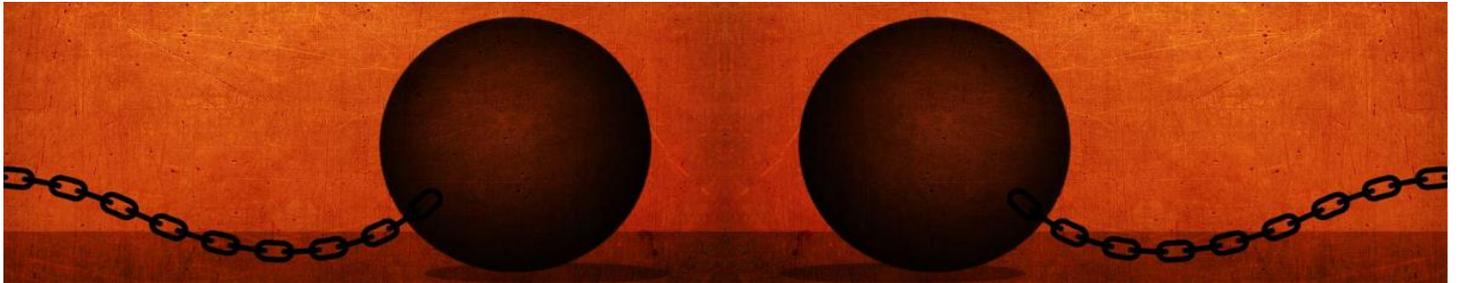


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# GENDER FORUM

An Internet Journal for Gender Studies



## Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction (I)

Edited by  
Judith Rauscher and Marta Usiekiewicz

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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (9th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (9th edition), and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months.

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## Editorial

The last year was a year of transition for *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies*, which is now entering its twentieth year. As the new general editor of *Gender Forum*, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Beate Neumeier, the founding editor and outgoing general editor of the journal, for her decade-long services to *Gender Forum*. I am in awe of what you and your editorial teams have created over the last twenty years and honored that you trust me to continue your work. I would also like to thank Sarah Youssef for her tireless work as managing editor of the journal during the years prior to my arrival and for your willingness to share your expertise during the transition between editorial teams. Your work, like the work of many managing editors, review editors, and student assistants before you, has been invaluable for keeping the journal afloat. Your dedication to the idea behind the Early Career Researchers Issues, in particular, has been an inspiration. I hope the new team can continue the work of *Gender Forum* in your spirit.

This year was not only a year of transition for the journal; it was also the second year of the Covid pandemic. This pandemic has brought with it challenges for everyone, but it has undoubtedly brought more challenges for some than others, further exacerbating the inequalities that exist in academia. As a free open access online journal invested in intersectional feminist publishing practices, *Gender Forum* is dedicated to promoting the work of early-career researchers, marginalized scholars, and precariously employed scholars working in the fields of gender and queer studies. Scholars from these groups have been hit hardest by the adverse effects of the pandemic on scholarly working conditions, especially if they have also had young children or if they have been living with pre-existing medical conditions.

Here at *Gender Forum*, we want to acknowledge the energy it takes to publish in times like the ones we are living in now, especially when your financial situation is not stable, when your future is insecure, when concerns for your own health or the health of others keep you away from networking opportunities, and when you don't have a room of your own

to work in or enough time for your research due to care-taking responsibilities. We also want to acknowledge the pressures that come with deciding not to publish because the hurdles to submit work are too big. This present issue on “Gender, Violence, and the State in Speculative Fiction” and the following two are going to come out later than we had originally intended. We have been trying and will continue to try to process and publish accepted submissions in a timely manner because we know that career opportunities can depend on the timeliness of publications. Yet, we have also been trying and will continue to try to keep the publishing process attuned to the needs of the people hoping to work with us. If you are one of these people, do not hesitate to ask questions about the publishing process and let us know about things that might help us to work with you more productively. We are looking forward to your submissions and proposals.

Judith Rauscher  
General Editor

## Introduction: Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

Edited by Judith Rauscher and Marta Usiekniewicz

Speculative fiction encompasses various types of exploratory genres and media, including science-fiction, fantastic artworks, utopian and dystopian writing, weird fiction and film, as well as post-apocalyptic narratives in literature, on screen, and in video and online games. Depending on their research interests, scholars of speculative fiction across different media have outlined a variety of histories of the genre. Many of the literary texts evoked in these histories combine imaginaries of social and political organization with explorations of gender and issues of violence. For example, Thomas More's *Utopia* (Lat. 1516, Engl. 1551) imagines a more egalitarian society that nonetheless remains strictly patriarchal. It also imagines a perfect government that ensures prosperity and peace by fighting preventive wars, encouraging (assisted) suicide, administering the death penalty to adulterers, and promoting corporal punishment for unruly women and children. Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666), a text in which women leaders bring about a utopian society through armed invasion, anticipates late 19th-century feminist utopian visions such as Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1880-81), where women's liberation is achieved through a state-driven biopolitical project of selective reproduction that eradicates both men and racial others. Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) famously examines the gendered implications of creativity, science, and reproduction, but it can also be read as a commentary on different types of gendered violence and how they are perpetuated by formal and informal social institutions such as universities or the nuclear family. In H.

G. Well's science fiction classic *The Time Machine* (1895), to give a final example, human beings have evolved into two separate but co-dependent species: the predatory Morlocks breed and slaughter the gentle Eloi, who no longer present recognizable gender differences, because, as Well's narrator notes, they are kept in a pre-social and pre-political state of abundance in which competition and interpersonal violence is almost nonexistent, a fact that has made a "specialization of the sexes" obsolete.

Twentieth-century speculative literature and media, too, have frequently addressed issues of gender, violence, and the state. In the Jules Verne inspired silent movie *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), often considered one of the first, if not the first, SF movie, for instance, a group of sages/state-officials travels to the moon, presumably to study and conquer it. Defeated by the moon people, who wear headdresses reminiscent of traditional African masks, the explorers/invasers return to Earth with one of the moon warriors, who is subsequently paraded in a triumphal procession, in which male soldiers and female dancers represent the gendered dimensions of nationalist and imperialist practices of citizenship. During the 1930s and 40s, superheroes such as Superman and Captain America appeared in US comics, protecting the United States and the world from the attacks of fictional aliens and less-than-fictional Nazis. These hypermasculine supersoldiers were soon joined by Wonder Woman and Supergirl, who represented different variations of an idealized yet violent (American) femininity. With the rise in Britain and the US of New Wave SF during the 1960s, feminist science fiction during the 1970s and 80s, and dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction from the 1980s onward, authors such as J. G. Ballard, Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Joana Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and Gerald Vizenor explored connections between (state) violence, capitalism, and its alternatives, technological and scientific progress, and the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Explorations of similar topics together with their ethical implications can also be found (with varying complexity) in SFF blockbusters such as *Mad Max* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Water World* (1995), and *Independence Day* (1998), as well as in speculative TV, such as in the different *Star Trek* series or series such as *Babylon 5* (1993-1998), *The X Files* (1993-2018) or *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007).

Whether as literary texts, film, TV series, comics, or other forms of cultural expression, contemporary speculative fiction continues to discuss (state-)violence and the gendered nature of socio-political relations. It shows how certain gender roles, certain kinds of gender expressions, and certain forms of desire are normalized by the state and its formal and informal institutions, while others are punished and

obscured, whether through direct, structural, or cultural violence. Speculative fiction evokes the successes and failures of familiar as well as unfamiliar political systems together with the various communities and interpersonal relationships that these systems produce. It also imagines what happens to social relations in the absence of a state or traditional forms of organized government. In doing so, it invites reflection on the limitations and potentialities of the modern nation-state in the early twenty-first century, as well as on the various threats to democracy that characterize our current moment. It also invites a more sustained critical examination of how gendered violence is intertwined with different political systems and social formations, of the kinds of violence that these systems legitimize and delegitimize, and of the ways in which issues of gender inform these processes of de-/legitimization. Finally, it allows for imagining alternative political structures and social formations that might do without, or at least less violence, whether physical or psychological, direct or indirect, structural or cultural.

This special issue of *Gender Forum* is part of a two-issue series dedicated to analyzing representations of gender, state, and violence in contemporary speculative fiction. We have been as open with the definition of the word “contemporary” as our contributors suggested that we be through their choices of primary materials. As a result, half of the contributions in the two issues focus on 21st-century works, while the other half deal with works released or published before the turn of the Millennium. The selected essays present a variety of theoretical approaches to a diverse selection of primary sources from the Anglophone world. This exclusive focus on Anglophone texts and visual media was not intended but is doubtlessly a result of our own disciplinary location in (North) American Studies, which brings with it certain interests and networks, but also certain lacunae. Still, we hope that the contributions collected in this issue will also be useful for scholars of speculative works in languages other than English as much as for scholars of gender studies, queer studies, and cultural violence studies who would otherwise not turn to speculative genres and media. After all, the essays that we received in response to our call for submissions touch on many issues that are pertinent for literary and cultural studies at large, including debates about social and environmental injustice, the limits of human agency and control, the tension between resistance and complicity, and the cultural, social, and political conditions necessary not only for individual survival but for collective well-being.

All four essays featured in the present issue reveal the need to reconsider and revise traditional SF tropes and narrative models associated with imagined worlds, sometimes by following the critical revisions of these tropes and models in the chosen works and sometimes

by reading the works against the grain. Melodie Anne Roschman, in her essay "Religious Nationalism, Embodied Violence, and Feminist Subversion in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*," argues persuasively that Alderman's novel uses the political language of American evangelicalism to disguise gendered oppression as a matriarchal rule, a rhetorical move that is revealed through the ways in which gender variance and queerness are treated in the text. Stefan Schubert's "Playing as/against Violent Women: Imagining Gender in the Postapocalyptic Landscape of *The Last of Us Part II*" examines the various types of violence committed by and against the female characters featured in the popular game to discuss the narrative and ludic strategies employed both to justify physical and symbolic violence in the story world and to call into question such justifications. Like the post-apocalyptic world of *The Last of US*, the future world discussed in Linda Hess's and Ina Batzke's text "Gender and Violence in Pandemic Futures in Larissa Lai's *Tiger Flu*" is one in which the (nation-)state as we know it has been replaced by a different kind of political organization, here a corporate one. Lai's novel, Hess and Batzke argue, portrays the various dimensions of gendered, classed, and racialized violence that result from the exploitation and commodification of queer, non-white female bodies in the wake of a global pandemic while also questioning the utopian potential of the all-female communities that have emerged in its aftermath. Finally, Sascha Klein's "Outlaw Territories: Negotiations of Gender and Race on the American Inner-City Frontier in U.S. Urban Crime and Sci-Fi Gang Films of the 1970s and 80s" takes a broader historical view of the developments of a violent, masculinized, and racialized film genre. His discussion of SF films and their precursors illustrates the ways in which the vigilante script has traditionally been used to legitimate state power in the service of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, while certain revisions of this script, for example, in Blaxploitation and speculative cinema, may have the potential to challenge these ideologies along with the institutions upholding them. Finally, in their review of Ryan Lee Cartwright's *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of Rural Nonconformity* (2020), G Angel discusses a study that continues the issue's theme of deconstructing U.S.-American cultural narratives, albeit in a different context: they suggest that the monograph under review provides an alternative history of the anti-idyll in American culture that "challenges the reader to consider the complex interconnections and interdependencies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in rural spaces in an effective and accessible manner."

As the first part of our double issue goes online and as we are working to prepare the second part, which will feature another set of essays discussing cultural representations of gender, violence, and the state in speculative fiction and film, we would like to thank our reviewers for their

willingness to dedicate their time to improving other scholars' work and our contributors for their willingness to engage with the blind peer reviews as well as our own suggestions for revisions of their submissions. We would also like to thank the small team of student research assistants and interns who have been supporting our work as (guest) editors for this issue of *Gender Forum*. Thank you, Julia Hahn-Klose for creating a wonderful new design for the journal and taking care of much of the formatting of this issue, Tensae Desta for the diligent proofreading and providing additional feedback to contributors, and Izel Ercanoglu for designing the cover and helping with the formatting and the website. We couldn't have done this without you.

Judith Rauscher and Marta Usiekiewicz

## Gender, Bodies, and American Christian Nationalism in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

Melodie Roschman, University of Colorado Boulder, United States

### Abstract

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) imagines a world in which women develop the ability to deliver powerful electric shocks, reversing gender relations and leading to the establishment of global matriarchy enforced by violence. While the existing scholarship by José M. Yebra and Alyson Miller focuses on the figure of Mother Eve as a critique of global patriarchal religion as well as the relationship between religious and state power in Bessapara, I attend to the often-neglected figure of Margot, a rising American politician. In this paper, I examine the rhetoric surrounding Margot, arguing that Alderman uses Margot to satirize contemporary white evangelical Christianity and its accompanying right-wing political agendas. I explore the historic connections between abstinence-only sex education, patriarchy, and nationalism, analyze the novel's parody of American political rhetoric, compare the depiction of Margot's queer-coded daughter Jocelyn to gay conversion therapy, and examine the novel's depiction of both sexual and military violence. Ultimately, I argue that *The Power's* depiction of a sexually violent, nationalistic, and ultimately apocalyptic American matriarchy is in fact a representation of American evangelicalism that has "changed Her garment merely" (127).

### Introduction: "Playing with a Nuclear Bomb"

In her account of a visit to a youth rally organized by Silver Ring Thing, a USA-based sexual purity organization, Sara Moslener relates the lyrics of an original song performed for the mostly-teen audience: "The world says use a condom/ If we told you you'd be fine, we'd be lying to your face/It's like playing with a nuclear bomb/ You could wipe out the whole human race" ("Nuclear" 266). The song, Moslener notes, while meant to be humorous and hyperbolic, is part of a larger rhetorical trend within the American white evangelical Christian sexual purity movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: a trend in which teenagers' individual commitment to sexual abstinence, heteronormativity, and women's submission is directly linked to national power and military success. "The moral absolutism of the purity movement," she explains, "cannot be conveyed without the construction of a moral economy that works alongside the larger cosmic battle between good and evil" (*Virgin* 262). In the rhetoric of Silver Ring Thing and other similar organizations, teenagers are actors in a battle for American sovereignty and national cohesion: for the nation to be pure and strong, they must be pure and strong as well. Conversely, if teenagers choose to have premarital sex, use birth control, or question traditional gender roles, they threaten to destroy the nation and hasten Satan's triumph in the imminent apocalypse. While such connections between military nationalism, Christianity, and adolescent sexuality may seem laughable or limited to fringe groups, the influence of purity rhetoric, abstinence-only sex education, and nationalism is prevalent in twenty-first century American discourse and legislation. As Heather Hendershot explains, evangelical Christian abstinence campaigns of the early 1990s found purchase in federal and state legislation, leading to funding for abstinence-only sexual education programs in public schools that continued through the Bush, Obama, and Trump eras (Fox et al. 497).<sup>1</sup> "Chastity persists as a *moral* movement in much of the media addressed to evangelicals," she explains, "but outside of that community evangelical politicians have transformed chastity into a *health* movement under the banner of 'abstinence.' Evangelicals have succeeded in bringing abstinence into the public sphere, in part at least, by obscuring the evangelical roots of their anti-sex (and anti-safe-sex)

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<sup>1</sup> Funding for abstinence-only sex education was significantly reduced during Obama's presidency, but not eliminated; Donald Trump's administration, predictably, reduced funding for comprehensive sex education and increased the funding for abstinence-only sex education once again.

movement" (90).<sup>2</sup> By disguising moral judgments about gender and sexuality as public health policy, evangelical purity advocates were able to embed their teachings about the relationship between gender, sex, and nation within mainstream political and educational rhetoric.

Silver Ring Thing's equivocation of pre-marital sex using a condom and widespread nuclear destruction not only offers a window into the rhetoric of the evangelical sexual purity movement and its wide-ranging political effects; it also provides useful context for Naomi Alderman's 2016 feminist dystopia, *The Power*. In this paper, I examine the novel's treatment of religious power, gendered violence, sexuality, and nationalism. While the existing scholarship focuses on *The Power's* depiction of the prophetic Mother Eve and her founding of a global matriarchal religion, I argue that *The Power* also functions as a specific critique of white American evangelicalism and its rhetorics of patriarchal dominance, sexual purity, and national power. Through an examination of the rhetoric used by the novel's American politician Margot, a comparison of the queer figure of Jocelyn to gay conversion therapy rhetoric, and an examination of the novel's depiction of both sexual and military violence, I argue that *The Power's* depiction of a sexually violent, nationalistic, and ultimately apocalyptic American matriarchy is one of an American evangelicalism that has "changed Her garment merely" (127).

### **American Evangelicals, Gender, and Sex**

Before commencing my argument in earnest, I would like to provide some background for my deployment of the term "evangelical" and my accompanying theoretical framework. Contemporary American evangelical Christians do not adhere to one creed, share one common theological understanding, or belong to one denomination. Indeed, self-identified evangelicals often disagree upon who belongs within this category. The most commonly agreed upon definition of "evangelical" is likely the one put forward by historian David Bebbington in 1989, in which he identifies evangelicals as Christians who share four main qualities: biblicism (a high regard for the Bible), crucicentrism (a focus on Jesus' crucifixion and its saving effects), conversionism (a believe that humans need to be converted

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<sup>2</sup> I do not discuss the evangelical politics of abortion in this essay, but it is worth noting that abstinence-only sex education is pushed as one part of a platform that claims to be invested in reducing abortion; this is not supported by the evidence (Santinelli et al. 273). As Randall Balmer has elucidated, evangelicals historically did not oppose abortion, but seized on it as a useful political issue several years after *Roe v. Wade* passed when they realized that their pro-segregation politics were becoming unviable.

to Christianity), and activism (the belief that faith should influence one's public life) (Bebbington 4).<sup>3</sup> That being said, historians and commentators have come to specifically understand American white evangelicals from the 1970s through the present day as being a group united as much by their similar cultural touchstones and political affiliations as by their theological similarities. Historian Kristen Kobes Du Mez argues throughout *Jesus and John Wayne* (2020), her study of evangelical masculinity and nationalism, that today evangelicals self-identify primarily along political lines: "Many Americans who now identify as evangelicals," she writes, "are identifying with this operational theology—one that is Republican in its politics and traditionalist in its values" (7). Furthermore, I want to emphasize the *whiteness* of the evangelical movement I am examining—while there are self-identified evangelicals within every major ethnic group in the United States, the evangelical rhetoric I analyze in this paper originates with white leaders and organizations, and implicitly supports the project of white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> As Kobes Du Mez notes, it is significant that 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016. She argues that the white evangelical embrace of Trump was the "culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad" (3). This ideology is specifically invested in the protection of white, heterosexual womanhood by white men, and the maintenance of the United States as a white supremacist, patriarchal Christian military power.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As Kristen Kobes Du Mez points out, this definition is complicated by the fact that many people who claim the term evangelical hold views traditionally defined as heresy, and many people who do hold these four distinctives do not identify as evangelicals. In one study, for example, just 25 percent of Black Christians who subscribe to all four "evangelical distinctives" self-identify as evangelical (6).

<sup>4</sup> While this paper does not expound upon the novel's treatment of race, Alyson Miller and Abigail Nussbaum have both rightly criticizing *The Power* for overgeneralizing experiences of gendered oppression while overlooking the axis of racial oppression. This is especially curious because two of its characters are non-white: Tunde is Nigerian, and Allie is biracial, but their status as people of color is never relevant to their storylines (save for some racialized dislike of Allie by her stepparents at the beginning of the novel).

<sup>5</sup> As Moslener examines in her history of American purity campaigns, contemporary purity campaigns and abstinence-only sex education are the descendants of eugenicist propaganda and, even earlier, 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts to prevent white women from having sex with Black men. For a thorough genealogy of purity culture, see Moslener's excellent *Virgin Nation* (2015). For more on the white supremacy of the Trump campaign and presidency, see Jean Guerrero's *Hatemonger: Stephen Miller, Donald Trump, and the White Nationalist Agenda* (2020).

With this understanding in mind of evangelical ideology and rhetoric as primarily political and cultural in nature, I focus on the following two central characteristics of American evangelicalism in this paper: heteronormative, complementarian understandings of gender and sexuality, and a commitment to maintaining national power. Complementarian theology is a theological and cultural mindset that asserts that God created men and women to occupy distinct, fixed, and separate roles: men are called to lead, protect, and be breadwinners, and women are called to submit, nurture, and be homemakers.<sup>6</sup> While proponents of complementarian theology frame it as “separate but equal,” critics argue that complementarianism perpetuates white patriarchal power and makes no space for women’s empowerment or LGBTQ+ identities. Kobes Du Mez argues that complementarian theology evolved as a direct reaction to the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s: “the virulence with which conservative Christians opposed gay rights,” she writes, “was rooted in the cultural and political significance they placed on the reassertion of distinct gender roles during those decades. Same-sex relationships challenged the most basic assumptions of the evangelical worldview” (63). As I note in my introduction, the evangelical commitment to heteronormative, patriarchal gender roles is directly linked to the strength and perpetuation of the American nation state as a Christian military power. “A father’s rule in the home,” Kobes Du Mez explains, “is inextricably linked to heroic leadership on the national stage, and the fate of the nation hinges on both” (4). Much as in the Silver Ring Thing rhetoric cited above, in this framing the maintenance of strong and distinct gender roles and sexual norms is directly related to national power. Because of this investment in power and control, evangelical rhetoric frequently employs threats of violence, chaos, suffering, and even death to reinforce gender and sexuality norms. As Jason Bivins explains in *Religion of Fear* (2008), evangelical messaging provides its audience with a clear picture of a world clearly divided between good and evil, in which evangelical Christians—their teachings, their convictions, and their choices—stand

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<sup>6</sup> The most prominent advocate for complementarian theology is probably the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, an evangelical parachurch organization created in 1987 by several evangelical leaders, including Wayne Grudem and John Piper, aiming to “set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women, created equally in the image of God, because these teachings are essential for obedience to Scripture and for the health of the family and the church” (“Mission”). The Council has released two notable statements: the Danvers Statement, in 1989, which opposes women’s ordination and gender-neutral Bible translations, and the Nashville Statement, in 2017, which condemns gay and trans identities as incompatible with Christianity and the Bible.

alone and steady in the face of chaos. This messaging infuses political and social issues with mythic importance: “creators provide for audiences and readers an interpretive template that posits demonological causes for political decline, and they situate readers in a historical framework and define for audiences a coherent, unchanging place therein” (Bivins 9). Questions about sexual orientation, gendered bathroom use, female clergy, and other shifts in understandings of gender and sexuality have cosmic stakes: culture warriors understand themselves as battling for the soul and survival of the nation. As I demonstrate in the following analysis, *The Power* both reflects this relationship between heteronormativity and national power and draws attention to it by inverting it through its depiction of a violent, matriarchal United States.

### ***The Power* and Religion**

*The Power* provides readers with a vision of a society in which women suddenly discover they possess organs that allow them, much like electric eels, to deliver powerful electric shocks to attackers or victims. In the years following this discovery, the balance of power around the world gradually shifts, as women first seek revenge for misogynistic violence, then come to dominate politics, media, religion, the military, and everyday life, before eventually bringing about nuclear war and apocalypse. Alderman traces these developments mainly through the eyes of four characters: Tunde, a Nigerian photojournalist and the novel's only male protagonist; Roxy, the powerful and cynical daughter of a British crime boss; Margot, a mid-level American politician, and Allie, an abused foster child who becomes the prophet and face of a new, matriarchal religion based around “Mother Eve.” The Mother Eve religion eventually spreads worldwide, reinterpreting diverse religious texts to centralize female power, and aids in propping up Bessapara, a matriarchal military state in former Moldova. Further complicating the text is a frame narrative, set in a matriarchal mirror of our contemporary publishing world, in which the young male author Neil Adam Armon (an anagram of “Naomi Alderman”) writes to his mentor, an arrogant female author named Naomi, about his new speculative historical novel, also entitled *The Power*. Upon its publication, Alderman's novel generated a great deal of buzz and critical acclaim, in no small part because it resulted from a mentorship program that paired Alderman with legendary science fiction author Margaret Atwood. Due to this mentorship as well as thematic links between the works, critics have connected *The Power* to Atwood's own gendered dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). NPR's Lynn Neary, for example, writes that “it seems fitting that 2017 has been bookended by two

novels about women and power”: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which reached best-seller lists following the novel’s successful Hulu adaptation and the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, and *The Power*, which had just won the Bailey Women’s Prize for Fiction and appeared on several year-end best-of lists.<sup>7</sup> Despite critics making connections between the themes of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Power*, few have connected the novels’ depictions of American Christianity. Extremist Christianity is, of course, at the heart of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as numerous critics have explored in depth.<sup>8</sup> What little scholarship exists concerning *The Power*, however, has mostly overlooked the heritage of specifically American Christianity that backgrounds the novel. José M. Yebra, in his study of violence and dystopia in *The Power*, notes that “the novel is deeply embedded in tradition, particularly Judaeo-Christianity and its palimpsestic substrate, namely nature and biology” (74). He focuses mainly on the connection between Mother Eve teachings and violence; when he critiques religious radicalism in the novel, however, he connects it mainly to Islamic terrorism (79). Alyson Miller, meanwhile, refers in passing to the novel’s depiction of “abstinence culture,” but focuses most of her study on the depiction of sexual violence and its relationship to power (409). Neither of these critics dwell on the figures of Margot and Jocelyn, instead locating most of their examination of religion in the text on the central religious figure of Mother Eve. As such, I suggest, my examination of evangelical purity rhetoric and gendered nationalism within *The Power* is a novel and meaningful intervention.

While it is tempting to read *The Power* as a vision of matriarchy or a feminist dystopia, I read the novel primarily as satire of current patriarchal power—including contemporary American evangelicalism. As Lucy Atkins argues, Alderman uses textual codes to signal parody, framing her novel using a “self-referential play on notions of fact and fiction, authorship, genre and gender” (n.p.). By reading the novel as satire, the reader is encouraged not only to imagine a strange and eventually horrific alternate society, but rather to also recognize the parallels between the novel’s society and ours. The novel’s matriarchy, Miller argues, functions “in the narrative [...] not to suggest a new way of being, but rather to underline an existing dynamic in

<sup>7</sup> While *The Power* was published in the UK in 2016, it was released in the United States in 2017, where it received widespread acclaim and press coverage.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Kristy Tenbus’s “Palimpsestuous Voices: Institutionalized Religion and the Subjugation of Women in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”; Christabelle Sethna’s “‘Not an instruction manual’: Environmental degradation, racial erasure, and the politics of abortion in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”; and Ray Horton’s “Is There a Context for Gilead? Reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Lila* under the Christian Right.”

which self and other perpetually collide” (407). She quotes NPR’s Michael Schaub: “What a man reads as a horrifying dystopia, a woman reads as a fairly accurate state of the world as it is today” (407). While I corroborate Miller’s assertion that the novel functions as a satire, I believe that in focusing her attention on the figure of Mother Eve/Allie, and worldwide patriarchy more broadly, she overlooks the specificity of Alderman’s parody of American evangelical rhetoric.

### **Margot Cleary and the Politics of Evangelicalism**

A close examination of the figures of Margot and Jocelyn Cleary demonstrates how Alderman specifically satirizes contemporary evangelical Christianity and its ties between gender, sexuality, and nationalism. As a mid-level American politician in the rapidly changing United States of *The Power*, Margot Cleary provides a window into American politics before, during, and after the shift between patriarchy and matriarchy. In the turmoil that follows women’s sudden acquisition of superior physical power, Margot reports fear and outrage from religious leaders: “Preachers and televangelists grab the news and squeeze it, finding in the sticky entrails the unmistakable signs of the impending end of days” (22). In one of her chapters, Allie corroborates this reaction, noting that “in those days, in the South, there were many preachers who explained it: this is a punishment for sin, this is Satan walking among us, this is the sign of the end of days” (89). This reaction reflects the logic of an evangelical worldview as outlined above by Bivins, in which disruptions to existing gender dynamics are understood as apocalyptic and threatening to national security.<sup>9</sup> We see a similar connection, for example, in the famously controversial remarks of American evangelical leader Jerry Falwell Sr. following 9/11.<sup>10</sup> In an appearance on fellow evangelical leader Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club*, Falwell declared, “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians [...] I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen’” (“Falwell”). Falwell, much like the televangelists in Alderman’s novel, draws a direct line between national disaster and deviance from heteronormativity, suggesting a cyclical cause-and-effect relationship between gender and

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<sup>9</sup> Though to be fair, gender norms notwithstanding, any human developing powers similar to those of an electric eel or a member of the X-Men would no doubt be (pardon the pun) shocking.

<sup>10</sup> Falwell Jr. is also the founder of the evangelical Liberty University, one of the largest Christian universities in the world. His son and its current president, Jerry Falwell Jr., is famously a close friend and political ally of Donald Trump, in whom he says “evangelicals have found their dream president” (Mazza).

sexual deviance and attacks on the state. In *The Power*, religious fear of the shift in gendered power is matched by political anxiety. However, much as in the rhetoric surrounding purity culture and abstinence-only sex education in the United States today, when reactions towards women's electroshock powers appear in the political realm in the novel, politicians initially use more veiled language to convey their messages.

In her depiction of American political reactions to the emergence of "the power,"<sup>11</sup> Alderman explicitly invokes the language of evangelical sexual purity. Throughout the novel, women's ability to electroshock is sexualized: Tunde gets aroused at the idea of being shocked by a crush, Roxy has boys begging her to shock them during sex, and Margot compares her first experience using the power to losing her virginity: "It feels as natural as anything she's ever done, as known and understood as the first time she had sex, as her body saying, Hey, I got this" (70). Correspondingly, the fictional government direction about how to regulate the power parody existing American conservative government instruction regarding sexuality:

The official line for now from the Mayor's office, handed out on photocopied sheets to schools across the major metropolitan area is: abstinence. Just don't do it. It'll pass. We keep the girls separate from the boys. There'll be an injection within a year or two to stop this thing happening and then we'll all go back to normal. It's as upsetting for the girls to use it as it is for their victims. (70)

There are two aspects of this passage that I want to highlight. The first, and most obvious, is its echo of evangelical purity language: "abstinence. Just don't do it." Girls' use of the power is seen as abnormal and threatening to their male peers and to society as a whole, reflecting purity rhetoric such as that seen in the introduction to this paper. As Mosleener writes:

[...] purity culture demonstrates how sexual immorality poses a legitimate threat to the individual and to the collective well-being of the American citizenry. In doing so, evangelical purity culture marks adolescent sexual purity as a venue rife with opportunities for personal transformation, national revitalization, and quite possibly, the salvation of American civilization. (*Virgin* 15)

As Mosleener's analysis suggests, we can find a second aspect of purity rhetoric in the above passage from *The Power*: the argument that sex is damaging not only to others and to the nation but also to the self. The government argues that using the power is "as upsetting for the girls to use as it is for their victims" (70). By framing girls' use of the power as mutually

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<sup>11</sup> Terms are bound to get confusing; when I refer to "*The Power*" I'm discussing the novel; when I refer to "power" I'm speaking of the general theorization of relations of violence, control, and influence; when I refer to "*the power*" in the context of the novel I'm referring to women's electroshock abilities.

damaging, the government assumes that there cannot be consenting, pleasurable uses of the power (an assumption that we see refuted throughout the novel). Furthermore, this passage also works to cast teenage girls as passive and equally victimized, suggesting an effort to maintain a status quo in which boys are naturally active and girls are naturally passive. This rhetoric surrounding girls' power shifts in correspondence with changes in the structure of society; later on in the novel, rhetoric around teen girls' use of the power more closely reflects evangelical descriptions of male sexuality.

As women become the dominant gender in *The Power*, Alderman uses Margot to satirize evangelical attitudes towards both male power and male sexuality. One of the first hints of this shift occurs when Margot finds out that her daughter Jocelyn has participated in shocking and seriously injuring a male classmate. "There were...three other girls?" Margot supplies in response to her daughter's ashamed silence. "I know they started it. That boy should never have been near you. They've been checked out at John Muir. You just gave the kid a scare" (24). In this scene, Margot employs minimizing techniques to absolve Jocelyn of responsibility for violence: she blames her peers for their bad influence, as well as victim-blaming the boy for putting himself in the situation where he got hurt. In doing so, she mirrors patriarchal constructions of masculine power and coy feminine weakness—constructions that exist within American society as a whole but are especially egregious within evangelical purity rhetoric. As Hendershot explains in her analysis of conservative evangelical culture, evangelical narratives of power and sexuality tend to frame teenage girls simultaneously as sexless beings desperate for affection and as dangerous temptresses whose bodies invite attack; boys, meanwhile, are seen as being completely at the mercy of their sex drives. Hendershot writes:

By constructing a teen body utterly lacking self-control, a body that can only be controlled or cured by a spiritual commitment to chastity, evangelical books, magazines, and videos may not only be dangerous to teen self-image but also may encourage boys to be sexually violent and girls to see submission to sexual violence as natural. Boys and girls who are repeatedly told that at a certain point they are no longer in control may as a result feel less in control, and it may actually be more difficult to stop sexual activity if one conceives of one's body as a runaway train. (9)

As Hendershot notes, a construction of the body as dangerous and difficult to control absolves boys of moral responsibility for their actions and furthers victim blaming for girls. This logic parallels the logic of the above passage, in which Margot constructs Jocelyn as blameless within the interaction with the injured boy. Lest the connection between violence and teenage sexuality

seem dubious here, I turn to Margot's thoughts a few sentences later, in which she considers Jocelyn's inability to talk to her mother about her actions and feelings: "Margot remembers trying to talk to her own mother about boys or the stuff that happened at parties. About how far was *too far*, where a boy's hand should stop. She remembers the absolute impossibility of those conversations" (25). Here, Margot explicitly links Jocelyn's use of the power to her own adolescent experience—not only of sexuality, but also of sexual threat. The irony, however, is of course that now her daughter is in the position of the aggressor, not the victim.

This societal shift towards excusing powerful women for their aggression and framing men as in need of protection becomes especially clear in the novel's depiction of Margot's political trajectory. Margot begins her rise to power by advocating for training camps in which teen girls teach each other to use the power effectively. She frames this project as a civic one, in which teenagers will learn to harness and control abilities that would otherwise be incredibly dangerous. In a television appearance promoting the program, she quotes a Biblical passage: "In times like these, we should probably remember what the Bible says: 'the highest among us aren't always the wisest, and the older generation isn't always the best to judge what's right.' She smiles. Quoting the Bible—a winning strategy" (98).<sup>12</sup> Two things are notable about this passage. The first is the most obvious: Margot cynically deploys the Bible as a politically strategic intertext, indicating the popularity of Biblical messaging with American voters and suggesting that politicians often use Biblical intertext for political gain without necessarily believing the Bible's messages. Secondly, Margot's choice of verse reflects the shifting public attitudes regarding gender. She frames herself simultaneously as an underdog—not "the highest among us," as well as a representative of youth and innovation—not part of "the older generation." She adds to this impression by having Jocelyn join her and "testify" to the damage of her encounter with the boy she hurt. "It was scary," Jocelyn says. "I hadn't learned how to control it. I was worried I could have really hurt him. I wished...I wished someone had shown me how to use it properly. How to control it" (97). By having Jocelyn promote her agenda, Margot uses a rhetorical tactic that, while common, is especially pervasive in abstinence-

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<sup>12</sup> Margot is likely paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 1:27-29—"But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (NIV). This verse is famously used—far more earnestly—in the climax of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

only messaging: the appeal to the remorseful young person. In this tactic, popularized by anti-drug PSAs and afterschool specials, a teenager recounts how they lacked the knowledge and control to self-regulate, made a terrible mistake, and wish that their peers could learn from them to prevent being hurt. As Caroline Blyth explains, cautionary tales framed as testimony from peers are popular evidence for writers and activists advocating for sexual purity: teens' "[...] virginity is fetishized, and its 'loss' is mourned as a source of their remorse, unhappiness, and sin" (19). Jocelyn's statement follows the same blueprint as these cautionary tales: she used the power (her sexuality) instead of knowing how to control it, she is remorseful and hurt, and she wishes that she had someone to teach her how to control the power (her sexuality).

As Margot's political rise demonstrates, however, abstinence rhetoric and evangelical gender roles are often a smokescreen for the promotion of gendered power and national security. The turning point in Margot's career comes while she is running for governor, in a televised debate with her rival and former boss, Daniel. Daniel's team pursues traditionally gendered attacks, accusing her of being cold and hard and a neglectful mother and failed wife, and they appear to be working until Margot gets angry and shocks Daniel slightly. While voters claim, in polls, to disapprove of Margot's use of violence, she wins in a landslide:

It turns out the voters lied. Just like the accusations they always throw out at hard-working public servants, the goddamned electorate turned out to be goddamned liars themselves. They said they respected hard work, commitment, and moral courage. They said that the candidate's opponent had lost their vote the moment she gave up on reasoned discourse and calm authority. But when they went into the voting booths in their hundreds, and thousands, and tens of thousands, they'd thought, You know what, though, she's strong. She'd show them. (187)

Through the voice of Daniel's furious campaign manager, Alderman contrasts voters' attested values—hard work, commitment, and moral courage—with their actual allegiance: strength, as seen through “righteous,” retaliatory violence. Though *The Power* was published in Britain a week before the 2016 American election, Margot's election bears a striking similarity to the surprising triumph of Donald Trump, who rode to power supported by a base of white evangelicals. While media outlets covering Trump's campaign and election into office reeled in an attempt to understand how so many professed Christians would vote for a candidate who seemingly betrayed their moral values, other critics argued that Trump represented a form of militant masculinity and brash thirst for power that reassured evangelical voters. As Adam Serwer famously argued in a piece for *The*

*Atlantic*, entitled “The Cruelty Is the Point,” “Trump’s only true skill is the con; his only fundamental belief is that the United States is the birthright of straight, white, Christian men, and his only real authentic pleasure is in cruelty” (n. p.). Kobes Du Mez, meanwhile, points to evangelical support of Ronald Reagan—another Hollywood figure who promised to protect American interests and take hardline stances against crime and communism—over devoted Baptist Jimmy Carter as a precedent for this seeming hypocrisy: a precedent that Alderman implicitly draws on with Margot’s election. Margot’s election marks a turning point for gendered power in the novel, as well as offering a sharp critique of contemporary evangelical politics: voters and politicians alike, Alderman suggests, may claim moral superiority, but their real alliance is with power, violence, and defiant aggression.

### **Conversion Therapy, Homophobia, and the Queerness of Jocelyn**

My analysis of Margot as a critique of evangelical nationalism and purity rhetoric is complicated and deepened by the queer coding of her daughter, Jocelyn. Jocelyn is positioned throughout the novel as an unruly figure not only for her inability to control her power, but also for its frequent inexplicable absence. After her first television appearance, before the complete shift in global gender dynamics, Jocelyn receives hate mail linking her unruliness to an inability to conform to gender roles: “You want to know *why*?” her critic writes. “You want to know if anyone else is having trouble, too? You don’t know the half of it, sister. This rabbit hole goes all the way down. Your gender-bending confusion is just the start of it. We need to put men and women back where they belong” (90). The letter writer explicitly links Jocelyn’s struggles with her body and place in society as linked to her inability to conform to existing gender roles, describing her as “gender-bending.” The use of this term is especially fascinating, since at this point Jocelyn does not dress or act in any gender nonconforming way, nor have men traditionally had electroshock powers. Rather, the letter writer is threatened by Jocelyn’s power as a woman and believes that a strict adherence to traditional roles will rehabilitate the status quo. Notably, however, even as women are widely embraced as the more powerful gender, Jocelyn remains coded as queer. She begins secretly dating Ryan, a boy she met online who has a secret, low-functioning skein—the in-universe term for the bundle of nerves located on women’s collarbones that allows them to

electroshock people—due to a “chromosomal irregularity.”<sup>13</sup> Jocelyn’s attraction to Ryan is described as simultaneously physical and emotional: she enjoys talking to someone who also doesn’t have much consistent power in their skein, but also, “Jos quite likes girls. She quite likes boys who are a bit like girls” (171). The novel does not directly describe Jocelyn’s sexual orientation or gender identity other than with this statement: it does not name her as queer, bisexual, or some other identity, nor does Jocelyn unpack the physical essentialism of her comparison of Ryan to a woman because of their shared skein. This is, arguably, due to Alderman’s framing of gender as binary and physically-determined throughout *The Power*. As Constance Grady critiques, “at no point does she look at what it would mean for the trans community. It’s as though Alderman cannot imagine critiquing our current patriarchal system of gender without erasing trans people from the world, which is one of the fundamental failures of this novel” (n. p.). Nevertheless, if one continues to read the novel partially as a satire of evangelical Christianity, then Jocelyn’s queerness—and Margot’s treatment of her—are especially pointed.

I argue that *The Power*’s connection between Jocelyn’s erratic supply of electricity and her queerness serves to satirize evangelical narratives of homosexuality, gender, and national power. Miller has criticized the depiction of Jocelyn in the novel, arguing that:

Given that Jos is one of the few characters signified as queer, there is, arguably, a problematic imbrication of her dysfunctional skein and an ‘othered’ sexual identity. Such a pairing evokes a rhetoric of biological fault, an error of neurological wiring that might be rectified via the regime of Margot’s NorthStar training camps, a ‘force for good’ designed to train and regulate the use of the power in young girls” (428).

While I believe that Miller is correct in recognizing the novel’s connection between Jos’s sexual identity and apparent biological dysfunction, I assert that she overlooks how *The Power* uses Jocelyn to satirize evangelical rhetoric regarding queerness—especially male “homosexuality.” While there are outliers amongst evangelicals, the vast majority of evangelicals throughout modern history have condemned nonheteronormative gender expressions and sexual orientations as explicitly sinful and incompatible with Christian faith. This condemnation stems in part from an anxiety regarding the unruly queer body: a body that—as evangelical Christian leaders readily

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<sup>13</sup> Despite his “chromosomal irregularity,” Jocelyn (and the narrator) exclusively refer to Ryan as a boy, not as nonbinary, intersex, or transgender. As I discuss further later in this paper, the novel does not feature a serious engagement with trans identities or other forms of gender diversity.

admit—threatens complementarian gender roles and patriarchal masculinity.<sup>14</sup> This sense of threat is demonstrated by the rhetoric and practices put forward by evangelical proponents of so-called gay conversion therapy. Proponents of gay conversion, whether encouraging at-home study and reflection or urging concerned parents to enroll their errant offspring in camps and programs, frame the queer individual as a) fundamentally flawed or deviant, and b) capable of being rehabilitated (Bjork-James 647).<sup>15</sup> This model is framed in explicitly gendered terms: queer individuals experience “same-sex attraction” because of childhood trauma or a failure of their relationship with their parents, and they can be cured through a combination of religious faith and gender conformity. As Kristin Wintermute describes, for example, at Exodus International meetings “workshops focused on embracing traditional masculinity or femininity, as antidotes to being gay. Conference attendees also took part in gender-conforming activities, such as the men playing football and the girls wearing make-up, as conditioning towards becoming what ‘God wants’ you to be” (n.p.). Gender conformity is seen as transformative: the body is pliable, but God’s power of transformation is not enough; it must be augmented by performing heteronormative masculinity and femininity. The focus on adhering to strict gender roles within gay conversion therapy suggests the anxiety at its core: not that the non-conforming individual is sinful, but rather that the unruly individual is a threat to the continuation of patriarchal masculinity and complementarian understandings of gender and sexual orientation. Within this context, then, the connection between Jocelyn’s queerness and her “faulty wiring” that needs to be fixed at the NorthStar training camps should

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<sup>14</sup> This is seen clearly, for example, in the “Nashville Statement” (2017) from the previously introduced Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which argues that individuals cannot simultaneously be Christians and affirm LGBTQ+ identities, and was co-signed by over 150 evangelical leaders. In linked articles, the Nashville Statement affirms “divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect[ing] God’s original creation design” and denies “that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God’s original creation” (Bolz-Weber n.p.). In response, progressive Lutheran pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber led her LGBTQ+ affirming congregation, House for All Sinners and Saints, in composing The Denver Statement, which critiqued evangelical connections between holiness, masculinity, and complementarianism, and insisted on the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ Christians and bodies.

<sup>15</sup> Ex-gay ministries including Exodus International and Focus on the Family’s Love Won Out were both popular and profitable in the 1990s and early 2000s, but have faced increasing scrutiny and opposition in recent years. In 2009, the American Psychological Association issued a statement criticizing sexual conversion therapy as both unscientific and damaging, and a growing number of states have passed laws making it illegal for licensed counselors to practice conversion therapy with underage patients (Bjork-James 650).

be read as a reference to evangelical rhetoric's frequent connections between queerness and the health—or frailty—of the nation. As Moslener notes, evangelical connections between queerness and the health of the state date back to the Cold War: “Numerous leaders believed that not only was homosexuality an acceptable practice under the Soviet regime, as were other forms of sexual anarchy, but that American homosexuals were susceptible to blackmail by communist spies” (“Nuclear” 260). Later, evangelical critics identified the AIDS epidemic as signaling a fundamental threat queerness posed both to individual health and to public life.<sup>16</sup> Understood through this framework, then, the “rehabilitation” of the queer figure is not merely a question of personal morality or spirituality, but rather is essential to the endurance of the nation.

With this context in mind, then, I assert that Jocelyn is framed as a biologically deviant figure with a dysfunctional skein in need of rehabilitation not because Alderman sees queerness as a moral error or bodily weakness, but because evangelical rhetoric does. Throughout the novel, both Jocelyn and her critics use language to describe her skein and her relationships that echo the language of gay conversion therapy and queer Christian experience. Shortly after encouraging Jocelyn to break up with her boyfriend Ryan, for example, Margot frames herself as a benevolent figure wanting to help Jocelyn live a whole and correct life:

“I still think we can find some help for you. If we could find someone to help you...well, you'd just be able to like normal boys.” Jos puts her cup down on the table slowly. She says, “Do you really think so?” And Margot says, “I know it, honey. I know it. You can be just like all the other girls. I know we can fix it for you.” (215)

In this passage, Margot explicitly links Jocelyn's own gender conformity (“just like all the other girls”) with her sexual relationships (she'd be able to like “normal boys”). Furthermore, she suggests that Jocelyn's gender conformity can be enforced and that by being “fixed” and learning to be a proper woman, Jocelyn will eradicate both her queerness and her difficulties using the power. Margot's solution for Jocelyn's “problem” is to enroll her in a NorthStar training camp, one of her experimental camps that train women to

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<sup>16</sup> This narrative proved so effective and pervasive that it has endured in evangelical circles even as the AIDS epidemic has diminished in the United States and AIDS is no longer experienced internationally as a primarily “gay disease.” As Bivins examines in his study of evangelical Hell Houses (elaborate immersive theater experiences depicting sinful lifestyles), many narratives attempt to simultaneously depict gay men as sexually promiscuous and dying of AIDS (a 1970s-80s stereotype) while also depicting them as perversely seeking the right to marry in parodic gay weddings (a twenty-first century phenomenon) (154).

use their power—and prepares them to be private mercenaries. If one reads the NorthStar training camps partially as an analogue for gay conversion therapy camps, then Alderman is suggesting that by attempting to eradicate Jocelyn's queerness and teach her to embody gendered power, Margot is also encouraging her daughter to prop up national power and protect the nation-state through violence. This reading is reinforced in the only scene set at one of the camps, in which Jocelyn—still unable to control her power despite training—accidentally shocks a trespasser to death, and then is praised and held up as a hero and an exemplar (236). “It’s great to know that we have young women like you ready to defend the country,” the breathy young anchor tells her on television later that week, reinforcing that when Jocelyn exhibits power and violence she is read as a good woman and protector of national security. Despite her training at the NorthStar camps, however, Jocelyn cannot “fix” her skein—or by extension, her queerness, a situation that leaves her anguished and feeling inadequate. Near the end of the novel, in a private meeting with Mother Eve, Jocelyn once again mirrors the language of evangelical queer experience, begging Mother Eve to fix her. “Please...Please heal me and make me normal,” she begs. “Please ask God to take this burden from me. Please let me be normal” (254). The implication is clear: despite all the training, patriotic bravado, and social encouragement in the world, Jocelyn’s status as a queer figure is unalterable—and despite a shift from a patriarchal religion to a matriarchal one, her political and social worlds still convince her that God wants her to become “normal.”

### **Conclusion: Matriarchal Power, Matriarchal Violence**

By way of conclusion, I turn to two of the violent results of the gendered power and violent nationalism exhibited by Margot—and, by extent, evangelical Christianity. While an extensive analysis of the depiction of sexual violence in *The Power* is beyond the scope of this project, I cannot proceed without noting the pervasive threat and depiction of rape in the novel. Rape is present at the outset in its patriarchal world, practiced systemically against sex workers and personally against the foster child Allie, and it endures in the new matriarchal society, as seen horrifyingly as a weapon of war in later scenes set in Bessapara. Alyson Miller has addressed *The Power*'s depiction of sexual violence deftly, suggesting the novel frames sexual violence as “intrinsic to the exercise of authority” (401). For the purposes of this project, however, I am more interested in how these eruptions of sexual violence are framed as the inevitable outcome of subtler attitudes from figures like Margot. In a diplomatic meeting in Bessapara late in the novel, Margot—now a U. S. Senator—promises to look the other way regarding Bessapara’s

oppression of men and rampant state-sanctioned rape, excusing it as “cultural differences” (249).<sup>17</sup> While Margot does not rape anyone nor ever explicitly condones rape in the course of the novel, she does begin to display casually condescending and sexist attitudes towards attractive men that suggests she now sees them primarily as sexual objects and believes her political and physical power gives her a right to their bodies. Ogling Tunde, she notes that he is “handsome as hell” and wonders “how’s she supposed to take him seriously now, when she’s seen his broad shoulders and narrow waist, and the rolling landscape of obliques and delts, glutes and pecs” in his live reports from tropical locations (245). Later in the scene, Margot uses her power to sleep with an attractive young male intern, with the implication that he owes her sexual favors because she is his political superior (251). Through the figure of Margot, Alderman satirizes the hypocrisy of so-called moral authorities who promote sexual purity while also reinforcing patriarchal power. As Kobes Du Mez notes, while American evangelical leaders have frequently perpetuated an image of the benevolent patriarch who protects white womanhood, children, and the nation, in reality the evangelical they have preached a “vision of Christian masculinity—of patriarchy and submission, sex and power [...] that promised protection for women but left women without defense, one that worshiped power and turned a blind eye to justice” (294).<sup>18</sup> In the figure of Margot, Alderman demonstrates the absurdity of any claim that the superior power of one gender will lead to the protection of other genders rather than their exploitation. Far from being a feminist vision of an empowered woman in politics advocating for justice for the oppressed, Margot duplicates the abuse of power practiced by male church authorities and political figures alike in contemporary American society.

The denouement of *The Power* simultaneously satirizes the end goal of evangelical politics while also critiquing the inevitable destruction caused by untrammelled thirst for power and violence.<sup>19</sup> The novel ends in nuclear war,

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<sup>17</sup> For a disturbing account of how evangelical politicians in the United States often lend support to more extremist gendered projects abroad, see Jeff Sharlet’s *The Family: Power, Politics, and Fundamentalism’s Shadow Elite* (2008).

<sup>18</sup> This was demonstrated vividly in the #ChurchToo movement, in which women who had experienced sexual abuse within the context of Christianity shared their stories in response to the larger #MeToo movement. For more on the #ChurchToo movement see founder Emily Joy’s *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (2021).

<sup>19</sup> As Andrews F. Hermann explains, among more right-wing evangelicals and similarly extreme right-wing politicians, apocalypse is one of the major focuses and goals of

condoned by men's rights activists, exiled Saudi Arabian generals, Mother Eve (now dictator of Bessapara), and Margot alike. Margot, in particular, sees her advocacy for war simultaneously as retribution for her Jocelyn being horribly injured in combat, as a way of finally destroying patriarchy, and as a way of asserting American sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> "My country comes first," she declares. "We need strong leadership" (369). In Margot's advocacy for nuclear war, we see a logical outcome of dogmatic nationalism and the uplifting of any gender as physically superior and entitled to power and control. Margot has served throughout the novel as a parody of evangelical rhetoric and politics; when she self-righteously brings about nuclear war, Alderman suggests the horrifying end game of the evangelical agenda that props up abstinence campaigns and sanctifies patriarchy. While Silver Ring Thing may claim that safe sex is like a nuclear bomb, *The Power's* satirical treatment of American politics, purity culture, and patriarchy suggests that evangelical Christian rhetoric is far more likely to "wipe out the whole human race" (Moslener "Nuclear" 266).

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evangelical Christianity: "Fundamental evangelicals believe that in the coming final battle, America will fight on the side of Israel, and in order to do that it *must* remain a Christian nation. America *must* remain pure. Purity is imperative: individually, sexually, and nationally (416).

<sup>20</sup> Jocelyn, now a soldier abroad in a war zone, is nearly fatally electrocuted during an altercation in which her skein fails to provide her with ample power.

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## Playing as/against Violent Women: Imagining Gender in the Postapocalyptic Landscape of *The Last of Us Part II*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article examines how femaleness and femininity are constructed in the 2020 video game *The Last of Us Part II* (*TLoU2*), analyzing how it imagines gender narratively, visually, and ludically. The game is set in a postapocalyptic future in which the majority of the population has turned into zombie-like creatures, while the surviving parts of humanity have formed new societies and groups that fight against each other. Players control two characters, Ellie, who was already featured in the first *TLoU*, and Abby, who is initially set up as the antagonist of the story and whom Ellie determines to kill in an act of revenge. *TLoU2* is thus one of very few mainstream video games that champion (especially active, dominant, and, indeed, violent) female characters as protagonists. In order to examine the depiction of gender in the game, I approach *TLoU2* through an affective framework that analyzes the nexus of violence, femininity, and empathy. I argue that *TLoU2* constructs violence as liberating and emancipating for its female protagonists in a postapocalyptic world that itself was created and is regulated by violence. Simultaneously, the game insists on the importance of balancing potentially justified violence with empathy for the position and perspective of others. It establishes this point both diegetically in the story of its two protagonists and extradiegetically in how players are forced to act aggressively against characters they have grown to empathize with, a 'ludo-affective' dissonance that consciously and productively discomforts the act of playing.

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### 1. Introduction: *The Last of Us Part II* and Gendered Anti-Fandom

When the video game *The Last of Us Part II* was released in June 2020, it garnered a polarized reaction: game critics and journalists praised the game as one of the best available for the PlayStation 4, while some players seemingly considered it a definite failure. This divided reception was encapsulated in the average scores that the website *Metacritic* tracks for ‘critic reviews’—95 out of 100 right after the game’s release—and for the ‘user score’: 3.4 out of 10 (Tassi). As it turned out, the game was subject to ‘review-bombing,’ a concerted effort by players of certain communities (most of whom had not had the time to finish the game) to ‘bombard’ the game with bad reviews. Despite this concerted effort, which seems to have been driven by a particularly outspoken minority of players, *The Last of Us Part II* has now been cemented as one of the most highly praised video games in gaming history, collecting “more game of the year awards than any other release ever” (Calvin) and at times being called a “work of art” (Glennon). Yet even after so many months of critical acclaim and popular success, disdain for the game still remains strong in some digital communities (Trumbore). While there are certainly legitimate complaints against the game, the kind of ‘hate-watching’ or ‘anti-fandom’ (cf. Click) that some gamers have organized around focuses not so much on the game itself but on what some players think it represents. Put differently, the outrage says something about a particular segment of (US) gaming culture rather than about the quality of the game. Indeed, the main complaints lodged against *The Last of Us Part II* in these critiques (cf. Trumbore) have to do with how it represents gender, alleging that this is a game made by and intended for “social justice warriors” (Trumbore) because it features a female protagonist (Ellie) who is shown in a same-sex relationship, a second female protagonist (Abby) whose muscular physique is not normatively feminine, and another character (Lev) who is transgender (Byrd; Glennon; Trumbore).<sup>2</sup> For any other type of fictional narrative, and perhaps especially works of speculative fiction in other media, the inclusion of these characters might not have been particularly noteworthy, but in the realm of video games, non-normative forms of sexuality and gender identity are still rarely represented. In *The Last of Us Part II*, as Jen Glennon summarizes, the presence of queer characters

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<sup>2</sup> Many of these players would certainly criticize this as an unfair characterization, claiming instead that their complaints are merely about the game’s story decisions. However, besides a few other aspects of the game that get targeted in these reactions, most of the complaints can be linked back to a sexist and frequently explicitly anti-feminist ideology, a tendency within video-game communities that has already been explored in considerable detail (cf. Cote; Fox and Tang).

has led to a number of outspoken players being “angered by what they perceived as [game developer] Naughty Dog and game director Neil Druckmann’s desire to ‘force’ left-leaning views on gender and sexuality into the game” (Glennon).

In this sense, the backlash against the game certainly fits into the regressive political climate that has predominantly been visible in the United States both in 2020 and in previous years (not just since Trump’s election, but certainly amplified by it). On a smaller scale, the controversy around *The Last of Us Part II* is also related to the notorious Gamergate harassment campaign, which has brought to light the deep-seated anti-feminist and anti-queer sentiments in some segments of the ‘gaming community’ (cf. Cote 177-87; Murray, *On Video Games* 35-42). However, I posit that the game’s content is worth a much closer look than is possible within these broader ‘political’ strokes implied in the controversy surrounding the game’s alleged ‘feminist agenda.’ In particular, I would like to propose that the game uses its postapocalyptic setting to complicate and defamiliarize ‘traditional’ conceptions of femininity common in speculative fiction as well as in video games, particularly through the omnipresence of violence.

*The Last of Us Part II* is a sequel to a game by the same name released in 2013. Both present a fictional world in which the United States suffered an outbreak of a mutated cordyceps fungus that turns infected humans into highly aggressive zombie-like creatures (called ‘Infected’ in the game). The outbreak occurred in 2013, with the first game taking place twenty years later, in 2033, and the second one mainly in 2038 (while also including a few flashbacks). Both games depict a ruined civilization, a world in which nature has reclaimed some of the cities that humans have abandoned and in which danger is ever-present not only because of the roaming Infected but also because different groups of humans vie for authority over the remaining cities. In the original game, players control a character called Joel, a smuggler who lives in Boston’s quarantine zone, which is under the totalitarian rule of the militarized FEDRA (Federal Disaster Response Agency), one of the last remnants of the US government. Joel travels westward across the US to deliver a teenage girl, Ellie, to a group of scientists called the Fireflies. Ellie is immune to the infection and hence of interest to the scientists. Over the course of the journey, Ellie and Joel gradually form a close bond. Only when they reach the Fireflies in Salt Lake City does Joel learn that in order for the scientists to try to create a cure, Ellie would have to die. As a result, Joel proceeds to kill most of the Fireflies in order to save Ellie from this procedure and lies to her afterwards, claiming

that they were unable to develop a cure and that there are other immune people.<sup>3</sup>

In the sequel, players control Ellie instead of Joel. Through later flashbacks, they find out that she has grown distant from Joel after discovering the truth about his actions—she was especially furious that he chose her life over the chance for a cure. Early on in the second game, Joel is killed by Abby, whose father—as players find out much later—was killed by Joel when he rescued Ellie from the Fireflies. Following Joel’s brutal murder, Ellie in turn plots to take revenge. Accompanied by her girlfriend Dina, she tracks down Abby in Seattle. Players first witness the three days Ellie spends in Seattle from her perspective, then they switch over to Abby’s during the same time. The game concludes after multiple pursuits and confrontations between the two characters, who, eventually, forsake their plans for revenge and go their separate ways. The switch from (mainly) controlling Joel in the first game to playing as both Ellie and Abby in the sequel recontextualizes the franchise’s postapocalyptic setting by letting players explore it from the perspective and through the experiences of two different (but equally violent) female characters.

In terms of the gameplay (i.e., the way in which the game works and players interact with it), *The Last of Us Part II (TLoU2)* is an action adventure. Players control Ellie and Abby from a third-person perspective. With the camera positioned behind their avatars, players move through the environment, fight against Infected and human enemies with a variety of weapons, sneak around them, find helpful equipment, and overall traverse the game’s postapocalyptic world in order to pursue Ellie’s and Abby’s individual goals. There are a number of cutscenes in the game, i.e., filmic sequences when players have to watch the narrative unfold without any possibility to intervene. In addition to that, dialogues between characters also take place ‘automatically’ while players are in control of the protagonists (and can, for instance, move away from a character they are speaking to). In order to glean more narrative information on what has happened in the game’s storyworld, players can also overhear conversations between other

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the characters and narrative events from the first game are important for the second one, yet I will focus on the latter in this article and refer to the previous one only if it is relevant for understanding aspects of the second game. Thematically, there are also important parallels between the two titles, and there is quite a bit of scholarship on the first game that can help contextualize the second one as well—for instance on nature and the environment (cf. Green), fatherhood (cf. Hill; Cruea), femininity (cf. Jones), and whiteness (cf. Murray, *On Video Games* 109-21).

characters, find hidden notes and documents, and pay particular attention to their visual surroundings. It is especially through this kind of environmental storytelling, via the 'narrative background' (cf. Magnet; Schubert 78), that players can gain more information about how society is structured in the game's postapocalyptic world, fleshing out the fictional setting.

The protagonists arrive at the main setting of the game, Seattle, years after FEDRA has given up control of it. Through a number of dialogues and additional documents, they learn that the Washington Liberation Front (WLF, or Wolves), to which Abby also belongs, has taken over after a protracted war against FEDRA's military forces. In 2038, many parts of the city have been left to the Infected, while the remaining territories are fought over by the WLF and the Seraphites, a group of people depicted as a fanatic and primitivist cult. Ellie gets attacked by both groups when she encounters them in the city, and she also witnesses them fight against each other. Violence thus is omnipresent in the game's world, both physically and symbolically. The Seraphites, for instance, uphold a repressive and heteropatriarchal gender regime—when the trans character Lev refuses to be married off as a wife to another Seraphite and shaves his head in defiance (and in a symbolic act of asserting his masculinity and maleness), he is ordered to be killed. In this sense, while US society and the US government as players know them from their extradiegetic world seem to have collapsed in the game (as is common in postapocalyptic scenarios), the new social order and the individual groups that the game depicts have created their own particular systems that exert power through force. That is, in the postapocalyptic absence of a government, these smaller groups have formed communities that enforce order and control in a way that builds on violence, similar to how a more centralized state would.

Overall, the game offers an intriguing case study of a postapocalyptic world made playable in which violence is a central element narratively, visually, and ludically. At the same time, violence is closely connected to how the game constructs the gender identities of its two protagonists. Since there is, as of now, little scholarly engagement with the game,<sup>4</sup> I want to focus on a slightly broader reading of the game's gender politics, particularly in terms of its construction of femininity. Specifically, I want to examine the game through an affective framework and especially consider the nexus of violence, femininity, and empathy that I see as central for the cultural work

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<sup>4</sup> There have, however, been quite a lot of critical discussions of the game on blogs and other websites, for instance around Lev's trans narrative (cf. Muncy; MacLeod) or gendered violence (cf. Flores).

that the game does. Exploring this nexus will allow me to punctuate this overarching analysis with a few close readings of *TLoU2* that show how narrative, visuals, and gameplay affect representations of violence, femininity, and empathy in the game. Overall, I argue that *TLoU2* constructs violence as liberating and emancipating for its female protagonists in a postapocalyptic world that itself was created and is regulated by violence. Simultaneously, the game insists on the importance of balancing potentially justified violence with empathy for the position and perspective of those others who are perpetrators or may become victims of violence. It establishes this point both diegetically in the story of its two protagonists and extradiegetically in how players are forced to act aggressively against characters they have grown to empathize with, an affective dissonance that consciously discomforts the act of playing.

## 2. Contextualizing Violence, Femininity, and Empathy in (Postapocalyptic) Video Games

A large number of video games could be said to be part of speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and related genres. This is true for the earliest video or computer games (Tringham 1) just as much as for more recent ones, even though more recent games sometimes evince less direct or visible links to such easily identifiable generic roots (Tringham 13). Partly, this is also because genre can be seen as designating two different aspects of games. One could be called ‘gameplay genre,’ so the difference between a role-playing game or a strategy game or a racing game, while the other could be understood as the ‘narrative genre’ that is commonly used outside of video-game parlance: a role-playing game can be science fiction or fantasy or Western, etc. (cf. also Apperley). The *The Last of Us* series is arguably rooted quite strongly in the narrative genre of postapocalyptic fiction, of which there have been many video games of diverse gameplay genres especially in the last decade (cf. Pérez-Latorre). Since *TLoU2* is thematically quite rich (touching on questions of survival, grief, trauma, revenge, justice, love, family, and many others), I want to focus on only three aspects—and their interconnections—that, I argue, stand out in this postapocalyptic world: violence, femininity, and empathy. I will briefly accentuate these vast topics in terms of how they figure in video games like *TLoU2* in particular.

Much has been written about violence in video games, and especially outside the scholarly realm, violence is still often the predominant cultural lens through which games are discussed, in addition to more focused academic studies (cf., e.g., Markey and Ferguson). However, I am not

interested here, as most of the nonacademic and some of the academic studies are, in the psychological effects playing violent video games might have, but rather in the functions and meanings of violence within a game like *TLoU2*, in which social relations are such a large part of world-building. Some gameplay genres centrally build on players performing violence and are consequently constructed around competition and domination, which, in turn, such games envision primarily as physical conflicts. Generally speaking, the violence that is often featured in works of speculative fiction either on the representational level or as a subject matter certainly exists in most postapocalyptic video games as well. Yet, in action adventures, this is intensified by the violent actions that often constitute the main gameplay. In this article, my focus will be on the (inter)active potential of (and limits to) performing violence as an integral and constitutive part of playing the game—and, during that process, of making sense of it and of the social relations that it depicts. In order to examine the representation of violence in *TLoU2*, I will analyze what the game does and does not allow players to do, what it forces them to do, how it portrays violence visually (including what is and what is not shown), and how it features violence narratively.

In comparison to the long established issue of violence in games, gender and sexual identities have received attention only in more recent scholarship on video games (cf., e.g., Malkowski and Russworm; Ruberg and Shaw; Murray, *On Video Games*; Wysocki and Lauteria). Both scholars and cultural critics have pointed out the continuing representational problems of many video games. This includes a general lack of representation of non-normative gender identities on the one hand and stereotypical, often sexualized portrayals of female characters on the other. *TLoU2* offers more complex representational politics, and studying its portrayal of femaleness and femininity can be linked in particular to the act of playing (and performing acts of violence) as these female and more or less feminine characters. Since playing is inherently an active process, featuring female and feminine protagonists in video games already complicates a stereotypical association of femininity with passivity. Instead, the kinds of active, dominant, and violent femaleness that Ellie and Abby exhibit in the game could also be framed as notions of 'female masculinity' (Halberstam). My interest lies in tracing how the game depicts its female protagonists as engaging in behavior that is stereotypically coded feminine or masculine in the players' worlds and in how these gendered associations (in particular in reference to violence) might work differently in the game's postapocalyptic setting.

Lastly, I want to suggest that these issues of violence and femininity can be especially productively explored in video games—and in *TLoU2* in particular—through a reading of the game’s affective dimension, and specifically in terms of how *TLoU2* transports empathy. The study of emotion, feeling, and affect has become more influential in cultural studies for a few years now, prompting some to speak of an ‘affective turn,’ and more recently such investigations have extended to video games as well (cf. Anable; Murray, “America”). Here, I am particularly interested in what Soraya Murray calls ‘political affect’: “a diffuse structure of what Ann Cvetkovich has described as ‘relations between the emotional, the cultural and the political,’” an “affective component [that] can gather up intensities” (“America,” para. 3). While Murray traces this dimension of political affect through the visual landscapes that video games evoke (which is potentially a very fruitful approach for *TLoU2* as well), my reading will focus more on how characters in the game transfer certain affects onto the players. For that, I build on Sara Ahmed’s work, which has highlighted “how emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (1). In this phenomenological understanding of affects or emotions (which, in line with Ahmed [205-08], I understand as less easily distinguishable from each other as some scholars posit), certain emotions ‘stick’ to a body and can get transferred to another person when these bodies encounter each other, a process that, if transferred to video games, could also be traced from fictional character to extradiegetic player.

Studying affect in fictional texts can potentially invite criticism of “[p]henomenological imprecision” (Anable 6). Trying to circumvent that methodological risk, I want to analyze what could be called the ‘affective affordances’ of the game. Caroline Levine has made the term affordance productive for literary and cultural studies in using it “to describe potential uses and actions latent in materials and designs” (6), shifting attention away from a text’s ‘intended’ usage towards the “potentialities [that] lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements” (6-7). Extending this to questions of affect, the affective affordances of a text can be understood as describing how its material, medial, or formal properties shape its affective resonances. Examining a game’s affective affordances—i.e., the narrative, visual, and ludic elements that enable and encourage a particular structure of feeling—is thus meant as a means of analyzing how a game makes its players feel, and how it can trigger empathy or apathy

through the act of playing.<sup>5</sup> This overall interest in the game's affective dimension will guide my analyses in the following sections.

### 3. Violence in *TLoU2*

Violence is omnipresent in *TLoU2*. Like in many postapocalyptic works, the world that the game depicts has partly regressed to championing physical strength and to solving conflicts through violence. While the game depicts a few self-sustaining and peaceful locations (e.g., the town of Jackson that Ellie has been living in for a few years), there is also a constant need to protect these settlements from the Infected—and from other humans. Outside of these settlements, many autocratic and warring groups seem to exist, evidenced by the conflicts between the WLF and the Seraphites, Ellie's interactions with members of these groups in Seattle, or also by the existence of gangs like the Rattlers, a group of heavily armed slavers that Ellie and Abby encounter in Santa Barbara toward the end of the game. In addition to the physical violence manifesting in these conflicts, many of the communities or factions in the game have also been formed around systems of social and symbolic control, such as the strictly heteronormative role that the Seraphites prescribe for Lev and how they deny the validity of his trans/gender identity. The storyworld that the game constructs thus features numerous instances of physical and symbolic violence in its settings and its character interactions. Additionally, the (often brutal and tragic) deaths of characters form a main part of the narrative as well, overall establishing the pervasiveness of violence in this postapocalyptic setting.

Arguably the most viscerally and cognitively disconcerting representation of violence in *TLoU2* is in its gameplay. Ellie and Abby shoot other humans and Infected with a variety of guns and arrows, stab them with numerous melee weapons that they can find in the environment, kill them silently with a shiv, or in more dramatic fashion with hand-crafted bombs, mines, or molotov cocktails. While the game, in many areas, also offers players a stealth-centered approach to advancing in the game, focused on circumventing rather than fighting enemies, there are a number of encounters which produce conflicts that have to be solved with physical violence. Since almost every area in the game is filled with various enemies, thinking of ways to fight and dispose of them is, in many ways, the main method of progressing in the game—and thus also of advancing the story.

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<sup>5</sup> In other words, this is not an investigation of an empirical player's feelings when playing the game but of the structures that the game provides for how players are supposed to feel, for instance because of the bodily display of emotion of a fictional character.

Given that ludic violence is such a central element, it is crucial to consider how it is visually (and aurally) depicted in the game. For instance, thinking about the affective affordances of some first-person shooter games, killing ‘hordes’ of enemies can produce a desensitizing tendency, since ‘faceless’ masses are more difficult to recognize and feel for than individual human beings. Instead, *TLoU2* opts for a particularly visceral display of physical violence that highlights the effect of violence on individual characters. Specifically, it represents violence in a highly realist mode, comparable to how postmodern genre films such as examples of revisionist Westerns reacted to earlier glorified portrayals of violence in the classical Western by including the physical, and literally bloody, consequences of violent actions (Loy 122). To create this effect of realism, the game features elaborate character models that visibly react to Ellie or Abby hitting and shooting them. The game not only shows their deaths in notably gory detail but also includes gruesome screams, drawing attention to the pain and suffering that Ellie’s and Abby’s acts of violence cause, which helps to actually mark that violence as a significant aspect of the game’s world.

Although players look at their avatar from behind their shoulders, there are many semi-scripted encounters in the game in which the camera is explicitly positioned differently in order to highlight the brutality of a murder. For instance, when Dina tries to save Ellie but then is struggling for her life against the WLF member Jordan, players—as Ellie—rush toward his back and receive a prompt to ‘strike him’ (chapter “Seattle Day 1 (Ellie)”). When they do, a brief cutscene seamlessly takes over: as Ellie grabs Jordan around his back and shoulder, the camera spins around 180 degrees to show their faces. Ellie (who at this moment is not controlled by the player) stabs Jordan twice in the neck with her switchblade, and each time a hit lands, the camera jerks to the right, simulating the knife’s motion. Simultaneously, the camera moves even closer onto Jordan’s face, with blood gushing out of his mouth and neck. Ellie’s face and her reactions are also clearly visible in this particular shot—she does not seem particularly shocked at her own actions but instead content in having managed to overpower Jordan. His body then falls to the floor, positioned at the bottom of the frame, and players hear his choking and gurgling noises. He rolls out of frame and dies, which leaves a shot that shows Ellie and Dina standing over him. While, in terms of camera positioning, this scene is filmed through an external focalizer, the composition increases the identification with both characters: Jordan suffering the consequences of Ellie’s brutal actions, and Ellie’s intensity and satisfaction with them, as she exclaims: “Got you, motherfucker.” While

excessive violence might be an everyday reality in the world of *TLoU2*, the game stages this violence in a way that makes it spectacular, precisely so as not to appear mundane—but instead to shock and disturb. This dramatization also makes the players' gameplay more meaningful on a narrative level, displaying the consequences their ludic actions have on the character they are playing just as much as on the other characters in the world. Such scenes are repeated throughout the game, and they can often lead to discomfort with what is being displayed—or with what players have to do to complete the game successfully.<sup>6</sup>

The choices that the game does and does not offer in terms of how violence is being used by its protagonists are crucial in provoking an emotional reaction from players. Generally, players are free to roam around the different areas of the game, to explore them in detail or ignore them, and to choose how exactly to engage with the many other characters (most of them enemies) in the game. However, the main story of *TLoU2* is linear, with no significant choices, featuring a low amount of narrative agency (cf. Schubert 36-37). This combination of ludic freedom and narrative constraints is also evident in the depiction of violence, as in the cutscene just discussed. The way the death of another character is staged in the game illustrates this connection even better: after a long chase, Ellie finally catches up to Nora, one of Abby's friends, and wants to know where exactly Abby is hiding ("Seattle Day 2 (Ellie)"). Moments ago, Nora got infected, with no way to save her life, so she sees no point in helping Ellie, at least not until Ellie retorts: "I can make it quick. Or I can make it so much worse." The sequence that follows is once again a cutscene where the camera switches between looking at Ellie and at Nora, all bathed in red from the emergency light of the building. When Nora declares initially that she is "not giving up [her] friend," the camera is positioned above Ellie, looking down onto the crouching Nora, and then turns around to show Ellie's face, in a slight low-angle shot that suggests Nora's perspective. Ellie seems to struggle with what to do for a while, but after a few seconds, a button prompt pops up on the screen, indicating to players to push the square button on their controller. When they do so, Ellie hits Nora's face with a pipe that she picked up earlier, and while the camera remains in the same position, blood is seen splashing upwards

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<sup>6</sup> This is especially the case in the scenes that pit Ellie and Abby against each other, which I will discuss in more detail below. Additionally, the violent and brutal nature of deaths in the world of the game is also displayed whenever Ellie or Abby are killed by enemies, with a zoom on them actually showing them dying before the game then reloads to a previous stage.

and Nora is heard sobbing. The prompt, which players now know is a prompt to beat Nora to extort information from her, comes up two more times, before the screen fades to black. The next scene shows Ellie as she arrives back at her and Dina's hideout with a hint on Abby's whereabouts—but also visibly distressed at what she had to do to receive that information. If players do not push the button three times, the scene does not advance.

In this sense, even though the sequence involves a kind of interaction (players have to press a button), it still offers no practical agency and no meaningful narrative choices at all. Instead, it forces players to use Ellie to torture Nora—while at the same time making them more complicit in the violence committed than if the cutscene had progressed without any player input. The sequence thus works similarly to a canonical moment in video-game history, a scene in the game *BioShock* which explicitly and self-reflexively highlights that players have had no practical agency in any of the game's events so far (cf. Schubert 92-99). While *TLoU2* generally does not offer narrative choices in this way, pointing one such choice out so clearly in this scene, while really making only this one choice possible, serves to strengthen the notion that players have to perform violence even if they feel discomfort doing so (a point I will come back to later)—and, by implication, that such violence might be necessary in a postapocalyptic world.

While many deaths in the game emphasize the brutality of killing another human being by explicitly depicting the direct consequences of violence, players do not see how Nora gets killed. Instead, the game foregrounds the distressing effect the torture of Nora precipitating her death had on Ellie. In my reading, both of these representational strategies establish that *TLoU2* does not use violence gratuitously and does not glorify it, which was a controversial question surrounding the game's release as well (cf., e.g., Bailey). Instead, the realist depiction of violence is meant to disturb and distress players. The occasional explicit death sequences serve to instill a feeling in players that they are not just pressing buttons to progress the game but that their actions have brutal diegetic consequences and thus certain ethical implications. This realization might lead to discomfort and frustration, and to the desire to look away while playing the game—or even to take breaks from playing (cf. Sims). Yet this is exactly the point the game wants to make: that there is ultimately nothing redeeming or glorious about violence, even if it is apparently necessary in the game's postapocalyptic world, not only ensuring the protagonist's survival but also forming a crucial part of how their identities are constructed.

#### 4. Femininity and Violence in *TLoU2*

For both Ellie and Abby, violence is central to their gendered identities. The game's setting generally builds on a construction of gender that differs from the lived realities of its players—the postapocalyptic world, after all, is organized in vastly different ways, so that not all markers of femininity or gender performances prevalent in contemporary US society apply in the same way. And yet, twenty years after the outbreak of the infection, gender as a social category of difference of course still exists and matters in the game's world, and characters are frequently gendered by others in specific ways. For instance, Ellie, at 19 years of age, is repeatedly called a “girl” by other characters and enemies, infantilizing her perhaps due to her small stature but also more generally, since she is apparently not being taken seriously as an adult. In contrast, Tommy, Joel's brother, recalls another person describing Abby as “a woman [...] built like an ox” (“The Farm”)—such a reference to her muscular body type is typical of how a number of characters react to her, and the dehumanizing comparison to a male animal also implies that her physique and overall appearance is not considered normatively feminine. While physical violence plays a central role in establishing these gender identities, unlike in many stereotypical portrayals of women (especially in video games), this is not primarily about the violence done *to* these female characters. While both Ellie and Abby are certainly also victims of violence—being attacked by numerous enemies and shown in many cutscenes as being punched, hit, and shot by others, men and women alike—much more often and centrally they are the perpetrators of violence themselves.<sup>7</sup> This propensity of female characters in *TLoU2* to commit violence as part of their gender performance adds to the ways in which the game subverts stereotypical depictions of women as necessarily feminine and of femaleness and femininity as associated with non-violence, which particularly a lot of video games but also other popular postapocalyptic fictions still adhere to (cf., e.g., Garland et al.; Keetley). Other aspects of the narrative do revert to those more stereotypical portrayals, though, overall leading to ambivalent representational politics.

Ellie and Abby are very much round characters, and while many players will already have known Ellie from the first *TLoU* game, the second part also includes a number of playable flashback scenes for both of them, most of them quieter and less violent than the main chapters, providing a deeper

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, the game does not depict overly sexualized violence—sex scenes between Ellie and Dina or Abby and her former boyfriend Owen, for instance, happen consensually—even though the world itself is full of violence.

characterization. Throughout the game, Ellie and Abby both appear as active, dominant, assertive, emotionally strong, and violent women—all of which works against reactionary depictions that, in binary constructions of gender, associate being a woman with being feminine, and femininity with non-violence. At the same time, none of these characteristics take away from their gendered identities; it is Abby's physical appearance, not her personality traits, that prompt others to comment unfavorably on her as a woman. This way, in the world of the game, being violent can be understood as performing a kind of normative femininity, since the postapocalyptic setting has made it necessary for women and men alike to be prepared for its physical dangers. At the same time, Ellie and Abby are also very different characters and exhibit distinct gender identities that go beyond stereotypical binaries still prevalent in mainstream (genre) fictions (such as between the character types of the 'fair' and the 'dark lady' [cf. Cawelti 11]).

Significantly, these differences are established in the game not only through how differently Ellie and Abby behave in the narrative and how they are visually depicted, but also via gameplay: when players start controlling Abby in her chapters, the gameplay subtly shifts. The game does not explicitly indicate this (unlike with other gameplay hints that the game does provide), but since Abby's physical strength enables her to effectively harm enemies by punching them and since she generally has more weapons available, her chapters can at times be approached in a more fight-oriented, hands-on way. Ellie's shivs and crafted tools, in turn, allow for a slightly stealthier approach (especially against Infected enemies). This ludic difference is significant because in many other games, playing as different avatars entails playing a character that looks but does not play differently. In *TLoU2*, this difference in game mechanics adds to the overall complexity of Ellie's and Abby's portrayals. Such nuanced depictions extend to other female characters in the game as well, like Ellie's girlfriend Dina, Abby's fellow WLF member and Owen's girlfriend Mel, or Lev's sister Yara. While they all are supporting characters, they have distinct personalities that go beyond serving the interests of a main character. As mentioned before, this breadth of representation also extends to sexuality—even though the characters in the game do not use any explicit labels for themselves, from their actions, players can infer that Ellie is lesbian, Dina is bisexual, and Abby is heterosexual.

While some of these characters' queerness subverts stereotypical portrayals of women in games as heterosexual and as sexually available to heterosexual men, more reactionary gender tropes are woven into these

subversive portrayals. Perhaps this becomes most evident in the interactions between Ellie and Dina, as Ellie is generally the more assertive and active one in their relationship (and in the game's story in general). While Dina initially accompanies Ellie on the dangerous trips through Seattle, she has to stay at 'home' in their hiding place once Ellie finds out that Dina is pregnant (from a previous relationship with the character Jesse), while Ellie (and later Jesse as well) ventures out. The pregnancy pushes Dina into a position and gender role that recalls traditional patriarchal constructions of femininity, with her assuming a more passive and submissive role in the relationship with Ellie and in the couple's struggle for survival. The heteronormative evocation of a family in which the mother stays at home while her partner provides for her is repeated later in the game, when Ellie and Dina are depicted living on a farm after the events in Seattle, with Dina's child JJ having been born and the two taking care of him together. When Tommy visits the two with information on Abby's whereabouts, Ellie wants to go after her again, to which Dina vehemently disagrees. As Dina explains, she does not just want to "sit here and wait for [Ellie]" and instead evokes their shared life: "We've got a family. She [i.e., Abby] doesn't get to be more important than that." Ellie, in contrast, notes in brief sentences that she feels restless and not like herself as long as Abby is alive: "I don't sleep. I don't eat," and when Dina begs her to stay, she replies curtly: "I can't" ("The Farm"). In depicting Ellie's identity as so centrally organized around her desire for revenge that she disavows the idea of family as providing an alternative source of identity, Ellie's and Dina's relationship here works according to stereotypical narratives for heterosexual couples. Thus, the game casts Ellie as active in contrast to Dina, portraying their queer relationship in heteronormative, binary terms, with a clear power imbalance.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, this kind of ambivalence between subversion of and submission to stereotypical tropes also extends to the connection between violence and femininity in *TLoU2*. Both Ellie and Abby are centrally motivated by revenge and use violence as a means to an end: Abby kills Joel to avenge her father's death, and Ellie wants to kill Abby to avenge Joel, in a similar emphasis on (adopted) fatherhood. However, especially as the story progresses, they also resort to violence in order to protect others and care for them. This is already evident in the scene of Ellie killing the WLF member

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<sup>8</sup> Similar to the first game's thematic relation to some myths of the Western genre, this can be seen as another nod to tropes of the (classical) Western in which the male Western hero can never stay in 'civilization' but has to continuously move further westward into the wilderness to stay independent—just as Ellie travels west to Santa Barbara.

Jordan that I discussed in the previous section. She kills him so brutally and while visibly enraged because he was about to harm Dina; Ellie's use of violence thus often explicitly serves to protect her loved ones. This is arguably less the case for her overall quest to avenge Joel's death, which seems more self-serving. However, at the end of the narrative, Ellie gives up that pursuit—she does not kill Abby when she has the chance but lets her leave instead. The ending suggests that Ellie is eventually able to forgive both Abby and Joel and move on to a different chapter in her life: the last shot shows her leave the guitar Joel gave her at the farmhouse (which Dina has since left), and as the camera moves forward to look out of a window, Ellie is visible walking into the distance (“Epilogue”). The shot is laden with symbolic meaning that goes beyond the scope of this article, but while it is unclear if she will try to reconnect with Dina or not (potentially embracing family life), she has certainly given up on the idea of revenge.<sup>9</sup> Abby's story has a parallel development, just further advanced—when players control her, it is already a while after she has exacted her revenge on Joel. This act apparently was unable to give her the satisfaction and closure she had been seeking, as she becomes disillusioned with the WLF and her current life throughout the ensuing days. Gradually distancing herself from the WLF, she eventually focuses on protecting and taking care of Lev, with whom she drives away in a boat after the final confrontation with Ellie. Their kind of mother-child relationship suggests an embrace of family as well, and a way for Abby “to find something meaningful in her life” (Muncy). While a focus on the caring and ‘nurturing’ role of motherhood is certainly a stereotypically reductive imagination of femininity, Abby still combines this focus on caring with her propensity towards violence, using violence not for revenge but for the purpose of protecting others.<sup>10</sup> The quasi-motherly role that she adopts is thus still one as a violent woman, a dominant and not a submissive carer. This connection between violence and empathetic caring overall manages to complicate stereotypical portrayals of femininity.

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<sup>9</sup> Ellie puts down the guitar also because she cannot properly play it anymore, having lost parts of two fingers in the fight with Abby, a reminder of how their violent encounters have (also physically) changed her. Still, I read the composition of the shot as symbolically expressing hope, demonstrated by Ellie leaving behind a personal item that, as a reminder of Joel, was closely connected to her quest for revenge.

<sup>10</sup> Following the parallelism in Ellie's and Abby's characterizations, and since Ellie has already broken with the cycle of violence between the two at the end of the game, this might also be read as a hint that Ellie, too, will seek relationships or family life to fulfill her life beyond thoughts of revenge (instead of staying alone).

### 5. Empathy, Femininity, and Violence in *TLoU2*

In a last argumentative step, I want to connect the notions of violence and femininity in the game through the lens of empathy, which is both a particularly important theme throughout the game's story and part of a range of emotional reactions that the game wants to trigger in its players as well. The importance of understanding another person's perspective, to feel for them and with them, is centrally evoked in the game through its emphasis on the perspectives of two mutual enemies who players are both encouraged to empathize with, by playing through the same period of time first as Ellie and then as Abby. After Ellie is ready to give up on her search for Abby and leave for Jackson with Dina, Jesse, and Tommy, Abby ambushes them in their hideout. At the moment when Abby seems to have decided to shoot Ellie, the screen suddenly fades to black and reopens with players controlling Abby in a flashback scene (at the end of which they learn that Joel killed her father). The next chapter is again titled "Seattle Day 1," but this time the game unfolds from Abby's perspective, who is woken up by her friend Manny. Subsequently, players control her while she traverses the base of operations of the WLF, a repurposed stadium. For a number of minutes, there are no violent scenes in the game, as Abby walks through different areas of the stadium and players get to witness how the WLF functions as a self-contained society (similar to an earlier chapter from Ellie's perspective in Jackson). This includes walking past school classrooms, talking to some of Abby's friends in a cafeteria, looking through her and Manny's room, and seeing the farms and training facilities that the WLF has set up. The overall picture is one of tranquility and organized, 'civilized' life in this particular settlement—which stands in stark contrast to how players experienced the WLF as Ellie, namely as a seemingly hyper-aggressive and militant organization and thus as the enemy. This contrast of perspectives is repeatedly evoked throughout Abby's chapters, especially since she meets more and more characters that players have already killed in Ellie's chapters. In terms of the game's affective affordances, these scenes are set up to provoke shock and guilt, to make players realize that many of the characters they previously killed while assuming them to be 'faceless' enemies are (diegetically) real people, with friends and relationships, lives and personalities of their own.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As one example, in the chapter "Seattle Day 2 (Ellie)," Ellie kills a female WLF soldier who played the video game *Hotline Miami* on a handheld console, the music from which is audible to players as well. Later in the game, as Abby in the chapter "Seattle Day 1 (Abby)," they encounter the same character—particularly noticeable and memorable because the

In switching perspectives half-way through the game, *TLoU2* turns Abby from the central antagonist in Ellie's story into another protagonist; simultaneously, the enemies Ellie has killed without much regard for their humanity become more fleshed-out characters from the players' perspective. Such a complication of the question of who is positioned as protagonist and antagonist in a fictional world and the moral ambiguity that follows from this complication is particularly important for mainstream video games, whose narratives often still work with simplistic moral binaries, and it is also typical of postapocalyptic fiction's interest in the complexities of humanity. While *TLoU2* makes this explicit through the shifted perspective on the WLF, it also hints at a similar importance of considering another person's point of view for other groups depicted in the game.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the overall narrative suggestion that players consider their enemies as complex humans is also mirrored in the gameplay: the gameplay demands that players think of their human enemies as complex actors as well, since the game's artificial intelligence will provide particularly challenging combat situations in which simply rushing your enemies will almost always lead to failure. While this could be seen as an instance of ludonarrative harmony, at the same time, players still cannot always avoid violent confrontations, so they will have to continue killing enemies despite the game making them want to think of them as individual human beings, an affective frustration that is also evoked through the game's main plot.

In fact, the pivotal moments that bring these affective dimensions together are the two direct confrontations between Ellie and Abby. Generally, even though they are very violent characters, the game is invested in making both of them likable. Most players playing *TLoU2* will already be attached to Ellie thanks to the first game (in which they assume Joel's role as her protector), and there are many more moments in the second title that further flesh out her characterization. Evoking the same depth of character is more complicated for Abby, who is initially introduced as a villain to players. Yet in terms of affective affordances, the game is designed in a way that encourages players to understand and feel for her as well, be it through the crucial switch in perspective or through a number of flashback episodes that

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music from *Hotline Miami* is playing again. Only now do they learn the character's name, Whitney, and that she was acquainted with Abby, transforming her from a previously 'faceless' enemy just like the many others that Ellie has killed.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, the impression players get of the Seraphites is mostly one from an outsider's perspective, yet in Abby's chapters certain assumptions about them are also occasionally challenged by Lev.

provide more motivation for her actions.<sup>13</sup> The fights between the two female protagonists, however, set up a conflict between characters players should both be attached to. After players have reached the end of day 3 in Seattle for the second time, this time from Abby's perspective, the fight between the two resumes. The cutscene plays again and continues, and then the game returns control over Abby to players, now in Ellie's hideout, with the task of killing her ("Seattle Day 3 (Abby)"). This sets up a crucial affective disconnect: at this point, players have gone through both Ellie's and Abby's journeys, but in this crucial sequence they are only in control of Abby. Whereas she (perhaps understandably) wants to exact revenge on Ellie for having killed most of her friends, players arguably will not want to do that—Ellie is, after all, the first and main protagonist. While the overall switch in perspective is supposed to increase players' sense of empathy for those that Ellie has murdered, she had been a flawed character already before that, and yet one that the game sets up as likable also because of this more multidimensional characterization.

The key confrontation scenes are thus characterized by a profound affective dissonance. When the game shows Ellie killing Jordan, the scene is set up in a way that aligns players with her panic and anger in that moment. Here, however, players cannot share the emotional state of the character they control, since they have already experienced half of the game's story from the point of view of the character introduced as their opponent. In this way, the scenes afford identification with both characters simultaneously, a highly unusual situation for action-adventure games that normally build on players rooting only for the character they play as—and having them perform violence against antagonists only. In turn, this feeling is intensified because, once again, players have to perform particularly gruesome violence: when Abby does manage to sneak up on Ellie and to hit her, the game switches to cutscenes that depict the two brutally hitting, stabbing, and shooting at each other with different weapons. When Abby gains the upper hand for the third time, she seems to break Ellie's arm and then punches her repeatedly with full force in the face while Ellie lies on the floor. In this way, the game forces players to see how their avatars perform violent acts against a character they have grown to like and identify with, potentially frustrating them due to their

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<sup>13</sup> This might not have worked for some players who express their 'hate' for Abby in criticism of *TLoU2*, but the game is still structured in a way to afford such an emotional bond with Abby as well. For instance, the experience of seeing her father killed is also set up as a parallel to Ellie witnessing Joel's death, and there are many moments of her bonding with Yara and Lev, joking around, or 'humanizing' details like her fear of heights.

lack of agency and creating a feeling of discomfort. As Sara Ahmed notes, “[d]iscomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled” (148). These sequences create discomfort for players because, for once, there is no character on screen whose body visibly expresses the emotion that the game design encourages players to feel. Instead, players might experience an odd sense of relief when Ellie briefly seems to win the fight, attacking the character players currently control; or they might be tempted to lose the fight so that Ellie does not get hurt; or they might try not to act at all (similar to not pushing any button when Ellie is about to torture Nora)—but none of that would progress the game. Abby has to win this fight against Ellie for the story to continue, so in terms of the affective regime the game has set up by then, players are essentially playing against themselves: against their own discomfort and their own moral compass.

The lack of agency in these scenes is, again, not accidental, I would argue, since it fits within the game’s overall interest in highlighting, but also complicating, empathy in the context of a veritable culture of violence. It forces players to play as somebody with whose goals and emotional state they are not aligned in this moment,<sup>14</sup> shifting their perspective and identification to their opponent—just as the game previously highlighted the importance of understanding one’s apparent enemies as complex human beings as well. In turn, this discomfort—what one could call a ‘ludo-affective dissonance’—also extends to a hesitance to perform such violent acts against each other, and in this way, the game transfers its characters’ emotional turmoil to the extratextual level of players currently playing this game.

## 6. Conclusion

This article’s analysis of *TLoU2* has attempted to highlight how the game’s complex affective setup combines questions of violence, femininity, and empathy. While video games of this genre often inherently build on violence, *TLoU2* uses it more self-reflexively to represent different constructions of femininity that its postapocalyptic setting make possible and believable. It forces its players to experience (narratively), look at (visually), and perform

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<sup>14</sup> While in their first confrontation, players, unlike Abby, do not want to kill Ellie because they have gotten to know Ellie for the majority of this and the previous game, in the final confrontation, when players, now as Ellie, this time have the upper hand on Abby (“Santa Barbara”), they have already been compelled to internalize what Ellie is about to realize only at the very end of their fight—understanding Abby’s perspective and being able to forgive her.

(ludically) acts that are excessively violent and disturbing, only to make them realize the full extent of these actions later, appealing to their empathy. The frustration that might come from a lack of choice in what the characters do even after players have already internalized this appeal to empathy is used purposefully to evoke a feeling of discomfort that fills the act of playing with more meaning exactly because it is pointed out as such: players control a character, narratively assuming to *be* that character, in a situation that restricts or might fundamentally contradict their preferred action. Meanwhile, *TLoU2* also shifts the focus away from the omnipresence of violence that the game only alludes to as governing the institutions and communities that structure the remainders of US society to the more ‘localized’ and everyday violence perpetrated within that world—and notably one that is fundamental to the game’s protagonists’ gender identities.

This complex of frustration and discomfort that the game sets up players to feel can perhaps constitute a legitimate complaint to be lodged against the game, unlike the ideological criticism I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Yet in order to make the ludic experience of a postapocalyptic world more meaningful, it seems crucial to also productively trouble this playing experience—to make playing not only fun but also grueling and unsettling, a feeling that can still elicit pleasure beyond ‘mere’ entertainment (similar to pop-cultural pleasures of horror, cringe, or disgust). *TLoU2*’s affective setup will leave players with these unresolved emotions, offering no simple answers to the ‘merit’ or potential necessity of revenge or violence but encouraging them to think about the consequences of the deeds they have performed as these fictional characters. Certainly, though, the game’s postapocalyptic world provides the space to think about and imagine the need for violent female figures in situations or constellations that also exist beyond the realm of speculative fiction.

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## Gender and Violence in Pandemic Futures in Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

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### Abstract

This article engages with the speculative future of Larissa Lai's 2018 novel *The Tiger Flu* and its exploration of utopian possibilities via alternative forms of female survival. In contrast to prototypical depictions of survival in classic dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives, such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), where straight white male heroes are the ones who take charge, Lai changes some central premises: the novel is alternately told from the first-person perspective of Kirilow Groundsel and from a third-person perspective that uses a second protagonist, Kora Ko, as a focalizer. Issues pertaining to gender and sex as material-discursive formations that shape social relations are thus foregrounded in *The Tiger Flu* not only by the fact that the eponymous flu itself has "a taste for men," but also through its two female queer protagonists of color, who are, moreover, not contained by the contours of lone hero/ine tropes. As we will show, however, the novel is likewise careful to not conjure feminist utopianism as a *dea ex machina* via its two protagonists and the worlds they inhabit: Lai's narrative also traces continuities from "the world before," showcasing that patriarchal structures, and particularly gendered violence, are not as far off as it would seem. Quite to the contrary, they are now frequently perpetuated and perpetrated by women and even by the protagonists themselves, and for that very reason might appear less conspicuous. *The Tiger Flu* hence simultaneously explores, celebrates, and criticizes utopian possibilities while emphasizing the continued parallel exploitation of both the environment and women – and by doing so the narrative teases readers with the possibility of utopian closure that it, however, ultimately denies in favor of interrogating ways of working towards utopia.

## 1. Introduction

Larissa Lai has been recognized for the ways in which her first two novels, *When Fox Was A Thousand* (1995) and *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), as well as her poetry volume, *Automaton Biographies* (2009), fuse cyborgs, technology, mythology, pop-culture, history, and science fiction elements, “foregrounding the politics of racialization, animality, and sexuality” and “build[ing] on the rich tradition of women of color writing in sf/speculative fiction” (Ho 2012). Lai herself has stated that she is drawn to speculative fiction for the possibilities it offers without “having to wade through the swathes of mainstream life and heteronormativity before we get to the place where we actually want to tell the story” (“Interview”). The narrative of her newest novel, *The Tiger Flu* (2018), is set over 120 years in the future, in the Gregorian year 2145 or Time After Oil (TAO) 127. The latter designation marks the fact that the world presented in the text is not only post-pandemic but also post-fossil fuel. Indeed, the future world Lai imagines is one in which petro-culture devices and machines only exist as leftover artifacts from the past. Environmental destruction has shattered the planet, and most people are struggling to survive under highly precarious living conditions: Movement is forcefully restricted and controlled by the military, knowledge is almost entirely privatized, and ordinary citizens do not even have access to the official currency.

At first sight, *The Tiger Flu* seems to meet all the characteristics of a prototypical or even classic dystopian or post-apocalyptic narrative. However, in an interview that Lai gave in 2019, she affirmed that she was consciously writing against prevalent examples of these genres. Pointing to “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, in which the woman kills herself at the start of the novel, ceding the story to the man and the boy,” she instead “wanted to write a story where the men are vulnerable, and the women survive” (“Interview”). Survival, perhaps the most prominent theme in post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, is also at the heart of *The Tiger Flu*. Yet, Lai changes some central premises in contrast to the prominent post-apocalyptic scenarios in which straight white male heroes are the ones who take charge (Lavigne 7): the novel is alternately told from the first-person perspective of Kirilow Groundsel and from a third-person perspective that uses a second protagonist, Kora Ko, as a focalizer. Kora is a teenager from a low-income family living in Saltwater City, an urban center overrun by patriarchal and corporate technocracy; Kirilow, by contrast, is a doctor living in the rural Grist Village, a community of genetically modified, parthenogenic women who have been exiled from Saltwater City three generations ago. Even though the cooperation between the two protagonists is sometimes reluctant, their stories gradually become entwined, and the novel’s resolution highlights rationality and community instead of heroic individualism.

Imagining a future world in which the struggle for survival requires not only highly individualistic and self-serving capabilities, but rather collaborative endeavors that successfully navigate diverse cultures, large parts of the narrative of *The Tiger Flu* are set in a thoroughly hybridized Vancouver (Saltwater City), characterized by a confluence of Chinese and Canadian cultures. Moreover, the eponymous flu that caused the devastation with which the novel confronts its readers is one that disproportionately targets men, making them vulnerable and dependent: “[t]here are no men in the streets. The men are shut up in houses, covered in lesions and coughing their lungs out [...] or else, they are already dead” (13). But even though, at first glance, this illness seems to reinforce a gender binary between men and women based on biological difference, such a binary is complicated by Lai: while her female-presenting protagonists challenge clear-cut assumptions about “woman” as an identity category, Kirilow, all the Grist sisters, and even Kora, as it turns out later, are posthuman mutants who simultaneously represent “women” and negate the category as one that can be biologically essentialized.

Issues of gender and sex as material-discursive formations that shape social relations are thus foregrounded in *The Tiger Flu* not only by the fact that the eponymous flu itself has “a taste for men” (Lai 13). Rather, such issues are also highlighted by the novel’s two queer protagonists of color,<sup>1</sup> who are, moreover, not contained by the contours of *lone hero/ine* tropes: skills that ensure survival are explicitly presented as taught and passed on within communities and intergenerationally, and risky situations are rarely resolved by individual heroic feats but rather by cooperation and negotiation. In this way, the novel juxtaposes relational existence and shared knowledge within all-female communities, not only with prevalent post-apocalyptic story-arches but also, on the plot level, with the radical privatization of almost all aspects of life, from police to education, in the post-pandemic society at large. *The Tiger Flu* presents both the communitarian and the liberal(ist) logic as outgrowths of a profound absence of state-run social institutions. Even though Lai invites readers to draw their own comparisons, she does not offer any unequivocal solutions.

The novel is careful not to conjure feminist utopianism as a *dea ex machina* via its two protagonists and their worlds. In contrast to the ruined landscape of Saltwater City, Grist Village is evaluated positively, particularly because “[t]he Grist women are in tune with their physical bodies, ancestry, and earth” (Dunston). However, Lai’s narrative also traces continuities from “the world before” in both Saltwater City and Grist

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<sup>1</sup> They are all of Chinese ancestry. This will be explained in further detail in section three.

Village, showcasing that patriarchal structures, and particularly gendered violence, are not as far off as it would seem. Quite to the contrary, they are now sometimes perpetuated and perpetrated by women and even by the protagonists themselves, a fact that might make them appear less conspicuous even though they are no less destructive. As we will argue, then, *The Tiger Flu* presents a speculative future that explores utopian possibilities via alternative forms of female survival. Such survival has to be secured in the context of continued parallel exploitation of both the environment and women by patriarchal and colonial structures, predicated on—in Judith Butler's terms—"lives that are cast as destructible" and "ungrievable" (31), within and by technocratic capitalism. In the following, we will first outline how these persistent forms of (gendered) violence are narrated within each of the two storylines (Kirilow's and Kora's) of the post-pandemic and post-petroleum world of *The Tiger Flu*, and then turn to the ending of the novel to offer a close reading of its queer, posthuman reimagination of survival as a challenge to sexist and racist logics of expendability.

## **2. The Persistence of Gendered Violence and the Creation of Expendable Bodies in Saltwater City**

While the world in year 127 TAO at first glance seems unfamiliar and disorienting to readers, recognizable structures are soon revealed in Saltwater City, where Kora Ko lives. Lai's narrative here traces subsistence during the *long apocalypse* of living in a polluted world in which a technocratic corporation—by the name of HöST Light Industries—has taken over former state functions. By replacing the state with a corporation, the narrative is attentive to the oppressive structures of class, sketching out the ways in which people in Saltwater City suffer as a consequence of being dispensable to its corporate elite. HöST, the "family company," which Drew Marie Beard describes as a "militaristic corporate monopoly" (76), rules the city "in its own best interests" (3): its governing has taken on totalitarian forms, as all fundamental aspects of daily life, from food (HöST supermarkets) to education (so-called "scales" sold by the HöST companies) are in the hand of this one super-corporation.

The corporation's monopoly on all areas of life engenders a society in which the general population does not have access to the city's official currency. Moreover, HöST also commands the city's police force (52), and the corporation's CEO, Isabelle Chow, is revered as a quasi-religious idol (53). The eerie worship of a business leader as a deity emphasizes the transgressiveness of Chow's power, which is further highlighted by the fact that HöST and Chow willingly accept that their operations create what Vivian G. Shinall has described as "expendable bodies," a term that

“delineat[es] those who are [deemed] nonessential to society” (17). While a small, rich percentage of the population lives “walled in” in the comfort and safety of Saltwater City’s glass towers, venturing into the streets only “to do things they wouldn’t be allowed to do in the glass towers” (Lai 153), the general population is progressively decimated, not only by the flu but also by precarious living conditions. Clearly belonging to this latter group, Kora’s family lives without secure access to such necessities as potable water and sufficient food, surviving mostly through subsistence farming on their rooftop garden, which is also limited since the soil is almost completely depleted. While harvesting potatoes with her uncle, Kora must face the realization that new, fertile earth is unobtainable to them because “[t]he wet market farmers want renminbi, a currency no one in the Ko family earns” (23). Moreover, most of the potatoes are “gnarled and slimy” and infested with “wireworms” (23), so that subsistence seems to move slowly but steadily towards starvation. In addition to material goods, knowledge has also been privatized in Saltwater City and is only available to those who can access the satellites Chang and Eng, where common knowledge and historical information is stored.<sup>2</sup> Inhabitants of Saltwater City get piecemeal access by buying and trading “memory scales” (23), which are fish-scale sized microchips that connect directly to the brain and deliver knowledge on specific subjects, such as the phases of the moon (23), “medicine” (207), historical events, and other pieces of information about “the world that was” (29).

The lives of ordinary people in Saltwater City are thus continuously subjected to the less tangible but no less pernicious forms of violence connected to their “expendability.” Building on Shinal’s concept, the notion of “expendability” as we use it here relates to concepts such as Zygmund Bauman’s notion of “wasted lives,” that is to say, the lives of populations rendered superfluous in modern societies. It is also connected to Achille Mbembe’s understanding of “necropolitics” as the state’s power under colonialism (and similarly oppressive regimes) “to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not”

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that Lai chose to name the pair of satellites after the conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, born in 1811 in Thailand (then Siam), points to the complex legacies of colonial, racialized, and class oppressions. The twins were frequently “exhibited” as curiosities in the so-called freak shows when they moved to the United States in 1829. However, they also became rich while touring the US and Canada, adopted American citizenship, and became slave-owners. It is also a point in the narrative, like many others, that emphasizes the long *durée* of oppressive legacies which will not disappear unless they are actively acknowledged, addressed, and changed. That their names now endure in the form of satellites also illustrates the ways in which historical knowledge in the narrative world has become severed from its origins and morphed into new forms, similarly to the mutated endurance of pop-songs in the teachings of the Grist sisters (also see Section three of this article).

(27), and to Judith Butler's discussions of "grievable" versus "ungrievable" life. In *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), she explains that "a life has to be grievable—that is, its loss has to be conceptualizable as a loss" (59, italics in original) to safeguard that life from violence and destruction. She adds that frequently, however, lives are framed as "ungrievable, not only by those responsible for taking the life, but also by those that live in a world where the presumption is that such lives are always vanishing, that this is simply the way things go" (74). Shinall, who critically examines *ecoracism* and the normalization of *embodied toxicity* of "racial minorities and impoverished communities" (17) in Indigenous contexts, moreover, draws on Rob Nixon's concept of *slow violence* and Julia Sze's writing on environmental racism to examine the notion of disposability of lives that are not registered as worth safeguarding. She observes the close connection between the "increasing environmental degradation of the spaces in which expendable bodies reside, and how these bodies have ultimately suffered from embodied toxicity due to the toxic conditions of their environments" (17-18). This interconnection between environmental degradation, toxicity, and expendability is also apparent in *The Tiger Flu*.

While there are few concrete explanations as to how exactly society reached TAO (time after oil), it becomes clear just how polluted this world is when Kora notes that the rain is so acidic it burns holes into clothing (Lai 26) and that a "heavy layer of pollution" (28) pushes down on the city at almost all times. One of the rare moments when readers do receive a glimpse into the history that brought about the precarious conditions of 2145 occurs when Kora shares a collective drug-induced memory-vision which illustrates connections of tiger bone wine production (which turns out to be the origin of the flu) to climate change and to the precarious and toxic living conditions of the novel's present:

Happy revellers drink from crystal glasses at first, mouth to spigot as addiction deepens. Then the same vintners and revellers waste away in overstuffed hospitals and clinics from Albuquerque to Seoul to Kinshasa to New York City. The tigers pad softly into the night and then the room fills with the roar of another crumbling. Vast cliffs and towers of the polar ice calve into the warming sea [...] Oceans swell and rise to engulf whole cities. The denizens of Saltwater City construct a massive wall of earth to protect themselves. The earth's angry maw gapes to swallow those outside [...] (210-211).

Not only do consumerism, climate change, and the flu itself become closely connected in these brief "history lessons," the vision also once again exposes how the lives of those left outside the city walls to die in the floods have been rendered expendable to those trying to save themselves within the city.

Constantly underlining, in this way, the persistent links of the past to the future, even in this seemingly radically altered world, the narrative

makes clear that patriarchal structures still pervade society, despite the increasing absence of men. While women are largely the only ones left to keep society going due to the pandemic flu, Isabelle Chow only inherits HöST's corporate empire once all her male relatives have succumbed to the disease (14). Once in charge, she simply keeps extending the company's power through the same gatekeeping mechanisms (privatized knowledge) and exploitation of labor that her father and her uncle employed before her. This can be seen, for example, in HöST's newest project, LiFT, which offers the possibility of "uploading" one's consciousness onto the mainframe satellite of Eng. The option of leaving one's body behind to "live" eternally in a virtual utopia is highly tempting, especially to those most likely to die of the flu. But even this allegedly new form of life reproduces patriarchal structures of oppression and fosters toxic forms of masculinity. Kora first learns about the "upload" when her brother's friend Stash, whom she intensely dislikes, insists on giving her a glimpse of the *Quay d'Espoir*, the virtual reality created by HöST. Via a small disk, he establishes contact with his uploaded friend Oscar, who immediately dives into a speech about all the new world has to offer, gushing, "You're going to love it up here. We're strong the way we were before. There are cars like the old days. And steak and beer, and girls, man, thousands of chiquitas like you would not believe," which he follows by "drop[ping] his pants and shak[ing] his floppy wang at Stash" (126). The virtual world of LiFT thus presents a nostalgic return to "the old days" which seems to be structured around heterosexual male fantasies and stereotypical notions of patriarchal masculinity.

When Oscar exposes himself, Stash hastily apologizes to Kora for his friend's sexism, saying, "I'm sorry Oscar is such a pig. We aren't all, you know" (127). Yet his behavior toward Kora calls this statement into question. Only a few weeks prior, as readers already know, Stash "surprised" Kora on the rooftop garden by hugging her hard from behind and then "lick[ing] her face with his white tongue" (15) as she tries to push him away. Much like his friend and perhaps worse than him, Stash thus embodies toxic masculinity and shows sexual aggression toward Kora, which in his case is not only virtual but physical.

The fact that the men of Saltwater City still engage in the same sexist behaviors as before the flu is also confirmed through an outsider's perspective. When Kirilow, who is utterly unfamiliar with the company of men because she has spent all her life in Grist Village, arrives in the city (in search of hidden Grist sisters), she must negotiate being exposed to the male gaze for the first time. When a man falls into step next to her, Kirilow considers the implications of the situation for what the city may do to her understanding of herself: "I never thought about my looks until this

particular man looked. Is that how it's done in this decaying city?" (201). She immediately dislikes it:

Old Glorybind taught me what women are. I know how humans doubled in the time before, how they still do in Saltwater City. Technically speaking, we Grist sisters have the same bodies they do. He touches my arm and an unexpected electricity runs through me. 'Go away, or I'll hurt you.' I walk faster. He follows me. (201)

Kirilow establishes here that no matter her self-identification, she is treated like a woman of the city because she looks like one. Her experience on the city's streets also confirms that even in a world in which almost all men are sick or dead, they still expect their power over women to remain intact.

Because she is unused to the male gaze and any form of interaction with men, an uncomfortable overlap between flirting and harassment becomes apparent through her eyes. Chloe Dunston observes that in Lai's narrative, "the situation of frailty and viral toxicity in the physical masculine body also more profoundly signals men's historical toxicity, to humans and to earth, which they have achieved repeatedly through hegemonic masculinity" (n. p.). She concludes that "Stash and other men embody toxicity literally through disease and figuratively through masculinity—both of which are, in fact, escapable" (n. p.). In alignment with Dunston's perspective, Chiara Xausa argues via Susan Watkins that Lai's novel is one of several recent feminist sci-fi works that turn away from nostalgia for past societal structures to highlight instead critically "the relationship that exists between structural inequalities generated by patriarchy, misogyny and racism and issues such as climate change, global capitalism, and technoscience" (25). The significance of this connection is confirmed when towards the end of the novel, Kora finds out more about Isabelle Chow's plans for LiFT, which promises those who complete the upload "*life after life*" (203), an eternal virtual life after they have given up their physical existence: to make this virtual world "feel real" (73), it needs Grist sister clone DNA, because without it, the experiment has stalled at "eighty-five percent verisimilitude" (114). In this way, the LiFT project relies on further bodily exploitation of the Grist sisters' bodies. Kora observes how six men

[...] usher a group of [Grist] women into an empty elevator. Docile as sheep, eyes emitting green vapour, the women step unquestioning past the sliding doors. The doors reel shut behind them. The numbers of the little dial begin to ascend. Then the doors of the elevator beside it slide open. The foul odour of ammonia, sweat, and rotten onions fills the room, and water gushes out the elevator doors. There is something in it. A writhing, flapping mass of fish, interspersed with clots of red. Blood? The water floods away into a deep gutter at the elevators' edge. (213)

The bodies of the Grist women and others are literally “fed” into the elevator—their minds are uploaded, and their bodies turned into fish, which are subsequently eaten by the remaining population of Saltwater City (239, 248). At the same time, and in contrast to others that freely choose the upload, the Grist sisters do not believe in virtual existence. For them, “[t]his strange killing and rebirthing is [Saltwater City] business. We Grist sisters have no faith in such things. If the body is dead, then so is the woman, whatever these occultists [inhabitants of Saltwater City] think they have copied” (232). With the forced upload of the Grist sisters, the kind of capitalist exploitation that occurs everywhere in the novel turns into cannibalism, the ultimate form of transgressive consumption.

The lives of the Grist women are made expendable for no other reason than the fact that those in power thrive off of the flu. To make matters even worse, Kora’s brother, K2, reveals to Kora that the epidemic continues because it is actively kept alive by the corporation. He explains that the tiger-bone wine factories are still “operating smooth as silk. [...] Why do you think the flu epidemic keeps getting worse? They are making it worse and trying to export it to the UMK [United Middle Kingdom]. It’s not just hangover trauma from some time long past. It’s happening over and over again, right now” (226-227). To make Lift more profitable, HöST keeps infecting people on purpose (229). Consequently, a huge number of sick men are uploaded in the hope of being able to cheat certain death. The Grist sisters are thus not the only ones who become victims of corporate “progress.” Unlike the men, however, the Grist sisters do not get to choose or to refuse the upload. After all their DNA is needed to render the virtual environment more realistic. Their role as a useful commodity to HöST highlights how the intersections of gender, race, and class render some bodies more “expendable” than others.

Via the transgression of cannibalism, the narrative also raises questions about the ramifications of expendability beyond the realm of humans (or humanoid clones). The consumption of human flesh, “disguised” as or transformed into fish, and Kora’s absolute revulsion once she realizes just what she is offered for food recalls an event from earlier in the novel when Kora experienced a bout of violent vomiting after she gave in to her hunger and ate a bowl of stew made of her pet goat (and friend) Delphine (Lai 67). Yet, in the rest of the narrative, animals are consumed at various points with enjoyment. Those isolated counterpoints serve to highlight the cultural customs that render animals’ lives expendable as a norm, be it because they are turned into food or clothing. When Kora’s family urges her to join the Cordova Dancing School because it could presumably secure her continued survival and access to enough food, Kora, for example, also learns about “catcoats” that render its wearers invisible. Made by the headmistress out of kittens,

which are pounded to fit the human form, catcoats are still “alive” to the extent that they can feel pain, and they purr when they feel human body heat (153). *The Tiger Flu* here not only evokes fantastic stories about magical objects, but it is also reminiscent of Philip K. Dick’s famous science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*,<sup>3</sup> which questions cultural attitudes towards animals. Like Dick’s novel, *The Tiger Flu* raises questions about what behavior toward other sentient beings is acceptable and what is considered cruel, repulsive, or taboo. *The Tiger Flu* here moreover links the ways in which humans are reduced to their consumable bodies to how non-human animals are treated as expendable all the time. Lai thus draws attention not only to cultural attitudes, but also to ethical questions, and to material inequalities which complicate any simple answers to those ethical questions.

At the school, Kora also quickly learns that her own survival is predicated on killing others, or at least on not caring if they die. As part of her “training” she is more or less coerced by two other girls to shoot an old man while the group is raiding a so-called “plague house” for food (140). Terrified at having pulled the trigger when the man tried to stop her, Kora “runs out, over the heap of decaying bodies, and into the sunlight. Modesta and Soraya are there on the black lawn, laughing their heads off” (140). Testing how hardened new recruits already are seems to be a firm part of being initiated into the group of dance students. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of Kora’s first experiences after arriving at the Cordova Dancing School is a small group of girls hazing her while repeatedly taunting her with the question, “what’s the worst thing you’ve done for food?” before forcing her to eat her own vomit (98). Although her family advertised the school to Kora as a “safe space” from the perils of Saltwater City, it turns out that even within the school community, violence is used to keep individuals in line. This example shows that even presumed “safe havens” like the dancing school are pervaded by the structures of violence that organize survival in Saltwater City.

The fact that neither of the two narrative perspectives in the novel is omniscient limits the readers’ perspective on the larger political structures of the world depicted, structures that remain very difficult to discern throughout the novel. Travel between quarantine rings (i.e., different zones) is strictly controlled and frequently prevented by armed militias. When Kirilow and Kora contemplate how they might escape Saltwater City towards the end of the narrative, a friend warns them that the border

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<sup>3</sup> In Dick’s novel almost all real animals are extinct. Therefore, to possess a real animal is an enormous luxury; most people only own mechanical animals. However, owning an animal of some kind is deemed essential because taking care of an animal is seen as a moral necessity for humans in the narrative’s post-apocalyptic world.

to the second quarantine ring is only open “to a lucky few. Lots of people are dying or disappearing on that border. The UMK doesn’t want Cosmopolitan Earth to take in too many refugees from Saltwater Flats. They’ve sent in military police” (242). The people of the UMK are the only ones who still possess nuclear arms—and thus they are feared by others. Still it is unclear whether any of the regions mentioned in the narrative have democratically elected governments or whether they are all in the hands of corporate family dynasties, such as the one of Isabelle Chow. What becomes clear in this part of the novel is that poor inhabitants like Kora, the Cordova girls, and many others who struggle to subsist in the city are subject to violence on the part of state-like technocratic powers that have replaced former national structures. The inhabitants’ vulnerability is exacerbated because they do not have access to reliable information about the larger power struggles and political conflicts between governing authorities.

Here, as elsewhere in the novel, the present condition of the world is not portrayed as unique or disconnected from previous history but as a continuation of what came before. Having been drugged during her escape from Saltwater City, Kora is overtaken by overwhelming anxiety. She begins to scream until “she becomes the scream, the howl of the lost dog at night, the scream of a decade past, and the decade prior to that, the trail of tiger flu in reverse” (274). As she screams, her vision reaches backward from “the emergence of the quarantine rings, the first epidemic, the tiger wine craze, the end of oil, the launch of Chang and Eng, the expulsion of the Grist sisters, their legalization for labour on Pacific Gyre Island [...]” (274) all the way back to

the consolidation of the United Middle Kingdom from China and all the little Asian countries that surround it, the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, the birth of Chan Ling’s great-grandmother to a young Hakka woman in the village of Happy Valley in the early days of the British colonial administration, the Opium Wars, the fall of the Ming dynasty [...] screaming the scream of her long history. (274-275)

Via the physicality of her scream, this history is presented as an embodied—and also as a gendered and racialized—inheritance. She “becomes the scream,” which illustrates the persistence of past violence and oppression in the present. In this way, Lai once again subtly depicts how the present world emerged out of the past, by emphasizing connections between colonial occupation, the destruction of nature, consumerist greed, and the existence of the tiger flu.

### **3. Construction & Doubting Utopia in an All-Female Society: The Grist Sisterhood**

The world Lai has created in *The Tiger Flu* is one where—instead of taking the poor, the racialized, and disenfranchised—the virus primarily affects the white, the rich, the men, the ones in power, and those who associate

with them. In other words, it would appear that the conditions in the novel are such that they enable the creation of a non-white, all-female or female-dominated society as the basis for a feminist utopia. As the previous section has outlined, however, the environments that Kora encounters in the novel (Saltwater City, Saltwater Flats, the Cordova Dancing School) are anything but utopian or marked by gender equality: patriarchal structures have survived, and violence is persistent. The potential for a utopian all-female society is still arguably present in the Grist village and its inhabitants, the Grist sisters, which serve as an oppositional alternative to the post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic world of Saltwater City and the quarantine rings.

The Grist sisters are introduced to the readers by the second protagonist Kirilow in Chapter 2, directly following the exposition of the Saltwater City storyline in Chapter 1. The Grist sisters originated from the genetically modified parthenogenic clones of a group of Asian women, who were exiled from Saltwater City three generations earlier. They fled to a region in the fourth quarantine ring, and set up an all-female community. Historically, another form of expendability is thus embodied by the Grist sisters. Since they were originally clones manufactured by the Jemini Group as workers for the HöST factories, their lives were never registered as lives worth safeguarding. They were brought into the world as useful but expendable bodies to exploit their workforce; their individual lives are not valued, and the possibility of their untimely deaths is considered as a calculated risk. Alexander Pedersen reads “the Grist sisters [...] as a critique of global capitalism’s exploitation of ‘disposable’ cheap labor, but also, specifically, of “dehumanised Asian workers” (23), a link established via the Grist sisters’ Chinese lineage.<sup>4</sup> In parallel to how the expendability of Grist sisters is explored in the passages set in Saltwater City that deal with the Lift project, the history of the Grist sisters presents their disposability from the very beginning as gendered.

In the novel’s present, however, the focus is on the make-up of the (all-female) community the Grist sisters established after they escaped from the company. In stark contrast to Saltwater City, the Grist village and its inhabitants are posthuman and live in close touch with nature. Not only have they developed a mode of reproduction that is based on the physical re-growth of organs, their lifeworld is also characterized by states of complex embodied selfhood, natural environments in which human and

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<sup>4</sup> Lai’s focus here is also specifically anchored in British Columbia’s and Vancouver’s history of xenophobia and specifically anti-Chinese-racism, which does not lie in the past, as anti-Asian hate crimes have again been surging since the Covid-19 pandemic (Canadian Human Rights Commission). This specific connection adds another way in which *The Tiger Flu* exposes enduring ties between the past and the present (and the future) that trouble clean-slate fantasies of utopian thinking.

non-human agents interact and coexist in harmony, and organic detritus that becomes material for repurposed clothing or homes: tents, pillows, blankets, and gauzes are made from mushroom fibers, and instead of a net to catch prey, the Grist sister use a “womb bomb” (45). Moreover, they have intentionally detached themselves from all kinds of technology from “the time before” (201), and they follow a religious mythology, the Religion of the Mother, which puts a particular emphasis on “maintenance and oral transmission of knowledge,” but also on an “inevitable imbrication and inseparability of the human body and mind” (Pascual 101), thus establishing a strict opposition to the upload of knowledge and consciousnesses the satellites Chang and Eng enable in Saltwater City.

Taken together, these innovative and posthuman features of the Grist sisterhood—and thus their continuous positioning as an opposition to the inhabitants of Saltwater City throughout the novel—have often led to the interpretation that *The Tiger Flu* “celebrat[es] the Grist sisterhood’s guiding principles” (Murray 13). Arguably, the Grist sisterhood presents a female apocalyptic alternative that stands in contrast to narratives such as *The Road*, because it replaces “colonial and patriarchal narratives of paternity and conquest with metaphors of mother-daughter relationships” (Watkins 13, also see Murray). Yet, identifying the Grist sisterhood as the female utopian alternative to still existing patriarchal structures in Saltwater City also erases some of the problematic aspects of this community. This holds true in particular when focusing on the use of violence and the newly established (gender) hierarchies in Grist village.

A first problematic aspect to be addressed is reproduction and the violent social relations it produces: the community of the Grist sisters consists of a queen, Radix Bupleuri, and three types of regular grist sisters: “grooms,” “starfishes,” and “doublers.” Because only the “doublers” can reproduce parthenogenically and thus see to the survival of the community, it is the “grooms’” responsibility to cut organs from the so-called “starfish”-members of the community. Starfishes have the ability to regrow bodyparts and are expected to give them to the “doublers” to prolong their lives. When Kirilow introduces readers to her community, she points out that the Grist village where she lives only has one doubler left, Auntie Radix. Being a groom herself, Kirilow has to harvest organs from her beloved starfish Peristrophe Halliana to then provide them to Auntie Radix:

Even if she is our last doubler, I don’t want Auntie Radix to have Peristrophe Halliana’s eyes. Auntie Radix already took Peristrophe Halliana’s liver a week ago, and one of her kidneys four weeks before that. Auntie Radix says that it is the duty and nature of a starfish to give. I tell her it is the duty and nature of a doubler to know when to stop asking. (Lai 18)

This statement, which opens Chapter 2, makes clear from the very beginning that the new reproductive structures of the Grist village do not represent what Xausa in her discussion of the novel identifies as a “new paradigm for care work, which must be considered not as unpaid and feminized domestic labour but as collective care” (31). While the Grist sisters work as a collective, Kirilow nevertheless showcases the costs and pain the reproductive mechanisms entail for individual members of the collective. For example, when Kirilow cuts Peristrophe Halliana’s eyes, this procedure is assisted both by the heavy usage of drugs, the so-called “forget-me-do” (Lai 21), and religious chanting, which is meant “to push down the dread that roils in my [Kirilow’s] belly” (20). When kept in perspective, the hierarchy in the Grist sisterhood is thus one that resembles—in uncanny ways—that of their origin as female clones to be exploited for their productive labor to the point of death. In Grist village, starfishes, such as Peristrophe Halliana, essentially serve as living biobanks for the other Grist member, and doublers take on the roles of surrogates, who are separated from their offspring soon after birth and only kept alive to produce further offspring.

At first, the loving relationship that groom Kirilow has with her starfish partner Peristrophe Halliana might mask the painful reality that the Grist sisters are bound to repeat the exploitative structures from which they have tried to flee by escaping the company. Eventually, the question of the “expendability” of Grist sisters’ bodies surfaces again, however, this time in their community rather than in the corporate world of HöST. In Chapter 8, Auntie Radix needs a new heart and Kirilow is asked to take Peristrophe Halliana’s and, thus, to kill her:

Glorybind Groundsel told me, if the Grist is dying down to the last doubler, her word is flesh, her word is god. You can’t say no.

But all my fibres scream it. (34)

According to the Grist reproduction hierarchy, when doublers are at risk of dying, the starfishes’ lives become expendable, and personal relationships to that doubler, such in the case of Peristrophe Halliana and Kirilow, are not allowed to matter. When Kirilow cannot force herself to take Peristrophe Halliana’s heart, and Auntie Radix dies, she is, therefore, cast out by other Grist sisters as a “traitor” (62).<sup>5</sup> With Kirilow, *The Tiger Flu* thus introduces a protagonist who, from the beginning of the novel, deviates from her own society’s norms and raises questions about the apparent utopian structures of the Grist sisterhood.

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, this development has haunting parallels to the body economy of the Jemini Group and HöST, where the (virtual) lives of some are priced over the physical lives of others.

While the sisterhood at first glance is in stark positive contrast with the unsustainable top-down capitalist ways of Saltwater City, Kirilow's pain illustrates the cost of this "utopia." By foregrounding her story and perspective, the novel hence calls into question the familiar "good" vs. "evil," or "utopian" vs. "dystopian" narrative form that is particularly common in patriarchal "end of the world" narratives. While the Grist sisterhood certainly imagines various innovative procedures and "technologies" that showcase how they "co-habit with the animal and vegetable worlds in egalitarian and harmonious ways" (Xausa 29), when it comes to survival, their community structures are exposed as being anything but egalitarian and harmonious. This observation is valid not only for structures within the Grist sisterhood but also for its relationship to outsiders, as exposed by the following scene where Kirilow encounters a "Salty," an inhabitant of Saltwater City:

There's a red flash of hair. It's a biped, like us. One of those sneaky creeps from Saltwater City? But unlike us, tall, pale, and gangly. Our genes don't express like that. We manifest crow-black hair, autumn-leaf skin, and short legs. [...] It stumbles into a clearing. Gotcha! I throw a knife at it, neatly severing its left hand. (Lai 36-37)

While Kirilow initially considers a certain similarity between herself and the stranger, she eventually uses the physical difference between them as her justification for denying the humanity of the stranger. Consequently, in her view, violence is warranted. When she tries to throw a knife at the Salty in order to kill it, she however only injures the stranger's hand, and the Salty is able to run away. When Kirilow sees the Salty again a couple of days later and manages to capture it, hatred and the wish to hurt the stranger once again overcomes her ("I yank the womb bomb tighter", "Whenever I want you, all I have to do is preen" [44], "At least let me bleed it a little" [45]). It is only when Kirilow and her "mother double," Glorybind Groundsel, realize that the Salty's hand has grown back, potentially making it a starfish, that Kirilow begins to acknowledge the humanity of the Salty. This value however depends on the Salty's immediate reproductive worth for the community.

While Kirilow has been taught all her life that inhabitants from Saltwater City pose a threat, the fact that the intruder might be a starfish could increase the chances of survival for the Grist community, who at this point of the narrative have not only just lost their last doubler, Auntie Radix, but also only have one starfish left. Notably, Kirilow's taught hatred against Salties still eventually gains the upper hand: "But you can't stop me from hating. You yourself told me the stories—of how they rounded our grandmothers up by the thousands [...] Why should you care if I hurt it or not?" (45). She eventually convinces the other Grist sisters that the Salty "came to infect" (72) the Grist sisterhood, drugs it with forgetting

tea, and takes it back to the forest to “dump it unceremoniously into the dirt” (72). The hatred, which is mostly based on a historical hostility against Salties and hence knowledge Kirilow has not experienced first-hand, thus eventually prevents her from considering the stranger as someone whose starfish capabilities could help the Grist community. In a plot twist, only hours after the Salty was released back into the forest, Peristrophe Halliana, the Grist village’s last starfish, dies.

In parallel to other scenes in the novel, the encounter between Kirilow and the stranger exemplifies that when the Grist sisters say that they “hold all that remains of the old world’s knowledge in our raw brains” (20), this also applies, at least in part, to problematic hierarchies and prejudices against outsiders. In some uncanny ways, the Grist sisterhood is still linked to its Saltwater origins—and thus also to the world of the past. While the linkages are only in some cases made explicit, such as in the examples above, the Grist sisters also sometimes point them out themselves (“The Grist may have evolved beyond its former masters, but we are not immune to their illnesses” [48]). It is striking in this context that the first chapters narrated through Kirilow’s voice also contain numerous (pop-)cultural references to the “time before,” many of which point to old power hierarchies and systems of exploitation. The references the Grist sisters use are, however, always several steps removed from their original contexts. While the phrase “diamonds are a girl’s best friend,” the famous line from Carol Channing’s eponymous 1949 song, helps Kirilow to remember that her whetstone is made from diamonds stolen off the fingers of dead married women, a reference to a popular commercial reminds her that her scalpels must be disinfected at least twice so that they “shimmer clean, a lean mean clean [...] like the lemon muscle man from time before” (22). Other “chants” Kirilow uses during the procedure of cleaning her knife and cutting out Peristrophe Halliana’s eyes include “The first cut is the sleekest” (22, cf. Rod Stewart’s “The First Cut is the Deepest”) and “Those are pearls that were her eyes” (22, cf. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*).<sup>6</sup> As much as these veiled and repurposed pop-cultural references are still recognizable if one is familiar with them, all the phrases Kirilow was taught in the Grist sisterhood now belong to the so-called Religion of the Mother, an ideology which is a powerful guide for Kirilow that also keeps her from scrutinizing her life and her role in the community. Drawing on the personal experiences of Grandma Chan Ling (the founder and late matriarch of Grist Village and an escapee of Jemini’s labs) in addition to pop-cultural “wisdom” of the past, the Grist sisters thus use a partly imaginary, but certainly selective and distorted version of the past to help them remember lessons that will in turn help them to survive

<sup>6</sup> Note how these references also perpetuate traditional patriarchal and heterosexual notions of gender relations.

in the present—a process that is problematized through the protagonist Kirilow and her actions.

One of the epigraphs of *The Tiger Flu* that further underscores such a critical reading of the intertextual references is from Monique Wittig's 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*, another radical feminist utopia featuring an all-female community:

They say that at the point they have reached they must examine the principle that has guided them [...]. They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture. (epigraph)

What Lai emphasizes here is that communities such as Wittig's *Guérillères* or the Grist sisters, which are pitted against highly patriarchal dystopian societies, are not per se completely oppositional, non-patriarchal, and/or utopian. Instead, such societies, too, are at risk of perpetuating knowledge structures and behaviors from “a dead culture” (epigraph), that is to say, from the patriarchal society from which they evolved. Simply reading the Grist sisterhood as the oppositional and thus prototypical all-female utopian alternative to Saltwater City thus obscures that violence, harmful hierarchies, and prejudices still exist even in the Grist sisterhood and that all three are woven into the very religion that guides this community. In turn, these aspects complicate any unilateral understanding of the Grist sisterhood as a utopian alternative to Saltwater City.

#### 4. Conclusion: A Queer Posthuman Utopia?

Apart from writing against male-dominated post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, *The Tiger Flu* also draws on familiar strategies by feminist authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge Piercy, and Monica Wittig. Not only does the novel feature two non-white female-presenting protagonists, whose individual quest narratives are resolved in a commitment to relationality, it also features the all-female posthuman community of Grist Village as a potential alternative to Saltwater City, where patriarchal structures and violence have outlasted large-scale social upheaval. But while *The Tiger Flu* adapts and innovates such traditional dystopian and feminist utopian elements, it ultimately challenges the original paradox of dystopia/utopia and thoroughly complicates the notion of a new and different post-pandemic world as a necessarily worse or better world: emphasizing the continuance of violent and oppressive structures in *both* Saltwater City and Grist Village, the novel highlights the necessity, even in this seemingly radically altered world, to reckon with the lasting ties of the present to patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures of the past. Instead of emphasizing the simplistic utopianism of one solution for all, *The Tiger Flu* works to interrogate several older utopian and dystopian models and the traditional

ideologies on which they rely. By showing how such traditional ideologies are recycled, modified, and reused in post-pandemic knowledge structures, the plot emphasizes utopian possibilities as a continual aspiration for communities rather than as an endpoint at which one can arrive once and for all.

Particularly the ways in which the individual quest narratives of the protagonists ultimately become entwined are indicative of *The Tiger Flu's* own quest of probing different models of dystopian/utopian traditions without necessarily settling on one. After both the last doubler and the last starfish have died and HöST attacked Grist Village, Kirilow eventually decides to travel to Saltwater City to find a new starfish, as the Grist sisterhood otherwise faces extinction. She meets Kora at the Cordova Dancing School and learns that the school, like Grist Village, was founded by a group of clones who escaped the Jemini factories. When Kirilow amputates Kora's hand after it becomes infected, it grows back, revealing that Kora is a Grist sister as well and a starfish. However, Kora at first is anything but willing to join Kirilow and rather accepts an invitation from her brother K2 to a "tiger party" held at the Pacific Pearl Parkade hoping to be reunited with her family. It is there that Kora learns that even her own brother has betrayed her and realizes she must flee from Saltwater City. In the end, it is thus neither Kora's nor Kirilow's world, or rather worldviews, that succeed or supersede the other; only through eventual compromise and collaboration, the two protagonists manage to survive and escape. When Kora gets hit and injured fatally during their flight, Kirilow uses both her skills as a groom *and* instructions from one of Isabelle Chow's chip-like knowledge scales to reprogram the LiFT and upload Kora's mind to save her consciousness, since she cannot save her body:

The wormy scale teaches my fingers something they didn't know before. At last, I pull my bloody hands out from the meat of the LiFT. 'Here goes nothing!'

[...] I kneel and stroke the dying girl's hair. 'It's going to be okay,' I tell her. 'In just a few minutes, you will see.' (255)

While Kora and Kirilow start off in the novel as two protagonists from opposing worlds, the resolution of *The Tiger Flu* presents them in a cautious care relationship with each other, thus connecting the two worlds.

Notably, these notions of collaboration and care are also upheld in the last chapter, entitled "The Kora Tree," which presents the reader with an outlook to the future: after her upload, Kora's mind was downloaded again and transferred into a so-called starfish tree: "*Bombyx Mori and Kirilow Groundsel worked for many years to make me what I am and to seed the entire Starfish Orchard that nurtures the Grist Garden*" (328,

italics in original). In a truly posthuman fashion, the conscious Kora Tree ends up serving the newly established New Grist Village as an organ donor, thus securing the survival of the Grist sisterhood. That this development is understood as a truly new form of existence is also marked by a change in narration: most of the last chapter is narrated through the Kora Tree, which “vibrates language” (327) to a group of young Grist sisters who sit underneath her branches (this vibrating is marked in italics). Notably, the Kora Tree not only explains her function to the young members of the Grist community but also once again points out “the ills of a hetero-patriarchal society that used to exert violence of every kind upon its female members” (Pascual 109), ills that can perhaps finally be left behind by the next generation of Grist women.

In contrast to “old” Grist Village before the planting of Kora Tree, the establishment of New Grist Village is narrated almost like a return to Eden: “the little doublers turn to admire the Starfish Orchard that surrounds them in a leafy, comforting dance of light and shadow” (Lai 262). Seemingly, the closing chapter of *The Tiger Flu* offers up a pastoral refuge, as contrasted to the “dirty garden” of Saltwater City (325). Unlike the many “betrayed Edens” (Buell 647) which nature writing, environmental literature, and climate fiction frequently offer, this ending appears truly utopian in some ways: an all-female, post-patriarchal world in which the “starfish tree” grows replacement organs, effectively abolishing the necessity to harvest organs from Grist sisters and thus older forms of reproductive/restorative violence. In the new and isolated Grist Village, old structures of corporate exploitation, patriarchal norms, and heterosexual reproduction finally seem to lie outside the sisters’ realm of concern.

The ending thus offers a glimpse into a queer, posthuman future that raises the question of whether *The Tiger Flu* settles on a final utopian vision, after all. And yet, even in this presumably utopian world, Lai includes space for ambivalence, as the former world still has not entirely disappeared. Both Kora and Kirilow are still marked by what they have lost. While Kirilow dreams of reuniting with her beloved Peristrophe Halliana, the Kora Tree likewise betrays a yearning for the past. Just as Kora gets ready to resume her teaching of the young Grist sisters, “[a]t the very top of her branches a little tendril lights up momentarily, calling out to no one. She wills it to dim” (329). The utopian present is not free of history, at least not yet. This impression is further reinforced by the last sentence of the final chapter, which reads: “[F]ar beyond the earth, in the deepest reaches of space, the old communications satellite Eng lurches along her still-deepening orbit, a long ellipsis that will take her a thousand years to complete” (329-330). Eng’s ever-expanding orbit has been a reminder since the beginning of the novel that humanity’s technoscientific

projects are frequently deeply flawed, because when Eng moves too far away from Earth, the knowledge and consciousnesses it stores will no longer be accessible. At the same time, the suggestion that the satellite will reappear in the distant future is also a reminder that the new Grist Village in all its radical new existence might rely on ignoring the outside world and the potential return of patriarchal and other exploitative structures at its own risk. Saltwater City, Cosmopolitan Earth, and other political entities continue to exist and operate at a distance from the localized utopian community of the Grist sisters, even if Kora narrates them as a thing of the past. By insisting on these ambiguities, Lai teases readers with the possibility of utopian closure that *The Tiger Flu*, however, ultimately denies. If at all possible, utopia is definitely not envisioned as a place, though maybe as an ongoing process. In this sense, possibly the most utopian quality of the new Grist Village is the sincere acknowledgment of existence as not only necessarily relational but also ideally compassionate, when Kora states, almost like a new maxim for the community, “You must remember my pain, as I remember yours” (327).

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## Outlaw Territories: Negotiations of Gender and Race on the American Inner-City Frontier in (Speculative) Urban Crime Films of the 1970s and 80s

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### Abstract

This article seeks to elucidate how the American frontier myth with its specific narrative conventions, personnel and archetypes crucially informed a wave of urban crime film dramas from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s. Its special focus will be on the films' gender politics centering around a regenerative vigilante masculinity that these movies inherit from their Western ancestors. The basic gender script analyzed here is that of a white masculinity that re-establishes its seemingly lost or endangered position of superiority via the use of vigilante violence against an abjected non-white, underclass or female other situated in ethnic inner-city neighborhoods. While apparently undermining the state's legitimate power, the regenerative vigilante ultimately assists or calls for a greater presence of the state in such urban 'outlaw' territories. The article discusses how movies such as *Death Wish*, and *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx* reiterate or even reinforce the male vigilante script inherited from the American Western tradition and how 1970s Blaxploitation cinema and particularly speculative gang films of the early 1980s, from *The Warriors* to Carpenter's *Escape* films (partly) subvert or decenter this script. The personalized bracket of actress Pam Grier, who played characters in several of the above mentioned movies, will help to illustrate the various discursive framings of race, gender, violence and the state within these three strands of the urban frontier narrative.

In his seminal study *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin follows the American frontier myth through a myriad of 20th-century cultural productions and shows how it was adapted to changing socio-economic and cultural circumstances in the U.S. After a period of almost thirty years roughly from 1940 to 1970, during which the frontier myth arguably reached its highest cultural prominence in a massive output of Hollywood Westerns, Slotkin notes that the Western experienced a sharp decline during the 1970s. This, however, did not entail a decline in the relevance of the frontier and its narrative, character, and gender codes within the American imagination. Rather, they merely seemed to change their disguise and setting, as

the Frontier was displaced into genres dealing with metropolitan crime, [...]. Between 1971 and 1977 urban crime dramas, featuring as heroes detectives, policemen, and “urban vigilantes,” were the predominant type of American location action film. (Slotkin 634)

Strikingly, these urban crime dramas negotiated and made sense of mid/late 20th-century urban problems by way of essential elements of the American frontier myth, widely popularized in the Western movie boom of the previous thirty years. In doing so, these crime dramas relied heavily on established characters, tropes and narratives from the mythical American frontier along with its specific gender politics. They helped to re-actualize a white self-reliant, hyper-violent (vigilante) masculinity within a racially and sexually diverse urban space that was perceived as a threat to a society gone all-too liberal and a masculinity grown all-too soft. These films thus reiterated the discursive logic that brought about the mythic American frontier trope and its ‘rugged’ masculine ideal (epitomized in the cowboy figure) in the first place. In their essence, these ideals were constructed in the late 19th century by a group of white elite intellectuals and writers, among which Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister rank as the most prominent and influential ones.<sup>1</sup> Slotkin has convincingly shown how this group’s discursive framing of the American West in social-Darwinist terms as an arena of existential struggle for racial survival between a white Anglo-Saxon race and non-white races (especially Native Americans, to a lesser extent also Mexicans) functioned as the response of a white male establishment to a general ‘urban threat’ emanating from “the debased political culture and racial character of the polyglot metropolis” (Slotkin 169-170). This threat was marked by

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<sup>1</sup> See Roosevelt’s idolization of the cowboy and/or frontiersman as an ideal of both true masculinity and racial superiority in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888) and *The Winning of the West* (1889), also visible in his own self-styled persona as rugged frontiersman during his years in South Dakota or as Rough Rider in the Spanish-American War; also see Wister on the racialized construction of the cowboy as pioneer and epitome of a superior race in his 1895 essay “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher.” Also see Slotkin on this (29-62, 169-183).

significant race, class and gender implications: not only did late 19th-century American cities house a growing number of non-Germanic immigrants, they were also the home of an increasingly organized and powerful urban proletariat (see Slotkin 18-21 on the class aspect).

The basic setting of these late 19th-century urban frontier myths was easily adaptable to the American 1960s and 70s. Just as back in the late 19th century, a white social establishment and its (conservative) intelligentsia perceived certain inner-city areas as dangerous urban frontiers complete with large disenfranchised non-white populations, a liberal-leftish political climate of revolt and protest embodied by a young white counterculture, Black and Latinx activist movements as well as burgeoning and increasingly visible LGBTQ communities (especially in New York City and San Francisco). In the mind of the white establishment, these urban zones and their inhabitants constituted an abjected 'other' to a white, heteronormative, middle or upper class American identity kernel. Judith Butler has captured the spatial dimension of this process of negative subject constitution through abjection in the following passage of her influential *Bodies That Matter* (1993) that rings true for any kind of frontier situation, no matter if located on the original Western frontier or displaced onto declining urban centers:

The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler xxiii)

By way of staging inner-city urban milieus as abjected 'other spaces', as heterotopic zones of illusion<sup>2</sup>, where the values and norms of a 'civilized' mainstream America are turned upside down via an abundance of social deviance, criminality, drug abuse, non-normative sexualities and gang violence, urban crime films of the 1970s and 80s became crucial instances of popularizing politically conservative discourses on urban ills as well as of demonizing inner-city areas and their 'savage' populations

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault distinguishes heterotopias of illusion from those of compensation in his influential article "Of Other Spaces": whereas the former constitutes a "space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory", the latter defines a space "as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled." This very distinction will remain productive for my argument in other parts of this article ("Of Other Spaces" 8).

(see Macek 37-70). They thus also proved central in legitimizing tough-on-crime, zero tolerance and harsh drug policies to be implemented from the 1980s onwards. Yet as long as the state remained absent from these abjected zones, such films—in full accordance with American frontier ideology—legitimized and perpetuated a vigilante violence that ultimately also functioned as a means to constitute a hyperviolent white male subject that finds its ‘constitutive outside’ in these zones. As much as American frontier history comes down to a collective and continual ‘regeneration through violence’ against a non-white other<sup>3</sup>, the individual white male subject continues to be (re)constructed through violent acts against a non-white other, endlessly reiterated in narratives of the old Western and the more recent urban frontier.

This article seeks to do two things. Firstly, it sets out to explore Slotkin’s hypothesis on the frontier coding of 1970s crime drama in greater detail. With his focus on war, adventure and a couple of Western films from that period, Slotkin misses the opportunity to elaborate on the crime film genre in his study. In focusing on this neglected genre, this article will first look at examples from the mainstream urban crime drama and Blaxploitation cinema and then focus specifically on a cycle of late 1970s and early 80s cycle of speculative gang films. An analysis of the first two movie strands will allow for a detailed assessment of how these gang films emulate or subvert (gender) scripts and tropes of the frontier narrative with a specific focus on depictions of frontier masculinity and violent conflict between abjected subjects and state forces. Secondly, this article will embed these fictional scenarios in a historical context, to show their correspondence with contemporary discourses and policies targeting urban crime as well as outline how the films supported, anticipated, subverted or criticized these discourses and developments. The specific thematic and temporal focus of this article, namely the representations of (speculative) urban crime films of the 1970s and 80s therefore also determines its source selection, even though these issues might also be explored in more recent media.

### **1. Gunslingers on the Urban Frontier: The Vigilante Hero and Regenerative Masculinity in Hollywood’s Urban Crime Drama Cycle 1970 to 1981**

Two of the earliest examples of the 1970s Hollywood urban crime drama already provided the basic character types and narrative conventions for the entire genre, both of them in striking congruence with the established codes of frontier mythology. Both released in 1971, *Dirty Harry* and *The*

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Slotkin’s concept of ‘regeneration through violence’ see a summary in Slotkin 10-16 or in greater detail in his eponymous 1973 publication *Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*.

*French Connection* introduced cops that represented gritty “urban gunslingers, [...] steely-eyed, cynical, fast on the draw, and likely to resolve the plot with a climactic gunfight,” thus undeniably proving themselves to be “heirs of the hard-boiled detective, the gunfighter, and the Indian hater” (Slotkin 634). Harry Callahan and Jimmy ‘Popeye’ Doyle’s kinship with the mythical heroes of the Western frontier is further reinforced in these films by individual costume and prop details, such as Harry’s use of a Smith and Wesson Model 29 revolver or Popeye’s signature pork pie hat. More importantly, however, these two cops continually prove their willingness to routinely work above the law and break police rules when hunting down “punks” or mobsters on the urban frontier of NYC or San Francisco’s post-industrial wastelands, a behavior that gives them the air of vigilantes with a badge. Considering their often-blatantly racist and politically reactionary attitudes coupled with their frequent complaints about city officials’ indulgent stance on crime, these cop-heroes’ popularity also turned them into anything but subtle mouthpieces for conservative political and criminological discourses opting for much harsher strategies in ‘managing’ the problem of urban crime (see Corkin 103-111). As will become clear in the following passages, their modern vigilantism iconized in these popular films also served, much like the original ideal of the cowboy in traditional frontier fiction, as a gender script for regenerating an aggressive masculinity or a rugged ‘manliness’, to echo Roosevelt’s preferred concept. Allegedly grown soft or effeminate in urban civilization, such true manliness can only be regained by white men through the use of violence within a ‘savage’, i.e., uncivilized, neglected or not properly state-controlled territory and directed against a racial, but often also gendered other.

The urban vigilante formula arguably reached its most perfect and influential realization in *Death Wish* (1974), also because it narratively connects its protagonist’s vigilante rage to the archetypal frontier model. Similar to *Dirty Harry*’s lead actor Clint Eastwood, who rose to fame in the Western TV series *Rawhide* and several acclaimed Italian Westerns during the 1960s, *Death Wish*’s lead Charles Bronson was also primarily identified with his Western roles, most notably his role as the nameless harmonica player in *Once Upon a Time in The West* (1968). Following his appearance in *Death Wish*, which also inspired several sequels, Bronson quickly came to be known as the quintessential impersonator of avenging vigilantes. The early 1970s cinema audience could easily connect these actors’ Western personas to the urban gunslingers they embodied in a range of crime films. One might even argue that Eastwood and Bronson simply transplanted their Western personas into the urban settings without changing too much in their basic frontier-shaped attitudes and

behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Along with these personas, they brought to the 1970s screen reactionary ideals of a violent masculinity that operated largely independent of the state, but nevertheless in its service or rather in that of a white national community deemed under assault by a criminalized racial and sexual other in the nation's urban centers.

*Death Wish* provides such an effective scenario because it closely charts the psychological transformation of its protagonist from a liberal pacifist into a merciless gunslinging vigilante who deliberately seeks to provoke violent confrontations on the nightly streets of Manhattan. Architect Paul Kersey, the protagonist of the movie, lost his father in a hunting accident as a child and swore never to touch guns again, thus turning into a conscientious objector who served as a medic in the Korean War. With his identity and masculinity thus defined by strict non-violence, the successful architect also seems to harbor a liberal social agenda, allowing him to ignore or even deride the media's outcry over sharply rising crime rates or his colleagues' bigmouthed tough-on-crime rhetoric. The clash of political attitudes on urban crime is aptly staged in an early conversation between Kersey and his colleague Sam Kreutzer:

KREUTZER. Oh Christ, you are such a bleeding-heart liberal, Paul.

KERSEY. My heart bleeds a little for the underprivileged, yes.

KREUTZER. The underprivileged are beating our goddamned brains out. You know what I say? Stick them in concentration camps, that's what I say.  
(00:05:06 – 00:05:20)

Recalling the clashing perspectives evoked in the above scene, the movie's turning point comes about when Kersey's wife and daughter are violently attacked and raped in their Manhattan apartment, leaving the wife dead and the daughter traumatized to the point of permanent catatonia. Kersey's devastation is heightened by the police's obvious inability to solve the crime (the original perpetrators are never arrested, nor will they fall victim to Kersey's vigilantism). In this situation of existential crisis, Kersey comes to question his vow to non-violence, ultimately reconsidering his sense of self as a liberal pacifist as well as his sense of masculinity due to the fact that he was utterly unprepared to defend his family on a gloomy urban frontier of relentless gang violence. His development into a cynical and world-weary vigilante is further inspired by a business trip to Arizona. Here, in the heart of the old

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<sup>4</sup> There even exist a number of urban crime films with cowboys hailing from the modern-day American West that come to the big city in order to provide the law enforcement that an incompetent (because lacking a true frontier masculinity) urban police force appears incapable of. The first and most striking example, *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) even stars Eastwood and literally seems to mark his transition from the 1960s Western gunslinger to the 1970s urban detective. Other prominent examples include the TV series *McCloud* (1970-77), *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993-2001) or the movie *The Cowboy Way* (1994).

American West, Kersey not only runs into a Western show with a reenacted standoff in an old Tucson Western town that used to serve as a film set. He is also invited to a gun range by the rugged, cowboy-styled local developer he is working for, who prompts him to touch and shoot a gun for the first time since his childhood days. Thus invigorated by the spirit and violent masculine ideal of the mythical American West, Kersey returns to the cesspool of New York City, only to discover that the developer's farewell present is a Colt Police Positive revolver. This revolver becomes a necessary item to fully complete his transformation into a vengeful urban vigilante and thus to overcome what the film presents as his effeminate pacifist urban masculinity.

Kersey's trip to Arizona serves as the ideologically transition from the old to the new (urban) frontier. While vigilante violence has been reduced to a mere simulacrum for entertainment in the new, state-controlled West, a real frontier has newly emerged in the increasingly non-white and state-neglected heart of American cities that cries for the same white, male vigilantism that was once a legitimate *modus operandi* in the old West. Yet, just as in its original frontier script, the urban vigilante tale is a narrative of male resurgence from indulgent or effeminate passivity through violence, exerted outside the realm of official law enforcement and in response to a (series of) real or perceived crimes or indignations. There is also the idea, present in all urban vigilante scenarios, that on the 'savage' outlaw terrain of urban frontier lands, vigilante justice is ultimately a legitimate, if not the only strategy of survival in the face of overwhelming inimical forces that the state fails to control. By claiming for himself the right to enact the kind of violence traditionally monopolized by the state, Kersey is also able to reclaim a position of racial and gender supremacy (within an increasingly diverse urban milieu) that the state and its institutions can or are no longer willing to protect. Thus armed and ideologically invigorated, Kersey henceforth roams the Manhattan streets and subways at night only to gun down any petty criminal trying to mug him or other unarmed civilians, incidents which take place at an excessively high rate.

*Death Wish's* staging of the urban frontier as a lawless arena overpopulated by young, male and exceeding non-white gang criminals harassing or attacking any white civilian within minutes after their stepping onto the streets provided one of the most powerfully distorted portrayals of inner-city plight of the mid-1970s, a portrayal that would inspire and legitimize harsh law enforcement policies for years to come. *Death Wish* also proved so unsettling in this regard because it addressed the insufficiency of urban law enforcement schemes implemented by the state: after a series of murders committed by Kersey on his nocturnal sprees, the whole city speculates about the identity and agenda of the

mysterious vigilante, with some even applauding his actions as a welcome response to soaring urban crime. With the ubiquitous menace of the vigilante out in the streets, city officials begin to register falling street crime rates and instruct the detective trying to hunt Kersey down not to arrest him (the policeman eventually lets him go under the condition of permanently leaving the city). In this way, the city officials integrate the vigilante phantom as an effective, if highly questionable deterrent into their law enforcement strategies (see Corkin 134-140). After all, the media as well as state authorities (even if such vigilantism undermines their monopoly of legitimate violence) also seem to tolerate the development of a parallel system of illegitimate law enforcement, because Kersey's vigilante rage ultimately defends and embodies the very system of white, male domination that they seek to maintain as well.

In the police drama *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981), the adaptation of traditional frontier scripts and motifs to the urban space is pushed to the extreme. Not only does the title already invoke a Western classic, John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), but the film also transplants this fortress to the utterly hostile late 20th-century urban frontier of the South Bronx, staged as an apocalyptic scenery of ethnic ghettoization, urban wastelands (as a result of both post-industrial plight and slum clearance), poverty, gang violence, drug addiction and prostitution. Upon handing over the precinct to his successor, the outgoing Chief Dugan introduces the neighborhood as a truly savage urban frontier with the usual discriminatory confluences of ethnicity, crime, non-hygiene, violence, unemployment, poverty, prostitution and insanity:

DUGAN. This is Siberia [...]. You got a 40-block area with 70,000 people packed in like sardines smelling each others' farts, living like cockroaches, [...]. You got the lowest income per capita, the highest rate of unemployment in the city [...]. Largest proportion of non-English speaking population in the city! [...] Families that have been on welfare for three or four generations. Youth gangs, winos, junkies, pimps, hookers, maniacs, cop-killers [...]. I mean this neighborhood'll bury ya. There's enough dirt in this precinct to bury every smart-ass cop in the city! (00:18:02 – 00:19:37)

This distorted picture of a nightmarish and malicious ghetto is confirmed by the movie's disturbing opening scene: a drugged Black prostitute approaches two cops in a police car, seemingly in order to offer her services to them, only to suddenly draw a gun and shoot both of them dead. The hostility of the inner-city territory is heightened still by a group of Black and Latinx teenagers that loot the dead officers without any sign of shock or emotional reaction.

Within this deeply hostile urban frontier space looms the safe haven of the 41st Precinct—nicknamed “Fort Apache” by the policemen—as a designated sanctuary of law and order, normative sexuality, masculinity, and whiteness (with few exceptions, but certainly in comparison to the

neighborhood's overwhelmingly Black and Latinx population). Similar to its cinematic namesake, this urban fort has to be defended when attacked by 'savage' local hordes and is used as a base camp for forays into the dangerous territory by a brave police cavalry.<sup>5</sup> After a riot breaks out in the neighborhood following the new police chief's tough apprehension methods applied in the search for the murderer of the two cops, the precinct is actually besieged by an enraged mob, which can only be dispersed after the use of tear gas. The reference to the mythic frontier trope of the Alamo is as much evident here as the reference to a number of Western siege scenarios. They typically feature a small, but heroic and homogeneously white Anglo-Saxon community under competent male leadership defending their position against a superiority of either a villainous foreign army, outlaws or, most commonly, throngs of bloodthirsty Native Americans.

In accordance with the same ideological script, the 41st Precinct in *Fort Apache, The Bronx* represents a last stronghold of white, male state authority in a vast territory of non-white aggression and sexual non-normativity. The entirely male police force therefore not only appear as rightful defenders of white superiority which has to be continually regenerated via sometimes excessively violent acts (tough apprehension policy and a murder committed by openly racist cops during a raid). While committed to this mission, they also pursue a much less obvious, but ideologically crucial quest of personal gender and ethnic regeneration. Male superiority not merely over the ethnic community is recurrently reinforced by the ultimately unsuccessful actions to hunt down the cop-killing prostitute (the ultimate subversive agent in a cosmos of male dominance) that have the air of a retributive campaign against the whole community due to its extreme scope and violence. These collective acts of reclaiming male dominance over the ethnic ghetto are repeated on the personal level with regard to female bodies, such as Murphy's romance with a Latina nurse, his help in delivering the child of a Latina teenager (an quasi-colonial scenario with Murphy as the white savior) or his partner's pertinacious attempts to force his (white) virgin girlfriend into having sex with him. The racial perspective is also of relevance here, as most modern cop/vigilantes differ from their Anglo-Saxon frontier models in terms of their (recently overcome) ethnic minority status: the surnames of some of the most prominent cop/vigilante protagonists in 1960s to 80s urban crime films—Coogan (*Coogan's Bluff*) Curran (*Joe*), Callahan (*Dirty Harry*), Doyle (*French Connection*), Murphy (*Fort Apache*)—all point to their Irish origin and thus to an ethnic group in the U.S. not considered fully 'white' until well into the 20th century. In *Fort Apache*,

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<sup>5</sup> Slotkin has also stressed that the movie "treats the violence of contemporary racial ghettos in terms of the standard cavalry/Indian paradigm" (634).

Murphy and his Italian-American partner Corelli are fully aware of their ethnic heritage, which puts them into an intermediary position on the urban frontier: not quite white, but not really non-white either. Their police service on the urban ethnic frontier thus also serves them to redraw the line between a white urban establishment and its racialized others in ways that allow them to continually stress their own whiteness and loyalty to the state in opposition to a Black and Latinx inner-city community.

The logic of contesting and reclaiming the position of white, male authority is rendered obvious when taking a closer look at *Fort Apache's* most disturbing and disturbingly clichéd character, namely Black prostitute and heroin-addict Charlotte. As the urban frontier's 'satanic savage' she is the malicious siren luring white cops and civilian suitors near her in order to violently kill them. Charlotte functions as the movie's plot trigger via her initial murder of the two cops and the ensuing large-scale investigation. She is also central to the motif of the unsolved crime or rather to that of the unpunished delinquent, common to so many urban crime films of the time (such as the elusive attackers of Paul Kersey's wife and daughter in *Death Wish*). Charlotte herself is ultimately killed by a dealer whom she intended to make her next victim. With her body eventually disposed of in the roadside trash, her end proves both satisfactory and unsatisfactory in the sexist and racist logic of the contemporary urban crime film. Represented as the most malicious, transgressive urban reincarnation of the frontier narrative's satanic savage, Charlotte seemingly receives her 'just' fate when being consumed by the very ghetto violence that she herself represented. And yet her insidious crimes remain unsolved and she remains unpunished by the law. The movie's plot therefore denies any satisfactory retribution element in the sense of a reconstitution of white dominance over the non-white, female usurper. While her life is ended at the hand of a (non-white) man, she cannot be held to justice or overwhelmed by a white, male state authority and thus the very force she symbolically intended to undermine in her crimes.

Overall, many urban crime dramas seem to suggest that the urban frontier is far too "savage", its vice far too powerful and its endless chains of violent acts far too complex for any police force to properly solve crimes within the given political reality of inner-city laissez-faire and underfunding of urban law enforcement authorities. Given this situation, excessive police violence or even vigilante justice might arise as legitimate compensation. For all its obvious reiteration of frontier stereotypes and its political-ideological underpinnings, *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx* does not, however, amount to an entirely uncritical reflection of police work in the inner city. It problematizes excessive police violence through the case of two racist cops that kill a Puerto Rican teenager during a large police

operation by deliberately throwing him off a roof, an act that is ultimately reported by Murphy just before he himself quits his job in an air of absolute disillusionment. In his final discussion with the new police chief, Murphy also denounces his superior's confrontational police measures, which ultimately triggered the latest war-like clashes between officers and local mobs.

*Fort Apache* offers an early hint at, but also an early critique of tough-on-crime ideologies and mass incarceration policies which were just beginning to become popular with American law enforcement authorities at that point, before attaining the status of common sense by the 1990s (see Parenti 69-89). In an earlier scene, Murphy mocks the new chief's mass apprehension scheme by hypothetically thinking it through to its logical end: "So the jails will be full, the neighborhood will be empty and you won't be one step closer to solving those killings," he notes (00:54:02 – 00:54:07). Unknowingly, Murphy here delineates a scenario which would recur first as part of a dystopian vision in another strand of urban crime films, but then came true in actual policies of mass incarceration that have been dominating U.S. law enforcement for the past thirty years. These policies emptied American inner cities of its young male Black/Latinx population by locking them up for excessively long periods of time, often for only minor offenses. With politically conservative agendas on urban crime (also popularized in these films) and policymakers in power, the state and its institutions—in particular a militarized police force, racially biased drug legislations and a penal system of mass incarceration—were able to reclaim a strong role in securing white male dominance (see Parenti 161-210, Alexander 59-139). Yet even though such measures seemed to make individual vigilantism superfluous, the figure of the humiliated man seeking regeneration through violence on the urban frontier has not entirely vanished in popular media of the past forty years, be it only to stress and legitimize the ongoing necessity for a racially biased law enforcement system.

As outlined in this subchapter, mainstream urban crime dramas of that period prove to be deeply rooted in the narrative conventions and gender scripts of the frontier myth. While in many cases they appear to adapt these conventions in their racist and sexist logic of male regeneration through state-sanctioned or -tolerated violence rather uncritically to their contemporary urban situation, one should not overlook their revisionist potentials. Despite perpetuating many of the frontier script's problematic elements, urban crime films such as *Joe* (1970), *Taxi Driver* (1975) or *Cruising* (1980) also offer explicit critiques of their vigilante (anti-)heroes as reactionary, mentally unstable, if not psychopathic loners that project an imminent threat into their urban

environment in order to justify their eventual violence as a means to reclaim a position of white, male dominance.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Black Subversions? Shaft, Coffy, Foxy Brown and the Ambiguous Race and Gender Legacies of Blaxploitation Cinema 1971 to 1979

The racist and sexist underpinnings of *Fort Apache*'s female satanic savage character Charlotte would have already been disturbing enough, if it were not for another striking symbolic dimension to this character which is crucially connected to the actress playing the role. Considering Pam Grier's prior film career as well as her significance for (Black) American cinema, her casting in the role of the malicious man killer haunting the ethnic ghetto suggests itself as a calculated decision by the filmmakers. In fact, Grier might be considered the most prominent female star of a cycle of 1970s films that came to be known as Blaxploitation cinema. These films with an often entirely Black cast focused mostly on urban crime narratives located within the Black American ghetto. In many ways, one might consider these films a variation of the mainstream urban crime dramas covered in the previous subchapter. Blaxploitation cinema partly emulated these mainstream urban crime dramas and thus also reinforced their problematic aspects, yet it also subverted their often blatantly racist undertones by telling its stories from a Black inner-city perspective, which is necessarily alien to the standard white cop and/or vigilante.

One of Blaxploitation's first great hits and still among its most prominent entries in film history was *Shaft* in 1971. It stars Richard Roundtree as Black private detective John Shaft who goes about his dangerous business in a crime-ridden Harlem and operates in between the conflict lines of a white police force, Black nationalists and mobsters. Shaft is a politically conscious Black man who has to face the violent reality of a largely mob-controlled Harlem—a place where the upwardly mobile Shaft no longer resides himself. Similar to many other films of the genre, *Shaft* reinforces a white mainstream's distorted image of the crime-infested, violent Black ghetto (see Corkin 74-96). Moreover, the character of Shaft embodies another racist stereotype that is a common and frequently criticized feature of Blaxploitation characters, i.e. his hypersexuality, showcased throughout the movie by his various sexual relations with a number of submissive women. Coupled with an often

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<sup>6</sup> Also, it is true that the urban crime genre showcased more and more diverse detective teams during this period: the gritty white cop is often joined by a non-white or female partner, such as in *Starsky & Hutch* (1975-79), later installments of the *Dirty Harry* series or the *Lethal Weapon* films (1987-98), even though such ethnically diverse pairings also have a well-established frontier model in asymmetric cowboy and Native American teams, such as most prominently Lone Ranger and Tonto.

openly misogynist machismo attitude, Shaft's exposed hypervirility may be read as part of his empowerment as a discriminated Black man. Yet, it is also a harmful reinforcement of a common racist stereotype of Black masculinity. Shaft is thus complicit with his white movie doubles in regenerating a subordinated masculinity into a hegemonic one via his continual dominance over a number of both Black and white women.

Yet the genre also proved open for subversive gender politics. Blaxploitation certainly reached its emancipatory prime with *Coffy* in 1973 and *Foxy Brown* in 1974, featuring Pam Grier as the eponymous street-wise female vigilantes. These vigilantes single-handedly fight against ruthless drug and prostitution cartels responsible for the drug addiction or murder of people close and dear to them. Distinct from normative roles as mere companions to heroic men, love interests or damsels in distress, assigned to women in mainstream urban crime dramas, Blaxploitation films offered the opportunity for presenting Grier's characters as sexually objectified, yet also and most importantly empowered female action heroes. This kind of character was unheard of in American mainstream films and even rare in the exploitation cinema of the time. Film posters for *Foxy Brown* introduced their iconic heroine with the words: "Don't mess aroun' with Foxy Brown / She's the meanest chick in town!", while the movie trailer presented Grier, already fully identified with her vigilante role in *Coffy*, as "that one-chick hit-squad." Already the movie's advertisement thus conferred crucial characteristics of the male white frontier hero and his 1970s urban heirs, such as self-reliance, aggressiveness, ingenuity and a defiant willingness to take the law into his own hands, onto her female character.

Wearing an afro hairdo, speaking in Black English Vernacular as well as harboring a vindictive sense of justice when met with racist humiliation, Grier's character is equipped with a specific Black Power style and ethos. But her urban frontier heroism is also coupled with and extended by a specific female performativity<sup>7</sup>, which is necessarily inaccessible to or deemed unsuitable for the male urban detective or vigilante. Surely, Grier's characters do not break with a heteronormative sexuality and the often-voyeuristic staging of her body clearly is intended to cater to the male gaze, i.e. the assumed viewing pleasure of a heterosexual, male audience. And yet, her film personas are able to make strategic use of their female sexual appeal as well as a range of normative female behavior scripts in order to come close to the male objects of their revenge. In fact,

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<sup>7</sup> This term is used in the Butlerian sense that gendered behavior is not rooted in one's biological sex, but rather in the endlessly reiterated, quasi-theatrical performance of codified gender scripts for men and women. Subversive performances in contradiction with one's born-with sex are thus possible, but practically scarce as such acts are continually met with rejection and sanctions in most social contexts.

that very modus operandi might be described as Coffy and Foxy's most common strategy on their vigilante missions: in both movies, Grier's characters impersonate prostitutes<sup>8</sup> and specifically adapt their appearance and behavior to the preferences of white dealers, pimps and mobsters.<sup>9</sup> In this way, they are able to attract their attention and come as close to them as possible, only to suddenly transform from submissive sex objects and thus vehicles for male regeneration into 'phallic' vigilante avengers that gun their victims down without remorse.

The confusingly quick shifts of 'phallic power' from white crime boss or henchman to the Black female vigilante-gunslinger that recur as climactic moments in these films may be seen as their ideologically most subversive moments as they embody the violent disruption of common hierarchies of race and gender. After having overwhelmed all henchmen at the end of *Foxy Brown*, Grier's heroic character arguably performs the most blatantly phallo-clastic act in Blaxploitation cinema by handing the white female head of the drug and prostitution cartel a jar with the cut-off genitalia of the latter's racist boyfriend-accomplice.

As much as Foxy is stylized into the agent of a Black, female or even feminist subversion and usurpation of white, male domination here, her Black vigilantism in contrast to the male vigilante is not motivated by a need to reclaim a seemingly lost position of gendered power and dominance. She is not per se interested in undoing gender inequalities and stereotyped performativities (as can be seen in her normative behavior towards her boyfriend and her willingness to perform as a prostitute). Rather her subversive vigilante acts originate in a (maternalistic) urge to seek personal justice for her boyfriend's death. They also originate in her urge to free the Black community from organized crime. Despite the fact that her boyfriend operated as an undercover police agent, she cannot count on the help of a legitimate law

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<sup>8</sup> In general criticized for exploiting Black culture by way of "reconfirm[ing] white expectations of blacks [so as to] [...] repress and delay the awakening of any real political consciousness," Blaxploitation films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* may also be accused for inviting a double exploitation in the light of gender concerns (Guerrero 93). Not only are Grier's heroines visually exploited by way of a sexually objectifying staging, but even on their plot levels both movies involve the protagonist's deliberate and seemingly unproblematic self-exploitation by temporarily working or at least performing as a prostitute as a central strategy on her vigilante quest.

<sup>9</sup> A crucial feature of these Black inner-city counter-narratives seems to be the fact that the criminal organizations suffusing and intoxicating non-white neighborhoods with drugs, violence and prostitution are headed by (often openly racist) white men or women, yet aided by villainous and—at least from the perspective of a Black Power vision of ethnic solidarity—also treacherous and corrupted members of the Black community. One might even argue that the Black vigilante's struggle against white mobsters can be read as a regeneration of Black ethnic identity through violence or rather defense against white villains and oppressors.

enforcement that is unable or even unwilling to serve the Black community. In fact, the police are revealed to be customers of and thus involved with the very drug and prostitution ring Foxy seeks to bring down. After undertaking her vigilante mission alone for a long time, she finally enlists the help of a Black Panther group. Only ethnic solidarity, it seems, can help the black vigilante on his or her quest for personal justice—without the help and often also against the agents of a racist, violent and corrupt state.

The very image of the Black female castrator and usurper of white male power that uses her female and ‘exotic’ appeal to lure male victims near her only to kill or humiliate them ultimately returned monstrously in the figure of cop-killing prostitute Charlotte within the male urban crime universe of *Fort Apache, The Bronx* in 1981. Grier reappears in her well-known role as an objectified (fake) prostitute with her attract-and-kill tactics, but this time not as a heroic vigilante empowered both as a woman and as a member of the Black community. In the racist and sexist logic of the mainstream urban crime script, subversive characters like Coffy or Foxy Brown can only be read as vicious threats to white male superiority, seductive succubi haunting the inner city that need to be exorcized by the guns of white policemen. By casting Grier in a distorted and ideologically reinterpreted version of her signature role, *Fort Apache* works to undo the emancipatory ideological rewriting of the urban crime narrative attempted in Blaxploitation’s most daring moments. Furthermore, it opens up the harrowing vision of what might have happened to Coffy or Foxy within their inner-city homelands not only after the end of Blaxploitation and Black Power (at least the end of its heightened cultural visibility), but also in the light of the actual transformation of several urban ghetto communities into virtually apocalyptic wastelands by the late 1970s and 1980s. Reduced to a barely conscious and sexually exploited heroin-addict randomly murdering white men, Charlotte lurches through the literal and metaphorical debris of a broken community. Ultimately, her fate is a scenario that proves Coffy’s heroic one-woman vigilante quest for avenging her sister’s addiction and cleansing her community from crime, drugs and sexual exploitation devastatingly unsuccessful.

### **3. Outlaw Nations: Spaces of Coercion and Illusion in the Dystopian Gang Film 1979 to 1983 / 1996**

As Blaxploitation cinema came to its end by the late 1970s another set of films based on the basic premises of urban crime cinema came to the fore. Similar to Blaxploitation films, this new group of sci-fi-esque films typically revolved around (ghettoized) urban gangs. Set in a near-future dystopian U.S., these speculative films reiterated and reinforced some of

the tropes and archetypes of the mainstream urban crime genre, but also questioned and subverted its fundamental ideological script in crucial points. The dystopian gang film's seminal installment was Walter Hill's 1979 movie *The Warriors*, whose key character types and aesthetics were imitated by most if not all other movies of that movie cycle. Set in a nocturnal NYC of the near future, the film follows the eponymous youth gang in their quest to return to their home turf in Coney Island, after a citywide gang gathering in the Bronx, defending themselves against attacks from both the police and rivaling gangs. *The Warriors* and its premise of a (potentially) gang-controlled city outnumbering the police three to one might, in fact, reinforce mainstream urban crime cinema's most nightmarish inner-city scenario, such as it is suggested in *Death Wish*, for instance. At the same time, this gang movie is marked by a significant qualitative difference in its choice of protagonists, as it shifts the viewer's perspective from that of the male white cop and/or vigilante to that of his abjected enemies, namely youthful, racially mixed street gang members. In doing so, the movie invites its audience to sympathize with the very villains or scapegoats of the dominant urban crime narrative, such as it was known from both fictional media and real-life political discourse. Thereby, films like *The Warriors*, but even more so the two *Escape* films (see below), allow their viewers to experience and question the media's and the state's increasing abjection strategies in the service of defining a white position of superiority from the very perspective of the abjected others. Targeted at a younger audience, the street gang personnel of *The Warriors* and similar movies also proved appealing because of their often playfully exuberant fashion styles. Largely reminiscent of certain contemporary sub-, youth or sports cultures, they also served to mark their ideological position within the frontier-shaped mainstream urban crime antagonism.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly influenced by *The Warriors'* subcultural style, John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) embedded the basic urban gang crime scenario within a larger, politically as well as ideologically provocative narrative framework: in Carpenter's dystopian vision of the year 1988, the United States is not only caught up in a Third World War, but has also answered skyrocketing domestic crime rates by transforming into a police state and adopting drastic mass incarceration schemes. As a consequence, the entire island of Manhattan (already established as a shady, gang crime-ridden horror land in 1970s urban crime cinema) has

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<sup>10</sup> One member of the Warriors literally does so by not only naming himself Conchise after the famous Apache chief, but also by wearing feathers and other adornments that symbolically link him to the Native American tradition. Some of his fellow gang members follow in the same frontier tradition with names like Cowboy or the gang position of "War Chief."

been turned into a heavily fortified maximum-security prison meant to house the country's exploding number of criminal subjects. Manhattan Island is less a correctional facility, though, than an early modern asylum for locking up everyone deemed undesirable by a future American society. As each inmate is sentenced to lifetime imprisonment, there is neither a social will nor a chance for personal rehabilitation ("The rules are simple. Once you go in, you don't come out" (00:03:49 – 00:03:54)).<sup>11</sup> This crude, yet effective solution to unmanageable urban crime has established a seemingly contradictory blend of heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense: at first sight, the prison island represents a space of absolute compensation and coercion by way of its heavy fortification and surveillance via helicopters and watchtowers on the opposite shorelines. At the same time however, it also is a space of total illusion and subversion as the prisoners are basically free to do whatever they please in the emptied-out urban spaces of Manhattan. Carpenter was very careful in fashioning the semi-political entity that has formed within the walls of the prison island, this literal nation of outlaws, as an almost complete illusion heterotopia, an upside-down reflection of mainstream American society. Ruled by the Black Duke of New York, this multiracial prison society is composed of all sorts of non-normative individuals free to express themselves in all sorts of playful subversions of race, class and gender dichotomies and hierarchies. Subversions in the field of gender, however, are not as thoroughly explored here as they are in the movie's 1996 sequel *Escape from L.A.*

Released fifteen years after the initial movie, *Escape from L.A.* (1996) featured an almost identical, but also crucially radicalized scenario that reflected major political events and developments of the past years, such as the rise of the Religious Right, the L.A. race riots of 1992, the increasing militarization of law enforcement (prisons in the movie are controlled by an army-like United States Police Force) and an

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<sup>11</sup> The idea of locking up each undesirable individual in one place as imagined here bears a striking resemblance to the early modern era's ideology of the 'Great Confinement', of incarcerating a sizable number of people deemed 'amoral' (only with the difference that in early modern times, the 'inmates' were actually supposed to be 'corrected' by way of hard work and religious instruction), as it was famously described by Foucault: "The walls of confinement actually enclose the negative of that moral city of which the bourgeois conscience began to dream in the seventeenth century; [...]. In the shadows of the bourgeois city is born this strange republic of the good which is imposed by force on all those suspected of belonging to evil [...]. From [...] the opening [...] of the first houses of correction, and until the end of the eighteenth century, the age of reason confined. It confined the debauched, spendthrift fathers, prodigal sons, blasphemers, men who "seek to undo themselves," libertines" (Madness 57). The early modern asylum thus served the same purpose of moral self-definition via abjection of everyone deemed amoral that also defines the future U.S.s' relation to its prison islands in the *Escape* films.

exacerbated mass incarceration policy that had turned into the dominant American penal paradigm by the mid 1990s. In Carpenter's updated scenario, the U.S. has transformed into a theocratic regime ruled by an evangelical president for life modeled after prominent pastor and televangelist Jerry Falwell. Following a massive earthquake, central Los Angeles has been separated from the mainland. This new inner-city island is subsequently remodeled into another vast, walled-off prison city, which functions as a "deportation point for all people found undesirable or unfit to live in the new, moral America" (00:04:17 – 00:04:24), namely everyone non-white, non-Christian, non-heteronormative or socially liberal.<sup>12</sup> Politically, this "island of the damned" is a no-man's-land, which no longer forms part of the U.S. and its resident-inmates have been stripped of their citizenship. And still, for those confined in it, this urban mega-prison also represents a heterotopic sanctuary, a safe haven, indeed a "dark paradise" (as the protagonist calls it) for actualizing their non-hegemonic identities as well as for establishing political entities and cultural forms not based on normative codes of race, class, gender, religion or sanity. In conversation with the two movies' rugged protagonist, Muslim woman Taslima points out this paradoxical freedom within incarceration that many of her inmates seem to share:

SNAKE. Why are you here?

TASLIMA. I was a Muslim in South Dakota. All of a sudden, they made it a crime.<sup>13</sup>

SNAKE. I mean, why did you stay? You can go south, Mexico.

TASLIMA. L.A.'s still the place, Snake. If you think what's happened on the other side of the world. That's the prison. This is the only free zone left, anywhere.

SNAKE. Dark Paradise...

TASLIMA. At least we get something out of the deal. A girl can still wear a fur coat if she wants to, for example. No, once you figure out this place, it's really not so bad. (00:46:47 – 00:47:28)

Both speculative movies stress their prison cities' subversive racial politics when presenting non-white characters to hold the most powerful positions within their outlaw nations. They do so by featuring the Black Duke of New York and the eccentric Latino communist revolutionary Cuevo Jones, outwardly modeled after Che Guevara, even though these characters are otherwise not depicted as specifically sympathetic or progressive individuals. In *1990: The Bronx Warriors* (1982), an Italian

<sup>12</sup> Carpenter's vision of vast inner-city prisons seems to eerily fulfill Paul Kersey's colleague's fascist dream of locking up a demonized urban underclass identified with uncontrolled street crime into concentration camps in *Death Wish* (1974).

<sup>13</sup> Taslima's fate not only foreshadows the discrimination of the US Muslim population after 9/11 as well as during the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but her entire persona breaks with common gender stereotypes about Muslim women as meek, traditional, religiously conservative and dependent on men.

movie pastiche of both *The Warriors* and *Escape from New York*, the Bronx is staged as a vast gangland no longer under the control of any state forces. Indeed, a Black man and a white woman, nicknamed “The Ogre” and “The Witch” feature as its most powerful (semi-)political agents. Yet despite these characters’ efforts to single-handedly head the prison society, their positions are continuously contested and undermined by other less powerful gangs. After all, these non-white leader figures, especially the ones in the *Escape* films, prove to be imitators of their white counterparts outside the prison or, for that matter, the mainstream white vigilante: in their desperate urge to political and male superiority, they frequently draw on excessive violence against and spectacularized punishments for everyone defying their dominant position. And yet, their regenerative use of violence or compensatory ‘state’ rituals is not based on common hierarchies of race and gender. As non-whites<sup>14</sup> among other non-whites or non-conforming individuals, they can only demand allegiance. Such allegiance, however, is hard to enforce within a territory that still remains an urban frontier, an illusion heterotopia, where everyone “figur[ing] out this place” can “get something out of the deal”, to echo Taslima’s words. Despite their obvious insecurity and disorder, these cinematic prison communities evoke a different, more inclusive notion of America, the state, or even the frontier than their real and fictional counterparts outside the prison walls. Indeed, the latter societies’ self-image has long been founded on the very paradigm of racial exclusion and polarization that has, among other things, led to an excessively inflated prison population.

The overall dystopian scenario of Carpenter’s *Escape* films might be deemed their most intriguing and politically subversive part. Yet, when read as a critique of conservative discourses on race, gender, crime and incarceration, their characters and plot elements turn out to be rather generic and also operate along well-trodden frontier paths. In both movies, the original 1981 one and its 1996 sequel, important political figures (the President and the President’s daughter, respectively) have been kidnapped and smuggled into the inner-city prison islands, thus formatting their plots as standardized captivity/rescue narratives. The (anti-)hero chosen to perform these dangerous rescue missions is former Special Forces war hero Snake Plissken, a traditionally masculine, heterosexual white man who has, however, fallen from grace after being convicted for robbing the Federal Reserve. With his athletic stature,

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<sup>14</sup> Each of these gang movies seems to deliberately reference the subversive race and gender legacy of Blaxploitation cinema by casting one of its stars in a role of authority, namely Isaac Hayes as the Duke of New York in *Escape from New York*, Fred Williamson as “The Ogre” in *The Bronx Warriors* and Blaxploitation’s female star Pam Grier as transgender gangster boss in *Escape from L.A.*

superior strength, practical ingenuity and cynical, monosyllabic ways, Snake likely embodies the most perfect modern-day reincarnation of the mythical cowboy figure in all urban crime/action cinema. And yet: not only is it difficult for the viewer to fully sympathize with an always moody, psychologically hermetic Snake. He also differs from most urban cop/vigilantes heroes of the time in terms of his ambiguous, never fully transparent allegiance to either the state or the demonized inner-city 'savages.' Once a distinguished representative of the state's military power, he has now turned to criminal activities and awaits his punishment by the state. For this state, however, he is nothing more than a means to an end, namely freeing the President (1981) or the President's daughter (1996) from the hostile prison netherworld.

When roaming the prison city, Snake appears to be an utter alien, clearly uncomfortable, if not even resentful to the inmates' non-normative 'freakiness' which could not be further away from his own reclusive and controlled masculinity.<sup>15</sup> As his—always defensive—violence against attacking prisoners and his credit as a well-remembered war hero serve to confirm Snake's dominant male position, he does not have to resort to compensatory violence against a racially and sexually diverse prison community. And even though on an official state mission, he bears no special allegiance to a state that (mis)uses him for its own purposes. He thus proves to be a less ideologically charged (modern) frontier hero than the manly, Anglo-Saxon warrior, animated with notions of racial and masculine superiority, as he was defined by Roosevelt and Wister in the late 19th century. It is because he is his own master free of racial and state allegiances, that he is willing and able to team up with a whole range of inmates in order to secure his own life and freedom—alliances which would be neither imaginable nor viable in the racist and sexist logic of standard urban crime scenarios. In New York, a white, heteronormative Snake relies on the help of the aged taxi driver "Cabbie", non-hegemonic male scientist "Brain" and his girlfriend Maggie. In Los Angeles, he cooperates with an even more diversified group of inmates, namely aged

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<sup>15</sup> In both movies Snake's male body and heteronormative gender identity frequently 'comes under attack' both literally and metaphorically: he often becomes the object of various inmates' hetero- and homosexual desires and thus has to fend off several advances. On other occasions, his body is also literally in danger of being taken apart in brutal fights. Yet none of these confrontations appears to be as disturbingly dangerous to him than his capture by the Surgeon General of Beverly Hills in *Escape from L.A.*. His own face a mere surgically reinforced mask, the general intends to 'farm' Snake and Taslima's bodies for specific organs and skin parts in order to provide his oddly disfigured patients, mere pastiches of foreign skin and body parts, with fresh tissue. This imminent mutilation threatens to turn Snake, just like the surgeon's other patients, into a patchwork of skin tissues and organs transferred back and forth from both male and female bodies, thus causing a literal transsexualization of his pristinely male body as ultimate safeguard of his heterosexual identity.

hippie-surfer “Pipeline”, geeky non-hegemonic “Map to the Stars Eddie”, self-reliant Muslim woman Taslima and trans woman of color Hershe Las Palmas together with her East Asian guards.<sup>16</sup>

Snake’s relation with Hershe, played by Pam Grier and the movie’s most clearly identifiable transsexual character, seems to be the most complex one among these and invites a number of interpretations: Snake and ‘Carjack Malone’ (Hershe’s former male name) share a history as partners in crime until Carjack framed Snake during a joint coup some years ago. In the meantime, Carjack has been convicted and deported to the L.A. prison island, where, now living as Hershe, she has since established herself as a powerful gang boss residing in the dilapidated ocean liner Queen Mary, and was able to change her sex—something impossible to accomplish in the fundamentalist U.S. beyond the prison walls. Naturally suspicious of the person who framed him and initially confused due to her altered sex, Snake almost immediately gropes Hershe’s crotch. Allegedly, he does not do so to check whether the sex change has entailed surgery, but to disarm her of a small gun that he knows Carjack always kept in this spot. Nonetheless, his action evokes the gendered violence of similar scenes in earlier crime drama, in which the male hero affirms his dominance by way of sexual aggression.

Ultimately, Snake’s act of aggression also proves to have metanarrative significance, as the viewer is prompted to remember Grier’s most iconic performances as gunslinging vigilante-seductress in *Coffy* or *Foxy Brown* with a similar habit of hiding a gun beneath her clothes in order to point it at her male victims in the most intimate moment. This detail not only establishes the gun once more as a symbol of phallic power to be seized by the female vigilante, it also ties Grier’s character in this 1990s speculative film back to her other notable appearances in the urban crime genre discussed further above. At first, this scene might suggest a metanarrative act of male revenge against Grier’s subversive, man-killing characters in *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Fort Apache* at the hand of Snake Plissken. Yet, the latter ultimately differs from the urban crime cinema’s cops, vigilantes and gangsters, as he seeks cooperation with rather than literal or ideological confrontation with the urban frontier’s diverse denizens: Snake eventually teams up with Hershe and her loyal

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<sup>16</sup> One might also argue that Snake’s character exists as a safeguard to allow white action/crime audiences to identify safely with his non-allegiant white man’s position rather than with that of the non-normative and often non-white prison population. From this perspective, the *Escape* films appear less daring than *The Warriors* or even *1990: The Bronx Warriors* with their non-white protagonists. Nevertheless, identifying with his position also invites white viewers to critically reflect on the state, its possible authoritarian elements or the future of its already existing race-biased mass incarceration policy.

guards in order to turn against Cuevo and secure their shared escape from L.A.

**Conclusion: Pam's Journey through the Urban Frontier 1973 to 1996—Ideological Reinforcements and Subversions**

Looking back, it seems that the characters impersonated by Pam Grier manifest the fate of many (Black) inner-city communities from the 1970s to the 1990s. First, the Black communities received a heightened cultural visibility, claimed greater social participation and a collective empowerment that crystallized politically in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and culturally, among other things, in Blaxploitation cinema (with all its obvious deficits and shortcomings). Then, they suffered a harrowing demonization in neoconservative discourses that sought to construct a non-white urban underclass inherently prone to crime and all sorts of social ills into a generalized urban problem in dire need of 'management' by state authorities, such as it was popularized throughout the 1970s and 80s by mainstream cop and vigilante dramas. And finally, many Black inner-city neighborhoods faced the great lockdown of large parts of their populations as a result of a new mass incarceration paradigm and zero tolerance policies that were creatively and critically imagined into entire inner-city prison complexes in a number of early 1980s speculative gang films. Throughout this development, mainstream and alternative urban crime cinema have provided an arena for negotiating gender-based identities ultimately rooted in American frontier mythology. These identities have gone through ideological reinforcements in mainstream films, centering on hypermasculine, hyperviolent cops and regenerative vigilantes shooting their way through a hostile urban frontier space that proved threatening to their integrity and hegemony as white, male and heteronormative individuals as well as the white communities they represent. At the same time, these frontier identities have (partly) experienced subversions, disruptions or critical reevaluations within the realm of at least two strands of alternative crime films. Blaxploitation cinema attempted to subvert the standard scripts of white, male vigilante/cop vs. non-white ghetto by reinterpreting these antagonisms from a Black and/or female perspective. At the same time, it staged Black vigilantism as legitimate violence in the absence or even presence of racist law enforcement authorities that ultimately prove to be not an ally in the quest for justice, but rather another enemy.

Both currents of urban crime drama culminate in a cycle of the early 1980s inner-city prison gang films that provide an even more radical subversion of the general race and gender antagonism. Firstly, they fully shift the viewer's perspective and sympathies to those of the abjected populations locked up inside the walled-off inner-city spaces and/or

prisons. Secondly, they imagine alternative outlaw communities that undermine common divisions and hierarchies of race, gender, age and in/sanity present in the world beyond the prison walls, thus paradoxically turning these prison islands into actual harbors of freedom. In the same way, these scenarios champion characters that favor cooperation and solidarity instead of vigilante rage and its logic of compensatory domination via racialized or gendered violence. After all, these three strands of urban crime cinema follow the dichotomous logic of Foucauldian heterotopias: while mainstream urban crime films seek to compensate for seemingly lost (gender) identities by way of reinforcing them along normative lines of race and gender, Blaxploitation and speculative gang films (in different degrees) subvert and decenter all-too-reinforced race and gender identities by diversifying and opening up new perspectives.

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Review:

**Cartwright, Ryan Lee. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity*. The U of Chicago P, 2021.**

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The anti-idyll is a “longstanding cultural trope and social optic that produces tales of white rural nonconformity” (3). This optic is used as a way to name the presumed failures of rural communities to perform whiteness “properly”—namely, by refusing to adhere to its demands of heteronormativity and ablenormativity. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of Rural Nonconformity* (2021) by Ryan Lee Cartwright seeks to challenge the anti-idyll through an examination of its proliferation in American cultural history and the ways in which it has left rural communities marginalized. The book functions as a genealogy of the sensationalized anti-idyll, in which Cartwright maps out the origins and expansions of the idea throughout the twentieth century. However, they recognize that there is no straightforward history of social difference in rural communities, and instead use their chapters to provide examples of how a narrative of such a history was created through different cultural artifacts and practices.

To achieve the goals of the project, *Peculiar Places* employs what Cartwright defines as a queercrip historical methodology, which they argue is necessary in order to “read against the grain of anti-idyllic texts—for finding the material and the mundane in what is represented to be monstrous” (13)

through the engagement of queercrip analysis. This analysis also allows for the expansion of the definition of what qualifies as disability or queer histories. Indeed, despite or rather because of the use of queercrip analysis, *Peculiar Places*' subjects do not always fit the conventional labels of disabled or queer. This is intentional; Cartwright suggests that "if we do not require our subjects to meet certain standards of legitimacy, transparency, and belongingness, then we can focus less on categorical terms and more on how power flows" (16).

*Peculiar Places* is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, titled "Harlots from the Hollow," Cartwright describes the origin of the anti-idyll: the eugenics family studies of the 1920s. They argue that the anti-idyll was formed as a way to place "moral values that had no place in an industrial capitalist society" explicitly and only in rural areas of the country (31). These studies aimed to notice bodily and behavioral differences in rural communities and denote them as social pathologies. In this way, these studies created a way of "diagnosing undesirable traits as evidence of a social disease that could only afflict white people" (47). This allowed for society to consider the problem of supposed rural white degradation without calling white supremacy into question.

In "Curious Scenes," Cartwright examines the continuation of the anti-idyll into the 1930s. To do this, they examine the Farm Security Agency's archive of photography, which was created to "chronicle structural poverty" (49) experienced in rural America and to rehabilitate the image of white rurality. In this chapter, Cartwright clearly demonstrates that hidden within the archive, space existed for both disability and queerness, despite the project's goal of documenting the ideal white citizen.

In the third chapter, "Madness in the Dead Heart," Cartwright produces a compelling, complex historiography about how the criminal case of Edward Gein helped to coalesce previous notions of the anti-idyll into a coherent narrative. They examine the 1957 criminal case of Ed Gein and how it shaped spatialized ideas of rurality and rural monstrosity through the examination of local, regional, and national newspaper coverage of the case. Together, these varying interpretations of the case helped to shift the dominant perspective by dislocating ideas of monstrosity from Gein himself and relocating them as a function of his rurality. It is through the Gein case, Cartwright argues, that the anti-idyll was fully articulated.

"Maimed in Body and Spirit" examines the Appalachian poverty tours of the 1960s. A product of the War on Poverty, these tours promised "glimpses

of the sensational poverty, disability, and non-heteronormativity that purportedly accompanied [the] economic exploitation" (119) prevalent in the region. Although these tours perceived these markers of difference as signs of rural moral failing, Cartwright conceptualizes them not only as ordinary but as desirable.

In the fifth chapter, "Banjos, Chainsaws, and Sodomy," Cartwright explores the proliferation of the anti-idyll into the 1970s urbanoia film genre. Films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) amplified the messages of rural monstrosity first demonstrated in the Gein case. However, Cartwright is overtly critical of these anti-idyllic properties of the genre. These properties, they argue, contribute to the idea that nonnormative embodiments and sexualities are inherently violent or monstrous. Cartwright also provides several key alternative readings of the films. One such alternative reading surrounds the perceived proliferation of disability in rural communities. Although ableist ideology suggests that this proliferation of embodied difference is negative, Cartwright argues that the presence of disabled or queer embodiments is a function of community care and resistance to the institutionalization of difference.

The final section of the book, "Estranged but Not Strangers," examines the resurgence of the anti-idyll in 1990s hate crime documentaries. For this purpose, Cartwright considers two documentaries: *Brother's Keeper* (1992), which explores the "anti-idyllic story of fratricide and fraternal intimacy" among four brothers, and *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998), which documents the murder of Phillip DeVine, Brandon Teena, and Lisa Lambert (168). In examining these cases, Cartwright demonstrates that disability, sexuality, race, and class become weaponized to support ideas that rural spaces are inherently violent and less socially enlightened than urban spaces.

Throughout the project, Cartwright clearly delineates the history of anti-idyll, while also providing considerable evidence that rural individuals and communities are significantly more complicated than the anti-idyll suggests. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity* challenges the reader to consider the complex interconnections and interdependencies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in rural spaces in an effective and accessible manner. As such, this book contributes to a better understanding of the anti-idyllic lens through which individuals are taught to read rural America and of "how fraught those interdependencies can be, particularly on the spatial and social margins" (189).

## List of Contributors

**G Angel** is a first-year PhD Student in the Department of Gender Studies at Indiana University. They also have a BA in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with an emphasis in LGBTQ Studies from Grand Valley State University. Their research predominantly involves the rhetoric of monstrosity, and in their work, they consider both which identity groups are determined to be monstrous and the socio-cultural impacts of this determination. More specifically, they are interested in the intersection of queer and rural monstrosity.

**Dr. Ina Batzke** joined the University of Augsburg, Germany, as a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in American Studies in 2018, after she received her PhD from the University of Münster. Her most recent publications include her monograph "Undocumented Migrants in the United States. Life Narratives and Self-representations" (Routledge 2019) and the edited volume *Storied Citizenship* (2021, with Katja Sarkowsky), which both concern her research interests in life writing and critical refugee studies. In connection with her post-doctoral project, she has recently become interested in feminist technoscience, ecocriticism/ecofeminism, and posthumanism and how these concepts play out in both life writing and contemporary speculative fiction.

**Dr. Linda M. Hess** is a senior lecturer and postdoctoral researcher at the Chair of American Studies at the University of Augsburg. She is the author of *Queer Aging in North American Fiction* (2019), and has published articles in the fields of age studies, ecocriticism, and humor studies. Recently she co-edited the volume *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene* (Palgrave 2021 with Ina Batzke and Lea Espinoza Garrido). Her current research focuses on ideas of grievability, preservation, and loss in ecocriticism.

**Dr. Sascha Klein** has studied English studies and history. He wrote his dissertation as a fellow at a.r.t.e.s Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne. It was published under the title *Skyscraping Frontiers. The Skyscraper as Heterotopia in the 20th-Century American Novel and Film* in 2020. Currently, he is part of the teaching staff at the English Seminar I at University of Cologne and working on his post-doctoral project. His research interests include film culture, American Western and frontier fictions, Gothic literature, spatial theory, gender studies, media studies and urban studies.

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**Melodie Roschman** is a PhD Candidate in the English Department at the University of Colorado Boulder in the United States. Her dissertation research examines how contemporary American Christian women use the memoir as a counternarrative in response to conservative American evangelical hegemony. Her areas of study include modern and contemporary literature, memoir, women and gender studies, Christian literature, popular culture, and material history. She especially enjoys teaching, and has taught classes on life writing, romance novels, and genre fiction. Melodie has a BA in English and Journalism from Andrews University and an MA in English from McMaster University. In her spare time she enjoys cooking, travel, and all manner of DIY projects.

**Dr. Stefan Schubert** teaches and researches at the Institute for American Studies at Leipzig University, Germany. His dissertation on *Narrative Instability: Destabilizing Identities, Realities, and Textualities in Contemporary American Popular Culture* was published in 2019. He is coeditor of *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture* (2015), *Video Games and/in American Studies: Politics, Popular Culture, and Populism*, and the forthcoming *Beyond Narrative: Exploring Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work*. Among his wider research interests are popular culture, narrativity, game studies, gender studies, genre theory, discourses of privilege, 19th-century literature, and (post-)postmodern literature and culture.

**Dr. Marta Usiekiewicz** is an Assistant Professor at University of Warsaw's American Studies Center. Her research interests cover gender and sexuality studies, feminism, and body and critical eating studies. Her scholarship is intersectional, focusing on gender, class, race, and ability. Recipient of the Fulbright Junior Research Award. Currently working on the forthcoming book *Food, Consumption, and Masculinity in American Hardboiled Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan) and a project on cannibalism in popular culture entitled "Useful Cannibalism: New Visions of Antropofagy in Culture." Her work has been published in *InterAlia*, *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, *Fat Studies*, and *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*.