins that they are constructed in and continually disrupt the boundaries of any such moral cinematic universe. The film places the agency of the woman not in a cathartic act of violence alone, but in her navigation of those intersecting paths and networks of marginalisation. Badru and her mother Shamshu operate in a network of solidarity.

The figure of the violent woman, when constructed thus, is part of a network built in marginalisation and empowered by its moral ambiguity. She is able to rhizomatically evade dominant, ideological narrative restraints; she is not morally perfect or represented through a straightforward ›goodness‹, she is violent and complex. Here, her agency is thus possibly empowering to others, especially other women, and is shared collaboratively. Badru and her mother Shamshu's stories of violence are shared and mirrored, inviting a reflection even outside their cinematic universe. The ladies, we realise, are not only armed, but arm in arm in their subversion.

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Ladies and Arms

Quasi-Objects in Luc Besson's Cinema

Jörg Türschmann

1. Ferrets, Parasites and Wandering Buttons: Metaphors for the Encounter between Human Subjects and Material Objects

In his book *The Parasite* (Serres 1982), the French philosopher Michel Serres deals with objects that are used by several players during games. This can be the ball in soccer, the joker in card games, or what is known in French as the *furet*, or *ferret* in English. This metaphor refers to a button that moves from one hand to the other in the game *Button, button, who's got the button*: »This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject« (Serres 1982: 225). French sociologist Bruno Latour has adopted the metaphor of the ferret and has repeatedly claimed that the quasi-object, through its circulation, creates a network between players in which there is no longer a difference between human and non-human actors (Latour). Players and toys have the same ontological status. The ferret also refers to the soldier who holds a weapon in his hand and becomes one with it. The network of weapon and soldier forms a new actor who can expand his network. Latour calls his theory »Actor-Network-Theory«, or »ANT«, and uses the animal metaphor of the ant to suggest that networks are actively and industriously expanding their agency.

Can the connection between a human and a non-human being that can be observed in reality be compared to its staging in a film? And does it matter that a woman represents the human part? My contribution examines these questions in Luc Besson's cinema, specifically in the films that belong to the blue period of so-called *cinéma du look* with an aesthetic and with characters that I read as ›cool‹. To analyse the ›cool‹ look I discuss contrasting examples from contemporary cinema by other authors. I specifically examine if the female protagonists in some of Luc Besson's films form a network when they hold a gun in their hands, or if they are the playthings of the other (mostly male) protagonists. My thesis is that Besson's

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heroines are initially a toy or a weapon in the hands of some players – but they emancipate themselves by forming a common network with the players.

2. Besson's Anna and Leeloo Save the World

The opening credits and the poster of Besson's film *ANNA* (2019) already show that the director plays with the name of the main character by turning the second letter N (*N*) around. In this way, the palindrome becomes perfect not only phonetically, but also graphically, forming a bridge between the players. In the film, Anna is first hired by the KGB, then by the CIA. She is thus a double agent and in this way the plaything of the two Cold War superpowers. Neither party is aware that Anna forms a network between them, being the weapon that threatens and protects each player at the same time. Anna has an erotic relationship with an agent from the KGB and the CIA at the same time. However, both men are professionals and hunt Anna when she is exposed. In the end, Anna has secret information that she can use to blackmail both superpowers and therefore protect her from further persecution. Finally, the *triangle érotique* meets in Monceau Park in Paris. Anna declares that she loves both men, but that she is now free because of the secret intelligence she gathered. Anna's emancipation is only possible in this relationship of tension, and she knows that she will be in danger again when the secret information becomes obsolete and the network disintegrates.

In this scenario, the double agent Anna herself becomes the weapon. This also becomes clear in Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), in which male scientists reconstruct the »perfect woman«, as she is literally called, from the remains of an alien creature. The iconography is familiar from film history: Like the actress Brigitte Held in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), Milla Jovovich is naked at the beginning and later only scantily clad, resembling a wolf child like all female protagonists in Besson's films. She is wise because she represents cosmological peace, yet she has to learn human language and love, for she will be romantically united with the cab driver Fred, played by Bruce Willis in a reference to his iconic cop-savior character John McClane from the *Die Hard*-action movie series. Leloo's love education takes place in the metal tube in which she has been constructed. According to tradition, the wolf child called »Leeloo« is the only weapon against the onslaught of a fatal fireball that will destroy all life on earth. In *The Fifth Element*, the male accomplices must create a network by placing four stones representing fire, water, earth and air. Leeloo, the fifth element, must be placed in the center of the square so that she can direct her destructive beam of light against evil. The four stones representing the elements are previously in the body of the opera diva Plava Laguna and are ›recovered‹ by Fred from the diva's corpse. Thus, two female bodies are joined together with Fred's help. The actress who impersonates the opera diva, the model Maïwenn le Besco, herself

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a well-known director, was married to Besson at the time, making the director indirectly additionally present as benefactor in the plot of the film. He is not only the creator of the work and its characters, but also sends an actress into the arena who is his lover. In this respect, Leeloo's emancipation remains limited because the director provides, as it were, from the extra-filmic space, through the body of his lover, the tools that Leeloo needs to be the saving weapon against evil.

The Fifth Element is no exception when it comes to the private relationships between the director and the actresses in Besson's films. Anne Parillaud, Milla Jovovich, Maïwenn le Besco and Virginie Silla were all married to him. In film history, it is sometimes part of marketing that between the lovers in a film, the private relationship of their actors is made public or claimed in order to increase the appeal of a film. In the case of Besson and his wives, the relationship between director and actresses provided the gossip and his films got additional publicity in this way.

3. Terminology: Role, Actress and Person

A central question remains as to what actually constitutes a woman when it comes to cinematographic representation. Brian Epps writes in his introduction to a book on female Spanish and Latin American filmmakers:

> The human beings grouped by the sign »woman« are permeated by a multiplicity of other signs, among which the ethnic and the socio-economic ones stand out, marking other groupings and only partially coinciding with the gender-sexual groupings. […] For the female identity of a director or protagonist is »a media effect«, »a projection«, »a fantasy«, »a mask«. (Epps 2014: 10, 18; my translation)

However, a few factors can be gathered that are responsible for the depiction of a female film character (Wulff 2006: 52; my translation and adaptation):

1. [person:] the actress is the actress herself
2. [body:] the actress-body is at the same time the character-body
3. [role:] the actress illuminates a character, playing a role
4. [diegesis:] the character stands in the context of the work, cannot be isolated from the context
5. [moral:] the character has an intentional content in the context of the statement of the play or scene, it is the product of a statement activity and serves, for example, to illustrate a stated ›moral‹ (such as the drunkard who illustrates the devastating effects of alcoholism)
6. [type:] the character is grounded in the semiotic context of ›typage‹ and therefore can be seen as a representative of a class, caste or group.

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The networks in *ANNA* and *The Fifth Element* concern the immanent context of the film. But what is the relationship between the other aspects? To answer this question, I would like to start from the dilemma of the framework in which the various protagonists find themselves: In cinema, it is doubly tragic that a robot must become an attractive woman to justify its existence and that the actress has to become a robot to justify her role. Taking into account the Actor-Network-Theory it is of course not a tragedy, because there is no difference between non-human and human actors. But if you are a humanist and believe in human agency, you will regret the loss of the human in a network.

Conversely, in reviewing Besson's films, my thesis is that the protagonists represent the source of life through their uniqueness. True, in the diegesis, they are one actor among others in a network, but they are represented as unique, as literally one of a kind: In *Subway* (1985), Héléna (Isabelle Adjani) is the unique beauty, in whose arms her lover Fred (Christopher Lambert) dies after he forms the music band of his life and the music finally resounds. She is the survivor of a hopeless love story because her lover is hunted down by a gunshot for his crimes. She has previously separated from her husband and is now alone due to Fred's death, but free to live her own life. In *Nikita* (1990), the eponymous heroine (Anne Parillaud), like Anna (Sasha Luss), is a killer who eludes her employers and regains her freedom. Joan of Arc (Milla Jovovich) becomes Queen of France, yet dies for her beliefs and a better world (*The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*, 1999). In *Angel-A* (2005), whose title orthography recalls the letter play of *ANNA*, the heroine Angela (Rie Rasmussen) functions as a lonely guardian angel, who fights against misfortunes with miraculous powers. Leeloo (Milla Jovovich) is the only weapon against evil in *The Fifth Element*, and in *Lucy* (2014) the protagonist (Scarlett Johanssen) is a descendant of the prehistoric woman Lucy. At the beginning, a monkey can be seen at a river, which is presumably supposed to be Lucy, the famous female specimen of a precursor of Homo Sapiens.

4. Cyborgs and Transhuman Beings: Metamorphoses of the Paranoid Body

Luc Besson's films offer a new take on the science fiction genre through their unique female protagonists. In *Lucy*, the protagonist's voice opens the drama off-screen: »Life is given to us a billion years ago. What have we done with it?« (0:01:47). At the end she says: »Life was given to us a billion years ago. Now you know what to do with it« (1:22:22). Like Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*, Lucy encounters a world that needs saving. To this end, the heroines use their weapons. Anna prevents a nuclear war by shooting the head of the KGB, helping her immediate superior to become the first woman director of the KGB. Lucy turns into a computer at the end and leaves the

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message, »I am everywhere«. But the film begins with the division of amoebae or cells, with the emergence of life. Uniqueness and multiplicity are put into a positive context here.

Hence Besson's approach differs from many other science fiction filmmakers. One of the most interesting directors of cyberpunk films (a dystopian subgenre of science fiction film that often depicts city dwellers in slums under constant surveillance) at the moment is Alex Garland, known for his movie *Ex Machina* (2015), or for his Netflix production *Annihilation* (2018), in which a group of military-trained women, including a molecular biologist (played by Nathalie Portman), search for the cause of a shimmer that has settled over a coastal landscape. The special thing about the enclosed area is that the cells of plants, animals and ultimately humans unite to form new living beings, i.e., a perfect entropy of genetic material. Two deer appear, with flowers growing from their antlers. The motif is similar to the mosaic by Catalan architect Antoní Gaudí created for the entrance to the Cathedral of Palma de Mallorca, in which two deer drink from the source of life. In the biblical Psalm 42, the deer's thirst for water is also read as a metaphor for Christians' desire for salvation from the threats of life through baptism. In *Annihiliation*, Garland turns the source of life into an autophagic cell division, unity into a pathological multiplication, whereby the cells between humans and animals mix and one creature dwells in the other, which is usually shown through the eyes. This double identity can be portrayed positively, as in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Resurrection* (1997), where Sigourney Weaver plays a hermaphrodite of human and alien and, as in Besson's *Fifth Element*, saves the earth through the use of weapons. The evil version of the venereal horror and the perverted body can be found in David Cronenberg's film *Rabid* (1977), where the female character uses a penis-like dagger under her armpit to kill her victims, who then turn into zombies. Brian de Palma's film *Carrie* (1976) is referenced there. Carrie has telekinetic abilities and takes revenge on her schoolmates making fun of her when she menstruates in the shower after playing sports. Telekinesis as a weapon can also be found in Besson's *Lucy*. Milla Jovovich, who plays Leeloo and Joan of Arc, also has telekinetic abilities in Paul W.S. Anderson's *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) and *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010).

Androids or humanoids symbolize the two most important ingredients of entertainment cinema: sex and crime. Robots, clones and cyborgs are used as weapons, but they can also be their creators' prostitutes. Morphing plays a special role here, because it is about the transformation of a machine body into a human body. Men create their dream women in *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes 1975; Frank Oz 2004) or the ›female‹ robot Arisa (Paulina Andreeva) in the Russian-Chinese television series *Better Than Us* (since 2018). From the era of silent film to the present, similar scenes present the act of creation, as seen in *Metropolis* and *The Fifth Element*, when male scientific genius creates a female body according to his ideas. These creatures always appear as attractive young women of reproductive age. They are sterile or,

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as in Besson's *Léon: The Professional* (1994), too young to have children. Therefore, an incestuous relationship between ›father and daughter‹ or creator and creature is impossible. The women can or must emancipate themselves from their maker, because they have no family commitments. More recent films not only show female desire for male robots as in *Ich bin dein Mensch* (*I'm Your Man*, Maria Schrader 2021), but female beings are even humanoids who fall in love with cars and change their gender (*Titane*, Julia Ducourneau 2021). Socially critical films that tell coming-out stories also belong here, such as Lucía Puenzo's film *XXY* (2007) about a transgender person with female and male characteristics.

In order to stage the fragile identities of AI robots and their female incarnations, actresses of color and multiracial backgrounds are cast in recent films, such as Sonoya Mizuno in *Ex Machina* (2015), Yvonne Strahovski in the television series *Dexter* (2006–2021), Noomi Rapace in *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott 2012) or Maggie Q in *Divergent* (Neil Burger 2017), or Milla Jovovich and Sasha Luss in Besson movies. The robots develop a strong artificial intelligence because they do exactly what the men expect of them in order to strike at the right moment and eliminate their tormentors. In *Ex Machina*, the robot that escapes to freedom is a Caucasian woman in camouflage: Ava, embodied by the Swedish actress Alicia Vikander, uses the skin of an Asian woman as a kind of biological appropriation that is nonetheless racist because it ensures white supremacy: »Asian skin secures Ava's ›secret‹ robotic form and allows for the next evolutionary step in a Western future, covering up Ava's android frame in order to protect the longevity of white personhood into the posthuman age […]« (Wong 2017: 48). The pleasure in horror and excitement that such an »incarnation of a paranoid body« (Wulff 2006: 47; my translation) evokes can nevertheless be interpreted as the frightening and exciting search of the artificial ›female‹ protagonists for freedom. The robots, whose existence in female appearance as weapon and sexual object depended on their male creators, paradoxically free themselves from their owners by means of the connection of human exterior and machine interior. So they repeat the network of weapon and shooter by embodying it themselves.

5. Replicas as Cinematic Self-reference

The protagonists' construction takes place in form of a repetition and a series of similar images and motifs. That is why this kind of scene is also about cinema itself as an »(in)visible object« (Nardelli). The moment when an AI realizes that it is an independent species is often shown in an allusion to the beginnings of cinematography. The praxinoscope, the phenakisticope, the kinetoscope, the zoetrope and finally the photograms on a strip of celluloid show the movement of the motif in front of a camera by a sequence of images of the same motif. A similar setting can also be found in *Ex Machina* and *Archive* (Gavin Rothery 2020), where the image of the robots is re-

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peated in several mirrors or in several monitors in the form of a series of images. These repetitions resemble photograms on a celluloid strip that are invisible during projection and give the impression of a moving body.

This statement fits well with a basic feature of the cinematic medium. Former critic of the famous French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, Alain Bergala, states: »Many great films that have inspired the love of cinema have taken as their subject the act of teaching, of passing down an inheritance (and the encounter with evil, the initial exposure to evil)« (Bergala 2016: 50–51). This fits the moment when Besson's Anna has had enough of the insults of the photographer at the photo shoot and attacks him with his own camera to symbolically kill him. After that, she stops working as a model. In this way, Anna prevents further photographic reproductions of her body. Similarly, in *Resident Evil* and its five sequels (2002–2016), Alice (Milla Jovovich, who can be seen in Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* and *The Fifth Element*) is on a quest to find the beginning, herself, and must fight numerous Xenobots, i.e. genetically cloned robots of her original self. Her task is to prove herself to be the original from which the copies originated.

6. Uniqueness, Independence, and Commitment of Besson's Heroines

Even though the female heroines in Besson's films seem to be related to the dystopian cyborgs of other films, there is a difference: they do not multiply, nor are they produced by men in a series. They are unique in their narrative world because, as Thomas Hobbes explains in his text *Leviathan* (1651), they have the power because the others exercise the power. This is in line with the Actor-Network Theory, according to which an initial actor is absorbed into a network and thereby gains expanded agency. The weapons here are admittedly only an actor in temporary situations and resemble the button mentioned at the beginning in the game *Button, Button, Who's Got the Button*. As described above, however, the ferret is the symbol of a weapon that is not only wielded by human hands, but that acts itself and thus possesses some of the power of its masters. It is interesting to see that in a film that shows how the permanence of weapons is not respected by their owners, the plot ends in a catastrophe for both. In Spanish cinema, the symbol of the ferret has even found its concrete expression. In Carlos Saura's film *La caza* (*The Hunt* 1966) the ferret is used to hunt rabbits. The ferret crawls down the rabbit hole and drives the rabbits to the surface, where they are shot when they escape into the open. Frustrated by the small prey, the hunters shoot first the ferret and then each other. There are similar images of the rabbit hunt in the film with the revealing title *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, Jean Renoir 1939), where frustration leads to murder because the power of weapons is not respected, thus anticipating the catastrophe of the Second World War.

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In this context, much could be said about the music in Besson's films, which often forms an ironic relation with the plot or creates a melancholy mood. The music thus has a character of its own and is not simply a mood score, i.e. merely the image's ›weapon‹, so to speak, to better assert itself. In these cases, image and sound form an ensemble of equal components. In this way, the liberation of the female protagonists as weapons in the hands of their clients is additionally expressed. In contrast, in films like *Kate* (Cedric Nicolas-Troyan 2021) or *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller 2015) it is often intradiegetic hard rock music, intended to give additional acoustic expression to the brutality of the fight scenes. Moreover, an electric guitar held in the hand resembles a rifle in both films. Here is also the difference with the women who ultimately remain alone, but free, as in the action film *Angnyeo* (*The Villainess*, Jung Byung-gil 2017) which is about a female killer who remains a loner. The film has been compared by some critics to Luc Besson's neo film noir *Nikita*. This is because Nikita also remains alone and fights only for her personal freedom.

Nikita is an exception in this respect, meanwhile some other main female characters like Anna, Lucy and Leeloo fight in Besson's films not only for their personal happiness, but for the preservation of life and the salvation of the world. Joan of Arc dies for her ideals at the stake and she too remains alone. And every *cineaste* recalls the small slight brave woman at the end of Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), an *invisible* Vietcong sniper who nearly kills an entire platoon of well-trained, muscular, and loud-mouthed US soldiers. Kubrick shows her only at the very end of his film, a surprising apparition who kills so many men before she herself dies for her ideals. She also acts alone. It is perhaps no coincidence that Kubrick made this film in the 1980s, when Besson was also beginning his career.

7. The Beautiful Heroine: Just a ›Gender-Bomb‹?

A poster in Jeunet's film *Resurrection* (1997) shows Rita Hayworth ›traveling‹ to Hiroshima ›riding‹ an atomic bomb, Joan of Arc travels to Orleans, Lucy travels to Taiwan, Laureline (Cara Delevingne) travels in Luc Besson's *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (2017) to Alpha, Anna travels to Paris, and Nikita is already there. On their journeys, the female actors find themselves by taking a diversion: They multiply in a different way than cyborgs, they equip themselves with weapons and they make a pact with the devil. In this respect, a pin up girl on the atomic bomb establishes despite her really devastating effect a similar imaginary connection with the weapon as a female model appearing as a film actress, but with a different result. Luc Besson chose both models and actresses for the leading roles in his films. They shoot and fight in many cases and form a partnership with their weapons and their roles.

Bruno Latour (under the pen name »Jim Johnson«) turns to the example of the soldier and his gun and calls this network of human and non-human a »quasi-ob-

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ject« (Johnson 1988: 301, Latour 1991: 142). But the weapon dictates to the human what is to be done. A military instructor pronounces the ›silent commands‹ of the weapon and relays them to the shooter: »The military are especially good at shouting them out through the mouthpiece of human instructors who delegate back to themselves the task of explaining, in the rifle's name, the characteristics of the rifle's ideal user« (Johnson 1988: 301).

The question is whether Besson's female protagonists are not merely caught in the actor-network of a ›gender bomb‹ like Rita Hayworth shown in *Resurrection* or whether the models play the leading role as actresses, insofar as the gun and the shooter merge in their bodies. They are not a male fantasy of a *femme fatale*, but seek in this way to free themselves from a forced situation. It seems as if the instructors are men who give the female shooters instructions on how to handle the weapon, but that the armed ladies take their cue from the initial autonomy of the weapon and confidently return the command to the instructor reformulated in new cosy togetherness with the weapon. Anna and Nikita are typical representatives of this development. In contrast, Leeloo is the weapon herself, who breaks away from her clients. Joan of Arc is the henchman of her Christian faith, but she chooses it as her ideal because in her childhood she had to watch her sister being raped in the war. Thus a personal motive becomes a social mission. Finally, the director does not seem to be exclusively concerned with the gender of his protagonists: his film *DogMan* (2023) shows a man who, as a result of the abuse his father committed against him as a child, develops a strange love for dogs, because they trust in man, as he states, and he also uses them ultimately as weapons.

Besson's cinema is about who initiates a network. His heroines often fight to escape these networks or to make use of them. They want to find themselves and no longer be strangers to themselves. In the end, this is how they find their way back to their origin, which was the trigger for their adventures: personal freedom, love for humanity or faith in God, in other words, the purpose they lost in between.

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Not Citizen-Soldiers but Vigilantes

Superheroines in *The Old Guard* (2020)

Mareike Spychala

1. Introduction: *The Old Guard* and (Female) Superheroes in Comic and Film

While most action movies and a majority of comic books focus on hypermasculine male characters, speaking to how tightly the ideal of the citizen-soldier and the ideal of the superhero/vigilante are intertwined with certain ideas about gender, the comic book series *The Old Guard*, as well as the 2020 *Netflix* adaptation of the first book, feature two, and later even three female leads.[1] And where most superhero/vigilante teams are made up of white people, and especially white men – *Marvel's Avengers* are one example – the lead characters in *The Old Guard* feature a white woman, an African American woman and an Asian woman. If such comics and movies focus on teams of soldiers or superheroes, like Marvel's *Avengers* or DC's *Justice League*, they usually feature only one token regular female member who is consistently positioned as a hyperfeminine foil for the men surrounding her, like *Marvel*'s Peggy Carter or Black Widow. As Jeffrey A. Brown notes, »[t]he inclusion of women on these teams of Hawksian Professionals in action narratives almost always reduces her to the role of sexual object. The women may have admirable skills in any area of professional expertise but as the lone female – the Smurfette among military experts – her primary use to the team is typically her sexual attractiveness« (Brown 2015: 59).

Sexual attractiveness, however, is not the »primary use« the female characters in the comic book series *The Old Guard* have for their team. At the time of writing the series consists of Greg Rucka's and Leandro Fernandez's *The Old Guard, Book One: Opening Fire* (2017), *The Old Guard, Book Two: Force Multiplied* (2020), and the anthology *The Old Guard: Tales Through Time* (2021), which features two chapters by Rucka and Fernandez and ten chapters by other teams of authors and artists. The art of

1 A second film, provisionally titled *The Old Guard 2*, was greenlit by Netflix in 2021 and started shooting in the summer of 2022, but as of writing there has been no release date yet.

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the comics emphasizes Andy's and Nile's conventional attractiveness. Andy is depicted as a slim white woman with long hair and full lips who uses hook-ups to try to deal with her existential crisis. Nile is an equally slim Black woman with short, straightened hair. In the film version, neither character has to use »feminine wiles« or is in any other way depicted as hypersexualized. Indeed, Andy who, as the oldest of this group of quasi-immortal vigilantes, is the clear leader at the outset of the story (in both film and comic books) has short black hair in the film and references to her sex life have been entirely removed. This slightly more butch aesthetic seems to be supposed to signal and emphasize her role as a leader, continuing the superhero film genre's long association between masculinity and leadership. Still, Andy's slightly more female masculinity presents a departure from other female characters in superhero movies. As part of her leadership role, it is Andy who repeatedly makes tough decisions to protect the group, including »extracting« the newly resurrected Nile from a Marine base in Afghanistan while the others flee to a safe house after being exposed by a contact, the ex-CIA agent Copley. Nile, as a former Marine, also does not fit the stereotype of the sexualized female superhero and, in her turn, will later on be instrumental in rescuing Andy and the male members of the group. This dynamic shifts in the second book, while the anthology is more focused on exploring unknown parts of Andy's and the other characters' backstories.

The comic and film versions of *The Old Guard*, then, present female superhero characters who are not reduced to being the hyperfeminine sidekick to the all-male group around them. Andy's role as a leader of the group and Nile's role as rescuer of the other immortals later in the film present them as more effective and self-determined than female characters in most other current action movies and at least some current comics, aligning them more closely with the archetype of the independent male vigilante/superhero. Thus, *The Old Guard* is part of a wider turn towards vigilante (super-)heroes who are presented as more effective than official militaries that has become a recurring theme during the past few decades of the so-called »War on Terror« and is connected to conceptualizations of the »warrior« more than the citizen-soldier. And while the vigilante hero is by no means a female-only figure, I argue that *The Old Guard*'s representation and positioning of Andy (and to a lesser extent Nile) allows us to investigate larger questions about how contemporary popular culture conceptualizes women with guns (and other kinds of weapons).In this essay, I plan to interrogate how constructions of gender interact with and compound representations of women as vigilantes rather than citizen-soldiers in US American post-9/11 popular culture. Here, I will place a special focus on the character of Andy/Andromache and how the comic books' and the film's representations of her past – and especially her connection to ancient the Amazons of Antiquity's Scythia and to the Greek epic of the Odyssee – interact with their representations of a vigilante femininity. In a second step I will argue that the fact that gun-toting heroines are so often located outside of the controls of the nation-state or international organi-

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zations cannot be read as a straightforward feminist interrogation of these states or organizations and their military institutions. Instead, the comics and the film participate in Eurocentric narratives of »Western« progress without meaningfully using their diverse characters and their pasts to interrogate these narratives.

2. Citizen-Soldiers and (Female) Vigilantes in the Post-9/11 World

In many ways, Andy and Nile form the central dichotomy of *The Old Guard* in both the comics and the film. Andy, or Andromache of Scythia, who is the homodiegetic narrator, is several thousand years old and has seemingly been a fighter and, more importantly, a vigilante for most of this time, fighting with her group of changing companions »for what [they] think is right« (*The Old Guard* 00:44:18–00:44:35). She is also a white woman.[2] Nile Freeman, on the other hand, is a Black US Marine who gets killed and resurrected for the first time while on deployment in Afghanistan. While neither the comics nor the film give precise dates, the technology – for example smartphones (00:03:32) – depicted in both, the reference to Afghanistan, and especially Nile's work in a unit that seems to be modeled on the US Marine Corps' Female Engagement Units – units of female Marines that would talk with local women and children – situate the storyline in the late-2000s or 2010s, and thus within the context of the so-called Global War on Terror. Thus, she is not only much younger than Andy, she also starts the film as a present-day citizen-soldier, one following a lengthy family tradition of serving in the US elite fighter group of the Marine Corps. And, if her last name is any indication, with connections all the way back to the American Civil War. Lisa D. Cook et al cautiously suggest in a working paper that the name »Freeman« could be part of a set of names that »reflect political or social intentions« and that it »could certainly reflect political ideals and the emancipation of former bondsmen (one's child was born free) (Cook 2013: 16). Crucially, Andy and her team fought on the side of the Union during the Civil War as viewers are informed by a lingering shot on an old photograph in the film (00:15:42–00:16:05). Thus, while Nile's last name connects her to a pivotal moment in US history that Andy's group has influenced, her first name highlights her connection to Africa. These telling names also highlight the interracial alliances within the group: Andy and Nile serves as one example, while Joe and Nicky are the most prominent second one.[3]

2 The comics, more than the film, have the potential for troubling and questioning the category of race, especially given Andy's apparent ease to fit in with very different groups and societies (see also fig. 1). The question of whether they are doing so, however, lies outside the scope of this essay.

3 The group's, or at least one member's participation in the US Civil War is further expanded on in the short comic »Love Letters« in the Anthology *The Old Guard. Tales Through Time*. As this story focuses almost exclusively on Nicky, however, it is outside the scope of this essay.

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Thus, as the film begins, Nile is presented as a female citizen-soldier. The citizen-soldier ideal, which originates in the theories of statecraft of enlightenment philosophers Niccolo Machiavelli and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is linked to the founding of the US and to the War of Independence. For most of US-American history, it has been, and remains, a decidedly masculine ideal. R. Claire Snyder explains the gendered conception of the citizen-soldier in the following way:

> engagement in the martial practices of the civic militia simultaneously creates citizens with civic virtue, soldiers who display manly *virtu*, and men who acquire their *armed masculinity* in opposition to a denigrated femininity. Consequently, Machiavelli's Citizen-Soldier ideal fuses together soldiering, masculinity and citizenship. (Snyder 1999: 25; orig. emphases)

The citizen-soldier, then, is an archetype for men's relationship to the state and one that stands in clear opposition to the male superhero or vigilante, who »claims surpassing concern for the health of the community, but he never practices citizenship« (Lawrence/Jewett 2002: 48). With this differentiation in mind, it also becomes clear that all the members of the Old Guard could be read as former citizen-soldiers who have turned into vigilantes. (Though this reading is somewhat anachronistic for Andy, Nicky, and Joe, whose first lives and original military service – in the broadest sense – took place before the development of republics and nations states.)

The feminine equivalent of the US-American citizen-soldier is traditionally the figure of the Republican Mother, which also originates in the War of Independence but becomes even more defined during the 19th century. As Linda Kerber notes, women at the time of the Revolutionary War created »an ideology of citizenship that merged the domestic domain of the preindustrial woman with the new public ideology of individual responsibility and civic virtue« (Kerber 1980: 269). Nile, like many female Marines and other female servicemembers deployed during the so-called »War on Terror«, clearly falls into the category of the citizen-soldier, even as she retains some last vestiges of the Republican Mother. Viewers meet her and the rest of her Female Engagement Unit out on patrol, assisting in the search for a suspected terrorist by talking to a group of Afghan women. Thus, while she carries a weapon and even shoots her unit's target, she and the other female Marines also act as mediators between the domestic space of the Afghan women and the public space of the street, occupied by US-American Marines.

After Nile is killed by the insurgent and resurrected through her body's spontaneously developing healing powers, however, Nile's role as a Marine and thus as a citizen-soldier is immediately undermined in both the first comic book and the film. Before readers or viewers even get to see the resurrected Nile, they are witnesses to a conversation between two other female Marines, with one of them clearly doubting the fact that Nile could have survived her neck wound (*The Old*

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Guard 00:25:13–00:26:49). The film lingers on these suspicions, showing scenes in which stares and whispers follow Nile through Camp after she is discharged by the doctors. When she returns to the tent she shares with the other female Marines, the other women's conversation immediately falls quiet. What is more, the other Marines clearly know that she has been ordered to relocate to Landstuhl, Germany for more testing and have packed her bags. No words of parting are spoken (00:29:11–00:30:36). Instead, they quietly stare as Nile collects her things and leaves. Here, the film, more so than the comic, highlights that Nile is no longer »one of the team« for the other Marines and foreshadows Andy later telling Nile that she is »not a Marine anymore« (00:42:59–00:43:04). Unlike Nile, whose citizen-soldier body belongs to the military and is deployed and ordered to a hospital, despite her miraculous recovery and desire to remain on active duty, Andy and her group are much more self-determined and mobile. Nile having to follow orders she does not like contrasts sharply with Andy's one-woman trip to »extract« Nile, which is a mission she decides to undertake on her own while sending her team on ahead to a safe house.

This mobility and the lack of oversight allows both the comics and the movie to strongly imply that the vigilantes are more effective in changing history and making the world »better« than governments and their non-military and military forces. While Andy is deeply disillusioned at the beginning of the comics and of the film, stating »We've done nothing. The world isn't getting any better, it's getting worse« (00:16:31–00:16:43) in the latter, it turns out by the end of the film that her and her team's actions have had positive ripple-effects across history. Copley, the former CIA agent who has discovered the group's secret, points out that whenever Andy saves someone, »two, three generations down the line, we reap the benefits« (01:29:22–01:29:33) because the descendants of those saved go on to do great things like inventing new medical procedures or otherwise becoming pioneers in their fields. Later, the film reinforces this assessment again in a scene involving the group minus Booker after Andy, Nicky and Joe have been freed from the villain's research facility and Booker has been sent into a 100-year exile. The scene cuts between close-ups on Copley's evidence – photos and newspaper clippings of different conflicts or desasters across the decades, photocopies of ID cards for the different members of the group, articles about people achieving great things and post-it notes on when and by whom in the group they were saved – and close-ups on Nicky, Joe, and Andy's faces. Meanwhile, Copley explains »This is only what I found going back the last 150 years or so. When you think about how old you are, the good you've done for humanity becomes exponential«. Nile drives the point home further by saying »Maybe this is the why, Andy« (01:51:02–01:52:52), referring back to their earlier conversations about the group's immortality and Nile's struggles to accept her new state (00:53:00–00:53:11). The soundtrack drives this point home even more. The song used in this scene is Active Child's »Cruel World« (2017) and the following

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lyrics coincide with the scene: »Count your blessings, you won't need them when you're gone/It's a cruel world/You can't see it, you can't see it, even though/it's a cruel world…«. The song's »cruel world« is clearly on display on Copley's wall of evidence. And the repeated words »You can't see it« hark back to Nile's earlier reaction to Copley's evidence, when she realizes that Andy cannot see the good she and her group have been doing because »she's in it« (01:29:33–01:29:39), i.e. she is too close to these historical events to see the impact she is having. Here, then, the film uses several techniques to imply that the groups actions and the saving of seemingly random individuals has been influential in »making the world a better place« even if it does not seem so to the group and Andy specifically.

In the comics, this revelation about the group's impact on the world comes much later in the storyline, in the second book *Force Multiplied*, when Noriko/Quynh, a former member of the group who had been lost at sea returns and kidnaps Booker. In the book, Copley shares his information with Nicky and Joe who have caught him spying on Andy while she is talking to Noriko/Quynh (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 96–106). Rather than portraying one conversation followed by the other, the narrative switches back and forth between them, using the revelation of the group's positive impact on the world to emphasize the difference between them and Noriko/Quynh. This emphasis is not only created by contrasting these two conversations but also by Copley insisting that »[Noriko] is not like you guys. You *help* people. She *hurts* them. Drugs, weapons, trafficking, ties to criminal organizations around the globe…« (ibid.: 106). Noriko/Quynh is thus a clear foil for Andy and her group, an immortal who has a negative impact on the world. The fact that she is an Asian woman adds a racially charged dimension to the story that I will explore in more detail below. It remains to be seen how the second film will pick up on this storyline, but it is clear that in both the first film and the comics the group's impact on the world has led to positive gains for humanity.

The same does apparently not apply to governments and their various agencies, who we only encounter in the context of death – both the Afghan insurgent's and Nile's before she is resurrected. Ultimately, the film and the comics justify Andy's and the group's vigilantism by highlighting the positive impact their actions have on the world. In the film, Andy's hiring of Copley so he can find the right jobs for them represents a recommitment to the group and its lifestyle on Andy's terms. The world apparently depends on this group of quasi-immortals operating outside of any kind of formal power structure for continued progress. What neither the comics nor the film have addressed so far, however, is the impact all the killing the group does has on world history. Including this dimension would complicate the narrative's black and white dichotomy as it would force a different kind of reckoning with violence and its effects. Essentially, the mercenaries and private security hired by the group's antagonists – most obviously Merrick in the film and the first comic book – are portrayed as bad by association and therefore, the film implies, as deserving what is

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coming to them. This is maybe most obvious when a group of Merrick's mercenaries homophobically mock the captured Nicky and Joe and are subsequently killed (00:58:57–01:00:21). This framing »work[s] to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot« (Butler 2010: 3).

Staying outside of governmental organizations or supervision is shown as a way for Nile and Andy, as well as the queer couple Nicky and Joe to affect historic change. This could be read either as a deliberate criticism of governmental power and overreach or as a entrenchment of post-9/11 developments in popular culture. As Erik Mortensen has pointed out when analyzing vigilante movies,

> [i]n the past decade there has been a proliferation of vigilante texts and images in the culture in the form of books, graphic novels, films, and television shows. 9/11 not only helped to create both a new climate of fear and a new found [sic] desire for defense at a national level, but it also eventually eroded trust in both big government and one's neighbors and fellow citizens. The War on Terror, in other words, raised the possibility that the enemy could be anyone. As a result, the mythic individuality of America is being both called upon and resisted in the form of more government regulation and control for security purposes. (Mortensen 2015: 157)

The Old Guard and its insistence that unilateral decision-making by vigilante actors is more effective and, most importantly, more likely to improve the world than nation-states and their governments in the post-9/11 world needs to be seen in the context of this development.

3. (Female) Vigilantes as Perpetual Outsiders and Unilateral Actors in »Western« History

While academic analyses of comics and the first film have been sparse so far, *The Old Guard* was hailed as a feminist film by pop culture journalists after its release.[4] I would agree that the way it positions especially its female characters challenges the usual gender dynamics of the action hero genre. Andy and Nile's depiction in the movies, especially the more butch looks chosen for both deviates from the hyperfeminine and in some ways hypersexualized depiction in the comics. I would also, at least in part agree with Novak and Wieser-Cox's assertion (2022: 76) that the film

4 Anne Cohen's review titled »*The Old Guard* Director Gina Prince-Bythewood Wants To Show Women They're Warriors« (2020) is one example as is Murtada Elfadl's review titled »The Old Guard« (2020). A year after the films initial release, Aviva Dove-Viebahn published another review titled »The Old Guard: Revisiting an Exceptional Feminist Action Film on its One-Year Anniversary« (2021).

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queers the genre and how it represents violence and extend this to the comics as well. At the same time, I would not go so far as to say that the comics or the film present a meaningful feminist interrogation of central tropes and narratives of the action movie or the comics genres, especially where narratives around power and power structures – governmental or otherwise are concerned because the film sticks too closely to the dominant depictions of vigilantism of the post-9/11 era, without interrogating the need for this vigilantism or, indeed, its supposedly positive effects.

As DiPaolo has pointed out, superhero stories can be sorted into three broad categories: »establishment, anti-establishment, and colonial« (DiPaolo 2011: 12). I would suggest that *The Old Guard* falls into DiPaolo's definition of the anti-establishment superhero narrative: »In the second category, the anti-establishment narrative, the superhero stands in opposition to an evil governmental, corporate, or aristocratic villain (which is sometimes propped up by a misguided establishment hero)« (ibid.: 12). In the first comic and the first movie, the pharmaceutical executive Steven Merrick (Harry Melling) is clearly the »corporate villain« who is trying to exploit the team's quasi-immortality for his own gain. The film also positions the military – and by extension the US government – as a possible antagonist to Nile's self-determination and well-being. In addition, the second comic shows the group being tracked by an FBI agent and other law enforcement agencies, another way in which the US government is positioned as an adversary.

The film's ending, which sees Andy and her team deciding to continue their mercenary work, but now supported by Copley who is supposed to find missions for them that will have a positive impact on the world, could be seen as critical of both governmental and corporate power structures. The same could be said for the larger story told in the comics. Indeed, as I have pointed out above, the film version of *The Old Guard* has garnered much praise as a »feminist action film« (Dove-Viebahn 2021: n. pag.) that is troubling its genre. And while the films and the comics focus on two female leads – and potentially three, if we count Noriko/Quynh – I would argue that that alone does not a feminist movie make. Similarly, the inclusion of Nicky and Joe and Andy and Noriko/Quynh's past relationship, while adding representations of queerness to the genre, could also be seen as a form of what Horacio N. Roque Ramírez has called »rainbow capitalism« (Roque Ramírez 2011: 192). Or, put differently, while the books and the film add a focus on female and queer characters, they do so while perpetuating post-9/11 narratives about omnipresent threats and the necessity and positive effects of unilateral decision-making that viewers are familiar with from other action movies. It is just that women and queer people now get to participate.

Despite all the ways *The Old Guard*, especially in the film version, goes against some trends in its genres, the comics and the film are also very Eurocentric. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have pointed out in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994),

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> Eurocentric thinking attributes to the ›West‹ an almost providential sense of historical destiny. Eurocentrism, like Renaissance perspectives in painting, envisions the world from a single privileged point. It maps the world in a cartography that centralizes and augments Europe while literally ›belittling‹ Africa. (Shohat/Stam 1994: 2)

The *Old Guard* comics *and* the film are rooted in this kind of thinking, especially when it comes to the characters' backstories, which are hinted at in the movie and expanded on more in the comics books. The entire team has ties to so-called »Western« history, Andy is an ancient Scythian, Joe and Nicky met during the Crusades, Booker used to fight for Napoleon Bonaparte, and Nile is a (former) US Marine.

It is notable that Noriko/Quynh, who is introduced as an antagonist, is from Asia, though neither the comics nor the film make clear from where on the continent exactly. Joe and Noriko/Quynh *could* complicate the Eurocentrism underpinning these different texts, but so far, their characters fail to do so. Joe, or Yussuf, is a former Saracen warrior defending Jerusalem against the Christian crusaders. After becoming immortal and falling in love with Nicky (or Nicolo), a former Christian knight, the pair eventually meets Andromache and joins her group. Thus, Joe, rather than offering a counter-perspective to Eurocentric thinking, is subsumed into the teleological narrative of »the immortals« and their positive impact on (Western) civilization.

As Andy is the oldest immortal in the group and thus has had the longest impact on history, I will mostly focus on how she and her connections to so-called »Western civilization« are portrayed. Both the first comic and the first movie place Andy's origins in ancient Scythia, connecting her to historic nomadic people and to ancient myths about Amazons – nomadic tribes of female fighters that are featured in Greek myths. Her name means »fighter of men«. This is of course a telling name because fighting others, and mostly men, is central to Andy's identity. The thousands of years of fighting she has seen are also part of the identity crisis she suffers from in the first two books and in the movie. At the same time, this name connects her to both the Trojan War and to the Hercules myths. The most famous Andromache in Greek mythology is of course Hector's wife, who has long been a symbol for wifely duty, purity, and mourning in Western culture. However, there are also ancient myths that mention an Amazon fighter called Andromache who in some versions of the tales fights Hercules, replacing the more famous Hyppolita (Mayor 2014: 255). In addition, there are versions of the story of the Trojan War in which a band of Amazons joins the war on the side of Troy, as Adrienne Mayor points out: »One of the lost Trojan War epics, the *Aethiopis* (attributed to Arctinos of Miletos, $8^{th}/7^{th}$ century BC), was a sequel to the Iliad, taking up the action where Homer left off. The *Aethiopis* described the arrival of Queen Penthesilea and her band of Amazon mercenaries who came to help the Trojans fight the Greeks«. The comics never specify whether Andy

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is one – or maybe all of these – mythic heroines, but they certainly play with these allusions and their implications, as well as with the renewed pop culture interest in women warriors in cinematic production and merchandise, such as the *Wonder Woman* films, the *Woman King*, or the elite woman guard in the *Black Panther* series.

Fig. 1: Opening page of The Old Guard: Opening Fire, 1

The Old Guard's first book introduces Andromache by juxtaposing three panels of her making love to different men with scenes that show her mid-battle, most prominently in the second panel of the book's first page, in which she is towering over soldiers in ancient Greek helmets (fig. 1). The way her body is posed in this panel

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is almost orgasmic and together with the panels on the following two pages, which juxtapose further violent fight scenes with Andy lying on her back in post-coital exhaustion entrench sex and fighting as the two ways in which Andy is »killing time« (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 4), as her narration in the text boxes puts it.

In the film, this juxtaposition of sex and violence has been removed and the fact that Andy's life reaches back to antiquity is revealed later, when Andy introduces herself to Nile as »Andromache the Scythian« while extracting her from the military camp she is stationed in (00:30:20–00:31:26). Instead of juxtaposing sex and violence, the film focuses more on Andy using alcohol to self-medicate, which is a trope usually connected to male vigilantes, and on the connection between Andy as the oldest of the immortals and Nile as the youngest. This foregrounds their interracial alliance and the reciprocal roles of rescuer and rescuee they inhabit over the course of the film.

The second comic book, meanwhile, focuses more on Andy's feeling of loneliness which seems to haunt her through the different ages. On a page containing five panels in total (fig. 2), she is shown riding into battle leading different groups of ancient warriors, one of them once again in ancient Greek helmets, while Andy is wearing an ancient Greek hairstyle and dress. In addition to the changing groups of warriors and styles of dress around her, the panels also highlight the passage of time and Andy's growing loneliness and disillusionment through her left-to-right movement. While she is at the very left in the first panel and seems eager for battle, she is on the very right of the panel in the fourth, and while she is still on horseback, her posture is one of weariness. The last panel on this page features the appearance of Noriko/Quynh, who emerges out of darkness while Andy tells us in the accompanying text that she had been seeing Noriko/Quynh in her dreams for thousands of years. This highlights Noriko's age and her connection to Andy, both pivotal in the second comic and connected to the themes of loss and mourning that define Andy's character.

These themes, which are deeply connected to Andromache of Troy, play a central role in Andy's story throughout the comics and the film. Whether it is the loss of Noriko/Quynh, whose return causes another identity crisis for Andy in the second comic book, or the accumulating losses of several thousands of years of warfare, mourning defines her character almost as much as violence and a desire for revenge as, for example, in the chapter »How to Make a Ghost Town«, in which Andy annihilates the inhabitants of a village who murdered her former partner, Achilles, after she had left to evade questions about herself (»How to Make a Ghost Town«, Rucka et al. 2021: 88–101).[5] That this relationship with a mortal human, as well as Andy's

5 That her partner, who escaped slavery, is named Achilles is both a nod to the practice of US-American slaveowners of using names of Greek heroes for the people they enslaved and, I would argue, another way in which the comics play on Andy's connections to Greek antiquity

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relationship with fellow immortal Noriko/Quynh ends in grief emphasizes Andy's role as a woman apart, who is unable to settle down due to the world's rejection, but who also cannot keep all the members of her group of immortals safe.

Fig. 2: Page from The Old Guard: Force Multiplied, 90

and myth. If she is indeed one or all of the Andromaches of the myths, there is an irony in her spending a lifetime with a man named after the hero who killed Hector, in this scenario one of her former husbands.

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The themes of loss and mourning are complicated by narrative descriptions of memory – or the lack thereof. While the film and the first book highlight that Andy can't really remember her family, in the second book she describes being killed by a tribal leader who may have been her (chosen) mother in the text box narration that functions like a voiceover:

> If she wasn't my mother by birth, she was my mother in every other way. I couldn't have been *more* loyal to her if I'd tried. But by then she'd grown *afraid* of me. That's the truth of it. I was young and strong and smart, and that threatened her. Me coming up from *behind*, and *time* in front of her, waiting to collect its *due*… it made her *paranoid*, it made her *irrational*. That's why she murdered me… even if it wasn't her hand on the *spear* that did the job. Speaking as someone who has been *hurt* in almost *every way* imaginable… there's *no pain* quite like a broken heart. (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 85; orig. emphases)

This description is part of a longer reflection on being immortal, loneliness, biological kinship narratives and the (failure of) its alternatives, as well as the purpose Andy and the rest of her group serve. Andy highlights her difference from the others and her growing disillusionment. It also leads up to the depiction of Andy's and Noriko/Quynh's first meeting, thus emphasizing that Noriko/Quynh was the first person that made Andy feel not alone and setting up Andy's split from the group and joining up with Noriko/Quynh at the end of the book.

The short comic »My Mother's Axe« in *Tales Through Time* (Rucka et al. 2021: 4–17) on the other hand presents a spin on the »Ship of Theseus Puzzle«, a thought experiment first raised by Plutarch which asks if an object remains the same even after all its original parts have been switched out (Wasserman 2021: n.pag), centering on Andy's axe and, especially, on the fact that she inherited this axe from her (chosen) mother and the value the axe has for her because of that. Given the ending of the second book, it seems clear that the short comic takes place earlier than the narration I have quoted above, so it further highlights the discrepancies between what Andy tells the other members of their group about her life as immortal and what she actually remembers. At the same time, her insistence that the axe is still the same one she inherited from her mother highlights her deep concern with remembering and even mourning the past, even if she cannot recall all the details of that past. Here, the interracial alliance between Andy and Nile and an instance of matrilinear filiation is highlighted, one in which the axe plays a central role. And while we see Andy use both guns and the axe very proficiently throughout the comics and the film, the axe is highlighted as a special weapon several times. It features prominently in all the covers of the collected comics and is also the weapon Merrick takes as a trophy in the film and that Andy uses to injure him before Nile throws him (and herself) out of a high-level window to kill him (01:41:40–01:46:26). It is clear that Andy has a

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special attachment to the axe, precisely because it was given to her by her (chosen) mother, even if that relationship ended in betrayal.

Through all these stories the comics, more obviously than the film, interrogate both biological kinship narratives and their alternative: the matrilineal filiation represented by Andy's axe and the story about her mother. The comics here seem to indicate that being immortal makes parent-child relationships – like the one between Andy and her mother or the one between Booker and his children (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 148) – as well romantic relationships – like the one between Andy and Achilles – impossible or at the very least fated to end in heartbreak. For the latter category, Nicky and Joe seem to be the only exceptions and this is because they are both immortal. »They got lucky in more ways than one« (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 48), Andy comments in the first comic when explaining who the other members of the group are to Nile. Nicky and Joe clearly act as a foil for Andy and Noriko/Quynh, whose relationship was interrupted when Noriko/Quynh was lost at sea and which turns decidedly negative after her return.

This breakdown of different kinship narratives, Andy's resulting loneliness and depression and especially her despair over what she sees as the world's negative development contrasts sharply with the narrative's insistence – in both media – that the immortals improve the world because the people they rescue have children or grandchildren that go on to make important discoveries or be influential in some other way (*The Old Guard* 01:29:22–01:29:33; *Force Multiplied*, 102–105). I would argue that her disillusionment and pessimism further highlight not only Nile's idealism, once again positioning the two of them as foils for each other, but it also highlights the good the immortals have been doing and the ways in which they have influenced (Western) history, further adding to the film's and the comics' Eurocentric bent.

The implication that the group's actions, unbeknownst to them, have for hundreds or thousands of years, made the world better by making it possible for specific people to be born, and the fact that they decide to more actively influence this dynamic by the end of the first film and the second comic book respectively feeds off of longstanding imperialist narratives positioning the West as arbiter of progress. This is especially the case because the historical events expressly depicted as being influenced positively by the group of immortals are almost all events commonly considered important turning points in »Western« history: the American Civil War (*The Old Guard*; *Tales Through Time*, 102–114), World War I (Rucka et al. 2021: 60–73), or World War II (ibid.: 18–31). This is, in part, due to what can be depicted as »historical« record in the comic books or via movie props – reproductions of photographs, for example – but it also circumscribes the group's sphere of influence and connects them tightly with dominant, Eurocentric ideas of history and progress. Thus, while depictions of Andy's past are rarely connected to specific events – tellingly, the only detail visible on the material on Copley's pinboard labeled »Andy« in the second book is a photo connected to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (Rucka/Fernández 2020:

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104) – by repeatedly connecting her to ancient Greece and, less frequenly, to pivotal moments of Western history, the comic books and the film still participate in a teleological and ultimately Eurocentric narrative.

Noriko/Quynh is very clearly positioned as an antagonist to Andy's group. Her goal is not to improve the world, as she makes clear when her and Andy talk in *Force Multiplied*: »I figured it out, Andromache…dying over and over again I achieved clarity. I understood why. I was being punished…« (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 100–101). She further insists that this punishment is due to the immortals' hubris and that they are »[n]ot made to help them but to hurt them…our purpose is to make them suffer« (ibid.: 101). Thus, Noriko/Quyn is, at least in the comics, diametrically opposed to Andy's group. Making an Asian woman the antagonist of a group so clearly rooted in Western history and dedicated to improving the world is another expression of Eurocentrism, one that relies on tropes that portray the »Far East« and its peoples as a threat to the supposedly more progressive West.

This depiction of the group's influence on history also moves the film (and the books) away from a truly intersectional and feminist critique of governmental power and power structures. Instead, it relies on a staple of the vigilante/superhero narrative: that the rugged individual (or a team of rugged individuals) knows better than governments or international agencies and that they therefore get to unilaterally influence the fate of the world. In addition, neither the film nor the comic books have so far included any confrontation with the reality that their chosen path means that they have to actively choose who to save in the future. Nor, as I already indicated above, have the comic books or the film grappled with the negative effects of the killings and violence the group routinely enacts, effectively rendering their antagonists ungrievable. Instead, the published books seem to foreshadow a confrontation between Nile, Booker, Joe, and Nicky on one side and Noriko/Quynh and the freshly disillusioned Andy on the other hand, once again positioning the former group, rather than governments or intergovernmental agencies as best positioned to stop Noriko/Quynh and the crime syndicate she is leading.

4. Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the next film or future comic books will go further into any of the questions raised in this essay and present more thorough commentary or even criticism of the superhero/vigilante trope and whether they will turn away from presenting female superheroes and vigilantes as most effective when they are operating outside of governmental structures. While they do have this in common with some male superheroes, it seems to be a more insistent trope for female characters, one that, I would argue, is rooted in gendered conceptions of citizenship and heroism. It further remains to be seen whether future entries into this narrative universe

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will complicate its Eurocentric depiction of history. The last chapter in the anthology *Tales Through Time*, titled »The Bear« introduces a new character who seems to have a connection to the Middle East, going by some of the decorations depicted in his home (Rucka et al. 2021: 156–169), pointing towards the possibility of explorations of additional stories and complications of the ways in which history has been represented almost exclusively from a Eurocentric perspective in the comics and film so far.

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Section IV: Shooting to Kill (Patriarchy): Feminist Gunwomen

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What is a Painter without a Gun?

Nasta Rojc: A Legend for Our Times

Andrea Feldman

1. Introduction

The image of a woman bearing arms is not foreign to the Balkans. Ever since the 3rd century BC when, after the death of her husband, the Queen Regent Teuta led the Illyrian tribe of the Ardiaei into battle against the Romans and caused them many problems, the memory of this woman armed with a spire has been well preserved beyond her stronghold in Rhizon in the Bay of Kotor. The latest proof is the commemoration of Teuta on the Albanian 100 leka coin. Then there were the *virdžine/tobelije/burrneshë* – sworn virgins of the families that lost or did not have sons – who took a vow of celibacy and assumed the social standing of a man in their families, tribes and villages in the high mountains of Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania. They appropriated the male gender and the man's role in a community, wore men's clothes, smoked cigarettes and took on the duties usually assigned to men, warfare included. Some of them – *burrneshës* – were even prominent as military officers in Enver Hoxha's army. During World War II, the women partisans, armed women warriors, became symbols of resistance to the Nazis and of the emancipation that was supposed to follow the Communist revolution in Yugoslavia.

Even if all these examples are taken into consideration, and for all the reference to gender equality and the emancipation of women over the past few decades, the image of an armed woman has not, however, been characteristic of Croatia and its culture, which is more commonly regarded as mellower, perhaps even more petty-bourgeois, Central European, and Mediterranean. Therefore, we might ponder on the reception of the painting »Self-portrait with a rifle« (fig. 1) when it appeared in 1912. Viewing it today, an observer would immediately jump to a conclusion about the fluidity of gender roles, and would hint at the author's apparent lesbianism, although at the time the painting was created this would certainly not have been the case. This quite unusual self-portrait was received with a mixture of awe and expectation of the inevitable, a sign of a new, more progressive age. The artist was Nasta Rojc, in her time a painter of international repute, and this work was apparently

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the first in the history of Croatian art to represent a woman with a rifle. Outfitted in hunting gear, the artist invites us to pose the question about whether this image was the result of feminist rebellion or an indication of the privileged life of a bourgeois daughter.

Fig. 1: Nasta Rojc, Autoportret u lovačkom odijelu (Self- portrait with a rifle), 1912, oil on cavas. National Museum of Modern Art, Zagreb, Croatia. Goran Vranić © Nacionalni muzej moderne umjetnosti, Zagreb, 2023.

2. Nasta Rojc's Background and Education

Although at first glance one might consider Nasta Rojc's background as typically bourgeois, and therefore comfortable in the circumstances of turn-of-the-century Croatia, where the middle-class stratum was extremely thin, her family situation should be regarded as rather more complex. From the 1980s, feminists have steadily insisted on the oppressive patriarchal environment that was trying to suppress Nasta Rojc's artistic ambitions. Her father was supposedly the one who tried to

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prevent her development as an artist, and to whom his rebellious daughter had to address her demands regarding her education and artistic training. In her diary, Nasta Rojc herself testified to his insistent opposition to her career as a painter (Kovač 2018: 15). What, however, were her parents really like?

Nasta Rojc was born in Bjelovar, a provincial town in northern Croatia to the influential family of Milan Rojc and Slava Blažić. Her mother bore seven children, five of whom survived infancy. Nasta's father, Milan Rojc, was an attorney and a politician and although his profession might point to a dull and bureaucratic career and indeed character, he was not without literary leanings, since in his early days he published two plays which were comedies. He supported education for all children, irrespective of their gender. Nasta's sister Vjera Rojc (her later married name was Katušić) was the first woman to gain a doctorate in pharmacology from the University of Zagreb in 1915. It could be that under the influence of his capable daughters, he became rather open to women's education. Moreover, Milan Rojc went on the record with an article he wrote in support of women as lawyers. His article is systematically argued from the feminist perspective, because he claimed that women had proved their capabilities during WWI by taking part in the war efforts, and in certain cases even by taking up arms. Insistently fighting prejudices against women, Nasta's father must have taken a lesson from his daughters, who each in her own way paved the way for women in the professions. A telling example of his willingness to learn and listen, and as the result of many arguments with Nasta about her wish to become a painter, during his tenure as minister of education he helped to establish the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1907.

Nasta Rojc spent her childhood at the large family estate of Rojčevo at Gudovac. For all the references to her physical weakness, and she indeed suffered from many illnesses, she was no stranger to physical work. As she wrote in her diary, she harvested the corn, chopped the wood, cut the grass in the heat until she was too tired to continue, and she even ploughed in the rain with oxen and horses (Nasta Rojc 2014: 17).

She was at first educated in Varaždin by the Ursuline Sisters, whom she did not particularly appreciate, possibly due to her early atheism. She started to think of herself as an artist very early in life, an idea that was not easily accepted by her parents. Still, due to constant medical issues, she moved to Zagreb upon finishing two years of secondary school in Bjelovar to continue her training as an artist at the atelier of Oton Iveković, one of the prominent representatives of the Croatian historicist school. She then proceeded to Vienna to continue with additional training at the *Kunstschule für Frauen und Mädchen* (1902–1904) where she was taught by Austrian artist Hans Tichy and where she formed a life-long friendship with the Austrian Impressionist Tina Blue. Vienna was an inspiration in many different ways, and Nasta dived into different courses at the *Kunstschule*. She remembered how her father insisted that she took a course in photography, so that she might be able to

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support herself with that practical skill in the future while painting. While in Vienna, Nasta enjoyed riding in the Prater every morning, and even managed to buy a pony, Olenka. Riding in full hunting gear, and carrying arms as well, she created quite a stir among the villagers in the outskirts of Vienna, who used to whisper about her: »She greases her rifle with something, and even exchanges secret signs with horses! A witch!« (Kovač 2018: 23).

Continuing to study art and painting, Nasta Rojc attended the *Frauen Akademie* in Munich, where she befriended some of the best Croatian painters of her generation, the most prominent of whom was Miroslav Kraljević, as well as Josip Račić and Oskar Herman. Very useful for a future portrait artist, she developed an interest in psychiatry, and read extensively about it. After graduation, she did the obligatory Grand Tour in Italy, and was taken by the works of the American painter John Singer Sargent that she saw exhibited in Venice. She rushed back to Zagreb, where she was eager to implement whatever she had learned on the way and established herself as a successful portrait painter.

3. *Self-portrait with a Rifle*

From early on, Nasta and the rest of her family firmly shared the sense that she was not a typical child. At the age of seven she had already rebuffed the narrative about God and formed her own judgement about the laws of nature. Related to this, she formed her own »life programme« as an intelligent creature that had a will of her own and stuck to it for the whole of her life. »I am not going to be a blind slave of nature«, she wrote in her diary (Kovač 2018: 7). Such an attitude was certainly not expected from a young woman, but Nasta was able to establish herself as an independent entity in a society that had very clear, if not particularly ambitious, perspectives for their daughters. Her mother tried (in vain) to teach her how to cook, and was rather unhappy to see her off to study in Vienna. Her father indicated in many of their arguments that he perceived the way of life of an artist was not just unsuitable for a young lady from a respectable family, but also quite dire, since they already had artists in the family who were constantly on the edge of survival. For a young woman in search of a career, the economic dimension was a major family concern. One needs to admit that, in contrast to the interwar period when Nasta Rojc actually achieved prominence as one of the finest portrait artists in Croatia, selling 277 paintings and even managing to design and build her own villa in the residential part of Zagreb, the lean postwar years brought her to the brink of starvation. So, her parents' worries proved to be substantiated in due course.

At the time, however, Nasta displayed nothing but courage which was materialized in her holding her gun. Upon arrival in Vienna, she rented a small room, which she wanted to organize according to her tastes. The first thing to do was to hang her

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rifle, belt with ammunition and her handgun above her bed, in place of a painting of Madonna, a move rather unusual for a young woman. On the table close at hand, she put her *gusle* – the national instrument – a fiddle that was ready for her when she came back from school in the evening. Her riding whip was hung on a nail next to the door, in place of the sprinkler that held the holy water. The rest of her possessions were her paints and brushes that she took to school instruction every morning. In the city of Sigmund Freud, it would not be difficult to understand the connection of the rifle, gun and riding whip with the paint brushes as psychoanalytical tools to explain her state of mind. She was not only a (not so) dutiful daughter in search of her artistic career, but also a young woman who expressed the need to achieve pleasure in a way that was as unconventional as it was subversive.

Travel was part of the pleasure, as well as a learning experience. As was typical of a young woman of her background, Nasta Rojc used to travel for education, for medical purposes, for holidays, and those journeys bore fruit. Among the many different places she visited, Great Britain held a special role for her. It was the country of her close friend and travel companion, Alexandrina Onslow, who introduced her to the way of life in England and Scotland, about which Nasta Rojc published a series of extensive commentaries in epistolary form on her return to Zagreb. More importantly, during her stay in London in 1926, Nasta Rojc prepared an exhibition of her work at the Gieves Art Gallery at 22 Old Bond Street. This exhibition not only affirmed her own ambition and artistic standing, but was also a sign of the assertion of Croatian art in an international setting. Aware of the lack of understanding of Croatian culture and art among the British public, Nasta Rojc took it upon herself to inform interested audiences not only of her work, but also about the work of her colleagues, such as that of her friend and opera singer, Maja Strozzi, who sang at her vernissage.

An important part of her English experience was interest in the changing role of women in public life, in particular regarding the role of women artists. Upon her return to Zagreb in 1927, and inspired by the Women's International Art Club of London, Nasta Rojc founded the Women's Artists Club in Zagreb. This club gathered an impressive number of women artists headed by Lina Crnčić-Virant, who helped her as co-founder. The other members were Zdenka Ostović-Pexidr Srića, Cata Dujšin-Ribar, Mila Wod, Vjera Bojničić, Mary Stiborsky, Zenaida Bandur, Lucie Kučera-Buchmeister, Leopoldina Auer-Schmidt, Mira Mayr-Marochino and Danica Peklić-Peyer, a remarkable count of dynamic female artists. The club and its activities resulted not only in several collective exhibitions, but also prompted public debate on the role and social standing of women in Croatia. Some of the artists and art critics that took part in this debate were for the first time of a feminist orientation. Marija Hanževački, Verena Han, Roksana Cuvaj and Reska Šandor were among them, openly countering people who were against women's public engagement and who opposed it vigorously.

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Another consequence of Nasta Rojc's travels was the widespread network of friends and colleagues she acquired that helped her throughout her life. One of the prominent figures close to the British suffragist movement whom Nasta mentions in her correspondence was the actress Vera Louise Holme. Vera started her acting career at the beginning of the century, and because she very often played male roles, she earned the nickname »Jack«. It was the period when Vera became engaged in the suffragist movement, and became notorious among the London elite as the Pankhurst family chauffeur. During WWI, just like Alexandrina Onslow, she actively participated in the Serbian front, as well as in other parts of the Balkans, and so became acquainted with Nasta Rojc. Vera Holme was a member of private and informal lesbian associations which, in line with the demands of the time, were rather secretive. One such association was called the »Foosack League«, whose membership was limited to women and suffragettes. Some of them took an active part in the British war effort, and spent a part of WWI in south eastern Europe. Nasta remembered the time when she met Holme and two of her friends in Dubrovnik in the aftermath of the war. After befriending Onslow, Nasta Rojc became a part of the network, and during the 1920s corresponded with Vera Holme and invited her to visit Zagreb, »that most civilized of Yugoslav cities« as she referred to it. What followed were the Adriatic holidays and voyages on »Festina Lente«, the yacht that she mentioned frequently in her letters. While visiting England and Scotland, Nasta Rojc would remember the courageous British ladies whose relentless work, often under arms during the Great War, she admired greatly.

The experience of drawing close to women who lived and enjoyed their life outside the company of men must have appealed to Nasta's individuality, and in particular must have helped her assert her gender role and sexual orientation. As a teenager, Nasta already seems to have felt and behaved differently from her environment. Contrary to what was projected for a young lady, she had no patience with household duties, she refused to cook, and was not intellectually inclined, but she did like to smoke, which must have been a sign of rebellion at the time. In addition, she refused to be courted by young gentlemen, and managed to negotiate an agreement with her father which allowed her to continue art studies in Vienna, without a promise to get married. It seems that from very early on she intended to become a painter and not to follow the expected destiny of women in becoming a wife and mother. »I want to learn how to paint, and not to create sick and unhappy people«, she confided in her diary (Kovač 2018: 17). It could have been a sign of her being sexually inclined toward women, but there is no direct confirmation of this in her published work.

Although she expressed her reluctance to marry quite openly, Nasta Rojc did eventually decide to comply with societal expectations. Nasta Rojc met her future husband, Branko Šenoa, when she was 15 years old. A young artist himself, a painter from the well-known Zagreb family of the prolific novelist August Šenoa, Branko

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impressed her enormously because of his willingness to answer her many questions about the art of painting. Her decision to marry him in 1910 was based on yet another compromise, again with her father, but also with Branko himself. She made it a condition to live life in »a false marriage«, i.e., an unconsummated marriage, a decision that she defended with her continuous poor health. This marriage of convenience suited them both, since they managed to acquire an atelier that they shared.

Toward the end of the interwar period, and after the publication of her travelogues from England and Scotland in epistolary form, Nasta started to publish more of her writings and reflections. She was prompted to publish several interesting and women-oriented articles by her very good friend, Marija Jurić Zagorka, the most prominent Zagreb journalist, who was in the 1930s editor-in-chief of *Ženski list* [Women's Journal]. Besides, Nasta Rojc appeared on the Zagreb radio station on the occasion of her exhibition in 1938 in an effort to inform the wider public about her work, and as an original way to encourage the public to come to her exhibition.

After the very productive years of the 1930s, Nasta Rojc stopped painting almost completely. The coming of the war, another global conflict that she has anticipated in some of her work, together with the death of Branko Šenoa in 1939, made her pause and turn to another form of activism. With the war starting in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941, Nasta Rojc and Alexandrina Onslow decided to help the resistance efforts of the partisans. As democrats who were opposed to the German advances, as well as to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, in fact a German-Italian condominium, they were both banished from their home and in July 1943 were imprisoned following an accusation by two Ustashas – Croatian Nazi collaborators. Although the accusation could not be proved, and they were released from the prison hospital, Nasta could not repossess her house, so they had to live in the atelier.

After the end of WWII, their antifascist stand did not help them at all, since their house was again occupied by »the soldiers who went into the woods only at the end of the war. They do not possess any social sense, and are not interested in any kind of cultural activity, but only want to live a more comfortable life«, recalled Nasta in her diary (Kovač 2018: 67). The greatest disappointment for them came in the form of the same member of the Ustasha movement who had reported them to the authorities at the beginning of the war. He turned coat after the arrival of the revolutionary justice, and made Nasta realize that »the people are suffering still from the power of egoists, fascists. Will they ever set themselves free? Will they ever enjoy the fruits of huge sacrifices?« (Kovač 2018: 68).

The postwar years were not particularly favourable for Nasta Rojc and Alexandrina Onslow. In 1946, Onslow was already »blind, deaf, very ill, 76, cold, and doubtless also hungry«, and the situation was made worse by the fact that both Nasta Rojc and her friend depended significantly on the help of their old friends abroad (LSE library/archives, London. 7VJH.3.4 pt.2. pdf. Skrine to Holme, London, January

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17,1946). After the end of WWII, Vera Holme tried to ease their abysmal situation by sending them parcels of essential provisions through their friends in the high echelons of British politics. One such person was the British Ambassador to Belgrade, H.E. Sir Ralph Skrine Stevenson, who confirmed the delivery of »a hot water bottle to Miss Onslow«, but advised not to send parcels any more: »I am afraid that although letters usually seem to get through I cannot say that there is any really safe way of sending parcels to Yugoslavia as yet, except perhaps through the Red Cross« (LSE library/archives, London. 7VJH.3.4 pt.2. pdf. Stevenson to Holme, Belgrade, February 9, 1946). Their property, which included the villa that was built according to the design of Hugo Ehrlich and with Nasta's own earnings in the 1920s in the residential part of Zagreb, on Rokov Perivoj, was taken from them, never to be returned. The Communist authorities moved new tenants into their house. Most probably due to old age, but also because of the limitations of socialist realism that were imposed on artists in the aftermath of the war and in the revolutionary takeover, Nasta Rojc more or less stopped painting. Onslow died in 1950 in Zagreb, and Nasta Rojc passed away on her birthday on 6 November 1964. Contrary to sentimentalist views occasionally expressed in today's press, they were not buried in the same tomb in Zagreb's Mirogoj cemetery.

4. The Reception of Nasta Rojc in Croatia

After many years of neglect and even oblivion that lasted throughout WWII and the Communist period, during which interest in Nasta Rojc and her work rested with a few committed collectors and friends, a new generation of young women, the second generation of Croatian feminists of the 1980s, started to look into her opus with renewed attention. Lydia Sklevicky, a pioneer of women's history in Croatia, was the first to analyse the relationship between Nasta Rojc and Alexandrine Onslow at the 1987 conference »Black Lambs and Grey Falcons« at the University of Bradford in England. The importance of Nasta Rojc's art was acknowledged mainly by the relentless work of Josip Kovačić, an art collector who specialized in collecting the art of women artists when such an interest was regarded as marginal. He donated his enormous collection to the City of Zagreb after his death, but it is still awaiting proper assessment, although some of the works are retrievable on the internet.

The public change of attitude toward Nasta Rojc and her art was acknowledged by the Croatian postal service, which in 2006 issued a commemorative stamp of the famous self-portrait with a gun. Several exhibitions, most recently the retrospective of 2014 at the Art Pavilion in Zagreb, finally addressed all the unjust neglect, and presented to the Croatian public more than 100 paintings, among which her »Self-portrait with a rifle« was again the most prominent. As far as the popular culture representation of Nasta Rojc's legacy is concerned, the latest example is the graphic

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novel »Nasta Rojc: Me, the Fighter« published in 2018 by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. The authors, art historian and critic Leonida Kovač and Ana Mušćet, an artist who created collages, entitled the book after one of Nasta's lost, and then rediscovered, paintings. Nasta Rojc's voice in this publication is authentic – parts of her unpublished autobiography: »Light, Shadow and Darkness«, her published correspondence, and autobiographical notes written after WWII, all point to Nasta's rebellious nature and search for fulfilment in art, as in life. The quoted texts accentuate the most significant parts of her life experiences, and were taken from the sources preserved by Josip Kovačić and Elena Puškarsky, which have not yet been completely presented to the public.

5. Conclusion

In an attempt to reveal the art of survival of an artist and a lesbian under fascist and communist dictatorships, this work provides insight into the ways in which this prominent intellectual continues to intrigue new generations in a post-Yugoslav and post-communist setting. The question, however, raised at the beginning of this work has not been answered unequivocally. Considering how exceptional her life story was, the manifestation however of her rebellion was rather subtle. The life of Nasta Rojc was a life of privilege, indeed, not only because of relatively comfortable circumstances of her family circle in the interwar Croatia. One could consider it an ultimate privilege to be allowed to work without obstacles, following one's own artistic and intellectual motivation, and this is how Nasta Rojc managed her career as a painter and a public figure. Her Self-portrait with a gun, was at the same time a sign of a feminist revolt, an expression of a rebellious dutiful daughter, who had decided very early on to negotiate every step of her own career and life circle. Rediscovered as a paradigmatic feminist and lesbian icon at the times of changing patriarchal mores, in the twilight of the communist regime, this gunwoman's feminist rebellion continues to be an inspiration and model for intrigued audiences in contemporary Croatia.

6. Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the help of Gillian Murphy and Clive Graham from the library and archives of the London School of Economics and Political Science for their friendliness and for making available to me the materials from the Vera Holme legacy, kept in the Women's Library.

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Unpopular Feminism

The Shooting Woman in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*

Simon Dickel

1. Introduction

Even though US critically acclaimed author John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp* may not be considered a contemporary text in the narrow sense of the word, a recent 40th anniversary edition of the novel and a projected HBO-miniseries[1] attest to the narrative's current cultural relevance. First published in 1978 and adapted for the cinema in 1982, it moved debates within 1970s US feminism to the realm of popular culture. The narrative frames the life of the protagonist T.S. Garp as dependent on the decisions of women: He is born because the nurse Jenny Fields decides to get pregnant and raise her child as a single mother. His life ends, because Bainbridge Percy, a radical feminist in her early twenties, shoots him. Even though Percy is a minor character in the narrative, her shooting the protagonist is significant since it escalates Irving's satirized version of feminism and armed resistance to patriarchy. My contribution reads the shooting woman Bainbridge Percy against this background.

The characters in *The World According to Garp* represent different strands of 1970s US feminism, most notably liberal feminism and radical feminism.[2] Irving's fictionalization of feminism was acknowledged by the women's movement of the time, so that »in 1982, *Ms Magazine* included Irving in its list of twenty-five male heroes for ›integrating feminism as a major philosophical theme‹ in his novels« (Loudermilk 2004: 73). However, from the time of the novel's publication onwards, most reactions by feminist critics have been negative. The narrative's alleged feminist leanings were reinforced in 2018 when, in his foreword to the novel's 40th anniversary edition, Irving called *The World According to Garp* his »ode to the women's movement«

1 The miniseries was announced in 2015, but it has not been realized (Haynes 2015). I couldn't find any recent information on the project.

2 I use the term »radical feminism« to describe a political approach that is in favor of separatism and operates outside of institutions, such as political parties, and may or may not agree to violence as a political means.

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(Irving 2018). Stating that he sees a relation between his novel and current political movements concerned with feminism, gay rights, and transgender rights, he implies that in terms of progressive politics, *The World According to Garp* was ahead of its time. Three decades ago, I shared this view. As products of popular culture, the German translation of the novel and the dubbed version of the film, first on television and then on a taped VHS cassette, became available to me as a gay teenager in a small town in West Germany in the early 1990s. Here was a text that was not silent about feminism and queerness. I mistook the narrative's take on these topics for political progressiveness and this is the main reason why *The World According to Garp*, both novel and filmic adaptation, became important during my adolescence. The materiality of the translated paperback and of the videotape point to my then limited access to information on the topics it addresses. When discussing the status this text had in a German context during the 1980s and 90s, the time before the advance of the internet, it is crucial to be aware of the limited access to feminist publications from the United States and of traditional ways of filmic distribution.

In this essay, I will outline the ambiguous image of 1970s feminism presented in *The World According to Garp* and in feminist literary criticism. This includes a discussion of Irving's negotiation of rape, the possible function of his positive depiction of the transwoman Roberta Muldoon and the trans-negative rejections of her character by feminist critics from the 1970s to the 1990s. I will close-read the shooting scene which marks the ending in both the novel and the film and argue that since both novel and film construct the shooter as an infantilized, de-gendered, de-sexualized, and ultimately de-humanized female character, Bainbridge Percy's shooting of T.S. Garp leads the audience to presume that radical feminism is harmful, delusional, and futile. Engaging with the criticism directed at *The World According to Garp*, the majority of which is much more recent than the novel and the film themselves, sheds light on the figure of the shooting woman as discussed by feminist and other critics.

2. Radical Feminism and Rape in *The World According to Garp*

The World According to Garp narrates the life story of its protagonist, the writer T.S. Garp, from his birth in the 1940s to his violent death in the 1970s, when he is shot by the radical feminist Bainbridge Percy – a woman he has known since both were children. The other main character is Garp's mother Jenny Fields, a nurse who writes a bestselling autobiography titled *A Sexual Suspect* and becomes a feminist leader and head of a women's shelter. Like her son, she is shot to death. In her case, an antifeminist man shoots her while she is giving a supportive speech for a feminist candidate at an election-rally. The narrative parallelizes these two instances of male and female violence in order to underline the irrationality of the shooting woman.

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Percy's reasons for shooting of Garp remain vague. In the novel, Irving entangles Percy's reason for killing Garp, his alleged mistreatment of her sister, with the issue of violence against women. It thus connects her motif to a key topic of 1970s feminism. Other such topics include sexual autonomy, domestic violence, sex work, and, most prominently, rape, which is a theme that runs throughout the narrative. The feminist ideas represented in *The World According to Garp* can be related to different approaches within feminism. Whereas Jenny Fields, as well as Garp's wife Helen Holmes, and Garp himself adapt a liberal approach because their family models offer alternatives to the structure of the traditional patriarchal family with a male breadwinner and a housewife, many of Jenny Fields's followers stand for more radical approaches and aim at a fundamental change of the patriarchal order and are willing to use violence to reach their aims.

Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, is constructed as an autonomous woman who rejects society's normative gender expectations. In the mid-1940s, she decides to have a child without a partner and then raises her son Garp as a single mother. She starts working as a nurse at a school for boys in order to be independent from her disapproving parents and to provide her son with a free education. In the 1970s, she writes her autobiography *A Sexual Suspect* and becomes an influential feminist leader. To a lesser degree, her son, the writer T.S. Garp, also rejects the expectations connected to his male gender role. In his home, the roles of breadwinner and housewife are reversed: While his wife Helen pursues an academic career, he stays at home to do the housework and raise the kids. The couple is moderately critical of societal norms, such as monogamy, and experiments with a sexual affair with another couple. However, their openness to non-traditional relationships has limits. Whereas Garp's affair with a babysitter remains without consequences, Helen's affair with her student Michael Milton is the reason for a horrible accident, in which their son Walt dies, their other son Duncan loses an eye, Garp and Helen are injured, and Helen's lover is castrated in a turn that might be read as representing poetic justice in keeping with the heteronormative system: Helen is punished for her affair, which signals the limits of the liberalism embodied by Garp's family.

The topic of rape – a key topic of 1970s feminism – runs through the narrative. It begins with Jenny Fields's rape of a severely wounded WWII-veteran, the disabled soldier Technical Sergeant Garp, who is in her care. As his injuries affect every aspect of his bodily and mental abilities – except for the biological function of having erections and ejaculations, Jenny Fields decides to insert the man's penis into her vagina and have him impregnate her. The scene is depicted in a positive light and thus appears to be an act of mercy. When »Jenny drew him inside her and sat on him with all her weight« (Irving 1988: 38) and asks him if this was good, he speaks the word »good«. As if to legitimate the rape, the narrator lets the readers know that »it was the first and last true word that Jenny Fields heard him speak« (Irving 1988: 38).

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It is noteworthy that many feminist literary critics downplay the rape of Technical Sergeant Garp for the sake of elevating Jenny Fields's sexual self-determination. For example, Kim A. Loudermilk writes that Jenny Fields »manages to conceive a child, almost without sexual intercourse. Her one sexual encounter is with a brain-damaged soldier whose only pleasure (only ability, really) is orgasm. Shortly after this singular act of intercourse, the soldier dies, and Jenny learns she's pregnant« (Loudermilk 2004: 81). Even if the novel clearly depicts the sexual act as non-consensual, Loudermilk reduces the severity of the rape to a »singular act of intercourse« with the »brain-damaged« Technical Sargeant Garp whose disability is downplayed here in favor of his remaining biological »ability« to have an erection and ejaculate. Jenny Fields's abuse of a man she is supposed to give care to is also mitigated by Karen R. Tolchin's use of the verb »straddle« when describing that Fields »embraces her outcast status and takes the extreme measure of straddling a mentally handicapped patient with a perpetual erection, in order to conceive a child without the involvement of a husband« (Tolchin 2007: 48). Similarly, Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson call the sexual act a paradoxical and problematic combination of »an act of mercy with a benign rape« (Harter/Thompson 1986: 76). Janice Doane and Devon Hodges dedicate a significant portion of their *Garp*-chapter in the feminist literary study *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (1987) to the significance of rape in the novel – but omit Fields's rape of Garp's father. Elke Weiß, who distances herself from the feminist critiques of the novel, is the only literary critic who acknowledges the rape but relates it to the biblical trope of immaculate conception which frames Fields as a figure of Mary:

> The act of Procreation itself turns into an ambiguous event. From Jenny's perspective, who is free of any sexual desire and only wants to have a child, a form of immaculate conception is taking place in all innocence […]; from another perspective – if the defenseless Technical Sergeant had a perspective in his mental confusion – a rape might be taking place. (Weiß 2002: 48, translation S.D.)

Even though Weiß uses the term »rape« (»Vergewaltigung«), she suggests that rape is a subjective experience, thus reiterating the rhetorical strategy to undermine the authority of those who name rapists by pointing out their alleged subjectivity. Weiß highlights the assumed subjective perspectives of Jenny Fields and Technical Sergeant Garp, even though the scene itself – like the novel as a whole – is narrated from the perspective of an auctorial narrator giving the reader all the information needed from an outside perspective. However, including Garp's own voice in the novel – in the form of his literary texts, some letters, and personal notes, Irving adds Garp's subjective perspective to the narrative, a strategy which steers the readers' sympathies towards Garp and his family and adds a metafictional level to the novel. Even though I am critical of the way Weiß addresses this case of rape, I do

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agree with her idea about the narrative function of Garp's conception by rape as the opening theme that sets off the events and runs through the whole narrative (Weiß 2002: 49).

Garp's killer Bainbridge Percy is also directly related to the topic of rape. Before shooting Garp, she joins the Ellen Jamesians, a group of several hundred women who surgically removed their tongues in solidarity with the 11-year old rape victim Ellen James, whose tongue was cut out by her rapist to hinder her from telling. The Ellen Jamesians communicate through written notes, and their radical actions reiterate the Philomena myth.[3] This group is later opposed by the rape victim Ellen herself, who motivates Garp to write the book *Ellen*, in which he sides with Ellen James and criticizes the Ellen Jamesians' practice of self-mutilation.[4]

3. Close reading: The Shooting Woman

In my close reading of Bainbridge Percy, I will analyze how her flat character is depicted in misogynistic terms and constructed in negative opposition to Garp and his family. I will contextualize this depiction with reactions by feminist and other critics, as well as examples of how radical feminism surfaced in American popular culture of the 1970s and 80s. The plot of *The World According to Garp* is framed by two acts of violence conducted by women against men. In the beginning, the 1940s, Jenny Fields uses a scalpel to severely injure a soldier in a movie theater, because he approaches her in a in a sexual manner. In the end, the late 1970s, Bainbridge Percy shoots T.S. Garp, Jenny Fields's son. While injuring and killing the men, both Jenny Fields and Bainbridge Percy are wearing white nurse's uniforms. As Jenny Fields would always dress in her uniform, even after she becomes a writer, many of her feminist followers, such as Bainbridge Percy, choose to wear similar uniforms, albeit with a stitched red heart instead of a red cross. On the one hand, nurses' uniforms evoke positive associations and stand for altruism, care, and healing, and for Garp in particular, the white nurse's uniform stands for the motherly care he experienced as a child. Next to these positive associations, the uniform, on the other hand, also stands for Jenny's opposition to sexuality and lust, as it signals rigor and sterility. In

3 The removal of the tongue of the rape victim refers to the ancient Philomela myth (see also Doane/Hodges 1987: 74; Weiß 2004: 48). It is taken up by Shakespeare in his play *Titus Andronicus*. Here, the rapists cut off Lavinia's tongue and hands. Afterwards, she reads about a similar crime against Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and – like Philomela – she exposes the rapists.

4 The book and film depict the Ellen Jamesians slightly differently: While both present them as an obscure and misguided group of radical feminists, the novel awards them the expression of at least a few political views, while the film simply depicts them as irrational.

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1978, the depiction of a nurse must have strongly resonated with the character of Mildred Ratchet (Louise Fletcher), the nurse in Miloš Forman's 1975 filmic adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), which is set in a psychiatric hospital. Both novel and film depict nurse Ratchet as the authoritarian, cold, and unscrupulous antagonist to the unconventional and free-thinking patient McMurphy (Jack Nicholson). Her telling name signifies that she serves as a tool to uphold an oppressive system. What is more, »Ratched« sounds like the word »wretched«, which frames her character in negative terms. When first reading *The World According to Garp* in the early 1990s, this cultural reference must have influenced my reception, too, because *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was the novel we read in my English class, and I remember that we also discussed its filmic adaptation. Since the 1970s, the image of the violent nurse has resurfaced in American popular culture, most notably in Stephen King's novel *Misery* (1987) and Rob Reiner's 1990 filmic adaptation of the same title, as well as in the Netflix-Series *Ratchet* (2020) starring Sarah Paulson, which shows Mildred Ratchet's life prior to the time narrated in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Irving's decision to use a nurse's uniform as a marker for feminism resonates with such different cultural meanings of nurses' uniforms, which inform my close-reading of the shooting scene. Bainbridge Percy is constructed as the antagonist to the narrative's hero Garp. The shooter's outfit and the place of the shooting are significant. Bainbridge Percy deceitfully uses the nurse's uniform as a disguise to approach Garp. Shortly before she shoots him, »The nurse smiled at him. There was probably no one Garp felt as comfortable with as a nurse; he smiled back at her« (Irving 1988: 537). Upon seeing her, he fondly remembers his late mother. The shooting takes place in the wrestling room, where Garp works as a coach – the same wrestling room where he first meets his wife Helen as a teenager and a space which, throughout the novel, stands for warmth and safety. Because of the emphasis on its warm temperature, humidity, padded floors and walls, and seclusion its descriptions evoke protection. When Jenny Fields first enters it while she still works at Steering Academy for boys, she viscerally perceives the room with different senses, most notably touch and smell:

> Immediately, she felt off-balance. Underfoot was a soft fleshy feel, and the wall sank under her touch when she leaned against it; she was inside a padded cell, the floor and the wall mats warm and yielding, the air so stifling hot and stenchfull of sweat that she hardly dared to breathe (ibid.: 81).

The »soft fleshy feel« likens the wrestling room to a human organ and strongly evokes the association of a womb. Both novel and film point out that taking up wrestling is one of the very few choices the young Garp makes against his mother's will. The

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wrestling room is thus constructed as a male social space beyond her influence[5] and it mirrors the female space of the women's shelter she later runs. However, from the beginning the male space of the wrestling room is extended by the presence of a female: since she was a young girl Helen has spent her free time reading there, while her father worked as a wrestling coach. On the day Bainbridge Percy shoots Garp, Helen is present, too, again reading a book: »When Helen came into the wrestling room, the temperature was up to 85° [Fahrenheit] or so, and climbing. […] Helen went to her usual corner of the wrestling room where she could not easily be fallen on. She opened her book. Her glasses fogged up; she wiped them off« (ibid.: 536).

Shortly before Bainbridge Percy fires the first shot, Garp sees her gun, recognizes her and her »square jaw-line« and her »sloping forehead« which gave her head »the shape of [a] violent navy vessel[s]« (ibid.: 537). The description of her as a violent navy vessel aggressively invading the cozy and padded wrestling room indicates that the radical feminist Bainbridge Percy herself – rather than the gun she uses – is the actual lethal weapon. After shooting the surprised and defenseless Garp twice in the stomach and chest, »Helen tackled [her] on the mat and kept her from firing a third shot« (ibid.: 537). Then, two wrestlers help Helen overpower Bainbridge Percy.

In this final chapter of the novel, Bainbridge Percy is the only remaining representative of radical feminism. The narrative satirizes and dismantles her as a *pars pro toto* for this particular radicalized version of the feminist movement. In this and most other scenes in which Bainbridge Percy appears, the narrator uses her telling nickname »Pooh« (Irving 1988: 71, 101), since she used to wear diapers until the age of fourteen. She is also featured in the novel's concluding epilogue, »Life After Garp«, which gives details about the future lives of each character after Garp's premature death. Bainbridge Percy's paragraph in this section describes her as »[a]n androgynous twerp […] with a face like a ferret and a mind completely sodden by spending nearly fifteen years in diapers« (Irving 1988: 551). In this quotation, her wearing diapers is related to her mental health. In fact, she is described as »retarded« early in the novel (Irving 1988: 111).

During the shooting, the reader learns that Bainbridge Percy has joined the Ellen Jamesians: After the two shots, a first wrestler »pinned Pooh Percy belly down to the mat and ripped her hand with the gun in it out from under her« (Irving 1988: 537). The other wrestler

> wrenched the gun out of Pooh's hand by breaking her thumb. At the moment her bone *clicked*, Pooh Percy screamed; even Garp saw what had become of her – the surgery must have been recent. In Pooh Percy's open, yelling mouth, anyone near

5 Even though the school as a whole is an institution for boys, she makes her influence on her son effective by attending all the classes prior to Garp and then advising him which ones to take.

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> her could see the black gathering of stitches, like ants clustered on the stump of what had been her tongue. The […] [wrestler] was so frightened of Pooh that he squeezed her too hard and cracked one of her ribs; Bainbridge Percy's recent madness – to become an Ellen Jamesian – was certainly painful to her. ›Igs!‹ she screamed. ›Ucking Igs!‹ An ›ucking ig‹ was a ›fucking pig‹, but you had to be an Ellen Jamesian to understand Pooh Percy now (Irving 1988: 537–538).

Describing her as »sexless« and »androgynous« (Irving 1988: 491), Irving de-feminizes and de-sexualizes her. Her nickname »Pooh« refers to human excrements, she is depicted as incontinent, mentally ill and unable to communicate coherently, due to her own misguided self-mutilation when joining the Ellen Jamesians. Garp, in turn, is depicted as the helpless victim of this hateful and irrational feminist killer.[6]

In her reading of *Garp* in *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality* (2004), Loudermilk focuses on the grotesque in Irving's depiction of the Ellen Jamesians. She argues that the passage quoted above »combines several elements of the grotesque body – the open, gaping abyss, the stump of the dismembered organ, the revolting thought of eating insects« (Loudermilk 2004: 78). Building on Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Loudermilk states that »the Ellen Jamesians as grotesque figures, may embody cultural fears about feminists. And as objects of ridicule, they may lead to the defeat of these fears and, ultimately, diminish the power of feminist activism« (Loudermilk 2004: 80) Whereas I think that her argument about the Ellen Jamesians as grotesque figures is well supported by her reading of the description of Bainbridge Percy quoted above, I am skeptical about the way she frames the connection between negotiations of feminism in the diegetic world of the novel and the impact it may have on feminism in the real world.

Loudermilk's critique stands in a tradition of negative feminist critiques of Irving's version of radical feminism that started after the novel was first published. For example, in 1981 feminist writer and activist Ellen Showalter relates Bainbridge Percy's silence to her use of the gun to shoot Garp. She states that

> the Ellen Jamesians mutely protest a society in which women are silenced; […] The gun offer[s] a universal language to women who have no political or social voice. But this offer, like Irving's outrage, is a fake. The real invitations of this novel are to voyeurism, cynicism, and vicarious thrills. (Showalter 2016/17: 774)

6 Doane and Hodges build their argument that the shooting of Garp ties in with the novel's antifeminist agenda on the structure of the narrative rather than the representation of characters. They criticize the novel's traditional narrative conventions, which, they argue, do not question patriarchal structures. They state that Garp's symbolic »death of the father at the hands of a feminist extremist dignifies the hero at the expense of feminist ideology« (Doane/Hodges 1987: 76).

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Upon the 1982 release of the filmic adaptation of *The World According to Garp*, Marilyn French's review »The Garp Phenomenon« was published in *Ms Magazine*. She points out that she considers *The World According to Garp* to be an antifeminist novel and particularly mentions the Ellen Jamesians. She criticizes that Irving depicts their self-mutilation as a feminist act and states in response that women »who martyr themselves do it instead of opposing men, not in order to do so […] as a symbol, Irving's Ellen Jamesians suggest that feminism is self-mutilation because it is rooted in hatred of men […]. As symbol, Ellen Jamesianism, like so much else in our culture, blames the victim« (French 2004: 76, 77). As a case in point, a book review published in the *New York Review of Books*, evinces French's critique of victim-blaming: it states that »the book is rather tame in the end, in spite of its violence and timeliness, its response to the turbulences set off by the women's movement« (Wood 2004: 69), and thus argues that the women's movement is the reason for violence, rather than misogyny and patriarchy.

Fig. 1: Bainbridge Percy as a child (00:11:13)

In the 1982 film adaption, the shooting woman Bainbridge Percy (played by Brenda Currin) is an even flatter character. The negative character traits ascribed to her in the novel are signaled through a few condensed markers: the viewer never learns her real name, she is only referred to as Pooh. She hardly speaks a word. Only once, after the removal of her tongue, she pronounces Garp's name as »Arp« when she exposes him at his mother's feminist funeral, which he attends in drag. This allusion to Dada-artist Hans Arp can be read as a further reference to the grotesque.

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Fig. 2: Bainbridge Percy as an adult (02:05:56)

The two screenshots, the first from the beginning of the movie showing her as a girl, the second near its ending when she is a grown woman, signal that Bainbridge Percy did not mature while growing up – she simply looks like an older version of herself as a child – wearing similar round-shaped thick-rimmed glasses and white clothes. Whereas her black family dog, aptly named Bonkers is sitting next to her in fig. 1, in fig. 2 she is holding a black gun. Both Bonkers and the gun are pointed at Garp: whereas Bonkers bites off the young Garp's earlobe in the scene following the first screenshot, Percy uses the gun to shoot him immediately after the second screenshot, while his wife Helen is in the backdrop, reading her book.

The deprecating and grotesque depiction of Bainbridge Percy resonates with feminist theorist Caron E. Gentry's analysis of the depiction of women terrorists in research literature. In her article »Women and Terrorism«, she states that women are often pathologized, seen as driven by irrationality, emotions, obsessions (Gentry 2019: 415). Even if the Ellen Jamesians are not depicted as a terrorist organization, such common beliefs about women in radical political groups make Irving's depiction of Bainbridge Percy intelligible. Bainbridge Percy's character also resonates with a historical figure of the 1970s, the radical feminist Valerie Solanas, the author of *S.C.U.M.-Manifesto* (1967). In dominant media representations and in popular culture, Solanas is known as the woman who shot Andy Warhol in 1969, 10 years before *The World According to Garp* was first published. Like Bainbridge Percy, Solanas was a woman shooting a male artist. She is often described as mentally ill and is seen as a single extremist who acted alone – without the support of a movement, as in Mary Harron's 1996 biopic *I Shot Andy Warhol*. For a 1970s readership, Bainbridge Percy's character might be easily readable as alluding to Solanas. She is depicted as wearing a nurse's uniform which indicates her devotion to the late Jenny Fields and to her book *A Sexual Suspect*. Here, one could cautiously argue for a further reference the

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novel makes to Solanas. While we do not get much insight into Jenny Fields's autobiography, its programmatic first sentence is quoted in its entirety: »In this dirty-minded world you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore – or fast on your way to becoming one or the other« (Irving 1988: 24; 154). The rhetoric of this sentence resembles the often-quoted opening of Solanas's *SCUM-Manifesto*:

> Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex. (Solanas 1971: 3)

This first sentence, too, makes a generalized, apodictic, and programmatic statement about patriarchy. Alluding to *SCUM-Manifesto* in this way and taking Jenny Fields's first sentence as the political program which unites the women following her, the novel seems to suggest that violence is the logical and inevitable outcome of feminist texts using the rhetoric of manifestos.

4. Transgender and Feminist Critiques

The group of feminists following Jenny Fields also includes a transwoman, Roberta Muldoon, thus offering a commentary on debates about trans rights within feminist movements from the 1970s, which is still relevant today. It is notable that Roberta Muldoon's gender identity is not a political issue, she is never misgendered, and she is welcome in spaces reserved for women, so the feminism depicted in *The World According to Garp* is not trans-exclusionary. The other feminists, who are constructed as cis-women, and the trans character Roberta Muldoon share the same political goals. However, building on the feminist readings of the novel and the film, I will show that the role of transwomen in feminism was not an uncontroversial issue during the 1970s and 80s.

Roberta Muldoon belongs to the group of feminists who are inspired by Garp's mother Jenny Fields, and she lives with them in Jenny's house, a women's shelter, in Dog's Head Harbor. She is such a positive character that cultural critic Christianne Benedict, in a 2009 video essay on the filmic adaptation of *The World According to Garp*, explains how this character resonates with her own experience as a transwoman. She states that Muldoon's positive portrayal is exceptional in light of most other stereotypical filmic trans characters (Lee 2009). Such positive assessment of this character was taken up again in two more recent publications. In 2012, Matt Kane of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) pointed out that »Roberta is considered by many to be one of the first sympathetic transgender characters in a film made for a mass audience« (Kane 2012). Likewise, and referring

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to the novel, Ilana Masad writes in *The Paris Review* that Roberta Muldoon is »a wonderful trans woman« who »is three-dimensional, complex, and more maternal than any of the cis characters« (Masad 2019). Most of the earlier feminist critics writing about *The World According to Garp*, however, put forward a trans-negative reading of this character. French describes Roberta Muldoon as »male« (French 2004: 75), Loudermilk does not address this trans character, at all, even though her chapter is on »fictional feminism« in the novel. Doane and Hodges write rather technically that »in a gesture toward androgyny, [the novel] provides characters who prove the viability of transsexuality« (Doane/Hodges 1987: 66) and then they omit the only trans character Roberta Muldoon from their feminist critique of *The World According to Garp*, even though they discuss every other female character in the novel. Using the term »androgyny« despite the fact that both novel and film unequivocally depict Roberta Muldoon as a woman, Doane and Hodges signal that they doubt her femininity. Tolchin calls Roberta Muldoon's sex-assignment surgery »a voluntary maiming« and refers to the accident in which the character Michael Milton has his penis bitten off as an »involuntary sex change« (Tolchin 2007: 50). In short, none of them accepts Roberta as a part of the feminist project, and many explicitly doubt her status as a woman.

One reason for this rejection may lie in the 1970s view many radical feminists held about trans-women. A prominent example of this trans-exclusionary agenda is Janice Raymond's book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which was published in 1978, the same year *The World According to Garp* came out. In her book, she attacks the now well-known trans activist Sandy Stone for being part of the women's collective Olivia Records, even though she is not a cis-woman. This motivated Stone to write her seminal essay »The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto« (first presented at the 1988 conference »Other Voices, Other Worlds: Questioning Gender and Ethnicity« in Santa Cruz, CA), which is widely regarded as a foundational text of transgender studies as an academic discipline. In her essay, Stone reads »Raymond to be claiming that transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallocratic empire and were designed to invade women's spaces and appropriate women's power« (Stone 2014: 4).[7]

7 Transgender activist and writer Shon Faye historicizes this trans-exclusionary position in US-feminism. She states that »contemporary feminists in other anglophone countries – including the United States, where anti-trans feminism originated – generally agree on the inclusion of trans people and have disavowed the exclusionary position« (Faye 2021: 229). In her book, Faye writes about the current situation in Britain. Here and in other parts of Europe, including Germany, this trans-exclusionary position within feminism has resurfaced and is fueled by conservative media and politicians. Those who hold views like the ones Raymond formulated 45 years ago are now commonly labeled TERFs, an acronym that stands for »trans-exclusionary radical feminist«.

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Given the 1970s/80s debate within the feminist movement about the status of trans-women and the trans-negative reactions to the character of Roberta Muldoon I quoted above, one might speculate whether Irving's depiction of a trans-woman supporting radical feminism might have been intended as a provocation. This strategy has at least one well-known predecessor, namely Paul Morrissey's film *Women in Revolt* (1971). This parody of the women's movement was produced by Andy Warhol who also did the camerawork, and it was understood as a reaction to Valerie Solanas's shooting of Warhol. The film stands out because the three radical feminist protagonists are played by transwomen who were Warhol superstars, namely Jacky Curtis, Candy Darling, and Holly Woodlawn. Mocking Solanas's acronym S.C.U.M. (»Society for Cutting Up Men«), the feminist group they form in *Women in Revolt* is called P.I.G.S. (»Politically Involved Girls«). Building on the parallels between the media image of Solanas and Irving's depiction of Bainbridge Percy outlined above, one could argue that the trans character Roberta Muldoon echoes the trans-female actors acting as radical feminist caricatures in *Women in Revolt*.

A reason for the feminist critics' skepticism of Roberta Muldoon's character which goes beyond trans-negativity might lie in Muldoon's narrative function. Throughout the narrative, she serves as a mediator between men and women. While she is living with the feminists who are inspired by Jenny Fields and is on friendly terms with the Ellen Jamesians, she is Garp's closest friend, even though he and the Ellen Jamesians are antagonists. It appears that this character is constructed as trans in order to make intelligible her seemingly holistic understanding of what is otherwise depicted as separate male and female spheres. Weiß argues along similar lines that

> the androgynous figure of Roberta Muldoon. […] combines masculine physical strength and feminine sensitivity, masculine protective instinct and maternal warmth. […] The concept of androgyny is used here to soften the hard-defined positions in the relationship of the sexes to each other and to open up an opportunity to end the gender war (Weiß 2002: 92, translation S.D.).

Contradicting Weiß, I contend that the narrative strategy to have a trans character mediate the gender war builds on clearly defined notions of cis-male and cis-female attributes and does not question the gender binary. What is more, reading Roberta Muldoon as androgynous implies an understanding of trans-women as having an identity that is not female. Like Doane and Hodges, Weiß describes Roberta Muldoon as androgynous even though her femininity is never doubted in the diegetic world of both novel and film. While these critics do not go so far as to misgender her, their use of the term »androgyny« signals that they refuse to read Roberta Muldoon as a female character.

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5. Conclusion

In his foreword to the 2018 40th anniversary edition of *The World According to Garp*, Irving reframes the novel as a feminist text and describes himself as a feminist writer: »*The World According to Garp* was always a feminist novel, but in the passage of time I've become more of a feminist. […] *Garp* is a political novel, and the politics of sexual intolerance and suppression haven't gone away« (Irving 2018). Considering Irving's positive depiction of trans-female protagonists in his more recent novels *In One Person* (2012) and *The Last Chairlift* (2022), I actually do believe that Irving changed his political views and became an ally of queer and trans persons. While being aware of the dangers of biographical fallacy, I also believe that the transition of his trans daughter might have had an impact on the way he now addresses feminist, queer, and trans topics.

The metafictional elements in *The World According to Garp*, however, suggest a view that contradicts his statements in the foreword to the 2018 edition. The metafictional level suggests that while writing *The World According to Garp*, Irving had the clear idea that the women's movement would find his novel controversial. Garp, after all, is a writer, and his fourth novel is called *The World According to Bensenhaver*. In this novel, Garp describes in graphic detail how a woman is raped and how she then kills the rapist. After its publication, Garp finds himself at the center of fierce feminist critiques. Next to the negative criticism, however, the narrator mentions one positive review, which »helped to establish the rumor that *The World According to Bensenhaver* was a ›feminist novel‹« and Jenny Fields calls this view »one of the many popular misunderstandings of our time« (Irving 1988: 447). If one reads this comment as a foreshadowing of the reception of *The World According to Garp*, one could state that it was a popular misunderstanding of the 1980s that it is a feminist novel, a misunderstanding Irving reinforces in his foreword to the latest edition.

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Armed Women as *Fascinosum Tremendum*

Icons, Structures, and Transformations of Gunwomanship in Western Culture

Dagmar Ellerbrock

1. Introduction

Alfhildr Enningsdottir is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating and talented personalities in current pop culture. The Norwegian series *Beforeigner*, an HBO Europe production, follows the main character in her fast-paced professional life as part of the Oslo Criminal Investigation Department. Alfhildr is not only proficient in modern weaponry, but also familiar with the latest IT gadgets, which complements her experience and knowledge of early historical weaponry technologies and practices. Whether wielding an axe, a sword, or her bare hands, Enningsdottir is adept at all three. This is due to the fact that she is a time traveller: she was one of the chosen warriors of Tore Hund, the most important Viking chieftain of the 11th century. Although the series shows the shield-armed Viking maiden in the midst of public discourse during martial combat, debates on the television series completely ignore the aspect of Alfhildr being a female warrior herself (Metz 2021).

Euphoric reviews praised the series as original, thrilling and »inherently funny« (Udel 2020), calling it the »most socially relevant TV show« (Johnson 2022). Praise focused primarily on the culture clash sparked by the time travelers who bring »their pre-industrial ways to your once-pristine waterfront condo building« (Johnson 2022), as well as on the sophisticated way in which the series blends culture clash with time clash. Much of the fascination comes from the culture clash the Time Walkers have created, and essentially through the gender crash that they have imposed on modern liberal Norwegian society. The two shield-maidens Alfhildr and her girlfriend Urd embody battle-hardened women, proficiently trained in weaponry and always ready to fight. This martial concept of gender jarred not only with modern concepts of civilian control of violence, but even more so with bourgeois concepts of gender that portrayed women as peaceful and conciliatory since the 18th century (Hausen 1976).

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Looking at interpretations of armed women, the differences between pre-modern and contemporary narratives may not be as clear-cut as they seem. This article argues that perceptions of armed women show an impressive continuity throughout the centuries and are mainly characterized by ambivalent feelings: the attraction to and fascination with armed women, and at the same time, the fear of armed women which often leads to physical and verbal abuse. To fully understand the paternalistic roots of historical weapon culture in Europe, this contribution combines grand narratives and historical facts to understand how they fuel or contradict each other.

Fictional texts, especially iconic master narratives, hold important insights about the cultural environment that can be used, especially for periods when archival sources are unavailable. Additionally, reconstructing the historical framework of these narratives is necessary to fully understand the historical structures. To fully understand the historical dimensions of female weaponry, women warriors and civilian gunwomanship, this article combines historical and fictional sources to trace the structures, constructions and interpretations of a deeply paternalistic armament culture. First, I ask, what do we know about armed women in different eras and societies? What are the overarching narratives? Second, what were the contexts and reasons for female armament? Third, what changes can be observed over time, and how were these changes justified?

Following these questions, this article will look across different centuries at key narratives of female armament as a legitimation of self-defense, and at gender concepts of the armed woman, heroines and reviled women; it will identify the keywords and iconic historic female figures who shaped the discourse on weapon-bearing women. Finally, it will argue that the structural distinction between civilian, military and (semi)military/terrorist culture is essential to understanding structures and shifts in the current popular culture representations of armed women.

I trace the state of research between different disciplines and eras. I focus on the aspects of armed women in pop culture, some exceptional woman warriors (Queens and Emperors) as well as women in the military/militia. So far these different clusters are not linked, nor is the disparate national knowledge brought together. Due to my focus I will not cover disparate national historiographies, though this article, for the first time, connects key lines of scattered knowledge about armed women and enriches them with historical research on private armament cultures and practices to provide a more detailed picture of the armed woman in the European cultural archive.

2. Contemporary Narratives of Viking Warrior Women

Common pop culture preferably construes armed women as pre-historic warrior women. The aforementioned HBO series *Beforeigners*, with two seasons released in

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2019 and 2022) revolves around a female character inspired by a shield- maiden from the army of Tore Hund, who commanded the peasant army in the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. Similarly, the series *Vikings* (2013–2022, writ. Michael Hirst) focuses on Lathgertha, a powerful shield maiden who not only joins the men's raiding parties but fiercely fights for female autonomy and respect) These depictions of powerful, armed women, effortlessly wielding their swords and axes contradict the long-held image of an entirely male-dominated Viking culture. Although the vast majority of warriors may have been male, recent research reveals that women also possessed and carried weapons (Gardeła 2013; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Homquist 2009; Jesch 1991). These images of well-fortified women correspond with Northern mythology, showing pictures of female goddesses as self-determined, powerful and usually armed women, frequently engaged in outdoors activities such as hunting and fighting.

3. God Sagas: Pre-Modern Armed Women and Women Warriors

Freya the Goddess of love, fertility, war, and battle, combines an autonomous, sometimes aggressive sexuality with a lust for the battle (Price 2020: 41–42). Freya was the leader of the army of Valkyries, violent and militant women warriors. Sources from the 9th to the 13th centuries knew fifty-two Valkyries by name and described many more unnamed Valkyries as armed with sword and shield, sometimes helmet, as terrible, and as »the essence of violence« (ibid.: 52–55).

Roman and Greek Mythology also passed down tales of armed goddesses: The most prominent woman warrior was Minerva, goddess of wisdom and guardian of knowledge, as well as goddess of wisely planned war. Although Minerva is often shown with a dagger, her main weapon of war is wisdom, usually represented by the owl that accompanies her. Diana, the goddess of the hunt, is often depicted with bow and arrow, sometimes with a spear, but always with a small deer with which she can speak and communicate. We find the topos of armed Diana in close communication and harmony with wild animals throughout the centuries: on ancient coins and statues, on 19th-century paintings and even on more modern images. Interestingly, these two ancient goddesses actually represent the main areas in which armed men and women used weapons in their historical daily lives: in war, in hunting, and in armed self-defense – incarnating the principles of morality and justice. So this is an interesting example of how fictional sources and narratives can be very helpful in giving us clues to the structure of society when historical sources are lacking, and in giving us clues as to where to look for sources on the sparsely covered topic of armed women.

Besides these well-known goddesses, the most famous tales about armed women were the myths about the Amazons. Roman and Greek historians – from

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Herodotus to Strabo to Pliny and Orosius – described the Amazons in vivid terms and understood them as fierce warrior women (Mayor 2014: 10–11; 249–304). In ancient culture, there are numerous allusions to warrior women (Mayor 2014: 3–10; 210–232; Fornasier 2018: 81). Ancient narratives about warrior women were complex and changed over the centuries, but the sagas were linked by some common topoi: Warrior women elicited mixed feelings: they were dangerous, frightening, and scary, but at the same time desirable and incredibly beautiful (Fornasier 2018: 76–81). This ambivalent stereotyping also found its way into contemporary popular culture narratives. It is this contradictory image of the armed women in the male gaze, the simultaneous feelings of fear and sexual desire she evokes – that forms the basis for the enduring fascination with ladies in arms through the centuries.

Concerning the narrative connection between sagas and historical armed women, it is important to keep in mind that sagas cannot be equated with empirical facts. Stories about ancient and foreign cultures of armed women, as well as images and sculptures of warrior women, should not taken as historical evidence for the existence of the armed woman. Following this important distinction between fact and fiction, modern scholars have viewed ancient myths about weapon-bearing women as merely a product of vivid imagination, rather than evidence of historical reality (Mayor 2014: 11; Fornasier 2018; Städele 1996). Even while maintaining this important distinction between fact and fiction, sagas and myths as well as imagery and art, offer important resources for discovering hidden historical practices. The narrative structure, imagery, and topoi presented in sagas point to the places and contexts in which historical research might be found. The narrative of fiction, literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt argues, represents the deep structure of culture (Greenblatt 2001) and is therefore helpful for deciphering deep cultural arrangements. As for how and where women carried weapons, the myths and sagas refer not only to women warriors and war, but also to contexts of self-defense, sports, gaming and hunting, as well as to moral notions of autonomy, justice and (gender) identity.

The issue is more complex, however, as recent studies indicate that ancient stories about armed women are at least partially based on fact (Mayor 2014: 12–13; 17–33; 63–83). Particularly archeological and DNA investigations of tombs have revealed that some of the famous warrior tombs were actually those of powerful women warriors (Gardeła 2013; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Mayor 2014: 63 ff.). These recent discoveries prove that armed women were indeed part of social and political life, and raise the question of where else in history a more nuanced view might more urgently discover armed female practices. To answer this question, I will map what is known so far about the armament of women in ancient times (i.e. 800 BC–500 AC).

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4. Women Fighters in Antiquity: In the Arena and in War

Although sources are few, one of the most exciting references to armed women is a relief from Halicarnassus, probably from the 2nd century AD, on display in the British Museum. Classicist Kathleen Coleman claims the relief depicts two female gladiators. Clearly, there were very few female gladiators, and the fact that fights between armed women were for entertainment underscores the fact that armed women were considered extraordinary spectacles (Coleman 2000). Like their male counterparts, female gladiators, the gladiatrix, were often captured foreign warriors forced to entertain the Roman public. Accounts about these fighting women even found their way into Roman historiography: the historian Florus reported on the Battle of Cimbria (101 BC): »There was quite as severe a struggle with the womenfolk of the barbarians as with the men; for they had formed a barricade of their waggons and carts and, mounting on the top of it, fought with axes and pikes« (Florus 1995: 1, XXXVIII,16). About 300 years later Cassius Dio reports about the war of Marcus Aurelius against Celtic and Germanic tribes in northern Italy (ca. 172 BC): »Among the fallen barbarians were found the bodies of armed women«. (Cassius/Cary/Foster 1914: LXXI, 3,2). All references refer to the topoi of female warriors and emphasize the principle of (military) self-defense.[1]

While modern gun cultures are characterized by the distinction between public and private (collective and individual) arms cultures, there is usually no clear separation between military and individual armament practices in the pre-modern era. Moreover, armed violence often took place in the context of self-defense. One of the most famous stories is told in the biblical Book of Judith of the Old Testament: Holofernes, an Assyrian commander, besieged the Jewish city of Bethulia and was on the verge of victory. Just as the Jews were about to surrender, Judith sneaks into Holofernes' camp, gets him drunk and beheads him. This story is about female self-defense, armed (military) liberation and (once again) the ambivalent combination of fear threat and seduction ascribed onto the armed woman. Judith's act against Holofernes has been revisited over the centuries, for example by Renaissance painters Botticelli, Lucas Cranach, Caravaggio, and female painter Artemisia Gentileschi for the Sistine Chapel. Contexts of female self-defense can be seen as practices of weaponry widely accepted in different cultures and times. After all, Holofernes' murder was justified since it ensured the Jewish communities survival and enabled Christianity to flourish. It was an act of self-defense rather than military practice that is key for the Christian origin story.[2]

1 For references and discussions on ancient armed women, I thank Martin Jehne and Christoph Lundgreen.

2 For the complex history of different lines of narratives of female heroism, its intermingling and transformation during Middle Age and Renaissance, see Reinle (2000).

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5. Fascinating and Terrifying: the Valkyries

Many antique sources, as well as their medieval and pre-modern reinterpretations, refer to Norse/Germanic women, possibly based on Viking myths and arming practices. Norse myths are populated by powerful, armed women. The oldest sources on these armed gods and warriors are two Icelandic prose collections – the Poetic *Edda* (Dodds 2014) and the 13th century Prose *Edda* (Snorri/Faulkes 1987). Most famous are the Valkyries, who are armed with spear, sword and shield, and serve Odin's military rule (Price 2020: 52, 55). It remains an open question how these fictions link to historical social practices, especially since Viking culture has been portrayed as a cruel and paternalistic (Jesch 2009). The discovery of women warrior's graves suggests that Viking women had complex social roles and included participating in Viking expenditure, travel, and warfare movements (Jesch 1991: 204–208). Chronicler Saxo, in his *History of the Danes*, wrote around 1200:

> Once Alvild had been prevailed upon to despise the young Dane, she changed into man's clothing and from being a highly virtuous maiden began to lead the life of a savage pirate. Many girls of the same persuasion had enrolled in her company by the time she chanced to arrive at a spot where a band of pirates were mourning the loss of their leader, who had been killed fighting. Because of her beauty she was elected the pirate chief and performed feats beyond a woman's courage. (Saxo/Davidson/Fisher 2002: book 7, 211)

Since Saxo was a Christian monk, his description must be read as a commentary on both cultures. Particularly his portrait of fighting women may be a critique of his own 12th-century culture, which he perceived as lazy and decadent. The story of the Danes mixes the medieval view of armed women (Jesch 1991: 176–180). From Saxo's point of view, the warrior women were brave, but in the end they lost the war. More importantly, although they looked like women, he described them as masculine in heart and spirit: »Among these was Lathgertha, a skilled female fighter, who bore a man's temper in a girl's body« (Saxo/Davidson/Fisher 2002: book 8, 238).

Regardless of the actual extent to which women were armed on a daily basis, Valkyries remained powerful. The widespread fascination with and reception of the defensible woman began as early as in the 13th century, the sagas of the *Edda* and Norse mythologies were reinvented as the Middle High German epic poem *Song* (Krüger 2003). The poem about the warrior queen Brunhild and the heroic revenge of Kriemhild was handed down between the 13th and 16th century and tells of two powerful women who fight for their honor and their kin – in sum they correspond very much to the earlier characteristics of the Amazons. In the late 19th-century the song of the Nibelungs become deeply interwoven with nationalistic narratives, and important part of German school education as well as present in common daily

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culture as shown in the advertisement for Palmin household grease (fig. 1). The ad shows Kriemhild holding up the head she cut off Gunther's body. In this 19th century version, Kriemhild is an updated version of the belligerent housewife, embroiled in the heroic, armed struggle for her revenge and survival (Reinle 2000; Bermbach 2011).

Fig. 1: Kriemhild with Gunter, advertisement for Palmin household grease, 1894
Courtesy of Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe, Germany, 116 E 199 R, p. 1.

In Western European culture, war is men's business – and this seems to be true for all centuries. Although the role of women in the armed forces, in medical service or in infrastructure has increasingly come into focus (Lynn 2008; Maubach 2009; Hacker 1981), women as armed combatants have hardly played a role in theory. Even the early Middle Ages, contemporaries viewed women who aspired to take part in the militia as disreputable (Reinle 2000: 14). At the same time, impressive examples of women warriors have been documented (McLaughlin 1990: 196; Hacker 1981; Jones 1997; Wilson 1996; Pauw 1998; Nicholson 1997; Watanabe-O'Kelly 2010). Most of them were noble women who took the lead in times of crisis, but fighting women could also be found among the common troops (Füssel 2011). Joan of Arc, the most famous middle-aged woman warrior, was a peasant girl, whose masculine and armed attire evoked adoration and criticism in equal measure (Simon-Muscheid 1996).

Megan Mc Laughlin (1990) ascribes the declining acceptance of women warriors during the Middle Ages to the professionalization of warfare and its separation from the domestic sphere. This article argues that a distinction between military and civilian weapons culture, with their different norms and reference points, is instructive in understanding gendered armament practices. Importantly, structural factors are

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crucial to understanding the changing integration or exclusion of women in military institutions (Goldstein 2005) as well as the perceptions of armed women. There have been periods of silence or greater tolerance of women warriors and periods of rejection (McLaughlin 1990), with women warriors provoking criticism at all times and being measured against masculine norms. Narratives of armed women persisted for centuries and continue to influence modern images of women warriors (Watanabe-O'Kelly 2014). Images of women warriors on horseback and armed in the Mongol Wars, described in medieval chronicles as particularly dangerous (Schmieder 1994: 258), are remarkably similar in structure to the ideas of armed, aggressive and dangerous shotgun women (German »Flintenweiber«) in 1920s German Freikorps-literature (Theweleit 1987–1989: 70–78; Römer 2011)[3]. The phantasies about dangerous gunwomen made it even into regular newspaper coverage, when the *Kölnische Zeitung* in March 1920 reported about »Spartakus broads, who rode with flyinf hair, a pistol in each hand […] (towards) the men, who were doomed to die a Spartakus death« (Kölnische Zeitung 1920; quoted in Theweleit 2019: 99; after: Lucas 2019/Bd. II: 186; all subsequent translations from the German D.E.). These novels and memoirs by paramilitary Freikorps' fighters show that, during the early years of the Weimar Republic, attitudes toward shotguns were omnipresent but disparaged. The misogynist attitude towards armed women displayed here followed a longstanding disdain for armed women and the conflation of masculinity and heroic combat (Fieseler 2011; Maubach et al. 2011). During the revolutionary fights at the beginning of the Weimarer Republic the hostile attitude of the right extremist corps towards armed women often turned into violence and even murder, as a letter from soldier Max Zeller reports in April 1920: »we (also) shot ten Red Cross sisters immediately […] because each of them had a pistol. We were happy to shoot at these disgraceful women, and how they cried and prayed; but whoever is encountered with gun in hand is our enemy and has to die. We were much nobler in the field against the French«[4] (Ernst 1921: 68; quoted in Theweleit 2019: 192). The Nazis drew on these traditions, intensifying negative emotions toward armed women fighting for foreign armies from the East and using them to justify their mass murder of female Red Arms soldiers (Römer 2011; Jahn/Aleksievič 2002). Paradoxically, the Nazi regime nurtured deadly

3 German original: »Spartakidenweiber, die auf kleinen struppigen Pferden ritten, mit fliegenden Haaren und in jeder Hand zwei Pistolen […] (Männer), die […] dem unabwendbaren Spartakidentode geweihet seien« (quoted in Theweleit 2019: 99).

4 The German original states: »wir (haben) auch zehn Rote-Kreuzschwestern sofort erschossen […] von denen hat nämlich jede eine Pistole bei sich. Mit Freude schossen wir auf diese Schandbilder, und wie diese geweint und beten haben; aber wer mit einer Waffe betroffen wird, der ist unser Gegner und der muß dran glauben. Gegen die Franzosen waren wir im Felde viel edler« (Josef Ernst 1921, Kapptage im Industriegebiet, Hagen p. 68 quoted in Theweleit 2019: 192).

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contempt for foreign women warriors in German soldiers, but at the same time instilled in them a euphoric admiration for Norse myths and their allegories of powerful, armed women and Valkyries.

6. Warrior Women as Modern National Allegories

The British national allegory Britannia, common since early modern times, was armed with a spear in 1797 and received a helmet in 1825 (Hargreaves 2015: 123). The invented traditions (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983) of armed female warriors as national allegories fighting for freedom and nation became successful with the French Revolution. One of the most iconic depictions is the French Marianne armed with a rifle and national flag on the barricades of the 1830s Revolution in the painting by Eugène Delacroix (fig. 2). Marianne carries a Percussion Rifle with bayonet, the common armament of the French Army at this time, also used by the revolutionaries of the 1830s (Günther 1909:18–19; 23).

Fig. 2: Eugène Delacroix, Liberty Leading the People, 1830. Oil on Canvas.
Louvre, Paris, public domain

The Western nationalist movements of the 19th century appropriated Nordic myths of warrior women, disseminated them and instrumentalized them for political purposes. Richard Wagner's opera popularized the armed female figures from the *Song of the Nibelungs* and the *Edda* (Schulz 2011). Wagner's »Ride of the Valkyries«

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politicized the image of the armed Valkyries in the 19th and 20th centuries, even spreading the theme into contemporary pop culture (Zenk 2017). It is striking that previous research on Wagnerism more or less ignores the topoi of armed women (Wegner 2017; Bermbach 2011) and hardly reflects on the wide dissemination of the topoi of the warrior woman and its relation to social and political culture.

In latter day Germany, the national allegory of Germany also became increasingly martial with the rise of the nationalist movement. In the context of the 1848 revolution, the political movement for national unification invented a Germania tradition aimed at uniting the so-called German tribes, drawing on ancient descriptions of the belligerent Germanic tribes that emphasized their martial prowess, invincibility and independent spirit (Ellerbrock 2023). Germania became their fierce and menacing embodiment, armed with sword, shield and wild blond hair, combining many of the characteristics of the ancient Amazons and Valkyries of the *Edda* poems (fig. 3). The fact that the medieval *Song of the Nibelungs* as well as Richard Wagner's opera cycle *Ring der Nibelungen* (1854–56) also drew on these narratives only made the appeal for the political movement more tangible.

Fig. 3: Friedrich August von Kaulbach, »Germania« (1914)
Deutsches Historisches Museum/Indra Desnica, Inventarnummer 1988/82.

The invention of a well-armed Germania not only indicated the adaptation of the Norse myth and its transformation in favor of the German unification movement, but also initiated a fundamental shift within the German gun culture and the rights granted to women. Revolutionaries combined a willingness to fight for national unification with the right to political participation. Military duties and suffrage suddenly merged, symbolized by swords and arms in the hands of the people fighting for both political and national rights with the revolutionary movement's motto of

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»arming the people« (German »Volksbewaffnung«) (Rotteck 1816). In the revolutionary times of the 1840s, conscription was linked to the right to bear arms. Part of this fascinating transformation that made the once unloved military conscription attractive was the invention of a (new) right to arms. This concept of a »right of arms« historically never existed. Until the 19th century only the duty for military service (for noble men for example) existed. The duty to go to war had to be fulfilled at different times by different social groups: Noblemen, townspeople, mercenaries and later commoners (Frevert 2001; Tlusty 2011).

The 19th century bourgeois revolutionaries created the new concept of the citizen with a masculine »right to arms« which was a new phrase for the duty to go to war, and linked it to ideas of a common (masculine) political vote. Conscription had never been very popular, not even in the revolutionary heat of the 1840s, and the rebranding of the old duty to fight in war as a new right to arms did not change male reticence, although the new link between a right to be armed and suffrage immediately gained popularity and support (Ellerbrock 2014b). It seemed instantly convincing that those men who were willing to risk their lives for king, people and fatherland should be granted the right to have a say in the fate of their community. This newly invented tradition rhetorically excluded women from gun culture and gendered the discourse on gun practices and gun legitimation.

This new right to bear arms in times of an ongoing war was a privilege available only to men. In the Frankfurt 1848 National Assembly, deputy Friedrich Wilhelm Eugen Bock polemicized against the idea of a general assembly with the remark that, if this were to happen, then »also every woman […] would like to carry the weapons […]« (Bock 1848: 801). His remark caused great hilarity and laughter in the first German parliament. Armed women provoked irritation and amusement and armed female citizens were politically inconceivable (Ellerbrock 2014a). In fact, this heteronormative discourse about armed women only referred to the political sphere. In private and civilian contexts, the use of guns and pistols was also an everyday practice for women. Before turning to this civilian gun culture, which represents the most important field of female gun practices, it is worth noting the contradiction that a new structured national order, with its reorganized military gun cultures based on conscription rather than paid militia, fundamentally excluded women and at the same time was represented by Germania, a heavily armed woman. The reason for this is as simple as it is unpleasant: The new national movements, which ultimately aimed to grant equal political rights to all men, had no intention of extending this to women. One effective way to deal with this was the ambivalent image of the Amazons, threatening and powerful. On the one hand the German orientalist Andreas David Mordtmann interpreted the breastless Amazons as »destroyed femininity and maternity« (Mordtmann 1862:11). Similarly, the Swiss Ancient and Legal historian Johann Jacob Bachofen described »the degeneracy contrary to nature to which female existence [in its Amazonian way of life] had fallen« (Bachofen 1861: xxii). The

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armed Germania was not suitable as a role model for 19th century German women, who according to political liberal discourse aspired to »true German womanhood«, which could not be found in the »participation in our public electoral and parliamentary assemblies and in the offices of state, and in general in all male endeavors and struggles, including those of war, [the woman] would give up chastity and modesty« (Welcker 1845: 630ff.). Consequently, women's suffrage was not debated in the 19th century. On the other hand, the heavily armed national allegories also invoked the intriguing aspect of the powerful and threatening image of the Amazons, who fought vigorously and victoriously for their tribe – a feat behind which any national movement would readily rally. Although the German bourgeois revolution failed, the debate over male gun rights succeeded in establishing a new structured military gun culture. The newly invented male right to be armed closely linked military gun practices, masculinity, and male political rights. The idea of an alleged male gun right was an invention that linked the imagined national community (Anderson 1983) to male privilege and justified this alloy by means of the contradictionary construction of heavily armed female national allegories; it denied political gun rights for women and tolerated private female arms practices only.

7. Civil Gun Cultures and Gunwomanship

The flip side of the new ideas of a military gun culture in Germany was a civilian gun culture that became increasingly distinct in the centuries to come. Whereas in earlier centuries military and civil arms possession and use often intermingled, the two spheres became increasingly distinct with the rise of modern nation states. In hunting, self-defense and in sports, women were long used to carrying weapons. While in the military context women were explicitly excluded from armed tasks and ideas on armed military women caused amusement, there was no gender discrimination in the civilian regulation of weapons. Overall, firearms were barely regulated before and during the 19th century, although there were a few norms that defined the use and possession of firearms: In all German states, police penal codes defined how to handle weapons and firearms. For example, in Württemberg the Police Punishment Law of October 2, 1839, regulated in Article 43: »The possession of firearms is not subject to any restriction, with the exception of dangerous rifles« (Kappler 1850; Bürgerwehrgesetz 1849:9), in Baden, »everyone was permitted to possess and carry weapons« (Schlusser 1897: 22), and in Prussia, the General Land Law for the Prussian States (Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preußischen Staaten, ALR) allowed only concealed and secretly carried weapons since 1794 (Rönne/Simon 1840: 648–650).

From a legal perspective, women were allowed to arm themselves just like men, and they did so in Germany and other countries. (Stange/Oyster 2000; Homsher 2001; Browder 2006; Brown 2012). Women took up arms and raised their knives to

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protect themselves from harassers or to deal with their unfaithful husbands or lovers (Spierenburg 1997; Chesney-Lind/Pasko 2013; Silvestri/Crowther-Dowey 2016). This fits well with narratives that emphasized armed female self-defense. Self-protection at home or on the road was at least as relevant for women as it was for men. Travelers were advised to carry adequate weapons for self-defense, and they were often already aware about gun laws in foreign countries. In the 20th century, feminist debates that the need for female self-defense often roots in patriarchal, male-dominated structures (Carlson 2014; Carlson 2015). The debate on gunwomanship dithers between arming women as tool of self-empowerment and symbol of a repressive violent culture, were women have no choice but to arm themselves (Bassin 1997).

In addition to self-defense, hunting was an important arena of armament. Especially noblewomen handled the rifle with great virtuosity, which is documented in many hunting-related sources: In 1925, Alexander Prinz von Hohenlohe described his mother as a passionate huntress: »Hunting was perhaps the only passion of my mother; but only the so-called high hunting. […] She was an excellent shot, especially in her younger years […]. Her favorite was hunting chamois, but she also liked to go after deer, wild boar, and in general all the high game outdoors, she liked to go for« (Hohenlohe 1925: 183). Alexander von Bülow reported retrospectively about his fiancée: »There were many hits, since Gerda shot quite well with the light Belgian shotgun, caliber 28, with which she […] practiced a lot on the clay pigeon stand« (Bülow 1951: 13). The wide assortment of weapons designed specifically for women's hands and tastes, and advertised by arms dealers, proves that there was a broad market and many women interested in guns, rifles and pistols that catered to current fashions. International studies, particularly for the US, estimate a female firearm ownership rate of about 20 percent from the 18th to the 20th century (Browder 2006; Homsher 2001; Kelly 2004; McCoole 1997; Lindgren/Heather 2002).

After the failed bourgeois revolution in Germany, shooting clubs, the »Schützenvereine«, were stripped of their military function and held only sports competitions. Although most shooting clubs did not accept women until the 20th century, some integrated them into their festivities as early as the 19th century: an inviatation to a 1845 meeting at »Whitsun in Cardemin near Blanckenburg« addressed also women shooters, »because in Pomerania even the ladies can handle a rifle« (Kürenberg 1935: 26). After World War II, more shooting sports accepted women as active members, and this trend accelerated after the 1970s, when sport shooting clubs established themselves as an alternative to more traditional shooting clubs. Civil gun culture has also been the mainstay of gunwomanship in the US: as cowgirls, farm women or horse dealers, white pioneer women who wielded their Winchesters, Colts and Brownings with great skill are ubiquitous in the U.S. cultural narrative of the frontier (Seagraves 1996; Stange/Oyster 2000). Throughout Western society, gunwomanship evolves around self-defense, sport-shooting and hunting (Dizard/Stange 2022)

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In general, modern firearms became increasingly common since the second half of the 19th century. Technology had advanced, and firearms become more accurate, fast and easier to handle. This was particularly interesting to women, who often chose to carry one of these chic modern pistols in their handbags. Global consumer culture with its advertisements gives a clear indication that handguns, especially small pistols, were fashionably tailored for female buyers. The same was true for male consumers whosetastes were considered by gun manufacturers (Stukenbrok 1999; Ellerbrock 2023). We know from memoirs that women bought and carried these modern firearms, so we can detect a very well-established female gun culture in both Europe and North America in the 19th century (Browder 2006). It is noteworthy that private gunwomanship was not perceived as contradictory to the supposedly peace-loving gender stereotype that shaped the Western image of womanhood (Hausen 1976). Gunwomanship was widely tolerated, sometimes even promoted by clubs and sellers (Browder 2006), if it was limited to civilian gun culture and focused on sports and self-defense. However, at the same time, the defamation of gunwomanship continues well into the 20th century, as women set out to claim equal participation in men's domains of fighting such as the military, the police, or even terrorism.

8. The German Red Army Fraction's Female Terrorists

After harsh denigration of gunwomen and women in military service in the early 20th century, the discourse on female terrorists became downright hysterical in the 1970s. These armed women were denied any female identity, as armed female terrorist attacks were seen, in a polemic in the German news magazine Der Spiegel as an »emancipation excess« (*Der Spiegel* from August 7, 1977). In 1977, *Der Spiegel* lamented the female militancy that could be observed worldwide: It mentioned Fusako Shigenobu of the Japanese Red Army, Palestinian terrorist Leila Chalid Irish IRA leader Maire Drumm and others. That female terrorists were not only professional with guns, but – even worse – that »often shooting girls commandeered armed men« (ibid.) seemed particularly threatening; the article followed sociologist Erwin Scheuch's argument these women »produced themselves as female supermen« (ibid.). The gun hidden in the beauty case became iconic – according to West German sociology, these practices marked the final »break with rejected femininity« (ibid.) On the other hand, public discourse disempowered female terrorists by labelling them as »terror girls« (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2009: 72). Oscillating between superwomen and terror girls, modern discourse on gunwomanship is still caught in a fundamental ambivalence with denies armed women feminine identity (Grisard 2011). For armed women, too. the point of reference is still masculinity and the armed man. This placed femininity in a binary opposition to any kind of

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military weaponry practice, an opposition that even armed women soldiers could not overcome.

The harsh denigration of armed women in terror discourse transformed parts of the struggle against female terrorism into an argument against women's emancipation (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2009; Paczensky 1978). Among female intellectuals, too, the presence of armed terrorists sparked debates about the relationship between terrorism and gender (Paczensky 1978). To feminist scholars it was obvious that carrying a gun was not a miraculous path to emancipation, since women in the context of terrorism were often reduced to practices of extreme self-denial and domination and exposed to toxic, violent masculinity (Fabricius-Brand 1978). Today, whether *gunwomanship* contributes to women's empowerment remains highly controversial (Kelley 2022; Stange 2000) while most feminists consider guns to be problematic for emancipation (Friedman 2017) and women tend to support restrictive gun laws (Goss 2017). *Gunwomanship* – in itself – does not seem to be a suitable means to creating an emancipated society with equal rights. Nevertheless, *gunwomanship* can be seen as an interesting indicator of equality, as seen in debates around women soldiers as potential challenges to military culture.

Only recently did women become part of the regular armed military forces and police forces (Carreiras 2006); at the beginning of the 20th century only the Russian Army included female combat troops, Israel stated conscripting women in the 1940ies, whereas Western democracies only since the 21 century included women soldiers in their combat forces. Though women warriors have always been part of military history they remain exceptions. The de-feminization of armed women within military contexts proved how the rigidity of traditional gender orders. Even female gun practices did not have the power to blow up this gender hierarchy, at least not as an offensive tool to overcome the patriarchy. The recent integration of women into the armed forces of all Western societies can be seen, on the one hand, as an expression of political emancipation that ended women's exclusion, and, on the other hand, as an instrument to normalize gunwomanship. In this respect the gender-neutral restructuring of military gun culture can be seen as a transformation of a culture which is becoming more egalitarian.

9. Conclusion

Women carrying weapons have always been a part of European history; within many different settings, in civilian as well as in military contexts. Armed women have been much more diverse and active in different roles than historical research has presumed. Basic valuations of gunwomanship partly changed, especially at the turn from the 20th to the 21st century, but some narratives toward armed women remain surprisingly stable. This included the ambivalent idea of the fascinating-

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terrible character of Amazons, warrior women, and Valkyries, which created the mixed feelings that shaped the basic perception of armed women for centuries and still structures their image in popular culture. To fully understand gunwomanship, it is essential to recognize the difference between military and civilian gun culture. While female warriors elicited degradation in the context of civilian arms practices, i.e., hunting, sport and self-defense, gunwomanship barely received criticism or was even supported.

More recently, we see the reappearance of the fierce, wild, and armed Norse or Viking warrior woman in popular culture. We encounter the ambivalence of the wild, uncivilized women who are simultaneously perceived as powerful and fighting for superior moral principles. These narratives have entered all niches of popular culture, and render armed women a presence in many aspects of daily life, in civilian and military contexts alike. The most profound change can be observed in military weapons culture, where the integration of women into military services meant a departure from older notions of misogyny. Although some gender discrimination persists in modern military and police institutions as well, the fundamental integration of women as actors capable and authorized to bear arms represents an elemental reorganization of the culture of gunwomanship.

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Warrior of the Light

Female Personifications of Ukraine on Mass Media during the Russo-Ukrainian War

Ganna Kolesnyk

1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine which started in February 2022 is a visualized war, and it inevitably causes a visual response. The imagery created in wartime depends greatly on ideology and becomes a vehicle for important messages. In her seminal work *On Photography* (1990), American philosopher Susan Sontag stressed the role of images as instruments of knowledge production that shape the people's perception of the events and to construct and reconstruct our understanding of the world (Sontag 1990: 3). Communications scholar D.K. Thussu also underlined the fact that visual images produce documentary evidence to support the commonsensical claims of ideology, and in turn to use the very appearance of seemingly factual representations to subtly camouflage the constructed, historical, and social roots of ideology (Thussu 2007: 220). At the same time, according to Nathan Roger, in the modern digital world people face the »weaponization of images« (Roger 2013) when both conflicting sides use images to achieve their ideological aims, and although some audiences will get the meanings encoded in the wars and images of war, others will not or might even refuse the encoded meaning (Perlmutter 2001: 33).

Images have turned into a powerful means of shaping public perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war as well. In the digital age, the most effective way to spread visual information is the Internet, especially social media and messenger services. From the first days of the war in Ukraine, the crucial role of social media in its perception and representation became obvious. American journalist Peter Suciu aptly characterized this war as »the first social media war«, emphasizing the fact that it is the most internet accessible war in human history (Suciu 2022). According to the research carried out by the company Gradus Research, the number of Ukrainians using social media and messenger services as a source of information has been growing rapidly in Ukraine since the beginning of the war (January 2023). Social media with their orientation to visual impact offer a perfect territory for the visual cover-

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age of the events. Easy accessibility of social media platforms and their interactivity makes them a convenient space for publishing live updates, photos and videos thus helping in documenting the events. Simultaneously, social media is an effective vehicle for sharing personal war experiences and emotional responses to the traumatic events connected with war.

The war in Ukraine has changed the lives of many people throughout the world, but most of all, quite understandably, it touched the lives of Ukrainians. About 10 million people, mostly women and children, had to leave their homes in search of safety. According to the OECD report (May, 2023), the share of women among adult Ukrainian refugees is around 70 percent, and in some countries (Italy, Greece) the percentage is even higher, 80 percent. This is really different from other refugee flows, for example, women lodged only about 30 percent of all asylum applications during the 2015-17 refugee crisis in Europe (OECD 2023). This makes the Ukrainian crisis very »female« and vividly shows the importance of women in it.

At the same time the women who choose to stay in Ukraine play a vital role in Ukrainian society. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense reports that at the beginning of October, 2022, 40,000 women served in Ukrainian military formations, and among these women, 5,000 were directly at the front line protecting their country with weapons in hands (Krechetova 2022). Besides that, there are also many women volunteering, including medical professionals and supportive staff doing their best to ensure the army gets everything it needs to fight effectively. What is more, in spite of all hardships connected with war, women continue to work in all spheres of social life demonstrating a lot of moral strength and courage.

The reactions to the war may take different forms, and one of them is the creation of art works. A bright example of such a response is the emergence of multiple artistic representations of Ukraine as a Warrior Woman which flooded the Ukrainian segment of social media since the beginning of the war. These images quite often go viral due to their constant reposting, and in most cases it is quite problematic to trace their original sources and find their real authors.

Current personifications of Ukraine as a Woman put to active use mythological imagery and return to the roots of the country's national identity. Besides that, as the personification is a main technique used by the allegory, they are highly symbolic and contain multiple possible interpretations, thus presenting interesting research material and charting new territories for investigation. In this article, I adopt the method of critical visual analysis to explore and problematize representations of Ukraine as a Warrior Woman posted on social media after February 24, 2022. My main focus is on the dominating tendencies these images represent and their relationships with Ukrainian traditional culture. My research material consists of 120 images created by Ukrainian artists after the beginning of the war and collected through the social network Pinterest, which I chose because this popular social net-

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work (it belongs to the list of 10 most visited social networks in the world) was developed specially for collecting and storing images.

2. The Sources of Female Warrior Imagery in Ukraine

Personifications of a state as a human being became really popular in European countries at the beginning of the 19th century with the rise of national movements. The connection between the land and the woman is archetypical, and is present in most cultures since prehistoric times (the land as a Mother Goddess), so generally states were personified in a female body (Höpflinger 2015: 55).

The tendency to personify Ukraine as woman also dates back to 19th-century nationalist beginnings. At the same time, this image was really popular among Russian painters of the 19th century who loved to depict Ukrainian girls in traditional clothes, such as Ilja Jefimowitsch Repin, or Nikolai Efimovich Rachkov. Vladimir Makovskiy's »Ukrainian Girl« (1879, fig. 1) serves as an example: the girl in this portrait looks extremely vulnerable and feminine, evoking in the viewers a desire to protect her, thus translating the dominating narrative of the Russian Empire when Ukraine was seen as the territory in need of help and protection by its »older sister«/»mother« Russia, or »Rossiia-Matushka«, one of the most famous Russian symbols both in Russia and abroad (Riabov 2007: 27).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ukrainian nationalists actively exploited the image of Ukraine as a suffering woman, as seen for instance in the postcard »Ukraine's Golgotha« printed in 1921 in Austria, which depicts Ukraine as a young woman dressed in traditional clothes tied to the cross with a burning village in the background and two small children clutching to her. The woman's untied hair, torn skirt and scratched hands hint at the possibility of a sexual assault she has recently suffered. There are four crows over her head symbolizing the powers fighting on the territory of Ukraine in 1917–1921 (Germany and Austria-Hungary, the White Russian Volunteer ArmyWhite Russian, the Red Army, the Ukrainian anarchists, and the Second Polish Republic Force) and »raping« Ukraine by killing its people and destroying its cities and villages.

The transition from personifying Ukraine as a submissive or suffering woman to visualizing it as a Warrior started less than 10 years ago, during the events on the Maidan in Kyiv (also known under the name of Euromaidan) in 2014. One of the key moments marking this existential shift was the speech given on January 29, 2014 by famous activist and military volunteer Maria Berlinska during the protests. Addressing the audience from the Maidan scene she passionately declared that fighting for Ukraine and its freedom was not an exclusively male right, and women had it as well. She opposed the desire of some men to protect women during Euromaidan and reduce their role to performing exceptionally supporting functions: »Don't ›pro-

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tect‹ someone by taking away their freedom of movement […] You can't force your protection on someone. If an adult, rights-bearing person consciously decides to go to the center of the action to fight for her people – that is her holy, sacred right« (quoted in Phillips 2014: 420). These words were sincerely supported by the women present at the Maidan and led to real actions when women fought alongside with men at the barricades). Out of this dissatisfaction with women's partial exclusion from the Maidan grew an all-women self-defense brigade, the »Woman's Squad« Olha Kobylianska Zhinocha Sotnia (Rubchak 2001: 315), which initiated the complicated process of changing the attitude to fighting women in the Ukrainian society.

Fig. 1: Vladimir Makovskiy, A Ukrainian Girl, 1879. Oil on canvas.
Kyiv, Museum of Russian Art (Tereshchenko Museum). Public Domain.

The events on the Maidan provided the ground for a unique situation when Romantic ideals of Ukrainian national heroes (which had been actively fostered after the crash of the Soviet ideology) became relevant and manifest in the present moment. Ukrainian society had been brought up on heroic, male-centered narratives of defending the motherland, and as a result, had considerable difficulty accepting that women also had the right to take an active part in the Maidan protests. Men and

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women participated in the Maidan protest in near equal numbers: sociological polls showed that 41–47 percent of Maidan participants were women (Onuch 2014). Still, when the Maidan provided the opportunity to try on attractive roles of heroic fighters for the freedom of Ukraine in the real world, men found themselves in a much better situation. While male protesters actively represented themselves as direct descendants of the Cossacks and OUN/UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) fighters, women were offered only supportive traditional roles connected with cooking, cleaning, and some administrative functions (Bolin 2016: 4). In spite of the considerable role of women during the protests, on the discursive level (and in the media), women's protest participation was interpreted largely in the vein of »mothers of the nation« and »inspiration for the male protesters« (Phillips 2014: 425).

One of the main reasons for such a situation was a total lack of female heroic models in the national discourse which could be explained by the masculine nature of the two dominant sources of potential heroic stereotypes in Ukrainian culture. The first one is the military community of the Cossacks which thrived from 15th to 17th century in Zaporizhian district of Ukraine and played an important role in Ukrainian history (Wilson 1996). The cult idealizing Cossack society started yet at the beginning of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the 19th century and was closely connected with the very origin of the Ukrainian national idea (Saltovs'kyi 2002). During the Soviet period, the Cossacks received much less attention, but after the end of the Soviet era in the 1990s, Ukrainian nationalist movement made this military community one of the central symbols of the national revival. References to the Cossacks as an embodiment of Ukrainian national heroism first appeared in the Ukrainian cultural discourse after the fall of the USSR when there was an urgent need to replace Soviet cultural heroes with the ones representing Ukrainian national ideals. Ukrainian Cossacks were a perfect match for this need, and quickly became an essential part of the Ukrainian national myth in an process of nation branding, i.e. the practice of governments, PR consultants, media organizations and corporate business to promote a specific image of a particular nation-state and foster soft power and public diplomacy (Bolin/Ståhlberg 2015). The Cossacks entered almost every sphere of cultural life starting with the national symbols (for instance, the collar and mace used by the Cossacks' leaders, Hetmans, now represent the power of the President) to advertisements of all kinds (Bureychak/Petrenko 2015). It is only logical that images connected with the heroic Cossack past became extremely popular during the period of the Maidan. In his article devoted to the Euromaidan, journalist Arkady Babchenko made this heroic parallel most vivid: »The Maidan is the Sich. The same Zaporozhye Sich [the Cossacks' fortified outpost in the 16th and 17th centuries where they lived and trained between military expeditions, Kolesnyk]. The same semi-marching-semi-military-semi-civilian way of life, which everyone associates with the Cossacks. […] The Maidan is the territory of freedom« (Babchenko 2013). Still, the Cossacks were a typically masculine military

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community which glorified predominantly male values such as courage, physical strength, military brotherhood, and where women performed mostly symbolic and marginalized roles (Kryvoshyy 1998). As a result, this vivid symbol of heroic masculinity actively promoted patriarchal discourse, excluded women, and supported the derogatory attitude towards them.

Fig. 2: Igor Pereklita's »I am a Banderivka« (2007)[1]

A similar situation exists with the second most important source of Ukrainian heroic imagery – the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) founded in 1929 and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (known under the Ukrainian abbreviation UPA) created by the representatives of OUN in 1942. According to T.

1 Available at swiatowidz.pl at http://swiatowidz.pl/2013/11/dresy-i-karki-ksiezna-diana-handlujaca-na-bazarze-banderowka-z-pepesza-ukraina-sztuka-silna/igor-pereklita/. Accessed on 24.08.2023.

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Bureychak and O. Petrenko, OUN/UPA members turned into the images of undefeatable and unvanquished fighters for Ukraine's freedom and attained discursive privileges widely used both in commemorative practices when honoring members of the Ukrainian nationalist underground, as well as in the mass media, and in the nation's historiography (Bureychak/Petrenko 2015: 5). But despite historiographers' attempts to include women into the OUN/UPA heroic narrative, their roles were limited to traditional ones of mothers or loyal wife/lover-helpers serving as couriers, guides and nurses to their heroic men (Khromeychuk 2016; Gavryshko 2017). In certain tragic situations, women could replace their husbands/men in performing heroic missions, but these stories involved a lot of self-sacrifice bordered on martyrdom and had very little in common with the masculine heroism of the narratives about male OUN/UPA fighters (Zariczniak 2015: 68).

The representation of the Cossacks and UPA/OUN fighters as national heroes and the tendency to consider contemporary Ukrainians their descendants reinforces an androcentric model of the Ukrainian nation, implies its homogeneous nature and factually marginalizes women. The events at Euromaidan succeeded only in reestablishing the same stable forms of gender order in the heroic narratives. At the same time, they provoked an active feminist response to this patriarchal discourse.

It is quite emblematic that one of the first artistic images of a Warrior Woman which became widely popular during Euromaidan also referenced the OUN/UPA movement. The painting »I am a Banderivka (OUN/UPA supporter), I am a Ukrainian« (fig. 2) created by Ukrainian painter Igor Pereklita back in 2007 gained popularity after its copies were distributed during the Maidan protests. This color painting imitates propaganda posters of the mid-20th century, and its Maidan black and white cheap copies only enhanced this likeness. The painting features an extremely pretty young girl in a richly embroidered national costume and an OUN military cap on her head with a black machine gun. It is quite remarkable that the artist gave a lot of attention to the girl's long loose hair. Women's hair is an extremely important symbol in all cultures, and Ukraine is no exception. Women's hair is closely associated with wealth and female sexuality, especially long and untied (Cooper 1971: 67). There is still a popular Ukrainian wedding tradition when the hair of a girl is publicly unbraided to be put in a married woman's manner and covered with a headscarf. Besides that, it is worth mentioning that the girl's thick curly hair is golden. Blond hair is not typical for Ukrainian women, but being widely used in popular culture as an essential component of female beauty it emphasizes a woman's grace and tenderness. Though the machine gun is present in the picture, the girl does not hold it in her hands, instead it is hanging »in the air« in front of her. Still, the blonde's hands are not empty: in one hand she holds a grenade and in the other a cluster of guelder rose berries. The latter is an important cultural symbol in Ukraine. On the one hand, it is closely connected with blood (guelder rose berries recall drops of blood) and through it with the concepts of life, love and death. On the

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other hand, this plant symbolizes Ukrainian family values and the nation as a whole (one cluster – one family, a guelder rose bush – Ukraine with its people) (Formanova 1999: 146). Under the girl's feet are two more symbolic objects: a hedgehog with ripe apples, creating connotations with the harvest season (most likely the harvest of Death in this particular situation), and at the same time a strong symbol of self-protection, and a skull. The line next to the skull »Death to Moscow occupants« makes it quite clear whose scull it is. The girl is painted against the landscape with the domination of black and red colors which were the colors of the UPA's flag. This picture quite vividly demonstrates an attempt to construct a new female hero image through connecting it to the heroic past of Ukraine and its male models thus giving it validity. Ironically, instead of presenting a new model of a Woman-Warrior, it mostly succeeds in reestablishing existing stereotypes of women as passive and weak sexual creatures incapable of real fighting. It is difficult to take seriously a nicely dressed blonde with carefully arranged curls wearing a pair of model shoes even if she has a grenade and a machine gun. The girl in the painting looks more like a desired prize for a courageous male warrior than like a warrior herself.

3. Ukraine as a Violent Woman

When the Russo-Ukrainian war started, social media got flooded with female personifications of Ukraine. Very likely V. Putin himself gave an extra push to the topic when, speaking about the Minsk agreements on February 8, 2022, right before the Russian invasion, he made a clear reference to Ukraine as a Woman by saying: »Like it or not, my Beauty, you have to put up with it« (»Нравится- не нравится, терпи, моя красавица«).[2] It is necessary to add that in Russian, this phrase has a clear reference to a sexual assault when a woman has no choice but to wait till the end of the sexual act, trying not to cry of pain. This absolutely horrible sexist phrase metaphorized Ukraine as a submissive desired female, and, as a result, triggered a completely new discourse which took different forms. No wonder that visual images became an essential part of the response being related to the very nature of contemporary culture with the domination of visual imagery.

One representative pair of images created by Ukrainian painter Andrii Yermolenko uses the contrast between Ukraine in the years 2014 and 2022 (fig. 3). In

2 The speech is available on youtube under the title »Putin: Like it or not, you have to put up with it, my beauty.« https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD+%D0%BD%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F+%D0%BD%D0%B5+%D0%BD%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F+%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BE. Accessed on 24.08.2023.

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the first picture, Ukraine is depicted as a helpless teenage girl in a traditional blue and yellow flower wreath and untied hair (an ancient symbol of virginity), who is rudely threatened with a gun in her mouth by an unidentified male hand. The words above her head belong to Putin and refer to the Minsk agreements: »You have to negotiate«. In a reversal to this, the 2022 picture shows Ukraine as a young beautiful woman in a sexually appealing outfit with the same blue and yellow flower wreath on her head holding a gun in the mouth of a kneeling man who looks very much like Putin. Her aggressive body language demonstrates that she knows how to use this weapon, and she is truly capable of protecting her freedom and dignity with it. The phrase in the background says: »I am not your ›Beauty‹«. The dominating colors of the pictures – red-black and yellow-blue – symbolize the flags of UPA and of Ukraine creating a reference to the heroic Ukrainian past.

Fig. 3: Andrii Yermolenko on Twitter, »You have to negotiate« »I am not your ›beauty‹« (2022)[3]

Another popular picture created in response to Putin's metaphor of Ukraine as »Beauty«, also plays on the contrasts. This time the contrast is between the serenity of the background painted in soft colors and featuring an orthodox church, a very attractive young woman in a traditional intricately embroidered white blouse with a red necklace and a folding dark skirt, and a huge modern sniper rifle she holds in her hands. The tender beauty wears sunglasses and holds the gun in a highly professional manner which emphasizes her ability to fight back. The inscription »A beauty

3 Twitter: »I am not your Beauty«, Ukraine World [@UkraineWorld], »if you get the context. »I am not you ›beauty‹. -- great image by Ukrainian painter Andrii Yermolenko«. Twitter, 11.02.2022. https://twitter.com/ukraine_world/status/1492270793367199750.

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will not put up!« gives an answer to Putin showing the readiness of Ukraine to protect its freedom with weapons.

Being different in their artistic manner, both images belong to the first days of the invasion and vividly manifest the main tendencies which became crucial for personifying Ukraine on social media. First of all, they show Ukraine as a young attractive woman. Besides that, they include folklore elements and traditional symbolism, and they depict Ukraine wielding weapons on the level of an experienced professional soldier, and thus capable of protecting herself effectively.

4. Warrior Ukraine as Berehynia and Morana

Although the personifications of Ukraine on social media vary greatly, they can be divided into two big groups according to the traditional cultural images they make reference to. The first group is related to Berehynia, one of the most popular gender stereotypes in contemporary Ukraine. This extremely controversial image demonstrates a bright example of the situation when under the influence of national ideology historical facts are misinterpreted, totally ignored or replaced with officially approved fakes. In Ukraine the image of Berehynia is widely used to represent Woman as Wife, Hostess and Mother as well as Keeper of the traditional family values and Preserver of the collective memory, and therefore is turned into an ideal vehicle for promoting stereotypes characteristic of the patriarchal society.

The first misinterpretation connected with Berehynia is hidden in the name itself. Most Ukrainians sincerely believe that »Berehynia« comes from the word »berehty« meaning »keep safe, protect«. But a thorough research demonstrates that it is far from being so: in this particular case the name comes from a different word »bereh« meaning »a river bank«. As the proof of this explanation serves the fact that, in Old Slavic mythology, people called dangerous mermaid-like female creatures living on the banks of rivers and lakes »berehynia« (Buys'kykh 2018).

Quite amazingly, the transformation of an evil mermaid into a loving goddess protecting Home and Family did not take place many centuries ago but dates back to late 1980s – early 1990s, the time when the Soviet Union collapsed. According to O. Kis, the potential need for new Ukrainian mythology arose during the Perestroika period, when communist ideology lost its monopoly and, as a result, the canon of femininity formed by it – the Soviet superwoman – was finally discredited. In the context of Ukraine's newly won independence and a new national ideology formation, the authorities tried to revive Ukrainian spirituality, ethnic identity and cultural values by updating numerous historical myths in a neo-romantic manner (Kis 2019: 12). As Nina Yuval-Davis explains, nationalism is a maternalist discourse associating women with symbolic and biological reproduction of the nation, when women's bodies are seen in service to the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). Ukrainian na-

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tionalists also see motherhood as the highest social mission of women. The head of the Svoboda Student Organization which promotes the ideas of nationalism in Ukraine, Oleksandr Siudak proudly stated in one of his speeches: »[…] it is mothers who give birth to the future warriors and protectors of the nation… To raise a patriot of the Motherland is a great and sacred matter« (Bureychak/Petrenko 2015: 16). In accord with this principle, Ukrainian state leaders turned to the symbols of femininity and motherhood (Orlova 2010: 207) and made the matriarchy myth an integral part of the Ukrainian national mythology, moving the image of Berehynia to the spheres of politics and social life. This phenomenon of creating a new mythology answering the needs of the state was aptly called »fakelore« by American folklorist Richard Dorson (Dorson 1977: 4), and later got the name of invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). It is also worth mentioning that contemporary representation of Ukraine as a traditionally matriarchal country is firmly connected with the desire of Ukrainian nationalists to distance themselves from Russia. As Kis explains, this was a way to demonstrate that Ukrainians have always been an independent nation with its own customs and traditions different from Russia, thus validating the Ukrainian right to have an independent state. The idea of matriarchy was a very bright and convenient example proving the existence of these differences in contrast to the traditional Russian patriarchal way of life (Kis 2006: 15).

There is nothing surprising in the fact that the symbol of Ukrainian home matriarchy, Berehynia, was created by a man: Ukrainian journalist and writer Vasyl Skurativskyi ín 1987 wrote a novella called »Berehynia« where he literary »invented« this new goddess for Ukraine. What is more, knowing the truth about Berehynia and other creations of new Ukrainian mythology, most professional historians, folklorists, and ethnographers supported this purely political venture by keeping silence about its real sources and aims. Only few researchers raised their voices to oppose this artificial construct. For instance, the famous Ukrainian literary critic and feminist S. Pavlychko stressed the potential danger of spreading and supporting the Berehynia myth, pointing out that though this image fit ideally into the torrent of magical thinking developed by Ukrainians, in fact it expressed disdain to women reducing their lives to supportive and reproductive functions (Pavlychko 2002).

The war has reinforced patriarchal values in Ukrainian society and the binary gender roles have become much more prominent in it. In this system men are the ones who build the state, and their primary duty is to protect their native land and kill the enemies. In contrast, women serve merely as symbols of the nation and their privilege is to bless men's noble fight and patiently wait for their return protecting peace, preserving normal life style and caring for the children. After the end of the war, men should have a cozy home they can return to and the best women waiting for them, ready to become prizes for the courageous heroes. A lot of the images where Ukraine is personified as Woman glorify this perception of the female fate and mourn women's pitiful lot during the wartime. However, as Olesya Khromeychuk

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correctly noted, by viewing women as victims of the enemy or performing auxiliary roles, we deny women's agency (Khromeychuk 2016: 2). Subsequently, many images represent Ukraine as an actor, demonstrating female refusal to obey such passive gender roles and claiming their right to fight for the freedom of the Motherland together with men.

A considerable number of images inspired by the Berehynia myth depict Ukraine in a much more violent way. In one picture, »Welcome to us on Fire«, created by Sveta Gryb (March, 2022), for instance, Ukraine is represented as a young hostess receiving the guests.[4] According to an old Ukrainian tradition, the woman of the house should meet the guests with a loaf of freshly baked bread with salt on an embroidered towel. But in this picture, the bread is replaced with a bunch of burning bottles with Molotov cocktail on a snow-white embroidered towel. The girl's stern gaze and unruly loose hair makes it clear what welcome unwanted Russian quests will receive in Ukraine.

One of the main reasons why the Berehynia myth became a part of Ukrainian cultural discourse so quickly lies in a long tradition of veneration of the Virgin Mary as The Mother of God in Ukrainian culture. The Cossacks considered the Virgin Mary their Holy Patron and worshiped her, and the UPA leaders chose the religious holiday of the Theotokos (Pokrova, October 14) connected with the cult of the Virgin Mary as the day of their organization's founding. The Ukrainian government continued this tradition by making this day the Day of Ukraine's Defenders and a national holiday. The image of Berehynia symbolizing Motherhood got mixed with the image of the Virgin Mary and the result has found its reflection in the popular war imagery.

The idealization of the image of the Mother is a common practice in contemporary society where a highly romanticized vision of motherhood often serves as an effective means of social control. The phenomenon of »new momism« is a vivid proof of such a tendency (Douglas & Michaels 2004). With the beginning of the war this discourse became more important for Ukraine. Images of suffering women and children belong to the most productive ones in the process of framing the war, due to the emotional response of the potential audience, so world mass media keeps publishing them. This tendency led to the creation of new Ukrainian »Madonnas« based on the photos of real Ukrainian mothers and their war experiences. Artist Marina Solomenikova based her »Madonna of Kyiv« on the photo of a mother breastfeeding her newborn baby during a Russian air raid in Kyiv Metro and subsequently the picture was turned into an icon and placed in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Mugnano di Napoli.

Multiple images represent Ukraine as a suffering Mother with a child in her hands in need of protection and help, and as a result, employ martyr discourse in

4 Available at Sveta Gryb/Sunseed Art. Source: UGC Read. https://www.behance.net/svetagryb. Accessed on 25.08.2023.

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relation to it. However, there are authors who refuse to follow this model and while preserving all features of the Berehynia myth, present Ukraine as an active defender of her children and home rather than a helpless mother grieving over their doleful fates (fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Visual art of Ukraine; left: Ukraine as fighting mother/Motanka figure; right: Andrii Yermolenko's Motanka image.[5]

In one of these images created by Andrii Yermolenko, Ukraine is shown as a young pretty mother dressed in traditional clothes with an elaborated flower wreath on her head skillfully holding a gun in her gloved hands. Though the gun is decorated with blue and yellow flowers, it still looks threatening. The woman carries her child dressed in modern clothes in a sling behind her back. This position is very convenient because on the one hand it keeps a child maximally protected, but on the other enables the mother to move freely when it is necessary to fight. The dominating colors

5 Left: »You thought I would wash my face with tears? I would kneel before you? The heir of the pitiful horde, I am too tough for you, I am Ukraine!!!!! I am a nation, a people, I am the light which can never be extinguished! I am the true love which cannot die!« Twitter, 11.10.2022. https://twitter.com/Irina61032137/status/1579906589464854529. Right: Euromaidan Press. »Motanka – an ancient Ukrainian talisman, a symbol linking the past to the present. […]«. Twitter, 08.01.2023. https://twitter.com/EuromaidanPress/status/1611977752382406657.

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of the picture are red and black (the clothes of both the child and the mother) as reference to the heroic UPA, and yellow and blue of the national flag (the flowers on the gun and the background).

There is also a popular tendency of presenting Ukraine through a female image split in two halves – one of them belongs to the times of peace, and the other one is at war. These images symbolize the painful division which exists in the minds and souls of all Ukrainians: life before the war and during the war. A good example of such a division demonstrates an image of a split motanka doll, created by Andrii Yermolenko. First of all, a motanka doll is an ancient Ukrainian talisman of protection made by mothers for their children, and now firmly associated with Berehynia. The doll in this picture is dressed in national embroidered clothes in which dominates the combination of white and red (light and life (red is blood and therefore symbolizes life/death according to Ukrainian traditions) and wears a beautiful red necklace, also typical for Ukrainian traditional outfits. Her head is decorated with a flower wreath with brightly visible national colors, her hair is loose and she holds a baby doll in her left hand. The left side of the picture depicting peaceful Ukraine features dark blue sky with bright stars and high green grass, but the right is being consumed by fire. The right side of the doll is burnt, instead of a flower wreath there is a wreath of thorns on her head, her hair is gray, her necklace is made of cartridge-cases, and she holds a machine gun in her right hand. It is important to mention that she holds the baby and the machine gun in exactly the same equally natural way. The protective female force of motanka is redefined and gets a new meaning under the circumstances of the war.

The double perception of Ukraine as the Mother and the Warrior is vividly presented in »The New Orants« (2022) created by artist Dana Vitkovska (fig.5). This image combines two traditional positions of the Virgin Mary in iconography most popular in Ukrainian Orthodox Church: The Tenderness (the child is nursed and covered) and The Virgin Orants (the depiction of the Virgin Mary in prayer with extended arms) making reference to the double nature of Ukrainian femininity during the war time. As the basis for this work, the artist chose the most famous Virgin Orants in Ukraine, the 6-meter-high mosaic located in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, highly venerated by Ukrainians. Instead of the Virgin Mary's cloak, the Warrior has a masking net which covers the mother and the baby, protecting them. Though the Warrior in the picture does not hold an actual gun, her full ammunition proves that she has one and uses it regularly.

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Fig.5:: Dana Vitkovska, The New Orants[6]

After Ukraine was given a new type of weapon called Javelin, and import from the US, some artists half seriously half-jokingly started to create images of so called St Javelin. These images are rather controversial because they present a woman dressed in The Virgin Mary's clothes holding weapons in her hands. The reactions to St Javelins images were quite different, while part of Ukrainian society liked them and actively reposted on social media, others disregarded and criticized such pictures. The story of the St Javelin mural created by the Kailas-V group in May 2022 in Kyiv is quite remarkable in this respect.

The mural portrays the »Saint Javelin« meme with an Orthodox Madonna clad in green and cradling a Javelin anti-tank missile instead of the baby Crist in her hands (Vidar 2022). This mural caused a strong negative reaction of the Church authorities who considered it disrespectful to the religious people's feelings (Gorpenchuk 2022). As a result, the nimb around St Javelin's head was made invisible with one more coat of paint to reduce the likeness with the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, this mural still looks impressive and brightly conveys the idea of the women's ability to protect what is dear to them in the most violent way.

6 Vitkovska, Dana. »#ukraine.« Facebook, 21 April, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/vitkovskadana/photos/a.152788504084020 6/2742668836028481/. Accessed on 31.08.2023.

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Fig. 6: The Kailas-V group with their St Javelin mural (Vidar 2022).

There are also cases when the image of Berehynia is mixed with other cultural icons to reach a peculiar result. The image called »Berehynia« (2022) by Larysa Shostko portrays Ukraine as a young girl sitting in the middle of the shelter where sleeping children and women are hiding from Russian missiles. The most remarkable thing about the girl is her pose which copies the pose of Cossack Mamay, a popular folk painting character. This desperately courageous warrior connected with the Cossack heroic past is considered a male personification of the national character and depicted in a standard pose with a number of fixed details (his weapon, horse and bandura) (Laska 2007). Though in this case the artist does not follow the tradition in everything, the image is still recognizable. This reference to the Cossack tradition actively implies the idea of a woman as a worthy descendant of the Ukrainian warriors of the past. The girl in the picture is dressed in a combination of traditional clothes and a military uniform, and is additionally draped in the national yellow and blue flag. She wears a very beautiful wreath which contains not only flowers but also wheat ears which imitate the crown of light rays and create a halo around her head. The effect is enhanced by the actual ray of light from above. In one hand the girl holds a machine gun and her other hand covers a red cat sleeping on her laps in a protective gesture. The only other non-sleeping creature in the

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picture is a German shepherd dog. In the background there is a hanging piece of red fabric which falls on the floor under the girl's bare feet and becomes a rivulet of blood when it reaches the margins of the picture. Though the pose of the girl seems relaxed, her body language hints at her potential deathly power and danger for those who will try to harm the ones she protects. The image is highly intertextual: next to the Cossack Mamay's symbolism, it contains multiple references to Ukrainian culture and events of the war. For instance, the crown of wheat ears refers to the role of wheat for Ukraine, the woman with a baby in her hands to the motherhood which needs protection, the dog symbolizing loyalty, and the shelter, which is not a real shelter but an old basement, reminds of Mariupol and other Ukrainian cities where people had to survive under the most difficult circumstances.

The second important group of images makes a reference to Marena/Morana, a goddess of Death in Slavic mythology closely connected with seasonal rituals of death and revival (Ivanov/Toporov 1987). It is remarkable that this group is the biggest one.

The situation with Morana/Marena is not simple. In fact, very little is really known about Slavic mythology because the information about it belonged to oral tradition and was thoroughly erased with the introduction of Christianity. Quite paradoxically, almost everything modern researchers know about Slavic mythology and paganism, they learned from Christian authors who left detailed descriptions of pagan beliefs while fiercely condemning them (Heishtor 2015). The first mentioning of Morana dates back to 1460, when a goddess with a similar name (Marzana) appears in one of the Polish chronicles *Annales* seu croni*cae incliti Regni Polonie* (1460). Still, in the source Marzana is described as the goddess of Harvest, not of Death. Only in 1719 Abraham Frencel in his work *Disertationis historicae tres de Idolis Slavorum* referred to Morana as the goddess of Death for the first time. This idea seemed extremely attractive to Slavic folklorists of the end of the 18th century who started developing it. Nevertheless, it is still not clear if this interpretation has anything to do with historical truth, or if it is a pure invention of A. Frencel's imagination (Mikhaïlov 2017).

The image of Morena as the Goddess of Death became truly popular with the development of Slavic neopaganism after the fall of the Soviet Union. The followers of this teaching consider Morana/Marena a goddess of Death of the pre-Aryan origin, and some of them even claim that German and Scandinavian goddesses of death were derived from Slavic Morana. They energetically develop the image of this goddess adding numerous symbols and features, thus succeeding in making it quite eclectic (Aǰdachić 2021: 169). Most neopagan websites describe Morana as a Slavic goddess of Death and Winter connected with Harvest, the patron of Witchcraft and Justice. Quite often, she is seen as a Slavic version of Kali and depicted with six hands. To her main symbols belong a spindle, which she uses to spin people's lives, a sickle used to cut the threads of lives as well as to harvest, a goblet made of a human

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skull, a heap of skulls under her feet symbolizing her power to take lives and a black moon symbolizing both grief and revival. In such a way, Morana has been turned into an artificial myth related more to the world of fantasy than the world of history. However, this image is widely popular in contemporary mass culture, as multiple personifications of Ukraine with Morana's attributes prove vividly.

The work of Ukrainian artist Alina Antonova »Get out of My Land« (2022) represents Ukraine as a Warrior Maid coming down from the heavens. The composition of the picture resembles paintings with The Virgin Mary descending from the sky. The huge flower and wheat ears wreath on her head imitating a halo, white birds flying in the sky and the play of light in the picture make this religious parallel even more prominent. Still, while the figure of the Virgin Mary is normally depicted against the blue heavens, the sky in this case is covered with heavy clouds which allow only occasional rays of light to go through, a reference to the situation in Ukraine now. The Warrior Maid is dressed in a combination of traditional clothes (an embroidered blouse) and a military uniform (camouflage trousers, high boots and protective equipment). In one of her gloved hands she holds a modern rifle in a professional gesture, her other hand forms a fist. Under her feet there is a heap of human skulls lying on the ground. It is difficult to say whether these are the skulls of innocent victims of her enemies. The desire to find justice and to punish the guilty is quite obvious here. This image is highly representative as it combines Christian motifs (The Virgin Mary) as well as neopagan ones (Morana) to evoke a stronger emotional response of the spectators.

Though the style of Oleksyi Chornyy's work is completely different, he also combines references to important cultural myths in one striking image. Ukraine here is represented as a Warrior Woman dressed in a traditional complicated outfit with a beautiful necklace and a flower wreath. This woman has got several pairs of hands as a neopagan Morana (or Indian Kali). Over her head there is a fiery halo which may belong to two traditions as well – Christian and Hinduist. In the two front hands she holds a machine gun which looks very similar to the one used by OUN/UPA, one more pair holds two blooded sables thus making reference to the Cossack past, and one hand she uses to cradle a baby. The background is divided into two halves: the upper one is black and the down part is consumed by red and orange burning flames. Though the UPA flag has a different order of colors (red/black), the reference to it in this case is evident. This picture demonstrates an attempt to create a new heroic image of Ukraine by appealing to different aspects of its mythological past.

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Fig. 7: Stanislav Lunin, Welcome to Free Ukraine (2022). Courtesy of the artist.

In the last picture, created by Stanislav Lunin, Ukraine is also personified as a Warrior Maid (fig. 7). The girl's body language conveys that she has just finished a successful fight. Her huge gun is still smoking, her beautiful face and her embroidered blouse are splashed with blood, both her own and of the enemies. The girl is dressed in traditional clothes and wears a modern breastplate. Her intricate headdress consists of two parts: a red and white flower wreath with yellow and blue ribbons and a halo made of wheat straw. A lot of attention is given to the gun which is depicted in a very realistic way with many lifelike details. It creates a bright contrast with a highly symbolic background with burned Russian tanks marked by Z and hands of people dying in a sunflower field.

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5. Conclusion

Female representations of Ukraine published on social media (Facebook, Pinterest) during the Russo-Ukrainian war have become powerful carriers of meaning and turned into an ideological weapon used to influence the people's perception of the war and modifying it. These images share a number of characteristic features employing gendered assumptions and manifesting general tendencies which exist in Ukrainian society and, as a result, become vivid illustrations of the dominant ideological narrative.

It is worth noting that the target audience for the images representing Ukraine as a Warrior Woman are Ukrainians. These personifications are complicated allegories containing messages which cannot reach the people with no grounded knowledge of both Ukrainian cultural symbols and stereotypes, and Ukrainian war realities. Most representations draw on the images from the past and have a clearly marked contextual and historical nature, combining emphasis on heroic models derived from the Cossack past and the OUN/UPA struggle.

By and large, when men and women at war are visualized, the main masculine symbol is the strength of the spirit, while female one is the body, however, this is not always the case with the female personifications of Ukraine. Though all images depict Ukraine as a strikingly beautiful maiden or a young woman, only few of them are openly sexual and clearly aimed at the male perception of women as sex objects. Much more often they represent Ukraine as an independent actor capable of protecting not only herself but also her children. Besides that, these representations obviously bring into play a popular cultural myth about a Ukrainian woman as a Matriarch in opposition to the Russian patriarchal family system where a woman is treated as a subordinate.

In general, events involving violence, destruction, death, and suffering often produce imagery in which one party is repeatedly presented as an aggressor and the other as a victim (Bayulgen/Arbatlib 2013), and the Ukrainian war is no exception. This is not the war of the equals: Ukraine as a country is much weaker than Russia, and at the beginning of the war nobody believed in its ability to stop the invader. It is quite significant that Ukraine is mostly personified as a slender maid or a young woman who obviously lacks physical strength and goes on purely on the power of rage and despair. Paradoxically, such a depiction, in spite of all the warrior attributes, still reflects the assumption that Ukraine is a victim and makes the parallel between a rape/female abuse and the war in Ukraine rather prominent. As a result, a feminist idea that a woman should fight against any type of abuse is reinterpreted in a symbolic key: similar to a woman, Ukraine cannot stop fighting because otherwise it may lose not only dignity and freedom, but also life itself. From this point of view, all representations of Ukraine as a Warrior Woman convey a clear pro-war message. This finding suggests that such images are to some extent

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a result of propaganda, and at the same time they transmit a powerful ideological message as well.

Notably, some images are accompanied by visual depictions of the war horrors (dead bodies, skulls, dripping blood), inviting the viewers to scrutinize horrific details. This strategy plays an important role because it is aimed at evoking empathy. Moreover, a number of these representations fall back on fantasy fanart and computer games design, employing widely spread elements and heroic imagery of popular visual culture.

Most viral female representations of Ukraine as a Warrior on social networks can be divided into two main categories: based on the »Berehynia myth« which is associated with defense and protection, and on the »Morena myth« connected with justified revenge and active resistance. Notwithstanding the category, Ukraine as a Warrior is always dressed in a traditional Ukrainian embroidered outfit, though in some cases artists also use elements of contemporary military ammunition to emphasize her status as a soldier. At the same time, the Warrior Ukraine always wears a richly decorated flower wreath which sometimes contains additional elements (wheat ears or straw) turning it into a halo, and has colorful ribbons (blue and yellow/black and red). What is more, most images depict Ukraine with loose hair symbolizing her desire for freedom (though in Ukrainian tradition it was not appropriate for a woman to go with loose hair in public). Other important symbols actively applied by authors, include a Ukrainian traditional red necklace (»namysto« – an ancient protective talisman) and »national« flowers combined with other natural elements (poppies, sunflowers, cornflowers, ears of wheat). Additionally, the images commonly highlight Ukrainian national colors (blue and yellow of the national flag, and red and black of the UPA flag) in the depiction of the background or as elements of the uniform and equipment.

A lot of attention is also given to the depiction of the weapons and other military equipment. Most often Ukraine is depicted carrying modern assault rifles, sniper rifles and machine guns which represent the best species of weapons available for Ukrainian soldiers at the front line.

To sum up, the use of female personifications of Ukraine on mass media during Russo-Ukrainian War is remarkable. It shows active artistic reaction to the events of the war aimed at the consolidation of the nation through recontextualizing the Ukrainian heroic past. At the same time, due to a number of intertextual connections and heavy use of symbols, these images reinforce the role of Ukrainian women in the war who demonstrate extraordinary courage and strength in the face of tragic circumstances.

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